



Scarlet Rose



Christina Phillips

Foretaste of Forever

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by

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Dedication

I would like to thank my wonderful critique partners,
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and ability to both crack the whip
and share chocolate whenever the need arises!
I would never have made it without you.

To Victoria, Charlotte and Oliver—I love you guys.

And to Mark, my real life hero. This one's for you.

Prologue

Elyesha rested one hand against the stone wall of the ancient castle and smiled as her lover emerged from the forest. The silver moonlight cast an eerie glow across the wild Irish countryside, and a warm breeze stirred the hot summer night.

"I thought you weren't coming." It was a lie. She knew he would come. He always came to her. "These summer nights are so fleeting, Ben. It's wrong to waste a single moment when we can be together."

"One night," Ben said, as he took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "I won't come back, Elyesha. And I'll be free of your mystic entrapments."

She laughed and cupped his aristocratic jaw. "You'll never be free. Haven't you realized that yet?"

His dark eyes captured hers, causing the breath to hitch in her breast. Would she ever get used to the haunting beauty of his eyes? Ever become so accustomed to the angle of his jaw or the silken touch of his glorious hair, that her body would no longer respond with instant, breathless desire?

"I realized that long ago." He threaded his fingers through hers and drew her to his side. "But a man can hope."

She laughed and wound her arms around his neck, rising onto her toes to reach that mocking smile on his lips. "You'd be lost without me," she whispered, and yet the truth was she would be lost without him. For thirteen years she had woven her spells around Ben, but in the deep recess of his stubborn soul he resisted all she could offer him.

"Your delusions fascinate me." Ben wrapped his

arm around her waist, lifting her from the stony ground as if her weight meant nothing. His deceptive strength thrilled her and she pressed against him, delighting in the sensation of his hard lean body. "How do you think I survived before we met?"

She speared her fingers through his long black hair, and allowed the silken strands to trail seductively across her palm. "That's all you did, my love," she said. "Survive. But with me, you live."

Ben stared into Elyesha's amber eyes and marvelled at her supreme confidence in their love. Did she truly have no doubts? "You call this living?" He'd called their existence many things over the years. Exquisite hell was the closest definition to how he felt when he answered Elyesha's tempting call.

She sighed and her warm breath caressed his lips. Despite his best efforts to resist the inevitable, the blood heated in his veins and spiralled inexorably toward his burgeoning cock.

Curse the gods. This woman only had to look at him and he was lost. Had been lost from the moment he'd gate crashed that Samhain gathering almost thirteen years ago and seen Elyesha demonstrate her formidable powers.

"Yes." Her whisper dragged him back to the present. "I call this living, Ben. Anything less would be mere existence."

He laughed, half in despair at her continued refusal to acknowledge the true situation between them, and rammed her against the uneven stone wall. "Lust has blinded you."

She gripped his face between her hands and forced his head back. "Love opened my eyes." She sounded so sincere. But how could she believe such a thing, when even her closest kin condemned their union?

Elyesha hooked her ankles around Ben's waist as he strode through the castle's crumbling entrance. For a fleeting moment, she wished it had retained its former glory, but her ancestors had allowed the magnificent stronghold to fall into ruins centuries ago.

Besides, it didn't matter where she had Ben. So long as she had him. And soon—she would have him forever.

In the Great Hall, with its soaring arches and remnants of ancient grandeur in the carved four poster bed, he paused and she slowly slithered from his grasp. "What shall we do now?" she said, tilting her head to one side and allowing her long hair to tumble provocatively over her shoulder. She traced one finger over the hard ridge of his erection and hid a smile as Ben clenched his jaw.

"No suggestions?" She raised one eyebrow and trailed her finger over his groin and toward his chest. She didn't know why he fought against her some nights. What did he hope to achieve? Sooner or later, she'd get her way and then he would see how foolish all his protestations had been. "Perhaps I'll strip you naked," she suggested, loosening the ties on his scarlet linen shirt.

He didn't reply, except to give the merest grunt of a laugh. She tugged his open shirt from his britches and admired his perfectly sculpted chest, before sliding the shirt over his shoulders and along his finely muscled arms.

"Enjoying yourself?" There was a rasp to his voice, as if he tried to deny the rising desire between them.

She shot him an exasperated glance. "I intend to enjoy myself far more before this night's over." She tugged at the fastenings at his crotch, deliberately prolonging the procedure as she massaged his rigid

shaft. Occasionally she found Ben's inhuman self-control infuriating, but even that didn't matter. Because, in the end, he always succumbed.

But sometimes, she wished for the early years. Before Ben had rebelled against their relationship. Before his misguided sense of honor had risen its unwelcome head and corroded their perfect world.

Impatiently she thrust the thought aside. She admired his honor, but had no intention of destroying what they had at its altar.

"So long as you're enjoying yourself." Ben's sardonic comment penetrated her thoughts, and wet heat flared deep in her pussy at the look on his face. He was no longer rigid with self-control but lust, and his eyes glowed with rising desire. "I exist for your amusement, Elyesha."

She ripped the last fastening free and dragged his pants down his muscled legs. "Never forget that." Her voice was uneven, her heart hammering against her breast. How could he do this to her, after so many years? She had only to think of him to want him, had only to see him to desire him. And when he teased her, she knew in her heart she would willingly die for him.

If she was only given the chance.

He hauled her to her feet. "And now it's your turn to entertain me." There was no hint of reluctance in his eyes now. Only love. For her. She wrapped the knowledge around her heart and knew it wouldn't be long before Ben made the final commitment to her.

Ben allowed Elyesha to pull free from his grasp and, as she flung back her head, her midnight black hair brushed the stone floor. He ached to bury his face in that silken cloud, tangle his fingers through the wild curls, and salve his corrupt heart in the heat of her embrace.

