

Fantasy

THE NOETURNE

In war-torn, late medieval France, an ill-fated sorcerer must surrender his soul after tragedy strikes, and afterward struggle against his own power - in a future that has long been foretold - to redeem himself before being separated from his true love forever.

“Nothing like a good medieval tale.

An arresting hook with a solid cast of characters”.

- Steve Duncan, Screenwriter & Author

THE NOETURNE

Jordan S. Scott

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The Nocturne

Book One

Jordan S. Scott

Blackthorne Media



LONDON

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*I would like to dedicate this to my mom,
who is always here for me.*

Acknowledgments

I owe tremendous thanks to Blackthorne Media and Griffon Publishing, but I would like, first and foremost, to thank my mom, for supporting me in everything I do and for encouraging me to finish this project. I would also like to thank the rest of my family, for hours and hours of reading random scenes at random intervals, and for going through the entire book, word after word, when it was finally finished. And a little shout-out to my friends—Thank you for your support, especially the people who have been asking me for years, “Did you ever finish that book?”

Now that I have completed it, after more than three years of intense research, character development, writing, rewriting, editing, and writing a little more, I also owe thanks, in part, to my professors, without whom I would not have learned the importance of crafting a story with characters and dialogue that come to life on the page.

About The Author

As of the printing of this book I am approaching my 18th birthday. My goal was to have it published by the time I turned 18. As an actress, musician, songwriter and model, I have worked in the entertainment industry since I can remember, but I became serious about my writing when I graduated high school at age 14. I commenced studies in a Harvard University Psychology program when I was 17, after which I wanted to major in Film and Theater, and transferred to UCLA.

I divide my time between writing, college, and playing music.

About This Book

Let me start by saying this book is the first in a planned trilogy. It is also written in a unique style, with every chapter being told in the first person, from multiple characters' viewpoints. I chose this because, originally, the story was told only from the perspective of the protagonist; and once I began to add chapters where he was not present, it created an issue in the storytelling. I felt strongly about using this style, as character development is one of the most important aspects of my writing. I wanted for my readers to feel an emotional connection to each character and what their particular feelings are throughout the book. I have placed each character's name at the top of their respective chapters to remind readers who is telling the story at that time.

This book began as a challenge for me when I was to write a short story just after I turned 15. And I found inspiration in an archway in my backyard, which I will not explain as it would give away an element of the next book in the trilogy...but I will tell you that my goal was to write a 10 page story about a sorcerer. But as I began to write it, I added a love story component that introduced another crucial aspect, without which the story would not be the emotional journey that it is. I chose the Fifteenth Century as

the setting for it, as it was not quite the Renaissance, but past the Dark Ages—a good medium between the two. France seemed like the ideal location, as it is one of the most romantic places in the world, and one that comes to mind—for me, at least—when I think of a medieval tale.

As the short story progressed it became a novel, which was well over 700 pages at one time. What's more—I had only begun to tell the tale! As a result, I decided to divide what remained of it (and added a few hundred pages, of course) into two additional books, as there was way too much to tell in one. It's important to remember when you read this book: the saga is only beginning; there's a great deal that my characters and I have yet to say.

This story is entirely mine, completely original, as historically accurate as I could make it, and without derivative archetypal fantasy themes or clichés. I'm proud of that. So sit back and get ready for a fast-paced fantasy: the beginning of The Nocturne Trilogy.

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Chapter One

Rainier

IT WAS TOO LATE by the time they pulled her from the well. She was already dead. I was some distance away when this happened, doing all I could to gain control of my horse—Samson—as he reared and pawed madly at the ground, causing the reins to slip from my hands. No matter what I did he went on furiously, prancing and jolting sideways as I clamped my knees against his ribs and fought to steady him.

My only choice was to give him his head; and in doing so he trotted faster. The more I urged him to slow down, pulled back and commanded it, the faster he raced. He made his way from the fields—back to the village—with unbelievable speed. He leapt over all sorts of obstacles, tore

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through streams, thundering down the pathways until I gave in completely and no longer tried to hold him back. He had not been frightened in to doing this; it was far simpler: he knew where we were going, and nothing would stand in the way of it. Did he have a sixth sense, I never knew...but that day he forever changed the course of my life.

I reached the pathway within the village in no time. My horse neither slowed nor wavered; at the same speed he continued toward the centre street, near the parish church. I hadn't been afraid of what may happen, and trusted him until we neared a wall, outside which there was a fire burning in a hollow. This was not a street, nearly too narrow for travel by horse, the wall was perhaps four feet tall or so—behind the merchants' quarter. My mind and heart were racing, for he continued onward and I was powerless to stop him. I could not even leap from the saddle—his speed was too great. I should have seen this from miles away, but I'd been so concerned about keeping hold of him that I lost all perception.

I heard his hooves rumble against the cobbled path as he raced on, and people shouting for me to stop. But I couldn't. This was it. I felt the heat of the flames as we drew near—and suddenly as I pulled back on the reins he leapt forward with one great stride, scarcely crossing over the wall before the fire. It felt as though, for that split

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second, he was soaring through the skies, without limit. Even now, as I look back, it thrills me to this day.

After that final leap he finally stopped, just on the other side of the fire, and stood there catching his breath. Frothy white sweat had spread across his body, all the way to the long black tresses on his hocks. His mane, which came well past his shoulder, was knotted and disheveled, as was his tail. He was exhausted, as was I, but, to my wonder and surprise, my journey was only beginning...

As day broke, golden tendrils of sunlight shone upon the snowcapped Alpes, streaming down to dance across the open forest. The sea lapped at the sparkling white shore, its extended hand brushing over the caverns and eroded rocks below us.

As I slid from the saddle I saw a throng of people in the distance, all gathered around a well, woebegone and sobbing. I hurried toward them with Samson trailing behind me.

“My God!” I said. “What happened?”

“A girl was fetching water and she fell into the well,” a woman said. “We pulled her out as quickly as we could, but we lost her. The poor thing.”

I pushed through the crowd. “Aren’t you going to do something? Help her, let me help her.”

“She is gone,” said a man beside me.

Then another: “There is no heartbeat.”

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No words can describe what I felt when I first saw her. Without question, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and so perfectly childlike. She could have been no older than fifteen, a year younger than I. Her features were so delicate, her body so petite, everything in splendid proportion. Through her drenched little gown I could see the ample curves of her breasts, as well as her shapely hips and legs. Her hair, though wet, was long and wavy brown, with sun-bleached strands here and there. Her skin was flawless and lightly-tan, but had turned blue from the cold...and the fact that she wasn't breathing.

I knelt at her side and quickly felt her neck for a pulse. There was none. She was absolutely still, in death's hands now. Yet somehow I could not bring myself to accept it, to realize that she was gone. I'd never met this child-woman, but my God, I felt the most intense connection to her, as though it had been this way all my life. As though, being here, I'd awakened feelings that had always lived in me. With that came a power I'd never known before, and a passion that made my heart pound wildly with anticipation. When I looked at her, I felt as though this love, if I should so soon call it love—was a dagger that had plunged straight into my heart, and would be there for all time. My feelings for her transcended everything—life, death. I would never let her go. I would do as my intuition told me: breathe life into her.

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I moved her hair from her face, causing tiny beads of water to roll down her cheek. I opened her mouth, breathing in as deeply as I could before I brought my lips against hers and slowly exhaled. As I did this I sensed an overwhelming power within, and focused all my energy using it to revive her. I crossed the threshold between life and death, it made me feel dreadfully empty, like an abyss, without light or touch or sound; all was still, black. And it terrified me.

Passersby were gathering round, closer now. All I could hear—distantly, at that—were the muffled cries of women, some telling their husbands and sons to alert this girl’s parents of what was happening. As I breathed into her again, I felt the faintest quiver in her chest. At this she tried to breathe on her own, and I moved, allowing her cough up the water in her throat.

When she opened her eyes and looked at me, I found they were unlike any I had ever seen—amber with golden flecks, fringed with thick black eyelashes. Absolutely breathtaking.

The onlookers drew back, shocked and mystified by what I’d done. Most were too shaken to speak, but a small few gathered their wits enough to say: “He has raised the dead!”

Those who were standing around rushed to her, helping her to sit up as they wrapped pelts around her for warmth. She continued to cough up water, having difficulty catching

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her breath. Yet she found the strength to ask me, “How can I ever thank you?”

This felt so awkward, I couldn’t help but smile. “There was nothing else I could do.”

“What happened to me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “They brought you out before I arrived. You must have slipped on the ledge.”

She shivered, burying her hands beneath the pelts. “You were the first I saw when I awoke... It was dark when I fell; I think I slipped when I reached for the pail...and then I woke to see you and all the people around me, and the light. I thought I was in Heaven.”

People were scurrying about, still awestruck. Then, in the midst of this, one woman drew close to the girl and said,

“Your mother is on her way. You had best get to shelter—it’s bitter cold.”

“I should like to thank my rescuer.”

“Thank him then, before you catch your death.”

The girl looked past the ever-growing crowd, seeing her mother as she drew near. Then she turned to me, our gazes locking for a second that fled by all too quickly. She was adorable, so endearing with the most childlike mannerisms. Even her voice was more pure than any I’d heard before: soft, spirited and passionate, with courage far beyond her years.

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I could not help but wonder: Is there such a thing as *love at first sight*? I tried not to be naïve in thinking that she may have felt as I did, yet the possibility drove me wild with wonder. I was drawn to her in ways that made me feel as though I had known her my entire life. It couldn't be love, could it? Is this how it feels?

It was then I noticed I was being treated strangely: people were whispering and glancing about this as though I had done the most dreadful, horrid thing imaginable. Not one person approached me to say it was a miracle, or anything of that sort. Instead they kept at a distance, seeming wary and fearful of me.

"It is the work of the Devil to raise the dead," one woman said to the others. "He must be punished."

"Witchcraft," said one on horseback.

At the same time the girl's mother arrived, hastening to her. "My God, what happened? You're freezing—look at this—you look like death."

"I was fetching water and I fell into the well." She turned to me, and all gazes followed. "He saved me; he saved my life, Mother."

The people who had gathered around wasted no opportunity to speak their minds: "She was dead; he used witchcraft."

"I was trying to help her," I said. "It has nothing to do with any magic."

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“Come,” she said; “you will catch a fever in this cold.”

“Mother, no! Thank him, please.”

“That’s enough, Annora. Witchcraft, magic—what is the matter with you? He’s a pagan.”

“He saved my life.” She turned toward me, smiling faintly. “I don’t even know your name.”

It was by pure impulse that I reached for her hand then, lacking the strength to think about what I was doing. As I did she extended her hand to me, and suddenly her mother pulled her outside my reach with one quick, jarring movement. Just then, as I can remember perfectly to this day, she said, “You saved my daughter, and you have my thanks...but we will have nothing more to do with you, or whatever this magic is that you know. Farewell.”

As I stood there I overheard even more people, beside the well, speaking of me.

“That boy is cursed,” one woman said. “He is defying God...and the Devil.”

Then a man on horseback added: “If the old woman cannot control him any better than this, she should take him back to wherever he came from.”

She shook her head. “We know that isn’t going to happen.”

“If it’s what it seems, he will leave here; I’ll see to it.”

I turned away without thinking of what they had said. I was much too preoccupied to care about it; and I watched

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as Annora and her mother walked away, wishing, if nothing else, that I could have the chance to say goodbye. But she made it obvious: Annora would have nothing more to do with me. Even worse—I could not begin to understand where this power came from or how I saved her. All I knew was that, to the bottom of my heart I loved her more than anything in this world. I could not overlook my fascination with what I'd done, nor could I deny my love for her. It was then my purpose coincided with my newfound thirst for knowledge. This amazing power was mine alone and somehow I would learn to wield it. But I had transgressed nature's most important law by raising the dead.

That was when I first became a part of a prophecy, although I didn't know it at the time. There was one thing I realized was true—my fate did hold something truly grand...but I haven't told you about that, have I?

MY NAME IS Rainier de Aaradyn. I was born in the year 1385, and have no memory of my parents. I was ill-fated when I came into this world. I am part of a dreadful curse...or so everyone thought at first, because there is a dark-red birthmark on my shoulder. My father and mother were told it was a sign of evil, a scar that only Hell could cause. They cared for me until I was three years old, which was when my curse somehow disgraced our family. I never learned how or why this happened—all I knew was that,

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suddenly they abandoned me. Blessedly, I neither understood it at the time nor remembered it afterward.

I was taken to a village of freemen on the south-eastern coast of France, where I was left with a sorceress who had no children of her own. Throughout the rest of my childhood I watched as she studied books of magic, and conjured little spells; but, of course, it meant nothing to me. I never realized how secretly she went about practicing sorcery or speaking to me about it. I thought of it as an acceptable part of everyday life, never knowing it was a forbidden form of magic.

I had no interest in learning how to practice sorcery until I was twelve years old, when my village was raided by vampires and nearly all of the children my age were killed. I felt helpless standing there, at the slit window of my house, watching the hunters ride out, armed with silver-headed arrows and rosewood stakes. Corpses littered the streets. Those who were bitten but didn't die were killed and their bodies burned, as there was no power great enough to heal them. That night left an indelible impression on me. It changed me for the better, as I was determined to become a healer, stronger than any other, and put an end to these tragedies. Not long after, my Aunt, as I called her, began to teach me how to heal wounds by summoning spirits, and showed me how to conjure spells and bring forth the powers of magical creatures, but none of this is

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how I saved Annora, this was an unknown power within me.

Before I tell you any more of that, there are some less important things you should know. I hate, more than anything, to describe myself this way, as it makes me sound like a sort of dandy, but it is best for creating an image of me in your mind: I am handsome, broodingly so, one might say. I have brown eyes and thick, wavy brown hair that is collar-length. My skin is fair, and I have, almost always, what looks like a night beard in the shape of a goatee, though it is faint. I have rather smooth features; my cheekbones are well contoured, my overall features neither chiseled nor refined; and my nose is short and well-formed. My lips are full enough, though finely shaped. I have a sensuous voice; the tone is soft, pleasing yet husky with a romantic quality.

I was then—and still am—charming and charismatic, strong and slightly rugged-looking. I am rather tall and an average weight for someone my size. My body is well-developed, with steel-tight muscles in my arms and chest; good definition—nothing grotesquely overbuilt. This came from all the days I spent in the forests working as a board-hewer.

Each night, toward the end of my childhood, I rode to a hilltop near my village, carrying my scrolls and books of spells. I had no desire to practice any other form of magic—

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I loved to heal people. I honed my skill of summoning spirits, and during spells they would do my bidding. It had been my greatest joy for years. Yet I wanted so much more now—I wanted to explore the feelings I knew were because of my powers.

Chapter Two

Rainier

HOURS AFTER I saved Annora, and once the people in my village had grown even more curious of what I had done I heard about the prophecy for the first time. My Aunt praised me for my good deed, while she cautioned me about trying to control this power, as it was unlike any she knew. It was strange and unpredictable; and because of it, I was not now to be trusted.

I remember that day perfectly: it was late afternoon, and the sun was beginning to fall behind the jagged peaks of the Alpes-Maritimes. The Mediterranean Sea roared as it sprung toward the terraced village above the shore. I tethered my horse, unloaded the cart of hewn boards from the day's work, and then began my walk up the hillside.

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When I climbed the last path between two houses, I saw my Aunt standing there with a small group of people—her closest friends, in whom she often sought guidance. Whenever a message came from the north, they would share it and encourage others to do the same, as it affected all of us. But this time was different, somehow, and when I heard one of them mention my name, all I could do was wait and listen.

As I crept along the wall, gravel rolled beneath my boots, scattering here and there. I winced, lest I be seen. From there I stepped into the alleyway, and then I leaned back; my legs stretched in front of me; my shoulders touching the wall as I struggled to hear what would be said next.

A tall, thin woman with auburn hair, said: “People are furious about this—they say it is a curse and we will all suffer for it. They are demanding answers—and I have none. What am I to tell them?”

An old man stood beside her, shaking his head all this while. “Just look at what he has done—now the whole village is afraid of him. And they are blaming the prophecy for it.”

“He has broken God’s Law,” she went on. “If you cannot control him, he must leave.”

“I know he doesn’t realize what he has done,” my Aunt said. “But I will talk to him about it.”

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“No one must raise the dead—it is unnatural.”

“What does the prophecy say?” the old man asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Answer me. What does it say?”

With sadness in her voice my Aunt then said, “I think it’s best not to discuss it here. I will talk to him.”

“Defying nature is a crime greater than any other,” he said. “How do you take this so lightly? The boy is cursed. And he has put that girl in danger by making her a part of this.”

“I will not punish him for saving her life.”

He sighed. “Then he can take his magic elsewhere. He is not welcome here.”

She gathered her effects and stepped toward the passageway where I stood. “It is not Rainier, I know it isn’t. He has power he does not understand...but he is learning. He is not the one the prophecy speaks of.”

“If only we had your certainty.”

I drew away from the wall, but unavoidably sand crunched beneath my boots, and tiny pebbles rolled down the trail. As I walked away, she said my name. I turned around, having no explanation for what I’d been doing.

“You heard,” she said with little emotion.

“Yes.”

“Don’t let it worry you. The prophecy they are speaking of has nothing to do with you.”

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Once we were alone, I found the courage to ask her a question we had both avoided for as long as I could remember: What happened to my family. She had, in the past, avoided talking about it, and I knew better than to ask...yet now my life was changing—we both realized it. In order to understand what I had done, and this prophecy that everyone was speaking of, I would need to understand where these powers came from and why. I had not taken it seriously, but ... now that had all changed. Now I could no longer suppress my fears and unanswered questions.

