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Devyn Quinn



*The Price of  
Eternity*

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# The Price of Eternity

*Devyn Quinn*

“The Dragon and his legions will wage a great war. The beast will rise and death shall reign over all...”

— prophecy of the *Lioar Fàisneachd*, the book of Armageddon.

Part One  
*Resurrections*

## Chapter One

The flash of a blade. Sharp and deadly, it came in a murderous arc, swift as a heartbeat, cutting through naked flesh.

Excruciating pain. Invasive...the trickle of blood warming chilled flesh.

Then came fear, in the shape of a devouring beast. Vicious. Untamed. Gnawing its way through his body, twisting his guts and turning his bowels to liquid.

Screaming...the shattering wail of agony...of betrayal.

He should not be screaming, but he was. The cries of abject terror were his...



Escaping a long, blurred nightmare in which he seemed to stumble through the storms and shadows of a Hadean dreamscape, Xavier D'Shagre gradually drifted back toward consciousness. Around him, the sound of a low, keening chant rose, beating incessantly at his ears, beckoning him back from the sphere between waking and sleep.

"O Dragon, give strength to our master, draw him not into everlasting darkness, but release him..."

The voices intoned on, their plea punctuated with phrases that vibrated with a sonorous, pulsating rhythm. Tampering with nature, bending it to the will of deviant forces, the rising and falling cadences of otherworldly litanies transported him on raven-black wings, ending his long passage through the searing heat of consuming flames, away from the breath of the Dragon.

Rescued from the chaotic inferno, he hovered, disoriented by the mingling and merging of corporeal and incorporeal. Writhing in anguish, convulsing, his body arched in agony. His head thrashed and his arms beat the air, defending

himself against an enemy living only within his twisted brain. A sluggish groan rose to his ears, feeble and without objective, extended by the wheeze emanating from his mouth. Grasping fingers clawed at him, threatening to drag him back into the abyss of insensibility. He resisted, struggling to remain aware.

There was a low throbbing throughout his body, but it was all far away, held at bay by the voices reverberating around him. Moaning, he twitched, the feeling of abject helplessness only adding to his panic as his senses reeled. A chill seized his brain. He could not control his limbs, or rise to his feet. He became conscious of the beating of his own heart. The organ hammered inside his chest, a hollow, irregular rhythm. His blood thrummed through his veins at a furious pace, pressing for release.

In a delirious haze, he groaned again and muttered in a strange, eldritch tongue. The swollen slit that was his left eye—his only one remaining—cracked open, eyelid twitching like a moth impaled on a pin. Through long, frightening minutes he saw naught, and merely stared into a dusky gray nothingness. Bewildered and then, by turns, enraged, he feared himself blind, imprisoned in the morass that was his own mind.

He shut his eye, praying silently that he not be forever sightless. When he opened it once more, he was able to detect the spiking shafts of firelight that filled the atmosphere with wavering shadows. He breathed a secret sigh of relief as his vision adjusted to the gloom. He lay shuddering, bound, while the sensations that had seemed so terrifying moments before faded.

With great difficulty, Xavier turned his head, discovering that he rested on an altar of stone. Its elaborately engraved surface was darkly stained with layers of dried blood, a remnant of many human and animal sacrifices. This time was different. The husk that was his physical body rested on the sacrificial stone, not as an offering, but for restoration.

Lit by ever-burning torches set into the walls, the underground sepulcher serving as Temple of Ouroborous was immense. A concentrated haze of sandalwood incense hung in the air, mingling with the oppressive humidity. Water trickled, drop-by-drop, out of cracks in the foundation to fall onto the stone floor. Because of the dampness, the arched mosaic ceiling was lost in a green luminescence; draped like mossy cobwebs, phosphorescent lichen was

attached to the moist stone. Engulfing huge sections, it grew down the walls, its vile breadth a haven for mutated insects.

The voracious plant was an unstoppable virus, its putrescent growth creeping toward any source of inviting warmth. Inexorably attracted to the torchlight, its smothering wetness threatened to snuff out the sooty flames. The torches flickered and spluttered, creating wavering shapes morphing into grotesque figures around the chamber, unsuccessfully resisting the parasitic fungus. Given time, all the chambers underground would be consumed.

Ruin...

Decay...

Death...

All surrounded him, gathering him in a familiar, rotting embrace, drawing him close to a breast pillaged by time. He was one with devastation, for he was a carrier of destruction. As one who wrought the demise of countless beings, he was part of the ruination, could never escape it.

Kneeling around the edges of the altar was the *Yn-Jeea*, the first tier adepts of Ouroboros, who served his needs. Their chanting voices grew louder, stronger, more intense. The ritual of his legion deepened, quickened, pulsed in a strange, echoing cadence extending through the infinity that was time and space—encompassing the beginning, the end and all else throughout the three worlds. The closed chamber cast back the strange words of the worshippers. All were hooded, their mantles drawn over their heads and hands.

Lowering her cowl, a woman broke away from the worshipper's circle, gliding up to the altar. She was tall, her body narrow with an unnatural, painful gauntness. Her face was not beautiful—eyes spaced too widely, nose and mouth too generous to fit the oval of her head. Her skin was pasty, and a green-veined pallor marked her as one who spent much time within the cloak of shadows. Her rich brown hair was shorn close to her scalp, leaving her a soft, downy nap. Small creases at the corners of her eyes were the sole indication that she was not as young as she appeared.

She was dressed in drab robes, and leather moccasins masked her steps. A delicate red circle with two dots at its edge was tattooed onto her left cheek: the mark of the Dragon. Her step and manner were disciplined. The voices receded into silence.



Xavier inwardly welcomed the woman's presence, so familiar to him.

"Ilya..." His words were little more than a weak gurgle. His mouth was parched, tongue swollen with dehydration. He tried to rise but fell back, hampered by limbs that would not obey.

"I am here to serve you." Ilya's voice was low and resonant, with an overlay of effort, as if she always held herself in careful control. "And to never fail you."

She reached out, stroking away the oily sweat beading his hairless brow. Stinking pus leaked from poorly placed stitches tearing into his bloated flesh, a recent and gruesome mutilation. His right eye was gone. Long ago, the eyeball had been gouged out. Grotesque thick scars marred the hollow socket.

He stretched out an imploring hand. For the first time he became aware of the thick bandages wrapped around the appendage. He tried to flex his fingers. Spikes of pain shot up his arm like sharp little fangs, bringing an agony so intense he could feel the blood drain from his face. He remembered his hands, once so strong and skillful, able to create life as well as take it. The twisted travesty that was now his right one enraged him. It had been scorched to the bone, mutilated, the flesh beginning to putrefy underneath the bandages, additional damage to the hatefully weak carcass that was his physical shell.

The realization disturbed the precarious control he held over his mind and body; the surging disparity left him alarmed. He found himself thinking that this anguish he suffered was the preliminary of a grievous punishment. For what? Failing Ouroborous? In his mind's eye he could clearly visualize the time when, as a young apprentice by his father's side, he had forever pledged his soul to the Dragon.

*Follow him and you will not regret your heritage,* Sylvaan had told him.

Gasping to catch his breath, Xavier made a bizarre imprecise sound much like a sob. Did he regret his choices? He wasn't sure. Then, as was true now, the Dragon never really abandoned a servant. Hadn't Ouroborous opened paths to new sources of power in the past? Yes, the Dragon was always willing to share his knowledge...for a price.

*A price must always be paid, and I've paid several times over.*

Gritting rotting teeth over the sacrifices he had made to the demonic god he served, Xavier unclenched his good hand and raked his fingernails across the surface of the altar. Desperately he sought to halt the psychological upheaval

that would diminish the vanishing dominion he barely held—yet must continue to hold—over the many agonies he was suffering.

Ilya took his hand and guided it back to rest across his stomach.

“Do not move,” she soothed. “It’ll only hamper healing.”

She put her own skilled hands to work, laying aside the cloth covering his face. Seeing the damage, she did not turn away, for she was used to viewing the miseries of mutilated flesh. Her jaw hardened as she examined the wound. Running from the bridge of Xavier’s nose to the edge of his cheek was a slash etched so deeply into his flesh it threatened his sight.

“The assassin’s blade cut deep.” Ilya’s tone was shaded with hatred, and she bit off the last words as if they tasted unpleasant. “The fever isn’t receding.”

She motioned with her hand to a second figure. A woman clothed in the brown sackcloth shift of a serving wench stepped forward, extending a copper basin filled with an astringent of agrimony, woundwarts and black birch bark. The medicinal properties could reduce pain and swelling as well as aid in healing. Ilya dipped into the bowl, then pressed a wet cloth against the wound.

*The assassin*, Xavier thought, relishing the cool against his feverish skin. *He’s come back...* He turned white and rigid as unwelcome memories curled back his numb lips.

“Morgan.” The single word became a low growl that settled deep in the back of his throat. His forehead ridged, the folds growing deeper as his animosity intensified. Images began to filter through his mind, tugging him back to the vicious events that had come close to sending him spiraling into the dark vale of the netherworld.

An odor assailed his nostrils, one he too well recognized. It was the smell of fear. A palpable thing, more sour than the bile at the back of his throat, his fear was a specter, mocking, laughing, a leering death’s mask. He would never forget the sight of the dagger his enemy had wielded or the sensation of cold steel penetrating fragile flesh. The echoes of his screams still resounded in his ears, mocking his failure to maintain control.

*Once you were as one of my own*, came the silent accusation, *but the dark war changed that. You turned on me, turned against me, betraying my power to humble me. But I had the last laugh, owning your soul.*

“Do not think of him,” Ilya’s gentle voice soothed. “You must rest if you are to regain your glory. Later, you can deal with your enemy.” Laying aside the cloth, she slid her hand under the sorcerer’s neck, lifting, pressing the rim of an engraved silver chalice to his mouth.

Xavier raised his head and drank down the healing potion: snakeroot to treat the fever and black cohosh, which would act as a relaxant and sedative. His guts spasmed painfully as the bitter liquid hit his empty stomach. He clenched his teeth when a long shudder rippled through him.

“I will be made well.” Again silence, as his emotions became too tightly stretched for speech.

A fit of unexpected quaking overtook him. His blood turned to icy water. Fighting the mental quagmire of writhing snakes in his head, Xavier concentrated his energies and struggled to center his thoughts. He did not yet want to succumb to a slumber so deep he would barely draw a breath. Gathering strength, he said, “I will have my revenge.”

As his brain wound through the murk of the potent drug, he felt Ilya press her palm to his feverish forehead.

“You must have a care during this healing time,” she warned, her words quiet and calm. She gently laid her cool hand across his swollen throat. “Don’t try to speak further. Rest.”

Xavier blanketed her hand with his. His grip tightened, fingers crushing hers. She did not flinch at the pain he inflicted, though her face paled.

“I want Morgan back under my control...” he rasped. “He shall suffer a thousand torments.”

“I pray to the Dragon it will be so.”

Breaking away from his hold, Ilya made a ceremonial bow, then turned and spread her arms in a wide arc toward the brethren. With her hands she made a certain sign.

“I call you forth to serve your master, give of yourselves so that he may grow stronger.”

At her command, the worshippers in the chamber rose from their knees. They glided forward on silent, sandaled feet to surround the altar. Ilya did not join the group. Instead, she stepped aside and stood alone, covering her head with the cowl and concealing her hands in her sleeves.

Forming an unbroken circle, the members of the brethren placed their hands, palms down, on Xavier's body. Their eerie male-female vocalization commenced a second time, intensified, growing louder, pulsing inside the closed tomb with a thundering force. A strange, ragged lightning with no apparent source flickered into existence, and a sudden blast of ice-cold air moaned through the chamber. The bolt struck one of the worshippers, enveloping the robed figure in an iridescent field. The fire spread, pale at first, then gaining strength as it grew.

There came a distant roar as the flames flared, claiming each body but causing no damage, for no heat issued from the otherworldly force that closed the acolytes of Ouroboros inside the unyielding grip of the ritual. Red-orange flames tipped with yellow danced in a hellish harmony. The light burned bright and strong with the aura of power that belonged to a timeless, all-consuming evil.

*"O Drago, is mór an onóir é feidhmiú."* O Dragon, it is a great honor to serve...

Xavier began to draw from his acolytes, feeding off their soul-essences like a parasite sucking away the vital fluids of life. He could feel their strength flow into his mangled form, stimulating him as healing energies fused within the voracious core of his being. A steady tempo, a regular beat that was both sound and light, engulfed him; and he felt as if he were rising, floating. In, around and of every living thing, he did not need eyes to see, or ears to hear, or hands to feel.

The chanting receded, becoming a long, low hum as the pulses of the adepts joined his, the many becoming a single unit. The altar beneath him began to crack from the forces leveled around it; then all was quiet, silent. One by one, the worshippers fell away, collapsing in a heap until none remained standing. They lay discarded at the base of the altar, all dead, sacrificed to feed the Dragon's eternal craving.

Well sated, Xavier closed his lone eye, blanketing his mind in soothing darkness. Ilya's potent restorative was beginning to exert its full strength. He felt strained muscles unlock, taut nerves relax. A dreamlike trance began to overtake him.

Twitching and muttering in the Madnahr tongue, Xavier drifted back into the psychic vale of the Dragon's shadowy world. The suffering of his flesh was gradually replaced by malevolent spirits fracturing his psyche. The residue of angst insidiously slithered to the forefront of his tortured cranium, bringing with it the humiliations of the event he would neither forgive nor forget. Failure was a provoking thing, something he refused to accept.

Now he faced it anew, and it grew within him, giving foul birth to a poisonous hate. His only solace was his lust for revenge. Behind a wall of distorting ambition, this malicious spawn took deep root and began to sprout, nurtured by the animosity in his heart against the man who had recently defeated him.

*I will own Morgan Saint-Evanston again, he wordlessly vowed. And death shall offer him no escape.*

## Chapter Two

Julienne Blackthorne hung suspended in an endless void. Ensnared by the insidious webs of a dark, lingering nightmare, phantasmagoric images paraded constantly through her mind. Creating a twisted dreamscape, they stifled all reality, ushering her into a hellish world in which she comprehended she would ultimately die. The prolonged struggle to break free had drained her spirit and strength.

A slew of images ravaged her feverish brain as she mentally relived an actual terrifying experience. Through a veil of kaleidoscopic memories, she observed a glowing red pit. A being she believed to be Satan himself walked leisurely around it. He was a looming figure clothed head-to-foot in crimson robes. He seemed to be coming for her, his hands bearing down into her vision. His fingers, twisted into a claw, latched into her forehead with a viselike grip, digging sharp fingernails into her skin. A thousand splintering facets of agony spread through her as he ripped asunder the soft flesh of her face. Her blood flowed in rivulets, mingling with the sweat of her fear, stinging her eyes. She struggled to breathe, gasping as coppery slime assaulted her lips and she tasted her own blood. Fighting for air, she gagged when a crushing weight pounded into her chest. Like a giant spider's victim paralyzed by the bite, she felt she had been pierced and seeded with a strange alien life form, a thing that would eat her up from the inside.

Suddenly, her nightmare shattered.

But the pain remained.



The fire in the pit had burned out, and the dungeon was very cold and still. Cracking open swollen eyes, Julienne weakly shifted her head, trying to make

out her surroundings. Torches cast eerie shadows, and the dungeon lay deserted beneath their hazed light. The thick sooty smoke they exuded hung like a gray vapor around the stone walls and floor.

The atmosphere of the immense chamber was flat, tranquil and quiet, as though separated from all reality. The lingering scent of burnt flesh and congealed blood mingled, creating an odor that made it difficult to breathe. The nauseating stench singed the fragile lining of her nostrils; she began to pant heavily through her open mouth. Her guts heaved and she swallowed hard, resisting the urge to vomit.

She gagged, feeling a strange writhing sensation between her lungs. A thin film of sweat coated her skin. She was chilled despite the fever raging through her. And though she had been badly wounded, there was a curious numbness in her body, as if she were anesthetized.

A grimace crossed her face; the movement of the muscles hurt. Without her willing them, her hands rose. She felt the wounds, tracing each with her fingers. She winced when her touch brought pain. Her face was savagely disfigured, marked with raw cuts. All at once the memories resurrected themselves, chilling the blood in her veins. Details of the night she had crossed into Sclyd solidified. *Morgan...the temple of light...being captured by the Jansi warriors...being tortured...*

In a spasm of terror, she wrenched her head to one side, begging the visions in her mind to go away, to leave her alone. There were so many, she wasn't sure if they were real or part of a strange fantasy. But one memory was stark, for it accompanied an unspeakable agony.

A mad giggle escaped her throat. No other voices chimed in to comfort her. Silence all around.

She moved her mouth, but for a moment no human sound came forth.

"My face!" she keened in a hoarse whisper. She refused to cry. This place would extract no tears from her. Her body hurt; and when she remembered why, her ache went deeper, past the physical and into her soul. She did not want to remember or think. She wanted to close her eyes and forget this place, sink into the oblivion that was death so she wouldn't hurt anymore.

*Sclyd. I've come into another world now.*

The anomaly of the occult existing on the edge of mortal reality...

As she stared dizzily about, the hopeless futility of her plight stabbed at her heart. Half-mad with the realization that her horrible nightmare was no dream, her mind teetered on the brink between sanity and insanity, acceptance and denial warring inside her.

“Morgan,” she moaned softly, his name a sob on her lips. Her indistinct voice echoed in the vastness around her, repeated a thousand times over, as if the broken silence took glee in mocking her. Fear was beginning to loosen her hold on reason.

Still too weak to rise, she turned her head in the only other direction her neck would allow. Now holding only gray ashes, the great stone pit of her nightmares had gone cold hours ago. Instruments of torture stood silent, mute testimony to the many victims who had found their deaths in this unholy place. The sorcerer and his minions were gone.

*How long have I been unconscious?* She had no way of knowing.

The battle was over. The casualties had been counted, the dead claimed. Had her lover survived, or had he perished? She recalled very little of how she came to be unconscious. She only knew that she seemed to have been left behind, completely and utterly abandoned. If Morgan had not died, had he left her deliberately? She had not forgotten his threat that he would leave her if she became a burden. Had she become a liability—expendable, disposable—because she was only a mortal?

*Surely, he didn't...surely he wouldn't...*

*Did he leave me?* Her heart pounded frantically, her thoughts becoming a weird babble as the last pieces of composure deserted her. Unwelcome tears stung her eyes. Morgan was crafty, and she knew it. Morgan manipulated people, and she knew that, too.

Had he manipulated her, played her for a fool? He hadn't wanted her to cross over into his world. Had he chosen to walk away, deciding to free himself of their bond in the only way possible? The fear, the doubt, began to gnaw at her mind, pushing her deeper into the mire of madness that shimmered like a dark pool in the depths of her soul.

*You wanted to deny being mated to me. Is this your way of paying me back for defying you? Leaving me here to die?*



Morgan, she knew, could be obdurate, detached, irresponsible and, above all, much given to contradiction, but she had never had reason to believe he truly wished to hurt her or that he took the slightest pleasure in doing so. Though seemingly self-absorbed, he missed little. He was introspective, but his antennae were attuned to those around him. If he had survived and departed without her it was because he had to, not because he wanted to. She had to believe that.

She did not regret the decision she had made to follow him, but she knew that she had acted rashly and the consequence dismayed her. She had trusted him to protect her. Through the deep tide of confusion, she realized he had not been able to do so. But he was not completely to blame. He had warned her of the dangers. She had made her choice, choosing to let her heart rule her head. She had to accept the responsibility that she had done this to herself. Realization, however, did not lessen her sense of hopeless abandonment.

Footsteps stole through the dungeon, alerting her that she was no longer alone. Hearing them, a brief hope came to light in her heart. Through skewed vision she saw scuffed leather boots walking toward her. Her blurred gaze traveled up, taking in the dirty trousers of the man who stood before her. Bare from the waist up, his head was shaved completely bald. He bore an odd tattoo on his left cheek.

Her eyes widened in recognition. She felt all blood drain from her face. Men much like him had captured her and Morgan, bringing them here to the lair of the sorcerer who was Morgan's deadliest enemy. Seeing him, hope crumbled, squeezed like delicate petals in the hands of a cruel child.

The Jansi warrior hunkered down, squatting on his haunches. He grabbed a handful of her hair. Though he was not a tall man, his body was well-defined—broad chest, powerful arms, legs thick as tree trunks. He looked as though he could easily crush her skull with a single hand. She could feel the heat of him, smell the sour stink of his unwashed body.

*Don't move*, she commanded herself. Eyes clenched shut, she listened to the sibilant panting of her captor. What did he want with her? The answer came soon enough.

"You were a pretty one..." he grunted. "But there's life in you yet." His free hand briefly brushed her lips.

*Oh, God!* Panic, wielding a brutal knife, flayed her senses. She could not understand his words, but his intent was clear in the leer that colored his features. *Surely he's not going to...*

But a woman, any woman, was fair game in this barren world. Even wounded, she was valuable. Grinning obscenely, he settled his hand on her left breast, squeezing it, testing its firmness. *If he plans to rape me, I can't stop him.* Time seemed suspended, trapping her like a fly in amber. She might as well be dead, for she was truly in hell. She prayed for death, would welcome it willingly.

Julienne gritted her teeth when the man began to fondle her, rolling the tip of her nipple between thumb and forefinger. She trembled so violently she could barely summon the strength to fight him. Rape was a woman's worst humiliation, making her feel ashamed to be a victim. What could he see in a woman whose face was so mutilated? Why would he even want her? Her body, she realized, was not her own, but about to be invaded, defiled by a man she did not desire.

Crying out in disgust, she tried to roll away from him, but he grabbed her and pinned her down. He straddled her body in a smooth, easy move and captured her flailing arms above her head. Pinioning her wrists with one hand, he moved the other to her breast, teasing her nipple. His panting grew harsher, more excited as he skimmed her belly. His erection strained against his trousers.

Writhing and bucking, she struggled to squirm out from under him; but her assailant swiped his huge hand against her head, knocking her flat. Too weak and disoriented to prevent it, she felt her head crack against the cold floor, sending blinding spikes of light through her brain. Her world reeled, threatening to plunge her into darkness.

She felt him tear away her skirt, parting her legs to probe between her thighs, invading her most intimate places, places only a lover had touched. The feel of his dirty hands against her naked flesh disgusted her.

"No," she moaned. "Please, don't..." The words burbled from her mouth. Bitter tears welled up in her eyes, further blurring her vision. She was helpless to defend herself, helpless to stop him. *Please stop touching me.* A misty veil curled around her senses; self-preservation caused her mind to shut down.

*If I don't think about it, it's not happening*, she told herself. She lay as one lifeless, too weak to struggle any more; she was in the final stages of exhaustion. The convulsive spasms tearing at her grew weaker.

But it was happening, and there was no way to blot out the fact that he would use her body for pleasure. She squeezed her eyes shut so she would not have to see him take her.

The harsh voice of a second man brought a new surge of fear. She opened her eyes, dreading the presence of another rapist.

"You would do well to leave her alone, brother," the second one warned. He knelt and tugged aside the material of her torn, bloodstained blouse to bare her chest. Unlike the first man, his eyes held no interest in her exposed breasts, only repulsion.

"She's infected by one of Xavier's mutants," he continued. "If she's not dead now, she soon will be." Rising, he gave her a hard prod with his boot. "She's useless as a breeder."

Julienne breathed a sigh of relief when the first warrior drew away, disgust coloring his features. Seeing the look of pity in his eyes, she struggled to sit up. She felt a sharp jab as something within her chest shifted. She moaned at the pain, as her hands flew to cover her nudity. She pressed her palm to the valley between her breasts and thought she felt something breathing inside her even as she drew air into her lungs. The sensation was much like a balloon being blown up, the air let out, then blown up again.

Using all her willpower, she lowered her head, for the first time seeing the damage. There, under her breastbone, her fingers brushed the jagged ridges of the small hole the creature had made when it burrowed up under her ribcage. No blood seeped from the wound. A strangled sound of torment escaped her numb lips. Her heart skipped a few beats, and she gasped.

*Oh, God!* she moaned in mental anguish. *Xavier's daemon...it's in me. How long before it eats me up inside?* Sickened and disheartened, she looked to the men, searching for answers.

"Help me..." Her voice was no more than a mumbled hiss. Understanding her anguish, they only shook their heads.

"A waste," the first warrior spat.

“She’ll soon be eaten up,” the second man said. “Take her, before her guts are spewed out by the creature.”

The first man bent, grabbing her wrist. He jerked her with such force her head snapped back on her neck to hang limply between her shoulders. The warrior began to tow her. By the curses escaping his lips, she was clearly a burden he did not relish bearing. He dragged her like a sack of dirt, and her legs were scraped raw by the sandpapery stone. She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth to keep from crying out. For a moment she considered struggling, trying to break away, escape.

*Escape to where?.*

*Nowhere,* was the reply. *You’ll never leave this place alive.* All strength deserted her, her will to live flagging with each passing second. She let her body go limp, pliant. Why resist? Wherever he wanted to take her, whatever he wanted to do with her, she was at his mercy.

*And from the look of his face. That’s an unknown concept to him. But it doesn’t matter. With that thing inside me, I’m as good as dead anyway.*

She was so exhausted, so spent, that her eyes dropped shut. Sick and tormented, her mind withdrew into the deepest, darkest parts of her skull, where not even the soul dared to tread. Merging with the merciful womb of unconsciousness, she willingly gave herself to that sinister void where none could follow and cause her further pain.

## Chapter Three

Morgan Saint-Evanston sat alone before the hearth, concentrating on the snapping flames. Following fits of fury that alternated with abject apathy, he felt gaunt and spent, as empty and barren as a desert under a hot sun.

Heavy with weariness, he couldn't help but surrender to the paroxysms. His head was a space filled with anger and grief. He had tried to replace it with guilt, but it was not working. It never worked.

Julienne was dead. And no matter how hard he tried to block them out, images of her kept circling in his head. He clenched his teeth, cursing himself for a fool. She was gone. Why couldn't he just accept that? If he allowed himself to think otherwise, he'd only be inviting more heartbreak.

He squeezed his eyes shut and paced his breathing, determined to try and rest. It didn't work. All he saw was her face; her beautiful green eyes, full red lips and that impossibly thick mane of copper-red hair. He tried to tell himself that she had meant nothing to him. But facts were facts, and he could recall everything about her in vivid detail.

The pain of losing her returned, a slow, throbbing ache that soaked straight into the core of his being. His mind churned with shame, misery and knowledge of failure. Though he had professed no love for her, he knew it was not true. He had loved her in his own way, but it had not been enough. Her devotion for him had gone even deeper, and her ultimate sacrifice had brought him freedom.

*Do not think of these things*, he admonished himself, but such warnings were useless. He was still half-stunned by the recent events, poised among relief, anger and oblivion. Carried away by emotion, acquiescing to depression, he went much farther into his thoughts than he'd intended. Everything he was trying to forget, trying to blank out of his memory, came cascading back.

*Julienne.*

Both of them had been searching, lost. In a short time, she had delved into his heart despite his determination to deny her offering of love. Intense passion had drawn them together, two unstable personalities driven by inner demons they could not reconcile.

That same passion had destroyed them. They were mated, a coupling that did not end with the death of one. Until he joined her, there could be no hope of clemency for his own soul.

*Uaigneas mór, go deo, a choích.* Great loneliness, forever and ever.

It seemed to be the ultimate curse upon his head.

*I will go back for her, he promised himself. I will recover her body and take her back to her world. She deserves a proper burial, to rest with her ancestors. It is the least I can do to honor her memory.*

The plan gave him little comfort.

His hands rose to cover his eyes, shutting out all light, all sight, as if by not looking he could block his lover's image from his mind. It failed.

He swallowed, trying to breathe past the incredible lump in his throat. Remorse seized his heart, wrenching it with cruel hands. The agony reflected a deep and personal despair, a bitter and poisoned brew. The many flaws in his character struck with renewed force. He was physically sick with the knowledge that he'd left her behind. The need to escape before more of Xavier's warriors joined the attack had outweighed trying to carry her body. At the time, it had seemed better better to leave.

Yet lurking in the back of his mind was the nagging question: had he walked away and left her because he did not truly want her? He had made it clear he didn't want any ties to the mortal identity he was attempting to leave behind. Julienne had been a reminder of that past.

The sound of light footsteps broke into his rumination. The pictures in his mind dissolved, and he lowered his hands. A woman knelt beside him. While hardly young, she possessed an ascetic beauty, her face plain but not unappealing.

She offered a bowl of thick, meaty rabbit stew. "You should eat something."

Morgan shook his head. "I need nothing." The smell of food curdled his guts. Tension tightened his shoulders, creeping up his neck to bang heavily on his skull. The worst was yet to come.

The woman laid a light hand on his arm. "If there's anything—"

As if scalded by her touch, he yanked his arm away. Seeing the hurt look on her face, he realized he'd done the wrong thing. She was only trying to help.

"No, nothing. I am fine," he said in a less harsh tone, trying to phrase his words in such a way as to cause the least offense.

Suppressing a sigh, he looked around the windowless lodge. The huge, single room was partitioned into living quarters, one area designated for the preparation of food, another for general living and yet another for sleeping. A solidly constructed stone hearth held a brightly snapping fire. It filled the air with the wild scent of burning pine. Around the room, lamps—clay pots of oil with floating wicks—supplemented the firelight, brightening and warming.

The floor was earth, compacted hard and firm. Leather skins hung on the walls, keeping the cold at bay. Outside the wind rose, howling at a merciless sky of rolling gray clouds throwing down ice-spiked raindrops.

Rutola lay on a pile of blankets. His hearth-mate Asa sponged his brow with water. The woman by Morgan's side was Maya, Asa's sister.

It had taken roughly a day's travel to reach the main camp, shortened by the help of Raider scouts patrolling the edges of Xavier's territories. Recognizing Rutola, the men were quick to offer their horses to transport their wounded leader. Though eager to go on alone, Morgan had remained with the group for the safety extra men offered. Wounded, he was in a vulnerable position and open to attack.

The group had journeyed through hostile terrain, following a river whose course flowed east, cutting a deep course through a rocky land that gradually gave way to forested valleys. Pine, spruce and silver fir grew in abundance on the hillsides; river oak and willow grew by the river. The landscape was rugged, but also wild and beautiful as the vegetation prepared to change into the colors of early fall. Already there was a severe chill in the air, and the leaden sky threatened storms as it wrapped the landscape in its luminous mists.

Rutola had collapsed halfway through the journey, overcome by his grievous chest injury. Xavier had dealt him a mortal blow, and it was only a

matter of time before he succumbed. Rutola's own familial clan was very powerful, and had stood against the rise of the Dragon's legion. Though an immortal, Rutola shunned the arts. He was a man of direct action, not spells and counter-spelling.

Although one who did not age as humans did, Rutola was not invulnerable to injury. This made him a careful man. He made no move without great consideration, thinking out all angles and how it would best benefit his people. Unlike others born to live a life that spanned ages instead of mere years, he had a great respect not only for humans, but for life in general. He understood that a strong mortal populace could strengthen an immortal's bloodlines, preserving the ancient legacies instead of destroying them.

Maya set the stew aside. She cast a worried glance toward her sister's husband, saying in a low voice, "Rutola will not survive the night without the hand of a healer." Her mouth trembled with barely contained emotion. "I know you are Lethe, a bringer of death, but I beg you for the life of her husband."

Morgan's attention settled on the dying man. *A bringer of death.* The words echoed in his mind.

*I owe Rutola a debt of honor, he thought. It must be paid.*

"You have no need to beg," he said, sternly disciplining himself to put aside his own hurts. He'd been beaten to pieces by Xavier's soldiers, but his injuries were nothing from which he could not recover. "He will not die this day."

He clearly read the gratitude in her face when she heard this.

Climbing to his feet, he moved to Rutola's side and sat down, ignoring the weariness that went as deep as his bones. He was immediately struck by the ravages of pain in Rutola's face. Remembering what had been done to the man, Morgan felt a chill colder than ice creep up his backbone. The torture Rutola had been subjected to had once been his own favorite method.

"A slow strangling, the loss of breath..." he remembered Xavier saying as he shoved the blade of a sword between Rutola's ribs. "Asphyxiation as you slowly drown in your own blood."

Closing his eyes, struggling to mask his emotions, Morgan put aside the ugly memory and took refuge in preparing for the coming ritual.

"Tell no one what I have done this day."



Both women nodded in agreement, pressing fingers to their lips to indicate their compliance.

Hearing him, Rutola opened red-rimmed eyes. He raised his head. His skin was hot, burning with fever. His dirty hair hung in limp strands, plastered to his forehead by perspiration.

"It's hard to die when a man has no gods to pray to." Exhausted by the effort, Rutola laid back down, limp, struggling to catch his breath. He was slipping away, almost insensible but holding on to awareness with what seemed to be his last wisps of strength.

"You know there are no believable gods."

Morgan lifted the pad of soft rabbit fur covering Rutola's chest. Deep bruises and smaller cuts covered his abdomen, but these were minor compared to the savage punishment Xavier had applied. Rutola was slowly smothering, wheezing as he fought to draw breath.

Rutola choked, the beginning of a wracking cough that shook his entire frame. Blood mixed with saliva dribbled from the corners of his mouth. When he could speak again, he asked, "Are you making...deals...today, Lethe?" Thin lips characteristically stern, his face betrayed his suspicion.

"No deals. I do not want another soul on my hands." Morgan turned to the hovering women. "Get hot ash from the fire."

Asa hurried to scrape warm ashes into a clay bowl. She set the bowl within easy reach.

Rutola spoke again, grunting in broken words. "Then why...save...my life?"

"There are more battles yet to be fought. Your people will need a leader when Xavier sends his Jansi to punish them for what we have done."

Rutola released a restless sigh. "Then you...would...hold me...to...no servitude?" His weary voice faded again. Deep lines were etched around his mouth and across his brow. The pain was winning.

"I hold you to nothing."

Pinching the ash between thumb and forefinger, Morgan cast a bit toward the four directions of north, south, east and west, saying, "I invoke and conjure the spirits of light to aid me in this healing. Spread thy gentle hands of protection over this man, guard him from the spirits of wrath. All most

powerful, one and all, I invoke the light, for healing, for strength, for hope, for life.”

This done, he used more ash to create a five-point pentagram on Rutola’s chest, placing the star around the puncture. Drawing his dagger, he made a small cut in his index finger, using his blood to mark several symbols around and within the pentagram.

“As I do cast this healing toward mine ally, make him well.”

Cutting into his palm, he tipped his hand and let the crimson stream dribble over Rutola’s wound, infusing his own strengthening blood into the depleted, weakening body of the Raider. “With this cut, thy will be done to ease the pains of his flesh and bind him from further harm.”

His blood acquired a strange animation, drawing itself into a worm-like shape. Like a snake slithering into its hole, it entered the deep puncture. The shape of it could be seen under the skin as it encircled the wound and began to mend the flesh, passing like stitches over the puncture and closing it.

As if he were being attacked from inside, Rutola’s mouth flew open and his jaws gaped, releasing a blood-curdling scream. He writhed, groping, his head jerking side-to-side in a convulsive movement as his whole body arched.

“It feels as if icy fingers are grasping my insides!” he cried. His body went limp, and he lay in a huddled mass, so spent he could not move, his strength all but gone.

After a few moments, his breathing came easier, less labored. Color infused his pale skin, and his pulse assumed a normal, stable beat. His eyelids fluttered, but he did not open his eyes, instead falling into a restful sleep.

Morgan brushed away the pentagram, breaking its magical properties. “I scatter this energy, return it to the source of light. Go in peace, return to your sphere and harm none as you depart.”

He pressed his fingers to the cut in his palm to stop the flow of blood. When he drew his fingers away, though, the slice still lingered. On his forearm, he could see the marks of the bronze nails that had been driven through when Xavier’s men tried to crucify him. His hand was still numb, fingers barely able to flex. His system was still in massive shock, and he was not physically healing, as he ought to. He should be concentrating his energies on regeneration.

His vision dimmed when he stood up. He staggered a little, might have fallen had he not put out a hand to the wall to steady himself. He felt overwhelmed and assailed, inside and out. His head spun alarmingly, and the fire's light was beginning to hurt his eyes.

Maya made a strange ceremonial gesture with her hands. Her face was aglow and reverent. "He has been touched by death and given life." She reached out and gently guided Morgan across the room, urging him to sit on a pile of soft animal furs. Asa lay down beside her husband.

"You must rest," Maya whispered, so as not to disturb the peaceful lull settling over the lodge. She took a place beside Morgan. "Save your strength."

Morgan reluctantly pushed himself up, voice rigid. "As long as I am here, none of you are safe."

"We were never safe when you weren't here," she replied. "Just two seasons ago, my husband was killed and my daughter taken to serve. Rutola, too, lost a son." Hatred flashed across her face.

He stared at her, surprised, feeling a further tightening in his shoulders. "Is that why Rutola came looking for me?"

"He knows his people will never be safe until the legion is taken down," Maya affirmed. "He knew if you came back, the war would start again."

There was a long silence, during which he gritted his teeth, keeping silent only through force of will. "The war has never been over," he sighed. "Just delayed."

Maya nodded. She looked deeply into his eyes as though seeing the entire universe, then raised a questioning eyebrow. A faint smile crossed her lips.

"I know what you are thinking," he said, feeling the weariness of the long centuries foisted upon him.

Maya offered a gentle smile. "It isn't my place to judge. You had reasons for leaving, just as you have them for returning." She leaned forward, stroking stray wisps of hair off his forehead. "Stay here with us, join the tribe. I know Rutola will convince the others to accept you." There was an unspoken intimacy in her touch that said *she* would welcome his presence.

Morgan drew away. It would be easy to stay with the tribe and make a place among these people, forgetting the recent past by immersing himself in what was probably to be a violent and bloody future.

But he didn't want to forget or let go of the past. Not yet. The grieving process was only just beginning. Maya did not know of Julianne, or his loss. She was only doing what came naturally in this ravaged land. A woman's best chance of survival lay in choosing a strong man to protect her and the young of her hearth. She was letting him know through subtle touch and gestures that she would embrace him as a lover.

Though he did not find her unattractive, and could easily lose himself in the lush curves of her figure, it was too soon to consider taking a new woman. And while Rutola didn't rule the outcast people, they rarely refused him anything as elder leader. Where *he* was concerned, however, they might.

"I am still an outlaw, even among the tribes," he said. "Xavier will mete out a harsher punishment if I am found here."

"No harsher than anything else we've known," Maya countered. "And may yet know."

Morgan shook his head. "I will leave at first light."

She frowned. "Going where?"

"To the Northlands." He paused, as if wondering if he should speak the word. "Home."

A sense of foreboding washed over him. There was nothing he could say. He had only the single, grim purpose on his mind. He would forego the rest he desperately needed because he knew where his next steps must take him. There was someplace he had to go, where *it* waited for him, straining for freedom against a bond of stone. The time had come for revenge, a settling of the eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

He had murdered Nisidia.

Xavier had taken Julianne.

Morgan knew that in waging a personal war against the sorcerer, he would have no support from the witches' council this time. It would be a stand he would have to make alone. The way to strike back against Xavier was to begin taking out the backbone of the Dragon's legion, the Jansi. What did he have to lose? His life? That was useless. He might as well make it worthwhile; see how many of them he could slay before they killed him. Truth be known, he was aching to give chance and the fates another push.

## Chapter Four

In secluded chambers, Xavier reclined on a divan heaped with soft pillows. He lay in gentle repose, hands resting across his stomach. There was an aura of serenity inside him, a tranquility that he'd not experienced for a very long time.

The silence around him was charged with electricity. Heavily bandaged, his mutilated face was still, his expression almost calm. Breathing slowly and with deliberation, he could feel the vital strength of the soul-energy coursing through his body. The defiant force of life itself was harnessed and made more powerful inside him. He had fed the Dragon's hunger, and in return had been fed a new strength.

It was a fair trade. While not fully recovered from his close brush with death, he had again successfully evaded the Reaper's touch, sacrificing many lives so his would endure. He was determined to outlast his own father's two-thousand-year reign and seek eternal power within the physical and sentient world.

*It is my destiny that no one shall succeed me.*

Except for his silent form, his rooms were deserted. He needed time alone, demanded it. Because his senses were so highly attuned, he had at first been unable to bear the presence of those attending him—the psychic noise was painful. He heard it all: their breathing, the beat of their hearts, even the flow of blood in their veins, unnaturally aware of the energies that animated their bodies.

*You survive by taking pain, turning it into strength, he reminded himself. What my enemies have done to me shall be turned back upon them tenfold. Those who have doubted will soon believe.*

Because he had lost so much, he was determined to once again bring down the wall between the natural and the supernatural. For his crimes against mortality, he had been stripped of his position and cast out from his cult. A devastating judgment, it had been a fate worse than death. He was a disgrace to his heritage and undesirable among his own people. Because he was born in Sclyd and possessor of a second bloodline, no one could entirely deprive him of his occult knowledge or the sorcery he capably wielded.

The Council of Witches.

How he despised the congregation of twelve entities who appointed themselves the keepers of cultic justice. They allowed the right of survival through sacrificial worship or hunger, but did not sanction dominating and stifling a weaker race.

Yet he had defied them—and survived. It had not taken him long to topple his successor and resume leadership of the cult of Ouroboros as its Archpriest.

*Soon, very soon, he vowed. I will have my reckoning with the council.*

Since he could not yet see clearly, only shapes and shadows, he'd spent his quiet hours in a meditative state. He allowed his thoughts to stray toward the studies he'd pursued before the three worlds returned to alignment. He had a thirst for knowledge and the power that was knowledge. It was only right he should devote his time to his research, as he grew stronger. He needed to prepare.

What he had discovered of late was an intriguing thing, one he was eager to follow up on. He was not sure, but he believed that he alone possessed the key to a lost phenomenon that could transform him from a mere immortal to one eternal.

*The Scrolls of Cachaen.*

Created in a time only dragons remembered, this set of writings had been carefully gathered by an obscure sect of wizards devoted to gaining knowledge belonging to the ancient gods. Legend decreed the scrolls held the secret of generating astral energies into this physical world. The mastery of such an enigma allowed them to grant carnal form to netherworld spirits conceived of their conjuring. With such animation at their beck, it was believed that the brotherhood could open the gates to the core energies of creation itself.

Realizing the great dangers inherent in their dabbling, that curiosity had given them knowledge that could bring annihilation, the brotherhood receded into a xenophobic society as a self-imposed penance. History agreed the dozen rolls of script were to be entrusted to the monk Erabris. So that Erabris would not be tempted by the great power in the sacred writings, he was euthanized and entombed with the scrolls at his hand. Forevermore would the grimoires be lost, for the location of the tomb was never spoken aloud.

This narrative, some pieces of it resembling actual truth, was dear to Xavier's heart. He coveted the power of lost knowledge and dreamt of the day when he would rediscover it. That day seemed at hand, closer than he'd once believed possible.

At great risk, he'd invaded the Cachaen monasteries to search for clues. The Cachaens were meticulous record keepers and, long having renounced violence, were targeted by predators. Xavier had brought much destruction and torture to them during his attempts to unveil the resting-place of the scrolls.

His search had proven fruitless.

The Cachaens who had attended the actual entombment were long dead. Those remaining preferred to die rather than break their vow of silence. Xavier cast their bodies aside with malice, turning his attention to their libraries chronicling Sclydian history. He discovered most of the volumes were useless.

"Until now," he murmured. "Now I see where I have been blind. My past folly was in seeking cryptic leads when simplicity would suffice."

For several centuries, he'd held in his keep a collection of manuscripts he believed unimportant. What a fool he'd been to ignore the tattered journals of Cachaen ceremonial rites, shoving the manuscripts away with other stolen writings. Retrieved years later from damp recesses, the pages were decaying, barely more than yellowing sheets of animal skin pressed between rotting sheathes of leather.

Through the course of his reading, the writing became scattered. All were eventually shoved aside to make room for the smaller, less impressive batch of pages beckoning for attention, a series of narrative passages ripped from the heart of an ancient funeral tome.

The stained pages reeked with the stench of noxious herbs employed to preserve the faded writing. The potion had done much to protect the

parchment, but not even magic could forestall the decay of time on a tome whose materials were composed of the earth.

He'd made slow progress through the moldering pages. Most were illegible. Many were torn, leaving only ragged edges at the end of a passage. However, the clumsy scrawl had revealed enough to awaken a spark in the depths of his brain. He could hardly believe his good fortune when words, some barely discernable, came together to form a glimpse of a legend shrouded in mystery and deception. He could easily recall from memory lines scratched completely through the thin parchment, lines that spoke of Erabris and his entombment:

*Sacrifice for guardianship must be a soul untainted by temptation. Erabris is chosen and begins the ceremony that shall redeem us in the eyes of the gods. Quickly does poison freeze Erabris' blood and still the beating of his heart. We brothers around him cleanse and anoint a body that can know no resurrection, wrap him in a shroud of virgin white. He is laid in a surround of stone. With him rest the truths of creation. No more shall we seek beyond ourselves. Our minds were not ready for that which did come.*

There, the words ended. The rest of the page was torn away.

No longer, though, were Xavier's thoughts focused on the words translated from the funeral tome. Instead, his recollection of the past skimmed back to the days when he was young, his visage unscored by trials and battle. His mind was seeking then, grasping to learn and to understand all about the cult he had been born to serve. He had eagerly delved into the lures of the forbidden, reveling in the power ritual and worship produced. And lamenting, cursing as did all dark disciples, at the loss of the Cachaen scrolls, the keys to eternity's gates.

Xavier lifted his decomposing hand. Under the bandages, the bones of his fingers were beginning to emerge as bits of burnt flesh fell away. He was mending, but slowly. He silently cursed his weak shell, infuriated that complete regeneration of the physical self was beyond him. Although he had lived fourteen centuries, he continued to age, however decelerated the process. His spells would soon be useless on his damaged body.



The Dragon god was frugal with worshipers who fell into disfavor through repeated failure. To recover the scrolls would guarantee his return to triumph, except the pages did not reveal where the tomb of Erabris was located. There were no more lines of text, nor could he find more pages. The answer was not within the writings.

A sense of utter desolation washed over him. Would Ouroboros forever hold the scrolls from his reach or, worse, reveal them to the eyes of another? Surely not. Since his discovery, he had begun to have strange dreams, visions he believed to be oblique clues to where the scrolls might rest. As with most dreams, he could only glimpse, but not completely identify, scenes from a very ancient time.

*The secret of where the scrolls rest is concealed in the folds of the past. Unfold it, and their hiding place will be revealed. Secrets are never completely lost, only temporarily misplaced...*

The opening of heavy bronze doors broke into his thoughts. His forehead furrowed a little, not with rage but annoyance—he had been deep in contemplation. By the heavy treads on the hard stone, he knew the identity of the person. The man who had entered his chambers was expected. He turned his head and gave a ceremonial nod to show he acknowledged the presence of his *bria-thar*, or low cenobite of the third caste.

“Azoroath.” Lifting his hand in welcome, he spoke in a firm, distinct tone.

Azoroath stepped forward. He embraced Xavier’s hand and knelt briefly, not quite going down on one knee; they were bound, servant and master, to the collective cause of serving Ouroboros.

Heavy of build and muscular, well over six feet tall, Azoroath’s height seemed to stretch on endlessly. Set on a thick neck, his large head was shaved completely bald, save for a thin strip of hair at the nape of his neck. He wore the Dragon’s tattoo of ownership. A more elaborate symbol was branded above his right eye, just above the brow, marking him as holding a sacred rank, a step higher than the Jansi drones, whose only function was to fight and die. High forehead, aquiline nose bearing flaring nostrils and a sharp, jutting chin finished his severe face. Overhung with heavy brows and spaced unnaturally far apart, his eyes were a strange unsettling shade of pink—not a gentle, soft color but hard and glassy, variegated with slivers of crimson. His mouth was a

slash, smiling and cruel, like a wolf. Of indeterminate age, he dressed in trousers, a simple short-sleeved undershirt, tunic slashed to the waist and leather boots. A broadsword was strapped to his back, a short dagger tucked into the sash at his waist.

"I have news." He spoke with grave courtesy.

Xavier drew away his hand. "Good. You have done as I asked?"

A nod. "Yes, Lord. My men have been watching."

"What say you..." The lines around Xavier's mouth tightened, then relaxed. "...about Morgan?"

"My scouts have sent word that the assassin is weak. He can be had now that he has taken a horse and left the Raider camps." Azoroath's hand strayed toward his weapon. "Just say the word, and you shall have his head."

"Stay your anticipation," Xavier advised. "There is time yet."

"This watching, the waiting," Azoroath countered. "Why risk giving an enemy time to recover?"

"Risk it?" Xavier laughed; then hastened to dismiss his acolyte's misgivings. "I am risking nothing. In fact, I have a task for you, one that must be managed with the greatest care."

A look of doubt washed across Azoroath's expressive features. He quickly hid it by bowing his head in acceptance. "Then...I am honored you choose me."

"Here is what I wish." Xavier licked his lips. "You will carry a message to the assassin who has done this to me."

Azoroath's impassive expression twisted again briefly, cynically.

"A message, Lord?" It was clear by his tone the prospect dismayed him. "Is he not a thorn in your side, one that should be immediately plucked?"

Hackles rose. "Are you questioning my judgment?"

"Of course not, Lord," Azoroath acceded. "Forgive my impertinent words."

Xavier nodded, then continued. "Here is what I wish of you. You are to say, in my name, that the witches' council and I now have a truce for the common good of Sclyd."

"Is such a move wise?"

Xavier's upraised hand commanded silence. Azoroath had a habit of overstepping himself. His raw voice rose, adding a layer of harsh remonstrance.

“Hear me out!” He paused to gather his thoughts; then he went on as if Azoroath had not interrupted. “He knows our world is desperate, close to becoming extinct. Tell him that all we seek is survival, a right even the council cannot deny. He has been away a long time. Things have changed on both sides. Say that we wish to understand the mortal realm, how best to use its resources to benefit our world. In that, he would prove most valuable.”

Azoroath broke his unwilling silence. “Ego-stroking words, indeed, but I hardly believe he will be of the mind to cooperate. He will not easily...ah...forgive the death of his mate.”

A short space of silence passed. Xavier barely managed to subdue his irritation. He might be temporarily blinded, but he was neither stupid, nor stricken dumb. His hold over his people might be a shaky one, but it was one he was determined to rectify. Soon.

“As I have not forgiven the death of Nisidia. In that, we are even,” he said. “But listen. If Morgan refuses—and he will—wound him. Badly. But do not kill him.”

“Do not kill him?” Azoroath repeated, as if disbelieving the words.

“You heard me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I am counting on you to show him his weaknesses.”

“I would advise you not to tempt him,” the adept hastened to say. Then with a restrained tone that gave emphasis to his words, he added, “The assassin is like a scorpion. Poke him enough and he will strike back. He can be a powerful enemy when provoked.”

“Trust me when I say I know what I am doing.” Sensing Azoroath’s hesitation, Xavier explained. “My legion is strong, and after a long war, we are at peace. Personal vendettas aside, an attack would be unprovoked and, more importantly, unsupported.”

“Remember, he was once backed with the power of twelve other justices. He no longer possesses that since he turned from the council. He is an outlaw, and his allies are presently very few. Because the balance of power is shifting to my advantage again, I can afford the luxury of a little cat-and-mouse. I relish his return. I have waited a long time for my revenge. I have plans. Many plans.”

Collecting himself, Azoroath rested his hand on the weapon at his side.

“I hear your words of wisdom.” He made a sign. “You are truly the wise one, Lord.”

Xavier gave a gesture of dismissal. “Go now, at once.”

The acolyte inclined his head in a brief nod. “I will do as you say.”

Moving with effortless, confident grace, the towering being strode across the chamber. The doors opened a second time to allow his exit.

## Chapter Five

Morgan dismounted from his borrowed horse. The animal snorted and pawed the ground, nervous, as though it sensed it had come into a bad place. He put a hand on the animal's neck, a steady stroke to calm it.

His long ride had been a chilling one. The mountain winds lashed out at the landscape as though to rip the earth out from under the horse's hooves. A storm was brewing in the skies above, and he was ill-equipped to weather the elements. Aside from borrowed clothing, he'd taken no extra supplies.

Not that he felt the cold hammering against his skin. Unspeakably weary, he was determined not to give in to the uncooperative environment. Hours ago, his body had gone numb. Regeneration was trying to set in, heal his wounds, but he was fighting his need for rest. Only sheer will and determination moved him.

Letting go of the horse's reins, he gave it a firm slap on the rump. The stallion bolted into an immediate run, as though chased by the hounds of hell. He watched it gallop off into the distance. He had no need of it now. The animal would be found and reclaimed. He'd already pushed chance by leaving the safety of Rutola's camp, but there was a great need within him to return to this place.

He walked up a crumbling flight of thirty steps carved into stone. His legs seemed made of lead; he had to force himself to put one foot in front of the other, keep going forward. The steps led to an open courtyard, its six pillars and sagging roof none too stable under the merciless erosion of the mists. He was too dazed to notice that it was darkening into a gloomy gray as night descended.

Morgan looked up warily, contemplating how long before the whole mass crashed down to block the entrance. He reached to touch one of the pillars. Bits of marble turned to dust beneath his fingertips.

As unwelcoming as the remnants were, *it* was here. And, now, so was he. Still, he hesitated, unwilling to make the next move.

Shaking his head, he moved on, stepping over a deep crevasse, mindful that a fall could seriously injure him. He must take care not to twist a leg in the jagged slices rending the rock.

He crossed the courtyard toward the castle. It ended at a second set of stone steps. These led up to an arched set of wrought iron doors. Twelve feet in height and nearly as wide, they had been designed and created long ago by artisans of an era long past. Set high above the doors was a single stained-glass window. Beautiful, yet savage was what he considered the lions emblazoned in the glass. It amazed him the mural had not been broken through the years of the sanctuary's abandonment.

Skirting around the enormous stone girth of the structure, he observed the condition of the outer walls. Here, too, was damage from the encroaching mists. Entropy had permeated the foundation. Gaping cracks were visible from the foundation to the dome. Misty fingers dug at the openings, giving the impression the exterior was being torn apart by giant, phantom hands.

It was only the beginning of the dissolution. Soon the *marbh saol*, a plant-like virus traveling on the mists that settled across the land at night, would take root and begin its corrosive spread. Once that happened, nothing could be done to stop its invasive rot. Slowly but surely the dead zones were progressing, cutting an ever-widening swath of sterility across the land.

Gaining entrance through a rear door, he walked down shadowy hallways, brushing aside spider webs to enter the dining hall. It had been stripped of all furnishings except the rectangular table that had, in the past, served as many as fifty-two people. Its top was littered with the carcasses of small fowl and other beasties. Silver goblets once flowing with wine now were empty, containing only dust and the memories of bygone times.

Others had come, but they had not remained. Few wanted to claim a land that was uninhabitable.

He went on, making his way through the maze, until he came to a great stone foyer. Here, he confronted the lions from outside. The great beasts glared down at him, threatening and malevolent. They guarded the front door, locked by a huge plank held firmly in place by iron staples on both sides.

He continued onward. Opening a door at the foot of the staircase, he stepped over the threshold. He paused, feeling the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Yes, *it* was present. Waiting. As he knew it would be.

"I know you are here. Show yourself."

A steady radiance immediately sprang up around him, tiny flickering golden flames hovering in midair, chasing away the darkness of the chamber. The flames gave no heat, only light. A smile turned up the corners of his lips. He was not the source of the light.

But he knew what was.

This was *its* domain, the place where he'd trapped his *ci'biote*, that spirit that embodied his magical legacy, when he'd separated from it. Far from being inactive, it continued to exist in this stone prison, a thing still animate amid the decay.

"It has been a long time." He searched every nook and cranny of the chamber as if trying to memorize the smallest detail.

The den was the only room in the huge old castle that was paneled in wood, an innovative bit of carpentry for the medieval time in which it had been constructed. Chairs and a single divan were covered with beautifully woven Irish linen, decorated with bursts of Celtic needlework depicting pagan symbols. Thick hand-woven carpets lavishly covered most of the stone floor, and exquisitely crafted tables matched the furniture in elegance as well as usefulness. All but one table held silver candelabra with unlit white candles.

Positioned on a stand between two of the chairs sat a chessboard carved from dark Spanish oak. Chessmen cut from black ebony and white ivory were fashioned in the images of the Grim Reaper and an Archangel, the pieces poised for the game of war.

Shelves lined with old manuscripts and exotic curios, collected over centuries, populated two and a half of the den's five walls. The fourth and widest wall had a fireplace hewn deep into the gray stone, overhung by an

elegant black marble mantle. A black wrought-iron screen, held in the paws of two iron lions, hedged the hearth.

The fifth wall of the den supported the staircase to an open mezzanine surrounding the room. A four-foot iron rail insured occupants against a nasty fall.

Tucked under the staircase was a recess that housed a bar, an obvious afterthought to fill space. More than a haven for well-aged whiskey, the bar served as a reference point. At its end was a concealed entrance to the catacombs under the sanctuary.

Ascending the stairs, Morgan walked to the center of the room. As he moved, the mysterious dancing flames moved with him, jumping from candle to candle, lighting the wicks. The last flew into the hearth, spreading out across the dry wood stacked there. Now that it was illuminated, he could see the den had been no less bitten by time's spoilage. Cobwebs covered the ceiling and most of the furniture. The silver was tarnished. A heavy layer of dust coated every item, dulling the workmanship of craftsmen long dead. Everything was still in its place, exactly as he had left it. It was with no joy that he was returning. Coming back was not a victory, but a defeat.

*This damned place has my blood embedded in its very stone. And it was alive, abounding with the sins committed inside its walls. Filleán meal ar an meallaire.* Evil returns to the evildoer. Never were words more apt.

Depression all at once surged through him like an angry bull, feeding his self-hatred. A red haze colored his thoughts, spreading through his mind. Sorrow was a hole in his soul; it was deep, black, cold—a consuming thing of sheer malevolence. Regret was a fever, crawling through his veins and throbbing in his cranium like a pulsing fire, the emotional pain progressing past the physical and going straight into the core of his being. He wanted to deny he had feelings, needs, but in this instance he could not. For the second time in his life, he had let a woman get to him.

The first had been Nisidia.

The second was Julianne Blackthorne.

Two women. Both tied to him in blood, both entangled in the sins that would forever taint his past and curse his future. Two women who had to die because he'd made a grievous mistake.



He lifted his left hand. On his third finger shined an engraved circlet of gold. Here was the selfish reason he had returned—to reclaim from Xavier the soul of the unborn child sired between himself and Nisidia.

The accursed thing seemed to wink, burning into his skin.

*Like all curses, it comes with strings attached,* he thought. *Like a millstone around my neck, I will be saddled with it unto the end of my days.*

He didn't want to possess the damned ring, but if it fell out of his ownership he would again be obligated to serve whoever held it against him. Moreover, if he were to pass beyond the physical without possessing it, he would be trapped, neither truly dead nor alive, a specter wandering between worlds. That was the true hell of Xavier's spell. Not even death offered escape. Neither had his exile. That had only delayed the inevitable.

*Even though I am free, there is no walking away. Always, I am bound to be something I do not wish.*

Taking the ring off, he balanced it between two fingers and lifted it to study the intricate engraving scored into the surface of the delicate gold. To possess it was a bitter victory. The price paid was too high. What he had fought to regain—his soul—now meant nothing to him.

"Is this what you are waiting for?" he snarled. "Your freedom?" He was not sure whom he was addressing. Himself? Or the silent but potent entity that waited in the shadows.

"You wanted it," he continued in a harsh voice he hardly recognized as his own. "Coveted it—sacrificed lives and souls..." He closed his fingers over the ring. "Now that you have it, what will you do?"

As if in reply the hidden door opened behind him, a section of the wall sliding inward on silent hinges to expose a gaping maw of darkness.

Sensing more than hearing it, he turned. The open door was all he saw, all his fogged mind could concentrate on. He felt his blood pressure drop, the air in his lungs becoming a deep, heavy weight in his chest, a crushing sensation. He felt dazed and sick, but more than that he felt the true emptiness of his entire existence since he'd turned from the occult. He felt a wild impulse to burst into loud, hysterical laughter. His mouth moved a little as he struggled with strong emotions, but he forced himself to keep silent.

Wanting to turn away, yet knowing he could not, he walked on leaden feet toward the opening. He leaned forward, hands gripping each side of the door's frame as if trying to keep the maw from dragging him inside. He could not fail to be affected by the atmosphere the sepulcher below spewed forth. Its aura seethed with tenebrous secrets. Was he imagining it, or had the drone just beyond the edge of his hearing turned into voices? Calling him, mocking him, daring him to return to the depths which had spawned him.

*Come back, they called.*

Sinking to his knees, struggling to resist the voices, he closed his eyes, trying to suppress the tremor passing through his body.

*It never entirely left me, he thought. It is a thing I cannot escape, for it is an inborn part of me.*

*Hear me, the voices repeated, their drone becoming a chant that echoed oddly, half in his ears, half in his mind.*

As if gripped by the static fingers of a nightmare, he could not shut them out. His breath caught. His eyes closed, awareness stretched taut.

*"I knew you would not let me go." He wished the voices would cease, but instead they grew stronger, louder, replying in a reverberating unison that filled his skull. You have no choice. Legacy will not be denied. Blood will not be denied.*

Unable to listen any longer, he pushed away from the tunnel's mouth, settling down on the floor, his back to the wall. It was as far as he could go. He ran his hands through his disheveled hair, then clenched them into tight fists.

Feeling his disintegration, he bowed his head and massaged the ache in his temples. Was he losing his mind? Gritting his teeth, he shook his head, struggling for control.

*"I deny thee," he grated in a voice barely above a whisper. "You have haunted me with your temptations since I cast you away. I know what you are—the darkness in my heart, the shadow on my soul. I will not hear you. I will not again be your instrument of death."*

The voices from below receded into a low drone, but they continued to call, a mournful wail that carried the sorrow of abandonment. Even with his eyes closed, his mind engaged in denial, he could still hear the unbroken howl.

Gripped in his inner torment, he did not immediately notice a figure slip into the chamber, gliding stealthily down the staircase, until it was too late. Because there was no longer a circle of protection around his sanctuary, anyone could enter and do harm.

Morgan shook his head, making an inward effort to fight the pain. He needed time for rest, for regeneration, but doubted his enemies would grant it. They would strike when he was at his weakest.

He rubbed his eyes to clear his vision so he could better see the approaching figure. He did not bother to get up, draw a weapon. He didn't feel like fighting. Heavy with weariness and lassitude, he didn't even feel like standing. He mentally sized up the man.

Morgan recognized him: a priest of the lower-caste adepts—and a skilled warrior. It had not taken long for Xavier's mercenaries to come crawling out of the woodwork.

"Azoroath." He offered a brief nod. At the moment, it was about all he could do.

The tall being proceeded, crossing the space that seemed suddenly smaller for his presence. Shadows aped his movements on the walls, a dark army ready to act at his summoning.

Azoroath wrinkled his nose in disdain. "How predictable of you to return to the ruins of your past."

Morgan shrugged. Conversation was not on his list of things to do at the moment.

Azoroath continued his taunt, his speech rough and curt.

"Looks like you've come crawling back to lick your wounds. It seems to my eyes you are hardly the invincible lord of death anymore." He laughed, short and curt. "But then, you never were. Xavier found your weaknesses, played on them, bringing one of the gods to the ground."

Morgan shifted his body, trying to find a more comfortable position—impossible given the hard stone beneath him. "I never claimed to be a god."

"Yes, I remember. You always fall prey to your human side, the frailties of the flesh. That mortal blood in you can have little use, yet you allow it to cripple you." Azoroath's analytical expression betrayed no compassion, only distaste. He made a brief gesture with his hands. "You still skulk in the

shadows amid the remains. I ask myself: why? Why did a being of such power choose to waste it?"

"The *tholtanagh*, the ruin, suits my mood," Morgan bit off. "But surely that cannot be why you came here, to remind me of my failures."

Azoroath stopped his round-the-room transit. "I call them as I see them." A sly look sidled into his eyes, and he prodded with his booted foot, a gesture of disdain and contempt. He hunkered down, no hint of compassion hovering behind his pink stare.

"If you do not care for it, then *ersooyl lhiat*," Morgan said. "Go away!"

"You know why I have come," Azoroath answered, his features perceptibly altering to utter seriousness. All derision aside, there was reason behind his presence.

"To avenge the humiliating blow I have dealt your master?" Morgan opened his hand to show what he held. "And for this?" He deliberately slid the ring back onto his finger. "You can have it if you can kill me." He reached toward the dagger sheathed in his left boot. "If you think I am entirely helpless, think again." His voice was low, menacing. A man with nothing to lose had the advantage.

Azoroath's gaze flicked over the ring. The hint of a smile seemed to linger across his arid lips longer than necessary. He was toying with his prey the way a cat would a wounded bird. He knew he had the advantage. He knew he had the time. He certainly knew he had the intent to kill.

"I have no need of it because I have not come to mete out Xavier's revenge." He lifted his arms in a reverent gesture. "It is the opposite—to show you his mercy. The blow you dealt him was a minor one. You should know that as long as we are willing to feed him our lives and souls, he is eternal."

"Xavier's mercy?" Morgan repeated with a derisive snort. "How generous, but I am not impressed."

"Believe it or not." Azoroath made a motion of appeasement. He spread his large hands wide, palms up. "I came to try and speak sense to you. I draw no weapon, to show my words are true. That I came alone is further proof. You don't know what has occurred since you left."

There was a long and faintly uneasy silence.

“Say what you will, then.” Morgan let his hand drop. *This day may yet bring my end.* The idea did not alarm him. Instead, it offered great relief, an easy escape from the guilt, from the voices harrying him. His life was *gyn feeuid*—worthless—of no value except to those who would take it.

Azoroath inclined his head in a condescending manner.

“When the heavens went out of alignment, it wreaked havoc upon our realm. Forces are shifting that affect us all. Our ways, our very world, is in danger of becoming extinct. Look around. Sclyd is ravaged, growing more barren with each passing year. We need mortal resources to replenish ours, their people for mating.”

“And sacrifice. Let us not forget how hungry Ouroborous is for souls.”

Azoroath ignored him, saying emphatically, “Since the parting, their world has changed in ways we do not understand...”

“...and I know their ways,” Morgan finished.

Now he knew why Azoroath had come, and what they wanted from him. For all the illusions that could be conjured, there were many things magic could not do, such as weave cloth upon the loom to make clothing or grow food to fill the bellies of those dependent on physical needs. Someone had to do the common work, till the fields, harvest crops.

Much worse, though, the human populace settled in Sclyd was beginning to suffer from a devastating sterility, unable to reproduce. The gene pool of pureblooded humans desperately needed replenishing, and for an immortal to engender an heir, a mortal mate was needed.

“You’ve spent a long time on their side,” Azoroath said.

“I will not serve the legion’s cause,” Morgan breathed out, “by helping them take down the *faase ainmhidh*, the weaker animal.”

Azoroath made a ritual gesture, tucking his two middle fingers under his thumb, extending his index and last finger before turning his hand down. “You give no thought to your answers.”

Morgan recognized the gesture. He was *ddeyrit gy baase*, under the sentence of death. He glanced toward the gaping mouth of the catacombs. He closed his eyes, but only briefly. In his brain, a brutal struggle raged, the desire to escape completely fighting the pull of voices only he could hear. There would

be no escape. Even if he ran back into the mortal realm, he would not for very long be able to dodge the warriors who would come after him.

Jaw tightening, he hardened his resolve. "You are wrong," he said. "I give every thought to them."

Scowling, Azoroath lifted his hand in a sharp gesture. "Then you give no choices." His resonant voice rang loud. "If you won't stand with us, then you are against us."

Morgan released a brief, bitter laugh, wishing the dull thud in his head would cease. "I always have been."

He was tired. His nerves were frayed. And his migraine was getting worse, pain overcoming sense. The demon in his mind drew out its whip, lashing viciously into the soft tissue of his brain, a relentless tormentor.

Azoroath set his mouth into a tight thin line. "I expected more of you. You've been away a long, long time. The politics of our world is altering. Even now, there is peace between the legion and the witches' council."

"And they were wrong to agree to an alliance. What they believe might preserve Sclyd will destroy it."

Azoroath's eyes turned icy with offense. "Xavier has given you the opportunity to redeem yourself, and you have refused. It truly is the mortal half that makes you weak. Living among them, taking one as a mate, has twisted your thinking."

Morgan snorted in derision. Hot rebellion began to flow through his veins, further strengthening him. Azoroath was hitting every sore nerve.

"I will not be swayed by deceptions and lies as the council has been." He was more aggrieved than he cared to admit.

"If you will not join us..." Azoroath rose to his full height and reached over his shoulder. He brought forth his sword, letting it hover menacingly. The blade glinted dangerously in the firelight. "I could take your head now."

Morgan pushed the tip away and climbed to his feet. The idea of discretion being the better part of valor was completely lost on him, and living to fight another day was barely a fleeting thought in his mind.

Azoroath had been dispatched to kill him. Fine. He could accept that. He knew what he'd face when he returned.

"You would not kill me that easily," he chided. "It is not your way."

Considering the weapon in his hand, Azoroath unexpectedly cast it aside. "You are clearly wounded. I'll at least offer you the chance to defend yourself." It was apparent by his smirk that he did not expect the assassin to be much of a challenge.

"You need not have made the gesture!" Morgan snapped. "It is yet to be seen if you are the one who will be walking away."

Azoroath briefly inclined his head. "We'll see."

"Yes." Morgan stiffened in anticipation, facing the man intended to be his executioner. "We will."

The fight was about to commence, and Morgan was in no way ready for it. He was at a distinct disadvantage—recently wounded, reflexes addled by the threatening migraine. His sole advantage was experience, and that might count for naught. Right arm still aching, he would have to rely on his left to carry the brunt of the action. Azoroath would play on that weakness, automatically going for his infirm side.

The two began to circle each other, both waiting for the other to make the vital move that would signal the fight should commence. Azoroath was a large man, easily outweighing him by some thirty-five pounds. His bulk was threatening; he was literally a mass of flesh.

Morgan had never been one to back away from a brawl. In fact, he had started more than a few with his razor-sharp tongue and fast fists. However, he was nowhere near top form, and he knew when he didn't have a chance in hell of winning and it would be better to walk away.

