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Falling for Anthony

By

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Chapter One



Appearances are almost always deceiving
The Doyen Scrolls

London, ENGLAND
MARCH 1811

A single glimpse at the disarray in Colin's bedchamber and, the valet's harried expression was all Anthony Ramsdell needed to determine that his best course of action would be to exit, and quickly. Colin Ames-Beaumont, the younger son of the Earl of Norbridge, could not be hurried in his dress—neither the most pleasurable entertainment nor the most beautiful woman could ever induce him to leave the house before every fold of his cravat lay perfectly in place—and anyone who happened to be in his vicinity at that time could be subject to his valet's attentions, should Colin judge that person unfashionable in any way.

Anthony had made that mistake more than once, and though his green waistcoat, black coat, and tan breeches might pass Colin's inspection, his linen lacked the proper amount of starch and was no longer blindingly white. His evening shoes, though he'd done his best to shine them, were scuffed from regular use. His chestnut hair had grown too long in the front; Colin had chided him the week before for letting it fall into his eyes like a schoolboy—a look, Colin had observed, that ruined his own sartorial perfection by association. As Colin had only been half-joking, Anthony was certain if he stepped into the room the valet would have scissors out in a trice.

Self-preservation sent him retreating downstairs, smiling. He couldn't be annoyed by his friend's vanity; he understood Colin too well for that. He was only glad that the other man had recently changed his style from brightly colored silks and cosmetics to the simple elegance of a dandy—even if that elegance took him almost two hours to achieve and, by all appearances, was now only beginning the second hour.

Knowing from experience how that time could drag on, Anthony headed for the earl's study. He'd been a frequent guest in the house for years, spending as much time with the Ames-Beaumonts as with his own family, and the study had always been one of his favorite rooms. Though much smaller than the library at the earl's ancestral home in Derbyshire, it held a significant selection of volumes, with enough variety to satisfy Norbridge's mercurial taste and Anthony's predictable one.

He knocked once on the door out of habit—when he'd been a boy, the earl had always required him to announce his presence in that manner—and chuckled self-consciously. Norbridge wasn't inside and would not issue an authoritative command to enter; Anthony had met with him that morning and, their business

completed, Norbridge had left for Derbyshire shortly thereafter.

Thinking of the agreement they'd reached, hollow resignation settled in Anthony's stomach. In two days, he would join Norbridge's good friend, Major-General Cole, on the Peninsula to serve as his personal physician for as long as the campaign against Napoleon persisted. Norbridge had shaped the proposal as a request, but Anthony had recognized it for what it was: a demand for repayment of a debt.

A debt Anthony readily acknowledged, but would have preferred to settle another way.

Any other way.

He sighed, closing the door behind him and walking along the bookshelves lining the adjacent wall. Furnished with dark, heavy wood and rich fabrics, the room was an impoverished scholar's luxurious dream; Anthony took little notice of or pleasure in his surroundings. He hadn't indulged in a bout of self-pity since childhood, but as he stared blankly at a leather-bound volume of *Paradise Lost*, he thought spending the next hour privately whining to himself might be just the thing.

The sudden clang of metal against stone drew his attention to the opposite end of the library, and the invectives Anthony had been planning to hurl against God silently expired on his tongue. Colin's twin sister, Lady Emily, stood with her back to him, hair unbound, swinging a sword wildly at the marble fireplace; the blade skidded across the mantle, knocking books and a small statue to the floor. A deep scar in the stone revealed where she'd struck the first blow.

"Emily?" Surprise gave his query a sharp edge, and he briefly wondered if she'd been sent by some higher power to purposely torment him on this day of all days. Another reminder of everything he could never have and shouldn't want to have.

Emily had constantly been at his and Colin's sides until they had begun attending public school. Anthony had suffered a childish infatuation with her, and his teenage years had been fraught with frustrated longing. But her head had been filled with romantic dreams and noblemen, and she'd never looked twice at her brother's poor, untitled playmate.

Eventually, he had outgrown his feelings for her, and they had become friends. Their meetings had been brief and infrequent of late years, however, due to his medical studies and her social schedule.

Having recently passed his exams, he'd thought to enjoy her bright and humorous company more often, and to renew their friendship—but Spain and his duty to her father would make that impossible.

His certainty that he was the butt of a cosmic joke faded when she stiffened, and the sword froze mid-swing. She turned to glare at him and spoke through clenched teeth. Firelight glinted against trails of moisture on her cheeks. "Get out, Anthony. I don't want to hurt you."

He eyed the sword warily but didn't move. If she'd simply been weeping over some feminine dilemma, he would have been the gentleman and left, but concern for

her safety prevented him from leaving her alone to act out her rage and violence.

He had thought he'd witnessed all of her moods, but the pinch of her elegant brow and the angry, bitter slant to her mouth was new. Emily possessed a perpetually sunny, dreamy disposition; over their long acquaintance, he'd seen her upset only a few times. It would not be too difficult to help her regain her natural good humor. He would stay until she did, and until he was certain she would cause no harm to herself.

And despite her warning, he did not feel he would be in danger. He had no fear that Emily would turn on him.

He attempted a smile and said, "Hurt *me*? And what have I done? Inadvertently criticized a new hair ribbon?" Though he strove for a light tone, it came out stiffly, as if he meant to insult her.

She stared at him for a long moment before presenting her back to him.

Anthony bit back a sigh, a flush crawling up his neck. He'd forgotten that around Emily, his humor seemed to twist, and he invariably sounded like an idiot or a prig. Perhaps it would be better to fetch Colin; Anthony might not be up to the task.

That would mean leaving her alone, however, and he was loath to do that, even for a few moments. To cover his embarrassed silence, he crossed the room and chose a seat on the green velvet sofa angled between the desk and the hearth. From that vantage point, she stood in profile to him, and he studied her features as best he could. The firelight danced across the gold of her hair but left her expression shadowed. Her shoulders were squared, and she kept a tight grip on the handle of the sword. The tumble of hair down her back and the long column of her dress should have softened the impression of rigidity in her posture; instead it lent a tight, brittle cast to her form, like a porcelain figurine on the verge of shattering.

Discarding any further attempts at humor, he said quietly, "Has something happened, Emily?"

She gave a hard, short laugh. "How astute you are, doctor! Are you so observant with all of your patients? Obviously, *something* has happened."

His color rose again, but this time his embarrassment was tinged with anger that she would mock his concern. He tamped down both feelings; at least she was responding to him.

He hesitated and then ventured, "Has yet another suitor disappointed you, then?" In the five years since her debut she'd had scores of admirers and nearly as many proposals—none of which had been to her satisfaction.

"*Yet another*?" she repeated, her voice rising with each syllable. She whirled to face him. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes large. He knew they appeared hazel in the sunlight, striated with green and blue; now, they were dark with fury. "I detect disapproval, Anthony—"

He shook his head. "No, I only meant—"

"And who do you think you are to disapprove of *me*?" She threw her hands up, and he instinctively drew back from the swipe of the blade. It hadn't come near him, but he kept a cautious eye on it as she continued her tirade, hacking the air to punctuate each question. "Do you think my dreams of love are not worth pursuing? Do you think them so worthless, so impossible? Is it so ridiculous to believe that love can be all-consuming and true, and to *wait* for that before pledging myself for eternity to a man who can't be what I want him to be? Am I a fool to think I can have that? Are my expectations too great, my requirements too exacting?"

Her voice broke on the last, and for just a moment, she seemed to withdraw into herself before gathering and refocusing her anger. Her wild jabs at the air ceased, and she pointed the tip of the sword at Anthony with cold deliberation.

"And what of your dreams, Anthony?"

He looked away from the blade, startled by the sudden change in her demeanor. Where she had been heat and fury, now she was ice and mockery. "What of them?" he said carefully, hoping she would not mention his youthful infatuation.

He'd never thought to see one of her smiles contain the cruelty of the one that now curved her lips. "Come now, Anthony—don't tell me you *wanted* to be a doctor. It was the most painless way for you to get a title other than 'Mister.' My father's suggestion, and you went along with it, allowed him to pay for your education, because you thought he'd make you *his* personal physician, and you and Colin could carry on as you always have, here in London."

A hot, dull flash crawled up Anthony's cheeks. He hadn't realized she knew the particulars of his debt to her father. And he couldn't refute her other charges—he hadn't been hungry for a title, but he had wanted to advance his position in society so he wouldn't be bound by circumstances of his birth.

His gaze dropped to the scar on his palm, a lingering reminder of the blood-brother pact he and Colin had performed years before. They had used the earl's sword—the one Emily now wielded so casually—and, afterward, his hand had become swollen and he feverish. His mother had said the infection was to remind him of his place, to remind him of his duty to help raise the family from their straightened circumstances.

Anthony had never asked if the earl had found similar meaning in Colin's sickness.

"And you'd never have to return to the family that rejected you for lowering yourself. The family that would rather have you remain a starving, indebted gentleman than work in a profession, even as their house falls into disrepair around them." She paused for a breath. "But perhaps your jaunt on the Peninsula will make you a hero, and you will restore the family name and fortune."

He'd thought Emily couldn't hurt him, but she didn't need the sword to do that. He regarded her silently, pain and resentment thrumming under his skin. Everything about her declared her station in life: the pale peach walking dress skimming over her curves was of the finest cut and cloth; the way she held herself erect, the sweep of her neck, the high planes of her cheeks, the softness of her hands all confirmed the

ease and luxury that permeated her existence. She would never understand his dismay at her father's suggestion that he join Cole in Spain. She could never conceive of the shame that came from being reminded of his place by the very man who had offered him hope of something better.

He didn't know what had come over her to speak to him as she had, but if he stayed in this room much longer, he was going to say something he would regret. With stiff lips, he said, "My lady, I must beg leave—"

But her thoughts must have also strayed to her father, for her gaze turned inward and she continued as if he hadn't spoken, "What you have failed to learn is that we—Colin, you, and I—are nothing to my father. Only Henry and my nephew matter to him, because Henry is the heir, and Robert is Henry's heir. My father is on his way to Derbyshire now, to fawn over the boy as his twelfth birthday approaches. He expected me to join them in their adoration—but children cannot interest me." Her mouth trembled and she looked away from Anthony, and her tone softened. "But I can hardly fault you for your stupidity; I myself have only just realized this today."

Compassion warred with his embarrassment and anger. The Countess of Norbridge had died in childbed after delivering Emily and Colin; the earl, deeply in love with his wife and stricken with grief, barely acknowledged their existence for the first years of their life, and only took a passing interest in them as they aged. He saved his attentions for Henry, who was ten years older. Emily had never seemed to mind her father's indifference—but perhaps that had not been the case, and she had suffered from it.

But his own wounds were too fresh to completely forgive her for exposing them, and his tone mocking as he replied, "And what other astounding revelations have you had today?"

Emily slanted him a cynical glance, hefting the sword. "That he cares more for this than he does for us." He followed her gaze as she examined the length of it, turning the short bronze blade from side to side. "It's been in my family for so long, the story of its origin can barely be credited: my ancestor, a knight, finding it during the Crusades and bringing it back from the Holy Lands. It never needs to be sharpened; it's never corrupted by age. I suspect my father cleans it at night, to keep its legend alive for my family. He usually keeps it in Derbyshire—except he's been spending so much time in London, he brought it to have it near him here." She tilted her head, her eyes glinting with dark curiosity. The hard edge to her voice returned. "I wonder what will happen if I smash it against stone a few more times?"

Anthony frowned and forgot about his intention to leave. "You won't be able to reverse the damage you do to it, Emily. Are you certain your anger—whatever the cause—is worth this?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed, and in a smooth, quick movement, she whipped around and slammed the tip of the sword straight into the marble. He shook his head in exasperation.

Then her cry of surprise sent him surging to his feet, crossing the short distance

to her side. Astonishment furrowed his brow.

She'd embedded the sword halfway into the stone.

Her hands fell away from the hilt, and she covered her mouth with shaking fingers. Her eyes were wide, and her voice trembled with light, genuine laughter—familiar laughter. "He apparently sharpened it *very* well."

This was the Emily he knew. Anthony grinned. "Apparently."

She continued to stare at the sword. "Have you ever seen anything like this? It is extraordinary, don't you agree?" She lowered her hands from her face, and Anthony saw the bright streak of crimson on her cheek.

He caught her wrist; turning it, he saw the thin line of blood welling from a shallow slice in her thumb.

"Oh!" Emily stared at the cut. "I didn't even feel it. When the sword stopped moving, it jarred my hand over the hilt, but I didn't realize I'd touched the blade."

"I have this," Anthony said, digging a clean handkerchief from his pocket.

Her fingers were long and delicate; the scent of lavender rose from her hair. The warmth of her skin against his seemed to gather and spiral directly to his loins. He ignored the sensation and forced another grin. "Aren't you fortunate I'm a physician? You could have bled to death from such a wound." His jest sounded strained to his own ears, and he hoped she wouldn't notice.

She lifted her gaze to his. Her humor had fled, and though he did not detect her previous bitterness in her expression, he could not determine her mood. His own anger had cooled, leaving behind embarrassment and a growing arousal—and her proximity made him doubly aware of both.

With the barest of smiles, she said, "You have the most amazing countenance—I can read every thought you have."

His hands stilled, the handkerchief half-wound around her thumb.

Absently raising the fingers of her uninjured hand to his brow, she smoothed back the forelock that had fallen into his eyes and murmured, "The lift of your eyebrow, the crinkle of your eyes, the corner of your mouth: they all give you away." She touched each feature as she spoke; admiration filled her expression, surprise—as if this was the first time she had *looked* at him. "It is so rare for a man to have such finely drawn features as you, and yet there is no doubt of your masculinity."

The tilt of her head was assessing; dumbstruck, he could not reply.

"You are truly beautiful; it is no wonder Colin has always kept you close to his side. You are a magnificent accessory, the perfect complement to him." Though her words stung, he knew she intended no insult; and, taken aback by her compliments, he could find no reply. He finished tying off the makeshift bandage in silence.

She looked past him, her eyes soft and unfocused. "When we were younger, I used to wish that you weren't so unsuitable, that one day you would discover you were the long-lost son of a duke or—"

He drew a sharp breath, and the sudden heavy weight in his chest made his voice harsh. "Don't be ridiculous."

Her tiny smile froze in place and became brittle again. "Yes, it was ridiculous. All of my dreams were." Pulling away from him, she grabbed the sword and yanked it from the stone. It slid out easily, as if from liquid.

Anthony turned away from her, collapsing onto the sofa before his legs gave out beneath him. *Even worse than not being noticed*, he decided, *was being noticed and found wanting*.

Some masochistic impulse made him watch the sway of her hips as she walked toward the earl's mahogany desk and placed the sword on its display stand. She paused for a moment, cast him a calculating glance, and slid her forefinger along the flat side of the blade. He followed its progress, and the image of that simple touch on his skin rose, unbidden.

When had her movements become so sensual? Was it deliberate?

Do not be a fool, he admonished himself. He was unsuitable. Considering the hopelessness of a match between them, only a witless idiot would think there was a possibility of his having her.

And the proof, he supposed, was that the most brainless part of his body liked the idea of having her very much.

"Are you upset with my father?" she asked softly—too softly. As if she were planning something.

He answered her carefully, uncertain of the motive behind her question. "No," he said finally. "I'm disappointed in myself for expecting too much."

She nodded, and her cool smile did not fade. "I did, too. We make quite a pair." She tapped the sword with her fingernail and then stepped away from the desk. "Perhaps I should find a way to let him know how disappointed I am."

Anthony nodded absently, disliking the direction the conversation was taking and searching wildly for a topic that would ease the icy tension that lingered in the room, that would leave them on a better footing before he left.

Before he could speak, Emily said, "I did have one other *astounding revelation* today. A rumor came to my attention, and I had to ascertain its truth for myself. I have just come from Cranborne Street, off Leicester Square."

Grateful that he would not have to come up with a subject, and relieved that she had shifted her attention to gossip, Anthony grinned slightly and prepared to laugh at some entertaining *on dit*.

Her color high, she added, "While I was there, I learned that if a woman takes a man's organ into her mouth, she can make him do anything she wishes."

He blinked, his smile paralyzed on his face, his mind unable to comprehend that the statement had come from *her*, his body, however, understood perfectly. The sudden, superb ache of his erection broke through the numbing hold shock had

placed on his other emotions: jealousy, concern, and desire fought to place words on his tongue.

Emily stole them away by lifting her skirts, straddling him, and capturing his lips with hers.

Chapter Two



There is not always a choice; alternatives are not always to be had;
there is not always a decision to make.

—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Surprise held Anthony's mouth immobile and closed under hers, and she slid her tongue along his bottom lip, demanding entry. The practiced caress brought Anthony to his senses; Emily shouldn't know how to kiss like that, and she certainly shouldn't be on his lap with her hemline bunched around her thighs.

He grasped her wrists tightly and pushed her upper body away from his. Her weight shifted against his rigid sex, and her name was a hoarse groan instead of a stern warning. "Emily!"

She stared at him, her face set. Her lips glistened from the kiss, but her expression was determined rather than passionate.

Deliberately, she rocked against him.

His breath hissed out from between clenched teeth as he fought for control. He should have tumbled her onto the floor, removed her from his person, and stopped this madness. He couldn't; she was a lady, a friend, and should be treated as such—even when she behaved as shockingly as this. Instead, he gave her a shake. "Do you wish to bring ruin to your family? Who taught you this?"

"A little bird," she replied; he shook her again for her flippancy and had to grit his teeth. Each movement of her body ground against his erection. "A bird of paradise," she added, her eyes flashing as if she dared him to reprimand her. "I had questions; she answered them."

"You went to a courtesan?" He couldn't begin to fathom it. He recalled her mention of a visit to Cranborne Street; though no longer a fashionable part of London, it had some claim to respectability. A courtesan—a very discreet one—could possibly pose as a widow and live among the gentry there. "Why?"

Her mouth pressed into a firm line. She turned her head and pulled against his grip.

Torn between relief and regret that she'd apparently abandoned her attempt at seduction, Anthony released her wrists. Her hands fell to her sides, drawing his gaze down; a strangled sound caught in his throat.

An ivory stripe of bare thigh peeked out above a garter of white ribbon. Pink silk stockings embraced her slim legs and trim ankles. As he watched, Emily's fingers curled around her hem, and she raised the dress higher, fine muslin sliding over satin skin.

Realizing that her seduction hadn't ceased and his resistance would soon fail, he wrapped his hands around her waist and began lifting her away from him. She countered by slipping her hand between them, firmly stroking his length, up and down.

Even with two layers of clothing between her palm and his shaft, he felt every inch of the scandalous caress burning into him. His hips jerked, nearly unseating her; he steadied her automatically, his hands trembling against her waist.

"Good God, Emily," he said desperately. "Stop this."

Her fingers plunged beneath the placket at the front of his breeches; without his being aware of it, she'd unfastened the buttons. She pulled at the front of his drawers as she nimbly untied the tapes.

"Stop!" he repeated—and then his erection was in her hand and his voice failed him. With quick fingers, she worked his arching sex from its confines. It rose up against the tousled folds of their clothing. She held it carefully, though with the strength of his arousal, it needed no support. At the sight of her pale hand surrounding the base of his shaft, his defiance fled.

And in the back of his mind, where his self-pity and disappointment lingered, a desire long suppressed emerged: *She'll have to marry you. She'll be yours.*

Possession—an emotion unfamiliar and heady—ripped through him, left him breathless, and mingled with self-disgust that he would ever use such a method, that he was participating in this calculated ruin. Emily rose higher on her knees, her eyes cold with purpose. She guided his tip to her entrance; he immediately recognized that she wasn't ready, but she began to sink onto him before he could implore her to wait.

The pleasure of being enveloped by her heated depths overwhelmed the discomfort of his entry until she whimpered softly in distress. He realized that despite her practiced kiss and her knowledgeable fingers, she didn't know more than the mechanics of intercourse.

With clinical detachment, he heard himself say, "Lift yourself up, then push back down. Slowly."

Her face blazed with color, but she followed his instruction. Considering that she had been bold enough to instigate this, Anthony had a moment to wonder at her embarrassment—was it caused by their actions, his frank instruction... or because it was *him?*—before the leisurely drag of her inner muscles up his length captured

every bit of his attention.

She took him in again, more easily than before; her body had begun producing moisture. With a small, relieved sigh, she began riding him in slow, shallow strokes.

It was torture, but he dared not force her all the way onto him for fear of hurting her. To keep himself from thrusting deep, he leaned forward and buried his face between her breasts, biting the bodice of her dress. He inhaled sharply, letting the dark, warm scent of her fill his senses.

She suddenly paused with his shaft halfway inside her, and his teeth threatened to tear through lace trim. "Anthony?"

He hoped she would take his choked grunt as an answer; at that moment, nothing he could have said would have been sensible.

After a brief hesitation, she said, "Do not spill your seed inside me."

That brought his head up. Uncertainty and fear pinched her mouth.

"I won't," he promised.

"Will you spill it soon?" she said, with a fleeting, pained expression.

