

Prophecy: Child of Light

By F E Heaton

Chapter One

Trapped.

That's what she was, what she had been for as long as she could remember.

The walls around her had seemed to close in as the years rolled on, making the mansion increasingly unbearable, and drawing her ever more to the world outside her bedroom window.

Rain rattled against the windowpanes, creating an eerie melody when combined with the howl of the wind cutting through the power lines. Watching the streaks of water coursing down the windows, Prophecy ignored the ramblings of her blood-mother, Iona, and kept focus on the outside world.

She slowly ran the brush down her long auburn hair, smoothing away the knots and tangles while she stared out into the night.

Something stirred in the darkness and her gaze shifted there. The hunting group crossed the grounds towards the gates. There were eleven of them tonight, one less than last night because one had fallen. Talk of it had reached her even before her mother knew. The walls had ears in this house and Prophecy knew the owner of them.

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A chance meeting with the other bloodline that lived in this city had led to a fight in which her family had lost a son.

Not that she cared.

What was it to her who died out on the hunt? She didn't know them, didn't know anyone outside a set sphere of people.

Her brown eyes followed the group as they reached the gates and she watched them slip into the darkness beyond. She knew where they were going. They were heading down into the city, down to a place she'd never been. Losing sight of them, she glanced at the high stone wall that surrounded the grounds.

It was the final barrier between her and the city. The outside wall of her prison.

A wall she longed to breach.

"Where do they go?" she said in a distant tone of voice, sounding as disinterested as possible.

She heard a swish of material and felt her mother close behind her.

"To hunt," her mother replied in a matter of fact tone. She took the brush from her.

Prophecy mused her mother's answer while she stared at the rain-soaked scenery and felt the brush in her hair, her mother's delicate fingers working through the knots.

To hunt.

It sounded so enthralling, so dangerous and dark. She wished she knew what it was to hunt, but she'd never been allowed out into the night with the others, not even with her so-called brother, Arkalus.

"Can I go too?" she asked, knowing what the answer would be, but hoping that tonight it might be different from the thousands of times that she'd asked in the past.

“I am afraid not,” her mother replied and smoothed down her hair.

“Why not?” Prophecy challenged and turned to face her mother.

Iona didn't look at all concerned by Prophecy's outburst. Her face was a mask of calm, and Prophecy's eyes roamed over it, taking in the luscious black of her mother's curled hair and the wicked red that smeared her lips. Her eyes were surrounded by layers of black and brown, making them sinfully dark and alluring against her creamy pale skin. In all the years that Prophecy could remember her, Iona had always looked this way—like a true child of the night. Her mother was a fitting master of their bloodline, never straying from the tradition of dress or habit. Never straying from the laws.

All her life Prophecy had been taught to obey the rules of their society and of their house, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to obey her mother. She could feel the lure of the outside world keenly, as though it was in her blood, and she could no longer ignore it. She had tried. She had spent night after night resisting the call of the city and the promise of excitement it whispered in her ear. Now her blood was screaming at her to escape the confines of the mansion and taste the thrill of the hunt, to take hold of it and live the life she was born to.

“You're too young.” A fond smile teased her mother's lips and she raised a slim hand. She pushed Prophecy's hair behind her ear, clearing it from her face. “Soon, maybe.”

Prophecy allowed herself a small smile. It was the first time her mother had said that she would be allowed to hunt soon and it ignited a spark of hope inside her. She glanced at the window, still smiling serenely as her eyes followed the spatter of the raindrops against the glass.

“But first, you must complete your training.”

A sigh escaped Prophecy's lips while she thought about that. Each night she woke and went through the rigmarole of training, and each night she was held back while the others went out to hunt. All she wished for was one night of freedom.

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One thrilling night out hunting, even if it were with Arkalus.

Then she would be happy.

Then she would gladly spend eternity cooped up in the mansion.

She watched her mother leave and turned her attention back to the rain-soaked world outside her window. In the distance, she could see the pinpricks of light that were the buildings in the centre of the city.

Prague.

She longed to go there.

During her studies in the library, she'd read every book about the city and its dark history, even when she was supposed to be reading about her family and their own black and bloodied past. She didn't care much for them or the other family that presided over the city; she just wanted to be out there in amongst the people, and feeling the thrill of the chase.

She wanted her first taste of a kill.

Standing, she ran her fingers around the smooth white column of her throat while thinking about killing her first victim and her large dark eyes scanned the horizon. She caught sight of two guards patrolling the grounds.

How was it everyone else was allowed to hunt when she was forced to stay at home? She'd done her training, knew how to execute a clean kill, and could defend herself from the other family if she needed to.

She was ready.

Why didn't anyone see that?

Why was she being held back?

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Casting a glance around her dimly lit room, she stopped when her eyes came to rest on her wardrobe. A mischievous smile wove its way across her lips.

She would see this city. She would feel the excitement of the hunt and learn the taste of fresh human blood, and no one would even know about it.

Tomorrow, the night was hers.

* * * *

The city was dark and clouds hung heavy in the air, weighing down upon it as they threatened rain. Prophecy slipped through the black shadows. Quieter than a cat, she moved from street to street, invisible to the people walking them as the nightclubs turned out.

She froze when she entered the cemetery, hurriedly crouching low and turning her face to the sky as a rumble of thunder echoed overhead. Her eyes narrowed and ran over the clouds, assessing just how long she had before the downpour reached her.

Just enough time to hunt.

She listened to the chatter of people as they passed by on the other side of the wall, unaware of the creatures they shared their world with.

Creatures like her.

She couldn't remember a time she had been like them. She'd never been able to remember it. Her kin barely spoke about their lives as humans, but she knew they could remember them. On the rare instances they'd mentioned them, she'd always been listening from the shadows. Their conversations had left her wondering about her life before she was a vampire and why she couldn't remember it.

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The voices drifted into the distance and she stood up. She moved swiftly into the inviting darkness of the graveyard, allowing it to envelope her and hide her from the world.

She slipped from tomb to tomb, sharpening her senses more and more with each passing second and waiting with baited breath for someone to stray from the human world and into hers.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. She pressed her back flush against the wall of a crypt when her sensitive ears picked up the sound of footsteps heading towards her. Her eyes closed as the person neared and she listened to their erratic movements. Inhaling deeply, she tried to catch their scent in the damp air.

Lightning forked in the distance, the thunder rolling above her just a few seconds later.

She only had a short time before the rain came, but it was all she was going to need.

She grinned when the man she was tracking stumbled and fell.

This man had been drinking.

Smoothing her clothes, she checked her appearance and then slipped out of the shadows and into the path of her quarry.

He stopped, his eyes raking over her as she stood awaiting him.

“What do we have here?” he breathed in a thick Czech accent.

She braced herself when he took a step towards her, his smile widening. Her stomach tightened with nerves and she struggled to keep her focus while she repeatedly went over what she needed to do in her head.

She managed a smile, dipped her head slightly and looked up at him through hooded eyes, luring him in. She fluttered her eyelashes when he stumbled forwards. The stench of alcohol came off him in waves and intoxicated her senses as it mixed with the scent of his blood.

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He wasn't a large man, barely the same height as her and nearly as thin. His sandy hair hung in loose, wet curls, like a shaggy mop on top of his head. She wondered if someone had dunked him in one of the city fountains. He couldn't have been caught in the rain because it hadn't reached them yet.

"All alone...pretty girl like you...city like this," he slurred.

She kept her smile steady, holding her nerve and waiting for the right moment to strike.

When he came within arms reach, she lowered her head completely, turning it away from him so she was almost looking behind her.

So her face was hidden in shadow.

"I don't come out often," she said, hesitating while she built up the courage to take her first life.

"Shame...not enough girls like you in this city. You shouldn't hide away." He stepped up to her.

His fingers brushed against her cheek. She closed her eyes and inhaled sharply. Anticipation curled like a snake in the pit of her stomach and she was ready to strike.

"Not enough girls like you in the world," he murmured and she smiled.

"You'd be right there." She raised her head as her fangs descended and in one swift move, she was on him.

Grasping his arms, she bit deep into his neck, hoping her aim was true and she would catch a vein strong enough to drink from.

Her hands wrestled with his. He struggled against her in a desperate attempt to break free. She sank her teeth deeper into his neck and was rewarded with a mouthful of blood. It tasted sweeter than the rarest wine as it slipped down her throat and she couldn't stop herself from drinking deeply. It was intoxicating. He started to cry out and she covered his mouth roughly with her

hand, stopping him from drawing attention to them. She held him tighter and tried to contain him so she could feed properly. He was wriggling against her now and it only served to drive her on, heightening the thrill of her first kill. The taste of fresh, warm blood made her fingers curl and she didn't even notice that her nails were digging into his flesh.

All she could think about, all she could feel, was the all-consuming pleasure of his blood.

His heart stopped and she released him, hearing him slump to the ground at her feet.

Her head fell backwards and she lost herself in the sensations running rampant through her, potent feelings she'd never experienced before. Her mind swam with desire while she savoured the divinity of what she'd tasted.

* * * *

From the shadows, Valentine watched her, his eyes following her every move. She wiped her fingers across her mouth, licking and sucking every last drop of blood off them as though it would be her last. He'd never seen one take so much pleasure from the hunt and the kill. He'd never witnessed one lose themselves so much in the feed.

Slipping out of the darkness, he walked towards her, moving silently for fear of alerting her to his presence before he was willing to make himself known.

She was entralling. Still wrapt in delight, she ran her fingers down her body, clearly buzzing from the fresh blood in her veins. He arched a brow at her when he stopped at a distance, close enough to see who she was, but far away enough that she still didn't notice him. She ran her tongue along her soft full lips, clearing them of any remaining blood.

"And what have we here?" he said.

Prophecy started as the velvet-edged, strong voice roused her from her haze. For a moment, she thought about answering him

by mentioning that he'd just said exactly what her last victim had, but then she caught his scent and froze.

He wasn't human.

He was a vampire.

Her eyes shot open and she stared at him, her senses becoming painfully sharp when he stared straight back.

His eyes were sharp, narrowing as he studied her. "Who are you?"

She remained mute. She could sense a power in him that was nearly as strong as her mother's and she knew instinctively that he was from the other family. Her eyes remained fixed on him when thunder rumbled threateningly overhead and she blinked rapidly when fat raindrops began to fall. The sound of them filled the silence. She was saturated in a matter of seconds.

Those seconds seemed to stretch into minutes while she stared at him and he looked back at her. The dead body of the man she'd killed lay prostrate between them, marking a line that she chose as the boundary between her and the newcomer. If he stepped near it, she'd bolt in the opposite direction and head for the safety of home.

Until then, she would stay where she was and stand her ground as she'd been taught.

Lightning illuminated the turbulent blanket of grey above them. She noticed that his hair was black against his skin; a tangled spiky mess that made his slim face look even thinner. He stood straight, his head tilted back a fraction and his focus wholly on her. His eyes were as green as hers were when she was in her vampire guise and she was drawn to looking into them as he stared at her with a critical coldness.

He took a step towards her and she moved back one, keeping the distance between them steady.

“Why are you alone?” His words were an obvious attempt to get her to speak. She kept silent. “Not hunting with the pack?”

She felt like turning that question against him, but she was trapped in his gaze and answered without thinking.

“They won’t let me. I’m still learning.” It came out sounding sulky and she lifted her chin in defiance when he pulled an expression of mock sympathy.

“Learning what?” He took another step towards her. This time she remained standing in the same spot, not letting him back her up any more.

“To hunt,” she said.

Her senses stretched out and assessed all avenues of escape around her. Now that he was closing the gap, she could feel just how powerful he was and her instincts were telling her to run before he got too close. She knew she would be able to outrun him. He was taller than her, but had a slightly heavier build, which would slow him down, even with his heightened abilities.

He laughed mockingly and then gave her a serious look when he took another step towards her, cutting the distance between them down to only a few feet.

“To hunt is in your blood.” His voice lowered, his intimate tone sending a shiver down her spine. He looked deep into her eyes and held her gaze while he moved towards her. “To kill, your nature.”

She blinked.

“Who is your sire, little one?” He purred the words at her, his sensuous voice lulling her. Her eyes closed for a split-second before she got the better of herself and they shot open.

She raised her head in an attempt to show him that she wasn’t scared of him. She wasn’t going to answer his questions and she could see he wasn’t pleased about that when a shadow of annoyance crossed his face.

Her eyes widened when his teeth extended, his eyes shifting into their blue state as he revealed his true self. She gasped when he closed the gap between them and caught hold of her before she could move. She should have run when she'd had the chance. She shouldn't have come out alone.

Pressing her hands against his chest, she felt as though the tables had been turned on her while she struggled against him, trying to escape his grasp like her victim had attempted to break free of hers. She flinched away from him when he held her firm and whispered words to her.

"Do not be frightened. You know what I am going to do," he said and she closed her eyes, leaning away from him when he neared her neck.

She had to block him, had to stop him from seeing the visions of her past from her blood like he wanted to. She desperately tried to remember what she'd been taught, but forgot it the instant his lips brushed against her skin, sending shivers of desire racing through her, washing away all fear.

She swallowed hard and grimaced when his sharp incisors penetrated her, sinking deep into her. She stilled for a moment as pain swept through her, clearing the clouds of desire from her mind. He pulled on her blood and his fingers tightened around her upper arms. She struggled against him.

Escape.

She needed to escape.

* * * *

As the images that were swimming in his head came into order, Valentine stumbled backwards and stared at her. She was standing before him, clutching at her neck, her eyes wide and full of fear. He blinked once, twice, and then frowned when she bolted out of the cemetery gates, leaving him alone in the darkness.

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He stared at the place where she'd been not two seconds before and then brought his fingers up to his mouth. He brushed the blood from his lips and thought about what had just happened. He thought about what he'd seen.

Could it be?

He glanced at the blood staining his fingers.

“Prophecy.”

Chapter Two

When he approached them, Valentine nodded at the two guards that were flanking the main entrance of his family's house. The rain was falling fast now, the wind driving it hard against the façade of the old mansion and saturating the heavy black coats the guards wore. He mused that they wouldn't provide much protection against the weather tonight.

Stepping out of the darkness and into the brightly lit hall of his home, he unbuttoned his long coat while he walked along the corridor and through the entrance reception room. Shaking the excess water off his jacket, he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, ignoring the vixens of his household as they called to him. He didn't have time for making sport tonight.

Tonight he had more serious business to attend to.

His thoughts drifted to the female vampire. She had been slim, her dark tunic top and trousers clinging to her figure as she'd defiantly stood before him in the rain. Her long hair had been soaked and had hung in loose tendrils. The darkness of it had made her face seem even paler than it probably was, drawing his attention to it. Her round dark eyes had spoken volumes to him, but all in a language that he couldn't understand. There had been something about her that had drawn him in until he'd been powerless to resist seeing what she held in her blood. Little had he known that what he would see would only confuse him. If instinct had told him that, he would have let her go.

Let her go?

By the Devil, he wished he had.

He wished she'd answered his damn questions, wished he'd never laid eyes on her.

He stopped just short of the heavy wooden doors that led into the main reception room.

What was he doing?

He almost laughed aloud at himself while he tried to make sense of the thoughts that were running riot through his mind. He shut them down. To think such things was mutinous, disloyal. His hands curled into tight fists, his nails digging into the softer skin of his palms while he stared unseeingly at the dark doors. It was his duty to report this. It didn't matter what he'd seen in her blood.

Taking a weary step forwards, he pushed the doors open. Everything felt heavy, his limbs, his heart, and his head. It all conspired to make him feel as though he couldn't take another step towards his destination, that he couldn't tell his lord what he'd discovered tonight.

The sounds of merriment drifted into the background as he pushed on, walking into the room and closing the doors behind him. He could feel all eyes on him and he knew what they were thinking.

He didn't belong here.

He was too young to be a part of this hallowed scene, this sanctum for the elder vampires of his family, this place where they hid themselves away from the idle play of the children. His place was here, whether they liked it or not. He'd worked hard to attain his position. He'd spent over two centuries as a loyal servant to his lord and a dutiful son of his bloodline.

He looked down at his hand, almost seeing the smear of blood that had stained his fingers not thirty minutes ago. Her blood. That's all it was. Just blood. There was nothing more to it. It was responsible for the disquiet he felt inside. It was always a danger when drinking from another of the seven pure bloodlines. They had power, enough to intoxicate the drinker and make them believe the things that the blood whispered to them.

"Good hunting?" A voice cut through the noise and reached his ears.

Peeling his jacket off, he handed it to Cornelius who was approaching him from the side.

“No...interesting hunting,” he answered, stopping a few feet inside the room.

Cornelius arched a brow at the soaking wet coat and then neatly arranged it over his arm. Valentine gave him a look that warned him not to complain. The only reason that Cornelius was allowed into this area of the house was because the young vampire was his aide. That title meant bearing everything that he threw at him—even wet coats. He knew his friend would do almost anything he asked so long as it afforded him such standing amongst their family and so long as he was treated well.

“Did you run into him?” Cornelius asked.

Valentine touched a lone finger to his lower lip, remembering the sweet taste of her blood. He could smell it still, knew it continued to stain his lip for all to see.

“No...a her.”

His eyes scanned over the plush plum walls of the room, their height almost reaching forty foot. He ignored all the looks he was receiving while he searched the balcony and then the floor in front of him.

“Who?”

When he failed to find who he was searching for, his eyes fell to rest on an ornate mahogany door directly opposite him. His stomach squirmed for a moment and then settled when he reminded himself of his duty to his family. It was just her blood trying to work its will and contaminate him. That was the only reason he felt this way.

He nodded towards the door. “That would be telling. Is he in?”

Cornelius frowned. “He’s engaged with Indigo.”

“Not any more he isn’t. This is more important than pandering to that girl’s needs.” Valentine moved swiftly towards the closed door, continuing to block out the mutterings of his elders.

“What is it?” Cornelius hurried after him.

“You shall hear in time. I have to tell him first. I shall be a dead man if you know before him.”

“You already are a dead man,” Cornelius said as one of the men guarding the door stopped him and held him back as Valentine passed.

Valentine smiled and continued walking towards the door. His friend always had a habit of wanting to know everything first, but this time he couldn’t risk his lord’s anger by letting Cornelius know before Kalinor heard.

Taking a deep breath, he rolled his shoulders in an attempt to relieve some of the tension in his body and then pushed the mahogany door open, striding confidently into the room.

He ignored the alluring smile that Indigo gave him when she pulled away from her mate and slowly covered herself, drawing her black hair down over her bloodied neck. Blanking her attentions, he looked straight at Kalinor.

When his lord looked back at him, Valentine walked quickly towards him. He took Kalinor’s hand, pressed a kiss to the ring on his finger and then looked up into his eyes.

“Valentine,” Kalinor greeted him dryly with an empty smile that barely masked his annoyance over the disturbance. “Couldn’t this have waited?”

“I am afraid not, my lord.” Valentine bowed his head. He didn’t need to look up in order to see the displeased look that his lord would be giving him.

It wasn’t often bestowed upon him though. Usually it was one of the other vampires in the household who was on the receiving end. He’d seen it often enough to know exactly what Kalinor

would look like. His lord would be leaning against the large ebony desk, his long arms folded across his chest and his blue eyes watching him intently for a sign of why he was being disturbed.

Risking a glance, Valentine saw that he looked exactly as predicted.

Kalinor preened his sandy brown hair back into place and then scratched under his thin jaw before moving around his desk. He carefully arranged the tails of his long, ornately embroidered black jacket into place and sat down. Valentine watched him wave a hand at Indigo, silently dismissing her, and then found Kalinor's eyes meeting his again.

He didn't need to be instructed to sit. He moved immediately to the chair on the opposite side of the desk. Arranging himself comfortably, he held Kalinor's gaze.

The elder vampire stared at him and Valentine tried to quell the desires that were rising up inside him, rebelling against his better judgement as they whispered words of insubordination to him. He told himself it would be more than disloyal to do as they asked.

It would be a sin.

It would be illegal.

He struggled to maintain a cool façade as his lord sniffed the air and fixed him with a dark look. He knew immediately what the problem was.

He stank of blood.

Not the delicate perfume of human blood like he should have.

It was the stench of vampire blood, of Caelestis blood.

He had to tell him now. It was his duty. He swallowed hard as everything inside him told him not to.

Kalinor raised a brow.

“Is something wrong, Valentine?” Kalinor said the words with cold calculation as their eyes remained locked with each other’s. “Did something happen on the hunt? I’ve known you since you were barely turned and it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you like this.”

Valentine stood sharply, bowed his head a fraction and then walked to the other side of the room. He never could keep still. He had to pace in order to get his thoughts together and clear his head of the vision her blood had given him.

He had to clear his head of the vision of her.

There was something about her, something enthralling. The tiny trace of blood he’d taken from her had tasted so sweet, like honey on his tongue, and now a part of him was fighting against his better judgement and begging him not to tell his lord about her.

He could keep her to himself.

He shook his head to rid it of such a ridiculous notion. His allegiance was to his house, to the family of Aureora, not to a female vampire of the house of Caelestis. Besides, if he didn’t tell him now, Kalinor would have him executed when he eventually found out about her and discovered that he’d known of her existence all along.

But what he’d seen in her blood. It couldn’t be a lie. No vampire on earth had the power to make their blood lie. It was truth, and he had seen it with his own eyes and felt it in his heart. To tell his lord of her existence was to sentence her to death and that would have terrible repercussions.

He stared at the window, watching the rain streaking down it while he pulled himself together and reminded himself that he’d served this house loyally for over two centuries. Now wasn’t the time to be disloyal, not when he’d worked so hard to get where he was. Not when he was so close.

“You seem troubled.”

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He heard Kalinor stand and he looked at him out of the corner of his eye. His lord looked worried. He was drawing too much attention to himself. He had to tell him now before he grew angry.

“You did not succeed tonight in finding the hunter that plagues our city, but that does not mean you will not prevail. You will defeat him. I’m as certain of that as I am of you becoming the Law Keeper for Aurorea one day.”

Valentine closed his eyes as he felt those words plunge into his chest, twisting there like a knife. He would be a Law Keeper one day, if only he could find his voice and confess to his lord what he’d found tonight and why he smelt of their enemy.

He took a deep breath and felt tranquillity fill him.

“The prophecy,” he said the words slowly and looked directly at his lord.

Kalinor’s eyes widened, his jaw tensing while he waited to hear what he had to say.

Valentine began to pace, not wanting to see his lord’s eyes when he told him about her. He could feel Kalinor’s gaze following his every move, could sense the anticipation as it hung in the air between them. His lord would know that this was the reason he’d seemed so distracted and agitated tonight. He could no longer go back and keep her to himself. He had to go forwards and do his duty.

“Go on.” Kalinor encouraged him.

Valentine sighed.

“I had no luck in hunting the man responsible for taking two of our best. I ran into something else...something...” He closed his eyes briefly and replayed the image of her lost in the taste of blood and the thrill of the hunt. Opening his eyes, he looked at the floor and frowned. “Enthralling.”

“Enthralling?” Kalinor moved towards him, but Valentine moved away, going to the window and staring out of it at the darkness.

He watched the rain being swept in droves across the garden and clasped his hands behind his back.

“She exists,” he said and waited.

It wouldn't take his lord long to piece together what he was saying. He would know that the blood he could smell on him would have something to do with it. He didn't resist when Kalinor caught hold of his shoulders and turned him to face him. His lord's eyes came to rest on the small spot of red that was still marring his lips.

“She's one of them?” Kalinor said.

Valentine nodded in confirmation.

“I found her hunting, alone. She appeared to be executing her first kill. They have kept her hidden well...only she did not wish to remain that way.” He looked deep into his lord's eyes and searched them for an answer to his next question. “Is she dangerous?”

Kalinor smiled.

It was true then. Valentine remembered what he'd been told as a youngling, what all vampires were told. In the future, a dark day would dawn and with it would come the end of their existence, all at the hands of one of their own. The one he had met tonight was the child of the prophecy. She was going to destroy their kind.

Kalinor walked towards the door and stopped with his hand on the handle.

“For now, this goes no further than the elders. As an envoy, I will visit the house of Caelestis. You will be there at my side to recount what you witnessed tonight and we will see what they have been hiding from us.” Kalinor looked back at him and gave him a grim smile. “Then you will have the proud honour of destroying the abomination.”

Valentine's stomach dropped when he heard those words. They had been spoken with a smile that said what a true honour it

would be to be known as the vampire who had stopped the prophecy from coming true. He stared at the door his lord had walked out of and felt empty inside.

He would be responsible for destroying the abomination?

What honour was there in murdering her? He couldn't see any, not like his lord could.

He shuddered inwardly at the thought of killing her.

He didn't want to be the one responsible for her death, didn't want to take eternity away from her. There was nothing honourable about what he was being asked to do.

He could hear Kalinor shouting commands to the house elders when he walked back into the main reception room and stared blankly at the floor.

He should have listened to her blood. He shouldn't have tried to ignore the vision it had given him. Raising his head, he spotted the blond mess of hair that belonged to Cornelius through the heads of the elders and headed directly for him.

He caught him by the arm and started up the stairs with him. "Come with me. I need your assistance."

* * * *

Prophecy was soaked to the skin by the time she had made it over the high wall surrounding the grounds and back to the house. Scaling the drainpipe again, she pushed the sash window up and slipped back into her room. She clawed her wet hair out of her face, closed the window as quietly as possible and then let out a sigh of relief.

She was so stupid.

She should have listened to her mother when she'd told her that she wasn't strong enough to hunt. The other vampire had been so much more powerful than her. She hadn't been able to stop him from biting her and she didn't know what to make of his

reaction. At the time, she'd just seen it as an opportunity to escape, but as she'd made her way home, she'd begun to think about it. He'd been stunned by what he'd seen, and she couldn't fathom why.

It wasn't as if she'd led a long or interesting life. For over twenty years she'd been trapped in this house. What was interesting about that?

At least she was back safe now, and no one had to know that she had been gone. She would get changed, dry her hair off and then go down to see her mother. No one had to know.

She froze when she heard a noise in the darkness and realised that she wasn't as alone as she'd first thought.

"Brother," she greeted him coldly when he stepped out of the shadows by the door and moved towards her.

Turning away from him, she carefully covered the marks on her neck and stared out of the window, waiting for him to speak.

"Prophecy," Arkalus said softly and came to stand behind her. He moved to touch her shoulder but she stepped forwards and evaded his fingers. She saw his hand drop to his side out of the corner of her eye and wondered how long he'd been waiting for her to return. She'd been gone for hours. "Where have you been?"

She bit her tongue and continued to stare out of the window.

She could feel his eyes as they raked over her wet hair down to the smooth skin of her exposed shoulders.

"One day, you won't be able to turn me away so easily."

She frowned at his words, a thinly veiled threat that he emphasised by brushing his fingers lightly over her shoulder. Her jaw set tight and she turned her head away from him, disgusted by his attentions and wanting nothing more than to be alone.

Unable to hold her feelings inside, she found her mouth moving before she could stop it. “You’ll be waiting a long time.”

Her words had no impact. It was as though she’d never spoken them. His fingers moved to play with her hair, his tone becoming so intimate a whisper that it made her stomach squirm.

“What makes you think I won’t tell mother about your disappearance tonight?” He leaned in a little closer to her and her whole body tensed.

She tried to make light of it, hoping that he’d leave her alone and find someone else to bestow his attentions upon. “If you did that, mother would want to know why you didn’t tell her earlier... why wait so long? You’d be in as much trouble as me.”

He seemingly ignored her comment and stroked his fingers gently over her shoulder. She shuddered when he pressed a light kiss to it, the tendrils of his long brown hair grazing her skin. It brought the stranger back into her head. She remembered the way his lips had grazed her neck. An echo of the feelings he’d ignited then danced through her.

“You won’t be able to turn me away forever. I’m a patient man...” Arkalus whispered it into her ear. She leaned away from him, trying to escape his touch. “As soon as mother passes the house to me, I’ll take you as my mate and you won’t be able to stop me.”

She closed her eyes when the air shifted around her and then the door slammed. She let out the breath she’d been holding and slumped into her chair, thinking about what he’d said.

It was no secret that he wanted her as his own. The whole house knew. He’d been courting her for as long as she could remember, but she had never once shown any interest in him. Recently he’d taken to threatening her, and the more he did the more she wanted to lash out at him. She wished he would go back to how he used to be, acting like a brother to her rather than attempting to be a lover. She wished her continual rebuffs would show him that she didn’t want anything to do with him in that way, but they only seemed to drive him on.

So long as their mother, Iona, was walking the earth there was nothing he could do without her consent, but Prophecy knew that one day she would be gone and then it would be her duty to do as the head of the household commanded.

The idea of being Arkalus' bride made her sick to her stomach, but there would be nothing she could do to stop him if Iona was out of the equation.

Something told Prophecy that regardless of what he'd said, Arkalus was growing ever more impatient. If she didn't agree to his terms soon then there was a chance that he would take the death of Iona into his own hands in order to ensure that she was his.

Changing out of her wet clothes, she slipped into a long black satin dress and lay down on her bed. She closed her eyes and pushed away from the thought of being claimed by Arkalus, and returned to her previous ones.

Who was the vampire she'd met tonight? Was he one of the Aureora responsible for the death of one of her house or was he something else? He'd been alone, just like she had, not hunting with the pack like most vampires did. The way he'd looked at her after tasting her blood seemed like an image frozen in her mind. It haunted her.

He'd looked stunned, shocked by the visions he'd received from her blood, and it made her shudder to think of what he'd seen to make him look like that.

She'd suspected for some time now that she wasn't like the other vampires of her house. They all spoke about her behind her back. Serenity had told her that much. Prophecy had caught fearful looks in their eyes sometimes and now a vampire from the other house was looking at her in exactly the same way.

Curling up on the bed, she emptied her mind of all thoughts until there was only him.

His dark hair, his green eyes, and the way he looked at her as though he could see straight through her, down into her heart.

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There was something about him that she couldn't quite put her finger on, but one thing she knew she could be sure of.

This wouldn't be the last time she saw him.

Chapter Three

Valentine glanced across at Kalinor as they turned down the long cobbled avenue that led to the Caelestis mansion. His lord had insisted they walked from this point, leaving the cars behind in the street. It was a show of force. Driving right to the gates would have stolen any chance of scaring the Caelestis guards. By walking, they had given the guards time to see their approach and start to panic.

Valentine tried to ignore the feeling of apprehension that filled him, threatening to consume him when he looked at the high wall to his left. He could almost feel her on the other side, could almost picture her face when the time came to do the dreadful deed that he was being brought here for. His lord wouldn't need him by his side if he were coming to merely discuss the matter of a Caelestis being the child of the prophecy. Kalinor could have easily laid down the accusation at their master's feet and got the answers that he wanted. There was only one reason for bringing himself along.

Kalinor wanted him to murder her tonight.

Valentine's stomach turned when he looked up to see one of the wings of the dark grey mansion towering above him. The sight of it filled him with cold dread. He couldn't believe what he was going to do.

His eyes scanned along the windows and he wondered if any of them were hers. Did she have any idea what was coming to visit her house tonight? Did she know what cruel fate awaited her?

He dropped back from the group, letting the six guardsmen pass him while he stared up at one window.

He could feel her.

His eyelids became heavy as her blood called to him, making his senses drowsy as the scent of it enveloped him.

“Valentine?”

His eyes shot open when he heard his lord's voice and he found the whole group had stopped to look at him. He shook his head to clear it of her and focused on Kalinor.

“Is something wrong?” Kalinor gave Valentine a questioning look that made him feel as though his lord could see right through his calm façade to the turbulent emotions hidden underneath.

“I...” Valentine stumbled on the words. His eyes were drawn back to the mansion and the window but he forced them to the opposite side of the street where dense trees and bushes covered a slope. “I thought I sensed something.”

He could see that Kalinor was waiting for more explanation.

“I wish...grant me leave to see what it was that I felt, to ensure your safety. It is possible the hunter may have tracked us.” He held his lord's gaze and stood in silence, waiting to see if he was going to be allowed to leave. He was pushing his luck. In all his life as a hunter, he had never appeared so shaken to his lord as he had done tonight, and now he was bowing out of an important mission, one that his lord had placed great honour in him receiving.

Valentine's eyes desired to roam back to the window. His senses begged him to reach out to her once more and feel her where she waited for him.

Waited for him?

He resisted the temptation to shake his head to clear it of such an idea.

It was just her blood calling him. He had been foolish to drink from her. She had strong blood, more powerful than he'd ever tasted, and it seemed to have a hold over him still. Even his sire's

blood hadn't kept him under its thrall for so long. His sire's blood had never shown him things like hers.

"Go, but return to the mansion before dawn. We will bring the child of the prophecy there and deal with her." Kalinor's voice roused him from his thoughts and he nodded in acceptance of the command.

Valentine watched his lord walking up the road to the mansion gates. When the group reached them, he looked up at the wall to his left.

"I must be insane. It's the only answer."

He crouched low and jumped with ease to the top of the fifteen-foot wall and then slipped down into the darkness on the other side before any of the Caelestis guards could see him. He waited in the shadows as he pricked his head up, listening to the distant conversation between his family and hers. When an argument broke out, he ran silently across the damp grass to the wall of the mansion, using the inevitable scuffle as cover. He pressed his back flush against the wall and peered around it, watching his lord and the guardsmen as they walked the gravel path that led to the mansion.

He didn't have much time.

Turning away, he slipped from shadow to shadow, moving towards the rear of the house. He scanned his surroundings as he approached the servant entrance of the old building and then peered inside to make sure he wasn't going to alert anyone to his presence. When he didn't pick up anything on his senses, he stepped inside. He closed his eyes and sniffed, trying to catch a sign of her in the scent laden air.

His eyes moved to rest on a small stone spiral staircase that was heading upwards. The room he'd seen was on the second floor. Kalinor would draw the attention of the whole house when he asked for an audience with their master and if luck were with him tonight then the female vampire would remain safely in her room.

Sneaking up the stone steps, he sharpened his senses, attuning them to her blood so he could find her in amongst the other vampire signatures within the house. He paused briefly at the entrance to the first floor, reaching out with his senses to check if she was there and then moving on when he didn't find a sign of her. Rounding the top step and walking out onto the second floor, he ducked inside a dark doorway as someone crossed the end of the hall in front of him. It was a wide corridor. The dull grey stone walls made it seem cold and the large wooden doors were grand in their style. They were evenly spaced with a wide enough distance between them to tell him that the rooms on this level were vast. It was clearly the level on which the elders and those of higher standing within the family slept.

Was she of high standing?

He closed his eyes and sniffed at the air, searching for a sign of her.

When he picked up her sweet scent, he began following it. The sound of rushing feet told him that Kalinor had made it into the mansion and that he had been correct. Everyone wanted to see why his family were here.

A voice at the back of his mind reminded him that he should be there also. He should be standing at his lord's side, ready to execute any order given to him, rather than skulking through the shadows of his enemy's home searching for one of them. It was wrong of him to be here. It was wrong of him to want to assist her.

Assist her of all things.

He stopped dead and turned around to face the stairwell he'd just exited. This was wrong. His loyalty was to his family. It was his duty to do as his lord wished and kill the female in order to end the prophecy.

But he couldn't let her die. He couldn't murder her like he was being commanded to.

He'd seen in her eyes that she didn't know, couldn't know what she was a part of. Her blood had shown him things that he needed an explanation for, but he knew she wouldn't be able to give him one. She didn't know about any of it.

Turning back around, he forced himself to move forwards, continuing towards her door. He came to a halt outside one that was halfway along the corridor and looked at it. He could feel her on the other side.

Raising his hand, he closed his eyes and extended his senses past the barrier in front of him and into her room. He resisted the temptation to smile when he found her and instead lowered his hand until it came to rest on the handle. He took a deep breath.

He had to do this. He couldn't let her die. As much as it pained him to go against his family and everything he'd known all his life, he had to go through with it and obey his instincts.

He turned the handle and eased the door open.

The room smelt like her. It was dark, lit only by a weak lamp that barely illuminated the bedside table it was sitting on and made no impact on the vast room. His eyes strayed to her. She was lying on the bed, curled up and sleeping.

It wasn't too late to leave.

She stirred a little and her hair fell away from her face, revealing her neck. His eyes moved to the marks he'd placed on her not much more than two hours ago.

He had to go forwards. This was his fault and he had to be the one to rectify it. No, it was hers too. She should have remained in the mansion. He remembered her words. They didn't let her hunt. They'd kept her hidden from the world and he was the one to expose her. Either he rescued her now, or the next time he'd see her face would be when he was executing her.

Shutting the door, he took a step towards her.

But the prophecy. He'd be damning his kin, his species. He'd be damning the world.

So how come it didn't feel as though he was doing that?

He looked down at her pale face as she slumbered on, unaware of his presence and what was happening downstairs.

She didn't look dangerous but then looks could be deceiving. His eyes strayed to the marks on her neck again. Blood couldn't lie. Blood was truthful. He'd seen it with his own two eyes. He had to help her.

Kneeling beside her, he removed a slim wooden box from his coat pocket and placed it carefully down on the bedside table. He slipped the latch free and lifted the lid to reveal its contents. He ran his fingers along the three phials of clear liquid, moved over the three phials of black liquid and finally stopped on the first of them. Removing it, he took up the syringe and punctured the lid of the phial with the needle. Drawing the liquid out, he held it up to the light and told himself one more time that he could still leave and do his duty.

He looked down at the female vampire where she was still sleeping.

He couldn't let her die.

Edging closer to her, he slowly injected her in the neck. Her eyes opened briefly and then closed again as the drug began to take effect. Packing away the empty phial and syringe, he slipped the box back into his jacket and kept his senses locked on the world outside the door so no one could sneak up on him. He counted to ten in his head and then carefully lifted her left eyelid.

Nothing but black swirling liquid greeted him.

Pulling back the bed covers, he looked around the room in search of something for her to wear and grabbed the clothes that were slung over the back of a chair. They were damp. They must have been the clothes she'd been wearing when he'd met her in the cemetery. He carried them to the window and touched the

sill, smiling when he found it was damp too. Clearly she'd come back this way. Lifting the sash up, he took a deep breath of the cool night air as it filled the room. Now if anyone came in, they'd think she'd escaped again.

He threw the clothes over his arm and returned to the bed, looking down at the unconscious girl. He was going to have to do this quickly or someone was going to spot him. Gathering up the girl, he cradled her in his arms and walked to the door. He opened it a fraction and peered around it. The hallway was clear.

He slipped silently out and moved swiftly towards the staircase he'd arrived by, all the while listening for signs of anyone moving on this floor. He adjusted the girl in his arms as he began down the narrow stairwell and paused briefly at the entrance to the first floor. There was no sign of anyone in this section of the house. Kalinor must have drawn the attention of every member of the household except sleeping beauty.

He looked down at her. Her head was resting against his arm, her face soft and peaceful.

Sleeping beauty?

She was beautiful he supposed, and she was asleep, but it wasn't like him to think such things, especially about a vampire from one of the other bloodlines. The last time he'd thought a vampire beautiful was when he'd met the woman that had become his sire, but then he hadn't known what she was, or that she was going to give him such a dark gift. She was gone now though, banished from their family for loving a Vehemens. It suited her somehow, to love one from the most violent bloodline. She had always been dark and deadly. A part of him wished that she'd been caught and brought up in front of the Law Keepers for committing such a sin as dissolving the bloodlines.

