



WHITE AS SNOW

by

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Chapter One

For untold years you will wait upon death's door.

From the healer's hand and love's demand, you will live and love no more.

Through the crumbling castle, the words whispered, hollow as death, black as the night they were--black as his soul. Damian Alessandro tightened his mailed fist, his fingers digging into the scarred wooden arm of

his throne. Cold rage, barely leashed, fueled his body, clouded his mind. For centuries the necromancer's words had taunted him, an enigma he had yet to solve. Through the years, he'd given up hope, and so he remained in Helmskeep, seeking the answer to a riddle ... seeking an end to the torment of living death.

On a black throne he waited ... waited for an oblivion that would not come ... that would never come.

Outside a storm rose, shattering the calm of night like crystal thrown upon a stone hearth, mirroring the ever present turmoil of his mind. Beyond darkened windows, their panes broken and leaking in the fury of the storm, lightning flashed like silver in the clouds, the gods beating their drums in the sky, harkening their ire. The air charged with each hush before the thunder, and distant, he heard a sound, of breath heaved into worn lungs; horses screaming in terror; the snap of a whip sharp in the air.

He rose, dust sifting from blackened armor grayed by its obscurity. Long had it been since he'd left this throne, this hall. The wind tore through the abandoned hall, through the broken panes, whipping once lustrous banners, now rotting with age. Silvered threads, tarnished and black with antiquity, shaped his coat of arms: the spider and the rose ... unraveling as though the wind had teeth and devoured all. He raised an arm to block the noise, commanding the winds rioting through the hall to cease. A hush descended, and he listened.

Again the noise came to him, voices so faint, and yet so powerful a draw ... *life*. The need to touch a living soul was near unbearable. He had seen no creature in decades, but the power was unmistakable. He could practically taste their life's essence.

It had been a hundred years since men had dared walk his halls, a hundred years since his castle had last been seen by a mortal gaze. Damian lifted the cloak of darkness shielding Helmskeep from prying eyes. He had visitors. They must be welcomed.

* * * *

Frigid rain slashed down in slanted sheets with the stinging fury of a thousand bees, blinding Henry to the road ahead. He shielded his head with one arm as the coach slowed to a halt before blackened gates that almost seemed to appear from the gloom. There could be no other chance for shelter if they were to seek it, not along this route, for he'd seen no sign of civilization since their attack. He turned in his raised seat and slid back the small door to speak to his master. "My lord," Henry shouted above the din, "We cannot go on in this storm. The horses are nigh mad with fright. There are gates ahead. Should we stop until this storm abates?"

Lord John Bordeaux leaned close to the window, squinting weathered eyes against the rain spattering inside the lattice work. "Do Henry. Surely they'll not turn a gentleman away."

Henry nodded, slid the door closed, and dropped down to the ground. Thick mud sloshed over his boots as he landed, smacking his heels with each step, sucking at his boots as if to drag him down into its belly, as if the earth itself hungered for the sustenance of human flesh. Nearing the entrance, he could see the iron gates were wicked in the flashing light, barbed on the ends and looking more akin to some spider's web than any creation of man. Peering through them left then right, he spotted an

overturned stool and more distant, a squat house, but could not see if the gatekeeper's house was manned or not.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and called, "Hello?" He stopped and craned his head, listening but hearing no response. "Is there any man about? My master begs shelter. Hello?" His voice cracked with the shouting, but he received no answer save the roar of thunder overhead. Likely a gent fallen on hard times who couldn't afford extra staff, he thought, or else they'd taken shelter in the main house--from what he could see, the small building was shabby indeed.

Henry pulled his coat higher on his neck, shivering, and tried the gate's lock. The lever moved easily, and the gates pushed open, their creaking progress barely audible above the pounding thunder. His skin crawled. He stood unmoving, watching as the gates swung wide, looking for some sign of trickery, of life at all, something to ease the sense that evil dwelt here.

"Henry?" Lord Bordeaux called from the carriage. "Is anything the matter?"

Henry turned slightly and shouted over his shoulder, "No, my lord."

His imaginings were running away with him. Even if this land was abandoned, it was strange to leave the gates unlocked in this area--a border to Hellsing--den of any number of hellspawn. They themselves had been separated from heavy guard in a melee, which was why they were on this freakish pass--more's the pity.

Ignoring the warning in his mind, he went back to the coach and guided the horses through the gates, then shut them once they'd passed through.

He climbed back atop the driver's seat and cracked the reins. The horses shied, but he kept them under firm control despite their terror, moving ever forward.

The drive they traveled was overgrown with weeds near high as the wheels of the coach, hampering their speed, and large holes dotted the packed drive, chunks torn from the earth by heavy rains and roots. The pervasive feeling something was not quite as it should be persisted as they traveled down the drive, and an enormous dark shape loomed ever closer. Through the rain, he spied the great manor, its details clearer with their progress. More castle than anything else, its size was monstrous and imposing, making him wonder how such a giant of architecture could be missed.

This land was darker than their own and likely caused it to be overlooked. It could not be too distant from that place he called home, yet the atmosphere felt as alien and thick to him as he would feel trapped in the depths of a black mire. A pall hung about the land, perpetually ravaged by storm in his limited experience, and fog shrouded the castle's heights like cobwebs. The darkness before them was unbroken by the shine of life giving flame. No lights glowed from the broken windows, no man came to greet them as they pulled along the circular drive. Not that he'd expected it.

"Whoa," Henry said, easing back on the reins as the team slogged to a halt at the manor's entrance. He looped the reins on the break handle and dropped to the ground to assist Lord Bordeaux, eyeing the dark exterior with increasing foreboding.

“It appears the place is abandoned, my lord,” Henry said as he opened the door and shielded Lord Bordeaux with his coat until they neared the overhang that formed a dark cave of an entrance.

“Yes, it does.” Lord Bordeaux shook the rain from himself, looking up imposing doors that stood as tall as two men. Henry knocked sharply on the door, but after several minutes, it appeared there would be no answer. Wondering if it was as secure as the gate had been, Henry pushed the rusted lever. As before with the front gate, he found the door unlocked, unprotected, almost as if it had been left so in invitation. The door slowly creaked open.

They peered cautiously inside, seeing naught but utter blackness and the slight shine of lightning reflecting off of water that had puddled on the floor.

“I think you may be right, Henry. This land must border my own, yet to say truth, I’ve never heard of this place before, nor know to whom it belongs. Tend to the horses. I’ll go inside and find kindling for a fire.”

Henry took one last look at the blackness and shivered. “I fear this land is accursed. There is a taint to the air that chills my bones.”

“‘Tis naught but the cold and wet, Henry. I feel it too. We’ll soon have a fire to warm these old bones of ours. Go now, before the horses sicken.”

Henry nodded reluctantly and left.

Lord John stepped carefully over the threshold, keeping one hand on the stone wall so he wouldn’t get disoriented. A few steps inside, he found a wall sconce and lifted a beeswax candle from its holder. The wind

repeatedly snuffed the spark from his flint, but he finally managed to light the wick, and weak light crept over his hand and spilled onto the floor.

With the light, he could see he stood in a large antechamber. Behind him, dual, arched windows studded the wall, revealing little with night closed around the castle except in the brief flashes of nature's light that proved more disorienting, and unnerving than helpful. John tightened his coat about his middle against a sudden gust of wind and nearly lost the fragile flame to its snuffing fingers. Cupping his hand around the candle limited the extent of his vision, but it would have to do. As he looked ahead, he could see a black hole of a doorway break the smooth the inner wall, and he moved toward it, glancing inside.

A great hall opened before him, cavernous and black. The ceiling stretched beyond his sight in the dimness, saved only from infinity by broken windows casting meager light that couldn't reach as far down as his own head.

He shuffled forward, the pain in his knee flaring from the damp. He needed to find a hearth, and he was familiar enough with the architecture of olden days to know there should be a massive fireplace somewhere in the hall.

"Hold your steps, old man. You have ventured where you don't belong and would do best to take care."

The voice spoke from the dark ahead of him, as deep and cold as the grave. A fist squeezed his heart a brief moment before releasing him. Lord John gasped in pain and surprise, resisting the shiver crawling up his spine.

“My apologies, Sir. I thought this place to be abandoned, else I would not have entered. Who is the master of this house, that I may ask shelter for a time, until the storm abates?”

“I am lord of these lands.”

Lord John feigned a pleasantry he did not feel. “I am Lord John Bordeaux of Raedan. To whom do I have the pleasure of meeting? I confess, my lord, I ... I cannot see you.”

A flash of light lit the hall as torches flared along its length, and fire burst to life in two great hearths on either side of the hall, tall as any man. Blinded momentarily by the sudden brilliance, Lord John blinked rapidly to adjust to the brightness. A flicker of fear flared deep in his soul. A darkness entered his blurred vision, growing rapidly, seizing his attention as surely as death on swift wings. He dropped the candle he held, his fingers nerveless as he saw the lord of the manor. Frozen to the spot, encompassed by an unnamable horror, he could do nothing as the man in blackened armor strode down the centerway toward him. But this was no man ... no man at all....

The man stopped before reaching Lord John, thin tendrils of ice reaching out from him to steal his warmth. John took a halting step back, then straightened, his will fighting the terror gripping him. “T’l bid you goodnight then, my lord, if I am not welcome,” he spoke softly, his voice raspy despite an injection of false confidence.

“I think not. You have trespassed here. There is a price to be paid. By you and your manservant....”

“I came alone--” His jaw snapped shut as movement sounded behind him, a brief shuffle of noise quickly silenced before a gasp echoed through

the hall. Henry had joined them. There could be no denying his presence now. Silence reigned for the span of two pulsing beats of his heart, and John realized the quiet extended beyond the reach of his ears save for his own pounding heart. The storm had abated, or else it could not be heard in this great tomb.

“My lord,” Henry gasped, coming up behind him. His was a steadying presence, though his own fear was palpable even to John. What could two old men do against such a foe? He’d not wielded a sword in decades....

“What do you ask of me, my lord? I will pay any price--”

“Would you?” The dark lord laughed darkly, mirthless and cold.

“Gold, jewels. My daughters will pay any ransom you seek. Please, take pity on an old man.”

The black knight turned then to cross to the hearth fire, his deep purple cape a black swirl around him. Light reflected off his armor like hellfire, deep and red as the blood of the innocents. “Tell me of these daughters you possess. What of the eldest? Is she fair and pure? If you lie, I shall know it,” he said with barely leashed menace.

Lord John liked not this questioning but could say nothing more than the truth. She was safe. This monster could not harm her. “Sh--she is a healer ... renowned across the land for her beauty and her heart, a heart as white and pure as snow.”

The knight faced him again, raising mesh covered fingers to his helm in thought, as though considering John’s words. “I will give you your freedom.”

Lord John and Henry each breathed in a deep sign of relief. “Thank you, my lord--”

“In exchange for your eldest daughter, the healer.”

* * * *

“You cannot ask this of me.”

The dark one chuckled. “I do not ask, little man. It is the price I *demand* ... for your life.”

Lord John moistened his dry lips. “Might I speak with my manservant a moment? In private?”

A grim smile still playing about his cruel mouth, the dark one nodded. “By all means.”

Lord John bowed, and he and Henry moved a small measure away, far enough they felt they could not be overheard. Briefly, it occurred to Lord John that they might use the moment best by attempting an escape, but reality was a cruel master. They were neither of them young, strong, spry as they had once been. They stood not a ghost’s chance in hell of escaping the castle, even with such a one as the dark lord on their heels to add fleetness to their step. And, even supposing fear lent them wings, they could not recover the carriage and horses before he was upon them. Escaping on foot was not even to be considered as a possibility.

“You must go, Henry, and return with men to aid in my release.”

Henry blinked rapidly in surprise, holding his chest as if he feared his heart would break free and burst forth. “How can I, my lord, with that devil watching?”

“He means to keep me alone here. He has said nothing of holding you prisoner, and one of us must go back to fetch Bianca. He intends to send you. I depend upon you, Henry, to gather men willing to come to my aid.”

“Master, I fear they’ll not come. I would have to tell them who holds you captive, else the lot of them would balk and flee the moment they came within sight of this awful place. With their old superstition confirmed that a death knight roams these lands--”

“Do it. And let not my daughters hear of what has befallen me. I would rather stay and rot than allow that devil to get his hands on them.”

Henry said nothing for several moments. “He emphasized *healer*, my lord. I think, perhaps, he asks for her healing touch--”

“No. He is a villain, a devil. I cannot have them exposed to such evil. I *will* not allow it.”