My Aunt was folding blankets and placing things in the storage chests behind the table when I walked in, carrying some logs for the fire. After I set them down I stepped closer to her, simply watching and waiting for her to say something—anything. I knew exactly what was troubling her: the prophecy and what I had done. It could not have been any more obvious if written for me.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

She looked up at me with a forced smile, and a false sense of everything-is-just-fine. “No. Supper will be ready soon.”

I took a deep breath in hopes of preparing myself for what I would say. I was both thrilled and terrified at the same time, for all the sense it makes. “There is something I must know,” I said. “It is on my mind just as much as yours—I know that. And I’m sorry, but please, I must

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know...why is this happening to me? What have I done and where is it coming from?"

"I don't think you quite understand—that girl was dead...and you brought her back to life," she said. "Do you see how unnatural that is? It's never happened before. I don't know how to explain it—I have no idea how it was even possible."

"Samson took me to her," I said. "And she needed me. I didn't care what I had to do. There was this voice inside that begged me to save her, and it was burning through me, and I couldn't let her go."

She was quiet then, going over everything I had said, with a fear so great I sensed it without her saying a single word. But then, she said gently, "That's just what frightens me: your attitude."

"Because I wanted to save her life?"

"No, because you have opened the gates to all sorts of dreadful things. We can't see what spirits have come back with her. There is no way to tell what you've done or what will come of it."

All of this was sinking in with me now. I'd begun to realize just how remarkable—and fearsome—my powers were. And I dreaded the thought of my Aunt being angry with me, or disappointed in my choices. Now was certainly not the time to tell her I was in love with Annora.

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“Please,” I said, “don’t doubt me. I will find out how it happened, I promise you.”

She waved it away. “You don’t understand. I’m afraid you will let evil into your heart if you cannot control your powers. I’m so worried about you, I don’t know what to do.”

I smiled, in hopes it would put her at ease. “Then I will learn to use them.”

After supper, I left the house, and rode across the fields, with my little mutt, Tallis, on the trail behind me. She looked rather like a wolf, slightly larger than a fox, with wiry grey fur.

I stopped at the grassy hilltop I cherished as though it was my own land. And I lay there, gazing upward at the star-dappled sky. This was the one place in the world where I needn’t fear anything, where I could rest in silence and solitude that existed nowhere else. Tallis lay beside me, pawing at my hand and whimpering for attention. As it were, she became a perfect distraction.

How could I be a part of a prophecy? I wondered. I had heard of the paths in life being called fate, doom and destiny...but I didn’t quite appreciate these—not because I feared them—but simply because, not once had I witnessed any sort of phenomenon that made me believe there could be such a thing. But it all changed that day. I was fated to

Chapter Two

meet Annora—there was no question about it. My love for her was an unquenchable fire in my soul now, and I couldn't go on without it.

For quite some time I stayed there, pondering the prophecy. As I did, I found I was thinking: *It couldn't be true, could it? I have no great powers. I am not going to do what they have said I will.*

When I saved Annora, not only had I taken her from the grasp of death, I had preformed a task I couldn't quite fathom. It was done by will, more than with my abilities or power; yet exactly *how* it happened, I didn't know. But still, I could do nothing more than healing spells, and what was the harm in that? I hadn't changed. I wasn't powerful enough to be worthy of fear. I wanted to heal people, save lives. Whether or not I'd been born of any prophecy, I was going to use my powers for Good.

Chapter Three

Lucan

THE ARTIFACT seemed to come to life as the morning sunlight danced across it. Braden de Aaradyn lifted it upward, examining the tiny gold orb and its finely-crafted black wings. It was a magnificent sight, rich with wonder and a thousand years of history.

I turned to my brother—Braden—my junior by three years. Having a lean and well-muscled young body, wavy collar-length brown hair that framed my chiseled features, and ice-blue eyes, I was a ladies' man who could effortlessly charm my way to the heart of any woman. Braden, looking much the same, was likewise charismatic and handsome; the most noticeable difference between we two

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being that, his hair was a dark shade of blonde, and his eyes were colored with all the hues of autumn.

Braden and I, both on horseback, paused at the bottom of a hill we were to cross, looking upward at the snow-capped mountaintops under the crisp blue sky. Lush green fields swayed around us, twirling this way and that. In the distance was the persistent din of mock swordplay, the steady rhythm of wooden blades colliding with iron, accented with the applause and laughter of spectators. The tournament had attracted a crowd that was great enough to populate a small town, and brought a wild stir of noise and merriments to the streets.

Braden spurred his horse on, and with a shriek of displeasure it bolted sideways before halting. I rode beside him quickly, grasping the artifact. I was terrified that harm of one kind or another would come to it if he just carried it this way. He was no more responsible now than he had been when we were children.

“So careless,” I said. “This is why you are still in my charge.”

He grinned. “Forgive me...I’d forgotten that you have the brains between us.”

“And the looks,” I said, then pointed eastward, to the arena beside the village. “Never mind. Look, out there—the tournament won’t go on forever.”

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He sheltered his eyes from the sun by pressing his hand sideways against his forehead. He loved the thrill of a battle just as much as I did, but for some reason he would never bring himself to admit it.

“When will bloodshed no longer call to you?” he asked, in jest, though my answer would be deadly serious.

“When I am the king.”

We turned our horses around, and began to ride down the hill, slowly. As we went on, I took the artifact in hand, glancing at it every now and again. It was such a marvel that, I almost regretted having promised it to one of the local nobles—Lord Chenyn. We had been searching for relics of this kind for months, and bringing them to him in exchange for gold...and, with any hope, a place in his court. I'd yet to ask him for such an honor, but intended to do so later that day. My quest was coming to a conclusion. Or so I thought. I could almost taste the sweet victory to come. And my brother—well, he was somewhat of a hindrance—but he was my last moral thread, and at times caused me to stop and rethink my actions. But not that day; no, even he, putting all of those little ethical and honorable innuendos to use, could not change my mind. At last I was finding my place in this rotten society, and well on my way to becoming a Diplomat.

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“Don’t you ever wonder how the ancients would feel—how it would be to know that these things still exist?” Braden said. “And that people are finding them.”

I handed the artifact back to him. “No, all I worry about is the prize, the end. And you should, too.”

“I think there must be more than glory and power.”

I looked at him again, smiling this time. “That’s because you are a fool.”

“Did you see the symbols here,” he asked, “on the back of the wings?”

“There is a little dog etched on one side, and the sun, I think,” I said. “Why?”

“No, below that. It says, ‘Mathias’.”

“I don’t know—it’s Roman. Maybe the name of the one who made it, or an emperor.”

He ran his fingers over the item once more, then placed it in a pouch on his belt. “Or a god.”

At the tournament, the crowd greeted us with smiles, waving arms, and an occasional whistle—the way that all new challengers were saluted. A sea of would-be fighters waited in the near distance, some armed and ready for battle, others defeated and bloodied. The mass was so thick I could barely see the arena. A ramshackle fence surrounded it, complete with hooks where weapons were stowed. Within it, at that very moment, a battle was commencing between two strapping young men, one with a

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mace, the other with a shield and dagger. How uncivilized. Yet the mere idea of setting foot in that ring filled me with wonder and an unchecked excitement.

We slid from our horses' backs. I removed a short-bladed court sword from the scabbard at my saddle's side. Then we waited, and waited—and for the hell of it, we waited some more. But finally, it was my turn; and, just my luck, my challenger was brawny, fierce-tempered and outweighed me at least twice.

I stepped into the arena, confidently—perhaps arrogantly—cheered-on by voices and faces in all directions. Braden stood beside the gate, grabbed my shoulder as I walked by. I stopped for a second, and couldn't help but say, "Don't do that—it always makes me think you're going to kiss me."

He laughed, and all the high-spirited women around him giggled stupidly. I took a shield from one of the hooks, then stepped toward to my challenger, who was likewise armed.

The battle began, and he charged toward me. My first inclination was to block the blow of his sword, but the impact would have been too great at such speed. I struck at the same time. Our blades collided sideways, just above our chests, with the screeching toll of iron against iron. I drew back, and he moved in my direction once more, this time

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hitting the shield. The force of that alone pushed me off balance.

I lifted my sword, striking at—and narrowly missing—his arm, just when, with an uppercut he grazed my right side. Silence overtook the crowd when this happened. I lost focus and pressed one hand to the wound. Then, slam-bang, he forced the shield forward, beating me another time. I fell backward and slammed into the fence. I was stunned. Blood was dripping down my hip. The cut was stinging as you cannot imagine. But I brought myself to my feet, as he stood there looking at me, with one arm in the air to signal the now eager and screaming throng of his victory to be.

I rushed toward him this time, swinging the sword once, then twice, then another as I jostled him sideways using the shield for greater impact. He deflected every hit except that, and swung at me again, narrowly missing me this time. I was relentless. I drew closer and closer as I went on striking with both weapons. And he was wearing down.

Finally I'd thrown him to the ground. Before he could move, with a short running-start I leapt after him, bashing the shield against his chest with one smooth, downward movement. The crowd wasn't expecting that maneuver, and was cheerfully surprised. I rose a little and pointed the blade at him, with confidence I'd won. But I hadn't. All I had done was draw nearer to him, while he still held a sword. Then, most unexpectedly, he punched me—not

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once, but twice, rapidly—and I fell back on my knees before collapsing to the ground. I struggled to stand, but I couldn't by that point. I couldn't even hear my own thoughts through the roar of the crowd. So I lay there for a second, with my hair disheveled and covering my eyes, sweat dripping down my face, and blood oozing from both my nose and mouth. Not to mention the cut on my side. I wanted to somehow deny it, but I had been defeated.

I stepped outside the arena, where Braden waited for me, with a bandage for my side and a rag to wipe the blood from my face. I saw disappointment in his eyes. He could deny it all he wished, but still it was there, and it was real and saddening because I'd been certain I could win. I was furious and discouraged, and I made no point to hide it. As we made our way past the spectators, he did his best to sound encouraging and to reassure me of my ability as a warrior.

When we reached the posts where our horses were tethered, I wrapped the bandage around the middle of my body to cover the cut, while Braden strapped our weapons to the saddles.

“It was a great fight,” he said.

“I should have been more prepared,” I said. “Why did I not see that coming? I thought I'd won once he was on the ground. I felt it—victory; it was so close.”

“And it will be again.”

The Nocturne

“At least one of us is certain.”

“Oh, come off it. Lord Chenyn is our key to victory, anyhow—not this. It was one fight—one.”

I climbed into the saddle. “And in order to be strong enough, I must win. If I can’t, there is no point; we need to prove ourselves.”

“I think not,” he said. “Once he finds out about the other treasures we’ve found, we won’t need to do another thing.”

Later that night we arrived at the Chenyn manor, and were greeted by a pale-faced woman who ushered us through the doorway. I carried the orb inside a leather pouch.

“Do wait here,” she said. “I will summon the Lord and Lady.”

I had seen this place more times than I could remember, yet it always impressed me as though I were setting foot there for the very first time. I could not tear my gaze from the gleaming wooden floors, or the spacious quarters and leisure halls where guests were entertained, or the fact that each and every wall in this place looked so pure and white.

Within seconds, Lady Renna Chenyn arrived, youthful and gorgeous, with sleek black locks that tumbled about her shoulders, as I remembered, though it would be nearly impossible to forget her. When she stepped toward us, we

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bowed respectfully, and I took her hand, kissing it. A rosy-pink color spread across her cheeks as I touched her, and a raw, forbidden desire snaked through her mind. She hadn't forgotten me; in fact, it seemed she was more than pleased by our reunion. But before there was a chance for her to speak, her husband arrived, and greeted us amicably. He was a typical aristocrat: tall, thin, pale...and completely oblivious of the fact that, his wife was dreadfully unhappy in their marriage. Despite her standing there tensely and looking flush, he smiled the whole time. Not a clue.

“Good morrow to you both,” he said, and we bowed accordingly.

I untied the knot at the top of the pouch, then slowly removed it. “A pleasure, as always, my lord. I have the artifact”—I lifted it up, presenting it to him—“the last of Augustus’ treasures from the Roman Empire.”

“It’s magnificent. May I?”

“You are quite the treasure-hunter,” Renna said, gazing at the item as her husband took it in hand. “This is splendid.”

“As I promised.”

“What is your price?” he asked.

“It isn’t a matter of money, my lord,” Braden said. “It’s of far greater value.”

The Nocturne

I glanced back at Lady Chenyn, as to convey my message. “Like a beautiful woman. My price is that, I ask for a place in your Court, as a Diplomat.”

He pondered it for a second, then shook his head. “I’m afraid it is not that simple. My family wouldn’t allow it, with the difference in...class, and all. But, perhaps, if you can find the rest of the artifacts that belong with this one, you will have their regard.”

“But we have an accord?” Braden asked.

“After a find like this, certainly.”

I managed to smile. “Politics have their price, don’t they?”

“Lucan, I’m sorry I cannot do more,” he said, “but becoming a Diplomat isn’t as simple as you think. I wish it were—and I would choose you. Without knowing more about your abilities, they will never grant you that honor.”

“And how does my bringing you more treasures make me worthy?”

“It was your choice, your offer. When you have not proved your skills and worth to my family, there is no way to convince them. They will never allow—I hope this doesn’t offend you—a peasant to be in charge of our affairs and negotiations. You know how important that is. I cannot compromise it.”

“I understand.”

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“Good, then,” he said, walking toward the door of an adjacent chamber. “I will put this with the statues in the main hall. Then I’m off to the stables.” He turned back, gesturing to his wife. “Care to join me, dear?”

“In a little. I was going to offer our guests some wine before they depart.”

“Oh, right; where are my manners?” he said. “That would be splendid. I thank you both...farewell for now.”

Once Lord Chenyn had left, Braden, who knew exactly what was going on between Renna and I, said, “I will go prepare, and take water to the horses.”

I acknowledged him with a quick nod, and he left promptly. I turned back to her. Her posture was rigid, her gaze downcast with guilt and apprehension. But, all the same, she wanted this—for us to be together, regardless of how long it was going to last, or the consequences it may bring. She was miserable in an arranged marriage, with no hope of any change...and I was there for her, charming, gentle, and wickedly pleasing.

We had carried on this affair for several months, though her husband never suspected either of us. In his mind, all was well and he was living in a perfect world, with a perfect marriage and a wife who adored him. As the old cliché goes, Ignorance is bliss.

She began to kiss me, desperately. I placed my hands on the small of her back, pulling her close to me.

The Nocturne

“Not here,” I whispered, and touched her lips with one finger; a long stroking motion that wracked her body with a shivering desire. “There is too much at stake.”

“But I need you. Please....”

“Hush, darling. Wait until he is not here. I’ll return then, I promise you.”

As I drew away she was still clinging to me. I squeezed her hand tightly before I pulled myself backward. I was moving toward the doorway. She watched me with sad eyes, but didn’t utter a word. It was too dangerous this time. I wouldn’t put my future and fortune at risk for any woman.

Outside, Braden was waiting for me on horseback. He sensed my frustration when I walked toward him, (if he hadn’t earlier) and said, “Well, that was disappointing.”

“Indeed,” I said, “but I still bed his wife more often than he could dream of.”

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Rainier

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since I saved Annora, and I had yet to see her again. I did as I thought I should: I went on as though my feelings for her had never existed. Yet every place I went and everything I did somehow reminded me of her. In my soul was a longing that left me broken-hearted no matter how I told myself to forget it. And every moment that passed when we weren't together, my feelings for her never waned—they only deepened.

We passed each other on the street that day—and there it was again: the raw, heart-stopping passion that neither of us could ignore. She looked up at me with the faintest smile, though I did my best not to make eye-contact, for fear I'd lose control and reach out to touch her.

The Nocturne

As I walked by she turned around. I could sense her gaze scanning over me, but I resisted my urge to look back. I fought this futile battle as you cannot imagine, until it overwhelmed me and I obliged my innocent desire.

Horses and carts were moving by quickly, leaving little room for those on foot. So by the time I caught glimpse of her once more, she was making her way through the crowd. I stopped, but she was gone. For quite some time I stood there, just watching the people in an ever-moving stream, hoping that, by some chance I would see her again...but I didn't.

I turned around and walked back in the same direction as I had earlier, keeping close to the buildings and shacks to avoid the passing carts. I had nearly left the marketplace when I felt a quick and gentle touch grace my hand. I stopped, trying not to make a sudden and obvious turn down the alleyway. The space between the buildings was so narrow I was scarcely able to make my way through it. But there she stood before me, so cunning in her plan for us to cross paths again. I stepped closer, and she drew further into the alleyway, until we were but shadowy figures between two great walls; and the din of the village was muffled and seemingly distant. I followed her from there, to the left, where the path ended with a door to a shed.

There was absolute silence when we stepped inside. We stood, eyeing one-another with a yearning we could no

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longer suppress. Thousands of thoughts crossed my mind, all at the same time, and I was baffled when it came to words. I was at a loss for what to say. I couldn't confess my love yet, but neither could I deny it. I didn't care what I had to do to be with her, how long it would take, or how great my sacrifice need be. I'd never felt such a way before. In all my life I had not felt that rich fullness...the warmth of love, when nothing else in the world seemed to matter and I had no idea how I'd lived all this time without it.

She touched my chest with her hand, her fingers spreading out over my heart. "I never had a chance to thank you. You didn't even tell me your name."

I grasped her hand, laying mine across it and gently gliding my fingers between hers. "Rainier de Aaradyn."

"I have been trying to find you, ever since we met," she said. "But we mustn't be seen together; my family will not allow it."

"They're afraid of me."

She rested her hands on my shoulders and pressed her body against mine once more, driving me wild with all these new emotions. There was sadness in her eyes, and when she spoke it was in the softest whisper. "I'm sorry."

"*Shhh*.... Don't be; you can't help it," I said. "I don't care what anyone thinks. Having you here with me—I wouldn't trade that for anything—anything in the world. I mean it."