Azoroath was not offering that option. And, in the back of his mind, Morgan didn't really regret that he was probably going to lose. This was bound to be quick.

"You draw no weapon," Azoroath observed.

"I will if I have need of it."

"You will. Your death will be a waste, but no one shall mourn you."

"I expected no less," Morgan shot back. "But they would be mourning prematurely."

"You should give up now, save yourself more pain."

Azoroath struck first, swiping a fist toward Morgan, a teasing move to test his reflexes.

Morgan ducked the larger man's arm and came up, fist clenched. He sent it flying straight toward Azoroath's face, something he knew the larger man wouldn't expect. He struck squarely, soundly, shattering Azoroath's nose. Blood spattered in warm droplets.

Before Azoroath could react, Morgan laced his hands together and brought them crashing down into the base of the larger man's skull. Azoroath bent double, even as Morgan's right knee hammered up into his groin. Brought up sharply by the pain, Azoroath stumbled back and lost his balance, crashing into the chess table, shattering the fragile wood and sending chess pieces flying. Gasping for breath, he spastically arched his back and clutched his throat, unable to avoid the hard kick Morgan delivered to his ribcage.

"There is a little fight left in the old dog yet." Azoroath gasped, swallowing a mouthful of blood. Shock whitened his face. "You're not going easily to your death."

"I still have a few tricks," Morgan taunted, drawing in a deep breath to clear his head.

It was obvious the blows had unsettled Azoroath. He was hurt, embarrassed, and moreover, he had a job to carry out. He reached for the dagger at his waist. No more taunting. No more testing. Roaring angrily, he lunged, an enraged hulk.

Everything after that was a blur, the next moments chaotic.

Morgan grabbed Azoroath's wrist and snapped it downward, tearing cartilage. He bent over it, gripping it and coming down hard with his full weight. Azoroath howled, dropping his weapon, twisting in a defensive move to slam his shoulder into Morgan's body, upsetting his balance.

Knocked flat, Morgan could not roll away fast enough to avoid the crushing impact of Azoroath's knee into his chest. The blow stunned him. Bringing his leg up, he reached for, and found, his dagger. Eyes wide, face flushed, Azoroath saw his move and caught Morgan's arm with his uninjured hand. He wrenched Morgan's wrist hard, almost to the breaking point, payback for the pain he'd inflicted. Hand going numb, Morgan let go. The weapon skittered out of his reach.

*Dammit, he thought. You are on your own now.*



Struggling to regain the winning position, he came up hard across Azoroath's back with his leg. The solid jolt had little effect; and even as he hit a second time, Azoroath swung his fist and delivered a full facial blow.

Head cracking against the floor, Morgan saw blinding darkness, felt the spurt of blood from his nose when Azoroath hit a second time, putting wrath behind his weight.

*You are not winning*, he had time to think as another hard slam stole his breath anew. His head ached; his face stung. He was in pain. A lot of it. He swayed, close to losing consciousness.

Fighting the black void floating before his eyes, Morgan managed to knock Azoroath aside. Pushing himself up, he again kicked out in an attempt to topple the larger man. He angled his body to the left, jamming his elbow into Azoroath's stomach. If he could just get Azoroath down again, he could gain the advantage.

He lunged up, waiting for another attack, prepared to fend it off. Anger was his sole motivator. Blinking his eyes against stinging sweat, he momentarily lost his focus.

It was his undoing.

Azoroath rolled over onto his back, instinctively raising his legs together and delivered a hard kick. The force caught Morgan squarely in the chest and sent him flying. Reeling back against the wall, he hit hard, knocked nearly senseless. It was the chance his enemy had been waiting for.

Azoroath snatched up the nearest weapon. Staggering to his feet, he sprang forward and plunged the dagger into Morgan's abdomen, just below the ribcage. When he pulled the blade away, blood spurted from the narrow wound, cascading downward in a crimson rivulet.

"Xavier may only wish to warn you of the danger that awaits you here," Azoroath said. "But I am of the mind that it would be better if you were dead. His displeasure, I am sure, will not last long. As he makes plans, I have my own." He delivered one more stab before planting the third firmly in Morgan's chest, twisting the sharp steel viciously so it would penetrate the ribs and destroy the heart.

"I bind you unto death, my enemy. Thy hand cannot take out thy blade. It shall stay there until thy body rots."

Fatally struck, Morgan clenched his eyes shut. Silence. The beating of his heart, tearing itself apart against the steel. He felt the cold first—it made him shiver. Then the dampness, the sweat drenching him.

He opened his eyes and lowered his head, as if disbelieving that he had been mortally wounded, realizing, perhaps for the first time, the enormity of what had just occurred. His hand clasped open and shut, but he did not have the strength left to fight the blade and its invasion. He set his teeth against the agony.

“That old fool is soon to fall.” Azoroath let his menacing fist drop. “It is time for a younger man to take his place, lead our people into the prosperity the mortal world so enjoys.”

“We were not meant to be gods,” Morgan gasped, pressing his open palm to his stomach. He paused, forcing his breath to come evenly. The blood was spilling faster than he expected. He’d reached the limit of damage he could survive.

*Unless the blood stops soon.*

But he wasn’t sure he wanted it to.

He reached up with a shaking hand to wipe away the blood trickling from his mouth. At sight of the crimson that stained his fingertips, a fleeting smile crossed his lips. An unexpected laugh broke from his throat, but there was no humor in the sound. He shuddered, a convulsive shiver that seemed to tear through his entire being. Pain twisted him at intervals. He held himself grimly upright until he could no longer resist the stupor overtaking him.

He slid down the wall. Blood spread over the stone floor. He saw it. It was his.

Azoroath claimed his fallen weapons. “I shall take great pleasure in remembering this day,” he said before disappearing as silently as he had arrived.

Morgan heard nothing. His eyes slipped wearily shut, and he felt no emotion except muffled relief. He wanted to stay in this safe haven of darkness forever.

Lethargy crept over him, and it seemed the most desirable thing in the world to sleep. Loss of consciousness was a slow, creeping chill as the beating of his pulse began to falter.

Across the chamber, the door slid shut on silent hinges.

## Chapter Six

Ilya slipped into Xavier's chambers on feet as silent as a cat's. She hurried to Xavier's bedside and bowed reverently.

"It is time for your cleansing, Lord." She averted her head toward her feet. "Your baths have been readied."

Xavier nodded, pleased. Everything had been prepared. He gave his attention to the prowling woman who acted as his eyes and ears.

"My betrothed, she is to come?"

Ilya glanced up. A flash of jealousy raged behind her eyes, her pale face briefly enveloped in hate. She quickly stifled it. "Yes, Lord."

"Good. I must prepare for her."

Xavier rose from his bed. He stumbled on legs still unused to his weight. Ilya stepped to his side and offered her shoulder. He drew himself erect at once—weakness was something he must stifle. Still, he did allow her to lead him. Walking slowly, she maneuvered him over a threshold into apartments radiating a comfortable ambiance.

The chamber was immense, its illumination serene, warm. Lavish with artifacts of bygone ages, it lay under an arched ceiling lost above their heads. Marble pilasters buttressed walls covered in multicolored tiles of cream and gold. Persian carpets woven of silk were spread across the floors, their pattern of Ouroboros, the dragon devouring its own tail, imaginatively conceived. Furnishings crafted by expert hands, utensils fashioned from gold and alabaster, materials woven by hand upon the loom—the spacious room was designed for comfort.

The floor was a creamy, rich marble scattered with tiny bits of crystal. The walls, too, were white, with a strange glitter about them, like moonlight on a snow-covered plain. Lit by fire-warmed hearths and the many candles in the

candelabra, this harbor seemed rife with serenity, but its harmony was false. Fear was a constant undercurrent.

Across the vast area, a monkey-like animal sat on to its elaborately carved perch, sharp claws dug into the wood. Its movements were clumsy, its stubby hind legs shorter than its forearms. Chattering a string of nonsense words, the demonic homunculus scooped bits of leftover meat from a clay bowl with a three-talon paw. Its sharp beak shredded the morsels.

Xavier removed his hand from Ilya's shoulder with a gesture of impatience.

"Attend me."

Three scantily clad women came to guide him toward the sunken baths, where he would partake of a cleansing neglected for days. He stood with his arms extended while they helped him disrobe. Then, putting aside his clothes with great reverence, the slave women helped Ilya undress. Naked, every bone in her gaunt frame seemed revealed. She made no attempt to cover her nudity, instead directing him down five wide steps leading into a waist-deep pool. Settling into the warm water soothed his aching bones.

"You serve me well, Ilya."

"Yes, master," she murmured. "I try to prove my worth."

"I have not an acolyte among you who is capable of succession," Xavier rumbled. "All my women have proven worthless."

It was a cruel taunt, meant to wound. At one time, he had enjoyed relaxing in a hot pool, his every want attended to by his wife. The bath usually led to long evenings of lovemaking, in the hope of conceiving a legitimate child to rule at his side. Ilya was merely one of many disposable mistresses he had taken through the ages, her ancestors among those captured in the last culling of humans from the mortal realm before the portals had closed.

After Nisidia's death, he'd not taken another wife. Instead, he satisfied himself with his *ty-rai*—handmaidens—to fetch and carry, as well as perform for him in any sexual manner he chose. When he was done with the women, he sacrificed them to the greater enhancement of the Dragon without conscience. To him, the mortal spawn were less than animals.

Ilya was humbled. "I meant nothing by my words."

She moved behind him to massage his shoulders. Xavier smacked his lips, pleased he had put her in her place. A second woman joined them, and began to cleanse his body with a soothing wash of soap-root and chamomile.

He let Ilya tend to him, settling back to enjoy his bath. Though he had tortured her sisters to death some years ago, he kept her because she simpered at his feet like a mongrel hound, begging to be accepted. She had no great power, but she was intelligent, learning to participate in rites and rituals with astonishing adeptness. He found it amusing to taunt her, to keep her in utter submission.

The women rinsed the soap from his skin. Chortling, he gestured for the slaves to help dry and dress him. They hurried to clothe him in loose-fitting white pantaloons under a white tunic before enfolding him into a crimson robe. The colors were deliberately chosen. White for purity, crimson for power. The full-sleeved robe bore symbols woven in gold braid, symbols of his magical heritage. Lastly, soft slippers of leather were laced around his ankles.

When he was dressed, he settled into his place of honor, an elaborate throne fashioned of bronze overlaid with hammered sheets of gold. Dressed in simple gray robes, Ilya took her place behind his chair, ready to serve should she be needed.

Despite the rest of the last few days, he grew weary. His lips felt strangely numb. The potion used to dull the pain of his wounds was beginning to wear off, and the ache would soon become unbearable. Although nothing could be done to save his hand, there were ways to overcome physical frailties.

*I must not give in to weakness,* he thought.

The need for revenge made him desperate to prolong his life.

A half-naked man bowed before him. "She is here."

Xavier's broad nostrils flared. "Bring her to me."

Sweeping in like a goddess of light, Megwyn Ese-Yeveanston walked around the eunuch, pointedly ignoring him. A woman of commanding presence despite her diminutive stature, she entered the chamber as though it were her own. Indeed, she had come to know it well since she and her brother's bitterest enemy had formed their alliance.

Swathed in a gossamer gown of white silk, wrapped in a cape of coal-black mink, Megwyn held her head high. Taking her time in loosening her cape, she intently surveyed every angle around her.

With equal slowness, as he did everything, Xavier rose from his chair, offering a slight bow of respect to her as a guest in his domain. "I trust your journey was an easy one."

"It passed with little trouble." Megwyn flicked her hand in a gesture for him to resume his seat. She clearly had other things on her mind. "Have you word of my brother?"

"He has left the Raider camps. He can be taken at any time."

"His return has caused much dissent within the council," she replied, her countenance becoming a little less composed. "There are some who now question the wisdom of a truce with your legion. I have had to do much talking to keep the peace."

Xavier resumed his seat, silently cursing his tired old body. "You have done well in convincing them this cessation of war is for the good of Sclyd. They are not blind to the famine. They see the needs of the people."

Doubt flickered across her face. "If Morgan gets to the council, to the members who doubt this alliance—there are some, I believe, who would follow him."

"They do not want war again." Xavier leaned forward. "You need keep up appearances only a little while longer. Soon we will have no further need of them."

Megwyn grew pensive. "Morgan needs to be dealt with," she said. "We must have a care, though." Her eyes narrowed in thought. "He's unstable, at best. There is no predicting how this exile has affected his mind."

"I have made plans to take care of your twin."

Surprise brought her up cold. "Oh?"

Rock-like and patient, Xavier settled back. "You may not think it wise, but I am willing to offer him one chance to join us."

"You are?" Megwyn's voice quivered. It was clear this was a move she hadn't expected. She toyed with a silver bracelet on her wrist. "Why?"

Carefully rehearsed plans began to unspool. "The war is over. We are at peace."

"You have never felt that way before," she pointed out, her tone laced with suspicion.

"Morgan, too, turned from the council," Xavier reminded her. "He honors no allegiance to them. I have sent Azoroath to make him an offer."

"When?" she asked.

"Yesterday."

"And your message?"

Xavier did not need two good eyes to imagine her blue ones sparking with pique. He could almost hear the cogs in her head turning. He envisioned in his mind the careful pulling of each string.

*They are but puppets.*

"I've given Morgan a choice," he said. "To show I can be merciful, I'm offering absolution if he'll join us."

Megwyn's mouth drew down in a deep frown, as if she resented him going behind her back to make a decision that would vastly affect her. "And if he doesn't accept?"

"He will be wounded."

Her angry face relaxed. "But not killed?"

"To slay him prematurely would deny you your chance. In order for the ci'biote to be transferred to you as the next in the bloodline, he must die empowered. Then you will have the legacy that should have been yours."

Megwyn nibbled her lip in thought. "But what if he chooses not to revive it?"

Xavier snorted. "Then what danger is he?" he asked, with a calm finality. "He has seen how defenseless he really is."

She arched an eyebrow as comprehension of his intention dawned. "And now he needs to call it back to shield himself against us."

"Exactly. Since you and I found a common ground, I have thought these things through most carefully." Xavier paused and then asked, as if seeking her approval. "Are you not satisfied?"

"I am...pleased with your...maneuverings," Megwyn answered. "Either way, he will be a fine sacrifice to the greater glory of the Dragon."

"If you fear him..." Xavier let his words trail off in a suggestive manner, sure that she would take the bait. She did.



Megwyn drew back her shoulders. "I have no fear of Morgan."

A self-satisfied grin split his lips. "Good."

More than her beauty, what intrigued him most about this woman was that she held nothing back. She was always quick to speak her mind, no matter how harsh or unpleasant her words. She had a tongue like a dirk and did not hesitate to hone it on anyone who incurred her displeasure. She also had a great deal of steel in her spine—she was not to be cowed, nor would she back off until she had achieved the results she desired. In many ways she was much tougher than her twin; she certainly did not seem to have inherited the conscience that bedeviled Morgan.

She tilted up her chin in dismissal before offering a dazzling smile. "Forgive my doubts and questions. Any thought of my brother always angers me."

"Then think not of him," said Xavier. "He has done some harm, but that shall soon be remedied." He held out his hand. "Come to me, beloved."

Suddenly docile, Megwyn glided toward him, her small, lean body undulating female grace. There seemed a little glimmering and stirring in the air as she moved, a special electricity she alone generated; she appeared to gather all light about her, then scatter it in a rainbow of dazzling effulgence.

Kneeling at his good hand, she offered her own small one. Xavier took it, bent and kissed it in a reverent gesture.

"I am pleased you came."

Megwyn lowered her eyes, yielding gracefully to his touch. "I am here to serve, Lord." She lifted her head and fluttered her lashes. "I didn't mean to criticize you so harshly. I truly recognize my brother's betrayals and do not condone the error of his ways."

Xavier considered her words in silence for a moment then nodded his approval. Skilled in detecting a body's physical betrayals, he found no tension in her touch, no false stiffness to indicate discomfort in his presence.

*How much dare I trust her?* he wondered. *Like the snake, if I keep her in my sight, she can't bite.*

As Morgan, however, was currently in an uncooperative mood to help her attain her ambitions, she had turned to her brother's enemy. Megwyn hungered for power. When she failed to find it through the Council of Witches, she was quick to consider other paths.

Xavier knew he was no more than a disagreeable option, but one she nevertheless turned to because she recognized the benefits of joining two factions into a single force. Though defeated in the dark war, he had rebuilt his decimated legion and to many, he remained a powerful ally.

Morgan, although once powerful, was a poor one. Unreliable. He was too unpredictable, too unstable in his self-destructive ways.

"Think only of our plans," he finally said, dismissing his faint misgivings. He drew a symbol in the air, one of acceptance and protection.

Megwyn cast him another coy smile. "I wish nothing to interfere with our joining."

"Ah," he said, smiling. "You still wish to proceed?"

"Most decidedly." Standing, she stroked his hairless brow.

"Good. When I am wholly restored, I look forward to initiating you as my mate and first high priestess."

Megwyn twitched her shoulders; her loose hair moved smoothly on them. She tossed it back with an impatient hand. "To prove my loyalty, I'm willing to go through with the first rites toward my confirmation."

Her words pleased him. "Excellent. The ceremonial chambers will be made ready for your investiture."

"I look forward to it," she said. "I'll wear the mark of Ouroborous with much pride."

"We must work closely together," he cautioned. "Our walk will not be an easy one."

"But it will be a successful one."

Xavier bent close to the woman. In a way, he could hardly believe this captivating female had agreed to become his second wife. She was even more beautiful than Nisidia, certainly more compelling. She harbored a very dark soul, much like his.

Did the members of the council yet suspect how close he and Megwyn had become? Surely, they did not. Nor did they yet realize it was not only Xavier who conspired against them. Megwyn, too, planned to bring down the very entities that had put her in power.

He so dreamt of having revenge upon the remaining eleven who had judged him so unfairly. *I defied them and survived*, he thought smugly. *And now their leader is to become my bride.*

She was his trophy, his triumph. The only impediment would seem to be her twin, but even that was no longer a major bother.

*Morgan will not last long with so many wanting to claim the bounty on his head.*

He smiled a secret, gleeful grin, though not a muscle moved on his flaccid face. His mind found a new passage in which to stroll—Megwyn.

*She's a conniving bitch, every bit the cold killer her brother is, however surreptitious she keeps her schemes. She'll be my greatest weapon.*

"I believe the Dragon has shown me a path that will restore me," he confided. "Help me, and I swear I will hand you the legacy that would be better served in your hands. Then we can join bloodlines. It is destiny's plan, I believe."

"I agree we would be even stronger. My resources are yours, and I have brought the healer you need." Rising, she turned to one of the eunuchs guarding the entrance and clapped her hands. "Bring him!"

The eunuch ushered in a small, wizened Chinese man, who skittered without raising his eyes to kneel before the sorcerer. Bent and very old, he was dressed in the style of his ancient people, a conical hat, simple trousers, tunic and sandals. Out of respect, he touched his forehead to the floor.

"This is Duk-cho," Megwyn said.

In his thin, claw-like hands, Duk-cho carried a small chest carved of sandalwood. Its lid bore the seal of his ancestors fashioned in amber. He was not alone in his visit. He was accompanied by a tall, cadaverous man who lingered in the background, well away from the others, one whom Xavier recognized. Of dark skin and short hair, the being was considered an undesirable. His flesh reeked of the grave from which he'd so recently risen. He was a spirit creature whose survival depended upon inhabiting bodies of the recently deceased. His abilities were many, but his power was limited. Naylor, as the nosferatu called himself, was Megwyn's familiar.

Ilya bent over and whispered in Xavier's ear, telling him everything she saw.

"Duk-cho," Xavier greeted. "Your lady is very gracious to offer healing."

He did not address or acknowledge Naylor's presence. To do so would be beneath him. Instead, he let the black man do what he was there to do, watch and listen.

The apothecary shook his head and tugged at his sparse whiskers. His shriveled face crinkled.

"I serve her will." He spoke in the simplest Quarayan, not because he did not know the common language but because it was expected of one of his caste.

"The news pleases me. You can see I've not been fortunate. There's much damage to my hand." Xavier held it out. "And my eye! I fear I will never see clearly again. But sight is inconsequential to what the Dragon has revealed to my mind. I am close, very close, to finding my power again."

Megwyn laughed.

"Duk-cho keeps his thoughts to himself, but his expression says much. He thinks that we live in past glories, unable to accept the defeat of the present." She addressed the old man directly. "You're only a humble healer. Do not mock or question the ways of those who are in power."

Duk-cho nodded. He set down his beautifully designed chest and opened its lid. The healing scent of strange herbs wafted into the air. The old man carefully prepared an incense burner. A mixture of opium, powdered citrus rinds and a pinch of musk was lit to create a heavy smoke. Inhaled, the incense would relax and clear the senses.

With careful hands, Duk-cho next removed a leather pouch. Spreading out its contents, he picked up a pair of delicately crafted tweezers from among medical implements. He bent over Xavier's damaged hand. "This will be painful."

Xavier steeled himself. "Just make the hand work."

"Yes," Megwyn said, "Xavier must be restored. Do what you can, so my end of our bargain is upheld."

Duk-cho studied a strip of scorched skin taken from the index finger—no blood came when the dead flesh was lifted away. It was necessary to remove the charred skin to prevent poisoning of the blood.

When the old man had thoroughly cleaned the entire hand down to bare bones, he saturated the fingers in a potion meant to give strength and

movement to the appendage. He wrapped each finger, mummy-like, in thick strips of cloth before sewing on a tight-fitting leather glove and attaching it to the living skin circling Xavier's wrist.

"This is good." Xavier grunted, testing the hand. His fingers were stiff, but he fancied he could feel sensation in them. He balled the hand into a fist. "You see, I can be re-formed. Your brother so undervalues his regenerative system."

Megwyn rolled her eyes and shook her head in exasperation.

"Morgan has never valued anything about our heritage," she sneered, crinkling the edges of her piercing eyes. "He has thrown aside every gift of his legacy."

"Not all can be gods, my lady," Xavier said, assuming a paternal tone. His voice grew soothing, gentle and mesmerizing. "Only we who realize, accept and use our abilities will be the great ones."

"My brother has never accepted." Megwyn clasped her hands in front of her and looked at Duk-cho, who hesitated to begin in his next treatment. "What're you waiting for, old one? Continue your work!"

Nodding, the old man removed the patch of cloth covering Xavier's facial damage.

Xavier's left eye was intact, swollen almost shut by the long puffy laceration running from the bridge of his nose to his temple. The skin around the edges had yellowed with putrefaction.

Duk-cho gently lifted the lid. "Eye is not damaged. It's possible to restore his sight." He made a scissoring motion with his fingers. "The dead skin underneath the eye must be cut away and then re-stitched." He shook his head, as if eschewing the inadequate care Xavier had received.

"I must see fully again," Xavier prodded. "Do what you must."

Duk-cho administered a potent anesthetic to numb the delicate area. Then, with a steadiness belying his age, he took up a scalpel. One tiny error and the patient would lose his sight.

Megwyn dug her fingers into the old man's bony shoulder.

"Do not blind him, idiot!" she warned. "If you fail, you shall lose your life."

## Chapter Seven

A strange, distorted face swam out of the darkness. Swollen, sightless eyes stared, empty and unblinking, out of wide sockets. Taut lips were drawn back over yellowed, broken teeth bared in a bestial snarl.

Julienne screeched, a high, wild shriek of anguish. Rigid fingers tangled in her hair. Heavy arms and legs weighed her down. A foul odor washed over her, the smell of death and putrefaction. It latched onto her, dragging her into the very abyss of purgatory, where corpulent, wriggling maggots would infest her flesh and rabid, red-eyed jackals would tear out her soft guts to gnaw on her splintered bones.

Death was ugly.

Death was decay.

She didn't want to die.

"No! Please!"

Her cry faded into a strained, hoarse wail. No more coherent than a raving idiot, her mindless howling was that of a lost soul. Scratching at skin and cloth, she clawed to free herself from the fumbling, burdensome weight.

A stiff, cold object struck her in the face. Her brain detonated in an inferno of agony. She fought to keep from sinking back into unconsciousness, instinct warning her that to go into the dark void would be extinction.

Sobbing with pain, fright and frustration, she kicked and twisted to escape the crushing mass. Somehow, she pushed the heavy thing off. Desperate to escape her new attacker, she tried to stand, but her ankle violently twisted beneath her; she reeled and fell. Clenching her teeth in blind pain, she scrambled on hands and knees across the stone floor, stopping only when a wall impeded her. Certain that she was trapped, that she was about to be attacked again, she spun around and pressed her back against the wall,

determined to fight. Dread was an invisible but tangible force, quivering like a butterfly caught in the silvery strands of a black widow spider's web.

Nothing came after her. Lancing through the grayness, she saw only the ghosts of her own fear in pursuit.

Julienne blinked several times and wiped sweat off her forehead. She strained her eyes to pierce the murk. Her gaze darted from side to side, seeing all, but at first, comprehending nothing.

She was in a cavernous room. Torches black with caked pitch lined its perimeter, casting shadowy, pallid light. She had been placed among a pile of lifeless men. A few skeletons littered the floor, but most were simply dead bodies left to decay. They existed with a curious sort of finality. They just were.

She had been lying beneath four corpses, one dressed in the coarse trousers, boots and vest of a Raider warrior. Her breath lodged in her throat as tiny fingers began to squeeze her windpipe. Seeing him brought a sudden flash of horror; then the vague memories closed in, and she recalled her would-be rapist dragging her into the tunnels and tossing her into the charnel room. She shuddered. More bodies had followed hers—this place was brimming with people whose lives meant little.

Terrified by this new discovery, she covered her mouth with her hands to contain a whimper, utter shock blossoming inside her breast, her mind, and shutting down her senses. Fear twisted her guts, sent the tang of acrid bile to the back of her throat. For a wild moment, she wished to be stricken blind, to never see such an abomination again. Save for her abrasive panting, the chamber around her was silent.

Hysterical laughter mixed with the sobs in her throat. A churning sensation rose in her stomach, and she knew she was going to be very ill. Barely able to bend over, she vomited rancid green bile mixed with clots of blood. Dropping to her hands and knees, she continued to purge the contents of her stomach. With gut-twisting spasms, she gagged until dry heaves told her nothing remained. Her head bobbed on a weak neck, and her limbs felt like jelly. She gulped, trying to keep from falling into a dead faint. Tiny black dots floated before her eyes, threatening to merge into one large black void.

*I can't be unconscious again, she warned herself. I have to stay awake.*

When the spasms ceased, she used the hem of her filthy skirt to wipe her mouth. Dizziness overwhelmed her; her stomach lurched once more. Nothing came up.

Every movement brought new pain. The heavy atmosphere in the chamber was oppressive, foul and reeking. She drew oxygen into her lungs, hardly able to bear the fetid stench.

She slumped on the floor with a deep sigh, cowering, shivering violently. A moan only the dead could hear slipped between her numb lips. She bent her head and covered her face with shaking hands, closing her eyes.

The pain and stiffness in her face reminded her of what Xavier had done. She refused to explore the ravaged skin, refused to dwell on how hideous she must look. She was incredibly exhausted and unbearably cold. She licked cracked lips, trying to give herself some relief. Thirst clawed at her raw throat. The desire to lie down and drift into a final, cold sleep was almost too hard to resist.

Lips tightly clenched, eyes half-closed, she stared across the chamber, alone with her thoughts. A single tear trekked down her cheek, then another. Her sobs broke the stillness. She was utterly alone and didn't know what else she could do.

The mutant shifted inside her chest, a grim reminder of its presence. She moaned again, a hand flying to her breast. The all-consuming pain was a part of her, something she now accepted. As she pressed her hand to the wound, she felt the creature twitch again, knocking against her ribs. She grimaced ruefully. It seemed to be alive and well. She crossed her arms tightly across her chest, trying to warm her body, cursing her thinness.

Dissenting voices began to echo in her brain, teasing and taunting. Against her will, she had been forced to share body, breath and heartbeat with a mutant being. It was an awful defilement, a rape of the soul that nothing in life could prepare her for.

*Almost forgot about that fucking thing, she thought. Wonder how long it'll be before it's spitting out my bones? At least it won't have much of a meal.*

The movement stopped. Was the creature listening to her thoughts? It didn't require a live host, but she perceived it considered a living being a greater source of nourishment.



The torches around her began to falter. She knew they would soon go out, and she and the dead would be covered by another shroud of darkness.

Exhaustion scratched at her eyes. She gave herself a hard slap, striking her face with her open palm. She needed to stay awake if she was going to get out of this death room.

The chamber was unbearably icy, and her hot breath formed misty ribbons in the air. Chilled to the bone by the frigid cold, she was close to succumbing to hypothermia; a strange numbness was settling with ease into her limbs. Her eyelids began to slip lower, lower, bringing a welcome, peaceful void.

A delicious sensation of lightheadedness swept through her and she slipped into a trance-like state. She was no longer cold, no longer concerned with the pains of her human body. Her spirit freed itself of physical bonds and drifted into the nurturing, secure womb of the third world, the astral plane. The freedom was lusciously warm, as soothing as a summer breeze.

In her semi-dream state, Julianne was drawn down long tunnels and up steep staircases. She was so much a part of the scenery around her she could feel the heat of the torches propped in sconces, smell the acrid aroma of their oily smoke, trace the scrollwork on the ceilings and feel the hard chill of the floors. The sensations were frightening, wonderful and exciting and she reveled in her spirit's release.

But she was not entirely free, for some force, something she could not understand or resist, pulled her forward against her will. As abruptly as she'd entered the tunnels, her spirit passed through rock and into a strange chamber. Blazing torches and candles and a roaring fire in a massive hearth bombarded her acutely tuned senses. She hovered like a wraith amid many people, invisible to them.

She immediately recognized Xavier, the deliverer of her pain, a being who sparked a hatred inside her like nothing she had ever experienced. He sat in a large chair before the hearth. His face was contorted in agony as a small Chinese man worked on his wounds with the patience of a saint. Other servants fetched the implements the healer needed to complete his work.

"Finish, Duk-cho," the sorcerer growled.

"Once swelling goes down, you will regain sight," the old man said.

"Fortunate for you."

Julienne's attention shifted to a woman pacing the chamber a distance from the back of Xavier's chair. She was dressed in a flowing white Grecian-style chiton. All platinum hair, blue eyes and flawless skin, she held her head high. An aura of assurance and power exuded from her. Her fantastic beauty seemed unreal, illusive, with something hard and vicious marring her features. Her face, though stunning, gave the impression of great inner cruelty.

Julienne gasped. Her insides tingled white-hot, as though someone had infused her veins with fire. She had never met this woman, but still she somehow recognized Morgan's twin sister, Megwyn. Maybe it was because Julienne was Morgan's mate, bound to him yet through that, but the recognition remained, whatever its origin. Though Megwyn somewhat resembled her brother physically, there any similarity ended. Where Morgan was not consumed by ambition, this woman was. Megwyn was hungry for control, and Julienne sensed that, for her, to obtain it and use it to enhance her own greatness was paramount.

By comparison, Xavier was a tired old lion facing his own imminent burnout. Megwyn was just coming into a power she would use the sorcerer to help her acquire. Destroying her brother to further that acquisition was a large part of her plan.

Julienne's awareness zoomed on the whole of the room. The Chinese man finished his work and placed his implements into a small case. He stepped aside when Megwyn positioned herself at Xavier's side.

"You are sure we are the only ones who seek the Cachaen writings?" An edge hardened her voice.

Xavier gingerly touched the black stitches closing his most recent wound. "The scrolls have been lost for eight millennia. To find them will take much energy. We need fresh souls..." He chuckled, a rasping, grating sound that revealed a twisted sense of humor.

"I'll see that you have plenty to sacrifice."

Julienne recoiled, but also sharpened her hearing.

Megwyn unexpectedly whirled. Her body stiffened, as if she suspected someone of peering over her shoulder. Her piercing gaze scanned the room, raking every nook and cranny.

Xavier also cocked his head as if sensing something was amiss. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing." Megwyn shrugged. "Only that we must tread with care at this crucial point. I sense some within the council will oppose my move. Until I know who..."

Unexpectedly, Julianne was yanked from the chamber and whisked through a long, dark tunnel. She snapped awake in gloom, vaguely aware of the spiritual shifting that had allowed her to travel out of the chamber. Had she really seen an actual event, or was it merely the fancy of a sick, desperate mind?

Strange and welcome warmth began to envelop her, and curious, subtle and focused visions penetrated her mind, definite and meaningful. From somewhere nearby, a familiar voice whispered her name.

*Julienne...*

The chamber around her seemed to fade into obscurity. She summoned up the vision of an altar in a secret room, her grandmother atop it. For a moment she fancied she could actually see Anlese. The old woman's blurry image smiled upon her, her eyes gentle with love and hope.

"Grandmother," she murmured.

*Remember...* No sound came from Anlese's mouth, yet Julianne heard it. Then the old woman held forth her hand. A thin white scar marred her palm.

Julienne turned up her own hand. A matching scar was incised into hers. Yes, Morgan had cut, then bound their hands together. As if disbelieving, she looked again to her grandmother.

*You have a powerful gift inside.* The old woman's image began to fade. *Learn to use it.*

Julienne emerged from the vision slowly, a little disoriented but completely comprehending. She was again alone, still trapped in this hateful place of death.

She sat, reverent, absorbing the memories with mixed emotions.

The strange, intoxicating trance had lasted only a few moments, but it might have been forever for all that it revealed. She shivered as she thought about the visitation, lulled by its symbolism. With deliberate effort, she

recovered herself. What her grandmother had passed to her was not to be feared but embraced. Her gift would help her survive.

Surrounded again by the encroaching cold, she cupped her hands together and blew into the space between her thumbs to warm her fingers. The purple tips tingled when numbness began to recede. It was a temporary relief.

"I don't want to die like this, damn it!" she spat through gritted teeth, "I can make it."

Somehow, saying the words aloud seemed to reinforce her determination. *If I want to live, I have to get up, get moving. I need food, water, warmth, time to heal.*

Drawing her legs up, she pushed herself onto her knees and pressed her hand to the wall for support. The effort moved the mutant against her lungs. The sharp pain it caused made her lose her breath. She shuddered, feeling the tremors resonate into the center of her being.

Pain warned her that time was growing short. How long did she have before it emerged fully-grown? A few hours? A few days? It occurred to her she might be engaged in a futile battle. What if there was nothing to be done, despite her every effort to live?

*I won't think about what's inside me. As long as I'm breathing, there's a chance.*

The idea emboldened her. By God, she'd survived a trip through the hell of drug abuse and a near-fatal slashing of her face by her crazed ex-husband. This was nothing, a little inconvenience. Check that. Okay. A *major* inconvenience.

She pushed away from the wall, forcing herself to stay on her feet. She was unsteady, but she was operative. She took a halting step, and then a second. Confidence grew when she found she could remain upright. She tested her responses, pacing out the length of the wall. Her body was responding, her stamina returning.

Her bleary gaze found the corpses who were her only companions. Bitten by the damp in the chamber, she knew the clothes she presently wore were inadequate. She made a quick decision. The dead had what she needed.

She swallowed and stepped across the bodies. She kept her mind blank, wincing when rotted flesh oozed beneath her and brittle bones snapped. Her

attention settled on the freshest bodies, the first a young man lying on his back, arms and legs twisted at odd angles. *He can't be more than twenty*, she thought.

She clamped a hand over her nose and mouth and leaned in a little closer. Dressed in boots, trousers and a rough peasant shirt, he had a youthful face contorted in a death scream—his skull had been hacked open by the violent blow of a sharp object. His blood had still been flowing when he was placed in the chamber and had spilled on the bodies beneath him. His eyes were open, sight frozen by the Reaper's scythe.

Her movements were clumsy when she began to strip off his clothes; she concentrated to make her stiff fingers function. It was difficult to get a corpse to cooperate. Her work was slow, but her efforts yielded several pieces of usable garb.

Pleased with her harvest, she examined each cadaver with all possible haste, making a mental inventory of their possessions. Some things she could use, others were beyond salvage. Their clothes, bloodied in battle, were by no means clean, but they were better than what she wore.

"It isn't like they'll need them."

She felt curiously detached from her task. If she thought about it, she would crack. Therefore, it was best not to think. Breathing through her mouth helped deaden the odors. Rigor had come and gone, the limbs grown supple as rot set into the bloated bodies. Death was an ugly sight, made more horrible by the way the men had died.

Feeling she would never be warm again, she piled on several tunics over a pair of animal skin leggings. Mouse-colored and unadorned, the cloth had the consistency of burlap. The stitching, however, was fine. Care and craftsmanship had gone into their making. The style was simple, meant to serve a purpose and not fashion.

Her own boots fit well enough, and she was thankful they laced to the knee. Tying a leather pouch around her waist, she filled it with scraps of material and a few pieces of shiny rock, fool's gold and some flints. She didn't know what the stones were meant to represent, but if they were important enough for these men to have carried them, she wanted them.

One of the men had also produced a bonus, a knife and sheath strapped to his inner thigh. Missed in the search of the bodies for weapons, it was a blessing. She fastened the sheath to her leg, adjusting the dagger within easy reach.

She grunted with a satisfied nod. "This is good."

She now wore clothes fit for survival in the barren lands she'd thus far seen and had a weapon for defense. This small grace alone made her feel more secure.

"Let's get going."

She studied the door a few feet away. She knew it was unlocked. Why lock a door against the dead? Her movements were none too graceful, but there was purpose in her stride when she passed over the threshold.

## Chapter Eight

Lynar was dead. That was why he could not return to the land of his people.

Home. Danarra. So very far away. He wanted to go back, except he could not. He'd been banished by his people for a crime his elfin kinsmen would not tolerate: thievery. To steal was forbidden, but as much as he castigated himself and begged forgiveness, stealing was a habit he simply could not control.

He felt the hot flush of shame color his cheeks. Regret poked his conscience, digging tiny, needle-like talons deep into his brain. Loneliness welled up inside him. Being forsaken by his own people hurt him worse than he'd ever imagined. The ache in his heart brought a lump to his throat.

Why did he have to steal? He cursed the compulsion that lived in him, a mischievous urchin sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear to wrap his fingers around items that were not his. For his sins, he'd had to pay the price—turned out of his hamlet as an undesirable and exile. He had no place to go now, except forward.

The elf swallowed, wiping away the stray tear that escaped his eye. Standing at the edge of a rocky slope overlooking the lowlands, he surveyed the unfamiliar territory stretching before him.

Under a cloud-sown sky, patches of greenery—trees and grass—struggled to grow among ruins of villages long abandoned. Shielding his eyes and peering through his fingers, he could see the river of clear, running water just ahead. The countryside bore no recent signs of cultivation and few signs of human habitation. He had already traveled a great stretch of it, walking for miles, and had not encountered a single soul.

*I might as well be dead,* came the discouraging thought. *There isn't much here.*

It was eerie to walk through the ruins of a civilization torn to shreds by war. He moaned aloud in frustration as arctic spikes flicked at his raw face. His lips were chapped; his dry throat ached from breathing in cold air. The storm had blown in unexpectedly, hurling down from the Northlands, pelting the ground with tiny flecks of ice. The wind continued to howl, grating against his ears. He shivered and tugged the thin cloak around his shoulders. He ducked his head away from the arctic blast, cursing the coming winter. For a moment, he thought about turning back.

*Back to where, to what?* the voices in his mind taunted. *To nothing*, came the reply.

“Just like the nothing that’s here,” he whispered to himself.

Lynar sighed and began to pick his way down the rocky slope. He’d already skirted the eastern end of the valley and found nothing there. His going was slow, each step considered. The jagged crevices in the stone were deep, snapping at his heels like a mouthful of gnashing teeth. One wrong step and he could twist an ankle or, even worse, break a limb. A serious tumble down the steep hillside might even kill him.

He shivered at the vision that leapt into his mind, one of himself laying at the bottom of the hillside, helpless, a target for hungry predators. His nerves screamed at him, making him wary of every strange sound.

Never having ventured toward the Northlands, he was unfamiliar with the terrain. He did know this was a dangerous place for his kind. Raiders—tribes of outcasts—had staked out these lands. For those savage people, an elf would be good sport.

Humming a Danarran tune to distract his thoughts, Lynar hastened his pace until the valley became a vague memory. Step after step, uncounted, interminable, his walk progressed. His breathing sounded with an abrasive sibilance, seeming to creep after him, hounding his heels.

He advanced onto the steppes of a rockier land, toward the shelter of a low mountain range that served as a barrier against the harsh, almost glacial winds. He paused to catch his breath, panting heavily through his open mouth. Icy currents of air tugged at his hair and clothes, reminding him he would soon need to find shelter. He was not in a good area. If there was famine in the



valleys, there was nothing at the end of civilization. The infertile plateaus grew little more than rock.

Near the mountains, the air was thin, hard to breathe. Despite the creeping shadows of dusk, he forced himself to go on, not daring to stop and rest. His feet were sore from his endless walk, blistered in his moccasins. His eyes were heavy with weariness, numb from the cold, stung red from blinking against the flurries of sleet. His steps began to drag with exhaustion. He was sure strength would soon desert him. He forced himself to ignore the rumbling of his stomach.

Food would not be easy to find here, wood even harder. Trees were rare on the steppes, vegetation of any sort sparser. Overlooked by a wall of rocky cliffs, the ground was hard-packed, swept clean by the wind that carved its name in the drab brown stone. Only water was plentiful, but one could not live on water alone.

Lynar thought again about turning back and retracing his steps into the valleys. *It's been a long trek and I'm tired. Why am I even crossing these dead lands? Why don't I go home and beg forgiveness?*

He mentally pictured himself snug and warm, his belly full and a fire warming his chilled skin. But begging absolution was not an option this time. He'd used up his mercy chits a long time ago. *Too bad I got caught stealing that last batch...*

Conscience prodded again, and he was instantly ashamed he'd be stupid enough to try and steal his way to forgiveness. As an outcast, he was now nonexistent to his people. Even if he was to stand among them and shout, they would treat him as one dead.

On crimson-tipped wings, his mind flew back to the events that had led him toward the dead vistas of the Northlands. It was his habit of seeking treasure that wasn't exactly his that had led him to the sanctuary of Xavier D'Shagre. The Arch-priest of Ouroboros was reputed to have a great fortune hidden in his vaults, offerings from the legions serving him. Indeed, Lynar had laid his eyes on the copious amounts of gold in the sorcerer's keep. Busy stuffing his pockets with coins, he'd stupidly failed to notice he was not alone until a Jansi warrior picked him up by the scruff of his neck and proceeded to strip him of his new fortune.

Next came captivity.

Instead of feeling sorry he'd been caught thieving once again, Lynar had cursed his lapse in vigilance and swore that, next time, he'd keep an eye out for danger. That is, if there was a next time. Xavier was known to skin his victims alive before roasting them.

There was, however, not a repentant bone in the elf's body. As he had reasoned, stealing from evil to increase his own fortune was perfectly logical. Of course, it didn't occur to him it was equally logical the sorcerer would want to make his thieving a thing of the past.

Legs aching, rubbery from exhaustion, he began to stagger. His stomach was alarmingly empty, and his feet felt like lead weights carried on thin sticks. He was tired and sore; panic began to froth beneath the surface of his burgeoning comprehension. He did not fancy dying in this accursed place, a meal for the scavengers.

Utterly lost, needing guidance, he slipped his fingers inside the thick sash tied around his waist. He'd been stripped of his bag of tricks before being turned out of his homeland, but he had still managed to scrounge a few items vital to Danarran conjuring. Gathering was easy, automatic. Elves were trained from hatchlings to search for food and pluck other useful items while traveling, almost without pause. He'd scavenged many useful trinkets passing through the abandoned villages, things useless to humans but valuable to elves.

Handling his treasure with care, he unwrapped a tiny sliver of glass. This item was very important. In the hands of a true adept, a mirror could be used for divination and prophecy. Looking into its depth could bring images, visions from the mother goddess who could give answers in unsure times. Certainly, he needed her guidance to help him find his way.

"Ciire," he prayed. "Oh, Mother, please grant me a sign, show me the way to the one I seek."

Holding his breath, he concentrated, his eyes fixed on the mirror. Several minutes passed, with only the sound of the beating wind raping his ears as he searched the surface of the looking glass. Instead of the face of his beloved goddess, however, all he saw was his own visage. He sighed, disappointed.

*I guess Ciire doesn't wish to reveal herself to my eyes.*

Just in case he had not concentrated hard enough or said the right incantation, Lynar closed his eyes and concentrated harder. He was again disappointed. Ciire must be deaf to his pleas, shamed by his bad behavior. He felt sharp despair stab his heart. Would he ever again be in communion with his mother goddess? What was so wrong with him that he could not keep his sticky fingers off others' property?

Sighing, he wrapped his precious shard back in the soft chamois. He began to walk again. Though the chill zephyrs were thankfully receding, the mist was beginning to creep in, growing so thick he could barely see hand before face.

*Surely, I must be near the sanctuary I seek*, he thought in frustration. He wanted to find the man who'd freed him from the cruel bars of the cage.

It did not matter that his savior might want nothing in return. He was bound by Danarran tradition to offer himself in servitude, lest Ciire withdraw his abilities as a conjurer. Only when he gained complete absolution could he seek to travel his own way.

He'd followed the assassin and the wounded Raider from Xavier's dungeon, but he could not keep up with the horses that carried them. An elf could run at a good speed, that was true enough, but not that terribly fast. It had taken him hours to make his way to the Raider's camp and when he'd found it, he'd not dared reveal his presence. Raiders were known to use elves for sport, running them down like foxes, exhausting them to death.

Much to his relief, the assassin had soon departed the camp, allowing him to resume his tailing, wondering how to best present his services. In a short time he'd lost sight of man and horse, becoming confused in the maze of an unfamiliar land.

Eyes burning with fatigue, he blinked hard. Tiny chips of ice stung his face, causing his cheeks and nose to tingle anew then go numb. He scanned the area, breathing a sigh of relief when he spotted a high stone wall. At least he was coming toward some civilization.

Hurrying forward, he pressed his small body against the wall, attempting to find security in its solidity. Fingers trailing the stone, he followed it, coming abruptly to its end. Skirting its girth, he stood in awe before a most wondrous sight.

"Praise be!" He dimly realized he was becoming increasingly giddy from the thin air, but this did not seem important. Invoking the name of the mother goddess of lost souls, he touched his forehead three times. It was an ingrained gesture. Since his banishment, he often invoked the goddess's name, not the least when he was in captivity.

"He must be here." Lynar stood, visually scouting out the destination that might end his pilgrimage. Everything about it looked far off and hazy. *I seek the man named Morgan.*

Curious to know why anyone in their right mind would retreat to such a desolate place, the elf felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. He unwound a leather sling from around his neck, picked up two smooth pebbles and positioning them for firing. With wary steps he approached this sanctum that at least promised respite from the chilling wind and icy rain.

His nostrils flared as he wound his way over the uncertain ground. The stronghold he wanted to reach lay on the opposite side of the gulf, and at first seemed to be completely inaccessible.

With terror in his heart, Lynar eased his way along a slender juncture, barely avoiding the chasm that would have consumed him entirely had he fallen in. His heart thudded as though it would break his ribs. His hands and feet were frozen, but this was unimportant compared to the dull pains in his empty stomach.

Eyes front and center, trying to keep from being knocked down by the intense winds, he made it onto more stable ground. As he found shelter in the massive stone structure, the lashing wind seemed to abate; the cold was no longer so penetratingly fierce.

Safely across, he found the back entrance, an unassuming wooden door that had once been a servant's access to the castle. He crept into the frosty shadows behind the door and sniffed the air for danger. A musty odor assailed his twitching nostrils, and he sneezed loudly. His face wrinkled in displeasure. He decided he didn't need his weapon.

He draped the sling around his neck where it could be easily reached and tucked the pebbles away. He then fished for other objects. He wanted light, a fire to ward off the oppressive gloom of the interior. Withdrawing two shiny

stones, he struck them together. The iron pyrite and flint made a quick, hot spark.

Striking the flint and pyrite a second time, he whispered a few words. The spark fell to the floor at his feet. Instead of extinguishing, the flame became a steady light, a small bright beacon. However, a fire without fuel would not last long. He crouched and scooped the flame onto his palm. He held it out like one would a candle, left the servants' area and entered the main body of the first floor.

Within minutes, he'd gathered enough bits and pieces of kindling to make a small fire. When a blaze crackled in the hearth, he surveyed his surroundings. He was pleased to find he was in a kitchen-type area.

There were stone ovens for baking bread. Across from the hearths, on the other side of the room, was a long, stone counter broken by two deep, stone basins. A second fireplace had hooks and posts embedded into the stone to support heavy black iron kettles.

*This is a good place,* he decided.

Above the basins was a window with wooden shutters, closed against the harsh elements and the winds often generated. A narrow door in a far corner led down a short stone stairway into a second smaller room with a deep well that provided fresh icy water from an underground stream. Another small frigid room had hooks and wooden shelves lining the walls. It was used for the storage of meats and other perishables.

Eager to explore further, Lynar struck the flint and pyrite again. He scooped up the flame in the cup of both hands. Aside from the door leading down into the wintry pantry, there was only one other to take. It was clear which way he had to go.

A flurry of footprints had been stamped into the layers of dirt covering the floor. Chillingly, he also saw smears of blood.

He held his light high and walked down a long hallway. At its end, he found a dining room. Going beyond the table and to the far side of the room, he discovered another hallway. Thick drapings of spider's webs had already been brushed aside by heavy hands.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he came into a great stone foyer. His tiny flame cast eerie shadows on the walls, producing chills along his spine.

*He must be here, but where?*

The silence surrounding him was heavy and suffocating, chewing ceaselessly at his imagination and stoking it at the same time. His throat was dry, and his breath came in choking gasps. His heart skipped a beat; and he pricked up his ears, attuning them to listen for any sound. He had to make a decision, find a way to go.

His eyes were drawn to the open door at the foot of the stairs, tantalizingly cracked just enough for a small body to slip through. Not knowing it would soon lead him into adventures he could not begin to imagine, he took a single step toward the doorway, and then a second, a third.

*If not this way, there will be another.*

Lynar hurried toward the door. Slipping through the narrow opening between door and frame, he found himself standing on a balcony overlooking a chamber. He grasped the solid wood banister, maneuvering his body so he could peer between the slats.

Surveying the candle lit abyss, he pricked up his ears, attuning his acute senses to the expanse of the den. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Apprehension slammed the inner wall of his chest, accompanied by a rush of fear.

Illumination into the deeper recesses of the room was effectively cut in half by his high vantage point.

Lynar's heart skipped a beat. To see more, he would have to descend. Although he was afraid, curiosity beckoned. He hesitated. After a moment, he released the railing and descended, stopping on the bottom step. The silence was deafening.

"Assassin?" His small voice broke the silence. "I have come to beg sanctuary. What I ask, you must grant."

No reply. Gazing around, he could see a violent struggle had taken place. In the layer of dust on the floor, he saw sign of two combatants. The redolence of the fight still hung in the musty air—a deep, richer odor mingled with the smell of sour sweat and wood ash, an odor like blood.

Bending, he poked a finger into a crimson stain. The fight had been fierce. And it had not been over for long, either, he surmised. One, perhaps both, had been wounded. What had become of the man he sought?

He turned around. The sight of the body was a shock, robbing him of breath. Raising his hands to his mouth, he stood in horror. He closed his eyes, his mind half-blank, poised between nothingness and great disappointment. He stood for several long moments. How could he have anticipated finding a corpse?

Shaking off fear, Lynar approached. His shocked stare belatedly took in the details of the torn, bloody corpse. Kneeling, he touched Morgan's hand; the iciness of the skin was startling. Except for his black hair shot with silvery strands, not a speck of color was to be found in Morgan's waxen complexion. His eyes were closed, and his thick hair clung in damp shreds to his forehead. A dagger protruded from his chest. The blade had been thrust hard and deep, penetrating his heart.

Lynar drew back, a grimace distorting his features.

"So you earned your freedom from Xavier only to lose your life anyway." He could see the blood was still fresh, reflecting the flickering light. "I can only ask Ciire why this has happened."

Death automatically freed Lynar from his debt, and he was now bound to no one save himself. The thief in him took control. Perhaps the journey had not been in vain. There were treasures to be plucked from this sanctuary.

*Ciire knows my needs. Perhaps this is why she brought me here.*

Lynar's gaze came to rest on the ring. The gold glinted enticingly. He turned his hand up, staring into his empty palm. For a very brief moment, he'd held that ring. He'd been forced to part with it to buy his own freedom. It wasn't as if the owner would mind; it belonged to a dead man, one who surely had no use for it. It would be a fine treasure, one he felt he'd earned.

"I'll have this." He tried to slide the ring off. Frustratingly, it would not budge. His searching eyes came to rest on the dagger. *Ah. A ready solution.*

He wrapped his small hands around its hilt. It was crusted with blood, and he nearly gagged. Breathing deeply through his open mouth, he tugged. The silver blade slid out of the wound, making a crude, thick, liquid sound. He wiped the blade on his sleeve. The remaining stains didn't detract from its sleek design.

Lynar pressed the sharp tip against his palm, admiring the craftsmanship. It was a compelling piece, its hilt decorated with black onyx, blue lapis and

faceted crystal. The hand, pommel and guard were accented with sterling silver. The face of the tempered-steel serrated blade was etched with strange runic symbols. Not so large as to be unwieldy or so small as to be harmless, the blade's cutting edge was perfectly honed. It was a grand treasure.

But he was not to be the owner of the dirk for long. A sharp, stinging pain shot through his hand, sending slivers of lightning coursing through his veins. He cried out when the blade slipped and bit into his palm. He instantly let go, pressing his bleeding hand to his leather leggings. Without thought, he kicked and sent the weapon flying.

"See what your thievery has wrought!" He moaned, lifting his hand to examine the wound, a minor cut. Bright-orange blood stained his palm.

*Oh, Ciire, heal me and I promise this shall be the last of my thieving!*

A low guttural moan drew his attention from his hand.

*Surely, it can't be...?*

Lynar turned his eyes on the only other occupant of the chamber. A pang of guilty panic surged through him.

Trying to rise, Morgan's body went into a spasm of violent contortion. Suddenly, he stilled, lying quietly. The fit passed, and he began to breathe normally. After a long wrenching moment, his eyelids quivered. Fathomless eyes opened, staring, attempting to find focus.

"Assassin?"

Lynar blinked and repeatedly shook his head. He wanted to run, but his legs wouldn't move. He wanted to scream, but no sound passed his lips. He didn't possess any spells that could ward off the dead.

Morgan stirred again, awkwardly, struggling to gain his bearings and sit up. He labored to breathe, and his strained features bespoke the incredible agony he was fighting in order to remain conscious. He was at the end of his endurance, besieged by his wounds.

Holding himself grimly erect, he lifted a quaking hand and pressed it against his heart. Sweat ran cold across his brow and pain again seized him, twisting him double. He turned his head with difficulty.

Catching sight of the Danarran, he gasped, "You pulled...the blade...?" His voice dragged with weariness.



Lynar nodded dumbly. After a moment of disordered thought, he forced a reply. “I...ah...I did.” He gulped. The stale air in the room felt so heavy he couldn’t bring it into his throbbing lungs.

“I am...not sure I...give thanks for my...life.” A self-effacing laugh escaped Morgan’s lips. He smiled a brittle, hollow-eyed grimace. “It would...have been better...”

His voice faded as he was beset by another tremor. Gathering his wits, Lynar remembered why he had come. “I am a healer. I can help.”

Morgan slowly shook his head. “I only need time. I will be...unconscious...” Though no blood currently flowed, the incised wounds in his chest and abdomen did not bode well. He began to murmur slowly, painfully, in a strange tongue. His face turned a drained, ghastly white, a waxen mask. Then, as strength deserted him, he pitched facedown, the thump echoing harshly. No further movement or sound came from him.

“Now what to do?” Lynar choked out.

The answer was clear.

He had come to serve, and part of that servitude was to look after the needs of his new master. Perhaps the mother goddess would even forgive his small lapse into attempted thievery if this man survived. He reached into his sash and removed a few small items. He began to arrange them in a certain order upon the floor.

“Ciire,” he begged, beginning his prayer. “I am only a small elf, but grant me a circle of protection, not for myself but for the master I serve...” The sanctity of the old prayer enfolded him, providing a sense of calm, of succor. For once he knew he was doing right, and Ciire would smile upon him.

## Chapter Nine

The shrine of privacy that all initiates must use to cleanse themselves was a circle of clear shimmering water, ethereally cerulean beneath a low-arched ceiling of bone-white alabaster and floored with black marble. The pungent aroma of sandalwood hung over the water; light from a multitude of candles twinkled like a thousand blinking eyes upon its smooth surface.

To undertake the rite of welcome into the Dragon's lair, one must wash with the holy water of the Dragon's tears—ceremonially slough off old practices and be ready to assume new ones. Kneeling at the edge of the pool, Megwyn ran the tips of her fingers through the water, swirling a circle on its glinting face. The water was clear, clean and pure. She half-expected to feel some great mystic power surging through it.

But she felt nothing except a slight trembling in her stomach from having to endure Xavier's unpleasant touch. Reflected in the water, her face was haggard, seeming to unnaturally add the illusion of great age. But the reflection looking back at her was no illusion. The water was a truthful mirror, one she cursed.

She groaned, turning her head away and hiding her face in her hands. A queer surging of restless tension spiked through her, a hundred thoughts rioting through her mind.

Did she have the courage to go through with her plans or was she being foolish? She quickly squashed the doubt. It was not only that she wanted to proceed with her plans. She *must*.

Rising, she began to undress. Laying aside her clothing, she twirled up her long hair and secured it with a single straight pin. She stepped down into the pool until she stood waist high in the sparkling water, scented with holy oils. It

shimmered around her, flowing in ever-widening circular patterns away from her body.

For a moment she was seized by the wild impulse that what she was doing was wrong, that in turning against her bloodline, she would suffer dire consequences, stricken down by the hand of a vengeful god. Sternly disciplining herself, she sent her fear away into the dark abyss of her heart.

She began to bathe, splashing the water over her shoulders and breasts. Her hands lingered, rubbing at the light, liver-colored spots that were beginning to dot her alabaster skin at regular intervals. She was approaching her cycle of burnout, a hateful sequence that would bring the crushing weight of her age down upon her.

Unlike her brother, she had not inherited a physical system that would self-regenerate when wounded. Because of that, she was doomed to seek out victims from which to draw her youthful vitality. Underneath her beauty, her youth, lurked an aged, haggard crone. It was a cruel trick that she had to fight every day for every breath she drew, constantly practicing the rites that kept a body intact and ageless through the ravages of the centuries.

Her jaw hardened. *It is a fate I am hardly resigned to endure longer than I have to.*

Completing the ritual purification, Megwyn came out of the water with a new sense of purpose. She stood a moment, naked, reveling in the beauty that was hers when she was whole, the hateful hungers of her weak corporeal shell sated. Flooded with a sense of indefinite strength, she became aware that as an immortal, she was truly close to being one of the divine.

A small, still smile settled on her lips. There was a saying among her kind: *Immortality is easy to obtain. Eternity is impossible.*

She had immortality.

She wanted eternity.

Using the guise of taking on the practices of the Dragon, she would work her way toward her goal. She had no fear of betraying Ouroborous's legions. The unrevealed truth was that her bloodline was already committed to the darkest of practices, older even than those of the Dragon's cult.

Her twin preferred to tell the lie that their father was only a mortal.

Morgan told a lot of lies, as if he were unwilling to admit the real origins of their heritage. She didn't know why he struggled so hard against the truth. What her brother conveniently ignored was that, while their father was human, as a young boy Celeon Ese-Yeveanston was pledged to serve a sect of Celtic pagans calling themselves the *Gwyd'llyr*, or *seekers of purity*. Moreover, as an apprenticed acolyte to the *Ard-saggyrt* or Arch-priest Kellyn, Celeon had been a trusted member of the clan.

Settled for centuries among mortal people and eschewing their Sclydian ties, the *Gwyd'llyr* did not observe the strict caste laws of the two worlds. Once Celeon's studies were completed and he carried the title of Master-adept, he was considered an equal. Impressive both in looks and action, the genes he brought into the mating pool were much desired by women seeking a husband. The bride he took was Kellyn's daughter, Birgid, a young priestess with a great ability for healing.

Theirs was not a happy union.

There were always those adepts who could not be restrained from seeking out the forbidden arts of ancient times, those who would bastardize pure magic, use it for their own foul and nefarious purposes. Celeon was such a man. He soon grew beyond the boundaries of the elementary magic practiced by the pagans. Stifled by the vows that magick be used to do no evil and commit no harm, he broke away and began to devise forbidden ceremonies to bring forth ancient and deviant forces, the deepest blasphemies that shunned the truth of the light and summoned the lies of the depraved dark.

His practices soon took no regard of mortal humanity and its many frailties, turning him more inhuman and sadistic by degrees. It was not long until Celeon became a predator among his own.

In the face of such flagrant blasphemies, the elders of the clan had to pass a harsh judgment. Celeon was cast out, stripped of his rank and forbidden formal ceremony and rite. To set order to his house, Kellyn was also required by law to deny his daughter her rank and privileges, for she was then pregnant with the spawn generated by Celeon's forbidden ceremonies of unhallowed witchery and ritual fornication. Had she wished to remain with her people, the children she birthed would have to be stoned, their bodies cremated and

scattered to the four winds. Birgid had refused the harsh penalty, only to find harsher trials awaiting her at the hands of her husband.

Though cast down, Celeon never ceased his degenerate worship. It eventually destroyed Birgid; she had hanged herself in a fit of insanity, the only way she knew to escape the physical and spiritual torture her husband inflicted. Their children, only five years of age, had witnessed her death; and it impacted them in vastly different ways. Both reacted to their childhood experiences with mixed emotions—one accepting, the other denying.

Frowning slightly, Megwyn could not stay a shiver that coursed through her with unexpected force. A slight moan of agonized despair broke from her lips, half gasp, part whimper. Her right hand flew up to her shoulder, as if a lash had come down across her naked skin.

She closed her eyes, but not before a few tears escaped. She did not wipe them away; she took another step as another tear fell, and then the impulse died.

Megwyn stood, straight, stiff and very still, lost in anguish and sorrow. In these rare moments when she allowed examination of her past, the memories burst forth; oddly coherent visions and long glimpses of self-perception that lurked in her deeply damaged psyche. Fighting the bonds of extreme repression, the images her in mind awoke from their long sleep and reared monstrous heads.

It was hard to forget the way her father had enacted his cruelties upon her twin. When Morgan was a boy, Celeon had beaten him unmercifully, determined to break Morgan's mind the way he'd broken their mother's.

Against her will, her hands clenched into fists so tightly her fingernails dug into the soft flesh of her palms. Though seen by none, her face revealed her own madness when she lost all strength and sank down on her knees. Through the shadowy corridors of her head, she moved into that secret space she kept to herself. Minutes became as hours, ticking by with agonizing slowness as time was suspended.

As if looking through a dark glass, she saw ugly reflections of herself and her father. She remembered the strange, bitter drink, her mind going dim, her father lifting her onto the altar, his smile distorted by the shadowy firelight, the air thick with incense. A fearful, hulking form, her father's hard hands fell

heavily on her shoulders, pressing her down, his legs spreading hers, the straining heat of his erection poised to rip through the soft petals of her young womanhood. She could not raise her hands or move her head, even to summon the strength to cry out.

An acrid wave of revulsion lodged in her throat. Her hand flew to her mouth. The little demons circling there were all of the sudden set free in her skull, gnawing at her. Their sharp teeth and claws tore into the soft tissue of her brain. Their bellies grew fat as they glugged themselves on her memories of fear, shame and abuse.

A spasm of grief washed over her. She felt caged, locked in and shut out all at the same time. The images inside her head would not relent. She fell into a strange terror, too powerful for prayer. How could she possibly have forgotten what had been done to her? She'd been a slave to her father's lusts. He used her in incestuous rites to channel the energies he could no longer possess himself. Her mother's suicide had denied him his chance to become immortal through his mate, so Celeon had attempted to use his daughter.

A cry broke from her mouth, of torment, of shame.

"Do not condemn me, brother." Her voice broke in agony, sadder than the tears she had shed. "I didn't submit to him willingly."

She drew a long breath, fear and shame swirling inside her guts. Her flesh crawled with horror; her insides churned with sick loathing. She wanted to flee, get away, but there was no place to go when the nightmare was inside one's own mind. Far-off voices rose to taunt her, whether from an outside source or inside her own tormented brain she didn't know.

*Do not twist your poor brain to remember these things,* the whispered words echoed in her skull. *The high god bids you be silent. Speak not, think not of the past...*

The unearthly intonation slid off into a gentle croon. And, as commanded, Megwyn let herself forget what had been done to her by her father—her betrayer, her abuser, her lover. As abruptly as she had opened the Pandora's Box of ugly truths, something stronger within her slammed the lid firmly shut.

A slow-kindled chuckle broke from her throat. She started to rock back and forth, her unblinking stare becoming vacant, sightless. Sanity faded like a

candle snuffed out, and she tumbled headlong into the abyss that was her own madness.

“Morgan tries to deny this part of his cultic heritage,” she murmured to the voices. “But until he fully accepts and embraces it, he will be in torment.”

*He carries the gifts that should have gone to you,* the voices uttered in unison. *Your father maneuvered it so. Your mother’s choice was not accident, but defiance...*

But such was of the past, and the damage had already been etched into the folds of time. She could only go forward, attempt to rectify what had gone wrong. Just as her father had once betrayed his oath to seek the divine truths of blasphemous sorcery, so would she.

*I will take back what should have come to me,* she vowed. *And avenge our father’s murder at my brother’s hand.*

Like her father, Megwyn possessed the inborn ability to twist certain forces of psychic nature. She could make people see and believe what she wished them to. That she herself was so easily deluded was part of her own internal madness and only helped feed the methods she used to keep herself functioning.

*Ah, my brother...* On one hand, she pitied him the trials of carrying the great burden of power passed on to him. Pity was easily overtaken with envy, though. She envied his capabilities, his effortless ease in walking the centuries unscathed, untouched by any age or disease. Only his mind was affected and she believed that was because he fought it, refused to fully accept the awesome legacy that could only belong to one.

*I will be that one,* she told herself. *And when that power is mine, mortal and immortal alike will tremble under my shadow.*

With new concentration, she got up off the cold floor and began to clothe herself in the sacramental garments she’d been given to wear, refusing to think of the ceremony she must endure. It was necessary she make Xavier believe she stood with him and supported him. And if the old fool actually did lay his hands on the lost Scrolls of Cachaen, she would be ready to help him use them.

When she was dressed, she paused a moment to compose her thoughts. Then she struck the small gong that would summon the women who would accompany her on her walk.

“Father,” she murmured. “Let me not fail.”



The sacred chambers of Ouroboros were walled with intricate stonework overlaid with sheets of hammered gold. Lit only by fire, shadows played across the figures entering the sacred confines. An oval mirror hung high, reflected back the pulsing flames that bestowed an elusive, unreal quality throughout. Under the oval was an altar of virgin marble, its surface etched with magical symbols worked in black.

Megwyn passed beneath a softly shadowed archway, dressed in a simple gown of creamy white silk, low of neckline, loose of sleeve, easily removed. Her long hair was braided, the plaits interwoven with a gold circlet. She deliberately kept her expression frozen, impassive. Only her mouth held the shadow of a smile.

Ilya walked on her right, another unnamed woman on the left, both dressed in formal clothing. The women did not touch her, yet all walked in unison and the small entourage moved in silence.

Around the perimeter of the chamber stood the lesser priests of the Dragon's legion, brightly adorned in robes of a deep cerulean, the color of peace, serenity and joy. All eyes were riveted on the newest initiate.

The women escorted Megwyn to the base of the altar, where the sorcerer waited. They divested her of clothing so that in a few moments she stood naked, her body unadorned.

Xavier motioned for her to take her place. “Kneel.”

He made a holy sign, and the lower adepts stepped forward to form a rough circle around her, taking great pains to assume the correct positions. From their ranks came a low murmur, the beginning of the ceremony. Their controlled voices filled the chamber with steady resonance as they began the chant of invocation.

“Why have you come before us?” Xavier asked.

Megwyn crossed her arms over her breasts, sinking to her knees.



"I seek knowledge of the Dragon." She steeled herself against the blasphemy she was committing, a necessary thing. She'd agreed to go through with the rite and pledge herself to Ouroborous. There was no backing out.

"Dost thou come before me now with an open heart, willing to accept Ouroborous as your chosen god?"

Megwyn bowed her head again in reverent obedience. "I come with a seeking heart, Lord."

She leaned forward, touching her forehead to the cold floor at Xavier's feet.

*Degrading*, she thought. *A woman of my rank groveling at his feet like a mere worshipper.* Yet she held her tongue, said nothing that would reveal her motives to be less than honest. She had a plan. There would be no deviations.

She sat upright and let her hands rest across her bent legs.

"As I gaze upon the truth of the Dragon," she intoned. "So may he gaze upon me and smile at my offering of flesh, blood and bone."

Xavier put his uninjured hand on the crown of her bowed head. Megwyn felt her pulse twitch as he touched the downy softness of her hair. She was intensely aware of her position of supplication. His very presence disgusted her.

"Then by the power vested in me, I grant purpose and true knowledge to this woman, that her eyes be opened and she sees the truth of the Dragon and His ways." Xavier took his hand from her head. "Forevermore shall you bear the mark."

One of the worshippers broke from the circle; in his hands he carried a tray. On it were strange instruments: a sharp ceremonial spike and two small clay bowls, one filled with black ash, the second with a medicinal wash.

Ilya took up the tattooing pike and began to etch a small design above Megwyn's left breast. It was where she had chosen to wear her mark.

Megwyn gritted her teeth. *The mark means nothing*, she reminded herself. *I pledge myself to the Dragon only as a ruse, to lull Xavier into believing I stand as an ally beside him.*

When the design was complete, Ilya used a soft cloth to wash away the blood oozing from the small wound. When the flow ceased, she rubbed black ash deeply into the design, coloring it. The sudden wrench of pain caused

Megwyn to bite her lower lip. Beads of sweat rose on her skin, but she did not cry out or flinch. To do so would be beneath her.

