

Heather Killough-Walden



The Chosen Soul

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Book One

By Heather Killough-Walden

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Dedication

With thanks to:
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And to Fran... the Chosen Soul.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter One

The woman's screams were coming from inside of the small cottage. He paused before the wooden door and listened. Despite the raging storm around him, he could make out every whimper, every word whispered in agonized panic. Her voice had been worn ragged; she had been crying out in painful desperation for several hours.

He listened for a moment more and then knocked on the door.

Tortured wails continued from the other side, but within a few seconds, the door creaked open and a haggard looking man of indeterminate age peered back at him from the cottage's candle-lit interior.

The screams were much louder with the door open, and they poured out into the rain-soaked night like curses, mingling with the rising fog over the muddy streets.

"Yes?" the man asked, his brow furrowed. Dark circles beneath his eyes made his face appear hollow. He stood on the threshold with the hunched shoulders of a man who has not known sleep in some time.

"I request shelter from the storm, brother. My horse can no longer carry me. The roads are flooding and have become unsafe. I can tell that this is a bad time," the stranger continued, with a glance over the man's shoulder, toward the hall from where the woman's desperate pleas could be heard, "and I would not otherwise impose. I am afraid I have no choice." The stranger's voice was smooth and placating.

The man stared out at him for a moment, his eyes glazed and tired. And then he jumped as another shriek tore through the night, jolting him out of his temporary daze.

“I’m sorry. Come in. Please have a seat. Forgive me,” he said, his voice rough with fatigue. “I can’t see to your further comfort this night. My wife is birthing our first child.”

The stranger sat at the table, nodded and waved at him with a placating gesture. “It is not a problem, brother. Go to your wife. I will just rest here.”

The man nodded and was turning around when a short and stout woman dressed in a white apron and bonnet approached hurriedly from the hall. “Master Alastair, boil the water. Your son is coming straight away. I’ll need those blankets I asked you for before. And the alcohol, where is it?” She stood with her hands on her hips, ignoring the stranger at the table as if she did not see him.

Alastair ran a hand through his hair and motioned for her to follow him into the small adjoining kitchen. Even as they moved, another piercing scream rang out from the back room. Conciliatory whispers followed after, indicating the presence of the midwife’s apprentices.

And then his wife was calling Alastair’s name. He bounded from the kitchen and disappeared down the hall, the newcomer at the table, for the moment, forgotten.

The stranger listened quietly as the laboring woman grunted under the pressure of the pushing that she could no longer deny.

Breathe and whimper, push and scream. Again and again, she repeated the suffering that was the torment of every female soul. Until at last, when the empathetic apprehension in the house had grown to a nearly un-breathable thickness, she screamed one final time and the sound was followed by that of a wailing infant.

Alastair laughed out loud and the midwife gently consoled the exhausted mother. The stranger remained unobtrusively quiet as the final munitions of child birth continued in the now much more restful back room.

However, the peace was short-lived.

In a few minutes, the stranger heard the mother cry out once again.

“No, Anna, something is wrong!”

“Darling, what is wrong?” the man asked his wife. “What is happening?” he asked again, this time his questioning directed at the midwife.

The mother screamed once more.

“Oh, *by the gods*... There is another. Another child. She is having twins!”

This time, the woman’s piercing howl split the night as none of her other cries had.

In the dining room, the stranger’s lips curled into a smile.

The Sage Keeper of the Spring peered down into the swirling depths of the fount that he had been sworn to protect since he was a mere twenty years of age. Tonight, the pain in his old bones and joints was temporarily forgotten. All that mattered was the small black space of emptiness that now swirled along with the whiteness in the vast expanse below.

This was very bad.

The theft had occurred during twilight, when the line between day and night was blurred and all of those who lived in the shadows, flanked by existence and fantasy, animated for the length of a thousand heart beats and wreaked havoc on an unsuspecting

world. At a time when he and the other Keepers should have been most vigilant, they had instead been overwhelmed by the sudden storm, bullied by unforeseen torrential rains and whipping winds into fortifying the keep in any way that they could.

At some point between leading spooked horses into the covered stables and reinforcing the moat wall with bags of sand, he had realized that every Keeper within the ancient citadel was now preoccupied with fighting the storm. The Spring had been left unattended.

He had realized it too late.

For in that brief lapse of vigilance, someone had entered The Spring's Sanctum and done exactly that which its Keepers had guarded against for thousands upon thousands of years.

A soul had been stolen. And as the Sage gazed down at the darkness where its light had once been, he came to yet another grave conclusion. The soul chosen had been the oldest, brightest, most beautiful and powerful spirit within the Spring. Its absence actually seemed to vex the spirits that now swirled around the emptiness left behind. While he watched, this troubling unease spread throughout the Spring like a ripple upon the once calm surface of a glassy lake. The souls no longer swam in a seamless spiral. Instead, a few darted out of their normal paths like large, errant fireflies and some actually appeared to be confused as to which way to go.

The Sage Keeper gravely shook his head.

Alastair Grey had never been so frightened. He had once been stabbed in the gut by a nervous mercenary when the caravan he was traveling with had been waylaid by thieves during his youth. He had been scared then. He remembered the fear of an end to life, to existence; a blackness that no one, as of yet, had managed to return from. He recalled the fear of losing everything that he'd ever owned.

He was more frightened now; perhaps because he was older, perhaps because he was wiser, or perhaps because he had so very much more to lose. The fear gripped him like a vice, squeezing his lungs till he could hardly breathe, causing his vision to tunnel inward even as he fought to regain control over his emotions.

He gazed down at his wife, at her tear-stained face, her parched and bleeding lips, and the pain in her amber eyes that stabbed through his chest as surely as any mercenary's blade ever had. She squeezed his large hand in hers as the midwife's apprentices bustled around her prone form. The midwife, herself, remained at the foot of the bed, her capable arms beneath the modesty blanket. Alastair watched as the adept woman felt inside of his wife's belly, her lips pressing into a line more grim with each passing second.

Finally, she straightened, and her bright, age-lined eyes peered up at him. The expression on the elder woman's face was disconcerting.

"She's breached. The cord has wrapped around her neck. It'll take some work to unwind, but we may not have the time. Sarah's contractions are coming harder and faster now. Each one constricts the child's airways a little more. Already, she has been without breath for too long."

Alastair stared at the woman. A strange kind of numbness had seeped into his limbs. His hearing came and went and he wasn't certain he'd understood her correctly. As the color drained from his tired face, he forced himself to ask. "What are you saying, Anna?"

"I'm sorry, Alastair. I may not be able to save your daughter, and Sarah's life is now in danger as well – " Her reply was cut off as Sarah screamed yet again, the contraction visibly tightening her swollen belly and ripping a guttural cry of agony from somewhere deep inside of her.

Alastair's cry of despair joined hers and he was instantly kneeling by the side of the bed, his wife's hand clutched so tightly in his that he could no longer feel his fingers.

"What must we do? We'll do anything – *anything*! Tell me what to get for you! What do you need? Help her, Anna. Save my child! *Save my wife!*"

Anna moved from her position at the foot of the bed to stand by his bent and shaking form. She placed one hand gently on his shoulder and squeezed. "Master Alastair, right now, you must allow me to work. Leave the room and have faith in the gods. I will do all that I can. I promise." She spoke as gently, as persuasively as she could, but even so, he heard only half of what she said.

Somehow, he managed to rise. His numb fingers loosened their grip on his wife's hand and as her arm dropped back onto the sweat-soaked mattress, he stepped away. He moved automatically, torpidly, without real knowledge of what he was doing or where he was going. In a few moments, he found himself in the hallway.

Alastair entered the living room, his eyes downcast, his gaze unseeing.

The stranger watched him for a moment and then spoke.

"I can help you."

Alastair glanced up. His gaze focused and he blinked, remembering the man in black travel clothes that he had let into the house earlier that horrible night.

The man smiled gently. "I can help you, Alastair Grey. Both of your children can be born this night. Your wife can live many more years. You can be happy."

Alastair blinked again. "What?"

"Allow me to help. And all will be well." The stranger stood, one slow fluid motion, and Alastair noticed for the first time that he was very tall. Long blue-black hair fell in waves past the stranger's shoulders. His skin was so fair that it seemed nearly translucent. His eyes were the bluest that Alastair had ever seen. They shone and glittered in stark contrast against the almost bluish tint of the stranger's face. Alastair's brow furrowed. How had he not noticed that before?

The stranger moved around the table and came to stand before him. His tall figure towered over Alastair's, but Alastair did not step back. The stranger had said he could help. Alastair tensed as another cry rang out from their master bedroom.

"What can you do?"

The stranger smiled. "Tell the midwife to step aside. She is of no further use to you. Allow me to see to your wife."

Alastair stood stock still through yet another of his wife's horrid agonizing wails and then backed up a step. He nodded, resolutely, and turned down the hall. The stranger followed silently behind him.

When they entered the room, the midwife glanced up, and her gaze fell upon the stranger's form. She froze in place, her eyes widening.

"Anna, he is here to help. Please move and allow him to see to Sarah."

The older woman shook her head once, but Alastair's raised voice cut off her protests. "Now, Anna! Sarah does not have the time that you are wasting!"

In stunned silence, the midwife stepped back from the foot of the bed and was joined against the far wall by her two apprentices. The stranger moved to the side of the bed.

Sarah gazed up at him. Apprehension and exhaustion warred with each other in her amber eyes. The stranger smiled at her and it was a kind smile. She blinked. He was beautiful. The world seemed to melt around them, to slow down to the point of stopping.

He spoke and it was as if he spoke to her alone.

"Can you feel her dying?" He spoke in a hushed tone, but the sound was louder, more clear than anything Sarah had ever before heard.

She did not answer. The pain in her abdomen receded, leaving behind a heavy, deadened sensation. The fear that rode her system was paralyzing, and the blue fire that leapt in the stranger's eyes held her mesmerized.

"Your daughter's life slips away, Sarah, as does yours. But I can save you both. Will you let me save you, Sarah?"

She nodded. She would do anything to save her child.

The man's smile broadened. He rested a gentle hand on her stomach and closed his eyes. Sarah stared as a strange bluish light grew, pulsing steadily, beneath his palm. She could feel its heat radiating through her skin and into her swollen abdomen. It was warm, like a campfire in winter and Sarah closed her eyes. Little by little, its warmth melted away her fear as if she'd been frozen solid beneath the weight of its cold paralysis. Sarah felt a small kick in her belly as the warmth reached its mark. An unanticipated peace

began to fill her middle, spreading outward over her whole body until every inch of her no longer hurt but felt, instead, light and strong.

The stranger removed his hand, at last, and Sarah opened her eyes. There was new life within her. She could sense her little heart beating, feel her tiny lungs breathing.

Time sped up once again and the stranger moved back just as the midwife once more stepped forward, a sharp retort on her tongue. This time, he stepped away from the bed, allowing the older woman to do what she felt she needed to do. Alastair looked from the stranger to his wife and then hurriedly knelt once again at her side as another contraction tightened through her belly.

Sarah gritted her teeth against the expected pain, but it hurt far less than it had only moments before. She pushed when the midwife told her to push, and her eyes, no longer cloudy with pain, glanced up, her gaze locking with that of the blue-eyed stranger.

He nodded at her once and turned, silently leaving the room, his long black cloak billowing out behind him.

She took a deep breath and pushed one last time as the midwife leaned on her swollen belly and, quite suddenly, like the break of dawn at the end of a truly horrid night, an infant's cry rang out through the darkness.

Laughter and sighs of relief mingled with the irate wails of the second infant as the midwives cleaned her off and wrapped her in blankets as they had her brother. They then handed both children to their father. Sarah smiled and held out her arms. Alastair, crying full, fat tears of a kind of joy he had never before known and would never again realize, brought their newborn son and daughter to his wife and laid them, side by side, in her outstretched embrace.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Two

... Twenty years later...

Raven and Loki Grey looked nothing alike. Whereas he seemed to have absorbed his mother's hair, fine and blonde, she possessed long hair of the deepest black, shot through with bluish streaks that contrasted with her fair skin like night against day. Loki was short and stout, strong and steady. His sister, on the other hand, was tall and lithe, graceful and unpredictable. Loki was of average appeal, possessing of a face friendly and open but otherwise un-remarkable. Raven, on the other hand, was a rare and exquisite beauty. Her skin was fair and perfect, her cheeks always slightly flushed, her lips full and red. Though their parents' eyes were brown and amber, Raven's were a sultry midnight blue that would turn black when she was angry.

For twins, they could not have been less similarly inclined. Loki enjoyed the sun, summer, and his favorite color was yellow. Raven, however, was fond of the night, winter, and the crystalline white of fresh fallen snow. He relished in the gay speed and tempo of the fiddle. She, the sweet sorrow of the violin.

Yet, despite their differences, the brother and sister were the closest of friends. There was no where the one went that the other could not be found nearby. And so it was that morning, as they rested by the water's edge, listening to the brook babble the incoherent secrets it had carelessly told for decades.

"Sooner or later, you'll have to make a decision."

She shrugged. "Very well, then. I've chosen not to decide on any of them."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Mother and Father are beginning to worry."

Raven smiled. "It isn't as if I've ever pretended to be interested in the prospect of marriage. I've told Mother and Father how I feel. Loki, do you know any husband and wife in our village, other than our parents, who are happily married to one another?"

Loki blinked. Then he looked away, irked that he actually could not think of any.

She laughed. "There. You see? It's for fools. I'll not have any part in it."

In the distance, chapel bells sounded, six in a row, marking the twilight hour.

"We had better return. This time of day always makes Father nervous." Loki stood and began making his way back to the trail, stepping over brambles and tree roots as he went.

Raven frowned. "But this is the best part of the day!" She peered down into the water, which always took on a strange reflective quality at around this time. Then she looked up and gazed across the river's breadth, to the twisted forest that lay beyond the boundaries of her village's territory.

She sighed in frustration. The night's approach called out to her in a whispered language that only she could understand. The reprieve from summer's unrelenting heat caressed her skin like a cool rag on fevered flesh. She rose, hesitantly, and sighed again.

"Come on, you!" called her brother, already several yards down the trail.

She stood there for a moment more, her eyes searching the wooded shadows across the river.

"Raven, *now*!"

Raven bit the inside of her cheek, cast one last longing glance into the unknown and turned on her heel. Her long white dress billowed out behind her as she easily leapt over branches and tree roots, making her way to the trail as if there were nothing in her path. Loki stood still on the trail, his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

“You continue to run through the countryside like that, and you’ll break a limb for sure. I’m amazed at how you never manage to do so.”

“You fuss entirely too much, Loki. Go on then. Lead the way.” She stopped beside him and gestured for him to continue walking. “I’ll follow obediently behind you.”

Loki sighed, shook his head, and turned down the path. Raven smiled to herself as she followed in his footsteps, but her gaze often strayed to the river’s edge, and the tangled woods that beckoned beyond.

They reached the village road just outside of town, but she was so engrossed in her own thoughts that she didn’t notice Loki had stopped in front of her.

She ploughed into him, stumbling back a step. He didn’t move to help her, and that, more than the stumble itself, was what made Raven look up in surprise.

Three young men were blocking their path.

Raven’s gaze narrowed. She knew all of them well enough. The young man in the middle was the eldest of them, at twenty-seven. Brayden was the blacksmith’s son, and appeared it. He stood a full foot taller than Loki, his work shirt as tight across his chest and around his upper arms as his father’s was known to be. The other two were younger, but like Brayden, had become her hopeful suitors nonetheless. Selby was the spoiled son of a land owner who resided in a fairly large manor house on the outskirts of town. Cael,

the tavern keeper's only child, was somewhat quieter than the others, but was constantly harassed to marry by a mother who desperately wanted grandchildren.

The three of them glanced from her to her brother. Loki barely breathed.

"What do you want, Bray?" Raven asked.

Brayden's gaze slid down her long form and up again. His gray eyes sparked. Beside him, Selby smiled the degenerate smile that most of the young women in the village knew all too well. Only Raven had managed to stave off the infamous depravity of a rich man's heir. Cael, however, simply looked down at the ground. He seemed to not want to be there.

"I think it's best if you three return to your families." Loki said, his voice low and calm.

Selby snorted, tossing a strand of long blonde hair away from his face. His blue eyes flashed menacingly.

Brayden spoke up. "Get out of the way, Loki. We've no business with you. Your sister, on the other hand, owes us a little of her time."

At this, Selby laughed out-right, and took a step forward. Raven's heart beat sped up. She ducked further behind Loki.

"Back off!" Loki ordered. His amber eyes flashed a warning at Selby. His stance widened, his hands curling into fists at his sides. Raven swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and began to search the ground around them for something to throw.

"Stay out of this, boy!" Brayden bellowed at Loki. Then he came forward, and with more speed than either of them had been expecting, he shoved Loki to the side, where he stumbled, fell to one knee, and came back up again, facing the blacksmith's son.

Raven dove for the nearest good-sized rock, but before she could palm the weapon, Selby had her by her upper arms and was spinning her around, pulling her back and pinning her to his chest. She struggled uselessly in his grasp and cringed when he callously laughed in her ear.

A few yards away, Cael stood still, watching the ordeal, as Brayden faced off with her brother.

“She’ll never agree to marry you if you molest her, Brayden! Are you mad?” Loki tried to reason with the large man as the two circled each other like wild animals. Brayden was taller, but Loki’s form was stout and solid. They were not exactly evenly matched, but Loki was known to have the constitution of a rock.

“She never would have agreed and you know it as well as I. Your sister is nothing but a tease.” Brayden stopped, and his expression turned dark. Loki tensed, watching him carefully. “We heard you both by the river. There’s no point in pretending any longer.”

Brayden and Loki lunged at one another. Raven closed her eyes, but the darkness of her lids did nothing to stop the sound of their scuffling feet and grunts. She forced her eyes open again and watched as Loki ducked beneath Brayden’s large fist, but did not quite manage to side-step his other swing and the blacksmith’s knuckles dug deep into her brother’s mid-section, knocking the wind out of him.

“No! Brayden, leave him alone!”

Selby shook her hard, jarring the joints in her shoulders and causing her teeth to clamp down onto her tongue, drawing blood. Her eyes watered from the pain. His fingers dug into the flesh of her arms. “Keep quiet, lovely. We’ll let you know when we want to hear you scream.”

Loki glanced up from where he had doubled over, trying to catch his breath, and managed to drop and roll just in time to avoid Brayden's work boot as the large man tried to kick him in the head. Loki rolled back to a standing position and rushed forward, ramming his shoulder into Brayden's waist and driving him backward, where they both went crashing to the dusty ground.

Raven pulled her blurry gaze away from their twisting forms to look at Cael, who yet stood with his hands in his pockets, an undecided expression on his youthful face.

"Cael, help us! Please, you don't want -" Selby slapped a hand over her mouth before she could say anything further, and, without thinking, she took the opportunity to bite down.

He bellowed in pain and then growled, spinning her around once again and then roughly shoving her to the ground. She landed hard on her back, the impact forcing the air from her lungs and momentarily stunning her.

"You'll pay for that, bitch!" Raven did not possess the breath to cry out as he was then on top of her, ripping viciously at her clothes one second, slapping her across the face, the next.

Again and again, he hit her, and with each blow, Raven saw stars swim before her eyes and tasted more blood in her mouth. Somewhere in the periphery of her consciousness, a struggle continued, but she could no longer tell who had the upper hand, and a part of her no longer cared. A numbness was setting in. She was aware of what was happening to her, could hear, more than feel, the contact of his fists and palms with her flesh but even that awareness was fading. As she felt her clothes being ruthlessly separated from her beaten body, she began to desire nothing more than blackness, a sweet

and forgiving darkness that would come and whisk her away from reality before her rapist defiled her body in that final, unforgivable manner.

And then, quite suddenly, she was no longer being beaten, and a weight had been lifted from across her stomach. She moaned, rolled over onto her side, and opened her swelling eyes.

Cael held a very surprised Selby by the collar of his shirt and was shaking him roughly. Raven did not waste time pondering what might have brought about the change in Cael; she could barely bring herself to care. She pushed herself up onto arms that felt detached from her body, and looked down at the ground. Blood welled from her nose and dropped to the dirt, splash after tiny splash. Her body begged her to curl up and cover her head and fall asleep.

But her mind would not allow her to forget about her brother. She turned her head, searching for Loki through eyes that could no longer properly filter out light.

Brayden stood over her fallen brother a few yards away. As she watched, unable to stop him, the large man kicked Loki in the stomach. As her brother tried to roll away and lift himself up, Brayden kicked him again. This happened several more times, until Loki lay facing his sister, and she saw blood spill from his open mouth.

Raven stared at the blood.

Her brother's life liquid, staining an unworthy ground.

She looked up at Brayden, who now towered over Loki, his breath ragged, his expression insane.

Raven's vision swam, but it now swam as red as the blood pouring from her brother's lips. "I damn you to Hell, Brayden Smith. You and Selby both," she hissed,

drawing breath through split lips and expelling it through a raw throat. “May Abaddon’s devils devour you alive, and may you feel every last torment they inflict upon your flesh for the rest of eternity.”

Brayden glanced at her from where he stood, and his eyes widened. The ground began to tremble beneath them.

Raven glanced down. Cael and Selby stopped fighting.

A faint rumbling sound filled the air. The quaking grew in strength and Raven found the will to crawl over to her brother. Brayden stepped away from them, nearly stumbling as he retreated. Cael and Selby separated, their attention now entirely focused on the dancing pebbles around their boots.

“What...” Selby backpedaled as a tremor split the street open in front of him and steam rose from the crevasse’s depths. He looked up at Raven, who was now kneeling beside her fallen brother, a safe distance away. “What have you done?”

Raven did not answer.

She was as shocked as he.

A second chasm split open between them, further separating Raven and Loki from their attackers. Brayden shook his head. “No... You did this!” he yelled at Raven as he tried to move away from the yawning holes that were being carved into the street. However, anywhere he moved, another chasm opened up in front of him, until, finally, he and Selby were surrounded by steaming, sweltering rifts.

Cael stood to the side, once again immobilized by indecision, his expression one of abject horror.

And then a clawed hand appeared at the lip of one of the deep openings. And another. And another. Raven froze in fear and Brayden bellowed in terror as the chasms surrounding he and Selby were suddenly spilling over with red-eyed, black-clawed creatures. They crawled from the depths of the rifts, hissing steam making their scaled skin shine grotesquely. Flames licked at their monstrous feet, egging them further on, until they stood, a dozen or more, a grotesque circle of evil around Brayden and Selby, who were now screaming without pause.

Raven watched as the creatures attacked.

She could not look away. She sat there, paralyzed, her eyes glued to the scene as the beasts pulled her and her brother's attackers to the lip of one of the giant gashes in the ground. The flames in the rifts leapt higher, as if hungry for the human prize that awaited them.

Raven's hand rested protectively on Loki's head, and she finally glanced down when she felt him stir beneath her touch. He moaned and retched into the dirt, more blood finding its way into the puddle beneath him. She put her arms gently around him, attempting to lift him into a sitting position.

He opened his eyes and looked from his sister to the hellish sight thirty feet away. His eyes widened. He straightened, astoundingly finding the strength to stand. Raven pulled herself up beside him, fear making her strong. Her attention once again locked on the same nightmarish scene.

"You *witch*!" Selby screamed as the creatures brought him to the ground and began to drag his legs over the edge of the abyss. "Call them off!" He twisted and turned,

fighting frantically, his manicured hands unable to find purchase in the smooth dirt.

“Help us, Raven! Call them off!”

Raven stared, her eyes as wide as his, as the would-be rapist was finally pulled completely over the edge. His final scream pierced the twilight air and grew fainter as he descended further and further into the pit.

Raven began to tremble. Loki pulled her against him and back a few paces as Brayden was then dragged to the edge of the rift. His cries of desperation were nearly drowned out by the now roaring flames leaping from the chasm’s depths. At the last moment, Raven squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears.

She could feel Loki’s grip on her arm tighten and was vaguely aware of his fingers cutting into the bruises she already possessed.

Raven listened to the roaring of blood through her ears and the pounding of her heart. Moments passed. Then the ground began to shake once more. Her eyes flew open in time to see the rifts closing. Steam coiled backwards, flames died down, sinking into the depths of the chasms from where they had come. There was no sign of Brayden, or the hellish creatures. Cael had fallen to his knees, his hands over his head, which he was shaking vigorously from side to side, as if he could make what he’d just witnessed disappear from his memory if he tried hard enough.

Within another few seconds, the chasms were gone. The ground stopped trembling. What steam remained dissipated into the atmosphere. The only sounds were those of Cael’s whimpering.

The young man slowly withdrew his hands from his hair and opened his eyes. He scrambled to his feet, his gaze once again searching the ground. Then he peered at Raven

and pointed. “You... You did this! What are you – some kind of sorceress? You let those... those... they took them...” His gaze slipped from hers to the path around him and he began to move. His steps were cautious at first, as if he was certain the dirt would split from beneath him at any moment. Then, when nothing happened, his steps became quicker, broader, until finally he was running down the path away from them.

Loki stood silently beside his shivering sister.

“Loki...” she swallowed and tasted blood. “Did I do that?” she asked softly, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Loki did not answer right away. When she turned to look up at him, his expression was very grim.

He looked down at her. “Whether you did it or not, you’ll be blamed. The village council...”

If Raven could have blanched further, she would have. Brayden and Selby were dead. Vanished. Swallowed up by the devils of Hell. The village council would believe her to be a witch.

She would be executed.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Three

The wet warmth of the mid-summer's night stuck to Raven and dewed on her skin like tiny droplets of honey. She itched. Her clothes felt constricting, and the ropes, where they dug into the flesh of her wrists, left her raw with hundreds of miniature scratches. The bruises that had formed across her cheekbones were tender, but only to the touch. It was the inside of her mouth, where her teeth had sliced into her cheeks and tongue, that was sore.

She sighed and, despite the soreness in her muscles, the deep bruised tenderness of her bones, she rose from the small straw bed in the cell she'd been placed in. She moved to the barred window, her only connection to the world outside. She wondered about her brother.

Her wrists were tied in front of her, so she was able to grasp the bars in her hands and pull herself up onto her toes to peek out into the dark forest beyond. She shivered, suddenly chilled, despite the seasonal heat.

She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the bars, the day's events flashing before her mind's eye.

Loki had known Cael would run to the village council. Her brother had been injured badly, though, and needed to get to Haledon's temple as soon as possible. The Sun God's acolytes would be able to heal whatever internal damage he'd sustained. Raven helped him down the trail to the temple, and Haledon's healers met them at the door and tended to his wounds without question.

Loki never let up, begging his sister to run home, pack, and then head into the forest. As he had lain there, the acolytes casting healing spells over his injured body, he had pressed her to leave him, telling her that he would catch up later, once he was healed.

She refused.

When Haledon's acolytes had completed Loki's restorations, they'd turned to her. They had only managed to right her broken nose and swelling eyes before the council's leaders arrived at the temple, guards at their sides, enchanted weapons in their hands.

Loki rose from the table and stood in front of her.

The council regnant approached her. He was a middle-aged man with a gentle stature and bright, intelligent eyes. Raven had always respected his judgments. He stopped before them, nodded at Loki, and, in a quiet voice, repeated Cael's accusations. He then asked Raven whether they were true.

Raven had never in her life told a lie. There had been times – many times – that she had wanted to. However, in each instance, the truth had come spilling out before she could stop it. As it did this time. She nodded, admitting that Brayden and Selby had been swallowed up by the ground and that she had wished for it just before it had happened. The regnant took in the blossoming bruises on her face and the destroyed dress beneath the cloak she had borrowed from the priests. He was silent for a moment, his expression remorseful, and he took a deep breath.

Then he nodded and asked Raven to accompany them to the guardhouse.

Loki shook his head. "No. She is innocent. She did nothing but voice what anyone would have been thinking in such a situation. Those men attacked us. They tried to rape her. They got what they deserved."

The council members began to whisper amongst themselves. The guards tensed, placing their hands on the hilts of their swords. The regnant raised his left hand, stilling them all.

“I have no doubt, Loki. Unfortunately, Master Selby and Brayden are not here to stand accused. Your sister, however, is. I am afraid she is going to have to come with us.”

Loki moved like lightning, pushing Raven back several yards away from the group of men. He then rushed to the nearest wall, where Haledon’s symbol, the double-bladed, sun-detailed axes, hung above the altar. Without pause, he pulled them down and turned to face the guards, one heavy, sharpened axe in each hand.

Raven raced to stand between them. “Loki, no!” She faced the council members.

“I’ll come with you. I won’t fight. Just please leave Loki out of this. He has done nothing but take a beating.”

The council regnant looked from her to her brother, who stood, wide-eyed, several paces away.

“Very well.” He nodded once again and gestured for her to walk ahead of them.

Loki moved to follow, but Raven stopped, turned to face him, and shook her head once. Something passed between them in that instant, some unspoken agreement that slid from gaze to gaze.

He stood still and let her go.

And now she rested, alone, her feverish forehead pressed against the cool metal bars of a moldy guardhouse stall. She was to be burned on the pyre at sunrise. She smiled bitterly at the thought. She had never liked fire, nor sunrise, so it was fitting.

As she stood there, eyes closed, thoughts distant, she heard the door to the adjoining hall unlock and creek open. Raven pulled away from the window and turned to face her cell door. In a moment, the locks within its iron fittings turned, and that door swung open as well.

Raven stared at her mother and father, who stood in the archway with the attendant guard. Not able to bear the agony etched into her mother's features, she at last looked away and moved to sit on the small straw-filled bed. Her mother joined her there, placing a warmer cloak over her daughter's shoulders and pressing a folded bundle of clothing into her arms. Her father moved further into the room. The guard closed and locked the door behind them.

The silence stretched, as no one seemed to know what to say first. And then Sarah was sobbing, holding her daughter in an embrace that Raven could only return with equal dedication. Their tears fell freely, mingling before they dropped onto the dirty and hay-strewn floor.

Alastair Grey watched them from where he stood beside the small barred window. His expression was unreadable.

Minutes passed.

When it seemed Raven and her mother had no more tears to cry, they straightened and Sarah peered down into her daughter's face. Her weathered hands cupped Raven's bruised cheeks, her fingers shaking as she took in the damage that marred her daughter's abnormally exquisite features.

"What did they do to you, little one?"

"I'm okay, Mama. They didn't..."

Alastair came forward then. He was a tall and handsome man, his hair long, wavy and dark, his skin relatively unlined for his age, and his eyes unnaturally bright. Still, his daughter was far lovelier than his appearance warranted. “No, they wouldn’t, Raven,” he said. “Your father would not allow it to happen.”

Raven looked up at him. Confusion furrowed her brow. “But you weren’t there, Papa.”

Alastair and Sarah exchanged glances. Raven looked from one to the other. Then Alastair moved to stand before her, knelt so that he was on her level, and took her hands in his.

“Raven, I’m afraid there is something your mother and I have to tell you...” He paused, bit his lower lip, and took a slow breath through his nose. “The night you were born, a stranger came to call.”

Raven cocked her head to one side as she listened to her father recount the never before told version of her and her brother’s births.

Nearing the completion of his story Alastair leaned forward saying, “After I’d placed both you and your brother in your mother’s arms, I went into the family room to thank the stranger. As far as I was concerned, he was a guardian, sent by Haledon, to save my wife and children. But when I reached the room, he was gone. I opened the door and looked outside. The storm had stopped. The sky was clear. There was no sign of the stranger or his mount anywhere. It was extraordinary. Almost as if it had never happened.”

Sarah nodded, her gaze introspective. “We had many years to ponder what transpired that night. It was not until you were nearly five years of age that we heard of the theft at

the Spring of Souls. The theft had occurred the very night you were born. And your father and I came to grasp the truth.” Sarah looked into her daughter’s eyes then, and held her gaze steady. “Raven, it was the stranger – the stranger who visited us that night – who stole the Spring’s eldest soul. And it was that soul that he placed inside of your body. *You* are the Chosen Soul, Raven. That was how he saved you. That was how he saved us both.”

Raven stared at her mother. She blinked. The world seemed to drift off, far away, untouchable, unreachable. She suddenly felt strangely invaded, as if there were something inside of her that should not be there, foreign, uninvited.

She felt sick.

“We still did not know, however, who the stranger had actually been. We realized he had to have been powerful enough to make it past the Spring’s safeguards, and perhaps even to create the very storm that helped allow the theft to take place.” Alastair shrugged. “However, we had no true notion of who he was... until tonight.” He straightened and peered down at his daughter.

Raven turned to face her father, comprehension dawning on her beautiful features.

“What happened to Brayden and Selby was his doing, Raven. The stranger’s. He came to your aid when you needed him, heeded your call as a father would,” Alastair swallowed, his jaw tense as he continued, “because that is what he is. The moment he took your soul from the Spring, he became your sire. The body I helped give you was changed, altered forever, when that soul reached its core.”

Alastair knelt before her once again. “What happened to Selby and Brayden explains much. It is apparent, now, that the stranger was one of the Lords of Abaddon. And you are his child.”

Raven shrunk back away from her father and stood on shaky legs. She moved, somewhat wobbly, to the opposite wall and hugged herself against another uncharacteristic chill.

When she spoke, her voice was very soft and cracked slightly beneath the staggering weight of what she had just been told. “You are telling me that I am the daughter of a devil?”

Behind her, Alastair and Sarah glanced at one another. Sarah stood and moved to Raven, drawing her into her arms and holding her tightly. “You are *my* daughter, Raven. Always and forever. And I don’t care what the consequences, I swear that you will not die on the morrow. *I* will not allow it. Devils and council members be damned.” She released her then and moved to the door. She looked back over her shoulder at her husband, and he nodded.

Then he, too, hugged his daughter, kissed her trembling form on the forehead, and peered down into her blue-black eyes. “Have faith, Raven, most of the townspeople do not wish to see you executed. It is Selby’s father that has them in the palm of his hand. He is threatening to halt trade with Norrain if they don’t...” He pulled her into another tight embrace, and then, with one last kiss on her brow, he left her and joined his wife near the exit. The two of them nodded once more at her and then Alastair rapped twice on the door.

In a moment, the guard unlocked it and led them out.

When Raven was alone, she found herself sliding down the wall, her legs no longer able to support her. Her mind spun, reeling, dizzy with the information she had just been handed. She was the Chosen Soul. The infamous stolen spirit from the Spring of Souls in Kriver. The stranger – her *father* – had traveled far to deposit her soul within her body. Kriver was a very great distance from her isolated village. And one would have to venture through the forest... over the mountains... very few people were said to have completed the trip. Raven realized that that was why her parents had not heard of the theft from the Spring of Souls until five years after it had happened. But then, a Lord of Abaddon would not have to make the trip as a mortal would. In fact, it would mean no more than magical transport. Devils possessed such abilities as mortals possessed the ability to walk and talk.

Raven closed her eyes and laid her head back against the wall. Outside her window, the night grew long, the shadows deepened, and the moons rose higher in the sky.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Four

Loki aimed the bow with a slightly unsteady hand. The guard was turned away from him, gazing at something in the distance that Loki could not see. His back made for a broad target, open and waiting.

Loki swallowed the dry lump that had formed in his throat. A trickle of sweat threatened his left eye. He let out a shaky breath.

He couldn't shoot a man in the back. This was not the way he had been raised. This was not the kind of fight he had ever planned on fighting.

But if he didn't take the shot, do what he had to do, Raven would be killed.

Loki held his breath again and waited. Maybe the man would turn around. Not that he would see what was coming. Loki remained well hidden in the thickets of the dark forest that abutted the guardhouse. The shadows there were absolute, the underbrush soft and yielding, the canopy of trees above him blocking all light from the double moons in the night sky. Only the sound of his heart beating would give him away.

That, and the arrow he was about to imbed in the unsuspecting guard's chest.

Raven jolted awake for the hundredth time that evening. Her back ached from where she rested, stiffly, against the dank stone wall. She moaned, the sound echoing off of the boundaries of the cell around her. She thought about her father.

What would happen if she called him again right now? Would the devil save her from her mortal fate? Would he unlock the door? Distract the guards?

She shook her head, frightened now of her own thoughts, and attempted to think them away.

Her brother had not come to see her along with her parents. Raven knew her brother better than anyone alive. If he hadn't come to comfort her, he had had a good reason. Still, she wondered how he would react to the news of the stranger and the Spring of Souls. Loki had always been the 'good' sibling. He was quick to obey, first to offer help, and he'd been fond of Haledon since he was a child. In fact, he had sworn her to secrecy when he'd admitted that he was hoping to one day become an acolyte in the sun god's temple.

Would he judge her?

She was the daughter of a devil. There were nine lords of Abaddon. And she was the scion of one of them. She wondered which one. She recalled that Haledon's acolytes despised one Lord, in particular, above the others. Lord Malphas, ruler of the eighth circle, known as Caina, was Haledon's sworn enemy. His eternal plane of ice and cold and desolation was the antithesis of all that Haledon, the god of sun and light and goodness, stood for.

Raven rubbed her eyes and fought back tears. She thought she knew her brother well enough to be certain that he would not abandon her, no matter who her sire happened to be. But one never knew. Human beings were far from perfect, and they were allowed to change their minds.

Once again, the notion of calling upon the devil for help came unbidden to her mind. Just as she was squeezing her eyes shut, fighting to push the thought away, an arrow came whizzing through the bars in the window.

Raven stared at it for a moment and then came to her senses, scrambled to her feet, and rushed toward it after it hit the opposite wall and clattered to the ground. Tied around it was a note. Raven pulled the scroll off of the arrow's shaft and unrolled it.

I've gathered supplies in the forest. You know the place.

I'll take care of the guards outside.

You'll have to get the key from the attendant.

- Loki

Raven re-folded the note and placed it into the inside pocket of the traveling tunic that her mother had brought to her. She stilled her breathing and listened carefully for any unusual sounds outside. She knew her brother was out there now. And now she knew he hadn't abandoned her. In fact, he had been planning her escape.

Her mind reeled from the implications. If they were successful, they would have to run into the forest. She and her brother had entered it before, but only to a certain depth. Beyond that, the woods were said to extend for days and days, twisted and uncertain, devoid of trail or path to guide the way.

They would have to leave their home. They would never again see their parents.

"Hey!"

"Over here! Max, he's over here!"

Raven's head jerked up and she ran to the window. On tip toes, she peeked through the bars, straining her neck to get a better view. She could see nothing, no movement, no lights, no sign of Loki or the guards she had just heard.

Another arrow whizzed through the air. This one made an unforgettable thumping sound as it found its mark in human flesh.

"*Haledon*, I'm *hit*!" someone called through clenched teeth. Raven turned her head in the direction of the guard's voice. In the periphery of her vision, she could make out dancing lights, torches running through the night.

"Where?"

"My leg. Go after him. I think it's Loki Grey. Take the dogs with you!" The guard issued orders and Raven's heart beat sped up. How in the world would they outrun the dogs? She closed her eyes and tried to think. This was most likely an unforeseen event in Loki's escape plan. What the hell had he been planning, anyway? What was he doing with that bow?

Raven gritted her teeth and grasped the bars between her hands. Again, she tried to make heads or tails of what was transpiring beneath the limit of her sight. She had to get out there and help him. Where was the attendant guard? He should have come in by now to check on her, knowing that her brother was trying to break her out.