The Nocturne

“I mean that much to you?”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“My parents are very religious,” she said. “They don’t believe in sorcery because the church says that it is evil. But it isn’t, is it? Tell me it’s not, please....”

“No, it’s people who are evil, not magic. I wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

As she touched the side of my face she said, “I owe you my life—I think I’m indebted forever.”

She was so precious, so naïve, and perfectly beautiful. Oh God, I loved her with all my heart and soul. There was playfulness between us now, a childlike humor that was spoken most subtly. She knew I was teasing her—and responded in kind.

“Do you intend to repay me?” I asked.

“Yes, if your life is ever in peril.”

“What if it’s not?”

“I fear it will be if you ask again,” she said, and then paused. “And there is something I must ask you.”

“Go on.”

“Had you been kissed before that day, before you kissed me?”

I smiled. “It was not a kiss.”

“But it was,” she said high-spiritedly; “it was passionate.”

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I struggled to hide my embarrassment, but there was warmth rushing to my cheeks just the same. I turned away, then turned back and looked down at her. As I did, her body tensed, every little muscle tightening with anticipation.

She studied me for a moment, and whatever lightheartedness and humor had existed between us, was suddenly drawn away. We were silent again, gazing at one-another with a naïve sense of wonder, as neither of us had an inkling of what to do or say next. The notion of courtship was foreign to us both.

“Was it now?” I said, and could not help but smile. “I was only trying to help you breathe.”

“Not that,” she said. “It’s what you were feeling. I don’t know what it was, but I felt something, too. I cannot explain it.”

My heart began to race. It was difficult to keep my voice from faltering. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if it is not too bold”—she canted her head and drew closer to me, our lips nearly touching—“this.”

Instinct took over. It was obvious now, what she wanted; and it felt, to me, like an answered prayer or a dream come true. So with deft precision and purpose I brushed back her hair, then lifted her chin with one finger...and our mouths crushed together. She parted her lips, greedily urging me on; and I explored the upper, then

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the lower. I was beside myself with pleasure when our tongues met, as was she.

The rush of kissing her had dimmed my senses, but I welcomed it—how I welcomed the closeness and all these strange emotions, and how my heart ached for her. All of a sudden, as I had seen in my mind so many times already, we had fallen in the deepest, most passionate love.

Bells chimed and the town-crier announced it was the hour of four. Nightfall would descend all too soon; and, the moment Annora heard the bells of the church, she pulled away.

“The chimes,” she said anxiously. “My Mother will be looking for me.”

As she stepped toward the door I grasped her hand, and she turned around quickly for one last kiss. “How am I to find you?”

“By the road to the forest, at first morrow...before sunrise,” she said; “but you must let me go before someone finds us. Wait here till I’m out of sight; I’ll hurry. Then go the other way, please...don’t watch me, or some busybody will see you.”

“What are you so fearful of?” I asked.

“The punishment. I can’t be kept from you, I can’t let that happen.”

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A surge of pleasure went through me when I heard her say that—not a sexual pleasure of any kind, but a deeper, more spiritual one: it was in my heart, not my loins.

I followed her to the door to see her off safely. She opened it, stepped outside.

“Annora,” I whispered, leaning one arm on the doorframe.

“What?”

“Before sunrise.”

She looked back at me with a smile. “Goodnight, love.”

I WAITED until long after I felt it was safe for me to leave there. The sun had set by the time I was on my way home, and everyone I’d seen in the marketplace earlier had gone on about their business. Thankfully, no one had seen where I’d gone earlier; and it was my good fortune that there were no suspicions when it came to Annora and I. Yet I found myself watching everyone, guardedly. My conscience was instilling fear and guilt in my mind.

Annora was all I could think about. Everything she had said was playing over in my memory, and I forgot why I was at the market in the first place. So I walked back to the square by the basilica, to the post where I had tethered Samson, untied him and climbed into the saddle. I just wanted to get out of there, because I was a terrible liar and could, by no means, risk being asked where I had been. But

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that wasn't too likely, I realized; I could have been anyplace—who would know?

As I rode toward home I was confronted by an unpleasant—and familiar—voice. It was that of Samuel de Cort, the son of the only other sorcerer in my village. He was my same age, and tremendously arrogant. As long as I had known him—since we were thirteen—he acted as though he and I were in competition; there was a deep-rooted rivalry between us, but I had no desire to act on it. Most of the time I successfully avoided him...but alas, there was no escape that day.

“I heard about what you did,” he said, and brought his horse alongside mine. “Why am I the only one who’s not surprised?”

“Because you’re the only one who pays more attention to my life than I do,” I said.

“How clever. Your wit—it’s so...brilliant.”

I tugged my horse’s reins, and he stepped to the left. I was facing Samuel now, and we were close enough to touch. I was still mocking him every time it was opportune. “What do you want?”

“Well, I thought that, with all these powers you seem to have—”

“I haven’t time for this,” I said. “I regret that; I do.”

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“Everyone is talking about you; have they told you that? I came here to invite you to a challenge tomorrow—just you and I, of course.”

“I don’t care to fight”—I leaned toward him and tapped his shoulder, sarcastically—“but I can tell that you have my wellbeing in mind. Always.”

“It’s not a fight. Don’t be such a coward. It would be a magic challenge, on horseback.”

I looked back at him and shook my head. My voice was calm, collected, and firm. “I won’t accept. I’m sorry.”

He was quiet for a moment. I seized the opportunity to get away and began to ride to the path outside of the marketplace. And I had nearly reached it when I heard him say, “You know, it would prove you are in control of your powers.”

He had my attention. I stopped abruptly, but hesitated before I turned to answer him. I hated myself for considering this...and it was obvious that it was not his intent to help me; there was an ulterior reason behind what he was planning. But if there was a way for me to prove my intentions were good and I was in complete control, perhaps people would view me differently. There stood a chance—a slim one—that Annora’s family may gain trust in me...and as long as any hope of that remained, I could not refuse this challenge.

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“Tomorrow afternoon,” I said without turning back, “by the steeple. I will wait there.”

I WENT HOME without saying a word to my Aunt about the challenge tomorrow. If I had told her, she would have insisted that I was not strong enough to contend. Fortunately, for me, she was not home when I returned, which allowed me the time I needed to practice casting spells.

I retrieved a book from one of the storage chests. It had been sitting there for well over a year; and all I’d done, in the past, was glance at it. Written in the centre of its face was: *Book of Shadows*...a common term for a witch’s or sorcerer’s guide to magic. It was bound by thick leather straps, tied in a cross pattern to create a sort of brown lace along the spine, and was filled with fleshy sheets of parchment. On the cover was an ornamented gold lock that resembled a dragon’s head, with a key in the shape of a dog’s leg and paw dangling from a string.

I took the key in hand and pressed it to the in the mouth of the dragon head. When it came together with the tongue, the lock flicked backward and fell to the cover with a dull thump. Then I opened it to reveal a series of dark paintings and enchantments. There were also poems and little tales that had been gathered, throughout the years, by covens of witches. But one thing—a painting that always caught my eye—was the image of a crimson dragon. His body was

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carved with iron-like muscles that rolled and rippled beneath his scaly, fire-worn skin; and pearly knives of bone grew from his shoulders.

Written next to the painting was the name Sivven, and below that was a spell; not for healing, but for protection and a spirit guide. I had read it before, but did not until then feel I was powerful enough to cast it. But by then I was determined to prove I was in complete control of my abilities, and could wield them to do whatever I pleased.

After bringing together the items I needed to do this, I read at the table, by light of a single candle. Beside an empty cup I placed a small mound of rubies and onyx, after which I sprinkled ground cinnamon inside it, along with a sprig of peppermint. On the top of the stones I placed two rose-petals which had been dipped in oil. Next I took in hand a short silver wand; and, holding it loosely between my fingers as I tapped it against the edge of the cup and read:

*The spirits of all the elements, in worlds far and wide,
Bring forth a creature, and...*

The stones began to glow. Lilac embers of light sprung upward, scattering here and there.

Give this charm a soul to make my guide.

The embers soared into a tiny cyclone that turned to a deep purple hue as the stones glowed. With the wand still in one hand, I used the other to guide the embers into the cup.

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As the herbs and powders whirled, they moved upward, the colors melding together in a vibrant purple shaft of light. It burst forward as though it emanated from my palms, and then curved toward the cup, streaming in and over its wooden lip.

I placed the wand in the cup, and then I brought my hands above it, guiding it to whirl in from right to left. It spun round and round, screeching as it drilled through the bottom of the cup. With the final movement of my hand, the beam of light leapt forward and spread wings. Then I could see the ghostly form of a dragon, with light pouring through him.

He eyed me, snorting silvery tufts of smoke from his black nostrils. His wings were short, blanketed with ethereal white feathers. His body was aqua-blue with frilled white ears that grew backward and curled down the sides of his face. And he was a rather like a snake, with a sleek body, narrow diamond-like skull, and curious little white eyes.

He didn't acknowledge his name—Sivven, I assumed—and was quite a challenge for me already. But, then again—I was a healer, and I had not summoned a dragon before.

His jaws snapped open and closed with a sharp clack as he scurried around the room, his bony blue tail flicking to and fro.

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“Sivven,” I said, pointing the wand at him, but he refused to return to it. “Come now; back you go.”

He floated toward the table, burrowed into the cup and lifted his head, chirping as he watched me. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ah, so you live in the cup, do you?” I asked.

He nodded, placing his tiny claws on the lip as his ears curled to their original position. With renewed mental strength I waved the wand over him again and commanded that he return. With a low growl he obliged, vanishing as he leapt toward the tip of the wand.

I BARELY SLEPT THAT NIGHT. My mind was racing. I couldn’t stop thinking about Annora, or what would happen when I was to see her again. And, since I was unable to sleep I wrote a poem for her, on a leaf of parchment I tore from one of my books of spells.

THE NEXT MORNING, I sneaked out of the house, quietly, before sunrise. I ran all the way to the path by the edge of the forest...and Annora stood there, waiting for me, exactly as she had promised. Behind the trees we embraced, kissing passionately.

She took my hand, and I followed her to a stream that surged through the open forest and into a river that ran parallel to the village. It seemed such a long way off; I could hear only the garbled commotion of the boatmen on the waterfront, the livestock in paddocks on the outskirts,

The Nocturne

and the cadence of horse and cart on the path to the village centre...no voices.

Here we were out of sight, camouflaged by the trees and lush grass. The air was warm and sweet. Thousands of white blossoms were reaching for the dewy kiss of morning, and a soft golden light was on the horizon. And there we lay side by side, waiting for the sun to rise.

When I lay there with her, what little restraint I had left was fading fast. I loved this woman, and I wanted every bit of her. I didn't think of anything more; I didn't consider the consequences or the fact that we were not yet married.

Though I realized we could not be together yet, though I loved to imagine it.

"I wrote something for you," I said as I untied the scroll of paper from a string on my belt, "last night, when I couldn't sleep."

She took it in hand—but once she began to unroll it she pushed it back at me, smiling. "Will you read it for me?"

I nodded, then began to read the poem aloud: "Where on life's twisted path do we cross?"

"How, at every turn do I find thee?"

"In the war of love and fate,

"I am to choose but one,

"While my heart's desires, undying, I face each day;

"And still, in its secret chambers they lay confined.

"If this I'm made to feel, until my final breath

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“I prove undeserving—

“Thy love is a dagger, my fate the shield,

“My memories of thee, my trust and hope preserving;

“And challenging either, I have chosen death.

“At which point are we not separated by common bonds,

“When this love and passion I must not deny,

“And at destiny’s call we are not to part?

“I’ve found a love so pure, so perfect,

“For it no sacrifice is too great—

“With it, in my mind’s eye

“Our parting means

“For all time I’ll hold this love inside.

“There, in dreams and fancies we meet again

“In a love that knows no end: a bond that cannot be broken by time or distance, in this world or another:

“A sanctuary hidden and held dear within, safe from fear and pain and plight;

“Here we stay in sweet serenity, together, everlasting

“To succeed our final breaths—even if not taken together,

“As we are separated in body and soul, but stay one in heart

“Where there is neither darkness nor light, neither beginning nor end....”

The Nocturne

There were tears in her eyes when I finished. She embraced me and we sank to the grass in each-other's arms.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered. "Read it again!"

I laughed. "Next time, love."

"I love it, it's beautiful."

Starting at her knee, I slid my hand over her leg, working upward until I reached her inner-thigh. Then I stopped. She looked up at me without saying a word. I went on, trailing her leg with a slow circular motion, as I wished I could touch her skin—that it not lay hidden beneath her skirt.

"No, not yet," she said.

"I want to marry you now."

"It will be just a little longer, and all worth while when it happens, I know."

I nodded, forced to accept this, as it were; we would have to wait, even as every second of it was torture.

"If I were to ask for your hand in marriage," I said, "would I have it?"

She sat up, but didn't say a word. Then, as I sat beside her she extended her hand and stretched it over mine. "Does this count?"

"If I had a ring...."

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“No, I couldn’t wear it—not yet,” she said, and paused. “Do you ever wonder how things will be when we are married?”

“What do you mean?”

“We will be on our own and have freedom. We can do whatever we choose, and my father and mother cannot tell me what to do.”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Oh, no, it isn’t. There would be babies—five or so, I think.”

“Five is quite a lot.”

“But I love to see it in my mind.”

The sun was rising. People were moving about near the village now. And before there was a chance for either of us to say another thing, someone called out for her.

“That sounds like my father,” she said, and kissed me. “Farewell, until tonight.”

Chapter Five

Lucan

BRADEN AND I WERE successful in getting the attention of a local Diplomat—Auberon Von Sabre—when we offered to buy him however many drinks he desired, and introduce him to all the beautiful women we knew—in exchange for a few hours of his help.

We met at a tavern, seated ourselves at a table that flanked the door. Braden was beside me, occasionally sipping from a mug of ale. Von Sabre was explaining the necessary skills and qualities needed to become a Diplomat: one must be skillful with their words, which he was; persuasive, confident, and have a keen sense for unspoken clues.

The Nocturne

He was eloquent when it came to words, a little eccentric, and had, no doubt, a brilliant mind. But there was a sinister quality about him that I could not quite place.

“What you must remember is,” he said, “whomever you work for puts you in absolute control. You are in charge of everything. You choose what happens between them and their rivals, other aristocrats, and so on.”

“I think it will take years for us to earn their trust,” Braden said. “Lord Chenyn was adamant about us proving ourselves.”

“That stands to reason—it’s quite a responsibility. They have to trust you.”

“How did you come to do this?” I asked.

He leaned back in the seat and crossed one heel over the other knee. “I was born to aristocracy, learned all there was to learn about knighthood, and hated it,” he said. “So I went to train horses for the Baron and his soldiers. It took some time, but he did finally ask me if I would help him with his negotiations.”

The tavern doors burst open, all of a sudden. There was no barrier to hold off the nighttime breeze, which quickly swallowed up the fire in the lamp by the door. And then, four men arrived, dressed in swordsmen’s tunics, cream-colored breeches and red waistcoats, decked out with belts that held weapons, side to side.

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People were moving every which way, as no one knew who these men were or why they had stormed in here. The three of us sat there in awe until one of them rushed to Von Sabre and said, “You are under arrest.”

“For what?” he asked. “There must be some mistake, there has to be.”

“Adultery with the Baron’s wife, and for her death.”

Braden and I stood and drew back. We were awed and stunned at the same time, with no idea what to think or who to trust—or if this was even true.

“You don’t understand!” Von Sabre was saying. “I have barely spoken to his wife in months, and never alone. What happened?—someone, please, tell me what is going on. When did she die? How?”

He stood and resisted the arrest at first. But they bound his hands in iron clamps all the same, and placed them in front of his waist before pushing him toward the doorway. There was no opportunity for us to say anything more. I wasn’t sure I had anything to say, anyhow—what was there to ask under those circumstances?

We watched them take him outside and jostle him into a carriage with wooden bars on all sides, and a bolted door. Now he was a prisoner awaiting judgment. And from what I knew about the Baron, a wrongdoer’s fate would end tragically. What is the punishment for adultery? I tried not

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to think about it, but I had a suspicion of what to expect: he would be put to death.

The Baron's wife left a note to him and their son Alexander, who was twelve years old, I believe. It spoke of an affair she was carrying on—and that she simply could not bear to live another day. She then committed suicide. Her death was a horribly gruesome one, or so I heard: she slashed open every visible vein in her body, and then went to the stables, stood upon a barrel, tied a noose around her neck....and jumped.

The stable boy arrived and found her, but she had been suspended for hours by then. There was blood everywhere—even on the note, which she carefully left under a rock beside the wall.

After Von Sabre's arrest, some time later he arrived there. He was presented with the note, but swore he was never intimate with the Lady, and knew nothing of any affair. But he was punished just the same: death by drowning....and was deemed unworthy of a burial, so his body was taken to the forest and left to rot.

I wouldn't begin to dream of asking the Baron for the opportunity to become his new Diplomat. It would be impossible for me to keep from any woman who may be there—and God forbid—my fate would be the same as Von Sabre's. All we could do was continue searching for the artifacts which Lord Chenyn desired....and hope that would

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be sufficient in proving ourselves worthy of joining his court.

I think, by now, you must be growing curious of our identity and our past. You have probably met Rainier, already, so I will leave the rest of the story to him; but I will tell you all of the dark secrets I cannot share with him. Now, here is how it all began....

In the year 1379 I was born, and Braden three years later. I have very few joyful childhood memories, and even less faith. My parents, Lucian and Rixenda, were dealt a cruelly unjust hand in life. None of us were given a moment of freedom, as we were serfs, forever indebted to the nobles whose land we shared. We were slaves, more or less, toiling for every single thing in life, though none of it was truly our own.