Instead he remained perfectly still and watched her sensuously gyrate to a rhythm only she could hear. Slowly she peeled the calf length summer dress from her body and desire stabbed through every atom.

She was wearing a black lace corset threaded with scarlet ribbon, a scandalous piece of lingerie that enhanced the curve of her hips, the feminine dip of her waist, and her sinfully tempting breasts.

Hands on hips, she struck a seductive pose. "Do you like what you see, my lord?"

He raised one hand. "Come here." He barely recognized his voice. When she didn't immediately obey, he made an imperial gesture of haste and Elyesha smiled, as if his aristocratic hauteur pleased her.

With leisurely disregard for his impatience, she sauntered toward him on scarlet stilettos. "It's a beautiful night. Why don't we take a stroll on the grounds? Admire the moonlight glinting on the lake? Or—"

"Or fuck?"

She pretended to consider that, pouting her full lower lip in that way that drove him insane. "Yes, I suppose that's an option," she said. "You were so late tonight, there's no time for a walk in any case."

In the darkest corner of his mind, he found humor in her comment. Time was no problem for him. But for Elyesha, time meant everything. And dawn was approaching more rapidly than he cared to admit.

He thrust the thought aside. Elyesha was here now, and that's all he would focus on. In one swift movement, he swept her into his arms and, as she dragged her fingers through his hair, his senses became ensnared by her evocative musky scent. He quickly strode toward the brocade swathed bed.

Elyesha smiled as he lowered her to the bed. It

wasn't often they made love in such conventional surroundings, but tonight she craved pillows and sheets and the archaic beauty of embroidered tester and drapes.

As he stared down at her, his dark hair framing the face which haunted her every moment, she began to slowly pull at the ties of her corset. His hand covered hers. "No." His voice was husky. "Leave it on."

Heart pounding, she watched him kneel on the edge of the bed, as his fingers trailed across her exposed breast. His eyes never left hers. "I love you," she whispered.

"I know." A sad smile lifted his lips for a fleeting second, before he bent his dark head and flicked his tongue deep into her cleavage.

Need ignited low in her belly, hot and raw, sending tremors of desire to the center of her womb. "Tell me," she panted, as she raked her fingers through his silken hair. "Tell me you love me."

For answer, his teeth grazed against the soft skin of her breast and she moaned, twisting her body against him, wanting more than he was offering. He shifted, until he was lying beside her, and finally raised his head to look at her again. "You know I do."

Yes, she knew. But she needed to hear him say the words. And he never had. As if the words held power, and he wasn't prepared to relinquish that power.

It shouldn't matter. She knew she held his heart, his soul, everything he was belonged to her, as surely as she belonged to him.

But still, she longed to hear him say he loved her. Would love her forever. How could that be too much to ask?

"I always will." The words were so low she almost missed them. But she didn't miss the look on his face. Such agony, as if he had just confessed to

all the sins of the world.

Her heart ached with combined love and despair. Would he never come to terms with who they were? Could he not see that they were meant to be together, despite their differing heritage?

She pulled his head down, claiming his lips. Only when he surrendered deep inside her, night after night, did she feel they were truly equal. But she wanted more than that. She wanted everything from him.

And she would have it. Soon. Her powers were growing, and even Ben would no longer be able to resist.

"Stop thinking." His hot breath scorched her lips.

"I'm not."

"I can feel you thinking." He angled himself across her, his cock brushing against her thigh causing spirals of desire to ricochet through her blood. "It taints the air."

"I'm not thinking," she panted. "But you're talking too much."

His teeth flashed in the gloom, as if he found her amusing. "That's the first time you've levelled that accusation at me."

She scraped her fingernails down his sculpted back, and then gripped his taut buttocks. He reared in reaction, towering over her like a conquering warlord. "Pick your moments, don't you?" she gasped, as she tried to suck oxygen into her deprived lungs. "We can talk afterward, Ben. For now, just fuck me into oblivion."

Ben caught himself smiling again and despair flickered through his heart. It was always this way with Elysha. She could make him forget everything. And he was afraid that one night, he truly would forget everything and give in to her seductive

entreaties.

He slid his fingers around her breast, easing her from the corset. Her rosy nipple, proud and erect, taunted him from the center of her creamy globe.

He grazed his thumb over her hard peak, and her eye lashes flickered sensuously. Gods, what had he done to deserve this? With the face of an angel, the body of a courtesan, and passion of a succubus, Elyesha could have chosen anyone for her consort.

She had chosen him. And damned them both.

He sucked her nipple into his hot mouth, and her nails dug into his shoulders as she bucked beneath him. He held her breast still for his onslaught, suckling hard, flicking the erect nub with the tip of his tongue, grazing her delicate skin with his teeth.

It would be so easy to fall completely under her spell. To give her everything she demanded. He closed his eyes against temptation, but her allure writhed all around, clutching at his shoulders, his back, burning against his thighs and straining cock.

A groan of approaching surrender ached in his throat. He ripped his mouth from her and glared down at her. Glazed amber eyes meshed with his, full swollen lips parted for his pleasure.

He thrust his tongue between those lush lips, drowning in her sweet heat, seeking the heavenly oblivion only Elyesha could promise. She hooked her ankles over his legs, enticing him closer, and her wet pussy rubbed tantalizingly against his engorged head.

He pulled back, heart pounding, balls tight with need. "Too fast," he said, voice hoarse with lust.

"I want it fast." Her hands reached for him, fingers clawed.

Gods, yes, he wanted it fast and raw and to hell with the rest of the world. But he wanted Elyesha now and forever, and the only way to keep her was

to be inside her. To prolong the moment for all eternity and he knew all he wanted was impossible.