So, where was he? And then she realized what had happened. The attendant had gone to unlock the dogs from their cages. He had the only set of keys. Raven cursed under her breath. She was a nimble runner. She was fast, and she seemed to know exactly where to put her feet, even on unsure ground. But Loki was much slower. If he wasn't extremely clever, the dogs would rip him apart.

She cursed again, rested her head against the window sill, and squeezed the bars tight as she tried, in vain, to think of another way out.

It was the faint crackling sound, the popping and hissing right in front of her nose, that made her open her eyes.

She gasped. The bars beneath her hands had been coated in rime. The crystals spread and deepened as she stared at them. The ice extended from beneath her squeezing palms and raced up and down the bars until both had been completely covered in white frost. She exhaled shakily and her breath steamed in the warm air of the summer's night. Her skin, too, was steaming, coils of misted air rising from her flesh as the frigid temperature of her body contrasted with the heat and humidity around her.

In that instant, as she stared at the frozen evidence of her dawning powers, she realized which of the Abaddonian Lords was her father.

A barking sound filled the night and jarred her from her thoughts. Without further pretense, Raven gave the bars beneath her hands a good yank. They groaned and cracked, crumbling to a dozen frozen metal pieces around her. She didn't hesitate in placing her hands on the next two bars. In a few moments, those, too, were frozen clean through.

Another yank and pull and the window was free of obstruction. She looked around, spotted the bed, and ran over to it. In a few short moments, she had scooted it across the room. With its height beneath her, she scrambled up onto the window's narrow sill.

More barking and shouting filled the darkness. The sound of arrows whizzing through the air gave evidence to the fact that Loki had paused long enough to attempt to deal with the dogs in another manner.

Raven smiled when she heard the telltale yelp of one of the hounds and knew that the beast had been hit. Though she was not fond of the thought of harming innocent animals, she had never cared for those particular dogs. They were far from innocent.

She crouched beneath the building's shadow and listened once again.

Someone called for her brother to stop. Several dogs howled in unison. They were growing distant.

Above her, she heard the jingling and scraping sound of keys in a lock. The attendant guard had finally made his way back to her cell. She smiled again, imagining the look of shock on his face when he found the window's bars shattered to pieces and the prisoner nowhere in sight.

And then she was up and running, racing across the guard house's short lawn to the forest line as if death were on her tail. She plunged head-long into the darkness of the twisted woods, heedless of brambles and vines, as she had never in her life been caught unawares by such things.

Not a thorn touched her, not a root tripped her as she sped through the underbrush, heading at a full sprint toward the sound of a dog yipping and the guards yelling to one another in the darkness.

Within a few minutes, her long legs had carried her to an area that was at once familiar. She and her brother had built a fort not far from there when they were children. It was the place he had referred to in his note. He would be nearby. She stopped running and crouched low, listening. The light of two torches drew nearer.

Several yards away, she could make out a dog's quick panting.

"I think he doubled back to the river."

“No, Zeir’s picking up another scent. Just let him search here.”

Raven quieted her breathing as the guards and their hound came closer. Her heart sank in her chest when she realized that if he could scent out her brother, the dog would be able to smell her as well.

Unless...

A few feet away, a dog whined low in its throat.

“What is it, Zeir?”

“Something isn’t right. It feels cold here. I think it’s spooking him.”

The dog’s whining grew louder and Raven heard the distinctive clank of a leash’s chain being yanked to its full extent.

“He really doesn’t want to be here.” The guard paused and listened. The dog’s incessant whining most likely blocked any other, less conspicuous noise, from the guard’s perception. He sighed. “Head back to the river. I’m pretty sure that’s where we lost him.”

The sound of their footfalls grew fainter as the trio made their way in the opposite direction. Torch light dimmed and Raven stood from where she’d been kneeling. She took a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the new darkness and then searched the territory around her.

She recognized the layout of the trees, the fallen logs, even the way the leaves spread themselves across the forest floor. The fort was about a quarter of a mile East. But if the guards were right and Loki had remained by the river, she would need to find him first. Something might have happened to him. If he was well, he’d have gone from the river

straight to the fort. If he'd been hurt, though, then she needed to get to him before the dog did.

She glanced up. Unable to use the moons to guide her through the thick canopy of tree branches overhead, she relied upon her memory instead. There was a shortcut from the river to the fort. The river was the best place to start.

At once, she was off and running again. Her long legs carried her swiftly over the ground until she could once again see torch light. The water babbled and splashed as it cascaded down falls of rocks in this familiar bend. The path to the fort was on the other side.

Raven had no idea whether her brother were still here or not. If he was unconscious, she would have no way of finding him until the guards were gone, or until they had found him first.

They would hear her if she called out in any way. She sat there in the shadows and racked her brain for some way to distract the guards long enough to search the river's perimeter.

And then she heard the crackling sound again. She looked down, almost positive she would see ice spreading across the forest floor beneath her feet. But this time the sound wasn't coming from her.

She smelled smoke. She looked back up and noticed the new light across the river. A fire had been started. It sparked to life and grew with frightening speed. In a few seconds, it had become a bonfire, blazing bright and roaring with immense heat as it gobbled up the logs that had been placed atop it.

The inferno shed enough light to see quite clearly now and she watched the guards as they tried to stumble their way across the river while holding on to the dog as he yipped and yapped and struggled against the leash with all of his might. The animal had no desire to investigate the fire, however the guards seemed determined to do so.

She waited. She knew Loki was smart enough not to draw attention to himself in such a manner. In fact, she was fairly certain that the fire had been meant as a diversion. So, she sat back on her haunches and listened.

A snapping of a twig behind her drew her into a standing position, her hands at her sides, balled into fists.

“It’s me.” Loki came out of the shadows, a bow in one hand, a rag-tipped arrow in the other. Raven could smell kerosene.

“How did you get it lit?” she asked automatically, referring to the other arrow that he had obviously set ablaze and sent hurling into the bonfire across the river.

“The acolytes at Haledon’s temple gave me a fire stone. Said I would need it.”

Raven smiled. “I guess they were right.”

“Come on, we need to get our supplies and get as far away as possible while we can.”

Raven nodded and they quickly headed around the river at a safe distance from the bonfire. In the cast off light from the fire, it was easy to find the remnants of the trail they’d once carved into the forest as children. They followed it, running now, until the fire behind them was no longer visible.

Within a few moments, they arrived at the run down remains of what had once been their childhood hideaway, a tree house, falling and forgotten. Rotted timbers hung from

bent nails on thick, lower branches. A roof of faded linens, eaten through with multiple holes, dangled in rags, flapping in a gentle midnight breeze.

Loki led them to the base of the tree and began to shove leaves away from a small crevice in the trunk. Inside were two bags. He took one, threw the strap over his shoulder, and handed her the other.

“We’ve enough food for four or five days, if we’re careful. We’ll have to find water as we go.”

She nodded and pulled her own strap over her head and shoulder, securing it beneath the opposite arm. Then they were running again, putting distance between themselves and the guards that would now be realizing they’d been led astray. As they moved, Raven thought of the village they were leaving. The village they had been born and grew up in, the village they would never see again.

As she ran, she was thankful that Loki had to concentrate so hard on the ground before him so that he was unable to see the tears that stained his sister’s cheeks.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Five

Raven was unsure how long they had been running. They hadn't met up with anyone since they'd left the guards at the river's side. And yet, Loki had insisted that they keep moving.

By now, their run was more a fast-paced walk, and Raven's entire body ached, from her big toe to her scalp.

"We need to rest, Loki. I don't think they are following us any longer."

Loki turned to look at his sister. His eyes skated across the bruises on her cheeks and forehead, taking in the deep cuts in her lips and the raking scratches Selby's fingernails had made across one collarbone. He nodded and tore his eyes away, searching the area around them.

"I hear water. We'll rest by the river."

She nodded, in turn, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Loki guided them through the forest, following the sound of water, until they found themselves pushing through a thicket to enter a small clearing, a crystal clear spring at its center.

"Wow," Raven whispered as she took in the perfect little waterfall and the plush green grass that ran to the rim of the water. "It's beautiful." Ferns of all sizes abutted the stones surrounding the pond, and large lily pads floated peacefully around its perimeter. The water looked clear, cool, and deep.

Loki had not answered her. He cocked his head to one side, listening.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head and placed his fingers to his lips. She nodded. Motioning for her to remain where she was, he stepped forward into the clearing. His footsteps were cautious and slow. As he reached the water's edge, he paused, listening once again.

And Raven heard it.

Singing. Far away and beautiful. A woman's voice, and then a man's, singing in harmony.

The hair on the back of Raven's neck stood on end. She watched, eyes wide, as Loki knelt beside the water and peered down.

The spring's surface rippled.

Raven sprung into action, suddenly rushing forward and grabbing her brother by the back of his shirt. She pulled, yanking him away from the water just as its surface parted and two long arms shot out, water shimmering translucently along their lengths. As fingers grasped at the empty air where Loki had once been, their nails grew into sharp claws, and then shrunk back down again. In the blink of an eye, both arms sank back into the pool.

Raven forced her scream back down her throat before it could be given voice as she and Loki scrambled backwards, away from the shimmering water.

Very slowly, two lithe forms emerged completely from the spring. Loki jumped up, yanked his bow off of his shoulder and reached for an arrow from the quiver on his back. There were only two left. One was useless, having been wrapped in kerosene-drenched cloth. The other, he nocked, as his eyes remained locked on the strange creatures a few feet away. Then he raised the bow, aiming it in their direction.

Raven stood and inched slightly closer to her brother, watching as the beings rose to their full humanesque heights and then stepped onto the bank. They were as beautiful as the spring they inhabited. One was a woman, the other a man. Their pale skin shone iridescent in the moonlight afforded by the break in the canopy of trees above. Their hair was long and deep bluish green, like the color of the ocean after a storm. Their eyes were like emeralds, and their bodies were perfectly sculpted, as if carved from an artisan's alabaster. Droplets of water pooled upon their flesh. They wore shifts of some peculiar, shining material around their waists, and nothing else. The woman's breasts were perfect, small and taut, but Raven's eyes were drawn to the man, where his hair cascaded over his broad chest like a blue-green waterfall.

Deep male laughter drew her attention to his face. He was watching her, amusement clear upon his strange and handsome features. When he smiled, she could see that his incisors were long and sharp and she moved in closer to her brother.

"You are trespassing upon our home," the female said, her voice like the taste of honey, sweet and smooth. She gestured to indicate the spring and the clearing around it. "You have not been invited."

Loki took a step back, drawing Raven with him. "We apologize. We didn't know there was anyone here. We'll leave." His bow remained raised, his aim never wavering.

The man stepped forward, his smile was gone, replaced by a look of concern. "They have been injured, Minea. She bears the marks of an attack."

Raven blinked and then blushed. She could almost feel the sudden weight of the creatures' scrutiny. She knew her face must be a map of bruises and cuts, but had

forgotten about her injuries in the flight from the guards. She looked at the ground and tried to shrink in size.

The female cocked her head to one side and studied them carefully. “Indeed, you are right, Manus. And *he* has been recently touched by Haledon. I can feel his warmth from here.” She smiled a slow smile and Raven saw a muscle tick in Loki’s jaw.

“You need rest,” the man said, speaking directly to Raven. “If you should wish to remain, I give you my permission. You may now consider yourselves invited.”

Raven glanced at her brother.

He glanced back at her.

“What are you?” Loki asked, after a moment’s hesitation.

“We are the Naiads. We are guardians of the forest, as are the Dryads and the Sylph.” The man answered, his tone one of patient credo.

“I am sorry we startled you. You were not expected, and strangers at such close proximity to our home are not normally to be trusted.” The female offered. She glanced at her handsome companion and then back at Raven and Loki. “I can now see that you mean no harm to our spring, or to our forest. Manus was right to offer you salutation. You may remain, if you wish.” She paused, studying them with a slight smile on her beautiful features. “After all, you appear thirsty.”

Loki began to lower his bow, and then thought better of it. “We just need a little water. Are you going to pull us in if we try to drink?” he asked, aiming the bow once again, this time at the male.

The female laughed, and the male smiled. “No,” they said, in chorus.

Loki lowered his weapon. He looked at his sister. Neither of them spoke.

Then the female naiad waved a hand in the air. A moment later, there was a flash of light, and a small gold goblet appeared in her palm. She turned, knelt by the water's side, and dipped the goblet in. Then she rose and faced Raven.

“Ladies first.”

Raven looked at the goblet. Her mouth was so dry. They had been walking for so long. She glanced at her brother. His expression was uncertain, but after a few moments of hesitation, he nodded. They had to drink some time.

She moved forward and very slowly accepted the goblet from the female. Then she placed it to her lips and closed her eyes.

She drank.

It was cool and clean. Raven swallowed tentatively at first, but before long, she was gulping the water down, quenching the thirst she'd built up over the long, terrible night. The water soothed her sore throat, relieved the raw, red ache in her torn mouth, and seemed to infuse her entire body, from her chest outward, with a pacifying chill against the sweltering night. In a few short moments, the goblet was empty. Raven lowered the cup and handed it back to the Naiad. The female smiled at her and Raven smiled back.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” The Naiad then refilled the goblet and held it out to Loki. Loki accepted it without delay and drank its contents in a few big swallows. When he handed it back, he too was smiling.

“Now come and sit. Rest. Tell us what has transpired this night,” the male Naiad instructed. Raven turned to him and once again found her eyes wandering over his body. This time, when she blushed, she instinctively touched a hand to her face.

And it did not hurt.

“Raven, your bruises!” Loki reached out and turned his sister to face him. Before his eyes, the purple-yellow marks began to fade. The cuts on her lips sealed up and the fingernail scratches across her neck and collarbone lightened and then were gone. In mere seconds, Raven’s wounds had been completely healed. Loki stared down at her, dumbfounded.

“How?” He tore his eyes away from Raven’s now perfect face and glanced up at the Naiads, who were watching with twinkling eyes. “It was the water. It has healing powers, doesn’t it?”

The female nodded. “Yes. That is one of the reasons we protect it so carefully. Some people have ventured to our spring and gone again, only to spread word of its healing properties.”

“And then others come to take the water,” the man continued. “They come with bottles and flacons and flasks. They attempt to take without asking, to drain away that which we guard so that they may sell it for a profit.”

Loki nodded and looked back at his sister. “I understand. I would vigilantly guard such a thing as well.”

Raven’s long thick lashes shuttered her eyes demurely. “Thank you for allowing us to drink.”

The male Naiad waved the thanks away and smiled. “It was only a few drops, and you needed it. Now please, come and sit. You can repay us by sharing your adventures. Surely something vital must have occurred for the two of you to arrive at our spring in such a state.”

Raven and Loki sat in the cool, thick grass where the man indicated, and made themselves comfortable. The Naiads immersed themselves in the water up to their waists and then turned to face them, their chins in their hands, their elbows resting on the same cool grass.

In a few moments, the four of them were talking. Loki told them of the attack, and the beasts from Abaddon. This interested the Naiads greatly. They looked at Raven with a mixture of curiosity and awe. Then Raven told them of the acolytes from Haledon's temple, her arrest and her escape, and when she'd finished, Minea smiled and applauded.

"Thank you for that wonderful story. Now you two must sleep. If you have trouble falling asleep, you may drink again from the spring. A second drink so soon after the first will bring slumber almost instantly."

Raven yawned and Loki ran a hand through his strawberry blonde hair. "Thank you. We do need to sleep." He took off his cloak and laid it out on the ground, gesturing for Raven to take it.

She shook her head. "Thank you, but I have my own, Loki. You take that one." She did not wait for him to argue with her, but instead took off her own cloak and laid it out on the ground next to his and then instantly curled up on top of it, pulling its edges over her. She did not need its cover for warmth, as the night was sultry at mid-summer, but she had always needed the feeling of protection that covering up afforded her.

Loki laid down beside her just as the Naiads wished them goodnight and sank back beneath the surface of the water.

The night became absolute then, complete and quiet. As they drifted off to sleep, it seemed the entire world slept with them.

“Well what have we here?”

Raven came awake immediately, her stomach churning, her head pounding. Danger filled the air like an acrid stench, stinging her nostrils. She had been dreaming about winter, cool and crisp and white. Someone had called her name. Raven *Winter*... and then the dream had faded, like a melting into summer and then a drying into drought. She was disoriented, frightened, sick.

She rolled over to find herself staring into an ugly face, dirty and toothless. A man with lank, oily hair gazed down at her. And he was not alone.

“Loki!” she exclaimed, grasping her cloak tighter around her.

Her brother jolted awake, sat up, and, upon seeing the uninvited strangers, was scrambling for his bow. He did not make it to the weapon before one of the four men came forward, kicking him in the side of the head.

Raven screamed and rushed for him, but several hands grasped her upper arms, hauling her off of the ground and tossing her a few yards away. She landed and was instantly flanked by two of the men, their expressions lewd. They licked their lips and Raven’s gut clenched, bile rising in her throat. She choked it down and tried desperately to gather her wits.

Loki rolled from where he had landed and found himself staring down into the crystalline pool. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. His head throbbed and he could feel with his tongue that one of his back teeth had been knocked loose. When his vision cleared a few seconds later, he realized that another set of eyes was gazing up at him through the water’s depths.

Manus, the male Naiad.

He nodded at Loki and gestured with his hands, in the water, to move aside. Loki nodded back imperceptibly and rolled to the side, assessing the situation above him.

The four men had separated. Two now had his sister by either arm and were holding her immobile between them. The other two had rounded on him and were waiting for him to stand up, obviously itching for a fight.

All four were filthy from travel, stunk from the heat and wore expressions of overt maleficence. Loki wished with all of his might that he had a weapon.

“Well now, this mornin’s a lucky one,” one of them spoke, his gaze sliding from Loki to the pool beside him. “We come for the water and find an angel by it.” He glanced over at Raven, who glared at him, the hatred plain in her dark eyes. The man laughed. “An’ she’s a fighter, I see.” He looked away from her, and turned back to her brother, who was now on his feet, crouched beside the pool.

“Jus’ gotta deal with you, an’ we can have our fun an’ be on our way.” The man grinned a terrible, yellow-toothed grin and pulled a dagger from his belt.

Loki’s eyes darted to the dagger and then back up at the man’s face. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. He pondered his options.

And then the water exploded outward and a white form streaked by him, slamming full-force into the armed man. The man cried out in surprise, and the dagger went flying, freed from the man’s grip. It landed somewhere in the bushes.

Raven took the opportunity to let herself fall to the ground between the men, and because they were not expecting the sudden Naiad attack, or her the sudden weight of her limp form, their grips loosened just enough for her to slip one arm away. She

immediately pulled that one arm back and spun, balling her hand into a fist and plunging that fist into the throat of the man who still held her.

He instantly released her and stumbled back, his hands at his neck, his eyes bulging as he unsuccessfully attempted to breathe through his collapsed gullet.

The other man rushed forward, the promise of death in his eyes as he grabbed a handful of her flying hair and yanked her backward into his arms. Once she was there, he wasted no time in spinning her around and backhanding her to the ground.

Raven cried out in pain and anger as his knuckles once again caused her teeth to slice into her cheeks. She hit the ground, positive that her jaw bone had splintered as little white shining dots swam before her blurred vision. Her body was nearly numb with shock, so she barely felt it when the man lifted her back up off of the ground and threw her against a thick tree. The rough bark sliced through the thin material of her tunic, into the flesh of her shoulders and back. The pain cleared her vision, brutally bringing her back to her senses.

A few feet away, Manus rolled on the ground with the man he had just knocked down. They came to a stop, Manus on top, and the male Naiad's nails grew into terrible claws, just as he smiled and his incisors extended into cruel, poison-dripping fangs. The man beneath him screamed in fear and the naiad struck. He yanked the man's head to the side by his greasy hair and sunk his fangs into his grimy neck. Once again, the man bellowed, but this time in pain as the naiad's poison rushed into his system, burning like acid. He began to writhe in agony beneath the water guardian, but within a few moments, his movements slowed and his eyelids drifted shut.

The man in front of Raven shook his head at her. “I’m gonna make it hurt for that, angel,” he said as he came forward. Raven did not wait for him to reach her. Instead, she roared with rage, shoved away from the tree and attacked the man head-on, her nails clawing at his snarling face. She managed to dig deep furrows across his eyebrow and cheek before he hit her again, sending her flying back into the tree, where she sank to the ground, despite the damage she sustained from the bark in doing so.

And then a second white form was sailing through the air. Minea hit Raven’s attacker from behind, barreling into him with brute force, knocking him to the ground, where he rolled in the grass and came up onto his knees. Then the female Naiad was upon him, her claws raking across his chest, drawing deep grooves into his shirt and the flesh of his chest beneath it. He bellowed in pain and lashed out.

A dagger had somehow found its way into his hand, and as he swiped at the attacking Naiad, the blade caught her raised forearm. She hissed and drew back, blue-green blood oozing from her wound. The man wasted no time in standing and coming at her once again.

Manus rose from where he’d been kneeling above the poisoned man and turned to face Minea’s opponent. However, he was taken unawares as the poisoned man’s companion slammed into him, knocking him back down to the ground along with him.

Raven pulled herself up onto her hands and knees and found her brother at her side, helping to ease her into a sitting position. “I’m fine! Help Minea!”

Loki nodded, left her, and gathered a fallen tree branch from the forest floor a few feet away. Just as Minea’s attacker lunged, dagger at the fore, Loki swung, catching the

man on the back with the thick branch, and sending him sprawling. Minea leapt out of the way of the dagger as the man lost control and landed face-first in the grass.

Raven watched as Loki swung the branch again, catching the man just as he was attempting to rise. And then Raven turned her attention to Manus, who wrestled with another of the unwelcome visitors several yards away.

The male Naiad had managed to gain the upper hand, his extended claws carving large chunks out of the man's face and chest, however, unbeknownst to Manus, the man that Raven had slugged in the throat was now coming up behind him.

Raven barely had time to think as the second man pulled his own dagger from his boot and rushed at the naiad's exposed back. She pushed herself up onto her feet and raced toward him. She managed to reach him just as the dagger was descending. She put herself between them and wrapped her fingers around his forearm, squeezing and pushing back with all of her strength.

"Manus, behind you!" Minea's warning caused Manus to turn, unwittingly exchanging an exposed throat for his bare back. However, Raven's opposing momentum had succeeded in slowing his attacker's assault, the dagger for the moment suspended in the air between them.

Manus immediately backed up, his eyes widening as frost formed around Raven's grip, expanding at a heightened rate across his attacker's skin. The man screamed and automatically tried to pull away, but Raven's uncanny grip held. The rime spread over his forearm and down to his fingers, where it solidified the man's hold on his dagger, which also began to frost over. The magical freeze then shot up his arm toward his chest, and everyone watched as ice crystals appeared above the collar of his shirt.

The man bellowed again, fear and pain patent in his wide-eyed gaze. He desperately shoved away from Raven, using his other arm as leverage, and she let him go. He scrambled backwards, losing his balance and tumbling to the ground. As he impacted, his dagger arm made a horrible cracking sound.

Raven's own eyes widened and she held her breath.

And then the arm exploded into a thousand tiny pieces, petrified flesh cascading outward for several yards in every direction. The man watched this happen to his own arm, and his scream eventually died in his throat as he succumbed to a dead faint.

A few feet away, Loki lowered the branch he'd been holding, his opponent now unconscious at his feet. He turned and offered the female Naiad a hand. She accepted it and rose. The four of them stood still in the clearing, their gazes taking in the fallen bodies around them, the now silent air thick with unanswered questions and unspoken thanks.

The silence lasted a few moments more and then Manus moved to the water's edge. He raised his hand, the air shimmered, and a second gold goblet appeared in his grip. He lowered it to the water and filled it to the brim. He turned and held it out to Raven.

She accepted it without a word. As she drank, she felt the bleeding gashes in her back seal up and the wounds on her face once again vanish. It was her spirit, this time, that felt slightly sore as she wondered how many more times her body would be beaten, and as she fought with the knowledge of what she had just done, who she so obviously was, and what she was becoming.

When she finished drinking, she silently handed the goblet back to Manus. He took it, refilled it and handed it to Loki. He drank, also in silence.

Finally, Minea spoke. “It was fate that you two should be here this morning. We have not had thieves at the spring for several years. It is not easy to find. However, you stumbled upon it as if by accident.” She turned to Raven. “And, just now, you saved my brother’s life. I do not believe it to be a coincidence. You were obviously sent.”

Manus nodded his agreement. “Yes. And I thank you. We have grown overconfident in our inactivity. If it were not for your intervention, one or both of us would be dead right now, and the spring hopelessly depleted.”

Loki turned his attention to the bodies on the ground. Empty flasks hung from their belts in multitude. “They were here to steal the water.”

“Indeed, though it would have done them no good.” Minea shook her head.

Loki and Raven looked up. “What do you mean?” Raven asked.

Manus sighed. “Once the water is taken out of the spring, its healing properties diminish. It does not take long for them to be lost altogether. No more than a few hours, at most.”

“And if too much is taken at once, it cannot be replenished,” Minea continued. “The spring once held much more water. And much more power. Unfortunately, the foolhardy have destroyed what it once was. Now its powers are limited, and I fear that even those will one day be depleted altogether.”

Raven looked back down at the bodies. “What will we do with them?”

“The Sylph will take care of them. However, they will not show themselves to you. And so, I am afraid, you must soon take your leave.” Minea said.

Loki nodded. “We need to be moving anyway. Thank you for allowing us to stay at the spring. We needed the rest.”

“Thank you for the water,” Raven said. “I’ve never had to be healed twice in a twenty-four hour period before. I’m indebted to you.”

Manus smiled. “You saved my life. We are even. And, by the way, you’ve obviously some impressive powers of your own.” He paused, as if trying to decide how to phrase his next question. “Do you mind if I ask...” Manus followed them to where their packs lay on the soft grass. Raven glanced at her brother, who looked steadfastly at the ground as he lifted his pack over one shoulder.

Raven considered her answer before she spoke. “It’s something I was born with. I’m only now learning to use it.” She pulled her own pack over her shoulder and secured the strap. “Thank you again,” she said as she faced the Naiads one last time.

“You are welcome. Good luck in your travels. And, one more thing,” the Naiad said as the two turned to go. They paused and glanced back. “I assume you are wishing to travel to Kriver.”

Loki and Raven glanced at each other and then nodded in unison.

“Then, follow the trees with the yellow blossoms. Trust me. It is much faster.”

At that, the two Naiads moved back to the water of their spring and stepped in. Within a few seconds, their heads had disappeared beneath the surface.

Raven turned to her brother. “The yellow blossoms,” she said as they pushed through the thicket around the spring and came out into the forest once again.

“Right,” he agreed, and they were on their way.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Six

The trees with the yellow blossoms seemed to follow no discernable pattern whatsoever. The pair would turn at the sighting of one, head towards it and then look around, searching for another for several minutes before finally spotting one in nearly the same direction from which they had come.

Before long, Raven knew that Loki was frustrated and was wondering whether they should have followed the naiad's instructions after all.

“Loki, are you all right?”

Her brother hadn't spoken to her since they'd left the spring except to point out a yellow-blossomed tree every now and again.

Loki looked down at the ground, apparently concentrating on his footing. He did not answer and Raven's heart sank. Her display of icy power back at the spring had been Loki's first to witness. Now he would know, as well as she did, who the stranger had been that had given her her soul. He would know which of the Lords of Abaddon was her father. Perhaps actually having such knowledge solidly evidenced before you was far different and more difficult to cope with than simply imagining it.

She chewed her lip and fell into silence.

Finally, he spoke.

“I think they've led us astray.”

Raven stopped in her tracks. It was several moments before Loki did the same. He turned and peered at her.

“Loki, we have to discuss this eventually. It may as well be now.”

Loki looked around them. “Discuss what? The damned yellow trees?”

Raven crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her gaze. Her brother watched her for a moment and then sighed. He shrugged and ran a hand through his fine hair.

“Fine. What do you want me to say, Raven? I know who your father is? What do you want me to admit to you? That I know he’s truly evil – a *devil*, in fact – one of the most powerful in Abaddon?” He realized that his voice had been rising, and he paused, took a deep breath and turned away from her. He moved to a nearby tree and leaned against it, his gaze once more on the ground. When he spoke again, his tone was still troubled, but controlled.

“Do you know his name, Raven?”

Raven stared at him. She knew her father’s name. She’d known it since she’d frozen the bars in her cell. And she’d been filled with dread, because upon the realization, she had also recalled that he was the very devil that Haledon hated. She swallowed and blinked, not wanting to answer him.

There were nine circles of Hell, or Abaddon. Each was guarded and ruled by a devil overlord, an arch fiend of vast age, wealth and power. The Eighth Circle of Abaddon was known as Caina, an everlasting realm of ice and death. Caina was as cold as Nisse, the Ninth Circle, was hot. And its king was her father.

Her brother waited patiently.

“Yes. I know his name.” She would not speak it, however. It was not good to speak a devil’s name. There was much power in a name. “I’ve known since that night in the guardhouse. I didn’t take the keys from the guard as you’d planned. He never came.” She fell silent for a moment and took a shaky breath. “I had to freeze the bars to get out. That’s how I knew...”

Loki watched her for a long quiet moment. And then, finally, he nodded in silence. “Then you know that he is the Lord of Ice, the Ruler of Caina, the Bringer of Winter. He presides over the Eighth Circle of Abaddon and is the second most powerful fiend in Hell. He answers only to the Lord of the Ninth Circle.” Here, he paused and took another deep, steadying breath. “And he is Haledon’s greatest enemy.”

Raven watched her brother in silence. Then she looked away and gazed at the yellow blossomed tree in the distance. Her chest ached. She wondered, as she stared at its gently swaying blooms, if her brother blamed her. Did he hate her because she was the child of his favored god’s enemy? The last thing in the world she wanted was to lose the love of her brother.

A part of her yearned to apologize.

But a larger part of her refused. It wasn’t as if she had chosen her father. On the contrary, *he* had chosen *her*. And she was not so certain that she *was* sorry, anyhow. After all, it was this heritage of hers that had saved their lives at least once now. Where had Loki’s god been when she was laying beneath the weight of a man intent on raping her? It hadn’t been Haledon who broke out the bars of her guard house cell and freed her two nights ago.

She chewed her lip and pushed a lock of long black hair from her face. The ache in her chest grew and she wondered what to say.

“I’m sorry, Raven.”

She straightened, suddenly, and turned to face him. She hadn’t been expecting to hear that.

Loki stared at her, his eyes repentant, his shoulders slumped. "I love you, Raven. I always will. You're my sister now, as you were before, and nothing will change that." He pushed away from the tree and came to stand before her. "I'm so sorry that I waited until now to tell you that. I don't ever want you to doubt that I'm here for you."

Raven sagged against him as he pulled her into an embrace. "I'm an ass," he said, and she could feel him shaking his head over her shoulder. "Forgive me?"

She wrapped her own arms around his chest and squeezed, closing her eyes. "I forgive you."

They stood there a few moments more, and then he pulled away, straightening her gently as he did so. She blinked a few times, looked at the ground, and turned away, pretending to hide her movements as she wiped a few stray tears from her cheeks.

Loki waited for her to turn back around before he smiled and suggested that they keep moving. She nodded and pointed at the tree she'd been staring at.

"That's the next one."

Loki's gaze narrowed and he chewed the inside of his cheek. "I could swear this is getting us nowhere. Some of these trees even seem to double back."

Raven thought for a moment. "I don't know whether you've noticed, but it also seems like some of them appear where there were none only moments before."

Loki nodded. "I have. What do you make of it?"

Raven shook her head. "I don't know. Papa used to tell stories about the forest. I remember that he said a lot of strange things can happen in here. But, we have nothing else to go on, Loki. And I doubt that Minea and Manus have any reason to lead us in the wrong direction."

Loki turned to look at her, and their gazes held for a moment. Then he sighed. “Very well. We’ll continue on. At least for a little longer.”

They made their way to the tree with the cascading yellow blossoms and looked up at it. As they had done many times before, they then turned away from the tree and searched the surrounding forest for the next one. Raven spotted it immediately and pointed it out.

They began to walk toward it.

And then Loki stopped in his tracks, his head cocked to one side. He held his hand up and Raven stopped beside him. He placed his fingers to his lips and listened. In a moment, he said quietly, “Do you hear that?”

Raven had been listening as well. She could make out the faint sound of distant voices, a man and woman, arguing about something. She nodded. They followed the sound, their steps slow and cautious. As they moved, the voices grew in volume.

“Over my bloody hide!” a man yelled.

“Daddy, you’re being unreasonable! Someone has to go to market, and you’re incapable,” a woman retorted, her tone carefully held just in check.

“You’ll not step foot inside that city, I tell you. The Lords and Ladies will steal you away in a heart-”

“Daddy! Do not speak their names! They’ll hear you.”

Raven and Loki glanced at one another and Loki’s brow raised in interest. They crept softly to the forest’s edge and peeked out from behind the brambles.

A young, pretty woman, no older than twenty, stood before a bent middle-aged man. She held his face in her hands and was speaking to him in rushed, rapid tones. His

expression was one of helpless desperation, the lines beneath his eyes and around his mouth drawn tight. A cane supported him in one hand, while his other hand, wrinkled, calloused and dusty, rested lightly on his daughter's shoulder.

A small cottage sat behind them, nestled between thorny rose bushes on one side and sunflowers on the other. A dirt path led from its front door to a two-horse stable several yards away, and then continued on to a thatch-roofed barn. Smoke curled from the cottage's single, small chimney.

At first, Raven thought this strange. And then she realized that at some point during their trek, the heat had let up. It was not nearly as hot now as it had been when they had left their village. In fact, it seemed quite temperate.

She turned to her brother and widened her eyes questioningly. "What should we do?"

Loki chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment and then sighed softly. "We may as well show ourselves."

Raven nodded, and the two stepped out of the forest, into the clearing.

Their presence immediately drew the old man's attention. He moved fast for a crippled man, but his lame leg hobbled as he shoved his daughter behind him and held his cane out like a weapon. He eyed the two newcomers with a wariness they had never before encountered.

Raven instantly came forward, gesturing for Loki to remain slightly behind.

She held her hands out at her sides and smiled a warm, gentle smile. "I am sorry we startled you. We are travelers from a village not far from here. We're headed to Krivir. We heard voices and decided to follow them." She paused as the old man slowly began to lower his cane. Then she continued, "Again, I apologize if we scared you."

The man blinked, studying Raven carefully. Then he glanced back over his shoulder at the pretty blonde girl and asked her something that neither Raven nor Loki could hear. She nodded and the old man turned back to face them.

“What village are you from?” he asked as his daughter moved out from behind him.

“We’re from Aster Hollow. It’s just a few days from here. In fact, I didn’t realize you could get anywhere within a few days through the forest, from Aster Hollow. I’ve always been told that it would take months to find other people.”

The young woman looked up at her father and something unspoken passed between them. Then they turned back to face Raven and Loki. The woman spoke up.

“Actually, Aster Hollow *is* months from here.” She fell silent for a moment and studied the two of them very carefully, wariness evident on her youthful features. “Where did you say you were headed?”

“Kriver,” Loki and Raven answered at once.

“Well,” the old man took a few hobbling steps along the path beneath his feet, and then gestured with his cane toward the edge of the cottage behind him, “The truth is, strangers, you’re dead center of Kriver. If you’re not lying, then you’ve come three months’ distance in a few days. That’s Trimontium right over there.”

Raven and Loki glanced at one another and then moved toward the path and walked slowly around the side of the cottage. They cleared the small building and were greeted with an amazing sight.

In the distance, settled at the base of a range of rocky, snow-capped mountains, sat a vast walled city. Trimontium was the capital city of Kriver, and the largest city in the known world.

Raven and Loki stared at it, dumbfounded. Somehow, they had traveled hundreds of miles in two days. Neither of them spoke for a long while. And then Loki cleared his throat and, without taking his eyes from the city scape, murmured, “The yellow blossoms...”

Raven nodded slowly, her jaw slack, her eyes wide.

“I guess I’d say you’re surprised enough that we can believe you’re telling the truth,” came a gentle female voice from behind them. They pulled their gazes from the distant city and turned to face the young blonde woman.

“How did you arrive here in such a short time?” she asked.

Loki shook his head. Raven shrugged. “We were told that the path we took would take less time. We had no idea how *much* less time...”

Loki ran a hand through his fair hair and smiled sheepishly at the woman. She blushed. And then her father approached, his gaze bouncing from Loki to his daughter and back again. He came to stand between them, and his daughter visually shrunk back beneath the weight of his wary vigilance.

And then, suddenly, the old man’s expression changed.

He cocked his head to one side, studied both Loki and Raven carefully for a moment more, and then turned to face them, effectively excluding his daughter from the conversation.

“You’ll be heading into the city presently, then?”

They nodded.

The old man chewed his lip, leaning heavily on his cane. “Right. Then, I’ll ask a favor of you. Please accompany my daughter to the market. I don’t like the idea of sending her into the city alone. Her brother used to make our rounds for us, but he’s...”

“He disappeared,” the girl interrupted from behind him. “We haven’t seen him in five days. He went out for water from the well and didn’t return.” She stepped to her father’s side. Her expression was drawn, her pallor now somewhat more pale. “No one has seen him or heard from him. He left no trace, no sign. He just vanished.”

The old man nodded sagely. “I trust Tolen to be safe. He is a strong man. He can take care of himself. He’ll be back.” They all fell into silence. A minute later, the man spoke again. “Summer, on the other hand, should not be alone within Trimontium’s walls.” He turned to eye his daughter, and she shot him a warning look. “It isn’t safe.” He turned back to Loki and Raven. “I’ll pay you to accompany her. Two silver when she returns this afternoon. What say you?”

Raven and Loki looked from the old man to the young woman and then turned to face each other. They were twins. They’d cultivated a lifelong connection between themselves, a bond strong enough that they often did not need to speak aloud in order to communicate with one another. Now was one of those times.

Raven knew what her brother was thinking. It was the same thing she was thinking. Their astonishment at arriving in Trimontium so quickly was lingering, however, it was easy to rationalize, and its shock was currently being overshadowed by the realization that they had no plan and no idea what they were going to do once they’d arrived in Kriver. They had simply assumed they would have time to work such matters out as they’d traveled.

Now they were in Trimontium, and time had run out.

First thing was first. They had money, but not very much. They would need more very soon. And here was someone willing to part with a fairly good amount for agreeing to a relatively simple task.

It was a start.

Raven turned away from her brother and smiled at the old man. Despite his age, the elderly farmer was slightly taken aback by the beauty of that perfect, white smile, and his eyes quickly shot to the ground as his hands began to fidget.

“We would be glad to accompany you, Summer,” Raven turned her attention to the young woman. Summer returned the smile and nodded.

“Thank you. I’ll get my cloak and we can be off.” She spun on her heel and disappeared around the corner of the cottage.

“Keep her away from the Lords and Ladies,” the old man had leaned in toward them, and spoke in a hushed tone.

Raven’s brow furrowed. “Who?”

“You heard me. The...” he appeared to become nervous for a moment, his gaze shooting toward the walled city and back again, “*Them*,” he whispered emphatically.

“From the castle. They call it Eidolon. The Phantom Palace. You know – the *Fey*. The Lords and Ladies...” he swallowed. Raven noticed a drop of sweat trickle from his receding hairline toward his right eyebrow.