"Not immediately." Chagrin flushed his cheeks. When he had become a willing participant, he should have seen to her pleasure. "Have you exhausted yourself? Do you want to stop?"

She shook her head. "I will finish this," she said, rising up with determined vigor. She dropped, earned down by her weight.

She cried out in surprise at his full penetration; Anthony, unable to help himself, held her locked against him with his hands on her hips. His boot heels dug into the carpet. Fire licked at his spine, drawing his muscles taut.

After a long, shaky sigh, she began to move again, and he drew her hands to his shoulders so she could brace herself against him. Slipping his fingers between them, he sought the tiny organ at the apex of her sex. His thumb stroked; she gasped and tried to pull away; he followed, briefly triumphing in the soft sounds of pleasure she began to make low in her throat.

Not immediately, he had told her, but the slick glide of his fingers against her, of his shaft skimming against his hand with every thrust into her, undid him. His body tightened, trembled. He fought it, trying to wait for her, ringing the base of his cock and squeezing in a hopeless attempt to slow his orgasm. The urge to find his release inside her, to make his possession complete, almost overwhelmed the memory of his promise—but at the last moment he withdrew.

Grabbing for the first piece of cloth at hand—her chemise—he wrapped it over his glans as his orgasm tore through him, clenching his teeth against a shout.

And when the last shudder faded, the enormity of what they'd done hit him.

He stared down at the semen-soaked linen in his hand. *Oh, God.* Had he really been stupid enough to imagine that Norbridge would allow him to marry Emily? That

he would be a match for an earl's daughter, just because he'd compromised her? More likely, if he discovered Anthony had made love to his daughter, Norbridge would ruin him, make it impossible for Anthony to live or work amongst polite society.

Had he only believed it for that moment so he could allow himself to yield to her? *If I had been a man, instead of a boy searching for ease and pleasure, wouldn't I have kept us both from ruination?*

Shame stiffened his tongue, but he knew he had to apologize. He lifted his gaze; she was staring at him, her expression arrested on his face.

"Don't... blame yourself," she said. Her voice trembled, and she closed her eyes. "I told you I would hurt you."

Unsure how to respond, he gestured to their clothing and said the first thing that came to his mind. "I've not been hurt—only mussed." He attempted a smile. "Colin will be severely displeased by my state of dishevelment tonight; I hardly think he'll let me accompany him to his gentleman's club now."

To his horror, tears started in her eyes. As if she hadn't heard his jest, she said brokenly, "I have been an idiot to think love means anything. It is a fraud, isn't it?"

Without waiting for his answer, she buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed. His concerned queries yielded no answer. At a loss, he could only hold her, stroking her hair in a vain attempt to soothe her unrelenting despair.

Self-recrimination tore at him—why had he allowed her to do this? The answers that came to his mind were not pleasant, and in the end, he could only murmur against her temple his apologies, and his promise to return from the Peninsula and make reparations for the wrong he'd done her, to take away the troubles that plagued her.

He repeated the vow again and again as she cried, and he felt the weight of it settle over him. His life had never had a purpose, but one sat before him now. It would not be a grand purpose, but it would be *his*.

He would return and make it right—and she would be happy again.

"I promise," he said.

Albuera, Spain

May 1811

A soft breeze had swept away the haze of burnt gunpowder enveloping the fields, but the acrid odor lingered. The moonlight made formless lumps and shadows of the soldiers lying on the ground; its dim glow erased their identities, the blue and green and red of their uniforms showing gray and black.

Anthony raised his lantern high, trying to peer past the circle of light it cast,

silently urging the dead men around him to moan or call out for help. None would—he'd checked each still form in the field, bending hundreds of times to feel for a pulse that was almost never there. Earlier, he'd seen medical personnel and soldiers from both sides scouring the battlefields for survivors and collecting weapons. Now, as it neared midnight, the search for survivors had waned until the only living beings in that wretched place were him, the two hospital mates he'd accompanied, and the handful of soldiers they'd found and treated and who now waited in a medical cart for transport back to the hospital.

Across the ridge that ran the length of the Albuera River, the wagons carrying the dead back for burial were still at work, slowly taking the course the battle had followed and collecting its casualties. It would be early morning before they reached this field.

"Doctor?"

With a resigned sigh, Anthony lowered his lantern. A few paces away, Assistant Surgeon Dilby stood wiping his hands with a blood-streaked cloth. The skin around the young surgeon's face looked as if it had been stretched and released, hanging tiredly under his eyes and chin.

Suddenly feeling his own exhaustion, Anthony looked past him. On the edge of the field, the cart was visible only as a dim outline, the lanterns hanging from its bench seat two feeble spots of light. "Is the last one settled?"

Dilby nodded and tucked the end of his rag into his leather apron. "Phillips is still with him. He's stabilized; he might make it to the hospital. I don't know if the major will. He woke up that once, but..." He shrugged. "I'm surprised he lasted this long, what with his guts on the outside."

Anthony smiled faintly as they began their trek back to the cart. In only two months of war, he'd seen men live through worse and die from less. "He hasn't cocked up his toes yet, Dilby—perhaps he'll survive to let Surgeon Guthrie perform his magic."

"Skill and instinct, not magic," Dilby retorted quickly, and Anthony grinned. The young mate's adoration of the Principal Medical Officer had been clear since they'd met. Glancing sidelong at Anthony from narrowed, baggy eyes, he added, "But a personal physician wouldn't know that."

Anthony didn't take offense at the deliberate insult; he knew his service in the war was not a heroic effort but simply a way of repaying a debt. He'd rather have done anything but practice medicine and amateur surgery on the battlefield, and would rather have been anywhere but the Peninsula. Dilby deserved some reply, however, so he forced humor into his tone and said, "Convince Cole of my uselessness on a day when his gout is particularly painful, and I'll apprentice myself in the surgery tomorrow."

Chuckling, Dilby veered away from Anthony to avoid the corpse of one of Napoleon's soldiers. His tone became wistful. "I suppose when the war is over, you won't be his personal physician any longer. You'll set up a practice in London, join

society, and treat ladies' nerves."

With only the slightest break in his stride, Anthony stooped and felt for a pulse. Half of the soldier's face had been torn away, probably victim to English shrapnel. "Hardly appropriate work for a gentleman," he said softly. They were familiar words; Anthony's mother and sisters never failed to remind him of it in the letters he received.

When Anthony caught up to him a moment later, Dilby continued, "At least when you marry, you will be able to present your wife at court. My Sarah would have liked that." The folds on his face creased into the tender smile that appeared whenever he mentioned his wife or their young daughter.

Anthony tried to return the smile and to keep the doubts that had plagued him for two months from squeezing at him, but the words made his chest tighten nonetheless. *When you marry*. His promise to Emily hadn't been an understanding, and yet he could not help but hope that his vow had touched her, that she would consider his unspoken offer of marriage.

Would she wait for him? Likely not.

But as Colin's brief letters never contained information about her entering into an engagement, he saw no reason to give up that hope. There was little other pleasure to be had on the Peninsula.

With his gaze focused on the ground and his thoughts far from a bloodstained battlefield in Spain, it took Anthony a moment to realize that Dilby had stopped abruptly and was staring ahead, his eyes wide.

Anthony's question died on his lips as the light from the cart's two lanterns winked out, followed by the sound of crumpling metal. Surprise kept him rooted briefly to the spot—the medical cart was clearly marked to let medical personnel work unmolested, even in the heat of battle—until Phillips's sharp, terrified cry spurred him forward.

He broke into a run, the racing of his heart echoed by his pounding feet. Behind him, Dilby shouted, "We are medics! *Docker!*"

The lantern swung wildly in his hand. Its erratic illumination prevented him from clearly seeing the cart, but the half moon limned the shape of a man—too big to be Phillips—scrambling atop the cart and bending over until he was hidden by its wooden sides.

Suddenly cautious, Anthony slowed his pace to a jog, forcing himself to take deep breaths, and to think instead of blindly react. He hadn't heard a firearm, but the man could be armed—and Anthony was not. He had to assume that the only rifle the medical team carried with them, which had been in the cart with Phillips, was under their assailant's control. He was uncertain if the man had been wearing a uniform; perhaps a soldier needed help but was crazed from the battle and acting irrationally?

Fifteen feet from the cart, he stopped and steadied the lamp, staring at the scene and trying to make sense of it: the brown, gory lump at the front of the cart, the

smaller one beside it. His stomach clenched as he realized the mule's head had been torn from its body, the ragged cavity at the top of its shoulders still steaming.

Fear shivered over his skin, slick and cold.

Dilby came up beside him, panting from exertion. Metal glinted in his hand. "I found this... oh, God Almighty save us!"

Anthony silently repeated the prayer. Even amidst the terrible carnage of the battlefield, this violence struck him as unnatural, a malevolent perversion. A man, even a madman, couldn't have done that to the mule.

Every instinct told him to flee; he gripped the handle of the lantern tightly, as if its small weight could anchor him, and called out, "Phillips?"

A choking, gurgling noise answered. Dilby whimpered, backing up a step.

Anthony glanced at the younger man and met the horrified gaze that mirrored his own. He said hoarsely, "I should try to help him."

Dilby shook his head violently and took another step back. "I don't think—" He broke off with a shudder, the final words hanging unspoken but palpable between them.

I don't think he's still alive.

Anthony looked back at the cart. "I have to try."

As if seeing Anthony's determination bolstered his courage, Dilby squared his shoulders and nodded. His face was pale, the loose skin stretched tight with tension. His voice trembled, but he managed to say, "*We* have to try."

Anthony nodded gratefully; he didn't consider himself a coward, but he certainly did not want to face alone whatever waited for them—and if Phillips had been seriously hurt, Anthony would need Dilby's medical assistance.

He glanced at the sword bayonet the other man had found, and now held in a white-knuckled grip. Though the sturdy blade had a smooth brass handle, it was too short and awkward for effective hand-to-hand combat, but at least it offered them some protection. "Can you use that if you need to?"

"For Sarah and little Nellie's sake, I will," Dilby said.

Anthony's expression hardened, anger burning through the fear that had overtaken him. Dilby and he weren't soldiers; whoever hid in the cart had attacked unarmed and injured men.

He swept the lantern in a circle, looking for a weapon of his own. He found nothing, and delaying any longer wouldn't help Phillips—if Phillips could be helped at all.

In silent agreement, they rounded the cart, careful to keep a significant distance from it. They couldn't hide their presence; Anthony's lamp made them a target, as did Dilby's ragged breathing.

War hadn't prepared him for what Anthony saw; it wasn't the death or the

mutilation that made the vomit rise in his throat, but the gleeful expression of the creature who waited for them. Naked, completely hairless, it lay on top of the bodies of the soldiers, their blood splattered across its pale skin. Its penis was engorged, as if murder had been an erotic pleasure. Its elbow was propped against Phillips's leg, and it rested its chin in its hand. It watched them, grinning, blood smeared around its mouth. Casually, almost like Caesar plucking grapes from a platter, it reached down and tore Phillips's thumb from his hand and began sucking the blood from it.

"Oh, God," Anthony whispered, and the creature laughed sharply.

"No," it said, and Anthony recoiled, his horror magnified that the thing could speak. Despite its shape, it had seemed more animal than man. "Not Him. But imagine how grateful I am that His humans decided to kill each other and leave this feast for me." It rose to a sitting position and tossed the thumb over the cart's side. As one, Anthony and Dilby stumbled backward. "And how fortunate that I should also find living prey."

Vampire. Anthony recalled reading about such folk tales with Colin when they'd been children and trying to frighten Emily with them. What could kill a vampire? Fire? Beheading? His mind reeled, trying to remember.

He must have spoken the word aloud; the creature shook its head, still smiling, and corrected, "Nosferatu. Unlike vampires, we originate from Heaven itself." Pride swelled its voice.

"From Hell, more like!" Dilby shouted, holding the bayonet in front of him; Anthony was suddenly struck by the absurdity of it. They needed to run—there was nothing here to save, only evil.

Long teeth gleamed in the lamplight. "They didn't want us there, either." Gracefully, the nosferatu stepped down from the cart.

It was playing with them, Anthony realized. It enjoyed their fear as it slowly stalked them, and if he and Dilby fled, it would catch them.

Unless only one of them went and one stayed behind to fight it. He could keep it busy, distracted, while Dilby escaped.

A leaden weight seemed to fill Anthony's chest. He thought of his family, of Colin and Emily, and swallowed past the constriction in his throat. "Run, Dilby."

Dilby turned toward him; Anthony saw he was preparing to argue.

"Don't be stupid," he said sharply, fearful that if the other man hesitated, his own courage would fail. He added softly, before Dilby could speak, "For Sarah and little Nellie's sake."

The creature began laughing.

An indecisive, stricken expression slipped into the other man's eyes—then he flipped the bayonet around, its handle toward Anthony.

Anthony took the weapon; with a choked "Godspeed—and thank you," Dilby fled into the night.

The nosferatu chuckled. "I will be done with you in minutes and then I will track him down. Perhaps I'll keep you alive long enough to hear him screaming, so you'll know how worthless your sacrifice was."

Anthony didn't bother to reply; he simply waited. He knew he probably had only one chance to defend himself and that it wouldn't come until the creature moved much closer.

As moments passed, and Anthony failed to respond or move, the nosferatu frowned. "Run or fight," it commanded, its voice as petulant as a child with a disappointing toy.

Anthony silently stood his ground.

"I can smell your fear: so weak, so human." The nosferatu sneered, apparently hoping it would prick Anthony's pride.

They stared at each other for a long moment; finally, with a cry of rage, it attacked.

Even though he'd expected it to be strong, Anthony hadn't known it would be so fast. One instant it had been standing at the cart, the next it was on him, knocking the bayonet from his hand and grabbing him up into a crushing embrace.

Pain screamed through him but remained unvoiced as his ribs snapped under the pressure. Something tore inside him. *I wonder if Guthrie can fix this*, he thought wildly, and would have laughed if he'd had the breath. Desperately, he swung the lantern against the creature's back, his one gambit for survival.

Instead of spilling oil and igniting its skin, the metal thumped solidly against muscle and fell from Anthony's hand.

The creature laughed again and dipped its head, fangs bared. Anthony closed his eyes, waiting for the nosferatu to rip at him, but as they pierced his neck the teeth were almost gentle.

The nosferatu pulled back, yelping in surprise and releasing him; Anthony collapsed on the ground. His ribs shrieked, and his lungs felt pinched by a vise, but he turned and tried to crawl away.

The creature caught him and rolled him onto his back. Its eyes glowed amber as it stared down at him. "Tell me where it is—I can feel its power; I can taste it in your blood," it said, crouching over him.

Anthony shook his head, not knowing what he was denying. He couldn't have spoken in any case; he couldn't catch his breath. A metallic, salty fluid flooded his mouth, but though his body convulsed, he couldn't cough it away. *Lungs collapsed*, he realized.

As if coming to the same conclusion, the nosferatu smiled, its eyes boring into his. "Show me, then," it commanded. Almost immediately, Anthony felt an insidious touch in his mind, a darkness that dug painfully at him, and tried to close his eyes against it.

He failed.

"Show me," it repeated.

In the library of Beaumont Court, he and Colin with the carl's sword between them, slicing shallow cuts into their palms and pressing them together. Blood brothers.

The creature frowned. "That is why I taste it, but you have more recent knowledge of it in a different location. Show me."

Anthony resisted when the first images *of* the memory flashed in front of him, unable to stand the thought of it—that abomination—seeing Emily as he'd seen her: her romantic idealism shattered, the devastation that had driven her to seduction.

The nosferatu simply pushed harder, tearing through his amateur defenses.

Anthony tumbled headlong into Emily's arms once more. Then darkness crawled in, obscuring her face, her touch; all that remained was the echo of his vow.

And even that faded.

"Anthony," a voice said, and the darkness skittered away. The bright light that replaced it should have been blinding; Anthony automatically tried to squint against it but found his lids already closed.

Memory of the nosferatu rushed back.

It took a Herculean effort, but Anthony opened his eyes. He found himself lying on his side on the ground, the battlefield stretched out around him. The light surrounding him had washed its colors pale—and it originated, he realized, from the man who had spoken.

"Dilby?"

"He lives; your sacrifice succeeded—and it allows me to offer you a choice." The voice resonated through Anthony's body like music, painful *in its* exquisite beauty.

Anthony rolled over and looked up. He moved easily, as if the nosferatu had never crushed the life from him.

Except in his nakedness, the speaker was nothing like the creature that had attacked him. His bronzed skin seemed to glow with its own luminescence. His black hair had been cut brutally short; his face could have been sculpted from amber. Obsidian eyes stared down at him, and Anthony had to look down again, away from that penetrating gaze.

"Who are you?"

"They call me Michael," he replied. He spoke the name as if it was an explanation in itself.

Understanding dawned as Anthony took in the rest of the figure before him: black feathered wings spread elegantly out from bronzed shoulders.

His eyes flew back to Michael's, and the denial sprang from Anthony's mouth, "I made a promise that I have to keep."

Michael shook his head and held out his palm to assist Anthony to his feet. "I cannot give you that. You must be thought dead to everyone you knew before. I can only offer another choice: become as I am—a Guardian, an immortal protector, or accept your death and all that comes after."

Dead to everyone you knew. Grief touched him, but it could not grab hold. This could not be death. This could not be an end.

Anthony took the proffered hand, feeling absurdly small and weak next to the Guardian. *He offers me a choice to become like him?* "It appears a simple decision," he said.

The reply could have been carved from stone, along with the grim smile that accompanied it. "Appearances are almost always deceiving," Michael said.

Chapter Three



A demon wields despair like a sword, cutting deep into the afflicted human.

—*The Doren Scrolls*

Derbyshire, England

December 1811

It was odd, Emily thought, that she could so calmly receive the news of her twin brother's impending death; her hands did not shake, her lips did not tremble. She remained still, at once proud and saddened the physician's prognosis had not evoked in her an overwhelming, incapacitating grief. Surely Colin deserved such a reaction, but it would do him no good right now.

"Are you absolutely certain? Nothing you can do will cure him?" And yes, those were her words, spoken without the hint of a sob—her voice, serene and composed, as if she were discussing the weather instead of the death of her sibling. When the fire had taken half her family, she had wept for days. But now, despite her bond with her twin, despite a lifelong tendency to be swept away by her emotions, she could not summon a tear. Fear, she imagined, did that to a person.

Dr. Johnson folded his hands, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. The whiskers along his cheeks and jowls undulated as he seemed to search for words; Emily supposed he was torn between his need to reassure a member of the fairer sex and his professional duty. All the physicians who had examined Colin had been similarly

conflicted, particularly upon realizing the extent of the manor's—and Emily's— isolation.

The lack of servants had apparently escaped Dr. Johnson's notice, however, and as Emily was the only family member with whom he could consult, duty prevailed. "Regretfully, I do not believe any other outcome is possible," he said. "His condition worsens daily, and the poison within him has not seemed to decrease, despite the bloodlettings. And the leeches..." He trailed off, shaking his head in puzzlement. "I have never read of a sickness having that effect."

Emily smoothed her fingers over her bombazine skirt, willing away the memory of the leeches lying, pale and withered, against Colin's skin—as if *his* body had sucked the lifeblood from *them*. "How much time does he have?"

"As always, these matters are difficult to judge, but I would predict no more than a week. Days, perhaps."

"Days," she repeated softly and shivered. She could survive the days—surviving the nights was less certain.

She had not told the doctor everything she knew of Colin's condition: his sharp, frightening hunger after the sun had set, the unbelievable strength his emaciated form possessed, and the speed at which his injuries had healed. Nor had she told him—or anyone else—the truth about the assault leading to Colin's sickness, nor the method of their escape; it had not been a dog that had bitten him, but something far worse.

Something that, try as she might, Emily still couldn't quite believe—but she knew if she shared her memories of the attack, they'd be dismissed as grief-induced hallucinations—or worse, considered a sign of madness.

No, trusting the doctor with complete information was impossible; if she had only herself to think of, she might have told him, but she couldn't risk Robert's future by exposing herself. She was fortunate her reputation in society had remained as unscathed as it was, considering her romantic... indiscretions.

Sorrow and regret rushed through her. She could have confided in Anthony; he might have thought her fanciful and silly at times, but he had never doubted her word. If a treatment for Colin could be found, Anthony would have braved Hell itself to locate it.

But Anthony had been dead these eight months, and soon Colin would join him.

Unaware of her thoughts, Dr. Johnson rose. Clutching his bag, his expression sorrowful, he said, "I shall return next week, my lady, after I consult with my colleagues in London."

She nodded agreement and walked with him to the foyer, but she knew there was nothing he would find, nothing that could be done. Colin would likely be dead before he returned.

Emily pushed the heavy door closed behind him and then turned to lean against the wood with a sigh. Dr. Johnson had been the fourth physician from London to examine Colin in as many weeks, and his conclusions had been no different from the

others'. She'd hoped one of the doctors would have recognized Colin's illness for what it was, instead of what she'd told them—but it was either too rare for them to have seen or heard of it before, or as horrifying and as unnatural as Emily feared.