“My beloved Ben.” Her whisper echoed in his heart and again he was lost. There was always another night where he could take his time, lingering over her luscious body, glorious hair, and sinful mouth. Another night when he could say his final, silent goodbye.

But not tonight.

She shifted and, with cat like suppleness, hooked her feet over his shoulders, around his neck, and dragged him back to her. The way she always dragged him back to her, no matter how far he sought escape.

Her breath rasped against his shoulder, and her mouth moved over his burning skin. “Take me now,” she whispered, as her fingers curled around his aching balls.

His cock nudged her wet entrance and she surged upward, capturing him, sucking him into her welcoming channel. His restraint shattered and he thrust into her, pinning her to the bed with the force of his possession, crushing her beneath him, and sinking his face into the scented hollow of her tempting neck.

He flicked the tip of his tongue over her exposed skin, and she sank her teeth into his neck, sucking, tearing at his flesh, and primordial lust speared through his tortured body.

He ripped his head free and the dark enticement of fresh blood clouded the air around them. His erection responded immediately to the scent of the forbidden, stretching her wide and surging against the neck of her womb.

His blood smeared her lips. Inflamed by the image, he plunged his fingers through her hair, holding her still, before he ravished her mouth with lips, tongue, and teeth. Sucking his blood back into

his body, leaving her with nothing but spiralling lust.

She made a sound of protest deep in her throat. For answer, he pulled his throbbing cock from her pussy, before plunging his length back into her, as he plundered her mouth with his tongue.

Her nails raked along his shoulders, drawing more blood. He rolled her swollen nipple between finger and thumb, increasing the pressure until her sweet cunt convulsed around his shaft, grasping him so tightly starlight shattered deep in his brain.

The rolling waves of exquisite pleasure thundered from the core of his being, tightening his throbbing balls, arrowing along his engorged cock. He pumped his hot seed deep inside her, drowning in her heat, surrendering to her mystic power, accepting that their destinies were inextricably entwined.

As the roar subsided, her legs slithered down his back, and he collapsed on top of her, crushing her onto the bed. Dazed amber eyes captured him as her fingers trailed languidly against his jaw.

As their erratic breaths mingled and their pounding hearts slowed, reality seeped back into his consciousness.

It was always this way. For a few precious moments while he and Elyesha were one, he could forget everything but the love they shared. Could imagine accepting her terms, giving her all she demanded and sharing a future together.

But they were mere dreams. Fantasies created in the heat of passion and heights of ecstasy. They had no place in the hell he inhabited in the real world.

He rolled to his side, threaded his fingers through hers. Her wonderful hair, as black as midnight and soft as velvet, tumbled across the ivory linen pillows. For a fleeting moment, peace bathed

his wounded soul.

This was the reason he stayed. The reason he kept returning. The answer to why he couldn't simply leave Elyesha, when he knew deep in his heart he should. It was for these few minutes of perfection in her arms, when he could see heaven, taste paradise, and delude himself that somehow their different worlds could co-exist.

"What are you thinking?" Her voice was drowsy.

"How beautiful you are."

She drew his hand to her mouth, kissed the tip of his finger. "But not as beautiful as you."

His beauty was his curse. "Tomorrow, I won't be late."

Her fingers tightened around his, almost imperceptibly. "What is it?" he said, immediately attuned to the shift in her mood.

She let out a long breath. "There's a special gathering of the clans tomorrow night. My grandmother believes I should take more responsibility for our coven." She paused for a split second. "I want you to be there, Ben."

Loathing churned deep inside at the thought of Elyesha's grandmother. "No." It had been years since he'd attended one of the gatherings. He had no intention of attending another.

She sighed, as if his reply didn't surprise her. "Then we'll not see each other until the following night."

"It's only one night." He loosened their fingers and tenderly smoothed back errant tendrils of hair from her face. "Sleep now, my love. There's time before dawn."

Her tiny frown vanished and her eyelashes flickered. Within a heartbeat, she slid into blissful oblivion.

His hand stilled on her hair. Night after night they met. Time after time he promised himself never

again. And always he found a way to break that promise. To prolong their illicit relationship, to delay their inevitable parting.

How much longer did he intend to play this destructive game? There could be only one ending. He knew it as surely as he knew the sun would rise in the East each morning.

He rose from the bed and walked to the window. He leaned against the ancient stone, resting his head against his forearm as he stared, unseeing, into the darkness beyond.

His proud Elyesha would never forgive him for leaving. She would curse him, search for him, call his name. But eventually her love would crumble, and in time she would find another. A fitting consort who wouldn't deny her everything she desired. Everything her destiny demanded.

Acid burned his throat at the image of Elyesha with another man. But he had no choice. He had to let her go, or stay and watch her decay from bitterness and unfulfilled dreams.

His heart, which for thirteen glorious years had known a happiness he had never dared to envisage, withered. He pressed his fist against his forehead, dug his elbow deep into the uncaring stone, but physical pain didn't touch the yawning chasm splitting his soul asunder.

Elyesha stirred, forcing open her heavy eyelids. Ben stood by the arched window, and by the silvery moonlight she admired his perfectly proportioned body, from his broad shoulders to his tight buttocks and long, muscular legs.

He was all she needed in life. All she would ever need.

And as she gazed at him framed by the window, a shooting star sped across the heavens, leaving a sparkling trail before it disappeared beyond her line

of vision. She held her breath, shifted her focus to the waxing moon and closed her eyes. "Great Hecate, hear my prayer. Allow me Ben for all eternity, and I will face any trial you send me."

Elyesha leaned over the stone parapet of the tallest tower, and focused her powers on the dark forest which shrouded the castle from mortal view.