At last, the great pain ceased; the tattoo was complete.

Megwyn raised her head. The two women helped her to her feet and redressed her, this time in the plain gray robes of a first adept. About her throat was hung an amulet fashioned of green jade, the eye of the dragon. Thus clothed and adorned, she was led up three stone steps to the altar. Now, she must make her offering.

All within the chamber watched as two priests kindled the ritual fire that would purify her, building the flames within a huge iron cauldron whose base rested on the heads of four writhing lizards. Xavier picked up a ceremonial dirk and offered the blade to her.

“Pledge yourself in blood.”

She cut deeply. As her blood welled, Xavier took a silver tankard from the altar and held it under her hand. She let her blood drip into the cup to mingle with the red wine it contained.

Xavier passed the goblet over the ritual fire, and then lifted it to his lips. “As I partake of you, so does the Dragon.”

He drank deeply, smacked his lips and lowered the cup back. “Your body, your mind, your soul belong to the Dragon, His for the taking. Why should He not claim your life now?”

“I beg that I be allowed to offer sacrifice to prove my worthiness.”

“And what shall you offer?”

“A child, Lord.” She paused, making a hasty decision. “From the mortal world.”

Xavier smiled, pleased. “This night.”

“It will be as you wish.” Megwyn smiled and bowed again. She would prove her worth.

But not before she paid a visit to her twin.

## Chapter Ten

Morgan woke with a start.

One moment his mind was enveloped in the gentle embrace of dreamless nonexistence. And then came a jab that propelled him back toward consciousness, rousing him from the death-like trance that had held him for days.

He fought the coming of light, trying to will himself back to the darkness. Going into the illumination would mean returning to the thing he did not want. Yet as his spirit fought re-emergence, the instincts of his physical body betrayed him. Where no pulse had beaten, now came the flow of blood. Breath moved his chest as his lungs took in air. The cycle of healing had ended and he was, again, among the living.

Sprawled facedown, he shivered, feeling hard stone beneath his body. Every fiber protested when he rolled onto his back. The effort of movement forced a gasp from his lips. He lay, panting, the chill creeping through his bones. Sweat drenched him, though his flesh was frigid. The pain in his head was unbearable, throbbing in time to a lingering beat that hovered on the edge of his hearing. Even his eyeballs ached, the sensation akin to a thousand tiny needles being driven into the nerve. He was suffering the worse part of regenerative catatonia, the waking up.

Opening his eyes, he blinked several times to clear away the film blurring his vision. His sight seemed oddly streaked. Realizing what it was, he lifted his hand and slicked his bangs off his forehead. He could not help but notice that the sleeve of his shirt was stiff, coated with rusty stains. He knew too well what it was. Blood.

His hand dropped limply to his chest. He could feel the crackling of the dirty material beneath his palm. Never a good omen to wake up wearing blood.

He groaned as a burning sensation settled into his gut.

*How long have I been unconscious?*

The words echoed, a specter that haunted him. He was not sure where he was. He was not sure what he'd done. When the pain ravaged him, it stripped away rational thought and action. What he was capable of then was appalling and frightening. Even worse was that he possessed absolutely no control over the events—his reckoning was in the aftermath. Not necessarily because of what he might have inflicted on himself, but what he might have done to others.

Was the blood his own, or had he committed murder without conscience?

"Get up! You're lying around like a sack of dirt." A small foot administering a second prod to his guts followed the oddly pitched words.

*What the hell...?*

Morgan rolled his head toward the source of his new agony. As his eyes focused, he realized he was in his own asylum. And, except for an elf kicking him, he was out of danger. It took him a minute to recognize that the words that sounded like gibberish were the common Qurayan dialect most Sclydian inhabitants spoke. Clarification of the language allowed a few hazy memories of the recent past to come to the forefront of his mental haze.

At first, the pieces were haphazard, like a bizarre jigsaw puzzle. He vaguely recalled the elf from Xavier's dungeon.

Another stout jab to his ribs jarred his reverie.

"You're not ready for the grave yet!" The little beast thrust its chin out in defiance, determined not to be ignored.

Morgan raked his dry tongue over sandpapery teeth. "An early grave is the last of my worries," he rasped, sure his mouth was stuffed with shredded parchment.

He lifted his hands to cover his eyes, bringing a blissful darkness when he closed them. Perhaps the Danarran would go away if ignored. He just didn't feel like getting up. Could the elf not see he was in misery? "Go away and leave me be."

There followed a few seconds of welcome silence. Then he heard the beads in the elf's hair rattle as it knelt and began to pry at his fingers. He felt the warmth of small hands against his own chilled skin.

“Get up! You’re near useless as it is.”

Morgan released a heavy sigh. He was cold and uncomfortable in his present position. He lowered his hands in defeat and opened his eyes. “I will get no peace with you around, will I?”

Straightening first one arm and then the other, he managed to lift himself upright. He shifted into a more acceptable position, drawing up a leg to his chest and clasping his knee. The floor was hard, and new sensations of distress flared with every movement.

“What happened?” He pressed a shaking hand to his forehead, his lips a taut, thin line. The headache should be over, not lingering. Certainly beating his head against the wall would be more pleasurable. Something was wrong inside. It had never been this bad before.

It was seldom that he allowed such lapses to disturb him, but this did. What had happened, how it had happened, he could not recall with exact clarity. Bits and pieces rose from the black pool of his memory, juxtaposed in a blurry collage of images. Wounded, hurting... By the gods, where the hell was his mind?

Sensing his mental quagmire, the elf prompted, “The tall one stabbed you through the heart.”

The tall one...Azoroath...a blade sliding between the bones of his rib cage, penetrating soft tissue...

Morgan’s gaze followed as the elf pointed to the dagger. It lay on the floor, its blade crusty with dried blood. As if disbelieving the elf’s words, he placed his open palm on his chest. Aside from an ache deep inside his body, he had suffered no permanent damage. He was whole again.

“He almost killed you,” the elf said.

“Almost,” Morgan repeated dully, rubbing his eyes hard with a thumb and forefinger. “To me, it feels like he did.”

“There’s life in you yet.”

Morgan frowned. “How did you get here? I do not remember...”

At his sharp words, consternation rippled across the Danarran’s features.

“I meant not to save you. I came only for treasure—” The elf clamped his hands over his mouth and looked guilty.

Morgan eyed the tiny being from head to toe, as if seeing him for the first time. It took only seconds to assess the situation. "Ah, so you wanted the dagger to enhance your fortune. A pox upon your thievery."

He shooed the elf aside with a clumsy swipe of his hand. He was losing patience with the inane conversation. He was not of the mind to argue further with someone three feet tall.

*I can sit on the floor and rot, or get myself up, he decided. If I stay here, this babbling elf will end up with his tongue cut out.*

"Ciire commands I serve you to repay my debt." The elf tapped his forehead three times in reverence. "I'll follow the wish of the mother goddess. You granted my freedom. Remember?"

"At this point, no." Morgan frowned. Some pieces of recent events were still distressingly absent. "If we had an exchange, you owe me nothing. You can face your goddess with a clear conscience."

Uncertain in his balance, he got up off the floor. He cursed, almost fell, but managed to catch himself. A poke at his leg brought his attention down. "What?" His voice was harsh.

"I don't think I should leave just now. I'm a good healer. You need much care."

"What ails me you can not heal, *mynghadde!*" he snapped.

"Not *thief*," the elf argued, planting his little feet stubbornly. "My name is Lynar."

"Like I care." Morgan turned away. What he saw brought him to an immediate halt. As far as he could recall, the hidden door had been open. Now it was closed.

He glanced down. "Was there an open door?" He made a vague gesture, all he could manage. "Over there."

The elf looked from him to the seemingly solid wall, then back to him. "There is no other door."

His answer made sense. One had to know the layout of the chamber to be aware one existed.

"Surely, I did not." A maddening sense of indecision began to gnaw at his mind. Had voices really spoken to him from within its depths? Or had he just

imagined them because he wanted it back so badly? The alternative—that he was truly bordering on insanity—was unacceptable.

As he moved toward the concealed portal, his heavy steps echoed the beat of his heart. He depressed the lever keeping the door shut. It slid inward on silent hinges, unmasking the tunnel that led into the catacombs.

*I have to face this.*

He crossed the threshold. He needed no light to travel the long tunnels. He knew their layout exactly.

Entering the chambers, he paused to inhale the bromidic air, tilt his head to listen to its sounds. He could hear the steady flow of water in the underground stream that filled the reservoirs. Beneath the rushing of the water, though, was a second noise, a barely detectable hum. Something was close.

In the space of a very few minutes, the hum grew louder, leveling out at an uncomfortable frequency. The air in the chamber quickened, and an odd prickling sensation crawled over his skin. He felt rather than saw the subtle distortions as the physical dimensions of the room shifted, existing in neither space nor time, encompassing everything. An invisible something unexpectedly gave him a ferocious shove from behind, dropping him to his knees.

Without doubt, a grievous element had entered.

A familiar female voice cut the inky gloom. “And so the prodigal son returns to the womb of his creation.”

Morgan climbed to his feet, needing the support of the nearby wall to regain his bearings. He stood, swaying, fighting to keep his wits about him. He was shaking, as frigid inside as the chill permeating the damp underground. How strange to be back in these sepulchers after vehemently swearing never return to them. Why, then, was he letting himself be drawn back into this engulfing abyss?

He knew. He was summoned by a force stronger than his present will.

“The gods must hate me.” There was no flow of kindred warmth in his grating voice.

“I wondered if you’d dare show your face here.” Megwyn’s words echoed around the chamber as if she’d not decided where to settle. “Dare I note you don’t do it by any light?”

"You are the one who moves in the light," he snarled. "Why not show yourself?"

"Of course." His twin's tone was biting in its accommodation. "*Cur raad da me. Allow me.*"

A piercing glow exploded like the birth of a star. He shielded his face from the glare—a flash of dazzling color, an aura of sparkling illumination. Blinking hard against its intensity, he drew down his hand. When his eyes adjusted, he could see Megwyn's petite figure.

Her loveliness was breathtaking to behold; he could only stare at her, transfixed. She radiated youth and vitality. Tendrils of vapor played around her body, appearing to caress her before dissipating entirely. She had traveled effortlessly upon it as a bird in flight. The orb of light floated above her cupped palms, bathing her in myriad hues, offering gentle warmth to the frigid atmosphere.

Gliding more than walking, she approached the altar. There, she spoke soothing words and deposited the orb into the outstretched hands of three waiting goddesses, cast in gold and set in a circle poised atop the altar. The globe hovered inches above their circle.

He watched her reach out to stroke the light. It shifted color from soft yellow to a soothing peach, giving her skin the illusion of radiance. He wondered if she was, indeed, present or just a figment of his desperate imagination. Pain could do odd things to a man's thinking.

His headache, rather than fading, was growing in intensity. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. The pounding pain kept a perfect rhythm with the blood beating through his veins. When in the grip of a migraine, he couldn't stand light. The incandescent illumination was beginning to stupefy and confuse his senses.

Despite his ugly words, he swallowed hard to suppress the hitch that rose in his throat. Here, before him, stood the twin who'd shared his stone birthing. With her, he had a past, a history. Their relationship was one of love...and hate. He did not want to see her, have her there, but he was too weak to send her away.

"Megwyn."



Megwyn scanned his bedraggled figure. Her face was a mask. She appraised him coolly, and her gaze did not waver. "You knew I would come."

"Why? There is nothing to say." He knew how her mind worked, what she was thinking. To her eyes, he appeared as beaten in body as he was in spirit.

She corrected him. "There is much to say, brother."

Not entirely trusting her presence, he blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Is it true, the council and the legion are at peace?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Bitterness was immediate. "You must have a lot of fleas from sleeping with the dogs."

Megwyn's lips drew down in a tight grimace of frustration. "It was not a move easily made."

She cursed under her breath, words he could not quite hear. As if chilled, she rubbed her arms with both hands. "The council agreed to an alliance only because we wish to save our people."

He regarded her through suspicious eyes. "*Smooingaghtyn ooasle, lathair.*" Noble sentiments, indeed.

Megwyn, a scornful look withering her countenance, said heavily and with vicious emphasis, "More noble, I believe, than the actions of one who turns away from his *eiraght*, his heritage, and his people." Her tone was reproachful.

Stung by her sharp words, he inwardly recoiled. A bolt of pain lashed through his brain, dizzying him with its intensity. His vision dimmed. For a terrifying second, he believed he was going to faint.

Resisting the urge to press his hands to his forehead, he balled them into fists and fought numbing exhaustion. He was exerting himself when he should be at rest.

"You judge me, I know, for walking away," he said. "But I do not care anymore." A shadow of regret deepened his voice.

She spread her hands in silent entreaty, giving him a look that mingled sadness and dismay. "I can offer forgiveness."

Megwyn flitted across the chamber to stand in front of him. Her gaze challenged his, daring him to send her away. They stood, almost for a full minute, gazes locked. She was testing his will, seeking his weaknesses, shoring up her own. A silent agreement finally passed between them. He gave an

assenting nod. Her hands rose to part the material of his stained shirt. At first, he shied back, uncertain about her touch. "Megwyn... Please..."

She pressed on. "Let me in."

Body tensing, a sigh escaped him when her warm fingers skimmed his chest, tracing the scars incised into his skin. He moved restlessly, her touch weakening the fiercely held self-control that kept him functioning.

"If only you had accepted at a younger age, you would not wear these hateful marks." When he made no further protest, she pressed her palm to his heart, lowering her eyelids to attune herself to his body and its rhythms. "You were near your end." She made an odd sound, half-gasp, half-whimper. Her face betrayed conflicting emotions. "Very close."

His hand rose to cover hers. He closed his eyes, and another brick crumbled from the wall of his inner reserve. He felt limp, heavy, breathing with forced endurance. "It has been a long time..."

"Since we have been together." Tears began to fall, tracking down her pale cheeks. She blinked, wanting to hide her reaction from him, but anguish overwhelmed her and she blurted, "You didn't have to leave."

"Yes, I did. You know that."

"Nisidia—"

"Do not speak her name. That past...what happened then...it will never be settled between Xavier and me, no matter the truce called."

"She was your downfall," Megwyn said bitterly. "She destroyed you." She paused. "I know about your mate, the mortal woman. Her death is regrettable."

He shook his head. "I do not wish to think of that." His voice faltered, and he could barely say the words. Remorse was sharp and painful, cutting deeper than any blade. He drew away, turning his back on her.

"Morgan, can't we repair this?"

"Just leave me."

"I can't do that." Megwyn sniffed, running her hands over her face, wiping away stray tears.

Morgan remained motionless.

"Don't turn away now, please." Her voice was tinged with an intense longing.

He sensed her approach, her light steps upon the floor. Her arms circled his waist. She laced her fingers together, determined her hold would not be easily broken. He felt the pressure of her cheek coming to rest on his shoulder. Her touch ushered forth a tide of confusion.

"You want to stay in your own dark place," she whispered. "Deep in your mind, keeping to yourself where no one can reach or hurt you. It doesn't work that way when there are two of us, brother."

"I have felt you reaching for me." It was not in his nature to reveal his innermost feelings. He had learned from an early age to keep his emotions hidden. It was safer that way, spared him the pain of grief and loss. As far as people might manage to delve, they could not pass his psychological gate. Megwyn, more than anyone, knew his foibles, his vulnerabilities. She was his twin, his other half. His trembling lessened, the tension between them temporarily at bay.

"You need to come back," she said.

"No!" Somewhat regaining his self-control, he untangled himself from her hold. Her embrace was becoming too comfortable. Stay longer in her arms, and he would be tempted to give in to her pleading.

She lifted a hand to caress his cheek, deep concern chiseled into her features. "Your time in exile is over. I know the hunger is in you."

"I do hear the calling..." Voice trailing away, he wavered. Damn the pain! He could hardly think through the blazing agony.

"Until you do, you will know no peace."

His words escaped before he could think to stop them. "Is it wrong to want it again?" He had thought of it often during his exile.

As if on cue, the voices within the sepulcher commenced to chime anew, louder, stronger. *We are waiting...*

"It isn't wrong. It's what you are. You can't deny it and expect it not to punish you." Megwyn traced along his temples. Strands of his hair fell through her combing fingers. Watching it, a gentle smile tugged at one corner of her mouth.

"I remember a time when there was no *liath*, no gray." She began to massage his temples. Lips moist, slightly parted, a soft, cooing presence, she was the picture of womanly supplication: exquisite, vital, bursting with the

life's energy that had long ago abandoned him. Her nearness, her touch, was drawing him toward resolution.

*Accept and you could have her at your side, the voices said. Together, you will be formidable. Together, you will be whole.*

"I do not know why I have gone so wrong." He closed his eyes. Was it his imagination or did her touch still the desperate pounding in his head? "I have been so lost since I turned away."

"You don't have to be alone any longer." Her voice grew tender, sympathy in its quavering. "Come back. Claim what is yours—what is ours! Open your mind to me, share with me again."

Morgan caught her slender waist and drew her closer. His hand slid up her back, his fingers passing through her hair to curl around the nape of her neck in an intimate and accepting gesture. At his touch, she inclined her head. Her arms encircled his neck. Her upturned mouth invited a kiss. She closed her eyes. Her lips, red and ripe as sun-warmed cherries begging to be tasted, brushed his. She made it clear she desired him, would lead him as their father had led their mother.

He was close to giving body and soul to her when a movement at the edge of the chamber caught his attention. On the walls around them, the shadows reflected their interplay. More than mimicry, however, they began to assume animation of their own.

As though observing actors perform on a stage, he watched in fascination as his shadow-self accepted her kiss. She drew him closer, and he watched himself lift his hand to cup her breast. Kisses between them deepened, their sexual foreplay growing heated in its intensity. He pushed her shadow-self toward the altar, lifting her up on it even as her legs parted to receive him.

Appalled by the incestuous affection played out in the shadows, he looked down at the woman in his arms, pulling away from her in disgust. She'd played him expertly, preyed on his vulnerability, his confusion. Nothing was beyond her, not even sex, if she felt it would gain her desired results. He became aware of the scent clinging to her skin, the strange spicy fragrance of a flower known only to Sclyd. But under the perfume lingered an overpowering odor of putrefaction. His imagination? Perhaps his perceptions were still distorted.

But, no—it permeated her clothes, her hair. Without doubt, she'd been with Xavier before gracing him with her presence.

Before she could stop him, he yanked the dress away from her shoulder, revealing the newly etched tattoo above her left breast.

“You wear his brand. You belong to him.”

Sour bile rose from his gut, burning his throat. He swallowed hard to stay the sickness that welled up in his soul. Always, lies and deceit were at the core of her plotting.

Megwyn tore herself away, tugging up her dress to cover the tattoo. “Yes. Just this very day.”

“You have embraced the Dragon.” He went after her, pushing her back against the wall. His hand rose to her neck. “I did not believe the warnings that you had turned. Now I see why he asked for the assassination of the council. They are in his way—and yours. This peace is surely an uneasy, untrustworthy one. I suspect not all are in agreement.”

His hold tightened into a merciless grip at the base of her throat. It would be easy to strangle her. He wanted to kill her, wipe away the obscene leer her smile morphed into.

She did not lift her hands to defend herself, silently daring him to take the next move. “You can’t do it.”

He increased the pressure on her throat. He was so infuriated, he believed he could easily snuff out her life and smile as he did it. “*Kialgeyr galla!* Deceitful bitch!” He dug his fingers deeper, bruising her soft, delicate skin. “How dare you try to bewitch me!”

There was no fear in the depths of her ice-blue eyes. Instead, they sparked with defiance, as if challenging him to murder her.

*Go ahead*, her gaze dared him. *Try*.

He did, and the pain returned full force, roaring through his head with an intensity threatening to stagger him. The more anger he fed his desire to kill her, the worse it attacked him. If he carried his threat further, he would be driven to unconsciousness.

He let his hand drop, trembling when he stepped away. Some force within her—or was it within himself?—had aborted her murder.

"I knew you couldn't kill me. You're weak. You always were. And weakness isn't to be pitied. It's to be exterminated."

Her words fell like scalding acid, clutching him in the grip of an intense hatred.

"I turned away because the occult takes what you value and rips it to shreds!" Ashen, incensed, he felt a shudder creep through his entire body until his every nerve quivered from the strain to remain conscious.

She smirked. "*Lhig lhiam*. Spare me this talk. I see your dilemma. Go back and you lose the last of your self." She began to laugh. "Refuse it, and you'll never be whole. That's what's destroying you. You're incomplete. You always have been."

Morgan drew back his shoulders in resolution. "What few pieces of my mind I still have, I intend to keep."

He had to remember that not only was his twin a liar and a schemer, but she was insane in the worst way. Few recognized her madness until it was far too late to stop her. Compared to her, he was quite lucid, sane and sensible.

She shook her head as if in sorrow, clicking her tongue in mock sympathy.

"We are opposites." A scornful look crumpled her face. "I am light, golden and untouched by troubles. You are dark, black and burdened by an intense weight. How could we have shared the same womb?"

"Appearances are as deceiving as the shadows on the wall," he countered. "And where light falls, so does it reveal the presence of hovering evil. After the dark war, I realized your spirit to be corrupt. It is unfortunate my realization came after your investiture as the *ard-corrym*. The council will soon know your intent to betray them, if they do not already suspect. You are just as hungry to take the mortal world as Ouroboros's legions."

"If you will not stand with us, I will see you destroyed," she lashed out, harsh and stern.

He shook his head. "Unlike you, I serve no false gods."

"Heed my words, brother, when I say I will not stumble as that old fool did. He offered you many chances. I offer you none. I know your weaknesses, what they are and how to use them against you. If you fear anything, I warn you to fear me now."

He did not flinch. "Fear left me long ago. If you think there is anything that can scare me now, think again."

Megwyn's rage consumed her. The ball of light wavered, throwing their shadowy counterparts grotesquely out of proportion. A maelstrom of silvery-blue lightning bolts materialized in its center.

She drew her sharp thumbnail across the pad of her index finger; blood welled from the cut she effortlessly made in her skin. She lifted her finger and quickly smeared her blood across his lips.

"I've given you a chance to make amends, and I'll beg no more. Xavier and I do stand together, and you shall be only one of many who'll be devoured. Not even the mortal world will offer you an easy asylum this time." Her eyes were slits, twin pools of hostility in which dwelled black irises as empty as her soul.

He wordlessly scrubbed his mouth, wiping away her blood. Lowering his hand, he could see its stain on his fingers. She had marked his soul as hers to absorb. It was an act of revenge he never would have considered, no matter their estrangement.

Megwyn's face twisted with leering mockery. "I'll leave you in the mire of your own making." She turned to leave. Over her shoulder, she laughed as she summoned the misty veils that would allow her to take leave. Her last words were faint but audible as she vanished into the center of the haze.

"Guard yourself carefully. You won't be alone long. I'll pay a lot of gold to have you brought to me in chains. And when you belong to me, I'll take what I want from you. And when I am done, I'll enjoy sending your soul into an unending limbo."

The ball of light vanished, plunging the chamber into darkness. The silence lengthened, rushing in like a tide, then receding, suggesting the vast, dark grip of an endless eclipse. No light, no sound, no sense of self. Only empty, dreaded stillness.

## Chapter Eleven

Lost in a puzzling maze, Julianne looked around. Light provided by torches embedded into the wall filtered through the great stone tunnels. The atmosphere they created was thick with smoke, coating the ceiling with layers of oily soot.

"I don't like this place." Her words were barely a whisper. *You don't have much choice now*, her inner voice snapped back.

"No choice." An out rush of breath, almost a sigh, escaped her.

She turned in all directions, searching for a sign of where—which way—to go. She drew her hand along the wall, leaving a gaping bare spot in the webs she brushed aside. She wished the ceiling wasn't so low. She hated being closed into so small a place. Her breath was beginning to come in shallow, rapid pants.

She made her selection. Once the decision was made, she experienced a great sense of relief. Forward. She knew on one level that she was lifting her feet, that she was walking, yet it seemed as if she were going nowhere, moving no farther from the death chamber. The gray walls appeared unchanged.

"Breathe!" she told herself, panicking as she was overcome by a swirling darkness that hovered just behind her line of vision. She felt herself slipping away. She stood still. Intuition warned her that to fight the sensation would send her into unconsciousness. Instead, she concentrated, forcing herself to inhale deeply through her mouth like a dog.

"I can get out of here." Her hoarsely spoken words were filled with a sense of wonder; they affirmed what had really been driving her. It all revolved around Morgan. Even if she got out of Xavier's sanctuary, she could not survive here without him.



Through her deep tide of grief, she resolved with a fierce determination to find Morgan again. She would keep his name, his image in her mind like a talisman. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back the feeling of sickness in the pit of her stomach. This time it wasn't the mutant inside her that caused her to reel.

Unbidden, tears trickled down her cheeks and stung the deep wounds in her face. She quickly swiped away the wetness. Morgan gave scant consideration to human emotion.

*My hero by default.*

A furrowing of her forehead and a knitting of her delicate brows drew their unhappy mark across her features. Her shoulders sagged in a downward slope. Suddenly, she felt unbearably sad. She felt as if she had lost something. Or was it that she had never possessed it to begin with?

"Fight it. Fight it." Her heart began thudding unpleasantly, launching a hungry spear of pain to consume her. She tried to ignore it, failed, then tried harder. Giving in to it would finish her. "I'll get out of here if I have to crawl."

Driven on by mortality's ever-desperate reach for preservation, she began to walk again, slower, with careful steps. Her journey seemed endless; the underground paths extended through several miles, a maze that would confuse even one who knew them well. Several times, she had to stop and rest, kneel down for a few minutes to ease the ache in her chest, back and legs.

Exhaustion and thirst made her acutely aware of the danger she was in if she sat immobile too long. The urge to succumb to a long rest was enticing, yet she knew if she drifted off that she would lose more than a few hours. She might sacrifice her life to the hungry mutant.

Advancing another quarter-mile, she found her journey at its end. The tunnel became a flight of stone steps leading up a steep incline. She detected the sound of female voices coming from the top of the stairs, and smelled food being prepared. Her mouth watered and her stomach rumbled; she had not eaten in many days and was nearly starved.

*I wonder if I can eat,* she thought. The mutant inside her kicked, knocking against her breastbone, bending her double as pain clawed through her. She gasped, pressing her hand to her mouth. *Do I stay down here and try another way?* Her gaze rose to the top of the stairs. *Or do I take my chances up there? I*

*can't stay down here forever.* Hunger was a powerful motivator. As long as the food wasn't crawling with bugs, she would probably eat it.

She climbed the stairway, almost on hands and knees. At the top, she unsheathed her dagger. It was now or never. Her grip on the weapon tightened. She stepped under the lintel.

Julienne scanned the chamber and the people around her. Within seconds she recognized these women could do her little harm. Not the well-nourished whores or the harder-worked eunuchs, these were the non-people, women who did the menial labor. Theirs was dirty work and they were the dregs of the society, holding no rank or worth.

She was in their living quarters. Kneeling on straw mats around a huge stone hearth, several women worked to prepare the day's meal, leftovers from the sorcerer's feast. Black iron kettles hung over an open fire. Its contents boiled, a vegetable concoction more a gruel than any sort of stew. The aroma pervaded the air, a tantalizing scent to those for whom food was scarce. This single meal, along with shared bread and cheese, had to last them through a twenty-four-hour period.

Their dirty clothes were worn, patched several times over. The stink of unwashed bodies hung heavy, an odor almost as bad as that in the charnel rooms.

All the women turned wary eyes to the intruder. No one made a move. Indeed, they seemed as surprised to see her as she was to see them. A tense moment crackled, and Julienne quailed. Would they scream, give away her presence? Like deer caught in headlights, the women froze. They were clearly frightened.

*What the hell do I do now?* Julienne's gaze skimmed the chamber and lowered her knife. "I mean you no harm." She made a gesture of appeasement by sheathing the dagger. These women could not understand her language, much less speak it. Even so, they seemed to relax a little.

Minutes ticked by in silence, each wondering who would make the first move.

One of the women by the hearth finally picked up a wooden bowl. Ladling some broth from the huge kettle, she nervously spilled some and seemed

embarrassed. She stood up and, taking tentative steps, offered the bowl to the newcomer.

Her manner was careful, as though she didn't want to be seen. Her hands shook when she held the bowl out. She moved like a small sparrow, wounded, afraid the cat might pounce again.

Julienne's gaze swept the woman's tiny, thin form. She was very fair; her skin peach-hued, and her short hair was the color of rich, wild honey. Perfectly etched gray eyes peered out from under level brows, swept over by long, lovely lashes. Those eyes told of sorrow and sympathy. She understood fright. She had not been spared its ravages.

*Go easy, don't scare her. She's trying to help, I think.* Julienne felt drained but relieved. These women would not harm her or give away her presence.

Smiling shyly, the woman half-bowed and offered the bowl a second time. She said something to Julienne, speaking in a language Julienne didn't understand. Her voice was low, soft, as if seldom used. Her gestures were slow, lacking any animation.

Though she could not understand the words, Julienne correctly interpreted the meaning—*Eat*. She took the bowl, careful not to spill any of its contents. She could see what appeared to be small pieces of carrot and potato swimming in a yellowish broth, maybe chicken fat. She lifted it and took a sniff, breathing in the curling steam. Whatever it was, it was at least hot.

"It smells good." She offered a smile to show she was pleased and took a small sip. Though not enhanced by any seasonings, the bland concoction was palatable and warmed her insides. Thankfully, her stomach accepted the soup.

The woman nodded and replied with words Julienne thought likely meant she didn't understand her. She had the strong feeling the woman wanted to communicate as much as she did.

Julienne took a second sip and then a third. Deciding the soup was acceptable, she drained the bowl.

"That was good," she said when the last drops were gone. Her stomach rumbled, far from satisfied, her appetite only whetted.

The woman bowed her head then looked expectantly at her, awaiting some signal.

"I know you can't understand me, but thank you. Thank you for helping me." She had been trying to think of some way to communicate. She pointed to herself and said, "My name is Julianne."

The woman's eyes opened wide, a glint of understanding coming into her otherwise dull expression.

"Joo-lee-un." She had an odd accent. Julianne had heard a lot of languages, but none had the quality of the way these women spoke. Still, at this point, it was close enough.

She nodded and smiled. "Julianne." She pointed to the woman. "Your name?"

The woman leaned forward expectantly. "Joo-lee-un."

Julianne shook her head. "No." She pointed to herself again, saying her name slower. "Me, Julianne. You?"

"Joo-lee-un." The woman touched herself. "*Kee-rah*."

*Kee-rah*, Julianne repeated to herself. *What is that? Kiera? Kira?* She settled on the latter in her mind, a name to match the sounds, and nodded approval, smiling. At least she had something to work with now.

"Kira," she repeated. Kira's mouth turned up at the corners, a wide delighted grin. Spurred on by her success, Julianne held out her empty bowl. "Soup." She made a drinking motion. "More soup."

Kira immediately understood. "Awree."

Smiling, she took the empty vessel. She laid a light hand on Julianne's arm and indicated in a semblance of sign language that she should follow.

Going to the hearth, Kira dropped to her knees and patted a straw mat before refilling the bowl. This time she didn't spill a drop.

Although unsure if it was safe to remain long, Julianne sat, crossing her legs. As she settled down and sipped her second bowl, the rest of the women came to life, gathering around, offering bits and pieces of their meal. Though dubious about the freshness of the food, Julianne crammed it into her mouth. She bit down into a piece of bread. It tasted faintly of sourdough, crusty and chewy. Hunger made the food acceptable and in a very few moments, she had eaten everything the women had to offer.

Half-frightened, half-curious, they spoke in whispers. Some boldly reached out to touch Julianne's long hair. Their own had been shorn short. Except for

Kira, they made no attempt to exchange words. Perhaps the less they knew the safer they felt. They talked among themselves in their strange language. Julianne could hardly tell where one word ended and another began, much like Morgan when he spoke his hybrid Gaelic.

Kira hushed the group. Indicating Julianne's face, she chattered a string of instructions. One woman rose, walked to the back of the chamber. She returned with a large bowl and a few rags. Kira took up one of the rags, wet it, then made a motion of face washing.

Realizing what she intended, Julianne dipped back her head. Kira cleansed her wounds with the soft cloth dipped in what appeared to be some kind of flower petals. She wiped gently, flushing sweat, pus and dried blood away.

It tingled against Julianne's skin, not quite stinging, and she wondered if it was an astringent of some sort, perhaps an antiseptic, too. Julianne winced, gritting her teeth. The wounds were still painful to touch, but she realized she couldn't leave them untended. She could only hope this would help them heal cleanly.

Kira next sprinkled a whitish powder liberally onto the cuts. It had an immediate soothing effect.

The sound of harsh voices interrupted the women's meal. The men were coming to be fed; and by the sound they made, there were a lot of them. Grabbing Julianne's hand, Kira pulled her to her feet and began to drag her toward the rear of the chamber. There were about a dozen tiny rooms, hardly more than cubicles. Each was made up with a thin pallet on the stone floor, a few pieces of clothing and other personal possessions.

These austere and unwelcoming stone cells were the sole bit of privacy the women had. Pushing Julianne ahead, Kira quickly pulled together two thin curtains. She pressed her hand to her mouth. *Be quiet.*

Julianne nodded to show she understood. She watched Kira cross her small cubicle and begin to pat the walls, ignoring the soot that coated her fingers, the huge mutated spiders scurrying into dark crevices.

Finding what she sought, Kira stopped. She placed her palms flat to the wall. There was nothing unusual about the stone; it seemed as the others. But it was a special one; and she pressed harder, laying the full weight of her body against it. It moved, sliding back into the wall to release the lock holding the

concealed door closed. Julianne heard a low grating sound, music to her ears. A section moved aside.

Kira made a *hurry-up* gesture.

Julianne understood. It was her way out.

She ducked under the low edge. Darkness enveloped her as the door slid shut behind her. Until it was too late, it didn't occur to her to wonder if it was a way out or a trap.

*Light*, she thought. *There's no damn light!*

Turning around and around in confusion, she gradually became aware that a slight greenish glow emanated from the walls. Reaching out a tentative hand, she touched the wall. She encountered a wet, mushy substance. She immediately pulled her hand away, wiping it down the front of her shirt. The slime was a phosphorescent goo in puddles on the ground and climbing the walls, disintegrating the stone beneath it.

"God, that's disgusting!" Around her, the air reeked of moss and wet stone.

Still, it was light. Once her eyes adjusted, she discovered she could see rather well.

"This tunnel has to go somewhere. Let's just hope it's not a dead end. I'd hate to be walled in here alive."

Guided by the glow, she followed the tunnel, picking her way along. There were a few twists and turns, but no other chambers or tunnels leading to unknown places. There was only one way to go.

An unexpected whip of cold wind struck her in the face, bringing her out of her thoughts with its crisp scent.

*A way out!*

Following the breeze, she found the crack in the foundation, a crevice large enough to squeeze through, a glimpse of sky above. Freedom. Blessed freedom. The general shape of the crack was roughly triangular, the apex just high enough to allow a large dog through, or one thin woman. Without consciously thinking about what could be outside, she climbed the rocks and struggled to shove her body through the narrow gap.

"Where am I?"

Fear trumpeted through her guts, charging into her awareness. She stood silent and awestruck at the sight of crucified bodies nailed up on the wall.

Scattered across the hard-packed ground at her feet were the remnants of many more corpses, the stark white bones picked clean by carrion animals.

It was inconceivable that any ruins anywhere else in Sclyd could match these in the wild, rugged yet somehow breathtakingly beautiful desolation. There were mounds of scattered stones twenty feet high, great ruined pillars that had supported the arches that seemed to reach even higher. Beyond the great wall, which had never really been intended to keep people out but to put fear into them, lay the actual settlement—a city that had literally been carved into the face of low-lying mountains. There were strange paths made into the rock, some natural, some not. Though crippled by war, the city still functioned, the sole purpose of its inhabitants to serve and protect Xavier. By the cold moonlight and surrounded by a blanket of mist, it was a most chilling and awe-inspiring sight.

Since the last war had wound down to its unsatisfactory conclusion, it had fallen into partial ruin. Great portions of it had been knocked down by invading forces. But their efforts had not succeeded in destroying it completely. Still, the wall stood, hulking and immobile, as fierce and defiant as the sorcerer who had commissioned it.

The wind blew with such force it swept her against the wall. As soon as she left its shelter she would be out in the open, exposed to the elements. It was not an appealing thought.

Across from the wall, a low bluff guarded the rear flank of the sorcerer's sanctuary. As much as she didn't want to be out in the harsh wind, neither did she want to stay near this unholy place of death. She saw the twisted, bare branches of trees, maybe birches or willows, sculpted by the wind into odd, skeletal shapes. The sky was luminous, a mixture of purples and grays that danced to the orchestration of the wind. Strange night mists shimmered over the ground like the hand of a giant. It swirled in a heaving swell, stretching far as the eye could see.

Following the wall until it ended, eager to leave this place behind, Julianne passed under the last arch. She forced herself to ignore the numbness in her legs, the ache in her chest.

*Don't think about the pain,* she warned herself. *Just go!* She was departing that hellish place, and that gave her the strength to go on.

Pulling her shirt up to cover her head, she knotted the sleeves under her chin. She would lose warmth through her head. Best to cover it, at the expense of her body. Her fingers were unsteady as she fumbled to make a knot.

She paused, wondering where this journey would take her. She began to climb a steep incline. Jagged rocks tore her fingertips as she pulled herself higher. For one vast second she was sure she would lose her nerve.

Julienne walked until her body grew numb and she could not feel her arms or legs in the cold. How far she had progressed she didn't know until a new sound broke through the moan of the wind. She stopped in her tracks and cocked her head. The noise was the rush of water over jagged rocks. Ahead, she could make out the shape of a river.

The river bubbled, flowing south. Beside it, the wall of a low gorge veered away, its slope decreasing in a gradual incline that blended into the lush vales that were the oases of Sclyd. Located in a more temperate climate, these microcosms of lavish abundance flourished amid the great gaps of the ravished, famine-ridden lands. Only the Northlands were so desolate as to be barely habitable.

One look at the churning blue-gray water told her it would not be wise to try to cross at night. There was no telling how deep it might be or where the other shore was located. She had no choice but to follow it if she wanted to go on. Water usually meant some kind of civilization was nearby. She knew many Raider camps were established in the ruins of the cities. Right now any sign of humanity would be welcome.

She turned this way and that, wondering which direction she should go, dreading the idea of more grueling days of travel. Shivering violently, she realized she would have to find shelter soon. It belatedly occurred to her that she had no food and, other than her dagger, no way to hunt for and kill any. Even if she found some kind of vegetation, she had no clue what would be poisonous or edible.

Cold gusts of wind carried tiny bits of sleet that blistered her face raw when it struck. She bowed her head and walked into the lashing gale. Her thoughts wandered as she walked. She believed she saw lights twinkling in the distance, but that was impossible. There was no electricity. The idea of a world lit only by fire didn't occur to her benumbed mind at this point. Her skin was cracked,



painful. Her lips were chapped, eyes sore, nose pinched. Her throat ached as her breath was snatched away by the bitter air.

A violent blast nearly knocked her down. Losing her strength, she crumpled to her knees. She felt her tears freeze on her face, the cold begin to seep into her bones. Welcoming the icy touch, she suddenly wished it would carry her away to a place where she would feel no hurt, no grief. Trembling, she squeezed her eyes shut and began to pray for death. Faith was lost, fear turning her journey into an endless, fruitless void.

“Just let me die here,” she mumbled. “I can’t go on any longer.”

Oblivious to her warm tears and the cold shards of ice splattering her face, she shivered again, more from fear than the penetrating cold. She wished she hadn’t followed Morgan into this godforsaken land. This was his home and he knew it well; he could survive. She didn’t, and she couldn’t. It was as simple as that.

Crawling toward a small embankment of rock, wanting desperately to get out of the wind and cold, she lay on her side. Knees drawn to her chest, she fought to bring some semblance of warmth into her body. Face and hands blue with cold, she was once again close to perishing from hypothermia. In a very few hours, she would freeze to death. Misery needs no company. *I’ll die alone here...*

She thought about death, about her hopes and dreams, things she had done...and left undone. About how fruitless her life had been—directionless, useless, the flotsam of humanity, a waste of space and air until she had received that letter from grandmother, the one she had never read. What did the letter say? Would she ever know? Would reading it have changed her direction in life? Taken her to a better place? Or one even worse than here?

She thought about all the paths she had taken in her life, some of them chosen by other people, some by herself. What of Morgan? Did he really need her? Love her? More importantly, had he really wanted her or were they both manipulated by Anlese’s spell to join them?

A little bit of both, maybe.

That aggravating, impossible, irritating man! To think she’d once sworn a silent vow not to get involved with him. Was she weak? Was she stupid? Nope. She had been bewitched and her responses to Morgan were half attraction, half

spell-work and a pinch of an old woman's hope. The combination was, however, a bitter brew to swallow. There were more than a few hard feelings bubbling underneath the surface.

The little imp of *should-have-been* resumed its seat on her shoulder. Prodding with its sharp little pitchfork, it sent her brain reeling in a thousand different directions, none of them useful to the situation at hand.

*I'm going to pass away. Kick over. Croak. Cease to exist.*

She giggled.

*That's a fact, Jack.*

*A frozen carcass, it's only a shell.*

*Soon, I'll be warm...free. The pain will end.*

Though her body was still, her mind rambled on; her thoughts becoming blurred as she slowly lost strength and stamina. A great weight began to descend upon her, a feeling of being very heavy, very sleepy. Eyes closed, she accepted the darkness, welcomed it. It was warm, soothing, like sliding into a pool of hot, steamy water. She imagined herself dipping in a toe, then a leg, wading in up to her thighs, her breasts, her neck. Only her head remained, and soon she would be going under for the last time.

Julienne felt a touch on her shoulder. She ignored it, thinking it a hallucination of her sick mind, the jostling of the wind. A harder push. A pause, and then someone rolled her onto her back and slapped her face, hard.

Slammed rudely out of her numb half-sleep, she opened her eyes to see the outline of a hulking figure looming over her. Floundering, she was far too tired and miserable to feel fear. What could possibly happen to her now? She really didn't care.

As the man bent closer, she could make out bits and pieces of his features. A feeling of recognition washed over her.

"I know you!" she cried out in disbelief, then fainted dead away.

## Chapter Twelve

Nights in the mortal world passed violently. Each fall of darkness upon the Earth brought a siege of beings that stalked the shadows in search of weaker animals to dominate and destroy. Some hunted for the thrill of the chase. Others hunted for blood, flesh or bones to feed the unnatural hunger that drove them into the herd of mankind.

Humans were the prey, and many joined the uncounted souls who were food for the insatiable legions of the damned.

The weak succumb.

The strong postpone the inevitable.

It was the law of an unnatural nature.

But such are the ways of life and death, natural and supernatural.

This night, the sky was hazy, its wide canopy of stars dressed in an indigo coat stretching over the face of the land. Cool but not unpleasantly chilly, a breeze moved the branches of the trees like a violinist lovingly drawing his bow over the strings of a finely tuned instrument.

Other than the gentle flow of the earth's breath, the twilight should have been still, untouched.

So it was, until a subtle change came into the air.

Unrest had arrived, ushered in on silent, dark wings. Where before an atmosphere of emptiness had pervaded, there was presently something else as winding tendrils of vapor wafted in the nothingness, growing dense as a figure emerged from within.

Moving to the security of the shadows, Megwyn cocked her head and listened to the night. How she relished the dark. As her cloak covered her body, so the gloom covered the comings and goings of the Sclydian entities. To walk among mortals was to wander among ripe fruit, an orchard brimming with lives

for the taking. Humans were such easy prey. They believed walls and the locks on their doors protected them. That the prayers that fell from slack lips would keep them safe from all harm. But walls had cracks, windows were left open to admit the sweet night air and prayers for protection fell on the ears of a deaf deity who had untethered the devils long ago and had no desire to corral them.

“We are gods among them.”

She laughed, a sound that might have been mistaken for the shriek of a rapacious bird. Silent words came from her lips, words that made her one with the incandescent veils that bore otherworld beings into this mortal realm. Where the winds could go, a skilled conjurer could, too, for it was easy to merge with the air currents. She gave herself to the silvery embrace of nothingness, and her search began.

Incorporeal, she peered in dark windows with prying eyes, looking for the sacrifice she had been sent to retrieve for Xavier. When she found the right child, she entered through the cracks, coming with the air currents to lift her from a warm bed of innocent slumber. Muffling the child’s cries with a smothering hand, she crept away without a whisper or rustle of clothing to deliver her into the cold grasp of the Dragon.

## Chapter Thirteen

Morgan sagged against the altar. Blessing the silence, he pressed his hands to his skull. The pain was, mercifully, lessening, allowing him to gain a grip on his senses. He was exhausted by the violent encounter, his weary anger giving way to a dazed lethargy.

Since their last parting, his sister had grown bitter and vindictive. He had no doubt she would do her damndest to bring her threats to fruition—no matter what harm it did, no matter who stood in her way, she had made a sacred and solemn vow to destroy him.

A tiny glimmer of light stabbed through the tarry darkness around him, offering a bit of welcome illumination. Lynar carried the stub of a taper in his small hands.

“She’s evil.” The elf came around the altar, lifting his candle, curiously examining this forbidden place.

Nodding, Morgan scrubbed his hands together, attempting to rub away the stain of her blood. “She practices, as our father did, the rites and deceptions that destroy the soul. You did me no favor, thief, saving this life.”

Scores of sacred Celtic symbols drawn onto the surface of the altar caught his eye. He stared at them as though seeing a revelation, slowly tracing each. His parents had practiced intensely sexual rites on this altar, conceiving their twins in defiance of the balance between dark and light.

Like a string pulled too taut, something inside him snapped. He staggered away from the altar. He didn’t want to touch it. His fingers curled into a fist in an effort to soothe the quivering in his body. He’d never spoken about the event that had revealed he could find no release by his own hand, of the night the ci’biote materialized from the blood he’d shed. He’d seen the inhuman thing

inhabiting his shell. Not even his twin knew what it really was. And he would never tell her the truth.

But the thing...

He had the feeling it didn't belong to him. In fact, it seemed to fit very poorly inside him. The more he used its abilities, the more it tortured him. Had his mother, indeed, misread prophecy? Would it truly have been better served assimilated with Megwyn? Going back to the same time and place, would she have served as a harbinger of peace when, in that same time, he had been one of war?

It was a question that would have to go unanswered.

One choice. Two children. How could his mother have known which? She'd believed fervently that Cerredwen granted her special foresight, gave her visions of a savior who would walk as a peacemaker between the dimensions.

But were her visions true, or had they been the hallucinations of a woman going slowly insane?

The tingling in his fingers gave him pause. He was clenching his hand so hard his knuckles showed white under the already-deathlike pallor of his skin. He uncurled his fingers. Tension. Rejoining with the being would reawaken his psi abilities. Then, a stray thought could unintentionally turn lethal, and the repercussion could disable him mentally.

More than just a means of regenerative, it had granted him the talent to manipulate physical matter solely by thought. It was a faculty he did not regret losing after he'd renounced the occult and separated from witchcraft. The intense push of kinetic energy was draining on his mind and could trigger the migraines that plagued him. The pain could cause irreparable mental damage if not arrested before cellular degeneration set in. It was why the gray in his hair continued to grow thicker, the lines around his eyes deeper—they were signs he'd let the burnout creep up on him.

*I must take care, guard myself...I cannot let it consume me.* For the first time he noticed it was uncomfortably cold, the temperature previously ignored because his mind had gone astray.

The elf tugged at his leg, jarring him out of his thoughts. "You should leave here. This is not a good place, and it isn't safe."

"I know." Morgan blearily surveyed the chamber, most of it concealed in a shroud of shadows. "But I have things yet to do here."

"A fire would help." Lynar shivered, and the candle he held flickered.

"It would," he agreed, thinking that a pack of cigarettes and lighter would also be useful. "Bring your light."

The chamber was neither large nor small nor of an exact square shape. The walls angled forward from the entrance, progressing toward a beehive of tunnels that went even deeper underground. A pile of wood was heaped in the far corner, and he stacked a few musty logs in the nearest of the twin fireplaces. Lynar hurried to help, gathering smaller pieces for kindling. He set the flame of his candle to it, blowing gently to encourage the fire to spread. When it grew stable, the elf settled down, drinking in the warmth, though shivering no less.

Morgan sat down, his back against the wall, out of the direct light. The aura was eerie, a forbidding place seething with tenebrous secrets. A vision belonging to his father, the sanctuary was originally erected to consolidate Celeon's power as a feudal lord on Irish soil. When first built, the great stone rooms with their drab gray walls and vaulted ceilings were cold, drafty and generally as comfortable as a prison. Still, when he'd needed to cement his own position within Sclyd, the stone keep of his birth proved to be a suitable adornment to the Northland territories he'd staked out as his own in a move of supreme ego.

To merge one landscape into another, the veils between the two worlds need only be shifted, one atop the other, fitting as hand in glove. Dimensional perimeters between the two were ever changing and would continue to do so now that the heavens had fallen back into alignment. By Megwyn's words, the Dragon's legion was undoubtedly preparing to rise into action, most likely plotting to alter the terrain even further, acquire land unsullied by famine and disease. Given time, he believed the boundaries would disintegrate completely and both worlds would end as they had begun, in a collision of conflicting energies.

Such knowledge was hardly comforting.

He clasped his hands together, thumb of one rubbing the palm of the other, as if attempting to rub away a stain. The vivid flames could provide light but

not warmth. Nor could the fire drive away the pungent reek lingering in the shadows.

Dampness hung around the edges of the walls. A thin stream of water issued from the open mouth of the stone head embedded in the wall, the twin of the lion decorating the altar. The water filled a circular stone basin several feet wide and about three-and-a-half feet deep; a drain carved around its edge prevented overflow. The water was clean, clear and ice-cold.

"You should have something to eat," Lynar said. "I am a good hunter. I could—"

Morgan shook his head and made a gesture toward his filthy clothing. "I should clean up."

It was one thing to accept a certain amount of grime when living in a medieval world, but he was rank with sweat and dried blood. For the first time, he began to think of the long term. If he were going to remain here, he'd need supplies. This would mean trading in the villages.

"How?" Lynar asked.

Reluctantly getting up, Morgan retrieved a small chest out of one dark corner. Constantly on the move, he was accustomed to keeping caches of clothes and money in various hiding places; this was only the first of many.

The chest was cedar-lined, the items inside well preserved, untouched. Scavengers had plundered the levels above, but they were too superstitious to venture below. Looking at the clothes, he thought about how much the mortal world had changed, and how much Sclyd had not.

In a way, he almost pitied humans. For all their technological advances, how could they resist an enemy they could not see or understand? Soon, if not already, their people would begin to disappear—a few, at first, and then hundreds as the Sclydian entities grew bolder. Mortals were like sheep—prime, fat and ready for slaughter.

He gave himself a stern mental shake, dragged himself out of his thoughts and returned to the task at hand. He must take care of himself; no one else was going to do it.

He stripped off his bloodstained shirt. Tossing it aside, he sat down to unlace his boots.



"I am going to have to do some trading to replace these." Not a minute passed before he paused, acutely aware he was under close scrutiny. "What are you looking at?"

"You're not so very big," Lynar observed matter-of-factly. "If I stood a bit higher, I'd be just as tall, I bet."

"Not a near chance," Morgan said, peeved that the elf had to voice his every observation. It was like having a small child underfoot, questioning, testing and giving a running commentary.

"How tall are you?"

"Quite tall enough!" The elf was poking close to the one thing he was self-conscious about. His father had towered well over six feet in his prime. Morgan narrowly brushed five-eleven with the heel of a boot under him. "Besides, I have the extra inches where they count."

"Where?" Lynar sidled closer, looking closely, curiously.

"Bloody hell! Have you not something better to do than ask stupid questions?" He hadn't meant for the remark to be taken literally.

The elf continued to explore. He reached out to trace one of the lash marks crisscrossing Morgan's back. "I saw your newer injuries heal without marks," he observed. "Yet you still wear other scars."

Morgan sat up straight, startled by the probing fingers against his naked flesh. "First you kick me when I am down. Now you poke like a blind old woman." He swatted at the Danarran. "I had another life, a very long while ago. I still wear the marks."

The elf looked at him, golden eyes slanted in appraisal. "You saw much trouble then."

"Aye, it was a merciless time." He offered no further explanation.

"You'll tell me the stories?"

"No. And I will hear no more from you. You make me think too much, and such can bring me no good."

"Thinking is something you don't seem to do much of," Lynar returned, emboldened by his earlier successes.

Morgan abruptly rose and snatched the elf up by its scrawny neck. "I have had quite enough of your smart-ass comments!"

Arms flailing, the little being wriggled and twisted, kicking his small feet, but could not get loose. "I meant no harm!"

Morgan considerably tightened his grip. Air cut off from his lungs, the elf squeaked as he helplessly dangled.

In a few swift steps, Morgan crossed the chamber. He tossed the elf out. "God damn and good riddance," he cursed. "I need ten minutes alone, or you shall rue the day you got out of Xavier's dungeons!"

Lynar landed hard on his backside. "Ouch!" Scuttling to his feet, he rubbed his stinging bottom, backing away from the larger figure. "That hurt!"

"Be gone for good!"

Lynar had the good sense to scamper away, disappearing from sight.

Left alone, Morgan finished undressing.

Despite the chill of the water, it was a relief to wash away the blood and clinging filth—he doubted the stench would ever leave his nostrils. He dealt with his body in a mechanical, necessary way. He'd been taught to regard it as a machine that had to keep going. He had learned to ignore hunger, cold, injury.

He couldn't help but turn one of his wrists up. The long vertical scars marking his forearm were thin, but deep. Looking at them turned his mind to a phrase: *a self designed to be destroyed*.

How often had he thought this as he plunged into unknown danger at every chance? How far could he push luck before he crossed the line of no return?

The answer was, at last, revealed. He had pushed chance farther than he should've been allowed to. However, chance was now pushing back and he was stymied. He hated feeling trapped, helpless. *I have finally discovered just how vulnerable I am.*

Nailed down and almost hung like an ornament by Xavier, he now knew what true weakness felt like. To have been utterly at someone else's mercy mortified him.

A strange ache in his chest resonated through his body. Although his wounds had mended, he fancied he could still feel Azoroath's blade inside him. It felt much like what he imagined Julianne must have experienced when Xavier's mutant burrowed into her chest.

*Do not think of her. It hurts too much.*

Almost every thought was of her: how she looked, walked, talked, the inflections in her laugh, her smile, her touch. *Ah, her touch.* Like water to a thirsting man. If he closed his eyes he could again see the anticipation in her green eyes as he claimed her mouth, his hands sliding around her slender hips when he pulled her supple body close.

She was only a woman, damn it, one of many mortal lovers he'd taken. Yet there was something about her—in her—that deeply affected him.

His hand rose, pressing hard against his chest. He almost believed he could feel the mutant digging through his own flesh, settling into the cavity of his ribs. It would be heavy, pressed against the lungs, a suffocating parasite that would feed of its host until rebirth. The sensations he imagined he felt were agonizing, but bearable. He'd known worse.

Pushing thoughts of Julianne aside, he began to dress, slipping on a long-sleeved linen shirt that hung over form-fitting leather leggings. Over this, he put a tunic, a sleeveless verged garment slit down the sides from waist to knees. Laced knee-high leather boots and a simply cut skirted linen coat completed his wardrobe. Xavier's ring was hung on a gold chain and tucked into his sash. He rubbed his face, feeling the sharp stubble. He could use a shave, but decided not to bother with it.

The hollow sound of his footsteps echoed in the chamber when he departed. The sound grew fainter when he abandoned the tunnels.

## Chapter Fourteen

Morgan stood at the rim of the canyon. The winds of the evening ruffled his hair, brushing his long bangs off his forehead. He glanced to the sky. Above, a myriad of soft, luminous blues and purples danced in a graceful duet, churning clouds bearing the breath of winter. From his high perch he could clearly survey the landscape.

Far removed from the skeletal Northlands, a cornucopia of activity spilled forth. Though usually a nomadic people, the Raiders were settling in for the cold season and the storms it would bring in. Already, the air was frigid, nipping at his exposed skin like tiny little mouths. He ignored the cold, hardly feeling it.

The crossbow across his back, loaded and ready for use, felt comfortable. He carried three daggers; each was precisely balanced for throwing and fit his hand perfectly. One he sheathed in his left boot. A second was strapped to his right forearm, concealed by his long sleeve. The third was smaller and hidden in a seam of his coat.

As he watched the people go about the business of living, his hand tightened on the strap across his shoulder. Even among these exiled people, he was an outlaw. His return might not be appreciated.

*Ah, well, he sighed in silence. Someone has to be damned. How long would his freedom last? They have to find me first. And for every man they send, I shall return to them a body.*

“Guess I will soon find if I am still welcome in the camps.” A fast runner would have already been dispatched to alert the tribe he was among them.

Lynar, perched on a rock to allow a better view of the camp below, turned his golden eyes in an upward arc. “How much do they hate you?” The colored beads in his white hair rattled. He’d recently rearranged their style to indicate

he served a new master. It was possible he would soon be putting them into the style of mourning.

Morgan spread his hands in a wide gesture. "This much," he answered, not entirely in jest. Hitching up the heavy crossbow to sit more comfortably on his back, he jumped off the ledge. "Come on. Let us see what trouble we can make."

There was a walk of at least a half-mile yet to be covered. With an unerring eye, he picked out trails the animals trod in their search for food and passage to clear streams of fresh water.

The two moved on a downward slope, leaving behind the steep cliffs for the valley. Small fires dotted the edges of the water. Morgan could see people watching from a distance. Suspicious eyes glared out of dirty faces. A few gestures were made as the men drew themselves to their feet and waved their women aside.

Lynar cast an uneasy glance around. "Why do you stay in the dead place?"

Morgan fixed his gaze on the gathering crowd. He assessed each man, measuring size and apparent strengths and weaknesses against his own. Rutola did not seem to be among their ranks.

While not exactly young, Morgan was strong, healthy and unselfconsciously confident in his abilities. His whole life had centered on the taking of lives. Killing was what he did, what he was best at when he put his mind to the task.

"It was not always this desolate." He brought his hand up sharply, indicating the need for silence. "Quiet yourself and pay attention. We may have to move on...quickly."

Despite his words, he made no obvious move toward his weapons. Though armed, he was not in a mercenary mood.

"They don't look like they're going to leave us alone," Lynar chirruped nervously.

Morgan did not stop or look down. "I see they have sent the greeters out."

The men advanced to the edge of their camp. They began to circle the newcomers, cutting off escape as they formed a loose, wide arc. There were about twenty in all. He was definitely outnumbered.

A powerfully built man called out. His frank stare was appraising, showing disapproval. "You dare show your face, *madra*, now that you've caused us such trouble?"

Morgan eyed the man squarely. This was Graeymon, Rutola's brother. His face was plain and large, and his wide-set eyes perched over a large nose and mouth. His beard was thick and long. Barrel-chested, with powerful arms and legs, he was short, stocky. His vestments were primitive: leather boots, loose trousers tied with a thong and a sleeveless tunic. His blond hair was long, tied loosely in a ponytail. He looked to be about forty, though years of hard living and harder fighting had added some age to his features.

"I do."

Graeymon drew his finger across his throat in gesture of execution. "You should be killed. Since Rutola stood with you, Xavier's Jansi have taken four of our women. You've brought the dark days back with your return."

Morgan made a dismissive motion. "And you think I am responsible for Xavier's actions?"

Grunting, Graeymon drew out his knife. "Xavier's vengeance comes because fools stir his hive!" The men on either side of him stepped back. The fighting was about to begin, and so was the wagering.

Trouble had arrived too quickly.

Morgan did not reach for a weapon. "Think twice before you act."

Clearly not in the thinking frame of mind, Graeymon leapt forward, blade slashing out. "It's time some man collected the bounty on your head, Lethe!"

Morgan ducked the blade. He rose in time to catch the flying figure, slamming Graeymon's body to the ground in a single move of grace and speed. He caught Graeymon's wrist and twisted his arm. His bearded assailant howled and the knife fell from his fingers.

Morgan caught the strap of his crossbow and brought it around his shoulder, lowering the deadly weapon toward Graeymon's face even as his booted foot came squarely down on his throat. A bit of weight would crush the larynx. His finger was on the trigger, but he did not pull it.

"Good try." He shot a glance to the crowd of men, just in case a new attack was in the offing. No one moved. They wanted to see the outcome. "My turn now."

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Surprise, then anger flashed across the Raider's face. "Then kill me!" he snarled, panting from his failed effort. "I'm not afraid to die."

Morgan lifted the crossbow away. "If you are not, then spend your efforts killing Jansi." He held out his hand. Graeymon took it and was pulled to his feet in a single movement. Dusting the dirt of the fight off his face, he bent and retrieved his knife.

A new voice spoke. "You are welcome as a brother of this clan."

Rutola emerged; his men had deliberately been blanketing the presence of the elder leader. He looked better, stronger, injuries almost fully healed.

Rutola raised his hand in the accepted gesture of friendship when he came into the circle, indicating the men should disperse. They straggled away—some claimed their coin, others groaned over their losses.

"You have plans for going after Xavier?"

Morgan slung his bow across his back. "I do."

Rutola grunted and indicated agreement. "I wish to talk, then. I have men who are eager to fight."

Morgan cocked his head. "Even though the council and the legion have an alliance?"

Rutola shook his head. "The dark wars will never be over as long as the legion slaughters our people. That the council has entered into a peace treaty aggrieves me. They are no better now."

"I agree."

"And you?" Rutola's piercing stare fixed on him. "Are you going back to the battle, all the way?"

"I am."

"And your stand? Will it be against the council as well?"

Morgan gritted his teeth, recalling his twin's threats, her betrayal of her position and turning to Ouroboros. "Yes."

Rutola nodded again. "Good." His gaze found and indicated the elf, quivering behind a rock. "I see you have gained a shadow. Didn't we leave that thing behind us?"

"So I believed."

“Why you even let him out of his cage, there’s no telling. Elves are useless, like parasites.” Amusement reached Rutola’s gray eyes; and he laughed, hearty and deep in unexpected exuberance.

“Even parasites have their place.” Trying to shrug off his black mood, Morgan shifted into a lighter tone, though his voice held no hint of humor. “Come here. Hiding like a woman is beneath you.”

Lynar scurried, taking a place behind Morgan’s legs, concealed by the folds of his long coat.

Rutola’s mouth moved down in a frown. “Eating on your bones, it looks to my eyes. From the look of you, you barely have a pulse, much less blood in your veins.”

“Forget that.” Morgan drew a leather pouch out of his pocket. “A keg of *lhune roie* will put the life back in me.” He tossed it to Rutola. The stout malted ale would do the job of getting him drunk—very drunk.

Rutola caught the pouch, heavy with coins. He weighed the sack, tossing it between his hands.

“This will pay for your drink.” A queer smile parted his mouth, somewhere between a grin and a smirk. “You want a woman as well?” His eyes twinkled. “Maya has asked for you.”

Morgan shook his head. “I have sworn off those for awhile.”

“Your mate—”

He lifted a hand. “Do not speak of her.”

“I understand.”

“I was a fool,” Morgan said.

Rutola accepted his explanation and said nothing more. He threw the sack of gold to one of his men. “Go to the village and buy several casks. Show you’ll pay and not steal it.” He walked to the entrance of a stone hut, a shanty built both halfway above and below the ground. He pushed open a wooden door and beckoned into its murky depth. “You’d better see this. I doubt you’ll believe your eyes.”

Morgan graced Rutola with a skewed glare, half-annoyed, half-curious. “What is it?”

“You don’t trust me?”

“I trust no one.”



Nevertheless, he went inside. Rutola indicated the woman huddled under a pile of blankets. "I believe this belongs to you."

Morgan didn't think—he reacted.

"By the gods!" He gasped in absolute astonishment. "I do not believe my eyes. How...?"

There was a moment of awkward silence as he tried to pull his wits together. His heart pounded in his ears and his breath seemed wedged, a choking hitch in the back of his throat, one he believed would strangle him.

He glanced at Rutola. Disbelief must have been written all over his face, for the Raider nodded, saying, "We found her barely a night ago. She was almost frozen to death."

Morgan accepted the information without comment. He hesitated a moment, as though considering whether or not he should go to her. He'd settled it in his head she was gone. This threw a monkey wrench into his mind and emotions. All decisions he'd made earlier were shattered in an instant. He'd set his mind toward dark and morbid things. Now, he had to stop and reconsider the idea that his life was an expendable thing.

He decided in an instant; he would not walk away and leave her a second time.

Morgan put aside his crossbow, walked over and hunkered down beside Julianne. He reached out, stroked matted hair away from her torn face. Semi-delirious, disjointed words spilled from her swollen, cracked lips. Her eyes were open, but she was unseeing and unaware of anything around her.

He searched her face. It was bad, possibly worse than the damages of the mutant. Clearly, she was in much pain. Her features were obscured by the mask Xavier had raked into her skin. The festering cuts were yellowing around the edges. The sorcerer had deliberately primed his fingernails with an acidic substance designed to infect and scar. It was a wicked potion, feeling at first like a sliver of ice cutting through the nerves before turning into a raging heat that made the victim literally want to rip off the skin.

*I do not think she can survive this.* He pressed his fingers to her neck. Her pulse was sluggish, her skin clammy and chilled. He saw the fear, the agony in her eyes. *She is too weak.*

"Julianne," he murmured.

His voice seemed to awaken a spark inside her. Her searching gaze found and focused on him. Her haggard face became radiant, a look of almost painful hope lighting her eyes. She stretched her hand eagerly toward him.

"M-Morgan?" Her voice was a wracking whisper, breaking in agony. Breathing hard, trying to master her pain, she struggled to raise herself. Unable to find the strength, she grunted in frustration.

He gently pressed her shoulder, encouraging her to stay down.

"I'm here." Seeing her so weak, so helpless, guilt gnawed further into his tortured spirit. Despite her savage disfigurement, she had never seemed more beautiful. "Lie back and be still. You must rest."

Calmed by his presence, she let a wry smile settle on her lips.

"I can't. This thing inside me. If I go to sleep, it'll eat me." Her words were sadder than any tears she could shed. Her half-hearted grin turned into a grimace. She could never hide her feelings, but now there was no reason for her to try.

All of a sudden, her body arched and her head dipped back, eyes rolling to the whites. She moaned and clawed at her chest with a terrible tearing motion as great convulsive spasms began to rip through her.

Morgan captured her flying hands before she harmed herself. Finally, all her strength was gone, and she lay gasping. Beneath his gently restraining grip, she relaxed.

"It is all right." He linked his fingers with hers, willing his strength into her desperately depleted body, as if by sheer mental force he could make her unhurt and whole again. Her grip on his hand tightened.

In that moment, their minds met, briefly merging. Her undercurrents of emotion and thought blazed like wildfire through him. He could feel her fear, her searching, her needs. Breaking the connection, he felt dizzy and lightheaded from all she had fed into him.

He bowed his head, pulling his hand through his hair. He was not a man given to ready, easy expressions of warmth or concern, and the rush of these new feelings confused him. As much as he did not want to admit it, this young woman with her scarred face and wounded-sparrow soul had captured his heart in an unrelenting grip. Seeing her alive, he finally had a reason to live and—dare he think it?—hope.

Almost as if she could discern the tumble of his thoughts, she blurted, "Promise you won't let me die here."

Her face was flushed, her brow knitted intensely. The lines around her mouth tightened as the mutant wriggled, stealing her breath.

"You are not going to die." He looked away briefly, strangled by the incredible grip of remorse.

She shook her head, disbelieving.

"Please, take me back." Lips tightening stern and grim, her voice, despite its weakness, had a resoluteness that allowed no argument. "I want to be with Grandmother. And you—" A spike of pain briefly halted her speech. She closed her eyes, voice thickening, "You'll be free of me."

Looking at her stubborn expression, he lost all desire to argue. She knew she wasn't going to live much longer.

Hardly hesitating, he replied in unexpected confession, "I do not wish to be free of you."

His own voice was tight with the emotion he was barely managing to contain. *I need you more than you know.*

Morgan nodded. "I will take you back." He slid his arms under Julianne's body, hefting her half-lifeless weight. "And you will not die. I swear it."

## Chapter Fifteen

Xavier descended into the bowels of the earth. As he moved with concentrated effort, his leaden steps and the brush of his robes stirred dust long undisturbed. Born out of an unfathomable depth, a rush of chill air emanated up from the shaft that was part of an incredible labyrinth honeycombing the land beneath his sanctuary.

His vision was no longer blurred, and he could see clearly. Duk-cho had done his work with competence. Over his empty right eye, he wore a black patch. Swollen and twisted by the mass of stitches that ran from the bridge of his nose to his temple, his flabby cheek was contorted, thick lips set in a permanent grimace.

Ahead of him, carrying a torch to light their way, Ilya moved like a wraith. Beside him, Megwyn carried the mortal child she'd taken a day ago. Clinging to her neck, the little girl whimpered, low, choking sobs of confusion and fright. Megwyn hushed the child, murmuring words of comfort.

"Be silent." She smiled tenderly and gave the little girl's hollow cheek a quick peck. "You'll be fine, little one. Soon the Dragon will reach down and kiss you. She's perfect...so beautiful." Her voice echoed and re-echoed in the tunnel.

Xavier glanced at her. "You've chosen well."

*It has been a long time since I came here,* he thought. *Not since Nisidia's death.*

Unbidden, memories stole into his brain and began to play across the screen of his skull. Deep, threatening thunder started to roll through his head like thousands of massed voices, voices that merged into a single shrill scream. He flinched at the reverberating recollections, which would have shaken the ground out from under the feet of a weaker man.

He closed his single eye, briefly blanketing his mind in welcome darkness. Time slid back to the old days, and her image sprang up. The beginning and the end began to swirl, a tide pool of emotion—love and hate, regret and guilt. All revolved around her.