He eyed her sternly and then, after glancing once over each of his shoulders, he leaned in even closer, his lips approaching her ear as if to share a secret. Raven could not help but meet him half way. She had always relished secrets.

“The *elves*.”

He pulled away immediately then and turned to leave. As he did so, his daughter stepped out from the corner of the cottage, this time draped in a warm traveling cloak. She smiled at Raven, turned an even brighter smile upon Loki, and met her father half way down the path. They exchanged a few quiet words and she kissed him on the cheek. Then she joined them at the end of the path and they all turned toward the main road leading to the city.

Raven glanced once at her brother, the old man’s warning ringing in her ears. However, Loki’s eyes were on Summer, and he did not see the worried expression on his sister's face.

Raven blinked, looked back toward Trimontium’s tall stone walls and spires and squared her shoulders. Summer smiled warmly, and they began the short trek to the city’s gate.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Seven

Raven was beginning to become self-conscious.

They had been inside of Trimontium's city walls for less than an hour. The city's vast proportions were not the only notable aspect of Trimontium. For all of its people, and all of its business, the capital city of Kriver was the most orderly, most peaceful place in the known world. Everything seemed to run smoothly, from the perfect bread produced by its three bakeries to the almost disturbing lack of disagreement in the market place or social unrest at any of its multiple taverns. The people of Trimontium were polite and considerate, and Raven would have been quite charmed by the unanimous lack of desire for trouble, except for one tiny thing.

Every one of them stared at her as if she were some sort of specter. And their eyes always skirted across her face to where her ears were hidden beneath masses of long, thick black hair. They would openly eye her with abject interest until they at once realized what they were doing and looked away, apparently chagrined, to stare straight ahead or at the ground in front of them.

By the time the three of them had finished their business at the bustling marketplace, Raven had been oggled by man, woman and child so many times that she simply could not stand it any longer.

"What is it, Loki? What is wrong with me? Has my hair caught on fire? Am I growing horns?" She stopped in her tracks and blanched. "Oh god, please tell me I haven't grown horns..."

Loki stopped walking and turned to face her, a confused expression on his face. "What?"

“Loki, everyone has been staring at me. Is there something on my face? Is it my clothes?”

Beside her, Summer sighed and shook her head. “No, it isn’t any of those matters. And, no, you haven’t grown horns. My word, why in the world would you suspect such a thing?”

Raven didn’t answer.

“Here. Come with me.” Summer glanced hastily in all directions, and then gently took Raven by the arm to guide her and her brother toward a deserted alleyway. Once they were there, she turned to face the black-haired beauty.

“I have never been there, so I would not know, but perhaps everyone is as beautiful as you in Aster Hollow. Here, however, such beauty is very rare. And, in fact, is associated with only one group of... people.”

Raven and Loki were silent for a moment. And then Raven asked, “Who?”

Summer swallowed a seemingly large lump in her throat and glanced, once again, up and down the alley as if afraid they were not truly alone. Then she leaned in close, much as her father had done earlier.

“The Lords and Ladies,” she whispered.

Raven blinked, and then sighed. “Very well. Perhaps it is time you told us a bit more about these Lords and Ladies. Elves, I think your father called them.”

Summer’s eyes widened and she placed her forefinger to her lips. “Shh. Be careful what you say aloud. The Lords and Ladies do not take kindly to insubordination.”

Raven’s gaze narrowed. Oh, *so they’re those kinds of people*, she thought. She considered Summer’s warning a moment more and then crossed her arms over her chest.

“Do I look like them?” Raven asked.

“No, actually, other than your beauty, you look nothing like them. Your ears are entirely normal. And your facial structure... it’s too human. The Lords and Ladies look... well... *different*. Beautiful, but in an peculiar sort of way.” Summer seemed to be mulling over Raven’s appearance as she spoke. Her eyes studied Raven’s features carefully.

Raven, for her part, was still fixed on something she had said about her ears. “What do you mean, my ears are normal?”

Summer blinked. “Oh. Well, the Fey have pointed ears. You don’t. It was the first thing I noticed about you when you walked out of the forest on our farm.” She paused then, and smiled shyly. “Actually, it was the second thing I noticed. I looked for pointed ears because you are so attractive, and so are they.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “All right, so, she’s gorgeous. We’ve established that. Now, tell us more about these elves.” He didn’t mean it to sound so brusque, however he blushed when he realized that Summer was a bit taken aback by his curt tone. “Sorry. But we really should know, shouldn’t we? I mean, are they in charge of Trimontium?”

Summer nodded. And then she shook her head. And then she sighed. “It is rather complicated. Are you two hungry? We can discuss it over lunch. I know of a wonderful hostelry, where the food is always fresh.” She lowered her voice pointedly. “And the atmosphere is private. We can speak safely there.”

Raven and Loki nodded, and the three of them left the shadows of the alley.

“Is Trimontium always this crowded?” Loki asked as they shuffled through another large group of people.

“As Kriver’s capital city, Trimontium holds many people,” Summer explained. “However, the Solstice is approaching. The Mid-Summer’s Festival brings countless revelers from neighboring cities and towns. They are setting up in Festival Square. I can take you there after lunch. The Festival is quite an occasion.” She smiled to herself. “It is my favorite, though I would never admit as much to my father. He doesn’t know I attend the festivities.”

They rounded a corner and were walking down another placidly busy street when the hair on the back of Raven’s neck stood on end. Instinctively, she searched the street ahead of her, and when she didn’t find what she was looking for, she turned to glance behind her. There, she saw a smallish man, dressed in expensive fineries that seemed off-kilter with his undersized stature, beady black eyes, and mouse-like features. He was staring at her as a miner would eye a sparkling vein. She stopped in her tracks and turned her body to face him. He did not move from where he stood in the center of the street, his little eyes wide, his expression acquisitive.

“Um, Loki?”

Loki stopped and turned. He saw her staring and followed her gaze to the small man.

“Summer, who is that man?” he asked, his voice low, his expression turning dark.

Summer turned around. She blanched. “Oh no.”

At that, the man took off at a run, his little legs carrying him much more quickly than would seem possible. They watched him disappear around a building.

“What just happened?” Raven asked, her gut suddenly feeling like lead.

Summer shook her head, her gaze glued to where the man had vanished. “This can’t be good. That was Jax Narrium. He is a retired thief, a very rich, very selfish man. He is

also the eyes and ears of the Lords and Ladies when they do not sojourn into the city.”

She turned to Raven and her expression was regretful. “I am sorry Raven, but he has most likely run to tell them of your presence here. A woman of your beauty will most certainly be taken as a royal courtesan.” She swallowed, blushing furiously. “I am afraid that the King and Prince have many. It is what my father fears, though he concerns himself without cause. The Lords would not choose one as plain as myself.”

“You are not plain, Summer.” Loki spoke up. And then, as Summer met his gaze, he cleared his throat and nervously looked at the ground. Summer’s blush stayed put.

Raven crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze sliding from one of them to the other. She sighed, exasperated, and rolled her eyes. “So, what do we do?” she asked.

“Right,” Summer said and gestured for Raven and Loki to follow her. “We need to get to our destination as quickly as possible. I doubt they would search for you at Marrienne’s. It is not one of the more frequented taverns, and right now the others are filled to the rafters.”

Raven moved at a fast pace alongside her, but her expression was very worried. “Why don’t we head back to your farm? We have done what we came to do. Shouldn’t we leave the city?”

Summer shook her head as she strode through the street. “The first thing they would do is post guards at the gates. The only time they do so is when they wish to either keep someone specific from entering the city, or,” she glanced apologetically at Raven, “when they wish to keep someone specific from leaving it.”

Raven’s head spun. “Are you telling me I’m a prisoner in Trimontium?”

Summer didn’t answer.

Raven cursed under her breath. She didn't like the idea of being a prisoner, of being helpless. Thoughts of hands roughly ripping at her clothes and skin came unbidden to her mind. Her stomach clenched and her head began to pound.

"Raven!"

Raven turned to Loki. "What?" And then she noticed it – the steam she expelled with every breath. Her eyes widened. The temperature was balmy, the climate mild. She was producing the vapor in her own fury and fear.

She drew in a shaky breath and tried to calm her nerves.

"Just take it easy. Nothing is going to happen to you." Loki moved closer to her and took her gently by the arm. He leaned in to whisper in her ear. "You can control it. Just think of something else."

Raven nodded silently, trying to concentrate on something besides her possible demise. In a few moments, her breath returned to normal, no one but she and Loki the wiser. Her brother nodded slowly, smiled sympathetically, and gave her a squeeze before releasing her.

"Here we are. Hurry," Summer said as she held open the door of a small wooden structure crammed between two larger buildings. It's façade gave the appearance of having been built specifically to the dimensions of the inadequate spaces left behind by its neighbors. It appeared squished, but its cherry wood exterior looked new and well kept. Overhead, a small, brightly painted swinging sign declared "Marrianne's" to the world, and the three of them ducked inside.

Marrianne's interior was warm and inviting. In place of a winter's fire, several candles flickered in the corner hearth, lending the establishment a cozy atmosphere. The

smell of fresh baked bread mingled with the aroma of cinnamon in the air. The tavern was furnished with several round tables, at which sat numerous people who conversed quietly or ate delicious looking food.

Summer led them to an empty table and they each took a seat. Before long, a lovely young woman with flaming red hair appeared beside them, her crisp white apron pulled tautly over an overtly voluptuous frame. She smiled warmly at them and introduced herself.

“Good afternoon! Summer, it sure is nice to see you out and about.” She turned to Raven and Loki. “I’m Marrienne. What can I get for you three today?”

Raven instantly liked the woman. For one thing, she was outwardly friendly. But more importantly, she did not stare at Raven the way the rest of Trimontium seemed determined to do.

“Marrienne, we would like three of your mid-day dishes. I would have one for every meal, if I could afford it.”

Marrienne laughed, and Raven was reminded of a bottle of champagne.

“Sweetheart, you just come and help me with my dishes sometime, and I’ll make you as much food as you can eat.”

“Deal!” Summer said, immediately.

Marrienne’s smile beamed. “It’s settled then. Three mid-day’s, coming up.”

Raven raised her hand hurriedly. “Wait, please. Marrienne, I would like mine without any meat in it, if it’s all the same.”

The red-headed woman blinked. “No meat?”

Raven blushed and shook her head. She'd forgotten what it was like to request such a thing. In her village, the people were used to her curious habits. They considered her eccentric, but her charisma had won them over long ago, and they'd simply come to accept her differences.

"I would ask the same of you, Marrianne. My sister and I have never consumed animal flesh. I'm not sure it would sit well in our stomachs." Loki grinned at the plump woman, who blinked yet again.

And then, as if realizing that her manners had momentarily slipped, Marrianne returned the smile and nodded. "Not a problem, honey. It will be out shortly." She spun on her heel, her long curly red locks bouncing merrily behind her as she flounced her way to the back of the tavern and disappeared through a swinging door.

Summer turned a baffled expression upon her two companions. "You have never eaten meat?"

Raven shrugged. "Perhaps when we were too young to request otherwise. But for as long as I can remember, no. For some reason, I have never felt it... appropriate. And Loki, being the brother that he is," she smiled at Loki, who quickly looked away, his cheeks reddening, "has always backed my decision. He didn't want me to be alone in my choice, so he joined me. Our parents were very understanding." At this, Raven's expression changed, and she looked away from Summer to stare into the distance, her gaze far away.

She was thinking of her parents, wondering whether she would ever see them again, when she gradually noticed that no one in the tavern was talking any longer.

She glanced up. Everyone was looking at her.

And then her brother nudged her gently. She glanced over at him. His expression was a complex mixture of wariness and trepidation. He locked eyes with her and then gestured, with a very subtle nod of his head, toward the tavern doors.

She turned around to look.

There in the entryway stood five tall men. Four were dressed in decorated leather armor, brilliantly embroidered insignias on their chests, swords at their hips, and bows strung across their backs. The fifth man stood slightly apart and ahead of the others. His strong physique was clothed in rich, royal garb, a midnight-blue cape draped from his broad shoulders. Long, shiny, silvery-blond hair cascaded down his back, and he had the bluest eyes Raven had ever seen.

Those same eyes met and held Raven's gaze, and she was instantly overwhelmed by the sensation of falling, topsy-turvy, into an endless sky, a bottomless ocean, drowning in the charm of the most handsome man she had ever beheld. He watched her for a few moments more, the entire tavern echoing the silent tension between them. His face was a gorgeous but unreadable mask, his expression inscrutable, save for some hint of an alien emotion in the quiet depth of his impossibly blue eyes.

And then the man slowly smiled, his perfect lips curving upwards in cruel invitation.

Some kind of warning intuition began to resound deep within Raven. But she ignored it. She was too lost in that crystal blue gaze.

He came forward, his strides long and purposeful. Raven's heart leapt up into her throat and then proceeded to beat a thousand times per second. She stopped breathing.

The tall man reached the table and stood before her, peering down at her with abject admiration.

“I was convinced that the thief had been exaggerating,” he began, and his voice was mesmerizing, deep and perfect. “Clearly, I was wrong. If anything, his acclamation of your great beauty was an understatement.”

Raven simply stared up at him. He spoke to her as if she were the only one in the room. His words, his tone, his eyes were for her alone. Her mouth opened, as she struggled to say something, but when she could think of nothing to say, she closed it again and blinked. Then, with great effort, she pulled her gaze away from his and glanced over at her brother.

When she did so, the room broke into very soft chatter. Loki’s worried expression did not help to ease Raven’s nerves. She looked over at Summer, who was staring at her in wide-eyed astonishment. Raven’s brow furrowed. What had she done? What was going on?

She turned her attention back to the man beside her. The man’s confident and cruel smile had disappeared, to be replaced by a look of genuine wonder. He quickly recovered, however, and once again, she was captured in that azure gaze. This time, she felt that she could not have looked away, if she had wanted to, and she was glad to be sitting down, her legs having gone numb.

“I... I apologize. I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

More soft chatter filled the corners of the room.

His smile was back, and made Raven’s insides melt. “I am Prince Astriel, of the Lords and Ladies. Might I ask for your name, my lady?”

Raven's eyes widened. It was the *Prince*, the one Summer had cautioned them about. She would look at his ears, just to see whether or not they were pointed, as Summer said they would be, if she could find the strength to once again break eye contact with him.

That warning intuition inside of her returned full-force, and her body tensed in her chair. Something told her not to answer him, but the irresistible pull of his powerful gaze insisted otherwise.

She cleared her throat. "My name is Raven. This is my brother, Loki. We are new to Trimontium, otherwise we would have..." She suddenly couldn't remember what she had wanted to say.

The man chuckled low in his throat and goose-bumps raised across the flesh of Raven's exposed arms.

"It is indeed a pleasure, Raven. If you are new to our city, then you must need a guide. Perhaps you would allow me to escort you on a tour?"

That prickle of danger that had been steadily growing in Raven's gut suddenly came thrumming to the forefront, pulsing in time with her rapid heartbeat. Somehow, she simply knew that going anywhere for any reason with the Prince of the Elves was a very bad idea. But the full weight of his penetrating gaze was beginning to make her dizzy. She could also sense the guard's eyes upon her, along with every patron in the tavern.

She tried to blink and found that she couldn't. The Prince's presence was intoxicating, mesmerizing. She felt heavy, somewhat weak.

She wanted to say 'no'.

And then, she realized that in fact she wanted to say 'yes'. What had she been thinking? How could she possibly be afraid of such a man? He would not harm her.

She smiled, and Astriel's eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

"Of course. I would be honored if you would show me your city."

He offered her his gloved hand, and she took it without hesitation. She stood, and beneath the weight of her brother's mortified gape, she moved with the Prince toward his guards, who had been waiting, silently, just inside the doorway.

"No!"

Raven stopped in her tracks, momentarily disoriented. Who was that? Who was yelling? He sounded familiar.

"Raven, he's bewitched you! Let her go!"

The Prince's grip on her hand tightened slightly. She blinked, her brow furrowed. She turned around and the prince stepped before her, blocking her view. He then, himself, turned to face whoever it was that had called out to her.

"She has made her decision. Her well-being no longer concerns you." Astriel's tone was cool and calm, his inflection careful and precise. Something in the sound of his voice gave Raven a chill, and it raced up her spine, clearing her vision.

"Get away from her. I know you enchanted her. Raven would never do something so stupid unless under a spell."

She could almost remember now – it danced on the edges of her recollection. A kind, gentle man, with strawberry blonde hair, someone she loved dearly...

"Loki, please *sit*. Just let her go!"

Another voice, vaguely familiar, whispering to Loki, begging him not to interfere.

"Listen to her, Loki. She is much wiser than her father gives her credit for."

There was silence then, and a thick tension filled the air.

Several seconds later, someone roared with rage, and suddenly, everyone was moving around her. She was being pulled back, surrounded by the guards who had been behind her. Astriel was moving, speaking in quick low tones, a language she could not comprehend, and waving his hands in some sort of complex apocryphal movement.

In front of him, Loki had grabbed a chair and was lunging at the elf, holding it high over his head, obviously intent on slamming it into the Prince's tall form.

Light exploded outward from Astriel's open palms and slammed into Loki's chest, knocking him back several feet, where he landed, unmoving, in a heap on the floor.

And then Raven remembered. Everything.

She screamed in fury, fear for her brother driving unnatural strength through her body. With a great surge of power, she pulled from the soldiers' grasps, rushed forward, and raced to her brother's side. The Prince did not attempt to stop her as she stormed past him, her attention focused on the young fallen man.

"What did you do to him?" She rolled her brother's body over so that he was lying on his back. There were no visible signs of damage anywhere on him, but his eyelids did not flutter, his chest did not rise or fall. Terror raced through Raven's body like a giant wave of red water.

She slowly looked up at the prince, who was watching her very carefully, displeasure and frustration palpable on his coldly handsome face. Raven surrendered to the wrath building inside of her. She allowed its storm to surge through her limbs, into her fingertips and toes. She rose to her feet and her hands balled into fists at her sides. Her breath began to frost. The floor beneath her began to rime over, the ice crackling and

popping as it traveled outward from under her boots. Her vision darkened and she could hear her blood pumping in her ears.

She leveled her gaze upon the elf prince and gritted her teeth. “Fix him. Do it now. Whatever you did, undo it.”

Astriel cocked his head to one side and appraised her from head to toe. His gaze lingered on the ice coating the wooden planks of the tavern, and then he looked into her eyes once more.

“Come with me, Raven. Do not force my hand again.”

“Fix him!” her voice had become deeper, crisper, menacing. Its edges were laced with a grating growl, like ice scraping ice, like giant glaciers moving ever so slowly in distant lands.

Astriel’s gaze narrowed. He took a step forward.

“He is not dead, Raven, he sleeps deeply. Now come with me. I’ll not tell you again.”

Raven’s fury refused to die. Her vision went from dark to dark red, and she felt a sharp pain in her fingertips. The sudden sensation drew her attention away and she glanced down. Her nails were lengthening, their tips turning gray and shiny, like cold polished iron, horribly sharp and deadly.

They stretched and elongated until they had become six-inch blades, extending from each finger. Her eyes widened, surprise momentarily taking her off-guard.

The Prince chose that moment to strike. He moved forward, fast as lightning, and wrapped his fingers around her wrists. She jerked with the sudden contact, her body bucking as his Fey power poured over her in an attempt to force her compliance.

However, his overt attack had the opposite effect on her. Instead of succumbing obediently to the magic rushing over and through her form, her will beat against the onslaught, her vehemence rising to the challenge, more unnatural strength flooding her lithe frame until she was shaking with it.

In one swift, fluid movement, she wrenched free of his grasp, pulled her right hand back, and swiped it across his chest, drawing deep furrows into his shirt and chest. He hissed in pain and withdrew from her.

She watched him just long enough to notice that the liquid pouring from his wounds was clear, not red, and then she dropped beside her brother, covered him with her body and called out, with every fiber of her being.

“Father!”

In the next instant, the air shimmered around them. She gripped Loki’s unconscious form tightly, shutting her eyes against the vertigo that came with the shift in time and space. There was a tugging sensation, a starry sparkling beneath her lids, and then all movement ceased. The air had cooled significantly. Sound had faded into hollow silence, and all she could hear was her own ragged breathing.

There was stillness. And a presence. She could feel it, *him*, there before her, waiting patiently.

Raven moaned deep in her throat and faced the inevitable.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Eight

Summer's breaths came hard and fast, her chest rising and falling in quick succession, so much so that she felt she would faint dead away at any second. She could not believe what she had just witnessed. Nor could she come to grips with what she was witnessing right now.

The Elf Prince stared for a moment more at the space where Raven and Loki had been only seconds before. His expression was unreadable. He then turned his ice blue eyes upon Summer, and her knees gave out. She dropped, unceremoniously, into her chair and stared, slack-jawed at the second most powerful man in Kriver.

Astriel eyed her unrelentingly. Then, with a composed grace completely unbecoming of one who possessed four deep, oozing furrows in his chest, the prince righted a chair that had been knocked over, and lowered himself into it. With a nonchalant air, he began to peel off his soft leather gloves, one finger at a time.

Summer whimpered low in her throat, unaware that she had done so. She trembled in the presence of this man and his guards, knowing deep inside that nothing good could come of his attentions at that moment.

Just when she was sure she would pass out from fear and dreadful anticipation, the fey prince spoke.

"Tell me what you know of your two friends, Summer." He ordered softly, without looking at her.

She answered immediately. "I don't know anything, really! I swear I don't. I only met them this morning. They came out of the forest at our farm, said they had traveled from..." She stumbled over her speech then, trying desperately to remember where they

had told her they'd come from. She searched her recollection with the ferocity of one searching for an important, lost artifact amongst old, unimportant possessions. Finally, she remembered. "They came from Aster Hollow! They said it only took them a few days. Then my father asked them to accompany me into the city. They didn't know anything about Trimontium. I told them what I thought they needed to know. Then Jax saw Raven and..." She trailed off, suddenly embarrassed. She'd been about to divulge how she had warned Raven and Loki about the Prince and his father. Her cheeks burned hotly and, as she stared down at the table top, she finally felt the weight of the Prince's gaze upon her cowering form.

She closed her eyes, terrified of what he would do with her.

The silence stretched uncomfortably.

"So you presumed to hide them here." His voice was so soft, so calm, it sent horrible chills up Summer's spine. She gritted her teeth and nodded her head.

There was another long, silent pause.

"I see."

Summer began to cry. She sniffled, the sound loud in the silent-fallen room. A tear splashed to the rapidly defrosting floor boards.

"Thank you for your help, Summer. Give your father my regards."

The Prince then stood and turned to leave. Summer did not dare look up. She would not move. She would not breathe. He was going to leave her be. She would do nothing to draw his attention back to her, lest he change his mind.

Astriel's tall black boots sounded hollowly on the wooden planks beneath him as he moved across the tavern room to the waiting guards. One guard, a more elite insignia on

his chest, glanced down at his prince's chest and then met his gaze. Neither of them said anything. Astriel pushed through the front door and was gone. The guards followed silently after him.

The first thing Raven noticed was the vastness of the chamber she was in. She glanced up to find herself staring at a giant archway, carved of pure bluish ice, which was reproduced several times, in a circle around her. Beyond each archway was a hallway so long that it disappeared into darkness, despite the bluish light shed by blazing torches lining each wall.

She followed the arches around the room with her eyes until they came to a stop behind a massive ice-hewn throne twenty feet tall.

Upon it rested a man. He was at least eight feet tall from his horn-crowned head to the tips of his large black boots. The skin over his immense, heavily muscled body was nearly as blue as the ice palace around him. The tips of his fingers ended in black, claw-like nails and white glistening fangs rested, menacingly, upon his pale lower lip. He wore armored clothing of some magical iridescent-scaled beast, and bracers forged of a glimmering alloy that looked as if it had been melted and re-hardened around tiny, shattered stars.

Raven drew her gaze over his form, not able to help herself as she took in each detail, memorized it unwittingly. He was terrifying. He was beautiful. He was the Lord of Caina, the second-most powerful devil in Abaddon. He was Lord Malphas – her father.

And then she looked up into his eyes. They burned an eerie tri-colored hue, blue, gold and silver-white, like an ice-cold fire, and as she gazed into them, she felt positive they would sing a path straight to her core.

There were a thousand things she wanted to say, to ask, but no sound would emit from her lips. She could barely bring herself to resume breathing.

The giant man peered down at her, the corners of his mouth turning upward into a slight smile.

“Welcome to Caina, daughter.” His voice was thunder, rumbling across a vast expanse of ice. He rose, and Raven could only watch as his indomitable figure towered over her, appearing to dwarf everything in the cavernous room. He slowly strode toward her, his boots resounding loudly on the floor of smooth, carved ice. Raven glanced down at that ice and wondered, for a fraction of an instant, why she was not simply freezing to death in this frozen world. And then she wondered whether her brother actually was.

“He will not be harmed, child. However, I think it best he remain sleeping for the time being.”

Raven glanced back up at the arch devil and swallowed. He was probably right. Loki would most likely have a heart attack if he were to awaken in the throne room of the palace belonging to Haledon’s sworn enemy.

No, it was best he slept.

Malphas came to stand before her, then knelt and offered her his hand. She stared down at that massive taloned hand and then she laid her own hand, so small compared to his, atop of his palm, and his fingers gently closed over it.

He helped her rise. **“It is time, Winter.”**

“Time?” It did not register as strange to her that he called her ‘Winter’. It seemed perfectly normal, as if that had been her true name all along.

“I have brought you home so that you may accept your soul’s true form.”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“You suffer the undesired affections of others because your outward beauty reflects the beauty of your spirit. You are the most ancient, the most powerful soul ever offered up by the Spring of Souls. Hence, the perfection of your physical form. However, you are also my daughter.” He raised her hand before her, and her fingernails extended to their full, razor-sharp iron lengths, or their own accord. She stared at her hand. Malphas then placed his own palm against hers, and the similarity between the two was unmistakable.

“I made certain, as I placed your soul inside of your mother’s womb, that you would also retain a piece of me. You are my one chosen child, the heir of Caina. As such, you possess a true form, one native to your home realm. It is time for you to find this... and accept it.” He smiled at her then, and released her hand. **“It will give you power against your enemies, and protect you from those who would harm you.”**

She fell silent, pondering his words. Then she glanced at her brother’s form where it lay curled on the ice several feet away. “I do not wish to be anyone other than who I am,” she said quietly.

“And you shall remain so. You can call upon your true form when you need it.” He placed his fingers beneath her chin and turned her so that she was looking up at him once again. **“This body you possess at present will always remain. I am simply giving you what has been your birthright since the moment I took you from the Spring.**

You shall have two forms, daughter. One is Raven,” he stepped back and slowly let his eyes trail over her tall lissome form. **“The other is Winter.”**

She quietly mulled over what he was telling her. “I will still be me?”

He nodded slowly.

“But I will be able to defend myself,” she turned to look at her brother again, “and those I love?”

Again, he nodded.

She closed her eyes and swallowed, searching within herself. What did her soul tell her to do? She felt something uncoiling deep inside. It was like a shining, golden rope of power, a magical knot that had been tied up, useless and quiescent in its anchored state. It wanted to unwind, to expand, to be free.

She opened her eyes and met the fiery, eerie orbs of his commanding gaze.

She took a deep breath. She was trembling as she said, “Very well. I’m ready.”

His eyes sparked with something akin to victory, but Raven had no time to ponder the source of his triumph, as he then came forward once again and slowly, ceremoniously, placed the palm of his hand against her chest.

The world exploded around her. She cried out, arching her body, throwing her head back as unbearable heat, followed by a cold so frigid it burned like fire, surged through her body. It was relentless, cascading over the rift that was her sanity, dragging her along with it into the depths of the unknown.

Malphas encircled his daughter in his well-muscled arms and held her against his massive chest. She was so tiny, so fragile. And yet, as he held her, he could feel the dark stirring of immense power that she’d locked up so deep within herself. And as he

watched, she let her barriers fall one by one, allowing that darkness to climb up within her and take shape.

Wings of the finest raven down emerged from her back and then spread to a glorious wingspan. His eyes grew wide with surprise, for no one else in the Nine Circles of Abaddon had wings such as these. He watched, fascinated, as her hair became unbelievably soft to his touch, long and lustrous, fading to the color of spun arctic ice. He felt her grow taller in his grasp, stronger, and he looked on as her skin turned dark as a northern winter's midnight.

And when tiny fangs pressed against her full, red lower lip, he couldn't tear his eyes away from her mouth, luscious and tempting.

Her first change washed over her like an ocean, and he knew she felt as if she were drowning beneath the weight of it. He held her tight, lending her as much strength as he could without stalling her transformation.

Eventually, the intensity of the change waned, and she moaned low in her throat. Malphas's eyes were focused on the iridescent sheen of her extraordinary wings as she slowly came to and opened her eyes.

He found himself reluctantly letting her go so that she could stand before him in all of her glory. From her gorgeous wings to her web-spun, waist-length hair, to the smooth dusk of her perfect skin, she was pure flawlessness. But it was her eyes he loved the most. They were reflections of his own, having changed from solid blue-black to a tri-colored fire and ice that glowed hotly beneath impossibly long, thick lashes.

She was extraordinary. His only daughter was more beautiful than any she-devil he'd ever laid eyes upon. And she was his, a powerful piece of his soul, combined with the eldest soul in existence, made flesh.

She stood before him naked, her own clothes having torn in the conversion that made her taller and stronger. She blinked at him. She looked down at herself, and then she stretched her arms out, her eyes taking in the darkened tone of her skin, the curves of her strong musculature, the fine spun silver of her snow-white hair.

"Father..." She spoke, and her new sultry, other-worldly purr escaped from behind her fangs, wrapped around him, innocently, unknowingly, awakening protective emotions he barely recognized.

For the love of the Dark Powers, Malphas thought, This one will to be hard to shield from the prying eyes of Hell.

"I feel..." Winter paused mid-sentence, and the perfect skin of her brow furrowed slightly as she searched for the words to describe the sensations that flooded through her. "I feel so -"

"**Powerful,**" he finished for her. She blinked, smiling shyly. He noticed the faint glow about her body, the way she fairly emanated the magic of Darkness.

"Yes...." She closed her eyes and, holding her arms out at her sides, she released her claws.

"**You are,**" he said as he reached out, gently grasped one of her outstretched hands, and pulled her toward a window that she could have sworn was not there only moments before. "**And you will have to learn to control your new power before you leave this realm.**"

They reached the window and Malphas peered out over the dominion that was Caina. The vast expanse of an icy and desolate wasteland stretched into infinity under the towering shadow of Malphas's palace. Raven gazed out at the bleak landscape of cold, gray despair. A howling wind carved the pattern of eons into glaciers that shifted and floated, rimmed by rivers of slush and rime, bottomless and barren.

The mortal heart looking upon such frozen solitude would surely have felt the wretched anguish of frigid despondency. It would have, perchance, ceased to beat, overwhelmed by the unwillingness to go on, without hope, without passion, as dead inside as was this eternal, lonely winter.

However, to Raven – to *Winter* – it felt much, much different.

“Caina,” Raven let the word roll off of her tongue. It was an almost beautiful sound, soothing and welcoming in an unfamiliar kind of way.

“**Your home,**” her father added, softly, gently.

They fell into a mutual, comfortable silence.

Princess Zeta watched her brother as he gazed, distracted, into the fireplace in the richly decorated drawing room. He leaned over the marble hearth, his arms braced against the mantelpiece. The firelight cast shadows upon the planes and angles of his handsome face and caused his eyes to flicker like blue flame.

She smiled to herself. His mood had progressively deteriorated since his return from the tavern that afternoon. And as his mood worsened, hers improved.

She looked away, turning her attention to the diamond beading on her lavender silk gown. “So, she managed to break your enchantment, you say?” she cooed as she languidly stretched her long legs out onto the divan and re-arranged her dress so that it draped properly over the edge. She chuckled softly and shook her head. “And then she attacked you.” Her smile was all but cruel now. “She sounds positively delightful. When do I get to meet her?”

Astriel turned his gaze upon his sister and the azure irises of his eyes dilated from cat-like slits into the black circles that mortals were more familiar with. He returned her cruel smile, effortlessly, and much more effectively, and then looked away once again. “Soon. She’ll not escape me a second time.”

“Oh?” Zeta asked, mockingly. “From what I hear, she is not entirely mortal.” Her smile disappeared then, and her tone became serious. “I was told that she called out for her father. And that Malphas answered.”

He righted himself and turned to face her. Their eyes met and held for a moment and then he moved to the bookshelf against one wall and appeared to casually peruse the titles.

“If she is the daughter of Lord Malphas, then she will prove a difficult prey, indeed. And you must also consider, Astriel, what she was doing in our city. Have you thought about what significance her appearance might hold?”

He waited a moment before answering, his back still turned toward her.

“It crossed my mind,” he said casually. He pulled out a book, briefly shuffled through its pages, and then returned it to the shelf. Finally, he turned to face her. “I care little what plans the dark lords might be hatching. They are not what concerns me.”

“No, just one of their daughters.”

“She will be mine.”

Zeta’s smile was back. Astriel had never been denied something he wanted before. No mortal had dared ever defy him. This woman, this *Raven*, had to be simply killing his enormous ego.

“If you are so sure,” she began slowly, “then I propose a wager.”

This had Astriel’s attention. He gracefully sat in one of the overstuffed chairs opposite her, and leaned back, a curious smile on his gorgeous face. “Oh?”

Zeta’s eyes glittered malevolently. “Indeed.” She leaned forward, drawing out the suspense. “I bet you cannot capture this rebellious little prize of yours without resorting to magic. I wager ten of your courtesans that you can not bring her back to the castle as a mortal man would – using no Fey power whatsoever.”

Astriel stared at her in silence. His expression turned darker, more determined, with each passing second. And then, slowly and gracefully, he leaned forward and smiled a horrible, beautiful, dangerous smile.

“I accept.”

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Nine

Raven lay in the center of the her giant four-poster bed. She had been given her own room in Malphas's castle. In fact, she had been given an entire quarter, decorated lavishly, from the most basic of necessities to the finest of details. Malphas had told her that it had always been there, waiting for her to reside within it.

After her transformation, Malphas had waved Loki's sleeping form away to his own room. Then, with a second wave of his hand, he had fashioned for her, rich beautiful attire, out of thin air and magic.

Once she was clothed, he called his court before him to introduce her. As the demonic members of his court gathered, genuflecting, around them, she had wanted so very badly to hide behind her father, especially when she recognized the barely-kept looks of hunger that spread across their faces when they laid eyes upon her.

She had been accosted by a multitude of emotions when surrounded by their kneeling forms, and she had to admit to herself that though there were some she was certain would never lay a hand on her, there were some she simply did not trust because they truly frightened her.

Being surrounded by so many powerful devils at once was naturally overwhelming. Malphas shielded her from the full force of their devastating power, his awesome form standing between them on many occasions, as if he could psychically tell when their presence was becoming too much for her young mind to handle.

Her father had gently but firmly guided her through the castle, never allowing her to escape his gaze, and never letting anyone else get too close. And then when they had

finished with the introductions and the tour of the palace, he had brought her here, to her room, and sat her down on the bed.

“Daughter, I must tell you that once you return to the Terran realm, you will not be able to call upon me for help any further.”

Raven gazed up at her massive father, her beautiful brow gently furrowed. He turned his back to her and strode to the giant windows across the room. As he gazed out across all that was his, and would one day be hers, he continued.

“The Lord of the Ninth Circle has decreed that Dark Royalty can appear upon the Terran Realm but once a year.” He turned to face her again. **“Though I did not personally appear to you in Aster Hollow or in Trimontium, my display of power was far beyond what is normally allowed of our kind.”**

He paused, and Raven could feel the air around her grow thick with tension. Her father was angry at something and was fighting not to let it show.

“The Lord of Abaddon learned of my assistance and forbade me from further action beyond the boundaries of Hell. Therefore,” he said as he turned and approached her at the edge of the bed. **“You will be under Adonides’s protection when you return. He will help you gain control of your newfound powers.”** He peered down at her, his presence indomitable, demanding attention and compliance. **“Winter, you will go nowhere without first telling him. Do I make myself clear?”**

She nodded.

He smiled then turned and left her alone in the massive chamber.

She sat on the edge of the giant bed, her wings folded gracefully behind her, her head bowed. And despite her growth into the strong, lithe she-devil she now was, she at once

appeared delicate and tiny, a figure small and solitary in the immense ice-hewn palace of her father, in Caina, the Eighth Circle of Hell.

Malphas stared into the heatless flames of the hearth from where he sat in the large high-backed chair at the center of his study. Absently, he raised his goblet to his lips and allowed the heady blood-red wine to pass over his tongue and burn as it slid down his throat.

There was a brisk rapping at the door and Malphas returned the goblet to the small table to his right.

“Come.” He’d been expecting someone.

“My liege.”

“Adonides. Approach.”

Malphas turned his head slightly to watch the powerful Abaddonian move with practiced stealth across the room. His steward was a tall, strong devil, with skin of pitch like coal, and eyes that burned a golden blaze. His long black hair cascaded down his back, and his giant bat-like wings folded gracefully behind him. Adonides took a seat across from the dark lord.

Malphas leaned forward, searching his handsome face for traces of what he knew would be there. And he was not disappointed.

“You find her as intoxicating as do the others.”

Adonides was clever enough not to deny it. **“Yes. She is amazing.”**

His master leaned back again and took a deep breath. **“Indeed. That is what concerns me.”**

“You are shielding her presence from the other Circles.” Adonides knew this must be so, or there would have been interference by now. Winter was clearly not like any other female in Abaddon. She possessed more power, more beauty and yet more innocence than should be possible. He could think of quite a few arch devils who would be all-too interested in her existence, and Malphas had far too many enemies.

The Dark Lord nodded, **“She is safe while in our realm. However, she is vulnerable to danger on the Terran realm.”**

Adonides nodded. “Agreed.”

“Which brings us to the reason I have asked you here tonight.” He approached his steward, who was swarthed in the black garb of Malphas’s armies. **“She can not be allowed to leave here until she has at least learned to control her new form. When she does, I will send her back to Krivier, along with her brother.”**

The Dark Lord fell into silence then.

Adonides was a wise man. He grasped where this was leading, and he had to admit that the thought brought him nothing but pleasure and anticipation. Which he respectfully stifled.

“I will watch over her, my lord.”

“See that you do.”

Adonides knew he was being excused. He rose, bowed reverently, and turned to leave the room. And as he made his way down the dark passageways to the wing that housed the new Princess, he was filled, not only with a keen eagerness, but also with

apprehension. For he knew that his master would not allow any transgression against his daughter to go unpunished. And there was a thin line between right and wrong in Abaddon.

All afternoon, there in her private room, Raven struggled to gain control over what she had become. Her father had forbidden her from returning to Krivir until she was able to switch, effortlessly, between her two forms.

Her change into Winter had been guided, pushed along, and completely out of her hands. However, Malphas refused to help her switch back into Raven, and had insisted that her ability to do so on her own was imperative to her safety and wellbeing.

Which left her in a quandary. For, it seemed her soul preferred this, more powerful, figure to that of Raven, the woman who more often than not found herself a victim.