He was late. Again. How could he be late tonight, when they hadn't seen each other yesterday? Was this his way of punishing her for acquiescing to her grandmother's wishes?

Streaks of scarlet tinged the night sky, and a sliver of alarm splintered her impatience. Dawn approached, but still her lover remained absent.

"Ben," she called to him with her mind, and his name rippled through the continuum like a diamond dropped into a still lake. Silent echoes of the void mocked her rising panic and Elyesha grasped the ancient stone as vertigo slammed through her brain.

Never before had her power failed her so utterly. Even in the past when Ben had ignored her calls, she'd still been able to feel the heat of his blood and the turmoil in his heart deep in the elemental recesses of her soul.

But now only fissures of ice snaked through her soul.

Her lungs contracted, the breath hissed from her body and her heart pounded an erratic tempo against her breast as an impossible truth clawed through her brain.

He had left her.

But she wouldn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. There had to be another reason why she could no longer feel his heart as she could her own, why she could no longer touch the outer edges of his troubled thoughts with her searching mind.

She could tell herself a million reasons why the

connection between them had severed. The idea of Ben's death haunted her. If he had died, she would have felt his death agonies as acutely as if the death were hers.

He severed their connection. The knowledge tore through her, acidic and vile, and she raised her eyes to glare at the distant moon. For one eternal moment, the silvery disc shimmered black. Hecate's moon. The dark side.

Elyesha straightened. Her goddess was harsh, but just. She had called upon Hecate, and Hecate had answered. If her trial was to search the earth for Ben, then it wasn't so terrible.

Elyesha's powers were formidable, and she was young. She would find her lover within the year or perish trying.

Present Day

“*Ben.*”

The whisper caressed his senses, but he continued to stare at the dark, foam tossed sea. He wouldn't turn around. Wouldn't give in to his twisted fantasies and give them substance.

“I need you, Ben.” Her voice, as gentle and seductive as he remembered caused his gut to tighten. Would her memory forever haunt him?

“I've always needed you.”

He dragged in a chest full of the salt tinged air, searing his lungs with the chill of the night. Had she really found him again? Or had his mind finally unhinged? “But I don't need you, Elyesha.” It was a lie. They both knew it.

Her arms snaked around his waist, and his heart jerked in shock. *She was truly there.* Rigid with disbelief, he felt the heat from her body sink through the leather of his jacket and the linen of his shirt. With Elyesha, nothing was impossible.

“One last night, Ben. For old times sake.” Her breath against his ear was an erotic foretaste of the pleasures she offered, but the price was too high. He couldn't afford to give in to his weakness.

“We had our last night. Years ago.” The timbre of his voice betrayed his need. This woman was in his blood and no matter how he fought against it, she always would be. “There's nothing left to say. Go back to your world and leave me in peace.”

She sighed, fragile as spun glass and relentless as the waves crashing against the shore. “You know I can't do that.”

Yes, of course he knew Elyesha could never leave him in peace now that she'd found him again. Her nature demanded the impossible, always refusing to acknowledge how incompatible they were. From the night they'd met, he'd known their souls were as opposed as light and dark. Yet he had allowed her vivacity to enslave him. *And she enslaved him still.* His hands covered hers and the chill of them struck him.

"I love you, Ben."

"No." His voice seemed to come from a great distance, where time and shadows merged. She had loved him once. But that had been long ago. She couldn't possibly still feel the same, not after the way he'd left her without a word. The way he'd deliberately ignored her haunting call through all the desolate years. "You can't love me. You haven't the first idea how to love me."

She slid against him, every tempting curve of her body a sensual reminder of other nights they'd shared, until the danger of losing what little sanity he retained had become too great. "Poor Ben." She sounded sorrowful. "Of course, I know how to love you. I can show you how much I love you..." Elyesha stood before him, arms linked around him, enslaving him with gossamer threads he had no desire to destroy.

Fire raged through Ben's veins and his hands captured her head, fingers tangling in the black length of her hair. "Your love will send us straight to hell," he said. But what did it matter? He'd been in hell for too many years. What did eternity mean to him?

Arms winding around his neck, her nails dug into his flesh. "It doesn't have to be this way," she said. Ben wanted to believe her, but he knew the truth. "You shouldn't have left without a word, Ben. You must have known I would find you eventually—

somehow.”

“And now you have.”

“I won’t let you go again.”

He laughed at that. Even now she was so proud, so sure of herself, so confident of her power. How had he forgotten how stubborn she could be? “It isn’t up to you, Elyesha.”

“Yes. It is.”

Elyesha stared into his dark eyes, willing him to believe. He’d laughed, but now his face was a mask, his emotions hidden. A sudden chill snaked along her spine. Did he still have emotions? Despite how he’d shattered her heart, deep in her soul she’d never doubted his love. Through all the empty nights she’d told herself he had left because of his cursed sense of honor. Had she made a terrible mistake? His thumb traced the curve of her cheek, warming her frigid skin. She’d been so cold over the long years that had passed. Couldn’t he see that they belonged together?

“What is it you really missed?” His breath was warm against the chill of the night and she leaned toward the heat, wanting it, needing it, lifting her face so he could see her hunger.

“Us,” she breathed against his lips. “I heard you calling me. I felt your pain. You can tell me it’s over, but I will see the truth in your eyes. I always have.”

His dark head lowered toward her and she dragged her fingers through his long luxuriant hair. How she loved the smooth, silky strands as they flowed across her palm, tantalizing her with memories of deep velvet nights and hot promises of eternity.

His lips captured hers, teasing, tasting, and her frozen heart melted beneath the probing heat of his tongue. Yes, this was why she’d followed him across continents, over land and sea, through space and

time. Ben was her reason for existing, the one she'd sacrificed her destiny for and there was nothing on this earth that would tear her from his side this time.