If it was the latter, then God help Colin—and her.

Deliberately delaying her return to Colin's room, Emily returned to the front parlor and began clearing the tea service. The pale green walls and the peach damask upholstery on the sofa and chairs were bright and fresh; ten years had passed since Catherine, Henry's wife, had decorated the room, but the fabric showed little sign of wear, as if untouched by visitors or family.

If I had come, alleviated her loneliness instead of playing the whore, perhaps they would not have been in London when the fire struck. I should have roasted with them.

The thought rose unbidden, and Emily determinedly shook it away. She'd had similar macabre ideas over the last several weeks, brought on, she assumed, by the fatigue and stress of caring for her brother under such unusual circumstances. Her tired and frightened mind had been giving truth ghastly twists: Colin and Emily *had* been infrequent visitors to the manor, each preferring the excitement of London to the dullness of country life—but Henry and Catherine had been in town for the end of the season, not because of loneliness, and certainly not because they'd discovered that Emily had taken lovers.

Though she had once wanted her father to discover her indiscretions, to feel the same bitter disappointment in her that she once had in him—to feel *anything* for her—now she was grateful that her family had not died amidst a scandal. Except for Colin, her family had never known what she'd done. Emily had thought she would never forgive herself for being in the arms of a man when the house had caught fire. Nor had she thought she could live up to the trust Robert had bestowed upon her when she and Colin had found him, saved by his nurse taking the rear stairs to the exit.

Yet she had.

After the fire, for Robert's sake, Colin and Emily had remained in the country for the summer; except for the brief trip to London that had ended in attack and catastrophe, they hadn't intended to return to the city until the next season.

"To find a wife for me, and a mother for Robert," Colin had laughed. Emily had been amused then; but now, looking around the room that should have been comforting instead of sterile, its springtime motif an ineffective respite from the dreary Derbyshire winter, she wondered if any wife of Colin's choosing could have made this a true home for Robert.

Or now that he would never marry, if she could provide the support Robert needed. She had never imagined herself a mother, yet circumstances were forcing her to become one.

The delicate teacups rang sharply against silver as she set them down. She lifted the heavy tray—then nearly dropped it when her housekeeper appeared silently

beside her.

"Mrs. Kemble!" Emily gasped, laughing at the startled jump of her heart. The silver tray wobbled but then steadied under the older woman's sturdy hands. Emily gratefully passed it to the housekeeper. "I thought you, Sally, and Mr. Davison had already left for Hartington for the evening."

"No, ma'am," Mrs. Kemble said. Emily felt the other woman's concerned—and slightly disapproving—gaze upon her face. The servants had accepted Emily's order that they leave the manor at night and to return only after dawn, but they felt the sting of her demand—particularly Mrs. Kemble and the other servants who usually lived in the house. Emily paid their lodging expenses at a Hartington inn, but they were not pleased at being forced from their home, even temporarily. "Mr. Davison was delayed in the north field, and he has only just returned. We are leaving now, unless your ladyship would prefer we stay?"

Emily hardened herself against the hopeful note in the housekeeper's voice. "No, thank you, Mrs. Kemble. If Sally has left supper in the larder, Colin and I can make do by ourselves for the remainder of the evening."

The housekeeper nodded stiffly but hesitated before turning.

"Was there anything else, Mrs. Kemble?"

"Well, ma'am, I had intended to visit my daughter in Kent—"

"Oh!" Emily's hand flew to her mouth in dismay. She had forgotten that the housekeeper had requested leave for the birth of her grandchild. The servant must have felt obligated to stay during Colin's sickness; she had been scheduled to leave two days before. "Mrs. Kemble, I am sorry—you must of course depart immediately! Have you received word about the baby?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "I'm afraid it was stillborn, ma'am. I was meaning to let you know that I wouldn't be taking the time away after all, so you could depend on me to remain here while Master Colin is ill."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kemble," Emily said. "But wouldn't you prefer to be with your daughter?"

The housekeeper shrugged. "Babes die, ma'am. And my daughter is a strong lass."

Perhaps it was her own recent loss that made Mrs. Kemble's statement seem so coldhearted, Emily thought minutes later as she slowly climbed the stairs to Colin's room. It was true that childbirth was frequently accompanied by death; one should be prepared for an unhappy outcome.

But Emily hoped that, no matter how much death surrounded her, she would never be as prepared as Mrs. Kemble.

She winced as the key scraped in the bedchamber's lock, but upon opening the door she saw the noise had not disturbed Colin's unnatural sleep. He lay on the bed in his nightgown, his arms still tucked neatly at his sides in the position she had

arranged them following the physician's examination. She had pulled layers of blankets over him, but despite his clammy temperature and the chill in the room, he'd kicked them off. His thin ankles and calves stood out in sharp relief against the pillowy mattress, his white skin almost the same color as the sheets.

Aside from her lamp, the soft blaze in the fireplace provided the only light in the room; in the early days of Colin's sickness, when he'd been awake during a portion of the daylight hours, he'd been too sensitive to sunlight to allow it to shine through the windows. Though he was no longer conscious enough to object, Emily continued to draw the drapes every morning. Now, the orange glow of sunset peeked between them, settling in stripes on the rugs.

Cursing herself for allowing it to become so late, Emily ran to the bed, falling to her knees and reaching beneath the bedframe.

Her fingers sought and brushed cold metal, and with a clatter, she dragged out the heavy chains and manacles she'd hidden from the physician and the servants.

She lifted Colin's left arm. It hung cold and limp as she snapped the iron cuff around his wrist and twisted the key. Her heart no longer ached as it had the first few days she had performed this procedure. Initially, it had been at Colin's insistence—after she found him one night eating raw meat in the kitchen, he'd begged her to chain him. She had done it the first time to humor him, and to erase the haunted look from his eyes; now, she did it out of fear and self-preservation.

Her fingers were gentle as she slipped his right wrist into the iron. His bones looked fragile beneath his skin, the ligaments clearly delineated. The frailty was deceptive, she knew—he was preternaturally strong—but she could not bring herself to treat him carelessly, no matter what he'd become.

She wrapped the chains around the bedposts. The metal links jangled rhythmically as she pulled on their length; Colin's arms slid bonelessly toward the headboard. When there was only a little slack in the chain, she wound them around the posts once more and locked them together.

Clutching the key in her hand, she glanced at his face and was relieved to see his eyes still closed. His blond hair, only a few shades darker than hers, curled disheveled over his forehead. Knowing that he'd have hated its disarray, she quickly smoothed it into some semblance of order, watching him carefully for movement.

The illness had not been kind to him—the face Emily had often considered a masculine version of her own had withered and shrunk, erasing his angular beauty. Dark hollows around his eyes and in his sunken cheeks had left him skeletal; she was glad Colin couldn't see himself as he was now. If he'd been aware of the physical decline that accompanied the mental one, he'd have been devastated.

His eyelashes fluttered. Her heart leaping into her throat, Emily yanked her hand away and took three hasty steps back. She watched him in frozen trepidation. He did not move again; after a moment, she pressed her lips together against the absurd urge to laugh, to lose herself in hysteria.

There had been times in the last few weeks when she'd feared madness was not

far from her—she'd managed to counter the feeling, doggedly hanging on to normalcy through sheer will.

She turned on her heel, striding determinedly to Colm's writing desk and opening the curtains adjacent to it. The sun had disappeared over the horizon, and the deepening twilight cast the garden below into shadow. She looked out for just a few moments, letting the vastness outside fill her, give her a brief sense of freedom—from the house's locked rooms and her own secrets—before turning and sitting at the desk. Setting down the lamp, she pulled paper and pens from a drawer.

Letters were normal—about normal events, to normal people. Performing such an everyday task would anchor her, remind her of her sanity.

After dashing off a few short letters to personal friends, she faced the daunting task of writing to her nephew, Robert.

How much of the truth should she relate to him? How much should a twelve-year-old boy know? After losing his father, mother, and grandfather in so short of a time, now must he face the prospect of losing his uncle?

Not that Colin had been a significant part of Robert's life before that summer, she thought sadly. Nor had she. She remembered the words she'd once spoken to Anthony Ramsdell: *Children cannot interest me*. She closed her eyes briefly against the pain the memory of that night brought and brushed her forefinger over the thin, raised scar on the fleshy pad of her thumb.

She had been wrong—she could not have known how wrong she had been until she had spent the summer becoming acquainted with her young nephew. And had she known, would she have acted differently that night? Would she have called Anthony unsuitable, used him in her childish scheme for revenge?

For the briefest moment, she allowed herself to recall his offer, to imagine the course her life might have taken if she'd accepted it. *If I had not been so focused on my own needs and dreams, would he be alive? Would I be with him now?* But a marriage between them could not have prevented the fire, nor could it change what had happened to Colin.

Thinking of Anthony helped remind her that neither life nor death could be taken for granted; determined not to lose another moment caught in bitter reflection, she wrote:

Robert,

I hope this letter finds you comfortably settled and applying yourself to your studies. As you have recently come into your title, your new friends might give you a nickname; please do not allow them Nobby or Norby. Though it sounds quite stuffy now, insist on Norbndge. You will thank me for it in the future.

Your Uncle Colin's condition is very ill, but do not fret—I am certain he will soon be himself again and his cravat as tightly knotted as ever before. He should be recovered at the end of the half, and we will enjoy the holiday together.

Perhaps in the summer months we should visit the Lake District and try to muss his clothes during our travels. You might also enjoy Brighton, or a few weeks in London (although not too far into the summer, I hope). Or perhaps you would like to remain in Derbyshire? Our previous summer passed so pleasantly here, I should not mind another. But I shall accede to your wishes on this matter, my young lord.

Your loving aunt, Emily

A smile hovered over her mouth as she folded the letter and sealed it. Robert might consider her an eccentric guardian, but he would have little doubt of her affection. Would that she'd had the same from her father...

A gleam in the darkness caught her attention and she turned. Colin lay on the bed watching her hungrily, his eyes reflecting the lamplight. His lips were pulled back in a ghastly smile, revealing long, pointed canines. He turned his head and sank his teeth through his sleeve and into his bicep.

I should let him kill me, she thought.

Emily buried her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter Four



A Guardian may choose to Ascend at any time; however, after one hundred years have passed, they may also choose to Fall the alternative added as a reward for service.

—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Anthony landed neatly atop the city's tallest spire. Around him, Caelum spread out in a circle of coruscating buildings and temples. Its shining marble columns and towers speared into the cerulean sky, piercing a blue that had never been darkened

by clouds.

Anthony no longer raised his face to capture the sun's warmth, as he often had in England; without the cold and rain for contrast, its rays did nothing more than bring light. And now that he could see clearly on the darkest of nights, he did not even need that.

But he could fly, and for that he loved the unchanging sky.

The tip of the spire was not wide enough for perching; balanced on one foot, he waited, currents of air drifting across his wings.

The city's edge shimmered in the distance; it pulled his gaze, as it always did. A dark line marked the abrupt cessation of ivory stone—beyond it, a waveless ocean stretched to the horizon. He had explored its endless breadth and depths, but both the sky and the deep had been empty, and his splashless dives had disturbed nothing.

But Caelum thrummed and pulsed with life. Behind silent marble walls, thousands of Guardians watched, waited, and protected. They passed through the Gates and came back with Earth's odors clinging to them.

Anthony had learned to avoid those who were newly returned.

Like all new Guardians, he had to wait nearly one hundred years before he would be allowed to traverse those Gates: one hundred years of studying his new abilities and training to fight their enemies; one hundred years for everyone he'd known to die; one hundred years to forget the immediacy of being human. Until then, reminders of his past were as painful as they were alluring, and he preferred not to torture himself with them. It served no purpose.

Suddenly restless, he glanced away from the edge of the city, his eyes searching the ground below. Though hundreds of yards in the air, he could see the individual veins of color within the courtyard tiles, but he was not interested in the stone. Movement near one of the archways opening into the courtyard caught his attention—two Guardians held each other in an intimate embrace.

Two males, he realized. They kissed, and though Anthony was struck by the gentleness with which they touched each other, he had to look away. It was not unusual in Caelum to come across lovers in the public areas, but even after eight months, he had not grown accustomed to witnessing sexual acts performed between couples of the same gender. Over time, his shock and disgust had faded into mild discomfort, but he reasoned that he was, and maybe always would be, a product of his upbringing.

After all, he had not become accustomed to the idea of a male and female publicly displaying themselves, either. If a member of the *ton* had ever been so bold, he would have been expelled from society. Even if it took place behind closed doors, public knowledge of a liaison between unmarried lovers could have ruined the couple.

Emily had known that risk, but she had still pressed her lips against his.

Before that night, he'd dreamed of her touch countless times. Afterward, he could only look back with shame that his one opportunity with her ended in a mechanical coupling that had brought pleasure to neither of them. He still didn't know why she'd chosen him, but no matter her reason, their joining had likely failed her idealistic expectations. The image of her, eyes red-rimmed and her chemise stained with his semen, declaring that her faith in love had vanished, had been pinned like an insect into his memory.

No. He shook himself, forcing thoughts of Emily, of London, from his mind. Dwelling on what had been could only lead to unhappiness, could only bring frustration and regret. Here in Caelum, there were no titles or possessions, and value was not determined by birth or profession. He had a multitude of lifetimes ahead of him, and he would not spend them aching for a past that had rejected him at every turn.

With a deliberate shrug, he unrolled his wings and focused on the weight of them—they were heavy, but no more a burden than one of his legs or his arms. He tested the breeze against his skin and breathed the sterile air deep into his lungs.

Then he folded the white feathers tight against his body and plummeted.

He kept his eyes open as he rushed toward the ground. The wind created by his descent whipped his hair behind him and tore his shirttails from the waist of his breeches. The wildly fluttering hem cracked against his buttocks, startling a laugh from him before the torrent of air made him swallow it.

At the last possible moment, he snapped his wings wide. They caught air, and his trajectory changed sharply, vertical to horizontal. The effort wrenched his muscles, and he strained to hold himself aloft as he skimmed a foot above the courtyard tiles. His knees scraped; he cried out in surprise and tumbled over, skidding to a halt against sturdy, robe-covered legs. The brown wool smelled faintly of smoke.

Hugh's legs, Anthony realized with dismay as he lay on his back, stunned. *This stunt will likely earn me a stiff lecture.* He smiled in amused anticipation of it, particularly as the lecture would come from someone who looked a very young eighteen. Hugh's face, surrounded by boyish curls, could have been any youth's in a Botticelli painting, and yet his eyes bespoke his real age—they were too patient to have belonged to even the most mature boy.

Appearances, Anthony reminded himself, *arc almost always deceiving.* It had been one of the first lessons he'd been taught upon entering Caelum, and one of the hardest for him to absorb. As a physician, he'd been trained to trust what he observed and to act accordingly. As a Guardian, he had to learn to distrust it, along with many other things he'd taken for granted when he was human.

Instead of lecturing, his mentor only looked down at him thoughtfully and said, "Perhaps we should move on to the lessons for tactical aerial combat."

The unexpected response to his reckless dive, combined with the thrill of his relatively successful landing, had Anthony shaking with laughter.

Hugh's expression didn't change; if anything, it became more sober. He watched

as Anthony picked himself up and waited until his laughter had passed.

"Michael has summoned us."

Anthony paused in his attempt to tuck in his shirt. Michael had transformed him, brought him to Caelum, and then left him in the care of his mentors. Anthony hadn't expected to see Michael again until his hundred years had passed and Anthony received his first assignment.

"Why?"

The faint disapproval that thinned Hugh's lips was the strongest emotion Anthony had ever seen him display. "He's sending you on a mission."

Anthony's brow creased into a frown and unease skittered down his spine. "To Earth?"

Hugh didn't reply, turning stiffly in the direction of the Hall. Anthony was forced to follow him on foot—Hugh preferred walking to flying, as if the journey to every destination was a pilgrimage—and the trek gave him too much time to remember all the reasons he'd want to return to Earth, and too little time to forget them again.

Michael's residence, like much of Caelum, bore the unmistakable influence of the ancient Greeks. Columns topped with intricately carved scrollwork stood like sentinels around the building; on the doors, an enormous marble frieze depicted Michael's battle against the dragon.

Anthony had studied the sculpted scene during his exploration of the city and had been astounded that the artist's skill had so perfectly replicated the visage of the man in stone. Michael—naked, wingless, and armed with a single sword—stood alone against the dragon. Behind him, an army of angels lay beaten; riding the dragon, a horde of demons eagerly awaited victory. It captured the moment just before Michael had thrust the sword into the dragon's heart—his muscles bunched with effort, his expression desperate but determined.

Michael had been human then, but it had been his triumph that led to the formation of the Guardian corps. The first Guardian, he was the Doyen and the acknowledged leader. Although every Guardian had an equal voice in Caelum, if Michael did intend to break tradition and send Anthony to Earth before his training had been completed, there would likely be little opposition.

Unless that opposition came from Anthony.

Guardians prized free will above all other things. Though choices were sometimes limited, Michael would never force Anthony to do anything he resisted.

Anthony could—and would, he determined—decline the mission when it was offered. The decision quieted the unease that had plagued him and allowed him to enter Michael's sanctum with confidence.

The interior was as palatial as Anthony had expected, but except in scale it differed little from his own residence. Archways and columns divided the single large, open room. A seating area in the front held an elegant array of sofas, chairs,

and ottomans. Their styles varied widely, a testament to Michael's age and the extent of his travel, and came together in an arrangement too soft to accurately reflect the owner.

Anthony did not relish the prospect of talking to Michael while lounging on sofas and cushions, and was relieved when Hugh led him into the armory at the back of the room. Weapons lined the walls: ancient axes and bludgeons; swords and spears; newer firearms. The floor had been left empty—in his apartment, Anthony used the similar space to practice his fencing skills with Hugh. His mentor, despite his monkish appearance, was a formidable opponent; Anthony imagined Michael was invincible.

The Doyen waited for them beside a display of Japanese katanas and aboriginal slings. He wore a white linen tunic and loose, flowing trousers, and he'd chosen to vanish his black wings. The effect should have been less daunting than Anthony's last encounter with him, when Michael had been winged and naked, the glowing angel of death, but somehow his muted appearance seemed more impressive simply for its deception.

Anthony wondered if the effect was deliberate. Did Michael think to intimidate him into returning?

"Six months ago, the nosferatu you encountered in Spain killed three members of the Ames-Beaumont family," Michael said without preamble. "Several weeks ago, he attacked the remaining family but did not succeed in his attempt to kill them. You will go with Hugh and assist him in destroying the creature, before he finds another opportunity to strike at them."

If Michael had hit Anthony with his full strength, the blow would have been less painful than his words. Anthony staggered under their impact and spoke through numb lips, "Who?"

Hugh said quietly, "The earl, Henry, and Catherine."

Anthony sucked in a sharp breath, his relief that Colin and Emily had survived immediately accompanied by guilt—and, as the full import of Michael's announcement sank in, rage. His voice shook with it. "Six months? It killed them *six months ago*, and you are only now sending someone to destroy it?"

Michael didn't respond to Anthony's anger, his expression as hard and unyielding as ever. Realizing that the Doyen did not feel he had to explain himself, Anthony stepped forward, his fists clenching. If he had to, he would beat the answers out of Michael, and damn the consequences.

"We weren't certain he had targeted the family until the latest attack," Hugh said. His mentor's rational tones slipped under Anthony's anger and made him pause mid-step and listen. "The three died when he set fire to their London townhouse; although we had heard reports of a nosferatu in London at the time, the two events did not seem connected until three weeks ago. I've since been to the townhouse and verified he'd been there—his scent lingered in every room, from before and after the fire."

The fire. Sudden tears blurred Anthony's vision. If the nosferatu had killed them himself, their terror and pain would not have been less. The rage that had been focused on Michael shifted to its proper object and burned cold under his skin.

He recalled the pleasure in the creature's eyes when it had drunk his blood, its insistence on delving into his memories. *Its scent lingered in every room of the house.* "What is it searching for?"

Approval flashed across Michael's face at the question, but Anthony did not care what the Doyen thought. If it had been something in his mind that had brought tragedy upon the family, he would be the one to stop it—and for that, he had to know what the nosferatu sought. He had to think ahead of it.

What had been particular to the memories it had pulled from him?

"My sword," Michael said suddenly. "Blood had been spilled from it on both occasions."

Anthony started in surprise. "The sword from the Second Battle?" At Michael's nod, Anthony gave a short, humorless laugh. Norbridge's prized relic was far more valuable than the earl had known.

Beside Anthony, Hugh's body went rigid and he leveled an accusing stare at the Doyen. Michael returned the stare, unapologetic.

Though he noted the exchange, Anthony didn't stop to wonder what had caused the sudden tension between the men. He had his answer, and he didn't want to waste any time going over details. There would be time enough later, after the nosferatu was dead.