To further complicate matters, her new form came with a plethora of arcane abilities. A few, her father had pointed out to her, and helped her to realize. The rest, he said, she would learn on her own, as they would come to be when she needed them most. That worried her. It wasn't that she was contrary to surprises, she loved a good birthday party as much as the next villager. However, she was under no false notions of what, *exactly*, she was, and the last thing she wanted to do was accidentally blast her brother into oblivion the next time he said something untoward to her.

She crawled back into bed late that night, discouraged and badly missing her brother. She'd been allowed to check up on him, but his unconscious form was not the best conversationalist. She had never before gone this long without being able to talk to her

twin. It was disorienting, and by the time she pulled her soft, warm covers over her head, she was literally exhausted by the emotions thrumming through her.

She was asleep within seconds.

The next morning, Winter awoke as Raven. She stretched lazily in the large comfy bed and then slid off to make her way to the mirror across the room. When she saw her more familiar form staring back at her, she let out a whoop of delight, knowing that she would now be able to return with her brother to the Terran realm.

Almost instantly, the doors to her chambers came flying open, causing Raven to squeal again in surprise. She turned to find one of the noble arch devils she'd met the previous day standing just within her doorway, golden eyes flashing and weapon drawn. Raven's heartbeat sped up and she took a stumbling step backward. The man's eyes narrowed and he smiled a threatening, fang-tipped grin.

Adonides had been waiting outside the Princess's chambers when he'd heard a screech from inside the room. Immediately, he'd charged the quarters, drawing his sword as he ran through. What greeted him, though an enticing sight under normal circumstances, was most definitely not what he had expected.

Winter was no where in the room. In her place stood a completely nude young woman of incredible beauty, though mortal in appearance, with long ebony hair, a slight tan, and a slender, perfect body. It was the kind of body one such as himself had the craving to see in chains – and nothing else. It was the kind of body he could get quite used to commanding for many, many nights. But it was not the Princess. And, no matter how beautiful this woman was, she had done something with Malphas's daughter and that was his primary concern.

He watched as the woman yelped in surprise at his intrusion and took a step backward. His gaze narrowed and he couldn't help the predatory grin that slid across his lips. He wanted this little intruder to run from him. She would be incredibly fun to catch... and interrogate.

And then something struck him. A similarity. Something in the eyes – though they were deep black and not at all like Winter's, there was a familiar expression about them. An *innocence*. Surely, a traitor, an intruder, would not look so surprised to see him standing there. Certainly, one who had planned the kidnapping of Malphas's daughter would not be completely naked in her bedroom right now.

And then he understood.

“Princess?”

Raven stared at the man before her. Her blood rushed in her ears as a thousand thoughts raced through her mind, one after another. Pain. Death. Torture. Fear. And then he addressed her, in a formal but questioning manner, and his expression softened. And Raven found herself able to breathe again.

“Yes!” she answered, and doubled over, clutching her knees as a wave of dizziness swept over her body. “Yes, it's me. Watch.”

And she changed. It was easy. All she needed to do was want it, and the shifting took place. She realized that she hadn't been able to control it before because she really hadn't wanted to go back to being Raven. Raven was hunted. Raven was captured and abused. Winter, on the other hand, was treated like royalty. Winter *was* royalty.

Adonides's eyes grew wide as he witnessed the mind-boggling transformation of one incredible beauty into another. And in seconds, Princess Winter, the stunning daughter of

his master, stood before him in all of her dark, seductive glory. He swallowed and whirled around, turning his back on her.

“I apologize, your Highness. I did not know it was you.” He prayed that she would be forgiving, not like her father, and that she would not have him punished for intruding on her while she was in such a state of undress. Still, even if she did, he had to admit that a large part of him felt it was well worth it.

Winter blinked, somewhat confused. She thought for a moment in silence. And then she realized that none of the other devils besides her father had seen her Terran form. She needed to be more careful.

“No, it’s all right.”

She wasn’t used to the way Winter’s voice sounded seductive and helplessly sexy no matter what she said. But she didn’t exactly mind, either. With the grace of long, well-muscled legs, she moved to the bed, grabbed one of the white satin sheets, and held it in front of her, idly and barely covering her breasts and that intimate area between her legs.

“You can turn around now.” She couldn’t suppress the erotic chill that raced up her spine at the fact that she wore only a thin satin sheet in protection against a very powerful devil. Even at her new height, this devil stood nearly a foot taller than her. He was only slightly shorter than her father. Powerful. Dangerous.

“Princess, I am Adonides. I am here to see to your safety. Please forgive my presence.” His tone was courteous and filled with reverence, and so was his expression until he turned to see that she hadn’t exactly gotten dressed. *Dark Powers give me strength*, he thought to himself. She looked even more tempting now that there was something to tear away from her body. Adonides was suddenly very certain that if he did

not leave the princess's chambers soon, he would find himself using every power he had in his faculties to bend her to his will. Consequences be damned.

She stared at him for a few moments, not knowing what to do or say. He smiled at her, disarmingly, and she smiled back. "I'm sorry... Adonides. I guess I'm just not used to how things are done... down here." She spoke, and her voice held the deep timbre that accompanied lust and desire. She didn't do it on purpose. It simply came with the form.

Adonides's jaw clenched. *Get out now*, he told himself. "Princess Winter, I will await your presence in the hall and then I will escort you to the dining room. The cook has prepared your breakfast." He sheathed his sword and then turned quickly and left the room, closing the doors securely behind him. Once outside, he ran his hand through his hair, leaned up against the stone wall, and took a slow deep breath.

Winter watched him go. When the doors were closed, she let the sheet fall and turned to gaze at herself in the mirror. She truly was splendid. Her body was long, her muscles well defined and rippling, her skin smooth and dark, highlighting the tone and definition beneath its surface. Her breasts were slightly larger than Raven's, full and perfectly round, with darker nipples that pointed upward, defying gravity. And speaking of gravity, her wings were absolutely incredible. She smiled happily as she fluffed them and then spread them to their full span. The light from the windows played across their blue-black sheen and she wrapped them around herself to luxuriate in their thick softness.

She looked back in the mirror to carefully study her face. Her eyes were tri-colored, ringed in platinum, ice-blue hue encircling a sparkling golden fire. Her lips were full and red and her tiny fangs contrasted a stark white just behind them. Yes. She liked this new

form. She did a quick twirl and began humming a tune, delighting in the sound of her other-worldly voice.

Now that she had retained a little control over her situation, she realized that this was actually kind of fun. And then another wave of dizziness swept over her and she doubled over once again, trying to regain her balance. She was weak. She needed food. The last few days had been a trial to her system, to say the least.

When she emerged from the chamber a short while later, she was wearing the most revealing outfit Malphas's royal tailor had made for her because she just could not bring herself to cover any more of her perfect, soft flesh. She liked the way it felt when her wings and hair brushed against it. She felt alive with sensuality.

But the hungry look in her guardian's eyes when he gently took her arm made her wonder whether she should have chosen something a little more conservative. Still, he said nothing, so she dismissed her sudden wariness and turned her thoughts to other things.

When they arrived in the dining room, she was thinking about her brother and wondering when they would be allowed to return home.

"This is your home, child."

Winter froze in place and Adonides's grip on her arm tightened ever so slightly, as if he felt she might bolt and run at any second. Her father stood at the opposite end of the dining room. Two noble guards flanked him.

Winter said nothing. She swallowed nervously.

"Please, sit, daughter. You must feed. I can feel your weakness from here."

Adonides led her gently to the chair at one end of the table, pulled it out for her, and waited for her to sit before sliding it in.

Winter's gaze raked over the giant meal before her and her mouth watered. The tabletop seemed to present everything she had ever wanted for breakfast and nothing that she didn't like. It was as if he had watched her choose her meals for the past twenty years.

She glanced up at Malphas then, and could not suppress the ardent chill that raced, unbidden, through her new body when she found his eyes intently locked with hers. Somehow, she found the will to speak. "Will you be joining me?"

His features changed suddenly, as if he were surprised by her question. He watched her for a moment more and then responded. "**Of course, if it would please you.**"

She nodded slowly and smiled.

Malphas returned the smile. However, his was a victorious smile that almost hinted of admonition. Winter pulled her gaze back to the meal before her and hoped that the danger she had just foreseen in the dark lord's face had only been her imagination.

Later, the Lord of Caina stood at the open parapet of the tallest tower in his grand keep of ice. He looked out over the stark white landscape. He smiled to himself. His daughter had accepted him as her guardian, her father.

Every now and again, he'd had to push her mind a little, just ever so slightly. But it hadn't taken much. She was so desperate for acceptance, for solace from the confusion

that was her world, that her spirit did not really fight him, and his own soul fairly soared with the victory.

He relished in the thought of having his daughter and heir stand beside him, willingly, strong and fierce in her beauty and the Darkness of her innate power.

“My liege, a word?”

Malphas turned from the open window and acknowledged his steward.

“**Yes, Adonides?**”

“My lord, I noticed that there was no meat upon the princess’s breakfast table.”

Malphas smiled and nodded, knowingly. “**No. There was not.**”

“I am confused, my lord. Does she not need to feed?”

“**She does. However, Winter’s willpower is very set on just a few key points.**

This is one of them. She refuses to eat anything that must die to sustain her.”

Adonides’s expression was blatantly worried. “She will not regain her powers unless she does so.”

“**A devil must consume *life*, Adonides, in order regain spent power. Life flows through us all.**” Malphas raised his right arm and waved it in the air. Light shimmered around his fist, and a moment later, a dagger possessed of a twisted, sharpened blade appeared in his hand. He pressed the dagger’s point to his left wrist and pierced the flesh. Red blood instantly welled up and dripped over the edge of his wound, to drop and pool on the icy floor below. “**It is in our veins. I need not die to shed this life here.**” He waved his hand again and the dagger disappeared. In the next instant, his wound sealed up, and the blood vanished. “**My daughter will have no trouble finding a willing donor.**”

Adonides closed his eyes and lowered his head respectfully. He understood.

He turned then and left his master as he had found him.

Raven laced up the bodice of one of the tunics the tailor had fashioned for her. Each of the outfits he had magically created possessed the ability to change along with her form when she transformed from one to the other.

The material of the accouterments she now wore was a jet sable hue with an iridescent blue sheen and was incredibly soft to the touch. The skirt was long and hugged her body, except for the slit on one side that ran from the floor to the top of her thigh. The undershirt had billowy sleeves that laced around her arms with sapphire blue ribbon, from her shoulders to her wrists. The delicate bodice was blue and black lace, tied up the front, made to rise just beneath her breasts.

As a finishing touch to the ensemble, tall black boots with high but sturdy heels were slipped onto her feet and pulled up and over her knees to top off at her mid-thighs. The entire effect of the clothing was that Raven felt more attractive than she had ever before.

She finished tying the laces before her mirror then took a deep breath. It was time to return to Kriver.

“I’m ready,” she said.

Almost instantly, the air shimmered around her, and she was pushed and pulled through that familiar twist in time and space until, a bit lightheaded and a little shaky, she was left standing in a tavern room, her brother lying asleep on one of the two beds it had been furnished with.

She moved to his side and gave him a gentle nudge.

He moaned in his sleep and rolled over, only to roll right off the edge of the small mattress and land flat on his back on the hard wooden floor. His eyes flew open and he immediately tried to gain his footing. It took a few moments for him to realize that they were no longer standing in Marrienne's great room.

He turned to look at his sister, and his eyes widened dramatically. He scanned her tall form, from head to toe, staring at her clothing as one who had never seen the night would look upon the moon.

Raven smiled sympathetically. "You've been out for a while. We have a lot to talk about."

Loki didn't answer. He just stared at her a few moments more, and then ran a hand through his reddish hair and sat, unsteadily, on the edge of the bed.

Raven took a deep breath and sat beside him. It was going to be a long day.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Ten

Raven had been right about one thing. The day had, indeed, been long. She did her best to explain to Loki what had happened with the prince, and then in Caina. She explained to him who she was, what Malphas had shown her, and hoped, as she spoke in soft tones, that he would come to understand.

Loki had never looked so uncomfortable in his life. Raven's gut clenched thinking about how he must feel at that moment. His sister was the daughter of Lord Malphas, the one devil he had most likely prayed she would not be the daughter of. And then she had taken his unconscious form into that forbidden place of ice and desolation, as far as possible from the warmth and love that he associated with his god, Haledon.

The worst of it, though, was her transformation. She'd changed in front of him, slowly, so as not to distress him so much that he attacked her. The look on his face when he saw what she could become would leave an indelible scar upon Raven's spirit. She knew, at that moment, that she had, in some way, finally managed to isolate herself from her brother.

He would not tell her so, of course. He had simply watched her become Winter and then become Raven once again. And then, his face bloodless, his gaze distant, he had left her alone in the tavern room.

When he returned, several hours later, the sun was beginning its descent. He would not tell her where he had been. An uncomfortable silence matured between them, until finally, it was time for bed.

Earlier that morning, Malphas had transported Raven and her unconscious brother to a rented room in a tavern owned by a man who, apparently, would ask no questions about his tenants. Everything had been procured prior to their arrival.

They had bedding and clothing and food, which Loki would not touch.

The two of them prepared for sleep and climbed into their respective beds. Loki reached for the bedside flame and Raven hazarded one last question before he could extinguish the lamp.

“What will we do now?” she asked quietly.

There was a long pause before her brother answered. “It isn’t safe for us to stay in Trimontium. We’ll head out for Isca in the morning.”

He pinched the base of the wick and darkness flooded the room. They lay, silent, in the gloom for a while. Raven knew her brother did not sleep. She could feel his mind spinning almost as if it were her own. She fidgeted with her covers, fluffed her pillow, and rolled over. Then, a few minutes later, she rolled over onto her other side. Her head began to ache.

Loki, for his part, did not move and did not acknowledge her restlessness. Finally, Raven settled into a position on her back, pillow tossed onto the floor, long legs kicked out from beneath the covers. A part of her desperately wanted to cry.

A soft sound, barely audible, grabbed her attention. She turned her head to listen in the direction of the door. Her breathing slowed as she concentrated on the sound. But she heard nothing else. It was, perhaps, a mouse, or the timbers of the inn settling. She sighed, silently chastised herself for her agitation, and closed her eyes.

And at that instant, the door to their room came crashing open, splintering loudly as it did so, sending shards of wood flying in all directions. Raven screamed and ducked beneath her covers for fear of being struck by the sharp pieces. In the next few seconds, rough hands grabbed her from the bed, hauling her off of the mattress by her upper arms. She tried to call out, summon her powers, but a strong hand covered her mouth, blocking the sound with a small white towel. She struggled viciously, kicking one of her attackers and clawing at her captor's face, but her efforts were useless and dwindling, as the fumes from the cloth held over her mouth were beginning to have an unpleasant effect.

She was weakening. There was an evil churning in her stomach. The room and its inhabitants were blurring. From above the white tuft of cloth held over nose and mouth, she saw Loki stumble from his bed. Before he could even clear the clinging covers of his rented mattress, two men were upon him. One swung a lead pipe like a cudgel, and the other ran doubled-up fists into Loki's midsection. Raven watched as her brother went down.

And then she joined him in oblivion.

Prince Astriel rose from his throne and descended the stairs from his dais. He turned and nodded to the guards who stood waiting at the double doors to his throne room. "Show him in."

The guards opened the large double doors, revealing a single human male standing in the hallway beyond. The man came forward, his tall black boots echoing on the smooth

marble floor. He stepped into the light of the huge chamber, and Astriel studied his impressive form as he came toward the throne.

He was a very tall man, most likely standing somewhere near six and a half feet. He was perfectly proportioned, sporting a strong, broad musculature that bespoke of strenuous training and strength of will. His skin was swarthy, dark, and only slightly marred by the fine lines of the sun's perpetual kiss. His eyes, where they peered out from that dark skin, were of a stark contrast, like liquid metal, silvery gray and intensely sentient. The man's long black hair, which fell below his shoulders, had obviously been left alone out of a heedlessness to his appearance. However, it only managed to add to his dangerous appeal.

But it was the man's dark clothing that was Astriel's real concern. For he wore the seal of the Bounty Hunters of Tanith in prominent relief on the chest armor of his entirely black garb. A giant sword with a pommel and scabbard of metal bore the same seal, and lay menacingly visible, strapped across the man's back. At his waist was a dagger of similar make, sheathed in black leather on his belt.

The man came to a halt before the prince, and did not bow.

Astriel addressed him. "Drake of Tanith, your reputation precedes you. I have called you to Eidolon because you are allegedly the most accomplished bounty hunter in all of the realms."

The man said nothing. After a moment, he nodded. Once.

"Very well then. I'll not waste words." Astriel stepped past him and moved to a giant marble bowl that rested, on a pedestal, in the center of the room. "This is the woman you are to find. I will assist you with necessary information, a squad of guards, and any

equipment you need. Though, I am well aware that you can afford all of these things a thousand times over. Which brings up a point.” Astriel narrowed his gaze and met the man’s molten silver stare dead on.

“You wish to know why I have accepted your appointment.” Drake of Tanith’s voice rolled off of his tongue like distant thunder, a deep resonant base, precise and smooth. The prince said nothing. Drake nodded, the hint of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “I enjoy a challenge. The bounty you mentioned in your summons suggests that this target will be nothing less.”

Astriel smiled bitterly. He had indeed offered up a large bounty for Raven Grey’s safe return, and for precisely that reason. It was as he had suspected. Tanith no longer accepted every work he was offered. He was a very wealthy man, who had been doing what he did for a very long time. He would need incentive. The bounty was large enough to peak his curiosity.

“It will not be effortless,” Astriel said slowly, with a slight nod of his head. “That, I can assure you.” He waved his hand over the water, and its surface shimmered. When it calmed down again, Raven’s beautiful face could be seen in the water’s depths.

Drake stared at the image. For a long while, he did not blink.

“This is an image pulled from memory. She was in Trimontium as early as yesterday. She travels with her brother,” Astriel told him and then waved the image away.

Drake peered at the empty water where Raven’s visage had been a moment before. And then he glanced up, met the prince’s gaze once more. He was quiet for a while and then, hands casually on his hips, head cocked slightly to one side, he said, “You don’t need me, elf. Why haven’t you retrieved her yourself?”

Astriel smiled. "I have my reasons. And be forewarned, Tanith. She may not be entirely human. But then," the Prince said as he turned his back on the bounty hunter and climbed the stairs to sit on his throne, "so few of us are."

They eyed each other in silence for several seconds.

And then Drake turned and walked out of the room.

Loki rocked back and forth, his arms wrapped tightly around himself, his legs pulled up, knee to elbow. The bench beneath him creaked with his constant movement.

Beside him sat Summer on one side, her hand gently rubbing his back. On his other side stood a man in yellow, gold and red robes. Around his head, the man wore a circlet of smooth gold. It bore a symbol of the sun, which rested against his lined forehead.

"We'll find her, Loki," Summer told him softly. She had seen him early that morning, running past her farm, on the trail that led from the city to Haledon's temple. She hurried after him, wondering what had become of his sister.

Once inside, she had approached him. And, in a fit of pain and desperation, he had told her *everything*.

And despite the fact that his sister was Malphas's daughter, Summer had remained with him in the temple, standing close by as he was healed. She had not judged him or accused him.

He wondered what he had done to deserve this new friendship.

"Everything is going to be all right," she said.

Loki shook his head and stopped rocking. He ran a hand through his hair and then placed both hands over his face and gave a short, loud sound of frustration.

When he removed them, his jaw was tense, his teeth clenched. “I was so horrible to her. Haledon only knows what has become of her, and wherever she is, whatever is happening, she thinks I hate her. That I *abandoned* her!”

He stood then and pushed past them both, heading straight for the altar.

He stopped before the chantry and looked up at it. A giant bronze sun glimmered in the sunlight shed by skylights in the temple’s roof. Beneath the sun hung two crossed axes, elaborately decorated in gilded tri-colored gold, platinum and silver. They were Haledon’s axes, their sharp rounded blades, when crossed and laid one on top of the other, forming a miniature sun of their own.

Loki gazed at these weapons for a long, silent while, and then turned to face the robed acolyte. “You are able to heal me. Can you also find my sister?”

The man sighed and moved out from behind the bench. He approached Loki and placed his hands, palm-down, upon his shoulders. “I can try. It will take some time.” He studied Loki carefully for a few moments and then added, “Why don’t you assist me? I can feel your need to help. Haledon would never deny a soul that wished to take action for good.”

Loki blinked, glanced at Summer, who smiled, and then looked back up at the acolyte. “Very well. Show me what to do.”

Something was on her legs. She tried to move them and nudge it off, but whatever it was, it was so weighty, her limbs wouldn't budge. Her body felt heavy, and it took far more effort than it should have for her to open her eyes.

When she did, it was to find herself staring into the emerald green gaze of a man dressed in brown leather armor. Her brow furrowed. Her brain was fuzzy, but a reluctant memory presented itself. A room at an inn. The door breaking. Men in studded armor – hurting Loki – and then darkness.

She attempted to rise. She was able to come to a sitting position before she realized that her wrists were bound with wide suede straps which were connected to a loose chain. The man in brown armor held the chain in one gloved fist. Her legs were bound as well, but with manacles that were fastened to the bedpost near her ankles. A familiar, nauseating fear welled up inside of her. Her mouth went dry, her head began to pound. She tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat, but there was no moisture there, and she felt as if she were choking on rust.

The man smiled. Raven's stomach clenched.

"Where am I?"

He studied her for a moment, his eyes moving over the contours of her lovely face, taking in the exquisite details of her neck, the hollow of her throat, the milky smooth shoulders beneath her scant clothing. His gaze stopped where the material of her night shirt began. And then he was peering into her eyes again, his sinister smile never wavering.

Without saying a word, he turned and connected the end of the chain he was holding to a hook that dangled from the center of the ceiling. Then he turned away and paced to

the other end of the room. He leisurely pulled off his gloves, laying them on a table, beside a small crystal decanter filled with red liquid.

“For the time being, you are under my protection.” He filled a small crystal glass with some of the liquid and then re-stopped the bottle. When he turned to her again, it was to stride across the room and offer her the glass.

Though her wrists were tied, she would have been able to hold the glass easily. She eyed the liquid for a moment. It looked sweet, and she was thirsty. But she had no intention of taking it from him.

“Suit yourself.” He then finished off the last of the liquid himself. “Elven wine. There isn’t anything quite like it. You truly missed out.”

Her eyes narrowed. She thought of Loki, who was wounded, perhaps dead, and a modicum of the fear she was feeling was replaced with something much stronger.

“Who are you and why am I here?” she demanded, her voice now taking on a low, dangerous note that rumbled with an odd, almost unnatural tone.

His eyebrow arched inquisitively. He’d noticed the sound.

He moved to a chair across from the bed, sat down, and propped his feet up onto a nearby table. “Very well. If you must know, I am Talon. And you are here because I kidnapped you.”

Raven’s fists clenched. “*Why* did you kidnap me?” The oddly alluring rumble in her voice had intensified.

Her abductor watched her very carefully, his interest clearly piqued.

“I kidnapped you – or, rather, my men and I kidnapped you – because we are slavers and you can bring in a precious coin.”

At once, his expression took on a puzzled look, and he stood. He approached her in two long strides, never taking his eyes off of her. She forced herself not to cower or retreat on the bed. He knelt gracefully before her, elbow propped up on one knee, his fist beneath his chin. He cocked his head to one side, contemplating her closely.

Raven held her breath.

“Interesting,” he whispered as he peered into her eyes. “You have the most unique eyes I have ever seen. Something...” He straightened and gazed down at her, the expression on his face now much more serious than it had been. “Yes, you will bring a precious coin indeed.”

He turned away from her and made his way back to the table with the decanter. “Seeing as how you apparently possess some sort of,” he glanced back at her over his shoulder, “well, *enchantment*, there is really only one client suitable for you.”

Raven sat, somewhat stunned, watching him pour another drink. Could he tell who she was? She hadn’t done anything. What had he seen in her eyes?

She looked away from him and thoughts of escape chased each other through her mind. “Who?”

He turned around to face her and leaned back against the table as he pulled his gloves back on. “Why, Prince Astriel, of course.”

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Eleven

Talon smirked at her from where he stood, leaning casually against the wine table. Raven narrowed her gaze. She could feel her power swimming beneath the surface, waiting for her to call it forth.

She thought of changing into Winter's stronger form, but something felt *off* inside. Unlike when she'd been in Caina, it now felt as if her other form were a bit further away, a little more out of reach. Instinctively, she knew it would be a struggle to transform. She did not know why, but her strength was somehow diminished. The change would take too long. Talon would most certainly get to her before she could finish.

No, she would not be able to change.

But *some* magic was still there.

"I'm not afraid of you, slaver, or of the Prince."

Talon's brow arched. "Oh? I'm impressed, then. Not many little girls would claim such a thing."

She reached down deep within herself. And when she spoke again, her voice was unrecognizable.

"Release me."

In a flash, her eyes went solid black, from corner to corner.

Talon stared at her, his own eyes widening. "What *are* you?"

She was caught up in it now. A breeze began to pick up in the room, and thin parchment sleeves lifted off of the desk top, to spin about dizzily.

"Release me!"

The small crystal cup that sat near its matching decanter on the table exploded sending shards of precious glass soaring through the air in every direction. Amazingly, none came anywhere near Raven, but Talon hissed and cursed vehemently when a large shaving glanced across his cheek bone, slicing deep. Almost immediately, blood began to well from the clean wound. Raven smiled.

When he turned to her again, it was with murder in his eyes. He strode to the bed and grabbed her roughly by the back of her hair. She cried out with the pain as he brought his face within inches of hers.

“Witch! You think you can defy me?” His other hand began pulling something out of a pouch on his leather armor. “Do you have any idea how much that crystal is worth?”

Raven screamed as Talon threw her body down to the bed and held her there with one bent leg. She tried desperately to see what he was doing but could only make out some sort of bottle before he viciously pulled her hair. She sucked in a breath and winced under his brutal grasp.

“If I didn’t think you could more than make up for the cost, I would teach you a lesson in manners right here and now.”

Not again.

And then she smelled a familiar, bitter smell. It was the same acidic stench she’d experienced when the slavers had drugged her with the cloth in the tavern. New fear renewed her strength and she at once tried to kick and strike him. She flailed madly in her bonds, but her struggles only served to anger him further.

He released her roughly and stepped back. From another pocket, he produced a small white rag. Deftly, he poured some of the acrid smelling contents of the bottle onto the rag.

“No...” Raven muttered, half to herself, half to the world. If it weren’t for the entirely evil appearance of her pure black eyes, it would have been obvious to Talon that she was terrified. As it was, however, she appeared nothing less than feral, and he wasn’t going to have her harm him or herself before he received payment.

With the dampened cloth ready in one hand, he lunged toward her again.

A flash of blue white light illuminated the tent and everything within it. The blast of brightness was blinding, bringing Talon to an abrupt stop. A wave of bitter cold poured over him as it rippled out from some central point behind him. He straightened and turned.

A man with pitch black skin and giant bat’s wings glared at him through narrowed glowing eyes.

“Step away from her.”

“Adonides!” Raven cried out, relief flooding her system.

Talon gazed up at the powerful fiend, his jaw slack. The damp white rag slid from his limp grasp.

“Make no mistake, mortal,” Adonides said as he stepped toward the master slaver. “For your transgression, you *will* die. Whether I kill you with mercy or without it is all you can decide now.”

Talon took a step back, and his knee buckled. He stumbled, righted himself clumsily, and made a half-hearted attempt at the exit.

Adonides waved his hand, as if swatting at a fly, and Talon was lifted off of his feet and slammed down, flat onto his back, at the foot of the bed on which Raven sat. The slaver lay there, not daring to move, his breath trembling audibly.

“Your Highness, you are entitled to his life,” Adonides then said, his voice at once respectful and low as he bowed in place, his hand over his heart. “And so I offer it to you now.”

Raven blinked. What was he offering to her? The right to kill Talon? Her eyes widened in surprise. Was this some sort of code amongst devils? She glanced down at the man in front of her. He seemed so diminished, so much less frightening than he’d been only seconds before.

She almost felt sorry for him.

But not quite.

She shook her head, slowly, and in the next instant, Adonides pulled the sword from the scabbard at his belt and plunged its steely length into the man’s midsection. He sunk it deep, effectively pinning the slaver to the ground.

Talon’s eyes went very, very wide. No sound escaped from his mouth. He moved his lips, from which blood began to pool and pour, but silence was his only reward.

Raven felt bile rise in her throat.

Adonides waved his hand a second time, and the offending slaver was suddenly gone. Without a trace.

The devil turned to Raven and knelt before her. Deftly and gently, he ran his fingertips over the manacles around her ankles. They fell away at his touch. He freed her wrists next, and all the while, she stared at him in disbelief.

“Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head.

Adonides rose then and offered her his hand.

She hesitated, not sure she was entirely ready to stand. But then she placed her hand inside his and he helped her rise from the mattress. A wave of dizziness washed over her. Strong hands on her arms steadied her, and the dizziness passed. Raven looked up at the tall devil beside her. He smiled down at her, his white fangs flashing, his golden eyes glowing.

Adonides waved his free hand in the air and spoke an enchantment. A hooded snow white cloak of the richest velvet appeared, clasped between his fingers. He released her hand and moved to stand behind her. Once there, he lowered the cloak over her shoulders and fastened it around her neck.

She was instantly grateful for its warmth. The mid-summer’s morning was fair, but she felt cold, and very weak. She pulled the cloak tighter around herself and strode to the tent entrance. Adonides followed closely behind. With a shaking hand, she pulled the flap back and stepped outside.

Sprawled across a grassy field before her lay half a dozen dead men. Each bore expressions of agony, frozen forever beneath the layer of ice coating their twisted bodies. Raven stood stock still, her gaze moving from one corpse’s face to another. She recognized one of the men who had captured her. He had deep furrows in one cheek, where her nails had dug in.

Beside her, Adonides muttered several cryptic words and moved his arms. As suddenly as Talon had disappeared, the dead men vanished. The grassy field was empty.

The tents were gone, the campfire and bodies were gone. All that remained were her and her protector.

Raven continued to stare at the empty field for several minutes. Beside her, Adonides allowed her the silence. And then Raven straightened a little and turned to face him.

In a voice not quite as steady as she would have liked, she said, “Perhaps you should show me how you did that.”

Astriel strode through the castle’s corridors, his cloak billowing out behind him, his boots echoing coolly on the polished marble floors. He was distracted, his mind on something far different than the matters of Fey State that he’d been presented with at that morning’s meeting with representatives of other realms. He nodded at the guards who bowed as he passed, doing so out of habit rather than recognition.

He entered the royal wing of the castle and began to turn the final corner that would take him into Eidolon’s grand hall, but the sound of his father’s voice brought him up short. He took a step back and listened, concealed in the shadows of the massive tapestries that hung beside him.

“Why should this concern me?”

“My liege, they are only mortals, however, I thought you would be interested to know that this is the seventh such disappearance in as many days. The people of Trimontium have never before encountered such an occurrence. Their family members are vanishing without trace, your majesty.”

King Oberon paused in thought before his next reply. “Very well. Speak with Gray Beard on the matter.”

Astriel watched as the guard bowed low and exited the giant chamber. Then his eye was caught by something across the way, in the shadowy hall opposite the one in which he stood. There, a female elf watched and listened, hidden behind the tapestries, just as he had been. Astriel’s gaze narrowed. She was a Blue Robe, an elite elven battle mage who served under the Master Mage known as Gray Beard. The Blue Robes were so named because they wore vestments of sapphire blue, making them immediately recognizable.

She had not noticed that Astriel was there. The Prince backed up a few paces and continued to watch as the hidden mage quietly crept across the long hallway and disappeared into one of many concealed panels within Eidolon’s vast passageways.

Astriel smiled to himself, whispered a few arcane words, and disappeared.

At an ornate wooden desk, in a small book-lined room beneath the dungeons of the elven palace, the elven mage, Jaren, studied the large leather-bound tome before her. She glanced briefly at each sheet as she quickly turned its weathered pages. She’d gone through more than two dozen books like this one over the course of the afternoon.

She was searching for something.

She looked up, momentarily, from her work to glance nervously at the door. It was still shut tight. The fire still burned brightly in the hearth. Jaren had every right to be within Eidolon’s cavernous libraries. She was a Blue Robe, and as such, held a certain amount of power. But she was uneasy.

Things were not right.

She had first noticed it several weeks ago. Disappearances, unrelated, unexpected. The villagers were too frightened of the Lords and Ladies to directly approach their king with the questions stirring about in their heads. Until today. And Oberon had dismissed the issue out of hand.

But Jaren was not so quick to do so.

And that was not all. The days were not as long as they should be. No mortal would take notice, she was sure. However, each morning came several moments too late, and each dusk approached several moments too quickly. Night was encroaching upon day almost imperceptibly. To what end?

And then, this morning, as she'd watched the discussion between the guard and her king, she had remembered. She'd read it so long ago, so many thousands of years ago, that its details were vague in her recollection. She could only hope that the same book was still within Eidolon's vast archives.

She sighed, flipping quickly through the pages.

And then, as if unexpectedly, it was there before her. She'd found the right book, and happened upon the right page.

Her eyes widened as she read the fine script. It was both a legend and a prophecy, eons old, its warnings and precursors sending chills through her body.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Jaren jumped, gasped, and nearly fell from the wooden chair in which she sat. She looked up, her eyes meeting the pale blue gaze of her prince. Immediately, she rose from her chair and bowed her head.

“Your Highness. I did not hear you come in.” With that, she chanced a glance up at the door across the room. It was still shut tight. And the Prince stood beside the hearth, several yards away.

Astriel shrugged and smiled. “Please sit, Jaren.”

She did so, her brow furrowed warily.

The Prince calmly strode to the table and glanced down at the book before the mage. It wasn't that she had any reason for not wanting him to see it, none other than the fact that she wanted to be absolutely certain before alerting anyone, especially a member of elven royalty. However, as if by instinct, her hands came up and grasped the book at either end.

Astriel laid his black gloved hand across the open tome, gently but firmly, and Jaren blushed. She released it slowly and bowed her head.

“Tell me, Jaren, what is it about this, ” he paused, cocked his head to one side, and arched a brow mockingly, “*fairy* tale that has you so entranced?”

Jaren swallowed. “It is a conjecture on my part, your highness, nothing more.”

“Oh?” Astriel lifted the tome and read. As he did so, his expression darkened. After a few silent moments, he finished reading and laid the book back down. Then he moved to the chair opposite her and lowered himself into it, propping his legs up on the table top as he did so. “Please elaborate.”

Jaren stared at him. His presence was imposing, daunting. He was more handsome than any elf, save perhaps his father, and his gaze was arresting. She peered into the ice blue of those eyes and, even as an elf, a mage at that, she felt the power emanating from him, a strength so much greater than her own.

She was humbled. “Your Highness, the disappearances. The day and night-”

“Yes, I’ve noticed. What of them?”

Jaren was surprised, but only momentarily. She went on, “I believe they have something to do with The Legend of Cruor and Haledon – this legend here, on these pages.” She placed her fingertips against the book before her and waited for some kind of reaction. He merely stared at her.

She went on. “The legend tells of their battle, long ago. Cruor was a mortal, but he was a very powerful mage, strong enough to become a deity. He was evil, and in an attempt to stop him from reaching godhood, Haledon’s avatar challenged him. The battle between them resulted in the deaths of thousands, and in the end, Cruor’s spirit was split in two. He became half of what he was, a corporeal form without a soul.”

The Prince looked away from her, his gaze at once far away. “I know the story. What of it?”

Jaren hesitated and then continued. “The prophecy, within the legend, tells of Cruor rising once again. There are signs that point to his return. He will begin to consume souls, as he has not one of his own. They will give him the strength he needs.” She paused and licked her lips, wondering how much she should say. But this needed to be said, she was sure. She took a deep breath and barreled on. “An elven disappearance would not go unnoticed, your highness, but *mortals*... They can disappear by the hundreds before anyone of influence takes interest.”

Astriel glanced back at her and Jaren could feel herself shrinking beneath the weight of that gaze. She wondered whether she had said too much after all.

“And you believe that Trimontium’s disappearances signal the return of Cruor?”

“That is not all, your Highness,” she rushed to explain. “There are other signs – that accompany the prophecy. The paragraphs that follow describe the night growing longer, the return of Haledon’s avatar, and the advent of the Chosen Soul-”

“Indeed.” Astriel then stood to leave.

Jaren watched him, her eyes wide. Did he not believe her? Was he unconvinced?

“Your Highness, I-”

“Return to your master, Jaren. Perhaps Gray Beard will have more to say on the subject.” He turned away from her and made his way to the door. There, he stopped and glanced back at her over his broad shoulder. “And be more careful when spying, Blue Robe,” he smiled at her, tauntingly. “Your skill at concealment is truly abysmal.”

He opened the door, stepped through it and was gone.

Jaren stared after him, frustration building within her to the point that she trembled. The door closed again and she was left alone with her anger. Very well, she thought, If you do not believe me, I know of someone who will.

Astriel stormed through the castle, his strides long and purposeful. His thoughts were dark. Though he had never, before today, taken the time to actually read the prophecy, he was more familiar with the legend of Cruor than Jaren could have imagined... The truth was he’d been alive when the battle between the Sun God and the Mage of Death had occurred.

He had been but a boy. His parents, King Oberon and Queen Titania, had not given the matter much thought at the time, as Cruor was a mere mortal and the affairs of

mortals had never weighed heavily upon the matters of the Fey. However, amongst the humans, his name was feared. He had risen in power by creating a kind of magic that fed upon the life essence of those around him. He gained his power by draining it from others. They called him the Death Mage, the Devourer of Souls, and they hid behind locked doors that, in truth, would not have slowed Cruor down.

He grew in stature until the day the gods took notice.

Before that day, the gods had adhered to a strict rule of non-interference. For when one god insisted on helping a follower, their enemy insisted upon the same. To avoid what would amount to nothing more than a grand puppet show, the gods agreed to remain impassive. However, Cruor's rise threatened to topple the delicate balance the gods had achieved. His kind of magic was unheard of, novel and terrifying. It was destruction, itself, which gave him the ability to continue to destroy. For each soul he absorbed, he gained the capacity to absorb yet another.

And his power was becoming too great. He stood on the brink of immortality, where his corporeal form would fall away to reveal godhood, and no deity wanted to discover what kind of soul he would devour then.

And so Haledon had stepped in. The other gods agreed to a temporary truce, long enough for Haledon's avatar to rid Krivier of Cruor's influence.

The ensuing battle was devastating. Astriel remembered spending his days within Eidolon's invisible walls, watching the destruction through windows, as his parents had decided to shift the palace and its grounds away from Krivier's realm until the trouble was over. They had learned, the hard way, that matters of mortals can be much more pressing than the elves would, at first, believe.

Phased out of time and space, but close enough to touch that which he saw, Astriel watched as Cruor laid waste to entire cities, sucking the souls from men, women and children, without pause.

Through sheer force of will, Haledon, at last, won the battle. His avatar cleaved the Death Mage in two, splitting not only his body but his stolen soul. And in doing so, the spirits he had consumed were set free. Cruor was cast back away from the rim of godhood, and banished to a remote realm.

That was so many years ago. And none had ever come to learn of Cruor's eventual location.

Jaren was right. Astriel hated to admit it, but the Blue Robe was catching on to clues that he thought only he had noticed. But it was not the possible destruction of the mortal race that bothered Astriel the most. He had too much of his mother and father in him to be especially bothered by the comings and goings of the Terran realm. Humans were forever finding ways to destroy themselves.