Least of all Death.

Heedless of the bitter winter breeze, she slid her hands beneath his linen shirt and shivered with renewed desire as her fingers trailed over his muscular chest. So strong. So fearless, and yet he feared her. She knew this, had always known it, but even now could scarcely believe it.

She pressed her palm against his chest, and the steady beat of his heart sent her pulses soaring, damp heat slicking her aching pussy. It had been too long since she'd been in his arms, too long since she'd felt this craving deep in her soul. Nothing but black emptiness had filled her since this man had abandoned her to her lonely fate so many moons ago.

"You should go." His words penetrated the fog clouding her mind and in answer she pressed closer, melding her body with his, pressing her swollen clit against his hot cock. "Elyesha," his voice was tortured with suspended lust. "You know why I left... Why I must always leave you..."

She twisted against him, throbbing nipples straining against the fine silk of her bodice. "No. I don't know why, Ben." If she dared to release him for one precious moment, she would rip the gown from her body and find a modicum of satisfaction caressing her naked flesh against his. "Together we could be equal—but alone I wander in the dark. Is that what you want? To break my heart because you're afraid of what might be?"

His body tensed, all hard muscle and sinewy strength, but he didn't release her. "This gets us nowhere. We walk in different worlds, Elyesha. We always have and always will. There's no place we can meet as equals, and you know it. Yet you

continue to haunt me with your foolish dreams and fantasies.”

“As you haunt me.” Her nails scraped along his flesh, drawing blood, and he shuddered with a desire he couldn’t deny. “It’s the price we pay for who we are, Ben.”

Slowly she slithered down his rigid body, palms sliding over linen and leather. She sighed with pleasure as her searching fingers curled around the hard, throbbing heat of his shaft, releasing him from the leather confines, and his desperate groan thrilled her heart.

Kneeling before him, she gazed upward. A stark silhouette against the full moon, Ben no longer looked fully human; with his long flowing hair, preternatural height, and silver-red glow in his eyes, he could have been a primeval forebear, an alien ancestor of mankind.

The thought excited her, sent tremors of heat dancing through her blood. Tonight, now, Ben was hers. The way she had planned for so many empty years.

Her last chance.

She leaned forward, her warm breath caressing the engorged head of his cock, before she curled her fingers around his thick, pulsing erection. The tip of her tongue flicked across his slit, teasing him, tempting him, but the primal taste of his ferocious arousal sent her spinning toward oblivion.

Not yet. She drew on the wispy remnants of her magic to focus on the moment. She widened her mouth around him, lips sealing his massive head, before slowly sucking him deep into her warm, wet mouth.

He let out a harsh curse in his ancient mother tongue, as trembling fingers traced the outline of her face. Looking up, Elyesha saw his tortured expression; part ecstasy, part insanity. Devastating

emotions that had equally blessed and cursed them both since the dawn of their doomed love.

Fleeting regret speared her heart for all their lost chances. But it was too late to lament the past. Tonight was all she had, and tomorrow was beyond her grasp.

She tightened her fingers around the base of his cock while her other hand cupped his balls, feeling their weight, before scraping her fingernails over his sac.

His reaction was instantaneous and infinitely gratifying. His balls tightened, drew upward, and his fingers closed around her head as he slowly thrust forward, burying his penis within her. Elyesha swirled her tongue around his swollen shaft, stroked his taut sac, and inhaled his heady male scent deep into her lungs.

Alive. He made her feel so incredibly, deliriously *alive*. How could he turn from their love? Did it matter what it cost them both?

His body trembled with need, and Elyesha slowly pulled back, before once again sucking him deep into her mouth. Ben's fingers shook as he grasped her hair and primordial power filled her at the knowledge that, despite his words, he needed her as much as she needed him.

She stroked the base of his shaft, slid her fingers beyond and teased the sensitive spot behind his balls, as she made love to him with her mouth. He ground out an inarticulate curse, and although she was the one kneeling before him, the suppliant was Ben.

Ben's hands descended to her shoulders and he pulled her roughly to her feet, barely registering the exquisite pain as her teeth grazed against his straining erection. The moonlight cast silver shards across her face, but he remembered well enough the

strange amber glow of Elyesha's beautiful cat-like eyes, the way her pupils dilated with primitive passion when aroused.

How could he not remember? Not a night had passed that he hadn't thought of her. Dreamed of her. Cursed and worshipped her very existence within the same frenzied moment.

Her breath reminded him of summer meadows and gurgling brooks, of sunlight and cool breezes, a vision recalled from a dream or memory before the darkness descended. Before Elyesha had woven her spell and driven out his illusion of peace. "Your magic doesn't work on me," he said, as he dragged her against his tortured body. It was true. Her magic held no power against his kind, but she'd enslaved him just the same.

"Take me with you," she whispered against his lips, and he caught the elusive scent of his mad desire on her warm breath. "Don't abandon me again."

His hands snaked beneath her long woollen cloak, and he groaned as the cool silk of her dress slid over his searching fingers. "I can't give you what you want."

"You can. I want only you."

He cupped her full breast, his thumb caressing the hard peak of her nipple. She leaned into his touch, a silent sigh escaping her full, dark lips. "What of your daughter, Elyesha? Doesn't she matter to you anymore?"

She tensed beneath his probing fingers and, for a timeless heartbeat, he regretted his words. Yet he wanted to hurt her, the way she hurt him, but it was a hollow victory when her pain only magnified his.

"I'll never have a daughter. That opportunity is dead to me now."