He pivoted and stalked toward the exit. "I will collect my weapon and meet Hugh at the Central Gate in ten minutes," he said. Without waiting for an answer, he swept through the doors and took to the sky.

Hugh was silent until he was certain Anthony could not hear him, but Michael anticipated his objection.

"He wanted to know; I found the answer. You disapprove?"

"You entered his mind without his permission—that makes you no better than a demon. Or the nosferatu who started this." Hugh shook his head. "We don't do that."

"*You* don't." Michael's expression hardened. "The world has changed, Hugh, and the forces Above and Below are changing with it. Finding the sword is an omen."

"An omen—and yet you send a novice?" Hugh folded his hands together beneath the sleeves of his robe. His tranquil posture would not deceive Michael, yet he refused to betray his anger by word or expression. "You can have no reason to include Anthony. His familiarity with the family might be an asset to the search, but it will bring insurmountable complications. He learned quickly, but his lack of training, his ignorance of demons and nosferatu—he has not yet discovered his Gift. He cannot disguise himself from those he knows and who think him dead!"

"You think he cannot shift his form because he cleaves too strongly to his memories," Michel said. "I am sending him because he cannot shift; he must face the people he has left behind without disguise, without lies."

"It is an irresponsible decision. You will expose us—"

"Transforming him was a mistake," Michael said. "And if I do not send him to Earth now, the damage will be irreversible. He cannot be a Guardian."

Hugh could not hide his shock. "Do you send him to his death, then?"

"I did not realize you thought so little of your own skills and 'tour mentorship. If he has not learned enough to keep himself alive..." Michael's smile chilled the room. "Do you wish to have another go in your place, then? Do you refuse your part in this?"

"No," Hugh said, regarding the other man intently. "What has happened between his transformation and now? What have you learned?"

To his surprise, Michael looked away. "Your Gift may force me to answer truthfully," he said. "But if I do not answer, there is neither truth nor lie."

Hugh withdrew his hands from his sleeves. "If Anthony dies—"

"You will Fall?" Michael anticipated him again and laughed with genuine humor. "No. You'd not leave the corps for this. I'm disappointed in you, Hugh; whether he lives or dies, you should have more faith that everything will be as it should." He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, turned toward the display of weapons, and selected a long, curving Saracen blade. "Now, go. If Anthony's impatience and anger still burns as hotly as when he left, he might not wait for you and go through the Gate alone."

Hugh couldn't take the time to respond; though it annoyed him, Michael was right: Anthony was completely unprepared to experience Earth as a Guardian.

Chapter Five



A Guardian's Gift will come to him when he is ready for it; the Gift is a reflection of a Guardian's human life, but not always a welcome one.

—*The Doyen Scrolls*

"We have never spoken of that night."

Colin flicked Emily a meaningful glance so she could not mistake which night he spoke of, then turned his attention back to the horses. The steady clip-clop tempo of their hooves increased after a murmur from him. Emily tucked her lap

blanket tighter around her hips, thankful that the pink in her cheeks could be blamed on the cold—if Colin could see the color at all. Night had fallen quickly, and they had only just turned into the long drive leading to the house.

"Why would you wish to speak of it now?" She folded her hands in her lap and stared at the lines of buttons at the wrists of her gloves. "I can hardly think you would want to relive the experience, Going home to find our father, our brother, and his wife have perished in a fire does not make for easy conversation."

"No. Earlier that night at the hotel, Emily. Where, by the slimmest chance, I happened to see you with a—"

The phaeton lurched forward as one of the horses shied, breaking its smooth gait. Colin's fingers tightened on the reins, and he spoke a few soothing words before looking back at Emily.

"What could have possessed you to behave so recklessly?" Guilt shadowed his eyes, as if he blamed himself for her actions, and that shamed her more than his disappointment or censure could have.

She was saved from an immediate reply as the horses whinnied and tossed their heads, the metal in the harness jingling discordantly. Colin frowned, his gaze skimming along the trees lining the drive.

A shiver of uneasiness ran up Emily's spine, but it wasn't caused by the darkness. Her recklessness had not brought ruin to her family, but it may have had just as damaging an effect.

"I told Anthony he was unsuitable," she admitted.

"Anthony?" Colin pulled on the reins, bringing the team to a vicious halt. He turned in his seat to stare at her, anger lining his mouth with white. A muscle in his jaw flexed. "You rejected Ramsdell and then went to a whore?"

"No." She swallowed past the constriction in her throat. "He was first, and then I sent him to his death thinking that I considered him unworthy of further attention."

The horses shifted restlessly. Colin turned away from her, clicked his tongue, and they practically leapt forward in their eagerness to go. Emily watched his profile, wondering if she could ever repair her status in his eyes, if he could ever forgive her for courting ruin and insulting their friend.

She started in surprise as a laugh broke from him, and he gathered the reins in one hand and wrapped his other arm around her shoulders and hugged her close. "Em," he said with a wry smile. "Ramsdell was likely the happiest man in the world when he died. If you had to ruin yourself, I suppose I should be glad you gave my friend the one thing he'd dreamed of in the process."

She tilted her face into his chest and couldn't stop the giggle that rose in her throat. "That is a shocking and inappropriate response for a brother to have."

"You're my sister," he said, as if it were that simple. "Your reputation has

remained intact, so the only person to whom you will have to explain yourself will be the husband you select. You have obviously tortured yourself over the past—I would never add to it. I would as soon remove my arm as hurt you." He glanced down. "Are you weeping all over my new greatcoat? I should really hate to see it ruined with tears."

Emily grinned. "No, I—"

The horses screamed, and then Emily was screaming as the white, naked creature lifted Colin up, and then the blood was spurting from her brother's neck. And then it came for her, and she felt its teeth rending, ripping—

Emily woke, her hand automatically flying to her throat, but smooth skin met her fingers instead of torn flesh and blood.

Nightmare, she realized, but her relief did little to ease the racing of her heart. The dreams had come frequently in the last month, but she'd rarely been able to wake from them. She wasn't certain if that was a blessing or not; the sudden awareness was almost as terrifying as being trapped within them until the end.

In the grate, coals shifted and tumbled. She rolled onto her side, pillowing her head against the arm of the chaise, and watched the shadows cast by the embers' glow. Exhaustion settled over her like a blanket, but she didn't want to sleep again. She wanted to rise from the makeshift bed, turn around, and find Colin whole and healthy.

Because that hope faded day by day, she let her eyes drift closed. Some nightmares were preferable to reality, and it had been a long time since she'd believed in fairy-tale endings or miracles.

But maybe...

Even as she scolded herself for her silliness, she sat up, made a wish, and looked over at Colin's bed.

Colin's *empty* bed.

Oh, God. The chains lay serpentine across the sheets, the manacles gaping. She blinked, but nothing changed, and she didn't wake up.

How had he unlocked the chains? Had he escaped the room, or was he hiding in the dark? Should she call for him, or try to run? Would running attract his attention?

Her heartbeat drummed slow and thick in her ears, and she fought the panic that darkened the edges of her vision. She resisted the urge to look behind her, toward the fireplace and dressing room. He hadn't been there moments ago, and he wasn't there now, waiting for her to turn around before he grabbed her.

Her room was only four doors down the hall, and it had a sturdy lock. She was light on her feet; it would only take seconds to—

A scraping, sliding noise interrupted her frantic preparations. She caught her breath on a sob, her body tensing as her brother grasped the leg of the bed and dragged himself into view. His face was pressed against the floor; she didn't think he

had noticed her. He slowly crawled around the edge of the bed on his elbows and stomach, digging his fingers into the rug with each forward pull. His legs slid behind him, and he gave a kittenish mew when his knee bumped the footboard.

The pathetic scene wavered through her tears. She wanted to help him, but the risk was too great, his weakness deceptive. Better to leave the room and lock the door behind her—in the morning she would repair him to his bed and try to discover how he'd loosed himself.

Though the rational decision heartened her, it took a few moments to screw her courage. Then she gathered up her skirts and sprinted to the door.

She knew the moment he saw her; she heard a growl, but she was already pushing at the handle.

It wouldn't open.

She cried out in dismay, certain it had not been locked when she'd fallen asleep. But she took no time to ponder the mystery of it, spinning around and fleeing to the dressing room. It wouldn't lock, but she could prop a chair against the door.

She didn't make it. Halfway across the room, Colin crashed into her and sent her sprawling against the coal bin next to the grate. It spilled over with a clang and an explosion of black dust. She reached out blindly for the iron poker that flanked the hearth.

He caught her wildly grasping arm, yanking her against him. Pain, excruciating and hot, ripped through her shoulder, and she screamed.

His fingers tore at her neckline, his nails scoring her skin in long furrows. She flailed at him with her free arm, numbly recognizing that her death was upon her. She stilled and let it come.

His head bent, his breath cold against her skin. She closed her eyes against the bite, praying that it would be quick—praying that it would be complete. She did not want to become what he was.

"Colin." Whether she spoke the word as a plea or to bestow forgiveness on this thing with her brother's face but the mind of an animal, she didn't know. But her voice must have touched some last bit of humanity in him; his weight shifted, lessened—and though she waited in agony, the bite didn't come. Hopeful and afraid, she opened her eyes.

And looked into the face of a dead man.

Anthony Ramsdell had wrapped his hands over Colin's jaw and was holding those sharp teeth away from her neck. Beside him, a youth in a monk's robe pried Colin's fingers from her dress.

Anthony gave her a lopsided grin. "You two are a little old to be wrestling, aren't you?" A pair of white, feathery wings waved gently behind him.

When did I die? Emily wondered, and then Colin attempted to struggle against his captors, jolting her shoulder. She shrieked, and merciful darkness flooded the pain

anyway.

Colin fought wildly, but after they'd extricated him from Emily, Anthony and Hugh no longer had to be gentle with him. Hugh lifted and tossed Colin back onto the bed and had a manacle around his wrist before the vampire could move. Colin screeched in fury, pulling against the chains.

Anthony left Colin to Hugh; the older Guardian could certainly handle a vampire, particularly a half-starved one. Scooping Emily from the floor, he carried her down the hall to the room he remembered as hers.

It still was, apparently; although Anthony had never entered Emily's bedchamber, the romantic cream and rose perfectly suited the girl he'd known.

Except she was no longer that girl, he reminded himself.

With a sigh, he set her on the bed, glancing cursorily down her form to determine the worst of her injuries. The claw marks on her collarbone were bloody and raw; coal dust had settled into them, and they needed cleaning. The lump above her shoulder demanded his immediate attention, however, and it would be far better to reset the dislocation while she was unconscious.

He rolled up his sleeves, smiling grimly. For years, he had resented the necessity of his medical training and, when he'd been sent to the Peninsula, the circumstances under which he'd learned combat medicine. Emily's injuries weren't as serious as those he'd seen during the war, but he'd never been so pleased that he had the knowledge to help someone.

It took only moments to tear the dress away from her, revealing her white chemise. His hands were sure and steady on her shoulder, aided by his increased sensitivity and strength. She whimpered when he pushed the joint into place, but she didn't regain consciousness. He found a pitcher of water and a wash basin on her nightstand; he used it and a cloth to clean out the scratches and one of her nightgowns to make a crude dressing.

More of the black dust covered the left side of her face, and he gently wiped it away, leaving a clean trail of damp, porcelain skin. He traced the curve of her lips; they were softer than he remembered, and he suddenly wanted to wake her up, to see her smile. He wanted to capture every expression her mobile features could produce, find her flaws and pronounce them endearing, worship her scent and her touch and her voice.

Hugh had warned him before they'd entered the Gate that some Guardians became enthralled upon returning to Earth—Caelum's sterility could not prepare them for the sensorial onslaught. It could overwhelm or captivate their heightened senses, rendering them helpless until they learned to adjust.

Anthony's determination to reach Beaumont Court had prevented him from noticing much of his surroundings; once he had entered the house, he'd finally understood why Hugh's warning had been necessary. His senses had been immediately attuned to Emily's every movement, her every breath. When she had wept, it had taken every bit of his strength to stay away from her. When she had

screamed, he'd used every bit of it to reach her.

He brushed her eyelashes with his thumb; they were long and thick, tipped with pale gold. No tears streaked her cheeks now, though the flesh around her eyes was tender and swollen.

They were the only marks of strain that he could see; despite her loss, despite the burden that had been placed upon her, she'd remained steadfast. He'd never imagined that the girl full of dreams would be a woman with a core of steel. Since learning of (he nosferatu's attack on Colin, he'd berated himself for failing to fulfill his vow to return, for leaving her alone—but she had not needed him.

Except, of course, when her brother attempted to rip out her throat.

His gaze returned to the dressing above her breasts. Blood had already seeped through the thin material. Frustration made him clench his teeth; he needed better supplies—and a few servants to help find clean cloths and renew the water. As he had neither of those things, he ripped a length of bedsheet to replace the nightgown and exposed the scratches. He frowned at their ragged edges and their depth. They would scar, leaving a physical reminder of her terror.

Instinctively, he willed her flesh to knit itself, imagined the skin closing and repairing in the same manner he willed his clothes and his wings to appear, and pressed his hand to her injury.

He pulled it back as his palm burned against her skin. Pain shot through his arm, but it was the smooth, undamaged skin at her neck that made him curse aloud in surprise.

His exclamation brought Hugh instantly to the door, and Anthony had the absurd desire to know whether his mentor had actually run from the other room or just walked very quickly.

He repressed the question with a grin. "I believe I have discovered the nature of my Gift."

Hugh looked at Anthony's hand, then at Emily lying on the bed. "Waking unconscious women?"

"No, healing—" Anthony paused and glanced at Emily. Her eyes were still closed. "You just made a joke," he said in disbelief.

Hugh regarded him steadily. "Hardly. I was expressing hope: we need her awake. This situation is more complicated than we had realized. Colin's behavior is not just the result of starvation; he has not been completely turned."

Anthony's heart sank. "We can't kill the nosferatu then. We'll need him to finish it."

"Yes."

"Can we trust him to do it?"

Hugh cast him a reproving glance and walked slowly over to the bed to look down at Emily. "Of course not. Nosferatu are even more treacherous than demons.

And though demons are bound by law not to kill humans, nosferatu are not. He'd not hesitate in murdering Colin." Almost absently, he touched Emily's perfectly healed skin. "Which leads me to our other problem."

Anthony tore his eyes away from the other man's fingers and fought the possessive urge to remove the Guardian's hand from Emily's chest. "Which problem is that?" he asked tightly.

"Lilith." A long-suffering sigh escaped him, and he folded his hands into his robe. "A demon."

Chapter Six



Human motives are rarely as simple as they appear, their actions driven by myriad emotions and thoughts. Demons name them—greed, lust, envy—but these shallow words cannot do the human heart justice; Guardians must learn to read its complexities.—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Emily tried to remain asleep, snuggling deeper into the warmth surrounding her. It had been so long since she'd felt secure, and the arms holding her were strong, the voice crooning in her ear familiar.

But the insistent ache in her shoulder would not let her rest, nor would the lingering sense of horror that crept around the edges of her sleep. Something had gone dreadfully wrong.

She slowly surfaced; the crooning that had lulled her stopped, the arms holding her tensed as if in expectation of her waking and then slipped from around her.

Anthony's arms. Anthony Ramsdell had saved her.

Perhaps she had stopped believing in miracles too soon.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on her bed, a blanket draped over her. Pillows propped her shoulders and head, and she had to turn only slightly to see him.

Anthony leaned back against the headboard, his long legs stretched out in front of him. She felt the pressure of his thigh against her hip, as if he'd withdrawn his embrace out of propriety but couldn't completely give up all physical contact.

His wings were gone, and the hesitancy on his face made her want to cry.

She smiled instead. "I suppose it was too much to hope that I'd actually make it to Heaven."

He pressed his lips together as if holding back a laugh. He'd always done that, she remembered—particularly when he was around her. He'd always taken his time

answering, always paused before laughing, as if he didn't trust himself to speak or react spontaneously.

She had taken advantage of that once, and the memory made her flush with shame. She forced herself to add, "After all, women who compromise innocent men are hardly candidates for sainthood."

As an apology for a wrong, it wasn't a very good one—but judging by the way the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement, one he appreciated.

"And I am sorry I died and couldn't return to make a reformed hoyden of you as I'd promised," he replied solemnly.

She gasped in mock outrage and then burst into laughter. It felt good to let her worries go, even for a moment—but that moment passed all too soon, and her laughter expired on a sigh.

She sat up, holding the blanket to her chest with her uninjured arm. He must have already seen her in dishabille, but it seemed important to maintain at least some semblance of modesty in front of him, particularly if he had become what she suspected.

Thinking of the wings she'd seen, she pulled the covering higher.

The pain in her other shoulder flared, and she winced. Noting his concerned look, she asked, "Is it broken?"

"No. It was dislocated; it will be sore for some time. Unless I can heal it," he added.

Something about his tone made her narrow her eyes. That summer, Robert had used that same tone when he'd promised to show her a trick he'd taught his pony; he'd been bursting with pride at his own cleverness. She had ended up with mud in her hair and down the back of her favorite riding habit. "Unless you can heal it?" she echoed suspiciously.

He nodded, and his hair fell into his eyes. She had to resist the urge to smooth it back. She clenched her fingers more tightly on the blanket to give her uninjured arm something to do besides touching him, besides assuring herself that he was real.

He watched her carefully. "Do you need to be down again? I know this is a lot to absorb, but—"

She pinned him with a disbelieving stare and didn't wait for him to finish. "Half of my family died six months ago. Since then, my brother and I were attacked by a monster, and that monster was chased away by a red-skinned flying woman with a sword. I've had to send my staff away for their own safety, because my brother has become another monster. *That* is a lot to absorb. Discovering that my dead friend has become an angel is nothing."

His lips pressed together again, but he managed, "I'm not an angel."

She paused and examined him closely for the first time. His hair was as untidy and overlong as always, and it was still a deep chestnut brown. He'd rolled up his

shirtsleeves, revealing strong, tanned forearms with a light dusting of hair. Though his shirt was of a fine cloth and blindingly white, he didn't wear a coat to cover it, or a cravat. She should have realized that his exposed, masculine throat was too immodest for Heaven—and the cling of his breeches against his lean, muscular thighs would be positively indecent.

Why had she never before noted how lovely his eyes were? They seemed to glow with blue fire, and his grin made her heart skip.

"You are beautiful enough to be one," she said boldly, and enjoyed the blush that crept over his cheeks, "but your clothing probably left too much to be desired."

"Colin always professed that sartorial excellence was next to godliness," he said.

At the mention of her brother, Emily could not keep the sadness from her smile; she didn't try. "Can you heal him?" she said, and was sorry that her question made his good humor fade.

"No."

She sighed. "What are we to do with him?"

He raised his hand and cupped her cheek. She turned her face into his palm, afraid to see the answer in his eyes. "Hugh is watching over him right now. I'm not certain we can help him, but we will do everything we can." He tipped her chin so she had to look at him. "If we do find the creature that did this, Colin will live—but he will never be human again."

"What will he be? Like you?" She couldn't stop the hopeful note from entering her voice. Whatever Anthony was, it had to be better than the thing Colin had become.

"No. He'll be a vampire," he replied, and when her lip trembled at his answer he smoothed his thumb over it. He held her gaze with his and addressed her darkest fear. "He'll be himself, for the most part. He won't be evil, Emily—he won't be like the nosferatu who attacked you."

She released a deep, shuddering breath; she had been so afraid Colin would die, would *have* to die, that she'd never allowed herself to consider an alternative.

And yet an alternative was possible—perhaps not a perfect one, but one she could accept.

She had thought happiness had deserted her, but it suddenly bubbled through her like water and washed away the grief and shame that had held her soul numb. On impulse, she kissed his thumb, then dipped her chin and pressed another to his palm.

When he looked at her in surprise, she bounced up onto her knees and kissed him heartily on the mouth. Her shoulder protested the movement, but her face was all smiles when she pulled back and said, "I could kiss you forever for what you've just given me."

He lifted an eyebrow rakishly, but ruined the effect of it with his crooked grin. "Please do."

His answer widened her smile, even as it left her nonplussed. Aside from his

hesitation upon her first seeing him, his bearing was more self-assured than she remembered. It wasn't arrogance, but a quiet confidence that left her uncertain, shaken.

Amidst her confusion, she tried to think of some witty reply; her gaze lowered to his mouth, and heat unfurled in her belly so quickly her thoughts deserted her and left her speechless.

Her sudden silence must have alarmed him. "Emily? Is it your shoulder? Do you want me to try to heal it?"

She nodded dumbly, grateful that he had given her an excuse. It wouldn't do to admit that she'd just had the most delicious inclination to trail kisses from his mouth to that gorgeous, shockingly bare throat. She wanted to taste him there, run her tongue down the cords on either side of his neck.

Perhaps there wasn't much difference between vampire and sister after all.

She turned to hide her disconcertment, presenting him with her back. She let go of the blanket and it dropped to her lap, allowing him better access to her shoulder.