My father was the core of our family, the one who held us together. I see so much of him in Braden. My mother was somewhat frail, always in need of reassurance. We struggled through every winter I can remember, as we were not allowed to hunt on the nobles' land, and whatever crops we grew were theirs to choose from before us.

And then, in the year 1384, a deadly plague ravaged the countryside. My mother and Braden and I were among the few who were unharmed by it, though my father was not so fortunate. A rampant fever struck him, and he died within a matter of hours. Afterward, my mother's mental

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state was free-falling to absolute despair. She was so distraught that she attempted to take her own life.

She held a dagger firmly in her hand one night, without knowing I could see her from behind the cracked door. I didn't understand what she was doing or why, and when I asked her she said, in a soft and wavering tone, "Go on, son, give me leave...please. Take your brother out with you."

"What's wrong?" I asked, but she waved it away.

Her voice was shaking, and tears flowed down her cheeks. And, for the first time I can remember, she shouted at me. "Lucan, go!"

I ran outside and took Braden by the hand as he stood flanking the doorway. Once we were out of the house I stepped onto a stack of wood beside the window, just tall enough to see her standing there by the faint candlelight. She was sobbing her heart out, holding the dagger with a trembling hand. She went to a chest near the hearth, opened it and removed a small glass bottle, filled with some sort of red liquid. She stabbed the blade into the middle of the cork, then pulled it side to side until it was free.

After that she went to the bed—a straw mattress on the floor—sat there and looked up at the roof, as though looking to God, somewhere in the heavens. "I'm sorry....Merciful God, forgive me. I have no choice."

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She brought the bottle to her mouth and eagerly drank its contents. No more than a minute could have gone by when she crumpled to the bed, screaming and clutching her hands in front of her. She looked to be in agony, twisting and contorting in ways I didn't know were possible. The sight of her this way terrified me, but for some reason I could not bring myself to look away. I had to stand there. I had to watch.

Shortly after that, she managed to get to her feet, and was coming toward the door.

“Quickly,” I said to Braden, “come on!” And we ran as fast as we were able to, and then dashed into an alleyway behind our house. She was barely outside the door when she clutched her stomach in pain and nearly fell down again. She was violently ill, vomiting and scarcely able to catch her breath.

I covered my brother's eyes, but I watched the entire thing with some kind of sick curiosity. What was happening to her? What drove her to make herself so sick? And what was in that bottle?

She fainted then, and lay there outside the house, completely lifeless. I ran for help, and went to her sister's (my aunt's) house. She rushed to help, but my mother wouldn't wake up...and she didn't until the next day. Her face was so pale it was frightening; and there were beads of sweat

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pouring down her forehead. She couldn't even stand, she was so weak.

We stood watching as my aunt tended to her, brought her a cup of water and herbs. She sat on the edge of the mattress, looking down at her. Neither of them said a word for a moment, but then my aunt picked up the little glass bottle, with three drops of red liquid, which were curdling with sickly black dots in their centers now.

“What is this?” she asked.

My mother closed her eyes to hold back tears, and then opened them, only to avert her gaze. She couldn't bring herself to answer.

“Rixenda, I must know. What is it?”

“I got it from one of the wizards who were staying here,” she said. “Why am I still alive?”

My aunt opened the bottle, and a look of sheer horror crossed her expression. “My god, it's poison! Why? Why would you take this?”

“I can't bear to live anymore.”

“But you have these children—they need you.”

“No, I cannot give them what they need....and I can't afford another.”

“What do you mean?”

“I found out right before Lucian died,” she said with difficulty; “I never had a chance to tell him. I'm with child—but I cannot keep another, I just cannot. The

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children I have are doing without as it is. Better to end my life than to make them all suffer.”

My aunt stood, both saddened and angered at the same time. She was outraged by my mother’s decision. “This poison”—she held up the bottle—“did they tell you what it is?”

“Blood and fire,” she said. “That’s what they called it. They said it would be a painless death...but it wasn’t. I felt as though I was dying. I’ve never felt so much pain.”

“Why didn’t you come to me if you needed help?”

“Would you have given me poison?”

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” she said and pitched the bottle into the hearth, “very, very proud.”

There was a small explosion as the glass shattered from the heat. Flames rose upward and lashed out, in the shape of a dog’s head with great long fangs. I was certain I heard it growl as well; the crackling of the flames was overcome by a deeper, more sinister sound.

We jumped back; everyone was startled.

“That poison you drank,” she went on, “was hellhound’s blood! Now you have let the devil straight into your soul.”

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, my youngest brother—Rainier—was born. The poison had not affected him, or so it seemed at first. There was a suspicion that he had absorbed it into his body, since it didn’t kill him. But then

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we discovered that dreadful red birthmark on his shoulder—a scar of hellfire. Whether he was doomed because of the poison, or the fact that my mother had tried to take her own life, no one knew...but he was ill-fated—that was for certain.

Things were never right again between my mother and I. There was no way I would ever forgive her for trying to kill herself, and I blamed her for my baby brother's disfigurement. But she felt sufficiently guilty when she saw him for the first time, before my aunt took him away for good.

We didn't see him very often after that; though they lived in the same village, she kept him from my mother as much as possible. And when he turned three years old, she took him and sneaked out of there one night, somehow escaping the guards at the nobles' castle.

I never saw him again, nor did I learn what became of him or where he may have gone.

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Rainier

I ARRIVED FOR THE CHALLENGE. Samuel was waiting for me, early, of course, and still on horseback, and there was an impatient crowd standing nearby already. We met at a grassy knoll behind the steeple, a ways off the path. Before us were eight posts which had been scattered indiscriminately, each topped with a wooden bowl, and tied with a rope which followed to the next, and on from there, until there was a sort of maze between them.

“The test,” he said, and pointed toward the posts, “is to ride through there as fast as we can, and cast a spirit spell for each bowl. Toss the potion or gems into there as you ride by, and try to summon the spirits without stopping.”

I did my best not to let him know how intimidating this was for me. “All right.”

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I rode to the course, unhooked the rope and waited for him to follow behind me. I stopped at the closest track, and he went on to the one beside me. The horses were pawing madly at the ground—and then, like lightning they both lunged forward at once. And we were racing toward the posts.

I think it would...cheapen the experience if I were to simply tell you that I used magic to do this, so I will explain it, in depth, as best I can in order to paint a clear visual in your imagination. It would be insulting to you, as a reader, if I were to describe anything less than that.

I came upon the first post within seconds. I reached toward it, while in my mind I was delving into my knowledge of magic, and desperately searching for a gateway to the spirits I would summon. I urged them to come forth, show themselves, just as I opened my hand and felt a great surging energy spring forth from my palm. It weakened me, instantly. When I looked, once more, at the bowl, I realized it was not a spirit I had brought forth, but rather a tiny dithering trail of smoke. That was all. Pitiful, isn't it? I was humiliated; and meanwhile, Samuel was racing onward, after having effortlessly cast a snake spirit.

I tried again, trying to gain control over the spirits; but they were running rampant in my head all the same, ignoring me no matter how hard I struggled to summon them. I was furious now, and spurred my horse on, then

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tried another time...only to have absolutely nothing happen. That was when I came to a halt, ripped the rope from the sidelines and rode away as quickly as I could. But it served me no good; I could still hear the jeering and shouting and mockery of the spectators. One of them shouted the word “Demon”, while another said I was cursed with fire and must be put to death. My powers were becoming more and more unnatural—and the people were right: I was not in control of my abilities.

Not only had I failed myself, I’d just lost every possible chance of gaining Annora’s family’s trust.

I WENT HOME, heartbroken and too ashamed to talk to anyone. Would I ever be able to marry Annora? I wondered. What will become of us?

Since the challenge, I feared the prophecy. By that time I was beginning to realize my fate was no longer in my hands—there was a greater, darker plan for me and I could do nothing to stop it. There was a prophecy. Somehow it was a part of me, and changing who I would become. Can you imagine how painful, how difficult this was to accept? I wanted to forget it—at least for the time being, until I could figure out what to do—but I knew that no matter how I was to fight against the prophecy or ignore it, there would be no difference. It didn’t matter anymore.

The Nocturne

Annora's love was all that could keep me in here, and for her I was willing to give my life and soul. Yet, as I now understood, it could—and would—never be.

“What did you think you were doing?” my Aunt asked as soon as I stepped inside the house.

“I don't know...I was trying to prove myself and that I am in control of my powers.”

“I can tell you are. Please, sit down here a moment.” She gestured to the table, and we sat facing one-another. “There is something I need to talk to you about.”

“I shouldn't have taken the challenge,” I said, “I know.”

“It isn't that.”

“What, then?”

She took a deep breath, seeming deeply troubled by this. “There is nothing more I can teach you. Your powers are greater than mine, too...and I don't know how to help you learn about them.”

I was silent; lost in thought, I suppose.

She went on: “People are demanding that you leave here. It started the other day, when you saved that girl. I tried to reason with them; I tried to say I could help you and it would be in control, but they won't have it. And I'm—I'm afraid of what will happen to you if you stay.”

“Don't,” I said with sadness in my voice, “don't say that...you can't. Don't send me away.”

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“I have no choice,” she said. “Listen to me, listen, please. You have two brothers; you are to go find them. They will know about what is going on.”

For a moment I was too stunned to speak. This was the first I had ever heard of my brothers—and the idea of it was both exciting and strange at the same time. Why did she not tell this to me before? I wondered. Why wait until now?

“Brothers”—I repeated the word in hopes of fully grasping the thought of it—“did I know them?”

“You did. But you weren’t old enough to remember.”

“Where are they?”

“Last I knew,” she said, “they moved to a village by the sea. I think it is several miles north of here.”

“Do you know their names?” I asked. “How am I supposed to find them?”

“Lucan is the oldest, and Braden is three years older than you are. I’m not sure—you will have to go to different villages and look for them.”

“If I find them, what am I to do?” I said. “I cannot leave Annora; I cannot bear to be without her.”

“Ask them to help you; and they will I’m certain. I’m sorry, Rainier, but you must go—you will be put to death otherwise.”

“How long?” I asked. “How long do I have?”

“You should leave at first light.”

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I LEFT THE HOUSE as quickly as I could. I didn't know where I was going, nor did I care. I was furious and couldn't bear to stay there another moment. Every conceivable emotion had struck me, in a wild tangle in my mind and soul. My life was falling apart. There were too many new feelings for me to grasp at once: the prospect of leaving Annora; the strange new wonder of the fact that I had two brothers; and the fear of my life being manipulated by this prophecy and everyone who believed in it. I didn't know what to make of this.

I should have spent that time preparing to leave here, but instead I walked down the hill, toward the village; and I stopped there, looking out at the sea. After a moment or so I was startled as something touched my back. I turned around—and there could not have been any greater surprise than when I saw Annora, standing beside me. I needed her, more than I ever allowed myself to think I would.

I trailed her cheek and jaw with my fingers. As I did she grasped my arm and pulled me toward her. She didn't know how upset I was, nor did she have any idea that we could no longer be together. She was her typical high-spirited, playful self, eager for us to cuddle and talk for as long as possible. But I wasn't, no matter how I struggled to hide it.

She looked so breathtakingly beautiful, standing before the soft moonlight that reflected in the sea; her hair

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cascading freely down her shoulders and back; her eyes warmed by her undying passion for life.

“I was waiting for you by the barn,” she said; “I thought you would see me there.”

I wanted to say something, but there were no words to accurately show my feelings. I was too brokenhearted to speak. So I stood, just looking at her with sadness and longing in my eyes.

“What is it?” she asked and brushed back my hair. “What’s wrong, sweet? You haven’t said a word....”

“I can’t be with you anymore,” I said.

“What? Why?”

“People are afraid of me. I’m to leave here until I’m able to control what I do with magic.”

“That’s absurd!” she said. “Where—when will you go?”

“At first light.”

“No, you can’t”—she leaned her head on the little hollow of my chest—“please don’t, I am begging you. They will change their minds, I know—ask them, or tell them. They will, they have to.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“What about me, what if I beg they let you stay?”

“It won’t make any difference,” I said in my usual soft-spoken tone. “And I may be killed if I stay here.”

The Nocturne

She looked up at me with tears building up. “Then I will go with you.”

When I tried to sound optimistic it fell terribly flat. “How would you?” I asked. “How do you think we would both leave without someone finding out? I will return as soon as I can, I promise you—”

Before I could finish she took my hand once more, urging me to follow her...and I did, until we reached the closest barn. When we stepped inside I could barely see where we were going, as the only source of light was the moonlight that filtered through the doorway. Then, as I held her in my arms we tumbled into the side of a haystack; our lips crushing together, our hands carefully exploring one-another. I had not felt such passion, such neediness in her kiss before. She grasped the bottom edge of the tunic I was wearing, and helped me to pull it off as I lifted my arms.

Once my chest was exposed, she trailed the curves of muscle with her fingertips, then leaned in and kissed her way downward nonstop until she reached my stomach. But when she caught sight of my birthmark she paused.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and began to put on the tunic. “I should have told you.”

She reached out, took the tunic from me and tossed it aside. “Why would you be sorry? It doesn’t offend me... I wasn’t expecting it, is all.”

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“I try to keep it hidden,” I said. “I hate it, I hate to see it.”

She drew closer and gently pushed me back until I was lying down and her body was stretched across mine, our hips so well aligned it made us both tense with desire. Then she leaned down and forward to kiss the birthmark on my shoulder, to show that she accepted me and all my flaws. Being so close to her—able to position my loins against the soft depression of hers—rocked me with the most incredible lust. I felt sensations I hadn’t even dreamed of in my entire life. There was this...pressure that was building to an excruciating high. Each time I touched her it throbbed as though fed by every vein in my body; and it was so arousing that I could give in—I was reaching that peak faster than I realized. I tried to regain control, but I couldn’t. I wanted her...now.

She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, and a shudder coiled through my spine. We were still kissing passionately. There was no way for me to pull away from her, I thought, but drew backward anyhow. I couldn’t bring myself to give in to my desires and then leave her behind.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

I caressed her, desperately, longingly. “I can’t do this.”

Her voice was thick with sadness “You mustn’t leave me. Please, take me with you!”

The Nocturne

I pressed my forehead against hers. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone,” I said, “and you must never forget it.”

With one swift movement I pulled her toward me and encircled her with my arms. She laid her hands on my shoulders, and wrestled playfully in my grasp. Her hair was flowing over her shoulders, its wavy texture creating a fringe of thick brown locks that framed her face. I kissed her neck, tickling her until she was nearly swooning with rapture. Just as I loosened my embrace she kissed my cheek before slipping her tongue over it, playfully.

I braced her hips with my hands, and with another swift motion I rolled to the left, pinning her on her back. I glided my fingers down her neck, to her collarbone...then I touched what little of her breasts lay before my eyes, at the top of her corseted blouse. Using my other hand, I carefully drew her skirt upward from her ankles, and rest it on her knees. Her body became a thousand lightning-struck nerves, each eagerly awaiting my next touch. As I began to kiss her, my hand slid beneath her skirt as I trailed her inner-thigh with two fingertips. She wasn’t certain what to make of this, but she clung to me, giving in, wanting more.

“Annora,” I whispered, “I will find a way be with you, I swear to it.”

She breathed sharply. The pleasure was escalating—and with it her body turned rigid, tight, pulsing with a

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maiden desire. I was so close to touching her, but I drew back before temptation overcame me. If I had gone any further than her legs, I would have dishonored our love. I would have ruined what made our relationship so pure.

I brought the lower-half of her skirt down to her ankles, put my arms around her middle and drew her as close as we could be. I was still feeling the hard rush of my body, which made it nearly impossible for me to think rationally. Yet I put aside what I wanted, because my love for her succeeded all else.

“When we are married,” I said; “we will make love then. Not before.”

She twirled a lock of my hair around her finger, and did all she could to hold back her tears. “How do you know we will see each other again?”

I placed my finger on her lips to hush her. “There is no sacrifice too great for love. Remember that. I’ll find a way.”

“But what if you don’t? I cannot go on without you....”

“Don’t you have any faith in me?” I asked.

“Yes, but I’m afraid.”

“Oh, love, come here.” I bent forward to kiss her in hopes it would be reassuring. “The day will come, I promise you—we are going to marry, and have as many babies as you want, and raise them in some beautiful place. It’s going to last forever.”

The Nocturne

Tears were dripping down her cheeks now. I wiped them away, looked down at her and saw her smile. And then there was this fierce shouting voice outside, moving toward us. There was no time to get out of there. I had scarcely rolled onto my side and was reaching for the tunic beside me when Annora's father rushed in, shouting all sorts of foul and appalling things; I heard him say I was worthless and had turned her into a whore. Perhaps it was wrong for us to be here this way...but I loved her more than it seemed possible to love anyone; I wanted to express it and make her happy, however long I would be with her.

Annora and I stood together, and I slipped into the tunic before there was time for her father to see my birthmark. He looked on in awe as we stayed there, holding each-other close. I wouldn't run off and leave her; I needed to stand my ground.

"Nothing happened, Father; nothing," she said between sobs. "He came to bid farewell to me—it's my fault, not his."

"Be quiet!" he said and turned to me. "And you bid farewell by...having your way with my daughter? Is that it? You bring her out to the barn and think no one will know? How many times has it been? Every night?"

"How can you say that?" she said. "He loves me, Father. He never touched me. And I brought him here; it was my idea, so blame me, please. Punish me...not him."

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He silenced her by slapping the side of her face with an open hand, yet still hard enough that I heard the sudden clapping sound of his palm striking her cheek. And it awakened an anger I didn't know I had, a dark and powerful fury that suddenly took over me. I had kept quiet and stood back as long as I could—and I wouldn't after he hurt her.