His lips grazed her jaw. "You need a daughter to continue your line. It's always been the way of your

kind.” He breathed in her elusive, musky scent and his body ached to sink into hers, to feel her hot, wet cunt clasp around him, hear her scream his name as he fucked her for all eternity and beyond. “Don’t lie to me. Your magic failed you before.” *And so had his.* “It will always fail you.”

“I don’t need my magic for this.” She dug her fingers into his skull, pain and desire mingling as they shared a desperate kiss that sent reality spinning.

Heat, red and lethal, raced through her veins, pooling with molten want between her thighs. His arms enslaved her, hard as iron, and yet she knew he was oblivious to his strength. Unaware of just how easily he could crush her with his passion.

She didn’t care. It wouldn’t matter if her life force were extinguished. She could feel the beat of his heart, hear the rasp of his breath, touch the warm vitality of his body and that was all she’d dreamed of since her girlhood vision.

It had been too late, even then, to turn her back on her destiny. Even if she’d wanted to.

“You’ll regret this.” He dragged his hands from her body and cupped her face. “We both will.”

Despite the heat his touch evoked, a chill snaked along her spine. She had been here before, in his arms, and tried to reason with him. Deep in her memories, the dream stirred, and she recalled with searing clarity the first time she’d ever seen Ben’s face.

He’d come to her in a dream, a vision, as her grandmother had predicted. Dark and dangerous, offering her the chance of a love beyond all her kind could imagine. And she’d welcomed him with open arms, a trusting heart, and eager body.

But that had been her fantasy. An elusive shimmer between life and death, a tantalizing taste

of what might be, if only she could find him in the physical world.

In her vision, while still a young girl, Ben left her. And then, countless years later, in the real world, he vanished from her life.

This time, there would be no escape for either of them.

"I'm damned already." She ripped his scarlet shirt, heedless of the perishing wind that tore at his naked chest. "Why not be damned together, Ben? Isn't that what you really want, beneath your civilized words of protest?"

He laughed, a deep resonant laugh that echoed along the lonely beach and vibrated against every sensitised nerve in her body. Head flung back, his dark hair whipped in the breeze and Elyesha caught her breath at his stark, terrifying beauty. Did she really imagine she could control this man? She'd forgotten the depth of his archaic power, the potency of his own mysterious magic and for one eternal moment she trembled on the edge of doubt.

And then he looked at her, and her heart thundered against her ribs in urgent denial. She couldn't live without Ben—had no desire to live without him. But was she strong enough deep in her soul to survive by his side?

She saw his eyes glitter from the pale gleam of the moon, saw the flash of his white teeth as he curled his lips in a mockery of a smile. Terror gripped her as lethal as acid. Could he see that thread of doubt, had he seen her fear all along? Was that the reason he'd left her to die a lingering mortal death?

"Yes." The word swirled around her head, and for one trembling moment she wondered if Ben could read her mind. It wouldn't surprise her—nothing Ben did could surprise her—but if he knew her fear she would lose him forever.

He slid her cloak over her shoulders, and she gasped as fingers of ice snaked into the heart of her being. He drew her into his embrace, and the heat of his body protected her from the elements even as cold fear clawed at her mind.

"I'm damned for all eternity for loving you," he said, his voice raw with need. "And yes, I want you by my side to share the guilt of my cursed existence. But my life isn't your life, Elyesha. You need a daughter to live, and our combined power isn't strong enough to grant you that wish." His lips caressed her hair, and she shuddered in his arms as her fear melted beneath his touch.

"It's too late," she whispered. "I'm too old to conceive my child now, Ben."

His laugh rumbled in his chest, a mirthless laugh that might have hurt her once, long ago. "Too old?" His voice was mocking, and yet his arms tightened around her as if afraid she might pull away. "Look at yourself, Elyesha. You could have a dozen daughters if you wanted."

She struggled against his arms, pushed her hands against his naked chest, stared up into his angry eyes. "Look at me, Ben. And tell me what you see."

Fury pumped through his body as he glared at the woman in his arms. She was as beautiful now as she had been on the day she'd first exploded into his existence as a young, innocent girl. He couldn't remember, now, how long ago that had been.

"I see a woman in the prime of her life," he told her and every fiber of his being wanted to sling her aside. Had she no idea how he hated what he was? How he wished he could give her what her heart most desired? "A woman who risks destroying her destiny through lust."

He saw her eyes fill with pain. "You are my

destiny, Ben. Do you really think I had a choice in the man I loved? My grandmother tried to warn me once she discovered the truth of my vision, but it was no use. My heart was yours before we even met.”

“Foolish prophecies. You know I have no time for them.” And yet he believed. He always had, for his own bloodline was even more ancient than Elyesha’s, even more intimate in the ways of the old gods than her foremothers were. “Your vision never promised a happy ending, did it?”

“How could it? All it ever promised was endless love.”

“All things end.” His voice was bitter with the knowledge of how bleak his existence would be when Elyesha had gone from this world. He thrust the thought back to hell because Elyesha was here with him now, and now was all that could matter.

“Not always.” Her voice was soft, coaxing, and her fingers caressed his taut cock. Could it really matter if he took her one last time? “It doesn’t have to end tonight. You know this. Will you deny me yet again?”

His fingers tangled in her hair, and he was consumed by the violent wave of love and hate that washed over him. Elyesha drove him to the edge of sanity and that was why he’d left her. And yet, in her arms, he found the only peace he’d ever known.

“You know I must.” He ground out the words against her soft cheek, and his love encompassed the hate, denied the hunger that gnawed his heart, and smothered the deep yearning that begged him to take what she so willingly offered.

“Do you love me?” She pulled back and he stared into the face that had haunted his waking dreams for years without number. The face he’d grown to love before the girl had ever entered his world. How could he laugh at her prophecy, when he’d shared it with her?