No. It was something else.

Something he had only now read for the first time in his long life. It was something that would have meant nothing to him a month ago. The advent of what was termed the Chosen Soul was a requisite piece of Cruor's return. According to the prophecy, the assimilation of this, the most ancient of spirits, would be sufficient to finally herald Cruor into the godhood he so inevitably sought.

It had not occurred to him that this process was set in motion two decades ago, when news of the theft of the Spring's eldest soul first reached his ears, because he had not read the prophecy. But now he knew.

The stolen soul from the Spring was the Chosen Soul from the prophecy of Cruor, and the spirit that would be sacrificed for his return as a god. And it was something in the prophecy's *description* of that soul that now furrowed the prince's handsome brow and set his steps at a quick pace.

It was a mere segment of the prophecy's prose, a short four lines, that captured his attention most...

As sable as this endless night

As stunning as the god of light

With will of fire and air of cold

A sacrifice for Cruor's might

Astriel entered his throne room and immediately waved everyone out. Guards and servants scrambled out of the chamber, leaving him standing alone, at its center. He turned to face the massive stone bowl in the middle of the room. The water within it was calm and undisturbed, its surface smooth as glass.

Astriel waved a hand over the water while softly speaking archaic words. Within moments an image shimmered to life.

The woman in the reflection smiled and blushed, her head lowered shyly. The large male devil beside her laughed and his giant bat-like wings folded gracefully at his back. *Adonides*. Astriel knew the Abaddonian well.

The devil leaned over her, taking her wrists gently in his fingers and guiding her hands in an ancient arcane gesture.

Astriel's heart beat hard against his rib cage. Her long raven hair shimmered like sapphires in the sunlight. Her deep blue-black eyes glittered mischievously.

He gazed at her image as she listened to Adonides say something he could not hear. There was a flash of blue-white light and snow began to fall around them. Her beautiful eyes grew wide and she laughed. She threw her head back to catch the flakes upon her tongue.

Astriel watched for several moments more, his gaze narrowing on Adonides. Then he waved the image away.

Now there was no doubt in the prince's mind. It was the woman who had escaped him. She was "sable as this endless night", her hair dark as a crow's wing, her eyes, endless pools of ebony. She the daughter of Malphas, she the heir of Caina.

She was Cruor's Chosen Soul.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Twelve

“Are you going to be all right?”

Raven didn't look up from the ground as she walked. She took a deep breath. “Yes, I think so. He took it hard, finding out who – and *what* – I am. But he's my brother, and he's most likely worried sick right now. He'll probably just be glad that I'm back and in one piece.”

Adonides walked beside her, always a respectful distance, yet Raven suspected, close enough that he could reach out and grab her at the slightest indication that there was trouble. They moved through the forest, cloaked by Adonides's veiling spell. As they walked, they made no sound, and animals continued about their business, oblivious to their passing presence.

Eventually, they came upon a clearing and drew to a stop.

Ahead, Haledon's temple sat, white-washed by the sun, clean and inviting, at the center of a field of sunflowers.

“Before you return to the temple, there is something else you need to know.”

Adonides had drawn closer and the look on his handsome face was serious. Raven gazed up at him, worry beginning to gnaw at her insides.

“What?”

“In the clearing, when I was teaching you... I performed the spells because I knew you could not.”

Raven's brow furrowed. “Of course I can't. I haven't yet learned how.”

Adonides shook his head. “No. That’s not what I mean. Raven, you are more than capable of casting any magic you desire. As Malphas’s daughter, you possess immense faculty. However... At the moment, you are drained. Weak.”

She looked away from him, embarrassed that he’d been able to tell. When had it showed? She’d been careful not to stand up too quickly or exert herself. The truth was, she’d been a little dizzy and weak since her trip back from Caina.

He put a finger beneath her chin and turned her face toward him once again. He was smiling gently at her. “I’m not only speaking of physical weakness, Raven. And yes, I can tell. However, I am also referring to your loss of power. Tell me truthfully why you did not deal with Talon on your own.”

Raven’s eyes widened. How had he known?

Adonides shook his head slowly, as if he could read her mind.

“Your magic failed you because you had not fed.”

Again, Raven’s expression turned confused. “I haven’t eaten in a while, but what does that have to do with-”

“Not food, Raven. *Life*. You must consume *life* in order to replenish your power. You have done much since first becoming all that the daughter of Malphas can be. You have learned of Winter, realized your magic, met your father – that, in itself, can be draining.” He smiled a teasing smile and continued. “However, everyone who has come to know you knows that you do not consume animals. You do not feed on life, Raven.”

At her comprehending look of disgust and horror, he continued gently, his hands softly grasping her upper arms. “You are Dark Royalty, Raven. I’m afraid you have no choice. Your power depends upon you feeding.”

“I can’t.” She said the words even as she felt the numbing reality sink in. Before he answered, she knew what he was going to say.

“You can,” he pulled back away from her, “and you will.”

In a motion so fast that it blurred, he had sliced his wrist open with one extended claw. Bright red blood pooled at the wound and then dripped down his wrist to fall to the ground below. Raven stared at the open cut, her heart pounding painfully behind her rib cage. She felt a hunger rise within her and was thoroughly disgusted by it.

“I can’t.”

What have I become? This isn’t happening. This can not be.

“You can. You will not hurt me, Raven, and I will not harm you. Let me help you.” He held his hand out before her. “I give this to you freely, Princess. Please drink.” His other hand wrapped gently but firmly around her right wrist, preventing her from fleeing.

“Adonides, I don’t want to do this.” She felt her knees go weak as she stared at the thick red liquid that continued to rise from his wound. She felt her power stir within her, as if it was waking up and listening, waiting.

“Yes, you do.”

She closed her eyes and let him guide her as he brought her closer, placing her hand around his wrist, helping her pull him to her lips.

And then his blood was in her mouth, sliding over her tongue, warm and sweet like wine. Raven unconsciously gripped his wrist tighter as the heady liquid slid down her throat. It was not at all salty, as she had expected. Instead, it burned and numbed like strong liquor. Its warmth spread throughout her body.

As she swallowed, she heard someone moan and wondered whether it had been her. The world spun away as she drank. All that remained were her and Adonides and his magical blood as it ripped through her senses, suffusing her with fire and ice, power and passion. As if from a distance, she felt a strong band come around her waist, a hard body pressed tightly against her own. She didn't care. She simply drank and wanted more.

And as she pulled the devil's blood into herself, the warmth sank lower, moving through her midsection and between her legs, where it pooled and heated, ebbed and swirled like a building storm.

She moaned this time, knowing full well it had been her, and lazily opened her eyes.

Glowing golden orbs gazed back at her, held her in their will, heated with a near frenzied passion. Adonides's fangs had extended and a low growl escaped from deep within his throat.

Raven's eyes widened. Whatever effect drinking his blood had had upon her, it had obviously affected Adonides even more. The hungry blaze in his eyes was unnatural, terrifying, and mesmerizing.

For a moment, a crazy recklessness inside of her considered surrendering to this furious need, both his and hers, and sating the monster that had awakened within her.

A monster.

I'm a monster. What am I doing?

And then she remembered that she was drinking blood. A devil's blood, nonetheless.

I am a devil.

She closed her eyes against the sway of his powerful gaze, swallowed one last time and released his wrist.

He held her tight as she caught her breath and reached for her senses. Power and magic swirled within her like a storm of fireflies, buzzing in her ears and through her bloodstream. She slowly came to grips with who she was and what she had just done, then she opened her eyes.

Adonides reluctantly let her go.

Raven glanced down at his wrist and watched as the wound began to heal. In a few seconds, the cut was gone, the blood evaporated from his skin.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“It was my pleasure, your Highness.” Adonides spoke softly, reverently, and she glanced up to see that he’d gained control of his ardor. His eyes no longer shone eerily and his fangs had receded significantly. He turned then, his attention at once upon the small temple in the distance. “You’re certain that Loki is here?”

Raven blinked. The change of subject was so quick, it was disorienting. However, she fully appreciated his chivalry. She bit her lip, cleared her throat, and took a deep breath.

“Yes. This is where he would have gone.”

Adonides turned to her and she faced him. He bowed his head in deference. “If you wish it, we can continue your lessons tomorrow afternoon. You will be strong enough to try the spells on your own.”

Raven nodded. Though she could not quite manage a smile, he acknowledged the attempt and smiled in return. Then he took a step back. “Until then, I suggest not going anywhere alone.”

She nodded again and the handsome Abaddonian disappeared in a flash of blue light and smoke.

“Raven!”

She quickly spun around and looked towards the temple. The doors had been thrown open and several people were rushing out to meet her. She recognized her brother at once, and Summer, just behind him. Two men in yellow, red and gold robes raced after them.

“Raven! By Haledon, you’re safe!” Loki sprinted down the path and barreled right into her. He gathered her up in a painfully strong embrace and hugged her tightly. He finally released her when he noticed that she wasn’t able to breathe. “What happened? Where did you go? Who were those men? How did you get free?” Loki stopped to glance around. “What are you doing standing out here?”

Raven could only smile at him. She hugged him and the two shared a moment of silence as the other three caught up to them. Summer was the first to speak up.

“Raven, are you all right? What happened?” she asked breathlessly.

Raven pulled away from Loki and smiled at the blonde woman. “I’ll explain it all inside. I’m starving.” She looked at the acolytes, wondering if they could tell she’d just finished drinking a devil’s blood. “I hope you priests are allowed to eat in that temple, because I don’t think I can go another ten minutes without food.”

Real food. Not blood.

They smiled, and one of them laughed. “Of course. Please come in.” He gestured to the temple, and they followed.

The young man in red robes knelt before a large shrouded throne. “Master?”

A figure in the shadows, dressed in black and draped in darkness looked up. Only his eyes, which reflected an eerie and unnatural light, were visible.

“Speak,” came his command, cold as the stone on which the robed man knelt.

“My lord, a Blue Robe from Castle Eidolon has come to see you. She claims to have information of great importance.”

The shadowed figure slowly lowered his head, contemplation evident in the heavy, silent air. “Show the elf in.”

“Right away, my lord.”

The man in red robes rose and exited the chamber.

A few moments later, he returned, this time with a female elf in blue robes trailing hesitantly behind him.

They approached the throne, she much more reservedly. As they moved, she took in the black metal sconces lining the walls, which held heavy lit torches, their red firelight sending dancing shadows across the symbolic relief carved into the stone around them. She recognized several symbols immediately. They were markings from various canons of augury and told tales of calamitous presages that had been passed down for ages.

They reached the stone throne and the man in red robes bowed once, rose, and left them alone.

Jaren stared into the darkness. With the help of her elven eyes, she could just make out the outline of a large figure in black clothing, the dark cowl of a hooded cloak shading every feature but the eyes, which reflected the firelight as would an animal’s at

night. She could feel those eyes watching her and the power of the presence she sensed reminded her of something.

“What is it you want, elf?”

“I’ve come to talk to you about Cruor. I know that the Omega Order studies his legend, among others. I know you are waiting for indication of his return.”

Silence was the reply.

Jaren swallowed and squared her shoulders. “I think the time has come for his rebirth. I have noticed the signs.” She paused, pulled a leather-bound tome from beneath her robes, and held it up in the fire light. “And I have brought the prophecy. It is the original, written tens of thousands of years ago. You’ll see that I am not mistaken,” she said as she held it out toward the throne, “once you read it for yourself.”

The silence continued, and Jaren’s knees began to grow weak. Had she made a mistake in coming here? The Omega Order had always been regarded by the elves as a fanatical sect of mortals who felt they could manipulate the outcome of fate by carefully studying, and attempting to influence, any prophecy that foretold of world-wide catastrophe. No one knew for certain who led the secretive cult, but much to the elves’ occasional chagrin, the Omega Order had managed to sway the outcome of many mortal happenings over the years.

They had been around for a long time, and Jaren hoped that by convincing the Omega Order enough that they chose to take action, she could prove to others, Gray Beard, in particular, that her speculations were correct.

She had been waiting for just such an opportunity to impress the Master Mage with her abilities. Should she succeed, he may offer her a place in the coveted Blue Robe hierarchy.

But as she stood there, the subject of scrutiny to one that she could not even see and whose proximity felt disconcerting in an entirely troubling yet strangely familiar sort of manner, she pondered the wisdom of her actions.

“I am curious, elf. Why would you care?”

He had spoken just when she was positive he had nothing further to say. She bit the inside of her cheek and wondered why she, an elf, and a Blue Robe mage at that, was so frightened of this mortal leader of some ardent cult.

She shrugged. “I have nothing to lose by coming to you, and I have much to gain should you find what I say to be true.”

More silence followed. And then he laughed.

Jaren blinked. The sound was beyond unnerving. It rolled across the darkness and over her skin like smouldering fog, nearly physical in its presence. She took a step back.

Through the darkness, she could see the shrouded figure rise from his throne. He stood to an impressive height and then moved slowly, deliberately, across the raised platform toward the top of the stairs.

“I must tell you, Jaren, that you are right,” he began as he approached the carved stone steps, “and you are wrong.” He began to descend, ever so slowly, and the shadows played across his cowl, teasing her by never allowing her more than the briefest of glimpses at his hidden visage. “Cruor is, indeed, returning. The Chosen Soul has surfaced and night grows longer in anticipation of its endless dominion.”

Another step. Jaren found herself retreating in time with his descent.

“However, you are wrong about one thing.”

Jaren shook her head, taking another step back. “What?”

He descended the final step and paused. And then, as if in a nightmare, he stepped forward one last time, pushing back the edges of his hood as he did so. It fell to his shoulders and Jaren gasped.

She shook her head again. “No... Impossible...” Her eyes grew wide and she would have said more, but her voice was caught somewhere deep inside, along with the air she tried desperately to breathe but couldn’t. Now she knew why his presence had felt so powerful, so familiar. Now she understood everything.

“You do indeed have much to lose by coming here. And lose it, you will.”

Jaren then tried to scream. With every ounce of her will and every bone in her ten-thousand-year-old body, she fought to cry out, to give voice to the myriad of spells she might have used in defense. But his magic was ancient and voiceless and poured over her like a wave of suffocating blood , warm, red, terrifying.

She felt her soul begin to spin as the Death Mage drew closer, his luminescent eyes glittering malevolently in the red fire light. She closed her eyes and fell, knowing that when her body hit the ground it would no longer contain life - it would be a spiritless corpse.

A sacrifice to Cruor.

“She is safe.”

“Yes, for now. However, the brother grows tiresome. He may pose a problem later.”

Silence filled the darkened space.

“Understood.”

Raven and Loki sat together on the short wooden bench in the temple of Haledon. They'd been left alone, after many questions and many answers, and now they finally rested in mutual calm, their voices naturally lowered in deference to the night and all that slept.

“Loki, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why does Haledon heal people if the gods are not supposed to interfere with our lives?”

Loki smiled. “Haledon doesn't heal people. *People* heal people. Using the same kind of magic you're learning to use.”

Raven thought of Adonides and the spells he'd shown her. “I don't know how to heal anyone.”

“No. Not yet, maybe. But one day. I don't think that's the kind of spell this Adonides you tell me of would teach you to use.”

Raven was silent for a moment. Her thoughts turned to the magic she'd come to understand thus far. It was all meant to hurt, to defend, to cause harm. She was the

daughter of Malphas, and despite what her brother said, she doubted she would ever be able to heal anyone. It just was not in her blood.

Blood.

She glanced at her brother, wondering when she would feel safe enough to tell him about this latest detail in her change from mortal to monster.

She asked, “Why is it only Haledon’s acolytes that heal if any one who knows how to use magic can do so?”

“I think when someone learns they can use healing magic, they find themselves attributing it to divine intervention. And they come here – to give thanks, to ask for more power, whatever.” He smiled again. “But don’t tell Maelix I said so. He’s the head priest here. He would throw me out if he heard me talking like this.”

Raven smiled, looking at her brother sideways. “You aren’t scared that Haledon, himself, will hear you?”

“I don’t think he’s the kind of god petty enough to care. If I believed that, I wouldn’t like him. And, I’ve always liked him.” He grinned broadly and she laughed.

“Indeed, you have. I think Maelix can tell. He said that the two of you performed a search spell together. Did it work?”

Loki nodded. “Yes. The message that finally appeared in the water read, and I quote, ‘look only as far as the eye can see’. It was terribly helpful.” His tone was laced with facetiousness.

Raven stared at the floor and pondered in silence for a moment. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the window that looked out over a darkened, sunflower-filled landscape. “Oh, I don’t know, Loki. What did you do after you read it?”

"I went to the window and saw you standing in the field."

"Well then, there you have it. You looked as far as your eyes could see, and there I was. After all, I was standing at the field's edge. If I'd been a few yards further, in the forest, you wouldn't have been able to see me at all."

Loki stared at her. And then he blinked. And laughed, this time a little too loudly.

"All right, you got me. Haledon knows what he's doing."

Raven nodded. "And apparently so do you."

Torch light sent flickering shadows dancing across the glassy surface of the scrying pool. "Show me the Chosen Soul." A voice, deep and terrible, echoed off of the cavern walls. A cloaked figure waved his hand, and the surface of the water shimmered to life.

An image materialized in its depths.

Cruor peered at the subject for several long moments. And then he waved his hand once again, and the image disappeared. He moved away from the scrying pool then, to the large leather-bound tome that rested on the stand against one wall. Again, he waved one hand, and the book's covers opened, thick pages flipping from right to left.

Somewhere toward the middle, the pages stopped, and the black-inked text upon the page began to glow. Cruor read.

At the dawning of this endless night

As god or morning reigns in light

My fingers shake, the dream I've had

Has wrapped itself around me tight

*I pen this vision, cloaked in rhyme
A scream that sounds like songs sublime
A message, pray, to no fruition
In our children's children's children's time*

*A thief of ice on a tempest's fall
Will steal the eldest soul of all
From the Spring of quondam spirits lost
And take it from the guarded hall*

*The eyes of Death will open wide
As the spirit is allowed inside
A receptacle of mortal flesh
Where, for decades – twins, it shall hide*

*Death will grow and come to see
All the Soul has come to be
His Chosen, flesh, and spirit marked
Food for mage and god to be*

*As sable as this endless night
As stunning as the god of light*

With will of fire and air of cold

A sacrifice for Cruor's might

Upon its taking, like a stone

The empty shell, aside is thrown

The world will shudder, warm no more

And Death will dance on frozen bones.

The Death Mage smiled and, if anyone had been present to witness it, it would have had a chilling effect indeed.

He closed the book gently and moved once again to the scrying pool. If the prophecy were correct, then The Chosen Soul was the key to his eminent ascendance and his exodus from this petty and binding mortal world. He needed the woman with the black hair. He needed her soul.

And now he knew where she was.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Thirteen

Raven lay in her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Haledon's temple was entirely too bright for her tastes. The curtains that draped over the broad windows of the guest quarters were constructed of a fine material that merely obstructed the view from outside and filtered none of the sunlight out of the room.

She yawned. And stretched.

A knock at the door brought her onto her side. "Yes?"

"Sis, it's me. Can I come in?"

"Of course." Raven sat up in the bed, pulling her covers up with her.

The door opened and Loki stepped in. "How are you feeling?"

She nodded. "Fine." She shrugged, hoping he would take it for an admittance to being tired. The truth was, Loki would expect her to be nothing less than exhausted this morning. Yet, she felt Adonides's blood stirring within her, awakening her to her power and ruthlessly shoving all thoughts of sleep far from her mind. "I loathe you morning people," she said, her voice teasing.

"Why don't you just stay in bed?"

"Because half of Haledon's priests are out on the lawn singing in chorus, and the other half are in the kitchen banging pots and pans. And Haledon himself has come to call," she said as she shot a menacing glare at the window across the room. Strong morning light shafted in through the thin curtains.

Loki chuckled softly and came to sit at the foot of the bed. He looked at her for a few moments as she stared out at the windows. Her face showed no signs of weariness.

Instead, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled, and her hair shimmered blue-black in the morning light. He shook his head, bemused by her beauty.

“What is it with your ability to look refreshed after all you’ve been through? In your shoes, I would look like a corpse.”

She turned toward him. “What do you mean?”

“You look as though you’ve slept for a year and eaten a feast. You look good.” He shrugged, still shaking his head, obviously baffled but unwilling to waste time pondering it much.

Raven took a deep breath. She sighed. “I guess it’s in my blood.”

That brought silence between them and Raven once again looked away.

“We should start toward Isca today, if you’re up to it. And apparently, you are,” Loki said.

Raven didn’t answer right away. After the silence had stretched for a few seconds, she sighed. “I have to meet with Adonides this morning. He has promised to help me learn more.” She turned to face him again.

His expression was clearly disapproving.

“Loki, I don’t know what’s going to happen to us. I’m not sure whether the elves will come after us for attacking their prince. Or, rather, come after *me*. If they decide to make an example of me, it won’t matter where we’ve run to. From what we’ve been told and what we’ve seen, the elves are too powerful.” She paused, her brow furrowed. “And I have this strange feeling. Like something is... Something is going to happen. My instincts are telling me I need to be prepared.”

Loki cocked his head to one side and studied her carefully. “Are you going to disappear on me again?”

“I’ll try my best not to.”

“You’ve been through so much, though. The village council... Brayden and Selby... the elf prince, and then Talon and your father.” He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently. “Raven, you *must* be overwhelmed. Are you thinking clearly? Is Adonides truly to be trusted? He’s a devil, after all, and devils can’t be...”

Raven pulled her hand from his and leaned back against the headboard. It was entirely natural for someone like Loki to feel the way he felt about devils, and particularly Malphas and his minions. She closed her eyes. She wouldn’t blame him if he never truly came to accept that she held a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul inside her own. She was as much a devil as Adonides, if not more so. She wondered, as her stomach knotted and she forced herself to relax, what Loki would think when he saw her drink blood. It was sure to happen, and sooner rather than later.

Raven sighed then and opened her eyes. She silently congratulated herself for the fact that they were dry.

“I understand your fears, Loki. I have them too. But I can’t change the past. I can’t help who and what I am.”

“I know,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

“And this is all a bit overwhelming, Loki,” she continued, as if he’d said nothing.

“You have to believe me when I tell you that things are even more complicated and more frightening than you know.” She shook her head then. “But, as I’ve said, I can do nothing

to change it. I can only learn to live with it and prepare myself for whatever it is I feel – what *I know* – is coming.”

Loki watched her silently for several moments. Then he nodded, stood up and made his way to the door.

“I’ll go to the kitchen and get you some breakfast.”

Before she could reply, he shut the door behind him and she was alone.

The singing outside had stopped and all was still. She glanced at the windows. They were shut tight, the curtains still and undisturbed. She felt no breeze, but she was cold. She shivered and pulled the blankets to her chin.

Despite Loki’s insistence to the contrary, she knew now that something was not right – that something was going to happen. And it had everything to do with her. She needed to gain control of her powers.

She needed to see Adonides.

She pushed her covers back and stood. Then she pulled on her clothes and, after tying her long thick hair back, she moved to the writing desk, where she penned a quick note to her brother. She knew where she was headed and hoped her written directions would suffice should he need to reach her quickly.

Then she moved to the giant windows and pulled the curtains aside. A field of sunflowers spread over several acres, coming to rest at the edge of a dense forest beyond. The tall yellow and orange blooms swayed and bobbed in the peaceful summer’s breeze. There was no one in sight. The acolytes had apparently retired for the morning.

With one last glance at the closed door, she unlatched the locks on the windows and swung them open. She climbed over the sill and landed softly in the ploughed earth

below. She pulled the panes shut behind her and peeked out from behind the bushes, making certain no one was within sight.

When she was sure the coast was clear, she quickly made her way to the trail leading from the temple, then ducked into the sunflowers and made her way to the forest's edge.

Retracing her steps from the previous night, she managed to find her way back to the small field of wild grass where Adonides had shown her several spells.

Raven entered the field alone. She paused at the entrance to the clearing, listening and looking. Not a soul was within sight or sound. She wasn't surprised. Adonides had said he would meet her in the afternoon. She had a few hours to waste.

She walked into the clearing, toward a group of boulders at its center. Then she sighed and climbed up on top of the largest rock, enjoying the mild warmth before the true heat of the summer's day set in.

She closed her eyes and laid back. The flat stone was long enough to support her entire body and she relaxed against its smooth surface, her mind spinning with the events of the past week.

The sound of grass and twigs crunching beneath hooves pulled her from her thoughts. Her eyes flew open and she sat up. Three dark figures stood at the opposite end of the small field.

She gasped and jumped to her feet, instinctively moving behind the boulder to put its girth between them. Three figures on horseback stared down at her. Two of the riders wore leather armor, studs and spikes dotting the breast plate and shoulder guards of their battle garb. Their twisted, red-skinned faces were lined with nicks and scars and their

eyes blazed a bright, eerie green. They were clearly not human. Raven had never before seen creatures of their ilk. A shiver of terror raced down her spine.

The third rider, whose tall, strong form sat upon a giant black steed between the others, wore pitch black robes and was cloaked in darkness, from head to toe. Still, Raven could feel the rider's eyes searing into her.

Panic rose in her belly. A thousand horrible thoughts chased themselves across her consciousness. She tried, frantically, to recall something – *anything* – that Adonides had shown her. But she hadn't actually tried any of the spells herself. She'd only watched him, and now fear drove even those memories out of her mind.

In desperation, she willed herself to change.

Just as she began to feel her limbs lengthen, her wings spring forth from her back, and her body grow stronger, the figure in black robes waved a gloved hand, and an incantation rang out across the field, his voice resounding against the forest line like an evil echo.

And Raven felt her power being sapped, being drained. Her change into Winter halted and she once again became Raven. "No!" she yelled, frustrated and frightened to the point that her heart slammed painfully hard against her rib cage.

And then the robed rider stirred. Slowly, he pulled back his black cowl, and Raven could not move. Locks of straight jet-black hair fell beyond his shoulders, a gray goatee covered his chin and a wicked scar ran the length of one side of his face. Piercing pale blue eyes gazed out at her from a striking visage both handsome and terrifying. His ears, long and pointed, marked him as an elf.

For several long moments, he simply stared at her, those blue eyes taking in every detail, as she could only remain frozen in place, coherent thoughts of escape just out of her reach.

And then he spurred his stallion into quick forward motion, and suddenly the three riders were charging at full gallop across the small field. Raven came out of her stupor as if lightning had struck her. She screamed and spun on her heel, then broke into as fast a run as her long legs could manage, heading directly for the forest line. The sound of thundering hooves rose behind her. Terror sent her heart into her throat and she could not breathe.

In mere seconds, she felt the hot breath of the horses at her back, and a strong arm snaked down from beside her, scooping her up into a steel-lined embrace. She screamed and a gloved hand clamped down over her mouth. She was roughly repositioned upon the stallion's saddle, her back pressed tight against her captor's chest.

She pulled at the arm over her mouth with both of her hands. If she could only speak, she could try a spell – *any* spell – it didn't matter at this point. She would make one up if she had to.

The horses continued at their relentless gallop and, somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered where they were going.

"If you say a single word," came a voice, hissing in her ear, "I will kill your brother."

Raven's heart skipped a beat. Blood rushed through her eardrums. Who *was* he? How did he know about her? What did he want?

"I want *you*, Raven. I want all of you. I want your soul, and you are going to give it to me, freely, of your own will." His voice carried clearly to her over the sound of the

horses' hooves thundering over the ground. It was a voice laced with powerful magic, she could hear it, recognize it in every word, feeling every intonation. She had the horrible feeling that he could do anything he wanted. And she feared for her life as she never had before.

She lashed out then, letting go of the strong arm he had over her mouth and driving both elbows back into his chest. It was a mistake. They connected with his body as if he were made of metal. She knew it was a spell of protection, even as the magical armor rang against her bone, she cried out with pain and her fingers went completely numb.

He removed his hand from her mouth then, as if he had not even noticed that she'd lashed out. "Not a word."

She couldn't help the whimper that rose from her throat as she fought not to at least ask him where they were going – or what, exactly, they were going to do with her.

The riders thundered across the field until they were at the forest line. They never slowed, entering the thick underbrush at break-neck speed. Their horses galloped easily over vines and boulders, as if they knew exactly where to place their hooves. None of them spoke. She could hear the sable material of her captor's robes whipping about in the wind.

And then, just as despair was beginning to set in, something black moved to her left, just ahead of the riders. Before she could determine what it had been, the object blurred and was slamming into both her and her captor, knocking them violently from the back of the horse.

She cried out as they fell and her captor pulled her tightly to him, turning with her in the air so that he landed on his back, she on top of him. The wind rushed from her lungs

at the collision of her body against his, but he had absorbed most of the impact, and she was only slightly disoriented upon landing. Almost immediately, she began to try to scramble away from him, but his arm held her tight.

In a few short moments, her captor was speaking in a strange language to the other two riders. She felt her body being shoved quickly to the side. Strong arms pulled her up, yanking her off of her feet and spinning her around.

She was being held between the two red-skinned creatures, their taloned fingers digging tiny furrows into the flesh of her arms. A few feet away, the robed elf stood and turned to face whatever it was that had knocked them from his horse.

A man in full black leather armor stood on the opposite side of the trail. He was taller than the elf by several inches and his build was monumentally stronger. Upon his back rested a long two-handed sword in a sheath of black leather that matched the rest of his armor and upon his chest was an emblem composed of three black-on-black symbols; an eye, a hand, and a rope.

Raven found her gaze drawn to him. He was incredibly handsome. His complexion was swarthy, his eyes like molten silver, piercing and stark against the dark tan of his skin. He'd come up in a fighter's stance, strong and steady, his weight evenly distributed upon both legs. His eyes bored into his opponent's, who had turned to stare at him, obviously sizing him up.

The elf smiled then, a horrible gleaming white smile, and began to cast a spell. In the split second before he released it, the stranger glanced from him to Raven, and their gazes caught and held.

Cast your own spell!

A voice exploded inside her mind, and Raven's eyes widened.

Then the elf in black robes released his magic and white-hot bolts of energy went racing from his outstretched palms into the stranger's tall form.

Raven wanted to close her eyes, unwilling to watch. However, the stranger's gaze held her steady and she was unable to breathe, much less move.

The elf's power crashed into his tall opponent, but instead of rendering him unconscious or frying him like lightning, the magic simply cascaded around the stranger's body, sizzling out of existence like a dying fire.

The elf's blue-eyed gaze narrowed.

The man in black leather had not looked away from Raven, even as the elf's magic had poured over him. Raven's heart had utterly stopped beating. Time seemed to slow, and the silence stretched.

Then, ever so slowly, dauntingly, the stranger turned his gaze away from Raven and looked once more upon the elf in black robes.

"Cruor." He bowed his head toward the elf, as if in greeting and deference. Then he smiled, white teeth flashing in a grin that brought Raven's breath up short. "Your magic can not harm me, mage."

The Death Mage's gaze narrowed, his brow vaguely furrowed.

Even Raven knew that the man in leather armor should have been leveled by that spell. His body should be crushed, or blown apart, or, at the very least, on fire.

Yet, there he stood. Utterly unaffected.

And in the next instant, he attacked.

He pulled his sword from his back with such speed that Raven could barely see it happening. The elf in black robes, the one the stranger had called 'Cruor', waved his hands in the air once more. A shimmering wall of magic appeared between he and his attacker, a sort of barrier made of nothing but solidified air.

The man with the sword swung and his blade collided with the force field, sending sparks shooting in every direction. Then he hit it again, and again, three times, four times more, until finally, the barrier began to fall.

Cruor's cat-like eyes widened and he took a step back. He raised one arm in his opponent's direction and spoke a few short archaic words. When nothing happened and the man came forward, sword at the ready, he stepped back once again.

The man with the sword shook his head. "I told you already, elf. Your magic will not work on me. Now, I wonder," he spoke slowly, calmly, as he continued to step forward, his long sword gleaming in the shafts of light that streamed through the trees overhead. "Does your prince know what designs you have against his woman?"

Cruor's gaze narrowed then. His eyes flitted from his attacker's face to the insignia on his chest. Comprehension dawned in his eyes and he looked back up. "Tanith." He hissed, a sly smile returning to his features.

The man with the sword nodded once again. "At your service."

Cruor shook his head. "Astriel must have hired you to retrieve her. I'm surprised he didn't simply recover her himself."

"He must have had his reasons."

"Tell me, what interest could the prince possibly have in the Chosen Soul?"

This time, the bounty hunter did not answer. He simply shook his head and lunged forward, his sword coming down in a swift, deadly arc.

Cruor was there in one instant and gone in the next.

Raven gasped. The bounty hunter straightened. His body stilled, his head cocked to one side. He was listening.

In the next moment, he was spinning, his sword coming up in an expert block as Cruor appeared behind him, dressed this time in leather armor that matched the bounty hunter's, all the way down to the insignia on his chest. In his hands was a long sword of the same make as Tanith's, and he was swinging it down upon his opponent's head with mastered skill and grace.

Tanith blocked the weapon's descent and sparks shot off of their blades as they collided and slid along one another. Again, Cruor attacked and again Tanith blocked.

The two began to circle each other, the sound of their swords clashing ringing out through the forest. So many sparks shot off of their blades that Raven was half afraid the underbrush would catch fire.

Use your powers, damn it! Get out of here!

Raven blinked. She was certain this time that the voice inside her head had not been her own. It was the man in black leather – the one the elf had called 'Tanith'. She knew it with every fiber of her being. Somehow, he was communicating with her in silence, inside her mind, and for a moment the realization kept her frozen.

Now!

She jumped at the sudden bellow in her mind and her breathing quickened. She looked at the red-skinned beast to her right and then at the one to her left. They were

impossibly well muscled, clearly very strong and the green blazes in their inhuman eyes was entirely unnerving.

Yet, Raven knew that this was her chance. Should Cruor win this battle, she would be his prisoner once again, and she'd already learned that she was no match for the elf.

She closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing, even as the continued sound of sword battle raged a few yards away. She thought of Winter, of her father, of Caina. She concentrated on the blood rushing through her veins. A devil's blood, powerful, deadly. She thought of the soul deep down in her core. The stolen soul. And a part of it, her father's.

She began to chant, silently at first, whispering the words inside her mind like a prayer.

Her power answered the call. Slowly, tentatively, it began to rise, to spiral up from down deep within herself, to stretch and flow and ebb to her extremities, pooling within her fingers and toes, building behind her closed eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, it was to find that everything had turned a very deep shade of blue. It was almost as if clouds had covered the sky and blotted out the sun, but Raven knew that it was only from her side, only through her own eyes that the world appeared that way.

And then she turned her gaze once more upon the red-skinned creature to her right. He turned his green glowing eyes upon her and they widened perceptibly.

Raven could not help what happened next. She smiled, feeling her incisors lengthen, and began to chant out loud. Her fingernails began to grow, becoming sharp and hard like

the blades of daggers. Without thinking, she curled the claws into her captor's wrist and dug in deep.

He howled in pain and drew back from her, releasing her right arm, which she instantly swung around to rake across her other captor's face. He too cried out in agony and backpedaled, releasing her other arm.

Raven took several long steps back and willed the rest of her change. This time it came fast and furious, her wings exploded from her back in a show of black raven's feathers and expanded to their full wing span within short seconds. Her form grew taller, her skin darkened, and her hair went from pitch black to shocking white in the space of a few heartbeats.

She beat her wings once against the air and rose several feet off of the ground.

And then she hesitated. The battle between the two men raged below, neither seeming to have obtained an upper hand.

Get out of here!

Tanith's voice was back, loud and clear inside her ear drums. She blinked, beat her wings once again, and rose out of the field even as the two demonic creatures she'd attacked with her claws began to scream at one another in some unknown language. One was pulling a bow from a large satchel on his horse. But long before he'd had a chance to nock an arrow, she was gone.

Raven, now in the form of Winter, flew over the tree tops, her body shaking, her heart hammering, her mind spinning wildly out of control. She lost track of time, flying as fast as she could, in no particular direction, just wanting to put distance between herself and her assailants.

Finally, as the adrenaline began to leave her body and she realized that she was lost, she peered down into the forest and searched for a clearing.

In a few moments, she spotted a small watering hole and brought her wings closer together, allowing herself to fall softly, slowly, to the ground.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Fourteen

Astriel returned to the library's vaults the next morning. He wanted the book that Jaren had been reading. He hadn't thought to ask for it when he'd cornered her in one of the reading rooms, and besides, it would have aroused the Blue Robe's suspicion if he had. However, the truth was, it was the only book he'd been able to find that spoke at all of the Chosen Soul, and Astriel's curiosity was beyond piqued.

Since he'd first laid eyes on the raven-haired beauty in that ridiculous little tavern, he had been able to concentrate on little else. Astriel normally dealt with such frustrations by visiting the courtesan's quarters. However, lately, such visits had been to no avail. Much to his vexation, and the resentment of his father's concubines, none of them seemed... *appealing* any longer. He desired no one but the one who had escaped him. The daughter of Malphas. The Chosen Soul.

He'd since learned her name, Raven, and the name of her fair-haired brother, Loki. In fact, he'd spent his time learning as much about her as possible.

Astriel had lived a very many years and his connections ran deep. He'd managed to obtain information about the woman that he doubted even *she* knew. He knew where she was born, who her parents were, what had caused her to leave her little village. He smiled at the thought of her realizing her powers for the first time. And then his demeanor once again darkened at the thought of the men who had attacked her, forcing her unwilling hand.

They'd learned the hard way that she was Dark Royalty.

The morning was calm and silent. The prince of the elves moved quietly through the underground halls and entered the familiar reading room that he had encountered Jaren in the day before.

The book was not on the table as it had been then. Astriel moved around the room, his eyes roaming over the titles written on the spines of books on the shelves. When he did not find it there, he began to search the shadows beneath the chairs and desks.

Finally, he had to admit that the book was no longer in the room. The Blue Robe must have taken it with her. Astriel's gaze narrowed. He would have to pay her another visit.

Loki clutched the crumpled note in his fist. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He and the other acolytes had been searching all morning. She wasn't in the field where she said she'd be. It had only taken a few minutes to run to the location and check. Other than a few hoof-trampled blades of grass, there was no indication of what might have happened to her.

Loki put his hands over his face and bowed his head. Never before in his life had he felt so helpless.

Or so angry. At that moment, he both loved and hated his sister. She hadn't listened to him. He'd known Adonides could not be trusted. She'd said it herself – something bad was going to happen – and yet, she was too stubborn to consider, even for a moment, that whatever it was might be avoided by not acting rashly.

She'd gone off alone. And Raven always managed to tow trouble closely along behind her.

He opened his eyes and looked up to find himself gazing at the giant bronze sun at the front of the temple. He was alone in the prayer room. The acolytes had gone into the city to search for Raven. Loki had not gone with them, as he was not yet certain what would happen if one of the elves caught site of either him or his sister.

So, he was left alone at the temple.

He sat in the silence and stared up at the shining bronze symbol of Haledon's power.

An idea presented itself. He could try the search spell on his own. Loki glanced down at the note in his hand and then stood from where he'd been kneeling in the aisle. Maelix would insist that he wasn't ready. But what did he have to lose?

He took a deep breath and moved to the front of the temple, where the viewing pool was located. Viewing pools were nothing more than large stone bowls, filled with clear water. They were the central component in many forms of magic and various spells. No temple or tower where mages resided would be without one.