Her chemise was a plain, sturdy one; beneath its wide shoulders she could see the dull bruise that had already formed below her skin. There were several more down the length of her arms, and she suddenly felt embarrassed, exposed—not by her underclothing, but by the fear that he would see her failure in those marks. Anthony had apparently been strong enough to defy death, and she...

"For a moment, I stopped fighting him," she admitted quietly. "I almost gave up."

The dip of the mattress signaled his movement as he kneeled behind her. His body seemed to radiate warmth; remembering the comfort she had felt when she'd awakened, she wanted to lean back against him, let him support her with his steady strength.

"You did, though." His voice was low, his fingers gentle as he probed lightly at her shoulder.

Her breath hissed out between clenched teeth, and he murmured in apology and removed his hand.

Despite the pain, she had to smile at his long, disappointed sigh. "It didn't work?"

"No. I will try again in a moment—I've only just discovered this gift."

Shifting around, she looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

His gaze fell to her chest. "When I healed the claw marks Colin ü It on you, that was the first time."

With a sense of wonder, she touched her clavicle. She had forgotten about the scratches. She glanced down, looking for any sign i them—but aside from a small tear and a stain of blood on the neckline of her chemise, there was none. "Thank you," she said belatedly.

She felt his gaze linger on the rise of her breasts, and the heat in his expression

made her nipples peak beneath the soft linen. He glanced up, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth, and she was once again reminded of the difference in his mien.

He would never have looked at her with such blatant interest, nor been so openly pleased by her reaction.

Whatever he had become, it was definitely not an angel.

She clung to that thought and tried to shift her focus from his usually sculpted mouth to something less... unnerving. Something secure. Something that had nothing to do with heat and craving and the bewildering sense that everything she'd thought she'd known about desire had recently tumbled into pieces around her.

"Tell me about angels," she blurted.

His eyes narrowed, as if he sensed she was running from him.

But his tone was even when he said, "I don't know any. Hugh and I are Guardians."

She waited a beat and then blinked. "Oh," she said. "Of course. Guardians."

He stared at her in surprise and then grinned. "I was going to make it difficult for you, make you drag each bit of information out of me. I can tell you've caught on."

"I have a nephew," she said dryly.

At her comparison of him to a twelve-year-old, his lips pursed as if he'd eaten something sour.

She wanted to lick that expression from his very adult mouth. With a deep sigh, she prompted, "Guardians?"

He regarded her intensely for a moment, and she nervously wetted her lips. Following the movement with his eyes, he said, "Guardians are men and women who have been chosen to protect humans from demons and creatures such as the nosferatu. We aren't angels, though I'm told we have similar abilities and powers as them."

"Such as?"

"I'm strong, fast." He met her gaze; the outline of his thick, dark lashes emphasized the startling blue of his irises. "I can materialize wings and fly." This, with a wistful tone.

She tried to imagine him soaring through the air and felt a dig of envy and disbelief. But she had seen his wings; she could not doubt him.

"And you can heal," she said.

He reached out, his hand hovering over her shoulder. A focused expression came over his face—then frustration as he pulled his hand away. "Not always." His lashes swept down as he looked at his fists, and he continued softly, "Not every Guardian can heal—we each have particular gifts. My mentor's, for example, is Truth. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to lie to him. Unfortunately." He added the last with

a rueful grin.

She remembered the youth who had been with him and his strange attire. "Your mentor—is he a priest? He's so young!"

Anthony's shoulders shook with laughter. "I've heard from other Guardians that Hugh was either a novice or a scribe during King John's reign. I do not know for certain, however—he has never related his history to me."

As she could easily imagine Hugh bent over a parchment or an illuminated manuscript, she nodded. "You do not age, then?"

"No. Our powers develop and increase over time, though. Most Guardians can not only create wings and clothes, as I can, but also shift their shape completely."

She eyed his breeches, leather riding boots, and loose shirt, "Your clothes are an illusion?" A blush heated her cheeks at the thought of him sitting next to her, naked but for a trick. Her fingers itched to reach out and test.

"They're real," he said, grinning as if he'd read her thoughts. "Things that are familiar to me are easy to create; also, things that I want very badly, like the wings. But shifting is much more difficult—Hugh claims I am holding on to my human life too strongly to let my form change."

Remembering all the people in her life she had recently had to let go, and the grief it had brought, she said quietly, "That is not such a bad thing, is it?"

He touched the corner of her lips, smoothing away her frown.

"No."

His eyes became troubled. "Emily, there is something I need if tell you."

Her gut tightened in immediate refusal—she didn't want to know what had brought that tortured expression to his face.

He took a deep breath. "The nosferatu attacked you and Colin and set fire to the house in London because of memories he found in me."

"The nosferatu set fire to—" Her voice broke. She closed her eyes, blinking back tears. "Why?"

"He wants your father's sword. We believe the fire was intended to divert attention from its loss afterward; but, he must not have found it—and that is why you and Colin were targeted next."

"The sword?" She shook her head in wordless denial. Pain ripped at her heart, grief all the worse for her certainty that she deserved it, that her childish desire to hurt her father had caused it.

Numbly, she whispered, "I killed them." She raised dull eyes to his face. "I destroyed my family."

Chapter Seven



It is not the Guardian's duty to seek justice, only to protect. Judgment is a function for those Above; Morningstar and his cohorts were thrown out because of their ambition to punish, and to take on roles that were not theirs. A Guardian does not follow in a demon's footsteps.

—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Anthony's relief that she hadn't turned accusing eyes on him after his admission immediately disappeared. Confronted with her tormented expression, he'd much rather have had her blame him.

"No, Emily—whatever you are thinking, stop." If not for her shoulder, he would have shaken her to break the stricken hold that his information had taken on her. "Listen to me; if anyone is at fault, it is the nosferatu. The Guardians who failed to track him after my death. Me, for being unable to resist him." He leaned forward and made her look at him when she would have bowed her head. "Not you. This course was set in Spain, when he drank my blood. There is nothing you could, or could not, have done."

She broke away from his gaze and shuddered, as if his words had torn something dark and heavy from every cell of her being. When she looked at him again, he saw the resignation that had replaced the agonized self-recrimination. "Then tell me how it started," she said quietly.

Though he related the story of his death as unemotionally as possible, tears coursed down her cheeks and her body drew tight in horror. When he had finished, silence hung between them, broken only by her low, hiccupping sobs. Finally, she used the heel of her hand to wipe away the moisture from her face; her voice distant with memory, she said, "When he came after us, Colin and I had just returned from London—we'd taken Robert to Eton, then met with the solicitors. The house seemed so dreary without Robert, we decided to take Colin's new phaeton out for a drive. It was a beautiful day, even for November."

Anthony smiled; how impractical, and how like Colin, to keep a fashionable high-perch phaeton not just in London, but in Derbyshire.

When she saw his expression, Emily returned his faint smile—but their shared amusement quickly faded as she continued, "We went too far; it was dark as we came up the drive to the manor, and that was when it attacked Colin." Her lids lowered briefly, as if she wanted to shut away the memory. "Took him right off the seat. By the time I got hold of the reins and stopped the horses, it was already feeding from him."

He clenched his hands to keep from pulling her to him. "What did you do?"

Her eyes flashed. "I got the whip—but before I could hit it even once, *she* was there."

"The red-skinned flying woman you mentioned before?"

Emily nodded. "She had a sword—she nearly severed its head from its neck while it was feeding from Colin, but it still managed to get up and fight her. Then they both disappeared. And I went to get help. The staff assumed that he'd been attacked by an animal—[let them think that. Until I saw the changes in him, I thought my wits had deserted me."

"They didn't," Anthony said. "Although witnessing such a thing might have driven anyone mad, you took care of your brother and stayed strong for him."

"I do not know if I could have been for much longer," she replied with simple gratitude. "I am glad you are here."

I am, too. The thought surprised him—he had originally made the decision not to return, but upon hearing of the nosferatu, he couldn't *not* return. It had not given him joy—it was an obligation he had to fulfill. Now, seeing her, talking to her, he was grateful he'd had this opportunity.

She was watching him expectantly; wondering how much she had read in his expression, his gaze fell. The bruises on her shoulder were becoming livid, and a quiet frustration ran through him. His Gift had manifested itself so easily before—why couldn't he heal her now? What had he done differently? He *felt* the ability in him, but how had he made it work?

The answer hovered, just at the edge of his mind, and he grasped for it.

"Anthony?"

"Just a moment," he said, distracted, and raked his fingers through his hair. He saw her look up at the mess he'd left behind and turn her face to hide a smile. The unmarked sweep of her neck pulled at him: how had he done it? He'd held his hand over the wound and willed her to heal—but when he'd done the same to her shoulder, thought *Heal*, nothing.

And then he knew.

He hadn't willed *her* to heal, he had willed the *process* of healing—had imagined and guided the reparation of her skin, the recovery of her flesh.

And when he looked at her shoulder, he knew the muscles that needed their fibers repaired, the broken vessels that needed mending. He knew how to erase the bruising, ease the tender joints and ligaments—even knew the names for each.

It wasn't a matter of wishing it; one had to know how to do it.

When he placed his hand on her shoulder and willed it, it flowed through him in an explosion of heat and pain. He gritted his teeth, forced himself to hang on until the last bruise faded from her skin. His arm was numb when he pulled it away, but the look of astonished wonder on her face made up for it.

Triumph rushed through him, and he grinned. "Apparently, those endless hours of studying anatomy were actually worth something."

And—because the thrill of success roared through him, because she was laughing up at him with those beautiful eyes and mouth, because he could not help himself—he grabbed her waist, pulled her from the bed, and kissed her.

She held on tight to his neck as he swung her in a circle, giggling against his lips.

Emily slipped her arm painlessly through the sleeve of her robe and shook her head in amazement.

He'd healed her, then kissed her—and when the kiss had become something else, had become charged with heat and tension, she'd bolted. She'd run off to the dressing room—ostensibly to change, but primarily to regain her composure.

Anthony's arrival had certainly given her reason to be giddy, but she was not a love struck girl in her first season. She had been that girl once, her head filled with romantic notions. She'd been a silly girl—a girl who would have tortured herself with the past, would have been overwhelmed by melancholy because she thought such suffering romantic and noble.

And when those romantic ideals actually had been shattered, she'd allowed herself to be overwhelmed by bitterness instead and tried to hurt those she loved most.

She'd been a silly, *stupid* girl.

She sighed as she emerged from the dressing room. Her bedchamber was empty; she wandered slowly down the hall toward Colin's room. She couldn't fathom why she was thinking about love when her brother still lay dying. Did Anthony's presence give her that much hope, make that much of a difference?

Yes, her heart sighed when she found him. He'd pulled a chair next to Colin's bed, his hands spread over Colin's chest. His focused expression told her that despite his declaration that he couldn't heal her brother, he was trying.

"It should not cause him pain," a voice said quietly from behind her.

Although she hadn't heard Hugh approach, his words had been so calmly uttered she hadn't been startled. Or maybe she'd already experienced a lifetime of fear, and nothing would surprise her again.

The idea was oddly depressing.

She didn't glance away from Anthony and her brother as she replied, "I know—the healing isn't at all uncomfortable." *It's even pleasurable*, she thought, remembering the warmth that had stolen through her, easing the soreness and pain. But she couldn't say that to the young, monkish man standing next to her.

She felt the long, measuring look Hugh gave her. "I was not speaking of your brother," he said finally.

She frowned, walking into the room and pausing at Anthony's side. This close,

she could see the strain that held his features taut, the slight shaking of his hands. She could feel the heat emanating from him.

"Anthony," she said softly, and laid her hand on his shoulder. "We'll find another way."

He stiffened, and she felt a final burst of heat come from him before he relaxed and turned to press his face against her belly. His arms came up to circle her hips.

"He's so thin," Anthony murmured, and Emily thought of how they'd been inseparable growing up, the improbable pair of youngest sons from impoverished gentry and wealthy nobility. She remembered how he'd always slipped into her thoughts, even when she'd been determined to only dream of dukes and princes.

Her lips parted on a sigh, and she threaded her fingers through his hair and held him against her.

And let those foolish dreams go.

Chapter Eight



During the First Battle, the three new orders of beings were determined: the angels, who fought for those Above; the demons, who sided with Morningstar; and the nosferatu, who abstained from the battle until the victor became clear. The demons were thrown down from Heaven, and they made their corrupt mirror in Hell. The nosferatu were not welcomed Above or Below; they are forever denied rest, hunted by angels and demons alike—and now, Guardians.—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Anthony stood at the window as the fingers of dawn slowly began peeling back the night, piercing the overhanging clouds with gold and blue.

Colin had been restless in the waning hours but had finally fallen into the daysleep. As the three of them had watched over him, Anthony had told Emily the history of the Guardians. Despite her earlier declaration, she *had* found his explanation a lot to absorb.

He glanced at Hugh, who had said nothing during the account, except to nod once or twice when Anthony had looked to him for clarification. His mentor was staring out the other window, ever alert. Though the nosferatu could not attack during the day, the demon Hugh had sensed could.

The chains jangled, and Anthony turned as Emily began unlocking Colin in expectation of the servants' return. She leaned over the bed for Colin's left wrist, and the hem of the nightgown lifted, revealing the delicate line of her ankles. His eyes skimmed up her form, allowing himself to linger for a moment where the robe pulled tight over the enticing curve of her bottom, and then he moved to her side to help

her.

Wordlessly, she handed him the key and began unwinding the chains from around the bedposts. He looked over at her, and a smile tugged at his mouth. "My story has shocked you into silence."

"No," she said. "I am merely trying to comprehend it all and think of what should be done next." She dropped the chains to the floor with a sharp clatter, and Anthony pushed the pile under the bed with his foot. She slanted him a wry glance. "And perhaps I am overwhelmed."

"When one is inundated with information," Hugh said without moving from his post by the window, "that is usually the end result. My pupil has yet to learn that short summaries are easier to deliver, and easier for the listener to take in, than epic narration."

How typical of Hugh to want the details framed in the most boring, succinct manner possible. Anthony's lips quirked. Perhaps he had embellished too much, but Emily had been a captivating audience. Her eyes had been wide, her skin flushed with excitement, and he had enjoyed being the object of her rapt attention.

He was absurdly pleased that her expression betrayed no similar excitement when Hugh recited, "Quite simply: after the First Battle, a group of angels descended from Above to reside in Caelum, to protect humans from the manipulations of those Below. But the humans began to think of the angels as gods; the demons, out of jealousy, decided to wage another war, the Second Battle. They managed to create a dragon, which defeated the angels—but a human was able to stop it."

"Michael," Emily said with a trace of awe, and Anthony grinned. Michael's battle had been one part of the narrative he'd lingered over. "And the sword he used somehow came into my family's possession, and the dragon's blood imbued the metal with the power to defeat the original angelic orders."

"Correct. After Michael's victory, those Above decided to create the Guardians, a corps of men who would protect against demons and nosferatu in the angels' stead. The Guardians' humanity would allow them to move among the humans as the angels never could. Michael took up residence in Caelum and began selecting those who would be in the corps."

Emily was silent for a moment and then she looked at Anthony. Her dark eyes sparkled with repressed mirth, and he felt her glance spear through him and settle heavy in his loins.

"Thank you, Hugh," she said. "That was *much* less epic."

Hugh bowed his head in acknowledgment, and Emily's gaze became thoughtful. "Why hasn't the nosferatu tried to kill us since that first assault?"

"You spoke to me of a female demon who interfered that night," Anthony said, with a quick glance at Hugh. If it had been a demon, the nosferatu might be dead.

She raised her eyes to Anthony's face. "If it was a demon, why would she have saved us?"

"If it is Lilith, as I suspect, do not suppose a rational motive," Hugh replied. "She'll reveal herself soon—she can't tolerate anonymity, and last night's mischief suggests that she is tired of waiting in the background—and then we'll discover whether she has killed the nosferatu."

"And the sword?" Anthony asked. "If the nosferatu lives and was able to delve into Colin's memories as he did mine, he might have already discovered its location."

Emily was shaking her head. "Colin doesn't know where it is." A blush crept up her cheeks, and she looked away from Anthony. "I had it sent—"

"Don't say it!" Hugh broke in sharply. Anthony and Emily stared at him in surprise, and Hugh added in his normal, staid tone, "Their hearing is as good as ours. Perhaps better."

Anthony felt Emily's sudden tension, and her hand clenched tightly on his. He realized, "If they are listening, then they will know she has the information they want."

Hugh nodded, and Anthony wondered if his mentor had counted on something like this to flush out the nosferatu. To use Emily as bait.

Unease flitted across Emily's features. If the nosferatu came for her, it would tear her apart in its quest for the sword.

"It would be best if you did not leave her side," Hugh said.

His voice tight, Anthony promised, "I won't."

Emily slowly brushed her hair, studying the line of Anthony's back in the mirror as he paced the length of her room. He moved differently than he used to, with new confidence; before, he had walked as if he didn't care to be noticed, entering a room and sitting as quickly as possible in an unobtrusive location. Now, he seemed to frill her bedchamber with his presence, each long stride marking off territory and claiming it as his.

Claiming Emily as his.

He turned and met her gaze in the mirror. Her cheeks reddened at being caught in a stare, but she refused to look away. A faint smile curved his mouth, and he resumed his pacing.

Emily set down the brush and pressed her cool palms to her burning face—but her hands could not soothe the heat that coiled low in her belly.

But his hands could.

The image of his fingers on her breasts, in the dark hollow between her thighs deepened her blush. Anthony caught her gaze again and, as if arrested by her heightened color, paused a few feet from her chair. His eyes darkened as they skimmed over her slim form.

Though her lips parted in expectation, he abruptly walked away.

Disappointment surged through her, but she could not find the courage to issue

an invitation. She stared at her reflection, wondering when she had become a coward—and why she found it difficult to clearly state her desires now. In the past, it had seemed so simple to convince a man—including Anthony. A kiss or a coin and their objections fell away.

I don't want to have to kiss his objections away, she realized.

For the second time, he tested the lock at the door, and she sighed. "The servants won't come in; I've left instructions for them to let me sleep undisturbed."

He jiggled the handle again. "It would be unfortunate should one come in here and see me; I'm supposed to be dead, and most of your staff knows me well," he reminded her. "And I do not have Hugh's ability to go about undetected."

She rose from her chair, crossing the room and pulling back her bedding. "I wonder that I was allowed to see you," she said, and climbed into her bed. She sat, her arms curled around her knees.

"I'm not supposed to return while you, or anyone else I knew, still lives," he admitted. As if finally convinced that her room was as secure as it could be, he joined her at the bed and sat down on the edge. His hip was only inches from her feet, and she fought the urge to wriggle her toes beneath warm, firm muscle. "I have barely begun my training; I shouldn't have come back to Earth until another century had passed."

Her eyes widened. "Did you break the rules? Will you be tossed out like the demons, or a fallen angel?" The thought that he would be punished for helping her made her chest ache.

He grinned and dipped his head, and she could tell he was trying not to laugh. "No, Michael bade me to come. In any case, there is no punishment for a Guardian. Falling is simply making the choice to reverse the transformation. If a Guardian chooses to leave the corps before the first one hundred years, then he Ascends and waits for judgment. After the hundred years, he can either return to Earth and live out the remainder of his life or Ascend."

As a reward for service, it left much to be desired. "If you chose to come back, everyone you knew would be gone," she said sadly.

He gave a short nod. "From what I understand, most who choose to Fall decide not to return." He glanced up at her face, sucked in a breath as if she'd hit him. "Don't look like that—it's not worth your tears. I'm fortunate to be alive at all, and becoming a Guardian is an opportunity I never could have dreamed of," he said gently.

She buried her face in the cradle of her knees and waited until the burning behind her eyelids stopped. Finally, she raised her head and propped her chin on her fist. "You might like to know that your sister Elizabeth was married six months ago to Lord Ashcom."

"Oh?" He lifted an eyebrow, his tone bland. "My mother must have been pleased with such an advantageous match. They did not even wait to come out of mourning

for me."

Death had apparently not softened his feelings toward his family. "I believe she will have a first advantageous grandchild *very* soon," Emily said with an arch smile and was rewarded as he feigned a scandalized expression.

"Hardly appropriate behavior for a lady!" he replied, and his sarcasm was not lost on Emily. His family had always insisted on respectability, had disapproved of Anthony for his profession, and yet it had likely been his sister's impropriety that had netted her a viscount. His family would never see the hypocrisy; Elizabeth's actions had gained a peer and access to a modest fortune. It mattered little to them that a physician was a respectable position in society; Anthony would have been paid for his services. His attempts to secure himself a comfortable living had relegated him to *trade* in their lofty view, no better than a merchant.

But it hardly signified now.

She opened her mouth to tell him so and was surprised to find his countenance overspread with a deep blush.

As if embarrassment had congealed on his tongue, he said stiffly, "Allow me to apologize, Lady Emily. I do not mean to suggest that *your* behavior has ever been less than appropriate, nor lowered your status in my eyes."

She stared at him, puzzled, until she recalled what he had just said of his sister. Then she burst into laughter.