“You know I do.” There was no point denying something they both knew. He’d left her because it was the only way to save her. But instead of accepting his decision, she had used her mystical arts to follow him to the ends of the earth. Just as she’d promised. And despite everything, deep in his tortured soul, he always knew she would find him. Had wanted her to find him. But as the years flowed by, his conviction had wavered.

But never his love. Ah, gods no, never his love for this enticing witch. And tonight, when his guard was down, she’d found him and despite his words he knew he never wanted to face another night without her by his side.

She abandoned his throbbing cock and wound her arms around his neck. With infinite deliberation she crushed her full breasts against his naked chest, and her aroused nipples seared him. “Then forget your principles.” Her whisper, a seductive entreaty, threatened his sanity. His hands slid down her slender back, silk and skin, her feminine curves reminding him of everything he once had lost.

He kissed her neck, drinking in the rapid beat of her pulse, inhaling the sweet scent of her rich blood beneath the fragile barrier of skin. His teeth teased her earlobe, nibbling on the tender flesh, his tongue tormenting the sensitive entrance to her ear. She sighed and trembled in his arms as he molded her against his unyielding desire.

“Stay with me.” He ground out the demand. “But don’t ask me for the impossible.” He would never take her freedom. But despite everything, he was still flesh and blood and it would be too easy to give her what she thought she wanted.

“No.” Her denial floated on the breeze, caught him unawares. “If I stay with you this time, it will be as your equal. There’s no other way, Ben.”

He thrust her from him, gripping her arms with

frustrated anger. “You hate my life! How many times did you try to change my destiny—our destiny? And each time you failed. How do you think that made me feel, Elyesha, to know how much it hurt when your magic couldn’t change who I am?”

“You wanted that, too. And when we knew that wasn’t to be, I was willing to join you on your terms. I knew what I asked. I always have! But this time, there’s no going back. It’s all or nothing. That’s why I had to find you—before it’s too late.”

His fingers bit into her soft skin, but she flung back her head and returned his glare. Damn this woman for stripping away his defenses, for exposing his vulnerable core, for being the only one in a millennium who had ever touched his cynical heart. “There’s nothing you can say to change my mind.” He relaxed his grip but still held her fast, as unwilling to let her go as he was to grant her foolish demand.

Her lips parted as she gasped for breath. Her bewitching eyes glittered in the moonlight and, for one brief moment, he imagined he saw tears.

But that was madness. His Elyesha never cried.

“I’m dying, Ben.” Her soft words rocked him to his foundation and caused him to jerk back in denial.

“No,” he said, and his heart slammed against his chest. It couldn’t be true. Her words seared into his brain, and he grappled with the appalling void her death would tear in the fabric of his existence. “You’re too young to die—you have the power to hold back Death, Elyesha.”

“But not for eternity.”

His throat constricted as an unknown terror gripped his vocal chords. A thousand years of wandering the earth hadn’t prepared him for this moment, hadn’t prepared him for the sweeping abyss that threatened to suck him into its treacherous sphere.

“There must be something you can do.” The words rasped from his throat, as though he spoke an alien tongue. “Or your grandmother...” Elyesha’s grandmother, the powerful witch who had tried to destroy him when she’d realized who he was.

When she’d realized *what* he was.

Elyesha laughed, a sad, wistful laugh, and shook her head. “My grandmother died almost thirty years ago,” she said, and her glossy black hair danced in the bitter wind.

“No.” He couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t believe it. “It hasn’t been that long—”

“Longer.” She breathed the word and he saw the truth in her eyes. “While you sleep, time still passes in my world, Ben.”

He wound her hair around his fist, pressed the silken threads against his face. Life, laughter, and brilliant sunlight exploded against his closed eyes, clawed at his guts, ripped his principles to shreds. He’d always known his Elyesha was mortal, that one day she would die. But that day was in the future, a future he couldn’t contemplate.

The future was today.

He flung back his head and roared his anger into the dark, uncaring night. His choice was clear—break his vow and take his love with him or stand by and watch her die.

He dragged her against him, burying his hands in her hair. Her beautiful black hair, which only now he realised was sprinkled with threads of pure silver. “My only love.”

She raised her head. “There’s never been anyone else for me. Not even after you left. So many wasted years...”

But through all those desolate years, Elyesha survived somewhere in the world. He couldn’t hold her, but he could dream of her and imagine she’d found some measure of happiness with a man who

could fulfil her destiny.

But her destiny wasn't his to shape. It was theirs to share.

"I promised I would never damn you," he said, his hands cradling her head, his eyes devouring her beloved face. The face of an angel still, despite the tracings of age and pain he now discerned. "And as the years passed, it became harder to honor my vow. That's why I left, Elyesha. Because I was afraid that one night I'd drag you into my twilight existence."

"Not drag." Her voice was a whisper. "I come willingly. I would have always come willingly."

His thumbs caressed her chilled skin. "Never to walk in the sun again... to be reviled by your loved ones..."

"You are my sun." She smiled at him then, a haunting smile that tore at what remained of his heart. "And my loved ones are gone from this earth. I'm the last of my line, Ben. I choose to spend eternity with you, but only you can invite me in."

She watched the agony wreath his features and her soul contracted for the pain he suffered. Her beloved Ben, with his chivalrous heart, forever cursed by the kiss of the damned and the demons let loose in his blood. Despised and feared by her kin, but they hadn't known the man beneath the mask.

"There will be no going back." His breath was hot against her neck, his lips gentle, his teeth sharp. "Stop me now, if you must, or embrace my way of life forever."