Henry nodded, his face drawn and solemn. “I will do as you ask, my lord.”

“Then let this be good-bye if you cannot rally the men.”

“Do not speak of such things, my lord. It bears on your cause. It is never wise to tempt the fates in such a way.”

Lord John waved his words away. “Take my ring. They will know your words for truth if you present it.” Lord John slipped his signet ring off his ring finger and pressed it into Henry’s palm.

He faced the knight once more. “I will send my manservant at once.”

A smile curled the death knight’s lips, chilling Lord John to his marrow.

Chapter Two

Horses covered in foamy sweat, the team raced through the open gates of Raedan, stopping abruptly in the teeming courtyard as Henry pulled back on the reins. The horses reared their heads, screaming their fatigue and ill use.

Henry could spare them no pity--not now. He dropped the reins and jumped down, shaking with weakness. He was immediately grabbed by the scruff of the neck by a guard.

“What is the meaning of this?” The guard shook him, looking at the exhausted beasts. “You have damn near killed the lord’s horses you old fool!”

“Where is Sir Zycar? I must see him at once!” He pulled Lord Bordeaux’s ring from his vest pocket with shaking fingers. “Lord Bordeaux demands it.”

The guard’s eyes widened and he released him. “He holds counsel with Lady Bianca and the others in the main hall.”

Henry nodded and dashed to the servant's entrance off the kitchen, fast as his old legs would carry him. He reached the hall in moments, and saw it filled with Lord Bordeaux's men at arms. Lady Bianca sat at the head of the gathering with Sir Zycar at her right. Her sisters were nowhere to be seen, thankfully. It would still prove difficult, pulling Sir Zycar away from her, but he had to try.

Henry moved through the throng at meal, until he'd reached the dais where Lady Bianca sat. Lord Bordeaux's chair sat empty, and would likely remain so if he did not succeed.

Sir Zycar spotted him at once, ceasing stroking his thick red beard as he stood and called in a deep booming voice, "Henry! Come here old man. Has Lord Bordeaux returned? Why were we not informed?"

The noise in the hall diminished, all eyes turning toward Henry. He shifted from one foot to another. "Sir Zycar, if I could speak to you in private...."

Lady Bianca regarded him, seeing straight through to his soul, her fine arched brows drawn down as she frowned. "Where is my father, Henry?"

He could not lie to her. She'd always had the ability to sense untruths. Henry turned pleading eyes to Sir Zycar. "Please, Sir, I dare not give my news before her."

Sir Zycar remained silent, grim, as if knowing his news was ill before he'd uttered it.

"I am in control until my father returns. Speak, Henry. Let us all hear what you have to say."

His shoulders slumped. He had failed his master, badly. But he could not disobey his mistress. “Very well.” He swallowed audibly before telling them of the attack on the winter pass.

“None of them have survived then, for they’ve none returned these many days,” Zycar said, stroking the braids in his beard absently.

Henry sighed, saddened at the news. Those knights were the best Raedan had to offer, but they were far more than protection alone. Each had families and people who loved them, who depended upon them. It was a catastrophic blow for him, almost as disastrous as the loss of their lord and master.

“There is more to tell. The pass blocked, we were forced along an alternate route, deep into the valley. It seemed to sense our presence like a live thing. A storm rose from no where to chase us away, but we could not turn back, for we knew the monsters who’d attacked could still be on our trail. We had to go forward. We journeyed for some time through the freakish storm, until the horses were mad with fright, and I weary from fighting them to hold them from running away with us ... and then gates appeared before my eyes. I thought it a trick of age, but now I see it as black sorcery, for inside lurked a horror.”

Henry stopped to force his pounding heart to slow, then continued, “Inside was ... a ... a death knight. He has taken your father, Lady Bianca.”

Gasps and shouts tore through the room in deep baritone. Some men made signs of protection against evil spirits across their chests, their faces filled with fear. Lady Bianca appeared stricken, her skin paling to the whiteness of death.

“The legends are true then.” Zycar breathed heavily, collapsing in his chair. “That such could exist ... able to kill a man with one word, one touch...”

“What does he want?” Lady Bianca asked softly, her voice barely audible above the uproar of the crowd. When Henry remained silent, she gave him a hard look, one that he could not resist.

“The death knight asks for you, Lady Bianca.” She paled more, cold and fragile as crystal. Henry faced Sir Zycar, unable to bear looking on her. “I don’t know what he shall do if she is not received.”

“He cannot be allowed to have her.”

“Lord Bordeaux’s words exactly. But please, we must send help. Our lord commanded me to bring help to free him, else his life is forfeit. The dark one will not barter for his release. He said only, your daughter for your own life.”

A man shouted from the crowd, “How are we to battle an immortal?”

“What hope have we in meeting such a one?” another shouted.

Chaos erupted as more and more men shouted their fears and doubts, their certainty that they could not hope to best such a foe.

Zycar slammed his fist into his palm. “He is lost to us. There is naught we can do to save him, for we cannot forfeit his daughter, not when he forbade it. We are but mortal men, we cannot hope to face such a foe alone ... not and keep our lives, not with hope of saving our lord. A hundred men could not face him and win. A sorcerer is required to battle his evil. We must send for one at once.”

“I fear there is no time, Sir Zycar.”

“We have no choice.”

They continued arguing among themselves, growing more heated as the minutes passed. No one noticed as Lady Bianca slipped away.

* * * *

Bianca hastily gathered supplies and clothing, both for herself and her father, and stuffed them into pouches on either side of the saddle. With a light load and a look of confidence, she mounted Beast and guided the horse from the stables. The gatekeeper guards, she knew, would balk at allowing her to pass unescorted, so she turned her horse toward the postern gate, knowing it would be unguarded at this hour.

Hours later, the horse's massive hooves thundered through the quiet forest, scattering birds and other wild life at their passing with the flutter of wings and the snap of branches. She guided Beast on a downward path, the air cooling as they headed north and down the mountain pass.

Doubts shook her as she rode, but Bianca dismissed them. She would find this castle of which Henry had spoken--she had to. Only one valley lay unexplored to the Raedan people. It was the only possible land where such a castle might lie. The valley lay as a shallow divide between their borders and those of Hellsing.

She worried over her father as she rode steadily down, the day passing in a blur. Her father was old. He could not last long with terror taking him in its terrible hold. She could only trust that the death knight would not physically harm him, or else he would have nothing to bargain with. In her heart, she trusted, though she knew it was foolish to believe such a terror could have any shred of honor.

As Beast tired from his steady pace, she lay her hands upon his neck, easing the gelding's worn muscles. Her fingertips glowed red, lit from within as the healing power spread from her body to his, healing his aches and hurts. She regretted pushing him so hard, but she could not allow her father to suffer any longer than he must.

Dusk snuffed the sun's light, night prowling upon them through the canopy of the forest. Bianca clung wearily to Beast, drained from using her powers, and by her thoughts and fears for her father. She drifted into a trance as Beast took the lead and picked his own way through the dark woods.

It wasn't until Beast startled abruptly that she noticed they'd reached the forest's end. The small trail Beast stood on opened into a wide path, and in the distance, she could see the spires of a castle grasping toward the moonlit sky.

A sliver of fear slithered over her skin as they trotted up the road. She ignored Beast's nickering and huffing, keeping her eyes on the dark mass as it grew more distinct the closer they came. There could be no mistaking the castle as any other but the one Henry had described in his ramblings. Drawing down a hill, the castle slipped out of sight behind a tall stone wall obscured to near invisibility by tree growth and vines clinging to the stonework.

As she rounded the border wall, the entrance came into view, and she urged Beast onward with near giddy relief that she was so close to her goal. She would soon see her father free.

The spider's gates, looking just as Henry had described them, hung open, welcoming, and she passed unhampered through them. The road

stretched smooth and wide, the lawn trimmed and well kept. She'd thought to encounter rot and destruction, wildness, not a dwelling of this caliber and keeping. It appeared almost ... lived in.

She frowned, wondering now if she had mistaken Henry's description, if she had wandered onto the grounds of some other castle. But she knew the land well. She could not believe another castle such as this lay nearby and had never once been seen by any of their people. This must be the place. Perhaps Henry, in his terror, had imagined much of what he believed he had seen?

She halted Beast near the entrance and looped his reins around a short, ornate post that stood at the base of the steps. Cautious, she gathered her courage and ascended. Knocking on the door garnered her no answer, so she opened it, allowing the heavy oaken door to fall open on oiled hinges and slap against the inner wall.

It rang hollowly through the antechamber, the clap echoing into nothingness. There was no one inside to greet her, but the chamber was well lit against the darkness closing in from outside. Bianca walked inside, looking around, expecting an ambush, and finally entered the vast hall. It was empty, as well.

She frowned, disconcerted that she'd ridden so far and found she faced no enemy. She had no idea where to begin searching for her father.

"Welcome, my lady," a man's voice spoke behind her.

Bianca whirled around to see nothing but air and the empty antechamber she'd passed through. The voice had to belong to the knight. He was taunting her. "Show yourself, fiend, and end this game. I have come as you demanded, for my father's life."

He chuckled darkly, amused by her show of boldness. “As you wish, my lady.”

A wind rippled through the hall, flames dancing in its wake, light flickering. A chill seized her, her neck hairs rising with the feel of someone, or something, staring at her. Slowly, she turned back to look at the dark throne....

Facing the death knight....

He absorbed her attention, capturing it, like a moth drawn to the sweet dew gathered on a spider’s web. Speechless, she could only stare at him, take in every detail like a dying woman thirsting for water. To look upon him, he appeared as a man, but a cold emanated from his being that the distance could not strangle.

He must not see her fear.

She strode toward him, her back straight, her heart pounding until she thought it would burst from her chest. Halting at the dais, she gazed up at him, willing her eyes to reflect a calm she did not feel.

An icy chill flowed from him, curling over her body like a lover’s caress. She fought against the numbness, watching as he took one step down and another, until he stood close enough she could reach out and touch him.

Armor, blackened as though scorched by flame, covered him completely. Carved into the breastplate was a coat of arms: a spider twined about a rose. Something about it teased her memory but remained elusive. She shoved the irritant away, lifting her gaze. Hair the shining white of platinum spilled across his shoulders, drawing her gaze upward to his face. A helm obscured his eyes from her sight, leaving only his jaw exposed.

Hard, angular, he was formed of bold lines, with hard, cruel lips that threatened soft, sensual delights and wicked pleasures of the flesh....

She shook herself mentally, wondering at the strange turn of her thoughts. He could be only illusion, a figment of her mind, for he appeared not to be a monster of old superstition. She couldn't know when it had happened, but she'd begun to doubt herself, doubt that this man could be something so horrid as a death knight. Hardly daring, she reached up to touch him, to see if he was real. A shock of fiery ice jolted through her fingertips at the contact, numbing her hand. Red light flared from her fingers, and she gasped and pulled back. The pain ceased immediately.

His eyes narrowed at her through the slits of the visor, but no longer did cold radiate from his armor. "You are a healer," he said, sounding almost ... amazed.

Bianca could only watch as his lips formed the words, fascinated. Some spell had taken hold of her. She dug her nails into her palms, squeezing her fists tightly. The sting cleared her mind, made her focus. "I am as such."

"And you agree to exchange yourself for your father?"

Bianca nodded. "I must see him."

"He is ... already gone."

Her composure cracked. "What? Is he ... dead?" She feared what he would say, yet feared not knowing. If he'd harmed her father--

His jaw hardened. "No. I sent him home on your horse when you entered my domain."

Bianca whirled to run from him, but the knight grabbed her arm, halting her. "When he awakens, he will be in Raedan once more."

Bianca turned on him. “You use foul trickery. How can I believe you?”

He watched her steadily a moment. “In your heart you know I do not lie. But hear this, I pledge on the eternal damnation of my soul, your father has been released. In time, I will release you to go to him ... once you have performed a service for me.”

Her pulse sped at the feel of cool metal gripping her arm, at the firm set of his lips. She could not deny his words--he spoke the truth. She sensed no life but her own here, not her father, not Beast. She was alone with this man--this death knight.

Bianca sighed, pulling her arm free. She was at his mercy then, until he had what he wanted. “So be it. But I ask a boon. Lift your helm. I would see the ... man ... whom I would call master and know his name.”