Loki shrugged off his cloak and rolled up the cuffs of his white traveling shirt. He searched his recollection for the exact words Maelix had uttered. He closed his eyes, repeating the words in his head, echoing their sound along the walls of his memory, until he was certain that he had them correct.

He opened his eyes, held his hands over the bowl, and dropped Raven's note into its depths. It floated there for a moment, leaking black quill ink into the water. When it began to sink, he spoke, "*Comperio expiscor invenio reperio sector*".

"She is none of your concern, priest."

Loki jolted at the intrusion of the deep voice and spun to face the temple's entrance. His eyes widened. There, just inside the temple doors, stood a tall male devil, his skin the color of coal, his eyes burning yellow as two suns, his giant bat-like wings spread to their full, massive breadth.

"You're lucky that you're here," the devil said as he came forward, gesturing to the building around them. "At least you'll be with your god when you die." The fiend smiled, bright white fangs contrasting deeply with his ebony skin. He moved slowly, steadily toward the altar.

Loki took a step back. There was no time to ponder who this devil was or why he was here. There was barely time enough for comprehension. The fiend was going to kill him. Loki was alone and without a weapon. He had to defend himself somehow.

He tried stalling. "Who are you?"

The fiend shook his head. "Names hold power, priest. Why would I give you such over me?"

"I'm not a priest."

"You're more of a priest than are most of Haledon's acolytes," the devil answered calmly, coolly. He continued to move forward. Loki took another tentative step back. He quickly searched his surroundings for something he could use. He kept talking.

"Is that why you want to kill me?"

The devil shrugged, all nonchalance. "It's reason enough."

Loki shook his head. "No. This has something to do with Raven."

The devil laughed. "All right, I'll admit as much. But then, doesn't everything?"

At that, the devil beat his wings once and rose into the air. Loki immediately shot to his right and turned toward the back wall where Haledon's axes hung below the giant bronze sun.

Just as the devil swooped down on him from above, Loki pulled the weapons from their places. There was an odd sucking sound as they were removed from their hooks, and they felt very warm, nearly hot, in Loki's hands. He spun around, swinging them out in an expert arc, which surprised even himself considering this was only the second time he'd ever held axes in his hands.

The blades sliced into the devil's chest, and the fiend wailed in pain. He shot backward, his wings beating heavily in the warm air, the deep furrows in his flesh leaking thick dark red blood.

The fiend glanced down at his wounds and then looked back up at Loki. He roared in anger and agony and then lunged forward once more, this time with claws fully extended and fangs elongated. His eyes flashed yellow, burning fury.

Loki dropped and rolled just as the devil's claws made mad swipes at his face. The axes felt as if they were humming in his grip, and he felt a surge of energy lift him off of the ground and spin him around to once again face his attacker.

The devil turned, eyed him carefully and landed softly. He then began to chant, and the archaic words filled the temple with blasphemous magic. A cold blast shot out from the devil's outstretched hands and barreled through the air toward Loki's stock-still form.

Loki did not know what else to do but close his eyes and raise his arms before his face. The axes in his hands formed a near perfect circle with their blades, and as the cold

blast slammed into them, it was repelled forcefully so that it bounced back and away, covering everything within ten feet in every direction in a thick coating of rime.

Loki opened his eyes and peered about. The benches and altar were buried beneath several inches of ice. The axes had deflected the spell. Loki stared down at them. They hummed with energy, and their blades shone in the light that streamed through the windows and skylight.

Across the room, the tall, wounded devil stood still, watching Loki carefully. As he folded his massive wings gracefully behind his back, an icon of absolute evil, standing amidst an ice flow of his creation, it dawned on Loki who he was.

“You’re Adonides.”

The devil smiled a terrible smile and bowed his head. “Correct.”

At that moment, the doors to the temple once again flew open and in ran several acolytes, including Maelix. They skidded to a halt at the scene that laid out before them. Once they took in the presence of the devil and the icy destruction, they looked up at Loki and then stared, wide-eyed, at the shining, sharp axes in his hands.

Maelix took a shaky step forward, but could go no further. His eyes shot from the axe blades to the wounds on the devil’s chest. The expression of shock on his face deepened.

Loki turned his attention back to the devil. His heart was racing as he waited for the Abaddonian to make another move.

Adonides eyed the acolytes and then settled his gaze upon Loki once more. “We will meet again soon, priest. Until then...” He opened his wings, beat them once, spoke a single arcane word, and in a flash of blue-white light, he was gone.

The ice in the temple began to melt. It withdrew from its original span with crackling, popping noises and water began to drip from the bottoms of the benches.

Maelix continued to stare at Loki and the axes in his grip.

Loki looked down at the weapons. He had the horrible sinking feeling that he'd done something terribly wrong. "I'm sorry, Maelix..."

Maelix slowly shook his head. He came forward, walking down the long aisle alone, the other acolytes remaining by the open doors. "Loki, this temple is made of nothing more than wood and stone. Yet, it has stood for thousands of years. The reason for its destruction is resting in the palms of your hands."

Loki looked down at the axes and then back up again.

Maelix continued, taking slow steps toward him. "In every temple of Haledon across the Terran realm, there exists weapons much like these. Alike in every way but one. The others are mere decoration. These are not." He approached Loki and stood directly before him. He glanced down at the axes, which Loki held out to him.

"No. They are not mine, Loki. Twenty years ago, I tried, as does every acolyte of Haledon who comes to this temple, to pull them from the wall. And I failed. These are the weapons that Haledon's avatar used against the Death Mage so many, many years ago." He paused, and Loki knew, with absolute certainty, in his gut and in his soul, what he was going to say next.

"No one has been able to remove them but you. They are therefore yours." He smiled, and it was a smile both warm and awe-struck. "Loki, you are Haledon's champion."

Drake of Tanith walked through the small dark tavern, his eyes focused on a figure that sat at the very last table, against the wall, its face hidden in shadow.

He approached the table and stared down at the solemn figure.

“I thought the elves banned scum like you from Krivier long ago.”

The figure finished swallowing whatever he was drinking and set down his mug softly. “Aye, they did. I guess I forgot to pay attention.”

Drake looked once over his shoulder toward the door and then proceeded to remove his sword from his back and lower himself gracefully into the one other chair at the table.

“What are you doing here? I thought you had a quarry to catch,” the figure in shadows asked.

“I did. The plan has changed.”

“Oh?” The shadowy form straightened and leaned forward, his face coming into the light. His skin held a strange greenish hue and his brown eyes were hooded by a heavy brow. His canines were sharp and pronounced and met with elongated tusk-like teeth on his lower jaw. His ears were pointed, resembling those of an elf’s, and his dark brown hair was long, braided on either side and held with bone beads.

“Already turned them in, did you?”

“No.”

The green-skinned man’s eyes narrowed. “What are you about, Tanith?”

“I need a favor.”

The man snorted and picked up his tankard of ale. “What else is new?”

“Don’t go martyr on me, Grolsch. You owe me more favors than I can count.”

His green-skinned companion laughed at that and shrugged. “That’s what you bought into when you decided to become my friend. Besides,” he added and then took another swig of his drink, “I keep you on your toes.”

Drake smiled and leaned back as a serving wench set a new mug of ale in front of him.

“Can I get you anything else, handsome?” she asked as his molten silvery eyes locked with hers. He shook his head. Once.

Her smile disappeared and she spun on her heel and left.

Grolsch laughed again and finished off his drink. “You made her leave before I could get another mug of ale, you son of a bitch. Why the hell do you always have to be so scary, anyway?”

“It’s in my blood.”

“Boy, you’re not kidding.”

Drake picked up his drink and took a long pull. He normally did not imbibe. But something inside of him was on edge, off, nervous. It wasn’t like him to lose any control, whatsoever, over his emotions. He had been doing his job for a very long time. He was good at what he did. The best. He’d never failed to bring in a quarry. Not once. He had a reputation to uphold.

And Raven Grey was about to blow it all to Hell.

“Grolsch, I need you to take her from me.”

Grolsch stared at him.

“Who?”

“The woman I’ve been paid to bring in.”

“Ummm... What?” Grolsch’s brow furrowed and his head cocked to one side, his eyes squinting as if he truly did not understand.

“You heard me. I need you to take her out of my hands. I can’t turn her in.”

Grolsch’s eyes widened. “You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“No.”

The green-skinned man leaned forward again and his voice softened. He looked nervous. “Drake, you’ve been doing this a very, very long time. You’ve never had a problem with your mark. What is going on?”

Drake did not answer right away. He was not sure what to say. What should he tell his friend? That he’d never seen a woman as beautiful as Raven in all his long life? That, from the moment he’d laid eyes on her in the prince’s viewing pool, he had been capable of thinking of nothing else? That, as he was researching his quarry, he’d learned she was the daughter of Malphas *and* she was the Chosen Soul... And that made her more special than Grolsch could imagine...

“I have my reasons, Grolsch. Not the least of which is the prince. He’s the one paying me. And he doesn’t deserve her.”

Grolsch’s large brow lifted in renewed interest. “Oh?” He leaned back again and eyed his friend carefully. “I’ve known you for a long time, Tanith. You’ve never behaved like this before. There’s something about her you’re not telling me. What is she, your sister or something?”

Drake looked up from his mug to meet his friend’s inquisitive gaze. “No. We are not related in any way whatsoever.” It was true. However, if Grolsch knew how close he’d come to the truth with that guess, he would have choked.

Grolsch nodded slowly. “I agree with you that the prince doesn’t deserve much of anything at all, much less a woman. But what makes this mortal so different?”

“For one thing, she isn’t mortal. And she attacked him.” Drake quickly added, hoping his friend’s attention would glide over the mortal thing and head straight into the topic of her attack, as he did so love to fight.

“She *attacked* him? A *woman* attacked the *Elf Prince*?” Grolsch threw back his head and barked out laughter. “By the gods, I wish I’d been there to see *that*!”

Drake sat silently, watching his companion.

Grolsch stopped laughing and settled down again. “Aye, she’ll be lucky if she isn’t executed for such a thing. If she’s fortunate, she’s pretty and her looks’ll keep her from the Blue Robe’s Ring. Then again, knowing what she’d face if she wasn’t killed, the Ring might be better.”

Drake’s jaw tensed. Grolsch had never seen Raven, so his comment about her beauty did not surprise him. However, his talk of the Blue Robe’s execution Ring set Drake even more on edge than he had already been. For now, he could not get the images of the forsaken ritual out of his head. Any time a mortal acted up in such a way as to deserve execution, it was the Blue Robes, the elven mages, who handled the punishment. The Ring was just that. A ring of land, roped off with magic, in which the condemned was placed.

Then, depending on the prisoner’s particular crime, either a single spell or a chain of spells were cast. The victim might die quickly. Or he might die a slow, gruesome and agonizing death.

Worse was the knowledge that the Prince had absolutely no intention of killing Raven. She was, singularly, the most stunningly gorgeous woman to walk upon the Terran realm, and Drake had no doubt that the Prince also knew she was both the daughter of Malphas and the Chosen Soul. No, he wasn't going to kill her.

On the contrary, he had other things in mind.

Not that Drake could blame the man.

Grolsch quieted down and watched the bounty hunter in silence. Several more moments passed before the large man sighed and shrugged. "Very well. I'll take her. But no one in their right minds is going to believe that an ork was able to take quarry away from Drake of Tanith."

"I'll take care of that part."

"Uh-huh. Sure. All right." Grolsch leaned over the table and took Drake's drink from him. "You weren't drinking it anyway." He took a big swig and placed it back upon the table. "Just what did you want me to do with her once I've got her?"

"Take her to the Draca Desert."

Again the ork barked with laughter and shook his head. "Right! Now I know you've lost your ever-loving mind. No mortal can survive in that desert." He eyed Drake carefully. "Why would I take her into that place? She'll die!"

"No. You won't take her *into* the desert. You'll take her *to* it. I'll meet you a half-day's ride from the valley leading into it. I'll take over from there."

Grolsch's eyes got very large. "Oh my."

Drake stilled.

"You're going to keep her."

Drake said nothing. He slid his beer back across the table and took a long pull from its contents.

“You’re digging yourself a grave, my friend. You are who you are, but I think you may just be underestimating the elves this time. If she’s so special you’re thinking of holding on to her, you can bet your hide, the elf prince is thinking the same thing.”

Again, Drake said nothing and again, his friend watched him carefully. “Where is she now?”

“By Mandarin Pond. She’s alone. And I’ve placed a shielding spell on her location.”

Grolsch was silent for several moments more. And then he asked, “By the way, why are there sword holes in your armor?”

“I got into a fight with an elf.”

Grolsch shook his head. “Lovely. Just lovely.”

Astriel did not bother to knock on the giant double doors that guarded the entrance to the mage tower. He simply waved his hand before him and the large wooden doors began to creak open. As soon as there was room, he strode through them and into the flickering darkness beyond.

Torches lit with multi-colored mage fire burned, heat-less and mesmerizing, in sconces that protruded, at intervals, along the stone walls. Bas relief carvings in the stone depicted several infamous scenes in the ancient arcane legends that all Blue Robes came to learn during their study under the master mage.

Astriel paid them little heed. He entered the main gathering chamber on the first floor of the massive mage tower and scanned the interior. Blue and white banners hung from rafters in the ceiling, and a giant hearth on one side of the room blazed and crackled cheerfully, casting dancing shadows across the tables, chairs and bookshelves in the room.

The chamber was empty but for one man. A Blue Robe with long black hair sat at one of the long tables, his back turned toward the chamber's entrance.

Astriel strode toward him, his boots echoing clearly on the marble floor. The Blue Robe did not look up at the sound of approaching footfalls and Astriel smiled at his intentional insolence.

When Astriel finally stood directly in front of him, the Blue Robe slowly placed his forefinger over a line in the book he'd been reading and glanced up, a slightly bored, slightly annoyed expression on his handsome face.

The Blue Robe looked him up and down and then smiled an utterly nasty smile. "Did you get lost, your highness, or is there something I can help you with?"

Astriel returned the smile. "I'm looking for a book. Jaren was reading it when I saw it last. It is a book of prophecies."

The black-haired man almost snorted. His lips twitched. "There are many books on prophecies within these walls, your highness. I'm afraid you'll need to be a bit more specific."

"I want the book on the prophecy of Cruor."

"Oh?" The Blue Robe raised one black brow. "Taking a sudden interest in mortal affairs, my prince?"

“My interests are none of your business, mage. Where is the book?”

The Blue Robe slowly pushed away from the table and came to his feet. His gaze locked on Astriel’s. “You are not among friends, Lord Astriel. You may hold sway in your court and among the mortals, however, when you enter those doors,” he gestured to the entrance on the other side of the room, “you enter the court of the Master Mage.” The Blue Robe’s gaze narrowed and his smile turned positively nasty. “And his power is far greater than yours.”

Astriel’s cruel smile never wavered. He shook his head admonishingly. “Honestly, Azmith, these lover’s tantrums of yours are unbecoming. Have you told Gray Beard of your true feelings for him?”

The Blue Robe opened his mouth to retort, but a sound across the room brought both men’s attentions around before he could say anything further.

From the shadows stepped a tall man, draped in sapphire and ebony robes. The nature of his build was hidden beneath the sheer volume of his vestments, but he moved with quiet grace as he silently entered the room. His facial features, though not ruggedly handsome, were engaging and very charismatic. His dark blue eyes glittered like gems in the firelight. His hair was long, straight and black, but his chin sported a graying goatee. A vicious scar ran the length of one side of his face, from above his eyebrow to his chin. Its effect did nothing to mar the man’s charisma, and in fact merely intensified his presence.

He approached the two men.

Azmith’s smile became a sneer of victory and contempt and Astriel’s face wiped itself clean of any emotion whatsoever.

“Lord Astriel.” Gray Beard greeted the prince with a slight nod of his head. Astriel did the same. Neither man smiled. “Is there something you need?” the Master Mage asked, his tone low, unspoken insinuation lacing each word.

“The book of Cruor’s prophecy. Your pupil, Jaren, had it last. And, as it goes, she appears to be missing as well. She was not in her quarters.”

Gray Beard took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh. “No. She would not be. She insisted on investigating ideas she has that Cruor is on the verge of returning.” He spoke in a calm voice, but something dangerous rode each syllable, as if a reminder that every breath he took was fortified with magic. “Why she would be interested in the matters of mortals, I can not imagine. She left yesterday afternoon, taking the book and several other items with her.”

Astriel looked from Gray Beard to Azmith. The younger Blue Robe appeared as if he desperately wanted to say something, but was holding himself carefully in check while in the presence of his master.

The Prince turned back to the Master Mage and the two stared at one another for some indeterminate amount of time. And then Astriel turned on his heel. “When she comes back, please let her know I would like a look at that book,” he said as he left the room. There was no answer from behind him.

He had not expected one.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Fifteen

Malphas stormed through his palace of ice, Cainan imps and monsters of frost scattering before his striding tirade, struggling to get out of the way of his indomitable fury. His eyes burned a hellish red, a rare and frightening testament to a temperament that reared its ugly head only once in a blue moon. And this day, it was his daughter that plagued his fevered mind and raged his ancient blood.

His daughter and her various hunters, far too many as they were. And one, in particular, whose power and aspiration had allowed him to come much, much too close to Raven.

Though her recent struggles might yet merely serve to further her father's own dark purpose and send her careening into her destiny, as he wished her to, he had to admit that he did not like the invasive turn of events that had just transpired. The Death Mage was far too impudent, playing a risky game with the devil's sole scion. Should the Blue Robe succeed in capturing Raven, all that Malphas had worked for would be lost.

Malphas desperately needed Raven to realize her own power – her own ability to do that which Malphas could do, himself. The very notion that she feared even attempting her own magic without further council from Adonides lent credence to the fact that she, as of yet, had *no idea* what she was capable of. She could easily crush Cruor all on her own, should she merely accept who and what she was and allow herself to well and truly become.

Malphas flung out a brief pulse of power, which sent the small devils, who had not skittered out of his way fast enough, flying back several yards to slam into the tall glacial walls of one of the castle's corridors. They grunted, slid to the frozen ground, and then

wobbled, heads down, through the nearest doorway as the Dark Lord strode past them, his attention still turned inward.

And then there was the bounty hunter. Drake of Tanith. A man who was mortal, but possessed of a mastery of skill and an influence so intense, it rivaled that of many immortals he had known. His immunity to certain magic, his indeterminate age, his ability to enter into his daughter's very thoughts, were unheard-of for a mortal, much less one who was not a mage. It left Malphas more than slightly irritated that he could not determine what part the enigmatic man in black played in his daughter's future. It was as if his aura, his destiny and his past were all clouded from the powerful archfiend, and Malphas was left wondering.

He did not like to wonder. He wanted facts.

The Dark Lord stormed into his throne room and approached his tall icy throne.

“Adonides! I call you now!”

Almost immediately, the handsome black-skinned devil appeared in a cloud of frost and blue-white light. Adonides's wings pulled in at his back, gracefully folding as he lowered himself onto one knee, bowing reverently before his king.

“Your majesty,” he greeted softly, and then fell into silence, his eyes upon the floor, as he waited for the Dark Lord to address him again.

“The priest yet lives. What transpired?”

Adonides kept his gaze downward. “He took Haledon's axes from the wall of the temple then attacked me with them.”

Malphas was silent for a moment. His red-burning eyes fell upon the deep furrows in Adonides's chest, which healed even as he watched. **“It would appear Cruor's**

prophecy has indeed been set in motion. The Death Mage attacked my daughter while you were attempting to rid us of her brother.”

Adonides’s head snapped up. His yellow eyes burned. “My liege, is she-”

“She lives. The Bounty Hunter of Tanith came to her rescue. Which brings me to why I have called you here.”

Adonides waited silently.

“The Princess has drawn the attention of far too many men. Her honor, life and, and the very soul I have given her are at risk. You will take this to my daughter and present it to her tonight. Inform her that it is the first of my gifts to her.” Malphas held his hand out, palm up, and a light began to shimmer above it. The light intensified, solidified, and then faded, leaving a smooth, shining ring of black metal in the devil’s open hand.

Adonides glanced at the ring and his yellow eyes once again sparked to life. He recognized it at once. It was a Ring of Halcyon, meant to allow its wearer quick access to all of the power she possessed inside. It rendered speech and movement unnecessary for spell casting, and the more its wearer used it, the more able to do so on her own, she became. Eventually, the ring would fall off, useless and obsolete.

At that point, its owner would have become powerful enough to use her magic unassisted, freely and forcefully, without voice or action.

There were only two rings of its kind in existence. One, Malphas possessed. The other belonged to the Lord of Nisse, the Ninth Circle of Abaddon.

It was precious, indeed. And it was the perfect gift for Raven. *For Winter.*

Adonides bowed his head once more, rose gracefully, and held out his hand, allowing his master to deposit the ring upon his palm. He curled his fingers around the small black ring protectively and then cocked his head to one side, as if listening.

“Your majesty, she calls.”

“Go to her at once.”

Adonides nodded and disappeared immediately.

Malphas sat back on his throne and gazed, unseeing, into the distance. He wondered what the Lord of the Ninth Circle would think of what he had just done.

Winter’s boots touched down in the soft sand beside the pond and she curled her wings in behind her back. Her heart was beating hard, her blood pumping loud in her eardrums. She was tired. She’d never actually used her wings to fly before.

It was hard work.

And she was really scared.

She turned in all directions, her tri-colored eyes searching the shadows of the surrounding forest, her enhanced hearing listening for any sound of movement, of danger.

When nothing appeared and all remained silent for several minutes, she let out a breath and collapsed upon the sand. She put her face in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut.

How had this happened?

How had she become the thing she now was? Embroiled in the mess she found herself in? She moved her hands away from her face and crawled to the pond’s edge. She

peered down, studying her reflection carefully. The white hair and bizarrely beautiful eyes still shocked her. She wondered whether she would ever get used to seeing them reflected back at her.

Raven – *Winter* – sighed a very long, deep sigh.

She certainly had a knack for finding trouble, but she was fairly certain that she'd never been in quite so much before. Some mad elf mage wanted to steal her soul. It almost made her laugh. A soul stolen twice! And the Elf Prince had hired a bounty hunter to track her down and bring her in. Why? Was it as she'd feared? Did he want her punished because she'd attacked him? Was he going to have her put to death?

She would have shivered, had she been in Raven's smaller form. But *Winter* was somehow stronger, somehow more capable of dealing with these stresses, both emotionally and physically. She merely continued to stare down, into that strange yet familiar visage on the water's shimmering surface. And she knew, instinctively, that she needed help.

She could call upon her father. Except that he had told her he could not help her a third time. And perhaps that was a good thing after all. She was in danger. She needed to learn to defend *herself*, with her *own* power. There was magic within her, stirring beneath the surface, ready to use. She simply needed instruction. Practice.

She would call Adonides. He could help her. She was not certain his nearness was the best idea after their episode in the sunflower field the day before, but at this point, she had little choice.

She opened her eyes once again and searched the perimeter for any movement. She had the strangest feeling she was being watched. She peered as deeply into the shadows

as she could. But there was nothing there. Nothing but the darkness and the underbrush and foliage.

She shook her head and placed her hand to her forehead. Not wanting to waste any further time, she then opened her mind, allowing the power within her to re-surface, to extend from her body like arcane tendrils. She let them go, spread away from her in every direction, feeling and searching across the feet, the yards, and then the miles. In silence, she called for Adonides.

Then she opened her eyes and waited.

The surface of the pond shimmered, cool and inviting. On its opposite side, a small waterfall sent fresh water into its depths. The babbling song of its descent was hypnotic and calming. Her skin began to itch. It felt strange beneath the mid-day sun above, as if it was made for glaciers and ice flows and thunderstorms. Not summer.

The water of the pond continued to glisten invitingly.

She extended her black feathered wings and smiled, still not used to the rush of pleasure she received from witnessing their glorious breadth and deep, rich color. Then she glanced once more at the water and stood.

It would probably be a while before Adonides came to her. She had never tried to contact him before, and she had done so in silence, not wanting anyone who might be near to hear her call out, thus giving away her location.

She had no idea whether the devil would be able to receive the mental communication. *Not as she had with Tanith.*

She paused as she recalled the handsome man in black leather. Her bounty hunter, the elf had said. Hired by the Elf Prince. He'd been inside her head. How had he done that? And she'd been drawn to him, inexplicably, deeply...

She wondered where he was at that moment. Had the elf defeated him? Had he gotten away?

The heat of the day continued to rise and her skin prickled.

With one last glance at the trees surrounding the small clearing, she took a deep breath, pushed her wandering thoughts from her mind, and began to disrobe. A quick swim would hurt no one.

The bounty hunter watched the woman who sat still on a patch of grass upon the shore of Mandarin Pond. He was completely concealed in the shadows afforded by the tall foliage overhead and by his enchanted armor, which caused him to become one with the shadows, to melt and meld, obscured and entirely undetectable.

It was noon and Drake watched as the sun directly overhead played colorful magic with her glorious raven's wings, refracting their dark light into a thousand shimmering rainbows. She shifted and her waterfall of silk, flaxen hair cascaded over her shoulder as she lowered herself onto her side and trailed one long, elegant finger across the water's surface.

Drake studied her carefully. He took in every detail, his eyes grazing her long silhouette, memorizing every feature, as he had done of his marks for countless years, though he had never in his life enjoyed it half as much as he was at that moment.

And because he had been doing what he did for so long, he noticed within her the signs of fatigue, fear and doubt.

Suddenly, she stiffened and straightened up, turning to gaze into the bushes where he hid. For the briefest of moments, he felt her eyes upon him and could have sworn she knew he was there.

But it was impossible. He was hidden in such a manner, by both armor and magic, that she simply could not see him.

He watched her more intently, mesmerized by her every move, by her mere presence. She remained so for several moments, a look of deep concentration on her lovely face.

Then she opened her eyes and effortlessly extended her wings to their full span. She smiled a stunning, pleased smile. His breath caught in his throat. His chest felt constricted.

Then she stood and Drake found himself gritting his teeth as she began to pull off her clothes, one article at a time, her motions graceful and deliberate. His molten silvery gaze flashed like liquid lightning, his irises smoldering as she at last stood beneath the shafts of summer light, completely naked.

When she slowly, gracefully, slipped into the cool water, his fists clenched at his sides.

He was invisible, but not inaudible, and when a groan escaped from low in his throat, his heart slammed against his chest, terrified he had heard her.

However, the waterfall's constant trickle and the sound of water splashing softly all around her drowned out anything she might have heard.

Drake found himself sweating beneath the midday sun, a problem he had never had before. His heart was pounding too hard, his muscles tensed too tightly. This was not going at all as he had planned. He had simply intended to come back here, take her into custody, and wait for Grolsch to arrive.

But at first sight of her, he'd been stilled and instinctively hid in the shadows in order to watch a while longer. She was in her true, devil, form, her skin darkened to the color of dusk, her hair as white as snow, her wings glorious beyond any before imagined. Her legs were long, perfectly muscled, her body proportioned like that of a goddess. Her breasts were full and taut, her waist tight and defined. She was an impossible dream.

And then she rose from the depths of the pool and Drake dared not breathe. She slowly emerged from the water, droplets of moisture running in rivulets down her perfect flesh. She stood on the bank of the pond and gathered her long luxurious hair, ringed the moisture from their locks.

He could only gaze upon her in rapt admiration as she then laid out on the thick grass and allowed the summer's heat to dry her.

There was no way in Hell he would approach her when she was in that state. He waited, his body aching in a way that it hadn't for many long years.

Within a few minutes, she'd dried enough to dress once again.

And he knew he could afford to wait no longer. She'd managed to blow every coherent thought from his brain, and he was aware that he simply was *not* in top form. But this had to be done. The capture had to be made. If it was not, his plan would never carry through. It had to be believable.

Raven was safe, for the time being. However, it would not be long before Cruor regrouped and came after her once again. If Astriel was allowed to come into possession of her, she would be that much easier for the Death Mage to find. After all, he was there, at the elven castle, in the guise of Gray Beard, the Master Mage of the Blue Robes. There would be no safe place in Eidolon for her to hide. She would be as good as dead.

Drake had no choice. He had to get her out of Kriver, away from the Prince, away from Cruor. And the first step in that process was to capture her.

He opened his eyes, settled them once again upon the beautiful creature in the clearing before him, and stood.

Then he stepped out of the shadows.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Sixteen

Elves of all age and stature gathered around the courtyard to watch the two men in armed combat. The few elven children there observed the match with wide luminous eyes and completely rapt attention. No one within the elven kingdom was better at sword play than the two that battled before them now.

The two combatants thrust and parried, dodged and dove, slammed their swords against each other with barely checked fury as tiny trickles of sweat slid down their perfect faces and stained the thin linen of their white shirts.

Astriel released his rage into his movements, slowly, little by little and bit by bit so as to not overwhelm his opponent. As he moved, his shirt front stretched open, revealing four long, thin scars where Raven's magical iron claws had sliced in clean.

For his part, Malveis withstood Astriel's onslaught. He was the captain of the elven guard and the prince's best friend, and the two sparred often. However, today, though he managed to withstand the prince's onslaught, he had only enough time or energy to concentrate on taking the brunt of Astriel's expertise while not completely succumbing to his powerful attack.

After what seemed like an exhausting eternity, Malveis began to weaken. The anger behind his master's attacks was wearing him down. He'd never before felt this kind of wrath when sparring with his prince, and his own well trained muscles were, alas, no match for the intensity of that kind of passion.

A few more delirious moments passed and Malveis found himself on the ground, the tip of Astriel's gleaming sword pressed gently but threateningly against the hollow of his throat. Malveis' blood hammered in his ears and he fought not to breathe too heavily, as

the sword's edge was incredibly sharp and was weighted all too dangerously against his flesh.

He peered up at his friend, his gaze caught by the tell-tale marks on the man's broad chest. Then he looked up into Astriel's eyes and found himself locked in their intense blue gaze. His prince was lost in the moment. He appeared, for all the world, a harrowed man hell-bent on destruction, with a very deadly sword in his hand.

"My prince." Malveis said softly, a little unsure, the tiniest amount of beseechment lacing the rims of his words.

"LORD ASTRIEL."

The crowd turned at the deep command and even Astriel was jerked from the darkness of his thoughts. All eyes were averted to the marble balcony that towered above them at the head of the courtyard.

King Oberon stared at his son from where he stood above them all and the silence that stole over the outer gardens was palpable.

A voice in Astriel's mind spoke unhindered, loud and clear.

Do not lose yourself, Astriel. Malveis is your loyal servant. What has come over you?

Prince Astriel tore his gaze away from his father's and looked down at his best friend, who laid perfectly still, his expression unreadable. Astriel sheathed his sword and offered a hand to his friend. Malveis took the outstretched hand without a moment's thought. He came to his feet and, though he wobbled unsteadily for a moment, he was quick to regain his balance and enough strength to stand on his own.

Astriel glanced back up at his father. Oberon had never looked away.

Behind the King, from the shadows of an open veranda, stepped Astriel's sister, Princess Zeta. She approached the railing and gazed down at her brother. Her eyes sparkled with interest, her thin, arched brow shot up inquisitively.

Astriel glared at her. She smiled a slight, entirely wicked smile.

She had won and she knew it.

It was time this ended.

"Accompany me to my sister's study, Malveis. We have some business to attend to."

Astriel clapped his friend on the back and made his way into the castle, Malveis just behind him.

A few moments later, he strode into Zeta's chambers, knowing she would be waiting for him. She glanced up from where she sat upon her fainting couch, idly playing with the long strand of finely cut gems around her slender neck. Her smile was victorious, her cheeks flushed, her violet eyes twinkling with triumph.

Astriel barely afforded her a glance as he said, "The bet is off," and headed directly for her viewing pool.

She threw back her head and laughed, the sound reminiscent of tinkling bells, and then she rose and joined him at the edge of the large bowl. Malveis entered the chamber next and came to stand beside them.

"I had a feeling it would not be long," Zeta teased softly. "After all, she attacked you. I knew the girl had to be special."

Astriel said, "You have no idea."

Again, Zeta's brow rose inquisitively, but Astriel told her nothing further and instead began a simple incantation, waving his hand over the viewing pool. The water's surface shimmered and he lowered his hand, waiting.

The plane of water stilled once again, and nothing appeared in its depths.

Astriel's gaze narrowed.

Zeta's expression of victory vanished, to be replaced with one of shock.

"Try again, my liege." Malveis suggested, his own expression somewhat surprised.

Astriel glanced at each of them in turn and then looked back down at the water. He had a feeling he knew what was going on. It was what he'd dreaded, what he'd known in the back of his mind would happen, even as he'd gone against his every instinct.

He was a fool.

Still, he tried the search spell again.

And again, it failed.

Zeta looked up at her brother. "Who is doing this?"

"Someone immune to elven magic," Astriel answered, his jaw set, his gaze hard. His voice was calm, but each word was laced with menace. He moved away from the pool to stand by Zeta's windows. There, he peered out over the city of Trimontium and the valleys and mountains beyond.

"Malveis, I want you to accompany me on a hunt." He began, speaking slowly and with a calm that utterly belied the emotions that were raging inside of him. Malveis and Zeta had fallen silent behind him, listening intently.

"I know not who, besides a member of Dark Royalty or an elf, would have the power to shield someone from my sight. However, I do know that Drake of Tanith's reputation

precedes him. He is known throughout not only this realm, but several others, including the Dark Realms, as he has been called by the Dark Royalty, on occasion, to run down certain political absentees.” Astriel paused and turned to look at them.

Malveis and Zeta glanced once at each other and then turned to Astriel once again. He continued.

“Drake of Tanith’s prestige, however, is not due, solely, to his innate ability to bring in such taxing and problematical bounty. There are... rumors, if you will, of *other* things which Tanith is known for.”

Malveis’ brow furrowed. “Such as what, my lord?”

Astriel smiled bitterly and began pacing. “Such as the man’s manifested talent for resisting certain types of magic.” He turned and pinned Malveis with another stare. “It isn’t just elven magic which fails against the man. Apparently, *most* magic has little effect on him, if any, and even the Dark Lords of several of Abaddonian’s Circles have allegedly failed in augury and sortilege against the bounty hunter.” He continued to pace, now staring at the floor in front of him, as he spoke. “There is also the matter of Tanith’s indeterminate age. It is one thing for an elf to look younger than his years,” this, said with a slight smile, “however, mortals are not afforded such luxuries. Except, it would seem, in Tanith’s situation. No one knows how old he is, and he is not prone to sharing this information.” Astriel moved to a second window in the room, which looked out over the western lands of Kriver, and afforded a view to the sea. “However, various evidence points to his latency in numerous realms – several thousand years ago.”

Astriel turned to Malveis, a strange, enigmatic look on his handsome face. “Does he appear to you as a two-thousand-year-old mortal would?” he asked.

Malveis shook his head, once. “No, my lord.”

The Prince fell silent for a few moments, and Malveis and Zeta once again glanced at each other. Then Zeta approached her brother.

“Astriel, you hired the Bounty Hunter of Tanith to go after this woman, and now you think he is hiding her from you?”

Astriel smiled. “No.” He moved to a chair opposite Zeta’s couch and leaned back casually. “I know he is. I sensed his interest in her the moment he looked upon her image in my viewing pool.” He eyed his sister, his expression one of dark amusement. “Not that I blame the man.”

Zeta sat down across from him and cocked her head to one side. “There is something about her you aren’t telling us.” She leaned back as well and once again began to finger the gems at her throat. “Isn’t there?”

Astriel smiled a nasty smile. “Much,” he told her, simply.

Malveis came forward then. “I will ready a contingent of men, my lord. We can leave within the hour.”

Astriel did not answer. He simply nodded once, his thoughts dark, his eyes full of sinister promise. Malveis bowed slightly and left the room.

Zeta watched silently as her brother stood, moments later, and left the room as well. As the doors closed behind him, she could not suppress the strange feeling that all of their lives were about to change once and for all.

Raven spun around at the sound of foliage crunching under foot. She thought, at first, that the tall dark figure across the pond was Adonides. But when he stepped further into the clearing and the sunlight fell across his features, she realized her mistake.

“You.”

He stared at her with those molten steel eyes and Raven’s insides churned. “Princess Raven,” he addressed her, adding a slight nod as one did for royalty. She blinked in surprise. Then he cocked his head to one side and studied her openly, from the tops of her wings to the tips of her boots and her body unconsciously reacted, her cheeks growing warm, her legs unsteady. “Or do you go by another name when in this form?”

Again, Raven blinked. How did he know she was a princess? How did he know about her at all? How had he found her?

“Who are you, Tanith? How do you know me and how did you get into my head back there?” she asked as she retreated a step out of sheer instinctual self-preservation.

His eyes moved to her legs as she stepped back from him and a muscle in his jaw ticked. She stilled, not wanting to anger him. She felt like a rabbit caught in a wolf’s gaze.

“I know everything about you,” he said as he pulled his eyes off of her form and turned his back to her. The action surprised her until he put his fingers to his lips and whistled. In a few short moments, the sound of hoof beats could be heard rushing through the forest.

Raven gasped and stumbled back as the tree branches suddenly spread apart and a massive black stallion leapt into the clearing. The sun shimmered off of his jet-black hair

and mane in the same way that it did her wings. His hooves landed on the soft earth, kicking up streams of sand, and the great horse slowed, turned, and trotted to his master.

Raven watched as Tanith whispered something to the animal and the horse actually nodded. Then, as he began to pull several items from the satchel across the horse's back, the bounty hunter turned his attention to Raven once more.

"Are you injured at all?" he asked, eyeing her carefully.

Raven blinked yet again and opened her mouth to ask him what he was talking about. Then she remembered the red-skinned creatures that she'd clawed to get away from as Tanith fought the elf mage.

She shook her head.

Tanith nodded, apparently satisfied, and moved around the horse toward a thick patch of green grass a few feet away. He then began to set the items he'd selected on the ground. Raven watched warily as he unfolded a soft-looking blanket large enough for two to sit comfortably on. He then opened a thin round metal canister to miraculously reveal perfect, ripe strawberries. He opened another and poured something that looked like wine from its depths.

Raven's stomach growled. Tanith looked up. She blushed furiously and took another step back.

"Stop," he said then, his eyes boring into hers. She felt paralyzed beneath the weight of his gaze. Her heart would not stop pounding.

Tanith let out a slow breath through his nose and then motioned for her to sit down. "Please, come and sit. You haven't eaten this morning." He gestured to the items on the blanket and continued to uncover more fresh food. A loaf of bread, a block of cheese,

and, most amazingly, a bowl of hot, steaming soup. The meal had obviously appeared through magical means. None of it logically fit in the small containers he'd originally pulled from his pack.

Raven recalled how the elf's magic had not worked on him. But Tanith was obviously able to use magic of his own.

"Raven, come sit down."

Raven eyed him carefully, her mind spinning, her stomach growling, her legs growing weaker by the second. And then she swallowed a lump that had formed in her throat and ever so slowly made her way to the edge of his blanket.

"It's Winter. I suppose you don't know everything about me, after all."

Now it was his turn to blink. He stared at her for a moment and she wondered what she had said. And then he smiled, and Raven's heart began pounding furiously again.