She wound her arms around his strong, vital body and her heart hammered against her ribs. "This is what I want," she whispered and with a low growl in the back of his throat he ripped the bodice from her breasts, his veneer of civilized restraint finally abandoned.

He cupped her breast and she pressed into him,

gasping with pleasure as he rolled her swollen nipple between finger and thumb, causing unbearable need to radiate throughout her body. The chill of the night faded as Ben lowered his dark head and took her breast into his hot mouth, suckling her as though ravenous, the tips of his razor sharp fangs grazing the sensitized flesh around her areole.

Elyesha speared her fingers through his luxuriant hair and flung back her head, eyes glazing at the myriad stars sprinkled across the moonlit sky. His fangs pierced her breast, pleasure and pain flooding her senses, and then his tongue lapped hungrily at the warm blood seeping from her miniscule wounds.

When he made to rise, she held him firm, pressing his head against her aching breast. "Bite me," she commanded, her voice husky with desire. "Suck my blood, Ben. Take me now."

He laughed against her flushed flesh, but lifted his face to hers all the same. "Patience," he said, the wild flame in his eyes belying his word. And then his mouth claimed hers, his tongue parting her lips in a quest to enter, and she opened up for him, welcoming his frenzied invasion. Tongue duelled tongue, and the coppery taste of her own blood inflamed her.

Elyesha's fingernails clawed down his chest, across his taut stomach, and dragged his leather pants over his lean hips. She wanted him naked against her, hot flesh against hot flesh, tearing her mouth from his as she slithered down the length of his body.

With a growl of possession, Ben hauled her back into his arms, one hand cradling the back of her neck to ensure she couldn't escape. His other hand roved over her aching breasts, cupping their heavy weight before rolling her nipples between his fingers until Elyesha moaned desperately within his

searching mouth.

His hand dipped lower, tugging the silken material of her ruined gown until it whispered over her legs to pool at her feet. She kicked free and caressed her naked body against him, rotating her hips until her swollen clit pressed snugly against the inside of his thigh.

His fangs pierced her tongue and she hovered on the precipice between agony and ecstasy, unable to move, unable to speak. Ben's hold around her neck tightened, as he thrust his knee between her legs, forcing them apart, and her clit throbbed with anguished denial.

Ben smiled against her lips, but his fangs sank deeper, and Elyesha's breath caught in her throat as she felt him suck on the tip of her tongue. As his tongue probed her captive mouth, his hand cupped her aching sex and she arched into him, desperate for more intimate contact.

His finger stroked her wet clit, teasing, caressing, before sliding within her. Her vagina convulsed, drawing him further in. Only Ben could alleviate the aching chasm that her lonely soul and shattered heart had become.

His pant of desire filled her mouth, and at last his fangs released her. She thrust her throbbing tongue between his lips, mimicking the erotic action of his finger buried within her pussy, rocking herself against him, gasping her own spiralling desire against his teeth.

And then, without warning, he hooked his finger within her grasping pussy finding her magical spot, and Elyesha's entire body pulsed with a renewed wave of exquisite sensation.

Ben growled deep in his throat, and the vibrations hummed along Elyesha's quivering flesh. As her clit throbbed and her cunt contracted, Ben released her neck and with superlative speed slipped

both hands beneath her cloak. Within a blink of infinity, his hands molded the curve of her bottom, hoisting her up with inhuman strength.

Elyesha wrapped her legs around his hips and wound her arms around his shoulders. His strength inflamed her and as he plunged into her she flung back her head, screaming her pleasure into the wintry, salt tinged night.

He thrust into her, again and again, and she greedily sucked him deep within her body. Each stroke of his shaft against her clit intensified her orgasm as her vaginal muscles clenched with heavenly passion.

This was why she had searched eternity for him.

His sharp teeth grazed her neck, hot breath sending shudders of anticipation racing along every nerve ending. As his fangs pierced her skin, another violent orgasm shattered through her and hot juices flooded her pussy, quivering muscles contracted around his thrusting shaft.

As he sank deep into her neck, throbbing agony seared deeper into her vein. The pain was pleasure; the pleasure was dark, demanding. All encompassing, obliterating the world of men and all its earthly prejudices.

Into the heat of her blood, Ben roared with his mind, his heart, his tortured soul as his orgasm exploded deep within her pulsating cunt. And intertwined with his every thought, love shimmered. Love for her, infinite and eternal, as necessary to his existence as the night itself. She could feel his cock pumping at the neck of her womb; could feel his fangs embedded within her neck, searching out her secrets, her desires. Her deepest fears.

“Ben.” Her cry was soundless as she surrendered her mortality to the man she loved. Blood and tears, life and death, nothing mattered as her heart joined with her lover’s.

An amber sunset played in her mind, copper fingers reflecting in the ocean as her mortal ravages of age and disease flowed away. Her life-blood...

The darkness claimed her, wrapping her in soft velvet that soothed her trembling limbs and calmed her fevered mind. So peaceful, so quiet...so lonely. *But she had paid Hecate's price of loneliness and mortal pain for years without number—surely the goddess wouldn't desert her now, not when her heart's desire was so tantalizingly within reach?*

"Elyesha." From beyond the sun, from the dark side of the moon, Ben whispered her name and she struggled against the ephemeral coil that bound her. Sweet heat flowed over her lips, through her frozen veins and a wave of raw ecstasy carried her to the shore.

Gasping, she opened her eyes and Ben was above her, holding her in his arms, protecting her from evil. She reached up, slid her fingers through his long hair, and her sensitised skin shivered with awe.

"Are we equal now, my love?" he said, and a smile of infinite beauty tugged his lips.

Relief, love, and desire filled her veins, filled her heart. She smiled back at him, and her hand slid around his neck. "Yes. Now we are equal. For eternity."

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