"Oh, Anthony!" she said when she could manage the words. She wiped tears from her lashes with shaking fingers. "You of all people—" A giggle erupted, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle the girlish laugh.

He watched her, his blush fading, replaced by the confident teasing of a long-time friend. "You were rather shameless."

Her giggles ceased as mortification struck, sobering and cold. She sighed. "You don't know the extent of my shamelessness, Anthony." She pleated the hem of her nightgown with nervous fingers, studying the wrinkles the folds left in the linen. She couldn't bear to look at him, to see the censure in his blue eyes as she admitted, "I didn't wait to mourn for you, either. I didn't even wait until I'd heard news of your death—within two weeks of your leaving for Spain I was in another man's bed."

She felt his stillness, his tension. She dared a glance at his face. He was looking blindly at his hands; a muscle in his jaw flexed, his chiseled lips held firmly together, as if he didn't trust himself to immediately speak. A flurry of emotions passed over his features, and those that she recognized twisted in her belly and made her regret her admission: hurt, jealousy, surprise.

His voice was hoarse. "Are you looking to me for absolution?"

"No." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm at peace with the past; I don't know why I told you." But she did—he had always looked at her as if she was an untouchable romantic heroine with no faults, even after she had used him. She wanted him to know the woman, the whole woman, she'd become—blemishes and

all.

He didn't reply. Silence stretched between them, and she was desperate to fill it. "Anthony." His name was a plea.

He finally turned to her. Her throat tightened with relief when she saw his lopsided grin, but the self-deprecation lurking in his gaze ripped at her heart.

"And all this time, I thought you'd fallen prey to my masculine charms and were wasting away in my absence," he said. "Who was this paragon for whom I was a substitute, and why isn't he married to you now?"

If her nightgown had been paper, it would have shredded beneath her anxiously working fingers. "They weren't—" She took a deep breath, tried to find a way to explain. "After that night—after you left—I was sick. A fever and infection. And when I recovered, I went out and sought the most unsuitable lovers I could find. I paid for their services and then their silence," she said in a low voice. She met his shocked gaze with her own, and added with force, "And you were not a substitute for anyone. They were... convenient."

"As I was?" The question was ripe with anger, but he quickly suppressed it. Though she wished she could deny it, he had the truth of it: he *had* been convenient.

He fell back against the mattress, staring at the ceiling. After a moment, he raked his hands through his hair and propped himself up on his elbow to look at her. She tore her gaze away from the collar of his shirt, the broad expanse of skin and muscle his new position afforded her.

His concern was as intense as his anger had been. "Whatever could have possessed you to risk your reputation, your future—your family? What happened that you would be so reckless? Were you in love with any of them?" The last seemed dragged out of him.

She shook her head, and a miserable smile pulled at her mouth. "I wanted that risk—with men with whom my father would not approve in alliance, so he might be as disillusioned as I was," she admitted.

"Why not tap the footman then?" he asked carelessly.

She could not keep the reproof from her voice. "Anthony."

He sighed. "I'm doing my best to reconcile the idealistic creature I knew with the woman who tells me that she not only used me out of convenience, but also a collection of prostitutes—in some plot against her father?" He reached forward and placed his hand over hers, stilling the agitated crumpling at her hem. "I knew you were not yourself that night—but frankly, whatever the cause, your reaction was ridiculous."

Her mouth fell open, and she laughed. In retrospect, it had been easy enough to call herself silly, yet she had always recalled the violent bitterness that had motivated her and justified herself with memory of that emotion. Put in Anthony's blunt manner, her motives *did* seem absurd.

"You will laugh," she said. "But it was because I found out my father loved a courtesan. His mistress, Mrs. Newland."

Anthony didn't laugh; instead, he looked at her as if she'd grown a third eye. "Emily," he said gently, like a mother imparting an obvious fact to a stupid child, "many men take mistresses before and after marriage; some even love them. Surely you didn't expect your father to mourn your mother forever?"

"Yes," she said simply. She tried to give a nonchalant shrug, to remind herself that it no longer mattered, but she couldn't keep the thickness from creeping into her voice. "Theirs was a romance that the *ton* still speaks of: the dashing earl and the beautiful daughter of a duke. He grieved for my mother so much that he could not love us; it gave him a reason to ignore Colin and me. It was a reason that was beautiful, tragic. I wanted love like that for myself." She paused, glancing down at their clasped hands. His thumb softly stroked the back of her fingers as he listened. "But if he loved his mistress, then his indifference toward us could not stem from his undying love for my mother. It simply meant that he never found us worthy of his love."

"Emily..." Anthony shook his head, a smile tilting the corners of his mouth. "You are an idiot. Colin loves you. The *ton* adores you," he said, and added with an uneven grin, "Even I love you."

"I used you horribly," she reminded him, but the heaviness in her chest eased, and Emily found herself smiling back. "You can't love me."

"Since I was fourteen years old," he said.

"Don't be absurd," she admonished, and her smile faded. "I *was* an idiot," she admitted with a sigh. "But I was young."

"It was only ten months ago."

"Many things can happen in ten months."

"Yes," he agreed quietly.

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, until the absent stroke of his thumb abruptly stopped.

"Did you meet this courtesan? Was she the rumor in Leicester Square, where you learned—"

He broke off, and his gaze dropped to her lips. She suddenly recalled the words she had spoken to him.

I learned that if a woman takes a man's organ into her mouth, she can make him do anything she wishes.

His hand clenched on hers, and she knew he was imagining it as well. A restless ache swept through her, tightening the peaks of her breasts, settling warm and taut beneath her womb.

She slowly nodded; his expression intensified, his jaw clenched. She leaned forward, a liquid movement, and brushed his hair from where it had fallen into his

eyes.

"This would not be wise," he said, a raw edge to his voice.

Desire thrummed through her; she could feel the answering tension in him and didn't need to question what he thought *this* was.

"We've already decided I have a tendency toward idiocy," she said, and then paused when Anthony pressed his lips together. She touched his mouth softly with her fingertips. "Why do you do that?"

He caught her hand in his and tugged her toward him almost playfully. "What?"

She rocked forward until her knees were against his thigh and sat back on her heels. An unladylike position, perhaps, but a comfortable one. "You don't allow yourself to laugh when you are with me. Am I so formidable?" She tried asking the question lightly, but she knew he would hear the anxiety that ran beneath her teasing tone.

"Yes." He turned her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. An innocent kiss, but tongues of flame licked the length of her arm. Her body tightened, trembled. His gaze locked on hers, warm, rich blue. "Your every smile, your every word leaves me breathless and delighted. If I laughed as often as I wished, there would be no other sound in the room."

His words pierced her like arrows. She drew in a deep breath, her eyes searching his face. "You aren't laughing now," she whispered.

He sat up and rested his forehead against hers. "A nosferatu is stalking you. He would kill you and your brother."

"He sleeps, as does my brother," she said, and threaded her fingers through the hair at his nape. It was soft, and his skin was like silk beneath her hands.

"A demon waits."

"Hugh watches for her." Her palms smoothed down his shoulders and felt the strength of him beneath his shirt. He shuddered under her touch, his lashes swept down as he closed his eyes.

"When I leave, I will not return for a century."

"When you leave, every day I will stare up at the sky and thank Heaven and you for looking after a silly, stupid girl and her vain brother."

A laugh rumbled through him but did not escape. He sealed her lips with his, and she rose up against him, winding her slim arms around his neck. She immediately sought to deepen the kiss, opening her mouth, a soft moan of anticipation sounding low in her throat.

He yielded to her quiet demand, his lips parting. His tongue gently traced the sharp line of her teeth before dipping inside, tasting.

His leisurely exploration sent delicious shivers along her spine. She arched closer, but he pulled away with a long, unraveling sigh.

"You undo me, Emily," he said.

She wanted him to become undone. She raised her fingers to her lips and felt the lingering moisture. His impassioned gaze followed the movement and then with a low growl of frustration, pushed away from the bed.

He strode toward the window, but not before Emily saw the taut stretch of his breeches across his loins and the outline of his shaft.

Tempted to lure him back, she got as far as uncurling her legs from beneath her before he turned around and pinned her to the bed with a heated stare.

"They will hear," he said, his voice thick. "Hugh, the nosferatu, the demon—if they are listening, they will hear us. Every sigh, every word, every movement of my body against yours."

The images his words conjured sent pleasure coursing through her, even as she recoiled at the thought of being on display—particularly for creatures such as those.

"I will be silent," she said.

"I fear I will not."

She tucked in a grin and flicked a glance at his straining erection. "You were last time."

He chuckled, a rich, deep sound that filled the room. She hugged a pillow to her chest, smiling with pleasure. It wasn't an outright laugh, but it would do.

Shaking his head, he said, "*Last time* was possibly the least-fulfilling sexual encounter—outside the marriage bed—in the history of England."

Her face went scarlet, and she hurled the pillow at his head. He caught it easily, and his renewed humor was payment enough for her embarrassment. "Go to sleep, Emily," he said. "We'll discuss your ineffective courtesan-learned technique later."

"I've learned many techniques since then," she muttered, but lay down, curling around her remaining pillow. She felt the warmth of his gaze on her and was certain that her roiling emotions and lingering arousal would never let her rest.

And then she slipped into dreams.

Anthony knew the moment she fell asleep. He heard it in the cadence of her breathing and the subtle relaxing of her form.

He still held her pillow in his hands, and he deliberately unclenched the fists he had sunk deep into its softness, grateful that it had not exploded into a shower of feathers under the pressure of his grip. He should not feel the jealousy that swept through him, nor the anger directed at those lovers she'd taken—he had her once, and his motives had not been pure. Yet he still wanted to tear apart every man who'd touched her, erase from her every memory of them: nameless men who had likely brought her more pleasure than Anthony ever had.

His erection rose taut against his lower abdomen, hot and insistent. Even now, with her back to him and sound asleep, the curve of her shoulders and hips, the nip

of her waist, the spread of her hair behind her was an overpowering lure, the urge to bury himself within her silky depths irresistible.

God, he would have done anything to bring her pleasure now. But it was not the right time—there would likely never be the right time.

"Anthony."

Though several walls separated them, he had no trouble discerning his mentor's voice. His reply was quiet, to avoid disturbing Emily's sleep. "I'm here."

"Are you enthralled?" Hugh asked bluntly.

Anthony bit back the angry response that rose to his tongue; of course his mentor had heard Emily's and his exchange. And he knew that Hugh's real question was: *Given your feelings, can you effectively protect her?*

Emily sighed in her sleep, and he walked over to stand next to the bed. Her lips were gently parted, her lashed fanned against her cheek. Lavender and her unique, feminine fragrance filled his senses.

He could easily lose himself in her, but he would never permit himself that luxury if it endangered her. He would die before he allowed that to happen.

Again.

"No," he finally murmured. "Being near her has always affected me thus." A lifelong enthrallment.

There was a long pause and then Hugh said, "I will not listen anymore."

Anthony glanced in the direction of Hugh's voice, his eyebrows arching in amusement. Had the Guardian just given him leave to make love to Emily if he wished—and had he really thought Anthony needed that approval from him?

But he was not insensible to the tacit compliment accompanying the approval—if Hugh thought Anthony incapable, he would never have offered privacy.

"Have you sensed the demon?"

"Everywhere," Hugh said cryptically and then was silent. The short answer was a signal that Hugh either knew where the demon was but was biding his time before confronting her—or conversely, that he had no idea but did not want to alert the demon to her advantage.

Anthony tilted his head and tried to open his senses to locate the demon, as Hugh had once instructed him.

Nothing.

He sighed at the failure, but it did not dishearten him. He would have years to learn, and he was no stranger to study.

Emily turned over with a rustle of linen. Her nightgown climbed over her knee, revealing sleek muscles and satin skin. How simple it would be to draw his palm over the length of her limbs, to seek the dark secrets between them.

If he had eons to study them, it would not be enough.

He'd thought the taste of her he'd had long ago would be—though he had been aroused, there had been little passion; it had been swept away by his surprise and her bitterness. When he'd returned, he thought he could resist her sensuality, could keep his craving for her under control; the kiss they'd just shared had banished that notion. He knew she made him happy; he'd forgotten how she made him ache.

And with every move, every laugh, every word she reminded him, until it seemed as if there had never been anything else.

Chapter Nine



Those who have been transformed yet cannot release their former lives should Ascend. For those, the hundred years of tutelage is an eternity, and their pain upon return to Earth—where nothing is as it was—excruciating. Guardians do not wish pain upon their own; those unfortunates should be encouraged to Ascend and not made to feel an obligation to serve.

—*The Doyen Scrolls*

Emily looked in on Colin when she woke; he was as still as ever, but it did not make her ache as it once had. "It will not be much longer," she promised him. She straightened his bedding and smoothed the hair that had become tangled on his forehead. Although she knew Hugh was in the room, watching, she could not see him. His silence and invisibility unnerved her, and she left the bedchamber as quickly as she could.

Anthony waited in the hallway, his eyes hooded and dark. "Where will you be?"

She paused at the top of the stairs. He could not be with her always. Only a fool would reject the protection he offered her, and yet they could not risk the servants seeing him. "Because I have minimal staff, we have not kept many rooms cleaned and heated. In the library," she decided. "Should Mrs. Kemble need to speak with me, you could wait in the adjoining parlor until she has left." A door connected the two rooms; he would be able to exit the library without going into the hallway, and he would still be close enough to help her should anything occur.

He nodded. By the time she took the first step, he had disappeared in a blur of movement.

She smiled to herself as she descended the stairs. He took such pleasure in his new abilities. She imagined him, a thousand years in the future, grinning as he healed those he protected.

It was an image that made her as happy as it made her want to cry.

She found him waiting for her in the library, turning the pages of a slim volume of poetry. He glanced up at her, a charming, slightly petulant look in his eyes. "I thought I might be able to read more quickly, but I can't."

Byron would likely have been gratified. "Not everything should be done quickly," she said dryly. "He titled it *Hours of Idleness*, after all."

A lazy, carnal smile spread across his face. "There are many things to spend hours on; poetry is not one of them."

She blushed, her nipples tightening as his gaze slid down her form. Wanton need slipped through her; she had the sudden urge to lock the door, push him onto the sofa, and replay the scene that had gone so wrong before, in London. Only this time, make it right.

But his gaze shifted from her, and he tilted his head, listening. "Someone comes," he said. "By the jingling of keys, I'd wager it is Mrs. Kemble."

Emily straightened, a flush coursing through her as if she were a child about to be discovered in some naughty act. Anthony grinned and strode to the parlor door. The flex and roll of his buttock muscles made her mouth water.

She looked up and found him watching her. He winked salaciously and closed the door on her gasp of embarrassment.

Composing herself took effort, but she managed to smooth her countenance before the housekeeper's brisk knock sounded at the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Kemble," Emily said as the older woman swept into the room. "I think I shall take my luncheon in here today. I have some correspondence to complete in my brother's stead, and we are behind in tallying the accounts." Color rose in her cheeks as her effort to appear as if everything was normal brought forth a garrulous spill of words; she did not need to explain herself to the housekeeper.

Mrs. Kemble sniffed. "Very well, milady." She looked Emily up and down. "Have you come out of mourning, milady? We will need to air your wardrobe."

Emily nodded. Anthony had ripped her best mourning dress; though she had others, when she had faced the selection of blacks and grays, she had not been able to make herself wear them. She had chosen a fine woolen dress in pale blue instead and then topped it with a sunny yellow shawl as a ward against the chill in the house.

As Emily had only just entered her period of half-mourning, the disapproval on Mrs. Kemble's face deepened. But she only said, "I will send Mr. Davison to Hartington to collect one of the upstairs maids."

Though she wondered at the housekeeper's boldness at showing her displeasure, she didn't comment. Mrs. Kemble was not the softest of women, but she had served the family faithfully for years. It was likely the peculiar arrangements had strained the other woman's temper. "Aggie White is staying with her family only half a mile away," Emily reminded her.

The housekeeper's eyes lit with an almost gleeful malice. "No, milady—have you not heard? Aggie got herself with child and took her own life." With a harrumph, she added pointedly, "A fitting end for a woman who guards her virtue lightly."

Emily's face paled with anger. "Mrs. Kemble—" she began coldly, but was interrupted by the crash of the library door as Hugh forced it open.

He filled the entrance, shaking his head. "Lilith." His voice was tinged with amusement, but the sword in his hand glinted with serious intent. "That was unsubtle, even for you."

Emily stumbled backward, shocked. Mrs. Kemble said, "Fuck."

Then Anthony was in front of Emily, his sword raised protectively. The housekeeper glanced at him and rolled her eyes.

Emily stood on her toes to look over Anthony's shoulder and then blinked in disbelief as Mrs. Kemble rippled, changed, and became the demon who had saved Colin's and Emily's lives. Black hair fell sharply back from a widow's peak, and pointed teeth gleamed against crimson lips—all of her skin was crimson, Emily realized as *all* of it came into view. A moment later, the demon dressed herself in an indecent combination of tight, black leather breeches and corset. Membranous, batlike wings sprouted from her back. She grinned at Emily, and a forked tongue snaked out to swipe over her red, red lips. "Like what you see?" Her eyes glowed with scarlet light.

Emily drew back in horror, and Lilith laughed and turned toward Hugh. "I had despaired you'd never figure it out, and I was ready to expire from *ennui*. Keeping humans entrenched in nightmares and trying to convince them to kill themselves becomes trying after a day—a month of it is torturous. It's so much more entertaining to play with *you*."

Hugh's youthful face took on an expression of deep resignation. "Oh, joy," he said.

Lilith hopped onto the back of a sofa, perched there as if weightless. Despite her easy, grinning demeanor, Anthony sensed that her mood would shift quickly and did not lower his guard. He clasped Emily's hand in his and pulled her behind the desk to put its solid mass between them and the demon.

Hugh flicked a glance at them and nodded in approval. Lilith's strange, glowing gaze fixed on Anthony. "I see you've found a pigeon to teach." Her eyes narrowed, and she stilled. "A very young pigeon—now what in the world would induce Michael to send a fledgling?"

"Tell us about the nosferatu, Lilith." Hugh's voice took on a commanding tone that Anthony had never heard from him. A wave of power surged through the room, and Anthony had the desperate urge to spill every secret he'd ever had.

Emily's grip on his hand tightened, and he squeezed back in gentle reassurance.

Lilith hissed, and her claws ripped holes in the silk upholstery. "*Free will*, Hugh," she spat the words. "You think to force answers from me with your Gift?"

"Your free will does not matter. You were never human." Another wave emanated from him, and Lilith growled in anger. "Tell us about the nosferatu."

Emily suddenly took a step forward, drawing all attention; her hand shook in Anthony's, but her voice was steady as she said with gentle entreaty, "Please. You saved our lives once when you drove that creature away—now my brother's life hangs in the balance. Please."

Lilith's eyes widened and then she broke into gales of laughter. Just as quickly, her laughter stopped, and she said with quiet menace, "I like to kill—and because rules forbid me from slitting your throat, I have to satisfy myself with the likes of the nosferatu."

"You could have killed him *after* he had finished with both Colin and me," Emily persevered. "And yet you stopped him."

"Did you kill him, Lilith?" Hugh asked calmly. This time, his question was not accompanied by the thrust of his Gift.

Palpable relief filled the room as Lilith admitted, "No." A slow, mischievous smile crept across her lips. "But if you want to know more, there'll be a price."

They remained silent, waiting.

She turned to Hugh and licked her lips. "Just one little kiss."

He could not help it; as a desperate, trapped expression settled over his mentor's sober features, Anthony laughed out loud.

Emily jabbed Anthony in the ribs with her elbow when Hugh finally emerged from the library. He obediently wiped the grin from his face, and she was relieved when he chose not to comment on the slight flush lingering over his mentor's cheeks.

"You heard?"

Anthony nodded. "You'll be leaving tomorrow?"

"At first light." Hugh glanced at Emily. "The nosferatu escaped to the south; Lilith tracked him as far as London, where she lost him. Nosferatu do not usually remain in populated areas for long, and she wondered what had interested him in this house, so she returned out of curiosity."

Remembering the nightmares, the sense of desolation that had claimed her over the last month, Emily said, "Where she decided to stay and torment us."

Hugh smiled ironically. "Her presence likely kept the nosferatu from trying again. As much as Lilith likes to wreak havoc, she likes hunting nosferatu more, and it would not have attempted an attack with her nearby."

Strange that she had so much to thank the demon for, Emily thought. That she and Colin had been saved as a result of Lilith's malevolent games.

"As long as we are here, he won't risk betraying his presence," Anthony added. "We're going to force his hand."

"How?"

Hugh regarded her steadily. "I'm going to go get the sword. In the morning, I'll come to you for the location, retrieve it, and return before sunset."

Anthony frowned. "And Lilith?"

"I'll take her with me," Hugh said.

It would be a risk, Emily thought, but Hugh did not seem concerned about his ability to handle her. And Anthony could not protect both Colin and Emily against Lilith, if she decided to stay and cause trouble. "Keep your enemies close," she whispered. Hugh nodded grimly.