I shoved him back, into the middle of the barn. When I came toward him he tried to push me in the opposite direction. And we were punching at one-another, caught in a vicious brawl, while Annora was crying and shouting at us to stop. I didn't want to fight, but something inside me kept urging me on. I was powerless to refuse it. I would stop at nothing to protect her. So we kept on, until my nose and under-lip were bleeding, and I had forced him to the ground and drew the dagger from my belt, ready to bear down on it with all my weight. I didn't know what I was doing, nor was I able to stop and consider it and reason with myself. I wasn't in control of my own body, or mind, or actions. The dagger was in my hand and I was going to strike and end this. Yet suddenly I realized what was about to happen, and I drew back, startled by what I had almost allowed myself to do. I wasn't a killer, I would never hurt anyone! What had happened to me? What was I doing?

Annora, still sobbing, rushed to put herself between us and stop the fighting. But I was finished—and by that time

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it was obvious to me—even more so than before—that I had no choice but to get out of there.

He stood, grasped Annora, who continued to protest when he dragged her toward him and held her there, firmly. I didn't resist because there was nothing I could do. I couldn't even kiss her, one last time. It was over.

"I don't ever want to see you again," he said, "ever! If there is any part of you that touches her...I will cut it off. Am I understood?"

I nodded.

"No!" she cried. "Don't do this. Please, Father! I love him...."

As he dragged her away he said to me, "I'm going to return for you, with everyone who is going to find out about what you've done—ruined my daughter, tried to kill me. And I'll burn everything, everything—you, your house—all of it!"

After a moment I finally found the strength to walk away. I didn't say a word more to either of them as they left. As soon as I left the barn I ran back home, gathered everything I wished to take with me—and could fit on the sides of the saddle—and swore to myself that I would never look back.

Chapter Seven

Annora

MY FATHER TOOK me home as soon as Rainier left. I tried to look back, but he kept pushing me along. I begged him to stop, tried to tell him how much Rainier meant to me, but he wouldn't listen. He didn't hear a word I had to say. I think, what upset me more than anything else was that, he was still treating me like a child—and I was old enough to marry! I could choose how I wished to live; it was my will, not theirs. This was my body, my life, and my immortal soul to bear the consequences...so why was not it in my ability to decide what I wanted? Why didn't it matter?

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I was barely inside the house and my Mother was scolding me. Once my Father told her what had happened, she waved her arms and broke down sobbing. I stood in front of her, but I didn't speak. I was too afraid of what would happen if I spoke my mind, and I wouldn't lie.

"It will be our good fortune to find you a husband," she said, "as soon as we are able to...if there is a man who will take you now."

"I don't want a husband," I said. "Can I not make my own choice of who I will marry? I'm of age—I will choose."

"Oh, you—," she said, got up and slapped my face, so hard that it brought tears back after I had just been able to hold them in.

"Why do you do this? He didn't touch me! I am still pure, I swear to you."

"Of course," she went on dryly, "of course you are. Don't lie to me, Annora. He took you out there to the barn, in the dark of night, and hid ...why? And he kept his hands to himself? Come, now, we both know what you were doing—and I am so ashamed, I cannot believe you."

It was difficult for me to breathe, for I was crying so much. "I swear this on my life, Mother...he did nothing wrong. I took him to the barn. We were saying goodbye, and I kissed him, and I'm sorry."

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“Go before God, then, and swear to your innocence,” my Father said. “Ask for God’s forgiveness, because you don’t have mine, and you never will. You have shamed this family—and for what?—some devil-follower?”

“He is a good person,” I cried. “I would be dead if it weren’t for him, dead and rotting someplace. And you take me for granted.”

“The boy is a sorcerer,” he said. “He is godless, he is damned. Do you know the kind of danger he has put you in already?”

I gave up on reasoning with them. They were furious, and there was no hope they were going to listen to what I said, or what I wanted. They were never going to accept Rainier, as we were devout in our religion and he had none. And he practiced magic, which we did not believe in, and which also, in the eyes of God-fearing people, made him evil, damned. But the worst thing of all (if there was one), was how they were planning to arrange a marriage for me, when I had promised myself to Rainier and agreed to his proposal. Oh, this was madness! It was the sort of awkward, horrible situation that I’d heard about so many times in legends and fairytales. I didn’t like to think it would ever happen to me—no one does, I suppose...but since it had, my heart was breaking in ways I never thought it could. I hurt, through and through. I couldn’t live without him; I meant that when I told him, though he promised he would

The Nocturne

return for me, and all was going to be well between us. If only I could believe that now, my love, I thought; I wish it were true, I wish I felt, in my heart, that you could come home.

THE NEXT DAY came much too soon. He was all I dreamed of, and the first one I thought about when I opened my eyes. There were dried tears on my cheeks, still, from the hours I spent awake last night, crying to myself. This was only the first day—one in tens, or hundreds, maybe—for me to endure without him. Where was I to even begin?

Before I met him, I believed my life was perfect as could be. I loved every second I was on this earth; it was too beautiful not to appreciate...but love—well, love was so much more. It was a thousand times brighter and more fulfilling than the most wonderful day you can imagine. From the day I met him, our hearts were one—and neither of us would be the same afterward. Fate brought us together, I believed, and it would find its way to do so again.

But now I was trying to forget him and to go on as if we had never met. Life will be easier that way, I thought, without the pain of our separation; without all the questions I must ask myself; without this simmering hatred I feel for the people who drove him away.

And yet, not a moment passed when he didn't cross my mind. Somehow our love was meant to be, I told myself,

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and nothing would stand between us. Oh, but I couldn't be that naive. Months—maybe even years—could pass before his return. What was I to do? It would serve no good to count the waking time, but I would wait for him, and keep all my faith and virtue, until my dying day. I made that vow, in spite of what my parents wanted for me.

That day, after he left, as I walked to the marketplace, young men gathered round me; some making insults, others groping at me as I tried to get out of there.

“What troubles you?” one of them asked pressing himself against me. I slapped at him, missing, of course, as the others clutched my wrists and held them firmly. “Can you speak?”

“She's a mute, too.”

“No,” another said, “all she understands is witchcraft.”

“It hurts,” I said, “let me go!”

Thankfully—if I should be so bold to say it—my Mother arrived and shoed them away. After they were gone I found composure, gathered my things in my arms, and hastened in the opposite direction. I wasn't able to face her down yet. How she looked at me was making hatred swell in my heart, and I could not bear to feel it. She had made me so angry I was tempted to pitch something at her—I was, truly—but I always stopped short of that, for fear I would make matters even worse.

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I went on quietly, and would have been content if I had not spoken for the rest of the day. I could not hide my feelings, though; everyone who looked at me saw the sadness in my eyes. They knew I was miserable...except no one cared enough to help me.

Chapter Eight

Rainier

I TRAVELED FOR MILES, trying to put behind what troubled me, what angered and pained me...and most importantly: what I held so dear. But no matter how hard I tried to forget everything, it was still with me. At first, every moment felt like eternity, but in time the minutes turned to hours, and hours to days. If I'd been given the choice, I would have cast aside everything about the prophecy and my destiny; I would have forgotten it without the slightest hesitation if it meant I could be with Annora.

It was my second night of travel, and I stopped to rest in the open forest. I made a bed of leaves and grass, tried to get to sleep...but no matter what or how I did, my mind was spinning—and everything that happened last night was

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going through my head again and again, which made sleep nearly impossible. I gave it up for the time being, and decided, if the moonlight would allow for it, find a dream spell in my Book of Shadows.

I tore a piece of parchment from the back of the book, and on the bottom of the page I wrote the spell I intended to conjure. And I folded it three times (very tightly), first in a triangle, and then I creased its lower corners, after which I ran my left thumb over it, as I whispered:

“Give my wishes, my power and hope a force so bright!

“That I can see her and she me, a vision to carry:

“Take my thoughts of her, to chase away the darkness and reveal light,

“So that, Annora, my one true love,

“May dream of me tonight.”

I pulled a dagger from my belt, and gently I pressed its blade into the pad of my thumb, bringing forth a drop of blood. I waited for it to spread, for the blood to become the size of a coin before I touched my thumb to the middle of the triangle. Once it came together with the parchment I closed my eyes and held out the triangle, shaking it vigorously. Then I did exactly as the spell said—I tossed the paper to the ground before I opened my eyes. And when I did, I was absolutely astounded by what lay before me. I crawled forward, planted my hands in the grass and leaned

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in to gaze upon it, this marvel that was the sheer work of magic. It was splendid. The blood had dripped here and there in the centre of the triangle...yet the result was a perfect little heart. I lifted it up, and as the moonlight was cast upon it, I was able to see where the blood had soaked through both sides...and in my hands, the heart seemed to beat.

As silvery clouds rolled in front of the moon and the light began to fade, I readied myself for sleep once more. Then, with the heart beside me, still beating faithfully, I drifted into sleep...

...IT WAS A DREAM AND I KNEW IT. I was traveling though the forest; I think it must have been these very travels—when I had stopped for sleep—but I could not be certain. I was startled, and the more I tried to understand this, the more confusing it became. Why, I don't know, but all of a sudden I thrust my heels against Samson's sides, caused him to jolt into a gallop.

With sweat foaming across his chest and down his flanks, he ran mile after mile, through the seemingly endless thicket, with swift and erratic motions here and there, over another shrub or stump, past the narrowest gap between two trees. Then there were some kind of specters—and they seemed so real, so frightening that I was a prisoner in my own imagination. All these grey and black demons gathered round me, their bony wings in a flurry of

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ripped and torn flesh that somehow suspended them. I tried to look back, but Samson was running much too fast. Yet as we went on and the beasts flew round and round us, I caught another glimpse of them...but I had no idea what they were.

The ground began to rumble, the earth splitting in shards like shattered glass. Trees snapped in half, creating a labyrinth as they crashed, collided with the world as it was torn apart. And water splashed out of streams, an upsurge—a crystalline volcano. As the path began to separate, Samson reared, his left hind-leg plunging into an ever-growing crevice. He let out a screech, craning his neck upward and to the right as I was thrown to the ground. And just when I was falling, I saw he was about to collapse on top of me! I rolled sideways, at the moment his leg sank and he collided with the earth with a thunderous crashing sound.

For a moment, the demons were gone. There was silence until...flames erupted beneath the earth, dirt and fire spraying from the ground like blood from an artery. It flourished, rising, rising, rising until the red and golden light seemed to devour the world, with shadows streaming here and there. There were more demons then, floating figures whose spines were bloody stumps that dangled beneath their black cloaks. I caught sight of their faces: I saw a skull with neither eyes nor flesh, but a fierce red light

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that burned within them and shone through the cavities in their bones.

I slid back, put my hands on the ground to brace myself. Samson rolled onto his stomach and bent his forelegs as he tried to stand. I looked up, and I saw one of the demons floating in front of me as the clash went on in the distance. Again I pulled back, seeing its bony fingers curl in a gesture for me to draw near. With a snakelike hiss, it drew back with movements as quick as light and smooth as mercury.

“*Abaddon, Wolfbane and Nighthawk!*” it shrieked, lifting its arms as though to command a great source of energy; and as it did, all the blood and bane of hell had been brought to earth.

Blood began to rush over the flames, first in slow streams and then in rivers that were fast becoming a lake. I could smell it, and with it was the horrid stench of death, of a thousand years’ rotted flesh and burned bones.

“Rise with the flames!” he said, wild flailing gestures of his hands still going on. “Rise, Abaddon!”

Can you imagine what a nightmare this was? I heard myself scream, but I had not the might to awaken. I was so deep in the dream, numbed by the spell...and it had gone terribly wrong.

I moved toward Samson, trying to steady him as he continued his struggle to stand. I heard the demon again, its

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voice thicker, louder and far more terrifying. The earth rumbled again, and a shadow spread over the treetops, darkening all but the fractures in the ground, from which I watched the three hounds of hell emerge...

They sprung upward, their gargantuan black paws gripping the forest floor. And trees crumbled to the ground, branches snapping in two as the fissure spread. I stared at them, with not the faintest idea what to make of this or why I was seeing such awful creatures. They were frightening. I was almost paralyzed by my fear. Their frames, massive as those of tigers, were covered with thick agouti fur; and their claws and fangs seemed to be arched, and were glimmering in the dark of night. As fast as they emerged, they tore into the thick of battle with smooth, catlike movements.

The demons let out a shrill cry; and as the hellhounds soared far past them, toward the moon, Abaddon parted his jaws and let out the most thunderous roar. Demons tossed blades of fire at one-another, fiery knives whirling through the darkness. And as the largest one fell, the hellhounds tore after it, flames rushing from their mouths.

It seemed the battle was going on forever, while I told myself it was a dream from which I should soon awaken and see it come to pass. But I couldn't.

"Bring them home now, Abaddon," the demon said. As he pointed to one that was fleeing, the hellhounds raced after it, leapt onto its back and tore its flesh with wet

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splitting sounds. When its wings were crushed and its body ripped apart, it shrieked, lurching forward only to be dragged toward the fissure. Roaring, screeching—the sounds went on and on until I could hear nothing else, nor could I see past the ongoing clash of flames.

I cried, trying to run through the blood lake...but naturally, the further into it I went, the more it deepened; and soon I sank with the red fluid covering my face and blurring my eyes. Then I was swimming through it...trying to find the light, the end. All of a sudden the darkness whirled around me, and the dream was slowly floating away. My chest was heaving; in my sleep I could hear myself struggling for my breath.

I AWAKENED, and opened my eyes to the warm glow of the morning sun, and saw nothing but an endless view of pine, oak and emerald shrubs. I was still on a bed of grass, with the forest for shelter and a sparkling fresh stream nearby. But that nightmare had seemed so real that, even after I awakened I found I was reassuring myself of the fact it was only my imagination.

Chapter Nine

Rainier

AFTER I LEFT the forest, I traveled for two more days before I reached the next large settlement; I had crossed through two small villages along the way. Each new place I came upon, I searched the fields and buildings alike, asking passerby if they knew anyone by the names: Lucan and Braden de Aaradyn.

I was determined to find my brothers. I wanted to learn about the prophecy and how I was born into it; I wanted to know why I was cursed with such a horrid birthmark; and more than anything else—I wanted to learn who I truly was. I went about my search for them alone, of course, but I wished then, even more than I had before, that Annora could have been with me, especially since it seemed so

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odd—and awkward—to approach two perfect strangers in hopes of being accepted and knowing them as family. For so long I'd acted as though—no matter our differences—it would bear no importance if they welcomed me or not. I would not allow them to change my life either way. I built a vast wall of courage in my mind, naive enough to think that everything would stay the same. Yet, even as I promised myself that, the day I would find them was going to be a wondrous one—perhaps one of the most exciting times of my life—still it was daunting beyond belief. I could not help but wonder: How will this affect me? What if it *does* change my life? If they tell me about the prophecy and what it truly means, will I see myself differently?

Then came the day when I arrived in a coastal village just outside of that settlement. From the meadows I could see the harbor: ships all along the docks; boatmen moving here and there; sails waving freely before the pristine blue skies. I was finally there and quickly growing closer to my goal of finding my brothers.

I tied Samson to a post just beyond the villages. Then I walked down to the harbor, making my way through the thick stream of sailors and other boatmen who were carrying crates and barrels aboard the ships. I was fascinated, and stayed there for some time, until in the early afternoon I resumed my search for my brothers, and went about asking the local people where I would find them. It

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took longer than I had expected (and hoped), but finally one man told me to go to the tanner's booth in the marketplace. So I did—and I was given vague directions to Lucan's house, and went there the very next day.

I rode to the outlying section of houses, banked along the hills of the countryside. A small few of them stood apart from the others, being slightly larger and facing a nearby river. One of these, as I had been told, was Lucan's home; the farthest from the hills. I approached it with a fear I wasn't certain I could overcome.

I was so nervous that, for a moment I paused and told myself I couldn't do this. But once I gathered my wits I rethought it and went on...and knocked on the door.

It was sheer torture waiting for an answer. My stomach was in knots. My palms were sweating so hard I couldn't keep them together. I felt like an absolute fool. I had not the faintest idea what I was going to say.

Then the door opened, and a handsome, dark-haired young man stepped outside, and asked: "Can I help you?"

"A boatman told me to come here...," I said. "I am trying to find Lucan de Aaradyn."

He leaned against the wall beside the doorway, smiling faintly. "Who wants to know?"

"I do. I'm looking for my brothers."

His gaze narrowed; and for the longest few seconds of my life he looked at me without saying a word. His silence

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made the situation even more awkward. I just wanted for it to end, somehow.

All of a sudden, as though some ancient memory had returned to him, he said brightly, “Rainier?”

I didn’t know what else to say, or if I should shake his hand or stand back. So I replied with a simple: “Yes.”

“This is—oh, it’s incredible!” he said, embracing me. “I can’t quite believe it. Where have you been all this time?”

“Not far from here. I didn’t—I didn’t know about you until a few days ago.”

He turned away, stepped past the house and shouted, “Braden, come here! You won’t believe this.” Then he said to me, “I haven’t seen you since you were just a little thing. We didn’t know what became of you.”

Braden arrived shortly thereafter, with no idea of what was going on. “What?” he asked, then acknowledged me before going on. “Oh, hello. What is it, Lucan?”

“This is Rainier.”

“That’s a strange coincidence,” Braden said to me. “We had a brother with that name.”

I laughed. “I know—it’s me.”

Lucan slapped his shoulder in the humorously aggressive way that brothers do. “You idiot.”

“Why didn’t you just say who he was?”

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“Don’t mind him,” Lucan said as he opened the door and gestured for me to follow. “Come in, please.”

Once we were inside and seated at the table I wasted no time explaining about my childhood, my love for magic, and the strange powers I was beginning to discover. They took all of this quite well, surprisingly; they didn’t even flinch when I told them about how I had saved Annora.