Nisidia was one of thirteen young women chosen every third season from the *teiytt*, the second caste of worshippers, for their physical perfection, beauty and some special talent that made them worthy to serve as handmaidens to the male acolytes attending the inner circle of the Arch-priest. The girls were taken young, as early as nine, before they began to reach puberty. They were trained for a single purpose: to bear the children of the priests. As a group, they were raised exclusively within a closed circle; they were extensively educated and prepared for their roles, to submit body, mind, emotion and spirit. At the end of their initiatory training, each female was given to her chosen mate.

It was the right of the Arch-priest to choose one of the women for his own. Barely twenty when she came into her full beauty, Nisidia was a sight to behold, a woman the gods had truly blessed. Her skin was dusky, a lovely shade of mocha cut with cream, almond eyes a rich shade of mahogany, lips the color of rubies. By no means a small woman, she was willowy and curvy, breasts and hips full and firm. A goddess of sexual delight, her brown eyes never failed to spark with desire over a mouth offering a dazzling smile. She was light itself, carrying a special inner glow creation granted only to her. He'd chosen this young woman to become his wife, someday to be the mother of his son.

It was not to be.

*Fate happened*, came the damning accusation. *Morgan happened*.

A bitter grimace crossed his lips. Without intending to, he clenched his fist, a glove of unfeeling leather, not living skin. The trial the Dragon had set for him was difficult. Though he did not want to think of those times, he could not chase images from the time before the dark war from his head. Unlike others, who tried to bury hurt, disappointment or anger, he thrived on nurturing his memories. Like thousands of snakes in a box, he kept them alive, feeding them with hatred and poking the writhing mass often to make sure they were thriving. To forget would be his greatest blasphemy.

*Many things have changed since Morgan was a favored guest within these walls. If only I had not welcomed him so openly. But he was different from the others...seeking not power, but answers.*

A silent presence, Morgan had watched and listened. There was no relaxation behind the tightly wound ticking time bomb that comprised the assassin's whole personality. Unpredictable, he possessed an ill temper and the deadly knowledge to back it up. Trouble brewed in the icy glare of his black eyes and the slight smile teasing the corner of his lips. Many men died by the blade he carried.

Women were victims of another kind, drawn like moths to the smoldering sexuality he handled with the ease of a master. Sex with him was rough, bruising and all devouring. There was no love in the act, only conquest and abandonment. More than one spurned woman tried to put a knife in his back.

Witness to the fear Morgan inspired as he came into his own legacy as the thirteenth member of the witches' council, Nisidia schemed to beguile Morgan into loving her even as her husband suffered a crushing defeat. If she succeeded, Morgan's status would also be hers.

Her game of seduction was elaborate, and there was little Xavier could do to stop her. Morgan had responded to her overtures, perhaps out of boredom or the satisfaction of taking the woman of the man he had vanquished. The nights she spent with him were torrid. But there was no love. Cold-hearted, Morgan let Nisidia weave her intrigue until he grew tired of her body and deserted her.

She returned a sadder woman.

*And I took her back, gladly.*

An outcast, he had nevertheless retained a semblance of his former position, and he had plunged himself into study to further his knowledge as he strove to regain his old place. He would find, in more ways than one, that Nisidia held a possible key. She had done her work well, weaving her fertility spells most effectively.

In her womb, she carried Morgan's seed and in her mind, she harbored thoughts of his death. Though unhappy with her pregnancy, she was pleased about her child, who would be a successor through blood to the legacy Morgan claimed. *We agreed I would raise the child, mentor its growth into the Dragon's cult.*

Though they tried to conceal the fact, Morgan somehow learned of Nisidia's pregnancy, divining the child was his. Furious, he confronted her. The quarrel between them was bitter. Morgan would take her back, he said, for his legacy was a powerful one and he could provide all she desired. But it was his wish their child be raised as a mortal, away from the influences of Sclyd, unknowing of its true heritage.

Nisidia had laughingly refused him. She did not love him, she said, had only used him to sire the child she carried. He could hardly deny his offspring recognition and acknowledgement.

Her words were her death.

Morgan had strangled her.

*I discovered them in time to see her body fall.*

Xavier's gloved hand rose to his face, stopping just short of touching the black patch covering the empty socket. He felt the scorching bitter taste of hatred in his mouth. *That glimpse cost me the eye. In that moment, I knew him for what he was.*

Pulling himself out of his reminiscence, he followed Ilya into a dank chamber. Using her torch, she lit others throughout, bringing illumination to this place where only the darkest of magic could be worked. Above their heads, the ceiling was furred with the luminescent green lichen. The walls, embellished with ancient and sacred symbols, had swollen and cracked from the constant damp. As Ilya lit the torches, the symbols seemed to dance, a mystery to those who did not understand the secrets of ritual conjuration.

A gray stone altar sat between two wrought iron braziers, but the altar was not in the center of the chamber. That place was reserved for the gigantic wheel. Carved entirely of white ash, it balanced on three legs that came together around a pillar that supported the wheel and allowed it to be spun clockwise or counter-clockwise. Ouroborous, the image of the Dragon feeding on its own tail, was carved in three dimensions and set as a centerpiece, a symbol of the cyclic nature of the universe.

Xavier smiled. The grayness seemed to coil around him, making him a living part of its dank depths. The time of sacrifice had arrived.

*Time has not been kind, but tonight shall change that.*

If the Dragon were generous, he would have the answer to his question of where the tomb of Erabris was to be found.

“We must begin the ritual.”

Bidding Megwyn to stay behind, he walked to the altar alone. He began his ritual by building a circle of protective fire.

Directing his hand toward the first brazier, he concentrated all his inner energies and said, “Here do I call the first Light of the Spirit. May it reach out across the barriers from this world to the next. May I make contact with that World of Spirit into which we will eventually enter.”

A strong, steady flame burst into glorious life.

He set his hand toward the second brazier. “Here do I call the second Light of Spirit. May this light also reach out across the barriers from this world to the next. May I make contact with that World of Spirit and help spread the light, illuminating the passageway between our worlds.”

Earlier, Ilya had prepared the necessary items, covering the stone with virgin white silk and laying out the implements of ritual: incense specially powdered and mixed, rosewood sticks, fragrant oil in an etched silver bowl and, lastly, a ceremonial sickle. At its haft was the head of a dragon, its ruby-encrusted eyes animated, seemingly lit with a glow that emanated not from the outside but from within.

Xavier’s essential tools had been arranged in four directions on the altar. He used the oil to anoint himself, daubing it on his forehead, cheeks and at the pulse points of his wrists. He touched each object, concentrating on the purpose of the ritual, and spoke the litanies.

“I consecrate thee with the powers of the wind and air, fire and water through the might of Ouroboros for the purpose of divination, that it may strengthen me in my search.”

Next, he picked up a slim stick of rosewood, using it to light a censer of incense. A sensual, cloying mix of black musk and rich brown sandalwood filled the air. Breathing deeply, he lifted up the burner and swung it, censuring the area around the altar, while rhythmically repeating the word “Merge,” building up his circle of protection.

Satisfied that he was safe from any who would cast against him, he turned to Megwyn. “Bring her here.”



Stepping into the sacred circle, Megwyn laid the child on the etched stone surface. His one-sided stare swept her form. He did not need two good eyes to see how she had changed.

Robed in white, her cowl lay across her shoulders. Her blond hair hung in lank shreds. Her face was wrinkled, jowls sagging. Dark circles ringed her eyes, the irises unnaturally dilated, twin black moons remote and empty as deep space. The hand she stroked the child with was that of an aged crone.

He turned his scrutiny to the child. The little girl had no strength to struggle, instead peering out through dazed eyes, too drugged to be curious about her surroundings. In her still-immature mind, she could not fathom the coming danger.

*A beautiful child. Her heart and mind are pure. She will be perfect. The Dragon will be pleased.*

Dipping his fingers into the virgin oil, he stroked the little girl's pale forehead and cheeks with quick, cutting moves. He could not help but recall the last time he'd stood before this altar.

It was the night Nisidia had died.

He remembered perfectly the expression on her beautiful face, even though he had been badly wounded, one eye gouged from his head. She had looked puzzled, as if she were confused that death should touch her. He remembered kissing her pale lips, and one of his hands found hers. He held it for the longest time. Her coming motherhood was readily apparent through her light robes.

Nisidia had stirred, then coughed, her body arching painfully as oxygen filled her scorched lungs. At the last moment, Morgan had relented—not even he was cold-blooded enough to murder a woman with child.

But her survival was not a part of Xavier's plan. Acting with quiet and deadly earnest, he'd instead taken the path of revenge, slitting her throat and opening her belly to lift the child of adultery from her womb.

*Faithless whore.* His hatred ran in a torrent of self-righteous rage. *She betrayed me. It was only right she paid with her life. Nisidia was the way to bring Morgan down, and I made the decision to let her go. She deserved to die, as surely as he deserved to suffer for taking her from me.*

Letting the anger of that old time drive him, he reached for the carefully positioned sickle. But his would not be the hand that struck the deathblow. To do so would sully him, cost him the concentration of energies he was building. Another must take the life of the child, bear the burden of her murder.

"Take it!" he commanded. "Prove your worth."

For centuries, Xavier had been trying to cheat the Dragon. But Ouroboros was wily, wise to the ways of deceit. Since the beginning of time, the Dragon demanded sacrifices of his disciples, judging their worth by how far they were willing to go. For his offering, he would be rewarded.

"My will is to serve."

Megwyn's slim fingers curled around the handle. She lifted the blade with great reverence. Her eyes flickered briefly to the child. Her mouth moved a little as she struggled to conceal her delight when she ran her finger along the edge, testing its sharpness. There was a cruel set to her jaw, her lips pressing into a thin, straight line. If she had any qualms about killing a child in cold blood, she said nothing and hesitated not at all.

"Thy will be done," Ilya chanted from behind.

Using both hands, Megwyn brought the edge down across the little girl's exposed throat, slicing hard, deep. Body arching, only a single smothered whimper escaped the child before her life was snuffed out. Neatly decapitated. The deed had been done with ease and swiftness, without remorse or regret.

In the damning light, Megwyn's shadow danced on the wall behind her. In one hand she held the sickle, silver blade still warm with the child's blood. In the other dangled the child's head. Filmy eyes stared off into dark oblivion, lips frozen in a scream.

"Bring the head before the blood cools and the energies begin to fade," Xavier ordered.

Crossing to the Wheel of the Work, Megwyn positioned the child's head upon its surface. She drew quickly away, covering her head with her hood and crossing her hands into the wide sleeves of her robe until not a bit of skin could be seen.

Ilya, watching with stiff disapproval, stood motionless. Her eyes were disturbed, doubtful, darkening with troubled shadows. Saying nothing, she drew down her shoulders and lowered her head, covering it with her cowl. It

was forbidden for them to witness the coming rite, lest the demon attempt to escape and possess one of the living bodies.

“These eyes shall see what we cannot,” Xavier intoned. “Here do I build Truth, for these lips shall give revelation.”

Again, he raised the censer and let its scented smoke encompass the entire area around the wheel while chanting: “Merge with thy spirit, charge thyself with energy. Reach out across the barriers from this world to the next. May the light from my sacrifice blend and grow, dispelling all darkness and lighting the way that my Spirit Guide may come and speak with me.”

With a practice born of centuries, he took up a heavy wooden mallet in his left hand. In the other, now unnaturally strong, he held a huge iron nail. The leather of the glove gave him a grip tighter than any human one. Concentrating, he held his hand over the symbol of the demon he wished to call: Zaal, spirit of the lost and hidden.

Much care had to be taken when dealing with demons summoned from the netherworld. A demon that is not controlled could easily get out of hand, turning on its summoner. A more intelligent demon might only pretend to be controlled, betraying the caster of the spell by delivering false prophecies, twisting the spirit of the task while adhering to the strictures of the ritual.

Silence so thick it could be sliced with a cleaver filled the murky cavern. The perspiration on his brow turned to icy droplets. Then the sound of the mallet resounding on the iron nail shattered the quiet of the unstable atmosphere. With the movements of a man in great anticipation, he began the sequence of his casting, a three-fold rotation based on sublimation, imbibing and coagulation. The bloody wheel began to turn counter-clockwise.

Xavier chanted the words of his spell, arousing a stirring and a quickening that existed in neither place nor moment but encompassed everything as defiant energies were harnessed then focused for a single purpose, that of the foulest sorcery.

“As the wheel begins to turn, the power it generates is nothing but Truth. In all that transpires between this world and the next, through the mouth of this innocent there is truth in all communications that come to me. At this most hallowed time, we are as one.”

In a moment of dynamic rhythm of space-twisting energy, the Wheel of the Work came to a crashing halt. Past, present and future, the physical and the nonphysical worlds merged together, and a pathway opened. The chamber was still, airless, as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room by a set of gigantic lungs. Abruptly, the child's head assumed an undead animation, writhing with eldritch life as if it had grown into the white ash. No longer with the face of a child, the visage spawned from the deepest pit of evil twisted into a terrible thing. Eyes rolling to the whites, it snapped and bared its teeth, mouth frothing slimy white foam.

When the eyes came down again, they were not those of a human but a demon—slanted, yellow and glowing with evil intent. A gruesome smile split the lips. Drawing no breath, the head began to speak in an old language. The voice was guttural and deep, the words belonging to a time before the gods had created man.

“He who seeks shall always find. He who walks far is not always lost. Go unto the land where no light falls, only stone grows. Where lies the future is only the past. In a timeless, ever-frozen place, deep beneath the world lies the center of eternity...”

“The words you say...” Xavier's voice rang with strange, harsh overtones, cutting through the chamber. “Be they true or do you deceive?”

The demon laughed and crooned, “Be they true or be they false, only the Dragon can know.”

The words jerked to a stop, and the face contorted into a mask of hate, exploding into violence. Xavier banished Zaal, saying, “Go thee back into thy darkness.”

The imp's eyes began to dissolve, bubbling and smoking, melting as if made of hot wax. Teeth gnashing, tearing at the pale, bloodless lips, it began screeching unholy, blasphemous curses before bursting into flames. A foul stench worse than smoldering flesh assailed the chamber, and the billowing smoke assumed the demon's true form, a dog-headed, winged snake.

The demon laughed, the awful image lingering as if scorched into the air. Then, with a grin, it vanished utterly. Seared into the wheel around the blackened skull were strange, primitive symbols.

Brain racing with revelation, Xavier studied the blackened scrawl. A smile split his lips.

*Ula'dh. The City of the Dead.*

He trembled with excitement. He dared not disturb the letters scorched into the surface of the Wheel. Could he believe what Zaal had revealed? Or was the demon trying to mislead him, punishment for his failure?

*But the words, he thought. 'In a timeless, ever-frozen place...'*

He laughed. The sound echoed through the chamber, a hollow glee reflecting the damnation of his soul. It was so clear, so obvious. Why had he not guessed himself?

Hundreds of feet under Sclyd's surface, past hard ground and solid rock, existed the three cities of the underworld. Closest to the surface and most prosperous of the three was Danarra, city of the elfin people. A world in miniature, it was lush and green, abounding with life. Its people were curious and open to strangers, accepting all and rejecting none. The underworld was a civilization that flourished despite being bordered by fire and rock.

Gidrah. City of the trolls. Trolls were workers of metal and keepers of the underworld's fires. Life near the flames was hazardous and the span of years short. Uncouth and rough, trolls harbored a lust for life. Clannish by nature and suspicious of outsiders, they were loyal to their friends and deadly to their enemies.

Closer still to the core was Ula'dh.

It was stark and desolate, devoid of all life. Most traces of its people had long ago vanished. Left were only empty streets and crumbling columns painstakingly carved from limestone. Commonly known as 'the edge of eternity,' Ula'dh seemed to have no past, as its people had left few written records.

*How fitting the Cachaens would choose the city as the place to inter their devastating writings. The city itself is a gigantic tomb.*

"When I possess the scrolls, the fettered power of the Dragon will break free and savage the land again. Then I will know ascension as a true god."

A sound behind him brought him sharply out of his musing. He turned in time to see Ilya, her body taut and trembling with horror, slide to the floor, sobbing great convulsive spasms that wrenched her entire body.

"The child," she cried, disturbed. "I can't believe you took a child...!"

Xavier leapt at her.

"You are weak!" His voice crushed the syllables in every word. "Useless." His gaze dwelt on her, disdain curling his lips. Raging, he loomed over her. "You, who vowed never to fail me...you do just that, Ilya. You, whom I believed to be my strongest—"

"A...child, Lord," Ilya blubbered. "She had no defense against you." She broke off to a deep, sorrowful silence and a curious pity lingered behind her eyes.

A ridge of muscle tightened his jaw. Forcing his voice to a deliberate calm, he caressed her face, the scent of the oil lingering on her white skin.

"Just as you have none now." He bent and grabbed her by her hair, wrenching back her head. He struck her hard in the face with his open hand, bloodying her lip. He knew he could break her easily, and he began to take pleasure in her fear.

He glanced to Megwyn. "What shall I do with the traitorous woman? Make her beg for her life?"

Megwyn shook her head. "It's a waste of precious time, Lord. Let me have her. I need the energies to restore myself."

Ilya sighed in defeat and went slack. Xavier nodded and cast her aside. "She is yours."

Megwyn grinned, a wolf eager for the feed. Kneeling in front of Ilya, she took the woman's hand, lacing their fingers together palm to palm to form a contact point. Ilya yelped in fright and tried to pull away, but Megwyn tightened her grip, digging her fingernails into the back of Ilya's hand. Her free hand shot out, catching Ilya's jaw. She began to speak.

"Your essence to mine, your youth to me, your life to me."

Megwyn pressed her mouth to Ilya's, not in a kiss but to snatch the breath from her lungs. As she inhaled, Ilya's hand started to shrivel, aging at an incredible rate as her body's energies were absorbed. As a sponge takes in water, Megwyn's skin became plump and pliant, glowing with health as the juices of youth filled and strengthened her. She kept her grip tight, refusing to let loose until Ilya crumpled to the floor, shriveled and lifeless.

“This will feed my hunger for the present.” She cast a look of disgust toward the corpse, then turned her beguiling gaze up to him. “Soon I will need another.”

Xavier took her hand. “When the mortal world is ours,” he promised, “we shall have all we need.”

## Chapter Sixteen

When presented with an obstacle, the best way around it was through it, directly and with force. At least, this was the reasoning Morgan used when met by a locked door.

Simply put, he kicked it in.

No easy task, considering he was carrying Julianne's almost dead weight and had an elf clinging to the skirt of his coat.

The crash of breaking glass and splintering wood brought the library's occupants directly to their feet. There were cries of surprise. Hearing the shattering glass, Melissa Greenwood sent her coffee cup sailing. Tobias, her husband, grabbed a lamp, determined to protect his wife. Danielle Yames' looked from Morgan to the door and back to him, her mouth quirked down.

"Why did you do that?" She'd worked for Morgan long enough to know he was a strange sort and had different ways of doing things.

Morgan shrugged as well as he was able. "Forgot my key."

Danielle's brow wrinkled. "Couldn't you just knock?" Pausing, she followed up with, "Thought you weren't coming back."

Again, he half-shrugged as he hefted Julianne's weight. "Forgot my cigarettes."

Danielle snorted in disbelief.

Tobias caught sight of the Danarran doing its best to keep hidden. "Is that a leprechaun?" The question was beautifully disingenuous, diffusing the tension.

Morgan huffed, nostrils flaring. It was hard to keep from rolling his eyes heavenward and appealing for the patience of all the saints above in his thickest brogue. He couldn't blame Tobias. What else would a half-breed Irishman pal around with, if not some kind of wee folk?



He gave Lynar a nudge with his leg. "Not a leprechaun," he said. "An elf."

All three nodded, casually taking in the information. Perfectly logical once explained. Coming from him, it would seem reasonable, too. After all, he carried the bloodlines of not one, but two, phylacteric lands in his veins. And, given a pint or three of good ale, he would likely be inclined to assume the same thing.

Tobias Greenwood knelt down and put out his hand in a show of friendship. "Does it understand?"

Morgan spoke to Lynar in the Quarayan dialect. "They will not hurt you." Then, to Tobias, "Give him something."

Tobias fished in his pockets, digging out a handful of change. Immediately, the shiny objects caught Lynar's interest, whetting the appetite of the little treasure hunter.

"Can I have them?"

Without waiting for a reply, Lynar ran up and snatched a few of the larger coins, no doubt reasoning that larger was better. Stepping back, he surveyed his new treasure—two shiny quarters.

Able to speak once shock had let loose of her tongue, Melissa broke in. "We didn't know what happened. You were both just gone!"

Tobias added, "We didn't know Miss Julie was going."

Morgan shook his head. "Neither did I."

Morgan eyed his staffers. He knew their souls and selves inside and out. Each had a similar story to tell. Their lives had been in pieces when he found them, each sinking into a mire of drugs, prostitution and debt. They were what he needed; people severing links to life and loved ones, willing to walk away from their identities. In a way, he'd offered hope, salvation of a sort.

Though they were only human, he trusted them implicitly. Without their discretion and ability to serve without question, he wouldn't have been able to move freely in the mortal realm. They were his front, the faces he presented to outsiders to shield his own.

For centuries, he'd manipulated events and the people around him as the director of a play would command his cast. During their time with him, all had learned to expect the unexpected. They were already aware he kept a lot of secrets.

*Secrets that are about to be revealed*, he thought ruefully.

Tightening her grip around his neck, Julianne, turned her face away, moaning, "Don't let them see me."

"Something happened—" Danielle began to say.

Morgan cut her off. "She will be fine. I will deal with it. Keep Lynar here. Leave us alone."

When Danielle and Melissa attempted to follow, he shot both a warning glare. "I mean it."

Morgan left the library, crossing the wintry foyer that had so intimidated Julianne on her first day at home. How frightening it must have been for her to come back to a place her mother had fled when she had been but a toddler.

He remembered how she'd looked—a thin, haggard woman returning to a place she had little memory of, trying to fit into a family she did not know. Career in ruins, newly divorced and bankrupt, it had taken incredible courage for her to make the journey.

He cursed himself as he carried her up the gently curved staircase. *She had every right to turn around and walk away—especially since you were so damned unwelcoming,*

At the top he took a sharp turn toward the master suite. The house, with its sixty-plus rooms and three levels, was so large that Julianne had once joked she would have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to be able to find her way through its maze.

Pushing open the doors of her suite, he ghosted toward the canopied bed. He placed Julianne atop the blue quilt her grandmother had created before arthritis stole away her ability to handle a needle.

Though her weight was no burden, he was relieved to have her in a place he considered safe. How long it would remain so was negligible. No one was safe as long as he had enemies. Soon those same enemies would slip through the veils and come looking for him. When that happened, the mortal realm would no longer offer any of them sanctuary.

Hell would truly be unleashed.

Feeling the welcome softness beneath her, Julianne sighed, a limp mass of arms and legs.

Flicking on a small lamp, Morgan sat down on the edge of the bed. In the low illumination, the room was gently shaded. "You are back where you wanted to be."

Julienne opened her eyes, seeking his face, grateful tears glimmering in her eyes. "Thank you...for coming home. I know you didn't...want to."

"This is where you were meant to be."

She exhaled, breathing with forced endurance. Perspiration dotted her brow. She rolled onto her side, clutching at her chest and moaning. Her face was pale and strained. "It hurts so badly."

Hand on her shoulder, Morgan attempted to turn her over. Her body stiffened. She resisted, trying to curl herself into a ball.

"Please, I can't take this anymore." Her mouth worked soundlessly as she rocked in misery. It was clear her strength was fading with each passing moment—pulse sluggish, heart laboring. Despite her great determination to live, to find him again, unless he did something, she would succumb to the mutant's hunger.

He persisted, gently rolling her onto her back. It drove him half-mad to see her so ravaged. He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her close.

"I can take the pain away." It would not last long, but it would offer temporary relief.

Julienne gave another groan of agony. Morgan sensed the desperation of her struggle to remain conscious. She was fighting with all her will, and losing.

"You...don't have...to...lie, Morgan. I know I'm...going to...die." She groped for his hand, grasping it, searching for reassurance. Quite suddenly, in a low, startlingly clear voice, she begged, "Kill me, please. Don't let me die like this."

Linking his fingers with hers, he said, "You are not going to die. I promised you that." He tightened his grip. "Do you trust me?"

She did not hesitate. "Yes."

"Close your eyes and the pain will go."

With his free hand, he pressed the tips of two fingers to her temple and massaged in small, slow circles. He began to speak in a low, lulling Gaelic, drawing on their bonding through his blood. "Take her pain into thyself, let her draw from thee the strength she needs."

It was the first time he'd consciously attempted to activate the psychic union that could exist between those mated as he and Julianne were. Because she was too untrained to seek back, he felt safe making a brief connection with her.

Joined in blood, joined in body, the last barrier to be bridged was that of the mind.

Closing his eyes, he envisioned himself stepping into her body as if passing through a door, merging his self with hers.

He was immediately attacked by an alien force. Raging with fever, Julianne's pain was a hunger. As her agony flailed through him, the ridge of his jaw hardened.

*Take my strength, Julianne, he silently commanded. Send the pain toward me.*

Seeking it, he went deeper, embracing her torture as his own. Across his mind's screen, he could see the mutant—it had taken hold of her heart, unfurling sinewy fingers into her veins. Well settled, it was growing at a rapid pace, threading itself like poison ivy through her system.

Minutes seemed to pass like hours, frozen by her great need, her weak body seeking the strength of his.

Julianne murmured drowsily. "I like this. I feel...you inside me." Her weary voice faded. A contented smile drifted across her lips, her taut features relaxing. Her brow smoothed as the sharp talons of agony loosened. Closing her eyes, she began to drift into a gray veil of wispy unconsciousness.

Gently withdrawing so his absence would not injure her mentally, Morgan severed the psychic link. Freeing his hand from hers, he pressed both of his together, disbursing the negative energy he'd drawn in. Pain lingered. Not hers.

His.

His head dipped. He pressed a hand to his forehead. It was dangerous to enter the mind of a dying individual. If the person passed on while a psi-link was active, there was a chance the initiator could become trapped in the void between life and death, unable to break the connection and return to the physical.

*Every moment that passes, she is being sucked dry.*

He looked at her, apprising her in the way one might an object to assess its value. Without his willing, his open hand moved toward her face. Would it be more merciful to spare her further pain?

Bile rose, and he detested himself for the malice in his heart. His thoughts were a barbed lash of scorn and self-loathing. Why must he always turn his mind to death when he held the capability to save lives as well? What was this shocking, hidden disease inside him?

For him, the idea of suicide was a harbor, a twisted desire gnawing its way into the center of his tormented spirit with each breath he drew. The impulse to escape was deeply rooted in guilt. What he was thinking now was an expression of a very personal preoccupation not at all out of sync with his inner psychological life.

Instead of bringing his hand down and snuffing out her breath, he surveyed her still form in silent appeal. He briefly caressed her torn cheek before curling his hand into a fist and drawing it away.

“You got in the way of someone who wanted to punish me. Now you are paying for my mistakes.” The barest trace of a smile crossed his face. “But as long as you breathe, there is still a chance.”

Rising, he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. Untying the thongs holding the leather sheath strapped to his right wrist and taking it off, he drew out the blade.

He used the dagger to cut through the layers of her clothing. He drew in a breath, steeling himself. No matter how much one saw of mutilations, none were ever pleasant. Nevertheless, he continued, pulling aside the layers of rough burlap-like material.

When naked skin was exposed, his gaze was drawn to the mutant’s point of entry. The claw marks under her ribcage were sloppy, the slashing of a ravenous animal.

*This is bad. It is growing faster than I thought.*

His mouth became a tight line as he pressed his open palm to her chest, probing the sensitive area. Her skin was clammy, dead white. He could feel the pulsing of the hellish creature inside her. Now and again it moved, causing her chest to heave, as it stretched to find a more comfortable position.

*This beast is a crime against nature, an abomination of sorcery.*

He examined her a long time, every feature etching itself into his brain with the bitter acid of doubt, blame and failure. It did not take a whole lot of knowledge to know the creature couldn't be removed.

Shaking his head, he drew a blanket across Julianne. Abandoning her bedside, he settled in a corner where the lamp's light did not quite reach. Sliding to the floor, he leaned back against the wall and rubbed tired eyes.

Though outwardly calm, his mind was racing.

"Xavier's mutant is not going to come out," he muttered. "For her to live, it has to stay inside, become a part of her without eating her up."

*Merge her with the beathach, that beast?* came the silent dissenting argument. *If she survives the change, the life she would be forced to lead is perverse, unnatural.*

His brow wrinkled, deep lines creasing his forehead. For the first time in a long time, he was truly afraid. He was used to emptiness inside, the sense of loss, of longing for something he could not find. Now, he had found all that he wanted in a woman and more. Unless he acted, soon, he was going to lose Julianne.

But was that his only dilemma? No, it was something more, something sinister that reached to his core.

To *physically* change her... Not at all impossible.

But that would take the will of magic.

Something he no longer possessed.



Later in the night, well past the midnight hour, Morgan made his way downstairs. After a shower, his medieval garb had given way to modern attire: dark gray slacks, crisp white shirt, silk vest. He had a confident walk, a purposeful stride that seemed to propel him effortlessly forward.

Though the others had retired for the night, one lone figure waited.

Morgan's brow wrinkled in annoyance. "Have you not somewhere else to be?"

Standing up, the elf shook his head. "My duty is to serve." He offered a tentative smile. "I'm a healer," he reminded. "I can help. I know how to take away the cuts..."

Morgan lifted a hand. "Yes, I know. *Leigheas* powder is a common remedy most know. Her face will be easy to repair."

Her soul was another matter entirely.

Hardly slowing his stride, Morgan went inside his den. Lynar scurried after him, barely making it through the door. The elf refused to be shut out or left behind. Morgan had to admire the Danarran's staunch determination, even if it was getting on his nerves.

Lynar's golden eyes curiously searched everything. "This place is so different from the other. I am glad to see it, to know its people. You travel many worlds. Has that always been the way of your kind?"

Morgan's sigh was restless. "Some of us, more than others." To this day, there were entities who'd never left Sclyd and yet others who were content with their existences within the mortal realm. Many were still confident that the two worlds would always remain separate entities. That belief was rapidly fading. Both sides were soon going to be in for a rude awakening.

"It suits you," the elf commented sagely. "And yet, it doesn't."

Morgan frowned. "That makes no sense."

Lynar hastened to explain. "I mean to say that what you were then, you're not now. Know what I mean?"

Oddly, Morgan did. Finding his cigarette case, he snapped it open and extracted a cigarette. The filterless brown paper was wrapped around a strong aromatic tobacco—tarry, strong, with just a hint of clove. He welcomed the burn on the back of his throat when he lit it and inhaled.

His gaze wandered to the bar. *No booze*, he warned himself. *I need a clear head*. Later. Yes. Later he would indulge. Self-discipline was his strongest asset. Too bad he rarely used it. Through the last few decades, he had grown lazy and self-indulgent.

Time for that to stop. He needed to concentrate. Think. Plan. Consequences.

For every action, there is a reaction. A law of physics. A law of magic.

"What happens now?" Lynar asked.

Taking a long drag off his cigarette, Morgan shook his head. To his surprise, he wasn't at all put off by the Danarran's gentle questioning. Lynar

possessed a straightforward directness that was refreshing in the honesty of its concern.

He exhaled a steady stream of smoke. "I have to figure out a way to make things right." His voice was rasping and utterly unlike his usual tone.

Lynar took in the serious gravity of his answer. A flicker of slight amusement passed over his face. "You think you can do that?"

Morgan shook his head again, trying to orient himself. That wasn't easy at all. He was not a man given to easy displays of emotion involving caring, worry or love. It was easier to keep the heart hard and uninvolved. "I am not entirely sure what I have in mind can be done at all. At this point, I am guessing."

Tired, but too edgy to settle down, Morgan built a fire in the hearth and lit several candles. He needed to work the old way, in a room brightened only by nature's light. Pulsing with heat, the flames whispered of the ages of man, the mysteries of the unknown, the unexplained. The pungent scent of wood smoke ushered him back to another time that was long gone. Ancient.

His gaze skimmed the chamber. The silence rang in his ears. Undisturbed since the day he'd left, he'd intended never to come back.

Or had he?

What he needed was here.

Flicking the remnants of his cigarette into the fire, he walked to a bookshelf. The hollow echo of his footsteps followed, mocking him. Instead of taking down one of the books, he pressed a secret lever. The whole shelf slid aside, revealing a small cubicle. No one but he knew of its existence.

*You can no longer avoid it.*

More shelves in this space. More books, their secrets untapped for centuries.

Before he'd escaped Sclyd, he'd taken great care to preserve these books within the mortal realm. It would have been too dangerous to leave them behind, though he suspected it might have been better if they'd been destroyed and the ashes scattered to the four winds.

Lynar watched as he retrieved a crumbling manuscript out of a deep recess. Once beautifully leather-bound and decorated with pure gold, the volume had long ago lost its luster as it surrendered to age and neglect.



Eyes wide with wonder and dismay, the elf shivered. "Such books are forbidden to my kind."

Morgan sensed his dissatisfaction, but it mattered not. "But not to mine."

A strange unease, a sickening disquiet crept into his mind. He was holding the secrets of his clan's gods in his hands. These manuscripts had passed from generation to generation, carefully kept and guarded by his mother's people. Between the dilapidated covers were the writings of a heritage too long denied—the finer arts of Celtic conjuration recorded in a meticulously fine script.

"It is the only way I can help Julianne," Morgan parried in a curt tone that said further discussion was not welcome. "She took a torture that should have been mine."

Eyes shadowed with worry, Lynar shook his head stubbornly. He had one final warning. "You travel a path that is unwise."

"So be it."

Morgan broke the eerie paralysis gripping him. He carried the book to his desk and set it down. Feeling as though cold fingers had gripped his spine, he suppressed a shudder.

"It has been a long time since I have practiced," he commented. "There will be no second chances, no room for mistakes. The casting must be letter-perfect or my spell will fail."

He felt sick and hollow, but there was no other way. The kind of conjuring he was contemplating sucked a soul dry of all feeling, a mind of all sanity. He could feel the tension creeping up into his head, neck and shoulders. The migraine, when it finally arrived, would be a hellacious one. Already the little beast was kicking at his temples. He would fight it, put it off as best he could.

Settling at his desk, he opened a side drawer and pulled out several sheets of unlined paper. He forced himself to remain calm. This was not going to be easy unless he attained total concentration. Julianne was not the only one facing the invasion of a foreign entity. The unused psi-centers in his brain would have to be reawakened, retuned to the energies of his ci-biote.

Pulling the candle close, he opened the book and took up an old-fashioned fountain pen. The writing inside was faded, nearly invisible in places. Tedious reading even for the sharpest eyes.

Lynar, disapproving of his master's choice, settled by the hearth to soak up the warmth of the fire. In less than ten minutes he was curled up, snoring softly. Vigilance, once again, was turning a blind eye.

Morgan glanced at the elf, the unintended companion who'd joined his circle. Trying to send Lynar away had done no good. He decided as long as the Danarran kept out of his way that it could stay.

Slicking damp bangs off his forehead, he blinked several times to clear away the cobwebs of fatigue. Reading from the book, he began to draw a series of symbols, beginning with a pentacle star.

He knew the casting for Xavier's mutants and could make one—or a thousand—himself if he wished. Trouble was, no one had ever dealt with a mutant inside a human body. It was a crazy idea, one he didn't even know if he could pull off. But no one had said it could not be done, and there was the key. Magic was not about limitations. It was about exploration and what could be. Julianne could be restored to health. She would be unique, a species unto herself.

A living vampire. Through his blood, he could grant her immortality, allow her to walk through the ages untouched.

*Ta dty lhiasagh dty ghoarn.* Thy recompense is in thine own hand.

## Chapter Seventeen

Julienne drifted toward wakefulness as if carried in the hands of angels.

Without opening her eyes, she lay savoring the gentle softness of her bed, the welcome warmth of the blankets across her body. Not wanting to return to the realm of the living just yet, she rolled over onto her side, covering her head with her pillow and letting her mind wander between that world of waking and sleep.

But lingering pain intruded on her desire to sleep and her mind was stilled riddled by horrific impressions perching in the back of her skull, ready to pounce with the coming of consciousness.

Sleep was a forgotten thing.

She closed her eyes. She was so tired, more than bone weary. Under the covers, she flexed her fingers. They seemed thicker, swollen, as if she were retaining water. She drew her legs up to her chest. There was a strange jumpy feeling deep under the skin.

A half-groan, half-grumble escaped. Her eyes opened like shutters across a window barred too long when she rolled over on her back. Repositioning the pillow under her head, she took a deep breath. Her chest felt sore, congested.

Above was the canopy of her bed. Her suite was handsomely enough appointed. Retaining a historical flavor yet updated to offer every modern convenience, it was decorated in soothing shades of blue and lilac. There was plush carpet on the floor and antique furniture that gave the impression the year was 1889, not 1989. French doors led onto a sweeping balcony, a sweeping curved affair that boasted a magnificent view of the gardens.

This had been her mother's room. This was home, where she belonged.

She sighed and struggled to sit up, only to be immediately stomped down by a sudden bolt of pain. Hands flying to her chest, she endured the spasm.

Thankfully, it was not the wretched agony of before. The pain seemed muffled, as if the mutant had been wrapped in thick cotton bunting. It was, she realized, a bearable thing.

Memories stirred, vague pieces floating slowly together. She had the reassuring impression of Morgan, of him touching her in a way he never had before. Not in a sexual way but intimately, caressing her skin with a light touch.

She remembered soft steps, muted voices and the cloying scent of Morgan's clove cigarettes. More memories broke through the haze—of warm water on her begrimed skin, of Melissa brushing her tangled hair, dressing her in a clean gown and tucking her between crisp sheets.

Feeling pressure in her bladder, she was reminded that some things could not be put off, mutant or not. She set aside the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the mattress. Darkness swam before her eyes, and a curiously numb sensation passed through her. For a fearful moment, she thought she was going to faint. She took a deep breath and forced herself to stand up. She was determined not to give in and was spurred on by the thought that she didn't want to embarrass herself.

Her legs were wobbly as a newborn colt's. *This feels all too familiar.*

Though the temptation to crawl back into bed and pull the covers over her head was inviting, she thrust the idea out of her mind. She made her way to the bathroom, gripping each piece of convenient furniture in its turn. The nightdress she wore was high-necked and long-sleeved, and the material fell in soft, flattering folds that hugged her figure.

Reaching the toilet, she braced herself against the wall, hiking up her gown and inching down her panties. Sitting, she began to urinate.

*At least I'm working inside.* She was glad to be doing something human.

When she finished, her gaze wandered to the deep bathtub. She nibbled her lip. *I'll do it if I have to crawl.*

Kicking off her panties, she lifted the gown over her head. The sight of her naked flesh was shocking.

Julienne gasped, running her hands over her skin as if disbelieving her eyes. Her entire torso was limned with thick black tendrils snaking underneath her skin. They extended completely around her ribcage to her back. The things

seemed to be following the course of her blood vessels, growing up her shoulders and extending down her arms to just midway of her forearms. Another six inches and they would reach her palms.

Her legs were similarly rooted, only the tendrils had not stopped at her knees; they extended almost to her ankles. She turned around, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of her back in the vanity mirror. Just as the front of her body was laced, so were her back and her buttocks, all the way down the back of her legs like varicose veins.

Her skin felt leathery and had a grayish, translucent hue—pale from the blood being sucked out of her body. Her fingernails had grown long; but instead of being straight, they had an odd downward curve.

Just like the claws of the creature that had attacked her.

She could feel the pulsing of the thing inside her, a vibration much akin to the purring of a cat.

Though she'd not eaten recently, she was not hungry. The thought of eating made her nauseous. Gagging on her own digestive acids, she believed she would never swallow sustenance again. Her body no longer needed it—she was the food being consumed. The butterflies in her stomach resumed their nauseating dance. She gulped. Her thoughts were so insistent her head began to thud.

Taking a breath, she tried to capture control of her feelings. She failed. Grimacing, she felt a twinge deep in her gut. How could she not know what it was? Not nervous tension but hunger. It was hard to turn a deaf ear to the primeval cries of the mutant inside, the disease living under her skin, infecting her body.

Swaying in misery, she felt her mind threaten to veer off into incoherence.

Tears slipped from her eyes. She grimaced, wiping them away. *Wait a minute.* Her face. Something felt different.

Julienne pressed her hand to her cheek. The butterflies of taut nerves performed dizzying somersaults in her stomach. Under her exploring fingers, she felt not deep, festering slashes but smooth skin.

Curious to see, she braced herself on the vanity sink. She stared into the glass, giving a hard, unabashed stare to the image there.

Julienne ran her fingers over her skin. The strange *leigheas* powder Morgan had once used to repair scratches on her arm couldn't take away scars already set into flesh, but could completely vanquish fresher wounds.

The scars James Hunter had etched in her forehead and down her left cheek would always be there. *I can live with these*. She'd sought the best plastic surgeons available after her ex-husband's attack, but even with cosmetics the blemishes still ruined her face.

Despite herself, a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. A queer little glow thrilled through her, and a crazy giggle broke from the back of her throat, lifting away layers of depression and hopelessness.

Hope blossomed in her heart. If something could be done, Morgan would do just that.

Setting to making herself presentable, she leaned over the edge of the tub. Turning on the taps, she let steamy hot water fill it. She poured in a capful of bubble bath, paused a moment, then poured in another. Bubbles. She wanted lots of bubbles. She wanted to clean away every bit of grime lingering on her skin.

She sank into its welcoming depths, inching herself into the scalding bubbly water as though she could somehow boil the creature out. The heat felt wonderful on her abused body. She lay, head back on the rim, eyes closed, savoring the warmth.

An hour later, Julienne made her way downstairs. She'd dressed simply in an airy long-sleeved caftan. It seemed sensible to wear nothing binding. Her long hair was braided. She wore a touch of makeup; powder, lipstick and mascara.

She'd barely reached the doorway to the library when she heard her name being called.

"How are you, dear?"

Recognizing Danielle Yames' voice, her gaze settled on a woman with short-cropped brown hair and a pert face with a gently cleft chin. Danielle sat on the floor in front of the coffee table. A pencil was perched behind her left ear. A stack of bills, a steno pad and mug of coffee at hand, she looked every bit the harried secretary attempting to sort through the daily correspondence.

Julienne's gaze swept the library a second time. Furnished in Early American style, its couches were still covered with afghans Anlese had knitted. Books lined the shelves, and magazines and the latest papers were scattered about on tables for easy access.

The day was slightly cloudy, dimming the light filtering through the huge bay windows. Everything seemed normal. Sane.

"I'm fine." Trying to quell the tremors racing through her, she forced a cool smile to her lips. No reason to let nerves get the better of her. Legs still shaky, she made her way to where Danielle worked and took a seat on the couch. It was a relief to sit down. Her eyes drifted to the closed door leading into a smaller adjoining den. She already knew that Morgan was not in the third floor suite reserved exclusively for his use.

Danielle smiled. "You look a little better today."

Julienne had no chance to answer. Melissa came bustling in obviously intending to join Danielle for lunch. A tiny figure nipped at her heels. Its skin had an odd golden cast, as did its eyes. Its ears were tipped with sharp points and its long hair was pure-white and braided with colored beads and ribbons.

"Miss Julie!" Melissa sat the tray of sandwiches down. "Should you be up? You could have rang for me."

Mouth agape, Julienne could only stare. She vaguely recalled seeing a similar creature caged in Xavier's dungeon. She was ready to pinch herself to make sure she was awake and not trapped in some bizarre dream.

"Where did that come from?" Her voice was half disbelief, half confusion.

Melissa's face scrunched up. "The master of the house says it followed him home." He peeked out again, little face pinched, eyes curious.

"What is it?"

"Lynar is Danarran. An elf."

"An elf? Like in Santa Claus?"

Melissa laughed and crossed her heart. "I'm not kidding. It's an elf." She bent and made a motion with her hand. "Go find Tobias. He has money for you."

Lynar grinned and scampered off. He obviously valued the human currency.

Danielle snagged a plate off the tray, turkey on rye. "I didn't believe my fucking eyes, either." She took a bite. "In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd swear we're all players in some mass hallucination."

Julienne nodded. "I'm inclined to agree."

"Never has been normal around here," Melissa commented wryly. She indicated the food. "Would you like something? Are you hungry?"

Julienne shook her head. "I'm fine."

It was clear by the look on Melissa's face that she thought differently. She reached out, gently sweeping the tips of her fingers across Julienne's cheek. "You had all of us worried sick. We knew Morgan was going, but not you."

Nausea curled through her stomach. "I couldn't let him leave alone..."

"I know." Melissa's gaze locked on Julienne's. "He came back here because of you. Somehow you've gotten yourself into that man's heart."

The words were as precious as gold to Julienne. She plucked them out of the air, turned them over, savoring each. They lent her strength. She reveled in the warmth hearing them brought.

"Really?"

"Yes," Melissa answered reassuringly.

Her feeling of relief lasted only seconds. A jolt from inside, sent a thousand shafts of lightning all the way down to Julienne's toes. Gasping, she pressed her hand to her stomach to quell the nausea pain ushered in. Her fingers balled into a fist.

Noticing her movement, Danielle stopped eating. "That place you went..."

"It was hell." Julienne's voice was thin, hardly sounding like her own. She gulped and made an unintentional mewling sound. Cupping a hand over her mouth, she closed her eyes and wished she hadn't.

Images of Sclyd began to circle in her mind, vultures ready to pick at her bones. She sucked in a breath. "It's a place you'd never want to see. The things that happened would curdle your blood. It's horrible there."

"I can only imagine." Melissa's hands went to her shoulders, rubbing away the tension.

"It seems like we were there forever," Julienne finished shakily.

"You were only gone nine days."

Nine days. It seemed like eternity. In reality barely a week and a half.



Julienne crossed her arms over her chest, trying to rub away the chills she felt deep inside. She frowned, the muscles around her mouth twisting spasmodically. For some odd reason, she couldn't help but to think of her mother. Cassandra's fears of Morgan and his world had shadowed her childhood. Those same fears now began to beat incessantly at her brain.

"Is something wrong?" Melissa questioned, worried. "If you need anything..."

Julienne shook her head. "I'm ok. I was just thinking about my mother...how much she despised this place. It frightened her so badly that she ran away."

Brows arched like wings over her hazel eyes, Danielle angled Julienne a questioning look. "She never told you anything?"

"No." Her voice was little more than a hollow quaver. "She refused to tell me about where we came from, what we...ah...what we really were."

Melissa reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Your grandmother begged Morgan for years to find you, bring you back. He never wanted to, but the sicker Anlese got, the more she insisted that you be found. She believed you belonged here. Most of all, she always wanted you to know the truth."

Julienne swallowed and knotted her hands. Anxiety filled her. "Morgan didn't want me to come to Virginia, I know. What was here was supposed to die when he left." She sniffed, wiping at her nose. "Now I've dragged him back to a place he doesn't want to be."

Grasping for something reassuring to say, Danielle spoke up. "I don't think that's true. Morgan never does anything he doesn't want to. He came back because of you."

Julienne slanted a glance toward the woman sitting across from her. For the first time, she began to realize how important these people were. Morgan had chosen each one for a specific purpose. They were here because he trusted them. "Do you think so?"

Silence. It pulsed in her ears, throbbed in her temples. She held her breath, waiting for Danielle to answer, wondering what she would say. Danielle looked baffled before understanding gradually dawned in her eyes.

"I know it," Melissa said, pulling up the slack. "He left us very specific instructions on how we were to help you transition through your grandmother's death and his leaving." She smiled. "I've been with him a long time. I knew he wasn't looking forward to leaving."

Danielle nodded, tracing her top lip with her tongue. "That's true. Usually he could walk off without looking back. This time was different. This time, he wanted another choice."

"When we found you'd gone, too, it seemed like this place, too, had come to its end," Melissa added. "None of us wanted that."

"I didn't want it to end either," Julianne confessed. "That's why I had to go. I couldn't let him go alone. He wouldn't have—"

Her words broke off. It was disturbing to realize that Morgan maintained such a hold over her. She felt he always would. His mind might be invulnerable to her, but his body certainly was not. They set each other afire, and she knew she he'd affected him more deeply than he cared to admit.

Melissa's brown eyes grew worried. "Are you all right?"

Julianne pressed a hand to her. "No," she confessed. "Right now, nothing's right."

She glanced toward the closed door. Her feelings regarding Morgan seesawed from anxiety to anticipation. She wondered how he would greet her. Uneasy, suspicious, cautious might prove to be more applicable emotions than ones of relief and welcome.

She was afraid of him and yet she had to admit that he provoked profound emotions in her. He'd become more than a lover. He was a part of her. She had fallen for him the day she'd first seen him. She'd eaten her heart out when she knew he was with another woman, felt the wretched twists of jealousy. Then, she'd tried to tell herself she was an idiot to want someone so selfish, self-destructive. He had every bad habit a man could have—and then some. Instinct had warned he would put her through hell.

Julianne understood at that moment that she'd reached a boundary of no return. Her mind was filled with tangled visions, memories of words said and words left unsaid between them. Regrets, retributions, what might have been, what should have been and things yet to be. Their relationship was unalterable, and she could not walk away. Without him, she had no life.

Pain tore at her heart with cruel hands, but it was an acceptable one, a taut, half-sweet ache. She was his mate, bound to him in blood. She had to follow that path to the end.

Even if it meant that she would end up dead.

## Chapter Eighteen

The scene inside the den was peaceful. A fire had been built and stoked. Several candles also burned, their flickering, diffused light offering a tranquil atmosphere despite the shadows they cast around far corners. These twitched and danced, animated by her imagination.

Morgan was stretched out on the couch. His boots scraped a dirty patch across the material and he used the headrest as a pillow. His eyes were closed; his hands rested on his stomach. An unlit cigarette was balanced between two fingers. The ashtray on the coffee table indicated he'd gone through a least a pack, maybe more. No sign of an open bottle.

There were books, though. A lot of them. Scattered across every surface, many opened to certain pages.

Curious as to what he might have been reading, Julianne crept to his desk and glanced at the closest. Immediately, she could tell that it wasn't like any other she'd ever seen. It was old, dog-eared, the edges of the parchment tattered. Beside the book, on sheets of unlined paper, were several drawings and notes, written in black ink using an old-fashioned inkwell and pen, the finer arts of conjuration recorded in a meticulously fine script.

Julianne felt a peculiar quickening of her pulse. A book of spell work. She could image him taking in their dark secrets, word after word. Here were the secrets that most dared not whisper of. *Witchcraft*. She lifted her gaze from the decrepit book, unconsciously clamping the fingers of her left hand around her wrist. Closing her eyes, a strange tension overtook her. *This is the world he belongs to.*

A hot tremor coursed through her. She lowered her hand to one of the book's fragile pages. As the tips of her fingers made contact, an electric spark

jumped from the page. She could see the flare of it, feel it thrumming through her body. It was awesome. And fear provoking.

*Angels and demons are waging an invisible battle over our soul even as we choose our sides*, she thought. Has he chosen rightly? Am I choosing rightly? She had to believe she'd been brought back to Blackthorne to fulfill a purpose.

She picked up one of the pages. It was the first time she'd ever seen a legitimate sample of his handwriting. The man was absolutely pathological about not signing anything he didn't have to. If he did, it was an illegible scrawl, no more than a marking of a pen across paper.

Here, the penmanship was vastly different. Neat. Precise. Letter-perfect. At least, she thought it was letter perfect. She could not read it. It was not written in English.

A new wave of chills began a route through her bloodstream. She couldn't help herself. Everything about this man and his mysterious world seemed to be unnatural, an abomination. The occult was a terrible and frightening thing.

A thing she belonged to. A thing she had to accept.

She cast another glance at the strange book, thinking about Morgan and his scars. In the back of her mind, she pictured blood flowing from open veins, his flesh growing chalky as life departed.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

Startled by the sound of his voice, she nearly jumped a mile. She was a bit embarrassed to be caught snooping. Again. *Just like old times*, she thought. Pivoting on her heel, she fired back.

"And satisfaction brings it back every time." As always, she felt an amazing combination of emotions toward him. Sometimes, he made her want to slap him silly. Other times, she wanted him to grab her and kiss her blind. "I thought you never slept."

He opened his eyes. "I was not sleeping." His English was perfect, but there was more than a trace of an Irish brogue. His diction was like his body—hard, concise, no excess.

"Yeah, right." She smiled. "Maybe you're just examining the insides of your eyelids for cracks."

His gaze was on her, studying her. "Exactly."

Reaching for his lighter, he lit his cigarette and waved away the cloud of smoke.

“Must be a lot of cracks,” she teased, moving to the sofa and perching on the armrest by his feet.

Seeing him dressed again in the clothes of modern times gave her pause for contemplation. He was the most amazing man she’d ever encountered. She was pleased by what she saw—his casual strength, the grace of his movements. Those taut muscles belonged to a man who knew how to fight.

He was not an exceptionally tall man, but he was an imposing one. Perhaps it was by virtue of the ramrod-straight way he carried himself that he seemed larger than he really was. As usual, he was elegantly turned out. A hanging gold watch chain bridged both pockets of his vest. At the end of the chain hung a ring, also gold.

Her eyes shifted to his face. He’d inherited the genes of two truly beautiful people. His hair was not simply dark—it was black. Glorious raven’s-wing black, salted with silver through his temples and bangs. An uncombed mass of loose curls, it came just to the top of his collar. His eyes were truly unique, black and unfathomable as a night ocean. His features were almost too perfect, with the strong, square jawline, high, well-defined brow, absolutely sensual mouth.

She felt like a moth drawn to the flame; he held for her the same fierce and immediate fascination she’d experienced the first time she’d laid eyes on him more than two months ago.

Striking, arrogant, ruthless and commanding, his personality was a compellingly moody mix of prickly thorns overlaid with an arresting sensuality. Possessor of a rapier wit and razor tongue, he spared no one. Mulish to the last drop of his Celtic blood, he was firm and inflexible. He would do anything to anyone at anytime to get what he wanted.

Blunt and to the point, he had a forceful, direct way of speaking. The words *fun* and *relaxation* did not seem to be a part of his vocabulary, and he did not have time to be bothered by any sort of nonsense. Brilliant, manic-depressive and an alcoholic, he could be by turns a genteel sophisticate or a complete ass. Fascinatingly dangerous and hauntingly sympathetic, he was ten men in one.

Abused in childhood, he suffered a lifelong rage that frequently poisoned his personal relationships, coupled with a survivor's guilt that led him into lacerating self-appraisal. He was obsessed with death, defying it even as he coveted it. Like glass broken, scattered then patched back together with clumsy hands, his was a shattered psyche. Some shards were missing forever, lost in the sweep. Other slivers, wrongly placed, cut deeply. Though enough pieces could be put back together into a semblance of wholeness, there was never a complete image.

"You are up sooner than I expected."

She shrugged, feigning a casual disinterest. "Such as it is."

He made a brief gesture. "Come closer. Let me see you."

She moved off her perch and settled in front of the couch, taking the hand he offered. She was touched by his simple gesture of acceptance. It was good to feel the solidity of his flesh, this man who was her lover. Looking into his eyes, she could see something new simmered there. Regret.

"You know I would not have left you if I had known you survived." It was clearly difficult for him to say the words, for he rarely admitted mistakes of any kind. A hard and inward man, he was not used to apologizing for anything, virtually strangling on the words he was compelled to speak.

She reached out and snagged his cigarette. She needed something to quell the lump growing in her throat. "Don't. There's no reason to go over that. You thought that thing killed me."

He gave a wry grimace and reached out to stroke her cheek, a silent apology, and an acknowledgement. He had done all he could to help.

Except that thing was still inside her.

He knew it. She certainly knew it. Why beat around the bush? She needed answers.

She put out her cigarette. Holding out her arm, she inched up her sleeve.

"It's growing." She turned her hands palm up. The lines there had been eradicated—life line, heart line and love line were all gone as her skin began to take on the leathery smoothness of the creature. "How much longer have I got?"

"Many centuries lie ahead of you," he answered somewhat solemnly, gazing at her. "If you are willing to cross over."

If he was joking, ridiculing her, she could find no trace of it. He was absolutely serious.

"Cross over? You mean become like you?" The flickering candles were beginning to unsettle her. Half-shadow, half-light. Which to embrace?

Morgan rubbed his eyes and flicked hair off his pale forehead. He briefly pressed his fingers to his temple. "What I have to tell you is not easy, nor will it make much sense, but it is the only answer I have."

"I didn't think it was going to be easy."

"I cannot take Xavier's mutant out of your body," he stated flatly, passing her a hard glance that reinforced the finality of his words. "Since it attacked you, the creature has become a part of your system. In another few days, it will be fully formed, and it will need more sustenance, thereby forcing it to exit."

"And when it leaves, I die?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't sound like much of a survival for me."

A tic drew down one corner of his mouth. He gave the ceiling benefit of consideration. Then he seemed to collect himself, sitting up and lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Because its essence is vampiric, it needs blood to feed on. Human blood. I have been doing some research into the spell-work of these creatures, and I propose to merge it with your system, joining the two into one complete being."

Julienne felt shock drive deep into her senses. How was she supposed to accept what he was telling her?

"One *complete* being?" The words were a jam in her throat, a heavy weight on her tongue. She was neither excited nor pleased with the idea. She felt a cramping of her bowels that was fear, dread and regret.

"Yes."

"If you can change its form, can't you kill it?"

"If I could do so without killing you, do you not think I would?" he responded, somewhat irritably. "The creature is attached to your heart, is becoming the very center of your body's functions. To destroy it would kill you. That is the way it was designed."

She stared sharply at him. "I don't want this."

His answer was blunt. "You have no choice if you want to live."



Julienne had no reply.

Climbing to her feet, she left him and crossed back to the book he'd been reading.

"How far you are willing to go to survive what has happened?" he asked from behind.

She cast a brief glance back over her shoulder. The pain inside was sharp. "I...don't know."

"Then I will clarify. Accept the mutant as your ci'biote, and its strengths will become yours."

She turned around, brow wrinkling. "My what?"

He arched a brow, cocking his head. "Do you recall when I told you how a child of cultic heritage is infused with their hierarchical legacy after birth?"

Julienne shivered. That night she well recalled, not only because he had told her that the children were killed, deprived of mortal life, but because that night their first sexual encounter happened. Heat reddened her cheeks. His sexual style was fierce, aggressive. He allowed no inhibitions, nor did he grant any mercy. He'd delved into her most intimate places.

She quickly lowered her eyes. "I remember."

He was looking at her now with real interest. He smiled, a slow sensual grin that clearly indicated he recalled the same incident.

Biting her lip, embarrassed that her blush was giving away the track her mind had suddenly veered off on, she turned back to the desk, planting her gaze on the old manuscript. She did not turn around. She waited, holding her breath, heart pumping like hummingbird wings in flight.

She heard him move. Put out his cigarette. Rise. Walk up behind her. Expecting him, she did not start when he touched her.

"It is the spirit that guides you in your immortal legacy," he whispered in her ear, his voice husky and compelling. "It helps you develop your talents as a multi-dimensional being."

Julienne felt her inner mercury rising at his closeness, his touch. His features, his build—indeed, his very presence was unrelentingly masculine. Even the subtle scent of his foreign cigarettes seemed intoxicating. She felt frail, very feminine next to his muscular form.

"Then it's some kind of companion?" she gasped, trying to ignore the lovely tingling sensation between her legs.

"No, not a companion. It is your soul, merged with energies that attune you to the untapped elements of the three worlds. If you allow it, I can change things for you, make the mutant better conform to the human body." His hands traced her arms. "Nothing shall stop you as you move through the centuries."

She drew a deep breath. "And you no longer have it, do you? That's what you mean when you say you separated from your legacy."

He stepped back, giving her the space to turn around.

"Before I went into exile, I performed a ritual of separation and sent it into limbo."

"Then how can you do this for me?"

"Because I am going back." His unnerving gaze bored into hers, and his accented words became clipped. "I have never made this offer to another woman."

Julienne searched his face. "Why do it now?"

For the first time, he was actually reaching out, asking her to join his world. She thought she saw a change, a new awareness in his eyes. No longer was his mind on his own selfish needs and wants. He was thinking of a future. His. Hers. Theirs.

Morgan's voice was a perfect mixture of resolution and steel. "I am going to need you beside me. The battle is not over. It never was. I was a fool to walk away. I will not make that mistake again."

Julienne was silent for a moment, hardly believing her ears. Had he said what she thought he had, that he needed her? Morgan had never admitted he really wanted her for more than a brief affair.

She forced herself to breathe more slowly, to shake herself out of the daze that held her.

"I'll stand beside you. You know that."

His mouth tilted up in a rueful smile. "It will not be easy. There are many trials to face."

"Because of Xavier?"

He shot her one of his inscrutable glances. "And Megwyn."

Julienne experienced a strange new fear beyond the powerlessness and loss she'd experienced so much lately. "I'd hoped you would have killed him." Her voice was hard, bitter, but she couldn't help it.

"I did some damage, but not enough."

Fury consumed her. "I want him dead."

"I will take care of him." A shadow of unease briefly crossed his face. His mood had instantly changed. As always, she had the uncomfortable feeling he was deciding how best to walk away from her if he needed to he said. "But before you cross, there are some things I have to tell you."

"What?"

Morgan caught her shoulders, saying with slow and extreme emphasis, "I have a past that is not pleasant. You know what I am, what I do for a living."

Julienne tried not to flinch. His fingers dug into her skin, as though he needed to hold her in place to say the words.

She gave a weak smile, trying to reassure herself as much as she wanted to reassure him. "You're a mercenary. A hit-man. It didn't take much to figure that out about you, Morgan. I'm not blind."

"Then you should be aware that my past will affect you—on both sides—if you choose to stay with me."

Julienne drew in a deep steadying breath. "I suppose a certain amount of danger would go along with that sort of...ah...lifestyle. I won't judge you for what you did in the past."

His hands dropped. "So you say. But you do not know there was more than one reason I had to return to Sclyd." He unhooked the gold ring dangling from the end of his watch chain, holding it between thumb and forefinger so she could see it. "Xavier held a bond on my soul. This is that bond. Whosoever possesses this owns me. Completely."

She looked at the simple gold ring. How could it be so important? "Having it now, you're free?"

Morgan tried to blank his face and failed. He pinched his eyebrows as if a headache had hit and avoided eye contact. She could immediately tell she had struck a very sensitive spot, an old wound that had not healed.

"Yes. But if it should fall from my hands, I cannot retrieve it by force or do harm to its possessor."

Ah. Now she understood. “So, it literally keeps you enslaved?”

“It can. And rather than face that when Xavier had it, I walked away from the occult and went into exile.”

“You had no choice.” A new question rose to mind. “How did he get it?”

Again the pause, the old wound opening, bleeding.

“If it’s something you don’t want to tell me...”

He leveled a hard gaze at her. “He forged it in the fires of Gidrah, from the flesh, blood and bone of my lover’s unborn child. My child.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Morgan's words hit her like a physical blow. Mind reeling, the words echoed in her skull. Morgan's child?

"He murdered the woman carrying your baby?" There was a long and fearful silence. Watching, she could see a ridge of muscle tightening in his jaw.

"His was not the hand that took her life." His voice, with its strangely harsh undertones, sounded through the pounding in her ears. "I killed her."

Surprise held her motionless, then a wave of revulsion sent every nerve in her body screaming. "My God! You killed a pregnant woman?" The question hung, stark and razor sharp between them.

Confusion, then anger hit her harder than any hand. She felt a tightening sensation deep in her chest, the pain of a heart betrayed. Wishing to heaven she had not heard, she pushed stray strands of hair off her forehead with a shaking hand. How could she not suspect his past would be a tangle of cruelty, deceit and murder? She knew what he was.

Trying to comfort her, he reached for her but she wrenched away. Every muscle in her body went rigid, shoulders taut with a trembling horror. She regarded him with a look of thinly veiled malice.

"Who was she?" she demanded through gritted teeth. "This woman you murdered?"

She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"Her name was Nisidia," he finally admitted. "She was Xavier's wife."

Her guts clenched. She felt as if she'd swallowed a handful of ground glass. He meant what he was saying; she could hear it in his tone, see it in his face. The knowledge that it was true shook her to the depths of her core.

She swallowed, knotted her hands. She was clinging to self-control by a very thin thread, shaking so hard that her voice quivered. An awful searing

pain lanced through her. The mutant? The anguish? Both? She did not know. She just knew that it hurt. Bad.

“You slept with Xavier’s woman?”

Morgan did not flinch. He simply confessed. “Yes. I took Nisidia as my mistress after he was cast down.”

The tightness in her throat was constricting, threatening to cut off her words before she could speak. She made herself spit them out, as if they tasted bitter.

“Is that how it works in your world? To the victor goes the woman of the vanquished?” She narrowed her eyes, sending daggers of pure hatred. In her mind, what he had done to a woman and innocent child was a disgrace, defilement. He was a bastard. She hated his guts.

His eyes narrowed. “Do not look at me like that.” Irritation put a hard edge on his accent.

“How should I look at you?” Her voice was high, hysterical. She was crying now, deep, shocked sobs coming between her words. “A man who murders the woman carrying his child?”

In an unconscious gesture, her hands went to her flat belly. His unexpected revelation sent her plunging into confusion. Ugly fury rose unbidden.

“How could you?” She wanted to hurt him as badly as he had wounded her. Before she could halt herself, and without thinking, her hand rose.

He saw the blow coming—open-handed, heading for his face. Before her palm struck, he caught her wrist. His grip tightened, causing her to wince. “Do not.”

Breath coming in short, quick pants of fright, Julianne pulled free. “What if I were to become pregnant? Would you kill me, too?” She flung the words without regard to what she was saying or how much they might wound.

The thing you did not want to see in Morgan was anger. When his obsidian gaze grew hard and his jaw set and his voice got low and precise, there was a definite feeling of fear in the recipient.

“How dare you even speak such words.”

Julianne refused to let that fear dictate her reaction.

“I have to say it because I’m never really sure where I stand with you. There’s so much I can’t even begin to guess about you because you play the

games of deceit so damned well. The things you've done make my blood run cold!"

His features turned hard as granite. His eyes assumed a veiled glaze, a look that could only be described as *defocusing*—his way of detaching himself from unpleasant or disturbing happenings in his life. He stepped back, hands dropping, lips thinning.

Walking to the coffee table, he retrieved his cigarettes and lighter. Lighting one, he headed toward the bar, found an open bottle of scotch. He poured himself a healthy shot, brought to his face and then hesitated. The glass lowered; he toyed with it in his hand.

Julienne knew why he was not facing her. Morgan hated emotional confrontations with a woman, would do anything to avoid it. When push came to shove, he'd rather walk away clean, gone like a goose heading south for the winter. Get too emotional and hysterical and he would leave. She had a feeling that he was thinking about that right now. The physical distance parting them wasn't very far, but there was now a disturbing chasm a mile wide.

*That's it*, she thought, watching him pour a second drink. *He's out of it*. The silence between them seemed to echo against her eardrums.

Still he surprised her by not taking the drink. Leaning back against the bar, glass in one hand, cigarette in the other, a forlorn expression ghosted across his face, as if his own internal furies had all of a sudden sucked all the energy out of him. The candles cast shadows that only emphasized the dark circles bruising the skin under his eyes. He was just as tired and worn as she was.

"If you think any of that was easy for me to confess, you are wrong," he said, tension electrifying the air between them. "What I did not only cost me the life of my lover and my child, it cost me my freedom—my very soul, even."

He paused and lifted his cigarette. Its tip glowed furiously red as he inhaled. There was an unsettled edge to his movements. His own nerves were strung tight, ready to snap. Sheer will was holding him together, keeping him functioning.

"You find me insufferable now?" he continued through a stream of smoke, voice tinged with bitterness. "Get in line. I was there first. I hated myself for bedding her and I hated myself that we used each other to inflict pain and revenge on yet another. It was wrong. I will not deny it."

Another pause. Another long drag off his cigarette, then flicking away gray ashes. He swore under his breath and tightened his grip on the glass, close to shattering it.

At this point she could say nothing. She could only listen.

"Dying, taking that to the grave...That would be too easy. Every day I draw breath, I pay for that mistake in more ways than one." He lifted the glass, swirling the amber liquid as he stared into its depth. "I have done everything I can to forget, but those memories will never let me have any peace. Until that time, I had some honor. I was not a killer of women and children. Then I crossed that line and there was no going back."

Julienne felt a thousand different emotions rushing through her. Her hands hung limp at her sides. Her strength was spent, and she was exhausted by the play of intense emotions. Her feet felt like lead when she dragged herself to a chair and sat down, her back to him so she wouldn't have to look at him anymore.

"What you did makes you no better than Xavier," she managed to push through numb lips.

*So there's the truth of his past, out in the open between us,* she thought bitterly. In a moment of sheer passion, he had handed the sorcerer his key to return to power and damned himself.

"Perhaps that is why I could never bring myself to kill him," he mused. "When I believed he'd killed you, it was check and mate. The score had been evened."

Suspicion slammed into her skull. "Is that all I am to you?" she asked, voice no more than a whisper. "A pawn you manipulated to assuage your conscience?" She shook her head, making a sound of disgust deep in the back of her throat. "You two psychos are playing a really sick game."

She clasped her hands together in her lap. Her skin was clammy, her fingers feeling like thin sticks. She made a great effort to quell the burning recriminations racing inside her skull. It was almost impossible to do. She could hardly breathe under the crushing weight.

Staring into the fire, she let the dancing flames carry her back to the day she'd first met him. The details came so clearly to mind that they might have taken place only the day before. Seeing him then, she'd wanted him. Maybe she



still did. She wasn't sure. How she wished she could suddenly be stricken deaf and dumb. Why did he have to tell her this now? Why ever tell her?

*Keep calm*, she tried to council herself. *Anger will accomplish nothing.*

Morgan put down his glass, then extinguished the remains of his cigarette. "I have never really known what you were meant to mean to me," he replied. "But I want to find out."

She refused to look at him, immediately striking down his olive branch. At this point all his words were was an unpleasant drone in her ears. "Do you?" she spat over her shoulder, half in disgust.

His reply from behind was stated directly. "Yes."

When she said nothing in return, he crossed to where she sat. He knelt in front of her. Her body stiffened in anticipation as to what he would do.

"I will not beg you." His tone was taut and oddly neutral. "The decision is yours to make." He fixed his dark stare on her face, refusing to flinch or back down. "Do you want to die?"