Anthony stood at the window as the sun rose over the horizon. He and Emily had spent the night watching over Colin; Hugh had waited until Colin fell into his daysleep, then Emily had written a name and address on a slip of paper. Hugh had read and promptly eaten it.

Then she'd pushed a folded letter into Hugh's hand, asked him to leave it where he found the sword.

Two figures slipped through the garden and then took to the air—two pairs of wings, one of white feathers, the other black and leathery. Anthony envied them for just a moment, before he turned toward the bed.

Emily had already fallen asleep; the lines of exhaustion on her face had faded, replaced by serenity. All night, she'd kept him company as they'd watched Colin. They had talked to him, reminiscing their childhood. Each reminder of the past only seemed to make the present slip away more quickly, and Anthony felt the oncoming rush of the future bearing down on him with the inevitability of death.

In Spain, his death had seemed unreal; the transformation into a Guardian had made loss an illusion. Now he knew what waited for him when he left: a future without Emily. There was only the present, and each mile Hugh flew toward the sword brought the end of his time with her closer.

Eater, he could not recall if pain or hope prompted him to make the decision, only that the kiss he pressed against the back of her knee sent a thrill through him that a plummet from the greatest height could not equal. And that when she turned to him with heavy eyes and a question on her lips, he fell willingly, completely.

The early morning sunlight played over her features, flushed with sleep. He shook his head, placed his forefinger against his mouth: a warning to be quiet, a notice of his intention. "I do not know if they've gone out of hearing range yet," he said softly.

Her eyes widened briefly and then she gave a small nod.

That permission to proceed overwhelmed him for a single moment; he wanted to dive in, devour her in one fell swoop. He forced himself to move slowly as he slipped his hands under the bend of her knees and pulled her toward him, her back sliding over the mattress. Her nightgown rode high on her thighs as he set her feet on the edge of the bed; she pressed her knees together, as if in an instinctive attempt to prevent exposure.

A rueful smile curved her lips, and he felt the weight of their self-imposed silence. What message was she trying to convey with that smile? Did she think it funny that modesty should assert itself at such a time? Did uncertainty linger despite her bold acceptance?

His fingers skimmed over her calves and the firm length of her thighs. He watched her, looking for sudden reluctance, a change of mind.

Her eyes darkened; she lifted an elegant brow, her expression one of gentle exasperation "Even now, you hold yourself back, waiting—and for what?" she whispered. A shift of her weight, a twist of her legs, and she was kneeling before him, the height of the bed bringing her to eye level. "Do I have to *say* how much I desire you?" She cupped her breasts and then slid a palm down her torso to dip in the linen between her thighs. His gaze followed her hand's journey, envied it. "When my body aches for you, weeps for you—you pause and wonder if my passion is in earnest?"

It was his turn to smile ruefully. A lifetime spent certain of her disinterest had left its mark on him; a mark that he barely recognized in himself, yet she had deciphered perfectly. He had let the past overwrite the evidence of her desire; he had been a convenience then, but he was no longer.

He wanted to laugh, he wanted to shout; he grinned instead, and said, "I thought you promised to be quiet?"—and decided that after ten long years of yearning for her, devouring would be exactly the right thing.

He tasted her mouth first, slanting his lips over hers and delving deep. She met his ardor with a joy that was almost tangible in its fervor. The flavor of her laugh melted on his tongue, but it could not satisfy his hunger.

And then her laughter faded, replaced by a passion that burned. She gripped his shoulders tightly and arched into his kiss. Fisting his hand in her long, sun-tipped hair, he pulled her firm against his torso and felt the soft press of her breasts against his chest, her hardened nipples. He suckled lightly on her tongue, wringing a moan from her throat. He softly bit her lower lip as a reminder and then licked its sweet fullness when she stifled the sound.

A rock of her hips, and the delicious pressure of her sex against his rigid length made him inhale sharply against a groan of pleasure. She smiled in wicked delight beneath his lips.

In answer, he cupped her bottom and lifted her, her weight nothing to his preternatural strength. As he climbed into the bed, the use with which he held her against him reminded him to be careful, but could not dispel the urgency of his body as he lay her in the v. enter of the mattress, could not stop the need coursing through him nor the pounding of his heart.

And he could hear hers, he realized in awe: the quick beat of blood and muscle and arousal. His eyes closed in sudden, grateful prayer. Then when she shimmied and pulled the nightgown over her head, he could not look away.

He took in her beauty with a single, ravenous glance, to hold and savor later. Her

small breasts, peaked with desire, her nipples dusky rose. The soft swell of her belly, the curve of her waist. The golden curls at the apex of her thighs, the hint of clinging moisture, the glimpse of the pink cleft hidden beneath. She lay before him, a banquet of silken skin and moist desire, and he knew he would never have his fill.

Emily. He breathed her name silently against her abdomen and glanced up. She leaned back on her elbows as she watched him, her eyes bright with anticipation and fierce heat.

He slowly dragged his fingertips up the insides of her thighs and felt her tremble. Her words ran through his mind: *if a woman takes a man's organ into her mouth, she can make him do anything she wishes.*

When he placed his mouth on her, could he make her love him?

Part of him rejected the thought, calling such a wish unfair, selfish. He would be forced to leave once his mission was completed. Her life would continue without him—far better that she thought him a pleasurable interlude in a time of grief and fear than love him.

But the other part of him, the part that had kissed her knee and awakened her, could not regret it.

And the whole of him rejoiced at her blissful sigh as his fingers slid into the heat and wet of her.

He parted her slick folds, ran his thumb softly over her clitoris, and then circled with gentle pressure. Her head fell back as a shudder of ecstasy raced through her. Unable to content himself with touch, he eased back, lifting her leg over his shoulder; pressing forward, he revealed her to his starving gaze.

Moisture glistened, her femininity swollen with her arousal. He licked, sampled; her hips rose in a wordless appeal.

He bent his head and feasted.

Emily clutched at Anthony's shoulders, dimly aware that at some point he had made his clothing vanish—one moment she had been scratching at his shirt, the next his skin had been beneath her fingers, warm and firm—but she wasn't certain of anything else. She had been pleased this way before and thought she'd known what to expect.

But she hadn't realized she would be consumed by fire, that every point of her body would burn from inside out—only to be reborn with each devastating lick, every exquisite bite.

His tongue flicked roughly against her clit and then he covered her with his lips and soothed with a gentle, suckling lick. His mouth never stopped, his fingers never ceased their thick thrusts; he only slowed when she shuddered, the frantic coil of orgasm unwinding brightly within her. And then, though she pulled at his hair and tried to draw him over her, he began again—easily at first, sipping to relieve painfully sensitive flesh, then with skill and fervor as pleasure mounted, as she sought his mouth and lifted herself to him.

But such intensity could not last, and when she came yet again her hands fell from his shoulders, her body replete, exhausted.

He moved up to lie beside her, and the rigid arch of his sex drew her gaze. It swayed with his movement, thick and heavy, the head shining and wet with his arousal. But when she reached for it he caught her wrist and pulled her over him so she lay against his broad chest, her thighs on either side of his hips. She felt his erection against her mons, probing at her slick heat, and she rubbed lightly against it.

He caught her mouth in a leisurely kiss that warmed her through, circled her waist with his hands, and held her still. Then, with a flex of his buttocks, he began his slow entry.

She broke away from his mouth and buried her face against his neck as he pushed in and in. She was tender, sensitive, and the delicious stretch of her muscles around him bordered on painful, his hard length intrusive. It was possession as she'd never experienced an unyielding in its gentleness, inflexible as it claimed.

Tears burned in her eyes—not from pain, but from something deeper, more elusive.

And still he pushed endlessly inside her, until she thought she might scream of it. He was no larger than before and yet he filled her as she'd never been and left her gasping and biting his shoulder.

Her fingers clenched on his biceps, and still he held her hips motionless against his penetration until he'd seated himself fully.

He remained locked against her, as if he couldn't bear to withdraw. She raised her head to urge him into motion. His face was stark, his skin taut across his cheekbones, and she saw the sheen in his eyes that he tried to blink away.

And understood that she had possessed him as unexpectedly—and as certainly—as he had her.

Oh, God. It wasn't supposed to have been like this. He was Anthony, her friend, and she loved him dearly for it—but it wasn't supposed to be *this*. She would not mourn for him when he left again—this would shatter her.

She'd been a silly girl who'd dreamed of love, and a stupid girl who'd declared love a fraud; but she'd never imagined that when she found it, it would be richer, more powerful than dreams, and the impossibility of keeping it more painful than the worst betrayal.

"No, Emily." The words seemed ripped from him, hoarse and broken. He sat up, shifting deep within her, and rolled her onto her back. He pulled and thrust, the strength of it chasing the wind from her lungs. "Just feel. Don't think of what can't be." Her back bowed as he drove into her again. "Just this."

And she allowed herself that fantasy; she rose to meet his heavy thrusts and let him withdraw each time as if she could hold him to her forever. He pressed into her, over and over, and each deep plunge seemed to push that inevitable parting a little farther away.

He braced his hands beside her head and never took his eyes from her face. She felt him watch as she gave herself over and writhed beneath him. She felt him memorize her as she clenched and arched, as he wrung the last bit of pleasure from her exhausted body.

A moment later, when he drove into her a final time and pulsed deep within her, she watched him.

Chapter Ten



Battles must be fought demons and nosferatu would destroy human souls and lives. Guardians must thwart the creatures before irreparable harm is done.

The Doyen Scrolls

Anthony poured the final pail of steaming water into the copper bath and gave Emily a dubious look. "Are you certain you wish to do this?"

She finished tying her apron and nodded. "If all goes well, he'll be better by the end of the night. I won't have him waking up look-in like he does now."

Anthony walked over to Colin's bed. Coal dust had darkened his blond hair, which was matted and stringy. Other than his hair, however, he was clean.

He turned back to Emily, ready to protest, but she silenced him with a frown.

Undaunted, Anthony suggested, "Why don't you and I take a bath instead?"

Her severe expression faded, replaced by a warm, feminine smile. "Later."

That sultry promise rolled through him, and he fairly leapt across the room to kiss her before she recalled that there would probably not be a *later* for them. "I'm only doing this because of this—and earlier," he said when he lifted his lips from hers.

"Kisses as payment?" she said breathlessly. "Lilith would be proud."

He laughed, and her eyes darkened with pleasure. With regret, he released her and strode back to the bed, reached down, and tugged Colin's nightshirt over his head with one quick movement. He lifted his friend's naked body, mumbling as he crossed over to the bath, and set him gently in the water.

"What did you say?" Emily asked as she propped Colin's neck away from the rim with a cushion of folded towels.

Anthony blushed. "I said it isn't natural to see a friend naked, let alone carry him around that way."

Grinning, Emily began soaping Colin's chest. "I'll never tell him."

"Good." He watched her efficient movements and then helped hold Colin out of

the water when she pushed him forward to wash his back. "You are good at this," he said with admiration.

Pink tinged her cheeks. "I don't make a habit of washing grown men, if that is what you are thinking."

Surprised, he met her gaze. "No," he said. "I wasn't thinking that at all. Just that you have a talent for caring for people."

"So says the poor doctor who resented having to become one," she said. She glanced up, her eyes wide. "I didn't mean that like it sounded."

He smiled. "I am glad I'm not the only one; around you, nothing I say seems to come out as I want it to." A hint of a smile curved her lips. He added, "And you are correct, I didn't want to be one. But now that I have this Gift, I am grateful I studied."

Nodding, she began lathering Colin's hair. "The unexpected pleasures are often the sweetest," she said softly. Her eyes took on a faraway cast, a mixture of sadness and love in their warm depths. "I did not know how much joy Robert would bring to me. He brought me out of it—that resentment I nearly let destroy me, my family. I was searching for someone to love me, a way to humiliate my father, and what I really needed was to think of someone other than myself."

"Surely it wasn't that simple," Anthony said. He dipped one of the buckets into the bathwater and poured it over Colin's head at her signal.

"No, it's not that simple," she agreed with a shake of her head. "But it feels that way now. Being with Robert made me remember how good it felt to believe in love, to regain that optimism and innocence—hope without *naivete*. I was able to let go most of that bitterness I'd let consume me."

She looked up at him. "I blamed my father—but he was not a bad man for ignoring me, was he? Nor was he really a good man." She wrapped a dry towel around Colin's head and rubbed. "He was just a man who fell in love twice."

Her words made his chest ache. "Yes," he agreed, his voice hoarse. "You will, too."

"I hope that is true," she said. Tears dripped from her lashes and landed with a splash in the bathwater. "Help me lift him out, then hold him up while I dry him."

He did as she bade, watching as she pressed a towel to her face before turning toward him, briskly wiping the water from Colin's body. "In the letter, I apologized to Mrs. Newland," she said. "When I visited her that day, I was horrible. I called her terrible names."

"How did she react?" Anthony said quietly, unsurprised. He'd seen the name she'd written on the paper for Hugh.

Emily smiled in reluctant admiration. "She held her own. When I accused her of using her courtesan tricks to entrap my father, she told me exactly what those tricks were." Her smile faded. "And then I found you in the library, and took out my

disappointment on you."

Anthony lay Colin on the bed. "Did your father ever mention the sword after you sent it to her?"

"No—I meant to make him ashamed, to let him know that I knew about her—but I don't think he ever was. And that made me angry." She worked Colin's arms into the sleeves of a clean nightshirt.

"Hence the other men." He tucked the blankets under Colin's still form.

"Yes. I thought if he could buy love, then I could, too." There was no shame in her eyes, no regret. "I am just human. Just a woman."

His woman. For a short, short time.

She met his kiss halfway. With a growl of need and hunger, he scooped her into his arms and strode from the room. Her hands roamed everywhere. His face, his chest, his back all felt the branding heat of her touch—a heat he feared and hoped he'd never forget. Her fingers slipped down, measured the rigid length of his cock, and he did not have the strength to make it to her bedchamber.

He entered the first room he found, turned, and pressed her up against the door, using her weight to push it closed. She gasped against his neck as he palmed her breasts and rubbed his thumbs over their hardened peaks through her bodice.

Desperate to feel her skin, he ripped her dress and chemise lengthwise from neckline to hips, muttering an apology. Her shuddering laugh ended on a moan as his lips closed over her nipple, suckling, biting.

Her hands fisted in his hair. "Tell me, Anthony," she demanded. "There is no one to hear."

The words pierced through him, but he could not speak.

She tugged, insistent. "I need to hear it."

She deserves to bear it. He laved his tongue along the underside of her breast and found his voice. "I love you," he said, and her breath caught. "I love the softness of your breasts, and the way you shiver against me when I worship them with my mouth, my tongue."

As if in answer, she trembled and watched with dark eyes as he circled her nipple with his tongue and drew the peak deep. Her hips rocked back against the door; her gaze never left his as he released her nipple and trailed kisses over her belly. "I love your navel, the little dip and shadow," he said, and flicked his tongue inside. The smooth muscles of her stomach quivered.

He reached lower, found the edge of her torn clothing, ripped it all the way to the hem. Tilting her hips forward, he dragged his tongue down her sex and held her up when her knees would have given out. "I love the taste of you, hot, drenched, the way you watch me unashamed." He grasped her behind her knees, lifted, and stood.

She reached between them and guided him to her. The head of his cock slid along her damp folds, notched against her entrance. "I love the way your muscles clasp

around me as you take me inside, as if you want to keep me out but can't bear to." Her back arched, and she pressed down hard, tilling herself when he would have gone slowly.

His throat closed as her warm sheath completely surrounded him. "Emily," he said, his voice rough with tension. "I can't keep telling you. I am coming undone."

Her thighs clenched as she lifted herself and then slipped back down over him. "Let me help you," she said. Her arms slid around his neck, and she rose and fell again. "You love it when I ride you, like this." A swivel of her hips stole his voice and his control, and he pushed her against the door and thrust hard. The sweet cling and drag of her inner muscles made him shake. He held her up with one forearm and slid his other hand between them.

"You love that I am tight—oh God, Anthony." He strummed her clit and felt the taut bud slick under his fingers. His hand moved lower, felt the stretch of her around his shaft, fisted himself, and pressed against her in sharp rhythm.

Her breath came in pants. "You love it when I spend," she said, "when I come apart in your arms." Her back bowed, and her nails raked along his back. Unclenching his hand, he allowed himself to sink deep, deep. The tremors that quaked through her small frame echoed the clasp and pull along the length of his cock, the vibrations of the door behind them as he stroked hard, as he took a few last greedy gulps of her before he buried himself completely.

She whispered the words against his lips as he came, gave back to him what he'd given to her. "You were never unsuitable, Anthony. I was." And silenced his protest with a kiss.

She rocked him to climax again as the base of the sun flattened against the horizon. He helped her as she dressed, his fingers lingering over skin soon covered. Together, they chained Colin for what she prayed would be the last time.

Her dinner of cold meat, cheese, and bread felt heavy in her stomach, and the wait for Hugh's return interminable. Anthony paced at the library window as twilight faded, watching as darkness fell.

She could not bear to look into it.

"Do you think something has gone wrong?"

Anthony raked his hand through his hair. "I don't know." His voice filled with frustration. "Why did Michael send me? I know nothing of demons or nosferatu, or protecting those I love."

"Stop," she said mildly, though anxiety coiled tighter inside her.

He glanced at her and grinned crookedly. "Thank you."

Rising from the sofa, she walked over to stand next to him at the window. He dropped a quick kiss to her lips and held her against his chest as he peered out into the night. "There they are," he said finally.

Emily turned, but she could only see her wavering reflection in the glass.

"Where?"

Anthony stiffened against her, leaning forward as if to confirm something he was seeing. "He's carrying Lilith," he said. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her out into the hallway and ran with her to the front door.

Her heart pounded in her chest as he paused. When she looked at him, he said, "Appearances are almost always deceiving—I'm not opening this door until I'm certain it is them."

"Why do they need a door?" Emily said breathlessly.

He blinked, and a moment later a crash came from the front parlor. "Perhaps the rules are forfeit," he said with a grim smile, and they ran to the parlor.

Hugh and Lilith lay in a shatter of glass; a cold breeze fluttered in through the smashed window. Hugh raised feral eyes to Anthony.

"Heal her," he commanded and leapt to his feet.

Anthony didn't hesitate, kneeling beside the demon. Emily moved to his side, gasping when she saw the hole torn in Lilith's neck, the blood spreading across the peach and green rug.

"What happened? Did the nosferatu do this?" Anthony said. He pressed his hands to her throat, and his body wrenched as he began the healing.

Hugh met Emily's wide-eyed gaze. "He has your nephew."

"Robert?" Her lips trembled, and a sick, numbing pain swept through her. Anthony's hands jerked away from Lilith's body, and he caught Emily when she would have slipped to her knees on the shards of glass. He carried her to the sofa.

"Heal Lilith first," Hugh said, his voice almost gentle. "We may need her to fight."

Emily nodded slightly, and Anthony returned to the supine demon.

"Is he alive?" she asked dully.

"Unharméd, when I last saw him—the nosferatu will likely use him to bargain for the sword. He knows he could never defeat all three of us."

Emily closed her eyes in relief, in dread. "But it is not so difficult to defeat the heart of an aunt?"

"No." Hugh's gaze was sympathetic. "I will not resist should you decide to make the trade."

"If he takes the sword, he will kill us all," Lilith said, her voice raspy. Anthony pulled the demon to her feet and then dropped her hand. "Better one die than five. Six, including your brother."

"Quiet, Lilith," Hugh said sharply. "You do not truly believe that."

Lilith shrugged carelessly.

Emily bent forward, covered her ears with her hands, and fought the urge to scream. She felt Anthony's fingers against her shoulder, gentle and reassuring, and

wanted to push them away. She wanted to hold her grief close and alone.

She slid her palm into his and felt her numbness ease. When she finally looked up again, her anger was hot and bright. "Where is he?"

As if in morbid answer, Robert's voice rang weakly through the room. "Aunt Emily!" The words were laced with sobs and pain, and she started to her feet with a cry.

Anthony steadied her with a hand on her forearm and shook his head. "That's not him," he said. "He's trying to draw you out."

"Are you certain?"

His eyes never left her face. "Yes."

She noted that his sword was in his hand now—Hugh and Lilith had armed themselves as well and stood shoulder to shoulder facing the hallway.

Her heart slowed to a deep, rolling beat within her as she heard the swing of the front door, and then the bump and slide of a body dragged across the parquet in the entrance hall.

The nosferatu hulked in the doorway, but she could only stare at the slim, lanky form of the boy who lay on the floor, his eyes closed. Robert's small hand and wrist were enclosed by the creature's huge fist, and the nosferatu pulled the boy farther into the room, coming to a halt fifteen feet from the small group by the sofa.

"I can hear his heartbeat," Anthony whispered. "It is strong."

The nosferatu smiled, his lips thick cuts of liver against his pale skin. "Unless I tear his arm off—which I will do if the human does not give the sword to me."