“Where did you grow up?” I asked. “I want to know as much about you as I can. I was told that you would be able to tell me about a prophecy.”

They looked at each other, then back to me, their faces without expression. Both were quiet, and then Lucan said, “Which one?”

I didn’t want to give away too much about my past, for fear they didn’t know about my birthmark and the supposed curse that went along with it. So I did my best to sound vague, hoping that, by some chance, I could learn more about the prophecy before telling them I was thought to be a part of it.

“I don’t know exactly,” I said. “I heard of it a while ago; people were speaking of a prophecy—that it was going to bring bad things to us all. Something to that effect.”

“Why ask us?” Braden said.

“When I asked, someone told me that the two of you would know.”

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“Well, there is one...,” Lucan said, “but I don’t think it is anything like what you are saying.”

“I want to know.”

He smiled. “Such fervor! I’m curious—why do you keep asking?”

“Just curiosity,” I said, leaning back. “I’m on a quest, I think; I want to learn as much as I can. And I’ve always wanted to know this—what about our family? I don’t know much about them.”

Their silence made it obvious to me that I had broached a very delicate subject, which, of course, I never meant to do. But there were a precious few things I had been told about my parents—and now my mind was racing with all these questions—all that I had wondered throughout the years; all I thought of when I went to sleep at night, or asked myself whenever that void in my life felt a little deeper than usual. It was difficult for me to be this age and have never heard anyone speak of my family, except when I asked my Aunt—and even that took hours.

“A long time ago,” Braden said with difficulty; “they died years ago.”

To hear him say that was painful, in a way, as it was my family as well as theirs. I felt...wrong for having asked, yet I remained just as curious, still wanting for them to have answers for me.

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“Don’t ask how,” Lucan said. “It isn’t easy for us to talk about.”

“You know,” Braden said, “on a brighter note, I think we ought to celebrate—the three of us; drink to our reunion.”

Lucan nodded, then gestured to me. “Come; let me show you how we celebrate. You will never forget it, I assure you.”

“Where do you go?”

As I stood, Braden took me by the arm, opening the door. “I’m sure you haven’t had a time like this before—you’ll love it. And we can get to know you while we’re there.”

I felt a bit intimidated, as I had no idea where they were insisting I go with them; but we needed time to get acquainted—and I wanted to spend as much time with them as possible. So I agreed; and they took me with them to the local tavern.

I had been in only one tavern before that. And it felt as though I had entered a completely different world. This was nothing close to what I was accustomed to, nor had I ever dreamed of spending a night that way. There were women everywhere, rushing about, and fetching drinks for the screaming drunkards who demanded them. There was shouting, brawling, laughter—everything, all at once, in one crashing, ringing din that seemed to have no end.

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When we first arrived I leaned against the wall near the entrance, watching groups of people arrive and depart every moment or so. I didn't know what more to do, and felt horribly out of place, while Lucan and Braden, who did this more often than not, had each found a beautiful woman and were served their drinks in no time. Then they were seated at a table in the far corner, the farthest from where I stood, while these women practically threw themselves at them, sitting on their laps and running their fingers through their hair. It disgusted me, as I had never been in that sort of situation, and I wasn't certain how to act. And it made me feel awkward because I would never be unfaithful to Annora, yet I couldn't ignore the savage needs of my body. I used every bit of strength and will I had to subdue such feelings. And I was thinking of her the whole time, wondering how and when I would be able to return to her. How were we going to wed—and where, without her family learning about it? If my fate as a sorcerer—grand as it seemed it would be—meant that we were not meant to be together, then what future was it at all? A dark and miserable one, I thought. How am I to go on this way? Why was I made to choose between her and what the prophecy may mean for me?

After a few moments, Lucan walked up to me and took me by the arm, leading me to a table next to theirs, where two attractive (and undoubtedly half-drunk) women were

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waiting for me. I didn't want this, but my brothers urged me on, saying, "Go on, Rainier, have something to drink. Sit down; relax."

One of the barmaids brought a mug to me—and I didn't know what was in it, what I was drinking, but Lucan and Braden were a strong influence around me already, and I thought, What is the harm?

We sat there for hours, talking and laughing as though we had known each other our entire lives. It was almost uncanny how well we got along. For the first time I felt like I belonged; I wanted to be here and they were thrilled I was with them.

While I was there I drank, and I drank, and I drank even more, until I was dizzy and weary and so out of sorts that I had not the faintest idea what was going on. The women took advantage of me as well, touching me in ways I would have never allowed otherwise, as right then I was too drunk to realize it. But I let it happen all the same.

By the end of the night I was so exhausted that I leaned on the table for support as I stood, and my brothers helped me to get back to Lucan's house, where I spent the night, while he was on the next mattress, not too far from me, with one of the women he met that night.

I didn't notice at the time what I had done, nor did I have the faintest idea what it would lead my brothers to plan for me. That night changed everything because, little

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did I know, they weren't simply being kind to me—they discovered something about my powers that made them decide to wield them as best they could, for their own gain. But I knew nothing of this; in my mind, all was well, and we were getting to know each-other after so many years apart.

Chapter Ten

Lucan

THE FOLLOWING morning, when I awakened, the woman I spent the night with had gone her own way, and Braden had slept on the floor of his house, too tired to crawl into bed. Rainier, on the other hand, was still fast asleep when we were sitting at the table after sunrise sipping tea, to ward off the lingering effects of our drinking. He had nearly passed out from the alcohol, which, I then found out, he was not accustomed to.

As we were talking, quietly, of course, and outside his earshot had he been awake, I asked, “Did you see what he did last night?”

“No, what?”

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“The table—didn’t you see it?” I said in an enthusiastic whisper. “He leaned against it, and when he stood up there were these...marks, burn marks, where his hands had been. I checked them—and they were burned, straight into the wood.”

Shock crossed his face. He didn’t know how to respond, and said the to-be-expected word, “Impossible! How could he?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t even feel it—he did that and he doesn’t know. And what’s more—he has no idea about the hellfire or any of the other things.”

“What do you plan to tell him?”

“Simple,” I said: “I don’t. But if we can keep him here with us, maybe he will be of some use, if you know what I mean.”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, he’s our brother and we finally have him back. How can you think that way?”

I sipped some of my tea, then set the mug on the table, glanced at Rainier, who was sound asleep, then back to Braden. “Don’t you see, this is why she got rid of him in the first place—he is cursed. He has been this way all his life—neither of us can change it. But if we can learn from him—have him teach us whatever magic he knows, it will make impressing the nobles so much easier. Braden, listen: what is the loss? We can give him a place to stay, so we’ll not take advantage. Fair?”

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“Don’t you have a heart?” he said. “We ought to help him, not use him! Be reasonable.”

“What?” I said. “And keep struggling while he is here, with all this power? How will it hurt him, hmm? Tell me. If we learn about magic, what will it do to him?”

Rainier had begun to awaken; he was moving about, restlessly. There was no more time for us to talk, and I settled our decision. “A few months,” I went on, softly. “Give me that, will you? Then he can go on as he pleases.”

Chapter Eleven

Rainier

I AWAKENED, unable to feel anything below my neck. It was a strain even to move my hands; I felt as though I had been paralyzed, and now my body was slowly beginning to awaken, tingling every once in a while. I couldn't remember what happened last night; it was a hazy dream, locked somewhere in my memories, beneath the pain and stiffness and the burn of the alcohol. I realized then that I never wanted to drink so much again, for the rest of my life.

My brothers were standing by the table when I finally rolled over to see them. There was a fire in the hearth, with a pot of tea suspended above it, steam rising every once in a while. I remember staring at it for the longest time, too achy

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to move, too tired to speak. But finally Braden walked over to me and knelt at my side with a cup of tea; and then he helped me to sit up and lean my back against the wall.

“I am never going to do that again,” I said, and heard them both laugh at once. “I feel awful.”

“But did you enjoy it?” Lucan asked. “You seemed to....”

“I’m not sure...I can’t remember. And now”—I swallowed some of the tea—“my body hurts; my hair, everything feels strange.”

“Haven’t you had a drink before?”

“Not like this,” I said, still half-dazed. “I don’t know what I drank, either.”

“Ah, well,” Lucan was saying, “next time you will pay more attention. And enjoy the women, please! We must teach you to enjoy it more, enjoy yourself.”

Thankfully, we didn’t visit any taverns after that. We spent most of our time together in the following days, becoming acquainted, asking questions. And a week or so later, once I was more comfortable with them, and starting to feel at home there, Lucan asked me: “How much magic do you know?”

“Very little,” I said, “aside from healing spells.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It has always interested me, more than anything else, I think.”

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“Will you teach us?” Braden asked. “I mean, could you?”

Lucan smiled. “In exchange for...a place to live, of course. You are more than welcome here as long as you like.”

“Thank you, but I couldn’t. That would be an imposition—I don’t want to be.”

He waved it away. “If it were, I wouldn’t have offered. And I am going to be traveling in a few days, up to some old place on the mountainside; would you come with me? Braden can’t...he will be working on one of the ships.”

I considered it for a moment, then nodded.

NEITHER DAY NOR NIGHT passed when Annora did not cross my mind. She was the center of my thoughts, always; and now I realized how truly lost I was without her. I acted as though I was happy and all was well, for I could not allow my brothers to see the heartbreak I endured at all hours.

I practiced magic with my brothers, often having hours to discuss it as we worked side by side in the fields, and at night before we went to sleep. My knowledge of sorcery had a profound effect on what they learned. I’d begun to teach them, although they chose much different paths. I still wished to be a healer, but the interest was mine alone. They did not share my passion for it, nor were they content to travel to the surrounding parishes. They were bold and

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always in search of a new adventure, wanting to take voyage abroad and learn all forms of magic. I taught them everything they desired. Not once did I try to succeed them, nor did I boast of what I could do. I went about my spells as they did theirs, trying my powers against my own strength and determination to better it. But Lucan seemed outright jealous of me.

One day when we were in the fields, hewing boards, I asked: “Why don’t either of you wed?”

Lucan pulled the saw toward him, bearing down as I pushed it back to split the board. “There is no woman worth keeping for more than one night,” he said. “Marriage—I don’t know—but I hate the thought of being bound to one woman. It doesn’t suit me.”

“Or me,” Braden added. “Why? Do you?”

Without saying anything I slid the next timber across the planks.

“That must mean Yes,” Lucan said. “When you are older—wiser—you will think differently.”

“What about our family?” I asked. “My Aunt told me that my birthmark is some kind of scar....Is it?”

They looked at each other and then resumed their work with downcast gazes. Lucan stopped long enough to regard me, though his voice was firm, hinted with an anger I had yet to see. “I don’t want to talk about it. There was a curse; that’s all you need to know.”

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When he mentioned a curse, every one of my old questions arose once more. For quite some time after that I pondered it, wondering if my powers could be passed on—and what it may mean if they were. I didn't like to think I had been scarred by hellfire, but now the idea was not so far off, considering what I had done in a whim—the powers that suddenly came over me, and my visions of the hellhounds.

I went on with my work, trying not to think any more of this, though I admit that it frustrated me when he made such...lingering statements, leaving me to ponder them for hours on end. Yet, of course I did obsess slightly—perhaps greatly—at times. Even after all these months I still had thousands of questions, most of which remained unanswered; and it grated on me. I could not begin to understand why my own family would not give me the simple benefit of their knowledge. All I asked was to know what happened to our parents; I wanted to be spared of nothing, to hear the tale in its entirety no matter how horrid it might be. And each time they denied me as though it was some great secret and I had no reason to know. Besides that, I hated to go on without knowing if I'd already reached my plateau of magical power, or if my fate held something much grander. Yet when I gave it more thought, I realized I had already been given my answer: my life was not leading me on some

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pointless trajectory—I did have a greater purpose, no matter what I'd been born of or who fated me to it.

DAYS LATER, Lucan and I were riding along the path that led to the nearby mountains. The sun rose above the forest, showering us with tiny beams of light that floated over the leaves and shrubs, twirling and glimmering here and there. The morning, still so crisp and cool, heralded the newest chapter of my journey—accompanying my brother on his quest for a relic at a Roman monument. There was a shrine as well, supposedly; nestled between two great mountains, just west of here.

The hills were growing steeper as we went on. Soon we were forced to walk, leading our horses, as it was too dangerous to ride through there. The path followed the winding ledge of the hill, and was blocked, in several places, by fallen rocks and broken tree stumps, as though in the wake of a devastating storm.

I decided to tether Samson there, as he was exhausted and a snow-capped hill lay not far ahead of us. Lucan did likewise with his horse; and shortly thereafter we reached the snowy peak, which alone was odd, being so close to the sea. From its crest, as we looked at the gorge between two mountains before us, we were able to see the outline of the monument, along with what looked to be a massive churchlike structure. Maybe he was right, I thought, and there is a shrine.

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“If there are treasures up here,” I said, “don’t you think that we aren’t the first to look for them?”

“Not this far out,” he said. “Who would know? The nobles won’t come this far, and anyone else is too afraid to leave the villages.”

As soon as we came upon the shrine we stopped in front of two pillars at the stairway—the entrance to the temple, covered with travertine and gold inlays. Here stood a towering monolithic wall, carved with Romanesque archways, and with statues of winged creatures, which stood guard at the entrance. The doors were solid marble, worn and moss-covered with age, and fit together as though they were once piece, and parted slowly as we pushed them forward with our combined strength.

Inside was a thousand years of history painted on the walls, telling the story of the Romans and their crusades. And strangely there was snow inside, having fallen through an opening in the ceiling where the stone had given way from its weight.

“Incredible,” he said, looking around to see every chamber door and battlement that surrounded us. “It’s enormous.”

“How did you know how to get here?” I asked.

He was still gazing upward at the ceiling with awe and wonder. “A map. One of the nobles gave it to me...without realizing it.”

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I took two steps in, and stopped to look at a pedestal that stood in the centre of the room. It looked to have been gold at one time, but was frosty-white with snow, and had darkened with the passing centuries. I wiped it clean with my hand, then did my best to read its inscription, which was in Latin, of course. I knew very little of the language, as it was long-since antiquated by my time; what I understood was a few words and passages I learned from the church scriptures in my childhood. I couldn't quite read the text, but as best I was able to tell, it spoke of Guardians. Yet there was one word in particular, which I did decipher—Béja—as it did not appear to fit any particular language.

Lucan came to my side, studied the pillar. After a moment he repeated the strange word—or name; we weren't certain what it was, exactly.

“Can you read this?” I asked.

“Only that—Béja,” he said. “The rest of it is...just Latin to me.”

“I can't tell, but it mentions a Guardian.”

He turned to the left, gestured to a doorway, walked toward it, and then waited for me to follow. “This way. The only thing we need to find is the reliquary.”

After we made our way past the door, we reached a stairwell, with webbed stone steps that led to a spherical chamber of tombs and a strangely lambent light. The stench of rain-dampened earth filled my head; and that awful,

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sickening smell of the burial chambers was enough to drive me wild with my own senses. Further and further we walked, until the air was no longer damp and sultry, but crisp and cold.

At the centre of the main chamber, suspended high above us, was an orb that spun atop an iron axle, whirring as it turned round and round, creating an everlasting source of energy that traveled through the lines below the ground. Beneath it burned a small flame, heating the copper hoops and in turn causing the orb to continue cycling. And attached to either side of it were two chains, both connected to twin elevated wheels, from which spun copper strands ran parallel to posts that surrounded the hall. Carefully aligning it were six rows of diamonds: the first two flanking the orb itself, then three more, followed by five, and then a row of eight, ending with a row of thirteen. Spun-copper lines connected a copper wheel, lined with thirteen loops of oil-soaked rope; this helm was suspended by chains yet self-propelled by five blades.

Once we came upon the top of the stairwell we followed a passageway straight ahead that grew narrower and narrower with each step. And there were lamps unlike any that either of us had ever seen: they were perfectly round, amber-color, amazingly bright with no visible flames, and hung from twisted chains along the corridor.

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“Look at this,” I said, pointing to the lamps. “How are they burning?”

He shook his head, at as great a loss as I was. “No one knows. I saw them in one of the tombs we went to, but when the door was opened they went out.”

We reached another chamber at the end of that passageway, with deftly-carved idols and golden-swirled facades.

“If there is one thing the Romans knew well,” he said, “it was building.”

“And this was only where they brought the dead.”

“Well, that makes sense, really: they wouldn’t have wanted them to escape.”

I laughed. And all of a sudden I felt a terribly cold breeze move across my back, as though something was crawling over my shoulder, onto my neck, and then down to the small of my back. It startled me, and I turned round quickly, glancing in all directions...but there was nothing.

“What?” he asked, and turned back to me. “What was that about?”

“I don’t know.” I looked in all directions once again, certain that someone—or something—had touched me. “It felt so strange. There was this presence, right here.”

He sighed in a perfectly exaggerated way. “Please don’t go mad just yet; I’m not prepared.”

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“No, I mean it,” I said, and reached out to touch one of the lamps. It was white-hot—and the second I drew close enough to peer into it, both Lucan and I were thrown to the ground by some great force that felt as though it came from the wall at our side.

I supported myself with my hands for balance, slowly rising to my feet, as he did the same. His voice changed tone so quickly: it was a low, cautious whisper when he said: “No, don’t stand. Look, to the right....”

I couldn’t believe it when I turned to see (close enough to touch), a massive white wolf standing beside me, watching me as though if I were to move—even slightly—it would strike. There was such keenness in the way it stared at me; there was an entire world of intelligence and wisdom behind its ice-blue eyes. This was not an ordinary creature; there was an angelic quality about it, as it had not a single imperfection; its fur was long, silky, flawless.