His teeth were perfect and white and his face, already so handsome, became unbearably so beneath the charm of that perfect smile. She tore her eyes away and tried to concentrate on the situation, the food, anything but his nearness, his eyes, the breadth of his shoulders, the insignia on the leather armor over his chest...

Her eyes returned to his armor and lingered there, taking in the detail. An eye, a hand, and a rope.

She looked up at him questioningly.

And his smile was gone.

She sat down.

He held the canister of strawberries out to her and she hesitated only a moment more before taking them from him.

“Are they poisoned?”

“No.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek and then took a strawberry out of the container by its stem. It was red and ripe and glistened in the shafts of afternoon sunlight. She closed her eyes and took a bite.

It was delicious. The best she had ever had.

She chewed slowly and swallowed, relishing in its sweetness. She took another, consuming it more quickly. And then she took a third and, before biting into it, asked, “Are you going to turn me into the Elf Prince?”

He had been watching her eat, and her skin had been growing warm beneath his gaze. But he looked away then and busied himself with breaking the bread into two pieces. “It’s my job.”

“How much did he pay you, Tanith?”

“It’s Drake.” He answered quickly, and then added, his tone still calm and low, “Does it matter?”

Raven popped a third strawberry into her mouth and chewed it up. Then she reached for the cheese and one of the two pieces of bread. She was starving and this food was delectable. And she might need her strength.

“I suppose not. Is he going to kill me... Drake?”

His head snapped up and his eyes held hers. They looked lighter than they had before, as if the steel within them had melted into mercury and was swirling about. Her limbs felt heavy beneath that gaze, her chest tight, her head dizzy. He shook his head, once, from side to side. “No. He is not going to kill you.”

She sat still, unable to move while he was looking at her so intensely. Then he looked away again and she was able to glance down at her food. After a few silent moments, she asked, “Who was the elf that abducted me?”

He hesitated a moment before answering, his expression one of indecision and some other emotion that she could not place. Then he said, “His name is Cruor.”

Raven sat on the small boulder overlooking the pond as Drake of Tanith re-packed the blanket and the empty containers and placed them in the saddle bags on his horse. Trepidation was a horrible aftertaste to the delicious, if simple meal she’d just eaten. But the bounty hunter had told her everything.

Everything.

And now fear built up within her gut and her nerve endings were beginning to itch with her need to run away, to fight, to prevent herself from being taken into a situation that might very well cost her her life. But every time she chanced a glance at the bounty hunter, it was to find him looking her way. Watching her.

She even had the insane notion that, should she take to the skies and try to fly away, he would sprout wings of his own and fly right after her. She shook her head. She knew, in her heart, that she could not escape from Tanith. It was something about who he was. The only way she would leave him was if he let her go.

Drake finished securing the bags and she heard him walk across the clearing toward her.

She'd changed back into Raven's form long ago, feeling the need, in the midst of all that Drake had told her, to have the more familiar body surrounding her soul. But now, without Winter's giant wings and strong physique, she felt so small in the shadow of the tall man in black leather standing so still beside her.

She would not look up at him. She stared into the water, wondering if there was any magic in the world that would help her escape him at that moment.

"If you take me to the castle, Gray Beard will find me there. He will kill me and take my soul," she said, her head still down.

Drake said nothing beside her. Finally, she looked up at him. And jumped to her feet.

He was staring at her intently and in one gloved fist, he held a rope. It was a light purple color and was constructed of some strange silken fiber that reflected the light at odd angles. It looked soft but it also looked very strong and Raven was willing to bet he planned on using it on her.

"Don't do this, Tanith. It isn't worth whatever he is giving you. Can't you see that?"

"It's what I do, Princess. Please don't make this any harder than it has to be."

Raven watched him as various emotions chased each other across his handsome face. She searched her brain for something, anything, she could say that would make him change his mind.

"Drake, when Cruor kills me, he'll kill you too. He'll kill everyone. You said so yourself."

When he looked up again, he gazed at her through the tops of his eyes and the look was so determined that it was positively terrifying. She hadn't been able to reach him. He was taking her in no matter what.

Raven took a step back, simultaneously speaking the words to a spell that Adonides had used the day before.

Drake swore under his breath and before Raven knew what he was doing, he'd reached out and grabbed her, his movements so fast they were an indiscernible blur of motion. He spun her around and pulled her back against his chest, bringing her arms together behind her as he did so. In less than a few seconds, he had the rope around her wrists and his gloved hand over her mouth.

Her breaths came quick and shallow, her eyes teared up and she fought not to allow the whimper of terror she felt inside to rise within her throat.

She felt his breath at her ear and then heard his voice, low and menacing.

"Don't fight me, Princess. You won't win."

He was lifting her then, carrying her across the clearing to his horse. He held her fast against his own body, preventing her from struggling in any manner.

"Let her go, Tanith."

Drake stilled.

Raven felt him tense, listening. She recognized the voice instantly.

Adonides... *Finally!*

Grolsch pulled his horse to a stop several hundred yards from the opening of the clearing where Drake had told him he and Raven would be. He dismounted and tied the stallion's reigns to a thick branch. Then he pulled a small silk-wrapped bundle from the inside pocket of his brown leather armor and proceeded to unwrap it.

A single arrowhead, forged of pitch-black metal and tipped in what appeared to be red gold, sat in the palm of his gloved hand. He gazed down at it. A symbol etched into one side of the small straight broad head depicted nine concentric circles, the inner-most circle plated blood-red.

Grolsch took a deep breath and pulled a long straight arrow shaft from his quiver. He placed the arrowhead to the tip of the shaft and, after a moment's hesitation, spoke a single arcane word.

The arrowhead began to heat up in his hands. He gritted his teeth and held it and the shaft steady. It burned, even through the leather protection of his gloves. There was a soft cracking sound and the arrowhead molded to the tip of the shaft, merging tightly.

Symbols then began to appear in red along the tapered cedar. Long lines of archaic text, deep crimson as blood, wrote themselves across the shaft until there was no more space.

Then the arrowhead cooled and Grolsch stared down at the weapon.

It was more deadly than most people could imagine.

“Just try not to kill me with it, Grolsch. Let’s aim for severely injured and call it good...”

Grolsch swallowed. His damned hand was shaking. There was no doubt in his mind that his friend had pretty much lost his sanity over this woman.

“She’d better be worth it,” he growled under his breath and then pulled his bow off of his shoulder and headed toward the pond.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Seventeen

“I said, let her go.”

“I heard you the first time,” Drake said calmly, maintaining his tight grip. Inwardly, he swore. His shielding spell must have worn off. This was not going at all as planned. Slowly, he set Raven down in front of him and grabbed hold of one of her arms, just above the wrist.

As he’d expected, Raven instantly tried to pull away from him. He held her fast and turned to face the winged devil across the clearing.

Adonides came forward, his golden eyes blazing, his white fangs bared. Drake knew the Abaddonian well. He’d dealt with him before. Of course, those had been far different circumstances.

“Adonides, how is your sister these days?”

The devil’s gaze narrowed and his wings twitched. He took a step forward, but just then, the trees parted once again and out stepped the ork.

Drake groaned inwardly.

Grolsch’s eyes widened. Drake’s gaze flitted from the ork’s face to the bow in his hands, and the arrow that was so dangerously nocked and held between two gloved fingers.

Adonides turned and peered at the ork. Then looked at Drake.

No one spoke.

And then, in a sudden explosion of movement, Grolsch lifted the bow and aimed at the winged devil, releasing the arrow into the air. At the same time, Adonides leapt and beat his wings once hard, rising several feet off of the ground. Drake shoved Raven to the

sand a few feet away and dove for the arrow he knew was going to miss Adonides by several inches.

But Adonides beat him to it, bringing his wings together quickly and falling fast enough to pluck the arrow directly from the air as it tried to sail past him. Drake saw the Abaddonian begin to spin in the air and he dropped and rolled, moving just out of the devil's reach as Adonides attempted to whirl around and plunge the arrow into Drake's chest.

Drake came up out of the roll facing the devil and Adonides landed softly, the arrow in one hand, a look of inequitable hatred on his handsome face.

"You always manage to be touching women you have no business touching, Tanith. Why is that?"

Drake shrugged. "Bad upbringing."

Adonides rushed forward. Drake braced himself for the impact. At the same time, over the devil's shoulder, he could see Grolsch racing toward Raven. He had no further time to watch or ponder, though, as Adonides slammed into him, knocking him backward.

Immediately, Drake's fingers circled Adonides's wrist, keeping the arrow at arm's length. It was precariously close to his neck as the two dropped to the ground and rolled, one on top of the other.

"Let me go!" Raven shouted.

Drake heard Raven's shout and knew that Grolsch was getting her out of the way. They stopped rolling, Adonides sitting on his waist, and Drake had to use both hands to

keep the devil from plunging the deadly arrow downward. They remained nearly motionless, each fighting against the strength of the other.

"Tanith, watch out!" Grolsch called out to his friend as he swung his sword in a wide arc, barely missing the dark skinned devil as Adonides dodged to the side and rolled out of the way, releasing Tanith as he did so.

Drake jumped to his feet in time to watch Adonides swat Grolsch away from him with a wave and a rush of cold, infernal power. Grolsch and his sword went flying across the clearing to land and roll to a stop.

Once more, Drake and the Abbadonian faced off.

A sound from his left drew Drake's attention. He glanced in Raven's direction. His eyes widened. Grolsch had tied her, in a sitting position, to a low-lying branch on a nearby tree. But at the moment, the silk rope he'd used was unwinding itself as Raven's lips moved in archaic rhythm. Her eyes were shut tight in deep concentration.

He was impressed.

She was learning to use her powers much more quickly than he would have thought possible. He couldn't blame her for trying everything she could to get away but her defiance right now was a distraction he did not need.

It was unfortunate that their first meeting had to be made under such false pretenses.

"Tanith!" Another warning from his ork friend.

But it was too late. In that instant, Adonides had managed to move with inhuman speed, feinting an attack with the claws of his left hand. Drake attempted to dodge the fake attack as Adonides plunged the arrow in his right hand downward, through the bounty hunter's black leather armor, and into his chest.

Raven screamed as the last of the ropes fell away from her and she lunged towards them.

Grolsch bellowed in anger and rushed forward as well.

Adonides viciously withdrew the arrow, drawing a grunt of horrible pain from Drake as he rolled to his side. In the next instant, Adonides was grabbing Raven by the upper arm and swinging her away from Tanith.

Grolsch watched as the woman struggled in the devil's grip and, though the scene made no sense, he had no time to ponder it further. His friend was injured. The arrow had struck true.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

Just as he reached his fallen companion, the winged devil and the woman disappeared in a cloud of steam and blue-white light.

Grolsch knelt beside Drake. "Tell me he didn't get your heart."

"He didn't get my heart." Drake gasped, his voice weak, his face drawn in pain.

"Close enough, it seems." Grolsch pulled a small vial of clear, iridescent liquid from a leather pouch on his belt. He brought the vial to the bounty hunter's lips.

"We'll take it from here, ork."

Grolsch whipped his head around to face the source of the low voice.

The Prince of the Elves stood several yards away, a small contingent of elven guards and soldiers flanking him on either side. Behind them stood six horses, all of them white. He hadn't heard anything approach.

The elves were quiet that way.

The Prince was dressed in dark hunting garb and held a shining long sword in one gloved fist.

Grolsch was not a fool. Prince Astriel's skill with a sword was legendary. He glanced down at his friend and back up at the elf.

Astriel's lips curled into a sneer of contempt. He spoke a single word of magic. The vial in Grolsch's hands shattered, its contents evaporating instantly.

"Great..." Drake muttered just before slipping into unconsciousness.

Grolsch's greenish pallor paled visibly. He gently set Drake's head down and slowly stood, placing himself almost symbolically between his fallen companion and the half-dozen elves across the clearing.

Astriel's gaze narrowed. He flung his hand out as if swatting a fly and Grolsch was picked up and thrown back several yards. He flew directly into a tree trunk and hit it with a loud thud. The base of his skull slammed against the rough bark and the wind was knocked from his lungs. His vision receded. His ears rang. He slunk to the ground and sat still for several seconds, the world tilting around him.

Through blurred vision, he watched the elf prince and his men come forward. Astriel's attention was turned to the unconscious man on the ground. His blue eyes sparked with untold emotion. He knelt beside Drake and slowly moved one gloved hand, palm down, over the wound in the man's chest.

"He's alive. Take him."

He stood and two elves came forward and lifted Drake between them. They moved him to one of the horses and draped him over its back. One of the elven soldiers mounted up behind him.

Astriel moved to his snow-white steed and ran his hand lovingly, gently over the horse's long shimmering mane. The horse nodded its large head once and nudged the prince.

Without looking at Grolsch, the Prince then addressed him, his voice a calm and very deadly warning.

“Get the hell out of my kingdom, ork.”

At that, he mounted up, as did the others, and the group of elves disappeared, taking Drake of Tanith with them.

Adonides held Raven's arm tightly as they reappeared behind a copse of trees beside a small trail just outside of a bustling town. She had been struggling in his grasp, apparently trying to get to Tanith. When they were both fully solidified, he spun her around and held her by her upper arms and then gave her one good, hard shake.

She stopped fighting. Her face was pale, her eyes very large in her perfect face. Her full, red lips were quivering.

“What has gotten into you?”

She gazed up at him and did not answer right away.

He shook his head slowly, admonishingly. “What is going through your head that you could possibly feel sorry for the bounty hunter?” He had not released her. She swallowed and he could feel her try to pull away, but he held her fast.

“Raven, he was paid by the Prince to bring you in, you know that, don't you?”

She gritted her teeth then and yanked her body away from him. He let her go.

“Yes!” she answered, her teeth bared. “Yes, I know!” She continued as she turned away from him. “Tanith told me everything.” She hugged herself and, at that moment, appeared so small and helpless that Adonides’s protective instinct reared its head inside of him.

He circled around her and gazed down at her.

She did not look up. He took a deep breath and sighed. He held the arrow out in front of him, low enough that she could see it. Drake’s blood still stained its wicked tip. “Do you see the symbol on the point?” He paused, allowing her eyes to find the etched markings. “This arrow is meant to kill our kind, your Highness. You, me. Abaddonians.”

There was a moment of silence and stillness. He continued. “The ork was obviously a friend of the bounty hunter’s, and this was in his possession. He sure as hell wasn’t counting on me showing up, and if he’d meant to kill you, he would have done so while Tanith and I were fighting. Which meant he was going to use it on his friend. The set up was staged.”

He fell silent and waited for comprehension to set in. He knew when it had because she looked up, eyes wide with understanding.

Adonides nodded, slowly.

“He wasn’t going to turn me in.” She spoke softly, slowly. “He was going to let the ork take me from him and then tell the prince that he’d been attacked... with this arrow.” Her beautiful eyes widened even further, her brow furrowed. “Which means he knew it would work on him.”

“An untruth is far more believable when accompanied by a grave wound.” Adonides finished the line of reasoning. “Tanith has not told you everything, after all. In fact, I suspect he told you next to nothing about himself. Am I right?”

She didn’t answer. He hadn’t expected her to.

“The bounty hunter is more than he appears to be. At the very least, he is one of us.” She remained silent but he could tell a plethora of thoughts chased each other through her brain. He would give just about anything at that moment to be able to hear them. But it was not something he was capable of doing with her. He knew. He’d already tried. She could call out to him in her mind, but he could not communicate with her.

Raven bit her lip and then pulled her gaze away from his once again. “What does it matter? He’s probably dying anyhow. I’m sure that makes you happy.”

Adonides’s gaze narrowed. There was only one thing he could think of at that moment that would please him more than knowing Drake of Tanith was dead. His blood burned at the thought of it as he peered down at her, with her glorious waterfall of jet-black hair, her perfect, lithe body, her innocent, stolen soul.

His body tensed. “We have a history, I admit. But it is unimportant.” He moved away from her then, needing to put space between them. As he did so, he hurriedly erected a shielding spell over their location, knowing it would not be long before someone else began searching for her. When the shield was up, he felt the first pang of his weakening hunger, a hiccup-like lapse in his power, and knew that the spell would not last long unless he soon fed.

Which made Raven’s nearness all the more unbearable.

Adonides forcefully pushed certain thoughts from his brain and reached into the pocket beneath his black shirt to pull out the Ring of Halcyon.

Then he turned to face Raven. “Give me your hand.”

She looked up at him. To her credit, she didn’t ask why. Adonides was pleased she knew enough to trust that he would not hurt her. She held out her right hand and he gently took it in his.

As she watched, he slowly slipped the shining black ring on her middle finger.

She gasped as its magic suddenly raced through her and he prepared to catch her should she fall. He’d heard of the ring’s potency and was unsure of how it would affect her.

But she did not fall. Instead, her eyes grew wide and she took a step back. She gazed down at the ring on her finger as it began to pulse, a blue-black light that grew and dimmed in time with her heartbeat.

“What is it?”

“A gift from your father.”

Drake’s body hurt. It burned, it ached, the muscles were stretched taut and on fire. His head swam and his eyelids were very heavy, but he forced them open and then tried not to retch as the blurry world spun before his eyes.

He snapped them shut again and groaned low in his throat. Even through the haze of pain, he knew that he wasn’t alone. He could feel the elf there, close by, sense his power

and the heat of his barely checked fury like roiling waves of sinister magic, rushing over his fevered skin, even hotter than the poison that now burned through his veins.

“Comfortable?”

Drake would have laughed, had he been able to find enough breath. His arms and legs were pulled to their limits, clamped down with manacles of pure silver, heavy and cold. They’d already begun to bite into his skin. The arrow had done its damage, its magic coursing through his body like toxic venom, eating him up from the core.

There had been times in his long life when he’d been less comfortable than he was now. But not many.

Again, slowly and gingerly, he opened his eyes. His surroundings gradually cleared.

Astriel stood several feet away. He was alone and unarmed. He was leaning casually against a rack of weapons. No... Not weapons, he realized. Tools. Sharp and twisted.

Drake closed his eyes again, not at all looking forward to what was sure to come.

“Where is she?” His tone was calm, utterly belying the rage Drake knew was just beneath the surface.

“I honestly don’t know,” Drake answered, impressed at himself that he’d been able to string several coherent words together in this state. He tried a few more. “Why don’t you cast a spell?” He coughed then, and tasted blood.

Astriel pushed off of the rack of torture devices and sighed. “Don’t think I haven’t tried.” The elf turned to look over his shoulder at the myriad of morbid implements laid out on the shelf behind him.

“Standard procedure when we need information from a mortal would be to leave the individual alone with the Blue Robes for a few hours until the knowledge was obtained.”

He said as he perused the instruments. “However, seeing as how you’re neither mortal nor subject to elven magic...”

This time, Drake did laugh. It sent him into a coughing fit that left him barely able to breathe. He could feel Astriel watching him intently.

“I would like only one thing more than to run you through and be done with it right here and now, Tanith,” Astriel said, his boots echoing loudly on the blood-stained floor as he slowly moved to stand directly in front of the bounty hunter. “You’re lucky I want it bad enough to let you live.”

Drake couldn’t blame him.

“Where is she?”

“I told you,” Drake said again, the arrow’s vicious magic filling him with more and more exhaustion and pain. “I don’t know. Adonides took her. Cruor will probably find her next.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Drake tried not to smile as he said, “Because he’s right under your nose you fool. He’s the Master Mage of the Blue Robes, the one you call Gray Beard.”

He began to cough again and, this time, blood trickled from the corner of his mouth when he was finished. He closed his eyes against the pain that suddenly gripped his chest. He felt as if his lungs were being squeezed in an iron-clawed fist.

The Prince was quiet.

Drake knew that he was dying. Adonides had managed to get close enough, deep enough, with the arrow that its magic would soon stop his heart. Somewhere, in the back

of his mind, he wondered what his father would do when he learned that his only son was dead. Drake almost smiled at the thought of depriving him of his precious heir.

And then he felt his heart skip. *Once...twice*. In his mind's eye, he pictured Raven. Her large, dark eyes, her smooth, fair skin... *A third time...* Her lips, full and the color of strawberries... *Four...*

The beating slowed and Drake's extremities went numb.

And then he felt something on his lips. Cool, like glass.

It was glass. Then a liquid slid past his lips and over his tongue. It tingled and soothed. He swallowed.

His heart sped up. His back arched. His stomach began to warm, and then to burn like fire. The fire spread from his midsection outward, tracing trails of scorching heat through his veins, across muscle and bone, to the tips of his fingers and toes. He cried out.

Eventually, Drake relaxed against his restraints, his body covered in sweat, his breathing ragged.

He was not going to die.

"No, Tanith. It seems you'll live."

Drake opened his eyes and gazed down at Astriel. Molten silver met ice blue and held.

"Now then," the Prince continued. "I have a job for you."

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Eighteen

Raven stared at the ring that pulsed on her middle finger. If it were possible, she would swear it felt both warm and cool upon her flesh. When she gazed at it, she was reminded of refreshing stream water on a hot summer's day and of a warm hearth fire in the dead of winter. It was comforting, and it fit as if it belonged on her finger alone.

She pulled her eyes from it and glanced up at Adonides. He was staring at her patiently.

"What does it do?" she asked then and turned her attention back to the ring.

"It guides you. Teaches you. I will show you how to use it shortly but first I thought you would like to see the ocean."

"The ocean? But Trimontium is no where near the ocean"

"That's true, however we are no longer in Trimontium."

"Where are we then?"

"Bridgeport. Isca is a half-day's ride from here."

Isca was a sea port a full week away, by horse or carriage, from the capital city of Trimontium. She and her brother had been planning on traveling to Isca. They'd known that Trimontium was no longer safe for them and that Isca was the next largest town. However, they had been planning on a month-long trip.

"You transported us half-way across Kriver?"

"Yes. You'll be able to do the same with practice."

Raven shook her head. "I can't even imagine such a thing. Right now, I can barely manage to untie a rope using my magic."

Adonides placed a warm hand at her lower back. "Give yourself time."

They approached the gates of the large town and, because neither of them were openly carrying weapons, the guards let them pass without pause. Raven could feel their open stares ogling her as she passed between them. She knew her kind of beauty was different, perhaps exotic, but she wondered whether she would ever grow used to that kind of blatant attention from men.

“Just give me the word and I’ll roast them for supper,” Adonides whispered beside her. She glanced up, but the smile on his face made her relax. He was teasing. However, there *was* that curious flash of promise in his eyes.

“Access to the shore is at the end of this street here,” he told her as he steered her down a busy street filled with vendors. Raven’s eyes roamed over the carts and their wares, taking in the woven rugs, the colorful tunics, and the eccentric jewelry of all makes, shapes and sizes.

“Do you see anything you like?”

Raven turned to Adonides. He’d been watching her closely. She smiled and shook her head. “At the moment, I don’t even own a house. I would have no where to put anything I purchased.” She laughed then. “I also have no money.”

Adonides’s face grew serious, his green eyes flashing. “You need only ask, and you can have anything you desire, my lady. Money is not an issue.”

Raven decided to let the subject drop, as, for some reason, it left her feeling slightly embarrassed. Instead, she turned her attention to the large docks that were now coming into view as they neared the end of the street. Raven was getting excited for she had never seen the ocean before.

As they approached the dock district, Adonides placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her to a halt. “Wait. Stop and listen.”

Raven stilled.

“Do you hear that?”

She listened. In the distance, she could hear a roaring sound. It was like hard-falling rain on a thatch roof during a summer’s storm. It grew louder and then softer and then louder again. It ebbed and receded. She nodded. “Yes. What is it?”

“The shore.” He took her gently by the arm and weaved her in between dock workers and traders as the men and women completed their business for the day and headed toward their homes.

They rounded a bend to face the open dock. Two large ships obscured the view to the sea, and their planks were lowered as merchants slowly emptied their cargo, two by two, onto the waiting docks.

Raven stared at the ships. She’d heard stories about them when she was little. But she’d never seen actually seen one before. She stood there in awe, her mouth open, her eyes sparkling. They were beautiful.

“Amazing,” she whispered.

“Aye. That’s just what we was thinkin’, lass.”

Raven’s attention snapped to and she glanced away from the giant ships to notice that half a dozen men had stopped what they were doing and were now in the process of circling and surrounding her and Adonides.

Adonides pulled her closer to him as four of the rogues stepped out in front of them, the other two breaking away to move around behind.

Raven's pulse sped up painfully and all that she'd eaten only moments before threatened to rise to the occasion.

"My, my. What 'ave we 'ere?" one of them asked, his eyes raking over Raven's tall, lithe form. He grinned in a grotesque visage that proudly displayed his lack of dental hygiene. Raven could not suppress the groan that escaped her constricted throat and she unconsciously scooted even closer to Adonides.

"How did a man like you manage to snag such a delectable little morsel, eh?" another asked Adonides, his eyes glittering frantically. For his part, Adonides simply leveled him with a calm and somewhat chilling gaze.

"I believe it only fair to give you some kind of warning before she kills you," Adonides said. His voice steady and low.

The men paused in their tracks and glanced at one another. That apparently hadn't been what they were expecting to hear. The one who had just spoken threw back his head and laughed outright, the sound grating across Raven's nerves like sandpaper.

Another smiled and shook his head. "What's she gonna do, eh? Pleasure us all to death?"

At that, the others roared with laughter.

Raven glanced at Adonides. He did not look at her. Instead, his hand trailed over her arm to her hand, where his finger tapped against the shining black ring she wore.

Raven closed her eyes. He wanted her to use her power.

Right now.

To save them.

But she didn't even know what the ring was supposed to do!

She heard something crunch under a boot behind them and she spun around, her wrist flying free of Adonides's grasp. The two men who had circled behind them were a mere yard away. She gasped and took a stumbling step back.

In her peripheral vision, she could see Adonides face off against another two of the rogues, turning his back to her as he did so.

At that moment, someone grabbed Raven's shoulder from behind. In less than a second flat, all reason and logical sense of fear flew, like a colorful swarm of insane butterflies, out the windows of her complicated mind. She spun around, a flurry of jet black hair and building electricity, and impulsively lashed out with the torrent of emotions that had been building within her over the past week.

The man who had accosted her let out a shriek of surprise when she faced him with solid black eyes, from corner to corner. But he could not step away from her as he suddenly found his feet were held fast in the mud of the street. He glanced down, confused, to see that the sludge had solidified – *frozen* – and that he was shin-deep in petrified muck. The rime on the street was spreading quickly, and the chill was mercilessly climbing up his legs. He gasped and swallowed and stared back up at Raven. She mercilessly narrowed her iniquitous black gaze and heard him whimper softly.

The man before her was young. No older than she was. But his body was too lean, his eyes too shaded, his mouth set in a line a little too cruel, a little too depraved. She looked into his bloodshot blue eyes and she wondered, for half a second, where his soul would go when he died.

And then she struck.

Her fingers had grown into iron claws. She drew back and then plunged them into his midsection, burying them fist-deep.

In her mind, she heard the sound of chanting.

Sauronalastra Ernoscolaram Cruernal Diemon...

They were silent, unspoken words pulled from the bowels of every realm, ancient and infernal, primordial in their power. They echoed, without thought, against the chambers of her consciousness, feeding a dark and dangerous power into her physical form.

The rest of the men surrounding them had ceased in their advance, and were now watching the raven-haired beauty with expressions of abject horror and disbelief.

Totolemanti saurona ruwimon Cruernal Diemon...

As Raven calmly pulled her long claws from the dying man's bloody abdomen and let him drop to the frozen ground, the sky began to snow. The few remaining people on the boardwalks on either side of the street stopped what they were doing and gazed upward.

The ring pulsed hot, heavy and evil on her finger.

Necrozium Farranolsa Umberantis Sauronalastra...

Raven's body began to glow. It was an eerie luminescence that grew and expanded, filling a perimeter around her with a light that was nothing less than a portent to death. She blazed with a power that now knew life, had been given conception.

She smiled.

Release.

There was a splitting intensity, strength torn from the fabric of existence, and Raven arched her back as manifested cold energy arced out from her body and coursed through the charged air, striking each of the six men who'd confronted them, driving relentlessly through their chests.

Wearing grotesque expressions of silent and painful protest, the half-dozen thugs rose several feet from the ground, helplessly attached to their chords of writhing cold, their bodies freezing from the inside out. Ice crystals formed upon their clothes, spreading across the flesh of their exposed hands and necks. No sound emitted from their frozen throats, but abject terror registered openly in their eyes.

Thunder crashed around them, as the clouds grew darker and the temperature dropped. Gigantic intricate flakes fell, millions at a time, to the frozen earth and stuck, building and piling, until the stunned residents of Bridgeport found themselves standing in quickly cumulating drifts of snow.

As the people watched the beautiful woman with the black hair and black eyes work a horrible magic upon the town and its residents, Adonides slowly smiled.

When Raven finally dropped her now dead, gelid victims to the frozen, snow-piled ground, Adonides moved forward, coming to stand silently at her side.

The thunder slowed and quieted. The clouds began to lighten, and the heavy snow fall settled into occasional flurries. Raven closed her eyes, as the furious intensity of her magic began to wane, leaving her unsteady on her long legs. She raised her hands to cover her face, and her cold iron claws sunk back into the flesh from which they had sprouted. The skin on her cheeks and forehead was hot where it pressed against her

palms, and she realized she'd been swooning when Adonides's arms suddenly came about her for support.

She moved her hands and gazed up at him. Her eyes were back to normal, but the look of fear within their dark depths was fierce.

“What have I done, Adonides?”

“What you had to do.”

She fell then, into a waiting darkness, having been utterly and completely drained, both physically and magically. Her body closed its eyes and slept.

Adonides lifted her easily into his arms and then, before all of the people who stood aghast, watching, he allowed his form to alter, once again becoming a tall, black, winged devil.

His yellow gold eyes peered down at the sleeping woman in his arms. She was beautiful beyond compare. He smiled a fang-toothed smile. All was going precisely as planned. The men she'd killed sold their souls to Malphas long ago. Raven had delivered them to her father, using her own immense power. The ring was doing its job most effectively.

But best of all, when she awoke, she would need to feed.

And he would be there to help her.

Adonides chuckled softly as he wrapped his wings around them both and drew in his power. Then he and his beautiful charge vanished from the streets of Bridgeport.

“I'm sorry, my lord. She is still being shielded from our sight.”

“I know.”

Cruor paced the large dark chamber, the firelight from the torches along the wall casting strange shadows across his handsome face. His blue eyes burned with untold emotion. His robes had been cast aside for black leather breeches and a loose black shirt. His long black hair was tied back from his face and black riding gloves covered his hands. His boots echoed loudly as he strode slowly back and forth through the room, his thoughts dark and scheming.

“Keep the spell open until her protector’s strength subsides. No shield can last forever. The moment it drops, inform me of her location.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Nineteen

Drake rubbed his wrists where the silver restraints had bit and cut into his skin. He could feel the prince watching him from across the room, along with Malveis, the captain of the elven guard, and the elven princess, Zeta.

Drake glanced up, met each of their gazes, and then sat back in the tall wooden chair. He looked around the room. There was only one entrance, a single door, and there were no windows. The room's furniture consisted of a round table, six chairs, and a viewing pool.

The four of them were alone, but Drake knew two guards waited just outside the door, and two more were within ear-shot down the corridor.

Astriel came forward from where he'd been leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. He moved to the table and slowly waved his hand over its surface, palm-down. A map gradually appeared on the surface of the table.

"As I told you before, Drake. Your task is to go after the Corrigan Dagger, find it, take it, and use it to kill Gray Beard before he kills Raven." He looked down at the map and pointed at a small light that marked a location at the center of the Draca Desert. "The Corrigan is kept here in an iron repository beneath Draca's Tomb."

"Have you ever ventured into the Draca Desert, Tanith?" asked Malveis, his voice low, his eyes boring into the bounty hunter.

Drake glanced up and met the captain's gaze, his smile slow, slight, and calm. He couldn't help but be reminded that only hours ago, he'd mentioned the very same desert to Grolsch, for a very different reason. They stared at one another, neither of them speaking.

"I suspect he has been a lot of places, captain," said Zeta, her violet eyes watching Drake in a much different manner. Drake turned his gaze upon her, and his silver eyes flashed. She smiled.

"The tomb consists of various layers, all of which are guarded," Astriel continued, as if the other three had not spoken. "Our ancestors were known to use traps, as well as magic and more mundane deterrents such as monsters."

"Remind me again why you are so certain this dagger will kill Curor," Drake said.

Astriel looked up at the bounty hunter. "The Corrigan Dagger was forged eons ago from the purest iron and fortified with ancient magic that ensured death to any pierced with its blade. Due to its deadly nature, the elves of old had ordered the dagger hidden away, in a cave lined with iron ore, where no elf would ever be able to venture. As you know, iron is caustic to our people." His hand unconsciously strayed to his chest, where, through his royal vestments, he felt the four risen claw marks left behind by Raven's iron talons. "The cave was also reinforced with traps and wards of elven magic which fortunately for you, Tanith, you are able to withstand."

The thought of the cave being enchanted with elven magic did not bother Drake in the slightest, however the particular kind of magic the dagger held made him uneasy as he was more than familiar with it. It was the same idea behind the Arrow of Astaroth, the arrow that had pierced much too close to his heart and had nearly cost him his life.

The Corrigan Dagger was meant to kill elves.

The Arrow of Astaroth was meant to kill devils.

Both were impliments of death, forged with a particular race in mind. And that made him uncomfortable. Magic borne of such determined purpose was not to be taken lightly.

However, he would be dead if it were not for the elves and the healing their prince had afforded him.

In the end, he had little choice but to accept the Prince's challenge and go after the dagger.

Astriel waved his hand once more over the table. "This is what you will be looking for." The table's surface shimmered and changed to reveal an image of a large dagger, its blade bisected into two wicked points, its grip wrapped in what appeared to be snow white leather. Symbols were etched into the blood grooves along each point and as the image turned slowly this way and that, the symbols glinted gold beneath some unseen light. "Its enchantment has carried through time immemorial." He paused, his eyes burning a cold blue fire. "It would kill any normal elf."

Drake held his gaze, watching the Prince with the same intensity that the elf used upon him. Astriel need not bother to expand upon the meaning of his words. Cruor was no ordinary elf. He was the Death Mage. Whether the dagger worked on him or not would remain to be seen.

Drake rose from his seat. As he did so, Malveis moved to the door, opened it, and spoke softly to the elven guards outside. Almost immediately, one of them entered the room, carrying Drake's confiscated weapon.

Drake moved around the table and took it, placing the long sword in its sheath across his back. Then he turned back to Astriel.

The Prince strode slowly toward him until he was a mere foot away. "Don't be late, Tanith."

They eyed one another.

“And remember our deal.”

“I gave you my word, *your Highness*,” Drake said, his silver eyes flashing. “It’s as good as done.” Then he turned and followed Malveis to the door. There, he stopped and faced Astriel once more.

“Keep her safe.”

Astriel smiled. “I intend to.”

Loki stared at the head acolyte for a moment. *Haledon’s champion?* Loki’s mind fairly spun at the thought. He blinked, almost dizzy, and then, he squared his shoulders and took a deep confident breath. *All right. If Haledon wants me as his champion, then he’s got me.*

He motioned for the priests just inside the doorway to come all the way in. They moved slowly toward him, as did Maelix. “Listen carefully, everyone. Cruor has returned. He is searching for the Chosen Soul - my sister - and if he finds her and kills her, all life as we know it will end. We know that Cruor is Gray Beard, the Blue Robe master mage at Eidolon. And we know that he has been leading the Omega Order for more than a thousand years.” He paused to seek out Maelix amongst the crowd of priests. “Maelix, we have to cast another search spell. This time, we’ll do it together. With our combined strength and magical energy, we may be able to locate either Raven, despite her shielding, or Cruor, despite his.”

Either way, Loki knew the Death Mage and his sister would wind up in the same place soon enough.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Twenty

Raven came awake slowly at first. She wondered what morning it was and what she had done the night before that left her so wasted. She moved her legs. They felt heavy and slightly numb, as if she were suspended in cold water.

“Raven,” a voice greeted. It was a deep voice, soft and gentle. She opened her eyes.

And remembered everything.

She sat upright with a jolt and found Adonides’s arms around her waist, steadying her, slowing her down. Her breath came hard and fast. She peered down at the ring on her finger and felt a scream well up in her throat.

She’d killed six men, no older than boys. She’d murdered them. All of them.

With *magic*.

The scream escaped. It was a wail of rage and terror. She fought off Adonides’s grip as she tried to rise from the grass. She was numb with shock and stumbled slightly as she stood.

“Shh! Raven, calm down. Listen to me, please.” He stood beside her, his massive form towering over her quaking body. She stared up at him with wild eyes and then glanced down at the black ring on her right middle finger. She reached for it with her other hand, and he immediately caught her, stilling her action. She pulled away from him, desperate now to get it off, and he came forward, catching both of her wrists in order to hold her fast.

“Let me go!” She could only see the cold lightning and their twisted, dying faces, as she fried and froze the young men in the middle of the street. It was the ring’s fault. Her father’s *gift*. Its banded weight witlessly made her want to chop the appendage off.

“No!” he answered, her fight bringing the predator in him to the fore. “Settle down. Listen to me, Raven, and stop struggling! You’re weak and you’re not thinking straight-”

“You’re evil, Adonides.”

She stopped fighting and looked him in the eyes. His golden eyes burned an eerie, heated yellow, but she held his gaze, refusing to back down. She knew what he had done. She’d figured it out. It had all been part of some twisted, malicious plan. He’d tricked her into taking the ring, into using her magic to kill those men.

Into becoming like her father.

And she hated him for it.

“I said let me go.” Her fangs extended as anger fueled her courage.

Adonides’s gaze narrowed. His own fangs grew and a growl rose from deep in his throat. He slowly shook his head, his face a mere few inches from her own. He held her wrists in his hands and used his leverage to pull her even closer. He then trapped her arms behind her back and placed both of her wrists into one of his hands as the other came up to grab a handful of hair at the back of her head.

“Yes, I’m evil. I am an Abaddonian. Did you ever really think differently?” His hot breath caressing her lips as she pulled against his strength with all her might. He was right. She was weak. She could feel it, not only physically, but elsewhere. It was as if some deep reservoir within herself had been drained, emptied.

She shook with fear and fury in his grasp. He'd tricked her. Used her. He was pulling her strings like a puppet, had been all along. What had she been thinking to trust him? He was her father's...

"Let. Me. Go!" she screamed in his face, as she willed her body into its devil form. As her skin darkened, and then lightened again, she cried out in frustration, feeling the change slip from her grasp. She simply had no strength left, no magic. Nothing.

Adonides laughed softly, his yellow eyes flashing, all pretense of gentleness gone from his handsome, horrible visage.

"You have no defenses, Raven. You have no means of escape. Tell me, Princess, what are you going to do now?" His voice had become a low rumble, a deep dark and demonic timbre that quickened her pulse and sent the blood pounding through her eardrums. She shivered, truly despising the devil who had pretended to help her, to teach her and guide her. He'd turned her into a killer.

"She's going to come with me."

Adonides and Raven both turned toward the voice.

Cruor stood alone, dressed in garb of shadow, his ice blue eyes glittering in the moonlight, his scar stark and severe against the otherwise perfect lines of his handsome face. His hands were at his sides, his stance non-confrontational.

He looked at Raven and smiled.

Raven's eyes widened. Real terror rippled through her. Whereas Adonides threatened her soul esoterically, Cruor wanted to eat it. He wanted her dead, and as things appeared at the moment, Raven didn't see any way of escaping him.