Still, she did not answer. For a long time there was only the silence between them. "I-I don't know..." she said at length, letting her lids drop shut, welcoming the darkness. How she wished she could just vanish into its depths, cease to breathe, to be.

He grasped her chin, lifted her face. She kept her eyes tightly shut, afraid of what she might see in his face if she opened them.

"Please, *caile*," he whispered. "Look at me."

His imploring tone made her slowly lift her lashes. When their gazes met and held, a slight wisp of a smile turned up one corner of his lips. She noticed the sheen in his black eyes, the concerned look that softened his normally severe features. She also felt the very slight trembling of his hand.

"I am more than you think I am." He traced his thumb over her mouth.

Tears rushed to her eyes even as her stomach lurched at the sound of his deep, silky tenor woven through with his rich accent. Sorrow and confusion clawed at the edges of her brain. She struggled to hold it at bay, but her self-control was taking a lot of hard hits.

Julienne took a breath to steady her thoughts. Letting her own passions cool, she spoke with clear straightforwardness. "How could I ever forgive you? How could I ever completely trust you?"

A shadow of uncertainty crossed his features. She realized then that the sane man inside was close to disintegrating even as the assassin in him was preparing to reemerge.

"The sin is not yours to forgive," he said. "All I can ask is that you do trust me. I will not lie to you again."

Untangling her tightly clenched hands, he placed the ring in the center of her scarred palm, closing her fingers around the small gold circle. Though the memory was blurred by fear and pain, she remembered Xavier having it, encased in crystal. Its face was scored with strange symbols and it felt warm against her skin, as though lit from inside with some strange energy.

The hand holding the ring began to tremble. Emotion closed her windpipe and this time when her eyes seared over with tears, she could not easily blink them away, was not sure she wanted to. Morgan had concealed himself behind his unbendable façade for so long that it was stunning to witness him trying so damn hard to be gentle and tender with her. For a man so out of practice, she thought, he was doing an admirable job.

"The essence of my very self is in your hand," he said, repeating the sorcerer's litany. "My body, my mind, my soul, the very blood coursing through my veins. Open your mind and let the memories trapped inside it in. Then the truth will be known."

Julienne closed her eyes again. She could feel the pulse of a tiny heartbeat. Her own or another? She concentrated, and the resonant messages the ring sent coursing through her flooded her mind with visions. The sensation was much like a faraway voice whispering on a soft night wind, telling the tale of a tragedy lost in the swirling past of another world.

Passions had run hot then, twisted by a war that found its beginning in the hearts of beings daring pursue the power of the gods. Jealousy and vengeance were the passwords for betrayal and murder, and all had played without regard for innocent lives.

She slowly opened her hand. The gold glistened against her pale skin. She looked to Morgan, searching his eyes for confirmation of the unspeakable truth that during a time of war, women and children were sometimes the collateral damages paid between men. He'd carried that burden through centuries, lacerating himself with the guilt.

“Of all my failures, this ring represents my greatest.” In the same quiet, almost emotionless voice, he went on to say, “But I could not let that child be born into such damnation. I consciously made the decision to kill Nisidia and acted on it.” He hesitated, then forced himself to finish. “And...when I did, I realized the potential I possessed to become pure evil, eclipsing even Xavier in the damage he could inflict.”

His utterance hurt more than a blade slicing through vulnerable veins, a flurry of emotions boiling under the surface of his studied control.

“Xavier exacted his revenge on me, lifting the child from Nisidia’s womb, creating this circle that bound me to serve him. I possess it now, but I am still not free. Mine is not the hand that can destroy it, send it back to the fire that gave it form. It will always be there, a shadow over my head that will forever threaten my freedom, my legacy...my very soul.”

Julienne wavered. She could see the ravages of pain, regret and guilt etched around the edges of his eyes and mouth. He was not wholly human, but neither was he immune to the injuries of life or the heart.

Fresh tears filled her eyes, threatening to spill. It had taken a great deal of courage to tell her what he had. How hard it must have been for him to reveal such undesirable parts of his past, much like opening an old scar to reach a bone that is cancerous. He was truly vulnerable, a man driven by a kaleidoscope of emotions he struggled to keep from lovers and strangers alike.

Morgan had never gotten beyond his past, could find no peace because he could not stop stabbing at the beast called conscience, the beast that pushed him ever closer toward total mental collapse. He could punish himself with the memories until hell froze over, but the bottom line was that what had happened had served to turn him from a path that would have been a thousand times more destructive—on him and on others. She barely repressed a shiver at the idea.

Far from being a man harboring no sense of right and wrong, he could not forget the unspeakable deed he had committed. Too late did he learn that not even death was an assured escape from the occult. It was a disillusioning lesson to learn, one he would probably destroy himself over if he did not finally come to terms with his past.

She could only hope his suicidal impulses could be balanced with the other side of his psyche, that of the sane and sensible survivor.

“Old sins can be forgiven by all the people they affect,” she whispered. “I can forgive.”

Spurred by an overwhelming need to touch him, to hold him and soothe away his anguish, she put her arms around his neck and buried her face in the soft hollow of his shoulder, pressing her body into the circle of his arms. She clutched the ring tightly in her grip. It felt so right to be there, so fantastically right. He would take care of her. She hugged him harder; wishing their embrace never had to end. Time ceased to matter and reality did not intrude. They simply remained together, purging themselves of old hurts that cut too deeply to be expressed with mere words.

When the storm had passed, he gently untangled himself from her hold, then ran his hands through his thick hair, leaving wavy furrows in the wild mane that only made him look incredibly sexy.

The creases between his brows deepened. “I know I am not the easiest man to be with,” he said, voice a bit hoarse. “But I want to honor our mating, give you what you have given me.”

Their eyes met and locked. The space between them seemed to grow smaller, more intimate. The wavering candlelight washed the den with dancing shadows as the flames licked their way down the wicks.

Morgan reached out and claimed her hand, cradling it in both of his. His touch was gentle but firm, potent in the way it sent a warm thrill through her body. It was a touch that said he knew what he wanted and he was going after it, no holds barred.

## Chapter Twenty

Traveling between the veils dividing the dimensions was akin to drifting through a blinding snowstorm, disorienting and dazzling at the same time. She felt weightless, a wraith, a shimmer of frost riding night-chilled air.

One moment Julianne was walking a shimmering path, then, abruptly and without transition, she was somewhere else. The experience left her dazed.

Numb but walking, she stepped through a set of double doors. She was aware of her legs taking her out onto a narrow balcony where Morgan waited. Its height was dizzying. She swayed where she stood, bracing herself to keep from falling against a stone railing, trying to shake the disorienting vertigo hampering her wits. Gray and dull, these surroundings were unfamiliar and unsettling.

“Where are we?”

Morgan’s answer was simple. “Home.”

Trying to center herself and settle the acute nausea, Julianne gazed around. She tilted her head down, staring into the depths of a strange foyer.

Candles in sconces lit the hall, their illumination jagged and cold. A peculiar glint caught her attention; she looked across to stained glass windows, a mural of stunning workmanship.

A lion wore a wreath of laurel on its head. In the big cat’s mouth were the broken remains of a dove. Beautiful but savage was her perception of the feline depicted in the glass. Cruel. She shivered. There was no mistaking the symbolism. The lion was betrayal and death, the dove an innocent victim.

She pointed. “Those lions, do they mean anything?”

“They represent the Eise-Yevanston coat of arms, the Spanish half of my bloodline. *Aithnichear an leomhan air scriob de iongann.*”

She smiled in mock exasperation. “I don’t understand half of what you say.”

Morgan translated. "The lion is known by the scratch of his claw."

"Ah, must be a hell of a scratch, then."

"*Cad a dhéanfadh mac an chait, ach luch a mharú,*" he said. "What would the son of the cat do but kill mice?"

"So, your name it isn't 'Saint-Evanston?'"

His stern lips held the shadow of a frown. "It has been modified through time."

She nodded. Interesting. Slowly, she was gleaning more. "And your given name?"

"Has also changed."

"Care to say what it was?"

"No." His reply was a smothered monosyllable. He passed her, descending the stairway.

Julienne hurried to catch him. She turned around, looking every which way. She saw five wide steps leading up to doors with a thick plank spanning them, locked into place by two iron staples embedded into the stone on both sides. Crude, it served the purpose of keeping unwanted intruders out.

To the right, an open doorway led to a hall. To the left, a stone staircase climbed to the balcony high overhead behind which was a second set of doors. A few feet from the bottom of the staircase was another arched doorway.

Expectantly, she glanced at Morgan. Pushing the door open, he proceeded into the dim depth and beckoned for her to follow. His footsteps seemed muffled, soundless, in this abandoned place.

They came to a second balcony, this one overlooking a den. Wavering candlelight washed the chamber with dancing shadows. Enchanted by the unusual design, she stepped forward and grasped the banister; she could feel the carvings decorating its face. She surveyed the ruins below. A strange sense of recognition crept into the forefront of her brain.

"I've been here before."

"Impossible."

She hushed him. "No, it's true. I have visited this place." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "The night grandmother died, she showed me..."

Words trailing off, Julienne descended the stairs, almost tripping in her haste. Arriving, she could clearly see the signs of a violent struggle in the

shattered chess table and other upended pieces of furniture. The chessmen were strewn all around like slain soldiers. She bent to pick one up. The ivory was smooth, perfectly carved. The black King. The Grim Reaper.

Morgan came down the stairs behind her. His brows were knitted, his eyes glowing like amber coals. She had clearly captured his attention.

“What did Anlese show you?” he asked.

Julienne tightened her grip on the playing piece. “You. Your murder.”

A strange expression of bewilderment flitted across Morgan’s features. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Finding the place she recognized, Julienne knelt. The floor was still stained by the spread of a rusty pool. “Here.”

Setting the Reaper aside, she reached out, touching it.

“I can see it now... so clearly...” The tips of her fingers began to tingle, as though the dried blood were infused with electricity. The strange sensation widened, traveling up her arm, up her neck, straight into the core of her brain. She flinched, drawing her quivering hand away.

“No.” She shook her head. “You couldn’t have won. You were too weak.”

Morgan knelt beside her. “Let it come. It is all right to use your gift.”

As though his words were knife blades cutting into her, she winced and shook her head. He persisted. Taking her hand, he guided it back to the floor. He gave her fingers a soft little squeeze of reassurance.

Julienne went perfectly still as a whirling vortex of images lit across her mind’s screen. The air around her seemed to crackle. She shivered. She could not think. She could not react. She could only watch in wordless horror as a fierce battle between two men played out. Morgan was wounded, weakening. The other man was larger, injured somewhat, but still the stronger combatant.

It took only seconds for the events to occur. In an instant, she saw everything, knew everything that had happened after Morgan departed Xavier’s dungeon.

The unsettling sensations dissipated as rapidly as they’d come. Her whole body trembled with shock, despair and anger. She could still visualize how Morgan had looked; so still and pale, seeming hardly a man, but a figure cast in wax. That’s how white his flesh had appeared.

She lifted her gaze to his face. "You nearly died here after leaving me."

A strange expression crossed his face, as though he wanted to deny the truth. "Yes," he admitted at length.

"What was his name?" The ferocity of her words stunned her—more a primal growl than anything a human would utter. "The man who tried to kill you?"

"Azoroath."

"One of Xavier's soldiers?"

"Yes."

"More like him will come. Xavier... Megwyn... Others who see you as an outlaw. The killing in this warped place doesn't ever stop, does it?" Fear swept over her, gaining in intensity as she considered the strengths of the opposing forces challenging her lover. In joining him, his crusade would become hers.

Morgan drew her to her feet. He smiled in that familiar, insolent way that could chill the blood or cause it to seize in desire depending on the emotion he put behind it. Then his expression grew serious. "Now is not the time to think of that. We have to concentrate on what lies ahead of us this hour. You are going to be very powerful, Julianne. You tapped into what happened here earlier without thinking twice. In time, with training, you will have more control over it. I promise."

She swallowed, knotting her hands. His words were true. She was not yet in control, but she was learning to let it guide her. Such recognition was awesome, and frightening. In body, mind and emotion, the balances were still delicate, and violent. There was a dynamic force within her, one that was attempting to emerge with an abruptness that was terrifying.

"It still scares the hell out of me," she admitted, voice wavering.

She'd not yet learned to brace herself against the shocks such a power would inflict. She could imagine herself exploding into a senseless idiocy if she did not learn to master and control her gifts. That had been her mother's mistake. Instead of embracing her power, Cassandra had turned away, and it had driven her mad.

Needing to compose herself, she began to walk around the chamber. There were so many things to face and very little time to make sense of it all. "So this is where you belonged all this time."



He grimaced slightly and shrugged. "The old place has fallen to decay. Sometimes I think both of us are well past our time."

She walked the length of the bar. The bookshelves caught her attention, and she moved into the shadows for a closer look. Many of the manuscripts lying closed on their sides were so huge, she doubted she could have lifted them, much less decipher their ancient scripts.

"This makes the library at Blackthorne look like a child's room," she remarked.

Between the books, unusual curios peered out. Idly, she reached to brush away the thick webs and picked one up. She squealed and dropped the thing when she realized what she was holding—a small skull with elongated canines.

"What is that?" She bent down to poke at it with a curious finger.

He picked up the skull and set it back in its place. "Ironically, it is the skull of one of Xavier's mutants, the first he attempted. They were flawed creatures, incredibly stupid and worthless. It took him many years to perfect his spell."

She shuddered. "It's what's inside me, isn't it?"

"Hardly. The creature inside you is far more advanced. Because of this, it can be restructured."

"When does it happen, this change?"

Morgan crossed the den, indicating that she should follow.

"Now."

He paused at the end of the bar and lifted his hand. A section of the wall melted under his touch to reveal a hidden entrance. He disappeared into the dim tunnel.

Clasping her hands in front of her to quiet the fluttering in her stomach, she followed him. Torches propped in high sconces lit the pathway. He walked with purpose in his step. She had to run to keep from being left behind.

"*Nish ny dyn dy bragh*," he muttered in Gaelic.

"What did you say?"

"*Coma leat*. Pay no heed."

Julienne barely managed to suppress her shivers at the sight of the wrought iron-barred door guarding the chamber into which he led her. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light. Despite fires burning in the twin hearths, the

room was unusually cool. In the near silence, a liquid trickle could be faintly discerned.

The cold did not seem to affect Morgan. As he entered the chamber, he began to roll up his cuffs. She glanced apprehensively at the long scars marring his forearms, disfiguring his smooth skin. Seeing them, she experienced a complex tangle of emotions.

*I will never get used to those.*

She was unaware she gasped out loud. At her sharp intake of breath, he shot her a vexed glance. Following her fixed stare, he turned up his arm to afford her a better view. His posture was stiff, the stance of a man on the defensive.

"They still bother you?" He traced the line of one scar with a finger. His voice was perfectly controlled. His stare did not waver.

Not daring to speak, she nodded. Goose bumps rose on her skin. She could feel the chill through her thin caftan. *God, it's cold in here!* She ran her hands up and down her arms, eyes pleading for him not to make her relive the violence she had experienced with him.

He pulled his mouth down in a fatalistic frown. "You want to know why I did it?"

Hesitant, she replied, "I think I get the idea."

"The first time, yes."

"And the second?"

There was a short pause; then, scowling, he said, "I went looking for it."

He began to circle her like a vulture. In a few short seconds, he underwent a mental change just subtle enough for her to note and grow wary. When he next spoke, his voice was mesmerizing. "You will find things here can be deceiving." He paced around, pushing fear deeper into her. "Your frailties are always victim for the forces at work in the occult, and each time they bite, another piece of your soul will be irretrievably lost."

Listening to the words, turning to keep him in view, Julianne felt as if she were being dragged into a malevolent vortex. The earlier argument still hung between them.

"Stop it!" She clamped her hands to her ears. "How dare you taunt me like that. Such cruelty is beneath you! It makes me—"

Julienne bit down the words as she tried to dash past him and escape. The emotions of the day were too many, too soon. She had not had time to think them through, understand them. She needed time.

But that was a luxury she did not have.

Morgan grabbed her arm, forcefully turning her to face him. In a voice devoid of any emotion he snarled, "It makes you what?"

Terrified, she became aware of the true extent of his strength. If he wanted to, he could easily snap her arm.

"It makes me hate you!" She swung her free hand in an attempt to hit him. "Let me go! You're hurting me!"

He flung her aside, walking away from the confrontation.

"Get used to it! You are not the first. You will not be the last." He stopped in front of one wall. Folding his arms across his chest, he stared intently at its gray nothingness.

Julienne picked herself off the hard floor. Clutching her hands into tight fists, she pressed her lips together to keep further words of rebuke her own, a very difficult endeavor. There was utter silence around and between them. Her parched lips couldn't release the curses scraping her dry throat. Violence was Morgan's accepted way of dealing with undesirable situations. Most people would back away, leave him alone.

*What the hell is happening? Has he gone insane?*

Or perhaps it was because he was afraid himself.

The figure he presented to others was one of practiced indifference, an invisible barrier that served to separate him from the world. He had a certain quality that proved hard to pinpoint or penetrate. It served as a shield for his restless intensity that few could really claim to know. He was always organizing individuals into compartments to ensure no one ferreted out his foibles and weaknesses.

He'd discovered that pinning people down under a hard probing stare and stabbing them with words put them so on the spot they forgot what it was about him they had questioned. Many people went away wondering who he really was but never had the nerve to inquire further. It was an effective defense against people.

*Don't like him too much. Don't get too close.*

That made it easier to cut the strings and walk away. Whom did his past belong to? No one.

The silence dragged through several uncomfortable minutes. Hours were likely to pass before he would relent and admit what was festering in his mind.

Julienne fidgeted, her anger dissipating. He seemed to have forgotten her, so long had he been staring at the wall. Unsure of how he would react but wanting to mend the rift between them, she finally went toward him.

Perceiving her tentative approach, he turned before she could touch him. "You are afraid of me. You always have been, and you always will be, I think."

She tried to smile, but found it too hard. "I am. This world, your ways, they are unknown to me."

He forced his impatience under control. "You must not fear what is unknown."

"I can't help my fright. I don't know who you are. I see now why I never could really know you."

He shook his head. "Forgive me. You are seeing a part of me I believed would never be revealed to any eyes again. I long ago forswore witchcraft."

"Then don't go back."

There was a grim look of determination on his face that she'd never seen before. "This is the only way I can help you." Backing away, he went deeper into the chamber. "It will take place here, and you will see the workings of the arts for yourself."

Julienne walked to the altar. Three spiraling black-and-white candles stood on its carved surface. Two sat near its right and left lower edges. The third sat exactly in the center above three naked goddesses. The candles formed the points of a triangle, the muses delineated it. A short-bladed, sharp dagger lay within the conjurer's triangle, a lion's head carved into its ebony hilt. Eyes of ruby glowed in the firelight, alive with an unnatural gleam.

She shivered. "You've been here earlier arranging this?"

He nodded. "Yes. I have been preparing to bring you over."

A round orb that seemed to be made of chalky white stone was cushioned in the protective hands of the goddesses. She looked askance at Morgan. When he nodded, she reached to touch it.

Its surface was rough, pebbly. There were tiny cracks in it. Deep within the stone, she thought she sensed some sort of energy. She grew tense, tremors gradually creeping through her entire body until her every nerve seemed to jangle.

"This is it," she whispered, realizing. "Where you sent it..."

"Into the stone. Yes."

Morgan crossed to kneel before the closest fireplace. On the floor was an elegant rosewood box. Opening it, he took out a slender stick of scented wood. He lit it in the flames and, back at the altar, lowered it to the left-hand candle. The wick caught, spurting to brilliant life.

Julienne, watching in disapproval, hardly dared to breathe. Her shoulders tightened. She felt the beginnings of a headache. "Can I ask a question?"

His left eyebrow arched. "Of course. The idea is for you to begin learning."

"Why do you have...?" She shrugged, encompassing the altar and its layout. "...all this? What does it mean, and what can it do?"

Morgan lit the second candle. "Ritual magic is difficult to explain, but in all aspects it is concerned with making reality conform to the will of the conjurer to compel change."

She stifled the urge to shiver again. "I don't understand."

A wry smile twitched at his lips. "Every object within nature possesses an identity to give it shape and essence," he explained. "The basic idea of magic is to take energy that exists in the nonphysical world and weave it into the desired form in the physical world through capturing, merging and transferring those identities. Blended under ideal circumstances, purified by fire and melded by blood, these substances can coalesce and form an entirely new property.

"The use of certain objects sets up lines of communication along which the energies can flow, a conduit, of sorts. There is no real magic, only energy. And when a conjurer masters energy, he can manipulate it to serve his beckon. What passes for conjuring is merely the science of the occult."

"But these...gods...you call upon. Do they exist?"

He laughed low and deep. "Gods, deities—call them what you will—are merely figments of the astral energies. There are no gods sitting in the heavens, waiting to answer your prayers. It is just the ancient way of identifying the

elementals and categorizing them for a specific purpose. I fall into the old habits occasionally.”

She grimaced. “It seems so unnatural, so...”

“Evil?” His tone conceded nothing.

“Yes.”

He fixed her with a hard stare. “What do you think evil is, exactly?”

She wavered. “I don’t think I know anymore.”

“Evil exists in the mind and in the hearts of men. The things that drive us to hate, to the destruction of others, ourselves. There is no black or white magic. There is only the intent of the conjurer and how he would use his will.”

“You have gone into the darkness...” Her words were not a question, but a statement of fact.

“Many times.”

Anxiety gnawed deep into her gut. “Then I don’t want you to do this. Please—it’s wrong.”

Morgan lit the third candle. “This time I will not fall.” He held out his hand, palm up, fingers spread. “Join me now or walk away.”

Julienne obeyed without question, pressing her palm to his—a gesture of acceptance. She felt deep tension within him, a coiled strength that struck her with almost physical force. She was learning they needed no words to connect and communicate.

“*My cheilley er son dy bragh?*” His even neutral tone betrayed nothing.

She closed her eyes, swallowing the lump in her throat. She could not walk away. “Together forever.”

Morgan drew his hand down, motioning for her to take her place at the end of the altar, to the south. She was to do nothing. Only watch. When she was in position, he commenced to speak in the old language. His voice rose, tainted with eerie undertones.

“Ever ’round the circle goes, a rotation interrupted but never broken. In life, there is death. For death, resurrection, the renewal of the cycle.”

A gust of air stirred, bringing with it a faded echo, a voice calling from an endless depth. It began to speak, rising and falling, gathering strength and volume, a strange chant in a horrible, wailing key. The candles flickered but did not go out. Misty white fingers appeared around the edges of the room. In

the twin hearths, the cinders appeared to glow like little glowering eyes through the fog.

Morgan spread his hands around the strange white orb. "Call I now a rising of what is eternal, a part of my identity I have too long disavowed. Spirit of thy will, essence of my true self, I bid thee come forth."

Within its circle, the white orb rose. Hovering high above their heads, it began to glow, taking on a strange luminescence. The keening wail deepened, a rushing crescendo of pure, unfettered energy, until it ranged beyond the reach of human ears.

Julienne listened, breathless. Unaccustomed to the experience of protracted ceremony of intonation and gesture, she found the meaning incomprehensible. His words beat on her ears and brain with bone-shattering force. She tried to shut him out, but could not. The air surrounding her quivered, crawling over her skin like a thousand tiny insects.

Cracks formed on the surface of the orb. They widened at an alarming speed, and a strong sulfuric odor assailed the closed atmosphere of the underground room as mist began to seep from inside the globe. The stone dissipated as thin strings of yellow gradually took on substance; it was a spirit that stirred and fought its bonds, growing and whirling as it emerged from captivity.

Gagging, Julienne put her hands over her nose and mouth, stumbling away from the altar. The smell brought to mind a freshly opened grave, the corpse inside bloated, rotting and crawling with maggots. She struggled not to be ill. Morgan's voice deepened, his words quickening and pulsing. A single, wailing dissonance answered him like a smothered sob.

The yellowish mist grew viscous. Across the altar, the haze began to take on the shape of a hooded figure. Cloaked completely in black, it hovered inches above the floor. Slowly, it grew animated, lifting its bowed head. No face was visible beneath the hood. A wail issued from the void, a long, chilling screech. Coppery-orange eyes slit open to reveal red pupils, eyes resembling those set into the dagger.

"You have come back." The voice of the apparition was raspy, as if there were neither mouth nor tongue to give it shape and tone.

Gasping, Julienne closed her eyes. Revulsion tightened her jaw.

"I have," Morgan said, then began to speak the ritualistic litany. When he ceased finished, the hovering apparition nodded.

"What will you give?"

"I offer sacrifice of myself," was Morgan's reply.

The glowing eyes under the hood grew narrow. "Promise in blood."

Julienne managed to force away her aversion, gaping at the thing with fascination, listening to the strange conversation.

"No!" She grabbed Morgan's arm and gave a fear-filled glance at the cloaked figure. "I won't let you do this!"

His manner was cool, dispassionate and detached. "I have made my choice. I will give of myself." He shook off her grip. "Get away so I may do this."

Desperately wanting to be rid of the terrible images, Julienne backpedaled until she felt the rough stone of the wall against her back. As though in the grip of a dream, she could not move or cry out. She knew if she only tried, she could shatter the ritual, send that damned thing away, but she didn't move. Action was beyond her. She could not raise the courage to defy Morgan.

Whimpering, she slid to the floor, feeling helpless and hopeless.

*God! What's happening? This isn't what I wanted, for him or for myself.* In her heart, she divined it would utterly destroy him.

Morgan held out his arms, hands palm up. He murmured more strange words, speaking with an intensity that was frightening.

"Bound by me, bound to me, I offer flesh, blood and bone. Cast thy darkness upon this shell, all most powerful, one and all."

A series of vertical red welts began to rise on his pale skin, going up his forearms as though some invisible hand were drawing a razor-like lash across his arms. The ridges began to part, blood welling from the cuts. His face revealed no pain.

Across the altar, the dark entity lifted its arms, mimicking him. Bony hands slid from its sleeves. It reached across and grabbed Morgan's arms, skeletal fingers twitching and tightening.

A numinous physical metamorphosis began to take place as Morgan's blood was absorbed by its touch. Veins, tendons, muscle and skin began forming over bare bones at a rapid rate. Whispery words echoed.

"Granted."



The grip grew tighter, infusing Morgan's pale skin with an otherworldly luminosity. The entity began to melt, merging with its host.

The surrounding mist grew thicker, became a churning mass that spread to enfold both figures. When it cleared, only a single figure stood alone at the altar, cloaked in black.

Deathly silence enshrouded the chamber. The quiet trickled, crawled back, then surged up, suggesting the unfettered vastness of the astral realm. Throwing back his head, Morgan let the hood slide away from his face. He shuddered. He pressed his mutilated forearms to his chest before dropping to his knees. Head down, eyes closed, he was absolutely frozen.

"Morgan?"

Julienne struggled to rise, breaking the eerie paralysis holding her back. Her foot twisted beneath her, sending a wrenching pain up her leg. She tried again, managing to stand, somehow making it to his side in a few swift steps.

Falling to her knees, she put a hand out, barely daring to touch the silken material of the accursed black robe. "Morgan?" Her voice was choked with worry. "What have you done?"

Morgan lifted his head and opened his eyes. His face was a blank slate, as if all identity had been wiped away. Disoriented, he gazed at her as if he didn't know who she was.

"We are again one." His calm was uncanny, a practiced thing that made her wary.

"You need to get away from this." She tried to pull him from the altar. "You have no right to torture yourself."

Morgan lowered his arms. The wounds in his arms had healed, leaving thin horizontal scars crossing those already present. The being's grip had seared the print of its fingers into his pale flesh, leaving rings of bluish bruises, a symbol of joining. What he offered had been forever claimed.

"I have every right," he muttered. "It is what I am."

Julienne's breath scraped her dry throat. She wanted to lash out. *Suicide or sacrifice? I don't think he knows anymore. The lines are becoming blurred.*

"I'm afraid to ask what you have given."

"I have reclaimed my self," he said. "My *whole* self."

He stood. He was unsteady, looking as if he might faint. Nevertheless, he shook off her hold, stepping out of her reach. Urging her back, he turned and extended his arms over the altar. The long sleeves of the robe spread out like black wings. "*Aiseirigh tine!*" Rise fire.

All light died. Inside the altar, ashes stirred. Embers came alive, hot and glowing, called to life by the force within his mind. Blackness retreated as yellow sparks burst to life. Flames lit the lion's slanted eyes and roared in a sheet from its gaping stone mouth.

Atop the altar, the muses' lifted arms worshiped the fire flaring high in their circle, and their stone bodies grew warm by its light. Flames leaping inside their sacred circle licked at their naked forms. The fire the lion breathed was searing.

Morgan lowered his arms, pressing his hands together as if in prayer. When he turned to her, there was a strange radiance in his eyes, new color in his flesh. Exhaustion had been cast aside, enveloped by the energy of the fire.

Approaching, he extended his hand. Her eyes followed it, but she did not move.

Was he a man...a demon...or a god?

Standing tautly posed, he had a new kind of sharpness, as if he were in focus and she but part of the blurry edges.

"Do not fear me."

She hesitated, afraid.

"Come to me of your own will." His voice was firm but gentle. "Take my hand."

She sank into his compelling gaze, was swallowed deep and drowned. She slowly held out her hand, linked her fingers with his. His skin was warm, the terrible cold chased away by the fire.

"Of my own will." Her lips trembled.

Morgan pulled her to him. He crackled with energy. One arm slid around her waist, crushing her close. "You will be *brisht stiagh*," he whispered. "Baptized with fire."

Julienne's skin thrilled to his touch. His caress was demanding. His fingers traced from her lips to her chin, the side of her neck down to her firm breasts and flat stomach, arousing in her fierce desire. Her breathing grew shallow,

ragged under his touch. Blood pounded in her temples. The yearning engulfed her when he undid her tight braid, freeing her hair to fall in waves around her shoulders as he combed his fingers through it.

"You are more beautiful this way," he whispered, guiding her lips to his. His mouth captured hers and her world spun.

A wave of electric shock went zinging through her body. She'd never imagined he could possess such gentleness, a sort so sensual, her knees began to quiver. Small, eager sounds escaped her throat, and she returned his kiss with equal passion. She longed for this tenderness, felt the trembling in her hips. The intensity of him seemed to enfold and engulf her. Exciting, wicked warmth filled her, and she felt as though she would dissolve into a sticky puddle. He was so close. Aroused.

He had made love to her before, and she recalled every nuance of movement: his touch, his scent, the weight of him between her thighs, penetrating her most secret places. He alone possessed the spark that ignited the delights of her deepest longing. Her limbs seemed molten. Her knees nearly gave. She could feel his essence flowing through her. With a start, she realized the blood they shared did, indeed, forge a physical, psychic and spiritual link. The intensity in his body seemed to fuse with hers, settling in her center as a taut, wired force passed between them.

*He's seducing me, seducing me to follow him into damnation,* she thought giddily. *Head and sense be damned.* Although her first instinct was to cling to the past, psychologically she was already exercising the instinct to move on, to forge a new future, she hoped, with Morgan.

The brief time he held her was heaven. It was sheer hell when he drew away and halted the roaming of his hands.

"It is time. See this invisible world open to your eyes." He ripped open the front of her caftan with an impatient growl. The silky material pooled with a soft hush when he cast it aside. Her panties suffered a similar fate.

Julienne lowered her eyes, feeling a rush of heat to her cheeks. She was conscious of the black tendrils coursing through her body just below the surface of her skin. Tangled in myriad emotions, she felt an unforeseen stirring deep inside her heart. She was both aroused and afraid.

Morgan swept her up in his arms, carried her to the altar and lowered her to its surface. Her body fit within the triangle of candles, and beside her the three goddesses rejoiced in their own nakedness. Though the fire blazed, the surface of the altar was not hot. Instead, it was infused with a force beyond heat or light. Beneath her skin, she felt a gathering of energies, lulling away her fears, her doubt.

He bent, his lips only inches from her ear.

“When you awaken, your old life will be gone and your new one begun.”

He stood straight and stretched out his left hand over her. Beside her, the goddesses also seemed to beckon. He spoke a few words; and the knife lifted from the altar, propelled into his hand. The lion’s head carved into the hilt seemed to animate and roar.

Morgan raised the dagger and held it outstretched. There came the distant cry of a thousand merged voices as the fire in the altar flared. The blade in his hand began to glow, red and sullen white, blazing with unearthly energy. Light glowed in a streak across his face, the aura of power and majesty giving his pale skin a translucent radiance. His resonant voice rang out; words came pouring from his throat, echoing and reechoing through the unimaginable infinity of time and space.

In a swift downward arc, he plunged the blade deep into her chest. “I evoke and conjure thee, O spirits...”

Julienne heard nothing more. She saw only an exploding kaleidoscope of lights. She pitched headlong into a chasm that encompassed the beginning, the end and all in between. In a whirlpool of color, the shimmering radiance of energy drawn from another realm pulsed and flared, wrapping itself around her. She felt as if she were drowning in a luminescent corona of heat and light.

The distortions continued to twist, closer now, dizzying her with swirling and sparking. She collided with the light and slipped below it. She opened her mouth to scream, but there was no air for her lungs to take in. She saw a flash of brilliant color and heard her mother and her grandmother calling her name.

Part Two  
*Retributions*

## Chapter Twenty-One

Megwyn sat cross-legged, naked, hands resting placidly palms up on her knees. On each side, bronze braziers were positioned, fashioned into the shape of Celtic lions. Incense burned in their depths, a dark, rich mixture of brown sandalwood and black musk. The air was hazy, heavy with dusky smoke.

Directly in front of her, three small statues of nude men were precisely arranged. Their outstretched arms provided the base for a flat, circular pane of cut crystal. This was her gazing pool. She preferred to practice the natural way, sky-clad, unencumbered by the negative vibrations of any clothing. Four black candles, a dagger and other implements were arranged within easy reach.

Like other witches who perverted legitimate magic, she worked in secret with the ancient forces, shunning the light for the magnetic, alluring gloom, just as her father had.

"Thrice 'round, thy circle's bound. I call to thee, spirit guides, bring to me the power of three." A wall of silver-blue flames burst into brilliant life, circling her. Apparently fed by no source and giving no heat, the flames snapped and danced, casting wavering shadows along the walls.

*"Mee shirrey...mee shirrey...ionsar jeeagh,"* she murmured, gazing into the depth of the glass. *I seek...I seek...to see...*

A fitful gust of wind from a mysterious source stirred the hazy air, causing the silver-blue flames to flicker wildly and bringing with it a whispering echo—a voice intoning in a strange, raspy pitch, curiously rhythmic and tenuous. Images began to form, seeming to float up from silvery depths. She saw a chamber, walled in gray stone, an altar in its center.

Her face changed, and for a moment the sternness grew almost tender. Her brother was present, as was the red-haired woman who was his lover. A still, small smile touched her lips. *You've come back, brother, as I knew you would.*

The scene progressed, and Morgan shifted to another ritual. He undressed, then lifted the naked woman onto the altar.

*...as her own father had once lifted and placed her upon the cold gray stone...*

Always sensitive, the connection she shared with her twin gave her an awareness of him that was uncanny in its completeness. Though he had long ago cut their psychic links, she could, with unerring instinct, sense his emotions. He was not pleased to return to his legacy, to reawaken his shunned past. A sense of duty motivated him. And love.

A strange longing filled Megwyn, an emotional turmoil she could not fully analyze. Her lower lip began to tremble.

*The way he touches her, kisses her...*

Her eyes glazed over. Numbness curled around her as a quicksand cold dragged her senses into a dark mire. Something malevolent slithered into the forefront of her brain, assuming control of her fragile psyche. She wanted to fight the coming entity, scream for it to go away, leave her but the screams died in her throat. Without quite knowing or understanding what was happening to her, she fell deep into a trance induced by the spectral force sharing her body.

Her father, Celeon's image arose, his blue eyes as cold and remote as arctic glacier. She imagined more than saw the brutal set of his jaw, the indomitable edgy line of his mouth. His eyes stared out through hers. Seeing all. Missing nothing. Inside her skull, a writhing storm of voices rose, the volume increasing, as it became a single intonation.

*What he possesses should have been yours, daughter. If you wish to survive, you must take it back. Make right the grievous sins of your mother.*

Passive in the grip of ghostly hands, there was little she could do to resist Celeon's invasion of her will. Since the day of her birth, he'd owned her.

“Yes, Father,” she murmured, deaf to her own voice. “Always I listen, and obey.”

*Nothing must stand in the way of taking your brother.*

“The body you need to live again, I shall conceive of him.” Her hand drifted to the flat plane of her belly. Though not a virgin, she’d never taken a mate nor borne a child.

Megwyn watched the rest of Morgan’s ritual. Seeing him brought back all the yearnings she had sought to repress. Flames of passion rose in her, all rationality lost in her desire for him.

She loved Morgan.

Wanted him.

Not as a sister cherished a brother, but as a woman loved a man. That was the source of the strife between them, the thing that repulsed him about her. He could not tolerate the thought.

Her brother had struggled for years to come to terms with their abusive childhood. Though he’d never made peace with it, he’d managed to rise a little above it.

Megwyn had not.

A shiver coursed up her spine, sending a slight, telltale trembling through her. Not fear or cold, but hatred. Hatred directed at the woman who held Morgan’s heart. A vague discontent tickled at the back of her mind, wriggling through her. Jealousy sprouted in her heart, taking deep root and spreading malicious odium. The images of her brother and his lover were emblazoned in her head.

Her vision blurred as burning tears dropped onto her cheeks. Her hands, usually so controlled, clenched into fists. Her fingernails dug into her palms until she drew blood. If she had once known sanity of any sort, it was a thing long gone. She wanted to possess her twin, utterly and completely. If they were ever joined in body, mind and spirit, she would, like the succubus, drain him dry and take everything from him. That is why he fought her. And the more he resisted her, the more she was determined to have him.



Driven by the dementia of demonic spiritual possession, it did not occur to her that such incestuous desires were perverse. She only knew she must obey or be punished.

*Morgan has a mate now*, her father's voice continued. *One who completes him. This cannot be!*

Julienne Blackthorne. His mortal lover. She should have been dead, no more than a corpse rotting in Xavier's charnel rooms. That she had survived to escape must have taken an incredible amount of will. It also showed great laxness of the part of Xavier's Jansi. What were those idiots for, if not to guard?

Megwyn's chin dropped, then lifted in resolution.

*She is strong*, Celeon stormed through her mind.

"An obstacle," she murmured.

*Take care of it.* Celeon's voice began to fade, receding into a dark recess carefully guarded.

Then he was gone, and she forgot his presence inside her. For a moment, she was confused. Her mind seemed to have drifted away. She tried to remember, but all was a fog. She believed her father's desires to be her own and did not question because, as always, he left no sign of his habitation inside the body of his daughter.

Shaking her head, she frowned and raised her hand, sending the hateful visions away. Control somewhat regained, her brows drew down in anger. Her mind began to tick, methodically planning. A perverse desire to inflict injury upon her twin clutched her. To punish him, she would get rid of Julienne.

*She will not last long*, she vowed, her lips firming at the thought. *As Nisidia did not.*

Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of what she wanted.

What Celeon wanted.

She made a brief gesture, snapping her fingers. A signal. A silent figure glided out of the shadows, a black man of tall and solid stature.

"Naylor?"

"Yes, lady." Ever vigilant and sensitive to her wants and needs, her undead familiar was ready to serve.

"Tonight you will cross over into the mortal world. I want you to keep an eye on this woman who has so bewitched my brother."

"Shall I..." He smiled, showing many teeth, his voice brittle as ice. "...slay her?"

Megwyn nibbled her lip. "For now, just watch."

He seemed disappointed. "Yes, lady."

Megwyn flung back her head and laughed. "If all goes well, she will be your reward. It will be an irony, indeed, that she fall prey to one who shares her coming hunger. Very clever of Morgan to restructure her so. Too bad he wastes his talents on the likes of a disposable human."

"A shame indeed," Naylor affirmed.

The witch began her spell work again, conjuring a new view in her scrying glass. This time, the great hall of the witches' council was revealed.

The Chamber of Justice had been carved into the side of the highest mountain overlooking the Eastlands, taking advantage of a naturally formed cavern. A mammoth undertaking of manual labor, it had been designed to recall the great coliseums of the Romans. Built around pillars of stalagmites, the great hall was circular in shape. On three sides, row upon row of bench-type seating had been carved into the stone. At the rear of the circle, set high on a dais, were twelve seats, also carved from stone. Like giant teeth about to gnash, stalactites dripped down from the ceiling.

Between the amphitheater and the dais was the Floor of Judgment, where those who had defied or inarguably broken occult law were brought to be judged. Xavier had once stood before the justices, as had Morgan. The difference between them was that Xavier was judged fit to live and Morgan was not.

The atrocities Xavier had committed could, after a fashion, be forgiven. Morgan's could not, for his was the ultimate blasphemy—renouncing the occult and turning away from his race. That he favored mortals above his own kind was unforgivable.

There were only four justices in chamber this hour. The matters were petty, hardly worth bothering the whole of the council with. Later, at the specified hour, all twelve would convene.

Megwyn tapped the face of the crystal gazing glass.

"Does the council yet know?" she wondered aloud. Were the rest of council members aware of Morgan's return to witchcraft?

"They watch as you watch," the revenant replied.

"Are they still with us?"

"For now, they stand. But you must tread carefully. There is much talk among them. Some suspect your turning, that you betray them."

"That talk shall have to be silenced."

Megwyn arranged four slender black tapers around her viewing glass. Passing her hand over one at a time, she said, "I summon the elements, invoke them, conjure them to do my bidding."

Each candle came to light. She then picked up a short, sharp dirk, pressing its tip into her left index finger. "With a prick of the finger, I give in blood. As darkness spreads its wings, so shall my will be done."

She began to draw a series of symbols around the edge of the crystal disk. "Bound by me, all light shall be withheld from their eyes, all words from their ears. Be mine enemy blind and deaf."

For a long moment, all was still as she worked her blinding spell, calling the eleven names of those she wished to deceive. She had no doubts that they, in their turn, were spelling against her. Spelling and counter-spelling. The energies—negative and positive—would clash, and all would be neutralized, accomplishing little except to buy time.

Though she was outwardly calm, anxiety twitched inside her heart. She was nervous. Today, she was to go before the council to plead for Xavier. She had to do this in a convincing way. It would be best not to arouse any suspicions—yet.

She was still in a vulnerable position. Several members of the council had yet to completely agree to an alliance that was still tentative, at best. They were wary, watching every move, analyzing every word. If they withdrew their support, the council would be divided. Divided, it would turn against itself.

*Lose them, she warned herself, and they may seek out my brother.*

That, though, was exactly what she wanted. A council divided would be in chaos. Out of that chaos she could emerge the victor, if she placed her soldiers in the correct places. Xavier, that damned old fool, was already in his place, ready to be sent into battle.

Her plea for the sorcerer would be easy. He needed to make a journey to Ula'dh, where he now believed the scrolls would be found. To get there, he could take one of two routes—through Danarra, land of the elfin people, or through Gidrah, land of the trolls. Of the two, Gidrah was the preferable choice. The elfin people would never sanction the sorcerer's passage. They were firmly against the rise of Ouroborous. So were the trolls, for Xavier had once wrought much destruction through Gidrah.

But trolls could usually be persuaded to forget past battles if the price was right. The sorcerer was prepared to pay steeply in gold for safe passage. She only need convince the council his journey was a necessary one.

That done, there was one more spell to cast.

The witch murmured a few words and the scene in her looking glass changed for the last time, revealing a new face.

Azoroath. Alone in his chamber. So blissfully unaware.

She clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Naughty boy." She knew that Xavier's messenger had defied the sorcerer's order in trying to kill Morgan. He'd come close to succeeding, too. In that fleeting moment when her twin had allowed her into his mind, she had experienced for herself the grip death had briefly had on him. He had nearly lost his life—something she was not quite ready for him to do. Yet.

"Good thing for you he survived, you oaf!" She spat at Azoroath's unaware image. "Your plotting nearly cost me my heritage." Rage filled her. It was time for a little payback.

Taking up her dagger, she made two swift, clean cuts across her palms. Clearing her mind, she held out both her arms, her recessive and projective hands curling into tight fists. Throwing back her head, she

began to chant: "As I do cast this spell, bring my enemy to the gate of hell. Hex of anger, hex of hate, bring him down, my time to wait. My revenge will have its day, afflict him with a fatal blow..."

She continued her chant, feeling the energies she had summoned entering into her recessive hand, flowing through her body to her projective hand. The blood warming her palm sizzled with a strange animation. Unable to hold it back a second longer, she cast her right hand toward the scrying glass, spattering her blood across its unblemished face.

Azoroath was cursed. The Reaper would soon take scythe in hand to cut him down.

He just didn't know it yet.

A wicked animation came into her eyes, glee mixed with anticipation. "Thy will shall be done," she murmured. "You shan't always rest safely behind Xavier's walls."

Opening both hands, she saw the cuts were still there. She cursed lightly under her breath and reached toward a small bowl filled with a powdery peachy-hued substance. She packed each cut with the powder. It stung like a thousand claws digging at her flesh. She gritted her teeth and bore the brief pain. Wiping the *leigheas* powder away revealed no hint of damages.

Finished with her spell work, Megwyn closed her eyes. Her hand rose to her left breast, where the tattoo of the Dragon had been etched into her flesh. A detestable thing, but a necessary one. For her plan to work, Xavier had to trust her. She had to appear to be giving herself to him completely, spurred on by the same hatreds.

She was wise enough not to entertain any true belief that the scrolls of the Cachaens actually existed. Maybe they had once, but surely, they had been destroyed a long time ago. She believed them to be a Golden Fleece, pursued by an old fool who dreamt of power he would never again really hold. Xavier was weak; regeneration was beyond him. Any physical injury he suffered further crippled him.

But she was never one to rule out possibilities. What if the scrolls did exist?

*I plan to have them.*

She smiled. *This is where I must play my part most convincingly*, she warned herself. Because all are tied to sacrifice in one form or another, one thing the council could not prohibit was the right to make sacrifice of human life for worship or hunger. That was an inalienable right.

At last she rose, cramped and cold. She lifted her hands, whispering for the circle of flames to be broken. It vanished in an instant, leaving no wisp of smoke behind or a scorch mark on the marble floor. She stood, naked, stretching her arms. Across the room was a full-length mirror. Catching sight of herself, she smiled.

Reflected back at her was the image of a stunning woman. Her hands skimmed over her slender, perfect figure. Her body was in its prime, as she had accepted the occult at an early age. Morgan had not crossed over until well into his thirties. Physically, she was merely twenty-two years of age, even though more than twelve centuries had passed since her youth experienced its first bloom.

Nothing mattered except her own selfish wants and needs. Insanity had made her temperament a strange and uncertain thing—she would do anything necessary to satisfy her desires. Lying, conniving and murder were all within her realm of operation.

Her arms, with a strange, pathetic gesture, fell to her sides. She flushed, appalled by the knowledge she was, after all, a flesh-and-blood being. Vulnerable.

“That shall all be overcome,” she said to the woman in the mirror. “When I have what my brother holds, I shall be complete. Mother be damned. It was to be mine.”

A stirring to her left caught her attention. The woman who entered gave a guarded smile.

“Are you ready to dress, my lady?” Her maidservant, Loran, gave a courtly, almost ritualistic bow.

Megwyn, with a little frown, inclined her head. “I am.”

She could not be sure, but it seemed to her that even in courteous inquiry, her slave’s voice held a mocking tone. She suspected all eyes to be spying, all ears to be listening. *Paranoia*. She gave her head a small

shake. She could not afford to fall prey to delusional thoughts. Such would cause her to stumble. No, not when she was close, so close to gaining what had always been denied her.

Loran bowed again and crossed the chamber to fetch the clothing Megwyn would be wearing. A petite woman in her later forties with soft brown eyes, she was dressed in a plain muslin wrap as befitted one of her status. Her chestnut hair was long, braided in a single rope down her back—her sole claim to beauty. Her plain face was deeply marked by the pox in early childhood. Eyes set too widely apart, nose just a beak, she much resembled a little brown sparrow.

Keeping her touch impersonal, Loran deftly robed her mistress in a narrow-sleeved, high-necked garment of white woven with bursts of a rich cerulean that flatteringly deepened the color of her eyes. She encircled Megwyn's slender waist with a wide girdle, fastened it with lacing in the back. Soft ankle-high boots covered her feet.

Around her mistress's throat, the servant hung a sigil of silver, Megwyn's totem as a witch and a protective talisman.

Thus clothed and adorned, Megwyn strode across the chamber. Her robes made sibilant whispers around her legs as she sat down before a vanity table. Following her, Loran took up a brush and began to pull it through her mistress's long hair. Her free hand followed each stroke.

Lulled by the relaxing brushstrokes, Megwyn sat lost in thought, staring at nothing. Around the chamber, Chinese lamps burned brilliantly. Tapestries of great beauty and age, relics of a bygone era, splashed gentle color across the walls. Thick hand-woven rugs blanketed the hardwood floor, jealously protecting the delicate feet of black teak cabinets and tables.

Polished to a mirror shine, the tables held oriental curios from dynasties long extinct. Yards of multi-colored silk were draped overhead in deep swags and folds. Ornaments of polished silver, green jade and black onyx completed her collection. As lovely as the items were, they hardly seemed to fit the personality of the woman inhabiting the chamber.

No one questioned her right to live well, when others of the council lived in more austere, less well-appointed quarters. She enjoyed her luxury, reveled in it. It was her right. She was, after all, the ard-corrym.

*A First Justice who wishes to see them all dead at her feet.*

Acting leader of the council was not originally her position—that honor had been reserved for Morgan. And he had, perhaps wisely, refused it; Megwyn had cunningly offered herself in his stead.

A snarl in her hair snapped her head back.

“Have a care!” she snapped. “Keep it up and you’ll pull me bald.”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Loran answered hastily. She divided the long tresses into sections and braided it around a gold circlet.

“Arrange it well.”

“Yes, lady, I shall,” Loran promised.

“I want to look my best this day.”

Thinking again of those council members she must plead to, a strange mixture of rage and resentment filled her.

*I’ll have to play these games just a little while longer.*

She raised eyes that teemed with devious plans. Her lips turned up in a smirk of self-satisfaction.

*And then, no more. When I am done, all the lesser people will bow to me.*



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Morgan stood quietly by the altar, vaguely disturbed. The fire in its bowels flickered and glimmered raggedly, like the phrases of a broken chant. Around him, a cold chill whispered in the air.

Save for the muted trickle of water, the chamber had grown quiet. Shadows hovered in every corner. The air was motionless.

Julienne lay on the altar. Eyes closed, lips parted in gentle repose, she slept a dreamless sleep. No black tendrils wound their way through her veins. The color in her cheeks was heightened. He skimmed her nude body. Hair spilling around her head like silk, her body was unblemished. Perfect. He had done it.

He wanted to touch her. Hold her and make love to her. Look into her eyes as he took her, letting her know she belonged to him, and he to her.

Drawing in a breath, he felt the familiar ache deep in his loins. He could recall the way she looked after sex, covered with a gloss of sweat, jade eyes shielded by the fall of long lashes, a satisfied smile curving her lips.

Lips tightly set, eyes half-closed, he guided his hand across her skin—the flat plane of her belly, the curve of her breast, her throat. He felt the softness of her, the warmth. He could hear her every breath, feel the pulse driven by her heart.

He ran his finger down her breastbone. Under his touch, the wonder of the physical body had come to life. He had never felt so keenly alive, the rush of his own energies amalgamating with those of the netherworld, becoming the spark that granted form to the mysterious, sometimes frightening, shadows of conjuration. His senses had

coalesced; falling together in a single coherent moment of sensation so intense it brought the meaning of creation home to him.

To change her, he'd struggled over the concepts Xavier had introduced into his alchemy, marveling over the complex essences the sorcerer employed to create his mutants, raising animation where there should be none. Moreover, he had managed to take his work one step further, actually merging one with a human.

The result was fascinating. A new respect for his former ally had developed as he explored the formation of an entirely unique being. Only a single ingredient would be needed to complete her transformation.

Blood.

It would bring the spell full circle and into completion. When her hunger finally came—if she accepted it—he would give himself as her first victim to seal his gift.

*She will have to give pain to get what she needs...*And he would be glad to take that pain to get the release he needed.

Feeling curiously disturbed, he drew his hand away.

Pain. The release he needed.

He shuddered, feeling sharp lance of guilt. There was a deeper way to connect with a woman, a way for two minds and bodies to join and share physical and psychic experiences, but he'd never practiced sexual magic. The idea repulsed him. The dangers of the old sins tended to recur and while he struggled not to commit them, he would never completely escape them, either.

With a single thought, he was drawn into the past, unwillingly thinking of another who had once practiced forbidden rites in this place of darkness. The altar revolved nauseatingly in front of his eyes, and he felt a renewed bitterness.

*My father...*

Morgan was a man who rarely allowed events to bother him. He did not believe in destiny, but he knew invisible strings were woven through the ages and the lives of men. They pulled at one like the memories of old lovers.

*We all leave behind bits, can become entangled in them if we allow ourselves to be caught.*

He didn't like the idea. He preferred to believe he could pick a path through time and follow it, by will and strength alone.

But he was wrong. His future was firmly intertwined with his past; and until he reconciled with one and accepted the other, in this present time he would know no progress. In that moment, he felt a deep, personal grief and a sense of defeat.

Memories. The graves littering the ground of his brain. Some bodies were well-covered, grown over, and barely left an impression. He'd made his peace with them and refused to look back. Others refused to rest. Buried alive, they struggled to return to the forefront of his mind, exhuming themselves to point accusing fingers.

His father's ghost was one that refused to stay buried. No matter how hard he tried, how deep he dug or how much he drank, he could not lay Celeon Ese-Yeveanston to rest. His mind was plagued with horrors of the past and the sorrow of what could not be regained.

A long shiver ripped through him, and he felt a chill creep into his bones. His heart beat heavily in his chest; he had difficulty breathing. It was as if a great vise gripped his body and was squeezing...squeezing...

Nobody could fail to be unnerved by the concentration of sheer disdain and hatred he projected. Celeon lived by one rule: he who has the power makes the rules.

And Celeon always made sure he had that power.

He was not particularly concerned with whom he destroyed in the process. Just his presence alone would make the hackles rise, the mouth go dry. He beat and belittled until he made people fear and hate him, the humiliations and physical blows he dealt out like cards simply the byproducts of the exercise of power, the one pursuit he delighted and excelled in. A sadist and a bisexual, Celeon's tastes bordered on the perverse. Though he would take women as lovers, his true desires included young boys.

Jaw tightening, Morgan fought the sick, gripping squeeze of icy fingers around his heart. Long, sharp nails dug deep and—damn, it hurt!

Thinking of his father never failed to unnerve him. He had hated being a child, hated the feeling of helplessness, of being smaller and weaker than an adult.

When he was young, he had learned to keep his mouth shut and his head down. The less Celeon saw of him, the better. He didn't realize that in seeking escape for himself, he was condemning his twin to a fate uglier than the verbal censure and physical beatings.

He laughed, but there was only self-condemnation in the sound. He took a step away from the altar. Innocence. It was a thing he did not remember ever having. There must have been a time when he didn't know these awful things, a time when he could close his eyes and not be attacked from within by the evil spirits devouring his mind. Why couldn't he forget the past and forgive himself for things he could not then control?

Too many disquieting memories, a strange emptiness in his core. Time could never distance such abuse. His rigid self-control faltered as words from the past echoed in his mind.

"No evil can enter your heart unless you permit it," his mother had said. "Keep to the light and use wisely what you have been granted. *Eshyn ghuirrys sheilley hayr yn skeilley*. He who creates evil shall be overtaken by it."

But she had gone into the darkness where there was no escape or hope. The darkness had destroyed her. Now he recognized the wisdom and wished he'd heeded it earlier. In the past, he had neither used his legacy wisely nor kept away from the darkness. Darkness ate away at the light. Disavowing her words, he could not help but be drawn into the shadows.

If he was not wise, he would fall—and take his mate with him.

*I cannot fail again.*

A wave of claustrophobia slipped around him, a heavy mantle of foreboding, guilt and regret. He felt a tightening in his chest, a strange emptiness in his head. Suddenly, he had to get out.

Unwilling to pardon the past, he turned on his heel, throwing off the black cloak and casting it to the floor. His strides swiftly carried him out of the chamber.

Disgusted, disturbed, he walked away from his necropolis of memories. Thinking rarely did him any good. It only made him angry; that was his worst trait. When he was angry, he was the most dangerous. Inside his rational mind, he could not deal with the life he'd led. Therefore, he hid the saner part of his psyche behind walls he imagined, walls that allowed for irrational and destructive behavior.

With Julianne's entrance into his life, the walls were coming down, forcing him to bring out and deal with guilt, as he never had in the past. And as much as he did not want to face these facets of himself, he knew he could not avoid them indefinitely.

It was not more than a minute or two before he reached the foyer. First bright, then dark, then bright again, the bleary luminosity of the day was depressing.

Morgan stopped dead. Head tilting back, he studied the windows skillfully designed with the Spanish crest of the Ese-Yeveanston bloodline. He felt a tremor of self-loathing rise in his gut. He did not want to admit he belonged to them, traveling full circle and returning to the very thing he had attempted to escape. He could've sworn the vicious carnivores were alive, accusing him of denying the life they represented.

He closed his eyes, rubbing his face. Lowering his arms, he could not help but notice his hands. These were the hands of a man who knew the ways of death. He had killed a lot of people with these hands.

The lions winked. Menacing. Mocking.

He could sense the entity inside looking out through his eyes, that thing shared his body, his soul, his mind. It was like a caged animal, large, vicious and cunningly intelligent, perched on a ledge waiting to drop down on the weaker prey.

*Someday I will shatter those damned things.*

He narrowed his eyes, centering his inner energies. Body stiffening, he moved his hands into position in front, palms out, curved fingers slightly spread. He gave the lions a mental nudge. Just a little.

From the center, a tiny hairline crack began to form in the thick glass.

Unconscious of his movement, he shifted and pressed the tips of his fingers together. Right behind his eyes he could feel a pressure, the reaction of action. Not bad. He pushed harder.

The single crack grew larger. He could hear the glass begin to give.

The pressure increased, bringing a twinge.

*Bearable. Nothing to worry about.*

He levered another mental thrust toward the windows. No more gentleness. Now he pressed—hard. The cracks multiplied, branching out in a spider's web, snaking with unnerving speed through the mural.

*Harder. Harder. Harder.*

The lions shattered. Thousands of tiny shards rained down around him. At the same instant, an electric sensation smacked him in the center of his forehead, right between the eyes. A blinding spike of pain lodged firmly in his brain when his pent-up emotions exploded into violence.

Dazed, only half-conscious of what had occurred, Morgan raised an unsteady hand to his temple, pressing his fingers against the prominent vein bulging there. Things doubled in front of his eyes then gradually resumed their normal appearance. He swayed a little but caught himself. His jaw locked. His head felt as if it were going to explode like a stick of dynamite in a bottle. The pain was no worse than he deserved.

Disgusted, he cursed his stupidity. *Idiot!*

Use his ability—abuse his ability—and he would burn himself out. Do it hard enough, long enough, and he could kill himself, at least mentally. Oh, his body would survive. His mind? He would be a complete vegetable.

*I must take care and not let the hunger consume me.*

Power. The lure, the siren's song. He had thought of it often during his exile. Why deny it?

*Do you want to keep your wits?* he asked himself. *Or do you want to lose it completely?*

Morgan shook his head, swallowing against nausea. He drew a deep breath, fighting to send the headache away. Gradually, his trembling stilled, and the pain receded. A little.

Not now. Not yet. He couldn't afford the luxury.

But later, he could. And when it came, he would give in.

It would come back. Small things, at first no bother, but rapping at his skull. When the migraine arrived, he would do as he always did: drink his way through it. The alcohol usually deadened him a bit and made him a vicious, temperamental jerk in the process. People around him knew enough to clear out when he withdrew into silence and picked up the bottle.

Despite that effort, though, the pain would gradually increase. As it grew, it would dash madly through his head with crushing force, demonic hooves sending out crimson barbs of pure agony. Light would become unbearable, to the point it would feel as though someone were pouring molten lava into his skull through his eye sockets. Sound even more so, magnified to where he was sure every cell in his brain would implode and collapse into a black hole.

It was when he could no longer think coherently that he got the urge to go digging for the thing inside, the thing bringing the punishment. At those times, he wanted to see it. Face it. Kill it. That dark, shadowy figure shot through with crimson standing in the center of his mind, lashing its barbed cat-'o-nine-tails straight into the soft tissue of his brain.

The razor blade. Surely the finest invention of modern man. Single edged. Sleek. Silver. Perfect for cutting, gliding through and parting skin with surgical precision. Times like that, when the pain was so bad he could not see straight, the razor was an oasis. Salvation.

Blood. The tide of warm crimson over chilled skin. Losing it made the darkness come, made the pain go. Regeneration. He would live. Memory like Swiss cheese, but brain cells intact.

It wasn't only razors that attracted him. Cigarettes. For the burning. One of the reasons he'd quit smoking.

And here he was. Calling it back like a lost child cried out for its mother, knowing it was going to punish him for going astray.

Why?

*Admit it.*

He liked the pain.

Enjoyed it.

Courted it.

Long ago, his destructive impulses had ceased to be about suicide, instead becoming a matter of satisfaction. Alcohol, the cutting, the burning—all eased the pressure and angst, the boredom, the apathy, the depression. But more than that, they also ushered in a powerful, almost erotic pleasure. It was all a coping mechanism. Probably the reason he had survived as long as he had. The bad part was, he sometimes transferred his need for self-torture into his sex life. It made for short, violent relationships. He would have to tread with care if he wanted to ease Julianne into that side of his life.

Feeling numb, yet wired, Morgan crossed to the barred door and removed the plank from its face. He was determined not to start another long slide into despair. Being in motion helped. Pieces of glass were ground into the stone when he left the foyer.

The wind outside was cool but not unpleasant. He enjoyed the sensation as it blew across the hollows of his face and pulled at his hair. He began to walk, going around a corner and farther out into the bare expanse. The haze, the shock of wet on his face, the soft wind and the cliffs—the gray skies perfectly echoed his mood.

He walked until he came to the brink. No crashing of waves filled the air. There was no water below. Only rock. The abyss was a deep one, hundreds of feet down.

He stood, listening to the wind. It seemed to whisper in his ear, calling him. He shivered. The idea sent prickles of chill up his spine.

A sardonic grimace crossed his countenance, wrinkled his brow. His brows hit a downward slope, and a hard glint came into his obsidian eyes, matching the growing darkness of the swirling clouds. He stared into it and tried to cope with his existence.



Sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, he took a step closer. The ledge was not unstable, would not crumble under his weight. It was far from dangerous. Still, he liked the idea of being on the edge.

He stood, motionless, contemplating the turbulent sky. It vaguely occurred to him that in not changing into a more suitable set of clothes he'd taken the first step in defying the rules of walking between the mortal world and Sclyd. It was the first thing stripped from mortals brought over. Clothing and any other possessions they'd managed to hold onto. The first thing they were deprived of was an individual identity. It was part of the breaking down process, taking away dignity by treating them as a sub-species.

The two cultures—one medieval, one modern—were never to be violated by the other. He'd resoundingly broken that rule. And he did not care because he no longer felt he belonged within the dimensions.

So where, exactly, did he belong?

Uncomfortable in his own skin and with the world around him, he had attempted to remake himself, distancing himself from the past. Throughout his centuries, he had reinvented his life several times. He liked the mystery he could so easily create. Enjoyed hiding behind the wall of anonymity time had allowed him to build. It suited him to be able to vanish into the unknown without a trace.

This time, however, there was no walking away. Through his whole life, something had been missing, the vital desire to live, really live. Before, he had not cared.

Now he wanted to survive.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

As if swimming through an ocean of molasses, Julianne came to consciousness, clammy with sweat. An unrecalled nightmare floated just beyond sight like a wraith.

Aware of the stone beneath her body, the chill permeating the air, she struggled to sit up. She felt bruised, limp and a little weak; but there was no pain. None.

Drawing a deep breath, she became aware that there was no longer a heavy weight between her lungs. She pressed her palm between her breasts. No injury. She surveyed her arm, her stomach and legs. The black tendrils were no more, sunken to merge with her bone structure. *My God, is it really gone?*

No, not gone. It was a part of her now, living deep inside. She and it were one. *One...what?*

Mind reeling with questions, she swung her legs over the edge of the altar and tried to stand. Her bare feet scraped against the stone floor; and she stumbled, falling heavily and bruising her hip.

“Ouch, damn it! That hurt!”

Needing to cover her nudity, she snagged the remnants of her caftan. Getting back to her feet, she wrapped the silken material around her body, cursing Morgan for ripping it. She was unsteady, but she was upright.

The candles on the altar had guttered, down to stubs. No other fires burned, the twin hearths holding only gray, cold ashes. In a few more minutes the candles would extinguish, leaving her in darkness.

The place was eerie; she didn’t want to be alone. Where was Morgan? She frowned.

Steps. Uncounted. Interminable. Odd—she didn't remember the tunnel being this long. Had she taken a wrong turn somewhere? Impossible. The tunnel was straight, with no twists or turns.

The soft padding of her feet followed as she made her way back up the long passage, the gloom curling around her like a cloak. The echo of her breath, creeping after her, seemed to whisper in her ears. She forced herself forward, one hand trailing along the wall her only guide in the darkness. She shivered with a fear not altogether born of the unknown world she had entered. Once again she had the feeling she was escaping from something that would devour her.

More steps. Bony fingers clutched at her throat. Had something gone wrong? Her nerves were taut, screaming at her to run, hurry, get out of this place. But she refused to hurry, refused to let her fear get the better of her.

Abruptly, the tunnel came to its end.

Julienne advanced with timid steps back into the den. It was empty. Abandoned. She hurried up the stairs, pausing to peer down briefly. She shook her head in a dismissive gesture and exited.

The foyer was lit with candles burning from recesses chiseled high into the stone walls. The mural of lions had been shattered. Pieces of glass showered the floor. The main door now hung wide open.

Her breath froze in her chest. *What happened?*

Drawing the folds of her torn caftan close, she crept around the glass and hurried up the stairs. A gust of wind rocked her back when she stepped outside.

She looked around, seeing only a blur of stark rock. Veiled in evening shadows, it was an uncanny, beautiful place. Remote. Inhospitable. The scent and promise of rain permeated the air. The breeze was cool, harsh, but not unpleasant, the stones smooth under her bare feet. She caught sight of the lone figure in the distance, standing near the edge of cliffs. Within the fog, he seemed unreal, ghostly.

*Morgan.*

She hurried down a flight of stone steps and out into the dead lands, halting when she saw how dangerously close he stood to the edge. Stifling shock behind her hand, she stood rooted in place.

Her concentration on him was so complete and intense, their minds came together, flooding her in emotions so focused they were bone-chilling, stomach-churning ice in her bloodstream.

Morgan's guard was down, his mind occupied with an assortment of thoughts, dwelling on past hurts and hates. The rush of extrasensory images that impacted her brain with a resounding clarity stunned her. As though in a hall of mirrors, her inner eyes were inundated with hundreds of stark images. Instead of seeing her own reflection, though, she saw Morgan's.

The nameless horrors within his memories were too many to count. Everywhere she turned revealed another facet of his past...his mother's body hanging, swaying gently...Celeon taking the young boy from behind, slowly strangling the child with a cord tied around his neck, a reverse form of auto-eroticism, the throes of death providing the ultimate orgasm for the sadist...Megwyn lying atop that accursed altar, her small, pale body covered in strange symbols drawn onto her skin in blood...

Horried, Julianne covered her hands with her eyes. Her hands were cold, her mouth dry. She was repulsed, but curiosity overcame it. She wanted to know more, to understand his past. Guided by an intuitive and inborn knowledge, she pressed past the terrifying images to encounter a chilling area deep within his psyche. Where fear should have rested, that whispering voice of wisdom and self-preservation, there was only weary resignation to the inevitable fate awaiting him. Whisper, whisper—little mouths with soft voices filled his brain.

*Insanity.*

By now Morgan was aware of her. Without turning, he closed one hand into a fist. He regained absolute control and shoved her out. Away. She'd overstepped a personal boundary.

*Please don't push me out,* she begged in a wordless plea.

No answer came other than his anger, a black, violent rush. It lasted less than five minutes, but in that time she felt she had been to hell and

back. Their tentative connection severed, her head felt tight, like her skull was in a vise. She drew a shaky breath, lifted a hand to her forehead. She swayed with the wind, feeling faint.

“Morgan?” she ventured, just loud enough to be heard over the wind. “Are you all right?”

*With those horrible things in his head?* her mind filled in. *No, no, he’s not all right. He’s far from all right. His soul and sanity to have been torn to pieces.*

For the longest time, he did not respond. When he did, it was to glance over his shoulder. His face, starkly austere in the pallid light, brooded with a distant, inhuman calm. She could see the bluish highlights in the rich black of his hair, the shine of the silver salting his bangs and temples. He was more stunning than ever but his face was pale and his gaze remote.

“Be careful with your abilities,” he warned in a brisk voice, inclining his head in curt acknowledgement. There was a fierceness behind his tone, one that said his old fires of wrath could burn strong and bright. “Some things I will not share with you.”

She allowed the barest of smiles to touch her lips. He did not smile back, and she didn’t think his voice could get any chillier. It contained the warmth of an arctic snowstorm. *I can’t have any illusions or delusions about him.*

“I can’t control it. It just came. I didn’t mean to.”

He turned back to the void below; she felt his inner wall go up. His cynical, irreverent mask had slipped a little but, as always, went back into place. She could tell he was restless, uneasy. Concerned, she went closer and placed her hand on his shoulder.

He immediately tensed, muscles coiling. He always seemed uncomfortable when she initiated touch. A momentary hardness locked his jaw before he whirled and freed himself, not with revulsion but with a coldness that filled her with apprehension. He was slipping away.

Her heart missed a beat. A coppery tinge of fear welled in her mouth. Hate and contempt warred on his features, his jaw line so taut the

muscles cording his neck stood out. But far worse than that—his irises were an icy, fathomless crystal-blue.