He stared at the face of the girl he was holding. Did this girl match her bloodline's namesake? She was beautiful, but was she heavenly? Surely a creature with such a name could not destroy the world. She could destroy the darkness that was vampires though. A heavenly creature sent to kill those of Hell.

Rousing himself from his thoughts, he walked down the stairs to the ground floor. When he started towards the door, another one at the far end opened and he ducked back into the dark stairwell. He closed his eyes and listened. There were two of them. Females. They were talking about his family. It didn't bother him that they were abusing his bloodline. It was expected from those of Caelestis, and it wasn't as though the Aureora spoke highly of them in return.

He could remember a time of peace between the houses, back when the truce had still been fresh, barely three centuries old. Now things were beginning to deteriorate again, and it would take a miracle to restore the harmony they had enjoyed for over four hundred years. It was the end of peace between Aureora and Caelestis.

The girl in his arms was going to see to that.

As the voices trailed off and the footsteps drifted into the distance, he made for the door. He struggled to get it open without dropping the girl and then eased it shut behind him.

The darkness of the garden and the sweetness of the night air made him feel as though he'd gained freedom from an eternity of Hell rather than thrown himself into it. He was going to pay dearly if his family discovered what he'd done and he would have precious little time to complete his plan before they did. Kalinor had ordered him to be home by dawn, but he wouldn't really expect him back tomorrow, or the next day. It was usual for him to be gone for more than a day, but if he were gone for more than three whole nights without leave to be absent that long, it would raise suspicion.

Running across the damp grass, he jumped the wall and landed with cat-like grace on the wet cobblestones on the other side. He looked down at the puddle in front of him which reflected nothing but cloud strewn sky and then ran towards the town.

He kept to the shadows as he made his way to a warehouse by the river. Pushing the heavy doors open, he stepped inside and carried the girl into a small room at the rear of the empty building.

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He placed her down gently along with her clothes and checked her eyes again. Still black.

It took a lot to knock out a vampire, and it had been a long time since he'd had to resort to such things, but he was glad that the toxin still worked. She would wake naturally if he left her for a day, her blood would quickly eradicate the poison, but he needed her awake now.

Removing the wooden box from his coat pocket, he took out one of the phials of clear liquid and the syringe. He filled it slowly and then bent over the girl and injected her.

He smoothed the hair from her face and then packed the syringe away and distanced himself from her. Watching her stir, he waited in silence for her to wake.

Chapter Four

Prophecy's head throbbed. It felt heavy and dull, and it spun when she tried to open her eyes. The world seemed dark, as though she was looking at it through a black film. She pressed one hand to her head and the other to the floor to support herself as she tried to sit up. She tensed when she felt the cold stone underneath her fingertips. Her senses immediately sharpened to a pinpoint and she realised that she wasn't in her bedroom any more, and she wasn't alone.

She knew that scent.

She forced her head to clear while her senses screamed of the danger she was in. Her eyes sought him out and she backed away when she found he was standing not ten foot from her. He was watching her with the same critical look he'd had when they'd first met.

Her eyes darted about the room, searching for an avenue of escape, and then she closed them as her head ached painfully.

"It will wear off soon."

The tone of his voice made her start. She hadn't expected it to be so calm and gentle. There was a hint of something in it that made her relax, something that sounded a lot like concern.

She shook her head, trying to make it clear now. Whatever he'd given her had been powerful. She could still feel her blood trying to expunge it. Looking back at him, she wondered what he wanted with her. Hadn't it been enough that his reaction to her blood had given her more questions than she could come up with answers for? Now he had abducted her and drugged her. What did he want with her? Was it something that he'd seen in her blood? He must have come to her house to kidnap her. He was either incredibly brave to enter the house of his enemy alone or incredibly stupid.

Her headache worsened and she cast him an angry look.

She couldn't even tell where they were. It was a warehouse, but all warehouses looked very much the same didn't they? How long had she been asleep? She'd read of poisons strong enough to knock out various demons and some of them could keep the victim unconscious up to three days.

"Feeling better?"

She didn't answer his question. She just stared at him and curled up, holding her knees tightly. She finally realised that he was standing between her and the only exit. She hadn't been strong enough to fight him earlier. Now she had been drugged and didn't have full command of her senses. All she could do was wait and see if an opportunity presented itself. Hopefully he'd reveal why he'd abducted her too, and what he'd seen in her blood that had startled him so much.

He took a step towards her.

"Do you have a name?"

She glared at him. He should be the one answering her questions, not the other way around. Biting her tongue, she resisted the desire to say something. He'd slip up and then she could escape. How the hell had he made it in and out of her house? She wanted to ask him, wanted to hear his explanation. There were guardsmen on the gates and stationed around the grounds, and there were nearly one hundred members of her family within the mansion walls at all times. It was impossible that he'd managed to find her and then take her without someone seeing him. Then again, she'd escaped easily in order to hunt.

"Who is your mother?"

Her frown intensified and her gaze dropped to rest on the ground.

"My mother is Iona, leader of my bloodline," she said without looking at him.

“No. I meant your real mother,” he said and she raised her eyes to meet his.

She knew she looked confused; she couldn't help it. What was he talking about? Iona was her mother. He smiled at her, or at least she thought it was a smile. The corners of his mouth barely moved, but his look softened. She felt as though he was mocking her, treating her as if she was a child like the rest of her family did.

“Do not be frightened.”

She got to her feet, pushing her fear down inside of her and keeping her expression empty as she glared at him. She wasn't frightened. She'd never be frightened of one of his bloodline. But his questions, they seemed to burn in her mind, making it spin and ache while she searched for answers to them. Who was her mother? It was Iona. She was the Chosen Daughter of her household, sister to Arkalus, the Chosen Son of Caelestis. But this vampire of Aureora had said she wasn't. He'd said he wanted to know who her real mother was. Real mother?

Her brows furrowed as she struggled to remember something. It seemed just out of reach, too far away for her to grab hold of and bring into focus. Her real mother? Who was she? A blurred image flickered in front of her eyes and then slipped away before she could make sense of it.

“I want to go home now,” she said in a pleading tone, her eyes meeting his again. He looked at her as though she was insane for asking.

“There is no going home.” He took another step towards her. “You are not safe there any more.”

“I'm safe in my household. It's here I'm not safe.” She moved backwards, trying to maintain the distance between them. It hadn't worked before, and it wasn't going to work now. Reaching out behind her, she silently cursed when her hands met the cold walls of the room.

He sighed.

It made her look at him. When he made no move to come closer, she couldn't stop her eyes from roaming over his face. The lights overhead made him sickly pale, even paler than he should have been. His eyes were still as green as she remembered them. They were clear and rich, sparkling with intelligence as he looked at her. His black hair was tousled and spiked, neater now than it had been when they'd first met and longer than she recalled. He had fine brows, and a slim nose that made him look regal. Her eyes dropped to his clothing. They were elegant. He wore a delicately embroidered deep red jacket that extended to his knees. The buttons were shiny gold, as fine as the material they were sewn on to. She skimmed over his tight black trousers to the highly polished black boots he wore.

He looked like a guard, but she got the impression that he was more than that. The status of guard seemed too lowly and common for him. He was something else. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing as he questioned her, keeping his voice gentle and soothing, and ensuring he kept enough distance to put her at ease. He had entered her home and stolen her, clearly without raising the alarm since he didn't seem in a hurry or at all flustered by how long things were taking.

There was something about the way he held himself that confirmed he couldn't be a guard. Guards of all the pure bloodlines were proud creatures, but this man's poise went beyond pride. His head was held high, his eyes betraying how sure of himself he was. He wasn't slouching and there was an air of wisdom about him. She got the feeling that he could handle any situation with ease, no matter how dangerous it was. He was older than her, his eyes told her that, but she couldn't tell how old.

"Your family had reasons for not letting you out. You disobeyed them, and now you are not safe anywhere."

The sound of his voice snapped her out of her thoughts. The strange sense of calm her perusal of him had given her vanished and fear crept in again. She looked into his eyes to see if what he was saying was true. How was she supposed to trust him? He'd

kidnapped her. For all she knew this could be a ruse to get her to do something for him, to make her lose faith in her family.

She backed against the wall as he advanced on her, his movements slow and steady as he closed the gap between them. Her time was up. She could see in his eyes that he was tired of taking things slowly.

She closed her eyes instinctively when he came to a halt in front of her and drew her hair away from her neck. He leaned towards the place where he'd marked her and a low purr rumbled through his chest.

"Who is your sire? If you do not have a mother," he whispered the words into her ear.

Her sire?

She struggled again, a frown flickering on her brow. She searched her memories for the slightest clue as to the answer to his question.

"It is Iona," she answered with all the confidence she could find in her now trembling body.

He pulled back and looked at her, shaking his head as he did so. "You have no marks, but mine."

Her hand automatically moved to her neck. It was true. She had no other marks on her neck. She'd never realised it until the day that her maid, Serenity, had told her, and since that day, she'd been thankful that she didn't have a reflection so she didn't have to be faced with it. The questions that had arisen in her mind still plagued her. She'd asked herself countless times how it was possible that she could have a sire and no marks. There was no other way of creating a vampire that she knew of. She'd scoured the library archives over and over again, searching for a book that would give her the answer. There had to be another way. She was a vampire after all.

"I could tell you."

His silken voice aroused her interest and she almost nodded. Could he really tell her? Was this another trick? How could he tell her how she came about, how she became a vampire?

His hands grasped hold of her upper arms and panic rose up inside her when he neared her neck. She tensed and screwed her eyes shut when his teeth penetrated her throat in the same place he'd bitten her before. She wriggled against him, trying to get her arms free so she could push him away, but he only held her tighter.

Valentine frowned and bit down harder on her neck, drawing her blood into his mouth and bracing himself while he waited for the images to hit him.

Nothing.

His teeth retracted.

It wasn't possible that she had the strength to block her memories from him. He'd easily seen the visions she held in her blood when he'd bitten her before. She hadn't put up a fight. How had she blocked him this time?

He moved back a fraction to look at her and didn't have time to react when her feet came up. They pressed hard into his stomach and propelled him backwards through the air. His breath was knocked from him as he slammed into the far wall and dropped to his knees, his teeth gritted.

When his body finally shut down the pain, he raised his eyes to look at her.

She was gone.

He hurried to his feet and swung around to face the now open door.

Not pausing to think, he began after her. He couldn't let her reach her family's mansion. If she made it there, then they'd both be dead. His family wouldn't want to hear any of the excuses that he could think of. Kalinor wouldn't believe him if he said that she had

been the danger he'd sensed. He would only see that he had abducted the child of the prophecy. When she told the two families of the questions he'd asked, he would be condemned to death.

They'd both die.

But it couldn't happen could it? Not if the things her blood had shown him were true.

He took a deep breath of fresh air as his feet hit the road outside the warehouse. She wasn't far ahead of him and he knew exactly which direction she was going to head in.

Running after her through the dark deserted streets, he kept his senses fixed on her and ducked down a side road. If he were quick enough, he would be able to cut her off before she made it half the distance to her house. He ducked down another alley and smiled when he came back out onto the road she was running down.

She ground to a halt the moment she saw him, her expression hardening as she realised he was again blocking her path.

She kept still, obviously waiting for him to make a move.

Relaxing, he straightened up and raked his eyes over her. She was fast, and strong. He'd not met a female as strong as her before. The way she'd thrown him across the room was impressive. She had power too, enough to stop him from seeing things in her blood. He wondered what else she was hiding from him.

He smiled inside when she continued to stand before him in a fighting stance, her fists clenched while she stood with one foot in front of the other in the weakly lit street. He listened to the sound of her heavy breathing as it cut through the silence. It was getting late. The sun would be rising soon. He was running out of time to convince her that everything she had thought was safe, was gone, replaced with a death sentence.

She frowned at him, clearly wondering why he wasn't making a move. He could almost see the question flickering in her dark eyes. His gaze wandered downwards. The long black nightdress she wore clung to her body, not hiding anything from the imagination. Her feet were bare. He gave a thought to the clothes that were still at the warehouse with the rest of his things. He should have realised that she wasn't going to make any of this easy. Not that it was easy. Going against his family was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, but his instincts had told him it was the right thing.

And blood never lies.

He raised his eyes back to her face. She cleared her hair away from her eyes, pushing it back over her shoulders and revealing herself fully to him. She still looked heavenly.

"Show me your true face." The words left his lips before he even had time to consider what he was asking or why he wanted to see it.

He was surprised when she did as he'd asked. The bones of her face shifted smoothly, her teeth elongating and sharpening, and her eyes changing to emerald green. She was a Caelestis then. No doubt about that.

She hissed and flexed her fingers while her claws extended.

He didn't bother changing. He had already satisfied her curiosity about the real him back at the cemetery. There was no need to reveal his demon face again. He stared at her. She moved her weight from one foot to the other, waiting for him to make a move.

When he didn't, she broke the silence.

She slid gracefully out of her vampire guise and raised her chin. "Who do you think I am?"

He could hear the nerves in her voice. It trembled. If she'd had a heartbeat, it would have been rocketing, sending his every instinct into overdrive and making desire scream through him.

The way she was reacting to him made him feel a ghost of that, only a hair's breadth away from what he would have felt had she been human. He wanted to push her, wanted to make her frightened so he could feed off the feeling of power it gave him, but it would get him nowhere and time was running out.

"Why did you take me from my family? I know you're not one of them. I know you have a reason for kidnapping me and I want to know what it is." She took a step towards him.

She had nerve. She may have some power, but he could easily defeat her in a fight. She was young, inexperienced. She'd proven that earlier tonight when she'd thought she could stand her ground against him and not answer his questions.

"I have a reason, yes." He took a step towards her, showing her that her manoeuvre hadn't frightened him as she'd intended it to.

Her lips compressed and her nostrils flared as she glared at him. She was young, definitely young, and probably no older in vampire years than she looked. She pushed her hair out of her face again, flicking it over her shoulders. There was such a spark of defiance in her and he didn't know whether she really wasn't scared of him, or whether she just had great command over her body. Now that he was closer to her, she seemed calmer and more relaxed. She wasn't trembling any more. She was standing with a resolute expression on her face that said she was going to get an answer to her question. He was willing to give her one, but he knew she wouldn't like it and she wouldn't believe it.

"You are not safe with your family any more. It was my doing. I revealed your existence and now the master of my bloodline has gone to see yours. I took you because..." He struggled to against the tempest of feelings inside him and tried to form the words he wanted to say. He could see that she was waiting. She wanted to know the reason why he had taken her and he wanted to tell her, but everything inside of him revolted against saying the words. He swallowed hard, tensed his jaw and then ground them out. "I wanted to protect you."

Her eyes widened for a moment and then narrowed again.

"I don't need protection," she said in a cold, composed voice.

"I am afraid that you do. We need to find out more about you. I know a scribe in England. He's older than any vampire I have met. He will give us the answers we need. He will give you the answers you want."

She backed away a step, the frown remaining etched on her face.

"I can't go. I can't leave my family."

He knew that for a moment he'd convinced her. It gave him a sign that she was willing to be convinced, that she would go with him if he made her see that it was her only option. She wanted answers, and she knew that he could help her get them. If only he could make her see that she was no longer safe with her family.

"They are not your family, not any more."

He dodged the punch that she threw at him and then gave chase the instant he realised that she was running again. He was getting tired of this. The sun would be up soon and even if she agreed to go with him, they were going to be cutting it close to make it back to the warehouse before it broke the horizon.

He glanced up at the sky as he ran after her. It was clear with only a few patches of clouds, not enough to protect them from the harsh light of day when it came.

Bringing his eyes back down to earth, he realised that she was running faster this time, and that he was beginning to lose her. He couldn't let her make it back to the mansion. He should have told her exactly what she was letting herself in for if she went back there but he had seen in her eyes that it would have been one push too many. Telling her that she no longer had a family had upset her enough. If he told her that she would die if she went back, that he was the one who would have to kill her, he couldn't imagine how she'd take that. She'd certainly never be able to bring herself to trust him. He'd tell her when she was ready to hear it.

Turning down the street that led to her home, he redoubled his effort. She was mere feet away from him now. He could easily catch her before she made it to the gates.

He frowned when he sensed other vampires, strong vampires, and made a lunge for her. Dragging her into the bushes that lined the opposite side of the road to her mansion, he placed his hand over her mouth to silence her.

Prophecy thought about biting into his hand as it clamped down over her mouth. She dug her nails into it, trying to prise it off her, and wriggled to get free.

She stopped the instant she saw why he'd dragged her into the trees and undergrowth.

Arkalus.

And he wasn't alone.

Her hands relinquished their grip on her captor's arms and she watched the scene unfold in front of her.

Arkalus was with one of the other family, one of stature. Was this the lord of the vampire now holding her captive? He was strong, and old. She could sense the power in him when he turned to face her brother at the gates.

He signalled and several guards appeared and moved off to a distance as he waved a dismissive hand. Her eyes strayed to them. If they were the guardsmen of Aureora, then she had been right about the vampire who was holding her. He wasn't a guard. He was something above that position.

She returned her gaze to her brother and thought about that.

"Then it is settled." Arkalus smiled broadly at the lord of Aureora. "We shall join forces and hunt the abomination together."

"For the safety of our kind." The other vampire grinned back at her brother and firmly shook his hand.

“We thought we could contain her. Iona was a fool not to listen to me. She is not worthy of running this house.” Arkalus’ smile faded, leaving his expression cold.

Her stomach dropped. Abomination? Safety of our kind? Aureora and Caelestis working together? She felt lost and struggled to comprehend what they were saying. Was she the abomination they were to hunt?

The vampire who was holding her had said that he had revealed her existence to his family, and her brother was saying that they had thought they could contain her.

What was happening?

She didn’t even notice the gates closing and the other family leaving. The vampire behind her let go of her and she slumped against a tree, staring at the dirt beneath her.

They were talking about her. Her own brother wanted to hunt her down and kill her. A vampire from the house of Aureora wanted to protect her. Her head pounded as she tried to make sense of everything. Who was she? How was she a danger to their species? She was barely twenty, had never left her home before tonight.

They’d kept her hidden, just as the vampire had said. She’d broken the rules of her mother and gone out into the night, and this is what had happened.

If she went back, they were going to kill her.

She looked over at the mansion, letting her eyes take in the sight so she could always remember it and the sense of safety it had once given her, and then looked back at the man beside her.

“I’ll go with you, but I need to know some things first.”

He nodded. “I will answer all your questions as truthfully as I can but we must get to safety before the sun fully rises.”

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Her eyes moved to the lightening sky. She hadn't even realised that she was in danger. The whole night seemed like a confusing whirlwind of events that had spiralled beyond her control.

She felt lost and empty, unable to deal with the things that were happening and what she was being told. She didn't want to know everything. She looked at the man again. He was watching her, his eyes intently locked on hers. She just wanted to know enough to make her feel it was all right to go with him.

She followed his lead in silence as he stood and began walking down through the trees to the path. Giving her home one last look, she started along the street, back to the warehouse.

The words of her Arkalus and the lord of Aureora haunted her.

She was an abomination in the eyes of her kind.

She was a danger to them all.

She frowned.

Just what was she?

Chapter Five

Prophecy walked wearily into the building. She could feel the sun rising but she didn't want to sleep. She wanted to clear her head, wanted the man she was with to make all the confusion and pain go away. She believed that he had some answers, at least enough to keep her walking the path she'd now chosen. Each step that brought her farther away from her family brought her more pain. She could never return home. Arkalus and the lord of Aureora would kill her if she did. She would be brought to justice for a crime she didn't know she'd committed. If they didn't get her, she was sure that the Law Keepers would.

Her eyes moved to the man. He closed the door, shutting out the harmful rays of the sun, and then locked it.

He looked like a Law Keeper, or at least how she'd imagined they looked. They were the elite that all the guardsmen of the families aspired to be one day. She'd heard tales of them through the chronicles and through her maid, Serenity. They'd often passed sleepless days talking about the latest news within the seven pure bloodlines, and it often involved the Law Keepers. There were seven of them, one representative for each bloodline, and it was their duty to uphold the laws laid down by their ancestors. They were emotionless, unattached to their own families. To surrender your ties to your bloodline was one of the requirements if you had been chosen to succeed the Law Keeper who had previously represented your family. She wondered if he had been destined to be one. He looked as though he had the skill and the standing within his family to achieve the honoured position once the current Law Keeper was finally killed. It didn't happen often. Most of the Law Keepers were over three centuries old and had been in service for nearly one hundred years of that.

She wondered how many of her kind they had brought to justice in that time. Most sins received the same punishment.

Death.

It was what she would receive if they caught her, and she didn't even know what she'd done wrong.

Her eyes strayed back to the man again.

She realised that he would receive it too. It was a sin to conspire against your bloodline and, by helping her, he was doing just that.

"You had some questions that you needed answering?" He picked something up off the table near the wall and flicked through them. They looked like little books. They seemed familiar.

She tried to remember what they were. They were something that she'd seen on the television many times. She frowned as she struggled to put her finger on it.

Passports.

England. He'd said they were going to England to see someone he knew.

"How do you intend to get us to this friend of yours?" she said.

He didn't bother looking at her. He just threw the passport he'd been looking at over to her.

She caught it and flicked through the pages. In the back of it was a picture of a girl. Prophecy scanned over her details and then looked at the man.

"It doesn't really look like me."

He smiled that slight smile again. "It doesn't need to. It's all in how they perceive things. The closer it is to you, the easier their minds are to fool, but I am working on short notice. It was the best my associate could get."

She'd never met anyone who had the ability to alter perception before; none of the vampires that she was allowed to speak to had that skill. He walked towards her and took the passport.

“What’s your name?” She didn’t hesitate in asking him. It was something she was going to need to know if they were going to be travelling together, and focusing on the small things was helping her avoid having to think about the bigger ones, like who she was and just how she was supposed to be destroying her kind.

He placed the passport down and glanced over his shoulder at her. He seemed to wobble in her vision and her head ached. She pressed her hand to it and leaned against the table behind her for support. She shrugged off the feeling as the after-effects of the drug he’d given her.

“Valentine,” he said.

She repeated it several times over in her head. It was a nice name. It sounded as proud and noble as he looked.

“I’m Prophecy,” she said.

He turned and gave her an amused look.

“And they expected to keep you hidden?” His lips curved into the faintest of smiles and then he went back to whatever it was he was doing.

When he turned around again, he was holding a bundle of clothes. He placed them down beside her and then distanced himself again. She picked them up. They were the clothes she’d been wearing when she’d first met him.

Taking the hint, she changed into them, noting that he somehow managed to avoid looking at her the whole time she was dressing. She was surprised that he wasn’t taking advantage of the situation and looking. Every male vampire of her bloodline wouldn’t have hesitated in staring at her if she’d been getting changed in the same room as them. He was so different to them. Staring at him, she found herself wondering how old he was. Whatever time he was born in, it had obviously been one where he’d been raised to be well bred and well mannered.

Hell, she would’ve looked at him if he’d been the one changing.

She smiled to herself while she finished putting on her boots.

Somehow, getting dressed made her feel the tiniest bit better.

She hopped up onto the table and sat on the edge with her hands pressed into the tabletop.

“Just why did I have to be hidden?” she said. He stopped packing things into a bag and his look turned pensive, but he didn’t speak. “What is it I’ve done?”

“It has nothing to do with what you have done, it is what you will do.”

She gave him a confused look. “What I’ll do?”

“The prophecy?” He frowned at her and she realised that he did know things that she didn’t.

“What?”

He inclined his head a fraction and his voice filled with disbelief. “You don’t know?”

She shook her head and wondered if she really wanted to know. Did she want to know the things she was supposedly going to do? Her brother and the lord of Aureora had said she had to be hunted for the safety of their kind. Was she that much of a danger? Was she somehow going to be responsible for killing them all?

She waited in silence while he propped himself up against the table he’d been arranging things on and looked at her. She got the feeling that he was trying to figure out how to break things to her. Her stomach twisted and turned in a riot of nerves and apprehension. He was taking so long to tell her that it had to be bad. Was he trying to find a way to word it so it didn’t seem so terrible? She wished that he’d just tell her straight and tell her quickly.

“There is a prophecy. It foretells the end of our kind at the hands of one of our own. The child of the prophecy will come and on a dark day they will destroy all demons.”

His words lodged in her mind, the only sound in the ringing emptiness that had filled it on hearing them. She was going to destroy them all. Not just vampires, but all demons. What kind of terrible power did she have? She cast her eyes downwards and tried to make sense of it all. Her head swam again and she closed her eyes, trying to stop herself from feeling as though she was swaying rather than sitting still. Her hand moved to her stomach as it rumbled and ached.

Opening her eyes, she stared blankly at the dusty concrete floor.

She was going to be the end of all demons.

“If that’s true...you should have left me to die.” Her voice was a broken whisper as it all began to sink in, filling her with a sense of dread about what her future held. What reason could she have for doing something so terrible, so horrifying? There must have been millions of demons roaming the planet and she was going to kill them all.

She listened to him moving across the room and stared at his boots as they appeared in her view.

“I probably should have gone through with my duty and executed you,” he said and she tensed, her body going rigid with fear at those words. He was supposed to be her executioner? “But I could not sense anything bad about you, I did not see anything like that in your blood. I am uncertain as to how it happened or how it is possible for me to see what I have, but I did, and I could not ignore it.”

She slowly raised her head and met his eyes. They had a distant look in them, one that told her a lot about him. Deep inside there was a part of him that wished he had done his duty, but there had been another part of him that hadn’t been able to bring himself to go through with it. He seemed like the kind of man who valued his standing amongst his family, who awoke every night to fulfil his duty to his house to the best of his abilities. This kind of man

would see honour in dying to protect something dear to him, and it was clear that his family and his position were very close to his heart.

So what could he have possibly seen to make him change his mind, to make him go against his orders and rescue her when he should have been killing her? She couldn't imagine what it would take to turn someone like him against his own bloodline. She knew the laws, knew that he had broken at least one of them in helping her.

He was still looking at her, his eyes never having strayed from hers the whole time she was thinking. There was a hint of sadness in them, hidden just below the surface but not far enough away for her not to see it. She still couldn't get over how they almost perfectly matched the green eyes of a Caelestis vampire in its demon guise.

He moved slightly and she found the courage to ask him another question.

"What did you see?"

He looked at the wall behind her and his brows drew into a thoughtful frown. "Battles, blood, you...it was all hazy, but you seemed to be fighting to get to something or someone. There was a door. You looked as though you were fighting to save...and I...you said..."

"Valentine?" she said.

His eyes met hers. They were wide, making him look as though he'd seen a ghost rather than heard her say his name. Had he seen himself in her blood? Had she spoken to him?

He turned away, avoiding looking at her by staring at the door.

How could he have seen things in her blood that hadn't happened yet? Had it somehow show him her future? She struggled to remember anything eventful that had happened during her life as a vampire and came up with nothing. All the years she'd spent locked away in the house had seemingly been

passed in the same way. Her thoughts went back to what he'd said. It was so familiar and she realised why.

"I have dreams like that. They started recently. I dream of great battles, of demons and witches," she said and kept her eyes fixed on him. He looked over at her but didn't say anything. "Why do they call me an abomination? Is it because of these things I can see? They're not dreams are they? My blood wouldn't show you a dream."

"A vampire has never been known to have visions, but it is possible that what you are seeing is one." He moved over to the table where the passports were. His air turned awkward and she frowned as she realised he'd avoided her first question.

"Why am I an abomination?" She repeated it, letting him see that he wasn't getting away without answering it.

"I honestly do not know. Maybe because they fear you."

She supposed that they had every right to fear her if she really was the child of the prophecy. She wondered if that was why she hadn't been allowed to talk to most of the vampires in her house and why they weren't allowed to speak to her. They all probably knew who she was and what she was going to do. If they had spoken to her, they may have accidentally revealed things to her that would have raised questions in her mind. Iona, her mother, knew exactly what she was and yet she'd tried to keep her hidden. Arkalus had said that their mother had been a fool and not worthy of running the house. Something in her heart said that she wasn't the only one in grave danger now. Arkalus would use this new turn of events to attempt to overthrow their mother and take her place as master of their bloodline. She couldn't believe that everyone had known about her all this time and no one had said a word.

Not even Serenity.

How could her maid and best friend have kept so quiet about it? They had spent long sleepless days and restless nights talking about how cruel it was that she was kept shut up inside the mansion. Not once had her friend told her that there was a dark

and horrible reason she was a prisoner in her own home. If she had known that leaving the house to hunt would lead to things like this happening, then she would have remained indoors. She would never have gone against her mother.

Now, she was going to kill her family. She was going to kill Iona, and Serenity. She was going to kill every member of the pure bloodlines of Aurora, Venia, Vehemens, Validus, Tenebrae, and Nocens. She was going to kill all of the bastard bloodlines that infested the planet. She was going to kill the demons that walked in both day and night. She was going to kill everything.

Even Valentine, who had dared to rescue her from death.

She pressed her hand into her stomach as it turned over. "I don't feel so good."

"It must be overwhelming to suddenly be faced with all of this."

She barely heard what he'd said as she screwed her face up in agony and struggled against her desire to change. She looked into his eyes as the bones of her face shifted to allow her fangs to descend, and her vision and senses sharpened.

"The Hunger is not helping," he said in a matter of fact tone and placed the passports into a bag. "It will pass. It happens to us all when we have executed our first kill."

She shook her head and forced her demon guise to recede. The Hunger? She'd read about that. Her tutor, Tiberius, had taught her about the symptoms; the incredible craving for blood that it awakens inside you and the way it seems impossible to slake your thirst.

"Get some rest. We shall be safe here for now. When evening falls then we shall go to the airport."

"To England," she muttered to herself.

"To Paris." He corrected her.

"Paris?"

“We will ensure that we were not followed and then we will travel on to England.”

“Followed?” She regarded him with curiosity. “You think they’ll follow us so quickly?”

“Not them, no, but a hunter may. I was looking for him when I found you in the cemetery. I have reason to believe that he is in Prague, and he is looking for me. Most hunters are easily dispatched but this is one you should fear.”

“Are we not safe from anyone?”

“No, not any more.” He lightly touched her bare shoulder and she fought to conceal the warm shiver it sent through her. He intimated the blankets he’d laid out in one corner. “Rest. You will need your strength. The Hunger is only going to get worse.”

She did as instructed and lay down on the makeshift bed. Closing her eyes, she thought about everything, from the prophecy to the way his touch felt electric. She couldn’t sleep. She could sense him still watching her, standing sentinel beside the door and obviously not intending to sleep himself.

She was going to destroy all demons.

Her family had joined forces with their enemy to hunt her down.

She was no longer safe from anyone.

But she was now certain of something.

All that stood between her and death was the vampire who should have been her executioner.

Chapter Six

Prophecy shifted in her seat, tugging at her clothes and the belt across her waist. She struggled to breathe. Everything felt too tight, irritating. She pulled at the belt again and growled underneath her breath. She wriggled closer to Valentine, who was sitting beside the window of the plane with the blind pulled down. He gave her a dark look and she knew that he wanted her to distance herself from him.

They were near the wing of the plane and the seat nearest the aisle was empty. She wished that Valentine had the blind open so she could see the night. The closeness of the people around her was making her feel as though she was suffocating. She was barely keeping control of herself as she breathed in all their intoxicating scents. She could hear every heartbeat, could smell their blood as it coursed through their veins, could almost feel it. She dug her fingertips into the arms of her seat, gripping it tightly. She clenched her jaw and resisted the desire to shift into her vampire guise and kill every person on the plane, drinking her fill until the hunger inside of her was sated.

The blood of her first kill was nearly gone, leaving her with an intense craving for more. Valentine had already had to stop her from getting out of her seat three times. She knew he didn't trust her.

Her head came to rest against his shoulder as the plane banked and she didn't have the energy to remove it. She felt as though she wasn't going to make it through the flight let alone what the future held for her. Everything was so overwhelming and frightening. The hours she'd had to reflect on what she'd been told hadn't helped in the slightest. She still felt as though her fear and the sense of emptiness inside her were going to consume her.

She still didn't know whether she should trust him.

It felt so wrong to be next to him, to be leaving with him to some foreign land. It went against everything, against the laws that had been laid down for good reason. She shouldn't be this close to someone of another bloodline. She shouldn't feel like she could trust him.

But she was, and she did.

She leaned into him as her stomach twisted and her teeth itched, desperate to descend. He tensed and she took a deep breath, taking in the rich scent of his blood. It seemed to soothe the Hunger and take the edge off her fear, but left her with an intense desire to get closer to him.

Her fingers twitched relentlessly while she edged them up towards his collar. Her breathing became heavy. She wet her lips and stared at his throat.

"I do not recommend it. You would not like the visions it would bring."

She hastily withdrew her hand and tried to look innocent as he raised a brow at her.

Valentine looked at her. She stared back at him with wide eyes. He tried but couldn't erase the feeling of her breath against his neck or the quiet thrill that had run through him when he'd realised what she'd wanted to do. She wasn't ready for drinking vampire blood, especially if it came from one his age. Besides, he didn't want her to see the things he'd done. She'd never trust him if she saw those, and he needed her to trust him.

She curled up on the seat, her hands shaking as she tried to smooth down her trousers, seemingly trying to find something to occupy herself with. It wouldn't work. Nothing could take your mind off the Hunger, especially when you were in the grip of it as badly as she was.

He could still remember the violence of it when it had taken hold of him all those centuries ago. It had been like a fever, burning and consuming him until he felt weak and ready to give up the

fight. It had taken the blood of four to sate it. Something told him that Prophecy's Hunger would be the same.

He tensed when her head came to rest against his shoulder again and resisted his desire to push her away. Ever since they had boarded the plane, she'd been so close to him, and he couldn't stand it. It made him want to lash out at her. He wanted to tell her that she was suffocating him with the way she was clinging. He looked straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of him, ignoring her as she whimpered and gripped his arm instead of her seat.

Closing his eyes, he told himself that she was just frightened and he was the only person here for her. It was understandable that she would want the reassurance that being close to someone would give her. Not only was she in the midst of the Hunger but also this was all new to her. She had never been around so many people and it must be hard for her considering she probably wanted to tear all their throats open.

Taking a deep breath, he relaxed into his seat and let her be close to him. It was only for a short while. They were already halfway through their flight and he'd be able to have a little more freedom from her when they were on the underground heading to Gare Du Nord in Paris.

It had been hard to watch the lights of his home disappear, so hard that he'd had to close the blind. It had felt as though he was watching his life drifting into the distance rather than the city.

He turned his head away from the blind and looked at Prophecy. She was sitting with closed eyes and furrowed brows. He still couldn't believe what he'd done. Deep inside he hoped that all of this wouldn't be in vain and that his instincts were right about her. Whenever he thought about everything he was risking in order to take her to England, his stomach turned and a part of him wanted to kill her.

Her jaw tensed and she made a small noise of pain.

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He could sense how frightened she was. It wasn't just the pain of the Hunger. It was what lay ahead of her and the prophecy. It was what lay behind her.

She was leaving her life behind too, but she'd never been out in the world. It probably all seemed so overwhelming.

He sighed and resisted the temptation to clear her red hair from her face as it slipped out from behind her ear. Instead, he ran his fingers through his dark locks, loosening them.

A person stopped nearby.

He raised his eyes to find a woman smiling at him, her red lips curving perfectly into it and her hazel eyes shining. Her tight blue uniform told him she was a stewardess.

He gave her a toothy grin and then let it fade from his face as Prophecy's fingers curled up into tight fists of hurt.

"Is everything okay over here?" The stewardess gave an anxious glance to Prophecy and then looked back at him. He noted that the stewardess seemed more concerned with him than the girl beside him. "Is it her first time flying?"

He just nodded and forced another smile.

When she began to walk towards the rear of the plane, he looked over the seat behind him and followed her progress. She looked back at him, brushing the hair from her face and smiling broadly before disappearing into the area behind the curtains.

She'd be an easy kill. She was willing and she'd taste as sweet as she looked. All he had to do was accept the offer she'd been clearly giving him and walk to the rear of the plane. She was probably waiting for him. He could go back there, kill her silently, and drink enough to keep him going and give the rest to Prophecy.

What in the Devil's name was he thinking?

Killing on a plane?

Feeding Prophecy?

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. The quicker they got to England, the better off he would be. He needed to place some distance between him and the girl again. She was tainting him with her closeness, corrupting his mind and making him think about doing things that were dangerous.

He'd spent years travelling across Europe and not once had he broken the rules he'd laid down for himself. He would use the contacts he had to get blood when he needed it. He wouldn't risk people finding out about his species by killing publicly, not unless it was key to his survival.

Especially on a plane, a place where there was a one hundred percent chance of someone discovering the body before you managed to disembark.

His eyes opened as Prophecy moved in her seat again, shifting away from him. He frowned and looked at his arm where it was now void of her.

It felt odd.

He'd wanted her away but now that she was away, he almost missed the sensation of her against him.

He closed his eyes again and cursed himself.

He really needed to get to England.

* * * *

Valentine took a deep breath of the night air as he walked. He listened to the sound of his boots on the pavement and concentrated on getting to their destination. The transfer in Paris had gone smoothly. It had been a close call at Gare Du Nord to catch the train to London, but in a way he was thankful for it as it meant that he was now certain that no one had followed them. He'd stared out of the window in the train door for as long as it took to make sure of that.

Prophecy had insisted on remaining close to him the whole time. He'd got the feeling that it was more out of a need to restrain herself from killing than a need for reassurance. She hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours now. The Hunger would be pushing her into feeding and she obviously didn't trust herself. He frowned. But she trusted him to stop her? Why? Was it because he was the only person there to stop her, or had he given her reason to believe that he cared about what she did? He'd stopped her a few times on the plane but that was out of common sense. If she killed one person, she'd have to kill them all and he didn't think he could contain that kind of a situation. He wondered if she wanted to be given leave to feed or if she was waiting for him to guide her somehow. He tried to remember how it had been all those years ago when he'd been a victim of the Hunger.

Lucya had been there for him. His precious sire had guided his hand and helped him to get through the pain of the Hunger. She had taken him out to hunt, showing him how to successfully kill and feed.

Was that what Prophecy needed?

He didn't have time to teach her such things.

He looked at her where she walking beside him and silently cursed her when a part of him wanted to.

Something about her made him want to teach her, made him want to look after her and reassure her that everything was going to be all right. He cursed himself this time. Wasn't it enough that he'd risked everything in order to save her from death?

Death.

He reminded himself that there was a chance that he had condemned his entire species by helping her. He had no way of knowing for certain that she wouldn't destroy them all. At least if she did, there would be no one around to point the finger at him. He smiled slightly, amused at his thoughts, but it quickly faded. What did he do if Mathias told him that what he had seen in her blood was wrong and she really was going to kill everyone? Would he find the strength to murder her then?

He realised she'd stopped walking and turned to look at her. She was rubbing her feet. Something glinted in the light and his head inclined while he stared at it, trying to make out what it was. When she walked towards him, it became clearer.