With extreme caution I tucked my leg under me and began to stand. The wolf was stock-still until Lucan placed his hand on the wall, which was when it leapt at him with the fiercest snarl one can imagine, and pinned him on the ground with a single paw. Then, with skill and precision it tugged at the map he had just taken in his hand, pulled it out of reach and shredded it to a thousand tiny pieces.

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All at once I remembered the pillar with the words Béja and Guardian. So I extended my hand to the wolf and whispered, “Béja?”

It turned, ears flicking back. Then, suddenly two more wolves appeared at her side, the larger of them being mottled red and brown, save for his muzzle, legs and underside, all being white; while the other was solid black.

“Tierney,” she said, her voice soft and feminine, “take him.” And then she turned to the black wolf, and he stepped toward Lucan, who was too terrified to move. “Let him sleep, and carry him home.”

She returned to me, drew close, breathed in and exhaled a frost as cold as winter. I felt myself grow tired suddenly afterward. As she breathed over me another time she said, “Sleep, and forget you have been here. It isn’t time for us to meet yet.”

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Annora

IF I so much as spoke Rainier's name, my Mother would punish me, somehow. Whenever I tried to reason with her she treated me as though I didn't exist, ignored everything I willed to do. So I decided to go on, as long as need be, without mentioning a word about Rainier. He was in my heart, nowhere else. I prayed he knew it; prayed that, somewhere he was thinking of me at the very same moment. My faith kept me going; without it I would have been lost. I loved him so much, I couldn't—and I wouldn't—give up.

Several days had gone by now. I quit counting them. It was too painful for me to remind myself how long Rainier and I had been apart. But even worse—my Mother had

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succeeded in arranging a marriage for me. The man she chose was a sailor, or so she told me the night I was to meet him. She invited him here, to our house, with me standing inside as though I was an object at his disposal. I cried the whole time. He was so revolting that I couldn't bear to think of him kissing me or touching me, or placing a ring on my finger.

There was hatred in me that I had not felt for anyone before, and every time I looked at him my stomach went into knots for more reasons than I could name. After he and I met for the first time I saved all the vile words and curses I knew, in my mind, and unleashed them when I saw him the next day, which made my parents furious.

Weeks had passed, and I had lived through this torture as long as I could. I decided, not long after I learned about the engagement, that my only choice was to run away from here, soon if it was possible. There was no way for me to tell which way Rainier had gone, but I would search for him, as long as need be.

I spent two days planning how I would get out of here. I thought it was foolproof—that no one would suspect I had left, if the time were right; and if I were careful in choosing a path, I would be miles outside of here by the time they would be in search of me.

I waited until night, when everyone was asleep...and I opened the door, an inch at a time, only far enough for me

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to get past it while holding in my breath. I sneaked out from there, to the barn. I let my mare, Kaeya, out of her stall, and was just about to saddle her when that wretched sailor—Terric—approached me from behind. It sickened me when he put his arms around my waist and drew me backward so we were touching. I tried to pull away, but he locked his fingers together, held me there.

“You wouldn’t want to rush off and miss our wedding,” he said, “would you?”

“I’d forgotten to check the stall gate,” I said. “I came to see if my mare was safe for the night...as though it matters to you.”

“Your mother told me to look after you. But this is our secret; I won’t tell her that you were...trying to leave. Or should I?”

I managed to pull away that time, and led my horse back into her stall. “Tell her whatever you wish.”

“I don’t think you appreciate our engagement well enough.”

“Don’t I?” I said wryly. “I didn’t realize it.”

“You are fortunate that any man will have you now, after you spread your legs for that scoundrel.”

“You hateful bastard!” I said and slammed the stall door. I walked away as fast as I could, for I was in tears and my voice was quivering. “If I had I would proudly say so. I would brag of it to everyone, and pray that I am bearing his

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child.” I stopped, turned back to see him standing there. He was too surprised to speak, I think. I went on: “But I never did, and I never will because I am here and hating my life and hating you.”

I ran home in hopes of escaping him...and I did, for the time being. Thankfully he didn't tell my parents what I had been doing, but I knew the generosity would have its terrible cost: his right to touch me in ways that were too awful to think of.

When I had watched Rainier ride away from our village, he held strings to my heart which drew me along with him. The further he rode into the distance, the tighter those strings wrenched all the love and passion I already felt for him. But it was that night when I realized there was a meaning to our love; it was the kind that would never die. All of this was happening for a reason—there must have been one. I was fated to be with him...and I would be, no matter what sacrifices I needed to make.

By the time two more days had gone by I was a little wiser than before. At nightfall I walked my mare to the barn, then around it when no one was in sight. And I tethered her to a stump that was blessedly close to my house. Then, once more, when my family was asleep I sneaked out, walked quietly to where I'd hidden my mare, climbed into the saddle and rode away as fast as possible.

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From there, I began my journey in search of the only one I would ever love.

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Rainier

IT HAD BEEN several weeks since Lucan and I had gone exploring, and we had no memory of our experience in the temple. We traveled more often than not these days, and I was already on a whirlwind journey to becoming to most legendary sorcerer in France. I healed only a few people, as there weren't that many nearby who were ill or injured...but because I cured them with a simple touch, I was regarded as having unnatural powers.

After being told there was a sick child here, I stepped inside the house, to see five people—some in grave sadness, while others paced frantically. A young boy of six years old was being carried around in his mother's arms. He looked positively dreadful; his skin was pale—milky—

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drained of what little color it had. And his eyes were without expression.

“He is a sorcerer—a healer,” someone said, and all gazes fell on me.

“Please, you must help him!” the boy’s mother said, while frantically she tried to place him in my arms. “I beg you, please help him!”

Everything about him was frail, and he was disoriented. He looked as though he was moments away from death. It was heart-wrenching for me to touch his clammy skin, or to look into his fading brown eyes.

“I am not sure I can,” I said. “He is—.” I broke off, taking the child from his mother’s arms and laying him on the bed. “I need basil leaves for him, and water.”

His skin was almost translucent, turning shades of blue and dark grey around his eyes, his mouth, and in places on his chest. There was a small wound on the lower part of his leg. I placed my hand just above the wound, and pressed down firmly to try and prevent any more blood from flowing to it. As I did this I tried to soothe him; and his mother stroked his forehead and whispered to him that he would be all right.

There was a dagger on the floor beside the bed. I picked it up discreetly. The boy’s mother consoled him, and she was finally able to bring his gaze up to meet hers. I pointed to the knife, and she nodded. I knew by then that

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most of the sensation had left his leg. And I was in hopes that had helped to contain the poison as well. I took the blade and I cut quite deeply across the two small holes of the wound.

Within a few moments, the boy's father returned with basil leaves.

"Outside!" I said as I picked the child up and pushed past the people opening the door. "Move aside!" I set him on the ground right outside the house. Then I ran toward the well, which, to my good fortune was close by. I pulled the bucket of water up as quickly as I could, and then rushed back to the child. He was still breathing, but his breaths were labored and seemed to bring him little air. But he had calmed slightly since I cut into the wound.

I was draining the poison from him, and I couldn't help but feel evil's presence. There was darkness, as best I can think to describe it.

I poured the mixture into the wound, and dabbed it into his skin, though I could still feel darkness coming from him. I put my hands over his chest and pressed down hard. He gasped and tried to break free. And his mother came running toward me and shouted at me, telling to get away from him. I closed my eyes and delved into my knowledge of magic, feeling the energies that surrounded me. After a few seconds I looked into his eyes while I pressed my

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hands against his chest. His heart racing, I felt the sickness swell in his blood, which would soon kill him.

I took a deep breath, reached as far into my mind as I could, then beyond, as though I was to draw from a well in which all spirits sleep. I drew back, feeling my soul rise ever-so-slightly above my body. Then there was a feeling of weightlessness and dizziness that made everything in the world seem to be a distant vision. I was now free to summon the spirits, but this weakened me to the point I felt I would not be able to stand again. Indistinctly I could hear the voices of the people who were watching: I heard them cry and gasp...and I remembered the day I saved Annora, how it was so much like this.

I was determined to save this boy; and, while drawing in the spirits, with all my might I pushed down the child's chest once again, ignoring his protests and airless screams. The spirits came straight through my hands, it felt, as I was guiding them to destroy his sickness and pain. Like a whirling cloud, they stormed, visible only in my mind. Still I was pressing them on, sapping out the strength of my body to the point I could scarcely endure another moment.

My heart was pounding wildly, and the coldness of the spirits and what evil they withdrew from the boy were falling into me. I felt as though my energy was a current that was whipping through me with speed and power I could never comprehend. It scorched my veins, my mind. I

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lost my sight for a moment; my eyes clouded and all I could see was a milky glow beneath the warm sunlight. The sound of a thousand bees hummed and buzzed through my ears to the point that I heard myself cry out for help.

This seemed to go on and on, but I knew it lasted no more than a few seconds. And just when I thought I would have to let go of the child, the spirits separated—drew out the dark energies—and freed me. I felt a burning sensation in my palms, and I glanced around to see onlookers were awestruck. Then, looking at the child, I realized he was no longer struggling...and that now he was breathing with less difficulty.

I stroked his hair, whispering to him before his mother rushed to his side, still crying as she waited for him to awaken. And it took no time at all; within moments he cried for his mother to hold him.

I was so weak, though. My muscles ached, and I had scarcely enough strength to stand. I was thanked to no end, by the child's parents as well as the onlookers.

Performing any act of sorcery was always a spectacle; it drew in skeptics and believers alike. I had quite a reputation by this point; as I had done the impossible yet another time.

“Oh...my...,” the boy's mother said, at a loss for words. She pulled the child against her chest, caressing him. “I don't know what to say. It's a miracle.”

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Everyone around was completely awestruck, as was I.

THE NEXT DAY everything was lovely, tranquil that day, as it was one of the first of spring. Sunlight shone over the countryside, casting faint shadows on the lowering hills and fields. The scent of lavender wafted in a gentle breeze, the fragrance of spring that was soon to come.

I was riding back to Lucan's house on a cart, which I had filled with the last few pieces of wood and thatch we would need to finish building another house. I stopped to let Samson drink from one of the troughs alongside the path and stepped down to make sure the boards were secure, when suddenly someone wrapped their arms around me from behind and covered my eyes with their hands. There was no suspense after that, no wonder or wait to find out who it was, as I knew her touch too well to mistake it for any other.

I turned, my heart racing wildly. And then I saw her, perfect as a goddess, wearing a somber grey dress that curled side to side with her movements. We were both too shocked to speak.

I took her into my arms. I kissed her—I cuddled her—I caressed her a thousand times. We shared the most impassioned greetings imaginable, filled with mirth and laughter and the truly heartwarming sense that only love can give.

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At first I wanted to ask what she was doing here, how she found me, how she was able to leave home—everything you might expect, but each was too... formal. I left out the likely questions, wrapped my arms around the small of her back, and willed her closer to me with a kiss I'd been starved of for so long. And just as I had been on the most fateful day of my life when I saw her for the first time, I was mesmerized by her every feature, her purity and perfection.

“My God,” I said, short of breath. “I can’t believe it! I’ve missed you so much, love, so much.”

“One day I’ll tell you what I had to do to get here.”

“What?”

She grinned. “There is no sacrifice too great for love, remember?”

That day was another of the most fateful in my life. It introduced a new chapter of my life—the one I feared I would never see. I explained to her about my brothers, introduced her to them, told her about everything we had been doing in the past few weeks.

We moved into our new house two days later, (slept in separate beds, of course) and began planning our wedding.

One night, not long after we were reunited, we visited the tavern to celebrate the Saints’ Day, without all the wild drinking there would have been if my brothers were there. It was late and pouring rain, so we stayed inside longer than

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we would have otherwise, simply talking, marveling in one-another's company.

When we left, neither of us realized we were being followed until we were quite a ways off from the tavern, on our way home. A small group of men—sailors, to be precise—was sneaking between the buildings, completely hidden in the rain and darkness. We couldn't even hear them, and went on with no idea what was about to happen.

We were hurrying along, and I was holding my cloak over her, when all of a sudden, four men—huge, burly sailors—rushed after us, from behind one of the buildings. With no opportunity to get away, we were trapped, surrounded.

Annora screamed for help, but no one was nearby—and even if they were, the rain and wind were so strong they silenced her. Three of the men tackled me, punching and kicking me, while the other grasped Annora and dragged her to the side of a building which was close by, and held her there, covering her mouth to subdue her protests. I did all I could to fight back; whenever they struck me I struck back, pushing and punching as hard as I was able, in a violent struggle to break free.

The one who held Annora waved the others on, saying, "Kill him, do it now."

They easily overcame me, having three times my strength between them. And then, one grasped me by my

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arms and pulled me backward, two steps or so, while the other hit my face so hard that blood gushed out my mouth, all over my chest. I coughed, spitting out another mouthful of it, just when he took a dagger from his belt and thrust it into my side, straight under my ribcage...and twisted the blade, which suddenly drew out my breath. A cold pang went into the wound, and I put my hand over it, feeling this gaping hole...and the outline of my ribcage, all warm and wet with blood. My whole world went dark. I continued to fight, though, determined to protect Annora, no matter the cost.

They threw me against the wall. And before I was able to breathe in once more I heard—and felt—the flesh-ripping, bone-crushing sound of another blade being forced into the middle of my chest, jostling me back just as I staggered forward. The dagger lodged there, and when they let go of me and I sank to the ground it fell out, beside me. I lay there in the mud, unable to breathe or see or hear for a moment. What little blood wasn't pouring out of my wounds seeped into my lungs, which made my breathing harder, heavier, more labored.

Blackness was coming, I could feel it. My body was turning cold. I couldn't move my limbs. I was dying.

Distantly I heard Annora screaming; and although I had not the strength to lift my head so I could see her, I knew exactly what they were doing: forcing her against the

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wall, trying to have their way with her. But not now, I thought, not tonight. Not while I am still here.

When the blackness came I felt weightless all of a sudden, as though my body was being lifted up until I was able to stand. Then, as I opened my eyes I found myself standing there, where I had fallen...but, most frighteningly, when I looked down I saw I was lying there, lifeless, with rain pouring over me and blood oozing out my mouth. But there was no time for me to think about any of that. Annora was running out of time.

Her skirt was ripping; I heard it come apart, a stitch at a time, as they tore it upward from her legs. And I felt this rage inside myself: an unbridled, unstoppable power I could not control. I lifted my hand, pointed it toward them, with my palm opened and facing outward. Then the power began to rise, until it was coursing through my blood. The heat became nearly unbearable; it scorched my hand, as though flames were lapping over it, singeing the skin, the bones—all of it.

Annora cried one last time, shouted my name before she fell to the ground. And as I looked at my hand, I saw nothing; yet when I glanced back at the sailors, I watched the blazing tongues of fire melt them from the inside, roaring, moving upward to melt the flesh from their bones and turn the rest to ash. Darkness came over me after that.

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I awakened a few moments later, on the ground, as I had been. Annora was by my side, as though she had been sobbing and grieving over me, as though, for those few moments, I had been gone.

“My God,” she said, frantically touching my hands and chest. “You need a tourniquet, quickly. Hold on, love...I’m going to find help.”

“Wait,” I said. “What happened?”

She stood, rain pouring over us both. Her voice was frantic, shaking; she was hysterical, for she thought I was dying as she stood there. “There’s no time—you’re bleeding! Please, just...try to hold on.”

I sat up, and saw the blood stains on my tunic, without remembering anything that happened after the struggle. “I’ll be fine. Don’t go.”

There was absolute shock in her expression. She could not begin to fathom how I had the strength to sit up, let alone talk or tell her that I didn’t need any help.

She knelt down again, put her arms around me to help me stand. “You were stabbed,” she said, “don’t you remember? Look”—she pulled up the tunic, to my chest and side...but there were no wounds, nor any sign of them having been there—“they were.... Here, in your chest. I saw it happen! They stabbed you. Where did it—.”

I ran my fingers over my side, feeling where she said the wound had been. I felt nothing except a strange warmth

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on my ribs, though there was no evidence of my having ever been stabbed.

Several days went by. When I stepped inside the house one afternoon, the roaring warmth of the hearth rushed over me. And I saw Annora, sitting on one of the mattresses, staring at her feet, remaining completely silent. I rushed to her and I sat down beside her, asking what was wrong.

“What is it, love?” I asked. “What’s troubling you?”

She took my hand in hers and she pulled me closer to herself, and rested her head against my shoulder as I embraced her. But then I drew just far enough away to meet her gaze. And I pushed her hair from in front of her eyes, wiping away the tears.

“What do you think it was?” she asked. “When we were at the tavern, I mean....”

I winced a bit as the fire crackled loudly in the hearth; twigs broke apart every now and again, and floating embers intensely burned. I moved past her, and I lie on the bed, stroking her sides. “I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t understand it.”

“I have tried. Over and over again, I try. I saw them stab you—I did, I know that.”

“I remember that,” I said, “and then I woke up, and there was nothing. The whole thing felt like a dream.”

“You healed yourself—you made those wounds disappear! Do you know how powerful you must be?”

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“Why were you sitting here?” I asked, wanting to change the subject. “Is that all that was troubling you?”

She smiled. “Well, I was thinking of it when I came in, so I stopped and sat here.”

“Are you afraid of that—or me?”

“No, love, no...not at all. If anything, I worry that your brothers will—I shouldn't say this, but—they seem to be using you for their own gain. And if they knew what you did, I don't know...but I just worry.”

“Sweetheart,” I whispered, then kissed her, “there is nothing to worry about, I promise you.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rainier

THE DAY of our wedding arrived at last, on the fourteenth day of June. It seemed there were cheers and celebration for miles, with white, lavender and burnt-gold flowers strung all around, chequering the path to a hill that overlooked the sea. At the peak was a wooden archway as an altar, garlanded with rosemary and tiny blossoms; and set beneath it was a flat stone with room for us to stand side by side.