A corner of his mouth lifted, almost a smile, but far too cynical to be pleasant. In an old courtly ritual, he lifted her hand and bowed low over it, pressing cool lips against her skin. “As you wish Lady...?”

“Bianca,” she said softly, watching as he straightened and reached up to pull the helm from his head.

He removed it and tucked it under one arm, regarding her boldly. Her heart froze at the deadly beauty of his eyes. Deep set, they were a piercing blue as dark as the vast depths of the ocean. He seemed to sense her stricken state and took advantage, allowing his gaze to roam down her body with sinful deliberation. The intensity of his gaze swept over her with near physical sensation, heating chilled flesh with effortless ease.

Briefly, her thoughts turned chaotic, carnal. A vision flashed in her mind of two bodies writhing in ecstasy, of covering his naked flesh with the

silk of her hair and the wet heat of her mouth. Just as suddenly, the vision cleared and she was freed from temptation.

Something of the past? She couldn't know, but knew with a certainty that he wished only to strike a nerve. He impressed her as more than what he seemed, an enigma, a contradiction of forces bound inside one tumultuous soul. His eyes reflected that strange quality, as though his existence was a torment to himself, and inexplicably, her heart reached out to him. She pulled herself from the brink of folly before it was too late, before she could lose what sense she still possessed.

"What are you called?" she asked, disturbed to hear the almost breathless quality of her voice.

"Damian Alessandro," he said, and smiled, though it did not reach his eyes. It was as if no joy could penetrate his shell.

She regretted her brashness in coming alone, but knew she'd had no other choice. With that thought, Bianca remembered suddenly that she'd failed to retrieve her things from the pouches on Beast. She turned away, kicking herself mentally for not removing them when she'd stopped.

Beast was long gone by now. "My things.... I have nothing. Not even a farewell from my father."

She felt the heavy press of his hand on her shoulder. "I will tend to your every need ... until you give me what I desire."

Chapter Three

Damian had thought the old man exaggerated her qualities. Instead, he'd hardly scratched the surface of the truth. Thick, rich locks pooled over her shoulders like ink, emphasizing the paleness of her skin and the fragile, blue lacework of veins pumping life through her body. The delicate bones of her face formed classical lines, her smoky eyes prominent, enigmatic. But her appeal was more than physical—despite her loveliness. It was an inner light that drew him inexorably to her, that pricked the blackness consuming his soul.

Long had it been since he'd encountered a woman of pure heart, and she tempted him in ways he'd not imagined. Inside something stirred, a sensation he had long forgotten, and denied, through the centuries. For what was desire but a fuel, an emotion of energy and vibrancy ... the creation of life ... and no part of his existence.

Damian tightened his hand on her shoulder, no more feeling her flesh than he could the air stirring his hair. His only sensation existed in his mind's imaginings, a torment to what still remained of his sanity. He could not *feel* her, could not smell her hair, nor taste her skin, though the temptation was there, nevertheless.

A temptation to appease the sudden, fierce longing, to resume his human form and take her was near overwhelming ... to lay her on the ground

and splay her legs wide, sink his turgid flesh deep within her and feel the liquid heat consume him--

Abruptly, he tore himself from the thoughts, removing his hand from her shoulder and the enticing appeal to do what he should not. He could not risk it. He had but one night in a hundred years to recapture a single moment of life, to resume his human flesh and feel the world as a living being. The promise of it had been his only solace in these dark years. An unwilling woman could not satisfy his desires, and the torment of having slaked his lust but for so brief a time would send him over the edge of sanity when it was torn away on the morning as his curse returned full force.

No, he must see her merely as a means to an end. For he was tired of this existence, weary of the yawning blackness teasing him with blessed oblivion but never nearing his reach.

She turned to face him, piercing him with a stare of shaky confidence and expectancy. "What do you wish of me, my lord?"

"You must call me Damian."

She nodded, and feathery strands of hair blew across her face, clinging to her lips. She brushed them away, a simple, sensual gesture that captured his attention fully.

"Very well then. When would you like me to begin my service to you?" Bianca asked.

She was eager to be gone. He could not blame her. The ways of the living were lost to him. "Any time your are ready to be free," he said.

"What must I do?"

He narrowed his eyes, studying her. This was what he wanted, what he'd sought for years and given up hope of attaining. Those that knew of

the curse had long since crumbled to dust. He couldn't expect her to know or suspect ... and yet his hope flared anew in her presence. If only she were willing to use her power for him. "I require you to ... heal me."

Bianca frowned. A look of doubt passed across her face, lightening the smoky gray of her eyes. "You are immortal, are you not? I don't understand...."

He turned from her, unable to face the condemnation he knew would show in her eyes once the truth was revealed. It should not matter to him. His feelings, he knew, had vanished with his humanity, but she'd broken through his armor of ice somehow. If she saw him as he truly was, no more than vacant armor and a translucence of flesh, she would run from him in terror. How ironic that he looked akin to the necromancer he had destroyed.

"I am accursed. This form is but illusion alone. Beneath this armor, lies only the shell of my spirit. You must heal me with your touch, as you banished the cold when you laid fingers upon my breast."

"I do not think I can."

Damian faced her, his jaw tight with anger. He should have realized she would try to elude him. "If you want to gain your freedom, you will."

"Perhaps if I knew the curse--"

"It is nonsense. The curse has no meaning or purpose other than to drive one insane. It is the blow he struck me which keeps me in bondage."

She sighed softly, shook her hair back from her shoulders. "Very well then. If 'tis an injury...." She reached up to touch his face and he pulled back abruptly.

He'd not been touched in so long. A painful longing reared, and he fought to control it, to bring the beast inside down.

“It must be done,” she said softly. He nodded slowly, his eyes wary, and allowed her to cup his jaw in her palms. “You’re cold,” she whispered and closed her eyes, concentrating.

Damian watched as a slight crease marred the space between her arched eyebrows, studied the dark sweep of her lashes and the movement of her eyes behind her lids. He could not feel her as he wanted and dared not hope, but it rose without his urging, defied his will. He could not doubt it when he felt the pang of disappointment as the red glow from before failed to reappear. She suffered no pain as she held his face. Something was wrong.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked at him, dropped her hands to her sides. “There is naught I can do. You are beyond my talents.”

A cold, deadly anger fueled the rage he’d held in check, a fury unleashed by the hope dangled before him then snatched away. She had not tried. He could not see how her touch could have banished the icy shell surrounding him before, yet she now lacked the power to free his spirit from captivity.

Fire flashed in her gray eyes, and she pulled back from him as if stung. Then he *knew*. Knew in that moment that she refused to heal him out of spite. He’d not harmed her father. There had been no other way to entice her to come. He *knew* in her heart she didn’t believe he deserved to be healed, that he was a monster ... even the death knight. If she had thought he deserved mercy, she would have been able to give him what he wanted so desperately.

He whirled away from her, unable to stand the scorn in her eyes. A growl of rage and agony poured from his throat, filled with the agony and longing he’d pent-up for centuries. Winds and flame rose with his voice,

battering the hall, flames reaching toward the ceiling as the banners ripped to shreds in the teeth of the wind.

Distantly, he recognized her sharp cry of fear, heard the soft patter of her feet on the stonework.

She would not leave him.

The heavy outer door slammed shut before she could reach it. She hurled herself against the door, her fists knocking against the wood. A hollow ringing sounded in the hall from her pounding. He crossed the short distance in seconds, clamped his hands on her shoulders and made her face him.

“You cannot leave,” he said, his voice a hiss of sound through his tight jaw. “Until you heal me, you will remain.”

She blanched, shocked that he touched her, her eyes wide with fear and desperation. He knew these emotions, had become a master at evoking them in all who ventured close. He knew terror had dulled her mind and she had not listened to him. He shook her slightly.

She blinked, as if waking from a nightmare, then trembled when she realized it was real. She tore at his hands, frantic. “Never! I’ll never help you!” she screamed and fought him feebly, her hair a wild, tangled mass, whipped by the blasts of air his fury had aroused.

For a moment, he felt pity and nearly released her from Helmskeep, but then he angrily banished such weak emotion. He would have what he wanted, even if he should be damned for all eternity for corrupting an innocent. His dues had been paid. If she’d once been pure of heart, the evil infecting his soul had surely penetrated hers. It mattered not. “You will not go until I have what I want.”

“NO!”

He released her and she pushed away from him, running to the windows. They were out of reach, but she could not have escaped through them regardless. He controlled this castle, these lands.

Breathing erratically, she gasped in frustration and ran away, back through the hall, disappearing into one of its many branches.

“Try all you like,” he whispered to the empty chamber, regret sharp and piercing, “you can no more escape than I can.”

* * * *

As Bianca fled through the halls, flames leapt to life in bronze sconces as she approached. Certain at first, that she'd discovered someone she could appeal to for aid, she had run faster, calling out. Finally, however, breathless, dejected, she had had to face the truth. She was alone in this wretched place with the death knight. She'd discarded the useless hope that a person ran before her lighting the candles, just out of reach-- someone who could help. A silly thought it was, for a foolish, naive girl. Damian Alessandro controlled this castle and everything in it. Even the windows and stone seemed to obey him, for escape hovered always just out of reach. Sometimes the windows' sills seemed but an inch distant, but if she found a table to stand on, they remained elusive, as if always rising beyond the reach of her arm.

She couldn't go back and face him. He'd terrified her, not as a death knight, but as a soul in wretched agony. She'd failed for the first time in her

life, failed to ease another being's suffering. Her own body had echoed that cry of anguish, and she could not bear it a moment longer.

The halls twisted, ending in inexplicable places, and turning in opposite directions, guiding her to some unknown destination--perhaps back to him. Finally, after what seemed hours, and her hope of escaping had given out, she came to a door at the end of the hall.

Weary from frustrated tears and her flight, she opened it, caution gone in the wake of exhaustion. Inside lay a sumptuous feast for the eyes, a delight to her worn senses. She rubbed her eyes, not believing what she saw, but still it remained.

A bed draped in ruby and gold brocade encompassed nearly one entire wall and extended far into the room. The bedcovers were turned back as though she was expected, revealing crimson silk sheets and mattresses stacked as high as her waist. Several gowns lay across the fine spread: an emerald trimmed in silvered lace with a train that spilled onto the floor; a deep indigo with ivy embroidery in pale cerulean; a third of gold, barely visible beneath the others. A fire burned merrily in a small hearth, and beside it, a tub of steaming water sat ready for her bath.

Her scalp and skin itched from the sweat and tears she'd shed in her frantic race. Her dark gray gown felt heavy, dirty, and somber, as if all her sorrow and hardship could be peeled away just by removing it.

The temptation was too great to be ignored. Bianca stepped inside and closed the door behind her. On a table beside the bed, a silver platter lay, gold filigree coating the edges like lace. Atop the platter lay several plates, each more tempting than the last: one of sliced meats in thick juices; another of cheeses, white, yellow, and some marbled with blue veins, others

a creamy paste to spread upon fresh, dark bread; still another plate held fruits; and another brimmed with cakes topped with wild berries and stiffened cream. She could hardly assimilate the delicious scents of food teasing her senses and the delicate fragrance of rose petals floating in the bath.

Bianca was past the point of caring if dark magic had conjured the room and its contents. If he thought to seduce her with food, bath, and gowns, he was wrong. Nothing he did would change the fact that she could not heal him.

But she was of no mind to spite herself and allow his efforts go to waste.

Testing the water, she discovered the bath was still too hot, so she sat on the edge of the bed and sampled the choice bits of food. Mulled wine warmed her throat and heated her from the inside out, and her nerves mellowed.

Full and sated, she stood and untied the lacings on the sides of her gown enough so that she could pull it over her head. She dropped the hopelessly soiled dress on the floor, then shrugged her shift off her shoulders. The thin shift followed the gown, and she stepped from the pile.

She shook her hair out, stretching her muscles, then walked to the tub, eager to wash the grime away.

“Is all to your liking, my lady?”

Bianca whirled around and screamed, covering her naked breasts and womanhood with her arms.

Damian stood near the bed, watching her.

“Get out!” she screamed and shook her hair forward for more coverage. She could reach for a bath linen, but then he would see something she’d rather he didn’t. How could he have entered? She’d heard nothing, not the opening of the door, not his footsteps, or the creak of his armor--nothing!

He raked his gaze down her body, and her skin flushed under his perusal as if he touched her. “I assure you, Lady Bianca, I have not the appetites of a mortal man.”