It was a silver star dangling from a chain around her neck. He couldn't believe that he hadn't noticed it before. He looked closer. It was intricately designed. The star was made up of five diamond shapes, all locked together, and was at least an inch across. It looked old.

"Where did you get that?" he said.

She lifted it up and frowned at it. "I've always had it."

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know." She let it drop again and shrugged. "I just remember having it and I never take it off. It feels wrong if I do, like I'm naked without it. Why all the questions?"

"No reason. It just caught my eye. I had not noticed it before," he said and looked at it a moment longer before continuing along the road, heading towards the centre of the city.

It had been a long time since he'd been back to England and seen Mathias, but he was sure that he could trust him. His friend had never been one to worry about the laws that governed their species. He'd never been one to report to their lord. Mathias had always kept to himself and rarely left his home and his books.

He wondered if he would still be there after all these years. If he was, there would be questions about the things that had happened in their time apart. Sometimes he got the feeling that although Mathias was happy remaining with his books and his research, he liked to live adventures vicariously through himself. The old scribe always asked too many questions about the hunts he'd been on and whether he'd had any narrow escapes. He'd probably be thrilled that he was bringing adventure to his door.

Valentine looked up to see the building opposite him. It looked exactly as he remembered it. The imposing façade was just one

of many along the broad road. Its honey-coloured sandstone was smooth and without the fancy carvings that adorned many of the other buildings in Oxford. The small turrets at the top of the building were the only extravagance. Their roofs were covered in deep brown tiles that blended with the warm stone. His eyes strayed to the sky above him and the clouds that were beginning to gather.

Stepping up to the arched wooden door, he knocked and then took a step back. He waited to see if anyone would answer.

He glanced at Prophecy where she was looking around her, taking in the new scenery. Everything here was lighter than Prague. This city didn't have the same air of darkness as his. He'd always felt as though he was safer here than anywhere on the planet. Oxford had a low number of vampires and Mathias was the only one of them who belonged to a pure bloodline.

He knocked again and ignored the feeling of apprehension that began to settle in his stomach.

Mathias would answer. He was probably just reluctant to leave his books.

When Prophecy shifted from foot to foot and gave him a look that showed him that she was as worried as he felt, he went to knock again.

The door swung open.

Chapter Seven

Valentine smiled when the door opened to reveal a dimly lit hall and then his friend. Mathias looked exactly as he remembered, his appearance that of a slim, dark-haired librarian in his late forties hiding what he really was. He supposed that Mathias spent so much time with books that he could easily qualify as a librarian, but his friend had always preferred the label of scribe. When Prophecy shifted behind him, he looked over his shoulder at her. She was standing with him directly between herself and Mathias, and was huddled up, her arms wrapped tightly around her and her hair partly obscuring her face. She looked pale. She'd need to eat something soon or the Hunger would drive her insane.

"It's been a long time, Valentine." The well-spoken voice of Mathias roused Valentine from his perusal of her and he returned his attention to his friend.

"Too long, and unfortunately the circumstances surrounding my visit are dire to say the very least."

"You'd best come in then," Mathias said and Valentine went to follow him into the house but the old scribe paused just inside the door. He didn't look around as he spoke. "Tell her not to worry. I'm not going to hurt her."

Valentine looked back at Prophecy who had remained standing in the same spot.

"He's an Aureora." Her voice was quiet and he could hear the mistrust in it. The last thing he needed was her making a scene in front of his old friend. She should have known that Mathias would be one of his bloodline.

He walked back down the steps to her.

“It’s safe. Mathias may be my kin, but he has no interest in reporting to Kalinor.”

She looked up at him through her hair and kept her eyes fixed on his for a brief moment before moving past him towards the door.

Turning on the spot, he followed her up the steps and into the building. He looked out into the street as he closed the heavy door, checking that no one had seen them enter, and then went to find Mathias.

He didn’t need to look behind him to know that Prophecy was following. He could feel her. All he had to do was reach out with his senses the tiniest amount and she was there. He kept them locked on her as he walked, leading her deeper into the house. All of the corridors were dimly lit by low burning lamps on the walls and on tables around the rooms.

“You really should start using this modern invention called electricity,” he remarked as he found Mathias pawing over a stack of books.

Mathias removed his glasses and looked around him.

The room was lit more brightly than the others they had passed through, but the walls were so dark it appeared gloomy. There were books everywhere, stacked in haphazard piles, some of them open but most of them closed. They lined the walls, covered the tables and even took up some of the chairs.

Valentine cleared one of them off and intimated for Prophecy to sit in it. He removed the books from the other chair by the fire and carried them over to Mathias where he had remained at the table, his fingers skimming down a page of a tome that looked as old as he was.

“It hurts my eyes,” Mathias answered him and then closed the book and began searching for another.

“A thousand years and you’ve spent every one of them with your nose in a book, old man. Surely you’ve read them all by now?” He picked up the book Mathias had been reading and raised a

brow. “The lights would not hurt your eyes if you did not spend all your time in the darkness. I cannot see why you insist on wearing those glasses. You would not have a problem with reading if you changed.”

“I can’t. Emily may see.”

Valentine nearly dropped the book. “Emily?”

“My housekeeper.”

Valentine looked around at the messy room again and then back at his friend. “You have a housekeeper? I have to say she is not doing a very good job. I would find a new one.”

“And do what with Emily? She has no family to go to,” Mathias said and turned his back.

Valentine frowned as he realised why.

“She is human?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The whole world had gone insane. It wasn’t just him. “You have a human housekeeper?”

Mathias glanced at him and then went back to rearranging the books. “Don’t give me that look.”

“Get rid of her. She will find out what you are one day and then you shall have the Law Keepers coming for you. It is a sin to reveal our existence to them. You know it is.”

“Valentine, do not tell me what to do. You have come to my house with a Caelestis.”

He leaned against the table and looked at Prophecy. She was sitting in the old high backed leather armchair idly flicking through one of the books he’d cleared off the chair.

Mathias was right. He had committed a worse sin than keeping a human. At least Mathias could say that he intended to kill her or turn her. What excuse did he have if the Law Keepers found him?

“What are you doing, Valentine, aligning yourself with a Caelestis? Is this what you’ve worked your way towards all of your life?”

“Do not remind me.” He looked away from her and toyed with the corner of a book. He stared at it while he picked at the frayed edge of the thick cover. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Mathias. He didn’t want to see the look in his eyes. “I need your help.”

“With her?” Mathias said and he nodded in confirmation. “Why?”

“She is...it’s hard...I had to bring her here, you understand. There was nowhere else to take her. I knew that she would be safe here.” He continued to pick at the book, keeping his eyes downcast while he waited for the inevitable question. He told himself again that this was the right decision. Prophecy would be safest here.

“Safe from what?”

“Everyone and everything.” He raised his eyes to meet Mathias’. “She is the child of the prophecy.”

Mathias didn’t say anything. He just stared across the room at her.

Valentine waited to see what his friend’s reaction would be. Mathias was always researching one thing or another, and he loved to look into prophecies more than anything. Surely he knew something that could help. Valentine knew there had to be a reason he’d seen those things in her blood. There had to be something about the prophecy that he hadn’t been told.

“She’s young,” Mathias said. “So very small. I always thought it would be a male.”

Valentine smiled faintly.

“What is she doing?” Mathias frowned and nodded towards her.

Valentine looked across to see her sucking on the back of her hand while she read the book. He frowned too.

“She does not realise that she is doing it. She had her first kill the other night. You know...” He didn’t need to say anything more in order for Mathias to understand.

“It’s been a millennia since my Hunger, but I can’t forget it. There is fresh blood in the refrigerator. She’s welcome to it.”

Valentine looked thankful for his offer and then let his eyes stray back to Prophecy. “She wanted my blood when we were travelling here.”

“I presume you refused. She isn’t strong enough.”

“Of course I refused, but I think she’s stronger than she looks. She threw me across a room in Prague. I underestimated her.” His hand moved to his stomach and he remembered what it had felt like to be flung against the wall like a rag doll. Everything about her seemed to be strong, including her blood.

Mathias smiled broadly. “An easy mistake to make when they look so frail. Feed her. She’ll need to be strong if she’s to cope with everything that is happening. The Hunger will only make things worse.”

He gave Mathias another smile of gratitude and then walked over to Prophecy. She looked up at him as he approached, her hand leaving her mouth and her eyes wide. He extended his hand to her and intimated the door with his other one. When she placed hers into his, he tensed his jaw and steeled himself against his desire to take his away. Her fingers were soft against his palm and it felt strange to have her hand in his.

He closed his eyes and cursed himself when her hand slipped from his and she walked past him towards the door. He shouldn’t have helped her stand. He should have kept his distance and just told her where to go to get blood to feed her Hunger. Why did he feel the need to help her? Why did he want to comfort her and tell her that everything was going to be fine whenever he saw her struggling to come to terms with her new life?

Glancing across at Mathias, he found his friend was watching them, or more specifically him, with a look of curiosity. He gave Mathias a warning look and walked past him. It was bad enough that he felt like this inside without someone picking him up on it.

He found Prophecy waiting just the other side of the door in the hall. She looked lost. He realised that in more than one way she was. He'd turned her world upside down, had stolen her family from her, and the life she'd known. She had a lot to deal with and if she wanted to be close to him then he shouldn't stop her. It didn't mean anything. The things he felt were nothing. It was just remnants of her blood and a strange sense of duty to her caused by what he'd done. He felt nothing. She was a Caelestis. He was only helping her because he was responsible for her discovery. That was it. It was nothing that he felt for her. It was forbidden.

He ignored the confused look on her face when he realised that he'd been silently staring at her while lost in his thoughts. Leading her down the hall, he held the door to the kitchen open for her. He flicked the light switch and she immediately took in her surroundings. To him, it just looked like any other kitchen—empty white cupboards, white refrigerator, and dirty work surfaces.

Opening a cupboard, he shook his head when he found they weren't empty any more. Mathias had clearly been maintaining a good façade for his human housekeeper. There were all kinds of vile food piled up on the shelves, stacked as poorly as the books in the other room.

He opened the refrigerator and bypassed the various foodstuffs as he searched for the blood. He found it at the back in a steel canister. Taking it out, he unscrewed the lid and raised a brow. He'd never been one for cold blood, not unless it was absolutely necessary. He took a deep breath. Still, it was good blood.

Taking down a glass, he filled it up and almost felt like teasing Prophecy with it when she immediately reached out to him for it. She sidled up close and licked her lips, her eyes pleading with him to let her have it. She looked like a child who was waiting for her first taste of blood—eager and desperate. He handed it to her. She stared at it for a few seconds and then began to drink.

She was hungry. In under a second she'd downed the glass and was looking to him for more.

He checked the refrigerator to make sure there was more than just the canister he held and then refilled her glass.

She took a sip and then stopped, looking at him with questioning eyes.

"It's human blood."

He nodded. "Were you expecting animal blood? Mathias drains the body of every last drop so he doesn't have to go out to hunt as often. It draws less attention to him. It is a good way of working if you can stomach it being cold."

"Can't you?" she said.

He looked down at the canister. The thought of cold blood turned his stomach. "If I have to, but only when I am desperate."

"That's a no then," she said and finished off the blood. She placed the empty glass down on the work surface and licked her lips.

When she looked up at him, her eyes dropped to his neck and she frowned. She stepped towards him, her eyes remaining locked on his throat as her hand came up.

"That's some scar." She reached out and went to touch it but he evaded her fingers and moved away from her.

When he looked back at her, she was still standing with her hand raised and ready to touch him. She looked at him with eyes full of hurt.

He sighed and reminded himself of what he'd decided. If it pleased her to be close to him, then he would allow her to be. He just couldn't help reacting whenever she was near to him. He didn't want her to touch him, didn't want to feel her fingers against his skin or her breath against his neck. He clenched his jaw and then relented when he saw the confusion in her eyes. He

closed his, lowered his head and fought for control over his feelings.

He was stronger than this.

He was just helping her.

Everything else was forbidden.

He raised his head and shut down the emotions that had threatened to overwhelm him, forcing them back into their places and reinstating the sense of calm he was used to. This was just a problem to be solved. There was no attachment to her. They would discover what Mathias knew of the prophecy and then he would do exactly what he'd been planning to do.

"Feeling better?" he said.

She nodded and he realised she was still upset by what he'd done. He touched the scar on his neck. It ran from just below his right ear down to where his collarbones met. Her eyes seemed to trace the path of his fingers and he knew she still wanted to know about it.

"I am surprised it took you so long to notice it," he said and she leaned against the counter. He closed the distance between them so she could see it and raised his chin to let her get a better look. "Werewolf."

"A werewolf did this?" Her eyes were wide with fascination and he was again reminded of a child. It was hard to tell just how old she was but he was beginning to get the impression that Mathias had been right. She was young.

"It was close. He nearly took my head clean off. He caught me with one of his claws. I caught him with mine. I think we settled things at that point."

"Did you win?"

He smiled inside at the way she was staring at him. He'd never had another look at him like that. All he had done was get into a

fight with a werewolf and she made it seem as though it had been life and death, a battle for the safety of the world. It wasn't. That battle was still to come. It hadn't even been the fight of his life.

"No." He noted that she looked disappointed by his answer. "We called a truce."

"You can't draw in a fight...that's just...wrong." She wrinkled her nose up and frowned at him. "My instructor would never settle for a draw. If I didn't win, I didn't eat."

He noted what she said. Her family had obviously trained her well. She had been able to execute her first kill without supervision and had proven that she could defend herself against others. He wondered what else they had taught her.

"He had no real desire to kill me and I in turn did not really want to kill him. What were we supposed to do?" He filled the glass again and handed it to her, urging her to drink when she shook her head. She needed the blood. She might feel fine now, but it would wear off in a few hours unless she fed properly. Two glasses of blood wasn't a real feed. He'd make her finish the entire canister before he let her out of his sight. "Do you think one of us should have killed the other just because you cannot draw in a fight? Many wars have been ended by a truce. Our two houses are testament to that."

"It wasn't really a truce," she said and sipped the blood. "I read all about it in the library. Lady Caelestis and Lord Aureora joined the houses. Which means our families aren't so different really. They claimed one another and a time of peace began."

"Only now it's falling apart." He watched her closely.

She nodded. "Do you think the houses could be joined again?"

"The laws were changed because of what happened. It is now a sin to dissolve the bloodlines in that way."

She just shrugged. "What does that mean anyway, dissolving bloodlines? The elders only changed the laws because they

believed our bloodlines would go the way of the weaklings. I don't think they would. Surely blood can only get stronger when it's mated with strong blood?"

She had a point, but he wasn't one to argue against the laws. He'd spent his whole life working towards becoming the one to uphold them for his family.

"They would kill anyone who tried." He took the glass from her and filled it with the last of the blood. She took it back from him with a hard look, as though he'd said something terrible rather than just telling the truth.

"Isn't peace worth it? Our families can't war forever. We have to learn to share our city."

"Your family could leave."

She looked mortified. "Us? Is that what you think? You think that we don't belong in *your* city, that we're not good enough for it?"

"I didn't—"

"You damn well *did* mean it like that." She cut him off and slammed the glass down, spilling some of its contents onto the counter.

He held his hands up and backed away from her, letting her see that he wasn't going to argue with her about it. It had been wrong of him to say something like that. Words like that were the reason why the peace between their families was disappearing. He would have willingly apologised but she looked as though she wouldn't accept it. Instead, he looked at the curtains that were drawn across the window.

"We should get some rest. The sun has been up for nearly two hours now. We shall talk more tonight."

She nodded in agreement and walked past him. He was surprised that she hadn't wanted to continue the argument. He had seen in her eyes that she wasn't about to let what he'd said go. He was struck by something she'd said earlier.

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“Prophecy?” he said. She stopped by the door but didn’t look back at him. “Do you truly believe that peace is worth dying for? Would you face death in order to achieve it?”

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes bright as they met his. He could see her answer without her even saying it. She really was stronger than she looked.

She smiled and walked out of the door.

“I’d die if it meant peace between our families.”

He looked at the empty doorway and then at the glass of blood she’d spilt. Dipping his finger into it, he brought it to his lips and sucked it clean, frowning as all he could think was that it didn’t taste as sweet as her blood had.

His eyes returned to the empty doorway and he repeated her words in his head.

She really was strong.

But was she as strong as she needed to be?

Chapter Eight

Prophecy snuck quietly down the stairs in the dark hall. She could hear Valentine talking to Mathias in the book-filled room they'd been in last night. She kept close to the place where each step met the wall so the wooden boards wouldn't creak under the pressure of her footsteps. She didn't want them to hear her before she found out what they were saying to each other.

She took each step slowly, biting her lip as she leaned her back into the wall and eased her way down to the bottom of the stairs.

This morning, Mathias had led her to a large room. He had promised her that they would look into the prophecy when night had fallen, and that Valentine knew his way around the house and would find his own way to a room to sleep in. She'd told him she didn't care what Valentine did. She'd gone into the room, thanked him and then shut the door and locked it.

She hadn't slept.

She'd lain on the bed all day staring at the ceiling and thinking about everything that had happened. She felt marginally better now and ready to deal with whatever Mathias was going to tell her.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she crept across the wooden floorboards to the opposite side of the hall. She pressed her back against the wall and edged towards the open door.

She didn't risk a peek around the door to see where they were in the room. She just stared at the wall opposite her, her eyes idly studying the tattered fabric wallpaper while she listened.

They widened when she heard Valentine's now familiar voice.

"I cannot do this." He literally growled the words and she wondered what expression he was wearing. He sounded angry.

She hadn't seen him angry. He'd frowned a few times, but it hadn't been anger in his eyes. "I am going insane, Mathias."

"You chose this path, now you must deal with the consequences." Mathias' voice was soothing and she got the impression he was doing his best to console Valentine.

What was wrong?

"But..." Valentine trailed off, the frustration evident in his voice. She heard the sound of glass hitting glass and wondered if someone was drinking, and what they were drinking. Was it alcohol? Arkalus drank. He drank so much that she had to lock her door and ask the guardsmen to stand sentinel outside it for fear of him coming to her. "She clings."

She clenched her fists when she realised that they were talking about her and bit her tongue to stop herself from saying something.

"I cannot bear it. I cannot. I cannot stand it when she touches me. I want to push her away. I hate it."

"She's just young and scared. From what you've told me, the whole world is new to her. Think about how she feels."

"I know." There was a note of resignation in Valentine's voice and she frowned. "This is my fault. I am the reason this has happened to her. I just...I need some space. I need to kill something."

There was a sound of chair legs scraping against the floor. She edged a little further away from the door and held her breath.

"Nearly three hundred years old and still acting like a youngling." Mathias' words made her smile. She could almost picture how sour Valentine would look on hearing them. "Killing won't solve anything and in your current mood, you're likely to kill openly. If someone saw you—."

"I would settle for some air," Valentine interjected.

"It sounds to me like you are scared."

She heard the creak of old leather as someone sat down and she pictured them sitting opposite each other in the two armchairs by the fire.

“I have never seen you like this,” Mathias said with a note of concern in his voice.

“What am I to do?” Valentine sounded desperate and she frowned.

She turned so she was facing the wall and pressed her palms against it. Reaching out with her senses, she tried to find Valentine in the room. She’d never realised that she was affecting him so much, that he didn’t like it when she was near him. He sounded as confused and lost as she felt. The calm façade he wore had hid his feelings well, but she could hear them clearly in his voice now that she knew they were there.

Letting her forehead rest against the wall, she closed her eyes and kept her senses fixed on him. She wasn’t the only one suffering. He had given up everything and was suffering too. It was so easy to forget that. When she heard someone sigh so heavily that it practically spoke words of bewilderment she suddenly felt that what she was doing was wrong. She was spying on him. Why?

She had wanted them to be talking about her. She’d wanted to hear what it was they were saying. Only she hadn’t been ready for the truth of it. Valentine didn’t want to be around her. He was helping her because he felt he had a duty to do so, not because he wanted to. He was just alleviating his conscience.

But she had seen things in his eyes and his actions that said it wasn’t just about duty. There had to be a part of him that wanted to help her or he wouldn’t have risked everything to save her from death.

When they began to speak again, she blocked out the sound of it, not wanting to hear any more. It had been wrong of her to listen in on their private conversation. She snuck back to the stairs and pressed her foot down hard on the bottom step, making it creak.

The room went quiet.

She waited a few seconds and then walked to the door. She couldn't get past what Valentine had said. She hoped that Mathias was right and that it was fear talking.

Walking into the room, she didn't know how to act when they both looked at her. They had been sitting by the fireplace, but as she entered, Mathias stood and placed a hand on Valentine's shoulder before walking over to his books.

She let her eyes meet Valentine's. He stood and gave her an indefinable look before turning to face the fire.

"Valentine...this isn't the time," Mathias said.

She didn't take her eyes off Valentine. He growled and dug his fingertips into the mantelpiece, his head hung so she couldn't see it. He didn't look at her when he pushed off and walked over to the books that littered the table by Mathias.

Her eyes lowered to the small table beside one of the armchairs and she saw a half full decanter of golden liquid and a used glass. He had been drinking.

"Come here, child." Mathias beckoned her and she resisted telling him not to call her a child. She supposed in his eyes she was. She was so used to having a high standing amongst vampires and hadn't realised that another bloodline wouldn't treat her according to her rank. Both Valentine and Mathias treated her like a child.

Her gaze strayed to Valentine. He was leafing through a book and looked as though he was still struggling with whatever was plaguing him. She kept her distance, not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable, and looked down at the stack of books nearest her.

"Let me get a look at you," Mathias said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Valentine raise his head.

She held her head high, letting the scribe look her over and feeling as though she had gone from being treated as though she was a child to a prized thoroughbred as he prodded and poked her. She frowned into his dark eyes and mused that he wasn't much taller than her and he was almost as slim. She could probably take him in a fight. She growled when he grabbed hold of her wrists, turning her hands over and gazing at her palms.

"Ouch," she said when he caught hold of her jaw and forced her to face Valentine.

Her eyes met Valentine's green ones.

"Mathias," Valentine said in a venomous tone and a dark look knitted his brows. "Let her go."

She felt fingers run over the marks on her neck and saw Valentine's expression darken.

"I said let her go." He started to move around the table but stopped when Mathias released her.

"No other marks or signs of a sire?" Mathias didn't look at her, he was holding Valentine's gaze, giving him a look that made it clear that he wasn't impressed by the fact that Valentine had commanded him to let her go.

She placed her hand over the marks on her neck and took a step backwards.

"None," Valentine said and visibly relaxed. "Just as I told you before."

She wondered how long they'd been talking before she'd listened in on them.

"You were right not to kill her." Mathias looked at her as he spoke to Valentine. "There is more to the prophecy than they tell the children."

"There is?" Valentine gave him a look of disbelief.

“The elders made sure that only a chosen few were told the true meaning of the prophecy. The rest have been told that the vampire will destroy the world. The prophecy hasn’t been translated in over a thousand years and now even those manuscripts are lost. They split the original scroll into two and hid each part in a place deemed safe.”

“Why?” She couldn’t help asking the question. The elders had to have had a reason for not wanting everyone to know the real prophecy.

“I’m not certain. It is possible that one of the elders would know. When I was a youngling, they altered the status of the prophecy to that of a sacred text. It is now illegal to translate it, which raises suspicion in my mind that there is vital information contained within it that the elders wished to keep hidden. I have never seen it myself, but I will translate it if you can bring it to me. I do not fear the Law Keepers. To understand the true extent of the prophecy you’re involved in, we need to study the scroll in its entirety,” Mathias said and her eyes dropped to rest on the books before coming up to meet Valentine’s.

“You said that I would destroy all demons, but that you didn’t believe it because of the vision you saw from my blood.”

He nodded.

She looked at Mathias. “What do you remember of the prophecy? What were you told?”

“We will know the child of the prophecy because they were born during a great eclipse. In their lifetime, another will come, but this one will signal the end. Nine of the translators believed that the child of the prophecy would damn our kind, but one amongst them believed differently. She believed that the child would be a saviour. Not just of demons, but of the world.”

Prophecy didn’t know what to say. She was either supposed to kill all demons or save the world. How was she meant to react to that? When Valentine had told her that she would kill everything, she’d wished that he’d killed her. She couldn’t bear the thought that she would do such a thing and she’d felt powerless to stop it.

Now Mathias was telling her that there was a chance that she was supposed to save everyone, but it was only one person in ten that had thought so. It was all too much. How could she save the world? In her eyes, it seemed easier to destroy it. To save it seemed impossible.

She looked at Valentine when he moved towards her and then she turned away from him, heading for the door. She glanced back at him when she reached it and found he was standing where she had been. She felt even more confused when she noticed he looked concerned.

“I’m just...I need some air,” she said and walked out of the room.

She went through the house, letting her instincts guide her while she remained heavy in thought. Her head ached as she tried to make sense of everything. When she’d come downstairs, she’d thought that she was ready to deal with the things that Mathias would have to tell her, but obviously she wasn’t.

A weight pressed down on her chest as she thought about what he’d said.

Save the world.

Not just her species, or demonkind, but the world and everything in it.

Pushing a pair of doors open, she felt relieved when the cool night air washed over her, enveloping her like a comforting blanket and soothing her. She raised her eyes to the sky and stared at the stars and the crescent moon.

She felt so small, so insignificant.

She wasn’t strong enough to save the world. It was asking too much of her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. If she didn’t save it, then she would destroy it. Maybe that’s what it meant. If she didn’t succeed, then her kind would die. Everyone would die.

Maybe she really was supposed to be the end of everything.

She found her fingers tracing the raised design on the star around her neck and stared at one of the constellations twinkling above her. It was the hunter, Orion. She frowned as a flicker of a memory surfaced and disappeared before she had time to catch it. It all seemed so familiar. Had she been here before and looked at this scene above her in the past? She had looked out of the window of her room so many times back at the mansion, but she couldn't remember ever really stopping to look at the stars as she was now.

Her heart felt heavy when she thought about her home and realised that she would probably never see it again, at least not under good circumstances. She didn't want to miss it, told herself that her years there hadn't been as happy as her memories seemed to make them now, but she couldn't help herself. Everything was happening so fast and every time she thought she was coping, something else came up to make things worse.

She wrapped her fingers tighter around the star and looked at the moon as she sat down on the little bench behind her. To think, she still could have been unaware of everything had she obeyed her mother's rules and remained in the mansion. Part of her wished that she had. She wished that she could go back to being in the dark and locked in the house. But how long could they have kept her hidden? Mathias had said that another eclipse would come, like the one that had apparently happened when she was born. When she was born? Born as a human, or turned into a vampire? Either way she couldn't remember it.

Her thumb came to rest against the back of the silver star, running over the holes that marked it and the protrusions.

It seemed so calming, as though it was carrying away all her heavy thoughts and leaving her mind clear.

She tensed when she felt someone nearby.

Her sense of calm disappeared, replaced by one of confusion when Valentine came to stand not five foot from her. She didn't look at him. She kept her eyes fixed on the heavens and continued to stroke the star, wishing it would calm her again now. Everything was so much more bewildering when he was near to

her. She wanted to talk to him, but didn't want to, not after the things he'd said about her. He didn't want to be near her. He didn't care about her.

So why had he looked so concerned when she'd left the room, and why was he here now?

Was Mathias right? Was Valentine merely frightened of the things that were happening? Was that why he wanted to distance himself from her?

"May I sit?" His voice sounded uncertain and he ventured a step closer.

She just sighed. He would sit if he really wanted to, of that she was sure, but it wouldn't help clarify things about him in her head. It would only make them more confusing.

He sat at the other end of the bench, leaving some space between them. She was thankful for it. If he'd sat closer, he would have only made everything worse.

She wished that she could make sense of him, at least then she'd have one less thing on her mind.

She traced the constellations above her, occupying her mind by trying to picture what they had looked like in the books she'd read. They'd always had images drawn over the top of them, pictures of mystical beasts and people from ancient myths. She'd never been able to see them like that. When she looked at the stars, she saw different images overlaying them. They were pictures of the constellations that she'd never seen, and she had to wonder why they were etched in her memory so deeply that she could only recall them and not the ones she remembered seeing.

The moon was beautiful, nothing more than a thin crescent in the deep blue sky.

"We shall discover more about the prophecy in due time." His voice cut the silence and a frown flickered on her brow before she relaxed again.

“You mean more about me,” she said, keeping her eyes fixed on the stars.

His silence told her that he didn’t know what to say in response to that.

“I feel...” She trailed off. She felt self-conscious, unsure of whether she should be saying such things to him when she wasn’t sure if he cared about her at all.

“Go on,” he said in a gentle tone.

She brought her eyes down from the stars to rest on him. He was sitting at an angle facing her. One of his arms was resting against his knee and he leaned forwards. There was a look in his eyes that said he wanted to know what she had been about to say.

Did he really?

She wanted to believe that he did, but it was all too much to deal with. She had to speak though. The words weren’t going to stay inside her and she had to say them in order to make herself feel better. A part of her hoped that he would say something comforting. It would be easy to fool herself into believing he cared if he responded to what she was going to say with something reassuring.

“I feel like everything has been a lie. My whole life has been one big lie. I’ve spent it pretending that everything was okay, and that the little things that constantly raised questions in my head didn’t exist. I did have a sire. I did have marks once but now they’re gone. That was it. I wasn’t abnormal. The reason people weren’t allowed to speak to me was because of my standing within my family, not because I was different in some way. The looks they gave me were because of who I was, not because they feared me for some unknown reason. I’ve fooled myself for so long and now I can’t.” She closed her eyes and let her head fall backwards so she was facing the sky. “Now I realise that I’ve been living a lie all these years, and the questions I’ve held at the back of my mind won’t leave me be.”

“What questions?”

She smiled at the way his voice had maintained its gentleness.

“Valentine?”

“Prophecy?” He shifted closer to her and she opened her eyes.

“Do you remember daylight, sunrise...sunsets?” She didn’t dare look at him, not until she had control over her feelings. She forced herself to remain as calm as she appeared, even though there was a dark vortex of pain growing inside of her, consuming every shred of peace she had felt and leaving her hurting worse than she’d ever done. Now that she’d begun to remember all the times she’d fooled herself into thinking everything was okay, she couldn’t stop the questions and the sense of fear that was creeping in.

“Vaguely,” he said. “Why?”

She looked at him. “I don’t. I don’t remember anything about my human life.”

He raised a brow and inclined his head, giving her a curious look. “You don’t? Why not?”

“I don’t know...Arkalus tries to help me. Every death day of mine, he takes me to the vault where it’s quiet and he tries to help me remember. I never do.”

His expression had darkened when she’d mentioned her brother and he looked pensive. “Some vampires can repress the memory.”

It had sounded as though he was talking to himself more than to her, but she hadn’t missed what he’d said and it had raised more questions in her head, questions that she now realised she should have asked long ago. Was there a reason why all her years in the mansion had seemingly been spent in the same way?

“Are you saying that I’m—”

“No...I am saying that it might be that he is hindering your memories rather than helping you. I know someone who might be able to help you unlock them.”

“Why would he do that? Why would he tamper with my memories, Valentine? What is it that I’m not supposed to remember?”

“I do not know. I am sorry.” He started to reach out to her but then placed his hand down on the back of the bench instead. “I shall contact the person I know and see if I can get them to see you.”

She nodded, silently thanking him for his offer. Had Arkalus really repressed her memories? Everything was getting more confusing by the minute and she wished that it would stop, or at least slow down, because she felt as though she was starting to suffocate under the weight of it all. She couldn’t deal with things when they were happening so fast. She needed time to think. She needed to take her mind off it all for a while.

“Valentine?” she said and he brought his eyes down from the stars to rest on hers. He still had that look of concern that he’d been wearing since she left the room. She sighed. “Tell me about sunsets.”

He smiled briefly and looked up at the moon again. “Sunsets? Let’s see.”

She shuffled into a more comfortable position, turning to face him so she could see his profile in the near darkness as he thought about what to tell her.

He closed his eyes.

“I remember the last sunset I ever saw.” The smile teased his lips again and she wondered if he could still see it now. “The sky was blue at first. London was bustling as people went about their business. I was resting against the wall beside the Thames, looking up river. The lamps were being lit in preparation for the evening. The air smelt of damp straw and the unique scent of the water.”

She closed her eyes too, wanting to see what he was seeing. "Tell me more."

"I watched the sky as it gradually changed, going from pale blue above me, down through subtle shades of green and yellow, and finally orange as it met the horizon. The colours intensified as the sun began to sink, becoming a glowing fireball as it edged towards the buildings, sending them into silhouette. The small streaks of clouds drifting overhead caught the dying rays, becoming threaded with gold at first and then pink as the sky began to glow a pale crimson."

She smiled, almost able to see it in her mind. "Was it warm?"

"It had been a fine summer day. The warmth hovered in the air, wrapping everyone up like a comforting blanket and promising a mild evening. I could still feel the heat of the sun even after it disappeared. It was beautiful to behold."

"It does sound beautiful, Valentine."

She opened her eyes and found him looking at her. He was silent, looking deep into her eyes. She blinked slowly.

"You should have killed me." Her tone was empty and resigned.

He shook his head. "You have a choice. You always have a choice. Mathias will help you learn more about the prophecy. You shall learn more about yourself. It has been millennia since it was interpreted. There are vampires who believe you will be the one to save us. Maybe they are right and the others are wrong."

She sighed. "I hope so."

He stood slowly and looked down at her.

"I have disturbed your solitude for too long. I shall leave you in peace now. No matter what happens, remember that you always have a choice, Prophecy."

She smiled and he bowed slightly before walking back into the building. Her eyes roamed up the height of the building in front of

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her and stopped on the moon where it was creeping across the sky.

She felt a sense of peace inside her and wondered if Valentine knew the affect that his words had on her.

No matter what trials she faced in the future, she would stand up to them and do the best she could to overcome them.

She had a choice.

And she chose to save the world.

Chapter Nine

The house was in darkness as Valentine walked through it. The only places that were lit were the study and the kitchen. He moved quickly, keeping his footsteps as light as possible so no one heard him.

When he reached the door, he realised that he'd been holding his breath. Was he that scared of someone hearing him? His species had good hearing, and it was a good enough reason to still everything that he could in the hope that he could leave without being caught by Prophecy.

He reasoned with himself that this wasn't the answer. Running away never solved anything, but what else could he do? There was a chance, albeit a minute one, that his family wouldn't have heard of what he'd done yet and if he went back now, they never needed to know.

He could ease back into his old life, leaving behind the chaos of the past few days, but he had to leave now or all was lost.

He opened the door enough to slip through and then shut it behind him. Turning, a sense of relief washed over him when he saw the empty street and began down the steps.

Mathias was out on the hunt, replenishing the stocks that Prophecy had been draining dry, so he would have to be careful when walking the streets. The last thing he needed was to get caught.

He watched the clouds gathering overhead and stepped out into the street.

"You're leaving?"

Her voice carried a weight of hurt that stopped him in his tracks and hit him deep in his chest. He could almost picture what her

face would look like without having to turn to see it. There would be a look of disbelief on it, her brows raised and her eyes wide as they echoed all her feelings to him, from anger to sadness. She felt everything so keenly that she could never hide it from the world.

He took a deep breath and stared at the kerb just in front of his feet. "I must."

"Must?" she said with an air of confusion, as though that word couldn't possibly apply to what he was doing.

"I cannot do this." He turned to face her. He was leaving her, so he could at least do her that courtesy and prove to himself that he was strong enough to leave openly rather than skulking off in the dead of night. "I have already sentenced myself to death by aligning myself with you. I have to go now or all is lost."

She raised her chin, looking down on him as her eyes narrowed and her arms folded protectively across her chest.

"Go then. Leave if you can. Go back to your life and your family." All emotion in her eyes vanished and she regarded him as coldly as he'd regarded her the night they'd met. "I can do this on my own."

"Proph—"

"Don't speak my name! You have no right to speak it." She cut him off with a fiery glare and he took a step towards her, his own anger rising inside him as he did so.

"I brought you here to hide you...to protect you." He frowned when she shook her head.

"I'm tired of hiding. I'll only be found. It's better to meet my destiny head on rather than waiting for them to come for me." Her expression became filled with solemnity and she heaved a sigh.

"What are your plans?" He ventured another step closer to her and the sadness in her eyes disappeared.

“My plans are no business of yours.” She towered over him, her face dark and her brows knit tightly. “A filthy dog of Aureora is below my notice and not worthy of my acknowledgement.”

He saw straight through her mask of anger, seeing the hurt in her eyes and hearing it in her voice as she spoke. It was his fault. He deserved it for attempting to leave without telling her. He had known she would react this way.

“Go, get out of my sight. I don’t need your help. I’m better off without you. Go back to your wretched family. Go back to Prague and hide there. Leave me alone. Go, slink back in shame and pretend that you’ve not done anything wrong. I hope you can live with yourself. I hope that when I’m facing death, when I’m fulfilling my destiny, that you’re there and I can show you how strong the blood of Caelestis is compared to yours. Go! You’re no better than one of the weaklings. You should have killed me when you were told to, should have been a good little boy and murdered me while I slept!” She came down the steps and pushed him in the chest repeatedly, the force of her blows getting stronger until she had her fists curled into tight balls and was banging them down on him. “Go. Go! What are you waiting for? Go!”

He grabbed her wrists tightly and restrained her, staring deep into her eyes. He tensed his jaw and didn’t relinquish his grip even when she began to struggle. She’d insulted him, degraded his family, and was now resorting to violence in an attempt to make him leave. Why was she so desperate for him to go?

She stilled.

“They’ll know,” she whispered and stared at his chest. Her brows were furrowed and her hair covered half of her face. It struck him that she didn’t want him to go after all. She wanted him to stay and that’s why she was pushing him away. It was all a reaction to what she was feeling inside, a defence mechanism. He could feel her trembling in his hands and the distant tone of her voice spoke of pain. “Someone will have seen us. To go back is insanity...is suicide.”

They were true words. There was a high chance that someone would have seen them together in Prague or Paris, or even here. Word would be out by now that Prophecy was wanted for crimes against her species and it would be a miracle if they didn't know that he'd assisted her escape.

Her eyes met his and he could see the hurt swimming in them. She didn't want him to go. She feared for his safety and believed that he would die if he returned to his family. He could see it all in the way she was looking at him, nothing hidden, everything on show for him to see.

"I heard you...I'll keep away if you stay," she said.

It took him a moment to realise what she was talking about. He remembered what he'd said to Mathias and the odd sensation he'd had that they were being watched. They had been watched, or at least listened to. He should've been more guarded with his words and the things he was speaking of. He shouldn't have spoken about his feelings in the first place, but he'd needed to get things off his chest and needed the advice of his old friend.

"I know you can't stand me. I know it's hard for you, Valentine. It's hard for me too. I can't hide any more. I have a choice, you said that, and I'm going to discover the true meaning of the prophecy no matter what it takes. I can't live life in the dark any more."

He closed his eyes briefly and searched for the right words to say to reassure her that things weren't as bad as they'd sounded. He didn't want her to keep away; he just didn't trust himself when she was near. She made everything so much more confusing. He didn't know what he was supposed to feel about her. When the tiny trace of her blood had left his system, he had come to see that there was something else motivating his reaction to her and it was something that was dangerous to them both. It was forbidden. She was a Caelestis, his family's enemy. He shouldn't want to comfort her and help her. He shouldn't want to protect her.