Like his sister...his father...

Julienne, troubled and a little dazed, closed her eyes and counted a fast ten. *No! That's impossible. Eyes don't change color.*

When she looked again, they were their normal obsidian. His gaze was bright with a strange frustration and a simmering, potent resentment. She held her breath and waited for him to speak. She needed to speak herself, tell him about her fears, her doubts. But he said nothing, and she could not find any words at all.

A pained hesitation. "How you survived..." she started to say, but what she thought to say died in her throat and her composure dissolved. His hard scowl ought to have warned her to leave him alone. It didn't.

"Forget what happened. It is easier that way." Morgan's expression was blank. He did not look indifferent. He looked guarded. He turned back to the cliffs, his meaning ringing loud and clear.

He didn't want this, she thought miserably. He wasn't ready to go back to what he was, much less drag me over with him.

There was a long and terrible silence.

Julienne studied him. His was a rugged and untamed soul, and she sensed a strange energy boiling beneath the surface of his calm, an incredible force just waiting to detonate. He tried to deny it, keep it bottled up but inevitably stressful forces would overwhelm him, often with devastating results.

*He's close to that now,* she thought.

Without a word, without any warning or provocation, Morgan unexpectedly grabbed her arm. She didn't see him move, but she drew back when he touched her. He was faster, his grip unyielding as he pulled her in front of him. Roughly five feet separated her from the edge.

It was happening again, that strange shifting of mental gears from morbid depression to quiet menace. There was no predicting how he would act or react. She had not meant to prod his self-destructive side. Like a snake, it was coiled and ready to strike at any time. Very

dangerous. His entire life has been built on lies. Strip them away, and you would find almost nothing of left of him.

She thought about the lash marks across his back, his father's way of beating the human out of him. She did not want to think of the other things to which Celeon had exposed his son. She'd had a glimpse, and that was enough to tighten her guts. It was not, however, the mutant causing this sickness inside her. It was revulsion. Not at him, but at those who had wounded him. The man standing behind her had once been a child who had been subjected to unimaginable emotional and physical abuse.

She should have been afraid. It had been a very disturbing day, and now this. Yet, though she held her breath, she wasn't panicky. If he wanted to kill her it would be easy. She was fairly light. It would take no real effort. All he had to do was push.

"Frightening, is it not, being so near the ledge?" he asked.

Hands at the small of her back, he urged her forward another step. Closer. She chanced a look over the edge and nearly fainted from vertigo. She'd always been afraid of heights. In such an exhausted state, her nausea and dizziness were amplified tenfold.

Fighting the urge to break away and run, Julianne clenched her arms around her body, fighting to hold her scraps of clothing in place. The wind whipped at the long folds of her torn caftan; the idiot notion it would pick her up and send her sailing into the air like a kite popped into her head. It seemed she could not speak, that her tongue had been cut out and she doomed to be silent until the end of eternity.

At last, her lips parted; and her voice was clear. "If you want me dead, push."

She closed her eyes, swallowing against the sensations rocketing through her. She was determined not to let him scare her.

*But it isn't just Morgan living inside his head now.* It was as though something had moved into an empty place in his skull; and whatever it was, it wasn't Morgan and it wasn't human. *That's the thing I don't trust.*

And that thing might have different ideas about being mated to her.

He laughed, low in his throat. Another push. Four steps separated her from the ledge.

*“Cha daink rieu yn baase gyn leshtal,”* he said, then translated. “Death never comes without an excuse.”

Julienne was sure he was preparing to shove her. She wanted to move away from the edge, but Morgan refused to let her go. She closed her eyes and gasped for breath. Mouth dry, heart pumping, she said, “How’d you kill her, Morgan? Tell me how you killed Nisidia.”

“I strangled her,” he breathed in a voice that sent chills down her spine. “I took the sash of her gown, wrapped it around her neck and drew it tight.”

Morbid curiosity filled her. “Was she beautiful?”

“Very.”

She gulped. “Did you love her?”

“No.” A layer of distaste.

“Do you...?” The question hung, but she could not force herself to finish it. *Do you love me?* Perhaps because she was afraid of what his answer might be. *No.* She didn’t want to hear it then. She didn’t want to know.

He lifted his hands and pushed her hair away from her neck, exposing bare skin. He began massaging her nape, her shoulders. She wanted to say something in response, to snap back at him or move away from him like a sensible person would. She stood motionless instead, lulled by the sensual, powerful feel of his hands on her skin. He was so close behind her.

She fought against the sudden fierce tightening in her body. He was near enough to ignite any number of erotic fantasies, every one of which came to her with a clarity that made her cheeks flame and sent molten lava through her veins. The intensity of his touch seemed to fuse his skin to hers, settling in her core as if she were completely naked.

Leaning close, he whispered in her ear. His voice was steady, the cadence more sustained now and in perfect rhythm with the pounding of her heart. It was achingly compelling.



“They say what does not kill you makes you stronger,” he said. “I cannot help but think that, in bringing you across, I am killing you.”

It was strange how quickly reality could chase away fantasy. Gathering her wits, she managed to stammer, “I don’t understand.”

His fingers stopped moving. She could not see his face, but she could sense his grimace. She could imagine his fingers pressing into her flesh, crushing her windpipe, cutting off her air.

“Not your body. Your spirit, your very soul.”

Troubled and more than a little disturbed, Julianne bit her lip and asked, “Why do you say that?”

His hands tightened on her shoulders. His fingers were cool against her too-hot skin. “Think about it. From now on, you will be living behind secrets and lies. Soon, you will become a thief of lives, because to feed the creature’s hunger you will have to steal what is not yours, kill if you have to protect what you are.”

She balked, aware he had grown even tenser.

“I-I don’t know if I could...kill...another human being,” she stammered. The thought of murder was repugnant. Her brain was filling with thoughts she never would have dreamed thinkable less than two months ago.

It dawned on her that the time she needed for soul searching had long since passed. She shook her head, amazed, disgusted and confused. Had she really considered the consequences?

No, she had not.

She’d chosen on impulse, and now she was paying for that impulse. In blood. Spiritual currency.

His hands clasped her shoulders more tightly. “You still have a chance to turn away. You are not complete.”

She realized his meaning. Was there envy in his voice that she still had an escape and he did not? He was silent, waiting for a response. She refused to give him one. Then she felt his hands moving again, along her neck, her shoulders. He continued with quiet patience.

“If you want to survive, you are going to have to learn this is a damned existence. There is little mercy.”

She thought of his earlier confession about his lover, about the awful things she had just seen in his mind. "Hard lesson."

"Only the strong survive."

With a tremulous breath, she finished, "The weak succumb."

Morgan's voice, with its strangely shaded undertones, rumbled in her ears. "Which are you, Julianne? Strong? Or weak? How close to the edge are you willing to go?"

"What if I'm not ready?" She didn't like the reactions he was provoking in her. Her pulse had quickened, and her palms were damp.

"*Is fearr lúbadh ná briseadh.* It is better to bend than to break." He unexpectedly gave her another push, closer to the brink. "I would not have come this far with you if I did not believe you were ready."

She knew what he was doing. In a not-so-subtle way, he was testing her mettle. Her merit. How easily did she become frightened and back off? Would she fold, or would she face the challenge head-on? If she weren't resilient she would be a liability. Such was a luxury he could not afford. In a way, she could not afford it, either.

And Morgan wasn't backing off. He was making her face her fear, waking her emotions and sharpening her senses.

"You're not being fair," she breathed. "I've done my best."

"I never play fair. You know that."

"Damn you," she hissed through gritted teeth. Breaking out of his grasp, she turned to face him. She was angry, indignant. She jabbed a finger into his chest. "Stop it. The time for playing games is over."

He was as still as stone, and she knew it was because he was waiting to see what she would do next. Then, without a word, he stepped back, far enough to give her room to go around him, offering a small relief to her harried brain. No one was going over the cliffs today.

A small, bitter smile tweaked her lips. He not only lived on the edge, he'd been over and back several times. And this time he was taking her with him.

Julianne gathered her wits and her courage, which at this moment were not much at all. "When does it happen?" She shivered, drawing the material tighter. "This change?"

He forced a cynical smile. "I am not really sure."

She took in a long breath, fear and repugnance tumbling through. "And if I choose not to go through with it?"

His gaze grew sharp and damning. "Your hunger will begin to turn on you." He brushed a wing of dark hair clear of his face.

"And I'll die."

She felt a surge in the pit of her stomach. How could she not know what it was? It was now a countdown, each passing hour bringing her closer to when she must have the life source of another living creature.

*Blood.*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The sky was overcast, not unusual for the time of year. Clouds, already low to the earth, sank to mingle with a translucent fog from no apparent source. It seemed to flow and change, light and shadow dancing together. An all but invisible pulsation of power brightened then darkened to expel a creature from a more sinister side of existence.

Naylor emerged from the veils. He hovered in the heart of a vast, empty space. The vapors around him shimmered like frost, but the odd, filtered light cast no shadows. His lean body assumed a vaguely human shape, creating a black space. He seemed to gather the darkness around him like a cloak, then disburse it, a shield of invisibility. His feet did not touch the ground. He waded, feather-light, floating.

The wind laughed, knowing firsthand the secrets of the night. Its cold fingers reached to caress his dead face. Night birds were silent, predators still, as if afraid of the unholy thing that had come among them. The land lay deserted, the acres uncultivated. Trees and berry brambles mingled with the untamed ivy. For the moment, he ruled the vast chaotic night, a prince of darkness.

Creeping like an experienced thief, Naylor moved forward, penetrating the boundary of a six-foot stone fence. Inside were the hallmarks of civilization: manicured gardens, sidewalks. Riding the air currents, he slithered forward until his dark gaze fell upon a whitewashed manor three stories high. This was the mortal sanctuary of his mistress's twin. He lived among mortals. Played at being human.

Naylor's lips curled. Disgusting. How could the assassin live among these weak animals, good for nothing but sacrifice?

Advancing closer, he caught a brief glimpse of the people within. Their faces were pensive, drawn. They were talking among themselves, low and seriously. His eyes narrowed. A Danarran sat among them. The elf seemed uneasy, glancing again and again toward the window and making protective symbols across his little body.

The Danarran knew.

The humans did not. They thought the moans outside only the wind.

Mortals.

Weak.

Warm.

Red.

Sustenance.

Naylor hovered, a wraith on the night air. His undead breath made no fog on the glass when he pressed cold hands against the window.

Abruptly, he drew back. He felt a presence, a pressure pushing him away. An angry hiss passed his lips. He began to search, finding at last the familiar symbols branded into the sill.

A circle of protection.

"Within thy circle," he whispered the words of the spell. "Here is sacred shelter."

He stifled the urge to break away, to scream aloud and shatter the glass. Gnashing his teeth, he longed to bound inside, ripping, tearing, bathing in the fear, glutting himself on blood pumping from hearts he held in his hands.

*Blood is the life.*

Calming himself, the black man smiled, revealing sharp incisors. He'd expected no less.

His frigid gaze grew pensive. He must take care—the assassin was a power no longer restricted or bound. But Morgan had committed sacrilege. For this he must surely pay.

*He knows we watch. He knows we wait.*

Naylor altered his shape, melted into the wind, a soft, haunting sigh accompanying his change. He drifted around a corner, tapping on windowpanes, twisting doorknobs. The manor was locked tight, not a

crevice to be found. More symbols were burned into sills and doorframes and chimneys.

He hovered outside, finally alighting on the roof. Though he longed to feed again, he would, instead, do what he had been sent to do.

Inspect.

Listen.

Wait.

And then he would glut himself on the blood of the woman he had been promised, a new kind of vampire.

A living vampire.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Arms folded across his chest, Morgan leaned against the doorframe leading, watching Julianne.

Unaware of his presence, she was settled on the window seat which had an unobstructed view of the back gardens. The library was her favorite place, perhaps because it had also been her grandmother's. Anlese had spent many peaceful afternoons in this room, knitting her elaborate creations. Many of the old woman's colorful afghans graced the furniture. A bag of knitting still sat by her favorite lounge.

Looking out onto the same scene, he could see that the sky was overcast. Trees wore brown and rusty orange garb; the velvety lawn a hay-like shade. Fading flowers withered. Even the fountain, with its magnificent Celtic lion, seemed...drab, blah.

Lynar sat beside her, small feet banging as he swung his legs back and forth, engaged in trying to figure out the mysteries of a Rubik's Cube. Twisting and turning, trying to match the colors, he was having little luck solving the puzzle. That was good. Anything to keep those itchy little fingers busy.

The elf was on everyone's shit list. Barely four days had passed, and Lynar had managed to endear himself to no one with his incessant thievery.

He'd heard every complaint. Already, Lynar had stolen a paring knife from Gretel's kitchen, a compact and lipstick from Melissa, a set of car keys from Danielle and every cent of change he could lay his hands on. His little pouch was bulging with scavenged treasure. Into everything and constantly underfoot, the Danarran's welcome was wearing thin. No one

knew what to do with him. Toys were the only solution. Puzzles seemed to engage his mind.

Completing a side of solid blue, Lynar held it up for inspection. "See?"

Julienne glanced down and flashed a brief smile, polite, but disinterested. "Yes. Very good. Now try to get all the sides the same color." Lynar went back to his puzzle cube. Not lacking in intelligence, he'd already managed to master rudimentary words of basic English and could make himself understood.

Julienne turned her attention back to the view outside. She watched Georges Losch and his sons busy with pruning and tilling. She'd cracked open the window to let in fresh air. The smell of damp grass mingled with the wild scent of wood cracking in the hearth. Winter was nipping the heels of autumn. It was the cycle of life, of death and, come the spring, renewal. The weary passage of the hours had only brought the unavoidable nearer. Soon the decision would be upon her.

Closing his eyes, Morgan stilled his breath. He centered his energies on Julienne, reaching out to stroke her, not in a physical way but a telepathic one, following the path of the blood-bond they shared. Julienne was a powerful, if untrained, telepath. Not wanting her to sense his intrusion, he only delved into her psychic aura for a second.

On a deeper level, where her thoughts were not clearly discernable, she was afraid. To hide her fear, she'd sought seclusion, turning away from him at a time when they should be growing closer.

It was a fear he understood. He couldn't blame her for seeking precious time to herself. Her whole life was about to be altered in a way most people could not imagine or comprehend. Even as she grappled with the agonies and exhilarations of her pending step into the existence of an immortal, other changes, physical changes, harried her.

These, too, he understood. The metamorphoses always proved too difficult for any sane being of conscience. And in shedding human traits a larger question always loomed. Would humanity, too, be lost? The inevitable answer was almost always yes. Her body, the citadel of her soul, was no longer her own but had been invaded, defiled.



He sighed, shifting restlessly. They were not sharing a bed and that irritated him. Even though each maintained private rooms on separate levels, they'd always managed to begin a night together, when he would indulge in the delights of her body. Usually he was the one to slip away when she fell into the grip of sleep. She was the restless one now, avoiding his touch as the last of her mortality slipped through her fingers like sand.

Would she decide on life? Or would she find the idea of vampirism wholly repugnant and refuse?

Life or death.

What did it matter that her agreement to cross over was given when she was wholly ignorant of what becoming an immortal might entail?

Morgan rubbed a hand over tired eyes. She wasn't the only one who wasn't sleeping, but for very different reasons. The burning desire to make love to her was all encompassing. Everything about her appealed to him. Her allure...her uncertainty...the very fragility of her spirit. Neither his mind nor body was invulnerable to her touch. It still amazed him that she could—and did—love him.

The sound of light footsteps crossing the foyer broke into his contemplations. Before he turned, he knew Danielle Yames was behind him, had sensed her intentions before she'd even known where to find him.

He stepped away from the door, not wanting to disturb Julianne. Reality would soon enough intrude.

Danielle held out a single page. By the look on her face she was not pleased. "Here's what you've been waiting for."

He declined to take it. "When is he coming?"

Danielle folded the paper in half. "He should be here any time. Within a half hour, I'm sure."

He nodded, reaching into his vest for his cigarette case. He opened it, looked inside for a moment, decided not to light one, then snapped it shut. That was odd. Usually, he was never fidgety.

"This will settle everything with the estate, won't it?" Danielle asked.

"Yes," was all the explanation he offered to her not-so-subtle prying.

She digested his information, fighting to keep her face impassive. She wasn't succeeding. "Then you won't be staying?"

He tucked the case back in his vest pocket. "I do not know." That was the most honest answer he could give.

"I see." Rather than leaving once her message had been delivered, Danielle stood staunchly. She wasn't giving an inch.

He narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Danielle shook her head in a chiding way. "You're no longer alone, you know. You could build something here—with her."

He leaned back against the wall, running a hand through his hair in agitation. "I have thought of that."

"Don't just think about it. Do it." Danielle talked fast, probably so he wouldn't interrupt her. Prying into his personal life was something he rarely tolerated. One of his most valuable employees, she was also his fiercest critic.

Instead of being angered, he considered her words. "I wonder if it could work."

"It might, if you give it a chance."

A long suffering sigh escaped him. "How simple you make it sound."

Danielle tilted her head to the side, pinning him under a gaze that said he wasn't going to wriggle off the hook. "Maybe it's time you quit packing up and running off every time someone gets close to you."

He couldn't deny her words. He always did just that.

"Perhaps." *Cha vel fer erbee cha bouyr, as eshyn nagh jean clashtyn*, he thought. *None so deaf as he who will not hear.*

"Holding people at arm's length must get tiring," she said.

He impaled her with his harshest glare. One hand balled into a tight fist at his side. "*Lhig lhiam!* Spare me this talk now. I have to think." His voice was rasping and utterly unlike his usual tone.

Crumpling the unread message, Danielle pulled back her shoulders, confident that she'd put a thorn in his side. As she walked away, her last words on the matter drifted over her shoulder. "You never should have left."

In a swift, half-conscious thought, it occurred to him that she was probably right.

Morgan glanced around the foyer, taking in every detail. Beautifully arranged, the entry was impeccably decorated, from the white marble of the floor to each piece of furniture and painting.

*Home is where the heart is.*

As many times as he'd left this place, he'd always returned, finding a warm hearth and the women who'd always guarded its secrets. He'd always resisted thinking of it as a permanent place to settle, that the day would come when he must walk away for the final time and never look back. That day, much to his dismay, apparently hadn't arrived. He was being forced to rethink his position on his legacy, his role in the Sclydian wars, his relationship with Julianne. In all those areas he'd made mistakes, grievous errors that had not only punished him but others around him.

He fully believed at the time that he was making the correct decisions. Hindsight was revealing to his eyes that he'd made the wrong choices, ended up hurting those who'd tried to help as much, if not more, than himself.

He continued staring at the ceiling. *I am not supposed to be human,* he tried to tell himself. *I am not supposed to act like them, or love one.*

Julianne had changed that. In fact, all the rules were altering, and he was just realizing the fact.

Dismayed and more than a little confused at the surge of emotions running riot through his senses, he straightened, pushing away from the wall. He returned to the library's entrance, hands bracketing the doorframe, holding himself back from entering.

She still sat silently, gazing outside, lost in her own world. Dressed in the casual jeans and t-shirts she preferred, she'd put her long hair up. Stray wisps of copper had come untucked from her untidy chignon, caressing the back of her slender nape in a most sensual way. The curve of her neck was enticing.

He sucked in a breath. His hands dropped. His need to touch her was too much. He simply could not stay away from her any longer. With purpose in his steps, he passed under the threshold.

Catching his reflection in the window, Julianne started. Turning around, she glanced up. "I didn't hear you come in," she commented. "You move like a cat."

He shrugged. "I practice." His gaze moved to Lynar. "*Immee royd! Troggal, nishtagh!*"

Confronted with the single person he dare not defy, Lynar hopped off the window seat. Clutching his toy, he scurried across the library and disappeared.

Julianne looked up at him, her face a puzzle. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him to buzz off."

She shrugged. "Be that way." Hardly giving him a second glance, she turned back to the view outside.

Her reaction to his presence hit him in the gut. Did she really feel that alone? He knew the answer because he often felt that way himself. One more thing they had in common and one more thing he would strive to change in both their lives.

Without thinking, he put his hands on her shoulders, massaging at the tension in her knotted muscles. Such physical contact put him unendurably in sync with her mind. Her exhaustion, her worry, her deeper doubts about his abilities to meet this challenge, her horror of the occult and her desperate doubts about her own womanhood assailed his brain.

His first instinct was to draw away, reject this undesired intimacy with her psyche. He steeled his resolve, knowing that to decline her would be the worst thing he could do. He must accept her completely, her weaknesses and foibles, just as she'd had to accept his. She was doing her best to change, to merge, to acquiesce.

To his relief, Julianne relaxed, freeing him a bit from her inner anxieties. "That feels nice."

There was a lot more he wanted to feel. "I am glad you think so."

She glanced up. Her eyes glittered with pleasure as one of her hands rose to embrace his. Her grip was possessive and said she welcomed the contact.

Heat rose inside him. Appetite whetted for more, he wanted to caress her, feel her skin against his. The promise was there, but the time was not.

"We have a visitor due shortly." He heard his own voice thicken and catch in frustration. "Do you feel up to seeing him?"

Eyes closing, Julianne's head dipped briefly. "I-I don't know..." She hesitated as if trying to shake off the shackles of a strange lethargy, then drew herself up. "I think so. Is it very important?"

His grip tightened, firm but gentle. "Yes. One of Blackthorne's attorneys will be arriving to settle Anlese's estate, and your inheritance."

She thought that over for a moment. "I guess this is part of what you set into motion before grandmother died." She broke off with apprehension, then blurted. "I'm sorry it all went so wrong."

He didn't like the sound of that one bit. "Nothing went wrong. We both got out of Sclyd with our lives."

Grimly, she nodded. "I suppose that's a good way to look at it."

More silence between them.

Her retreat into seclusion had worried him and he saw now that he had definite cause to be concerned. Her skin was already fading to a delicate porcelain white shade; it was a trait evidenced by all light-skinned beings inhabiting the night. His own skin was very fair. He rarely went out during daylight hours and when he did, he was heavily shielded behind a pair of dark sunglasses.

He hesitated, trying to find a way to gently phrase his question. "Has your time come?"

Julianne shook her head. "It's close. I don't think I can do this. I can feel that thing inside me." She shuddered as if with cold. "What it wants sickens me."

Fear Morgan wanted to send away. He lifted her to her feet. His arms circled her waist. Because her t-shirt ended just above her waistband of her hip-hugging levis, his hands gripped bare skin. As he inhaled the

scent of her, his body tightened even more. He closed his eyes and pictured her naked, the peaks of her nipples grazing his chest as their bodies came together. The vision didn't help calm the erotic beat in his loins one bit.

He fought to suppress a low groan. "But in a way, you want it, too?"

The hair on the back of her hair prickled into visible goose bumps. She sucked in a breath. "I know the hunger because it has known it. I know the taste because it knows."

Breaking away, she clasped her arms around her body as if to shield herself from further invasion, a sign of her long struggle with something far worse than fear or even pain. "I don't know if I can accept what it wants."

Her leaving left a cold space he did not welcome. He glanced into her green eyes and saw in their depth the need for reassurance. It was a small thing, more an ember than bright flames, but it nevertheless glowed inside her. "I fought it, too—the change," he said. "I spent thirty-seven years trying to deny it, escape it."

Her mouth twisted wryly. "But you were born into it."

A tinge of bitterness welled up. He forced it back. "Just because I was born into it does not mean it was easy to accept."

Unbidden tears came her eyes. She was making a desperate attempt not to cry again. She'd already spent far too many days weeping. "It feels..."

"...like a pack of demons have descended to pick away at your soul."

She gave him a look of pleading entreaty. "I feel my body changing in ways I don't understand yet. The light hurts my eyes. I hear every noise. It grates on my nerves to be so sensitive. Will it always be so bad?"

"It will take awhile to adjust to the altered textures of the world around you," he said honestly. "There will be days when you will not be able to stand to be around anyone. Everything will annoy you."

"It bothers you sometimes, doesn't it?"

A touchy question. He felt a strange prickle go up and down his spine. There were still a lot of secrets between them. He still hadn't told her the whole truth about the headaches. No one could fail to detect

something was wrong. His whole personality turned inward and he retreated behind closed doors to battle it out with the demons harrying his mind.

“There are times when I can not stand it myself.” He reached out, taking her hands in his. “You will not go through your change alone. I will be there for you.”

The days without her had been hell. And if this thing was happening too quickly for both of them, he was willing to let destiny take the reigns. He’d made too many wrong choices in the past. Recognizing the potential of what he could share with Julianne, he’d be a fool not to give this fresh start a chance.

But she had to be open to the future, too. He could not force her. He held her hands, waiting for her answer.

A relieved smile pulled at her lips. “I want this,” she said, trust in her eyes. “I want to be with you.”

He’d be a fool not to know what that admission cost her. Relief at her acceptance warred with the steady beat of longing pounding inside him. She deserved reassurance from him. “When your time comes, do not fight it. I will bring you over.” His voice came light, low and tinged with a hint of sexual promises yet to be fulfilled.

She tilted her head back. Chin firm, jaw set, she fixed her eyes on his. Gazes locked, they were connected more intimately than if they had been making love.

His hand rose, brushing her cheek. The craving inside him was building to unbearable proportions. “You are the only woman I have ever wanted forever.”

Before she could answer, he brushed a kiss over her soft mouth. He needed to taste her, drink in her essence even as he willingly offered his, but he kept his kiss deliberately light and excruciatingly slow. He simply enjoyed the feel of her lips, letting sensation take over.

His restraint was rewarded. Julianne’s fingers curled into his vest. A little moan escaped her throat. Her lower body arched against his, begging, pleading, for more. Gripping her waist, he pulled her close, needing to feel her skin against his, silently cursing the clothing

separating their bodies. The hint of what lie under those tight jeans she wore sent his imagination into overdrive.

His hands slid to embrace her firm buttocks, making contact in all the right places. The way she could make his body react defied all logic. With desire smoldering for days, their need was almost too urgent to contain. He hadn't meant for things to get out of hand so quickly, but the tempest of lust wouldn't be easily denied.

Just as he was contemplating locking the library doors, the spell was broken by a most inopportune arrival.

Suddenly they were not alone.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

Julienne jumped back, breaking her passionate embrace with Morgan. Drawn in by his enticing words, she'd lost her head, succumbing to his touch. Fighting the ribbon of need curling in her belly, she took a deep breath to regain her composure. She'd never felt so vulnerable or exposed.

Feeling heat rise in her cheeks, she glanced to Morgan. He, too, appeared nonplussed at being caught in the act.

"Damn bad timing." He scrubbed her lipstick off his mouth with the back of his hand, then straightened the front of his crumpled vest, smoothing the wrinkles of her exploring fingers. Fortunately nothing else seemed out of place. He turned to greet the newcomer. "About time you made it, Charles." Reaching into his vest pocket for his cigarette case, he extracted and lit one. His hand shook more than a little handling the lighter.

Despite her embarrassment, Julienne had to smile. It was clear she'd set him as much on edge as he had her. She took in his crisp gray slacks, the white shirt and lighter dove-gray vest pulled over his taut shoulders and nearly lost it all over again. Dark hair a tangle of loose curls, he wore no tie and the top button of his shirt was undone. No matter how seemingly sophisticated and civilized he appeared, there remained inside him a hedonistic beast that would never be tamed.

Danielle Yames cleared her throat. "Mr. McIntyre is here." The look on both faces said they both witnessed the steamy clinch. Danielle beat a hasty retreat, leaving Charles McIntyre to fend for himself.

McIntyre inclined his head in brief acknowledgement. "I came as soon as I received your instructions. I must say, you sent me on quite a chase." An inquiring eyebrow rose. "Dare I say plans have changed?"

Having displayed enough charm, Morgan curled up like a snake trod upon. Never an emotionally demonstrative man, sharing a private moment with his lover was one thing. Sharing it with outsiders was quite another. He rarely did anything spontaneously.

"Plans?" he snapped irritably. "What are those? Everything I envisioned did not come to pass."

"So I heard." McIntyre chuckled. A plain-faced man of about fifty, his shock of carrot red hair and thick burr clearly indicated that he wasn't far removed from his own heritage as a Highlander. "What happened?"

"Her." The reply was succinctly droll. "She happened."

"Ah, so our young heiress is a lady of charms. I don't blame you for the delay one bit then."

McIntyre bridged the gap, holding out his hand toward Julianne. She automatically responded to his courtesy, her hand disappearing into his larger one. His grip was firm, but not crushing. "My sympathies for your loss," he said, throwing in a courtly bow. "Anlese will be missed by all."

Julianne felt a hitch rise in her throat. She drew her hand away. "Then you knew her well?"

"Yes," McIntyre said. "I've served for more than twenty-three years. As I was once hers, I am now every bit your humble servant."

What an odd way to word his answer. Before she could give it further thought, McIntyre steered the conversation in a less emotional direction. "I'm only here to take a moment of your time. I have some documents that require your signature and then I can be on my way."

"I see." She looked askance toward Morgan. Without a word, he shrugged and sauntered over to his favorite chair. He didn't just sit, he conquered. He stretched out, one booted foot coming heavily down on the coffee table, the despair of any woman who valued her furniture. He lounged quite comfortably. Lost in a halo of smoke, it was clear he'd distanced himself from the exchange. It belatedly occurred to her that

had things gone as planned he would not have been present anyway. He expected her to handle this herself.

McIntyre steered her toward a corner desk where Anlese usually sat to read her morning mail. It was now hers, she supposed. He pulled out the chair, allowing her to sit. Briefcase opened, a sheaf of papers covered with legal jargon was laid out. He produced a pen.

Julienne took it. She scanned the papers. "What am I signing?"

McIntyre smiled. "In order for you to manage the estate and its affairs, you must establish yourself as the legal trustee."

"Manage? You mean I didn't inherit Blackthorne?"

McIntyre shook his head. "The estate is part of a living trust, set up to administer to the property's long-term preservation," he explained. "Ownership transfers to the beneficiaries named in the trust—in this case, you. This way, it avoids probate court, reduces estate taxes and keeps everything private because the terms do not need to be made public. Everything is handled quickly and quietly."

"And Morgan's name is nowhere to be found?"

"It's there," McIntyre said. "Nobody knows quite how it fits. That's my job."

"Then who set up the trust? Doesn't there have to be a grantor of some sort?"

"The trusts are controlled by Blackthorne Enterprises, subject to termination or modification if needed."

"Controlled by Morgan?"

"Yes. You could say that."

She put the pen down. "How do you get away with that?" As always, Morgan kept his agenda to himself, pulling the strings, making her feel somewhat like a marionette.

Through a haze of clove scented smoke, Morgan gave a sneaky sidelong glance. "Money. There are ways of bending every law if you have enough." Touche. He knew how to make it and he knew spend it.

McIntyre straightened. "Speaking of bending the law, I've cleared up that business with the county." He snorted, every bit the dour thrifty

Scotsman. "A hundred thousand dollars in speeding tickets and other fines is unconscionable. Why don't you just get a driver's license?"

"Would you still have to pay the tickets?" The question was firmly tongue in cheek.

"Of course."

Another shrug. "Then why bother?"

McIntyre's face reddened. "For heaven's sake! I don't condone further jackassery on your part if you continue to seek your asylum here."

Julienne had to snicker behind her hand at that jab. Annoyance wrinkled Morgan's brow. Obviously a subject he did not want touched on. It was clear they'd had the argument many times before.

Morgan flicked away ashes that had no chance of coming near an ashtray. His features sharpened, his expression growing intense and critical as all pretenses vanished. "Those who hassle me are the same ones who hire me for my expertise. I have been here a long time and I have cut my deals."

"Deals you are unwisely dismantling at a rapid rate with your behavior." McIntyre slid off his glasses, blinking and pinching the end of his nose. Arguing with Morgan could be as gratifying as banging one's head against stone. "Sometimes I question your very sanity. You seem to take great pleasure in prodding the very establishment that allows you to function unmolested in this world."

"Unfortunately, I am sane," Morgan countered curtly, though not entirely dismissing McIntyre's concerns in so many words. He knew better than that. He took a deep drag then exhaled smoke through his nostrils. "Depending upon your interpretation of the word, that is." He shrugged in acquiescence. "More complications I had hoped to escape, but I will deal with it when they come."

McIntyre replaced his glasses. "May I at least send a message that you will, at the very least, maintain a low profile as long as you remain in residence?"

Morgan thought that over for a moment, pausing to light a fresh cigarette off the dying embers of the former. "I am aware I have things to

settle with the Triad. On my terms, though, not theirs. Let them know that, Charles. My terms only.”

McIntyre nodded, mollified at having gotten such a concession out of his employer. “Of course.”

There was a long silence, each retreating to their own corners. Listening to the two men go back and forth, Julianne fiddled with the pen. Her lover’s past in the mortal world was not something that she had given much thought to before, but the cryptic conversation unexpectedly opened up a whole new side of him that she hadn’t suspected existed. She was aware that there was a thriving and very active cultic subculture wound tightly around the fabric of everyday life. There always had been. And there were mortal watchers—and she suspected McIntyre was one—who were aware of the threat posed by the Sclydian war.

To break the ennui, she tapped the sheaf of papers to bring attention back to the business at hand. “I believe this needs taken care of.” She scrawled her signature on blank lines marked obviously with a red X. Formalities completed, she became the legal chatelaine of the manor.

McIntyre reclaimed the papers, sliding them back into his briefcase. “My congratulations on the successful acquisition of this property.” He cast a glance toward Morgan. “And my deepest condolences on the acquisition of one bull-headed Irishman.” He winked. “If you strangle him and hide the body, I shall mount a most vigorous defense on your behalf.”

Julianne laughed. “Thank you, I think.”

McIntyre started to speak, then caught his tongue. He digressed, awaiting further instruction.

Morgan flagged a hand. He was stubbornly maintaining a studied disinterest, refusing to be baited. “Go ahead.”

“I have some items for you,” McIntyre informed Julianne. “Let me fetch them.” He left, returning a few minutes later, with his hands full.

Crossing to where Morgan lazed, he placed two objects on the coffee table. The first was a chest, roughly a foot wide and just as deep. The second was smaller, a velvet box of the variety that usually contained jewelry. Both immediately aroused her curiosity.

“As you asked, I deliver.” McIntyre offered another courtly bow. “And as my duties are done, I must now take my leave.” Mustering the last bits of his dignity, he walked away without a word goodbye, closing the door behind him when he departed.

When they were again alone, Julianne sat down on the sofa. The chest seemed to beckon her. She reached out and ran her fingers across the darkly varnished wood. The surface was carved with an assortment of strange symbols. A small key was attached by a ribbon to a small metal loop affixed on its face. A curious ripple went up her spine. “What’s this?”

“One is from your grandmother. The other is a gift I wished you to have.” When she did not immediately reach for either, he urged her on. “Open it.”

The chest was first. Her fingers shook a bit as she slid the key into the lock and turned it. Lifting the lid, she saw a stack of thick, clothbound diaries.

“What are these?”

“Anlese’s journals. She wanted you to have them, to begin teaching you.”

A lump rose in her throat. She forced it down. “I wish you had let her.” Her fingertips brushed the coarse material covering the journals. Lifting them out, she saw they were bound together by a leather thong. The faint scent of vanilla tickled her nostrils. Threaded onto the leather was a small charm. Looking at it closer, she saw the shape was feline.

“What does this mean?” she asked.

Morgan changed seats, moving to sit beside her. She welcomed his closeness. Now that they were alone again, some of his rigidity was dissolving.

“It is peach wood, a symbol of immortality. And all felines have nine lives. Wear it around your neck, and when you are in danger it will grow warm against your skin.”

Julianne untied the books, handing the charm to Morgan. He knotted the ends of the thong and slipped it over her head. “Wear it in good health,” he murmured.

His words pleased her. She opened the cover of the top journal. Strange symbols and odd lettering covered the pages. "I can't read these."

He tapped her forehead. "You already know. You only need to find it inside yourself." His touch was firm, his gaze intimate.

She put the journals back into the chest and closed the lid, setting it aside. "I wonder if I'll live long enough to do that." She sighed, the feeling of carrying a heavy burden washing over her again. The little demon she'd tried to banish crept again into the forefront of her mind.

He slid the smaller box toward her. "There is something else. Open it. I think you will find it pleasing."

She did. Nestled on a bed of black velvet was a most unusual piece of jewelry. Cast in silver and engraved with strange symbols, a slave bracelet was connected to twin rings by a delicate chain.

Morgan slipped the rings onto her two middle fingers, guiding the length of chain down the back of her hand and settling the thick bracelet around her wrist. When he closed the clasp that would hold it firm, she felt a subtle vibration emanate from the metal, as though it were somehow fusing and attuning itself to her ownership. Strangely, she couldn't get a grasp on its history. She had a feeling Morgan figured into it. He always did.

She examined her new treasure. To the eyes, it was a unique adornment. However, the rings masked a danger. On the inside, where they would do the wearer no harm, two sharpened half-inch spikes protruded.

She realized what it was. Fangs. When forced into skin, the spikes would open up a bite-like wound. Drawn across flesh, they would rip it open. It was a creation of simplicity, yet diabolically lethal.

If Julianne's heart hadn't already belonged to Morgan, it would have now. The bracelet was the first intimately personal item he'd ever given her. This small token said that he utterly and completely accepted what she was to become.

"It's beautiful. Thank you." She stroked the silver, tracing one of the symbols carved in its face with the tip of a finger. His gaze followed the movement. "Where did it come from?"

"These were once a popular ornament among Kynn women who used them to draw blood from their lovers." A secret knowing smile tugged at his lips, making her want to lay claim to his mouth. "No doubt Charles thought I was sending him astray when I asked him to find one."

The look on her face must have been a question begging for an answer.

"The Kynn are a different breed of vampire," he explained. "Though they draw most of their strength and vitality from sexual energies, they need to take a small amount of blood to make a psychic connection with their victim."

His hand crept to the back of her neck, stroking the vulnerable spot at her nape. Stomach clenching with an aching need, her skin tingled where he touched, reminding her of an earlier desire still unfulfilled.

He bent closer to her ear, voice rasping. "Many find the practice a highly satisfying one. Perhaps it is something we can explore together, tonight. I have a lot to teach you." There was a subtle hint of possessiveness in his voice.

Her heart started beating heavily again and she licked dry lips. Fiery darts of delight pricked at her nerve endings. He obviously had first hand knowledge in the gratifications to be found in her little trinket. He was so very much older than she was, quite the rogue male. The qualities she'd fallen deeply in love with were the same ones that would have her question his fidelity. Morgan was a man of willful indiscretion when it suited him. He liked beautiful women and he liked to indulge in carnal intercourse that involved pain. Adding the element of blood gave it that much more kink. The idea was becoming more and more intriguing.

"I have a lot to learn." Voice shaking, her breath caught in her throat as emotion conflicted with sexual need. Wondering what he had in mind, but certainly not daring to ask, she felt a liquid sensation traveling a path straight through her groin. Moist warmth pooled between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to ease the throbbing ache.

That was impossible.

Drawing her close, he nuzzled her neck with his lips. His touch began to wreak havoc on her senses. "I feel the hunger rising in you."



“Yes...” Her voice trailed off into a sigh of contentment.

He slid a hand between her legs, finding her most intimate place. His fingers rubbed in slow circles over the denim covering her, creating a sensation that was both sensual and erotic. Her breath came in shallow pants. The dampness increased and she moaned softly.

He stared at her under a smoldering gaze. “Tell me what you need.”

She wanted the ache to ease. She wanted him. She melted back against the cushions, spreading her legs wider, allowing him to stroke her as he wished. She knew where his seduction was leading, but was still unable to pull back. This man knew her soul. There was nothing she could hide from him anymore, and even less she wanted to. In trusting him with her heart, she’d given him a power that was frightening.

Feeling herself being swept away, succumbing to the fantasy he so deftly wove, the reality she still doubted. She understood then that she’d reached a boundary of no return.

The choice she had to make was unalterable, but she could not turn away.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Julienne barely managed to enter Morgan's third floor penthouse before she stumbled and lost her balance. She fell heavily with a thud softened by the thick rug. Strength seemed to have totally deserted her.

Lifting her head, she pushed strings of hair off her clammy skin. Her skin was deathly white. She was starving, and in denying the mutant, she was forcing it to turn on her. Her eyes were vague and unfocused, glazed with an agony no human could endure and live.

She sensed his presence. Earlier, he'd left her, forcing her to seek him out. She knew where he was if she needed him.

She needed him now.

He left the mantel by the fireplace and crossed to stand over her. He had taken off his silk vest, his broad shoulders encased only in a white shirt. From her vantage point, he seemed broad, tall and very male.

The air was redolent with the scent of his rich foreign cigarettes and the scented oil burning in the lamps. The lighting was low. Intimate. Three sets of bay windows punctuated the rear wall, blinds closed to exclude the outside world, prying eyes. The suite was beautifully laid out and furnished to suit a masculine personality.

His gaze traveled over her. "Your time has come."

Not a question. He made no move to help her.

She groaned. Panting, she lifted herself up. She swallowed, and her heart pounded as she surveyed every inch of him. She wished he would take her in his arms, kiss away her pain.

"It...wants me to...hunt...feed it." She doubled over when hunger twisted her guts with cruel hands, silencing her as a fresh spasm tore through her bowels.

“If you want to live, you must give in to it.”

“I...can’t... I won’t let...it make me...a monster!” Surrendering to the pain, she sank back to the floor. She could no longer fight the thrashing of the mutant demanding satisfaction.

Silence hovered. An object landed by her outstretched hand, its fall muffled like her own. Forcing open burning eyes, she stared at the silver glittering against the carpet.

It was his dagger.

The wickedly sharp blade glinted in the lamplight sneaking around the furniture. Temptation was outlined in its clean steel lines.

Julienne’s hand slithered out and her fingers curled around the elegant pearl-inlaid hilt. It felt warm, comfortable in her hand, the blade etched with the Ese-Yeveanston coat of arms, the Celtic lion. She lifted it off the floor, turning it inward. She’d declined to wear the bracelet. She wasn’t yet ready to walk the terrible corridors it would lead her down. Her hand trembled; her whole body shook. The touch of metal against her wrist was a spellbinding sensation. She understood why he’d chosen it.

He sat down on the floor beside her and lifted her to confront him. She was a doll in his hands. Moving her hair off her damp forehead, he stroked her face.

“Now you must choose—death or existence as an occult being. You know you will not live forever, but in the time you do, your existence will depend on stalking humans. The shadows are your home, the night your destiny now.”

He bent closer, and his hand circled hers, holding the dagger. Twisting, he brought the blade up between them.

“If you choose to die this night, I will help you.”

She stared with listless, empty eyes.

Reaching out, he claimed her free hand.

“Look at me.”

Inclining her head, Julienne let herself fall into the depths of his serious black eyes.

"In my centuries, I have come to learn nature is a series of balances. Life and death, natural and supernatural. You have the right to choose life—to survive—even if humans must fall prey to your hunger." He pulled her closer. She acquiesced without struggle. "Do you understand what I am saying? I will not condemn your means of survival." He hesitated, his richly accented voice growing gentle. "But I will also understand if you cannot face what I have offered you."

His eyes searched hers for a glimmer of understanding.

The spark was there.

"I don't want to die." Her voice trembled, revealing her lack of assurance in the sincerity of his promises. She could accept any fate as long as he supported her. Though he had never voiced any opinion, she had feared he would despise the creature she would become. A single tear tracked down her cheek. Another followed.

"Then choose to live." Unable to restrain his passion for her any longer, he drew her to him. As he wiped away her tears, his lips met hers in a kiss of ineffable desire.

Abandoning her fears and doubts, Julianne responded, returning the embrace, her tongue teasing his, coaxing, tantalizing. Their hands touched, stroking and petting until both were breathless and aroused.

The savagery of her hunger spurring her on, her body moved with a will beyond hers. Her spirit fought with all its strength, but there was no escape. She was unable to break free of the alien thing alive in her, its desires ringing loud and clear in her skull. Her own self-control wasn't lost and adrift. It was drowning.

For a terrible instant she floundered in the jumble of two conflicting viewpoints. Her world blurred as two different sets of images from two different minds—hers and the mutant's—were superimposed on one another. Though she ordered the mutant inside to let go, it wouldn't obey. She simultaneously felt exquisite pleasure and unendurable revulsion at what she was about to do. Blackness cut through her consciousness and she lost all control.

"I must," she said automatically, the word rippling up from her throat like a purr. What it meant she didn't know, but it felt delicious. She

surrendered to the beast raging inside, letting it loose. The creature owned her and all she knew was its hunger, its determination to survive.

She pushed Morgan back as she rose to a crouch. Grabbing his hair, she inclined his head to reveal the soft flesh of his neck. Hating herself, but too far gone to truly care, she moved in for the feast, using his dagger to make a small cut in his throat, by instinct missing the carotid. Her tongue traced her lips in anticipation before she dipped her head and pressed her mouth against his skin.

Hot blood flowed.

She drank deeply, eyes closed, savoring the life he gave. She reveled in the metallic sweetness, the lust now a concrete entity inside her soul.

Satiation pulled her away. She rose, wiping away the blood trickling down her chin with a swipe of her hand. She had consumed less than a cup, but it was enough.

Unsupported, Morgan slumped back down. The hand he lifted to rub his closed eyes trembled. An ironic smile played on his lips. A thin track of blood went down his neck to stain the white material of his shirt.

"You did well." He pressed his palm to the cut. When his hand dropped away the wound had healed.

Julienne came out of her feeding trance. The sight of blood on the white material seemed obscene—the slaying of the lamb to feed the jackal. She choked with disgust. Burning self-hatred ignited in her soul. Despite her denial, the blood-hunger had triumphed! Even more shameful, she had enjoyed the taste, savored the satisfying respite from the pain!

*Oh, God! What worse lengths would I go to feed?*

Shame burned hot on her face. A keening wail broke from her lips. She was aware she was still holding the dagger, though she did not remember using it on him. Bringing up her hand, she tightened her grip on the hilt, determined to cut out her heart, kill the creature tainting her soul.

"No!"

With a move quicker than hers, Morgan caught her wrist and twisted it. When she dropped the dagger, he knocked it away. The loss of blood

cost him nothing, and he grabbed her and yanked her back when she tried to go after the blade. She fought, desperate to escape. He ducked her flying arms and wrestled her down.

Glaring back at him, she kicked, screaming with rage.

“Let me go!” Her frenzied strength was a near match for his.

His eyes grew stormy, piercing, as if he could see inside her very soul.

“Stop it!” His voice was strained with the effort of keeping her pinned. His strong jaw was locked, stubborn, determined.

“I don’t want to live like this!” She clawed and squirmed to be free of his hold.

With effort, Morgan caught and pinned her hands on the floor beside her head. Her sharp nails had scored several deep trenches in his skin, and he was panting from his effort to restrain her.

“Do not think you can fight me. I created you. You belong to me!”

Hearing his words, she became still. The exertion had left her hot, damp with perspiration, a sexy sheen on her skin.

He drew his hands away, waiting. “Since the day I saw you, I have wanted you as I have no other woman.”

Julienne looked into his eyes, lost in what blazed there. Her love for him had survived the crucible that was crossing over, had survived and strengthened. She swallowed the lump building in her throat as tears ran down her cheeks. No more words were needed between them.

Morgan unhesitatingly claimed her lips, tasting his own blood, a strange nectar to be savored. His kiss was hard, demanding. His scent filled her nostrils and his taste filled her mouth. She liked the fluttery feelings spreading through her like warm honey.

Sizzling heat rose between them as her conscious awareness of her surroundings faded. There was only her man, holding her, kissing her. His hands caressed her, sampling her body as if he could not get enough of her, could not get close enough. He unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her creamy breasts in their lacy bra. The charm around her neck nestled snugly between.

Impatiently, he unsnapped the catch. She obliged him by sitting up and wriggling out of her clothes. As she did, he cupped her breasts, thumbs lightly brushing her erect nipples.

“God, that feels so good.” She closed her eyes, concentrating on the sensations he evoked.

The sultry, teasing tone. “You will be well pleased.”

Arching her back, she gave herself to him in utter purity. Other men had made love to her, but that was when she was encased in a human shell.

Tonight, she had become an immortal, crossed over to become his equal.

Tonight, she was a virgin and he, the experienced mentor, teaching her the ways of their kind as an exquisite abyss of pleasure followed the day’s heart-wrenching pain.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Xavier stoically walked up the hallway toward the main level of his sanctuary. Rested after several days of sleep, he felt a renewal of strength.

His face was better, too. He wore an eye-patch over his empty right socket, and the damage under his left eye was less deforming. The stitches were gone, leaving a long scar, thick around the edges because Duk-cho had cut away so much skin to save his sight. He bore the mask of scars with pride. Each represented another strike by an enemy he vowed he would someday see dead at his feet.

The deterioration of his physical self meant nothing. It was a temporary thing, a shell he would someday shed as he moved into another realm of existence where the mind was unfettered by the constraints of a disintegrating body.

He smiled, his mouth contorting to a poor semblance of a grin. The tantalizing scent of roasting meat drifted through the air. The low murmur of voices in the distance told him the night's guests had arrived.

To greet his special visitors, he had chosen his clothes with care, donning the traditional garb of his Persian ancestors. He wore his long blouse unbelted and his leather vest open over billowing trousers of rough hand-woven cloth. Suede slippers were laced to his ankles, a moccasin made for comfort and hardly suitable for rigorous walking.

In his grandest manner, he glided confidently into the great hall where his audience waited. Those present turned to acknowledge his presence with a great roar that filled the ears and stirred hearts. There were many familiar faces in the large crowd—some desired and others who would be unwelcome if he did not need their resources.



Tonight, he would call for a gathering of supplies to see him through his pilgrimage to the dead city of Ula'dh. Those he had summoned were the highest ranking in the cult, the nine priest-savants who served as his main council, overseeing the wealth and commerce of the legion. These men and women were accorded the position and respect of the highest order, second only to himself. He did not trust them, knew that each one was conspiring to assume his position and seize control of the legion. They were powerful in their own right but as a group committed to one focused purpose, they were even more deadly. He was aware that their loyalties lay only with themselves and that most viewed him as old and fading, a being entering the twilight—and soon to enter that dark devouring of death. The legion was powerful, that was true enough. But his hold was weakening by the day. Losing control of Morgan had only helped hasten that view.

Only if they believed he would again return to power, would they support his quest. And once he held the Cachaen scrolls, he would be a force unstoppable and unlimited by any. He knew his plan would be easy to accomplish. Locked in Sclyd for over two hundred and fifty years, the entities were hungry to partake of the resources of the mortal world.

Taking his place in the center of the room, Xavier spoke.

“My legion, these days are great days. Soon we are to reclaim our place, not only within Sclyd but in the mortal world, as well.

“My lord.” A woman stepped to the front of the crowd. She came to Xavier’s throne and bowed over the hand he offered. “It pleases me to be in your company this night.”

Xavier smiled thinly and pulled his hand from her cold grasp. Her name was Varen, an enchantress with long golden hair, ocean-blue eyes and a heart as black as tar. High priestess of the Fhidelian Oracle, she was wily and cunning.

“I know you came because you are curious about my well being,” he said. “Also, you are here for the secrets of your former lover’s soul, something you wanted for yourself.”

Varen laughed, a clear and tinkling sound, grating in its insincerity. Her own face was no mask, nor could she hide her contempt. As Xavier

was leader of the cult of the Dragon, she owned the allegiance of the Fhidelian priestesses. It did not mean she followed Ouroborous. “I confess I wanted to see how badly he damaged you,” she said. “I knew you could not keep him. His allies are few but powerful.”

Others in the crowd agreed. They were an uneasy bunch, doubting his power but curious enough to want to know why he had summoned them. The talk buzzing through the chamber ended in consensus—Xavier should have slain the assassin.

After giving the group time to air its opinions of his mistakes, Xavier lifted his hand, an indication he wished to speak.

“I admit Morgan had, and continues to have, help from the raider tribes. However, I have news that may surprise you. Megwyn does not support her brother. She has embraced the Dragon and will sway the council to new views of Sclydians taking the mortal world again as our own. She has sworn his execution order still stands if he is caught.”

“You had him, Xavier.” Varen toyed with a gold link chain around her neck, her gaze pinning the sorcerer with her contempt. “You could have killed him yourself. How do you know this is not a new plot to finally destroy your cults?”

Xavier turned on her. “Megwyn now stands with the Dragon. There will be a bitter war because of it. Morgan has once again embraced the occult, but he will remain a rogue. He will never return to the council as the thirteenth.”

“Still, the assassin’s return will mean trouble for the rest of us!” Varen protested. “We all have our quarrels with him. Our deaths by his hand would still serve his purpose. You should have taken out his heart and been done with him.”

“I had my own reasons for wanting him alive when I had his soul,” Xavier spat. “Do not question my actions, lest you all suffer my wrath.”

“And what would you do to us, old one?” Varen demanded.

“You are losing respect for my rule?” Xavier probed. “Would you challenge me?”

“The assassin dared,” Varen stated flatly. “And many more think it.”

“And he lost more than he gained,” Xavier said with satisfaction.

“So you claim,” she muttered, her words loud enough to be heard—as she meant them to be—and particularly stinging.

“Lovely Varen, you have the tongue of a viper and the scruples of an alley cat. How I do wish Morgan had strangled you instead of my beloved Nisidia. Of all his lovers, you most deserved such a fate.”

Varen grew stiff, her face reddening. Unconsciously, she raised one hand to trace the long scar running down her neck, the only marring of her beauty. Her voice was raspy because she had been a near-victim of the assassin’s wrath.

Yet though they were now enemies of another sort, the enchantress still lusted after Morgan, even as she despised him for using her to fill long nights he did not want to spend alone. She would not admit she had also used him, just as she would not admit she would return to him as his lover if he so much as beckoned.

“It seems to me your wife sought a man who could satisfy her desires when you could not!” she retorted with an anger that further reddened her complexion. “But never mind old accusations. I might kill him yet!”

“Let us calm down!” Xavier said, pretending Varen’s scathing comment had not affected him. Let those gathered under his roof think he was an old fool for letting Morgan slip through his fingers. When he had the scrolls safely in his keep, he would begin anew his vendetta against those who mocked him openly to his face. It was only a matter of time, time he would bide by making his despised guests useful to his purpose.

“Enough of this foolish talk.” Xavier motioned to bring the discussion to its end. “Such conversation is not appropriate for the feast to come. Let us eat and enjoy. Later, I shall tell what the Dragon has revealed to me. I think you will be interested. Very interested.”

At the sorcerer’s signal, a woman came forward with a carafe in her hands. She poured red wine into a silver goblet, careful not to spill a drop, and handed it to him. A beautiful girl of perhaps sixteen, she had none of the luster of youth. Too much crying had permanently reddened her eyes and blotched her complexion. Frown lines deepened her

forehead and chin. She drew back quickly when Xavier ran his hand over her bare arm before taking up his cup.

“A toast, my legions! To the Dragon. He never fails the true believers!” the sorcerer said, drinking the potent wine.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Morgan ran at an easy lope, keeping just ahead of his pursuers.

He was on the run because he'd just executed a raid on a Jansi scouting party, tracking the warriors through the *jurn-ae-hys* knowing they would be walking the veils searching for victims to snatch from the mortal side. The veils allowed Sclydians to walk among the humans without being seen. A scrounge of a wizard named Bennak was their guide.

He'd swiftly dispatched their unlucky leader with a bolt through the eye socket. The Jansi had no choice but to follow him back into Sclyd to escape the rapidly collapsing portal.

There were five men remaining, all of whom were mightily pissed off. Well-armed, their intent was to separate his head from his shoulders. He had no doubts they were going to try very hard to accomplish just that.

Lengthening his stride, he maneuvered his pursuers like mice in a maze, leading them into a dense Southland forest composed of acres of untrammelled wilderness. His stride was smooth, easy. The air around him whispered, the mist shimmering like the ocean under the night's twin moons. He was back in his element, doing what he did best—stalking prey. Only, in this case, the prey walked on two legs.

Putting all thought of what he was doing aside, Morgan set his mind into the mode of killing machine. His mental focus became as sharp and deadly as a razor. He was in the black realm of the assassin, finding that place deep inside his mind where there was no fear, no regrets or any second thoughts. There was only the will to destroy. He was more than an instrument that would deliver death—he was the Reaper at work with a merciless vengeance.

This was not his established territory, but they were playing by his rules. They just didn't know it yet. Across his back, his crossbow was a weight he hardly noticed. It felt familiar, resting easily. Save for the fall of his footsteps, he made no sound. He'd suffered no dwindling of physical power, no deterioration of skills.

He budgeted five minutes—or roughly one minute per man—to do his killing. He had no doubt about his ability to pull it off. The art of killing was also an exact science, and he'd studied until he was a master. To take five men without being injured himself he'd have to catch them off-guard and take down one at a time. That was easy enough.

A tall oak with straight, solid hanging branches hove into sight. *Perfect.* With the grace of a feral cat, he propelled his body into the air. Higher than any human could possibly jump, it was an easy reach for him. Catching the branch, he swung up like a gymnast, balancing on the limb.

Crouching down, he closed his eyes, stilled his breath, his heartbeat, and listened. Over the sounds of the forest, he heard the crash of angry, careless men. They ran without regard to stealth, pounding along the rough path. Having had so much time on his hands, he was well schooled in observation. Like any good surveillance artist, he required a fixed post.

*Beireann cú mall ar a chuid*, he reminded himself. A hound stalks his prey slowly.

A moment later the men passed beneath him.

Morgan counted. *One...two...three...four...five...*

As the last man passed under him, he struck. Dropping from the branch, he landed with full weight. The stunned warrior stumbled before falling spread-eagled on the ground. A soft *ummpph* escaped the man's lips, but that was all.

Straddling the man's body, Morgan caught his head between both hands and twisted viciously, snapping the neck like a twig, killing him instantly.

It had taken less than ten seconds.

Without pause, he grabbed the strap of his crossbow, bringing it around. Leveling it, he pulled the trigger, putting a steel bolt into the back of the fourth man. This death was not so silent—his cry of pain alerted the remaining men. Backtracking, they advanced, weapons drawn.

Dressed in leather trousers, knee-high leather boots and open leather vests, they were bulky men—big, brawny and dumb as oxen. They were well armed though, with swords at the ready.

Immediately on his feet, Morgan prepared to take the drones down. Driven more by instinct than consideration, he stretched his hand toward the first slain Jansi. His eyes narrowed, focusing on his objective.

*“Thalla!”* Come along!

The broadsword abandoned its owner’s lax fingers, rising from the ground to connect squarely with the assassin’s palm as though returning to the only man who should wield it. He did not have to think about it. The ability came as naturally as breathing. He and the ci’biote functioned as one complete being—it, using his fleshly form, he, its many abilities.

Drawing back his arm, Morgan flung the blade in a graceful arc, impaling the third man, spearing him like a fish from front to back right through the guts. It was this mastery of psi-kinetic forces that made him such a formidable enemy. It was also this gift that he suffered the most from employing. It was best used sparingly.

Three down, two to go.

He thought about loading another bolt in his crossbow, but there was no time to waste. Instead, he swung the weapon with fierce strength, connecting squarely with the closest man’s face. Clutching a shattered jaw, his assailant collapsed onto the ground, screaming. His skull exploded when Morgan delivered a second blow, then tossed the ruined crossbow aside.

The fifth man decided the present was not his time to be a hero. Backing away, he turned on his heel and ran.

“Damn it!” Morgan cursed under his breath. If the Jansi got away, he would look sloppy, as if he could not handle his chosen targets.

He sped after the man, tackling him from behind; and the two hit the ground, rolling. Gaining the superior position, Morgan slammed his knee between the man's shoulder blades, stealing his breath. The man began to thrash like a wild horse attempting to buck out from under his rider.

Reaching for the dagger sheathed in his left boot, Morgan dug his fingernails deeply into the man's brow, wrenching up his head. He heard the slice of the blade, the sound of flesh parting, the eerie swish of blood running from the gaping wound.

The man died with a soft gurgle. Blood spread in a dark pool around his face when his head fell.

The deed done, Morgan was able to breathe evenly again. He'd gambled and won, knowing the outcome of his actions. He had just declared a new war on Ouroboros's legion, committing an unprovoked act against his own race. The council and the legion were at peace; they would be forced to act, at Xavier's behest. At Megwyn's. He did not have many allies. Right now, that was the way he preferred it.

A groan cut through the silence.

*Damn.*

He froze, scanning the trees for sign of more enemies. He waited a minute. No more were coming. The slaughter was over.

Quickly on his feet, he walked over to the closest man, prodding him with his boot. The Jansi grimaced, groaning in pain. His hands pulled weakly at the sword protruding from his guts, blood gushing from his mouth, his nose.

"Have m-mercy," he struggled to say through the clutch of agony.

Morgan was not listening. "Would you have had mercy on the human women you were planning to take tonight?" He shook his head, answering his own question. "I think not."

Pulling out the sword like Excalibur from the rock, he chopped the blade across the Jansi's neck without emotion.

This was war. In war, men die. That was the way it had always been, since the beginning of time. That was the rule. Period.

He walked to the next, giving a prod with his black boot. Dead.



Tossing aside the bloody weapon, he reached for his cigarettes. Selecting one, he tapped it on the surface of the gold case, then lifted it to his lips. He gave a little mental *push*. Just a little. The tip immediately burst into a brief flame before dying into red embers.

He briefly scanned the woods again. Just in case. He would not fit among the Sclydians. He was not garbed in a medieval style. He wore a black shirt, black jeans and a long, calf-length black leather duster. Why the hell bother changing? He had chosen which side he would fight from. Nor was he the only one. Other forces were coming into play.

Many eyes watched—he felt their burning stares. Otherworld eyes, the familiars of those who wanted to know how he would act now that he had returned to the occult.

*They have their answers now*, he thought.

The watchers would not interfere. They were only there to observe.

He smiled. *Cha'n eil bàs fir gun ghràs fir*. There is no man's death without another man's gain.

He was neither excited nor thrilled to be going back into the battle he'd vehemently foresworn. He was only doing his job.

Cigarette clenched between his teeth, he sauntered over to the last man, the one who had taken a crossbow bolt through the back. Lying face down, semi-conscious, he'd attempted to crawl into the brush but hadn't quite made it. A tough one. Judging by the rattle in his chest, he would not last much longer, though.

A steel bolt through the back was a miserable thing. The arrow was barbed. It would only do more damage to try and pull it out.

Taking one last satisfying drag, enjoying the burn on the back of his throat, Morgan extinguished his smoke. He rolled the warrior onto his back, pushing the bolt clean through his chest. Agonized brown eyes stared up at him, pain contorting the Jansi's features. He had a raised white scar along his right cheek. Muscles convulsed, quivering uncontrollably as death wrapped its hands tighter. A cold sweat covered his brow; the stench of fear emanated from his body.

"You may take my life, Lethe," he spat out, gagging on his own blood as a trickle ran from the corner of his mouth. "But the Dragon will have your soul. You will only be one of—"

Before he could finish, Morgan's hand shot out. Pinching the warrior's nose between thumb and forefinger, he pressed the heel of his hand into the man's mouth, cutting off his air and effectively smothering him.

"Death might reign over all," he conceded. "But the Dragon shall not win this dark war."

That done, he stood.

Five dead men.

Death was so damn messy. Bodies were a bitch.

Leave them to rot?

One corner of his mouth lifted.

*Burn them.*

Rising, he spread his hands, palms out, away from his body. "Flames of my anger, their bones to dust, take them all, my revenge is just."

Centering his psi-energies, he pushed. Hard. The five bodies burst into flame, charring and withering, burning until reduced to piles of unrecognizable ash.

Raising his arms to the level of his shoulders, turning palms inward, he summoned the four winds to his command.

"Take far from here all that is profane," he commanded. "Take far from here all that lives in evil. Begone, shadows that live in darkness."

The breeze grew violent, sweeping the ashes into the air and bearing them away. Where the bodies had been incinerated, neither a single leaf, nor blade of grass was scorched or stained with blood. Not a trace remained save for the weapons they had carried. It was as if they had never existed.

The spike of pain came swiftly, without warning. A vein in his left temple jumped.

He winced. His hand rose, fingers pressing to his skin. His blood pressure was rising. He could feel the thick dull pain thrumming against the walls of his skin.

*You are pushing yourself too hard.*

Pushing? Hell! He was showing off.

Instead of fading, as it had the last time, the headache settled at the back of his skull, like a pasha sitting down to a lavish meal, preparing to glut upon the feast.

If he kept up this pace, there was going to be hell to pay.

Too bad he never paid attention to the warning signs.

## Chapter Thirty

Dirty gray fog rolled over asphalt patterned with cracks and potholes. Creeping like an experienced thief, the unnatural mist invaded dead-end alleyways between abandoned tenement housing and obscured the decaying buildings from each other. Alternately thick, then thin, swirled by the lashings of an icy wind, it acquired a sickly ashen cast from the light of the lampposts sparsely dotting corners of the neighborhood.

In the distance were sounds of the city's main streets. Car horns blasted, people shouted or cursed and the flashing red-and-blue lights of police cars cut into the nothingness. Swathed in the safety of civilization, people did not suspect the vapor descending on the city like a wet cloak might bring with it creatures from a more sinister side of existence.

Emerging from the shadows, Julianne smiled. She was in search of a victim to feed her hunger.

She carried no purse. She dressed simply in a mod, slightly street-punk ensemble. On her right hand, she wore the bracelet Morgan had given her. This time, she was ready to use it.

Single-minded in her quest, she strode boldly up the alley with a grace possessed by those fortunate enough to be born so blessed. She stopped when she reached the end. Pressing her body against the wall, she peered around the corner. Her tongue traced her lips in anticipation as she searched the fog for the silhouette of a human being. Her eyes were bright, alert and wide, taking in every inch of the street.

The streets of the slum were deserted.

Sighing, she withdrew and retreated to the rear of the alley, to the shadows in which she needed to conceal herself. The night was her time.

Her body was stronger and more flexible, and she moved with stealthy dexterity. Thinner than she had ever been, her tall frame had readjusted to accommodate the creature inside. As she had grown used to her new strengths, learning her limitations would come with experience. The only drawback—aside from the hunger for human blood—was a slight allergy to the sun. A long period of exposure caused her skin to break out in blisters. To avoid discomfort, she had to wear long sleeves, sunglasses and a hat with a huge brim.

For a few seconds, a veil obliterated the solidity of the solid brick wall. Morgan emerged and made no attempt to blend into the shadows. He too, matched her style, donning black jeans, a short sleeved, white t-shirt and black leather boots. With all the scars and Celtic tattoo ringing his left arm, he looked like the typical bad-ass thug, well fitting his surroundings. Beneath the calculated attire was a sinewy muscular man, walking with an athlete's grace and gait, a man who could speak and act with the raw profanities of the world when necessary. He proceeded without caution, automatically noting the alley's tactical strengths and disadvantages.

No immediate danger presented itself, and he relaxed.

"Do you see?" he asked.

"What?"

He pointed toward the wino sleeping in a stupor amid the overflowing trash heaped in the alley. He was oblivious to those who had suddenly invaded his impromptu bedroom. Half his body was covered with week-old, damp newspapers. His skeletal hand clutched an empty bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 he'd recently consumed. Clothed in Salvation Army rejects that never saw washing, the wino bore no resemblance to a human being. He could have been thirty or seventy—alcohol had taken such a toll on his fragile mortality, it was difficult to tell.

Julienne admitted sheepishly, "I didn't see him."

She wondered if he was even alive, so shallow was his breathing. She had not even known he was present. Now that she had, she did not care. No way would she approach the stinking figure. Not with the rat sniffing so familiarly around his wrinkled face.

The huge rodent crept out from beneath the trash, black eyes glittering and tail swishing, in search of food. Like her, it was a predator of the night, willing to go to any length to feed itself, even taking a bite out of human flesh.

Sickened by the parallel, she turned away, hands over her eyes, just as a black boot crushed the skull of the rodent. The rat died with a soft sound, barely disturbing the wino. The drunk snuffled in his sleep and rolled closer to the protection of the graffiti-coated wall. In his dream he probably had five dollars and a full bottle of wine.

"Is it dead?"

"I believe so."

Morgan kicked the rat back into the trash. This good deed done for humanity, he leaned against the opposite wall. His lighter flared in the dark, briefly illuminating the facets of his face with odd shadows as he lit a cigarette.

"Nice." She put her hands on her hips. "Didn't think you were the type who'd hang out in places like this."

"You would be surprised," he said. "Find some of my best people in these places. Probe for their weaknesses, then make my deals."

Julienne caught the undercurrent. "So in a way, you blackmail them?"

He gave back a brooding, half-lidded stare. "Only if they have the talents I need."

She glanced toward the wino.

"They say the devil can quote scripture for his own purposes." *And now I've gone and made my deal with him. Am I any better or worse off than that man?*

His free hand lifted to his eyes, rubbing hard. "I do what is necessary and what benefits me."

"Well, at least you're honest about using people." She caught his move. "Headache?"

His hand dropped. "No."

He took another drag, threw back his head and blew smoke into the air. His narrowed gaze warned her to watch herself. She was probing into a place that was none of her business.

She knew he was lying.

In the last few days, Morgan had begun to absent himself from the manor, disappearing for entire nights. When he returned at dawn, he would speak to no one. Instead, he stalked off and concealed himself from all eyes.

He was pushing himself at an insane rate, while she was just getting used to the idea of what he was and what he had to do. She would have to learn that he would be gone for long stretches of time and that he would be in no mood for any sort of company when he came back. She had the sense that he was slipping away—she could feel him growing more distant with every passing day.

Still, her grief over what was going on with him had less to do with him as a person than with what he had come to represent to her: comfort and security. She need not feel guilty—she loved him, even if he did not return that affection with an equal depth.

Julienne gritted her teeth and shivered. Not because of the cold, but of the chill hunger sent through her body. Five days had passed since she tasted blood and found the wine of life acceptable sustenance. Tonight, Morgan had come out of his shell long enough to sense her growing need and offered his.

She had refused—she would take no more from him. Instead, she insisted he take her where she could hunt among the legions of mortality for her food. Just as she wanted to learn to use her legacy, she also wanted to learn to fend for herself.

“I’m not human anymore,” she’d argued. “I have to learn.”

Surprisingly, he had agreed.