His gaze rested lingeringly on the blossoming curve of her breasts before moving up to settle on her face. His face remained impassive, but there was a glint to his eyes she’d not seen before. It was sufficient to make her doubt his words, and despite his earlier actions, a flash of heat suffused her insides and caused her skin to prickle with awareness. But perhaps it was merely the wine that made her react so.

Bianca swallowed and closed her eyes, counting to ten before opening them once more. Still he stood there, watching her, not recognizing--or perhaps unwilling--to take her hint.

She straightened and regarded him with a cool stare. “Leave me, now, or I swear I will do myself harm if only to be free of you,” she said slowly, enunciating each word for emphasis.

He smiled then, a curving of his lips that was crooked, self satisfied. Gone was his fierce demeanor. She could almost believe him just a ... man.

“As you wish, my lady. I will return to you on the morrow.” He turned and strode to the door.

“Remember to knock next time.” Her words stopped him. For several moments she more than half feared that he would turn his wrath

upon her again, but after no more than a brief hesitation, he continued as if she had not spoken.

She glared at the panels of the door as he closed it behind him. Though it was muffled by the thick wooden door, she swore she could hear him laughing.

But that was impossible.

He was a beast. Amusement was an emotion he could no more feel than he was capable of experiencing other human emotions.

Immediately, she twined a bath linen around her body, then strode to the door and checked to make certain it was locked, not that it would keep him out should he choose not to honor her privacy. She fumed inside, thinking of his gall. Oh how her father and his men would laugh to see her now, and then quail at the thought of her defiance to a creature of legend.

She'd reached the point of exhaustion where even facing nightmares failed to rouse her sense of self-preservation, though he'd managed to stir her with his entrance ... and not entirely with fear.

With that disturbing thought, she went to take her bath, but looked constantly over her shoulder, expecting to meet his piercing, encompassing stare. Tomorrow, she would find a way to escape if it killed her.

Chapter Four

Round and round she went in her mind, trying to think of a way to leave the castle without him aware of it. She could think of nothing that she hadn't already tried. The only way she would be able to accomplish her goal, she finally realized, was if he was not attuned to her every move. To do that, she would have to lull him into a sense of complacency. The she could slip away before he awakened to her plan.

Her problem in setting her plan into motion arose when she discovered he was avoiding her. She couldn't fathom why. He did not return to her room—though, when she wasn't looking, her dishes emptied and fresh food appeared both to break her fast, and later on at noon. She'd studied the platters thoroughly to discover the source of their power, and checked the room for secret passages but could find nothing.

His power extended beyond her comprehension, and she did not like the thought that he could come into her room so easily with no obstruction to do whatever he wanted.

She could not endure this. She had to act, but he was being ... difficult.

With great reluctance, she dressed in the indigo gown, struggling with the back lacings. She couldn't get them tight enough, and so the neckline slipped low on her breasts, just above her nipples. It couldn't be helped, but, if she was to believe his words, it didn't matter.

Perhaps some memory of his life before lingered, not a feel of what it had been, but a memory of what he had once felt, and that accounted for his seemingly lascivious behavior?

It might be no more than thoughts to comfort herself with, but it made far more sense to her way of thinking that to believe a ghostly creature could feel the fire of lust in his blood as the living did.

Bianca wandered through the halls, noticing they had changed yet again into some semblance of normalcy. Perhaps it was only her hysteria that had made them appear to be a maze the night before. She checked doors as she came upon them, but many of the rooms were barren, and those that were not, did not contain her quarry. She continued on to the great hall, but it too was empty save for two hearth fires and banners streaming the walls. She stopped a moment to study them, wishing she could understand why his coat of arms seemed so familiar to her.

Still the memory eluded her. Shaking her head, she walked to the opposite side from which she'd come, intent on finding him. The corridor was much the same as the other, until she reached the end. A shaft of light stretched into the dark corridor through an open doorway. She approached cautiously and peered inside. Warm sunlight turned the room to gold, revealing a rounded room lined with shelves of leather bound books. The pungent scent of oil and parchment pleased her, as did the earthy scent of leather.

She realized this was the tower she'd seen when outside, reaching so high to the sky. Arched windows broke the walls at regular intervals, disappearing up past her line of vision from the door frame.

Damian sat in a carved chair, facing one window, his profile to her. He slouched low in the chair, legs extended out, with his arms crossed over his chest and a deep frown upon his face. Dust motes floated in the air like fairy dust, glittering in the sunlight streaming through the windows, gathering on his armor and hair.

She couldn't help the wicked imp that took hold as she looked at him. "Sulking?" she asked, smiling.

He looked up at her, a thundercloud on his brow, and the door shut in her face with a resounding thud.

Bianca was taken aback, and then annoyed by his rudeness. How dare he! That was something a ... a child would do, not-- "Damian!" Bianca tried the handle, but the door wouldn't budge. She slapped her palms against the door. "'Twas but a jest! Can you not take a tease? Please, open the door."

She stopped, listening for movement inside, or a response. Either he was performing his silence trick from the night before, he couldn't hear her, or he didn't want to. She'd not give up now that she'd found him. "You're behaving like a child." She stopped and giggled at the incongruity of the situation--she felt like her father dealing with one of her sisters' tantrums. "I've come to make amends. You cannot continue to avoid me ... unless you'd rather set me free."

The latch clicked, and the door swung slowly open. She held her hand out, in case it was some trick, then moved through the doorway. He was standing, facing her with his arms across his chest. His expression remained dark.

“I’m not a child. I have seen centuries of existence--” He stopped his tirade as she clutched her stomach and laughed. He frowned at her. “What do you find so humorous?”

Bianca wiped tears away and grinned at him. “My apologies,” she sputtered at his fierce expression and clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle another round of giggles. He looked nothing so much like a man whose pride had been pricked.

Damian smiled as if it suddenly dawned on him what she’d found so funny. It was a true smile that reached his eyes, warming them with life, and it wiped all thought of humor from her mind. Seeing those beguiling lips turned up sparked a reaction low in her belly, and her heart fluttered as he moved forward and met her in the center of the library. He looked intent on some purpose.

She looked up at him, breathless all of a sudden to find him so near. She opened her mouth to speak, but he raised a hand to silence her. “Hush. Hold a moment.” Damian circled her. “This is not how this gown is meant to be worn.”

She startled when his hands touched her back, and she realized he’d removed his gauntlets. His cool fingers slipped through the weight of her hair to touch her back gently, and her skin tingled at the slight contact, prickling with gooseflesh. Her neck felt ripe for the taking, eager for the feel of his lips. Never before had she felt so exposed, and it was strange that he evoked such vulnerability within her. She should not feel anything, least of all this odd weakness.

With care, he tightened her lacings until the gown clung tightly to her waist, and her breasts swelled above the neckline. She felt the slight brush

of his hands on the small of her back, but knew she must imagine him lingering so near her buttocks.

He moved around her with an appraising eye, examining her body from foot to head. She swallowed tightly as his gaze locked with her own, and pleasure glimmered in the blue depths of his eyes. The light mood of before seemed to have changed to something darker, more seductive, but she couldn't help but wonder if it was all in her imagination.

"The indigo suits you, Lady Bianca," he said with a husky drawl that tightened the expectancy of her nerves.

Bianca resisted the impulse to shiver. "Thank you, my lord."

"Damian," he corrected.

"Damian. I ... I've come here to strike a deal."

He arched a brow, looked down the bare sweep of her throat and breasts. "But we've already made one, unless you've thought of something more ... pleasurable to us both."

She swallowed again, trying to moisten her suddenly dry throat. He'd told her he had no such interests, and she'd almost believed him. Could immortal beings share the appetites of men? No, she must remain focused. It made no difference to her if he felt desire. "I believe I could not heal you before because my powers are not strong enough."

His eyes hardened at the reminder of her failure. "Go on."

"To increase my strength, I must gather certain things to give me aid. But I must be allowed to walk about freely in order to do so."

He gave no answer but turned and strode to the window, looking out on the day. Sunlight limned his bold profile, casting a shadow across the

side of his face exposed to her sight. “If I agree to your ... proposal, do I have your word you will not attempt to leave?”

She was taken aback at the directness of his question, though she should not have been surprised. She was unused to lying, and it did not set well with her, but he would not listen to reason and would not believe that she truly couldn't help him. If lying was the only way out of her predicament, she would do it and pray for her sins once she had escaped. “Yes,” she whispered.

He faced her, but with the light behind him, she could not see his eyes or the expression on his face. She could not see if he believed her sincerity or not, or if he turned scornful eyes upon her. His stance remained wary as it was always, giving no indication of his thoughts.

Finally, after a minute passed, he said, “The meekness of your voice belies you, and you do not sound so certain. Do you promise me you'll not try to leave?”

“Yes,” she said with more force. “I ... swear it.”

“Very well then. I give fair warning: if you break my trust, prepare to suffer the consequences of your actions.”

“I understand,” she said, not believing for a moment that he would harm her. For all his bluster and rage, she relied on her initial impression that his was a soul in conflict, not of evil, and that he would not dare hurt her for fear of losing his one chance at life and the redemption of his spirit. Regret stabbed her heart at her deception, but she couldn't dwell on that, not now.

Regardless, she didn't plan on getting caught. If what she suspected was true, that he controlled his land and this castle, it followed that if she

moved beyond the outer wall, she would be free of his reach. She refused to believe differently, for that would only lead to despair.

* * * *

Damian remained in the library as she walked out. True to his word, the doors at the main entrance were unlocked and opened easily for her. She still could not believe he trusted her so implicitly, and so wandered around the drive in front of the house to test her limits.

She walked along the smooth drive, occasionally stooping to retrieve some bit of lawn while surreptitiously looking back at the door. He wasn't there, and the tower she had left him in didn't face the drive, so he could not see her from there if he still remained inside.

She continued that way, acting as if she was gathering small weeds, until the gentle swell of the land obscured her view, and she could no longer see the door from the distance. Certain it was now or never, Bianca gathered her long skirts in her hands and dashed down the road. It seemed much longer traversing it on her own legs rather than on Beast, but she ran through the stitch in her side until she reached the webbed gates.

She had no plan for once she'd made it out of the grounds but knew something would come to her. She felt certain that her father would have sent men to take her by now. If she could find them, they could see her safely home. If she remained inside, they'd likely not make it through the gates with the debilitation of their own fears. In any case, she couldn't completely rely on them, which was why she had dared Damian's wrath in attempting her haphazard plan.

The gates seemed higher than she remembered, more barbed, and the webbing thicker with barely a space to reach her hand through. She most certainly couldn't squeeze through the small spaces between the wrought iron bars. Nor would the latch release and open the gates--no matter how hard she fought to pull it open. She should have known he'd not leave the most likely exit unlocked. He was no fool, even if he did seem to trust her.

Thwarted with an easy escape, Bianca desisted, staring in frustration at the gates while she caught her breath, surveying her options. She couldn't open the gate, for she had no tools to break the lock, and she couldn't scale it with her dress on. Then it dawned on her--she could remove her gown and climb the gate in her shift, then pull the dress through from the other side once she was over.

It was a perfect plan.

She pulled the lacing loose at her back waist, but those at the top, between her shoulder blades, gave her trouble. After struggling for what seemed an eternity to reach one of the short strands, she finally managed to pinch the end of one with her fingertips. Panting and sweating from exertion, she carefully pulled it, fearing she'd lose her grip, and finally loosened the knot enough she could pull the gown over her head.

Bianca breathed a sigh of relief to finally be free and laid the gown against the edge of the gate. She knotted the hem of her shift up high on her thighs to allow her legs easy movement, then looked down to survey her disreputable state. Should anyone come along, she would be quite a sight, nearly naked with a scandalous expanse of her leg showing. There was no sense in worrying over such a ridiculous fear, however. No one would come to see her.

Chuckling at her own absurdity, Bianca edged the tip of one foot in a section of webbing and braced herself. She caught two handholds on the bars above her head and hoisted herself off the ground. She laughed, thinking she must look like some half dead creature caught in a spider's web.

Bianca had just lifted her left foot to the next section when a familiar voice sounded behind her, shattering her plans.

“Pray tell, my lady, what are you doing?”

* * * *

It took every ounce of his control not to strip his armor and take her there against the gate. She had not healed him, but neither was he the same as he had been. She'd awakened a primeval need inside him that grew with each passing hour, desire unleashed with the force of a river slamming through floodgates.