Letting go of her wrists, he watched her rub at them, her slim fingers caressing them. There were red marks on her where he'd

held her too tightly. He hadn't meant to hurt her but she'd provoked him into it with her words against his family and him, with the fact that she was trying to make him leave.

With the way that she was making him feel weak.

He stood in silence, still unable to find his voice as his thoughts dived off in so many directions that his head felt as though it was spinning. It was all falling away from him, everything lost because of his decision to help her. He wished that he'd never met her, but at the same time, in the recesses of his heart, was glad that he had.

He placed one foot up onto the step she was standing on and opened his mouth to speak.

"Are you going somewhere, Valentine?" Mathias' voice made his disappear and he turned to see the older vampire walking up the street towards them with a leather satchel over his shoulder.

Valentine looked at Prophecy. She was smoothing her long hair back over her shoulder, giving him an expectant look. She was waiting for him to speak. She was waiting to see if he really was going to leave.

He gave a brief look over his shoulder in the direction he would have gone in if Prophecy hadn't caught him. She was right. There was no going back, not for her and not for him. To go back now was to face certain death. If he remained with her, he would be able to protect her and guide her through the world. She was going to have to visit places she'd never been to before, would have to meet with demons that wouldn't think twice about killing her if she offended them by mistake and wouldn't know how to keep herself safe from the nightly dangers of the human world.

He closed his eyes, fighting against the voice inside of him that was telling him to go back to his family and continue as their loyal son, and the torn feeling he had whenever he thought about the choice he had to make.

It was her or his family.

But he did have a choice.

Just like he'd told Prophecy not a few hours ago.

He pictured how she'd looked as she'd sat beside him with her eyes closed imagining what a sunset looked like. She was so innocent, so young.

He smiled to himself as he made his decision.

"No," he said and walked past her into the house, meeting her eyes for the briefest of moments. She smiled broadly back at him.

He kept his eyes fixed on the end of the hall as she fell into step beside him and he led the way back to the study.

"I have news," Mathias said while he closed the doors and then followed them.

Valentine sat down in the chair beside the fire and crossed his legs, waiting for his old friend to speak. Prophecy sat in the chair opposite him. He raised a brow as Mathias removed several canisters from his satchel and opened one of them. The scribe filled three glasses with blood and carried two of them with him as he walked over to where he and Prophecy were sitting. Prophecy almost snatched hers. Valentine smiled when she looked sheepish and then he noticed that Mathias was holding the other glass out to him.

His stomach growled.

"It's still warm," Mathias said, as though he needed any enticing to make him drink what he was being offered.

He had to eat. It had been days since his last feed. He took the glass with a nod and waited for Mathias to retrieve his and join them. He was amused by the way that Prophecy kept licking her lips, her eyes not leaving the blood as she waited for a sign that she could drink it. When she looked across at him, he raised his glass and nodded, showing her that no one would think she was rude if she drank it now.

He sipped his.

She gulped hers down and then bit her lip while she looked at both him and Mathias, seeing that they weren't drinking theirs so indelicately. His gaze was drawn to her lips. Her teeth were bloodied, her lower lip stained with crimson. He felt drawn to it, mesmerised by the sight of her having fed. Images of the night he'd found in her the cemetery flashed into his mind. He really hadn't seen one take so much pleasure in blood. It had stirred fire in his veins.

He stared at the bloom of red on her lip as she released it.

It still stirred fire in his veins.

Tearing his eyes away from her, he swiftly drank the blood in his glass and stifled his desire to change into his vampire guise.

Mathias cleared his throat.

"You had news?" Valentine used it to distract himself and pushed away the images of Prophecy in the cemetery that lingered in his mind.

"News?" Mathias frowned thoughtfully and then raised his brows. "News, of course."

Prophecy placed her glass down and leaned towards Mathias where he was standing between the two chairs near the unlit fireplace.

"Well?" she said, her eyes showing her eagerness.

Valentine leaned casually back into his chair.

"I tracked a guardian tonight," Mathias said and Valentine's attention was immediately with him. "I've heard from a reliable source that the seven have had orders to release their guardians. Many of the families have already sent them out to seek out the child of the prophecy. The only house yet to respond is Validus. Hyperion shows no interest in releasing them. Aureora and Caelestis have informed the Law Keepers."

“You are certain?” he said.

Mathias nodded. A sense of dread filled Valentine. Prophecy had been right. There was no going back.

“We don’t have guardians. I wasn’t aware that my family kept werewolves,” Prophecy said with a frown and looked at him.

“Neither of our families keep them at the mansion. When our houses were joined, they built a compound in the outskirts of the city. They have kept the werewolves there. If all the bloodlines and demons have not been alerted to your existence by now, they soon will be. Kalinor will lose no time, especially if he has realised that I am with you.”

“You must move quickly,” Mathias said. “You will be watched for. Keep your guards up.”

“Where must we go?” Prophecy said.

“Paris.”

“Paris?” Valentine straightened up on hearing the name of the city he knew so well. It was where he’d had the most dangerous fights of his life against the hunter. He was sure that the hunter lived in that city. It had good connections, both land and air, to the rest of Europe, making it the most sensible place to base his operations.

“My research has uncovered something which I had long forgotten. In my youth, I had been curious about the prophecy. I discovered that there was a key that supposedly unlocked it.”

“As in translated it?” he asked and Mathias nodded.

“The prophecy is written in an ancient tongue, one which all vampires have lost their knowledge of. It took the ten original vampires over four years to translate the entire scroll. The wheels have been set in motion for a reason. I do not believe we have such a luxurious amount of time in which to decipher it. The key will help us, of that I am sure.”

“Where is the key?” Prophecy shifted forwards on her seat until she was balancing on the edge, as close to Mathias as she could get without leaving the confines of the armchair.

“There is magic mentioned in the scroll. The Three have the key. Head to Paris and seek them out. Valentine will know where to find them. They will know you are coming.”

She looked across at him. The corners of his mouth tugged into a brief smile that he hoped reassured her that he did indeed know where to find the witches Mathias had spoken of.

“And what of the scrolls?” Her attention returned to Mathias.

Valentine wondered just when she had began to take everything in her stride. The child he had seen in her over the past few days seemed to have disappeared since their conversation in the courtyard. She had accepted her fate and was now determined to face it head on and win. Did the things he’d said have anything to do with the woman now sitting before him? The layers of insecurity and confusion seemed to have been stripped away and she now looked as she had done the night he’d met her. She looked strong and defiant, ready to take on the world if she had to.

He didn’t look away from her when she looked at him surreptitiously out of the corner of her eye while continuing to face Mathias. There was a shy edge to her expression, as though she’d realised that he’d noticed the change in her and she was embarrassed by it.

She shouldn’t have been.

She was enthralling when she was like this. She was powerful, almost commanding, and he could see why she was the child of the prophecy.

He could see the woman that he had witnessed in his vision, one strong enough to lead an army.

“The first half is still held where it has been for nearly three centuries, by someone both I and Valentine know.”

Valentine looked up at Mathias, trying to think of a person they both knew that wouldn't care about the end of vampires, that wouldn't be tempted to translate the half of the scroll they had been given.

"A veritable princess," Mathias said with a small smile.

Valentine nodded in understanding.

The woman in question was as close to being a princess as vampires got.

"And the other?" Prophecy's voice was still certain and his attention was drawn back to her.

"The other is lost. It was stolen by humans many centuries ago. Thankfully they have never been successful in translating it, so the meaning remains hidden. While you are in Paris, I will attempt to locate the second half of the scroll."

"There will not be a train tonight," Valentine said and thought over everything they would need to do before heading to Paris. "We will have to get more clothes so we are not so easily spotted."

He looked down at the jacket he was wearing. He supposed it would do him good to get out of it. It was a tie to his past that he was better off without. It only served to remind him of what he had lost.

"When will we go?" Prophecy said.

He stood.

"We leave tomorrow night."

Chapter Ten

Valentine led the way as they walked through customs at Gare Du Nord in Paris. Prophecy waited in silence behind him, watching in fascination as the guard checked the passports and ushered them through without so much as a suspicious glance. She met his eyes as she passed, wondering if he was still under Valentine's spell. The guard winked at her and made some comment to his colleague. The two men grinned at each other like Cheshire cats.

She didn't need to speak French to know they'd said something dirty about her.

She glared at them and then pressed her hand to her stomach as it growled. Hunger pushed her, making her want to change and feed. She screwed her face up in agony and told herself that she couldn't change here. No matter how much satisfaction she would get from scaring the life out of the two guards.

Valentine would find her something to eat soon enough. They just had to make it to the hotel. He had promised to get them both some blood once they were safely there.

She looked up to see that while she'd been standing still, he'd continued walking and was now waiting for her by the exit. She hurried to him, ignoring the wolf whistles that the guards gave her as they laughed.

When she reached him, Valentine turned away and continued towards the underground. She didn't pay attention to where they were going. She let him lead the way while her eyes roamed the dimly lit corridors and the people who were coming and going. She smiled as a group of people passed them, laughing and playing with each other as they headed down into the depths of the metro.

She closed her eyes when she walked out onto the platform and smoky wind blew against her, signalling the approach of a train. She could hear the wheels screeching as it rounded a corner and then the lights appeared in the tunnel.

When it stopped with one of its doors in front of them, she ducked behind Valentine and used him as a shield to protect herself against the sudden river of people that flowed out of it.

A glance at the clock on the wall told her it was nearing midnight.

Why were there so many people still around?

She let her gaze follow them as they all disappeared up the steps and then hopped onto the train when she realised that Valentine had moved again without her noticing. There was so much to take in now that she was aware of her surroundings. When they had passed through the city before, she had been too deep in the grip of the Hunger to see anything. All she had been able to focus on was the intense pain.

Her stomach rumbled again.

Intense pain that was going to return if she didn't feed soon.

"Are you all right?"

She looked up at Valentine. The train began to move, jerking around the corner as it pulled out of the station. She gripped the rail by the door with one hand while keeping her other one pressed against her stomach.

"Hungry." She pushed the word out.

"We shall get you something soon enough. It is not far to go now. The hotel..." He trailed off and looked along the length of the train towards the next carriage.

"What?" She could see there was something wrong and her senses automatically reached out, trying to pick up on what he'd felt.

The carriage they were in was half full and she could barely see the occupants of the next one through the tiny window in the door. Was there something there? All she could feel were humans.

The second the train stopped at a station, Valentine caught hold of her hand and dragged her off it. His actions ignited a spark of fear inside of her and she gripped his hand tightly.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered and started to turn her head.

“Do not look back,” he said. She stopped herself just in time. He glanced down at her. “I think we are being followed.”

“Werewolf?” she said and stared straight ahead, her body going rigid as she resisted the temptation to look behind her and see what it was that was following them.

“No. Human.” Valentine looked around them when they reached the ticket barrier and then lifted her over it. He jumped the gate and caught her hand again. “Act normal. Do not panic. We shall soon see if they are following us.”

“Who are they?”

He didn’t answer her question; he led her up into the street. She looked around them at the tree-lined road with its pretty buildings and streetlights. There were still a lot of people around and she again wondered why.

Her question was answered when Valentine led her towards one of the buildings and gave some money to a man on the door.

She flinched as the music assaulted her ears and the strobe lights made Valentine look jittery as they headed deeper into the club. She growled and hissed at the people as they pushed her, making her almost lose her grip on his hand. The beat of the music was heavy, pounding with guitars and drums, and she tried to catch some of the words but failed. There was a bar against the wall furthest from her, and every inch of the floor was swarming with people. They were dancing, writhing against each other under the blue lights and flickering strobes. The air was hot,

swamped with the smell of sweat and the tempting fragrance of blood.

She was knocked backwards by a group of people and she growled at them. When she regained her balance, she found that Valentine was nowhere to be seen. She looked around her, hers eyes darting over every face that she could see as she searched for him. She felt dizzy when she tried to reach out with her senses to find him and was flooded by the intoxicating feeling of every heartbeat in the room. They all sped, making her head spin. She covered her mouth, trying to hide her teeth as they began to descend. She wanted to close her eyes and breathe in the delicious scent of blood that was engulfing her. Her claws extended and her eyes changed.

Overwhelming hunger swept through her.

She saw another person enter, a tall man who was broad in build, and she remembered why Valentine had brought them in here.

Someone was following them.

Her vampire guise receded, forced away by panic in an attempt to make her blend in, and she quickly searched for Valentine. She couldn't see him anywhere and the tall man was beginning to move through the crowd towards her. She needed to find somewhere safe to hide. Her eyes darted to her right as a bright white light appeared and disappeared. Perfect.

She forced her way through the crowd and pushed the bathroom door open.

The brightness of the light was blinding and her hand came up instinctively to protect her eyes. The door closed behind her and she breathed a sigh of relief as the wall dulled the feeling of the people in the club. She paused when she sensed that she wasn't alone.

Someone flushed a toilet and then fell out of the cubicle door into a heap on the floor.

Her head cocked to one side as the girl struggled to her feet. The girl stared at her with wide eyes and then stumbled towards her, wobbling on her feet as she leaned heavily against the row of washbasins.

Prophecy focused on the sound of her heartbeat, licking her lips as it pounded erratically, the staccato rhythm calling to her, urging her to feed.

“You’re pretty,” the girl said in an accent that sounded like the people in the television programs Prophecy had watched back at the mansion. American.

She didn’t say anything, just moved slightly as the girl reached a hand out towards her face. Her eyes were on it immediately, her Hunger begging her to bite into it and drink her delicate blood down. She needed to sate it. Valentine wouldn’t feed her for ages. Besides, she didn’t need him to feed her. She could feed herself. She frowned and told herself that Valentine had promised to feed her as soon as possible. She didn’t need to eat the girl. It would only make the situation worse.

She stared at the girl’s neck, watching the pulse that was visible in her jugular.

It wouldn’t be the same. Whatever Valentine could offer her wouldn’t be the same as drinking from the girl. Her claws extended against her will as her hunting instincts began to take control, whispering words of temptation to her as she struggled against it.

He didn’t have to know.

She needed to feed her Hunger. Bottled blood wasn’t going to sate it.

“I like your style,” the girl drawled and tried to stand without the assistance of the washbasins. “Pale and innocent. Guys dig that.”

Prophecy cocked a brow. Pale and innocent. Pale maybe, but she wasn’t innocent. None of her kind could be considered that.

She lost control the moment the girl turned to face the mirror, her eyes widening when she saw only herself reflected in the glass. Not waiting for the girl to turn to face her, and not giving her a chance to scream, Prophecy snapped her neck. She was too weak and desperate for blood to deal with the struggle the girl would have put up.

It would be easier this way.

When the girl began to fall, she grabbed her around the waist and held her tightly. She sank her teeth deep into her victim's neck, her eyes fixing on the mirror and watching the twin puncture marks appear on the dead girl's skin. The sight of it drove her on, making the blood taste even sweeter as it intoxicated her. A rivulet of red ran down over her victim's collarbone and she held the girl tighter, digging her claws in. She drank deeper, desperate for the pleasure that came from the fresh blood. It was delicious. She felt as though she'd been starving since her first kill. Now that she'd found the remedy for her craving, she didn't want to relinquish it until there was nothing left for her to drink. She bit down harder. Her head began to swim and she felt her hunger abating.

She blinked when she looked into the mirror again and everything seemed to sway and spin.

When the door opened, she hazily sensed something familiar and dropped the girl. She tried to wipe the blood off her lips but missed and instead watched her hand as it moved slowly in front of her. It looked fuzzy and the more she tried to get it to focus the worse her head felt.

She barely registered the tight grip on her arm before she was spun on the spot and her knees collapsed beneath her.

Valentine growled and caught her other arm, forcing her to stand. She beamed up at him, her eyelids heavy and her lips and chin covered in blood.

He tightened his grip on her upper arms until she pulled a face of discomfort and then he tugged her close to him.

“There are places to get blood. There are sources in every city where it is untraceable. But you have to do this! You are worse than a child!” His eyes narrowed, reflecting the anger in his voice. She flinched away, making a small whining noise while trying to prise his fingers off her. He towered over her, increasing his grip until he saw the pain reflected in her eyes. “Even children know the rules!”

He should have let go of her then, he knew that he should have, but he suddenly found that he didn't want to. He'd gotten dangerously close to her and now he could smell the blood on her. A feeling of desire began to grow in the pit of his stomach, running through every inch of him and taking command even as he tried to shut it down.

She broke free of his grasp but was back in it again before she'd even had the chance to move a foot.

“I'm not a child!” She retaliated and his fingers closed tightly around her arms again as he stared into her eyes. They moved over her, hunger burning in him as he ran them down her body and back up again.

“You really aren't.”

She stilled in his grasp, her eyes becoming wide at first as she caught his meaning and then drooping again as the moment of recognition passed and the pleasure of the feed fogged her brain.

Her flesh felt so warm under his fingers. The borrowed heat from the blood and the alcohol made her even more alluring than she had been in the cemetery. He pushed her away, wanting to shut out the desire he felt for her. A deeper sensation coiled in the pit of his stomach, spreading into his chest and drawing him to her as she stood before him with a drunken smile on her face. She was too tempting right now and he was too weak to resist if she made a move.

He looked down into her eyes and stepped towards her again. He licked his lips at the same time as she cleaned hers of blood. He wished it were his tongue doing that, not hers.

He shook his head in an attempt to clear it of such ideas and then found his eyes drawn back to her. She closed her eyes and smiled. He could see she still took intense pleasure in the kill. It wasn't the alcohol that was making her this way. The taste of fresh blood straight from the body had a profound effect on her, one that she didn't bother to hide.

His breathing became heavy while he looked at her and she opened her eyes to reveal their emerald depths to him. She had changed, her vampire guise making her even harder to resist. His chest heaved and he stared at her, unable to draw his eyes away no matter how much he tried. He wanted to reach out a lone finger and swipe the blood off her lower lip. He wanted to let her lick it clean. He wanted to taste the blood in a kiss that he knew was forbidden.

He barely kept control as his eyes switched and his fangs tried to descend.

Finding the strength, he turned away from her and grabbed her wrist, yanking her along behind him while he strode towards the door.

He was foolish to have waited so long before moving. The hunter may have realised where they were and it would be difficult to see him in amongst the crowd in the club. He shouldn't have let her get to him. He should have kept his mind off blood and on the business of getting safely to the hotel without being followed.

He shouldn't have wanted to kiss her.

Leaving the bathroom, he scanned the club, hoping that the hunter had given up his chase this time.

"Useless child!" he shouted over the din of the music and tightened his grip on her wrist when she tried to twist herself free.

The room went silent as someone screamed and he didn't need to look in order to know that they had found the body.

It was time he and Prophecy got out of there.

He mentally chastised himself and dragged Prophecy through the club behind him, heading for the fire exit sign he could see on the other side of the stage. He didn't relinquish his grip on her as he pushed the door open and took a deep breath of air to clear his senses of all the blood and the scent of humans.

"I feel funny," Prophecy mumbled.

He walked her out of the alley and into the street, and then looked at her. She was still swaying. It took a lot of alcohol to get a vampire drunk. The girl she'd fed from must have been close to falling unconscious. Her first kill had been drinking, he'd tasted a trace of the alcohol in her blood, but it hadn't been to this extent and it hadn't got Prophecy drunk too.

He gave her a look that said he wasn't impressed.

"I think someone drugged me," she said.

He began walking with her again.

"You are not drugged. The girl was drunk and now you are drunk. It will wear off soon." He stopped to get his bearings and then walked down the road to his right.

They weren't far from the hotel. It was something he was thankful for when Prophecy fell in a heap on the floor and giggled.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a drunken vampire.

He hauled her to her feet and cast her an angry look. She bit her lip, an innocent look on her face as she held her hand out to him. He rolled his eyes and took hold of it, tired of telling her off and wishing they were already at the hotel. He wanted some time to think. He'd let her sleep off the effects of her feed and do a little pacing so his head would clear.

It felt as though there was so much going on in it that he couldn't cope with anything else that came along. It was a dangerous way to feel. One wrong decision and they'd both be dead.

He picked up the pace when he saw the bright sign of the hotel beckoning him up a side street and scanned their surroundings to check it was safe before heading towards it. Prophecy stumbled along behind him, muttering things to herself that he didn't care to hear. She mentioned his name a few times, but he told himself it was best not to listen. She wouldn't be making any sense right now and the last thing he needed was to spend the whole night trying to decipher what she'd been talking about.

Stopping outside the hotel, he looked her over and roughly wiped her chin on his jacket sleeve in case there was any trace of blood on her. He didn't need the concierge seeing the blood and presuming he'd been hitting her.

He pushed the door open and held it for her. She walked unsteadily through it and stopped in the lobby. Her head fell backwards and she stared at everything with wide eyes and an open mouth.

Shaking his head, he went to the reception desk and checked them in, all the while keeping his senses locked on her where she was turning gradually on the spot.

Taking his door card with a smile, he grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the lifts. He kept the smile on his face as people passed him, and tugged on Prophecy's hand, trying to speed her up as his cheeks began to ache. He never could smile for long. Cornelius had always said it was because his position demanded for him to be serious all the time. He just thought it was because there wasn't much to smile about in the world.

He pushed Prophecy into the lift when the doors opened. The smile dropped off his face. He ran his fingers through his hair and leaned his head backwards while he heaved a sigh. Why did everything about the girl seem so difficult? They couldn't even achieve the simple task of arriving in Paris without drawing the attention of both a hunter and the police. It wasn't bad enough that they had guardians and Law Keepers hunting them, she had to get humans involved too. He looked at her. She was leaning against the wall opposite him humming to herself while she traced patterns on the mirror.

He shook his head again and sighed.

He'd arrived in this city no less than a hundred times in his life, not once had he been tracked by a hunter the second he'd arrived, and not once had he drawn the attention of the police.

The lift door opened and he went to grab hold of her wrist again but she pushed him away and walked in what she clearly thought was a straight line out into the hall.

He turned her around when she started heading in the wrong direction and suppressed his desire to growl when she jerked her shoulder backwards, making him let her go. She wove down the corridor, bumping into the wall occasionally and mumbling things under her breath whenever she did.

At least she was amusing to watch sometimes.

He whistled at her when she walked straight past the door to the room and she turned very slowly to face him, as though she was sure she would fall if she moved any faster.

He pushed the door open.

She held her hand out, ghosting it along the wall while she walked back towards him and then taking hold of the doorframe as she went into the room.

He almost walked into her when she stopped dead and looked around the room. Easing the door closed behind him, he slipped past her and let her take it all in. He went straight to the mini bar and opened himself a whisky. Sitting down on one of the couches, he watched her as she continued to stand in the same spot, her eyes moving over everything in the expansive room.

"Big," she said and he looked around.

It was big.

Not as large as the apartment he owned in Paris, but he couldn't risk taking her there. Whenever he'd travelled, he'd always

stayed at the best hotels. There was no point in being immortal if you couldn't enjoy the finer things in life.

The décor was typical upmarket hotel. The walls were painted a warm cream colour and the furniture was pompous and expensive. The living area between the two bedrooms was brightly lit. Flowers and fruit adorned the table that was situated near the window and the whole room smelt of them. His gaze moved back to Prophecy when she muttered something.

She moved painstakingly slowly towards the middle of the room. She blinked rapidly, her eyes rolling as she pressed her hand to her head and pouted. Standing, he downed the little bottle of whisky and tossed it into the bin. He caught her around the arm, pushed one of the sets of white double doors open and held his other hand out, intimating the bed.

"Sleep. You will feel better tomorrow," he said.

She looked up at him, right into his eyes, and smiled.

She placed her free hand against his chest. "Thank you."

He relinquished his grip on her arm and then turned away when she began to strip in front of him. His jaw muscles tensed and he stared at the ceiling, ignoring the voice at the back of his mind that told him to look. It had been hard enough in Prague when she'd got changed in front of him, now it was bordering on impossible.

He heard a soft thud and a sigh.

Risking a look, he found her flat out on her front on the bed wearing nothing but her underwear and a black vest top. The rest of her clothes were in a crumpled heap on the floor. He looked around the room, searching for a blanket to cover her with. She didn't need it to keep her warm since her body would never naturally get above room temperature. It was more for him than for her. He would never be able to concentrate if he knew she was lying on the bed like this.

He found what he was looking for in the wardrobe. Unfolding it, he draped it over her body and raised a brow when she moaned, shifted onto her side and curled up into a tight ball.

He should have got her some nightclothes when he'd gone to get them clothes to change into but he'd been in a hurry. As it was, all he'd managed to bring with them was a small black bag filled mostly with underwear and clothes for her. Mathias had given him a black jacket to wear that wasn't too dissimilar to his old one. It was less conspicuous, but made him feel like a Japanese schoolboy.

He gave her one last look and then walked back into the living area. He would leave her door open. That way if she woke during the day she wouldn't panic because she'd easily be able to find him. He didn't know how much of tonight she would remember, but he was sure it wouldn't be enough for her not to be frightened when she woke to find herself in unfamiliar surroundings.

Crossing the room, he pushed open the other set of double doors. He carefully unbuttoned his jacket and placed it over a hanger in the wardrobe. Throwing a glance at the bed, he walked back into the living area and over to the mini bar. He couldn't sleep when it was still dark out. He opened another whisky and went back to his room, pacing along the length of it while he tried to get his thoughts into order.

Prophecy was going to want to kill again, unless the blood Mathias had given her had helped abate the Hunger. Apart from her indiscretion in the nightclub, she had seemed fine, so there was a chance that another feed on bottled blood would free her of the effects of the Hunger. It would be better if she didn't need to openly kill again.

When they had the key, they would need to get the first part of the scroll. He knew exactly where it was and who had it. Mathias had said that a veritable princess was holding it.

Valentine swigged his whisky.

She was one at that. Mia was always pleased to see him and he would be able to kill two birds with one stone. She would give

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them her part of the scroll and she would be able to help Prophecy remember things. They would need good cover to slip in unnoticed and meet with her. The families in that city were powerful and although one of them had not released their guardians, it would still prove difficult to avoid detection.

But first, they had a job to do in this city.

First, they had to go and see the Three.

Chapter Eleven

The murky alleys they had been walking were a stark contrast to how Prophecy had imagined Paris. There was nothing beautiful and delicate about the places they had passed through in the last twenty minutes. They were dank, wet streets with little lighting in what seemed like a bad neighbourhood. She'd heard the sirens of police cars several times and had seen them as they sped down the wider roads that the alleys led out onto.

She looked at the old stone walls of the buildings around her. They looked like factories or something similar. She couldn't quite tell.

Her brows met in a frown when she trod in a puddle that had been made in a pothole and felt the cold water seep into her boot. She shook her foot off, the scowl remaining on her face as she tried to rid her boot of water.

"I hope you know where you're going," she grumbled, staring at her foot. She could see Valentine's meticulously clean boots just out of the corner of her eye. They were facing her, meaning he was probably watching her with another frown.

He'd been frowning all night. Whenever he looked at her, his brows knit and his eyes narrowed into a hard look. She knew that she'd done wrong and she'd apologised a thousand times, but it didn't seem to be enough for him. He was still angry with her. He hadn't seemed to hear her when she'd told him that she'd tried to resist the urge to kill but it had been too great. She could still hear his words from last night, had felt them hit her deep in the chest through her drunken haze.

She was worse than a child.

But then he'd changed, he'd looked at her with such a hunger in his eyes that all the words she'd been ready to throw at him had slipped from her grasp, leaving her lost in his eyes and

wondering if he was going to do something they'd probably both regret.

It would only make things even more confusing and that wasn't what they needed right now.

She'd awoken early tonight, before he'd risen, and had paced around the living area, occasionally sneaking glances at him when she passed his open door. She'd spent most of her time formulating an apology; the apology she'd recited at least ten times over to him throughout the course of the evening. The rest of the time, her mind kept replaying the moment in the bathroom. She could remember it all, could remember the way he'd held her close and tight, and the look in his eyes. She didn't know what to make of it. He'd told Mathias that he hated her and he couldn't bear her wanting to be close to him, but last night he'd been the one that had wanted to be close to her and it hadn't been hate in his eyes.

She raised her head to look at him when he spoke.

"A good hunter knows everything about his environment," he said and glanced up the alley. "It's not far now."

"A good hunter? Like the one who was following us last night?" She fell into step beside him when he began walking up the alley again.

"Him, myself, any one of the many elite."

She frowned, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinised him. He wasn't wearing his long red embroidered jacket any more, it had been replaced with a black one of similar stand up collar design, but he hadn't lost the proud and confident air she'd noticed the moment she'd met him. He still reminded her of a Law Keeper.

"You're a hunter? But hunters are human...do you hunt vampires?" Her frown remained in place. Had he been hunting her that night? Had he killed the son of her house?

"No," he said and relief bloomed inside of her. "I hunt the hunters."

She looked at him. He hunted the vampire hunters? No wonder he seemed like a Law Keeper. They had to be strong enough to take on the hardest of opponents and win, and Valentine looked as though he could certainly do that, especially if he'd spent a lot of time hunting the hunters that plagued their species. There were only a few vampire hunters that were skilled enough to take on a member of one of the seven pure bloodlines. Most hunters probably spent their whole life tracking and killing the weaker-blooded vampires that all of the pure bloodlines detested. Her family saw those hunters as nothing more than a form of pest control, something they were glad of as it kept the weakling population steady. Most hunters probably never met one of the seven. They were incomparable to the weaklings, their strength and abilities far superior, and their senses sharper. Most hunters who met one of them probably never lived to tell the tale.

There were only a handful of hunters that the seven had to be concerned about, and only one of them made the families worried.

Was he the one who had followed them last night?

She'd never heard of a vampire who hunted the hunters before. Her family didn't have one, and none of the others did as far as she knew. Valentine was unique. She mused that it must take great skill and courage to fight against the hunters and wondered how long he'd been doing it for. Mathias had said that Valentine was three centuries old. How much of that time had been spent working as a hunter for his family?

"We are here." Valentine's voice roused her and she looked at the dull grey metal door.

He knocked. She moved to stand behind him, waiting for someone to answer and not taking her eyes off the door.

He pressed his hand against the metal.

"Cold," he said.

She followed suit. It wasn't just cold. It was freezing to the touch. On looking closer, she could see small intricate patterns of ice

crystals near the edges of the door. What kind of place was this? What kind of witches lived somewhere so cold?

The door creaked open, revealing a set of steps and a small woman. Her silver hair was frizzy and wild, making her round face look even pudgier. She was dressed in dark clothing, her dress skimming the floor as though it wasn't made for such a short woman. She was pale, her skin almost white in the darkness.

"You're early," she said in a thin voice that made her sound older than she looked, if it was possible. "We need proof."

Prophecy looked at the hand she'd extended and then at the other one that held a needle.

Valentine stepped between her and the witch. "You are not touching her. You know who we are if you have been expecting us."

"We know everyone who comes to our door, young man." She smiled at him, her eyes closing and her cheeks rising with it. "Can never be too careful."

She stepped to one side and pointed up the stairs.

"Follow," she said and started up them, muttering to herself while she slowly mounted each step.

Prophecy could see why when she looked down at them. They were covered in a thin film of ice. It rose higher and grew thicker at the edges where it met the wall and her eyes followed it up. She let her fingertips graze the ice that was coating the walls and then looked up at the pale blue light at the top of the stairs.

It was getting colder the closer they got to it.

She moved nearer to Valentine when they finally entered the large circular chamber at the top. The walls were thickly encrusted with ice that sparkled like diamonds with an eerie blue glow. She could feel what little body temperature she had being drained from her as she moved further into the room and closer

to the flickering blue fire that danced in the centre of it. She realised it was emitting cold rather than heat.

She looked at Valentine and he managed a brief smile before a door opposite them opened and revealed two other witches. One was a contrast to the short witch that had greeted them at the door. She was tall and thin, her white hair drawn back into a tight bun, making her face appear even more severe than it already looked. Her nose was slim and pointed, her brows arched highly and her chin was long. Her dress was similar to the other witches, made of a dull blue cloth that looked uncomfortable and itchy. It was tight against her body, dipping in at the waist where a belt held it, and making her look even taller than she really was.

The other witch seemed similar to herself. She was of average height and build, slim but not thin, and her silver hair was long with soft waves kinking it. She looked much younger than the other two witches, her features still delicate and not wrinkled with age. She wore the same type of dress as them and had the same pale blue eyes.

They moved towards her, the short witch falling into line beside the other two as they closed the gap. Prophecy moved closer to Valentine, wanting to feel that she was safe.

The tall thin witch clasped her hands together in front of her so tightly that her veins stood out.

Prophecy leaned back as they all looked her over, their expressions curious.

“She is so young.” The tall witch looked at the others.

“Too young.” The short witch frowned.

“To have the weight of the world on her shoulders.” The youngest witch finished.

She frowned at all of them, unsure of what to make of what they'd said. They seemed to move as one, closing in on her, but backing away again when Valentine growled at them. They bent towards each other, their faces reflecting various feelings, and

she got the feeling that they were talking about her. She knew that witches didn't need to say things out loud in order to talk with others. They could say things straight into other people's heads. They all looked at her.

"She has red hair," the tall witch said.

"Red like blood." The short one reached out a hand and stroked the air as though she was stroking her hair.

"Red like her mother's." The third witch smiled.

Her mother? Did they know who her mother was? When the tall one opened her mouth again, she realised that they always spoke like this, in order and as one. They seemed to finish each other's sentences as though they were one person split into three, one mind in three different vessels.

"Her mother would be proud."

"So proud."

"I believe so."

"What about my mother?" She took a step towards them and Valentine caught her arm, holding her back. "Tell me about my mother."

"We need your blood."

"Your blood will make a key."

"Your blood is a key."

Her blood? She wished that they'd explain more, wished they had answered her question about her mother. Did they really know about her? Did she really look like her mother? Was this all some cruel trick?

"Come with us." The thin witch began to move.

Prophecy broke free of Valentine's grip and found herself following her.

"Don't move."

"You must remain here."

She turned to see the young witch with her hand against Valentine's chest stopping him from moving. Prophecy tried to give him a look that said everything would be okay, but she wasn't sure that it would. Turning away, she took a deep breath and followed the tall witch into the other room. It felt even colder than the first one. She could hear the other two witches still talking to Valentine and it only made her more uncertain.

"Don't enter that room," the short witch said.

"No matter what you hear," the younger one said.

"She wouldn't like what you'd see."

"But you'll see soon enough."

Prophecy watched them walking over to her, leaving Valentine looking lost. She wanted to go back to him, back to where she felt safe, but the witches had said they needed her blood in order to create the key and she needed that key.

The doors closed and she swallowed hard.

She stood in silence while they looked her over and she tried her best not to let her nerves show.

"Don't be frightened." The thin witch smiled at her.

"Never be frightened."

"Fear is empty, pointless."

They pointed at her clothes and she looked down at them, unsure of what they wanted. The youngest one came towards her and began unbuttoning her shirt for her.

“You want me to strip so you can take my blood? Can’t you just use a needle?” She looked incredulous as they all shook their heads in the negative.

“There are things you’ll need.”

“Things to unlock the power.”

“The power that is in your blood.”

“Power?” She frowned at them. She had power in her blood? The power to act as a key? Or something else?

They all indicated the raised slab of ice in the centre of the room. It was covered in a thick white blanket made of fur. At least she wouldn’t freeze while they prodded and poked at her naked body. Her eyes strayed to the door and she tried to sense Valentine on the other side.

Her eyes widened. That’s why they’d told him not to come in, because she’d be naked. She was glad they’d stopped him now. She was having a hard enough time knowing how to act around him already without the awkwardness this would have added.

She stripped off and placed her clothes in a pile beside her. The floor was freezing underfoot and the chill that hung in the air stole the last of the warmth from her body. She carefully hopped up onto the slab and lay down, taking a deep breath when the three women moved to stand at different points, the tall one at her head and the other two on opposite sides of her. They all smiled down at her. She moved her gaze to the icy ceiling and kept it there as they began to chant. Her skin prickled, the hairs standing on end as a feeling like static electricity filled the air. They were drawing symbols and her body began to burn. Her shoulders ached and her stomach twisted.

She tried to sit up, but found that she couldn’t move her hands. She looked at her left hand and attempted to lift it off the table but it wouldn’t shift. In desperation, she tried to move her ankles and found they were stuck too. A chill of fear swept through her. It was as though she was being restrained but couldn’t see the bonds.

“The boy can see her.” The tall witch cast a glance at the door.

“Likes her.”

“Has tasted her.”

She felt a finger run over the marks on her throat and furrowed her brows. She tried to move away from it and desperately wriggled. There was something soothing about their voices as they continued to talk and she began to focus on them, shutting out the fear that was engulfing her and the spots of searing pain that began to burn deeper at her shoulders and over her chest and stomach.

“Their paths are entwined.”

“Now.”

“Forever.”

Whose paths? Were they talking about Valentine and her? They said he had tasted her, and that he liked her and could see her. See her how? There had to be a deeper meaning to it than just being able to physically see her. Was it because of the blood he had taken from her? Were they talking about the vision he'd had?

“It is a good match.” The thin witch's hands began to get closer to her, still drawing the invisible symbols in the air.

“He will protect her.” The short one's hands edged towards her, matching the descent of the thin one's.

“Save her.” The young one smiled at her and brought her hands down to hover over her chest. She craned her neck to see what was happening as the witch continued to draw symbols.

“Like she will save him.” They all spoke at once and fiery pain ripped through her body as their fingers touched her, moving in a pattern against her skin and searing her.

The thin one's hands were marking her shoulders and she could feel the short one touching her stomach while the youngest witch

drew upon her chest. Prophecy could see faint marks appearing as the witch's hand moved faster and faster until it was almost a blur.

She felt numb when all the pain focused on where their hands were touching her and she screwed her eyes shut as it began to intensify, making the points where they were in contact with her feel as though someone was pushing a hot poker into her flesh.

She arched off the table, flung her head back and screamed.

* * * *

Valentine ran to the door the moment he heard her scream and pounded it with his fists. She sounded petrified, in pain, and he had to get to her. He banged on the ice, hitting it with everything he had and growling when it didn't break.

"Prophecy!"

He was thrown away from the door by some invisible force and reacted quickly when his senses screamed danger at him. He flipped backwards over the cold fire, narrowly avoiding it and coming to land gracefully on the other side of it on one knee and with one hand pressing into the floor.

He looked up the instant the door opened and stood, ready to fight if he had to.

It was Prophecy.

She looked white as snow against her black clothing, her body trembling as she held herself tightly, and he knew it wasn't the cold that had done this to her. It was the witches. He went to attack them when they appeared behind Prophecy but the youngest one stopped him dead in his tracks by simply holding her hand up.

"We did not harm her," the thin one said.

"She will be stronger," the short one continued.

“Stronger now than ever,” the youngest witch finished.

“Prophecy?” He looked at her.

She was shaking badly, her eyes fixed on the fire in a distant stare and her arms crossed over her chest, her hands gripping her shoulders. He went to move closer to her but she backed away, her eyes wide when she finally looked at him. She blinked rapidly and furrowed her brows.

“What did you do to her?” He didn’t hide his anger as he looked at the three witches who were standing behind Prophecy.