It did not require a decision; there was no choice to make. She turned to Hugh and nodded—with a sigh, he reached inside his robe and brought forth her father's sword. Lilith hissed with displeasure but made no move to stop him. Hugh flipped the blade around, offering her the hilt. "My lady," he said respectfully.

She wrapped her fingers around the handle without hesitation. It was warmed from the heat of Hugh's body, but she felt no great power in it. Strange that she should feel so little for a thing that caused so much pain.

The nosferatu's triumphant laugh echoed through the room. She took a step toward it, and Anthony's arms came around her waist and held her fast, while his mouth pressed to her ear.

His voice was tortured. "He will betray you the moment he has the sword," he said. "We will not have time to reach you. I cannot watch you die."

Her eyes on Robert, she said, "I have to believe it will come out right."

"If she becomes a Guardian, that would be a fine conclusion," Lilith called out, her voice mocking.

Anthony's arms tightened around her. "Though I would keep you with me forever, having you die in this way would not be worth it."

With gleaming eyes, the nosferatu let go of Robert's hand. She winced as the boy's knuckles banged sharply against the floor. "Give me the sword, and I will leave you all unharmed," he said. His stare penetrated, persuaded.

Emily felt the insidious twist of his mind in hers and closed herself off from his lies.

The sword grew heavy in her grasp. "Anthony, you cannot hold me here. I am not immortal, and we do not have forever. Robert and I must move on—I must go forward." Though her chest ached to say them, every word that came from her rang with truth.

"You do not have to sacrifice yourself in this way; I cannot allow it. We will fight it—"

Anthony's voice was cut off, and his arms were pulled from around her waist. She tore her gaze from the nosferatu to see Hugh's forearm wrapped around Anthony's neck, dragging him away. Anthony's eyes burned with rage, but he could not break the grip of the older Guardian.

Hugh's face was grim and full of regret. "We cannot interfere with her actions; we must respect her free will," he said.

"The nosferatu doesn't," Lilith observed dryly. The demon's red eyes were bright with amusement.

Emily turned back toward the nosferatu. She could not look at Anthony again; she did not want to see the anger nor the entreaty—nor the grief.

I have to believe it will come out right.

She held the sword in front of her, the tip pointed at the nosferatu as if in defense, though she knew with his speed he could easily deflect any blow.

A final look at Robert strengthened her, and the trembles of fear that had made the sword an iron weight ceased. She strode forward, never taking her eyes from the creature, making plans and calculations with each step. If she dove for Robert the moment he took the sword, perhaps she would gain enough time for the Guardians to protect her. If she dropped the sword, perhaps that would give her—and them—even more time.

Stopping when the tip of the sword was inches from the nosferatu, she said, "You may take it."

And then she did none of those things she planned, because the nosferatu looked past her shoulder and his eyes widened in surprise—and in that moment of distraction, she slid the blade forward and his stomach parted like water.

He screamed in rage. She nearly fell back with the force of it, but strong, familiar hands covered hers, twisting the sword and dragging it up through bone and muscle. The scream gurgled to silence as the blade bisected heart and lungs. The nosferatu stared at them, his mouth gaping open, fangs red with his own blood. When he collapsed to his knees, Anthony pulled the sword from his chest and severed the

neck with one sharp blow.

Emily crumpled to the floor and pulled Robert into her arms. Her hands smoothed over him, and a sob broke from her lips when she found him uninjured, breathing as if in a deep sleep.

Through tears of relief, she glanced up at Anthony. He stood stiffly, and she recognized his protective stance. She followed his gaze and gasped in horror.

The bloody point of Lilith's sword protruded from Hugh's chest. The Guardian's face was pale, his lips drawn tight. He gripped the blade of the sword with both hands, as if to stop the demon from repeating the same motion that Anthony had used to kill the nosferatu.

With a growl, Lilith lifted her foot and booted him forward off her sword. He fell to his knees, clutching his hands against the stain spreading across the front of his robe. She looked at Anthony and eyed Michael's sword greedily. "He was inhibiting *your* free will, after all. And mine. I was itching for a good fight. Now, be a good pigeon and give me that little toy."

Anthony's smile was like ice. "No."

Her lower lip pushed out in an exaggerated pout. "But doesn't the little doctor want to heal his friend? How will you save Hugh and keep the sword, I wonder?"

"Like this," Anthony said, and Emily felt a pulse of power, similar to when Hugh had used his Gift on Lilith. She pulled Robert closer and grinned. "I've always learned quickly."

Lilith watched Hugh doubtfully and then sighed in disappointment when the Guardian rose to his feet. "Oh, well—my father would have just taken it from me anyway." Her sword vanished, and her gaze fell on the nosferatu. "Perhaps we should go make a vampire while the blood is still warm? I may as well wreak some permanent havoc while I'm here."

Chapter Eleven



There is almost always another choice.

—*The (Amended) Doyen Scrolls*

Emily tipped the fourth cup of the nosferatu's blood to Colin's lips, watching in awe as his body regained its previous weight with each drink, as his hair thickened and seemed to grow. His skin paled slightly and took on a subtle luster, like light on a freshly washed face.

"This is revolting," Lilith said as she squeezed the nosferatu's body with manic glee, catching the last bit of blood in a basin on the floor.

Emily agreed, but Colin hadn't had the strength to feed himself. She and Anthony had been feeding him alternate cups. He sat quietly next to her now, his hand on her thigh, his expression pensive.

"He's rather attractive, isn't he?" Lilith set the basin on the bed, watching as Colin slowly drained the last of the blood from the cup. "Though I do wish he had killed you when I locked you in here with him."

Emily choked on a laugh. Robert was sleeping soundly in his bed, her brother was going to live, and the nosferatu was dead. Nothing Lilith said or did now could pierce her happiness. "I wish I could say I'm sorry, but I'm not." She dipped the cup in the basin to refill it. "Where is Mrs. Kemble?"

Lilith made a disgusted noise. "At this moment, likely changing her grandchild's shit-filled nappy."

Emily smiled softly to herself. "And Aggie? The upstairs maid?"

"I had no idea who the hell you were speaking of, so I lied." Lilith shifted her gaze from Colin to Emily. "You should have been easier to manipulate, but aside from the nightmares, you resisted most of my suggestions. It's as if you are tainted with goodness. Both of you. I don't like it, and it makes me want to vomit," she said conversationally.

"You should leave," Anthony suggested, his voice hard with dislike.

"I should," Lilith agreed. "But then *you* would have to leave, and you don't really want that, do you?"

His gaze locked with Emily's. The soft glow of his blue eyes contained a wealth of emotion, and he didn't need to answer Lilith's question.

Emily's chest burned, but she was saved from tears as Colin jerked upright and blinked at them.

His eyes widened in horror when he saw Anthony.

"Good God, Ramsdell! Are you in your *shirtsleeves*? And what sadistic butcher cut your hair?"

Emily dissolved in laughter.

She found Anthony in her room, staring at her bed.

He attempted a smile when she slipped her arms around his waist, but she could see how half-hearted it was.

"He has decided that despite the unlikelihood of a vampire being accepted in London's fashionable drawing rooms, he will enjoy being immortal." She laid her head against his chest, listened to the beating of his heart. "Apparently, the prospect of a future *sans* inevitable baldness convinced him. Henry was already becoming quite thin on top, if you remember, and my grandfather's skull could have given the

nosferatu a fright."

He shook with laughter and quickly kissed her temple.

"Let me see your wings," she said.

He sighed and focused, and she felt them erupt seamlessly through the back of his shirt. Stepping out of his embrace to walk around him, she trailed her hands along the sturdy, downy frame that rose from his shoulder blades to the wings' apex, feeling them quiver under her fingers.

"Take off your shirt."

It vanished, and she skimmed her fingers the length of his spine, his naked skin golden in the candlelight. His muscles were taut, the hands by his sides clenched into fists. She pressed her breasts against his back, nestled between his wings, and licked his nape. Her arms slid under his, her hands running over his chest and stomach, tracing the ridges of muscle with gentle fingers.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" she said.

His laugh was strangled by his arousal, and he nodded his head. "Twice."

She smiled against his skin, remembering, and quickly slid under feathers and flesh to face him again. Her fingers pulled at the front of his breeches as her mouth trailed wet kisses over his jaw, neck, and chest. Her tongue swirled around his flat nipple, her teeth nipped the small bud, and she dropped to her knees.

She felt him watching her as she drew his rigid erection from its confines and laid its pulsating length against her cheek.

His breath sucked in sharply between his teeth, and she glanced up, saw his face harsh with desire, his eyes heavy-lidded. His voice was rough, sensual, gravel and silk. "Is this when you'll make me do whatever you want?"

She held his gaze. "Yes." She whispered the word against the sensitive tip of him, lingered over it in a wet, suckling kiss.

His skin tightened across his cheekbones, and she wanted to take away the despair that warred with his arousal. "What will you make me do?"

Stay, she thought, but he could not give her that. To ask would only cause him pain, that the one thing she wanted he could not offer; it was not his choice. To voice it would be selfish, unbearable.

"Let me fly with you," she said instead, and licked the creamy drop of moisture that beaded on the taut crown. "I want to feel what you do. When I think of you, I want to be able to imagine myself with you." She traced the veins that lined his cock with her tongue, drew the heavy sac beneath into her mouth, and suckled with soft pressure.

"Emily," he breathed, and his fingers threaded into her hair. He guided her over him again and groaned in tortured bliss as her tongue stroked the sensitive underside of his shaft.

The sounds of his pleasure pulled her nipples tight and pooled beneath her womb with liquid heat. She pushed the tip of her tongue into the weeping slit to catch his flavor and felt the melting ache within her. His hips jerked as her tongue slid around the smooth head, and he thrust against her mouth. She took him deep and stroked with her lips and hands, lingering at the top with each suckling pull.

He tensed and tried to back away, but she insisted with her lips and teeth and tongue. She held him against her and drank him in and then gently licked the lingering seed away.

His chest heaved with short, shuddering gasps. She leaned in against him, wrapped her arms around his hips, and smoothed her palms over the small of his back. Their skin was slick with perspiration, her core swollen and hot with need.

"And then bring me back here, bend me over that bed, and tup me like a footman," she said, and held him to her as he laughed.

The cold night air stung her cheeks, numbed her nose, and brought tears that streamed like fire down her face.

It was glorious, she thought.

She'd screamed when they'd plummeted from her window, but it had turned to delighted laughter as they dipped and then soared. Each powerful beat of his wings took them farther, and they went over the Peaks faster than she could have dreamed possible, the moonlight shaping the stone-lined fields below into dark squares and rectangles.

How could anyone give this up? she marveled and knew that when the one hundred years was completed he would not Fall or Ascend but continue on as a Guardian. The thought brought her no pain, only a deep sense of awe and wonder and loss.

Though the wind took her words, she knew he heard them. "Will you watch after Colin?"

He tightened the cradle of his arms and banked toward the waxing moon. "Yes. And your grandchildren."

She touched her belly. "Do you think—"

He stopped her hopeful words with a kiss before lifting his head, aiming for home.

An ache spread through her at that wordless denial, but the tears that slipped from her eyes were only from the cold. The others, the ones that were hot and burned... those were for later.

"They told me you were here," Hugh said.

Anthony briefly nodded his acknowledgment, never taking his eyes from the parchment in front of him.

The muscles in the back of his neck tensed as Hugh silently looked over his shoulder. "I do not remember you showing interest in the Scrolls before," he

observed.

Anthony finished reading the one in his hands before answering. "I spent my life in study. I did not want to repeat the process in my death." A blooming frustration started in his stomach, but he tamped it down. Yet another scroll without the answer he sought—and though he could search forever, he did not have that long to find it. It had already been a month.

It would help if I knew what to look for, he thought bleakly.

"So what brings you to the Archives now?" Hugh lifted a roll of parchment from a nearby table. He began tapping it against his opposite hand, and Anthony could not recall a moment when he'd resented his mentor more. "I have been told that when you are not decimating your opponents on the practice field, you are here."

"You should be proud," Anthony said, unable to keep the impatient tone from his voice. He picked up another scroll. "The perfect student."

"Did you promise her you would return?"

Anthony sucked in a breath. He could not erase the image of Emily's pale determination when he'd left. She had smiled and thanked both Guardians with polite gratitude; but he had heard the racing of her heart, saw how her hands had been shaking. Her face had still been flushed with their lovemaking, her lips swollen from their final, desperate kisses.

As his own had been.

"No. I did not want to give her hope if there was none."

"And yet you had already decided to search for a way."

Anthony met Hugh's gaze and held it, unwavering. "Yes. I had no other choice."

Hugh ceased his tapping and tossed the scroll to Anthony. "There is always a choice," he said. "It is a rare man who makes the right one."

Unrolling the scroll, Anthony skimmed its length. Halfway through, he paused, reread carefully, and closed his eyes against a rush of gratitude. "Thank you."

Hugh's expression didn't change. "You would have come across it. Eventually."

Anthony pushed away from the table with a burst of energy. He paused and turned. "I made a promise to Emily that I would look after Colin when she could no longer do it."

"And her grandchildren. I will," Hugh said. "For as long as I can."

My grandchildren. The overwhelming pleasure that swept through him at the thought almost caused him to miss the hesitation that crossed Hugh's features.

"What is it?"

"Lilith said you were tainted—both you and Emily." He glanced down at Anthony's hand. "And although Michael told me something was amiss, I did not know what it was until I remembered that the sword shed your blood. It must have left some of its power within you—the power that favors humanity, that rejects the

divine and demonic. Lilith could not influence Emily as she wanted; you could not heal without pain and still cannot change from your human form." He gestured around them, at the massive inventory of scrolls and books. "You should have been able to read through most of this in the month you've been here."

"What does it mean?" Anthony asked guardedly.

"Once you have Fallen, it should not make a difference to you," Hugh said. "But I do not know what the effect will be on a vampire."

"The rules might not apply to Colin." Anthony nodded in understanding but couldn't let that uncertainty spoil his newfound hope. He clutched the scroll tighter in his hand. "I'm off to see Michael. Will you join me?"

When Hugh fell into step beside him, Anthony gave him a wry look. "I'm not walking; I'm going to fly there."

Hugh smiled. "Then I will join you."

Anthony materialized his wings and relished the weight of them before saying, "Do you think Michael will resist my leaving?"

"I think he planned it," Hugh said dryly.

"Do you like this one?"

Robert glanced at the rose-colored swatch of fabric and grimaced in honest repugnance, as only a twelve-year-old could do. "No!"

Emily grinned. "I think an all-pink parlor would be simply gorgeous," she said with an exaggerated, dreamy sigh.

"You're a female," Robert said patiently. He pursed his lips at her laughter. "Will you ever tell me how I came to be here from my bed at Eton?"

Emily's laughter died. She did not know if the nosferatu had made him sleep through the entire ordeal to keep him quiet, or if Hugh had removed memory of the creature afterward—and she did not care to know. It was enough that Robert would not have the nightmares she'd once suffered.

"No," she said.

"You told the messenger who arrived with the express that you had mistaken the date Michaelmas half ended and collected me too early," he pressed.

"I did." She gave him a quelling look and conceded, "I will tell you one day, Robert. Not today."

His sullen pout was interrupted by Mrs. Kemble's breathless entrance into the room. Her face was pale, her eyes wide.

"Dr. Anthony Ramsdell here to see you, ma'am."

Emily's heart twisted, and she squashed the hope that rose. Lilith could not be this cruel, could she? Would the demon pose as Anthony to cause Emily more pain?

She shook her head at her stupidity and wrestled for control of her emotions.

Yes, of course Lilith would.

"I thought he was killed?" Robert said.

"Apparently not. It is not unheard of for a fallen soldier to be misidentified," Emily said mildly. "Why don't you run upstairs and see if your uncle has woken."

Robert frowned but jumped up from the sofa and scampered from the room, speeding past Anthony with a mumbled "Pardon."

He stood at the door, heartbreakingly beautiful, his hair tousled and his blue eyes seeming to devour her from a distance.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kemble. That will be all for now."

They were both silent as the housekeeper left. Mindful that Mrs.

Kemble likely listened at the door, Emily said with icy quiet, "Is nothing beneath you?"

"In a few moments, you will be." His lopsided grin made her want to believe, his words scored heated furrows in her skin.

She straightened her spine. "Lilith, you cannot expect me to be deceived by you again."

His mouth fell open, and he doubled over and began laughing as hard as she'd ever heard him. The sound made her smile against her will.

When he looked at her again, he wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks and said, "Appearances are not *always* deceiving, you idiot."

She threaded her fingers together to stop their shaking. "How?" The question left her lips of its own volition, and she hated that betrayal of the hope that lingered within her. But he sounded so like Anthony; Lilith had never perfected mimicry of Mrs. Kemble as well.

"A Guardian can Fall after his hundred years, as a reward once he has begun service," he said, approaching her with slow, deliberate steps. "I held Michael to the spirit of that rule—I had served, so I had a choice. I made a choice."

Her lips trembled. "Why?" She did not know if she asked Anthony or Lilith.

"Because I had a promise to keep," he said. Crouching in front of her, he lifted her hands from her lap and clasped them in his. They were as warm and strong as she remembered. "And because I love you. I love the softness of your breasts, and the way you shiver against me when I worship them."

Her breath caught on a sob, and he rubbed her knuckles against his cheek. The skin was rough with stubble; before, his jaw had been perfectly smooth.

"I love your navel, the little dip and shadow," he continued. "I love the taste of you. I love the way you give yourself to me, unashamed."

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His mouth fell open, and he doubled over and began laughing as hard as she'd ever heard him. The sound made her smile against her will.

When he looked at her again, he wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks and said, "Appearances are not *always* deceiving, you idiot."

She threaded her fingers together to stop their shaking. "How?" The question left her lips of its own volition, and she hated that betrayal of the hope that lingered within her. But he sounded so like Anthony; Lilith had never perfected mimicry of

Mrs. Kemble as well.

"A Guardian can Fall after his hundred years, as a reward once he has begun service," he said, approaching her with slow, deliberate steps. "I held Michael to the spirit of that rule—I had served, so I had a choice. I made a choice."

Her lips trembled. "Why?" She did not know if she asked Anthony or Lilith.

"Because I had a promise to keep," he said. Crouching in front of her, he lifted her hands from her lap and clasped them in his. They were as warm and strong as she remembered. "And because I love you. I love the softness of your breasts, and the way you shiver against me when I worship them."

Her breath caught on a sob, and he rubbed her knuckles against his cheek. The skin was rough with stubble; before, his jaw had been perfectly smooth.

"I love your navel, the little dip and shadow," he continued. "I love the taste of you. I love the way you give yourself to me, unashamed."

Heat and joy circled, gathered, and twisted deep within her.

His voice broke at her continued silence, and he whispered, "Emily, I can't keep telling you. I am coming undone."

"I want you to become undone," she said, and slid onto her knees next to him. She kissed his lips, his face. "I love you."

"Oh, thank God," he laughed, and dragged her against him. His mouth covered hers and she melted into him, met his passion with delight.

He pulled away, his breath coming in sharp pulls. "I've done all this to come back for you—you must marry me. I come with a supercilious, greedy family and a profession; I have neither title nor holdings. I will likely work long hours, delivering babies and soothing ladies' nerves. I have discovered I have a gift for it, if not a miraculous one any longer."

She laughed. "I come with a vain vampire for a brother and a nephew whom I love like my own son. I have a romantic nature that leads me into trouble. And I think your family might be made to think more agreeably of your profession when we point out that your wife is an earl's daughter and her dowry is very large."

He grinned. "We will make quite a pair, won't we?"

"That's what I told you long ago." She slid her hands to the front of his breeches and thought about the effort it took to lock the door. Then his mouth was on her and she could not think anymore.

Anthony stood at the window and lifted his face to the sun, letting the warmth soak into his skin. Behind him, the bedclothes rustled.

"Has Colin returned?" Emily asked, her voice still heavy with sleep.

His gaze traced the path her brother had taken through the garden. "He came in from the stable just after sunrise." Colin satisfied his hunger with animal blood for now. Anthony thought he did it more for Emily's sake than out of concern for the

local maidens' necks.

One local neck in particular had him turning from the window.

Emily lay on the bed, eyeing him with drowsy hunger. "You have still not told me about Caelum," she said, and hid a yawn behind her hand. "I researched the name after you'd left—it is the Latin for *Heaven*, is it not?"

He smiled, slipping his robe from his shoulders as he walked back toward her. She arched back against the pillows, her gaze appreciative.

"It is like ancient Greece and Arabia melted together, and built of marble," he said, and bent his head to her nipple. "There are domes with minarets that climb into the sky, and columns topped with curling scrollwork." He brushed his lips over the skin of her belly, slid his fingers up the length of her thighs, and buried them in the curls at their apex. "It is all glistening, perfect white."

"And the food?" she asked breathlessly, the sound torn between a moan and a laugh. "Was it milk and honey?"

"I did not eat." His tongue traced the crease of her lips. "I did not sleep, nor did I dream." He slipped inside her, and she clutched at him with a sigh. "Do not be deceived, Emily—*this* is Heaven."