Her thighs were exposed to his view, the flesh smooth, taut. She had one leg hitched at a high angle on the gate for her climb, and he could see the tempting curve of one cheek of her buttocks. His shaft ached with the need to touch her womanly flesh, feel the hot, moist satin between her legs.

He clenched his hands, regaining control as she dropped to the ground and faced him. He'd given her her head, and she'd betrayed him. He must remember she could not be trusted.

She pulled uncomfortably at the neckline of her shift, looking anywhere but directly into his eyes. “I was just--”

“There is no need for explanation, Bianca.” He moved and righted the abandoned stool near the gate and sat, feet spread apart and braced. “Come here to me.” He slowly removed his gauntlets and let them drop to the ground as she watched.

She eyed his bare hands nervously. “No,” she said and squared her shoulders, thrusting her breasts forward unintentionally. Her nipples were hard, the rosy flesh visible through the near transparent shift, as was the dark thatch at the apex of her thighs.

“Now,” he said, leaving no room for argument.

Reluctant, she dragged herself to where he sat, stopping just out of reach.

“Get down on your knees, Bianca.”

Seconds passed, and the air grew pregnant with tension. She clenched her hands into fists, wanting to deny him, but finally complied. She dropped down to the soft loam, her hands digging into her shift as she viewed him warily.

“Come forward and lie across my lap.” He watched her steadily, the emotions running across her face---anxiety, expectancy. He sensed the increase in her pulse, the rapid beat of her heart and the quickening of her shallow breath. “Do not make me repeat myself,” he warned, his voice low with menace.

She shook slightly as she obeyed, bending over his knees. The weight of her body and the tilt of her hips, made him hard, but it was only in his mind--always in his mind. He smoothed the mass of her hair off her back, pushing the tendrils over her shoulders and head. She remained silent

as he stroked her back in concentric circles, moving steadily down her spine.

“You agreed I would punish you, if you broke my trust,” he said softly as he cupped one firm cheek.

She startled at the touch and bucked against him, pushing her upper body upward to flee. He held her lightly, controlling her movement, and whispered a single word. Vines snaked out of the ground at his command, wrapping around her wrists and ankles. She growled and fought the living shackles until they pulled her legs and arms taut and immovable. She could tossed her head and squirmed against his thighs, but she could not move otherwise unless he allowed it.

“Shh,” he soothed and stroked her buttock cheeks through the shift, smoothing a palm down the back of her bare thighs, then drew up the crease where she had pressed her thighs together. The fine hairs on her flesh prickled from his touch, pleasing him in some unnamable way. He inched his fingers under the gathered hem, drawing it up to bare her completely to his eyes.

He’d intended to spank her, until her skin pinkened from the palm of his hand, but seeing her naked, virginal flesh taunted him. He had no desire to inflict pain, not even the most minute. An entirely different want compelled him now, a desire to possess and claim filled him, searing his mind to all else. He stroked one finger up her slit.

“Do not!” she screamed and wiggled against him, to no avail.

“I regret that you give me no choice.” She stilled as he parted her folds with a single finger and stroked it back and forth, separating her moist

layers. Her clit was hard, swollen, and he nudged it with his fingertip, slipping in an easy circle around the nub.

She gasped and tensed, and he flicked his finger against her again, near groaning at her reaction, the delicious tension of her body as she waited to see what he would do next. He knew then no man had ever touched her this way before, that he was the first to probe her femininity, and it pleased him to have her this way.

He continued teasing her clit, never touching it, and moved a thumb to her passage, slipping inside her tight hole. She shuddered, arching her back as she released a moan.

Damian's groin spasmed painfully with the need to impale her, to have her in this position, open and vulnerable to his every touch. He wanted to release her bonds and wrap her thighs around his waist, let her ride his cock until they both reached fulfillment.

He wanted her as a man wants a woman, and wondered if he'd merely denied the existence of such wants these many years. It was possible. He could detect pressure, the weight of her on his lap, the clenching of her inner muscles as he thrust his thumb fully inside and curved it to her passage, but the joy of touch was gone. The electrifying impulses that spread pleasure along his nerves did not exist in this form.

Damian stroked the back of her neck, withdrawing his hand from her cleft.

"Don't...", she said breathlessly and trembled. Whether she wanted him to continue or stop, he did not know.

His fingers glistened with her wetness, pleasing him. He raised his fingers to his face, but he could not smell her musky desire, nor taste the

sweet juices flowing from her womanhood. Her wetness was evidence of her desire for his touch, whether she admitted it or not, and it satisfied a need to prove she wasn't as immune to him as she'd led him to believe.

"Do you like that, my lady?" he growled and thrust two fingers deeply inside her. She cried out at his force, shook as he roughly rubbed his thumb against her clit, back and forth, faster and faster. He pushed in and out of her tightness, harder and harder. Her muscles clenched against him, holding him, drawing his fingers in to his limit. She made small, animalistic noises in her throat ... soft, husky.

"Please," she begged, bucking against him, hands grasping the earth for support. She tossed her head, moaning. He stroked her, saturating his hand, until her juices flowed down the insides of her thighs. She screamed suddenly, her body spasming in release. She heaved for breath, and the tension fled her body as she collapsed weakly.

He'd brought her to climax, to a release he could not attain. His mind could make his cock hard, but no more. It was the ultimate torment, that he could take her, and yet never come. What would happen if he resumed human form?

Gritting his teeth he banished the temptation, realizing it would drive him mad not to have her for eternity, to find ecstasy in her arms only to have it snatched away again.

The vines released her, and she pushed away from him, anger flaring in her eyes.

He could see himself reflected in those gray depths as the monster he was.

“You beast,” she gritted out and stood, not bothering to dust the dirt from her legs and hands. She turned and ran away from him. He made no attempt to stop her.

Indeed. He had never denied what he was ... but he could regret it.

Damian stood and walked to the gate’s edge to retrieve her gown. His shaft remained tight and ached with need, never to be satisfied. It was a torture to keep her here, for she would not give him what he desired, in any way. He was helpless to refuse this starved need to keep her near, and helpless to control the awakening of his soul to the temptation of her body and spirit. He slammed his fist into the stone wall, receiving not even the satisfaction of pain.

Chapter Five

Bianca locked herself in her room, collapsing back against the door. Her womb ached, and she rubbed a hand between her thighs, encountering the evidence that this was no dream, feeling the wetness he’d aroused ... so

easily. By the gods, she'd *enjoyed* it! She closed her eyes, trying to deny it, but her body still quivered, thirsting for more.

How could she face him now? And would he even allow her to go outside? Chances were unlikely that he would trust her again.

She'd thrown away her only chance to leave this place. Growling in frustration, she tore her shift off and flung it to the floor, then climbed onto the bed and under the covers.

How could he claim he was only illusion when he felt so real? She punched her feather stuffed pillow and buried her face in it, hoping to suffocate herself and end her humiliation. It didn't work--she still clung to the urge to breathe.

A gentle rapping on the door reached her muffled ears. She turned bleary eyes to the sound, surprised he didn't just open the door and prance inside.

"Go away!"

"I wish to speak to you ... and not through this door."

"Accustom yourself to it, my lord." She turned back on her side and drew the covers up to her neck in case he decided to break the door down.

Minutes passed in silence, and she thought perhaps he'd taken the hint and abandoned her. She sat up, narrowed her eyes, and glared at the door as though she could see through it.

"I want you to accompany me to dinner," he finally said, breaking the silence.

Bianca crossed her arms over her chest, hugging the blanket to her breasts. "What if I decline?"

Another pregnant pause. "I don't think you'd wish to do that."

“My lord, you do not know me well enough to assume the inclination of my mind.”

* * * *

Damian raised his hand to splinter the door asunder and banish her argument, then stopped, thinking better on it.

She couldn't face him. The door was a shield to her feelings. He had unnerved her. She was just as disturbed by her reaction to him as he was to her. Likely she was just as mystified, as well.

The turn of thought tickled his memory, and Damian thought back to the curse that plagued him, wrapping his mind around the words. *By the healer's hand and love's demand, you will live and love no more....*

He'd focused solely on the healing aspect of the curse, but perhaps in that, he'd made his most grievous mistake. Bianca was a healer, pure of heart, and she didn't respond to him like he was not more than a monster. *Healer's hand and love's demand....* Could it mean without both her healing power *and* love, he would live and love no more?

Hope pricked the bleakness with which he'd insulated himself. There could be no other interpretation. After all this time, it finally made sense, and he'd been a fool for not seeing the easy solution sooner. All those wasted years ... the unceasing torture of absolute solitude....

He could have ended it long ago. But then, according to her father, there was no one else like her. Bianca had to be the key to his salvation--the only key.

But could he make her love him? Gentleness and wooing had been lost to him long ago. He was unused to humanity, for in the years following his damnation, vile anger had consumed him. He had embraced his darkness, reveling in the fear he provoked--all in an attempt to frighten away any would-be visitors. No longer the hero, he'd despised the flaunting of their life and his lack of it, and one night in a century was but a brief taste of what he'd had, more hell than heaven.

But Bianca ... she was different from the others. She did not fear him as a death knight, but as a man who aroused her hidden feelings. To give him her body was to give him her heart--he knew that, implicitly. If he seduced her....

Only then would she be willing to banish the chains of his damnation.
Only then would she have the power to heal.

Only if she loved him....

* * * *

Despite all her arguments against the folly of going, in the end, Bianca grudgingly conceded to go to dinner. Not to bow to his wishes and satisfy his belief that he could force her to his will, but because frankly, she was hungry.

Bianca dressed in the gold gown because it laced in the front, and she did not want to give him any cause to touch her again. She did not like the strangeness he evoked in her. It was far safer for her to allow some distance between them.

Damian met her outside her room, giving no indication of being smugly satisfied she'd come out to him. It was fortunate he could restrain himself. In spite of her efforts to remain aloof, he took her arm in his and escorted her through the long corridor and into the great hall to the rear. Near the throne was a door leading to a private chamber, and inside a long, slender table was set for one. Candelabras dotted the length of the table, giving off a warm, mellow glow.

"I thought you would be dining also?" she asked, stopping in the door.

"I have no such needs. I will enjoy watching you eat and serving you."

Damian was being very polite, almost suspiciously agreeable. Had she thought he had another objective beyond that need for her power, she would have been worried. As it was, she dismissed it and nodded absently, sitting at the head of the table as he insisted. He gently pushed her up to it, then poured wine and presented plates for her to choose portions of baked goose, steamed and shredded potatoes, and vibrant, brightly colored vegetables.

Damian sat to her left once he'd finished serving her. She chose to ignore him but he was not one to be disregarded. She couldn't help glancing up every few seconds to see why he remained quiet. Each time, she caught him watching her, following the movement of her lips and throat as she placed food in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Rather than feeling uncomfortable under his scrutiny, she found his steady gaze arousing, titillating in a most basic way. She couldn't stop thinking about what he'd done to her outside, how he'd laid her over his lap and controlled

her. He stroked his chin with one finger, that same finger that had parted her folds and touched a place no man had ever dared. He'd caressed her with a pulse quickening boldness, as if in that moment, she would belong only to him, forever and always ... her body was his to master. He'd thrust inside her, so foreign and hard, she'd climaxed almost immediately.

Beneath her skirts, her thighs felt hot and sticky with remembered sensation. She didn't know if she could make it through this dinner in one piece.

He smiled, as if he knew the turn of her thoughts. His eyes darkened as she licked a crumb from the corner of her mouth, making her clit throb with awareness.

She had to stop thinking like a madwoman and ignore the heat he conjured with a look. Bianca cleared her throat and toyed with her food, clenching her thighs together as she tried to ignore the uncomfortable wetness between them. "I-I would like to understand what happened to you ... more fully."

"I don't remember all that happened. It was many years ago."

She could tell he was lying, that he just didn't want to tell her the truth. God knew she needed something to distract her from the hollow ache of her womb. "Perhaps some tidbit? The least likely detail could give me some clue."

"I thought you did not want to heal me. You made that apparent today."

She ignored his reference to her earlier actions. Her frustration channeled her thoughts away from her sensuality. "If you do not help me, I cannot help you."

He sighed and touched his breastplate, his hand over his heart. “Do you see this hole?”

Bianca leaned forward. Yes, now she could see there was a hole bending the metal plate in. It was a thin slit, barely visible. She’d not noticed it before. “What of it?”

“I was struck with a cursed blade. The moment it pierced my skin was the moment my cursed existence began.”

“Perhaps then if I saw it....”

“The wound has long since disappeared. No, you would do well to improve your powers. If not, you may never leave me.”