They didn’t answer him either. They were more interested in Prophecy.

She had turned to face them, her body still shivering and her lips as ashen as her cheeks. It made her red hair look like blood against white tiles and an image of the nightclub bathroom flashed in front of his eyes. He wanted to lick his lips as he remembered the sight of Prophecy’s mouth covered in blood. He had to get some food, and not just for himself. Whatever they had done to her, she looked like she needed blood in order to speed her recovery. He would take her back to the hotel and make sure she was asleep before heading out to get supplies. Shaking his head, he focused on the witches and what they were telling Prophecy.

“In two nights, come to see us.”

“When the moon is fat.” The short witch moved to the steps.

“Then the key will be ready.”

He saw Prophecy nod and stepped to one side when she began to move, giving her room to walk past him without upsetting her any further. He glared at the witches and they all smiled at him as though nothing had happened. He shouldn’t have let her go in alone. He should have gone with her or not let her go at all.

But it hadn’t been his decision to make.

He walked in silence behind her. She quietly descended the stairs, her arms still wrapped protectively around herself. When they reached the bottom, he removed his jacket and placed it around her shoulders. She smiled weakly but didn't say anything. She looked too drained to speak.

He didn't speak either as he walked with her back to the hotel, letting her go at her own pace. She continually stared at the floor and held herself, showing no sign of even knowing that he was there let alone wanting to talk to him. When he looked up to see the sign of the hotel, he was silently thankful. She had clearly been through a lot tonight and was going to need to rest. There were only another three hours until sunrise, but something told him that she'd be asleep long before it came.

He held each door open for her as they made their way back to their suite and took his jacket from her shoulders when she finally came to a halt in front of her bed.

"Do you want me to?" He intimated her shirt and she shrank away from him, shaking her head. She sat down on the edge of the bed and curled up. "You need blood. I shall go and get some for you."

She shook her head again, swallowed hard and opened her mouth. "I just...I want to sleep now."

"I understand. Get some rest," he said.

She crawled further up onto the bed and pulled the covers over her without taking her clothes off.

He looked at her feet. She hadn't even taken her boots off. He didn't notice what he was doing until her boots were in his hands and then he looked at them for a moment before placing them down at the foot of her bed. He wanted her to be comfortable. That's all it was. She'd suffered some kind of trauma in that room, bad enough that she didn't want to talk about it, and it had awoken a desire in him to look after her.

Prophecy: Child of Light – F E Heaton

She seemed so small and weak, like Mathias had thought on first meeting her. She looked as though every ounce of strength had been drained from her.

He walked over to the chair in the corner of her room and put his jacket down over the back of it. Sitting down, his eyes fixed on Prophecy when she shifted on the bed.

He would wait a few minutes to make sure she was sound asleep and then he would go to retrieve some blood for them both. It wouldn't take him long and then he could return to this place where he could easily see her without being too close to her. He could feed while keeping an eye on her. He wouldn't move from this spot all night or all day.

He would wait here for as long as it took her to get the rest she needed.

When she finally awoke, he would be here. He would be the first thing she'd see and she would know that she hadn't been alone.

She would know that he'd been watching over her.

Chapter Twelve

Valentine watched Prophecy's eyelids flutter and her nose wrinkle up. He could feel the sun setting outside. He managed a smile when she opened her eyes and looked at him. He was leaning back in the armchair, his elbows resting on the arms and his hands together with his fingers pressing into each other and his palms apart.

She frowned and cleared her throat. He flicked the switch on the table lamp beside him so he could get a better look at her and she squinted as the light filled the room. She was still paler than normal and her eyes still betrayed how tired she was even as she sat up.

"I shall get you some blood," he said and stood. He went to the mini bar in the other room. The little bottles of water and alcohol now sat on the counter above it, discarded in favour of keeping the blood chilled. He opened the door and took out one of the packs of blood he'd got last night from one of the Paris sources.

He poured its contents into a tall glass and took it to her. She would need more than just a glass to feed her properly, but he didn't want to rush her. She had refused his offer of blood last night. There was a chance she would refuse him again if he offered her more than she could stomach. He'd be satisfied if she only had a sip. Even a sip of human blood could go a long way to giving a body the strength it needed to heal.

He held the glass out to her. She was now sat on the edge of the bed and when she took it from him, he moved back to his chair and sat down.

She looked at the blood and then closed her eyes and drank. She was hungry, he could see that, but she wasn't drinking it as swiftly as she'd done in Oxford.

When the glass was empty, she glanced at him.

“Would you like more?” he said but she shook her head.

She looked terrible.

He tried to think of some way to make her feel better again. The blood clearly wasn't going to have the effect he desired. Although it would help her body heal, it would do nothing for her mind. She blinked and when she opened her eyes again, they were fixed on the window behind him.

She longed to go out. It was written in the way she was staring at the curtain, as though she could see straight past it to the night falling on the other side.

He considered what he was about to suggest. Experience told him that it was too dangerous to leave the hotel without a good reason. Someone associated with the seven was likely to see them and he was certain that it had been the hunter who had followed them when they'd first arrived.

He looked at her while she continued to stare at the window and ignored all the warnings that were ringing through his head.

“Would you like to go out? I mean...” He stumbled on the words when her eyes moved to look at him, her lips curving slightly at his suggestion. “Would you like me to show you Paris?”

She nodded, her smile increasing. It felt good to see it. It seemed to bring a hint of colour to her ashen cheeks and her eyes looked brighter.

“Get dressed and I will take you anywhere you want to go.” He stood and walked to the door, closing it behind him and giving her some privacy as he went to his own room. He was sure that this would turn out to be a mistake, but he had to do something to get some life back into her and take her mind off whatever it was that was plaguing her.

Putting his jacket on, he waited for her while he drank some blood, taking the edge off the hunger that was beginning to creep in. He never had been one to gorge himself. He always preferred to be just the right side of hungry. Not enough that he couldn't

control himself, but enough that his senses were sharper and more likely to detect humans in places they shouldn't really be at night. Cemeteries, parks and open industrial areas were all a favourite haunt of vampires and therefore vampire hunters. His hunger not only made them easier to detect, but it made him want the kill more.

He looked up as the twin doors to Prophecy's room opened. She was dressed in black again. Her boots were in place, hidden beneath the baggy bottoms of her combats and she had put on the only other black shirt he'd been able to find for her. It was a little tight, but it suited her, and it meant she'd blend in more. All women's clothing seemed to be either tight or overly revealing these days. Cornelius had told him he was too old fashioned and needed to see the advantage of their restrictive clothing. Apparently, it gave you something to look at before you decided to kill them. All he saw when he looked at humans was his next meal or a potential problem. There was no attraction.

He smiled at the same time Prophecy did. She looked self-conscious and he realised that he'd been staring at her. He dragged his eyes away and headed for the door. Opening it, he checked that the do not disturb sign was still in place. The maids were probably becoming annoyed by the fact that they weren't allowed to tidy the suite, but he didn't want them coming in while he and Prophecy were sleeping and vulnerable, and it certainly wouldn't do to have them discover the blood stained glasses or the packs in the refrigerator. He waited for Prophecy to pass him before closing the door.

Turning to face her, he began to walk down the corridor towards the lifts.

It would be good to get her mind off things, if only for a short while.

* * * *

Prophecy's eyes were wide as she surveyed the city stretching out below them, a mass of twinkling lights in varying hues of yellow with different intensities. Valentine looked away from her and at their surroundings. There were buildings that stood out

from the rest, landmarks that were lit by bright spotlights. He could see the church of Sacré Coeur in the distance to his right and the Arc De Triomph directly in front of him. Between the arch and where they were standing, there was a long row of fountains. Their water carried the light as they danced in the darkness.

When his eyes fell to rest on Prophecy again, she was still staring at the city, drinking in the sight of it. She looked much better. Her eyes were bright and her lips were curved into a permanent smile. Even her skin had more colour.

He couldn't get over how fascinated she was by what she could see. They had already seen the Arc De Triomph close up. She'd watched the cars whizzing around it, their taillights streaking through the night as they hurried to unknown destinations. They'd walked down from the arch to the Eiffel Tower, and she'd insisted that they go up it. He had paid the entrance fee and let her choose her floor. She'd mumbled something about heights and had chosen the first.

And here they stood.

"How long has it been since you've been to Paris? I mean, apart from passing through," she asked, keeping her eyes fixed on the scenery.

He leaned against the railings and looked at the fountains dancing before bringing his eyes back to her. She was far more interesting than Paris. He'd seen this city so many times that he'd become immune to its beauty. Paris was just another city. Prophecy was enthralling.

"Five years, possibly more." He kept his eyes locked on her face, taking in the changes in expression as she thought about his answer and looked at another sector of the city.

"That long? If I had your job, I'd always be travelling. I'd see every city I could, as many times as I could. Tell me about the things you've seen. Tell me about the cities. Have you been to many of the balls that are held in the palaces and the mansions? Arkalus and Iona often attended them, but I was never allowed to go."

He shook his head in amusement. She was talking so fast that if she had needed to breathe she would have been blue in the face from lack of oxygen.

“I have attended a few. My position does not afford me such privileges. I can only go where I am ordered to go.”

She frowned. “But you’ve seen cities? I bet you’ve spent years living in some of them. I’d live a year in each city and when I ran out of cities to see, I’d start all over again.”

“You would grow bored. They lose their sparkle over time. When you spend too long in a city, you begin to see it as just another gathering of buildings. It becomes nothing special.”

“Oh. But it’s so fascinating. Look at it.”

He did. It wasn’t remotely fascinating any more. It was dull, tarnished by years of fighting for his life in its dirty back streets and searching for hunters. To him, it was just another battleground. He didn’t see the buildings any more, didn’t stop to look. All he focused on when he entered any city was completing his mission. He looked at her again.

She was fascinating, not the rest of the world. He could watch her for hours, especially when she was like this.

“What is it?” She caught him looking at her.

“You are so young.” He straightened up and reached a hand out, brushing his fingers against her cheek. “You are so very young and everything is so fresh and new. I have seen the whole world change. I have witnessed man’s progress...seen it all.”

Her eyes were large and round. He withdrew his hand and hers touched the spot on her cheek where his fingers had been.

She really was young, maybe too young to be facing something like saving the world. She’d spent her whole life trapped inside her family’s mansion. As far as he knew, she’d learnt everything from books and television, and her physical training had always been against the same opponent. She had a lot to learn and she

was going to have to learn fast. He would protect her to the best of his abilities, but there was a chance that she may have to fight without him at some point and he had to know that she could handle herself. He needed to test her.

“When I met you, was that the first time you had been out of your family’s house?”

She nodded. “I told you, they don’t let me hunt. I guess I know why now. I don’t think I would’ve been able to handle this whole crazy situation so well if I had been any younger.”

“If you do not mind my asking, how old are you?”

Her look turned pensive and she stared at the city in silence for a few seconds before answering, “I honestly don’t know.”

She looked as though she wanted to cry as she said those words and the need to comfort her rose up inside him again.

“We shall find out. Do not worry.”

She smiled at him. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He stared at her, feeling as stunned by her words as she looked. If she had been able to blush, her cheeks would’ve been blazing. She averted her eyes, turning her head away from him and fiddling with the railing.

He searched for something to say.

“The last time I was here was insane.” He knew that she wanted to know about the things he’d seen and if it alleviated some of the tension between them, he was happy to tell her. She looked out of the corner of her eye at him. It was a small gesture, but it told him that if he continued to talk she would turn back around and face him. “I had not one but two hunters to track. I had planned to kill the weaker one first, but things rarely go to plan. I ended up fighting them both at once. It wouldn’t have been such a bad thing if the second hunter had not been one of the few good ones.”

“What happened?” She turned a little more to look at him. If he kept talking, he’d be able to see her face properly again. He could see that she wanted to face him, but she was still embarrassed about what she’d said.

“It was close. I haven’t been back since because of it. I can handle most weapons in combat, but two hunters with swords were beyond my capabilities when I did not have a weapon myself. The scars still haven’t disappeared, and I doubt they will now.” He subconsciously rubbed at his chest while he remembered the fight. It really had been close. Looking up, he found that she was facing him again, her eyes full of questions.

“Did you kill them both?” she said and her eyes fell to rest on his hand which was still pressed against his chest. “Did they badly hurt you?”

He couldn’t get over how everything seemed to fascinate her.

“If it had been holy wooden swords they’d had, I would not be here today.”

She reached out her hand towards his chest. Her eyes were locked on it in a distant stare and her brows were raised. She paused, clearly realising what she was doing and withdrew her hand.

“So you still have the scar?” she said and he nodded slowly. He still had it. It served as a reminder of just how close he’d been to meeting his end and since receiving it he had worked even harder at perfecting his skills.

“I would show you it, but...” He trailed off when she averted her eyes again.

She leaned against the railing and heaved a sigh. “Valentine? What’s Prague like?”

He leaned beside her and his eyes settled on her profile. He’d thought she was going to ask him something more personal. He was beginning to get the feeling that she was avoiding asking directly. She was learning about him from his tales about the

cities he'd seen and the things he'd done in them. All the way here, she'd been asking about them. He'd told her about the time he was nearly killed in Istanbul by nothing more than a group of angry people. He'd told her about his visits to Rome and Florence. He'd even told her about the times he'd spent in England with Mathias. She'd now added Paris and Prague to the list. She asked him about cities, but not about himself.

All he'd asked her was about her family and how she'd learnt things without being out in the world to gain experience. He hadn't asked her anything personal like how she'd felt to be trapped inside the house, or what she liked to do.

It seemed they were both avoiding asking about each other. It was as though they were both trying to maintain their distance for some reason. He knew why he was doing it. A part of him believed that if he kept that distance between them, then he wouldn't be breaking the law. It was pointless. They had already broken one law; they may as well break the rest too. The penalty would be the same. Nothing they could say or do would stop the Law Keepers from coming for them.

He hated that name. It should have been his.

Two centuries he'd spent working his way through the ranks of the guardsmen, from the lowly rank that was assigned to stand guard outside the house all the way through to the high guardsmen, those that protected Kalinor. He'd moved one step beyond that by attaining the role of hunter nearly a century and a half ago. He'd been a single step away from becoming a Law Keeper.

Perhaps it was best that he hadn't achieved that rank. He would have had to do his duty and murder Prophecy. The punishment a Law Keeper suffered if they broke the law was unspeakable, so harsh that no vampire would bring themselves to consider it. All it would have taken was for the Law Keeper of Aurorea to have been killed and he wouldn't have had the choice of going against his family and his duty.

He sighed.

In a way, what he had done had proven that he wasn't perfect for the position after all.

He looked at Prophecy. She was still waiting for an answer, her eyes fixed intently on him. He'd given it all up for her. He hadn't even thought about what he was doing. His decision had been made the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he just hadn't realised at the time.

"Prague is beautiful, even when you spend many years in it. It has been my home since I was given this dark gift and I have spent half of my life as a vampire there. You can feel its history when you walk around it. It looks so at home at night that it seems as though it was built to be seen in darkness." He noticed the solemn edge her expression picked up and placed a hand on her shoulder. She winced slightly but tried to hide it from him. He frowned at her, concerned that she was hurt. Opening his mouth, he thought about questioning her about it but let it go instead. She clearly didn't want him to know what had happened with the witches and he didn't want to force her into telling him. It would only spoil the evening. "You will see it again. I am certain of that."

He removed his hand and let it rest on the railing again.

She smiled at him, evidently relieved that he wasn't mentioning her flinching. "I know."

His brows knit again when something caught his eye. It was too far off to make out in the dark square below them, but it was rapidly approaching. His fingers tightly gripped the railing as the creature below them finally came close enough for him to see it properly.

It looked as though the evening was about to get spoiled after all.

Chapter Thirteen

Prophecy didn't quite know how to react when Valentine leapt up on top of the barrier around the first floor of the Eiffel Tower. She'd been enjoying a quiet evening away from the increasing pressure of the prophecy and suddenly it was coming to an end. She looked at Valentine. He was peering at the ground below them, scanning it for something. He'd seemed a lot better tonight. He'd been happy to be near her and talk to her. In a way, she got the feeling that he was concerned about her. She'd given him good reason to be worried after all.

She pressed her hand into her shoulder and frowned while she rubbed it. It was still sore.

Her whole body was sore, but she didn't want to worry Valentine. It was strange seeing him so concerned about her. He was so agitated and attentive, and it made her feel self-conscious and awkward. She wanted him to be confident about everything again, everything including herself.

"What is it?" she said and then heard a scream from far below.

Her eyes immediately sought out the owner of it and she saw two men harassing a woman.

"Someone is about to get much more than they bargained for," he said and gave her a grim look. "Werewolf."

"Which one?" She focused her senses, trying to determine which one out of the three people was the werewolf.

"See you down there," he said and dropped off the side of the tower.

She watched him plummet towards the ground, land gracefully on his feet and then run straight for the three people. She hesitated and then jumped up to the same spot where he'd been.

Looking down at the dizzying drop below her, her gaze followed Valentine where he was now fighting the three. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

If he didn't break anything by jumping, then she wouldn't.

Would she?

Another scream pushed her into a decision and she stepped out into mid air, letting her instincts guide her movements during the fall. She kept her eyes closed, not wanting to see the ground as it came up to meet her. There was no point in looking; she wouldn't be able to do anything about it if she was going to hit the ground wrong. She'd rather not know.

She landed on her feet in a crouching position, opened her eyes and bolted over to Valentine.

She levelled a swift kick at the head of the man who was about to hit him and when it connected, she realised that he was human. He fell to the floor unconscious and she wondered if Valentine would be sorely disappointed if she killed him. She was getting hungry again. She looked at Valentine as he grappled with the woman and saw the other man unconscious on the ground. He hadn't come here to fight the men.

The woman was a werewolf.

A roar of pain filled her ears and Valentine clutched at his arm.

She was by his side immediately, trying to check the damage, but he was looking straight past her. She realised that the woman was gone and turned to see her running across the square towards the Eiffel Tower.

When Valentine started running, Prophecy did too. She kept up with him as the world sped by, nothing more than a blur as they tracked down the werewolf. They ran into an area of low bushes and trees. She stopped when Valentine caught her arm and pulled her backwards.

He pressed a finger to his lips and then pointed through the trees.

She looked there. It was another open square and the woman was stood in the middle of it, waiting for them to make a move. Prophecy looked up at the moon. It was only a quarter full. She wished it still held its sway over all werewolves, but those over a century old learned to defy it and change at will. The woman was staring at them and she got the feeling that they were about to find out if she was older than one hundred years.

The woman's bones shifted and clicked into place, her body changing shape as fur erupted across her skin and her face distorted into her werewolf guise. It stared across at them with yellow eyes, its teeth glistening with saliva as it waited.

"We have to kill her." Valentine's voice broke the silence and Prophecy glanced across at him.

"Why? She's just a werewolf. She probably doesn't even know who we are."

"She knows," he said, looking down at Prophecy. "She is a guardian of Aureora. I have met her before. That's why Kalinor sent her out to hunt us down, because she would recognise me. If we do not kill her, she will report back to our families."

She looked from him to the woman and back again. "But I've never fought a werewolf before."

"It is about time you learned then." He removed his jacket and placed it over a bench before he walked out into the open square.

She couldn't move. She didn't know what to do. She had to fight, but a part of her was begging her to remain in the safety of the trees. Valentine would be able to handle this. He wouldn't need her help so she was fine where she was. A quiet voice at the back of her mind said that she was hiding because she was frightened of going into a fight where she didn't know the strengths and weaknesses of her opponent. She couldn't even remember how to kill a werewolf. She knew it wasn't just silver

that could kill them. Although they were immortal like her, they were weaker and more vulnerable than a vampire. She cast her mind back, trying to remember what Tiberius had told her when she'd been learning about different demon species. A werewolf could be killed by silver, severe blood loss and decapitation or breaking of the neck. She didn't have any silver other than her necklace, she didn't have a weapon that she could use to damage it enough to create severe blood loss, and she didn't think she had the strength to break its neck. She had to fight it though.

She'd feel a lot better if she didn't have to fight bare handed.

Her eyes scanned the bushes surrounding her for something she could make use of. There wasn't even a decent-sized branch to make a club from.

She was really going to have to start carrying a weapon.

She watched as the werewolf and Valentine began to circle each other, both of them growling as they sized their opponent up. She had to move. She should be fighting by his side, not cowering in a bush. He was relying on her to help and she really did need to learn how to fight a werewolf if she was going to survive this prophecy.

Valentine changed into vampire guise. His face shifted when his teeth descended and his eyes became a rich blue. She flinched when he launched himself forwards, clashing with the werewolf as it mimicked his move. The twin roars of the warriors in front of her made her feeling of nausea worsen. Valentine lashed out at the werewolf, leaving deep gashes across its chest where his claws had made contact. The werewolf sneered at him, growling low in its throat as it leapt backwards, placing some distance between it and Valentine.

She couldn't move as the two pounced on each other again. Their actions were raw and primal, not measured or executed with skill. They both slashed and hacked with their claws, not giving the other an inch as they attempted to defend themselves while attacking. There was no room between them and as they moved into a darker area of the square, they seemed to merge

into one. Fur flew as they clashed, their growls filling the night air. She couldn't tell who was winning.

A loud roar filled her ears and instinct drove her to run out into the square. She hadn't needed to be able to see them to know that Valentine was hurt. When she reached them, she saw the werewolf hunched over Valentine with its teeth sunk deep into his shoulder.

She leapt onto its back, grappling with it as she tried to get an arm around its neck and drag it off him. When it released Valentine, she struggled to get her hands on its jaw. It tried to get her off its back, its teeth gnashing as it attempted to bite her hands.

She slipped into vampire guise and dug her claws deep into the flesh under its jaw and the side of its head. She tried to summon the strength to kill the beast as it shook, trying to shift her while she clung on tightly. It wouldn't come.

A low moan caught her attention.

She didn't need to summon any strength. When she saw Valentine lying on the ground with one hand pressed to his shoulder and smelled the blood on him, she roared.

Twisting the werewolf's head, she smiled in satisfaction when she heard the bones in its neck crunch. It fell to the floor with her still on its back. She sprang off, her face shifting back into her human guise while she ran over to Valentine.

She pressed her hand to his where he held his shoulder and then withdrew it, frowning at the sticky, dark blood that coated her fingers. He removed his hand to inspect the damage and fear clenched her heart.

The wound was bad. There were deep, ragged teeth marks in his left shoulder and the whole of his shirt on that side was wet with blood and saliva. It looked as though the werewolf had been chewing him.

“I must taste good.” He pressed his hand back to his shoulder and grimaced.

She looked from him to the werewolf. The woman had changed back now. She was lying naked on the floor with her blonde hair caked with blood and deep scratches marking her pale flesh. Crimson stained her lips and chin.

Prophecy realised that the werewolf had been drinking his blood in an attempt to weaken him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hesitated. I should have fought beside you from the beginning, then you wouldn’t be hurt,” she said. Her brows furrowed into a worried look and she touched his shoulder again.

“It is not your fault.” He pushed himself up onto his feet, his left arm dangling limp at his side. He stretched and gritted his teeth, his fingers clutching tightly at his shoulder.

“We should get that patched up.” She pointed to the wound. She wanted to tend to it, not only to alleviate her guilt, but because she needed him strong if they were going to make it through this. The battles that lay ahead of them were only going to get harder. They both had to be strong.

She followed him over to the bench where he’d placed his jacket and helped him slip it on over his good arm. He winced and sucked a sharp breath in through his teeth when she placed it over his injured shoulder and she gave him an apologetic look.

His eyes met hers and she didn’t bother hiding her concern. She ignored his weak protests as she manoeuvred herself under his good arm, letting it rest heavily on her shoulders and supporting his weight. Taking a deep breath, she started walking with him back to their hotel.

* * * *

Prophecy settled Valentine on the edge of his bed and gently pushed the jacket off his bad shoulder before slipping it down his good arm. He looked pale. His skin was white and sickly and he

kept swallowing, evidently trying to keep control of the pain. She waited for him to push her away but he didn't. He just looked at her and she in turn stared at him.

His eyes moved to rest on the wound and hers followed suit.

There was blood everywhere. The sharp metallic smell of it tainted the air, making her stomach gurgle. Looking down at his shirt, she could see the blood soaking through. It created a sticky dark patch that stuck the black material to his skin. The wound looked deep. Her eyes flickered to the buttons on his shirt. She would need to remove it in order to clean the cuts. Werewolf saliva acted as an anti-coagulant and with vampires, it had a tendency to slow the healing. She had to clear the injury of as much of the saliva as possible. Some of it would have been absorbed into his body already, but she could aid him by removing the rest.

She took a deep breath and edged her hands towards the row of buttons. Her eyes met his. Her fingers curled into fists and she withdrew them slightly, trying to build up the courage to remove his shirt. He couldn't do it himself, not without the use of his other hand.

She reached for the top button, fumbling with it as her fingers shook and moving swiftly onto the next one when it gave way. She kept her eyes fixed on her hands, not looking at his body as she gradually exposed it.

She was surprised that he was letting her do this for him. She'd half expected him to shut her out of his side of the suite once they'd made it back to the hotel, but here he was, sitting quietly on the edge of the bed and silently watching her every move. He was as still as a mill pond apart from the occasional twitch of his jaw muscle when the pain became too much and he gritted his teeth.

When she reached the last button, her eyes skipped over his chest and came to rest on his hurt shoulder. She carefully peeled the shirt back, ignoring the way he breathed in sharply each time she accidentally hurt him. She couldn't help it. She was being as gentle as possible as she drew the sleeve down his arm and over

his hand. She didn't remove the rest of his shirt. It was better that it kept half of his chest hidden from view. That way she would be able to concentrate on what she was doing.

Walking into his bathroom, she gathered everything she could find that could be of help to her, deposited it on the bed beside him and then went to her bathroom to do the same. She emptied the fruit bowl that was in the living area and filled it with warm water from the sink in his bathroom. She walked slowly back into the bedroom, trying not to spill any of it, and placed it on the low table beside the bed. She glanced at Valentine, checking that he was still all right. He was staring at the wound and looking paler by the second.

She grabbed one of the washcloths and stared at it. It was white. Why was hotel stuff always white? It was the most ridiculous colour on the planet. There was no way she could use it. The blood would stain it and she'd never be able to get it out. The last thing they needed was the maid seeing a bloodied cloth.

She spotted the bag that Valentine had brought with them sitting by the door into the living area and opened it. Rifling through the clothes, she found the tunic top that Valentine had taken from her room when he'd kidnapped her. She gave it one last look and found she didn't have the heart to tear it to shreds. Carrying it with her, she bunched a section of it up in her hands and dipped it into the water.

He winced when she dabbed his shoulder with it, applying tentative strokes to his skin to clear away the dried blood before moving on to the actual wound.

The bite was deep, cutting into his shoulder on both sides of his body. There were a series of perfect teeth marks where the werewolf had bitten him several times, probably trying to get a better grip on him. She bit her lip while she cleaned his back, her brows furrowing when the voice in the back of her head told her that this was all her fault. Valentine was hurt because of her. She cursed the tears as they began to fill her eyes and brushed them away so he wouldn't see them. He'd only think she was even more of a child if he saw how badly she wanted to cry. It was all

so difficult to deal with. She just wanted to break down and give in right now and they'd barely begun their journey.

Picking up the cotton wool and cotton buds that she'd found, she soaked them in the water and began to clean the wounds on his back. She couldn't bring herself to look at his face, didn't want to see the pain in his eyes as she tried to clean the saliva out of the deep holes. He wasn't bleeding as badly now so his body had probably begun to heal but it would be days before he was fully able to use his arm again. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his fingers tense against his knee, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles turned white. She knew she was hurting him, but it had to be done. She just wished he knew how sorry she was.

She mentally berated herself for what she'd done and then made a silent promise to herself that she'd never hesitate again, especially if Valentine was in danger.

When she'd pulled the werewolf off him, she'd struggled to find the strength to kill it until she'd seen how hurt he was. In that moment, she'd felt power surge through her, making her feel invincible as she snapped the werewolf's neck. She hadn't felt like that before and she didn't know where the strength had come from. It had felt strange and had left her fingers tingling and numb.

A split second before she'd felt the strength rise up in her, she'd thought about what would have happened if she had hesitated still. Valentine would have been lost to her. The werewolf would have killed him. That thought alone had given her the power to kill it.

Without him, she'd be alone in the world. No one else was on her side. Mathias wouldn't work with her without Valentine there to make sure that he did. She knew that in her heart. He was only helping because Valentine had asked him to.

Moving around to clean the cuts on his chest, she briefly glanced at his face. He was watching her hands as she worked, his brows knit and his lips compressed. She could see the muscle in his jaw tensing whenever she hurt him. He was doing an admirable job of hiding how much he was hurting and steeling himself against

the pain. She returned her attention to her work, going to soak another piece of cotton wool in the water and then realising that it was as red as blood.

She carried it into the bathroom and emptied it into the sink. She rinsed the bowl out and refilled it, staring into the mirror as it reflected nothing but an empty room back at her.

Sometimes she wondered what she looked like and sometimes she wondered how others saw her.

Valentine had called her a child more than once, but had also said she wasn't a child. Other than Serenity, he was the first person to treat her like the adult she was. Her mother treated her as a child, her family treated her like a princess whom they wouldn't speak to, and her brother treated her like a prize to be won or taken.

She looked down to see the water running over the edge of the bowl and sighed. Shutting the tap off, she emptied some of the water out and carried it back into the bedroom. She glanced at Valentine while she soaked some fresh cotton wool, her eyes straying to the patch of his chest and stomach she could see. His muscles were tensed, clearly defined beneath his pale skin, and she could see the scar over his heart.

She wasn't a child.

He knew it.

He'd said it with so much fire in his eyes that she'd seen his desire for her through the drunken haze in her head.

She applied the cotton wool to the deep gash that ran upwards towards his shoulder. He'd confused her that night. After the way he'd acted in Oxford, she hadn't known what to make of his reaction to her, and then tonight he'd been so concerned about her that she didn't know what to make of her own feelings. To wake to find him sitting near her, his sleep-filled eyes showing her that he had watched over her all day, had stirred something inside her and the way he'd touched her cheek tonight had made heat sweep through her veins.

For one infinitesimal moment, she'd felt like one of the heroines from the movies she watched on the television in her room or the books she had Serenity bring to her. It had taken a lot to remind herself that it was forbidden, and was only made worse by the fact that he was an Aurorea.

An Aurorea who had sentenced himself to death by helping her.

An Aurorea who seemed to feel the same way she did.

She stepped back and looked at the wound, avoiding looking at him.

She had nothing to cover it with. It needed to be bound, not to help it heal, but to stop him from staining the sheets while he slept. She wondered if there were any places open where she could get bandages and things. A glance at the clock said it wouldn't be likely. It was almost two in the morning.

There was something else he was going to need too.

Blood.

She idly touched the marks on her neck. She had strong blood. She'd heard him say that before. Her blood was strong but it carried even stronger visions. She didn't know whether he'd be able to take them right now and there was a chance she wouldn't be able to suppress them if he did drink from her.

"Do not even think about it," he said and she looked at him. "I will heal."

"But—"

"I said no," he interjected. "There is blood in the refrigerator. I can drink that."

She frowned and went into the living area to retrieve the blood. She stared at it and then at her wrist. If she removed her blood from her body, he wouldn't receive visions when he drank it and he wouldn't know the difference. It would be warmer than the

blood from the refrigerator, but he probably wouldn't realise until it was too late.

She extended her claws and punctured her wrist with her thumbnail. Holding her wrist over the glass, she watched the blood trickle from her. When the glass was almost full, she licked the cut clean, sealing it with her saliva. She bit into the packet of blood she was holding and swallowed most of the contents before adding a small amount to the top of the blood in the glass. She smiled at her plan. Now he would be none the wiser to what she'd done. He'd smell the bought blood and not hers, and the first thing he'd taste would be ice cold. He wouldn't suspect a thing.

She kept her face straight as she carried it into the bedroom. He was sitting against the pillows on the bed, his shirt now completely off, and was inspecting the wound. He looked up when she approached and she held out the glass, willing her hand not to shake. He took it from her. She held her breath when he sniffed at it and then relaxed as he drank it all down in one go. She took the empty glass and placed it into the bowl of dirty water.

Carrying it into the bathroom, she removed the glass and washed both it and the bowl out.

Valentine had moved, leaning at an awkward angle against the headboard to avoid putting any weight on his hurt shoulder.

She rounded the bed, picked up his ruined shirt and her tunic top and threw them into his bath. She walked into her own room, looking for something she could use as a bandage for his wound until they found something more suitable tomorrow night. She remembered that they had to go see the witches and swallowed noisily as her shoulders, stomach and chest ached and burned with pain. She clutched her shoulders, her eyes shut tight as cold fire swept through her veins.

When it receded, she took deep breaths and focused back on helping Valentine. She looked at the array of cards on the dressing table that mentioned all the different services the hotel offered and smiled when she found what she was looking for.

She paused briefly at Valentine's door.

"I won't be long," she said and didn't wait for him to say anything before heading to the door of their suite and opening it.

Hurrying down the stairs, she went to the lobby and scoured it for a sign of the shop mentioned on the cards. She spotted it down the corridor to her left and went to it, breathing a sigh of relief when she found that it was open. She wished she'd known about it before she'd started cleaning him up; she might have been able to save her tunic top. She filled a little basket with bandages and cotton wool pads, and was about to go to the counter when she spotted bottles of liquid soap. She tossed one into her basket, intent on getting the blood out of her top.

She gave the woman behind the counter her room number and then smiled as best she could when she was handed her purchases in a little plastic bag.

She rushed back to the room and pushed the door open.

"Prophecy? What in the Devil's name..." Valentine trailed off when she walked around the corner, put the bag down on the end of the bed and tipped its contents out.

"Pharmacy," she said with a smile. "Sit up."

He was still frowning at her. She stared straight back, showing him that she wasn't going to let him tell her off for leaving the suite alone.

"I wasn't gone long, and I was careful." She emphasised the last part so he didn't have a reason to be angry with her.

He responded by sitting up, his good hand tightly holding his injured arm while he shuffled towards the edge of the bed.

Concentrating on her work, she opened the pack of cotton wool pads and the crepe bandages. She wrapped a couple of the pads in some of the bandage to stop bits from entering the wound or sticking to the blood and then pressed them against either side of his shoulder before bandaging him up to the best of her abilities.

She'd never had to do this before and it was an awkward place to try to bandage. She frowned while she pinned the end of it into place and then wondered if she'd tied it too tight when she saw the pained look on Valentine's face.

"I can make it looser," she said quickly and went to unpin it.

"No." He caught her hand. "It is better this way. It...it just stings a little."

She smiled at the way he was trying to mask his pain, as though she'd think any less of him if he admitted that it hurt like hell. Her eyes dropped to their hands. He was still holding hers. When she looked up at him with wide eyes, his fell to rest on where she'd been looking and he quickly let go of her.

"I should rest," he said and averted his eyes.

She nodded, watching him manoeuvre himself into a comfortable position on the bed. He looked so tired. The wound was going to take a few days to heal, she was sure of that. If it hadn't been a werewolf bite then it would have been fine by the night after tomorrow. She just hoped that she'd done a good enough job cleaning it up so he would heal faster. One of the guards of her house had been bitten once and it had taken nearly a week to heal the wound. She needed Valentine strong again. Anything could happen in a week.

He closed his eyes and lay on his back, his chest still exposed and his boots removed. He must have taken them off at some point. Had it been when she had gone downstairs? It would have hurt him to do it.

Her brows furrowed while she watched him trying to sleep and images of the fight flashed in front of her eyes. She shouldn't have hesitated, but that didn't bother her now, there was nothing she could do to change that. There was only one thing playing on her mind.

The strength she'd felt.

Prophecy: Child of Light – F E Heaton

She curled up in a chair near Valentine and stared at him while he slept.

Where had she found the strength to kill that werewolf?

Why had it come to her when Valentine was in danger?

She touched her shoulders.

Why had every mark on her body burned with pain at that very moment?

Chapter Fourteen

Prophecy looked at Valentine. It had been over eighteen hours since he'd closed his eyes in sleep and he'd not moved once. She went to the window and opened the curtains a crack. High above her was a large moon. It was only half full, but it was bigger than she'd ever seen. It seemed so close.

It was fat; that's what the witches had called it.

She had to go to see them to get the key to the prophecy.

She looked over her shoulder at Valentine. He needed his rest. She couldn't make him come with her when he was hurt. She would let him sleep and heal while she went out alone to see the witches. She could do this without him. All she had to do was go and collect something. Getting there wouldn't be a problem as she had the witches' scents now and her instincts would be able to guide her back to their icy home.

Something told her that if Valentine woke while she was out, he would be angry with her, but there was no point in making him come along when he wouldn't be able to defend himself if they ran into trouble. There was no way she could protect him. She wasn't strong enough.

She frowned.

But she had been strong enough. Last night she had killed a werewolf with bare hands, only she didn't know where the power she'd felt had come from.

She pressed her hands against her stomach and chest as they stung with a sharp, stabbing pain.

Maybe the witches would have the answers to that too.

Giving one last look to Valentine, she walked out of the door.

* * * *

Prophecy walked with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her eyes fixed on the floor and her senses extended as far as they would go. She had found her way to the area where the witches lived; now all she had to do was find their door. Her stomach flipped and spun, making her feel sick. She turned down the alley and realised that she was almost there. The pavement was wet underfoot and puddles reflected the moon and stars. She struggled to stifle her nerves when she remembered what had happened the last time they were here and wished that Valentine were with her. He wouldn't let them hurt her again.

She stopped when she recognised the metal door to her right and glanced back up the alley.

Maybe she shouldn't have come alone. Even in his weakened state, having Valentine beside her would have made her feel safe.

She stepped up to the door and then jumped back as it opened before she reached it.

She stared into the icy eyes of the short witch. The witch poked her head out of the door and looked both ways up the alley.

"Alone?" she said.

Prophecy nodded and willed her nerves not to show. She could do this. All she had to do was go in, retrieve the key and get back to the hotel. It was simple and nothing to be scared of.

When the witch ushered her in, she didn't hesitate. She strode past her and up the stairs, not slowing down until she was in the circular chamber at the top. She looked at the two other witches as they paused at their work to glance at her.

"She is here," the tall witch said.

"She is alone," the short witch added.

"Why alone?" the youngest one said with a questioning frown.

“Valentine was hurt. It was my fault. When I went to help him, I found I had strength that I’ve never had before. Do you know why?” Prophecy watched them exchange knowing looks and then followed them when they intimated for her to come into the other room. She didn’t want to go in there again, but she got the feeling they weren’t going to answer any of her questions until she did.

She sat down on a low bench while they gathered around the table they’d laid her on before. The fur blanket was gone now. There was nothing on it except a small wooden box.

“There is strength in your blood.”

“A strength that you call.” The second one smiled at her.

“Whenever your heart fears.”

“My heart fears? Fears what?” She frowned, not understanding what they were saying. She wished they would tell her straight, not confuse her mind with their riddles.

“We do not know.” The first one picked up the box.

“Your blood is pure.”

“Powerful.”