“There’s nobody worth finding here,” she said. “Where in the hell are we, anyway? I swear, I hate to travel this way. How do you know where you’ll end up?”

He killed the cigarette. "Your mind is still too unfocused to perceive the depths of the dimensional veils. To your eyes it is all a haze. Experience will help you see it as it really is."

She pursed her lips and regarded him through narrowed eyes. "Fine. Where are we?"

He shrugged. "I will not swear to any specific place. My concentration was mostly upon seclusion."

His gesture of disinterest caused Julianne to grind her teeth. Her tension was growing. "I don't want to hang around here all night."

"Let me see."

He pushed away from the wall and passed her to take a look outside the alley. Julianne moved to stand behind him. Her hands were clenched at her sides, and like the rat's, her eyes glittered feverishly. Her heart pounded, beating against her chest, in her throat, at her temples and ears. She felt as if all the air had been sucked from her lungs.

"Well?" Her tone bore new urgency. Her hunger was becoming unbearable.

Morgan pointed. A path opened through the murk at his gesture. "There."

Julianne saw several furtive figures dart around a far corner. A minute later a police cruiser passed down the street on its perfunctory cruise of the slum district. Abandoned by even lower-class blacks and Hispanics, the neighborhood now belonged to teenage gangs and aging winos. The law left them alone, hoping the winos would poison themselves on cheap liquor and the gangs would kill each other off or overdose on the heroin they peddled.

At any rate, the night was slow. The patrol car turned. The cops would go down and hassle the drunks staggering out of the bar districts to pass the time.

"Others seek to conceal themselves in the night, their deeds less honest than yours," Morgan said. "I will catch one." He made a move to depart.

Julianne grabbed his arm. "No. I want to do this myself. I won't let you hunt for me."



Unconsciously, she moved a stray lock of hair out of her face with a slender finger. She slipped around him, and her figure cut through the white fog.

The hunger took over, consuming her mind, guiding her actions, a beast on the prowl.

She moved swiftly. No sound betrayed her when she vanished around the corner and out of sight. The beast inside worked independent of her will.



Morgan watched her go, his eyes on the sway of her hips. Her figure was long, lithe and sleek. She curved in all the right places, and the sexy t-shirt and faded denim jeans only served to highlight her pert breasts and round, shapely rear. It made him very conscious of being male; he would have liked to grab her and make love to her—except this damn headache pounded in the back of his head. A thick bolt of pain hit him squarely behind the eyes, beginning a slow war-dance around his temples.

He sank back against the brick wall. Icy pain squeezed his brain. He gasped, then gritted his teeth. A heavy layer of sweat broke out on his forehead. His mouth went dry. He could not swallow. His breathing was heavy and painful. He was all off the sudden nauseous, trembling so hard that his legs would barely hold his weight. His punisher and tormenter never failed to rear its ugly head at the most inopportune time.

The migraine was gearing up, getting ready to attack full throttle. It was going to be a bad one. Bad. Really bad. The kind of bad that threatened to make a mindless idiot out of him, this pain was akin to a giant swatting a gnat. Concentration was damn near impossible, and pushing himself nightly to hunt and kill in Sclyd was not helping. Having a finite well of patience, he did not admit he was as much on the edge from his own malady as Julianne was from hers.

Enviously, he wished he could satisfy his own demon so easily. The little blood he had lost to her hunger was not enough. He was going to

have to slow down and pace himself better or he would soon be lost in a full migraine attack.

He banged his head on the wall behind him. That helped a bit. Feeling every ounce of energy drain out of his body, he took another long drag off his cigarette and stared up into darkness. He licked parched lips. He wanted a drink. It was the last thing he needed, and the first thing he thought about when he wanted to blot out the ache.

He placed a hand to his clammy forehead, trying to will away the sensations incapacitating him. On the best of days, he was an ill-tempered alcoholic. On the worst of days, he was a suicidal alcoholic. Damn it. Now was no time to be on the edge, coming apart at the seams.

Julienne was unaware he was suffering. Suspecting something, however, she'd questioned him. He'd evaded answering directly—he wanted to shield her from his disintegration for as long as possible. He felt his control was not going to last much longer.

“You lookin’ for some action, baby?”

Eyes narrowing, Morgan gave the woman standing before him a jaded look. The pounding in his skull, echoing in his ears, had silenced her approach.

He took another drag off his smoke and decided she was not worth saving. In less than thirty seconds, he had made a connection with her mind and knew her whole life, backward and forward. She wasn't a woman at all, really, but a mere girl of sixteen.

Her name was Gini. She was a Cholo gang member and working whore. She was dressed in a tight, zip-up leather dress, garters, hose and scuffed high heels. She was as beat up as he was. Her black-rooted blonde hair was cut in an unflattering punk buzz, and amateur tattoos of her gang's logo adorned both of her needle-tracked arms. Her brown eyes were ringed with mascara and blue eye shadow, her lips and fingernails painted wild-cherry red. She wore a roach clip for an earring and had a pack of cigarettes and a lighter stuck in one of her garter straps.

Standing five-seven, she was thin and wiry, a hardened veteran of the streets. She was also a crack addict who owed the dealers a lot of money.

She needed cash, fast. She didn't care whom she scored it from, and this nicely dressed man looked like a perfect mark for robbery.

Morgan's eyebrows went up just a bit, and the barest trace of a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"You believe you have something I desire?" he bit off dryly.

"Sure, I got lots to offer." Gini smiled and reached to finger his coat, moving her thin body closer.

"I bet you do." Flashing into her thoughts again, he knew Gini hadn't expected to find anyone on the streets tonight except old Deke, the wino. It was the first of the month, and the old man always stuck the cash from his disability check into his sock. Regular as clockwork, she rolled him for the few bucks his woman let him keep out of his welfare check. With his money gone, Deke would be back to collecting aluminum cans from the trash for enough change to buy his beloved wine.

"Lotsa ladies where you come from?" She smiled in her best imitation of a flirt. "Bet I could outdo them all."

She was being careful, wording her tease just within legal limits in case he was a cop. She kept glancing over her shoulder, as if she was being followed.

Morgan did not betray the threat behind her. He was beginning to feel irritated. He did not suffer fools gladly, certainly not wasted pieces of humanity such as this whore.

"I think not," he bit off dryly. "But she can."

"No way, man! Trying to trick me! I'm no fool. The cops done made the rounds tonight! You can't be bustin' me."

Gini felt her presence then.

Behind her, the fog grew thicker; and a silent figure glided from within its center. The whore turned to run, but it was too late. A light laugh of delight tinkled in her ears. Rough hands clamped down on her shoulders. She screamed as a hand clamped over her mouth and effectively silenced her, the viselike grip of fingers digging deep into soft skin. She struggled but could not move; she was trapped by the woman wrapped around her like a giant spider.



Julienne wrenched back the whore's head to bare her neck, watching her brown eyes widen in terror.

"You were right about dishonest deeds," she said to Morgan. She dipped her head down. "When I saw this little tramp come this way, I followed." She nuzzled, her tongue tracing a burning line along the whore's jugular. "Don't struggle. I won't hurt you."

Her hand clamped down. The spikes from the twin rings punctured the vulnerable vein in the girl's neck, bringing forth a satisfying stream of blood.

She began her feast. As she fed, her fingernails impaled brown flesh. The whore's body convulsed; unconsciousness came quickly, the surrender of the street urchin as silent as the fog swirling around her limp form.

Julienne lowered the girl's body to the sidewalk. Kneeling, she kept her head down as she wiped away the blood dripping from her mouth. Looking at the liquid staining her fingers, she was struck with a stabbing remorse. She touched the teenager's forehead, then her neck, the terribly marred skin. Glazed eyes stared back at her in unseeing accusation.

The girl was dead.

Not from loss of blood.

From fear.

"I'm sorry!" The cry broke from Julienne's throat, as the mutant's will cleared from her mind. "Oh, God! What have I done?" *I killed her.* She swallowed and heard a sob in her throat. *I didn't mean to!*

Forgotten in the frenzy of her feeding, Morgan stepped forward and pulled her to her feet.

"Calm down," he said, more aware than she was that they were still in danger of discovery. "You made a choice to hunt tonight, now you must face the consequences. It is easy to forget how fragile humans are when you are no longer one yourself." He tried to turn her away from the corpse.

Julienne yanked herself out of his hold and stared at him in frightened bewilderment. "Excuse me for having feelings enough to mourn!" Her words were as icy and unforgiving toward him as her

expression. "I guess I'm just not the killer you are!" The moment the words left her mouth, she knew it had been the wrong thing to say. He could not easily forgive her for throwing that up in his face.

Patience vanishing, he pushed her back against the wall. He cupped her chin in his hand and lifted it. His grasp was not painful, but it was not gentle, either. His forbidding gaze bore straight through her.

"They will always be the weaker ones," he said, sounding resigned and slightly wounded. "You have to learn to put your survival ahead of theirs. Every time you feed, there will be risks." He pointed to the girl's body. "This is what you are now. Some of them have to be sacrificed toward your survival, Julianne. We cannot save them all. It is impossible."

Unable to meet his eyes, she slowly lifted her hand and stared into her palm, at her bloodstained fingers. Her gaze swept over the prostitute's body. She flinched from the memory of the hunger burning in her gut, the single-minded desire she'd had to taste again the rich, warm liquid that would take away the pain, bring satisfaction.

*He's right, she thought, feeling an unwelcome churning sensation deep in her guts. I'm not human anymore. These are no longer people to me. They're food.*

It was a bleak, rather frightening feeling.

A tight, airless sensation banded her chest and her blood hammered in her temples. "Oh, God," she whispered, the words falling from numb lips. "I never realized." A deep shudder of tension shook her body.

She suddenly resented him, resented him because he was right. She could not afford to be weak.

*They sometimes have to die if I want to live.*

Morgan closed his eyes for a moment in an obvious struggle for patience and shook his head. "It was a mistake to bring you over." His words were steadily spoken cutting through her senses like lightning. He turned and began to walk away. "You are not strong enough, like Cassandra was not strong enough..."

Watching him go, she felt sick because she'd once excoriated Morgan about his refusal to protect her world from the Sclydian entities that

would come for mortal victims. Was she any better now? *She* was the predator, humans the prey. She also felt ashamed because she had enjoyed her victim's fear. Grief sounded inside her like a bell tolling in the far away distance.

She squared her slender shoulders. She would have to be careful the next time she hunted.

The next time.

The idea loomed in her mind, a black specter.

She could only despise herself for such thoughts, because she realized it was up to her to carve out her own destiny.

"I'm not weak," she whispered. "I'm not my mother."

## Chapter Thirty-One

Xavier stood before the troll king's council in the great meeting hall of Asl, god of fire.

He wore crimson, his robes embroidered and imprinted with cryptic symbols denoting his caste and rank. The heat in the huge recess carved near the heart of an active volcano was sticky, coating him in a layer of sweat that made his clothes cling to his skin. Smoke issued from minute crevices in the rock, smog that choked up all but the strongest of lungs.

He was flanked by two of his *bria-thar*, the low cenobites serving within the third caste. Azoroath and a second man paced with silent gravity a couple of steps behind him. They were alert lest he be attacked.

"Why come you among us, sorcerer of the Dragon?" In his chair carved of hard volcanic stone, King Ha'rak gave the visitors wary scrutiny, as if awaiting some trick.

"I wish to make an offering." Xavier made a certain sign with his hand, forehead to heart, one that said he had come in peace.

"Why make an offering, *iarog*?" the king asked, calling Xavier *evil one*.

Xavier's features went rigid with displeasure, but he ignored the insult. He knew Ha'rak did not altogether trust him, but he had no wish to make an enemy in so high a place as the troll king currently occupied. If he took what he wanted by force, members of the witches' council who did not entirely sanction the alliance might be tempted to break away into a splinter group and rejoin Morgan. That he could not yet risk. Not now.

"I am on a pilgrimage to Ula'dh," he replied gravely. "A humble servant on a holy mission." He must maintain the guise of quiet humility to show that he honored the treaties.

Ha'rak's face betrayed his suspicion; his orange eyes were narrow, thick lips stern. "Why would you wish to go to the city of the dead?"

"I am on a mission, serving Ouroborous."

"As if we would care about honoring the Dragon." Ha'rak sniggered.

Xavier indicated the chest two of his slaves bore. With a quick wave of his hand, he bade them come forward and set down the wooden box. Azoroath flipped open its cover. Gold coins gleamed in the fire lighting the chamber, the metal's brilliance undimmed by the smoke.

A murmur of disapproval sounded through the chamber. The king hushed the noise with a sharp clap of his hands. "Silence!" he commanded, pounding his hand against stone.

"You can hardly refuse me. We are at peace." Xavier smiled, masking anger. "I wish to continue to honor that." A hint of derision flickered in his heavy-lidded single eye.

A deep, threatening thunder of hissing voices rolled.

"We remember his deceptions," the masses said.

Another roll of echoing voices. "He is still an untrustworthy enemy."

Ha'rak looked out over the assembled trolls, taking his time in quelling the voices of his council. His eyes seemed to seek out every face, head cocked to hear every word. Finally, he raised his hand. Silence ruled.

He nodded approval, then spoke with ceremonious formality.

"Last time you came to Gidrah, you took from us what you wished. Your ravages of my people knew no bounds. I trust your motives as little as those of the witches' council."

Xavier kept his face impassive. With a conviction that left no room for argument, he said, "What is past should be left to the past. I seek a fresh start with your people."

Ha'rak speared the sorcerer with an ugly, glare. "It is not easy for the vanquished to be generous when a conquering enemy stands before them."

The storm of voices grew again, forestalling any further speech with clamor and chaos. The troll left his chair and advanced. Ugly and malformed, with a head too large for his body, bulging eyes, sunken nose



and teeth protruding beyond his lower lip, Ha'rak stood perhaps four feet tall. He was dressed in moccasins, leather leggings and a short vest that did not cover his massive torso and belly. His skin was reddish, his hairy arms and chest marked with many thick burn scars acquired over the blacksmithing fires that produced his race's fine metalwork.

Xavier gritted his teeth, reminding himself appeasement was his best tactic. What he needed lay in Ula'dh. He must get there. He could cross by force, but wisdom dictated it would be wiser not to violate the new peace between the upper-world Sclydians and the underworld beings.

"Yet you cannot ignore the recent treaties between our people."

The troll's eyes narrowed. "I know many who ignore." He clicked his tongue in a mocking sound. "One you could not keep under your control."

"Morgan is no longer a power in Sclyd," Xavier hastened to say. "No one within the council recognizes his former position. He will be executed if he should be captured and taken for trial."

Ha'rak grunted. "*If* he is caught."

His words were a whiplash.

Xavier advanced a step and offered a ceremonial bow. "We must take our losses as we take our victories. Is that not the way of warriors?" His tone was even and low. He refused to let the troll goad him.

When he last came to Gidrah, he had desired the casting of a gold ring and needed the finesse of a troll metalworker to bring about the fusion of the ingredients he wished to use. To get his way, he had used his favorite methods of persuasion—fear and torture.

"I cannot forget your raid on my people," Ha'rak said. "In the name of Asl, be you cursed in the circles of destiny. By ritual and power, I pray your losses be everlasting."

The troll stopped at the chest and plunged his thick, four-fingered hand into the sea of gold. Picking up a handful, he let the coins slide through his fingers like sand.

Trolls were known for their love of the coin. Ha'rak's beady eyes shone with greed. It was clear he was struggling with his decision. His

rough-cut jaw, covered with reddish-brown fuzz, hardened; and his lips twisted into something that was neither a smile nor a grimace.

He slammed the lid of the chest down with a savage sweep.

“This is hardly enough to buy your way through Gidrah!” he charged. “I do not accept your tainted gold! It is stained with the blood of my people, and I will not be ally to your quest.”

Xavier bristled. “Then you do not grant my passage?”

A devious grin split Ha’rak’s thick lips. He made a quick ritual gesture. “I give you a challenge. Cross Gidrah in a fortnight, and you have your passage. If you have not crossed into Ula’dh by noon of the fourteenth day, I will send my warriors to take your hide.” He drew his hand into a tight fist and the muscles of his short arm corded like bands of steel. “Treaty or not, if you make a mistake, I will have your head on a stick and your bones for my supper.”

Xavier inclined his head. “Your challenge is accepted.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The day had been warm; but the November night was cool, giving a hint of the winter ahead. Cloaked in a thin haze, the stars were sprinkled like rare diamonds on the indigo velvet of the sky. Unseen in the darkness, night birds chirped mysterious songs, understood only by the shadows.

In her room, Julianne sat on her bed, legs crossed. Spread all around her were the spell books belonging to her grandmother, now hers. Through the last three days, she'd spent many hours studying the obscure writing inscribed on the pages. She'd examined the books for so long her vision was blurry with fatigue. The drawings and letters ran together, doing strange little dances.

Picking up the first small volume again, she cracked open its hard cover. Her grandmother's neat, feminine handwriting covered the pages, left to right, top to bottom. Looking at them, flipping each slowly in turn, she felt a strange stirring deep inside, an almost physical connection not only with her grandmother, but also with all Blackthorne women.

What Anlese had passed to her was waiting to emerge, to blossom like a desert flower after a long, dry summer. It only needed the waters of knowledge to grow and flourish.

Trouble was, at this point she comprehended little. The letters and drawings made no sense whatsoever.

"I can't understand a single thing here." She sighed in defeat, and laid the book aside. She couldn't look at it anymore. Turning her head, she scanned the closed doors, almost hoping they would open. Of course, they didn't. No one was looking for her.

Irritably sweeping her hair out of her face, she squinted to read the luminous numbers on the bedside digital clock—4:30 a.m.

Grumbling to herself, Julianne stacked her pillows and settled back onto their softness. Aside from her not being able to comprehend a whit of Anlese's writings, there was something more pressing on her mind, perhaps the true reason she was unable to concentrate.

She'd murdered a human being. It was a specter hanging over her head, one that refused to be easily sent away.

A stab of guilt lanced through her heart. Once again, she couldn't help thinking about the woman she'd killed. Through the days, she'd tried to tell herself again and again that the girl was a street person of little consequence, that one more homeless whore would not be missed, that her death would be duly noted by the press, her body disposed of in a pauper's grave, another unsolved murder for police who wouldn't care because their files already overflowed with too many of the same. The girl had been murdered by someone who walked away, free and untouched by the crime.

Just like her mother. Cassandra had been beaten and left to die in a back alley.

Somewhere, in an unknown city, were parents mourning the loss of a wayward daughter, mourning the way she'd mourned her own mother? Not with tears but with a sigh of relief that the unstable soul in life might finally have found peace in death?

On an unconscious level she kept trying to blame the thing inside her for the death. That was not wholly true and she knew it. She'd made the decision to go out and hunt. If she didn't accept the blame, she'd take another step toward losing her humanity. She couldn't let that happen.

Just as the guilt gnawed at her conscience, so did a second voice arise, a stronger, more damning one—that of the creature she fed. The will to survive had been the stronger. She must feed the beast to live. More than the need for food, for justification of her existence, though, was the fact that she'd relished her victim's fear, enjoyed the taste of warm blood on her lips, the fullness in her belly. She'd felt her true power, as an immortal then, knowing that she would walk away and

another would not. Such superiority was a heady aphrodisiac. It was easy to see how an entity could be seduced by the darker side of the occult.

Morgan had fallen once. Hard. Now, she was falling, too, straight into the same damnation. If she was not careful—wise—she would stumble and that would destroy her.

*I have the potential to be powerful,* she thought. *But I must have care. In my survival, I have to show mercy to the weaker species.* She resolved that she next time she fed, she would be gentler.

Because she could not ignore the hunger.

She counted the rhythm of her breathing for some time, an attempt to hypnotize herself into relaxing. As soon as she closed her eyes and began to doze, her lids flew open and she was again staring at the canopy over her bed.

“This isn’t working.”

Her mouth drew down into a severe frown. There was a reason she was alone tonight. Morgan had withdrawn, retaliating with silence against her harsh, ugly words by removing himself from her presence both physically and emotionally.

*What a stupid fool I’ve been. He warned me. He warned me, damn it, and I didn’t listen.* He’d also called her weak. Like her mother. That one had hurt.

A harsh laugh escaped her lips.

Now she was miserable, punished because of what she’d unthinkingly said to her lover.

*I guess I’m just not the killer you are.*

The words had burned themselves into her brain.

Remorse welled up inside her. Her eyes grew watery; her vision blurred. As she looked at the journals, tears ran down her cheeks. She wiped them away, a sob of frustration breaking from her throat. She drew her knees to her chest.

Morgan did not easily forgive and forget. He absolutely refused to have anything to do with her. Instead, he cocooned himself in his den during the days. When she tried to speak to him, he would fix her with a

cold, unblinking stare and refer his answers through anyone who happened to be present. It was as if she was an annoying insect in his world. But since he could not squash her, he'd chosen to freeze her out.

*How could I have said that?* she railed at herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

She gave a third look at the journals. "Grandmother," she whispered. "Please help me understand this. I need to learn."

Listlessly, she picked one up.

As though her grandmother were reaching out from the netherworld, a warm glow began to spread through her body. Anlese's voice echoed in her mind. *It's in you. Just let it come naturally.*

Julienne reached for one of the journals. When she opened it and looked at the first page, she was astonished to see the letters inscribed on the paper begin to morph, assuming new shapes. In a moment, they had rearranged into plain English.

She began to tremble in excitement. She was afraid to tear her eyes off the page. "I can read this!"

Fearing the words would vanish if she blinked, she closed one eye, then opened it. The words were still there. She closed both eyes, waited a moment. Opened them. The words were still there! She closed the book, waited ten minutes and picked up another. Ditto.

"I've got to tell him."

Except that Morgan wasn't around to tell.

That didn't deter her excitement. So elated she couldn't stay still, she slid her legs over the edge of the bed, retrieving her cigarettes and lighter from her bedside table. The pack was empty. Disgusted, she crushed it and tossed it aside.

Remembering she'd left an open pack in the library, she decided she might as well have a smoke. Morgan wasn't the only one indulging in a nicotine habit lately—she was nearing two packs a day.

She climbed off the mattress, retrieving her lighter as she stood. Dressed in a sweat suit, she slipped on a pair of moccasins and exited her suite. In addition to his indulgence in cigarettes, Morgan was

drinking again, returning with a vengeance to his crutch. What was he trying to blot out of his mind now? Was she one of them?

The huge manor was eerily still. Soundlessly, she made her way down the stairs and across the foyer. The silence put her nerves on edge. She rubbed away the goose bumps on her arms, quickening her pace.

She wasted no time turning on the lights and locating her cigarettes. Her hands shook as she lit one. Inhaling deeply, she placed the lighter and pack on the mantel. She noticed a chilly draft winnowing through the room.

The French doors were cracked open.

But no one was around.

Warily, Julianne walked past the piano, her gaze flitting from it to the doors. The breeze sneaking through the opened doors was brisk. She couldn't come up with a viable explanation as to why they would be ajar at such a late hour.

A burglar? Or something more sinister?

She shuddered at the thought and forced herself to approach. Although not quite full, the moon provided sufficient light, bathing the back lawns in an unearthly silver-blue glow. Enchanted by the sight, she stepped onto the patio.

The night air smelled clean, invigorating to take into hungry lungs. The wind stirred leaves and tugged at her hair, tousling the strands about her back and shoulders. The moonlight whetted her imagination with its myth and magic, compelling her to venture further onto the wide patio.

Amidst the mystical beauty of the nightscape, she noticed a figure in the distance, head tilted back as if the person were staring up at the moon.

Morgan?

Sharp as her eyes were, she couldn't tell.

She was about to call out, but the shadowy figure unexpectedly stepped out of sight, obscured by the heavy hedges lining the back lawns. Beyond the hedge was a tangle of overgrown paths. A series of back trails led throughout the wild greenery that had overtaken the

estate during the last seventy years. The paths led, respectively, to the family graveyard and Morgan's Stonehenge-like circle of stones, a place he called the Temple of Light.

*Let him go*, she told herself, shivering with the lowering temperature and the dread inching through her system. *We can talk when he comes back.*

Around her, the wind picked up, whistling across the back gardens. The mournful sound warned her to go back inside.

Julienne looked again to where she'd seen the figure disappear. She decided to find him. She took off across the lawn in a fast clip, cutting through the hedges. There, she was confronted with a series of confusing outlets.

"Damn."

She chose the clearest path, trying to recall if it would lead to the pagan's temple. The trail proved difficult. The ground was uneven beneath overgrown vines. As she tripped along, she wondered repeatedly how she'd talked herself into the insane venture. It would be wiser to turn back, to return to the house before she got lost in this jungle.

Breaking from the trees, she discovered she stood at the outskirts of the growth. Before her loomed a wrought iron gate and fence. She'd chosen the wrong path. She groaned.

The cemetery appeared peaceful. A benevolent resting place snuggled within verdant overgrowth. At the entrance, Julienne paused beside a looming statue of an angel holding aloft a sword, his stone eyes looking balefully at the sky. The cold, chiseled features unnerved her. In the moonlight, she could almost swear she could see a pulse throbbing at the temples. She expected the great marble head to turn and look down on her, and a glowing, yellow, wrathful gaze challenge her right to trespass beyond the gate. She could almost hear the sword whiffing through the air, and the thud of her severed head hitting the ground.

Anlese's body was there, within the icy, dark haven of the crypt's walls.

Before all courage could abandon her, she opened the gate, wincing as the rusty hinges screeched loudly with grating protest. Chills scraped



up her spine, and her heart pounded erratically. Why did she have the feeling she was being watched? She felt eyes boring into her back, yet every time she turned where she believed the stares were coming from, there was no one.

Shaking her head, filled with a nagging uneasiness, she progressed cautiously beyond the gate. If she could make her way through the cemetery, she could find the path leading to the temple.

She felt the small wooden charm around her neck growing warm. Where was the danger? She saw nothing. Every direction she looked, stone eyes watched her, their cold stares envying her warm, living body.

“Knock it off,” she muttered, chastising her imagination.

All at once, the cemetery was not so peaceful or calm. The temperature dropped significantly as a wind snaked through the yard, whistling among the headstones and rustling the leaves of the trees. She knew her fears prompted her hearing the sounds of harsh whisperings, but the knowledge didn’t help to quiet her rapidly increasing hysteria. An inner voice warned her to run.

*Julienne...*

The voice, a grating whisper, rose from the ground. The wind vanished. The stillness surrounding her became a heavy, suffocating cloak, so weighty it took all her willpower not to sink to her knees.

“Who’s there?” she called, trembling violently. “This isn’t funny. Please, you’re scaring me.”

*Come...closer...*

Was that her grandmother’s voice?

A whimper escaped her lips, and she glanced around. A flicker of movement caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

Julienne froze. Her heart lodged in her throat. A strangled cry escaped her when she saw the man.

He was black, tall, thin, dressed in the clothing of a medieval age. His nappy hair was cropped square and short to his scalp. He was rank with the stench of soil clinging to his skin. He smiled. Just a bit, just enough to reveal the deadly canines his thick lips hid.

He stood within six feet of her, overwhelming her with his presence. His big body filled her vision. The power he radiated enveloped her, kept her silent as she watched, scared stiff. Blood pumped through her veins, filling her with adrenaline.

Rooted in her spot, she reflexively glanced down at her hand. Her wrist was bare of the slave bracelet. Panic coursed through her. Why hadn't she put it on before leaving the house? It was stupid to go outside without any weapon.

"Wh-who are you?" The peach wood charm was sizzling now, hot against her skin.

The creature smiled. *I am the watcher.*

She heard the words clearly, though none passed his lips. It was unnerving to think he had the ability to penetrate her mind.

"Why do you watch?" She quelled the instinct to run. Run, and he would overtake her. Run, and he would kill her. Every fiber in her body tightened like a wound spring. She could at least fight, try to defend herself. Nervous energy crackled in the air around her.

*For you,* came his unspoken reply.

The low, feral growl of the hunter emanated from his throat. Before her eyes, his body began to contort, shifting and spinning into a glowing haze. All of a sudden, he burst apart, disgorging a hail of locusts. The size of a grown man's fist, the insects swarmed, an army of gauzy wings and sticky legs.

Julienne shrieked, blinded by the vicious bugs beating against her body, scratching her face, tangling in her hair. Deafened by their intense buzzing, she tried to escape the biting mouths piercing her skin, drawing blood. She stumbled like a woman afire, falling to the ground. Rolling over and over, she curled into a protective ball.

The locusts persisted, crawling all over her, feeling as though they were eating through her skin, devouring her eyeballs, penetrating her nose and mouth to suck the air out of her lungs.

A howling scream of sheer terror escaped her.

Then there was silence. She felt nothing. Heard nothing.

Julienne pushed herself up, looking quickly around. Seeing nothing, she climbed to her feet. "Where is it?"

A whispery voice in her head. *Here.*

"Oh, God." She slowly pivoted. Her heart thumped, raced, and she felt her blood flow through her veins, cold fear overtaking her more quickly with each passing second.

The man vaulted into the air, throwing himself onto her and knocking her back to the ground. He was stronger than she was, but her fear added to her already unnatural strength and gave her the edge she needed.

She shoved him away, lifting and driving her knees into his chest as he came down on top of her. A gush of air ejected past his lips. She kicked out again, rolling to her feet and backing away. He made garbled sounds as he regained his momentum, rushing at her intent on a second full-body tackle and slamming her against the wall of the crypt. The back of her head smacked hard marble.

Groaning, Julienne lashed out, her flailing hands finding flesh. She desperately tore at his face and neck but had no effect. His hands circled her head, smashing her skull into the stone as if he were trying to crack it like an egg. Blackness flowed across her vision like an eclipse descending over the sun. She thought she heard her grandmother saying her name repeatedly but as moments ticked by, the ghostly voice sounded further and further away, until stark silence raged in her ears.

Giving her head one final smash, the black man stepped away, watching as she slid down the wall, panting and lightheaded, tremors coursing through her.

"Please..." She tried to speak, but the words died in her throat.

He bent over, one hand gripping her thick hair. He yanked her to her feet. Wrenching back her head, he opened his mouth and dipped his head toward her vulnerable exposed throat. She could smell his wretched breath. Feel the iciness on her skin.

Julienne caught the rush of quick motion as Morgan charged in, sweeping the creature off her. Dropping to the ground, hands rising

protectively, she watched two bodies fall in a tangle of flailing limbs. Both acted and reacted in a blur super-human strength, speed and agility.

The man bucked, knocking Morgan aside and climbing to his feet. Fangs bared, snarling like a rabid wolf, he leapt forward, landing hard on Morgan. He slashed out with sharp fingernails at Morgan's throat, striking just under the jaw as Morgan turned his head to avoid the razor-like talons.

Cursing, Morgan retaliated viciously, bucking his body and wrapping one leg around the undead's neck. Slamming the man back into the ground, Morgan reversed their positions, bringing his knees down heavily on the man's flailing arms and pinning them to the ground. He lifted his arms over his head, hands clasped around some object. In a sweeping arc, he drove the stake into the man's broad chest.

Comprehension colored the black man's expression. He screamed in sheer rage, arching his back in agony. Morgan leapt to his feet when the vampire snorted, then gagged, a gory exhalation of black blood gushing like a fountain from his mouth and nose.

Horried, Julianne scrabbled back on hands and knees when the man climbed to his feet, stumbling a few steps before landing sprawled on his back. She could do little but stare in sheer disbelief. Every groan, every scream of pain from the creature tore at her heart like a razor. There seemed to be no oxygen in her lungs. Only coldness. Stark, frightening coldness.

Though only a few seconds passed, it seemed like hours to her shocked and benumbed mind. She watched the man clawing at his chest, trying to remove the source of agony. Unsuccessful, he beat arms and legs on the ground, wailing his anger in a frightening crescendo. In a final burst of strength, he lifted his hand, ripping at the air. He snarled a final time, a shudder streaming through his entire body.

Then he lay still. The length of pure white ash wood protruded starkly, marker of his doom.

Hearing footsteps, she cast her eyes up in time to see Morgan approach with an ease that reminded her of a male tiger armored in the pride of the kill. Bending, he lifted her to her feet; but instead of hugging

her to him, offering solace and showing a bit of relief that she was alive, he stepped away.

"I hate these animals." His hand raked across his scratched neck as his gaze swept her. "You look all right. He did not harm you too badly."

A bit put off by his lack of concern, she nodded stupidly, wrapping her own arms around her body.

"W-what is it?" she managed stammer out.

"It is a nosferatu. It dies to rise again in another body, one newly deceased."

"It's not dead?"

"Not yet, just paralyzed."

Her gaze settled on the creature. "How does one kill the undead?"

"You need not see. I will take care of it." Drawing his dagger, he urged her away.

Without looking back, Julianne took a few stumbling steps through the cemetery. But she couldn't leave. She had to see what was going to happen. More than simply indulging morbid curiosity, she wanted to see how she might someday die herself. She slowly turned.

Thinking her gone, Morgan knelt beside the corpse and wrenched the man's head off the ground. A smooth motion of his knife brought it cleanly off in his hand. He let the head drop to the ground as more blood erupted from the decapitated body. The man's teeth gnashed together in a final bite, the lips were shredded by the uncontrolled spasms of the canines.

The corpse began to rapidly decay. Skin peeled from the skull, and the eyes rolled back into the sockets to fall into the brain cavity. Bone cracked and oozed thick pus, marrow blackening and disintegrating into a gummy residue.

In a moment, it was over. All that was left of the undead were some oily clothes, a grinning skull and the gold sigil that had hung around his neck.

Morgan prodded the skull. Through the socket of one eye emerged the long legs of a tarantula. As the hairy spider attempted to scurry away, he caught it. Opening his hand, he looked at the huge arachnid

“Got you.” At his words, the spider burst into flames. He closed his fingers around its burning form. When he opened his hand, nothing except ashes remained. He scattered them to the night then picked up the amulet and pocketed it.

“Is it gone?”

Startled by her voice, Morgan turned. “He will not walk this earth again.” He brought his boot down hard on the skull. It shattered into dust.

Danger over, he pounced. “What the hell were you doing out here anyway?”

His tone did not set well with her. Pulling up her chin, she bit out defiantly, “I was looking for you.”

Making a disgusted sound deep in his throat, he turned and walked away. Dawn peeked over the horizon as the waning moon began to set into the west. As far as he was concerned, his night was over.

Julienne trailed in his wake, trying to keep her mind free of fears, questions and doubts as they left the cemetery. He was still firmly entrenched in his best ‘bastard’ mode. Why did he always have to be so hard and inflexible? Couldn’t he see she’d had a close call? Didn’t he care a bit that she’d had more than her wits frightened out of her?

No, she thought bitterly. He doesn’t care a whit. It was as if he’d let the creature attack her.

She shot a quick glance at his back. Was it such a silly thought?

*Drama queen.*

*You came out at night to a place where you had no business being and now you’re blaming him for your close call.*

Morgan did not stop to see if she was following. He took it for granted she would. Out of breath, she stepped over the low rail surrounding the saltillo terrace. She bumped into a wicker lawn chair and knocked it over. Ignoring it, she went through the French doors, into the welcoming light of the library.

It was deserted.

Glad to be inside, she collapsed into the nearest chair. She was a mess—grimy, stinking of sweat and lingering fear.

Closing and locking the library doors, Morgan lit a cigarette. "It is not safe outside these walls. When I am away, do not come looking for me."

She stared, perusing him from head to foot. There was something different about him, something she at first had trouble putting her finger on. Then, it occurred to her that what he had regained was something he had not possessed for a very long time.

Control.

No longer trapped in endless boring days, enchained by mortal limitations, he was rich, cultured and had the whole of not one but two worlds at his fingertips. There was literally nowhere he could not go, nothing he could not do. It was a bit intimidating.

*Check that, she thought. It's very intimidating.*

She couldn't take her eyes off him. Booted feet planted slightly apart, cigarette clenched between his teeth, he was dressed in mod street clothes, to which he'd added a calf-length black leather duster. God, but he looked good. Damn good. Why couldn't he have been an ugly man? It would have made it easier to stay mad at him.

Instead, all she thought about was how she wanted him to sweep her up into his arms.

Heat suffusing her body, Julianne became aware of his hard stare. *Oh, my!* How could she be fantasizing about having sex with him right at this moment? *Where is my head?*

She fanned herself with her hand, caught in an embarrassing hot flash. *Is it warm in here?* She swept her hands across her brow, wiping away the beads of perspiration on her skin. She was a young, healthy, twenty-four-year-old woman and days without sex had her hormones jumping. She didn't realize that fear and rushing adrenaline were being re-channelled straight into her libido now that the danger was over.

"In case you've forgotten, asshole," she snapped. "People do worry about you."

The expression on his face said that he didn't care if she worried or not. He appeared to be thinking for a moment, then blew smoke through his nostrils and silently crossed to the bar.

When he took out a glass and a bottle, she caught the gist of his actions. He intended to ignore her.

Julienne's own stare was as sullen as she could manage. Through narrow eyes she watched him fill the glass. Straight scotch. He sat down on the lounge across from her and resumed his smoking. His insolent perusal shook her to the core, made doubly vexing because of that damned ever-present hint of a smirk lingering around the left corner of his mouth.

*Ignore it. He's deliberately being a twit and he knows it.*

Grasping for something more to say, she blurted out, "I'm sorry."

Morgan's stare remained darkly leaden. His skepticism was clearly evident. "About what?"

"What I said." Annoyingly, her heart pounded. Heat colored her cheeks bright pink. "The other night."

"What makes you think I care what you said?"

"Because you've been sulking like a spoiled brat. For Christ's sake, if I hurt your feelings, say something."

He drained his glass. "According to you, I do not have any."

Startled at the stab of pain his words evoked but refusing to show how they affected her, she looked at him levelly. Damn his self-centered, insensitive arrogance, the way he thought he could dictate people's feelings. She tried to ignore the fact that he knew how to push her buttons.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to recapture control. "Wonder whose fault that is? I've said I'm sorry once, but I won't say it again."

He stubbed out his cigarette. "I am not asking you to."

His scowl was fierce. He wasn't cutting her any slack at all.

She blinked, bristling, silently cursing his passive-aggressive stance. Oh, but he was good at manipulation. He knew every trick in the fucking book.

"Be that way, then!" she snapped. "I tried."

A long silence ensued, each stewing. Neither seemed able to reach out, break the ice.



*We might as well miss by a mile as by the skin of our teeth, she thought. There are just no written steps to this dance we're doing.*

"All we seem to do is make each other miserable," she finally said. "I can't say the right things to you, and you can't even clue me in on what's bothering you. My God, how far are we going to get if we can't even fight a little? That's part of a relationship, of growing together, something I'm getting the feeling you don't really want to do. You shut the door in my face every time I get the slightest bit close to you." She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. The next words were going to be hard to say, but they had to be spoken. "If you want to leave me, you might as well go ahead. You're good at using people, then walking away."

There. She'd thrown down the gauntlet. Let him say he did not love her and walk off. Though it would hurt, he could go. She would survive.

The cold dissipated a bit. His expression softened. "I am here because I want to be, not because I have to."

She warmed at his words. At least he thought enough of her to say them.

"Really?" There was no battle won in this mutual surrender, but it was enough to satisfy her. Hope seeded her foolish heart.

"Really." Either he had a hitch in his throat, or she was getting to him.

Morgan rose to refill his glass, bringing the bottle back with him. For the first time, she noticed how drawn and gaunt he looked. He was unshaven and had a long, jagged cut under his jaw, pale skin, dark circles rimming his eyes. He had about as much life in him as a corpse thirty days deceased.

He'd been driving himself hard, allowing little time for rest. The effects were undeniably beginning to manifest.

She made a decision.

*Enough of his macho bullshit. I have to take care of this man or he'll kill himself with booze and exhaustion.*

Getting up, she walked over to him. Realizing what she was up to, he pulled a face and tried to wave her away. She refused to back off. Taking his drink from his hand, she set it on the end table. He put his hands up

as if to block her, but she gently parted them, then sat down, straddling his lap so she was facing him. She felt secure settled against his hard, lean body. Safe. She could feel him momentarily stiffen, then relax.

Bending forward, she briefly touched her lips to his. Her blood heated when their kiss deepened. Her brain grew pleasantly foggy. Closing her eyes for a moment, she took another step onto the shaky bridge that was her love for this man. As though blown by a strong wind, it quivered under her feet but remained secure.

When their kiss broke, she smoothed his hair away from his face. She ran her thumbs over his cheekbones before beginning to massage his temples in slow, firm circles.

“Headache?” She wanted to offer him her strength, show him he was not alone and did not have to guard his weaknesses from her.

It was becoming easier to accept the fact that her lover was the owner of a life centered on deceptions carefully staged to conceal the violence and pain enveloping him. In the midst of it all, somehow he managed to preserve his fragile sanity. His mood swings were sudden and drastic, and he often struck out without thinking of the damage he might do to others or himself.

For her part, she was coming to realize she must be the balance in his life, the stability around which he could center himself. She dared to argue with him, challenge his irrational behavior with reason. Though frightened of the world he had pulled her into, she realized she could not let him totally dominate and stifle her. She must be strong, meet his inconsistencies with firm reactions of sense and sanity, the light to his darkness, the calm to his storm.

The responsibility of keeping him intact was daunting. She realized for the first time the stresses he must have put on people who cared for him in the past. Sometimes, she wished she could have known him in that life, known him as a mortal before the occult claimed such a large part of his existence.

He closed his eyes. “A little bit.”

She cradled his face in her hands, savoring the texture of his unshaven skin, the hard muscles playing under her palms. “You need to

get some sleep. You remember sleep? Get into bed, snuggle up to a pillow?”

His eyes immediately opened, that dark stare lancing through her. “Forget it.” His tone grew gruff, warning her to back off.

Straightening her shoulders, she shook her head. “You’re not fooling me. You only drink when those headaches start.” She offered a brief smile. “I’m not stupid or blind, you know.”

His eyes narrowed, angst-ridden as undesirable thoughts passed through his head. He caught her hands and lowered them. “I will be all right.”

She pulled free, pinning him down under a hard stare. “Will you?”

He reached for his glass. “I am fine.” His clipped tone told her he did not wish to discuss the matter further. “Just have to get used to slaying dragons again.”

“I felt that you’ve been out hunting them.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“On the Sclydian side, as much as possible.”

“But they’re coming here, too,” she said. “Sometimes I get the feeling we’re being spied on. Closely.”

“Many eyes watch, on both sides.”

“That thing did more than watch. Where did it come from?”

His jaw tightened. “It was a familiar, the eyes and ears of another. What he did to you was only a warning.”

She tilted up his chin to examine the scratch under his neck. Dried blood flecked off under her fingertips. The cut was already healing, barely a purplish weal across his throat. A couple of inches lower, and Naylor would have gotten his carotid.

She rested her hands on his shoulders. “What it did tonight wasn’t a warning. It was here to kill.”

He didn’t answer.

She persisted. “Who sent that thing? Xavier?”

“No.”

“Who, then?”

“Megwyn.”

Her fingers flexed against the hard muscle of his shoulders. Her gut clenched painfully, only this time it wasn't hunger prodding at her insides. It was instinct warning her that his twin was a very dangerous and vindictive woman. *If anyone's going to completely devastate him it will be that woman.* Suddenly, a bit of repressed memory stirred.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

“What?”

“I saw your sister again with Xavier.” Would he believe her?

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “When?”

“When I was trapped in the tunnels beneath his sanctuary, trying to get out.”

“Tell me everything you saw.”

In a rush of words, she recounted the strange experience of leaving her body, of the conversation between the two and of the queer little Chinese man who had stitched up the sorcerer's hand and face. Even as the words left her mouth, she realized how unbelievable they must sound.

“You are sure what you witnessed was real?” Morgan asked.

She nodded. “I'm sure. It was too real to be a dream.”

“There is a way to find out.”

She looked at him. “How?”

Morgan dumped Julianne off his lap, tumbling her onto the couch. “The healer you saw. His name is Duk-cho. And I want to talk to that old man.”

Muttering a curse through gritted teeth, Julianne watched him stand up. Her eyes met his. “Now?”

Shaking off his exhaustion through sheer will, Morgan ran his hands through his hair, making it even messier than usual. “Yes.”

Julianne sighed.

So much for romance.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

The city of Gidrah was crude. Paths were narrow and hard to navigate by anyone larger than the troll people. As Xavier's procession struggled around bubbling pools of molten lava, hostile eyes stared out from the caves in which the trolls made their homes.

Because he was fleet of foot, Azoroath led the sorcerer's company. Steam issued from the ground, making the travelers doubt every step. Water was scarce in this barren land, a prize dearer to the troll population than even their precious metals.

Beyond their city lay the acrid wasteland that would lead the travelers into the city of Ula'dh. Only the strongest of plant and animal species survived there. In this barren land, rain never fell and the sun never shone. The sky was rock, and the night eternal. Fire was the only light.

Behind Azoroath, Xavier, flanked by two of his slaves because he was not so agile and feared falling, grimly pushed forward. He panted with each step, and his heart beat wildly with the exertion he had not experienced in years. The layers of clothes he wore clung to his sweat-soaked body, making him regret the decades of excess that made him ashamed to bare his body. The eunuchs were stripped down to the waist; and though their minds were broken by torture, their bodies were extremely well developed and strong. They bore their burdens with the patience of packhorses, docilely following where the master led.

It would be a long and arduous journey. To cross the borders and reach Ula'dh in two weeks would be more than a challenge—it would be a miracle. In order to make the crossing before the troll king's warriors attacked, the travelers would have to keep constantly moving. There

would be limited time to rest. Duk-cho had provided narcotic herbs that would give the body energy in place of sleep, but the old man had warned they must be used sparingly.

To over-use could prove lethal.

Though he had not yet had the need to use the potion, Xavier knew it would soon be the only thing that would keep them going.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

In the Westlands of Sclyd, the city of Kemryk flourished, a far cry from the glacial Northlands or even the more habitable Eastland valleys. For all the apparent prosperity, though, all was not well. Through the centuries the human populace had grown sparse. Elderly were infrequently sighted, children even rarer.

Julienne shivered and pulled her cloak closer. "It's so different here. A little more alive."

Her words trailed off as she surveyed the city they had yet to enter. She'd wanted to accompany Morgan in his search for Duk-cho and to her surprise, he'd agreed. It was time she started learning more of Sclyd, its customs and people.

For the crossing, they'd abandoned modern dress, donning clothing that would be less conspicuous. Since she had no appropriate clothing beyond what Anlese had left her, Morgan had provided some of his to wear. The tunic and trousers were a little large and hung in places, but they were acceptable.

"The people here live much as their ancestors did centuries ago," he said. "It has hardly changed."

"When you said we'd go to one of the better cities, I expected more," she commented.

He shrugged. "This is about as good as it gets."

Without a backward glance, he set off, heading down the embankment and boldly into the village center. Julienne hurried to catch up, keeping pace behind him. This time, she wasn't eager to go rushing off into the unknown. She'd learned her lesson.

They passed the poorer quarters on the outskirts of the village, places where several families often inhabited a single house. The buildings were square, with trellis walls made of stone cut and placed so precisely together no cement was needed. The roofs were thatched or sometimes of woven reeds if near the riverfronts.

Aware of how she was dressed, she cast glances at dirty men and women in garments of homespun material. The men wore long-sleeved tunics covered by a long belted cloak, trousers and boots of soft leather. The clothes had no pockets, so most people carried money and other belongings in a pouch tucked into wide sashes tied around the waist.

Women wore tunics with long sleeves topped by a cloak caught at the waist by a sash, and leather ankle slippers. Both sexes kept their hair long. The women wore theirs braided, then covered by a scarf. Men's styles were more casual—jaw length, usually pulled back into a ponytail. Most of the males had beards or heavy stubble. Few were clean-shaven.

The village was encircled by a palisade—a stone embankment topped with posts. While not exactly any kind of fort, the wall served as a barrier for keeping livestock in and predatory carnivores, such as wolves, out.

The day was just beginning, yet even in the early-morning cold the hard-packed dirt streets were already overflowing with people going about their daily fight for survival. The streets had been freshly tidied for the day's trading, but the smells of the city were still present. Odors of animal waste and garbage mingled with that of unwashed bodies. Recent rains had turned the streets to mud.

"My God, this is poverty. These people live in squalor. How do they survive?" Julianne pulled away from a ragged young girl who'd taken a liking to her slave bracelet. Egged on by her companions, the urchin was attempting to talk her out of the trinket.

A muscle in Morgan's jaw tightened. "To them, it is prosperity."

He caught the young thief by her scruff. Taking something out of his pocket, he handed it to the girl and let her go with a few sharp words. An instant ruckus over the gold coin ensued among her companions.

"Why'd you give that to her?" Julianne asked.



“That is probably the only real money she will ever see in her lifetime,” he explained. “And it got her mind off your jewelry.”

“This place is terrible. No one could live decently here.”

“To their minds, they do,” he said. “The ruling entities refuse to let the natural order of civilization advance. Most people here cannot read or write. Their only history is an oral one.”

There was no time for more idle talk. He had not come to show her the sights.

On the move again, Morgan strode through the crowd, urging people out of his path with sharp words. He seemed familiar with the twists and turns of the unpaved streets.

Head swiveling to take in every detail, Julianne noted the shops and the wares they offered. She even thought she could understand some of what the people said, just as she could now read the journals her grandmother had given her. While many of the words were still unfamiliar, she realized some of them were simply English that had been mangled through time into entirely different pronunciations.

Signs with drawings depicted the business within—a vine for a vintner, a horse’s hoof for a blacksmith, a cow for a butcher. In the market, chickens and geese were strung up by their feet, as were rabbits. In the butcher’s quarters, piles of offal swarmed with flies. Slaughtering was performed on the spot.

Luxury shops stood side-by-side with basic crafts. Horse, oxen and burro traffic made the narrow streets foul, congested. Fire was a constant threat.

Morgan made a sharp turn, leading her up an alley less populated but no less polluted with refuse. Prosperous merchants along this lane had multi-storied homes with business premises on the first level, living quarters on the second and third. From cellar to attic, the emphasis was on comfort. He stopped when he found the shop he wanted. Its sign was burned across the door.

APOTHECARY.

He pushed open the door.

Following him, Julianne entered an anteroom. A door to the side led to private quarters. A fire blazed under the hood of a huge chimney. Even in daytime, fire supplied light.

The large, low-ceilinged room was chilly. The walls were hung with panels of embroidered linen, and the furniture consisted of benches, a low trestle table and large wooden shelves—planks nailed lengthwise—that displayed the shop's wares. The windows were sealed shut, covered with split bamboo blinds. A heavy haze of incense floated in the air, issuing from the nostrils of a huge brass burner cast in the form of a winged dragon. The scent of sandalwood was stifling in the closed space.

Rubbing her watering eyes, she looked around. As her vision adjusted to the fire-lit dimness of the shop, she could make out shelf after shelf loaded with a variety of items, some occult, some not.

Curiosity aroused, she approached one, minding her steps lest she trip over something lurking in the haze. With a delicate finger she lifted the lid of a lovely rosewood box and peered inside. She quickly let the lid drop and stepped back in shock—the box held a dried human hand.

"Do you know what's in these?" she asked, turning to Morgan.

"I have a good idea." More than a few of the articles closely resembled those Morgan had once used in his spell work.

A small woman entered the room, slipping quietly through a waterfall of blue beads. Her almond eyes widened. Dropping to her knees, she bowed her face to the floor.

Julianne looked from the woman to Morgan. "I think she knows you."



Morgan regarded the bent figure. His hand tightened on the strap that held his crossbow in place across his back, but he did not draw the weapon. He had not come to kill. Just get information.

"Get up, Uan-li," he said in Mandarin.

Trembling, Uan-li Twrng lifted her head from the floor. She remained on her knees. Without prompt, she began to babble, a torrent of words spilling from her mouth. Her hands twisted together in front of her as she talked. She was nervous.

He listened intently. When Uan-Li finished speaking, he nodded and spoke to her in a reassuring tone. His words seemed to please the woman.

Uan-li picked herself slowly off the floor, arthritis making her movements stiff and awkward. She chattered in a staccato of Chinese, bowing and moving to the doorway through which she had come. Lifting the blue beads aside, she motioned with her hand.

“You are free to proceed.”

“Come on,” he said to Julianne as he slid through the blue beads.

“What was this about?” Julianne demanded as they began to descend an earthen stairway leading to an underground chamber. “I thought she was going to die when she saw you.”

“Uan-li would not die so easily. Every time she sees me, she thinks I have come for the kill. She forgets I do not hold grudges forever.” He paused. “She just thinks I do.”

“Oh? What’d she do to you?”

“Uan-li? Nothing.”

“Is there anybody you haven’t made an enemy out of?”

He did not answer. Reaching the bottom, he crossed to the threshold of another room, slithering through a second waterfall of beads. Like the floor above, the windowless, unventilated room was inundated with the dusky smoke of smoldering incense. A haven of drugs. An opium den.

Duk-cho sat cross-legged amid a pile of soft cushions of all sizes and colors. Dressed in a flowing kimono of red silk, he was thin, wasted by the physical disintegration he battled. His heavily lidded eyes were closed, his skin sallow. The thick scent of the incense could not conceal the noxious smell of the strong opium.

In pain, he puffed at the pipe of a hookah. A stream of smoke curled from his nostrils as he exhaled the potent drug. Without opening his eyes, he reached up with one hand and removed the stem of the pipe. “I see you came to visit, Lethe.” He put the pipe back in his mouth.

“I see you are still hiding out in the dens.”

Duk-cho lazily opened his eyes. His old face creased into a smile of mischief. “I am an old man, burdened with aches of the body,” he said.

"At least I do not resort to hacking on myself when miserable pains strike." He raked his gaze over the assassin's form, half in contempt, half-longingly. "Why have you come? I am in no mood to be seen."

Ignoring the comment, Morgan said, "I have word that you have aided Xavier in a healing, at my twin's request."

"My skills were needed, and Xavier's gold coins are good enough for me." He puffed the stem, drawing the opium deep into his lungs. "But you still have not said why you seek me out."

"I know you serve my sister. That you see and hear things others might not." Morgan reached into his pocket and withdrew the gold sigil. He tossed it. The amulet clattered to the floor. Duk-cho's eyes widened. "Her informant will not be coming back. You tell her next time she is curious to come herself."

The old apothecary made smoke circles with the stem of his pipe. The scent of opium was cloying. "Naylor overstepped himself. He was only to watch." The old man's penetrating gaze went to Julianne. "So your whore survived. Interesting how you've kept her alive."

"I have my ways."

Duk-cho inclined his head. "How long will this one last before you put hands around her throat?"

Morgan let the cutting remark pass.

Duk-cho curtly nodded at Julianne. "You are welcome in my house," he said in bad, but understandable English.

Not sure how to respond, Julianne bowed her head in response.

"Megwyn is not the only one wanting information," Morgan huffed, his tone changing from cordial to hostile. "I have heard of Xavier's plans for a pilgrimage. Where and why? Do not lie to me. I know you must have heard many things while you were tending his wounds."

Duk-cho's cheeks sank in as he took a hard pull from his hookah. His frustration was apparent in the amount of smoke he exhaled.

"Uan-li has let fear loosen her lips," Morgan prodded.

"Were I truly a follower of the Dragon, I would say nothing."

"But?"

"To say all would cost time."

Morgan huffed in annoyance. "Make time."

"Xavier follows the revelation of the Dragon, who has promised a greater power than any he has ever known. He journeys, even as we speak, to the center of eternity." Duk-cho smiled deviously. "Your sister plans to reap the benefits of his discovery."

"Physical endeavors are almost beyond Xavier," Morgan pointed out. "His own burnout is nearing."

"The time to abandon this realm and give himself to the dark devouring of death is drawing close for him," Duk-cho agreed. "But not for your twin. She is not looking forward to dying. Neither does she relish inhabiting a rotting body. She wants what Xavier seeks and to claim his place as Arch-priestess of the cult when the time has come."

Morgan's brow creased in thought. "Center of eternity?" he repeated. "You speak in riddles."

"It is destiny that takes him there. When two merge, one shall know true eternity." Duk-cho smiled and puffed on his pipe. His eyes turned toward the colorful silks hanging from the ceiling. "And when one has that power at beck, you are going to be the first to bow."

"They will not see such," Morgan countered gruffly. "Ever!"

"Or you'll what?" Duk-cho purred. "Destroy them? You've had your chance and never could. You are too weak."

Morgan took an angry step forward. Julianne quickly caught his arm, holding him back. She could feel his frustration and tension bubbling beneath the surface of his demeanor.

"He's an old man," she reminded gently. "He's just goading you. Let his words pass, please."

To her relief, Morgan did not pursue his impulse. He nodded his head. "You are right."

He looked again to the old healer. "Mark my words, old one. The chance will come again, and I will not hesitate. I have been too merciful in the past, but no more will I attempt to temper my wrath."

Duk-cho's own tolerance had come to its end. "I will speak no more this day," he said, closing his eyes and taking a deep draw off his pipe.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Xavier sat alone.

Behind him slept Azoroath and the slaves who made up the rest of his caravan. Bone tired, the men had gone immediately to sleep, some not bothering to consume the night's ration of bread and meat taken from the giant lizard Azoroath had killed with his slingshot.

The last few days of travel had been rough. To cross Gidrah in fourteen days, Xavier had calculated they must travel sixteen to seventeen hours a day, so little time was wasted on rest. The food his slaves had packed was well preserved and fresh meat was plentiful, if hunted. The single obstacle to achieving their goal, aside from sheer exhaustion, was the lack of water.

The supply he had brought was nearly used up, despite severe rationing. When it was gone, there would be no more. Traversing the wastelands with adequate water was difficult enough, as the liquid was sweated out as fast as it was consumed. Traveling without would soon dehydrate and weaken their bodies. Already, he had been forced to kill two of his eight eunuchs to lighten consumption.

*We must make it*, he thought. He did not care to contemplate the repercussion of failure.

Hovering on the edge of his camp, always close but never approaching, was Ha'rak's warriors. A constant shadow, they marked the days. Accustomed to the extreme heat of the wastelands, the trolls were not affected by it. They could afford the exertions of hard travel. Like coursing hounds, they were counting on the prey panicking and running itself to exhaustion.

The old sorcerer smiled. The trial the Dragon had set was a difficult one. Were he younger, he would have excelled at the crossing. But the centuries had been unkind to him, and his body was in decline. Azoroath, while competent, was undesirable as a constant companion.

Xavier rested his hands in his lap. One was white, fingers long, unbending. The other was hugged by leather as black as his heart.

Azoroath stirred. "Lord Xavier? Have you not slept?"

The sorcerer wearily shook his head. "Sleep eludes me. I am so very close to gaining again what I have lost. When I am restored, Azoroath, you will witness the great days of the past reborn under my hand."

"I believe so, Lord," Azoroath answered.

Xavier already suspected his servant planned to have the scrolls for himself.

And he was prepared.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

All knew when they entered Xavier's territories.

A stone wall faced with corpses confronted all daring to venture into the dead lands. Perched behind a part of the wall that had collapsed, Julianne scanned the strewn remains of the victims. Some had died quickly in ritual sacrifice. Others had suffered a slower, more painful death. These unfortunates were nailed to crosses of wood and hung upon the wall like human ornaments.

She grimaced. "It's horrible."

It was a sight she well recalled. The wall was her first true example of the Sclidian war. Chills went up her spine when she kicked aside a mound of bones so she could pass through the grisly pile. She cursed her tired legs as she and Morgan began to climb a second, steeper incline, passing under one arch still intact along the girth of the great wall.

There she set eyes upon the hulking shape of Xavier's sanctuary. "I hate this place." A shiver crept up her spine. "Why are we here?"

"Spying." Morgan's hold on the strap across his shoulder tightened as he peered through the thinning fog for signs of life. He quickly spotted several Jansi positioned along the wall—Xavier's sanctuary was well guarded. He made a hushing motion and directed her attention to the warriors.

"Getting inside is not going to be easy," he murmured. "We are going to have to do this the hard way."

"What's the hard way?"

"We kill them."



She gave him an incredulous look. "There's a dozen men lined up there. Unless that thing fires multiple arrows, I don't think you have a chance, no matter how good you think you are."

"I want to know what Xavier is up to."

"And you just have to get inside there?"

"I need to go into the chambers below ground where he does his spell work. If he has been summoning demonic spirits to guide him, the answers may be there."

"So, why don't we just waft on in there?" she asked sensibly. From what she had seen so far, it should be that damn simple. "That's how you people seem to travel."

"Easier said than done." He drew her attention to several strange symbols drawn on the wall. "These are symbols of protection. They are all over the place, and they bar other magical elements from crossing the barrier they erect. One may only observe, but do no harm from the outside."

"Why is this getting more complicated?" She was getting cramped hunched down behind the rock. If they were going to go somewhere, they needed to do it before she froze to death.

"Put up your hand. Palm out."

She raised her hand. "Like this?"

Morgan placed his against hers. "Now push."

She tried, but his hand held hers immobile. She pushed harder, but still could not move it.

"That is what I am trying to teach you about spell casting. One immovable force meeting another. If both are equally strong, neither moves." He suddenly struck her arm at the elbow, knocking her hand down. "So, you find your enemy's weakness and exploit it."

"Which means?"

"I do not have time to sit here all day casting counter-spells. So if we want to cross the barrier, we do it on foot. If we want to get inside, we kick down the fucking door. Once we're inside the barrier, it can then be attacked from within with counter-spelling."

"I understand," she said, putting a hand on his arm. "But I know a way inside without having to pass those assholes."

He appeared skeptical. "How?"

"When I was trapped in that place, I followed some tunnels underground. Some of the women slaves hid me, helped me. They showed me a crack in the foundation, one that got me out of there. We can go in that way and retrace the path."

Morgan gave her an admiring look. "That might be even better to our purpose."

"Glad you think so," she shot back. "I am worth something, you know."

"Here is what I think you are worth." Dipping into his sash, he took out the ring Xavier had created. Before she could say a word, he caught her hand and slid it onto her finger.

"What—?" she started to say.

He hushed her. The intensity of his gaze was serious. "You know whosoever holds this owns me. I cannot take it from them, but it *can* be taken from me. I want you to keep this—just in case something goes wrong. I know you would not use it against me."

Heart in her mouth, pulse beating in her head, she was sure she was about to faint. What the ring symbolized was the bond between himself and another woman and the child they'd sired. She still wasn't sure how she felt about that part of his past. This ring was still a symbol of how far he'd go when threatened.

"Are you sure I should carry it?" she asked nervously. She could not fail to notice the finger he chose to put it on—the third finger of her left hand. It was a little big, but it felt right being there.

"Yes, I am." He briefly touched her cheek. "Let no one take it from you."

Her heart almost dropped to her feet. "I won't." If he were to touch her stomach, he would feel her trembling inside. The butterflies were all tied up, fluttering wildly. She was afraid to have it, yet oddly honored. *I'll fight to the death to keep it safe.*

Letting her hand drop, he rose to his feet. "Are you ready?"

“Yes.” Gulping, she stood as well. “I’ll show you the place.”

“Lead the way, *caile*.”

Letting memory be her guide, she led him in a wide path away from the wall, circling it until she found the bluff shielding the rear of the sanctuary. Two Jansi loitered near the crack. Apparently, the secret escape route was no longer a secret.

“Damn,” she muttered, thinking he would surely relent and leave.

She was wrong. In a moment, his dagger was out of its sheath and he moved into action, killing both men before she could even think to blink. He moved with such inhuman grace and speed she hadn’t been aware of his intention until after the act was committed. The first man had not yet begun to fall before the second drew his last breath.

Though she could not condone carnage, what he’d done was necessary. *This is war*. She gritted her teeth. *And in war, people die. How many mortals did they slaughter?*

She didn’t know that answer. She was just glad he was on her side. Would her world be like Sclyd if he’d taken the opposite side? As if in reply, a foul, cold breeze swept across her clammy skin. She shivered violently.

Forcing herself to swallow her fear, she stepped over the corpses and wiggled through the narrow gap. She’d forgotten she’d had to climb to get through it from the opposite side so went tumbling, striking the ground with an *oomph!* She lifted her eyelids a fraction, seeing nothing at first but impenetrable blackness. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the strange, half-lit gloom.

On hands and knees she scrambled forward a few feet. Morgan dropped down, infinitely more graceful. He looked around, putting out a hand to touch the glowing walls. The phosphorescent goo was thriving, eating away at the stone. “I see entropy has settled in. No getting rid of it now.”

“What’s that?” She refused to touch the stinking lichen. It was putrid, crawling with mutated insects.

“Part of the *marbh saol*, the virus that travels on the night mists. By the time it is done, everything will be eaten away. There is no way to stop

its growth or the sterility it carves into the land.” He sighed. “One day the whole of Sclyd will be nothing but dead space.”

“Can we get out of here?” she asked. “I really, really hate this place.”

“Lead the way.”

There was only one way to go.

Once more relying on memory, Julianne led him to the secret entrance to the bedchambers of Xavier’s slaves. “Here. There was a door right here.”

Well, there had to be a door, as it was also the end of the tunnel.

“Where?”

“Here.” She insisted. “It was here.”

“Did it perchance open *into* the tunnel?”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “It did,” she admitted sheepishly. “How do we use it to get out?”

“These things are usually designed to be opened from both sides.” He began to examine the wall, locating a small lever and pressing it. The door cracked, allowing them to insert their fingers to pull it open.

Julianne crawled through, eagerly inspecting the small cubicle where Kira had slept. The pallet on the floor was empty. So were the rest of the sleeping cells.

She hurried into the area of the chamber where the women had gathered to prepare their food. It, too, was abandoned. Torches black with caked pitch guttered, close to extinguishing. No fire had burned in the hearth for weeks, and the eating and drinking utensils were left where their owners had put them down—there was still evidence of a half-eaten meal. It was clear the women had been herded away like cattle quite a while ago. The food was moldy, stinking.

“They’re gone.” She walked over to the straw mat where Kira had sat, ladling soup. Loose bits of a broken ceramic bowl crunched under her boots. She dropped to her knees.

“This is where they fed me.” Her vision grew blurry as tears threatened. She blinked, refusing to let them fall. “They helped me out of this damned place.” Wiping the tears away, she glanced up at him. “What did that bastard do with them?”

"I do not know." Morgan hitched up his crossbow and made a quick gesture. "We need to keep moving. A lot of Jansi against two of us will not be good odds if we are discovered."

Stifling a sigh, she thrust memories of those times from her mind. It was better not to wonder what might have happened to the women. Swallowing, she pulled herself to her feet. "I'm not going back down there unless I get some light."

He beckoned to her. "You shall have your light."

Taking her hands, he moved them together, palm up, left cupping right.

"Fire burning ever bright, turn thy darkness into light. Bring thine energy from inside, eyes to see, mind to guide."

A small, luminescent ball appeared on her palm. Its brilliance hurt her eyes at first. There was no heat against her skin, only a sense of pressure. Testing its solidity, she moved the hand it hovered above. The globe floated, easily mimicking her movements.

"That's amazing," she breathed. "How long will it last?"

"As long as you hold concentration, it will guide you."

Down a staircase, back into the hated tunnels. She had no idea how far they walked. It seemed like the caverns snaked underground for miles. When they passed the charnel room where her body had been dumped, she clenched her eyes shut, clamping her hand to her mouth to deaden the smell. The fumes still assailed her nostrils, and she grimaced. She could hardly stand to be back in that chamber of horrors.

When they entered the silence of the dungeon, Julianne could not help recalling the wicked tools of torture, the pit with its glowing red coals—a thousand little red, evil eyes. More than any image, the Iron Maiden was most prominent in her mind, and her eyes gravitated inevitably to the great metal lady. That's where that thing had sat waiting to attack, to share her body.

She gasped in shock. A hand, clenched and contorted, protruded from the gaping mouth of the Maiden. Fresh terror birthed in her breast, her mind threatening to shut down her senses. Swallowing hard to keep

the rising wave of nausea at bay, she turned away from the horrible vision.

The globe above her hand flickered, threatening to extinguish itself. She hastily whispered the words Morgan had used to create it.

*Please*, she silently begged. *Don't go out*. She repeated the spell. The light steadied, grew stronger. It was then she realized the walls and pit of the dungeon were covered in a layer of floating green.

Thick and oozy, the phosphorescent lichen covered the stone, crawled with spiders. When she saw what the movement was, she let out a yelp and tried to move to the middle of the room. She almost stumbled into the pit when she tripped over the green-coated corpse of one of Xavier's female slaves, impaled through the back with a long spike.

Horried, she recognized other slain females. One had been left alive in a cage hung over the pit. Horribly, she'd begun to gnaw at her own body in her starvation; a finger protruded from her black, swollen lips. Her body was not yet been invaded by the lichen, but gremlin-like rodents had stripped away the skin on her legs before the mutant spiders took the rest of the corpse to nest in.

"These are the women who helped me." A hand flew to her mouth. Fighting not to vomit, she swallowed hard. "Why did he kill them?" she choked.

Morgan, too, seemed appalled by the carnage. "Conserving his resources, fewer mouths to feed. I see no men. He must have needed strength to undertake his pilgrimage." He glanced around. "He could not plan to return here. Whatever he is seeking, he means to find it."

She gingerly made a wide berth around the impaled woman's body. She took care to avoid the slick pools of slime sneaking up out of the cold pit. She was trying to be brave and barely succeeded. "That son-of-a-bitch needs to die."

The answer was short, abrupt. "He will."

To avoid further questions, he quickly crossed the dungeon and found the entrance leading back into the tunnels on the opposite side. Lichen glowed from within, coating the walls. Torches once burning there

had been completely snuffed out. When all the warmth was gone, the lichen had ceased to grow and was beginning to die.

*I'm not cut out for this place,* she thought. The adventure was beginning to wear thin. She did not like the dungeon. Being there reminded her too much of what her own fate might have been if the Jansi had decided to torture her further instead of putting her in the charnel room.

*I have to go,* she decided. *Morgan warned me I would not like what I saw, but I came anyway. Let's get this over with as quickly as possible.*

She had to rush down the narrow opening to find Morgan, barely arriving in time to see him disappear into one of the dark chambers.

Hovering at the doorway, Julianne looked around. By the light on her uplifted palm she could see she was in a place more horrifying than the dungeon. She stepped inside. Fascinated, despite the repulsive ooze covering the altar's surface, she approached it.