It was cruel of him to mention it again, when she had no hope of bowing to his wishes. “My father will come for me.”

“Aye, he likely will, but he’ll not find Helmskeep. No one can unless I choose to reveal it. He could wander this valley for weeks and circle it a hundred times without knowing he did so.”

He continued talking, but she refused to listen. He’d effectively dried the well of her desire.

Never would he reveal his secrets, yet without full knowledge, he was damning her to fail. His determination to shut her out frustrated her, perhaps nearly as much as being unable to heal him and being unable to escape. It was odd that years of his existence hadn’t erased his unfavorable human traits when much of his good had likely long since departed. More so than all of that, she felt as though some twisted destiny had thrust them in one another’s paths, but she was helpless to know why ... or to do anything about it.

Damian's attempts to draw her back into conversation fell flat on her mood. Would he really let her father hunt her endlessly? Did he truly want to keep her that badly? Her own father teased her mercilessly about selling her to the lowest bidder, for she was headstrong and aggravating in her own right. Damian's patience was vast, but she could frustrate anyone, including him.

No matter, she would make it outside Helmskeep the next opportunity, for certain.

She noticed a sudden silence and glanced up, wondering what he was about.

"Now who is acting the child? You've scarce uttered a word in all this time," he said finally, a slight smile on his lips as he leaned back and crossed his arms.

She frowned at him, her attention caught. He'd made no mention of forcing her to converse, and she resented his implication. "Is it any wonder? I have good reason to." She was *not* acting like a child. She simply ... didn't have anything to say to him.

One corner of his mouth hitched higher, and he arched one brow. "Come, I did not ... beat you."

Bianca's skin heated as she blushed at the reminder of what he'd done. What sort of lowborn man would bring up such a thing at the table? Never mind the fact that she could scarcely draw her thoughts away from it. Just looking at his long, tapered fingers made her weak inside. "No, you did not."

She lifted her glass to sip some wine, and strangled as something touched her foot beneath the table. Bianca coughed and sputtered, near

jumping out of her seat. She patted her lips with a linen towel and surreptitiously looked down to see his foot disappear beneath her skirt. She felt the soft leather slide up her calf. He stroked it up and down, moving higher each time. By all that was holy--she wanted him to touch her again, wanted him to soothe her ache--but she couldn't allow it.

Bianca wiggled in her seat away from him and shook her legs, but he persisted. If anything, he seemed more determined now than ever. Perhaps if she showed no reaction, he would cease and desist. Any response he aroused in her only seemed to provoke him further.

Resolutely, Bianca ignored him, until his foot slipped up between her thighs. She clamped her legs tightly together, and he grinned. Actually grinned at her! He was using her weakness against her.

Her fork clattered to her plate as she dropped it and glared at him.

"Am I disturbing you?" His smile increased.

If she'd not been on the receiving end of his teasing, she would have laughed. At this moment, he was so unlike what he normally projected himself to be. It gave her hope that anyone could change, and she found his reversal enormously appealing.

He inched higher between her thighs, despite her efforts. He delighted in tormenting her. That was obvious. She would not give him the satisfaction of winning so easily. She returned his smile, her teeth gritted as she said, "No, my lord, you are not disturbing me."

"That is good, for I find for the first time in centuries, I'm enjoying myself."

She felt his toes wiggle on her sensitive flesh, and wondered how he'd managed to remove his boot. She tightened her thighs and smiled at

him with death in her eyes. “I wonder that your mind focuses so readily on sensual pleasures, my lord, when you deny such impulses affect you.”

“Perhaps you’ve healed me after all....”

Bianca startled as he touched her intimate folds. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in joy and gripped the arms of her chair, her knuckles whitening under the pressure. All hint of humor had vanished from her mood. Catching her voice, she said, “Stop that.”

“This?” He teased her slit, her own moisture easing the glide of his digits. “Or this?” He flicked her clit, and she gasped, unable and unwilling to move away.

She nodded. “Yes. Yes that.”

He rubbed roughly against her swollen nub. She jerked against him, her hips moving forward of their own accord, grinding against him. Her nerves danced with burgeoning pleasure.

“I apologize for my confusion. You wanted me to stop?”

Bianca bit her lip and nodded, then shook her head, then nodded again, dizzy and unsure of what she wanted anymore. She squirmed in her chair.

He stopped, and she wanted to cry out for him to continue. She cursed herself a fool.

“If I disturb you, leave,” he said.

But she couldn’t. Not until she had some assurance she could move about freely, and she’d not even begun to ask him. He was a devil for taunting her this way, for distracting her from her purpose. “Is ... is our arrangement still in place? Can I continue to gather necessities?”

He gave her a dark, unreadable look. “You must convince me I can trust you once more.”

“How, my lor--Damian?”

He held her gaze locked with his own, intense and hot. “You must please me, Bianca.”

Her eyes widened. “But--”

“If I feel confident you’ll do anything I ask, then surely you would not break your word again. You wouldn’t, would you?” He stood, over her, and she craned her head to see him.

“I will do ... whatever it takes, Damian.”

He smiled, and she shivered at the promise in his dark eyes. “I had hoped you would say that, my sweet lady.”

* * * *

Damian swiped his arm across the end of the table, sweeping away the tableware. Plates and crystal goblets shattered as they struck the stone floor, shards scattering like pebbles skipping over a still lake. The flames of fallen candles snuffed in the spilled wine, and thin tendrils of smoke rose in the dimmed room.

Bianca froze in her chair, startled by his actions. She was unable keep her eyes off him. “Why are you doing this? You can’t derive any pleasure from it.”

He turned back to her and slid his hand around the back of her neck, digging his fingers into her hair as he tilted her head back. He pulled her

close, and she rose instinctively, her skin prickling with the feel of his cool fingers guiding her.

He bent his head toward her, his mouth inches from claiming her own. “Your pleasure is my pleasure, Bianca.” He leaned closer, so near she could almost flick her tongue out and taste him. She realized she wanted him to kiss her, almost as badly as she wanted him to claim her.

He teased with his nearness, massaging the base of her skull lightly. “More than anything, I want to slide my shaft inside you and watch you come,” he whispered.

Her womb pulsed with each drawn out word, and she shivered. She should stop this ... but she couldn’t.

A breathless expectancy seized her as she waited for his kiss. He released the back of her neck suddenly. A surprised gasp escaped her throat as he grasped her waist and lifted her onto the table. She clutched his armored shoulders as he stooped and grabbed two handfuls of her skirts and lifted the hem high on her thighs.

He pushed between her legs, forcing them apart, spreading her cleft wide to him. He rounded her hips with his hands, pulling her close, and the cool metal of his armor rubbed against her exposed clit. She arched her head back, shuddering from the contrast of cool hardness to her feverish skin.

Bending, he dragged his lips down her exposed throat, tearing a moan from her as he moved to the curve of her neck and bit her lightly. She felt the pull of her laces, a shot of fresh air on her skin, and then he’d shoved one hand into her bodice and cupped a breast, squeezing the soft flesh.

“Will ... will you not ... kiss me?” she breathed, running her fingers through his silky hair, trembling as he pinched her nipple between his fingers.

He broke away from her neck to study her. “Where would you like to be kissed?” he asked huskily.

A hot flood of moisture suffused her cleft at the smoky look in his eyes. “Anywhere you will it, my lord.”

Damian leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers briefly. She parted her lips, expecting more, but he pulled away.

“Lie back, my beauty, and I will give you your kiss.”

Unsure, she slowly complied. Her breasts flattened slightly as she lay down, the nipples hard and rosy in the soft, golden light. Her hair spread around her in inky pools, clinging to her shoulders and neck like vines. She was lovely and open to him, open to anything he desired.

Damian knelt between her legs and smoothed his hands up the inside of her thighs.

She started to rise. “Wh--what are you doing?”

He pushed her hips firmly down, forcing her to drop back. “Shhh.” She was soaked for him, so eager and ready for him to thrust his shaft inside her. He bent and kissed the inside of her knee. She jumped, and he smiled, knowing she couldn’t resist learning what he planned.

Trailing kisses up her thigh, he moved his thumbs in circles on her hips, calming her nervousness. He nipped the soft flesh at the crease of her juncture and she gasped in surprise.

When he ran his tongue up her slit, she moaned and squirmed. He plunged his tongue into her passage, and her hips jerked against him at the shock of it.

“Please ... Damian ... don’t stop,” she gasped, grasping her skirts and tilting her hips to his greedy mouth. He held her down as he lapped at her juices, alternately teasing her swollen clit and thrusting into her sheath. He wanted to taste her so badly, to smell how much she wanted him. Her muscles clenched around his tongue like a glove, and he moved one hand to replace his tongue, plunging two fingers deep inside her wetness.

He stood, inexplicably weakened, his mind surging with need.

Bianca writhed on the table, tilting her hips to his fingers curling inside her. To see her legs spread and the dark pink lips of her femininity, unleashed a savage desire in him. He ached to drive deep inside her until their souls melded as one. Damian unbuckled his cod piece, freeing his cock. He removed his hand and settled between her thighs. The pleasure halted, she looked up at him through heavy lidded eyes.

“Please, Damian ... please....” She arched back, moving her hips closer to him. His arms shook with the effort to control himself from ramming into her.

She didn’t know what she was saying. She was as drugged with lust, as he was. He could take her now, wanted to with a desperation bordering on insanity, but he couldn’t. The shreds of his honor wouldn’t allow it.

With a frustrated growl, he pushed away from her and tucked his aching shaft back inside his mail. He couldn’t satisfy himself, but he could take her to bliss.

Picking up one of the tapered candles that had fallen to the floor and gone out, he rubbed it against her thigh and leaned over her.

Bianca wrapped her arms around his neck as he neared, pulling him down to her neck. She kissed his face as something cool and hard slipped inside her.

Yes, that was what she needed. He pushed it in further, as if reading her mind, inching into her tightness until he encountered her barrier. He kept pushing, stretching it to pain, then pulled back to the edge.

Her juices flowed harder as he worked into her again, easing his passage. "More," she begged, feeling herself edging to that precipice again. Damian scraped his teeth down her throat and nuzzled the valley of her breasts, nipping her soft flesh as he pushed inside her again, harder, nearly breaking the seal of her body.

She cried out at the pleasure and pain, jerking her hips as she spasmed around it. She dug her fingers into his neck, forcing him to take her nipple into his mouth, writing beneath him as he pushed in and out, faster. He sank his teeth into her aureole, and she screamed as the orgasm burst through her body, singing in her veins.

He pulled the hardness out of her, leaving her strangely empty, and brought his hands up to cup her face. Her scent covered his hands, marking him, and it pleased her in some indefinable way.

He pressed his lips to hers in a brief, chaste kiss. Bianca clung to his neck, desperate for more, for a deeper connection to him, willing him to open his soul to her. If he would just allow her in, she could heal him, she knew. She cupped an arm around the base of his neck, keeping him close when he would have pulled away. Willing her power to heal him, she tasted

his lips with her tongue, hoping this time it would work if she prayed enough, wished enough.

Nothing happened. Her eyes watered as he pulled away. She'd failed again. No matter how much she wanted it, she could not help him.

His eyes grew dark, angry, and she knew he thought the worst, that he thought she hated him for touching her like this.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her across the floor, away from the glass. He set her on her feet, and without a word, left her.

She stared after him. She did hate him. With a passion. But she could never tell him why.

Chapter Six

As much as Bianca hated to admit it, there was no future for her at Helmskeep. She could forgive Damian for being determined to find a cure, and she could forgive him for being selfish in locking her away. She could not forgive herself for allowing him to have hope. To dangle the promise before him was abominable, and she couldn't live with the guilt. He

surrounded her here, this castle, his lands, the whisper of his voice as he spoke to himself in the library--the constant reminder would slowly eat her alive.

She had to get out, if only to grant them both peace.

She'd unintentionally hurt him last night and had made no effort to dissuade the turn of his thoughts. It was better that way, she felt, for his anger at her would allow him to easily forget her.

There was no comfort for her in the thought. Only to think of him passing the years away with no memory of her hurt her inside.

Bianca didn't know what horrid deeds he'd performed long ago, but she would pray for his soul on her return to Raedan. There could be no deed so horrible as to justify a penance that lasted an eternity.

The hour was early when she went outside to roam the withered orchard behind the castle. A fog coated the ground like gauze, chilling her feet as she walked among the ancient, twisted trees. She could see her breath in the cool, crisp air, and she hugged her arms around her chest.