She kept her eyes on the box as the witches carried it over to her and then peered inside when the youngest one opened it. There was some kind of jewellery sitting nestled in amongst the plush purple velvet lining.

“The key?” She looked up at them and they all nodded. “This is the key to the prophecy? How will this help us translate it?”

They smiled.

“It will unlock what it is supposed to unlock.” The tall witch moved the box closer to her.

“It is a key.” The short one picked up the object.

“A key you must wear.” The youngest one held her hand out.

Prophecy wasn't sure what she was supposed to do so she just looked up at them, hoping they'd give her more information.

“Which hand is strongest?”

“Which do you write with?”

“Fight with?”

She held up her left hand and they smiled again.

“Perfect,” the tall one said.

“Wear the amulet on your right.” The short witch took her hand and slipped each ring onto her fingers before shutting the clasp around her wrist.

“Like your mother.” The youngest witch smiled broadly.

“My mother? You keep mentioning my mother. Did you know her? Am I like her as you said before?” She looked at the amulet they had placed on her. “Has she worn this?”

“It was hers to keep.”

“To protect.”

“Until death.”

She swallowed hard. “She's dead then. That's what you're telling me. My mother is dead?”

They nodded. She stared at the amulet. A ring fitted on each of her fingers and her thumb. There were strange silvery twisted threads of what might have been metal running from each one. On the back of her hand, they joined and formed an intricate star before attaching to the solid bracelet around her wrist. On her palm, all the threads met to support a dark purple stone. It shone in the icy blue light, and when she looked closely, she swore she could see movement in its clear depths. She flipped her hand

over. It was exactly opposite the star. She remembered the night she'd been here last and the marks the witches had been drawing. All stars.

She looked up at them and was about to open her mouth to ask more questions about her mother when they spoke.

"You have memories locked inside," the tall witch said and she remembered what Valentine had said about her memories and Arkalus.

"They will give you answers."

"They'll find their way out in time."

"How do I use this? What does it do?" She held her hand up.

The tall witch looked at the other two and they both nodded several times. She got the feeling they were talking to each other without speaking again and she wondered what it was about. Her question had been a simple one, or so she'd thought.

The tall witch gave her a sinister smile that sent a shudder up her spine.

"It is time you learnt your true power."

* * * *

Prophecy stared at the amulet as she walked. Her fingers still hummed and her whole body was buzzing. She couldn't believe the things the witches had told her. She'd had a mother. She'd had a powerful, brave mother.

She lowered her hand when she heard a noise and then thought nothing of it when it didn't come again. She continued along the dark streets, heading back towards the hotel. The sky was clouding over. Small streaks swept across the moon, glowing silver-grey as they passed it. She'd lost track of time when she was with the witches and couldn't tell how late it was. The sky was still pitch black and the lights were still lit on the Eiffel Tower

and other landmark buildings. There weren't many people around though. She'd only seen a couple since leaving the witches.

The witches had told her to be careful.

She decided that she wouldn't have felt so jumpy if they hadn't said that.

She walked out of a small road and into a large square. It was dimly lit and the moon had disappeared completely behind cloud, leaving the world in darkness. She sharpened her senses so she would be able to pick up on anything out of the ordinary. She considered changing into her vampire guise so she could see better and then decided against it. There were still people around and she didn't need to add any other crimes to her already growing list.

She frowned when she sensed something and looked around her at all sides of the square but couldn't see anything in the shadows. Walking faster, she kept her eyes fixed on the road that would lead to the hotel, and sharpened her senses. Her imagination conjured images of werewolves and vampire hunters. It wasn't far to the hotel. She could make it.

Something moved again. It was stronger now, which could only mean it was closer.

She jumped when a cat ran across her path.

"Stupid kitty." She watched it go and tried to relax. That's all it had been. Just a cat.

She froze.

Instinct forced her to change as her senses screamed of danger.

She turned on the spot and stared at the man standing not fifteen foot from her. His face was hidden in shadow, his scraggly hair hanging to below his jaw blocking the light. She sized him up, assessing the situation and all possible outcomes. He wasn't of a broad build like Arkalus, or tall like Valentine. He seemed average in every way. Her instincts told her not to underestimate

him when he moved forwards into a more brightly lit section of the square and she saw his face.

There was hardness in his eyes, and a sparkle of wisdom and calmness that set her nerves on edge.

“So you’re a Caelestis,” he said in a deep voice that made her stomach flip.

He knew what she was. He knew the bloodlines. He wasn’t a vampire; he was human. A hunter.

Her mind raced and she considered whether this was the hunter that Valentine had spoken of. She wished he were here with her. She couldn’t fight a hunter alone. She’d never met one before and she didn’t know what to do. If Valentine had never been able to kill this one, then how could she?

She backed off a step, wanting to place some distance between them and hoping she could get closer to the alley that led out of the square. She had been stupid to walk straight across it when she couldn’t see into the shadows. She should have walked around the perimeter, keeping to the shadows herself.

The hunter moved with her and her eyes were drawn to his hands. He had a weapon. She flexed her fingers, trying to focus but finding it impossible when the hunter raised the crossbow and pointed it at her.

“Why don’t you fight?” he asked with a frown.

She glanced at the alley and then at him.

“There’s no escape. I hadn’t realised that you were a Caelestis. I thought you’d be an Aureora too.”

It was him. He was the one who had followed them when they’d first arrived in Paris. What did she do? It was obvious he wasn’t going to let her go, not without a fight first. She didn’t want to fight him. There was something about him that made a part of her not want to hurt him. He was familiar somehow.

She looked at the alley again.

“Not going to fight me then?”

She shook her head, wanting to run but finding her feet didn't want to cooperate while he had the crossbow trained on her. She flexed her fingers again and he looked down at her hand, frowning at it and cocking his head to one side as he did so. When he lowered the crossbow a fraction, she bolted for the alley.

She had made it out of the other side when she felt something impact in her shoulder. She didn't stop running as the pain erupted and every vein in her body felt as though it was filling with ice cold liquid.

She stumbled and fell, landing hard on her knees and left hand as she tried to stop herself from damaging the stone in the amulet she wore. Her head ached and spun, the world spinning with it as her mouth turned dry. She swallowed repeatedly but it had no effect. Pushing herself up onto her feet, she clutched at her head as it swam and her stomach turned, making her feel like throwing up. She cringed as the points on her shoulders, stomach and chest began to burn and the ice in her veins was replaced with a fire.

When she moved her arm, she felt the dart in her shoulder and reached over, trying to grab hold of it but failing.

She was hot, too hot.

She wiped her brow with her hand, stunned to find sweat coating her palm as she brought it away. She turned around, her eyes shifting in and out of focus as she tried to see if the hunter was nearby. Her senses were off the scale, as though a million people were surrounding her but not at the same time. She couldn't concentrate on anything but the intense pain that ebbed and flowed through her.

She had to get to Valentine. He'd know what to do.

Pushing onwards, she clung to the walls of the buildings as she made her way back to the hotel at a painstakingly slow pace. Everything was getting darker, as though a black film was coating her vision and was getting worse as time drew on. She was barely conscious and had to force herself to keep her eyes open and keep moving. Her limbs were heavy as she approached the turning that led to the hotel. She felt numb, cold and hot at the same time. She reached again for the dart she could feel in her back and then pressed herself into the wall. She rubbed her back against it, gritting her teeth and crying out in pain when it didn't shift the dart. It just hurt.

She looked up to see the hotel sign and forced herself to keep heading towards it. She stumbled through the lobby, ignoring the calls of the concierge and staff when they saw the state she was in. She needed Valentine.

Valentine would save her.

Fumbling with the little buttons in the lift, she tried to focus on them as they swam in front of her eyes and she pressed the one that she thought corresponded to her floor. When the doors opened, she fell out into the hall and tried to stand but found she didn't have the strength.

She was so tired, so very tired. She just wanted to sleep. She crawled along the carpet, heading for the door to their suite by following her muddled senses. She could smell Valentine. She could smell his blood. He would fix her and make the hurt go away.

Reaching the door, she clawed herself up into a standing position and pressed her hand into it. Her head spun and she barely managed to stop herself from passing out as the world around her twisted and distorted in front of her eyes.

Mustering up the strength, she managed to bang her fist down once on the door before slipping into unconsciousness.

Chapter Fifteen

Valentine paced the length of the room, his hand balled into a fist and pressed against his mouth as he waited. She couldn't have been gone long. Mathias' phone call had woken him about two hours after the sun had set. Stupid girl. Why had she gone without him? He knew where she'd gone and he couldn't bear the thought of her going to see them alone. Why?

He sighed heavily and let his hand drop to his side. He winced when his shoulder throbbed with pain. Had she gone without him because she was under some kind of misguided belief that he wasn't fit enough to go out into the night? He'd had injuries worse than this before and had still managed to fight.

Where was she?

He glanced at the clock again. It was almost three in the morning. If she had left shortly after sunset, then she had been gone a long time.

He had to find her.

Grabbing his jacket, he headed for the door and stopped dead when a weak knock sounded. He opened the door and dropped his jacket as Prophecy fell into his arms. He collapsed to the floor with her, cradling her gently as she writhed against him. She was burning up. He pressed his hand against her forehead. She had some kind of fever. He caught her under her arms, gritted his teeth against the pain in his shoulder and dragged her into the living area.

Going back to the door, he closed it and locked it. He looked at Prophecy.

She was lying on the floor muttering things to herself. When she moved, something caught his eye and he frowned. He went to her and pulled her up into a sitting position so he could get a

better look at the slim shaft protruding from her shoulder. His stomach dropped when he recognised the type of dart. The hunter had found her.

He tried to ignore her ramblings as she moved closer to him. He didn't want to hear the things she was saying while under the influence of the drug. He couldn't stand hearing them.

She ran her hands up over his chest and he winced as they passed over his injury. She drew him closer to her, tugging harder when he tried to resist her and smiling coyly when he complied.

"My blood burns..." she whispered into his ear and tingles swept up his spine. "I hunger..."

He leaned to one side so his ear was away from her lips and the temptation they offered him but she pulled him back to her, digging her fingers in as she shivered with the fever. He looked at her. She was barely holding on as she moved her mouth back to his ear. He couldn't miss the seductive tone her voice had taken on as she whispered into it.

"Only your blood can sate mine, Valentine...give it to me...don't deny me..."

He closed his eyes, struggling against his desire to do as she'd asked and let her have what she wanted from him. He was powerless to resist her and she knew it. He tensed when she ran her lips slowly down the right side of his neck, teasing his skin.

"You have been drugged." He tried to keep focused while she edged ever downwards. "The dart was drugged and fitted with a tracking device."

He didn't know why he was still talking, she wasn't listening to him, but he felt compelled to talk, as though by doing so he could pretend this wasn't happening and could still the desires that were beginning to take control.

She reached the curve of his throat and nipped at him with blunt teeth. He could feel her feverish skin against his shoulder as she

drew the collar of his shirt to one side. He could feel it all happening, sense it before it even happened, and he knew there was no way he could stop her.

There was no way he would stop her.

He wanted it to happen.

He wrapped his hand around the dart in her back and pulled it out of her at the exact moment she sank her sharp teeth into his neck. He tensed, his whole body jolting with pleasure as she pulled on his blood and moaned low in her throat. He crushed the dart, letting it fall to the floor in pieces and trying to focus on it as he resisted giving in to the delicious feeling running through him. She just needed blood to cleanse her own of the drug and that's what he was giving her. That was all.

Bringing his hands around as she sucked harder, stirring his passion into life, he hesitated for a moment, standing on a brink between retaining control and distance, and surrendering to his darkest desires.

He wanted to focus and suppress his memories, but she was so hungry for his blood, for him, that it made it impossible. He let his hands hover over her, wanting to hold her to him but not wanting to at the same time. He couldn't cross that line. It was forbidden. They were doomed anyway. They had already committed sin when they'd fled together. No, he wouldn't cross that line. Crossing it would be admitting that he was doing all this for a reason other than it being his fault that she was discovered. Her life had been stolen from her. That was the reason he was doing this. It had nothing to do with the reasons his dreams whispered to him.

He closed his eyes when she bit down harder, her fingertips digging into his ribs as she held onto him. Before he'd realised what he was doing, he'd wrapped his arms about her. He felt as though he was falling as he held onto her, burying his fingers into her wild red hair and holding her to his neck.

The feeling of her fangs in him was divine, an exquisite pain that defied words, and he found himself clinging to her and letting her

take everything she wanted from him. He wouldn't stop her, not now, not ever. He couldn't stop her. He didn't have the will any more. Something that felt this right could never be wrong. The law had no hold over him any more.

His body ached and tightened in response to the desire she was stirring in him, and he growled quietly when her fingers moved against his sides, drawing him towards her.

When he opened his eyes and the room spun, he pushed her away from him, forcing her to stop drinking. She looked at him. Her mouth was surrounded by blood and her eyes were still a vivid shade of green. He stared into them and didn't stop her when she moved to lick the wound. He closed his eyes, breathing in deeply and relishing this last drop of pleasure she was offering him by closing the wound. Her tongue moved lightly over his skin, fanning the embers of his passion until he was forced to push her away again for fear of doing something he'd regret.

"We need to move. Are you feeling any better?"

She blinked at him and slid out of her vampire guise. She looked more conscious now at least. The drug would be starting to wear off and his blood would have helped, but she needed more if she was to cleanse her system. He stood up and ignored the way his head spun. He should have stopped her sooner. She'd taken so much from him and he'd been dangerously lost in the feeling of it all. He should have kept his focus and not let it affect him, but it had been impossible.

Grabbing her arm, he hauled her onto her feet and sat her down on the couch while he gathered their things. They needed to leave now. He had been foolish to waste time by letting her drink from him in the same place where he'd killed the dart she'd been shot with. The hunter would have used the homing device it was fitted with to track her here.

He threw everything back into the bag and zipped it shut before walking into the living area and putting it down on the table. He took his jacket and placed it on Prophecy, not listening to her weak protestations as he did so. When it was on, he grabbed the bag and put an arm about her waist to help her stand. He led her

to the door and took one last look around the room to make sure they had everything.

Leading her down the corridor to the lift, he thought about what to do. They would check out and get as far away from here as possible without being spotted. They were going to need somewhere to hide, somewhere quiet and safe, and she needed more blood.

There was only one place he could think of.

A cemetery.

* * * *

Valentine turned to face Prophecy when she began to lag behind. He pressed a hand to her forehead and frowned when he found she was burning up again. He was running out of time. Whatever poison the hunter had laced the dart with, it was powerful and he feared that if she didn't feed soon it was going to consume her. He'd never seen a vampire as sick as she was. She was constantly shivering, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she held his jacket closed. He picked her up, shutting down his own pain as she nestled close to him and aggravated his shoulder. He had to get her to safety. The sky was on the verge of lightening and there wasn't a sign of shelter so far in the cemetery.

When he reached the small church in the centre, he placed her down by a narrow door. This side would remain in shadow for most of the day. She would be safe here and it would be quicker for him to find shelter without her slowing him down. He crouched and ran his fingers across her brow as she murmured.

"I shall not be long. You will be safe here." He promised her and she curled up, holding her knees. She said things beneath her breath that he knew were directed at him. "We are running out of time. Stay here. The sun will not get you."

He straightened up and took one last look at her before walking off around the other side of the building. He hadn't got far when he sensed someone in the vicinity and turned to see a man

dressed in dark clothing walking towards the spot where Prophecy sat. He moved swiftly, aiming at first to cut the man off before he reached her and then deciding to wait so he could see the man's reaction.

He rounded the corner, looking at the man who was now bent over Prophecy and reaching a hand out to touch her. She growled and the man paused.

"Leave her be, preacher man, this is something that you do not want to see," he said.

The clergyman looked at him. "She is hurt. She needs assistance. She must come into the church and we shall help her."

"To help her is to sin." Valentine took a step towards the man. "To look upon her, is to look upon the Devil himself."

The man's expression became one of confusion and Valentine knew it was no use telling him again not to look. The man's eyes were already moving to Prophecy and all Valentine could do was wait.

Prophecy snarled at the clergyman, exposing her fangs by curling her top lip up.

The man stumbled backwards, his face blanched and his hands trembling as he stared at her.

"Wha...what...what is she?" The clergyman looked at him.

"We're angels with broken wings." Valentine grinned, snapped the man's neck and caught his body before it hit the ground.

Grabbing the keys from the man's belt, he carried him over to the small door and opened it. He placed the man down just inside and returned for Prophecy when he heard her whimpering outside. The sun was rising. He could feel it. He helped her up onto her feet and picked up the bag as he walked with her into the cold stone building, locking the door behind them.

He dropped the bag, put his arm about her waist and led her deeper into the church. It was small and bare. The altar was home to a single gold cross. He got the feeling that it wasn't visited very often. He didn't mind churches and the crosses that adorned them barely bothered him. They were handy places to hide since most demons hated them and most hunters never thought to check them, presuming that vampires hated them too.

Setting Prophecy down in a sheltered part of the building, he went back for the clergyman and the bag. She was muttering to herself again by the time he returned and her head snapped up when she smelled the man. Valentine let the man fall to the floor beside her and smiled when she pulled him to her and sank her teeth into his neck.

Watching her feed, Valentine wondered how many more sins they would commit before the Law Keepers caught up with them. Revealing the existence of vampires to humans was always a favourite of theirs, but this time wouldn't count since they had killed and fed off the human. The law was really created for vampires like Mathias, who clearly harboured feelings for his female housekeeper. Some of the most well known trials by the Law Keepers had been about human/vampire relations.

He couldn't see the attraction himself.

He stared at Prophecy. She was gorging herself on the clergyman, drinking so deeply that she looked as though she'd been starving for blood. How did she do that? How did she make him watch her like this? How did she make him want to watch her as though she was the most enthralling thing on earth?

Sitting down, he leaned back against one of the pillars, sighing to himself as he watched her.

She'd literally drained the clergyman dry when she dropped the body. His eyes followed the motion of her hands as she wiped the blood from her face, licking and sucking her fingers clean as she relished the last of it. He could feel the sun rising but it didn't bother him. They were safe here. They had gone far enough into the outskirts of Paris to not be tracked by the hunter. The area was quiet, the church was locked and the clergyman was dead.

Valentine closed his eyes.

He frowned when he felt Prophecy close by. He opened one eye and watched her curling up next to him. Holding an arm out to one side, he let her nestle close to him so she would feel safe.

“You shall be fine by nightfall,” he assured her.

“The witches...power...a key...my blood...the hunter in the square...why don’t I fight? I’m sorry...sorry for everything...you’ve sacrificed...” She trailed off when her head came to rest heavily against his shoulder and he realised she’d fallen asleep.

“It will be worth it. I am certain of that,” he said and let his hand rest around her upper arm, holding her to him.

She winced.

He frowned again.

Peeling the jacket off her shoulder, he pulled her shirt to one side to reveal what should have been smooth white skin. It wasn’t. There on her shoulder was a black star, intricately patterned with symbols around it. It was red raw like a new tattoo. His fingers hovered over it and he was surprised when he could feel power in it. Moving his fingers downwards, he looked inside her shirt to find a similar mark over her heart. He let her shirt cover her again and stared at her. Something was going on here.

Prophecy was going to have to do some explaining tomorrow.

But for now, she could sleep.

His eyes remained fixed on her face. He could remember his first encounter with a hunter and what it was like to be so young. The world had been a frightening place and knowing that he was immortal only seemed to make him fear death even more. There was nothing to comfort him if he was killed. No Heaven awaited. There was only Hell. He wondered how scared she was. She’d barely been out in the world for a few days and so much had happened. She was strong though, and quick thinking by the

looks of what had happened to her tonight. She must have run when the hunter attacked and that's how she got a dart in her back.

He looked down at her hand when she shifted and something glinted. Whatever it was, she was clutching it tightly and when he placed his hand near it, he could feel the same power he'd felt in the marks on her body. What had the witches done to her? There was magic involved, his instincts were telling him that much.

But how was it possible?

Vampires had never been able to control magic; it never obeyed their commands. Centuries of research by vampires wishing to command it had turned up nothing. Every attempt to use it had failed. Even the elders didn't have the power. But he felt magic in these marks, a power that went beyond anything he'd felt before.

No, not anything. The Three held such magic and he knew of another witch who commanded a power that was this strong.

But this felt different to hers.

He watched her face for a few moments longer as his eyelids began to grow heavy.

She had some explaining to do.

Chapter Sixteen

It was bright. The sun was setting over unfamiliar scenery, all of it pale and beautiful in the warm light. Row upon row of arched windows surrounded her and the sky was a vaulted ceiling above. She turned on the spot, completely unfazed by the daylight and feeling a strange sense of comfort. She watched the people as they zoomed past her, nothing more than blurs and jumbled words and laughter. She stopped when she saw someone in the distance. The world around her faded into black and white, but the woman in front of her remained in colour. The woman's wild red hair was long and the rich green skirt of her dress flowed like reeds in the river as she moved in slow motion away from her.

Prophecy followed, wanting to see the woman's face. She disappeared down the corridor and out into the narrow alley on the other side. Catching her should have been easy, but Prophecy was moving as slowly as the woman was. She felt as though she was running through deep mud or snow, unable to move faster as it hindered her. She just wanted to see the woman's face.

There was something familiar about her.

She chased her down the street, trying to catch a glimpse of the woman's features as she spun and turned in front of her. It was as though she was dancing rather than running. There was something joyful about her, wild and free, like a beautiful creature that had been released from a dark cell into the wilderness of the world.

Prophecy smiled too, running after the woman who was crossing over an arched wooden bridge. She could hear her footsteps on it and looked down to see slim dark boats passing underneath. The man who was pushing the boat with the pole didn't see her. He just waved at another similar boat as it passed him. She looked around to see the woman was far ahead of her now.

Running down the other side of the bridge, everything around her began to blur until only the woman was in focus. Prophecy followed her, watching her spin and twirl while she continued to run. She still couldn't see her face. Every time the woman turned, her hair shifted and hid it from view.

She stopped dead when the woman hopped up onto the low wall surrounding the long stone road they had been running along. There was nothing but water on the other side. Prophecy stretched out her hand to the woman but she turned and disappeared over the edge. Everything seemed to speed up and Prophecy ran as fast as she could to the wall the woman had fallen from.

Looking over the edge into the water, she found the woman, her face washed of colour but tinted with blue as she shimmered below the surface. Prophecy reached out her hand to her but the woman began to sink.

The woman's mouth opened.

"Don't be scared, child."

Prophecy woke with a start. Her breathing coming fast and ragged, she shot into a sitting position and quickly took in her surroundings. Where was she? She recoiled in fear when her eyes fell to rest on the crucifix on the altar and she shuffled backwards into the corner. Her brows furrowed, her eyes darting about as she tried to locate Valentine.

A glance at the stained glass windows told her it was night. The candelabra above her cast a warm glow on the interior of the church. Others hung above the aisle, but the candles in them were unlit.

She jumped when a door near her creaked open and she instinctively changed, letting her demon guise come to the forefront. She hissed at the intruder.

It was Valentine.

She slipped out of vampire guise and frowned. “Where were you?”

“I was on the roof, watching for danger.” He closed the door and cocked his head to one side when he finally looked at her. “Is something wrong?”

She managed to sit up straight and rearranged her clothing so she didn’t look as dishevelled. Her fingers paused when she realised that she was wearing Valentine’s jacket and her head ached to recall the events of last night. Raising her eyes briefly to rest on him, she saw that he was waiting for her to answer his question. She stared at the floor, trying to remember what she’d seen and felt.

“I had a dream,” she said quietly, unsure of whether she wanted him to know about it or not. If she told him, he might be able to tell her which city it was that she’d seen.

He crouched down beside her and looked into her eyes. “Are you sure it wasn’t a vision? Dreams do not usually shake people up like this.”

“Maybe it was...it was strange. I can’t make sense of it.”

He sat down and smiled. “It is even harder when you are trying to make sense of someone else’s visions.”

She smiled. She couldn’t imagine what he’d made of the things he’d seen in her blood. She had seen nothing in his last night. She remembered drinking from him and could see the marks on his neck as he sat next to her. His blood was strong, rich, and the more she’d drunk, the more she’d craved it. She still craved it.

Dragging her eyes away from his neck, she fixed them on the floor, tracing the cracks in the cold flagstones while she tried to remember her dream.

“I saw a city. There was a big square with a tower that seemed to reach to Heaven itself. There were a lot of people but one stood out amongst them. She was colourful when everything was dark and grey. I followed her down narrow streets with no names and

when we crossed over a bridge, I saw a white church and boats that had no rowers.”

“No rowers?” he said.

“None. The men pushed them with a big stick,” she said and then frowned when she remembered what came next. “I followed the woman again. I felt I had to see her face. I wanted to know who she was. She had hair like mine and skin as white as snow. She kept laughing and twirling as she ran along this road that was surrounded on one side by buildings and on the other by water. She stopped at the end of it, on the wall, and fell.”

“She fell?”

“Straight into the water, but there wasn’t a splash. I think I ran then, ran to see what had happened to her. She was in the water, looking up at me. She told me not to be scared.”

He frowned. “How real did it feel to you?”

“I felt I was living it. I was there,” she said and his expression became even more pensive. “It felt like the dreams I’ve had of battles but they’d never felt as real as this. The witches told me to dream. They told me sleep would give me answers.”

She noticed that he was staring at the floor now, lost in his own thoughts. His brows knit together into a frown and his jaw tensed. It made her uneasy for some reason.

“Valentine?”

“Venice. You saw Venice. This cannot be a coincidence.”

“What can’t?” she said.

He looked at her briefly before standing up and extending his hand to her.

She slipped hers into it and stood with his assistance.

“Mathias telephoned the hotel last night. He has discovered the location of a retired curator who might be able to help us discover the whereabouts of the second half of the scroll. The curator lives in Venice.”

She could see the disbelief in his eyes and she couldn't blame him. Her dream had been a vision. She'd been shown where to go to find what she was looking for. How? What higher power was guiding her?

She looked at the amulet on her hand and tensed when Valentine's hand appeared in view. He took hold of her hand and turned it over.

“I know about the marks.” His tone was low, thick with unspoken anger. “What's going on Prophecy?”

Raising her eyes, she saw nothing but hardness in his. He wasn't going to let her get away without answering his question this time and she supposed that if they were going to work together as a team, he had a right to know what was happening.

She raised her hand. The candlelight shone off the purple stone where it sat against her palm.

“The witches marked me. They told me that the stars were there all along and they just made them visible and activated them. They wouldn't tell me anything else until I asked them again last night.” Her eyes met his and she found they were still full of silent demand.

“How many do you have?”

“Eight of them.” She pointed to both of her shoulders, her stomach and her chest. “Each mark on my front has a corresponding one on the back.”

“What do they do?” he said and she could see the hardness in his eyes beginning to disappear.

“They focus something...it's...” She hesitated, feeling foolish and trying to think of a good way to say it. “You won't believe me.”

“Does it have something to do with the amulet you are wearing?”

She held her hand up again. “It’s the key.”

“How is that supposed to unlock the prophecy’s meaning?” He turned her hand over so he could see the back of it and then looked at the front. She had expected him to be rough, but his touch was gentle.

She smiled. “It doesn’t unlock the meaning...it...um...well, it unlocks me.”

He looked confused and dropped her hand. “What—”

“Watch.” She cut him off and concentrated hard, focusing on her hand and smiling when the stone began to glow. It had come quicker than last night. The witches had told her she would need to practice in order to make it come without her having to focus so much. Lazy threads of purple arced between her fingers, interlacing with each other and sparking wildly as her focus lapsed and she looked at Valentine.

He was staring straight into her eyes, his own full of amazement.

Her hand began to buzz and her eyes widened when she saw the threads of magic were winding themselves into a tight glowing ball above her palm.

She bit her lip as the magic crackled, sparked and disappeared with a pop.

Trying to call it back again, she frowned and pouted when nothing came. She still had to work on her control of it. The witches had said that when she got to know the power she commanded better, she would be able to use some of the more potent abilities that it carried. There was a book that had been her mother’s. It contained spells that she would need if she wanted to win the battle they were heading towards. They would find it for her, and would contact her to tell her where it was.

“What...how?”

She looked at Valentine. He seemed more confused than ever. Her fingers idly ran over the amulet.

“I don’t know. The only thing I know is...” She trailed off and stared into the depths of the purple stone.

“What?”

She raised her eyes to meet his.

“It has something to do with my mother.”

* * * *

Valentine kept his eyes fixed on his destination, not letting them stray to Prophecy like they wanted to. He still couldn’t believe what she’d told him. She could use magic. The witches had given her the key they had been seeking, but instead of translating the prophecy, it unleashed the magic inside of her. He’d been speechless when she’d shown him what she could do and he suspected that this was just a fraction of her power. She was just learning to control it and summon it, but he could already feel how strong the magic she commanded was.

She needed to be given time to practice. If she learnt to control it, the magic would help to protect her and it would be a useful weapon in the coming battles. He could feel the wave of battle building already, tugging at his feet and dragging him towards it. Before long, they would be lost in the midst of it, and the quiet they were currently enjoying would become something they longed to see again.

But they wouldn’t see it, not until they had been pushed to the limit and had fought for their lives. It was going to take a lot to get through this and live to see the other side, but he was sure they could do it. Prophecy had proven herself to be strong and capable, she just needed to shed her more impulsive side and learn to deal with situations like the nightclub without making rash decisions like killing someone.

It was asking a lot at this point. The world was still new to her, but she would adjust and learn with time. She would make a fine

warrior, especially now she had such a powerful weapon in her arsenal.

He looked up to see the towers of Notre Dame silhouetted against the moon and broken cloud. It had been a long time since he'd been here. Prophecy had been quiet since they'd left the church in the suburbs, but he could sense she was on the verge of speaking again and he knew what she would ask. Why were they here? Why had he made her walk halfway across Paris under the pretence of getting to the train station?

She'd be right to ask him those questions. They could have easily taken the underground to the train station and left Paris in relative safety, but there was something he needed to do first, someone he needed to see. He knew exactly where to find them and it wouldn't add much time onto their journey.

Her head jerked up and she looked at him with a frown. He felt the same movement she had on the edge of his senses. He stopped. They were in the middle of the square in front of the imposing arched door and dark, heavy façade of the cathedral. Exactly where Valentine had thought he'd find him.

"So she is with you?" The voice came from the shadows and he didn't need to turn around to know whom the owner of it was.

"She is," he said calmly and looked at Prophecy. She had tensed, her every muscle tightening like a coiled spring, and in her eyes, he could see her desire to let her face shift into demonic guise.

"Is this why you came this way?" she whispered to him, leaning closer.

He finally turned around to face the hunter, who was now standing a few metres from them.

"It is," Valentine said with a smile. "It will not take long."

"Is there a reason why a vampire of Aureora as elevated as yourself is roaming Paris with a female Caelestis? A loyal soldier no more?" The hunter looked at Prophecy as he spoke, his eyes reflecting curiosity.

Valentine felt her step behind him and heard her growl.

“It is a long story, hardly one for a meeting like this.” He placed his bag down and straightened up again, looking the hunter in the eyes. He could see in them that the man was confused about his being with Prophecy and he wanted to keep it that way. If the hunter was distracted by trying to figure out what was happening, it would make the fight all the easier.

“Vengeance? Valentine, I’d thought you were above such a disagreeable act.”

He smiled, brushing the comment off. He wasn’t above vengeance at all, especially when it had an added bonus as sweet as fighting his favourite quarry.

“Did you seriously expect us to still be there when you arrived at the location where I’d killed the dart? You should know me better, Caden. I have been toying with you for twenty years.” He smirked when the hunter frowned, a glint of anger showing in his eyes. It was fun to play with Caden sometimes, a pleasure to lead him in circles and wind him up.

“Toying with me? Is that what you think you’re doing?” The hunter laughed mirthlessly and then stopped abruptly. “It’s only a matter of time before you slip up. I knew you wouldn’t be at the hotel, but I also knew you would be here tonight. I knew you would want to protect her.”

Valentine glanced at Prophecy. She was staring at the hunter with dark eyes full of hate. From where he was standing, she looked as though she wanted vengeance of her own and he had half a mind to let her take it, but it wouldn’t do to have her getting hurt again. Even with her newfound powers, she wasn’t skilled enough to fight Caden, not yet.

“What are you going to do if I win, Valentine? What will happen to her then?”

“You shall not win. You never do.” Valentine smiled casually, sure of himself as he flexed his fingers and hid the pain it caused

in his shoulder. Even with the injury, he could still defeat the hunter if he chose to.

“This is madness, Valentine.” Prophecy grabbed his arm and he looked down at her. “Your shoulder...you can’t. We’ve no time for vendettas. We must go...please, Valentine?”

He considered her request for a moment, a part of him wanting to do as she’d asked if only to ease the worry he could see in her eyes, and then shook his head. “It’s too late to leave, the battles already begun.”

She glanced at the hunter, who was removing his jacket, and then back at Valentine. “It’s still madness to fight an unnecessary battle.”

He frowned and thought over what she’d said. She was proving to be quite the ambassador for peace. She’d said she would die if it brought peace between their families, that she would die for peace in general. Now she was giving him a lesson on only fighting necessary battles. Something told him that her answer to most fights would be the pragmatic option.

Talking wasn’t going to stop this fight.

He turned away from her and focused on Caden, shutting out the feeling of her nearby and silencing the voice in his head that was telling him that she was right—this was unnecessary.

But he couldn’t let the hunter do that to her and get away with it. Caden’s actions deserved retribution and this was the most satisfying form Valentine could find.

He quelled his desire to change into his vampire guise. Caden wouldn’t get the pleasure of provoking him into using the heightened strength it gave him. He would make sure that the hunter suffered at the hands of his weaker side so he would know never to touch Prophecy again or he would unleash his full strength upon him and end the merry dance they’d shared these past two decades.

It would be a shame to have to do it, but he could if he wanted to.

The hunter's eyes narrowed, his feet shifted and his hand came up to reveal a slim shaft of wood.

Valentine shook his head. "Been grave robbing again?"

The hunter spun the piece of wood around to reveal the other end of it. "Found it in a church. At least I know it's definitely blessed, not like that time in Budapest."

Valentine raised a brow at the crucifix and heard Prophecy hiss behind him when she noticed it. He wanted to turn to look at her but taking his eyes off the hunter would be a childish mistake. The battle was close to starting. He could feel the anticipation building inside of him and it was reaching a crescendo. Soon, one of them would make a move and then everything would become a blur as the fight began.

He extended his senses to see how far from him Prophecy was. She was close.

Reaching his hand out behind him, he pushed her out of the way at the same time that he sprang forwards towards the hunter. He slammed his fist into Caden's face, catching him hard across the jaw and smirking as the hunter stumbled backwards a few feet and tightened his grip on the makeshift stake. He was ready for the hunter's retaliation and easily blocked the punch he threw and the kick that followed it.

Ducking down, he swept a leg out towards Caden's feet and growled when his foe leapt over it. For a middle-aged man, the hunter certainly had a lot of energy. There had to be something driving him. Valentine just hadn't figured out what yet.

He kicked Caden in the shin and then flipped backwards onto his feet, instinctively blocking the hand holding the stake as Caden thrust it towards him.

"Getting slow in your old age," Valentine said and launched into a barrage of punches, each one hitting their target and knocking the hunter backwards. He growled and caught him hard in the stomach, smiling with satisfaction when Caden doubled over.

Grabbing hold of the long dark locks of his hair, he slammed the hunter's head down into his knee and let go of him.

Caden fell to the floor and pressed his hand to his head, his teeth gritted in obvious pain and his eyes screwed shut.

"Valentine!" Prophecy called to him and he turned to look at her. She pointed at something.

His eyes quickly moved to follow her finger and he frowned when he saw two dark, dangerous shapes coming towards them on the opposite side of the river.

"Werewolves," he whispered and tried to calculate how much time he had before they reached them.

"Getting weak in your old age," the hunter said and pushed himself up onto his feet.

"No. I could kill you in a heartbeat, but that is not the purpose of our tryst. This is merely a warning. If you go near her again, I will end this."

Valentine responded fast as the hunter launched a fist at him. Catching hold of it, he twisted Caden's arm around and punched him hard in the chest, launching the man into the air. The hunter landed heavily on the ground and lay still. Valentine stared at him for a moment and extended his senses. He hadn't killed him. He could hear the man's heartbeat coming quiet and steady. It took a lot more than idle play fighting like this to hurt the hunter. He knew that from experience.

He could feel the werewolves coming now. They were there on the edge of his senses and closing in. He watched Caden get to his feet once more.

"Leave. This is not your fight," Valentine said and the hunter looked at the werewolves as they approached.

The smaller werewolf was running over the bridge, a larger one following a short distance behind it. The hunter nodded and gathered his jacket before leaving.

Valentine set his jaw, slid into vampire guise and roared at the approaching werewolf.

He could feel Prophecy close behind him, could sense that she had changed into her demon face too.

She would have to fight now.

Prophecy reacted the second the werewolf sprang towards Valentine. As it landed, she moved swiftly, kicking it hard in the back at the same time as Valentine caught it across the jaw. She dodged its claws as it swiped at her and snarled. The other werewolf was fast approaching. They didn't have much time.

She swept its legs out and extended her own claws in an attempt to level the playing field. Lashing out, she slashed down its back, smiling grimly as it howled in pain and then rolling out of the way when it turned to bite her. She found herself standing by Valentine. He had a hand pressed into his shoulder.

"You're hurt. Fall back," she said and ignored the dark look he shot her way.

The werewolf pounced and she pushed Valentine to one side while she went the other way, dodging it and punching it hard on the back as it moved past them. She growled and leapt on it, digging her claws in and avoiding its jaws as it tried to get hold of her.

Valentine appeared in view and she motioned for him to leave but he stood firm as the werewolf went straight for him. She jumped from its back, trying to kick at it but missing. It roared at Valentine. On the edge of her senses, she picked up the other werewolf and turned in time to see it crossing the bridge.

She looked back at Valentine. He growled with effort and twisted the werewolf's arm, snapping it clean in two and forcing the bone through its skin. It whimpered and tried to escape, but he blocked its path and grabbed it around the throat, crushing it to strangle the beast as it struggled against him.

She ducked when she felt the second werewolf leap towards her and rolled underneath it. Coming to a standing position, her eyes widened when she saw that she'd allowed it to run straight at Valentine.

"Valentine!" she almost screamed his name.

He turned just in time to catch hold of the werewolf's front legs.

She grimaced as the stars began to itch and her right hand tingled. She could feel the power growing inside of her as the marks became hot, burning her skin until she could almost feel the ones on her back connecting to those on her front. When Valentine was thrown to the floor, threads of purple crackled between her fingers, making them prickle with tiny spots of pain as the magic passed through them.

Her breathing became heavy when she watched Valentine stand with a wobble and the werewolf began to close in. He couldn't fight any more. She couldn't let him fight any more.

She looked down at her hand where the magic was beginning to grow. It twisted ever faster as it formed a ball of purple and became white as it started to move so fast that she could no longer make out the individual threads.

"Valentine!" she shouted at him while he grappled with the werewolf again, his face contorting in pain. "Run!"