"Let her go, Adonides. She's through playing with you. She and I have plans."

“Like hell,” Adonides growled at the Death Mage. He roughly threw her to the ground behind him and turned to face Cruor. Raven hit the grass hard, but quickly recovered. She pushed herself up into a sitting position and watched as Adonides leapt into the air. He beat his giant black bat-like wings once against the night air, and then pulled them in and dove across the field toward the elf.

Cruor simply raised one black-gloved hand, palm-out, in Adonides’s direction.

Raven watched as Adonides froze mid-flight, and hovered, unmoving, a few feet away from the Death Mage.

She could not help the small whimper that escaped her throat.

Instantly, Cruor turned his attention to her. “Does it upset Raven to see him so?” he asked, a mask of real concern on his strikingly handsome face.

She could not answer. She couldn’t find her voice.

He kept his eyes locked on hers as he unhurriedly walked toward her. Adonides remained frozen in the air, as if time had simply stopped in a bubble around him. Cruor ignored him and focused on her as if she were the only living being in the field.

“He used you, Raven. He and your father, both,” he said as he made his way across the clearing. He moved with magical grace, almost gliding, his steps easy, determined. She tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat, but it would not budge.

“And he would have used you again,” he continued, his tone gentle. “You know that, don’t you?”

She stared up at him, her dark eyes searching his blue gaze for mercy she knew she would never find.

He smiled, warmly, and then lowered himself onto one knee. He offered her his hand.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Twenty-One

Raven somehow found the will to pull her gaze away from Cruor's ice blue eyes to look down at his offered gloved hand. Then she looked up at Adonides, suspended, motionless in the air. And then she looked back into Cruor's eyes.

She wondered why he hadn't taken her soul yet.

Why hadn't he killed her?

Through the roiling dread in her gut and the pounding blood in her ears, she managed to find her voice, though it was much weaker than she would have preferred.

"Why haven't you just taken it?" she asked.

Cruor's smile never wavered. He withdrew his hand and stood. Raven gazed up at him where he towered over her, a being of pure night, with cold blue eyes that glowed like two moons.

"Your soul is not mine to take, Raven. It is yours to give."

He turned from her then and slowly paced back to Adonides's location. Over his shoulder, he said, "He attacked your brother, you know. Tried to kill him," he spoke indifferently, coolly, as if they were merely carrying on a conversation.

Raven stared at the Death Mage. She stared at Adonides. She hadn't thought anything more could shock her. She'd been wrong.

"However," and he turned his bright white smile upon her, "apparently, your brother fought him off with Haledon's axes." He chuckled then and tsked as he shook his head, admonishingly. "The Sun God is unforgivingly meddlesome. Isn't he, Adonides?" he asked as he gazed up at the frozen devil. Cruor moved to the devil's side and waved his hand, palm-out.

Adonides un-froze, and was suddenly sailing through the air toward a target that was no longer there. He caught himself before he would have hit the ground and spun in time to land on his feet, his bright yellow eyes smoldering.

He lunged for the elven mage once again and Cruor's gaze hardened. He raised his left hand, palm-out, at the same time raising his right hand in the form of a claw. In quick succession, he interchanged them. Adonides once more halted in the air, as if held back by an invisible fist. As Cruor's other hand came forward in a grabbing motion, Adonides bellowed in pain, his chest exploding open in a spray of gore and blood, his heart ripped from its interior, still beating.

The light in Adonides's eyes went out, and the devil's suspended form went limp. The dripping heart pumped empty air where it hung a few feet from the body it had inhabited. The beats slowed, and after a few nightmarishly long seconds, stopped.

The world blurred around Raven. It darkened. She screamed. She ignored her weakness, found the strength to stand. Then she found the strength to run.

She turned, her hair and skirt flying out around her, and plunged head-long into the forest ahead of her. She didn't care where she was running, she simply had to go, to flee.

From behind her, she heard the sound of soft laughter. It followed her through the forest, wrapped around her, echoed off of the trees and stones.

"A game, then..." His voice whispered. It was there beside her, caressing her neck, running along with her, and just ahead. *"Run, Raven..."* He laughed again, a deep throaty chuckle of pure menace.

She ran blindly, terror fueling the muscles in her legs, pumping the blood through her veins.

She did not slow to watch where she stepped, or duck beneath branches. She was counting on the uncanny ability she'd always had to bypass tree roots or low-lying limbs without any effort on her part. However, this forest was different. Sinister. Branches scraped pitilessly at her skin as she dashed through the dense forest. It was almost as if they were reaching out for her, their leaves like grasping fingers, every plant covered in thorns, every bough barbed. Tree roots that had never given her trouble before now attempted to trip her up, getting in her way, slowing her down.

Her breath came hard and fast and her heart pounded painfully inside its rib cage prison. She was bewildered by the harsh, dark landscape, horrified by what followed closely behind.

"You can't escape me... I'm right behind you... Just ahead of you... Watching you..." He did not let up, his words were relentless, his power inescapable.

Raven headed directly into the thickest part of the forest. Again, laughter followed her, and again, Cruor whispered promises in her head. Her fevered mind worked frantically. She thought of Loki, wondered where he was. She thought of the bounty hunter, wondered if he was dead. She felt her skin burn and sting where the thorns and brambles relentlessly pricked and scraped, marking her as an intruder in the woods, a scrambling, stammering prey in a forest full of predators.

She cried out as a root suddenly wrapped completely around her ankle and she fell forward into a bed of soft, fallen leaves. The dense ground covering cushioned her impact, but she barely noticed. She quickly looked back to see that the tree root was unwinding from her leg, moving of its own accord, animated and very much alive.

Her eyes grew wide and more terror gripped her heart.

“Killian Wood is elven territory. This forest has been tended by our kind for thousands of years.”

Raven gasped and turned around, scrambling back on her hands and knees. She looked up to see Cruor leaning easily against a tall tree, his gaze turned upward as he casually perused the canopy of foliage. Even dressed in black as he was, he seemed to be a mere extension of the forest around them, at peace and ease with his surroundings.

Cruor looked down at her then, and his expression was unreadable. He slowly pushed away from the tree and began to walk toward her. “The forest can sense that you are not human. It’s curious...”

She backed up as far as she could and found herself flush with a hard tree trunk. He came to stand directly in front of her and then knelt so that he was on her level. Raven flinched when he slowly reached up and pulled a stray leaf from her long, tangled hair. He twirled the leaf between his fingers and then reached for her face. She shut her eyes tight, fearful of his touch. She felt the back of his gloved hand gently brush her cheek. His touch was cool where it trailed along her cheekbone and down her jaw line.

“The forest tasted your blood,” he said, and she opened her eyes. His fingers came away, the leather covered in red. She’d been scratched and scraped in multiple places upon her exposed flesh by the foliage of the forest. “But you heal even as we rest here.”

She looked up into his eyes to find him peering down at her with an expression of wonder. His brow drew together and he blinked several times rapidly as if hit with a sudden realization.

“You are, by far, the most beautiful woman I have seen in my long life, Raven,” he said as he gazed down at her. “A more fitting receptacle for the Chosen Soul surely does

not exist.” His expression turned into one of deep disappointment then. “It is truly a pity that you must die in order to join your soul with mine.” He shook his head slowly.

Tears slid from her large dark eyes and trailed down her cheeks, their saltiness burning where they met with the wounds that had not yet healed. She barely heeded the pain. A kind of numbness was setting in, and she almost welcomed it.

Cruor said nothing more for the longest time. And then he sighed, long and slow, as if truly disappointed. She watched him through her tears as he rose then, never taking his eyes off of her. “The fact of the matter is, Raven, I can not take your soul without your permission. It is the one soul I need to attain that which I’ve strived for. And it is the one soul I can not steal.” He turned from her then and she laid her head back against the tree that held her captive. She felt so weary...

“Therefore, I’m prepared to offer you a covenant of sorts.” He moved to the large tree that he’d been leaning on previously, and ran his hand along its bark. He seemed to be thinking several things at once. Almost distractedly, he continued. “If you give me your soul, I will spare your brother’s life. When the others die, he shall live.” He turned slowly to face her once more. “He and whatever petty human he feels he loves. They’ll live to raise a family, grow old together,” he paused, his expression at once appearing bemused, and then he closed his eyes and continued, “all of that nonsense.” He waved his hand dismissively, turned away and began to pace through the leaf-strewn clearing.

“I know you can’t possibly care as much for any other mortal in this realm, Raven. They have brought you nothing but pain. I can feel it within you. You carry the Spring’s eldest soul. Its bodies have died many times,” again, he paused, his distant expression and sapphire eyes reflecting an emotion that Raven could not quite identify, “in many

different ways,” he continued. “And you are, by no means, unfamiliar with the pain of slaughter. Humans can be so cruel...” He glanced at her, and the strange distant expression disappeared, to be replaced with a coldness she could actually feel upon her skin. “But your brother, you love, and so, for you, I will allow him to go on.”

He turned toward her then, and gazed down at her with a hardness and determination she hadn’t seen before. He strode purposefully in her direction. She stiffened, instinctively pulling against the strong roots that held her fast in place. Her breath quickened. He knelt before her. “You have until midnight to decide at which time I will kill him. And every hour after that, I will kill another. A child. An innocent...” His eyes found hers and locked them in their indomitable sway. “Your parents.”

Her eyes widened.

He watched her in silence. And then she flinched when he cupped her cheek with his hand once more. She froze beneath him as he closed his eyes and very slowly began to lower his lips toward hers as if he would kiss her.

At that moment, the sky tore open and lightning crashed to the ground, splitting the tree across from them in two. Cruor reeled back away from Raven, spinning as he rose to his feet. At the same time, the tree roots that had held Raven’s wrists let her go and receded into the ground. A half second later, another bolt of lightning split the night and Raven covered her ears, ducking her head instinctively.

When she raised it again moments later, it was to find the Elven Prince and a regiment of elven soldiers standing across the clearing.

His eyes were on Cruor.

Astriel was dressed in leather and dark metal armor, a long sword in his hand. The soldiers behind him had drawn either sword or bow, and all were posed to fight.

Raven could barely believe what she was seeing, what was happening. Was she to be saved from one crazed elf by another?

Astriel spoke then, his tone low, deadly, unmistakably furious. But his words were in a language that Raven could not understand.

Cruor's gaze narrowed, his sapphire-blue eyes flashing, his arms out at his sides. He answered, in the same melodious language, and Raven held her breath. She was no linguist, but the exchange had sounded very much like a challenge to her.

At that moment, yet another blast of light tore a hole through the darkness. It was accompanied by a warm gust of wind that knocked the leaves from the branches and sent the dead foliage on the ground swirling in a crackling vortex. Everyone in the clearing covered their eyes. The burst of sunlight grew stronger, blindingly bright, and then began to recede. The wind died down.

Raven moved her arm away from her face. In the wake of the light and wind stood her brother, a glowing, pulsing axe in each hand.

Raven rose to her feet, ignoring her weakness, and lunged toward her brother.

Cruor had her in his arms before she'd taken two steps. He grabbed her by the wrist and twisted her arm behind her back painfully, pulling her up against his chest. He brought his lips to her ear. "Remember my promise, Raven. I can kill him now rather than later."

She cried out as he twisted her arm up higher, using her pain to emphasize his threat.

A low growl emanated from the surrounding forest. Cruor stilled. Raven searched the shadows. Nothing moved.

“Let her go, mage.”

Raven turned her head to the sound of the voice, as did everyone else. Shadow separated from darkness, and Drake of Tanith stepped into the moonlight. His mercury gray eyes found Raven instantly, and she locked gazes with him. Raven felt an inexplicable rush of relief at the sight of him alive. It was as if she’d been waiting, holding some sort of breath deep down within herself, and could now release it.

He gripped a shining, iron dagger tightly in one hand. The contingent of elves to his left eyed the weapon warily. Astriel looked from Drake to the dagger in his gloved fist and smiled a slow, knowing smile.

The Chosen Soul – Chapter Twenty-Two

Cruor's gaze slid from the elves to Loki to Drake, and he smirked. "I think it's time we take our personal business somewhere more private, Raven," he whispered. He began to chant the words to a transportation spell, but before he could finish, Astriel exploded into action, his tall form blurring as he raced for the Death Mage, his sword simultaneously pulling back in preparation for attack.

Cruor took a quick step back, pulling Raven with him as he did. His free hand rose in a defensive movement, and a shield of hardened air formed between them, solid as stone. Astriel skidded to a halt just short of slamming into the invisible wall. He lowered his sword slowly and narrowed his gaze at the Death Mage.

And then a deep, booming voice rang out from behind him.

"Potui Sanctum Dilucesco Flamma Concremo Moenia!"

Astriel, Cruor and Raven were each thrown back violently as the wall of air between them was hit by an intense wave of energy and a blast of pure white light. Raven landed half on the ground and half on her captive as they hit the dirt and fallen leaves several yards away. Once again, the wind was knocked from her lungs, and stars swam in her vision. Nausea roiled up in her gut as they rolled to a stop. Cruor rose, brutally yanking her up with him, and was on his feet almost instantly. Raven hung limply in his grasp, her body holding on to consciousness by a thin thread.

Through a blurred and rapidly distancing perception, she heard her captor begin another enchantment, his words rolling across her skin like slightly charged tentacles. She knew he was once again attempting to transport them somewhere else.

Astriel jumped to his feet and rushed the Death Mage, even as his soldiers raced to do the same. Drake was beside him in an instant.

Cruor's form began to shimmer and fade, Raven's along with him, just as Drake and Astriel came within fighting distance.

“Capesso Concipio Belua Maleficus Attineo!”

Raven moaned when she felt Cruor's magic ripped away from her and her form solidify once again. With what felt like the last of her conscious strength, she raised her head slightly and peered at the scene before her through the wings of her long black hair.

Drake and Astriel were nearly upon them.

And her brother was glowing. She stared at him, certain now that she was already comatose and dreaming.

Loki's eyes burned bright white like the sun, mid-summer. His strawberry red hair suddenly shone as if it were on fire, and a warm wind blew through the small clearing, sending the air rippling about him in waves of impossible heat. His skin had lightened to a pale luminescence and gave off a radiance like the inner most flame of a candle.

Raven's brow drew together.

And then Drake was wrenching her from Cruor's grasp as the Death Mage and Astriel paired off on one another.

The Death Mage made a decision, letting her go as he retreated once more. He did not move fast enough, though, and the Prince's sword slashed downward across his body, slicing deep into his left bicep and chest. Cruor hissed in pain and momentarily lost his balance, stumbling from the impact of the injury. Astriel was upon him again, bringing his sword back up with intent to carve his opponent from the groin upward.

Cruor wasted no time attempting to dodge the second attack and, instead, spoke an unintelligible series of lightning-quick arcane words. As the Prince's sword sliced through the air, Cruor's form shimmered and faded, only to solidify moments later, a few yards away. The wounds that had been etched into his arm and chest were entirely healed.

Raven watched none of this, though. Her mind was spinning inward, tumbling end over end, sweet oblivion welcoming her with its painless, dark embrace.

"Raven, look at me."

She heard his voice, soft, low, gentle.

It seemed to be calling from across an ocean, carried to her on that perfect caress of a breeze that only blew in the places you dreamed.

"Raven, please. Open your eyes!"

But it was fading.

*Raven, I'm begging you. Wake up! Drink. Let me make you strong. **Please...***

Now his voice was much closer, louder, right beside her.

In her head.

She felt his warmth all around her, in such contrast to her chilled body. It nearly burned. He reminded her of a talking, breathing fire. A fire that was holding her in its arms, clutching her tightly to its chest.

Something warm and sweet trickled over her lip and ran over her tongue.

She swallowed automatically.

And the world exploded around her. She bucked as a cacophony of color erupted behind her eyes and the warm, sweet perfection of his blood on her tongue shot down her throat, through her body and into her limbs. Her hands came around his arm, holding his

wrist to her lips. Her tongue unwittingly traced the gash he'd made there, and she felt him shiver against her. With each long draw of his blood, the powerful liquid raced through her like wildfire, ruthlessly igniting her senses and awakening them to a kind of pleasure she'd never before known.

Mine...

She heard his thought slip past the boundaries of her mind. She felt herself drowning in his influence, wondered if she should pull away, all the while knowing it didn't matter. She couldn't have pulled away if she'd wanted to, and she knew instinctively that he would not have let her.

The inherent, ancient power in his veins forced itself into her, infusing her body with forbidden magic, with strength, and with terrible passion. Her back arched as heat and moisture pooled between her legs and she moaned low in her throat. She felt his arms like bands of steel around her body, heard his returning growl of desire as he fed her and she drank and the rest of the world melted around them, became obsolete, disappeared.

Compared to this, Adonides's blood had been as water was to wine. Drake's life force was infused with something so archaic, so intrinsically potent, it bordered on... *divine.*

She opened her eyes and gazed up at him.

His molten mercury gaze held hers, penetrated her core, seared her soul.

What are you?

There was no answer forthcoming. But the heat, the power, in that gaze told her everything she needed to know. His indomitable blood racing through her veins answered her question for her.

And she knew. She knew who he was. And, hence, who his father was.

Drake stared down at the woman in his arms. His blood stained her perfect lips red and flushed her cheeks pink. Her eyes sparkled beneath the moonlight. She gazed up at him in awe, in understanding. And he realized that she knew.

No one had ever taken his blood before. He had never shared it. But when he'd seen her in Cruor's grasp, her strength gone, her body and spirit weak, he'd known he would do it, without a second thought. He would always care for her, give her what she needed. Always.

It was inevitable that she would come to realize who – and what – he was. How could she not? The blood that ran through his veins was older than time itself. It held power immeasurable.

He'd shared it with her, knowing she would stare up at him as she did now.

In shock, in amazement... in *fear*.

He cursed the fate that had brought them together in this manner. If only there were time to explain. If only they were alone, no elven princes with swords, no Death Mages with apocalyptic designs. If only the cards had decided, just once, to fall in his favor.

Give her the dagger, Tanith.

Drake jerked in surprise at the sudden strong invasion. A voice was in his head. Loud and commanding. The time that had slowed down around he and Raven once again moved at normal speed. He tore his gaze from hers and she let go of his arm. He glanced behind them. Astriel and Cruor were several yards away.

Give her the dagger. Only the Chosen Soul can truly kill Cruor.

Tanith shook his head, more than a little bothered by the booming voice inside his mind. He moved his gaze away from Astriel and Cruor and settled it upon Raven's brother. The priest was staring at him with eyes that glowed as brightly as the sun. His body gave off a brilliant radiance, his red hair moved with a warm wind and appeared as if it was on fire.

Haledon, Drake thought, the Sun God's avatar. Born again.

Drake stared at the avatar, suddenly torn with indecision. Haledon would know who he was. What he was. He would surely just as soon see Drake dead as do anything to help him.

I care not who you are, Tanith. The world needs Raven now. She is the Chosen Soul. She must do what she was Chosen to do. Give her the Corrigan Dagger!

"Give me the dagger, Drake."

Drake spun around and gazed down at Raven. She was smiling at him. Her eyes had gone solid black, from corner to corner. He stared at her. She rose from the ground in one graceful movement, and he struggled to rise with her. Once they both stood, she continued to smile up at him, her expression at once calm and utterly eerie.

"Trust me".

Drake did not hesitate this time. He held it out to her, hilt first. She slowly took it, her fingers grazing the skin of his hand, never breaking eye contact with him.

On the other side of the clearing, Astriel lunged at Cruor. The Death Mage was expecting the attack, and he ducked to the right, bringing his left hand up in a block that struck the Prince's blade with an uncanny ring of metal against metal. In the next instant,

he reached his other hand toward Astriel's chest, palm facing outward, and hastily spoke the words of a terrible enchantment.

Astriel gritted his teeth and brought all of his power to the fore, creating an immediate and strong barrier between his soul and the man who sought to steal it.

"You'll have to do better than that." He took a step forward, preparing to once again attack the Death Mage in the manner for which Astriel was best qualified. Respectively, Cruor took a step back, his expression now wary and a touch uncertain.

Astriel continued, his voice daunting yet calm. "I am not one of your weakling students. I am the son of Oberon. Have you forgotten?"

Cruor smiled ingratiatingly. "Not at all, my prince. The royal bearing of your soul will make it all the more delicious when it surrenders to me."

Astriel answering smile was a bitter mirror to his opponent's as the Prince swung his sword in a circle, bringing it with blurring speed toward the other elf.

Cruor bellowed another arcane word, and a sword of the same make as Astriel's appeared in his gloved hand, already poised to block the Prince's attack. But, as if Astriel had known he would take such an action, the Prince's sword suddenly changed direction, moving so fast it was nearly untraceable, and, instead of coming down in the arc that Cruor had expected, it shot beneath the Death Mage's constructed defense and stabbed directly toward his midsection.

Cruor could not react in time to deflect such a blow. He merely had enough time to glance downward and watch as Astriel's shining blade penetrated the magical barrier around him and shot on through to pierce his flesh, puncturing deep, sliding in until the tip of the long sword exited the other side.

Astriel shoved it deep, and then, as he brought his body flush with Cruor, he looked the Death Mage in the eyes and gave the blade an evil twist.

Pain of immense design registered in the mage's eyes.

"That is for touching her," Astriel whispered, his words dripping with menace. He twisted the blade the other way and Cruor gasped at the new agony, sweat erupting on his brow. "And that is for hurting her."

They remained frozen there for the space of an endless moment. And then Astriel ruthlessly wrenched the blade free and took a step back.

Cruor stumbled backward, his body impacting with the trunk of a large tree, his hands coming out to steady himself. He stopped and then clutched at his stomach, his gaze locked on Astriel's as one would watch a dangerous animal.

"You can run me through a thousand times, Prince, and it will not kill me," he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"I know. I never meant to kill you, Cruor. I only wanted to hurt you. And that, I have done. It's Raven that will kill you."

At that, Astriel slowly turned, his gaze sliding from Cruor to the black-haired woman who stood facing the Death Mage, several yards away. Cruor followed his gaze and leveled it on Raven's now erect and obviously much more powerful, physically stronger form.

He gazed at her steadily, several emotions chasing each other across his handsome face. She watched him in silence, her expression unreadable, as he straightened, lifting off of the tree, his wound healing rapidly before her eyes.

She took a step toward him, and he toward her.

And then they each raised their left hands in a slow, graceful, synchronous movement, and the clearing faded into white, vanishing into bright nothingness within seconds, leaving only Raven and the Death Mage, face to face, alone on a plane of flat, frozen emptiness. Snow and ice stretched into the horizon as far as the eye could see. Nothing moved to mar the perfection of the wintry world. Only a hollow wind blew across the vast expanse.

This was the end, and they had chosen their battle ground.

He approached her slowly, his hands at his sides, his expression subtly sad, his deep blue eyes devoid of the wicked spark they'd held as he'd touched her only a few minutes before.

She came toward him in the same manner, her steps deliberate and calm, until at last, they stood together, a mere foot apart, a study in spatial conservation in this endless plane of frost.

"I promised you that which no one else, not even Haledon, can guarantee. Why would you so carelessly toss aside your brother's sworn good fortune?" Cruor asked quietly, his expression genuinely curious and a touch bemused.

Raven smiled gently. "You and I are not the granters of destiny, Cruor. As an empty body and a tired soul, we make poor substitutes for human choice and freedom of will. We are the *vessels* of fate, nothing more."

He furrowed his brow and shook his head slowly. "Is this truly what you want? A continuance of war and violence and a 'freedom of will' that sees innocents to their graves?"

Raven laughed softly. It sounded like a wind chime of ice crystals, blown by the breeze of their private realm. “If I give you this soul, Cruor, you will lay *all* innocents to sleep in beds of death.” She cocked her head to one side and stared deeply into his eyes. Her expression became one of puzzled curiosity. “Why do you continue to dispute a cause that you know I can never join?”

Cruor lowered his head slightly, his gaze intensifying. His jaw set and the cold air around them began to charge. “Because, Raven, I know you. I know you as no other ever could. I remember you as you *were*,” he reached down to gently grasp her right hand, and, unafraid, she did not pull away, “the *first* time your soul took form.” With that, he placed her hand against his chest and closed his eyes.

She closed hers.

And then opened them to find herself standing alone in the center of a wide open field. It was night and Krivier’s two moons shone full up above. White wildflowers swayed in a gentle breeze. She could smell smoke from a cooking fire and she turned slowly in place to see a small cabin at the base of a mountain in the distance.

She took a step toward it and was suddenly there, standing in the doorway of the log house. The door unlatched and swung slowly inward. Firelight and warmth greeted her and she stepped inside.

The man sitting at the table glanced up and smiled warmly. He was so handsome. She knew him well.

He rose from the bench on the opposite side and quickly came around to greet her. He stood tall before her and reached down to gently take her hands in his. He was warm to the touch. She felt safe in their home.

“How do you fare?” he asked softly.

“Well,” she answered quietly. She was tired, but peaceful. “The babe has been dancing all day, I fear. A boy, I would wager, as he has your energy, not mine.”

The man laughed, his long black hair shimmering in the firelight from the hearth as he shook his head admonishingly. “You’re the one who kicks, wife,” he said through a chuckle. “I’ve the bruises on my shins to prove it. The night you sleep without giving me your heel is the night I erect a statue in Haledon’s name.”

She laughed and then gasped as the babe kicked once again. She placed her hand to her swollen stomach and the babe stilled. Then she took her husband’s hand and placed his palm in the same place.

He waited. The babe remained still.

Her husband’s expression became mockingly stern. “Aye, definitely a lad. He is defying his father already.”

She shook her head, smiling. “You must be patient, Cruor. Best start now, while you’ve a chance to practice.”

He grinned and pulled her into a warm embrace. Then he kissed her, and his goatee tickled her chin. She chuckled softly and gently pulled away. “When will you shear that wretched little tuft of hair, my love?”

He laughed low and wicked, and leaned in for another kiss. “When it stops tickling you.” He replied.

She laughed again, but the sound was cut short by a knock at the door. Cruor pulled away from her and glanced in its direction. The knock came again, harder this time, a short smart rap that retorted loudly in the once peaceful room.

“Open in the name of your King, mage. I’ve a petition from your sovereign!”

She glanced at her husband, and he at her.

Then, with a frown where a smile had once been, he moved around her and strode to the door. He opened it and she gazed out at three men in uniform, the crest of their king emblazoned on their chests. Soldiers, sent by Lord Moradon. She fought to suppress the shiver that threatened her. The soldiers never brought good news.

“What do you want?” Cruor asked, ever to the point. He was in the king’s service, but as a mage, he commanded enough power to speak as he sought fit. Within reason.

“His Lordship requests ten new battle-ready spells by sun-up. We take Kinestaire tomorrow night. You will be in attendance, equipped as my liege has commanded.”

Cruor stared out at the armored man. The mage’s expression was one of shock. And then of anger.

“No mage can fathom ten spells in one night, soldier. You’re mad.” He stepped toward the soldiers, forcing them to retreat backwards. Raven grew concerned and moved up behind him. He held one hand back, directed at her, silently insisting that she remain inside, out of the way.

But something drew her forward.

So, she followed as the four men moved their discussion into the front yard, beneath the bright lights of the double full moons.

“And even if I could do it,” Cruor continued, ire causing his voice to raise, “I would not. I’ve other commitments.”

At that, the soldiers turned from him to look at her. She placed a hand to her stomach protectively. Dread welled up inside of her. The scene was familiar. Ancient, forgotten, but not entirely so.

The soldiers eyed her in silence for several moments. And then their leader nodded, once. He turned and his subordinates followed. He mounted his horse, and the other two soldiers mounted their horses after him.

He looked down at the mage and leveled him with an ice-cold glare. “You’ll have the spells by sun-up, mage, or your life is forfeit.” He glanced once again at Raven and his expression hardened. “And to make certain you are not distracted from your true duties,” he pulled a dagger from a sheath at his waist, “I’ll rid you of your other ‘commitments’.” He then and threw the dagger, expertly, at Raven.

She watched it flip end over end through the space between them, its blade flashing in the moonlight. Time slowed and she knew what was coming, remembered it, and waited for it.

The blade embedded itself in her stomach in one quick piercing moment. The physical pain she suffered was minimal. As she gazed down at the hilt protruding from her swollen abdomen, she felt her unborn infant kick one last time.

And then fall still. Silent.

Her knees gave out. The world spun around her. In the periphery of her vision, she saw her husband cast a spell. And then another. She heard screams, knew the soldiers were dead.

And then he was holding her in his arms. His fingers gripped her body bruisingly tight. She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. He was crying. She’d never seen him cry.

“I can’t heal you. I can’t heal you!” he screamed as he rocked her back and forth.

Her husband had never learned healing magic. He had never tried.

She said nothing. With the last of her waning strength, she reached for his right hand and placed it atop her stomach.

Then she closed her eyes.

And opened them to a white-washed world, bitter cold and desolate. She stared up at the man before her. His sapphire eyes were familiar now.

“I didn’t know until I touched you... In the forest.” He had been dumbfounded to find the familiarity there, shocked to feel her body, once known so well by his own, beneath his caressing fingers. He’d been shaken. And then angry. Furious that fate had punished him in this final manner, forcing him to destroy the one thing he had ever cared for in order to finish that which he’d sworn to do long ago.

And then he’d decided, as he’d turned away from her in that clearing, that he would not surrender to the pain that destiny had attempted to deal. He would have her soul, take it within himself, and revel in it. After all, what better way to become close to his wife once more?

And, as he’d faced her once again, his anger had given way to lust. He had been telling the truth when he’d told her she was more beautiful than any other. No one had ever been more beautiful to him than his wife. Ever.

He would kiss her, taste her, feel her one last time. He would have the woman he’d had thousands of years ago. She was already his.

He gazed down at her now and a muscle ticked in his jaw. "I swore revenge against man. And I had it." He said, his voice cracking beneath the weight of untold emotion. She waited several moments, saying nothing.

Then she raised her left hand and gently cupped the side of his face. He closed his eyes. Only for a second.

"You've lived an immortality of hatred, Cruor. It has turned you as cold as the ice on which we stand. You do not see that you have become the soldier in this field," she paused, glancing at the frost-hewn plane around them, "and humanity, the mage."

He gazed down at her, his brow furrowed, his lips quivering, and for once did not have an answer.

And then she pulled away from him and placed her hand to her stomach.

He looked from her face to her hand, and his entire body stilled.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. She knew in her heart that she had the power she needed to perform this one final piece of magic. It would take most, if not all of her strength. But Drake's blood flowed strong through her veins, and all doubt fell away, as useless as fear, as she turned her thoughts inward, searching within herself.

She saw the long hall then, a corridor with a thousand doors. Each one opened as she passed, and a being appeared. She passed them without pause, their ethereal shapes acknowledging her and then moving aside. A man named Herald. A little girl named Rhianna. An old woman named Bella. A chipmunk, a middle-aged farmer, an old man, a shark, a little boy, a pink pig, a dapple gray mare...

At the end of the hall lay the last door. It was white, in contrast to the others. The knob shone polished gold. She turned the handle, and the door swung open.

She embraced the spirit there, held it to her breast, rocked it gently in her folded arms, as she had never had the chance to do in life.

And then she opened her eyes. The white landscape replaced the corridor in her soul. But she'd brought the presence with her. She held out her hands, cupped together, as if they held something in them.

Cruor gazed down at her as light began to form in her outstretched palms. He watched as the light grew, and began to take form, amassing into a tiny, glowing shape that he recognized instantly.

Emotion choked him and he took a step back.

The light grew blindingly bright and then pulsed once and faded, leaving a bundled newborn infant in its wake. Raven held the babe gently, rocking him slowly back and forth. The infant peered up at her through large blue-black eyes, his tiny fingers grasping clumsily at the air as he issued forth indistinct gurgling sounds.

Cruor shook his head and stilled.

Raven slowly moved toward him, and this time he did not retreat.

She stopped just before him. "Take him," she said softly and held the babe out to the man who was once her husband. He shook his head.

"I can't."

"Yes you can," she told him, her voice gentle but firm. She moved closer and raised the infant directly in front of him. "Take him, Cruor. I'll not give you my soul. Not now, not ever," she continued, her tone still gentle. "But *this* soul was never born, was never mine. It merely rested inside of me. This soul, I will give you, Cruor, because it was already, in part, yours."

She smiled as he at last slowly raised his arms and, as if the action was as alien to him as breathing water, he took the babe, his hold somewhat unsteady, and peered down at him.

“And it is the one soul you have truly wanted all along.”

She stepped back from him then and watched as he gazed down at the child in his arms. The baby cooed, and Cruor’s brow furrowed. His eyes turned glassy. He exhaled, and his breath shook with powerful sentiment.

She waited several minutes more, allowing him this time with the child he had never had, with the soul that was meant to be his.

And then she waved her hand in the air, and their surroundings shimmered, changed, melted, and reformed.

They were again in the clearing, in the forest, spells exploding around them, time returned to what it was, once more.

They stood a mere foot apart and Cruor gazed down at her, his arms at his sides, his hands empty. She said nothing, no further words being necessary.

He did not even blink when she then plunged the Corrigan Dagger, hilt-deep, into his gut.

He looked at her several moments more and then tore his gaze away to look at the hilt protruding from his stomach. He closed his eyes and fell to his knees.

As they watched, Cruor’s head dropped, his long black hair cascading around his face, hiding his features. The ground began to rumble beneath their feet. Above them, the clouds started to gather and then to spin. The wind picked up, and the leaves on the trees quaked.

Raven looked from Cruor to Haledon's avatar - her brother - who stood watching several yards away. The avatar nodded at her slowly, his bright yellow eyes flashing, his body radiating sunlight that illuminated the clearing even as the clouds blocked all light from the moons above.

The avatar came forward then, calmly stepping over a fissure in the ground as it opened up beneath him and emitted a jet of steam. Another crevice opened up a few yards away, and Astriel and Drake exchanged uncertain glances. But even as several more gaps and cracks forged their ways across the leaf-strewn ground, each man held his position.

Haledon's avatar strode to Cruor's form and peered down at him. He raised one hand, palm down, over the Death Mage's bent head.

“Absolvo Solutum.”

His booming voice resounded over the building fury around them. Lightning split the night sky and the wind began to roar. Cruor's form started to glow. A strange kind of mist rose from his stilled body. As they watched, the mist ascended and swirled, caught up in the curl of the maelstrom. And then, before their eyes, it took shape.

Many shapes.

Small shapes, large shapes, nasty, twisted shapes, and serene beautiful shapes. The forms spun and swirled, caught up in their individual courses. And then each either spun up and away into the night sky, or was sucked into the ground, between the cracks and crevices that had formed there.

Raven watched in silence as the souls Cruor had stolen were finally released. A few, she knew, Haledon would see restored. They belonged to bodies that were not yet meant

to die. Those few, such as Summer's missing brother, would suddenly return, with no recollection of where they had gone or what had happened to them.

Their families would rejoice, regardless of the loss of time and remembrance.

The rest were sent where they'd been meant to go. Raven knew her father would be receiving a fresh influx of souls to inhabit his icy realm.

She glanced down at her brother then. She watched him free the last of Cruor's stolen spirits, and then step back.

Cruor raised his head slowly, and the storm quieted.

The wind died down, the lightning ceased, and the earth closed up. The clouds parted, thinning away. Nothing rumbled and nothing shook.

Raven gazed at the man in black who knelt at the center of the clearing. His eyes found hers and held her gaze.

A lifetime passed between them in the space of a single, last heart beat.

And then his head dropped a final time, and his body began to turn to dust. Before their eyes, his form dissipated at a rapid rate, crumbling to a fine gray ash. When the last of the ash had been lifted on a gentle breeze and taken away, a tiny light remained.

The light sat, pulsing in the spot where Cruor once knelt. It remained for several seconds, small and perfect.

Then it rose, as had the other souls before it, and was lifted into a now clear night sky, where it disappeared amongst the stars.

The Chosen Soul – Epilogue

Raven looked at the others in the clearing.

The Prince was watching her closely. As was Drake. Her brother stood at the clearing's center, his head bowed, his body no longer glowing like the sun.

She moved toward him, and he turned to face her.

He was crying.

She paused a few feet away. He smiled at her, dropped the axe that remained in his right hand, and rushed forward. She met him half way, and they caught each other in a strong embrace. Neither needed to speak. They were twins. They understood.

As they embraced, a second strange breeze picked up within the darkened clearing. Raven and Loki separated and turned around.

Several yards away, the air was separating. It spun, thickened and visible, a grayish foggy mass that roiled and parted, as if a hole were being torn in the fabric of space.

Raven gasped, at once troubled, and looked to Astriel. He was no longer watching her, however. His eyes were now on Drake.

Drake's eyes were on the growing portal. His expression was grim.

Raven's brow knitted with immediate concern. She took a step toward Drake, and in answer, he turned away from the growing, spiralling hole to face her.

His silver gaze found hers and seemed to hold tight.

She still carried his blood in her veins. She could feel him there, inside of her, filling her with an undeniable heat. His molten eyes flashed like liquid lightning. She took another step toward him, and he held up his hand, palm out, signalling her to stop.

She stopped. Her heart felt strangely heavy in her chest.

He held her gaze a moment more and then slowly turned away from her.

By now, the yawning gash in space had spread several meters high and several feet wide. Beyond the opening in the air, Raven could make out a grayness, like a fog, roiling and cloying, a dense thicket of mist that appeared impenetrable.

Drake peered into that grayness for what seemed a short eternity. And then he moved to stand before it.

“Drake!” Raven’s voice was ripped from her throat. It echoed the sudden desperation she felt.

The bounty hunter turned one last time, pinning her with his mercury gaze.

Unspoken promises. A lifetime of them.

And then he quickly looked away – and stepped through the portal.

“No!” she screamed, rushing after him.

Before she could reach the rapidly diminishing gate, the elven prince had her in his arms, holding her fast in his grip, a safe distance from the closing hole. They watched, she in horror, he in mute understanding, as it sealed at last and the wind in the clearing died down once more.

Raven stood there in Astriel’s arms, an odd numbness spreading through her body.

“Where did he go?”

“To the Witherlands,” he told her.

“Why?”

“A promise.”

Raven said nothing further. She closed her eyes and the Prince released her. He moved away from her, slowly, and she turned to face him. His ice blue eyes gazed steadily down at her.

She blinked up at the elf, fighting tears. Never in her life had she felt more unsure, more unsettled or confused than she did at that moment.

“Why did you send him after me?”

Astriel watched her in silence for several long beats. Then he said, “I wanted you with me. *Safe.*”

“You knew.”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Why would you want to protect me?” she asked.

He smiled a slow, helpless smile. “I can do nothing but. You’ve enchanted me from the moment our eyes met.” He moved closer.

She stared up at the Prince, dwarfed by his invincible stature, completely enclosed by the ancient power that his mere presence gave off.

“I care for you, Raven,” he said, as he lifted his hand to cup her face.

His touch was warm, unexpectedly comforting. She closed her eyes, her head spinning, her heart aching.

“Come with me to Eidolon. Let me protect you.” She felt his words pour over her, surround her, and knew that they were laced with magic. But at that moment, whether he was casting a spell upon her or not, she did not care.

She nodded. Once.

It was all he needed.

Heather Killough-Walden

(Coming soon...The Chosen Soul, Book Two)