Nothing lived here, almost as though perpetual winter encased the land. The only life she saw were a few birds wheeling in the sky. And they were so few in number as to be depressing. It was almost as if what infected him also diseased the land. She was saddened by it, for she could see Helmskeep had once been a jewel. Now it was dead and decaying.

As long as she walked, she could see no way out other than to scale the wall surrounding Helmskeep. The stone facade stood high, at least as tall as two great men, and likely taller, for she could not judge the distance it was so high above her head.

On the interior, no trees reached close enough that she could cross their branches and bound over the wall. Even if there had been, she had no way of getting down the other side other than jumping, or possibly using the vines that covered the outside.

She would have to examine more of the grounds later, lest she arouse his suspicion staying out too long. As she walked back and passed the tower, she caught the flutter of wings overhead and looked up, just as the bird struck the uppermost window of the tower.

Her hands flew to her mouth as the bird crashed to the ground in a broken heap. She ran to where it had fallen. An unbearable sadness crushed her heart, that even so small a thing could not survive in this place. She knelt on the ground and touched its soft feathers.

Her fingertips shimmered, and she looked at them in surprise. She gently scooped the bird into her hands, and they glowed brighter. The crimson light enveloped the bird. Its soul had not fled the body yet--she could give it life once more. she knew she could.

Slowly, carefully, she massaged its chest with her thumbs, infusing it with the power. Mere seconds passed, but to her, it seemed an eternity until the bird's chest rose and its golden eyes blinked up at her. She released it and it flapped its wings, flying away.

Bianca gave a watery laugh, wiping her eyes. She'd not lost her power, as she'd secretly feared.

"You would do for that bird, what you will not do for me?"

His deep, accusatory tone cut to the quick of her soul. "Yes, I have," she said softly, rising from her position. She slowly faced him, banishing

the sorrow she knew darkened her eyes. “There is nothing more I can do for you.”

“Nothing more you are willing to do.”

He began walking away, down the drive. She debated not following him, but she had to make herself clear to him.

“You can take my meaning as you will, my lord,” she said, walking beside him.

He glanced at her briefly, continuing his stride. “So we are back to formalities.”

“It helps me to keep an ... emotional distance.” The gates loomed ahead. Why had he led her here? Merely to tease her yet again? She turned to go back, and he caught her arm.

“So you feel nothing for me?”

Bianca faltered, her confidence wavering. Did she? How could she feel anything beyond hate for him? Did he want her love? It wasn’t possible, not in so short a time. And yet each minute seemed an eternity with him, not with the dullness of passing time, but with a rushing sensation of pleasure. His presence intoxicated her, yes. His touch made her weak.

An addiction wasn’t love, and she should never allowed herself to dwell on such feelings. He would always be a death knight. Black deeds cursed him. Nothing she could do would change that.

Swallowing hard, she summoned her voice and said, “No, I feel nothing.”

Expression vanished from his face as if he were made of stone. The light in his eyes, the amusement she’d given him had faded. She didn’t know when it had happened, but she knew it would never return. A sick

hopelessness assailed her, turning to despair. She'd hurt him with her admission.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned her head to it. The gates slowly opened of their own accord. "What are you--"

"Shhhh," he soothed, and cupped her chin, tilting her face up. She closed her eyes, parting her mouth, slightly breathless. Had he forgiven her?

He stroked a finger along her jaw and pressed his cool lips to her eyelids before whispering, "Go, Bianca. Remember this only as a dream ... or a nightmare, as you choose it."

"What did you say?" she asked, sighing.

He pulled away from her, and she opened her eyes to find him gone. A cold breeze slid across her skin, and she shivered, turning to look at her freedom. The gates still stood open, awaiting her departure. She'd been right. There was nothing for her here, no hope.

Bianca walked to the entrance and passed through the gates, out into the beyond and out of his life. Forever.

* * * *

The patrol guard found her on the overgrown road, freezing and exhausted. She collapsed as they gathered her up and settled her onto a horse in front of one of the men.

Bianca scarcely noticed in her misery. More than in her body, she felt a weariness in her mind that refused to relinquish control.

As the men began the long ride to Raedan, she fell into a deep sleep.

When next she awoke, it was in her own bed. A blurry shape stood above her, blocking the light from the candle sconces.

“Bianca? Are you awake?”

Bianca blinked rapidly, adjusting to the light. “Adriana?”

Adriana threw herself at Bianca and hugged her tightly, smothering her with her embrace. She pulled back to look at her, then laughed and hugged her again. “Oh, Bianca, we worried we would never see you again. Father is on his way. When you started to stir, I sent for him.”

Adriana sat on the edge of the bed, patting her leg. “Do you need anything? Are you thirsty, or hungry?”

Bianca smiled. “No, I’m fine. And I’ll be glad to see father. But really, Adriana, why do you carry on so. It’s only been--”

The door burst open and her father strode inside. He shouted and laughed to see her and shuffled to the bed. After many hugs and kisses, he pulled back from her and collapsed in a chair, holding her hand. “We’d nearly given up hope of finding you.”

“I’m sorry, father. I thought I was doing the right thing. I never imagined things would turn out this way.”

John looked confused ... and worried. His brow wrinkled as he frowned, and he ran his fingers through his thin, snowy hair. “Daughter, I can’t imagine what you were thinking, but I have some news for you.”

Bianca sat up in the bed, frightened by his and Adriana’s serious expressions. “What is the matter?”

“When you went missing, Cerise struck out after you. You know how bold she is. I fear she is lost somewhere in the valley ... or she has been taken into Hellsing. She has been missing for several days now, and I fear if

weeks go by without her return as with what happened with you, we will never find her.”

Bianca shook her head, confused. “That’s not right. I’ve only been gone a week. Cerise cannot be so deeply lost in that short a time. You exaggerate, father.”

His eyes widened, and he released her hand as she pulled away. “No, I do not. It has been *weeks*, my daughter. Weeks.”

This wasn’t right. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. Her world could not have skewed so horribly. Damian could help her set things to rights. He’d been the impetus since the beginning--he had to help her sort this out. “I will ask Damian to help us.”

“Who?” John asked, glancing at Adriana. Adriana shrugged, shaking her head.

Bianca massaged her temple. Her head pounded like a drum. “The death knight. I forgot you would likely not know his name.”

“Please, Bianca, this is no time for jests.”

“You do not remember the deal you struck with the death knight? I ran away that night to save you.”

“I know not why you left, daughter, but I am glad you are home. Perhaps you can help us find Cerise. The trackers picked up her trail heading to Hellsing. I feel certain we will locate her there, somewhere near the border. I’ve already sent some men in to continue tracking.”

“This can’t be happening. It cannot. He was *real*, father. As real as you or I.”

Adriana stood, looking worried, and left. Bianca scarcely noticed, her mind in a whirl.

“You are delirious from your time in the woods. I’ll leave you to get some more rest. Do not worry overmuch about Cerise. I have our best men looking. I should not have mentioned it to you so soon, when you’ve not even recovered.”

Bianca nodded and watched as he left, dousing the candles near the door. She was not so addle brained she couldn’t remember where she’d spent the last week. And she’d most certainly not been gone longer than that. Why could he not remember what had happened? Did he not think it strange that she would just suddenly run away?

It made no sense. Her head continued to throb with pain, and she massaged her temples and the bridge of her nose.

Tomorrow she would go into the valley. If what her father said was true, she had no need to stay here. Cerise was a handful, but she had a notoriously bad sense of direction, and she’d always managed to leave a trail behind in her ramblings through the woods wide enough any tracker worth his salt could find her with his eyes closed.

No, she would go out tomorrow, not to help track her sister down, but to find Helmskeep. She was not insane. Damian was real, and she would prove it.

A knock sounded softly on the door before it opened. Adriana stepped inside, carrying a tray with what smelled like broth on it.

“I thought perhaps you could use this,” she said and handed it to her.

Bianca accepted the cup and stopped Adriana from going. “You believe me, don’t you Adriana? About the ... death knight?”

She hesitated, then sat in the chair by the bed. “I-I believe that you do.”

Bianca frowned and sipped the steaming broth, burning her tongue. She set it down on her bedside table. “There has to be some way to convince you I’m not mad.”

“I want to believe you, but there’s no proof--”

“His coat of arms!” Bianca flung the covers off her legs. “That is the key.”

“What are you talking about? And where are you going?”

Bianca stood and slipped a robe around her shoulders. “I’m going to the library.” She took one of the candles glowing by the bed.

Adriana followed her as she left the room and walked down the hall. “Why?”

“There are histories of Raedan’s ruling families, as well as neighboring provinces. I recognized Damian’s coat of arms from somewhere: a spider and a rose. If I can find it, perhaps then you’ll believe me.” They reached the library, and Bianca lit several more candles around the room, flooding the small room with light.

“That does sound familiar.” Adriana rubbed her hands excitedly, looking around at the shelves of books. “It’s almost like a treasure hunt.”

Adriana always saw the positive side of every situation. Bianca worried that someday that brightness would be snuffed.

“Start looking for genealogy, then move on to history. He said it had been several centuries, so that would be many generations ago.” Bianca passed philosophy titles and religion. She found several written purely for entertainment, and set those aside for later reading. They’d been looking for half an hour before Bianca ran across her first book recording the family

history. Others bound similarly with gold scrollwork lined the shelves below it.

Bianca sighed and pulled the first one down and began reading. Hours later, bleary eyed and tired, she still hadn't discovered anything about Damian.

"Bianca?" Adriana called behind her

Bianca flipped through the gilt edged pages. "Hmm?"

"You said a rose and what?"

Bianca turned around, feeling a tremor of excitement. "A spider. A rose and a spider. He had banners with that insignia, and it was etched into his armor."

Adriana held up a massive book she held, turning the pages toward Bianca. There was an illustration. "Like this?"

"Oh my god!" Bianca jumped up and rushed to her, grabbing the book. "Exactly like this!"

The book was ancient, the pages filled with old style illumination. It was opened to one of the last pages, and painted with ink and oils was a depiction of a battle. Hordes of dark creatures filled the bottom half, battling knights with surcoats of silver and purple. Above them all on a precipice stood a knight in silver armor. Platinum hair escaped his helm, and a cape flew from his shoulders, embroidered with a crest of a single rose and a spider twined around the stem. In his hand, he raised a lance high, streaming his banner, and rising above him stood a white as death man, cloaked in black with a mist swirling around him.

Bianca felt a chill slither up her spine, and she shivered unconsciously. The detail of the picture was magnificent, a masterpiece of

the times. Bianca held her place and flipped the cover back. It was titled simply, A History of the Valiants.

“Is it him?”

Bianca turned back to the picture. “It has to be,” she said breathlessly. Carefully, she turned the ancient page. She scanned the lengthy passage, stunned.

Adriana noticed her pallor and asked, “What is the matter?”

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she wiped them away, staring down at the page angrily. “The last battle of the Duke of Keiranon, Damian Alessandro of Helmskeep. ...As the king commanded his champion, so did Lord Keiranon obey. He gathered his armies to Hellsing where the necromancer, Morveresson, lay in wait. Long had his blackness saturated the land with evil.”

Bianca skipped down to where the action picked up once more. “...the blood of his men stained the battlefield, swarmed by the growing horde. In a last valiant strike, Lord Keiranon pushed through Morveresson’s legions. Through the dying cries of his men, there could be heard his prayer, that though he should die, so too would the evil upon the land. May the gods give him strength. His steed burst past the last resistance, and Lord Keiranon poised to strike. Through the air his lance soared, striking Morveresson through the heart--” Bianca broke off as she shuddered for breath, her eyes pooling once more.

Adriana rubbed her back, leaning her head on her shoulder. “Is that all?”

Bianca shook her head and continued. “...With his last breath, Morveresson whispered the words of a curse unknown, and a black blade

could be seen flying through the air. Lord Keiranon did not see the blade's approach in his triumph, and the blackness pierced his armor, striking his heart. ...And as the necromancer breathed his last breath, so too did Lord Keiranon, last of the Valiants, die."

He'd not been a monster. He'd performed no black deeds. He was a hero, and in an ironic twist of fate, he'd been cursed to eternity as a creature of darkness. She had been wrong, so very wrong....

The tears welled up once more, but Bianca made no attempt to stop them.

Chapter Seven

"Are you certain you want to do this, Bianca? I fear what father will do once he finds you've gone again," Adriana whispered to her, nervously glancing around the dark stable.