Immediately, she drew back, hesitated, then moved closer. She could see the outline of a small body under the covering of plant life. Patches of a pink nightgown patterned with blue teddy bears wearing sleeping caps peeked out through gaps in the moss. The hand not covered by the lichen was porcelain white, tiny and delicate.

Her gaze went to the crusted dagger the sorcerer had used on his small victim. Horror cramped her insides and sent the tang of acrid bile to the back of her throat.

This child was his last sacrifice here. It was the death of innocence. Instead of sacrificing an animal, Xavier gave his Master human blood.

Carefully balancing her orb of light in one hand, she reached out with the other, her fingers hovering over the blade before she made up her mind to pick it up. Wiping it clean on her shirt, she glanced at Morgan. He was intently studying the surface of the giant wheel and did not notice.

*Good.* She bit her lip. *He didn't see me.* She carefully slid the cold blade into the sash around her waist, tucking it behind so her cloak would cover it. *If I get the chance,* she silently swore. *I'll use it on Xavier.*

"Bring the light here," Morgan said. "I want to see this closer."

“What is it?” She walked over to the great wheel, lifting her hand so that orb could provide better illumination. In its center, she discerned the three-dimensional carving of a dragon devouring its own tail. “Ouroborous?”

“Yes.” He indicated the strange lettering burned across astrological signs carved into the face of the wheel. “This is most interesting.”

Julienne looked closely at what he indicated. Though the letters were blurred, they formed words that could be read by one who knew the older languages of witchcraft. She could not, for even her grandmother’s knowledge had not extended this far.

“*Ula’dh.*” Murmuring the word, he nodded in thought. “Now I know what Duk-cho meant when he said ‘the center of eternity.’” He turned away from the wheel.

Morgan had not previously noticed the still, small form on the altar. Julienne watched his features harden. His eyes went narrow, black and glittering.

“*Goaill aile!*”

A gust of wind pushed through the chamber, gathering force and heat as it swept the orb of light away from her keep. Blinding in its intensity, a huge circle of pure white light began to form, surrounding the altar. The horrid plant quivered with new life as the radiance fell upon it.

A droning, humming sound began to build, like some gigantic swarm of bees. Suddenly, the sphere burst into flames, spreading out like a giant mouth and devouring the lichen-covered body. The child’s corpse was immediately reduced to ashes.

As though in a trance, Morgan spread both hands, palms out, before his body and turned to the wheel. The massive artifact set into motion, the wood slowly cracking and splitting as the heat directed at the center of the obscene dragon expanded outward. The carving suddenly roared. Flames blasted from its mouth, tongue lolling out spitting great sheets of fire before it burst apart at the seams.

The Wheel of the Work screeched in agony. Gray, scaly, horned and taloned, the demon spirits trapped inside began to emerge, smoke and



flame gushing from their nostrils like lava. Something like a lightning bolt struck each monster in its turn, instantly downing the flight for freedom. Screeching and writhing convulsively their bodies melted into ashes, filling the chamber with an unholy, blood-chilling crescendo of unearthly wails as one and all were consumed by the purging flames.

“Destroy it all!” he rasped. “I will bring this accursed place to the ground!”

Julienne felt the rush of his consciousness expanding outward throughout the chamber. Pure energy throbbed around her body like a thing alive, catching her in an iron grip. Blazing eyes and scorching claws seemed to attack her from every angle. Fearing that she, too, would be consumed by Morgan’s fury, instinct warned her that she had to act fast to bring him out of the darkness of his mind, where the black being in his soul dwelled, bidding the destruction to come forth. If his rage persisted, she would be blasted lifeless.

Breaking the grip of her own fear, she flung her body forward. She knew only one thing to do and had to do it fast and hard. Her hand rose, palm flying out toward his face. She slapped the shit out of him. “Stop it!”

The instant, unexpected shock brought him from the depth of the devastation he was determined to inflict.

Julienne’s hand was raised for a second blow. “Wherever you are, come out of it!”

As though drained of all energy, Morgan swayed in his place for a moment. Pale and drawn, his face was blank, a slate erased. Suddenly all strength deserted him. Without a word, he fell to his knees, barely catching himself totally collapsing in a heap. A vein in his temple throbbed. Dizzied, he pressed shaking fingers to his head. He opened his eyes, surveying the damage with some confusion.

The great wheel stood before him, its frame twisted, scorched and stinking. Without warning, it trembled, then collapsed with a final supplication. The chamber was in ruins, altar and wheel utterly demolished.

“What have I done?” he grated in the wake of silence.

Julienne put her hands on his shoulders. She could feel his shaking, as if his veins still coursed with yet a greater power he'd not unleashed. "You never said you could do that." Her grip on him tightened. She was trembling herself, half from shock, half from experiencing the power of his unbridled rage.

He shook off her hands. Climbing to his feet, his mouth was a grim, set line. "It has been a long time since I called this part of my power out."

"You frighten me," she breathed. "I never know what to expect from you."

He ran a distracted hand through his thick hair, ruffling his bangs away from his pale forehead. "I can control it."

"That wasn't very good control, though I can't blame you for it." She gave him a hard look. "I want to know exactly what you can do."

He answered slowly, giving careful weight to each word. "Move things around, start a few fires." He hastened to add, "It is not an ability I relish. It takes too much energy and..." His words suddenly ceased.

Her eyes narrowed warily. "And what?"

He pressed the heels of his hands to his temples again. "It brings on the headaches. The more I use it, the worse the pain."

"Then don't use it."

A stubborn glint lit his dark eyes. "I will if I have to."

A cold spasm of fear squeezed her heart in an iron grip. Shaking and drained, sick to her very soul, she only wanted to leave this accused place behind. "Let's just get out of here. Please. I've seen enough."

"There is one more place I wish to see."

Squaring his shoulders, Morgan walked back into the tunnels. He was determined to go forward at any cost until he found what he was seeking.

Though she only wanted to leave this hateful place, Julienne followed at a slower pace, reluctant to walk into an unlit chamber. Everywhere was the dark dampness and the sound of falling water and the droning of something yet deeper than she could not identify. It was growing maddening and painful, making her feel as though her head would burst. A few steps behind, she entered the huge recess where she saw Morgan's

dim figure disappear. The lichen had not yet infiltrated this deeply into the tunnels.

Foregoing further conjuration, Morgan set a fire in the hearth, dragging sections of wood into it until he had gathered enough to start a good blaze. Three grown people could have stood within the hearth's depths and spread their arms comfortably. Water seeped from the stone walls, hissing when the flames ate up the droplets. In a short time, the chamber was a steam room.

The fire's pale light revealed shelf after shelf of manuscripts lining a single wall. Decay ate the damp leather bindings, and the pages themselves were moldering. The rot sent up an unpleasant odor.

Morgan took one of the manuscripts down and began to flip through its pages. The delicate parchment was saturated with water, the writing forever lost, the ink smeared to blots and stains.

"Damn!" He flung the entire mass into the hearth. The wet parchment began to smolder. "They are all ruined."

"What are you looking for?"

"Clues as to why Xavier should want to go to Ula'dh. It is a forgotten city in the center of the underworld. There is nothing there."

"What was it before?"

"In the past, Ula'dh was a prosperous civilization. Now, it is desolate, a shell of what once was. That's why it is sometimes called 'the edge of eternity.' I should have thought of it when Duk-cho said as much."

"Obviously, he was clueing you in. What would attract Xavier to such a place?"

"How the hell should I know?" Agitated, he returned to the shelves of manuscripts and continued digging.

"There must be some clue." Circling the room, she toyed with the charm around her neck. She recalled her lover at work over his own altar. It was then she'd learned mysterious forces were loose in the universe, moving beneath the fabric of everyday reality like invisible currents. She shivered. She was a part of the invisible world now.

A battered wooden table drew her attention. Walking closer to it, she could see the petrified body of a small creature hunched beside a

massive candelabrum. A long time ago its red candles had burnt down to stubs. "What's this?"

"Where?"

She pointed to the carcass. "This dead thing."

He came to the table. "It is the remains of a homunculus."

"A what?"

He explained. "A homunculus is an extension of a conjurer's own mind, sort of an extra set of eyes and ears."

She poked the carcass with a curious finger and let out a squeal as it collapsed into nothing more than a few bits of dried leaves and animal parts.

An inadvertent smile came to Morgan's lips as he swiped the leaves away. A sheaf of rotting papers was stacked near the dead beast.

"What do have we here?" He carefully separated the fragile pages, as if he feared the fraying parchment might disintegrate. Silence ensued as he read the scrawled passages.

"I do not believe my eyes," he murmured. "Can Xavier have truly found them?"

"What?"

Morgan looked up at her, his expression startled and grim. "The scrolls of Cachaen."

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Two headless eunuchs lay still and cold. Azoroath had done the killing, sneaking up on the men as they slept and swinging the sharp blade of the machete in a deadly arc.

Xavier viewed the scene impassively. He had not slept last night, but was not tired. He had consumed only water that morning—his thoughts of the night before had dulled his appetite. He had added to his drink a liberal dose of Duk-cho's potion.

The ingredients worked quickly on his sluggish system. Alertness restored his mind, and a new energy pulsed through his body with every beat of his heart. With only four eunuchs remaining, the water would last four more days. In three days, he would kill two more of his slaves and the water would hopefully last the remainder of the journey. When he arrived at the borders of Ula'dh, he would dispose of the last two.

He and Azoroath would go alone to the tomb of Erabris.

"They are done, Lord. Do we go?"

"Yes," Xavier said. "Only a few more days now."

Without being prompted, the remaining eunuchs took up the burdens of the slain. There was no expression on their thin faces. They knew they would be next.

For them, it was a relief to know freedom was near.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lynar was home, seeing the lush lands of his birth for the first time in many years. He breathed deeply, inhaling the pungent odors of the forest. How fresh and bright it all appeared to his weary eyes. Perhaps if he begged forgiveness, he would be allowed to stay. He thought he could better control his thieving habit now.

Julienne trailed behind the elf, her own eyes were wide. She studied with interest the small, neat dwellings the elves had constructed. How similar they were to dollhouses with their thatched roofs and shuttered windows. Standing among them, she felt like a giant.

Morgan followed at a slower pace, last in line. His hand was on the strap of his crossbow. It was not loaded—for a stranger to bear a weapon was a crime in Danarra, a loaded one even more so.

Lynar led the way into an open clearing. The sky above the trees was not blue but a shining, luminous white. Crystals grew in clumps from the rock ceiling of the underworld. For twelve hours a day they glowed bright, granting light and warmth to the forest and its inhabitants. In the dark hours, the crystals rested, recharged by the goodwill and prayers of the Danarrans. It was a symbiotic phenomenon, for one could not exist without the other.

Taking it from his bag of tricks, Lynar put his pipe to his lips and blew a few notes of greeting. He paused, then repeated the sounds.

Slowly, the shutters of the houses came open. Doors were flung wide, and the Danarran people emerged. More than one dropped from the limbs of the trees or crawled out from beneath the bushes.

Like Lynar, they dressed in leather and beads. Ribbons adorned their white hair. Their golden eyes were sharp. The males came first, their slings drawn. The smaller females stayed behind.

Lynar blew more notes. “No harm!” he said. “The humans come in peace!”

An ancient elf marched forth with great ceremony, aided by two attendants. He was Enock, the oldest Danarran and their leader, and he was dressed in the traditional robes befitting his position. His long white hair was bedecked with all colors of beads and ribbons, for he was grandfather of the tribe.

“Lynar, why have you come here?” he asked. “You are banished.”

“I have not come to beg forgiveness,” Lynar said guiltily, changing his plan to ask to remain. “I have come with my people to ask for passage through Danarra.”

The old elf looked first to Julianne. He sensed no trouble in the female. But the man—he appeared familiar. “Your people bring weapons. It is forbidden of visitors.”

“He is no threat!” Lynar reassured him hastily.

Enock pointed. “Bring him. We will talk.”

Lynar edged over to Morgan. “Will you come? Enock wishes to see you closer. It will be up to him to decide if passage is granted or not. Do not bring your crossbow.” Though the visitors could pass through the Danarran lands by force if they so decided, they’d come to ask permission as a peacekeeping measure, showing respect for the inhabitants.

Morgan considered then slid the crossbow off his shoulder and tossed it to the ground.

The Danarrans eyed the weapon suspiciously. A few raised their slings just in case. All eyes followed when the assassin crossed to Enock. He knelt down on one knee, coming to the aged elf’s height.

“I know of you, Lethe.”

“I do not deny your words,” Morgan replied.

“Why come you here? We have no involvement with thy dark wars.”

“I ask passage be granted.”

“To Ual’dh?”

“Yes.” Morgan nodded. “We are on a journey.”

“The Gidrans warned us you might come for the evil one who is passing through their lands,” Enock said.

“They have given Xavier passage? At what cost?”

“His life, if he fails the crossing in a fortnight,” the old elf said. He is days into his journey.”

“I wish to be granted passage through Danarra to Ual’dh,” Morgan said. “I have reasons to stop Xavier from finding what he seeks there.”

“He looks for the old knowledge. He must beware.”

“Then the writings are more than legend?”

Enock nodded. “Yes. The tomb of the brotherhood is sacred. It should not be violated by outsiders.”

“And you have known all along?”

“Through the millennia we have known, and we have guarded its secrets. Now the evil one would defile that.”

“I will stop Xavier if I can.”

Hardly pleased, Enock searched Morgan’s face. “Though all know of the war, I am one of the few of the elfish people to have witnessed the great devastation. The carnage sickened my peace-loving soul. I cannot fathom the hunger to be a god, nor would I dare seek the forbidden. I fear those who would, but I know we must give way to the seekers of empty illusions. Do you seek the power the scrolls offer for yourself?”

“No, I do not.”

“Then you may have passage,” Enock said. “But I warn you to have care. The secrets of the gods are not for the eyes of men. Do not become tempted yourself.”



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Morgan sat on blankets the elves had graciously provided for their guests. He stared into the fire. The long grass made a comfortable cushion. The night was absolutely still. No wind stirred the trees and no crickets chirped.

*On the morrow, I will depart for Ual'dh.*

He calculated in his mind. If he traveled constantly without stopping, he would be able to reach Ual'dh first. Such an endeavor through the untamed parts of the forest would be demanding. He would have the advantage of needing only water. He could naturally forego food, and sleep he could do without for nearly a month.

He glanced at Julianne. She lay beside him, dozing quietly. He had not yet gotten around to telling her that it would be best if he went on alone. She would not be happy with the decision.

The elves had held a banquet in their honor. Because of his adventures, Lynar was forgiven his sins of the past and voted back into his tribe as a scout. Only a few Danarrans were granted this status—Enock had been one in his own youth and recognized the value of an inquisitive mind and bold personality.

With his new position, Lynar was the center of attention, and he wore his tongue out telling of the ways of the mortals. Many thought he was lying when he spoke of great cities with smoking chariots traveling at great speed and danger and flying machines.

For the feast, many delicacies were offered. Fruit, some familiar, some not, were heaped in wooden bowls along with vegetables and wonderful hearth-baked breads. Wine flowed freely, a pungently sweet

brew, each sip praised. Meat from small animals was plentiful, skewered on long sticks and cooked over an open fire.

When the meal was at its end, music was played and songs were sung. Prayers were offered to the gods who provided such a bountiful and lush land.

Though he and Julianne had passed over all foods, both of them had consumed more than their share of wine, to be polite. More than a little buzzed, he took off his coat and heavy tunic, undoing the collar of his white shirt. Hand on Julianne's hip, he turned her onto her back.

"Lynar has gone elsewhere," he whispered, giving her earlobe a nibble. "We are alone."

Julianne rolled over onto her back and rubbed her eyes. She pushed her hair out of her face. Beads rattled—the Danarrans had made her a part of their tribe, delighting in the softness and color of her auburn mane.

"Is that so?" she returned, voice husky.

"Yes." He could not take his eyes off her; her position on the blanket, her arms flung over her head, a gentle smile parting her lips. He could feel her heartbeat as he untied the sash of her tunic and lifted it over her head. Her string-tied blouse was half-undone, and she gasped when he slid his hand under the material to caress her stomach. The storm of feelings she evoked in him began to beat through his veins when her own hands came up to touch him.

A pent up breath rushed from her lungs. "You're seducing me." Her fingertips trailed slowly down his throat, raising an exquisite sensitivity.

He bent over her, kissing her with a need that surprised both of them. "I am doing my best." His fingers brushed her erect nipple, tracing the pink aureole. "You know you cannot go with me to Ula'dh."

She sat up abruptly, breaking the mood. "Why not?"

His hand snaked around to her back, and he plucked Xavier's knife from its hiding place, laying it aside.

"You saw me take it?"

"No, but you forget I can read you as clearly as a book. Your mind is still unguarded. I do not blame you for wanting him dead, but this is not for you to do. You do not need Xavier's blood on your hands."

"I've killed before!"

"By accident," he gently reminded her. "It is different to kill out of malice."

Julienne's features distorted. Hate glinted in her eyes as she set her jaw. "I could kill him!" she spat. "When I saw those women, I felt sick. But the little girl—I saw the pattern of her nightgown, the cute bears in sleeping caps. Can you imagine going to sleep and awakening on a cold altar with Xavier looming over you? It must have been terrifying. I've never been a mother, but I felt my heart break. Please, I want my chance at him. Not for you, not even for me, but for her."

A tear fell. She swept it away.

He inclined his head. "All right. Come, then. But I warn you now it will not be an easy journey. We are going into a place where the energies of nature have burned out. There is no life, and nothing can exist there long without becoming warped. It is dangerous to work any witchcraft. What you intend in mind and what manifests in the physical is often distorted."

"I don't care. Just let me watch the bastard die." Her words had an intensity that seemed to penetrate his heart, flooding through his bloodstream.

"I will promise you that," he said huskily.

Pleased that she had gotten her way, her mouth widened into a smile.

"Honestly," she half laughed. "Did you think I'd let you leave me behind?"

He shook his head, amazed that he'd given in to her so easily. She was certainly learning how to wrap him around her little finger. Maybe he'd been a fool to fall in love with her, but he damn well didn't care. He enjoyed the high adrenaline charge Julienne gave him—something he'd experienced with no other woman.

*It must be the wine,* he mused, but any sensible thought afterward was beyond him when her hand began to follow the inside of his thigh,

finding his hardness, tracing it. A wicked gleam came into her eyes and he forgot everything except how much he wanted her.

Morgan pulled her body to his, his lips claiming hers in a bruising kiss. Sexually, he was the aggressor. A woman he made love to was engulfed by sheer lust, swept away in the erotic whirlwind he could evoke in the female body. He went from tender to rough, from pleasure to pain, in the blink of an eye.

With her willing consent, clothing was shifted aside so he could commence exploration, his hand parting her legs to stroke the soft petals of her womanhood. Lifting her slightly, he abandoned her mouth to suckle at one nipple. Julianne gasped at the pleasure of it, the tip instantly hard under his teasing tongue, the gentle pressure making her whole body shudder with delight. With merciless licks, he continued the sweet torment, making her cry out more than once. Fingers kneading, then gliding, he prepared her to receive him. Then, moving his body over hers, he plunged into her moist depths with one smooth thrust. When he entered her, she closed her eyes and gave herself wholly to the passion, her hips lifting to receive all of him. Muscles tense, nerves alert, their rhythm increased to accommodate the climax toward which they were building. At the crucial moment, he pinned her hands down, concealing her heated cries with kisses until both their bodies trembled at the peak of release.

A few moments later he rolled to one side, relieving her of his weight. They stayed in each other's arms until she fell asleep.

He remained awake. Something about the journey was nagging at the back of his mind. He was not a man given to crediting prophecy, for he knew that outside forces could twist a foretelling in many different directions and render it untrue. Still, a distant voice in the back of his head persisted in warning him that great danger loomed ahead.

Not from Xavier or even Megwyn.

Something else was waiting.

Something deadly.

## Chapter Forty

Xavier stood on the boundaries of the vanished city. Exhausted, he leaned heavily on his staff. The last few days of travel had been constant, with no time given to food or rest. Ha'rak's warriors had grown bold in the last few hours of the chase. They practically trailed at his heels, bringing out their weapons in case he should not make it to the ravine leading into Ula'dh.

But he had made it, barely upon the stroke of noon. He was victorious.

The crossing of the ravine was, however, a daunting task. Several hundred miles long, it wended into the center of the Danarran forest. At its widest, it was barely a mile, and on its other side began a wintry-looking cascade of solid rock, a mountain of pure gypsum. At its craggy head lay the dead city of Ual'dh.

Where before there had been parching heat and not enough water, there were now cool temperatures and a deep lake. Unlike the dead pools in the center of the city, the water in the ravine was alive with multitudes of fish and crustaceans—soft-shelled, blind and dead white. It was brackish, drinkable if boiled, poisonous if consumed before refining.

In crevices, deadly toadstools sprouted. Snails, spiders, mites and beetles ran rife. A pale species of gremlin also subsisted in the ravine, sometimes venturing out into the plains of the Gidran desert only to be devoured by the tough lizards that survived in the hot, dense wasteland. Periodically, spring floods triggered by volcanic upheavals would bring an influx of remains from the surface world, replenishing the water and insect life.

The sorcerer cursed the damned underworld. It went from one extreme to another. He hated crossing through the waist-high water. At its end, he was miserable. There were no trees or bushes to get a fire going; and the only light was not real light at all, just the luminosity of calcium deposits that reflected back the distant glow emitted by the fires of Gidrah.

The travelers quickly stripped off their wet garments and discarded them for dry ones. Food was passed around, but he could not eat. Excitement burned in his mind. He wanted to go immediately into the city to search for the tomb of Erabris, but to go exhausted would be foolhardy. They would camp the night on the edge of the ravine and journey into the extinct city tomorrow. The chase was over.

He could afford a little leisure.

## Chapter Forty-One

On the edge of the Danarran forest, the banks of the river separated the city from elfish lands. The only link between the two was a bridge carved of pure limestone, an exquisite work in miniature fashioned from one single mass of stone. A perfect arch, its steps were wide, not high, spaced for the gait of people who were small, perhaps half the height of the average human.

Julienne felt a strange prickle go up and down her spine. “Ula’dh?” It was strange to gaze upon a place that human eyes had not seen for centuries. Time did not exist there.

Morgan slid his hand so that it rested lightly on the small of her back. “Yes.”

His unexpected gesture pleased her. She realized that she was breathing fast, heart hammering hard in her chest. His touch helped calm her. “It’s beautiful, but eerie.” She closed her eyes. “I feel nothing in it, no life. It’s absolutely dead.” Her slave bracelet was on her left hand, the faux-fangs that served her so well. Her peach wood charm hung secure around her neck. Thus far, the little trinket had not changed its temperature. Morgan’s ring was still in her keep, a thing she fiercely wanted to hang on to.

She pushed her hood away from her face and moved out of the shelter of the trees to approach the bridge. Their journey had been a long one, but her body was strong and could handle the rigors of travel without much stress. Sleep, too, was hardly needed—she found she could function well on an hour’s rest. Morgan had moved fast, but she’d managed to keep up with him as they plunged through thick overgrowth and across the rivers breaking through the ground. The elves had given a

leather pouch much like the ones they carried themselves. She'd stowed away a few vital things—Xavier's dagger, a potion to keep the bugs off her exposed face and hands, a flint and pieces of fool's gold, rags for washing and a small flask for fresh water.

Hunger had rarely touched her; she'd fed off Morgan's blood only two times. Knowing it weakened him, she'd tried to take only enough to sustain herself. She was worried—he'd been going nonstop for weeks. A crash and burn was inevitable. It was just a matter of when.

She reached to touch the stone, tracing with her fingers the lettering etched into the surface. "Who were these people?"

"No one remembers. Most writings of Ula'dh have vanished. They exist only as legend."

"What could have happened to make them go away?"

A frown wrinkled his brow. "No one knows."

"Such is life and death, I suppose," she remarked. "I see now why so many search for immortality. Death is ugly. The brotherhood couldn't have picked a more fitting place to conceal their secrets." She graced her lover with an inquisitive eye. "Tell me why the writings are so important to Xavier."

Morgan's forehead crinkled in thought, searching his memory for old legends. "Through the past days, I have been pondering the text of the funeral tome, trying to make sense of the archaic wording used by the brotherhood. The most I know is that those writings have long been called the 'keys of creation' because they are supposed to open up the last secrets of the astral."

"The astral?" Her gaze raked the boundaries of the ancient city. "Is it another dimension?"

"The third realm, the netherworld." Seeing her confusion, he hastened to explain. "It is the place where all within creation was given birth. It is difficult to explain the existence of a non-physical universe to one whose mind is not of the occult." Frowning, he tapped himself on the forehead, as if trying to dredge up the answer from a sluggish mind holding centuries of knowledge. "The astral is the sphere of the divine



consciousness. It is often called the arena of illusions, because elementals not of this world can exhibit themselves to the eyes of man.”

“You mean demons?” She hoped he would deny it, reassure her that such creatures were myth. She did not relish the idea there were yet more facets to the occult than she had already witnessed in the brief time she had spent with him.

“A legion of nightmarish creatures inhabit the astral realm and can be manipulated through occult influences to function within our material world,” he answered honestly. “But they are fleeting things. It is a strain on the conjurer to hold an apparition not made of solid matter together for any length of time.”

Her eyes locked on his face. “Have you ever sought out such yourself?”

She scanned his expression, seeing the muscle of his right cheek contract slightly.

He seemed to think on his answer before speaking. “I abandoned the quest many centuries ago and never became a true adept,” he admitted. “Xavier was the real master. He expended much time in study of the brotherhood, collecting every manuscript written by the monks. He believed the Cachaens could bridge the barrier between the psychic and physical worlds, merge what is real with the unreal.”

She listened carefully, struggling not to lash out and judge him. “You spent several years with Xavier, didn’t you?”

“Yes. For a time he was my mentor, one who led my growth into witchcraft when I began to delve into my occult heritage.”

“Why Xavier?”

“He was not always an evil man,” Morgan said. “He was an excellent teacher, one who surpassed brilliance. I wish now I had paid more attention to his discourses on the subject of the Cachaens. My own knowledge of them is sketchy, limited to bits and pieces of old folklore, which could be just stories.”

“The brotherhood concealed the writings away from all eyes,” she commented. “They must have felt they had something to hide. The Danarrans seem to believe they are real.”

"They just might be going on old myths passed down through the ages," he pointed out. "The truth does have a way of becoming distorted through time. There is no proof the Cachaens were more learned than others who delve into the occult. All conjurers seek to grow, learn of this vast universe and how to manipulate its energies."

Morgan frowned and rubbed his eyes then let his hand drop. "Of course, just thinking of the scrolls being found after several thousand years is giving me a headache. Theorizing about what they really are or can do is impractical at this point."

"What does matter is that if the writings of the Cachaens do rest in Ual'dh, Xavier might have a chance of finding them," Julianne said. "Either way, no one can risk him getting his hands on them, even if they are the pursuit of a fool."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Since this began, I have had the feeling those writings are trouble, that they foreshadow the coming of a second dark age."

She studied him for a moment. She felt overwhelmed. A complicated emotion—part anger, part sorrow and part fear—rose within her. Morgan rarely admitted when he had doubts or was anxious about something. He could usually hide it behind a mask of indifference. By his edgy energy, the way his hand kept drifting toward his weapon, she knew he was anticipating trouble. A lot of it.

"I wouldn't doubt that." She shivered, pulling the folds of her cloak closer to her body. "Do you think he's even here?"

Her mind was moving fast, anticipation of the danger ahead was sprinting through her body like a shot of pure adrenaline.

"We will soon find out. If he has been successful in his own journey, he probably traversed the ravine into the city's outskirts yesterday. His travel has been harder than ours, but he is closest to the center of the city. We will have to hurry to find the two obelisks which should mark the entrance to the tomb of Erabris."

Julianne stood and wiped her hand down the front of her cloak. "And if we find him?"

"I will kill him."

“And the scrolls?”

“If they exist, I am of the mind to leave them as the Cachaens wished.”

“Then I guess we’d better find them first.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

Crossing the gypsum mountain was easy. Stairs had been carved into its face, leading up to a great natural arch. To pass under it was to enter the city.

Azoroath, lamp held aloft, led Xavier. Behind them came the last surviving eunuch. The slave had been starved for several days and given no water. His ribs were clearly outlined under his skin, which was cracked and peeling from dehydration. Hollow eyes held only the hope his death would be a quick one.

At the top of the great stairway were two basins to the right and left of the arch. Both were waist-high and narrow. An aerator protruded from the center of both, surrounded by a thick, oily liquid.

Azoroath cautiously dipped a finger into one. The liquid clung to his skin. An expression of recognition sparked his pockmarked features, and he lowered the fire of his lamp to the tip of the straw-like protrusion. A bright, straight flame flared to life, sucking at the oil in the basin. He lit the wick of the second fountain.

“Ula’dh is alive!”

A magnificent vision to behold, the artistry of nature had been finely tempered by the hand of a people long disappeared. Ula’dh was vast, an array of caves and passages that revealed breath-stealing views of stalactites dropping from ceiling to floor. Drop by patient drop of limestone-laden water had trickled down through the crust of the earth to fashion the fragile intricacies of aragonite crystals, grown to glorious proportions as time added tier after tier of flowstone.

Out of the soft limestone, Ula’dhian artists had carved their city, fashioning Ionic columns out of stalactites. The colors of the formations

were incredible—the deep red of iron ore, the blue and purple of manganese oxide, blotches of pink and coral and, lastly, calcite as pure and polished white as any pearl.

Between the columns, walkways of pure limestone ground down to a smooth sheen wound around fountains full of oil to light the city's curious dwellings. Fine crafters of stone and refiners of water, a commodity so needed by the Trolls, the Ula'dhian people had lived aesthetic and contemplative lives. Their city had once been the most prosperous of the underworld civilizations, its borders touching the rich Danarran forests on one side and the dry deserts of Gidrah on the other.

Now there was no life, and not even a breeze stirred the air of the ancient metropolis frozen forever like an insect in amber.

The tomb of Erabris was eerily beautiful.

Set in a cavern much larger than any other in Ula'dh, the vision the firelight brought to the eyes was startling. Flowstone draperies cloaked the walls in a silky sheen of shimmering rust; and stalactites, long and slender, hung from the ceiling. Adorned with jagged dripstone, they looked like fine bone china. Crystal aragonite grew in odd formations, branching into finely spun spider webs of stone so delicate they would shatter into a thousand pieces if touched.

The only mark of a sentient hand lay in the floor, cleared and polished to an ice-like sheen, and in the single stalagmite expertly carved into a fountain filled with light-giving oil.

Azoroath approached the fountain and lit it. The remainder of the cavern came to light, revealing the tomb's interior to foreign eyes for the first time in eight thousand years.

Fashioned from slabs of pure limestone, the sarcophagus bearing the body of Erabris stood near the rear of the chamber. Inlaid with rich blue faience glossed with a lustrous glaze, the stone coffin stood four feet high, six feet in length and five feet in width. A sheet of obsidian spanned its face, sealing the Keeper of the Cachaen scrolls inside a womb of stone.

"It's here!" Azoroath set his lamp on the floor and approached the huge construct. Excited, he pressed the palms of both hands to the

surface of the volcanic glass. Vibrations began to emanate from its clear depths, and inside the sarcophagus, a glow came to light, revealing the blurry outlines of a body shrouded in white.

"The sarcophagus is alive!" he exclaimed, pulling his hands away. The light did not fade.

Xavier came forward. "Quiet, fool! I must concentrate!"

With the reverence of a worshiper in the cathedral of his god, the sorcerer approached. Putting aside his staff, he ran his own hands over the smooth obsidian cover, felt the lettering with the fingers of his good hand as he traced the seal of the Cachaens.

"Feel the power of old. Such is now within my reach. Help me move the cover. I must see the scrolls."

"Place your hands at its edge," Azoroath said. Without regard for preserving the obsidian, he helped push the fragile sheet aside. It shattered on the floor, and a whoosh of putrid air emanated from within the sarcophagus, causing the flame of the fountain to dim briefly before brightening again. A platform inside began to silently rise, lifting the entombed body into view.

Xavier reached to unfold the white shroud covering the corpse. His hands trembled with excitement as he pulled aside the stiff material. The body of the Cachaen had been preserved by soaking it in a solution of salt and natron, an embalming powder, after all the internal organs had been removed and cremated. Stuffed with cotton and sewn back together, the body had then been treated with resin and wrapped in bandages soaked in preserving oils, lastly to be dressed in the simple vestments of a monk.

The face of Erabris was peaceful. Across his chest, resting under his folded hands were the writings he had sacrificed his life to guard throughout eternity. Each of the twelve scrolls had been rolled and inserted into a leather pouch. Azoroath reached for one. Xavier slapped his hand.

"Careful, idiot!" Mouth open, teeth flashing, he growled, "They must be handled gently!"

Azoroath grew red in the face, but held his tongue. He watched Xavier take the corpse by the wrist and lift aside first one and then the other hand. The limbs were supple and easily moved.

Xavier picked up the first scroll and parted the drawstring to withdraw a roll of cream-colored parchment. Frayed at the edges, the animal skin the parchment had been pressed from was limber, not at all touched by age or decay.

He unrolled the thin page. Its face was painstakingly covered with thick letters written with a quill dipped into an inky mixture of powdered charcoal, plant resins and animal blood. The dialect was of Mahdnar, the old language of the occult. Holding the parchment close to his face, Xavier squinted. His vision blurred. He could barely read the script. Nevertheless, the words he recognized sent a thrill through his veins.

Yes, here, in his hands, were the secrets the brotherhood had kept hidden from all eyes for eight thousand years, the secrets of controlling the astral energies.

Smiling, he whispered the words printed on the page, feeling a thrill rush through his soul.

*Come, he thought. Show yourself to me.*

In response to his summoning, tiny cracks began to snake up through the cold limestone floor as the tenuous boundary separating one dimension from another began to open. The sound of tearing stone filled the abysmal silence.

“Feel it?” He laughed. “It answers my call. The Cachaens knew how to bend such energy to their will, bring it into our physical world intact!”

Azoroath smiled. Here was his chance to have the scrolls for himself. He drew his machete, bringing its blade down across Xavier’s good hand to slice off two fingers. Blood splattered onto the pale face of Erabris, the droplets giving the bizarre impression the monk was crying tears of crimson.

Xavier roared in pain. The scroll he held fluttered to the cavern floor as he clutched his injured hand. Beneath his feet the cracks in the limestone grew longer.

“The power of the scrolls shall be mine!” his acolyte said. “I will succeed where you have too long failed.”

The faint sound of a trigger engaging went unheard.

The steel bolt fired from the crossbow found its mark. It penetrated the back of Azoroath’s head, completely cutting through skin and bone to protrude out of his mouth as he spoke his last words. Azoroath gurgled sickly, strangling on his own blood as he collapsed.

Xavier slowly turned toward the entrance of the tomb. An ironic smile graced his distorted features at the familiar sight.



## Chapter Forty-Three

Julienne entered the tomb directly on Morgan's heels and her gaze raked the strange chamber. She glanced over the acolyte's dead body, settling directly on Xavier. The sight of him sent a surge of righteous hatred and rage coursing through her skull. She was surprised when Xavier threw back his head and laughed. His disturbing snicker echoed.

"I should have expected this would happen," he said. "So now you have taken to shooting men from behind?"

A chilling smile of satisfaction played on Morgan's lips as he loaded his crossbow with a second bolt. "I took advantage of the opportunity. How could I pass such a chance? Payback is hell, is it not?"

"I knew he would betray me." Ripping a length of material from his sleeve, Xavier wrapped it around his injured hand to stay his bleeding. "Just as I knew you would come."

"I went also to your sanctuary," Morgan said. "I found the pages of the funeral rites."

"Quite a revelation, are they not?"

"They are. If you have, indeed, found the scrolls."

"I have." Xavier's single-eyed stare landed on Julienne. "I see your woman survived. Her escape did not go unnoticed. The women were punished for helping her." He cocked his head. "But I am curious. How did she survive my mutant?"

Morgan's eyes narrowed. "I know your methods of spell-work. And I merged them. She has its strengths—and its hunger for blood."

Xavier gave an impressed nod. "Brilliant. You were one of the few who understood their casting. In so many ways, we are alike. We both have

the hunger for more. It burns inside you even now, the desire to walk as a god among men. You went back to your legacy, as I knew you would.”

“There you are mistaken,” Morgan said. “I have no desire to be a god. My reason for being here is simple—I came only to see you die.”

“Well, then, before you have your wish, you must see the thing we have so long called legend.” Xavier picked up a second scroll from the chest of the monk and beckoned them to come closer.

“Don’t!” Julianne cautioned him from behind. “I don’t trust him!”

“Neither do I.” Morgan tossed her the crossbow. “If he moves, shoot him.”

She centered the crossbow on Xavier’s heart. “Gladly.” She felt a surge of pure delight in knowing she’d be the one to pull the trigger. She was more than anxious to kill him, literally savoring the idea. One bolt was in the chamber, four more attached to the stock. There was no way Xavier was leaving Ula’dh alive. She’d use every last arrow. She knew she could do it, too. She squeezed. Just a bit, just enough to get the feel of the weapon in her hands. It was more than just a matter of survival. It was a matter of revenge. Of honor. She did not intend to falter.

*Hold steady, she warned herself. You’ll get your chance.*

She was not so happy to watch Morgan advance deeper into the chamber. Was he aware of the tiny cracks in the limestone beneath him? Surely he was. She felt something was going to go wrong, deadly wrong, but she couldn’t clearly identify what might happen. She had a weapon; Morgan was armed and Xavier was worn, wounded. Still, she didn’t trust the old bastard as far as she could throw him.

A cold sweat broke out on her skin, drenching her. The bow in her hands was heavy. Her palms were dripping wet. Fear was a specter, looming large in her mind. She watched closely as the sorcerer clumsily removed the second scroll from its pouch.

She tried hard to quell her agitation. *Why does Morgan want to see them? We just need to kill Xavier and get the hell out.* The peach wood charm nestled between her breasts was growing warmer, a sure sign of danger. *Damn you, Morgan. Come back here.*

Xavier unrolled the scroll and held it at arm's length. "I hold the keys to the powers the Cachaens called forth years ago. The energies of the astral are at my beck as I hold this page."

Seeing the men together, Julianne realized that these two had, in a strange way, a grudging respect and admiration for each other. Xavier had once been Morgan's mentor, true, but the pupil had soon overtaken the master and then surpassed him.

A shiver coursed through her. What would have happened if Morgan had chosen Ouroborous? Apart, both he and Xavier were formidable. Together they would have been hell to be reckoned with.

Her thoughts were forgotten when Xavier began to read more lines of the flaking script aloud. As he spoke the flame of the fountain threw capering shadows onto the walls of the cavern. The smoky firelight waltzed teasingly with the crystal webs hanging from the low ceiling. The ruptures in the limestone began to come apart, a ripping of sheer stone that grated in the ears. A pulsing illumination issued up through the jagged cracks to light the cavern with its otherworldly incandescence.

Morgan advanced, closing the distance between them to savagely strike down Xavier's arm, moving the page out of his limited vision.

"Stop it! You are playing a dangerous game!" Shading his face from the radiant gleam, he swept his eyes along the rips in the limestone. Long and deep, they threatened to shatter the entire chamber if they opened any wider. "This place is coming apart. You will kill us all if you persist."

"I will have this!" Xavier returned savagely. "Leave me if you fear the power I can summon!" A smile of triumph graced his thick lips. He dug his fingers deep into the page he held. His single eye narrowed in a threatening scowl.

"What you have found is dangerous, you old fool!" Morgan snapped. "You are too hungry to possess again the power taken from you. *Is measa cara fealltach ná namhaid follasach.* He who broods evil shall be overtaken by it."

Julianne swore softly. The crossbow was becoming uncomfortably heavy in her hands, and the light was so bright she could hardly see the

figures of the two men. She aimed for the larger, breathing a prayerful obscenity. She briefly squinted her eyes shut, shaking her head to clear her vision. They stung from the scorching intensity of the illumination. Her mouth was dry as cotton, her lips rasped raw by her breath. Saying a quick, silent prayer, she depressed the trigger.

Her aim was true. The bolt struck Xavier squarely in the chest. He howled like a wounded animal, an earsplitting wail ripping from his throat. The force of the blow sent him stumbling backwards, crashing into the sarcophagus and crumpling to the floor.

He stared up at Morgan, brows furrowed, eyes blazing with fury, as if the younger man, not Julianne, had been the one to shoot him. "Like Azoroath, you...you seek to take the power the Dragon has granted should be mine!" he gasped, drawing in a deep, wracking breath.

"I do not want them," Morgan said coldly. "And you shall not have them, either."

"You'll not keep the scrolls from me!" Fighting his pain, his scarred face twisted with anger, fingers scrabbling across his torso, Xavier reached up and pulled the bolt from his chest. The serrated barbs tore through flesh, blood and bone. He cast it aside.

"You think this puny weapon will kill me?" he demanded with a laugh as he crawled to his feet, hooking his bloody hand against the side of the sarcophagus to steady himself. "I am beyond death, beyond anything you have ever witnessed. The Dragon has granted me the keys to eternity. I will not be denied! Now that I have the power, you shall be the first to die!"

"My damnedest says otherwise." Morgan drew his dagger from its hidden sheath in his sleeve. His dark eyes narrowed menacingly. "The woman asked for the pleasure of killing you. What she leaves undone, I shall finish."

Levering in the third bolt, Julianne quickly pulled it back into place. Bringing the stock against her shoulder, instinct told her that a deep heart or cerebral wound would take down any immortal. The next was meant for the sorcerer's skull.

*I pray to God I don't miss!*

Outnumbered and unarmed, Xavier called out his final card. He threw his arms wide, intoning, "Gods of revenge, hear my call, all most powerful, one and all. From the mighty depths of hell, spread thy darkness on his shell. Consume their bones, smash and crush, make mine enemy turn to dust!"

Instantaneously, a shattering blast wracked the stifling atmosphere. The cavern rocked without warning. The floor under their feet buckled so violently that for a moment it appeared that the limestone had turned to molten liquid.

Julienne winced from the savage uprising. She felt the scorching pulse of light-energy cut right through to the core of her being. Dropping the crossbow, she instinctively raised her hands to protect her eyes as she scrambled toward the refuge of the stairs. Reaching a safe plateau, she turned to call out to Morgan. She saw him standing on the edge of the largest crevice and he attempted to jump as the soft stone crumbled beneath his feet. But he was not fast enough to escape the giant chasm rapidly spreading around him.

Missing the edge by inches, he plunged into the heart of the glowing abyss as more than half of the sepulcher was instantly consumed by the earthquake. The limestone floor around the sarcophagus was torn into shreds by a powerful tremor, splitting the Cachaen tomb asunder.

"No!" Julienne screamed in horror. "Morgan! No!"

At the same time Morgan vanished into the depths, an opaque, amorphous form burst into the world, settling unseen into a shadowy corner. Gathering substance, it slowly began to solidify. A breath was taken, air into lungs. Silver-plated eyes opened to the world that gave it life.

"My God!" Julienne gasped through numb lips. "No!" Tears streamed down her face. She suddenly couldn't breathe, feeling as though someone had torn out her heart and cast it into the chasm after her lover. Thoughts skittered through her frenzied mind, making no sense.

*Jesus, he was too tired, pushing himself too hard. He could have made it if he had been paying attention. What was he thinking? He let his guard down...*

She set a narrow gaze on the one-eyed sorcerer. Hate filled her heart, straight to the depths of her soul.

*I may not get out of here alive, but neither will he!*

Not caring about the danger, she rushed out onto the unstable floor, only to be blocked by Xavier's great bulk stumbling back into her in an effort to keep from falling, too. Dazed by what he'd done, he let the scroll he held flutter from his fingers. A giggle broke from his lips, growing into a full laugh when he realized he had managed to dispose of his old enemy and survive.

"He's dead!"

Julienne drew the stolen ceremonial dagger from her pouch. In a single, cat-like bound she plowed forward and buried the sorcerer's own blade deep into his heart, twisting it hard. Hot, spurting blood soaked her hands.

"Remember my face when you're in hell," she snarled. "Whatever it takes, I'm coming after you!"

Behind them, silvery eyes grew narrow.

Xavier gasped. Spit mixed with blood and bubbled from his lips. His mouth gaped open, but no sound came forth. He fell to his knees, his hands scrambling frantically to pull out the wicked blade. His single eye was an orb of fear.

"This can't be!" He pulled his knife from his chest. Coated in crimson, the blade fell from his numb fingers. Blood gushed out of the wound with every beat of his heart. He began to crawl toward the sarcophagus.

Driven by hate and her need to kill, Julienne's attention settled on the last of Xavier's fallen warriors. *Perfect*. Pushing her body into motion, she snatched Azoroath's machete out of his dead hand. Armed anew, she advanced. She raised the blade and swung it like a bat, sending Xavier sprawling. She gave him no chance to recover.

"You'll pay dearly for all the lives you gave to your false god!" she screamed. Again, she swung. The flat of the blade contacted with the back of his head, cracking against his skull.

Panting through his mouth, Xavier groaned and rolled over onto his back. Like a beached whale, his great body heaved and shuddered. He

hissed and moaned, gnashing his teeth, fighting for every breath. Blood gushed from the wounds in his chest.

He was quickly losing strength. He would not last much longer. She could hear him gurgling, struggling for breath.

"The scrolls are something you'll never have, so help me God!" Using both hands, she lifted the machete over her head. Xavier's single eye widened. Reading murderous intent in her twisted face, he reached out, fingers curling around the lost scroll.

"I...I will be...eternal..." he croaked. His gaze locked with hers. His eye had a foggy white glaze. "Eye to eye...mind...to mind...thy will...be mine." Like a psychic vampire, he began to draw her in, attempting to suck her strength into his body.

Mesmerized, Julianne felt herself being pulled into the depths of his mind. Briefly, they connected on the psychic plane between life and death. She experienced his fear, saw the Dragon reaching out from the depths of Hades to claim his own, clamping fiery claws around the sorcerer's damned soul. The beast was feeding, sucking away the energies that were life's very spark, even as Xavier was attempting to suck hers away.

Her confusion was growing, her exhaustion, her dizziness. The machete dropped from her slackening fingers. Xavier was winning the mental battle. She fought it, fought for control. Sensing she would be drawn into death with him if she did not free her mind, she gave a fierce shriek.

"Like hell you will!"

The mutant's survival instincts took over as the foreign synapses in her brain lit up. Driven by the smell of fresh blood, the creature acted with a will of its own. A passion, an animal need, swept over her. Seized by its desires, Julianne temporarily lost touch with her own identity.

Head spinning, she broke eye contact. Responding to the mutant's instinctive commands, her right hand shot out, fingers digging into Xavier's forehead. With a growl, she pushed his head over. Her free hand came up. Fingers spread, she slammed the twin spikes of her slave bracelet deeply into his the soft tissue of his neck and made two jagged

tears across his jugular. But she would not drink of his foul blood. To do so would be a desecration of her spirit.

“Rot in hell.” Like surfacing from a very deep dive, Julianne came back to separate awareness again. At the edge of consciousness, she sensed an onlooker, a shadow-presence lurking beyond her peripheral view. It was the presence of a pure and perfect evil.

It watched with steel eyes. And learned.

Foul breath forever stilled, Xavier’s death cry was little more than a strangled burble.

Abruptly, the light issuing from the cavities in the cold limestone extinguished, plunging the caverns into darkness. A hideous wail cut through the silence, deafening in its pitch. Shadows flickered wildly. Something was screaming, long and loud.

Startled, she whirled. A small rattle came from her throat. The first indication she had that something out of the ordinary had emerged was the intense sensation of heat, as though she stood too near an open fire. As the sensation grew into acute discomfort, her eyes adjusted to the gloom, her occult-heightened senses drawing in faint hints of light and casting before her gaze, the dim illusion of illumination. In this eerie, surrealistic glow, she saw directly before her the clear outline of an ungodly beast.

“Oh, shit!” She backed away, moving behind the damaged stalagmite fountain. Instinct told her to keep fire between herself and the creature Xavier had unintentionally set free.

Malevolence glared from the depths of the silver eyes protruding from the great horned head. A reptilian tail swished. Gaping jaws opened. Sharp teeth gnashed. The creature howled. Strangely liquid mucus hung like strings from its sharp teeth.

The clicking of long talons on limestone sounded through the tomb as the creature abandoned its shadowy corner and slithered between the bodies of the slain. A claw came off the floor. Greenish-gray, the creature’s skin was the color of a corpse rotted a month in a Cajun swamp.



It brought the deadly appendage down and clamped its nails into Xavier's face. Its grip tightened. Flesh, bone and brain were squashed together in a mess the creature lifted to its slit of a mouth.

It fed.

Julienne gagged. She felt woozy, sure she was about to faint. She swallowed hard, fighting unconsciousness. If she panicked, she might goad the creature into coming after her. She made herself remain absolutely still, drawing long breaths through her mouth to stave off hyperventilation.

Seconds crawled by like hours. Attention glued to the creature, she was acutely aware of the feel of the cool limestone under her fingers as she clutched the edge of the fountain, grimly watching the movements of the thing Xavier had called up.

Unexpectedly, the creature began to grow hazy. Its body shifted to take on new shape. In a few minutes, it became the image of the sorcerer lying at its feet.

Only the new Xavier was young, his face unmarked by any damage, body strong and agile.

He turned his head, looking at her through silver eyes with pupils like bullet holes, black and endlessly empty. His mouth opened, emitting a decidedly inhuman titter. Limbs were pressed into jerky motion. Hopscotching the jagged splits in the chamber floor, he loped up the stairway and departed into darkness.

Julienne felt her legs grow rubbery, no longer willing to support her weight as tension left her body. Faint from inhaling the oily smoke given off by the fire, she collapsed on the floor beside the fountain. She began to weep, uncontrollably, near hysteria. Tremulous sobs shook her body. Her mind struggled to digest what she had just witnessed before the realization finally hit her.

Morgan was dead and she was alone, the last survivor of a journey ending in disaster.

## About the Author

Award-winning author Devyn Quinn lives amid the scenic Southwest Texas plains with her many cats, four ferrets, and Shih Tzu puppy. A huge fan of dark gothic literature, Devyn is a recent Romantic Times Nominee and CAPA Award winner. Writing with a style that has depth, fire, and fiendish imagination, Devyn makes her New York debut with *FLESH AND THE DEVIL* and is currently working on her next goth-erotic title. Visit Devyn online at [www.devynquinn.com](http://www.devynquinn.com) or at her [www.myspace.com/devynquinn](http://www.myspace.com/devynquinn) for the latest details and upcoming announcements.

## Look for these titles

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### *The Keeper of Eternity*

by Devyn Quinn

Body aching, eyes scratchy with fatigue, Julianne stepped out of the shower. She'd stood under the stream for more than an hour, until the water had gone from hot to lukewarm, then finally to cold. Shivering, she quickly dried herself, putting on a pair of panties and a long robe, wishing now that she'd chosen a sensible heavy housecoat instead of a sheer, sexy one. Brushing her teeth, then combing her hair into a twist at the nape of her neck, she opened the door and padded barefoot into the bedroom, eager to climb into her bed, crawl under the warm covers.

Seeing a fire burning in the fireplace, she paused. The fire hadn't been lit when she'd closed the bathroom door. The room was quiet, lights dimmed. Suddenly, the sharp scent of cloves tickled her nostrils, and she knew she was not alone.

Morgan sat in a chair dressed in shadows, drink in one hand, cigarette in the other. A bottle of scotch rested at his elbow, barely touched. It was clear he had come prepared to wait. Seeing him, an ache knotted in the back of her throat, threatening to steal away her breath. She could feel his gaze touching her, exploring her visually as his hands had once done.

She blushed at the silent intimacy that passed between them, knowing what he wanted of her, that he had come to take her. Heart pounding, she decided without thinking that tonight he would give her what she desired—or she'd turn him away. Saying nothing, she simply stared at him, waiting.

After what seemed an eternity, he finished his cigarette, drained the last of his drink and rose.

“Julienne.” Her name, hoarsely whispered, conveyed not only his need for her, but also his anger and rebellion for being weak enough to come to her that night.

“I didn’t expect to see you.” She thought of the wondrous and primitive sensations his hands stirred in her when he touched her skin.

“I do not know why I had to come.” His tone was low, beleaguered. “Something drew me here, to you.”

With a desperate, angry sound, he came to her, his mouth claiming hers. Her lips parted willingly under the searching invasion of his tongue. She tasted sweet cloves and scotch. Her hands rose to encircle his neck even as his claimed her waist, pulling her to his hard, forbidding frame. Her body arched reflexively as one of his hands sought then fastened over her silk-covered breast, teasing the erect nipple under the material. His mouth left hers, and he nipped with gentle teeth at the soft flesh of her neck.

“You have bewitched me, woman.”

“I’ve been trying.” she said, at first tempted to give in to her need. She wanted to rip off her robe, surrender to the gratifying hunger to be naked to this man’s touch. But if she did, she knew he would not accept his own pleasure. He would take her, use her, then leave her, quivering and unsatisfied.

He kissed her again, tugging impatiently at her robe, his hand sliding over the flat plane of her belly, finding the soft V between her legs. He began to explore, his fingers sliding beneath her panties to probe her depths.

*I haven’t got the will to try and fight him, she thought wildly, almost forgetting her resolve. I want him too much.*

Putting her hands on his chest, she forced herself to squirm free of his hold. “No,” she gulped. “Not this way.”

Eyes glittering with a feral craving, he reached for her, but she fended off his hands, pulling her robe tighter around her body, wishing it wasn’t so sheer. The tips of her erect nipples rubbed against the material, aching for his lips.

“Why not?” The set of his jaw was severe, even frightening. For a moment she believed he’d storm out in anger.

Julienne lifted a single finger to his lips to silence him. “I’m not refusing you,” she soothed. “But I’m making a demand. Tonight, you can make love to me completely...” She paused, giving him time to gather the gist of her words.

“Or?” he grated through nearly clenched teeth.

“Or you can leave. I’m tired of not having you. I need you. *All of you.*”

The silence between them was terrible. There was a long interval in which it seemed to Julienne the whole world stopped spinning on its axis. She knew there were powerful opposing forces raging inside him. She selfishly hoped her words hadn’t driven him away. In less than one week, he’d be leaving. She wanted every moment of what little time they had left.

“I do not even know why I should desire you,” he growled in a husky voice, thrusting his hands into his pockets. “You are like poison in my veins, woman. In all these weeks, not an hour has passed in which I have not wanted you.”

She gently shook her head and drew a deep breath. It was time to tell him the truth of their attraction.

“There’s a reason you’re so drawn to me sexually,” she said. “Grandmother told me you saved my life the night I first came here.”

His face hardened with suspicion. “Yes. That is true. She took my blood to strengthen you.”

“And used that to bind us together in a...a...mating.” Her voice wavered then cracked with guilt as she rushed her next words. “It’s not a complete joining. It can still be broken—unless we make love.”

She gazed at him without daring to say anything more and in spite of the shadows in which he stood, she saw the intense expression on his face, something she had never seen on his hard countenance before. Complicated emotions—part anger, part grief, part desire—colored his features. It was clear he felt overwhelmed, that his feelings for her were warring with the plans he’d already made.

She had expected him to be furious, to storm out of the room and never come near her again, now that he knew he had been manipulated by a woman he trusted.

“And would you want that, to be mated to me?” His eyes were a hot, tarry pool. His ferocious gaze held hers, stealing her breath with its intensity.

“Would it be so bad?” She offered a weak, uncertain smile. “You’re going to leave soon. Even if we were lovers, how could it affect you? It won’t be a forever thing. I’m only human.”

He shook his head, as though unable to find the words he needed. “You do not understand. For my kind, a blood mating with a woman is forever. My going away would not end it.”

*It’s a forever thing, the words echoed in her mind. I want that. I want forever with this man.*

*She controls the elements, but he controls her heart.*

## Nuermar's Last Witch

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Nuermar's history is whittled in ruins, its prophecy carved in stone. Maelis, child of the Prophecies, is the last of her kind—a green-eyed witch, and the only one whom the stones of Nuermar say can channel the Elements. She alone has the power to vanquish the evil that reigns over her land. But without the greatest element of all, she has no hope of winning such an impossible battle.

A turncoat-assassin holds the key to her ultimate triumph. Yet the destruction of her village and the brutal slaughter of Maelis' family lies on Joran's hands. Can she overcome her hatred in order to fulfill the Prophecies and channel the ultimate Element—love?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nuermar's Last Witch*, by A.E. Rought:

Maelis Keshnar's tears fell unchecked. Dust rose up with each breath to smart and sting her eyes. Crouched as she was, she felt her heart thunder in her chest, an unsteady rhythm as it pounded in impotent rage. She squinted at the pouch her grandmother had forced into her hand before slamming the door on her hiding place.

Maelis was not prepared for it; she hated it already—yet that was a paltry emotion compared to what was to come.

Fireballs were lobbed through the windows to crash in puddles of flame against the back wall. The doorjamb cracked and gave way as the door flew open, crashed against the wall and sent pots and jars flying from their shelves. From her hidden vantage, Maelis watched her grandmother, Niomi, spin to face the door as an intruder swept in with a swirl of black robes. With surreal speed, he closed the distance between them and his large, tattooed hands snatched at the old woman as she turned to flee. Niomi threw her thin arms up in defense. He cinched the fingers of one hand around her wrist and whipped her around to face him.

Niomi's face paled in panic. A guttural cry escaped her lips only to be smothered by his heavy palm. Still, she struggled. Her feet flailed, kicked at his legs and knocked over storage baskets all around them, to no avail; he overpowered her.

He forced her into a chair. With one hand pressed against her chest, he searched the floor with the other. His hand came upon a knitting basket which had spilled over in their brief confrontation. His fingers curled around a wound, woolen ball and the cloaked man bound Niomi's wrists with her own yarn.

"Tell me where the Talisman is," he said. "Tell me where to find the Witch."

From her place of hiding, Maelis could not see his face for the darkness within his hood. His voice was disembodied. There was no point on which to focus her rage.

"Tell me, woman!" he snapped, and he moved his ink-worked hands as if he meant to throttle Niomi. He hesitated, his fingers grasping for her and then drew back. His retreat seemed more a gesture of annoyance than sympathy, as if he summoned tenuous inner resolve not to choke Niomi to death in his rage.

Not enough sport in strangling an old woman, Maelis thought, her anger increasing.

"I cannot," Niomi whispered. She looked deep into the darkness of the hood, peered into the face Maelis couldn't see. "Don't you understand? She is my grandchild, all the family I have."

He recoiled again, though whether moved by Niomi's words, or simply still considering her a nuisance, Maelis couldn't tell. Niomi hung her head and acted as though the intruder was no longer present. She waited bravely to die in silence rather than to speak Maelis's name or disclose her whereabouts.

"Very well," the man said. He balled his hands into tight fists, his posture rigid, his voice strained as if he spoke through gritted teeth. "I pray that she is worth it. May the gods have mercy on your soul."

With that sacrilegious petition and a final whirl of his vestments, he walked out and left Niomi tied to a chair in her burning home.



She's safe! Maelis rejoiced. I need only to free her and we will escape all this!

But no sooner had Maelis entertained that thought than another man entered Niomi's home. Like the first man, he sported tattooed hands, blackened robes, but he was slighter of build, shorter than his fellow. He strode straight to the chair where Niomi was bound, reached out, wrapped his hand around the old woman's neck and squeezed.

"Tell me," he growled.

No other words were necessary.

Niomi knew the information he wanted, but she would not give it. Her will did not waver and her body did not struggle as he crushed her throat. Her faded green eyes glared at her murderer until death closed them. Her body went limp and her head slumped down on her chest.

*No!* Maelis's heart cried out. *Not my grandmother!* She remained silent where she hid, unable to move, struggling to suppress the primal scream which threatened to break loose.

She could no longer watch; nor could she look away. She seethed in rage of depths unknown as this second cloaked figure ransacked the hut. A black, horrid hate wound its way into her heart and mind as he turned over furniture, shredded cushions with his dagger, knocked shelves off the walls. After a fruitless search, he kicked over an oil lantern and stormed out, without even a glance at the woman he'd killed.

The door, coated in licking tongues of flame, slammed shut and Maelis rushed to her grandmother's side. She knelt in front of that cursed chair and untied Niomi's hands. They were still warm and soft, as they had always been in life. Yet now they were motionless and gave no comfort. Maelis's eyes brimmed with tears as she laid her head in Niomi's lap, like she had done so many times as a child. Maelis kissed her grandmother's hand and her tears soaked into the simple dress the old woman wore.

"No more hiding," Maelis sobbed. "No more pain."

The blaze behind her mocked in crackled laughter.

Just then, a cry rang out in the streets, "Burn them all! Destroy the Witch's village!"

Maelis could see the murderer through the shattered window frame. He flung a lit torch against the side of their house, and the brittle wood and thatch immediately erupted in voracious flames. Ringed in fire, the man appeared inhuman, cloaked in darkness that eddied around him as he leapt astride his horse.

He spurred the steed, and shouted again, "Burn them all! The Talisman is not here!" He raised a whip and his hood fell back, revealing a young man no older than Maelis herself, his face, which might have once been handsome, now chiseled and made ugly with anger and hatred. The great horse turned, thundered away and took Niomi's murderer with it into the dusk.

Her own life was now in danger as the building burned down around her. The roof timbers groaned and gave way. The flames began to snap at Maelis as even her family's singular magick which had so long protected the hut dissolved in the heat. The only escape left to her now was Niomi's tunnel in the cellar leading out to the banks of the pond.

Maelis spun on her heel and ran toward the door to the cellar. The leg of an upturned chair caught her thigh, pitched her off balance and made her stumble. Burning beams crashed around her. Walls collapsed, and a shattered door jamb struck her arm and knocked her to the ground. Fire raged, devoured her home and every other. All around, the screams of the dying faded into the roars of growing fires. She rose on shaking limbs, forced herself to move again, so that her grandmother's sacrifice would not be in vain.

The blaze was nearly too much for Maelis, and her eyes felt raw from heat and smoke. She closed them out of instinct and fumbled blindly for the handle to the cellar door. The scorching metal of a latch singed her palm. Maelis turned it and tumbled against the hard dirt floor below. A rib cracked, her head struck the floor, and consciousness threatened to desert her.

Maelis coughed bloody spittle as she struggled to catch her breath there in the cool shadows. She struggled upright and scrambled her way up the slope and toward the far end, away from the stench of murder and toward the fresh air and wet smell of the healing mud beside Sunar's Pond.

Once through the tunnel and out the other side, Maelis stood alone; an open and easy target. But, her safety was not her concern. Her sudden loss, her impotent rage reigned.

Anger rose up like bitter bile in her throat. So much had changed, both within and without. Where once she knew joy, only sadness remained. Her jaw muscles clenched. She knotted her fist around the pouch in her hand. Her fingers curled so tightly that her knuckles whitened and her fingernails dug into the flesh of her palm. Blood welled up, soaked into the blue velvet, but Maelis didn't care. She couldn't. She could scarcely hold herself upright; her spirit besieged, her battered body threatened collapse. Only her will kept her moving, a will that spun with savage speed into a fury every bit as heated as the flames she'd only just escaped.

Maelis cocked her arm back, fist raised high. No prophecy could soothe her pain. *Nothing that this pouch could contain is worth so many lives*, she thought.

She inhaled a deep breath and readied herself to heave the bag and its culprit contents. Then, her grandmother's face rose in her mind—her grandmother holding the very pouch she held, and telling Maelis to take it and hide. Maelis had followed Niomi's directions, and in doing so witnessed her grandmother's murder. *She died to protect me*, Maelis mourned. *My grandmother died so that I might live to harness the power this Talisman controls*.

That truth struck her brutally, with a nearly physical force.

Her grandmother, the only family that she had ever known, had died to protect Maelis from the armies of Lord Nemenon. The entire village had shared Niomi's fate. The fires, meant for Maelis, had taken them all while she herself remained unscathed. The fires, meant for her, had taken them all. Her furious resolve failed, trickling away like the rivulets and streams feeding the pond by which she stood. She fell to her knees in the mud. Memories, so fresh and painful, deluged her mind.

"They were peaceful!" Maelis cried into the night air. She collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision, heartache blinding all else.

In silence Maelis vowed that she would avenge Niomi's death. The cloaked men would feel her wrath. In the pouch hidden close to her

breast was the magick talisman to destroy them all. Maelis would discover its contents and harness its powers.

*I will bring retribution.*

*A girl...a hitman...a time machine. It's time to get your adventure on.*

## A Bend in Time

© 2006 Michelle Miles

When hitman Dane Fortune was hired to kill the beautiful and sassy Skye Ransom, he never counted on her leading him on a game of cat and mouse through time...or that he'd just as soon kiss her as kill her.

When Skye Ransom finds her parents murdered, she learns a hit man is responsible and she's his next target. While trying to outrun her would-be murderer, she inadvertently transports herself back in time. Her biggest problem? Sexy Dane Fortune follows her to carry out his hit...or has he?

It's time to get your adventure on.

Enjoy the following excerpt from *A Bend in Time* by Michelle Miles:

A sudden rumbling of the earth beneath his feet gave Dane pause. He spun where he stood, his breath exhaling in white plumes on the frigid air. With a thunder of heavy hooves, hundreds of horses suddenly crested the nearest ridge, racing toward him. He recognized Nyan in the center, flanked by a riderless horse and Ilsa. His men rode behind them. Nyan came to a stop, his horses' hooves kicking up snow.

"Stranger, you go to save the girl," Nyan said, his gaze focused on Dane. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes." Dane still gripped the sword in his hand, wondering what the chieftain was up to.

"Because you love her?"

*Love her?* Dane thought. "No," he quickly corrected. "Because I swore to protect her."

He didn't love Skye. True, he thought she was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. True, he felt this inherent and inexplicable need to keep her safe, to defend her from harm, to see her home once again. True, she had a mouth on her sometimes he could just as soon slap as kiss, but did that mean he *loved* her? Surely not.

"I offer you a truce, then," Nyan said. "Join us. We can help each other."

Dane's gaze flickered between Nyan and his mother. She gave him a nod of approval, her expression urging him to mount the horse.

"We must stop Sovold before he reaches the temple," Nyan said and pointed to the building on top of the mountain.

"If I help you, then you have to agree to free us," Dane said, trying to bargain. "Me and the girl—both of us. We go free when it's over."

"Agreed," Nyan said quickly. He offered Dane the reins of the riderless horse beside him. "Now come."



Sovold shoved Skye to the snowy ground again. She panted, her lungs burning as she tried to catch her breath. He had been dragging her for what seemed like hours. Her legs ached from the exertion.

"Rest," he ordered. He paced back and forth in front of her, carving a rut in the snow. She could see the brown earth emerging beneath the heavy treads of his boots.

"It will do you no good to try and run from me," he told her, just as she'd started to entertain the thought of doing precisely this, of bolting to her feet and scampering back down the hillside in the direction they had just come. Sovold turned, wagging the dagger at her demonstratively. "And I will not hesitate to kill you if you try. There is no escape for you, girl. No rescue. Not even the healer—your precious love—can save you."

"My precious...?" Skye said, and she nearly laughed aloud, despite the circumstances and her shortness of breath. *He thinks Dane and I are in love? Oh, Jesus!*

True, she had thought Dane was quite possibly the sexiest, most attractive man she'd ever seen from the moment she'd first set eyes on him. True, she had grown to trust him—albeit reluctantly—and depend on him, to feel compassion and camaraderie for him. And true, he had an arrogant, chauvinistic attitude that she could simultaneously loathe and appreciate, but did that mean she *loved* him? Surely not.

"I don't understand why you just won't let me go," she said, her voice weak and weary. She was so very cold. Her teeth chattered. She folded

her arms in front of her trying to ward off the frigid air. It was useless, though. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you are the Pure One.” He paused, looking at her with a wicked smile and a frightful gleam in his eyes.

*What?* she thought, bewildered. *Oh, boy, does this guy not realize what a bottle of Jagermeister will do to me!* “What does that mean?” She breathed the words between her teeth, her breath exhaling on a white plume.

Sovold squatted down in front of her. “I knew it the moment I saw you, when I brought you and your companion to our camp. It was the color of your hair and your eyes that confirmed it.” His hand slipped under her hairline, caressing the nape of her neck. “The prophecy spoke of a copper-haired woman with indigo eyes who would drop from the sky. I sensed something ancient about you. I sensed your pureness.”

She flushed. Her skin tingled where he touched her and she didn’t like it one bit.

“The temple, you see, is where the power lies.” He pointed to the building on the mountain. “The prophecy states the Pure One will harness the power for the one who would proclaim himself leader. That is why we must join together in an ancient ritual at the temple. I had thought to control you with the elixir. It would have been easier for us both. However, you insisted on kicking it from my hand.”

His hand traveled to the nape of her neck. Repulsed by his touch, she felt bile rising in her throat, but she forced it down. He gripped her hair, tilted her head back with a yank and hovered over her. She could see his stumps of yellow teeth as his lips parted and his acrid breath pressed against her face.

*Oh, my God, he’s going to kiss me,* she thought, and nothing she’d suffered to that point—not running away from an armed hit man, traveling through time or finding herself in the middle of not one, but *numerous* major, bloody battles in the span of little more than a week—horrified her more than this sudden realization.

Panic seized her. Her hand fumbled against the snowy ground, her fingertips curling about the jagged curve of a loose rock. She swung it in her hand, smashing it into the side of his head.

Sovold screamed, released his hold on her, his hand going to his temple. She was pleased to see she had left a bright red mark and a tiny trickle of blood down the side of his face. She shoved him away from her and scrambled to her feet, starting to run. The snow was thick and deep, however, and her boot soles slipped for clumsy purchase as she plodded forward. She didn't make it five full strides before Sovold caught her again, grabbing her roughly by the elbow. He pointed the dagger at her throat, the tip jabbing her skin.

"I should kill you now," he hissed.

"Go ahead," she taunted. "I dare you."

She was banking on the fact that he needed her alive for when they arrived at the temple. She held her breath, saw the flicker of indecision in his eyes and then he lowered the dagger.

"Another misstep, pretty one, and I will."

And she knew he was telling her the truth.



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