The moment he rolled to one side, she grasped hold of her right wrist, letting her palm face the werewolf. It turned to look at her and snarled as it started towards her. She curled her hand into a fist, forcing the power back inside of her, and drew it back as far as it would go.

The werewolf pounced.

She slammed her fist into it, punching a hole straight through its chest and releasing the magic inside of it.

The werewolf yelped and exploded, showering the square with blood and flesh.

Panting hard, she fell to her knees, her head spinning, and closed her eyes.

“Prophecy?” Valentine’s voice appeared close to her and she looked at him. He was plastered with bits of werewolf and was gripping his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she said and pushed herself up into in a sitting position. “Just feel a little weak.”

“What in the Devil’s name happened?”

“I don’t know.” She stared at the amulet. He’d been in danger. The witches had told her that the strength would be called whenever her heart feared. She’d been scared that she was going to lose Valentine.

He offered his hand to her and she looked at it for a moment before slipping hers into it. It felt comforting as his fingers wrapped around hers and he gripped her tightly, helping her stand. When he released her, she stared at her hand again. When Valentine had been hurt by the werewolf below the Eiffel Tower, she’d feared for his life and the strength had come. It couldn’t just be a coincidence. It came whenever she wanted to protect him the most. It hadn’t come when they were fighting the vampire hunter or when the hunter had attacked her. It had only come when she’d been petrified of losing him.

“We should move,” Valentine said, picking a piece of werewolf flesh off his jacket. He frowned at it and then slung it to one side. “You might want to work on using something less volatile next time.”

She smiled at his mock annoyed tone. He was still impressed by the power she now commanded. She could see it in his eyes.

A clock struck out the hour in the distance and she tiptoed to pick a piece of werewolf out of his hair.

“You might want to get cleaned up.” She continued to smile.

He ran his hands over his hair, frowning as he found it was saturated with blood and small chunks of flesh. He gave her an unimpressed look and then started walking in the direction they'd been heading in before the hunter had shown up. She followed him, wondering how he was going to get cleaned up before they went to the station. As they rounded a corner, she saw a fountain and then looked at him. He was smiling.

"You're not..." She started.

He peeled his jacket off and handed it to her. "I am."

She raised her brows as he dunked his head into the clear pool. Threads of red crept through the water, turning it a pale pink.

Holding his jacket up, she wrinkled her nose up at it and began to remove all the little bits of werewolf. She shook it at the same time as Valentine shook his head, flicking water all over her. She frowned and he smiled at her.

Handing him his jacket, she kept her face blank when he took it from her, the smile not moving from his face. She wanted to tell him it was incredibly childish to take such obvious pleasure from splashing her, but couldn't find the words when he continued to smile at her, his whole face lighting up with it. She'd never seen him smile properly before. They'd always looked restrained or forced, but now he was really smiling at her and she was glad that she couldn't blush.

She drew her eyes away from him as he put his jacket on and was thankful that he had stopped smiling when she looked up at him again.

"Where now?" she said to fill the silence.

He picked up the bag and started walking. She hurried to catch up with him and fell into step beside him, smiling when he looked at her and spoke.

"Venice."

Chapter Seventeen

The ceiling above her bed was cracked and dirty. She'd never been in a room as small as the one she was currently occupying. The sun was setting outside. The call of the night had awoken her and she was giving herself a moment to wake slowly for the first time in a week. It was nice, relaxing, and something she was missing dearly.

They had arrived in darkness at the main station in Venice. The vaporetti had all finished for the night, so Valentine had made her walk all the way along the Grand Canal to their hotel. They'd found it down a tiny side street. All of them seemed to be narrow around here. It must have been a haven for her kind considering that sunlight would barely penetrate most of the city. They could probably move safely around it during the day if they needed to.

She hadn't seen much of the city as none of the landmark buildings had been lit because of the late hour. The ornate streetlights did nothing to illuminate the murky streets but they did give Venice a feeling of antiquity. She could see the attraction for humans and demons alike. All of the pictures she'd seen of it had been beautiful, making it look like something out of a dream rather than reality.

Sitting up, she clawed her hair back out of her face and sighed. She was getting tired of it being in her eyes all of the time. She scanned the room, searching for something she could use to tie it back. Rummaging through the empty drawers in the dresser, she smiled when she found a length of string sitting discarded in the bottom of one. It would have to do until she could find something more suitable.

She pulled her hair back again and wrapped the string tightly around it before tying it off. She ran her hands over it and smiled again, satisfied with her work.

Another glance around the room brought her amulet to her attention. She retrieved it from the nightstand and slipped it on, fastening the bracelet around her wrist and wiggling her fingers to make sure it was comfortable.

She still couldn't believe what she'd done in Paris. She'd blown the werewolf up. Ever since then, she could sense a slight edge of uneasiness in Valentine whenever he looked at the amulet, as though he wasn't sure about the magic she suddenly had control over. She wanted to know more about where it came from just as he did, but there was no way it was going to happen any time soon. For now, she would have to deal with it without having any information about it, just as she had to deal with everything these days.

Her eyes fell to the star on her chest and she touched it lightly. Would they ever go away? Was she going to be marked forever?

The door opened, only to be quickly shut again. She dropped her hand away from her chest.

"Sorry." Valentine's voice drifted through the closed door.

She grabbed the shirt that was on the bed and slipped into it, buttoning it up as fast as she could before putting on her black trousers. She suppressed a giggle when she tried to picture what he looked like right now. He'd shown her such chivalry by not watching her change in Prague. He was probably mortified that he'd walked in on her when she was only in her underwear.

Opening the door, she smiled at him when she found him standing with his back to the door and his hands clasped behind him.

"You might want to knock next time," she said.

He turned to look at her, his eyes betraying how awkward he felt.

"I was coming to see if you were ready...obviously you weren't." He stepped back and looked her over, his eyes settling on her bare feet. "And still aren't."

“I won’t be long.” She nipped back into her bedroom, pulled her socks on and then shoved her feet into her boots and tied the laces. Walking back into the other room, she leaned against the doorframe, amused by the fact that Valentine was again standing with his back to her. “Ready.”

He walked across the room and picked up a small piece of paper. She frowned.

“What’s that?” she said with a nod in the direction of his hands.

“The location of the curator. It is not far from here.” He put the piece of paper into his pocket and took his jacket off the back of the armchair in the cramped area between their bedrooms.

It had to be the smallest suite on the planet.

She watched his fingers while he buttoned his jacket up carefully, smoothing the area around each one as he fastened it. Sometimes, he was so methodical and practical that she could really see why he had wanted to be a Law Keeper. Other times, she couldn’t figure him out at all. It was as though he was two people. One was nothing more than an emotionless assassin just like a Law Keeper and the other was caring and protective, as he had been in Paris when he’d wanted to take revenge on the hunter for what he’d done to her and give him a message to never touch her again. In both, there were common qualities, like loyalty and duty, skill and determination. She wished he’d decide which one he wanted to be and stick with it, but she got the feeling that he didn’t know that yet.

If he let himself go more, he’d probably find he was the protective one, and that the emotionless side of him was only there because he felt he shouldn’t feel anything towards a vampire of another bloodline, just like she felt she shouldn’t have feelings for him.

She averted her eyes when his expression told her that he’d known she’d been staring at him.

“Shall we go?” he said.

She nodded, going straight to the door without looking at him. She wished that she could shake the feeling inside of her that said she shouldn't care about him, but it wouldn't shift. She didn't care if it was wrong. The law meant nothing to her, and it meant nothing to him. If they were caught, they'd be sentenced to death regardless of the things they did now. As far as she could see, they may as well make the most of it. She reasoned that she only kept a tight hold on her emotions because Valentine did so with his. Whenever he slipped and let himself go a little, her feelings rose to the surface and she didn't feel the need to contain them. On the Eiffel Tower, she'd felt as though the law didn't exist, that their families meant nothing, because it was just about the two of them and that moment together. He'd been so gentle, his eyes full of tenderness, that it had only served to confuse her even further.

"You are very quiet. Are you feeling all right?" he said as they left the hotel behind them.

She came out of her thoughts long enough to smile at him. There was concern in his eyes, a flicker of his other side. Over time, he seemed to be slipping more often. He'd changed so much since they'd left Prague, but at the same time, he seemed the same. She wondered if he was really changing or just growing used to her presence and letting his guard down. Either way, she preferred him like this. It was far better than the cold, indifferent man she'd first met.

"Fine," she said and then dropped her gaze. "How's the shoulder?"

He looked at it with a raised brow. "Healing. You did a good job of dressing it. I never did thank you."

She shrugged, not wanting him to thank her now because it would make her feel awkward and she didn't want that. She was silently thankful when he didn't say anything more on the subject. He just continued walking.

Her eyes roamed the streets around her. It was beautiful, just like it had been in the pictures, but she had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that said that whatever fate had in store for them, it

wasn't going to be romance and flowers like the scenery suggested.

The city was old and, for that reason alone, it was probably the favoured haunt of many different demon species. With an unknown bounty on their head, it wasn't going to be easy to move about undetected. A dark sense of foreboding told her there were going to be fights and there was a high probability that they were going to face worse things in Venice than they had done in Paris. They were going to have to stick close together and she was going to have to learn how to use her magic if they were going to make it through.

"Whereabouts are we going?" she said, trying to dispel the silence between them.

"Campo dei Frari," he replied, turning down another narrow street.

She wondered if he really knew where he was going. He seemed to know the city well. Had he lived here for some time too? It would be a wonderful place to live. She'd once seen a program about the carnival they held here. The people were all wearing masks and dressed in elaborate costumes. The canal was packed with boats of different shapes, sizes and colours. It had been a real Mardi Gras. It was a shame it was spring now. She would have liked to see such an event. It reminded her of the Creator Day masquerade held by the pure bloodlines.

When they came out into a square, she immediately looked around her. The buildings were all old, their plaster façades beginning to deteriorate with age. They had small windows and their roofs were low and tiled. She looked at the well in the centre. One side of the square was open and lined by a canal, with a small white bridge crossing it to the other side. As they walked further out into the open, she noticed the imposing front of the church and frowned up at it. She never could stand the sight of a cross. It made her stomach turn and her demon visage push to the forefront. Valentine didn't seem at all bothered by it. He strode purposefully towards a building opposite them and went in.

She wove her way through the corridors and narrow stairways, following him as he moved further into the building. Her unease grew when she looked around. The building appeared to be empty, unlivd in. The walls were dirty and most of the lights didn't work. She focused, letting her senses reach out and using them to survey the area.

When Valentine stopped in front of a door on the second floor, his signature grew stronger and she realised that he was doing the same as her. He was using his senses as a radar to see if there was any danger on the other side.

He knocked and she ventured a step closer when the door creaked and gave way, opening a crack. Something wasn't right.

Valentine looked at her and she shook her head, silently telling him that she couldn't sense anything on the other side.

"This is not good," he said.

"Why...oh." She realised that his hand was inside the boundary of the apartment and that could only mean one thing.

Their contact was dead.

Valentine frowned and withdrew his hand.

The curator had been human, and no vampire could enter a private place owned by one without an invitation. He tried to see into the room through the crack but it was too dimly lit to make anything out. Signalling for Prophecy to stay put, he pushed the door open and stepped into the apartment.

He stopped dead as it hit him and he covered his mouth. For the first time in nearly three centuries, he felt like retching.

The air was heavy with the scent of rancid blood. The coppery smell of it was tinged with death and decay, causing his stomach to lurch as he breathed it in, practically tasting it on the edge of his senses.

He fought the temptation to breathe and moved further into the room, his hand still covering his mouth. He held his other hand up when Prophecy started to follow him and shook his head. She probably hadn't caught the scent of death yet and it was better that she didn't. He didn't know how she'd take it. He found a lamp and turned it on, glancing at Prophecy.

Her eyes widened as she stared at the floor and he looked there too. There was a trail of blood leading across the living room and as he followed it, he noticed the blood streaked across the walls. It made them look as though they had been scratched and were bleeding.

He moved stealthily across the room, letting his instincts guide him towards where the scent was strongest. He stared at the door ahead of him and edged towards it, uncertain of whether he really wanted to see what it contained. He slipped into his vampire guise, trying to use the extra boost it gave his senses to see if anyone was in the room waiting to attack, but they were too full of the scent of rancid blood. His teeth receded, his face shifting back into its human form. He listened intently for a sign of someone as he approached the room.

Stepping in front of the door, he looked into the room long enough to know that the ones responsible had been gone a long time and then turned his back on it. He closed his eyes, shutting out the sight of the carnage for fear of being sick. He could feel Prophecy's eyes boring into him.

"What is it?" she said from the threshold of the apartment.

He could hear her footsteps on the soft carpet, could sense her approach, but couldn't move quick enough to stop her.

"Don't..." He raised his head and shook it, hoping she'd listen to him.

"Why?" She frowned at him, searching his eyes for the reason he didn't want her to come any closer.

“You do not want to see this,” he said and grabbed her shoulders when she stepped up to him, holding them tightly in an attempt to stop her from seeing past him into the room.

She peered over his shoulder and her eyes widened in shock, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. The colour seemed to drain from her face. He pushed her away and she turned, running for the door as fast as she could.

He listened to her retching in the hall and steeled himself before turning to look at the room again.

It was carnage. It looked as though it could have been three men originally. Their bodies were battered and mutilated, their flesh slashed open and torn apart. Blood covered the floor and drenched the sheets until it was a sea of red. It was splattered across the walls. There were deep grooves in the plaster where it had been broken in the fight.

Valentine stared at one of the men. His right arm had been torn out of the socket and his face had been smashed in. The other two men had suffered a similar fate of being mauled to death and having their skulls crushed. Looking down at the one nearest to him, Valentine could see the maggots crawling over his broken flesh and it looked as though he'd been gnawed on, partially eaten by whatever had done this to them.

Valentine stared blankly at them.

He didn't need this kind of setback.

Turning away from the room, he walked over to Prophecy. She was bent over in the hall with her hands pressed into the wall. She was breathing heavily. His brows furrowed when he sensed her distress and he went to her. He rubbed her back gently, not knowing what else he could do to soothe her.

When she straightened up at last, he led her down the hall. He took long deep breaths and tried to clear his senses of the smell of rotting meat and blood. Looking across at Prophecy, he felt sorry for her when he saw she was still struggling against her desire to be sick. He'd only ever thrown up once since becoming

a vampire. With nothing in his stomach but remnants of undigested blood, it had been horrible. It was one reaction he could live without but it seemed the human mind didn't forget the instinct, just as it didn't forget to make you breathe until you were nearing five centuries old, and even then he knew some vampires that still kept up the pretence in public so they didn't draw attention to themselves. Although he could stop himself from breathing, it was still an automatic reaction for him and he couldn't control it for long. He wondered if Prophecy could control her breathing.

Stepping out into the square, the cool night air washed over him, carrying away his nausea. He closed his eyes and exhaled a sigh of relief.

"Why...what did that?" Her voice trembled and he looked at her. She was stood clutching her stomach, her skin still drained of colour.

"Werewolf, possibly two by the looks of things. The curator was not alone. Whatever killed him, killed another two men at the same time." He felt concerned when she went a little paler and swallowed hard. "The question I would like answered is who sent the werewolves and how did they know we were going to see that man."

"You think they know we're here?" She looked around them at the empty square.

"They know, or at least someone does, and that someone did not want us discovering the location of the scroll. It is safe to say that somebody knows what we are up to and they are willing to go to any length to stop us."

"But who?" she said. His brows met briefly in a frown. She seemed to see straight through his eyes and into his thoughts. "Arkalus wouldn't. At least I don't think he would."

"You place a lot of faith in someone who has combined forces with my lord to hunt you down and kill you," he said, walking away without bothering to check if she was following.

He hated the way he felt whenever she mentioned her family's Chosen Son. It gave him an overwhelming desire to hit something, or someone, possibly Arkalus himself.

"We need to contact Mathias. Surely he'll know of another source of information about the second half of the scroll?" she said, catching up with him as he headed towards the bridge over the canal.

"We need to get back to the hotel in one piece first." He caught hold of her arm when she slowed down and frowned at him.

He scanned their surroundings for potential trouble and was only mildly reassured when he couldn't detect anything.

Their contact was dead but the werewolves that had disembowelled and played with the three men in the apartment were very much alive. If their master was clever, they would have been ordered not to stray far from the bodies so they could catch Prophecy and himself when they arrived.

Leaving the square in the opposite direction to which they'd entered it, he led Prophecy into the maze of narrow alleys at the heart of Venice.

They needed some answers and he knew where he might be able to get them. He glanced at Prophecy. She was walking beside him, her eyes darting down each alley they passed. He'd have to tell her his plan, but he was going to have to find the right way to break it to her.

She wasn't going to like it one bit.

Chapter Eighteen

They wove through the streets of Venice, trying to leave a trail that would be hard to follow as they made their way back to the hotel. Prophecy could feel Valentine looking at her as she walked next to him with her hand still pressed against her stomach. She felt better, but the images of what she'd seen were haunting her still.

She slowed as they walked over a large bridge that crossed one of the canals. The bridge was old and packed with tourists. In the centre of it were little stores selling souvenirs and she looked at them, taking her mind off the dead curator. She came to a halt when she saw the Grand Canal stretched out in front of her. The lights of the buildings along its length were reflected in the water and made it sparkle as the surface rippled in the wake of the boats.

It was breathtaking.

Narrow boats passed by below her, the tourists onboard them waving up at the people on the bridge. She looked at them. Everything here seemed so peaceful and relaxing.

“Prophecy?”

She turned her head and found Valentine watching her with concern visible in his clear green eyes.

She hesitated for a moment, struggling with the words she wanted to say and then finding the strength when he took a step towards her.

“Can we stay out a while? Just, I don’t think I can go back yet...I feel safer out here.”

He nodded and she was thankful that he hadn’t questioned her about it or told her it was best that they went back to the hotel.

She wanted to be out in the city, enjoying the night and letting the images of buildings and people erase the horrors of Campo dei Frari. She wanted to be out in the open where she could run if it was necessary, not get trapped in a room where there was no easy escape.

When Valentine leaned against the wide white stone wall that formed the side of the bridge, she mimicked his move. Her eyes traced his profile while he looked at the city and then moved to rest on the canal when he turned to look at her.

She smiled at the people in the gondolas and then turned her back on the canal and watched the people walking over the bridge.

Meeting the eyes of people as they passed, she wondered what she and Valentine looked like to them. They probably appeared to be a couple, just some more tourists in a tourist infested city on a warm spring night. She pondered how unaware of everything they were, not only of the presence of vampires and demons, but of the impending war.

She wondered if they really were as blind as they appeared.

They wrote stories about demons, had television programs and movies about them. It seemed to be instilled into some cultures. They had folklore about zombies, vampires, and various other ghouls and goblins. She looked at her hand. Even magic was something they dreamt of having. People became vampire hunters, and witches were magically inclined humans. It meant that at least some of them knew demons were real.

The others were just happy pretending it was all make believe.

She could understand why. It would be a frightening world for them if they all realised that they were actually lower down the food chain than they wanted to be. They believed themselves top of it, when in reality they were food for most demons, including herself.

There were demons that did worse things to humans than vampires did. At least some vampires spared the occasional

human by turning them into another vampire. No other demon did that. They were too busy eating their victim's eyeballs, hearts or brains to want to give them a chance at life after death. All a vampire needed from a human was the essence of life they held in their veins.

She watched a young girl skip across the bridge, her face bright with laughter as golden hair flowed around her shoulders.

She wouldn't be smiling if she knew the killers that lurked just feet from her. She'd be screaming.

Her teeth itched and her eyes flickered briefly into their green state before she got control of herself. No, she could never kill something so innocent, not even if she was starving. She turned away from the people and looked at Valentine. Would he? He'd admitted that he hated the taste of bagged blood. Would he rather eat a child if he were starving?

She bit her tongue, not wanting to broach that question because she already knew what the answer would be. She could live with it if she didn't hear him say it. So long as he was with her, she wouldn't let him kill an innocent child.

"Is something the matter?" he said without looking at her.

"No...nothing." She drew her eyes away from him.

"I can feel something's wrong."

She smiled. He must have grown used to her presence if he could sense the barest bones of her feelings. She could only do that with Serenity, the one vampire she'd spent a lot of time with. It was as though her senses had become attuned to her maid's feelings. Apparently, it happened to many vampires. She'd been told that claiming and mating between vampires had the same effect, only it was so strong that you could feel your mate's emotions as though they were your own and you were so attuned to each other that you shared telepathic communication. The strength of the bond determined the distance the empathic and telepathic powers worked over.

A thought rose at the back of her mind but she pushed it away. It wouldn't do to be thinking about things like that. A bond between her and Valentine was forbidden. She didn't even like him in that way. Did she?

She realised he was still staring at her, giving her that concerned look that seemed to melt her reserve towards him a little more each time. Her eyes met his and something stirred deep inside of her, forcing her to recognise that she did like him after all and it was in a way that would lead to a claiming if her feelings grew stronger. She told herself that it didn't matter how she felt. There was a war on the horizon and it was no time for love, not when the fate of millions would rest in her hands. She couldn't let herself get caught up, and she couldn't let Valentine know how she felt.

"I just feel...funny still. I can't shift the images of those people," she lied without flinching. She had shifted the horrifying pictures from her mind a short time after they'd stopped on the bridge.

"It will pass." The corners of his mouth moved into a small smile of reassurance.

He pushed himself up off the bridge and looked down the other side of it. She realised that he wanted to move and started walking. She knew they had spent too long in one spot. The werewolves could be looking for them so it was best they kept moving. Besides, she wanted to see the rest of the city.

Her eyes roamed lazily over the goods in the windows they passed, heading along a narrow corridor of buildings towards St. Mark's Square. She raised her eyes up to the top of the campanile as they walked out into the piazza. It was so tall, capped with its pyramid roof that marked a contrast against the square walls. Dropping her gaze, she looked at the elaborately decorated façade of the basilica. She could see the domes and the horses above the entrance arches as they approached it. It was beautiful. She'd never seen a building so richly decorated and ornate.

“It is even more beautiful on the inside,” Valentine said and she looked at him. He was standing beside her, his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes on the building in front of them.

She tried to resist the temptation to ask him what it looked like and then caved. “How pretty?”

“The inside of the domes are decorated with millions of gold mosaic tiles, pure gold.” He leaned his head towards her and she remembered the time he’d told her of sunsets. Everything he said seemed so easy to imagine. “They surround each mosaic of saints and other heroes of Christendom. There are angels, and demons, all looking down on you from a sea of gold. Every wall is covered with it, right down to the floor.”

“It sounds beautiful,” she said, looking at the doors. They were closed and the sign said it wasn’t open after dark. “How did you see it?”

“I just had to look.” He smiled and she got the feeling she was being teased. It was strange to be teased by him. He was evidently enjoying how hungry she was for information about the things he’d seen in his life.

He turned to walk away but she caught his arm. “Tell me.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “I heard about it from a werewolf. They can move about during the day so they can see the things we cannot. I had to see it, so I broke into the building one night, lit every candle I could find and drank my fill of the beauty it contained.”

“I’d ask if we can do that...but you’ll say no, won’t you?”

He nodded and went to walk away but paused and turned to face her instead. “Some day I shall take you in to see it.”

She didn’t know what to say as she watched him walking towards the two columns near the canal. He’d made her a promise of sorts. He’d said he would take her to see the beautiful mosaics inside the cathedral and she knew he wasn’t talking about doing it before they had fulfilled the prophecy. It was a masked

declaration of intent to remain in contact with her if they made it through this.

She tried to make sense of him, then realised that he had stopped walking and was waiting for her. The people in the square kept walking across the path between them, but she didn't notice them. She just stared at him, looking into his eyes as he stood patiently waiting. Everything else became a distant blur.

The spell broke when she placed one foot out in front of her and started towards him. He turned away from her again, walking slowly towards the canal, letting her catch up with him. Her eyes were drawn to the Victorian lights that lined this section of the square. They glowed warmly, adding to the romance of the piazza.

She looked at the couples as they walked past them. She'd seen movies about love and had read books, but she'd never been drawn to anyone like the heroines in them had. Arkalus wanted her as his, but the idea of it repulsed her. She could never love him.

Her eyes strayed to Valentine and she forced herself to look at the scene ahead of her. It was no use going down the route her thoughts were heading towards. No matter how much Valentine changed, he could never change enough to love a vampire outside of his bloodline. She wanted to tell herself that it was just his sense of duty driving his actions, but deep inside she knew that wasn't true. Neither was her belief that he could never love her, but it was the only way of protecting her heart. If she believed that he couldn't, then maybe she wouldn't have these feelings either.

She stared at the lights that were dancing on the water and sighed.

Things were complicated enough without her girlish fantasies carrying her away.

"Prophecy?"

She looked up and found her eyes meeting his. She couldn't look away when he gave her a small smile, narrowing his eyes, his head inclining to one side as he blinked slowly. Her insides trembled and she swallowed hard when he went to raise his hand and then lowered it again, as though he'd wanted to touch her and then got the better of himself.

"Are you sure that you are all right?" His expression became one of tender concern and she nodded mutely, unable to find her voice while she drank in the sight of him looking at her as though he really cared about her.

A shout brought her crashing back down to earth and she noticed it'd had the same effect on him too.

His head shot around and his brow arched at the gondolier as he shouted again in their direction. A smile curved his lips and she realised he could understand, if not speak, Italian.

When he looked at her, she smiled awkwardly, unsure of what to say or do to make things between them less uncomfortable. The moment had been shattered, but the feelings he'd stirred still lingered inside of her.

Her eyes dropped to the floor and it seemed impossible to bring them back up again. They moved everywhere, scanning over everything, but avoiding him. She bit her lip, struggling to overcome the shyness the gondolier's shouts had made her feel. She didn't even know what he'd said.

"What—" She cut herself off, feeling foolish that she'd even started to ask him.

"Did he say?" Valentine finished her question and she found the courage to raise her eyes back up to meet his. He looked amused. "That I am lucky in love and should never let a beauty such as you go."

She turned her head to one side and stared blankly at the rippling water. The gondolier had thought they were in love. Her stomach swirled and she felt as though she should try to say something

funny to alleviate the tension between them, but funny had never been her strong point.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes still fixed on the canal.

“Italian’s are a romantic race...he did not know any better.”

She frowned at his words. He didn’t know any better. It sounded like a flat denial of love to her. She straightened up, trying not to let how crestfallen she felt show in her eyes as she looked at him.

“Crazy Italian, thinking we’re in love. Completely ridiculous.” She forced a giggle as the feeling of elation she’d felt evaporated, leaving her cold and hollow.

“Absolutely. An Aureora could never love a Caelestis, and vice versa.” He smiled but it faded from his face when her frown intensified and she narrowed her eyes on him.

“An Aureora did love a Caelestis once, but then true love overcomes all boundaries.” She turned sharply and strode along the canal front towards the bridge.

“Prophecy?” Valentine called after but she continued to walk away, her head bent as she pushed her way through the crowds lining the street.

He sighed. He’d regretted his words the moment they’d left his lips. She really believed in the love that Lord Aureora and Lady Caelestis had shared and how it had united their families. He could see no future in it, no comfort. He didn’t want to go down in history as a star-crossed lover. He didn’t want to be history at all.

When she gave no sign of stopping to wait for him, or even slowing down, he went after her, following her at a distance while she roamed the city. It wasn’t safe for her to be alone right now, no matter how much she needed the solitude. He couldn’t let her be alone. He knew that when he caught up with her, he wouldn’t be able to find the words that would make her believe that he hadn’t really meant what he’d said. He had answered without

thinking but nothing he could say would heal the hurt he'd seen in her eyes brief seconds before they'd become dark with anger.

Was she in love with him? She'd barely known him a few days and there was so much bad blood between their families that it seemed impossible to him. But she was young, perhaps young enough to get caught up in the fantasy and not see the reality. No, he had seen in her eyes before that she knew the consequences of what she'd spoken of, and she knew that this was no time for falling in love.

There was never a good time to fall in love.

He knew that from bitter experience.

He couldn't let her love him, not because he could never return those feelings, but because he would never be certain that it was true love, as she put it, on her part. She had never been in a situation so fraught with danger before and his heart kept telling him that it was the only reason she believed she had feelings for him. He was the only one with her. She was bound to feel a bond to him and want to stay close to him at all times. He was the only person she had in the world, the only one standing between her and death.

He found her staring at the wooden bridge that crossed the Grand Canal.

She was frowning but he knew it wasn't because of what he'd said.

"Something wrong?" he said quietly not wanting to disturb her if it was going to upset her further.

She shook her head as if rousing herself from a daydream and blinked.

"Just...I think I've seen this before," she said, looking at him.

"In your vision?"

She nodded, her gaze returning to the bridge. He knew what was on the other side. He knew exactly where her vision had shown her. He'd thought nothing of it until they'd found the curator butchered and then it had dawned on him. They had been destined to have to turn to the contact he knew in Venice. It still didn't mean that Prophecy was going to like it and he got the feeling that he needed to tell her soon.

When she went to step onto the bridge, he caught her wrist. "Come this way."

She would cross that bridge soon enough but he wanted to keep her hidden for as long as possible.

She gave him an expectant look as she walked beside him, down from the bridge and into the maze of alleyways again. He could see she wanted an apology or at least an explanation for the things he'd said back at the square, but he didn't have the words. He couldn't believe how difficult everything was when it came to her. She didn't have to do anything and he was tied up in knots inside, a shadow of his former confident self. He'd dealt with the girls of Aureora on a daily basis, had amused countesses with his idle talk and was so socially groomed to perfection that at the last Creator Day masquerade he'd attended, someone had believed him to be a prince, but whenever he tried to speak to Prophecy, he became nothing more than a youngling.

Even Mathias had said he was acting like one.

Around her, he lost every ability and skill he had gained in his three centuries and he knew she was beginning to notice it. He'd tried to get the better of himself and maintain the professional distance he'd sworn he would, but it was growing impossible. She drew him in completely. She had enthralled him the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

The gondolier's words haunted him and he turned his head away, as though he could physically avoid them.

She wasn't in love, and neither was he.

Prophecy: Child of Light – F E Heaton

It was a childish infatuation on her part, and on his, he didn't know what it was, but it wasn't love.

He looked down at the marks on her neck, wanting to blame it on her blood but knowing that wasn't the problem any more and it never really had been. He laughed internally at himself. This wasn't like him. He hadn't been like this since Lucya, and he'd sworn he'd never be like it again.

"Valentine?" Her voice reached out to him, luring him out of his thoughts.

He found himself staring at the floor, his fists clenched and his jaw set tightly as he stood rooted to the spot. People were walking past him in both directions along the narrow street. They brushed against him, making him want to growl and take everything he felt inside, all the frustration and confusion, out on them.

He raised his eyes to meet Prophecy's. He wanted to take it all out on her. He wanted to slake his thirst and desire for her, wanted to get it out of his system in the hope that it would allow him to go back to how he'd been before she'd wandered into his life. He narrowed his eyes hungrily on her and hers widened, her hand coming up to press against her chest as her lips parted.

It would be so easy. She wouldn't resist. Hell, she wanted it as badly as he did. The voice at the back of his mind pushed him, cajoling him into taking everything she was offering so openly. He could have her blood, her body, and her heart. He could take it all.

No.

He closed his eyes, forced those thoughts back down and turned his head away from her. He wouldn't cross that line. It would destroy her and he didn't want that. Even if it would rid him of his feelings towards her, he couldn't bring himself to hurt her.

"Valentine?"

He breathed in deeply. She was close and he felt her hand on his shoulder.

“I am sorry.” He opened his eyes, staring unseeingly at the pavement.

“Don’t worry about it.” Her voice was light and he could hear a smile in it. It was probably mostly for show, but it alleviated some of the tension he felt.

He cleared his throat and managed to look at her. She was smiling. Her soft lips were curved into it and her eyes were bright. He gave her a small smile in return before heading roughly in the direction of the hotel. They had been out long enough now to satisfy her and he needed some time to pace and think.

They turned down a narrow street and followed it to where another street intersected it. He paused and inhaled, raising his head as he tried to catch another whiff of the familiar scent.

“What is it?” Prophecy frowned at him.

The sound of her voice broke his reverie and he cast his eyes around them.

“It is probably nothing. My mind must be playing tricks on me, echoing something from my past.” He felt as though he was trying to reassure himself as much as her. He could’ve sworn that he’d smelt something.

She gave him a look that spoke volumes and this time he could understand it. She knew he’d sensed something and she’d seen that whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“There is someone that I think we should see. They may be able to offer us some answers about what happened to our contact.” He neglected to mention that the person in question might have answers about her powers too.

He doubled his pace through the tiny streets, using his senses and knowledge of the city to guide him back to the hotel. A quick

glance in her direction showed him that she'd noticed his increased speed.

"Some answers would be nice." Her tone was pointed but it didn't draw him into responding.

They turned down another street and he looked back up the alley as they left it behind. He frowned again, searching the darkness for a sign, something that would tell him that his mind hadn't been playing tricks on him.

She couldn't be here.

Could she?

Chapter Nineteen

Prophecy raised her hand to protect her eyes from the sun, which was sinking slowly towards the horizon, turning the sloping field of wheat and poppies around her into a golden sea that swayed gently in the warm breeze. It looked exactly as Valentine had described it, the sky burning with vivid bands of orange, pink and green as the blue ceiling above her began to darken. Her hand fell slowly to her side and she took a deep breath and sighed. It was beautiful. Her eyes followed the path of the sun as it continued to creep downwards until it touched the rich purple mountains in the distance, drawing her attention to the dark grey castle that was half hidden by the dense forest in the valley.

She smiled when she saw Valentine standing a short distance from her in the field. He held his hand out and she began towards him, picking up speed until she was running. She came to a halt just short of him. He surprised her by catching her hand, his fingers easing into hers and locking tightly with them as he pulled her towards him. As their bodies pressed against each other, she couldn't stop herself from reacting. Her hand brushed over his chest and came to rest around the back of his neck. He didn't resist when she lured his mouth down to hers. The warmth she felt from their lips barely touching made her close her eyes. She savoured the tenderness he was showing her and how real it felt.

Her eyes shot open when his hands snaked around her waist to pull her possessively against him. She pressed her hands into his chest and her eyes closed again as his mouth claimed hers, crushing her lips in a demanding kiss.

She tilted her head back as he kissed along her jaw and down her neck. She frowned when she saw the sky was rapidly darkening and everything seemed to be speeding up. Before she could blink, the moon had risen and set, risen and set, and risen again. It slowed as it arced across the sky towards the horizon and she frowned.

There had been no sunrise, no daylight.

She pulled away from Valentine only to see him change into Arkalus, then into a robed person whose face she couldn't see. She stumbled backwards, fell over and hissed at the person when she felt the power they held.

The person's hood fluttered in the breeze as they roared at her.

Or at least she'd thought they were roaring at her.

Another roar caught her attention and she realised it had come from behind her. She looked up to see Valentine towering above her. She moved towards him but he rushed past her, his claws and teeth extending as he ran at the masked person. She didn't want to watch as they clashed with each other, but she couldn't take her eyes off them.

Suddenly, she realised that they weren't alone and they were no longer outside. Vampires, werewolves, and other under-demons surrounded her. They were dressed in armour, all fighting each other to the death. There were bodies everywhere. Blood of all species soaked the cold flagstones beneath her. She rushed to her feet, grabbing a sword from a fallen vampire as he began to quickly decay. Lunging forwards, she fought to get to Valentine. He was standing on a platform above the thousands of warriors filling the room. She paused for a second when she saw a vampire, tall and proud, stood by a large wooden door and flanked by two guards in ornate armour. Her breath caught in her throat and a chill swept through her as he said her name. Her gaze flickered to the guard on his right, her eyes meeting his rich blue ones for a second before she turned away. A scream of pain pierced the din of battle and her attention was immediately with Valentine.

She slashed and hacked at anyone standing in her way, panic growing inside her as the fight between Valentine and the robed person escalated.

As Valentine fell to his knees and the robed person raised their sword to deal the final blow, she stopped dead, her breathing the only sound in her ears.

The sword fell.

She screamed.

“No!”

Silence filled the room.

She looked around her with wide eyes. The battle had been frozen in time. She raised her hand to see the stone in her amulet glowing bright white. Her eyes darted to the platform, her body trembling. The robed person’s sword had stopped only inches from Valentine’s neck.

She tried to get to him, wanting to push the robed person away, but her limbs felt heavy and unresponsive. Panic lanced through her as the sword began to slowly fall. Her hand moved of its own volition and before she had noticed what she was doing, she’d unleashed a glowing, crackling orb of magic that tore through the room, turning everything in its path to dust as it headed directly for the robed person.

She flinched away when a blinding white light filled the room, then everything faded to black.

* * * *

Prophecy breathed in sharply as her eyes opened. She stared at the ceiling, not seeing it but seeing the last few moments of her vision before she’d awoken. There was so much to try to make sense of.

A knock on her door made her jump and she scrambled into a sitting position, gathering her blankets to cover herself.

“Come in,” she said in a voice that betrayed how flustered she was.

The door opened and Valentine appeared in view.

“I heard a scream.”

“Um...” She tried to think of something to say but failed dismally.

“Another vision?” He took a step into the room and she noticed the way his eyes strayed to the thin blankets that were hiding her body.

She nodded, not wanting to remember it but knowing that he was going to ask her to. She pulled her knees up to her chest when he gently sat down on the bed a few feet from her. Her eyes dropped to the distance between them. There was room for him to sit closer to her, but she knew that he wouldn't, not when it seemed to be taking him so much effort just to be in the same room as her while she was in such a state of undress. When she saw that he was staring at the marks on her shoulders, she let the covers slip a little, revealing them to his eyes. She smiled inside when he immediately stared at the patch of bed beside his thigh. It seemed strange that a vampire his age was so prudish. All of the males in her household loved to relate their sordid tales of seduction to each other. Surely, he'd seduced enough girls in his time that sitting here with her shouldn't make him embarrassed. She felt like asking him, but decided against it. He would leave if he thought she was mocking him about something like that and she needed his company.

Looking at him again, she found he was staring at her chest and she realised that she'd been letting the covers slip while she was lost in her thoughts and was on the verge of completely exposing herself. She drew the covers back up again and caught sight of the fire in his eyes when he looked at her. Evidently, he wasn't so prudish after all. The way he'd looked at her last night in the alley, and was looking at her now, told her that if he wasn't in such good control of himself, she would have found out by now what it was like to be on the receiving end of one of the seductions the men of her house boasted about. She got the feeling that he'd know exactly what to do and would probably put their stories to shame.

She bit her lower lip when part of her vision came back to her and she remembered him kissing her in the field. Her eyes dropped to his mouth, taking in the tempting curve of his lips. They had felt so delicious against hers and she'd not wanted the

kiss to end. She wondered if it had meant something. It had felt like a vision. If it was one, then surely it meant he was destined to kiss her, just like he had done in her dream.

“Prophecy.”

She couldn’t miss the note of desire that laced his voice and found it was still evident in his eyes when she raised hers to meet them.

“I saw...it was all so confusing,” she said, unsure of how to proceed or where to start.

“Was it Venice?” He leaned towards her.

“No.” She shook her head and stared at the far wall so she could concentrate. Whenever she looked at him, her thoughts roamed to the kiss and her eyes strayed to his lips. “I don’t know where it was.”