Even though he'd been tremendously happy to see his mistress returned, Beast was a monster of a horse, and it took both of them to saddle him.

“That’s why you shall cover for me. And if he finds us out, just make sure he reads my letter.” Bianca put her foot in the stirrup and lifted herself onto Beast. She tightened her cloak around her shoulders and tucked her skirts around her legs.

“I just worry about you, Bianca. You’ve changed somehow. You were never so ... so sorrowful before.”

Bianca reached down and touched her sister’s hair, smiling. “I know. And I must do this if I am ever going to go on with my life. I will return as soon as I can. Beast made the journey before in but a day and a half.”

Adriana nodded and opened the stable door for her. The courtyard was quiet, more so than usual, for many of her father’s men were out searching for Cerise before the trail could grow cold.

She hated leaving now but knew this couldn’t wait either. She had to let Damian know she’d discovered the truth.

Beast followed Adriana across the yard, and Bianca waited as she opened the small, private gate hidden in one corner of the courtyard.

Bianca guided Beast past the narrow door, her legs nearly scraping on the thick stone walls. But they made it through.

“Be careful. I love you,” Adriana whispered.

Bianca turned in the saddle to see her waving good-bye. She waved and blew a kiss. “I love you too,” Bianca called softly, then turned away and dug her heels into Beast’s flanks.

Helmskeep awaited.

* * * *

Dawn cut through the night like a razor. Two nights had passed as she rode, but she'd finally made it to the valley of Helmskeep.

A thick fog filled the valley, obscuring her sight of the castle. She kicked her heels into Beast's flanks to rush down the road. It had taken her longer than she'd thought it would to reach Helmskeep, and she was eager to see Damian again.

The road flattened out, and the stone wall came into view. The fog was higher down here, with only faint wisps creeping along the ground.

She rode around the perimeter to the entrance and halted upon finding it. One side of the gate lay on the ground, the black bars rusted through. The other gate clung precariously to the wall with but a single hinge still in place.

Bianca shivered in the early morning cold. Doubt surfaced. She shook her head and nudged Beast forward, trotting down the overgrown lane. Three days ago it had been smooth and well kept, now weeds choked the path, slowing her progress. Frightened in a way she had not been before, she pushed onward.

Cresting the gentle swell, the castle should have been visible to her, even through the rising fog.

It wasn't there.

With a sharp cry, Bianca raced down the rise. She barely waited for the horse to pull to a halt before she'd leapt off his back and ran to the crumbling steps. The front entrance was gone, and now only a broken space remained.

In stunned horror, she crossed the threshold. As far as she could see, only scattered stone remained. It was scorched, as though a fire had disintegrated everything but the foundation.

This ... this couldn't be real. Bianca touched the broken doorway, scraped her hand down the rough edge. She looked at her hand, saw an angry red line scored down the center of her palm.

Beast wandered off to graze on winter grass as she stood there in stunned silence. She wasn't mad! She hadn't dreamed everything that had happened, had she?

"Damian!" Bianca turned in a circle, calling his name again and again until her voice broke and she collapsed on the stairs. His name echoed back from the walls of the valley, mocking her.

"Where have you gone?" she whispered. "I came back for you. I wanted to tell you ... so much." She dropped her face into her hands.

"Tell me what, my sweet lady?"

Bianca jerked her head up. Damian stood before her, one foot propped on the bottom step, his expression solemn.

She jumped up and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. He hugged her and whirled her around before setting her feet on the ground. Bianca looked up at him, cupping his cheek in her palm. "Are you real?"

The blue of his eyes deepened. "I am as I have always been. Why did you come back here, Bianca?"

All the silly reasons she'd come were excuses hiding her true motives. She realized that now. "I've come to stay, if you will have me."

"You don't know what you are asking."

She laid a finger against his lips. "Shh. I do."

He kissed her fingertip, and she smiled, knowing that though she'd not healed him, she had released his spirit from torment. The necromancer had stolen his life force, but it had returned. She could see his vitality shining in his eyes.

He brushed his thumbs across her eyes, closing her lids as he kissed her. Air surged around them, and she gasped in surprise, breaking away from him.

The castle had returned.

Bianca looked at Damian questioningly.

"Illusion, my sweet. I thought it was best if you did not stay, but I cannot survive without you."

"Damian," she said, breathless. Smiling, he bent and scooped her into his arms, carrying her up the stairs and through the antechamber.

"Where are we going?"

"To bed."

Her heart skipped a beat, and she snuggled against his neck. Before she knew it, they were in her chamber. Lights flared, revealing a waiting bath, and the door shut quietly behind them as he deposited her on the bed.

Damian began unbuckling his armor as she watched. Excitement and sadness mingled in a dizzying mix. She wanted him to feel her as much as she did him. "Damian, I... What of your own fulfillment?"

He paused only a moment, then continued stripping off his armor. "I will enjoy pleasuring you."

Bianca blushed as he pulled his mail shirt off and exposed the planes of his chest and belly. He was so masculine, so beautiful. "You said once you could assume human form every hundred years."

He stood in only his breeches now, and stopped unlacing the front. “You don’t know what you’re asking.” He propped on a poster of the bed. “It will be a torment to us both to pursue this folly.”

“Were this the last night of my lifetime, I would wish to spend it with you. For this night, our first time, I want it to be as man and woman. I want you to feel everything I do.” Her voice broke on the last, and she swallowed, overcome with emotion.

“May dawn never come,” he whispered. He straightened from the bed and closed his eyes. A golden light emanated from his skin, growing until it encompassed him entirely. It rippled in a shimmering wave, then absorbed back into his skin.

He opened his eyes, and a look of pain crossed his features. “Something ... is ... wrong,” he gasped and dropped to his knees. A gash opened over his heart, and blood poured from the wound.

Bianca screamed and leapt from the bed as he sank to the floor. She pressed her hands to the wound, watching in horror as the red blood turned black. There was so much of it, everywhere, all around her. Her vision blurred, and she realized she was crying. Tears streamed down her face. “I can’t heal you, Damian. My power isn’t working!”

“The curse ... live ... love no more,” he whispered, collapsing.

“What is it, Damian? Tell me the curse, please!”

He raised a hand as though he would touch her face, but he had not the strength to lift his arm more than a few inches from the floor.

“You can’t leave me, Damian,” she cried, her tears mingling with his blood. “I love you.”

He smiled, and for a moment, she had hope. “I am glad I could hear you say it ... just once.” He closed his eyes and sighed for the last time.

“No!” she screamed and collapsed on his chest, sobbing. She looked up at his face, smoothing his hair back as she cried brokenly. Cried for the last of the Valiants ... for the centuries of despair ... for the life he’d given up to save countless innocents. And she cried for herself and the love she’d wanted to share ... with him ... for the whole of her life.

Lost now ... all was lost....

She closed her eyes, stroking his cool chest, willing oblivion to take her. Her fingertips tingled with the abrasion of his hair. She stopped and the feeling persisted. Bianca cracked her eyes open and bolted upright. Her fingers glowed a pale pink, and with each heartbeat they darkened until they glowed with blinding, crimson light.

Bianca stroked his chest, stunned, unable to believe the power surging through her veins. His soul ... it remained! It could be nothing else. He refused to leave her, even in death.

Heat suffused her as she massaged his chest, willing life into his body, praying with the essence of her being for him to breathe. She squinted against the light, watching in amazement as the small gash in his chest slowly mended, new flesh growing over the hole.

Bianca placed her palm over the new, pink skin. Light flashed with blinding force, throwing her back. She blinked rapidly and scrambled to his side, sliding her arm behind his neck. His body shook as if seized, and he gasped as his lungs pulled life giving air into them.

She pulled him into her arms, cradling him, kissing his face all over. He was warm, warm with life. “My heart, my love, I thought I had lost

you.” She kissed the top of his head and rubbed his back, unable to stop touching him for fear he’d disappear.

He coughed and pulled back from her, amazement in his eyes. He touched her cheek, her hair. “I can feel you, the heat of your skin and the silk of your hair.” He looked down at the small scar on his chest, touching it gingerly before looking at her once more. “The curse was fulfilled, yet you have given me a second chance, a second life.”

“I don’t care to hear any more of this curse.” She reached for him, but he stopped her.

His brows drew down in a frown. “You must hear it. I ... I never understood until now. ‘For untold years you will wait upon death’s door. From the healer’s hand and love’s demand, you will live and love no more.’ Your love set me free, Bianca, but when I assumed my human form, so too was the necromancer’s curse fulfilled. An ultimate cruelty, to have love but to lose it.”

“Then why do you yet live?”

“He could never have known of you, nor the power of your spirit. We were bonded, Bianca, even through death.”

Bianca hugged him tightly, kissing his neck. “I love you so much, Damian.”

They stood, holding each other. “I love you too,” he whispered, and gently removed her gown, dropping it to the floor.

He looked down her body and felt a fierce ache lift from his soul. The years of despair had been worth it--for if he’d not been cursed, he would never have known her. She’d healed him completely with her

miraculous power, infusing him with life, with love. He gathered her in his arms and strode to the bath, placing her inside.

Damian joined her in the steaming water. They bathed the hardships from each other, reveling in the feel of wet, slick skin, in the feel of each other. He wanted to touch her everywhere, kiss every part of her body. He rubbed a soap covered cloth over her breasts, and her nipples hardened, begging for his mouth. He rinsed them and kissed her nipples, groaning as they puckered for him and she dug her fingers into his hair. He wanted more, but he had to pace himself or he would lose control.

He traveled down the length of her belly, and she closed her eyes as he rubbed the cloth in her cleft. He massaged her clit, and she moaned, tilting her head back.

“Damian, I cannot wait for you any more,” she breathed, gasping as he slid a finger into her.

She was so hot, hotter than the water, like liquid silk. His cock hardened unbearably, burning with the need to sink into her depths. He could take no more. With a groan, he pulled her toward him, sloshing water over the sides of the tub.

She came willingly, sliding her breasts against his chest, rubbing against his nipples with abandon. The pleasure was sharp, lancing through his nerves. She tilted her face to him, and he crushed his mouth on hers, forcing his tongue between her lips to taste her, as he’d longed to do upon first seeing her.

She moaned into his mouth, her tongue finding his. Rough, slick, she tasted sweeter than ambrosia, intoxicating his senses. He ran his hands down her back, cupping her buttocks as she wrapped her legs around him.

Bianca tensed as his shaft nudged her belly. Her body slick with soap, she lifted her hips with his guidance until his cockhead rested at the opening of her womb.

She wanted to be one with him so badly, no matter the pain or pleasure, only he mattered now. Bianca returned his kiss and groaned as he jerked his hips and sank inside her. She cried out as he burst through her seal.

He broke from her mouth, breathing heavily, eyes heavy lidded with lust. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head and tightened her thighs around his hips, rocking against him. He groaned hoarsely and squeezed her buttocks, pulling her against him, drawing his cock out of her to plunge inside again.

She clutched his shoulders, clinging to him as her nerves danced with pleasure, the spasm of her body building upon itself. Bianca locked her gaze with his, riding with him. He filled her completely, stretching her nearly to her limit. She could feel him consuming her, touching every pore of her body with the force of his thrust and the heat of his love.

The pleasure crescendoed suddenly, blinding her with a wave of bliss. Her body clutched him, milking the seed from his body as he jerked inside her. She cried out and his voice joined hers in a chorus of ecstasy, and then he collapsed back, holding her in his arms.

He kissed her damp forehead, stroking her back.

“That was beautiful,” she breathed, kissing his neck.

“I am sorry I was so rough,” he said, pushing her wet, clinging hair away from her face.

“You will not apologize for that. Besides, I enjoy pushing you over the edge.” Bianca grinned and looked up at him.

He pinched a buttock cheek and kissed her nose. “What happened to the lady healer, pure of heart?”

Bianca returned the pinch, then groped his firm behind. “She is in here ... along with the bold wench who demands a repeat performance.” His shaft hardened inside her as she squeezed his cheeks, and she squirmed enticingly, loving the feel of him in her tight passage.

He growled playfully. “You’ll get what you wished for, my sweet lady.”

Aye, that she would. She smiled as he reversed their positions with her beneath him and descended for a kiss.

The End

Read Cerise Bordeaux’s story next in Red as Blood, coming in September.

Impulsive Cerise is determined to rescue her sister, captive of the black knight, but she finds when she enters Hellsing that she has crossed over into the realm of the vampire lord, Daegon Erlansson.