“Were you in a city?”

She met his question with another shake of her head. “No. It was countryside, wide-open countryside, like nothing I’ve seen before. There were mountains, and a field. You were there. And there was a castle. Then a battle. There was so much death. I screamed and it stopped, just before...before...”

She couldn’t bring herself to say what had happened.

“Before?” He pressed her. She looked deep into his eyes and didn’t hide her feelings, wanting him to see that what had happened had upset her and hoping that he’d piece it together for himself so she didn’t have to say it. He frowned. “I see.”

He was visibly shaken. A mixture of guilt and sorrow settled in her stomach, and she was overwhelmed by a sudden need to be close to him, to touch and comfort him.

She leaned forwards, reached out and placed a hand over his while her other arm held the sheet against her body. She looked up into his eyes while he stared down at their hands.

“Nothing happened. I didn’t let it happen.”

He still looked shaken when he met her eyes and smiled.

“I wouldn’t let it happen, Valentine.” She wrapped her fingers around his hand so the tips of them brushed against his palm and was surprised when he responded by curling his fingers under and holding her hand.

“I know,” he said in a gruff tone of voice that betrayed what he was feeling.

He was scared. She could see that now. Beneath the strong and confident exterior, he was hiding his true feelings. There was something about what lay ahead of them, or something about her, that scared him, that made him want to disconnect from it all and pretend that he could go back to his old life just like he’d wanted to in Oxford. She could understand. She was frightened too.

She watched his thumb brush against her fingers and could almost sense the depth of his true feelings for her.

They frightened her most of all.

His hand slipped free from hers as he stood. “You should get ready. My contact will be expecting us, and she hates it when people are late.”

Jealousy flared up inside her while she watched him leave. His contact was female. She glared at the far wall and wondered why he’d neglected to mention that earlier and then reasoned that he probably hadn’t thought it would matter that his contact was a woman. She huffed and threw the covers aside. It damn well mattered to her.

Tugging her combats on, she frowned the whole time. She slipped into a black vest top and grabbed the piece of string off her side table. Pulling her hair back, she gathered two long strands of her red hair and let them fall down the sides of her face like a fringe. She tied the rest of it back, and then put her boots on before walking into the other room.

Valentine was waiting for her. She noticed that he wasn't wearing his jacket tonight. He was just wearing his shirt and trousers along with his boots. She gave him a black look and started towards the door.

"Prophecy," he said. She turned to see him holding her shirt out to her. He looked at her shoulders. "It is best that you hide those from prying eyes."

She looked at the mark on her left shoulder. He wanted her to hide the stars? Why? Was it because he didn't want her drawing attention to them while they were out in Venice, or was it because he didn't want his contact seeing them?

She was tempted to ignore his thinly veiled order but took the shirt instead. He would have a good reason for wanting her to cover the marks, even if it was only to stop himself from staring at them. She slipped the shirt on and held her hands out by her side.

"Better?"

He raised a brow at her irritated tone and then nodded. She brushed her hair from her face and opened the door.

"Good. Let's go see this woman of yours."

* * * *

Valentine glanced across at Prophecy as they walked. He'd known she would react like she had done back at the hotel. She had a jealous streak a mile wide. He smiled, amused by the fact that he could make her jealous. He couldn't remember ever having that effect on someone before.

She had been silent since leaving the hotel and he didn't push her into speaking. She looked as though she was brooding while she walked beside him with her eyes locked on the ground. She couldn't have made it more obvious that she was avoiding looking at him if she'd tried.

He led her over the wooden bridge and she raised her head, a frown marring her features. She glanced at him and when she found he was looking at her, she dropped her gaze back to the floor. He raised a brow. She wouldn't be able to keep up the silent treatment for ever. Eventually, she would crack. He could see the questions bubbling up inside of her.

Besides, he knew she wanted to mention her previous vision of Venice and she had every reason to. After all, he was leading her along the same route it had taken her.

When they walked down the other side of the bridge, he could see the imposing church of Santa Maria della Salute lit up in the distance. It disappeared from view as they turned down one of the narrow alleys.

Prophecy sighed. She was looking at their surroundings now.

"Familiar?" he said.

She nodded, the tiniest of frowns knitting her brows.

"I thought it would be."

When they reached the end of the promenade, he stepped up onto the wall. Her eyes widened and she moved towards him, fear written in the lines of her face.

"Valentine!"

She beckoned to him, trying to lure him away from the edge. He stepped down off the low wall and held his hand out above the water, flattening his palm as he ghosted it over thin air.

"Can't you feel it, Prophecy?"

Prophecy frowned. There was nothing there. She couldn't see anything but lights of the buildings across the water and couldn't sense anything either. She watched his hand as he continued to move it like a mime feeling an invisible wall and then shook her head.

“Can you feel it now?” he said and her breath caught in her throat when he pushed his hand forwards and it disappeared.

“Valentine?” Her voice trembled as she struggled to understand what she was seeing.

He drew back and his hand reappeared.

“Don’t be scared,” he said.

Her stomach dropped. That’s exactly what the woman in her vision had said. She mustn’t be scared. She moved towards him, closing the gap and holding her hand out in front of her, waiting to see it disappear as his had. When he extended his other hand to her, she slipped hers into it and held it tightly, using the feeling of his fingers against hers to bolster her courage. He stepped up onto the low wall and then walked out onto the water. Her eyes widened in alarm when he disappeared, leaving only his hand holding onto hers. She furrowed her brows, closed her eyes and followed him. There was a rush of cold air that chilled her to the bone and an overwhelming sense of power before her foot landed on solid ground.

His strong grasp tugged her towards him and she opened her eyes to find herself staring into his. She went to speak but he forced her face into his chest as he buried his own into her neck. His arms encircled her, his hands locked against her spine. Her body ached for his touch, her mind racing to imagine the feel of his fingers against her bare flesh. Intense need filled her. She panicked at the new feelings and how strong they were. She wriggled and then stilled when his grip on her loosened. When he released her, she fixed him with a hard look and tried to gather herself.

He pointed behind her.

She looked over her shoulder to see two vampires disappearing through a shimmering blue-white portal. It must have been the way they had just come in. She watched it as it swirled and rippled, and then vanished.

She turned back to say something to Valentine but he was no longer standing next to her. She spotted him a short distance away, walking further into the strange place they had arrived in.

“Are we still in Venice?” she said and then noticed his clothing. He was no longer wearing his black shirt and trousers. He was dressed in black breeches, long boots, and a black tail coat. She frowned, completely confused by what was happening. “What...?”

He stopped, turned on the spot and smiled at her. When his eyes dropped to her body, their green depths now a smouldering flame, hers did too. She stepped back, stunned by what she was seeing and no longer surprised that he was looking at her so hungrily. He wasn't the only one whose clothing had changed.

She was now wearing a corseted dark blood-red dress with a wide skirt. Gold beadwork decorated the velvet bodice. She stared at her modest cleavage where it had been pushed up by the corset, put on display for everyone to see. It wasn't the only thing on display.

“Um...Valentine...I think we have a problem.”

When she raised her head, she found he was already striding towards her. She pointed at the star on her chest that was now visible to the world. He removed his jacket and held it out to her. She stared at the loose white shirt he was wearing and smiled at how clichéd he looked. She'd read all manner of stories about male vampires in frilly white shirts with tight black leather trousers and she'd laughed every time. He'd had the smouldering look only moments ago. The only thing he was missing was long hair to his shoulders and a highly charged sexual appetite.

He shook his jacket impatiently. She took it from him and slipped it on, standing in silence while he buttoned it up for her, making sure that the mark on her chest was hidden again. She wondered why he wanted to hide it. Was it something to do with the person whose power she could feel in this place?

Something told her that he didn't wholly trust his contact.

“We are still in Venice,” he said. “The woman who created this place has cloaked it so only demons or the magically inclined can find it, and only if they’re searching for it. The change in clothes is because she likes the old world. She’s clinging to it.”

He started walking again. She followed him, absorbing the scene around them. There was a large house a short way away on their right. On their left was the canal, its waters black like tar. In the distance, she could see more buildings but she couldn’t quite make out what they were. One of them looked like a tavern but the street was lit with oil lamps that burned low, giving the place a dank and dreary look, and making it difficult to see far even with her enhanced vision.

When he came to a halt in front of the large house, she ran her eyes over it.

It seemed to loom over her. She could feel the power that had created it and it was strong. She grimaced when the stars on her skin began to itch and her fingers tingled. A sense of foreboding crept through her, making her flesh crawl and her chest tighten. She stepped backwards, away from the building. Her senses screamed at her to leave. There was something wrong about this place, something that made her magic rise up as though she needed to protect herself.

“Are you all right?” Valentine said.

She automatically shook her head, her eyes never moving from the house.

There was so much dark power, so incredibly strong. A part of her wanted to flee, but an even deeper part of her was telling her to fight.

“We have to leave,” she said.

He looked confused. “Everything will be fine. The vision told you to come here, did it not? Why would it lie to you?”

She didn't know why. She had been shown this place for a reason, but now she felt as though they had interpreted it wrongly.

"Maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe I'm not supposed to meet this witch. Maybe I should be doing something else." She knew she sounded panicked, but every instinct in her was telling her to leave.

"You are right. She is a witch. The only reason you want to leave is because everything here is created by her power and therefore we can feel it the whole time we are here. It takes people many visits to grow used to the feeling and overcome the sense of fear it instils in them. I felt the same way as you once."

His little speech did nothing to calm her nerves, but she could see that he wasn't going to allow her to leave like she wanted to. Maybe he was right. She was probably just overreacting. But the magic here was strong. It felt stronger than the power of the Three.

"Come. Nothing terrible will happen. I promise." He held his hand out to one side, intimating the house.

She took a reluctant step towards it. He passed through the iron gates and walked up the steps to the door. Stopping just before the gates, she looked up at the two columns towering either side of the dark wooden door and then down at her amulet. She removed it, slipping it safely into the pocket inside her skirt. A feeling of calm washed through her when her magic lost its point of focus. She took a deep breath before starting up the steps after Valentine.

He was waiting for her by the door. When she reached it, it swung open to reveal a brightly lit reception room and a young woman. The maid smiled, bowed and let them in. Prophecy's eyes stung as the brightness of the lights hit them. She heard the door close behind her but didn't hear what Valentine said to the maid.

The house looked even bigger on the inside it. It was grand, with two staircases that swept up either side of the room to meet at a

balcony in front of her. The walls were highly decorated with beautiful white and black marble with the occasional accent of green. She frowned at the floor. There was a mosaic. The design of it seemed familiar but she couldn't put her finger on where she'd seen it before. It was a circle that contained a star, and within the star was a heart. There was a snake threading its way through the points of the star, and symbols that she felt she should know marked its path. She stared at it, trying to remember where she had seen something like it and hoping to decipher what it meant.

A sense of power rushed through her and she pressed her hand against her chest as the star there burned. Her head shot up. She stared at the woman who had appeared on the balcony. The woman was shrouded in darkness. It clung to her like a veil, hiding her features as Prophecy tried to see past it to catch a glimpse of her face.

Prophecy shrank back as the woman moved forwards, still hidden by shadows as though they were following her. She was about to turn to leave when she felt Valentine's hand in hers. Latching onto it, she used the sensation of comfort it gave her to calm her unsteady nerves and soothe her.

The woman extended a bony hand and crooked a finger.

A chill ran through her.

She felt powerless to resist the command behind the single word the woman uttered.

"Come."

Chapter Twenty

Prophecy moved forwards, her feet carrying her towards the stairs even as she tried to resist and turn away. She struggled against the power that was forcing her limbs to move of their own volition. Panic filled her, making her every vein hum with fear and her skin prickle.

“Valentine?” She could hear the desperation in her own voice, as though it wasn’t her that had spoken.

“Leave her alone, Elena.” His command seemed to break the spell.

Prophecy clung to the banister for fear of falling as control of her legs came back and they wobbled beneath her. Strong hands caught her under her arms before she could collapse into the railing.

“Got you,” he whispered into her ear. She closed her eyes, her whole being crying out over the safety those two words made her feel.

“I was just playing.” A voice drifted down from above her.

She leaned into Valentine, seeking the comfort of his arms as coldness swept through her again. He pulled her up onto her feet and turned her around to face him. Opening her eyes, she stared straight into his.

“She likes to test people’s will. Try not to let her get to you, understand?”

She nodded, unsure of whether she would be able to resist the witch but ready to try her hardest. She raised her eyes to the balcony, wanting to see her but finding it was empty.

“Ready?” Valentine said as he walked past her, heading up the stairs.

She took a deep breath and followed him up to the balcony, her sense of unease growing with each step. What kind of witch had the power to control someone? Did she have that power?

She looked up as they entered a room. The walls were decorated with the same marble as the entrance room and there was a grand fireplace of pure white marble streaked with blue. Beside it were two high backed dark leather armchairs.

In one of them sat an old crone.

She must have been ancient. Her skin was sagging, wrinkled with time, and her hair was frizzy and grey. The crone coughed delicately, her bony hands covering her mouth. There was a scar on the left one. It looked as though she'd been branded. The deep grooves in her flesh marked the shape of a star.

Prophecy's hand roamed to her pocket, coming to rest over the amulet hidden there. The mark on the old crone's hand was exactly like the star on the back of the amulet. Was it coincidence, or had the woman once owned something similar to that which she now possessed? Was this the reason Valentine had wanted to keep the stars hidden from his contact?

The crone's delicate cough became laughter.

Prophecy raised her eyes to see Valentine standing in front the woman.

“Valentine,” the crone said.

“Elena.” He bowed his head as though in recognition of her standing in life.

Prophecy didn't know what to say when Elena's eyes came to rest on her. She just stood very still.

“What pretty immortal of Aureora do you run with now?” Elena looked at her. Prophecy squirmed inside, feeling the power

emanating from Elena in waves that washed over her, making her skin prickle. “Not Aureora.”

Prophecy swallowed hard. The witch could see that just by looking at her? She felt as though the woman could see right down into her soul and that she could keep nothing from her.

“Little girl lost, should be dead.” The witch’s voice was silken and persuasive.

Valentine placed himself between her and Elena. Prophecy frowned at his manoeuvre.

“You want her to be like you. Make her like you. She has power.” Elena held her hand out to Valentine. “Take the power, make her yours.”

He shook his head. “I will do no such thing.”

“You will, in time.” Elena smiled knowingly.

Prophecy’s brows rose at the statement. He was going to make her his in time? She remembered the kiss in her vision.

When the tension in the air seemed to dissipate, Prophecy realised that Elena had been testing Valentine. Did she test everyone that came to see her? She thought that Valentine knew Elena. Surely, she wouldn’t test someone she knew?

“I am not here to play games, Elena. I will not talk with you when you are like this.” Valentine almost growled the words but his face remained a calm mask.

She didn’t know what to expect, but when the witch altered her appearance, her body and clothes morphing into another shape, she was stunned. Elena sat in the chair, her blonde hair hanging in loose soft waves around her shoulders and her dress of dark blue satin clinging to her curves.

“Is this better?” Elena asked with a sweet look, her shiny red lips curving into a smile.

Prophecy noticed that Valentine was frowning now, his eyes dark with anger as he looked at Elena. Clearly it wasn't better. She didn't recognise the woman that Elena had changed into, but he obviously did.

He shook his head.

Elena sighed, closed her eyes and hummed a little tune to herself while she altered her appearance again.

Prophecy was mortified when she found herself face to face with herself, only naked. She noticed that there were no stars marking the witch's body and took it as a sign that the witch didn't know about them. She frowned at Valentine when she saw he was staring unabashedly at the naked version of herself.

"Is this what you want to see, Valentine?" Elena held her arms out and smiled coyly.

Valentine seemed to get the better of himself and sat down in the chair opposite Elena. Prophecy noted that he didn't deny that he wanted to see her naked, he just waved his hand as though telling Elena to get on with it and change again.

Elena closed her eyes and morphed into a woman of milk white skin, dark eyes and raven hair that reached far down her back. She was wearing a rich purple gown that pushed her breasts up and pulled her waist in until it looked impossibly tiny. Prophecy felt a stab of jealousy over how beautiful Elena was and then looked down at Valentine to see if he was looking at her in a way that would justify her feelings.

He pressed his fingertips together, crossed his legs and leaned back into the chair.

"Better."

He didn't seem to care about how the witch looked. He'd seemed more fascinated when Elena had chosen the naked form of herself rather than her own real one.

"What happened to your sense of fun?" Elena said with a pout.

The idea that Valentine had once had a sense of fun stunned Prophecy. It seemed impossible to imagine him ever having fun. She moved a little closer to them where they sat near the fire and rested her hand against the back of Valentine's chair. He looked over his shoulder at her and smiled. She could see that he was trying to reassure her. She smiled to show him that she was all right.

"So sweet." Elena commented in a voice that lacked the sweetness she spoke of. "Like Lord Aureora and Lady Caelestis, and we all know how that ended. But then, love never does end well, does it, Valentine?"

Prophecy frowned, trying to understand what Elena was insinuating. Had the gondolier been wrong? Had Valentine been unlucky in love before? Maybe that was part of the reason he was so against the idea.

"You would know best of all," he said with a smirk.

Elena's expression darkened. "He's a fool. I made this place for him and he left me, he still left. He went to her. But...he'll—"

"Come back?" Valentine interjected in a cold tone. "I do not think he will, Elena. He will always go to her. He will always seek her out. It is in his blood."

Prophecy felt she was missing something. Was Elena keeping the place like this because of someone she loved?

"Speak no more of him." Elena waved her hand and lowered her head in a way that Prophecy thought looked submissive. When the witch raised her head again, the hurt that had been in her eyes was gone, replaced by a seductive look. "There's still a chance for you, Valentine."

Prophecy's gaze darted to Valentine to see what his reaction would be. He shook his head, silently declining the witch's offer. It hadn't been made in jest and she got the feeling it hadn't been the first time Elena had offered herself to him. Prophecy stared at her, trying to quell the fire that was racing through her veins as she thought about what the witch had just done. She had clearly

wanted Valentine to choose between them, and she had wanted him to choose her. Why?

She closed her eyes and power surged through her. She tried to keep control of it, not wanting Elena to sense it, but when she opened her eyes again, she could see it was too late. Elena was staring at her, smiling.

“She really does have power. Strange for a vampire to have such abilities.”

“That is not why we are here,” Valentine said. Prophecy was thankful to him for drawing Elena’s attention away from her and giving her time to regain command of her magic.

“Why *are* you here?” Elena cocked her head to one side in curiosity and smiled at him.

“We were to make contact with someone yesterday. When we arrived, our contact had been killed. The method points to werewolves.”

“There are no werewolves in this city, Valentine. They have long forsaken it.”

Prophecy’s attention was drawn to a door to her right. It was half open, but the other side was in darkness. She could hear growls that reminded her of the fight with the werewolves in Paris and sent a shudder up her spine. She could almost picture them on the other side, great hulking bodies and sharp teeth lurking in the darkness, waiting for the order to kill.

Coming out of her reverie, she found Elena staring at her again. She swallowed hard, trying to act casual and picking at the back of the armchair. Relief coursed through her when Elena resumed talking to Valentine.

“As I said. No werewolves, no demons that would be interested in killing a human. It is a shame that I cannot help you discover the perpetrator of the butchery, but...” Elena trailed off, fixing her with another frown when Prophecy glanced at the door again. The

witch's eyes became hard for a split second before she gently patted her thigh.

Prophecy shifted closer to Valentine as two scruffy looking grey dogs appeared through the door. They growled and snapped at each other. Their teeth were red with blood, their eyes white and glazed as they stared at her when they passed, heading for their master.

She looked down at Valentine, trying to gauge his reaction to the animals as they nuzzled Elena's hand and then began to fight with each other again. He didn't look at all bothered by them.

"Still practising necromancy?" he asked her.

Elena smiled. "How else would I still look so young after nearly a thousand years?"

Necromancy. Prophecy stared unseeingly at the dogs as they fought. Was that how Elena had managed to have some control over her when they'd first arrived? Would necromancy give her power over a vampire? Or was she just weak and susceptible? Valentine wouldn't have brought her here if he'd thought she'd be in danger.

"I do have some information that might be useful to you," Elena said.

Prophecy looked around and found the witch staring at her again.

"There is a great power rising in the east like the sun. An army is being gathered—vampires and under-demons alike. You have seen it, have you not?"

Prophecy hesitated and then nodded. She flexed her fingers while she remembered the power she'd felt in her vision and the magic she'd unleashed in order to save Valentine from the robed figure.

"I find it curious that a vampire is able to harness powers like yours. Where did it come from? They are not yours...they are a gift...a familiar one," Elena said.

Prophecy tried to think of something to say but the questions crowded her mind. The power wasn't hers? It was a gift? The witches had given her an amulet that had belonged to her mother. Did the power she had also come from her?

She was relieved when Valentine asked something and drew Elena's attention away from her. She realised that Elena didn't have any answers to her questions. The witch was curious about her magic and something inside of her told her to keep quiet.

"You must go to the shadowed land. There the end will begin and there you will find the one that the girl has seen. He is a great power that must be stopped before he ruins everything." Elena stood and walked across to her. "I see such light inside of you. You can defeat this enemy."

Prophecy swallowed hard, feeling the weight of responsibility on her shoulders. Her eyes roamed to Valentine when he stood and moved past Elena to stand by her side. She could see in his expression that he believed what the witch had said. She could defeat the enemy she had seen in her vision.

"You must go directly, before it is too late. There is no time to lose." There was a note of desperation in Elena's voice that made her frown.

"We have something that we need to do first," Valentine said.

Elena's look darkened.

Prophecy watched her closely. She reasoned that it was probably just her feelings of jealousy towards the witch that was making her suspicious of the witch. Elena had done nothing to raise alarm in Valentine. Prophecy was sure she would have seen it if the witch had.

Her eyes narrowed when the witch gently ran her hand over Valentine's chest and smiled up into his eyes. "I always had big plans for us. We could have been wonderful together, another Ineru and River."

Valentine removed her hand. “For that I would have to love you, and that is something I am incapable of.”

He turned and walked past her. Prophecy watched Elena smile fondly at the dogs.

“It doesn’t stop me from having plans for us,” Elena said and then looked at Prophecy. “Go to Romania. There you will find the castle of the lord of Tenebrae.”

“We have business to attend to in St. Petersburg first. Grant us safe passage from there to Romania.” Valentine held Elena’s gaze.

Prophecy noted that Elena looked uneasy about his request. The witch seemed to seriously consider it before nodding and holding her hand out to Valentine. He took it and pressed a kiss to it.

“It will be difficult to cloak you from prying eyes and protect you from such a distance, but I will try. Do not lose much time. It is against you, Valentine.”

“Always a pleasure,” he said and released Elena’s hand.

Prophecy felt his hand against her back. He turned her around and she glanced over her shoulder at Elena to see her smiling at her dogs again before she disappeared from view.

A million questions bubbled up inside of Prophecy while Valentine led the way down the stairs and over to the door. She didn’t understand what Elena had said to him about them being together. The reference to Ineru and River was lost on her and she knew that Valentine wouldn’t like her asking him about it. It had been obvious that he hadn’t liked Elena’s suggestion.

She couldn’t get past the note of panic in Elena’s voice when she’d told them to hurry and how unsure she had looked when Valentine had asked her for protection from St. Petersburg.

What was in St. Petersburg?

She looked up to see Valentine striding down the front steps of the house. He seemed intent on leaving quickly, as though he wanted to escape the place or maybe just Elena. She was the reason he'd wanted to hide her marks. There was something about the witch that he didn't trust and she couldn't blame him. She didn't trust Elena either.

She reminded herself that it was just jealousy speaking. She hadn't liked the easy way Valentine and Elena had talked, as though they'd known each other for centuries.

They were within a few feet of where the portal was when Valentine stopped and sniffed the air in the same way he had done the night before. She reached out with her senses, trying to see if something was there.

The magic that was creating the place they were in seemed to interfere with them, dulling them and making them useless.

She glanced up at Valentine and was amazed to see fear in his eyes.

She turned her head slowly as the portal shimmered into existence.

Magic hummed through her veins as it opened.

She tensed when Valentine whispered a word, his voice so full of emotion that she could almost feel it herself.

"Lucya."

Chapter Twenty-One

Valentine couldn't move as the portal flickered and Lucya appeared in front of him followed by Indigo. He blinked rapidly, hoping that this vision in front of him wasn't real. She was as beautiful as ever, her golden hair reflecting the warm streetlights, her eyes clearest blue and her dangerously low cut dress leaving nothing to the imagination. The narrow waist of it emphasised her figure and the front of her skirt was pulled up to reveal her legs.

If his heart could still beat, it would be racing now.

He cleared his throat, his eyes never straying from her while the whole world around them disappeared. He could hear distant voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. There was only her. There had always been only her.

She smiled, her delicate lips curving gracefully as her eyes shone.

"Valentine," Lucya said.

Her voice was as soft and delicate as he'd remembered it, even after two centuries apart.

"You look as dark and beautiful as ever." Her smile widened as she stepped towards him.

"You are still as stunning as the darkest rose," he said and narrowed his eyes on her, his lips arcing into a smile.

She lowered her head, covering her mouth with her hand and giggling. His smile widened. She tentatively raised her eyes to meet his again.

"How could I ever leave you?" Her voice was full of disbelief and regret.

He frowned at the reminder of what she'd done. She withdrew a step, a look of mild panic flickering across her features and her eyes darting to Indigo before she regained her confidence. Something wasn't right.

The world seemed to come back into existence for a split second and he felt Prophecy close by. He growled at Lucya, furious about her attempt to place him under her thrall and annoyed at himself for falling for it as he'd always done.

A cursory glance over his shoulder brought him face to face with a very angry looking Prophecy. He looked back at Lucya and Indigo. They were both smiling at him. Their eyelashes fluttered and they gave him their most alluring looks.

"Come, Valentine." Lucya held her hand out to him.

"War is coming, Valentine...we need you." Indigo ducked her head and smiled up at him through her eyelashes.

"Come..." Lucya swept her hands towards herself, luring him.

He shook his head, resisting the call she was sending out to him. She was still strong. Her blood still ran in his veins, that would never change, but she didn't control him any more, and she didn't have a hold over his heart.

Lucya frowned for a split second and then smiled at something behind him.

"She will be your downfall." Her tone was more serious. He looked at Prophecy and could see that she was itching to fight. "You must serve your family, Valentine. All will be forgiven if you come back to us now. It will be as if none of this had happened."

Lucya's words were honey in his ears, sticky and poisonous. He closed his eyes, not wanting to consider what she was offering to him but finding himself considering it anyway. He clenched his fists. Lucya didn't want him. She had left him over two hundred years ago for a Vehemens.

He looked at her. She was swaying on the spot, her hips moving enticingly and her hands coursing up and down her body in an attempt to make sure that he noticed her fully.

Thunder echoed overhead.

“Come, Valentine, my love, my passionate child, my darkest lover. Come back to me.” Lucya held her hands out again, her expression pleading him to do as she was asking.

He swallowed hard, listening to the sound of his own ragged breathing and the thunder in the distance. She was offering him everything he’d wanted since meeting Prophecy. It was his only chance to wipe the slate clean and return to his family, leaving all this madness behind him like he wanted to.

“Come...all will be forgiven, our dutiful son. Come back to us. Kill the girl.”

Her words hit him hard in the chest and he recoiled, a frown knitting his brows.

Kill Prophecy?

“Never,” he whispered and sensed a change in the atmosphere between them. It grew cold and distant. Lucya drew herself up to her full height and glared at him.

“So be it. If you will not come back to us, you will die with her, by my hand, child.” She spat the words at him, her eyes dark as midnight as she changed into her vampire guise.

“I would sooner die with her, than live with a treacherous snake such as yourself.” He let his demon guise come to the forefront, his teeth growing into sharp points and his bones shifting. “Did Kalinor offer you redemption if you lured me back?”

She looked offended and hissed at him.

He held his hand out to one side as Prophecy moved forwards and looked across at her.

“Don’t,” he said.

Prophecy frowned at him but eased back so she was stood a few feet behind him.

“Dissent in the ranks.” Indigo shook her head. “You really should take our offer. Your declination offends our family. Kalinor has offered us both to you and you think one little Caelestis is better than us?”

“Come, Valentine.” Lucya purred at him, her hands luring him to her.

He raised a brow and straightened up, tilting his head back slightly and looking down on her as he did so.

“Did your wretch of a Vehemens leave you, Lucya? I knew that he would. I knew in time that you would attempt to secure my feelings again.” He smiled when she looked hurt. “Your power over me faded long ago. Your blood may run through my veins, but it no longer commands me to do your will. I shall not murder Prophecy for you or my family. I will not lay one finger on her to harm her. Your offer of redemption means nothing to me, because you offer it only by pain of Prophecy’s death and that it something I could never live with.”

When Lucya wrapped her arms about her, a frown settling on her face and a look of hurt showing in her eyes, he could see that his words had hit their mark. She had believed that she still had power over him, that he was still her child to command. Kalinor had probably sent her here because she had promised to bring himself back with her. There was fear in her. He could sense it. If she returned without him, Kalinor would kill her without flinching.

“My place is here, with Prophecy,” he said and felt Prophecy close behind him.

He was surprised to find that she wasn’t scared. The power was coming off her in tangible waves, washing through him and making him feel as though it was his own. She wanted to fight. She was ready to spring into action at the slightest command.

A door opened behind them and a new power echoed on the edge of his senses. Elena had joined them.

“Leave,” Elena commanded on stopping next to him.

He gave her a confused look.

“This is my place. That makes this my fight.”

He shook his head, unable to fulfil her order. “If we leave and you do not defeat them, Kalinor will know that we have been here. They will get word to him.”

“Kalinor already knows that you are here.” Lucya smiled, her confidence returning as she ran her eyes over him. “That is why we are here. This was not a chance meeting. We were told of your arrival.”

“The werewolves,” Prophecy said and his attention was with her. She looked less confident now that she knew that Kalinor was here. He knew what she was thinking. If Kalinor were here, then Arkalus may be too.

“Not ours,” Lucya said. “She really is a dirty little Caelestis isn’t she, Valentine? Imagine my horror when I learnt of what you had done. Years of loyal service thrown away on such a filthy, despicable little creature.”

Prophecy growled and moved. He put his hand out to stop her and his jaw tensed when his palm pressed into her chest. He swallowed hard, a part of him wanting to let go while the rest of him rejoiced over the feeling of her soft bosom beneath his fingers. He held her firm, not letting her push him away when she tried to move forwards.

“I’ll kill you.” Her tone was venomous and he believed that she would kill Lucya if he let her go.

He toyed with the idea, wondering who would actually win. Lucya was older and wiser but Prophecy had more passion and strength. He could feel her power when she growled. It rumbled

through her chest and his fingers, little tremors that betrayed how close she was to losing control.

“Prophecy.” His voice was almost a whisper. He caught her eye and she immediately relented, backing off a step while taking a deep breath, probably to steady herself.

Indigo sneered at him and slipped into her vampire guise, her pale violet eyes switching into their lapis blue state. “Let’s fight. I’ve always wanted to get my claws into you.”

He arched a brow and licked his canines while surveying both Lucy and Indigo.

“I said leave...this is my fight.” Elena stepped in front of him, blocking his path. He growled at her, showing her that he wasn’t about to do anything she told him to. “You have more pressing matters to attend to.”

He noticed she was already calling up the magic. He could see it building between her hands as she muttered something beneath her breath.

“Don’t you...” He started.

She clapped her hands together. His surroundings shifted, the scenery spinning at a dizzying speed and making him queasy. When the world came back into focus, he was in St. Mark’s Square.

Prophecy doubled over, claspings her stomach tightly and trying to steady her insides.

“...Dare.” Valentine finished his sentence.

She looked at him. He was kneeling on the floor, a surprised look on his face. She pushed herself up onto her feet, closed her eyes and waited for the floor to stop pitching and the world to stop wobbling.

She reached out to Valentine, who was getting to his feet, but before she could touch him, she felt a pull inside of her. It felt as

though the magic had been sucked out of her and her body was a sudden void. Valentine dropped to his knees beside her, resting on all fours and grasping the pavement as though he was trying to steel himself against something. He changed into vampire guise and then back into human form before his face screwed up in pain.

“No!” He breathed and dug his fingernails into the paving as though he was holding on for dear life.

Feeling her power return to her, she crouched beside him and placed her hand on his back when he growled in apparent hurt.

“What is it?” She frowned down at him and felt her heart wrench when he looked up at her with a lost expression, his mouth moving but forming no words. “What’s wrong?”

His brows furrowed. The look of pain in his eyes increased and she swore she could see tears forming in them.

“Lucya.” He pushed the word out in the quietest of whispers.

She snatched her hand away as though he’d burnt her with his words. Her chest tightened, her brows meeting in a frown as she looked at him. He searched her eyes and she noticed that he looked even more hurt now that she’d withdrawn her comfort from him.

“She is...gone...” he whispered.

She couldn’t stop herself from gathering him to her when she realised what he was saying. She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his while he clung to her, holding her tightly and burying his face into her neck.

Lucya was his sire and Elena had killed her.

She’d seen vampires who had been devastated by the loss of their sire. The bond was irreplaceable and once it was broken, the child was left feeling empty and lost. She tightened her grip on him, not wanting to hurt his shoulder but desiring to hold him as close as possible so he knew that he wasn’t alone.

She could feel his breath against her neck and his fingers bunching the material of her shirt as he held onto her where they knelt together on the floor. Her fingers played in the shorter hair by his neck, trying to soothe him as best she could.

“Everything will be fine,” she whispered into his ear and savoured the feeling of him in her arms. She could feel him trembling and could sense his pain. She pressed the smallest of kisses to his ear.

Her eyes opened when she felt him nuzzle her neck. He let go of her shirt and flattened his palms against her bare back underneath it. She swallowed hard when his teeth scraped against her throat. A shiver of desire echoed through her. Her fingers tightened their grip, drawing him closer while she silently begged him to go through with it and bite her.

“Valentine...” She started and tensed when she saw movement in the shadows. “We’re not alone.”

He released her, his eyes still lapis blue and his canines still sharp. She looked at his mouth, the desire to kiss him rising up inside of her and making her forget the possible danger she’d just seen. She was surprised when his eyes dropped to her lips. She wetted them, anticipation building in her stomach and chest as she waited for him to make a move.

She was about to close her eyes when a roar broke the still air.

“Damn it,” she growled.

When she looked at Valentine, he was getting to his feet, his face back in human form. She sank back onto her heels, muttering a string of obscenities under her breath and then trying to find a bright side to it all. She supposed that if he had kissed her, she would have spent eternity wondering if it had just been because of the pain of losing his sire.

She took hold of his hand and smiled when he pulled her up onto her feet.

Two broad-built vampires were approaching them from one side while another three came from behind. They were moving slowly. She cursed the sky as fat raindrops began to fall, saturating the pavement in the blink of an eye. The thunder rumbled overhead, the lightning illuminating the wet square. Her senses sharpened in order to compensate for the effect the rain had on them.

She took a deep breath and shifted into vampire guise. She flexed her fingers, waiting for the vampires to make a move to reveal which family they were from.

Valentine growled as they approached. The hairs on the back of her neck rose and the marks on her skin prickled. She gave a thought to the amulet in her pocket and her hand hovered over it. The temptation to use it was great, but she couldn't risk the distraction that putting it on would cause. She had to focus.

Putting one foot out in front of her, she kept her eyes fixed on the two vampires. Valentine turned to face the others. They were carrying weapons, long blunt pieces of wood. Something told her they weren't here to kill them.

She looked at Valentine.

They were here to bring them home, but she couldn't be sure which family they would be taken to.

Valentine breathed heavily and tried to keep his focus on the three vampires that were skulking towards him. They didn't smell like Aurorea. They didn't act like his family either. His family's guards would never been seen without their uniforms, no matter what their orders were. These vampires were from Caelestis.

The lengths of wood they carried told him they wanted them unconscious. Lightning flashed in the distance and he noticed that two of them had manacles hanging from their belts.

His eyes switched to blue, his teeth sharpening and his claws growing. If they wanted to take them, they were going to have to fight. If they fought, instinct would force them to reveal their demonic face and he would have confirmation of their bloodline.

The one in the centre of the three changed. He caught a glimpse of green when the vampire charged towards him and threw a punch that he easily dodged. He caught the vampire in the stomach with his fist and then quickly switched his attention to the other two. They were both running at him now, the wooden clubs they carried held high in the air.

He heard Prophecy cry out his name when they reached him. Bringing his arm up above his head, he knelt and blocked the first vampire's attack. He swiftly moved his hand, arcing it around and catching hold of the vampire's arm before he had time to get another attack in. He pushed the vampire's elbow up and punched it from below, forcing the joint up in a way that would have broken a human arm. The vampire growled in pain and cracked the bone back into place.

Valentine rolled out of the way when the other two vampires lunged at him, one of them swinging the club dangerously close to his head and the other attempting a punch. He growled when he caught a foot in his stomach. Getting to his feet, he frowned at the vampire responsible, and attacked. He moved fast, punching him across the jaw with his right and then in the stomach with his left. He caught sight of Prophecy as she gracefully turned and brought her leg around at head height of one of her vampires. It connected solidly, making the vampire fall to the ground as it attempted to regain its senses.

Pain shot through his shoulder as one of the vampires attacked him, catching him hard with the club and following it up by kicking him in the back of his leg. His knees gave way and he collapsed to the floor. Grasping his shoulder, he barely had time to avoid being knocked out as he moved backwards and the club flew past his face, close enough that he could feel the air shifting around it.

He grabbed it and yanked it away from the vampire. Using it to assist him to his feet, he tensed his jaw and then roared at the three vampires that were circling him. Prophecy was still fighting valiantly. Her moves were impressive. It was the first time he'd really seen her fight and he was glad to see that she could handle herself well. She kicked the vampire that tried to grab her

and managed to catch the other one at the same time, knocking them both to the ground. She didn't give them a chance to get up, she attacked immediately, springing on them and punching them while they struggled to stand. She was fast, accurate too.

Spinning the club in a lazy arc at his side, he smirked at the vampires surrounding him.

The rain continued to pour down from the heavens, drenching them.

He wiped the water from his eyes and waited, knowing that they would attack if he kept still.

They did.

He smacked the club against the one that the first vampire swung at him, knocking it away. The other two attacked and he was ready for them. He brought the club down hard on one of the vampires shoulder, repaying him for his earlier attack, and caught the other with a swift elbow in the face. He growled with effort as they swarmed on him, kicking and punching as fast as they could. He blocked most of the attacks, even managing to get some of his own in. He cracked the club against their knee caps, moving in a swift circle and forcing them to back away in order to avoid getting hurt.

He stopped dead when he looked up to see Prophecy struggling against her two vampires. One of them had managed to catch hold of her arm and was holding it behind her back. She tried to throw them off her, but the other one crowded her, blocking her move.

He was about to run to her when he felt a sharp pain in the back of his head.

The world shifted in and out of focus and then the pavement seemed to come up from nowhere.

Everything around him faded.

The scenery.

The voices.

But one thing stayed with him, echoing around his head as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Prophecy screamed.

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