My brothers stood nearby, Lucan being closest to me. Behind the ring-bearer and a small procession of maidens, Annora walked down the aisle, wearing a diaphanous blue gown with frills about her shoulders, ribbons on her wrists, and a veil over her face. Her hair was braided tightly, in a

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French braid, as you might expect, and fashioned into a chignon.

Bridesmaids tossed herbs and petals across her path for our good fortune, as the young men before me gave a slight bow. Annora looked even more stunning than I'd imagined. My heart leapt against my chest when she came into view, and I stood there graciously, delighting in every second of it. She had such poise, such grace for one her age. I was thrilled to watch her.

Then, at last she stood before me. We each held a red rose, exchanging them as she stepped onto the stone at my side, where we faced each other.

"Rainier," the Priest said, "wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," I said, holding her hands in my own, never allowing my gaze to leave hers.

"Annora," he went on, "wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

She smiled, in her proudest moment. "I will."

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IT WAS THE NIGHT OF OUR WEDDING. The sun was just beginning to set when we walked to the sandy pebble beach, golden and blood-red banners of light dripping toward the water. Wet from wading just past the water's edge, Annora and I sat on the rocks on the shore, and as I held her in my arms I gave her a deep, slow kiss.

There was silence. It could have been no more perfect. Together we sat there, taking in every little wonder of the world. But suddenly, Annora pulled away from me—and I had no idea she was going to jostle me from the rock straight into the dunes. She slid down beside me, watching me as I lay playfully helpless in the sand.

I stood, dusting off my clothes. “That was...very funny, love.”

“I couldn't help myself!” she said.

I took her by the hand as she stood. “Now you must make up for it.”

“How can I?”

“Like this,” I said, pulling her against me as we sank to the dunes with my arms wrapped around her middle.

Her lips brushed against mine before she rolled off me, onto the sand.

“I love you more than anything in the world,” she whispered. “You do know that, I hope....”

We stood together. And then the ocean roared as the night-tide swept beneath our feet; and clouds fell in

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streams, as though a heavenly touch had glided through them to color the sky.

I walked behind her, put my arms around her middle; and when my chest touched her back, she turned around and pressed her body against mine. The closeness caused me to tense with anticipation, my every nerve sparking with a desire that would wait no longer.

We walked to the cavern, arm in arm, both laughing and acting perfectly childish. And then, once we reached the mouth of the cavern, she tried to pull me into it. She clutched my hands, and with all her might she struggled to drag me forward, her fingers locked with mine. I planted my feet and straightened my posture, but finally I yielded, took but a two steps inside. I could see the pale glow of the moon against the walls, a perfect sphere that burned like white flames in the indigo sky. There was such faint light I was able to see little more than shadows.

The cave floor was soft, dry sand. The walls were slick obsidian boulders that seemed ideally placed at seaside, maritime pines jutting sideways between them.

One last time she tried to pull me. I held steadfast at first, then suddenly I gave in, and together we tumbled to the ground....

When her gown fell to a pool at her knees, I was awe-struck by how stunning—how perfectly splendid she was in every imaginable way. Her body was the essence of the

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most ingenious design: her breasts so ample and her stomach well-toned, her tan skin like silk to my touch, her every muscle curving perfectly around her frame.

All the nights I'd dreamed of this moment, all the times I'd fantasized about her, nothing could begin to compare to how I felt when I truly saw her this way. She surpassed my every expectation a thousand times again, and the sweet, pure indulgence of looking at her left me breathless.

My entire body began to ache—not with a mere physical desire for her, but something even greater—the fact that my heart had waited so long for this, and it was finally happening. I most undoubtedly looked awestruck then, as I paused. And when I did she crossed her arms over her chest. She was nervous, and she must have thought that it disappointed me to see her, unclothed...but truly she had set off a chain reaction of urges that were going wild inside me.

“Don't do that,” I whispered and took her hand in mine. “You're so beautiful...I want to see you.”

I drew her arms to her sides, massaging her palms with the pads of my thumbs as I leaned in, pressing my mouth against her chest, just above her heart. When I began to kiss her I moved my fingers over her breasts in a slow circular motion, again and again, until her muscles tensed and she pressed hard against me. She leaned back, her voice catching in her throat when she tried to speak. Kissing her,

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followed the arcs of her hips, graced her taut stomach with my lips and tongue, drew back slightly to exhale against it...and then continued to work my way downward, over her every curve.

With trembling hands she lifted the tunic I was wearing; pulled it off as I raised my arms. Then she began to caress my chest, driving my senses into frenzy each time. After she tugged away what was left of my clothes, we were kissing again—and my tongue glided over hers in long, deep thrusts. Her hands moved downward slowly, until she was tracing my waist with her fingertips as we sank into the sand. They followed my spine, up to my neck and through my hair. My heart raced; and with it came vast rolling waves of my most primal desires. I wanted her more than life itself. I couldn't stop the feelings that were taking over: the physical needs begging that I go on, the yearning that spiraled inside me until I ached with it, and the passion that made this so perfect.

I cannot, even now, put into words how much I loved her.

I touched her face, my thumb settling on her under-lip. Looking down at her, I rubbed it soothingly to show that I would be as gentle as possible. But I paused there, and pressed my mouth to her neck before I said, "If you aren't ready, love, tell me."

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The warmth of our bodies together—and the intimacy—made it nearly unbearable for me to hold back. I was fighting my urges, because I loved her too much to go on unless she was absolutely certain she was ready. I took a deep breath, moving down to rest my hips on her thighs and support myself with my arms. I would wait for her for the rest of my life, if she wished; I couldn't bear the thought of being selfish when it came to this.

"I'm a bit afraid," she said.

"Did I do something that made you uncomfortable?"

"No. It felt so great—the kissing, and all—but now, well...I don't know what I'm going to feel."

I shifted uncomfortably, then drew forward and slid down to lie beside her; and she rolled onto her side to face me. I trailed her cheek with my hand, stopping to rest my palm on her chin. I was simply gazing at her—at every gorgeous curve of her body—and marveling in her beauty once again.

"What?" she asked. "Why are you looking at me like this?"

"Because you're too beautiful for me to look away," I said. "And I'm going to stay right here until you aren't afraid."

She smiled with the thought of how devoted I was to her. "You don't have to. I'll be fine. Go on; don't stop."

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I wrapped my hand around hers, lifted it to my mouth and kissed her palm. “*Shhh*.... You are worth the wait,” I said. “I will try to be careful, love; I will, I promise you. I’ll be gentle as I can...but it is going to hurt you a little.”

She reached out to explore and coax me with trembling hands. I did all I could to hold still, but she struck a nerve that aroused what I had just managed to subdue. “I know,” she said; “I know it will.”

I rolled onto my stomach, used my arms for support. Then, placing my hands on either side of her I caged her with my body and nudged my knee between her thighs. She moved them aside to accommodate me. But before I would go on I said: “If anything is uncomfortable you will tell me, won’t you?”

She nodded and I pushed myself downward, finally close enough to feel her hips beneath mine, flesh to flesh, with absolutely nothing to separate us.

I moved against her, quivering from my restraint. She did her best to relax and yield to me, while she willed me on with the most passionate kisses, nudging and biting my lips as we touched with a subtle rhythm. But I couldn’t advance as easily as I’d been: I had to go on almost sporadically, for each time I did she shied away from the intrusion and her body tensed of its own desire.

She slid her hands all over my shoulders and back while this went on, in a desperate attempt to cling to

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something as the pressure and strange new feelings grew stronger. There was a pulsation between us, building to the torrid moment of culmination. I tightened my hips, and she clamped her calves over mine to brace me. Seconds later she clutched my sides as the pain spiraled to a nearly unbearable high. Then, slowly, delicately, with one steady movement we came together as one.

AFTERWARD I HELD HER IN MY ARMS as we lay in on the soft cool sand, looking out to see the night tide as it crashed over the shoreline. Maritime pines swayed with outstretched limbs. Stars were scattered indiscriminately across the heavens, giving a pale glow to the world and its boundless sea. All was tranquil.

Not in all my life could I remember a moment to compare with this, with how it felt to lie beside her, thinking that we were not only husband and wife but man and woman, hours ago delivered from our innocence. With this came a new sort of pride, and satisfaction that went beyond all physical feelings. Throughout my body was warmth unlike any other, tingling until it caused weakness in my joints—the deepest, purest pleasure in this world.

My leg rested on hers, and I moved it back and forth, still tempting her. Lying with my chest to her back I kissed her neck, being slightly mischievous as I slid my fingers down her stomach and onto her legs.

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While doing this I asked: “How long did it take you to fall in love with me?”

“Oh, seconds.” She rolled onto her back and then said: “I never knew I could love so much.”

“Neither did I, and it was worth the wait,” I said, before playfully biting her earlobe. “But I thought it had taken hours—that we had to meet again before you felt this way. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“My mother came along and ruined it! Had I caught my breath sooner, I would have.”

“I still can’t believe you ran off. Most people wouldn’t dare—I wouldn’t,” I said. “You’re far braver than I will ever be.”

“And smarter,” she said, in jest of course, “because I came all this way to find you. I should be rewarded.”

“How so?”

“Very well. Where would you be without me?”

“Horribly lonesome,” I said, “and I would not be having half as much fun as this.”

I slid down, working my way to the side so that I lay close enough to press my lips to her thigh, nipping and kissing my way down to her knee, then back upward. After moment I paused, looking up at her as she giggled and moved helplessly against me.

“Stop,” she said, as though she had been robbed of all her strength and restraint. “Rainier, stop....”

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I leaned over her, now caressing her inner-thigh with my mouth and fingers. “Do you not like this?”

“I ought to be ashamed, but I love it. Everything.”

“No,” I whispered, “we are married now. Let me make you happy, however I can.”

“But I feel wonderful. I shouldn’t lust for more.”

“It is not lust...it is love. Anything that pleases you, I will do it—I want to,” I said, smiling. “We waited so long for this, I want it to be perfect. Don’t you have any fancies?”

She shook her head, having still this shy and innocent look, as though she was afraid to tell me what else she desired. “Will you always love me this way?”

“Until my very last breath,” I said. “Forever.”

“I want to think of it as that—forever.”

I hushed her, placing my finger on her mouth as we lie side by side, facing one-another. And after that I gently stroked the side of her face, all the way to her chin. “Then it will be. Now, without any shame, what would you like? Our wedding night will only happen once.”

She smiled, snuggling close to my chest. “Hold me? I love that feeling, I feel so safe in your arms.”

I reached for the blanket, pulling it over us as a cold breeze whisked through the cavern. “What if I were to make love to you again?”

“Right now?”

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With one swift motion I planted her beneath me, and she looked up at me with those innocent, sparkling eyes and an eagerness that spoke for itself. As I drew closer I said in the softest tone, “Right now.”

FROM THAT moment on, I had nearly everything I’d ever dreamed of and desired. Time was ours alone, with freedom to do whatever we pleased. I made certain that each day was special, precious; always eager to make her happy. Everything she gave to me—whether great or small, a tender kiss or blazing intimacy—never ceased to deepen.

It seemed we were on a whirlwind romantic journey, as had been in the beginning.

We traveled to the surrounding villages, where I practiced magic, sometimes participating in tourneys and challenges with my brothers. All this time I was gaining a reputation as a sorcerer and strength with new spells. During the warm summer days, Annora and I worked side by side in the orchards; and frolicked childishly in the lavender fields.

When passion overcame us, we rode to the mountain forest, to a secluded, quiet little place where we would make love, because the thrill of rushing there together was so wildly exciting. Afterward we lay side by side, watching the sunrise. We lay there for hours, taking to heart all the wonders we had come to see.

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I thought I knew her, completely, long before this...yet with the passing time I learned things about her that had never crossed my mind.

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Rainier

We had been married for four months, and each day I loved her more than the one before it. I mean this, truly; not in some sentimental way, because there was always a new quality about her to admire or appreciate. Whenever we disagreed—almost always about some petty thing—I would yield as I hated to argue with her. Our time together was much too precious to waste.

I traveled much less these days, wanting to be as close to home as possible, despite the stress my brothers were causing me. They wanted to fight in every tournament or magic challenge, and insisted I join them. The more I denied them, the greater their perseverance. At times I wondered if they were deliberately trying to put themselves

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between Annora and I—Lucan especially, as he was the most persistent. It seemed they just craved conflict. Yet, even as difficult as they made this I went on, more or less ignoring them. With any hope, I thought, they would change and respect that I was now married and no longer free to travel as we had in the past. I didn't mention a word of it to Annora, as I knew she was anything but fond of them already.

I spent every moment possible with her. We visited the surrounding villages, where I honed my healing skills as she helped to teach and care for the local children. We taught them how to read, write, count—simple things known by only a small few. She went about this so affectionately, kneeling down to face eye-to-eye with the little ones, and holding or kissing them. Watching her I could not help but think, What a splendid mother she will make.

One month later we were on our way home. That day is one of my most vivid memories. We had been traveling for several days, and were only two miles or so away from our village now, as we were following the long straight path through the open forest. There were no sounds except those of nature: the twitter and songs of birds; the coursing of the fresh cool stream; the delicate breaths of wind that passed over the trees and tall grass. Autumn leaves looked to have been scattered about the trail, painting it with a lovely array

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of color. In the distance, plumes of smoke rose above a cluster of villages, swirling as downy white clouds rolled through the sky.

We stopped at the bed of a stream to let the horses drink, and made ourselves comfortable on the grass. While lying there Annora seemed to have been lost in thought, dreaming of all her fancies and what her heart desired most.

“Sweet,” she said, and I looked into her eyes, “is there is something you have always wanted, something you cannot live without?”

“Not anymore. Not since we have been together. Why, what do you long for?”

Ever-so-gently she pressed against me, as she pushed one of my legs aside to make way for hers to rest between them. She was trembling, from excitement more than the cold, as I took her into my arms and made gentle movements with my knee, going over hers almost playfully. Then, at last she said, “A baby.”

IT WAS OUR FIRST anniversary, and we celebrated it by going to the tavern in the early evening before returning home for a romantic night together.

“Sit down,” I said. “There is something I want to give to you.”

I opened the smaller of two storage chests. Inside it, beneath quilts that had been rolled tightly together and

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bound, lay a gem attached to a thin, braided leather string. I took it in hand; and when the light fell, it radiated such a rich and mysterious hue that it seemed to bleed. It was nearly as transparent as a crystal yet emerald in color—a tiny green bolt of lightning. It was not formed of smooth curves, but jagged slants that looked to have been deftly carved by the very hand of Nature. Within it, thousands of tiny flecks glimmered, more dazzling than all jewels in the star-dappled heavens.

I held it in my hand as I stepped toward Annora, who sat on the mattress while waiting for me, her eyes shut, hands across her lap.

“May I open my eyes now?”

I laughed. “No, but rise and scoot over.”

After she rose, I sat beside her, gently pushing her hair to the side of her neck. Gracing her shoulder with my fingertips, I brought her back against my chest and kissed her cheek. Then I laid the gem just above where her breasts—so smoothly curved and ample—came together at the top of her blouse. I pulled the ends of the string beneath her hair and fastened it behind her neck.

“Open your eyes now,” I said.

“Oh, Rainier”—she wrapped her arms around me—
“it’s lovely! Where did you get this?”

“It was the fee for the sheep I sold.”

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With a proud smile she settled the jewel into place, so that it lay over her heart. “I love it; I’ll never take it off.”

“You look so beautiful. Must our honeymoon ever end?”

“No,” she said, running her fingers across my night beard. “And that reminds me—I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

She couldn’t contain her excitement, grinning all this time.

“What, love?”

“We are going to be parents!” she said with indescribable joy. “I am with child.”

At first I was too stunned to speak. I placed my thumbs on either side of her mouth and leaned in to kiss her with the most fervent passion. “How do you know, are you certain?” I asked. “God, I don’t know what to say.”

“Yes, yes, I have known for nearly a month. I waited until our anniversary to tell you.”

“How could you keep it to yourself? What an anniversary present,” I said. “I love you so, so much, I can’t think of what else to say. Come here.” As I embraced her we slid down to lie side by side, looking at one-another with a new sense of wonder and intensity. I fell in love with her all over again.

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She smiled, looking downward, then back to me. “I nearly told you once—well, several times. I kept biting my tongue when I would think to say, ‘When the baby comes’—or anything like that. I’ve been so anxious to tell you.”

I brushed back her hair using two fingers, then drew close for another sensuous kiss. “But it is the greatest surprise, and I didn’t expect it at all.”

“It is magical, isn’t it? Since I found out I’ve thought so much about having the baby, what it will feel like to see it for the first time. Life was wonderful before, but now, well...it seems perfect.”

“I still don’t know what I am feeling, or what to say,” I said. “I have never felt like this.”

She pulled up her blouse, just to her stomach, and did her best to look down at it. “Do I look any different yet?”

“So small,” I said lovingly, and touched her exposed belly. I was fascinated. “It must be so tiny.”

“What do you think, though?” she asked. “Do you see anything more? Do I look rounder there, in the middle?”

“I’m afraid not; I think the baby is too young for us to tell. But there’s no reason to hurry it along—you will be plenty large, don’t worry.”

“Oh, thank you. That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Which do you think it is, a boy or a girl?” I asked.

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“I want to be surprised, don’t you?”

“We could guess.”

She was so childish and playful it made me laugh “If we guess wrong, the baby’s feelings will be hurt.”

“I don’t think it will understand.”

“Well,” she said, “if you were a baby, would you want your parents to guess if you were a boy or not? If they thought you were a girl, wouldn’t you be hurt? I have this strong feeling in my heart, that I can tell if the baby is a boy or a girl. I don’t want for that to end yet—it’s so magical.”

“Which is it, then?”

“I can’t say yet!” she said with a faint smile. “I cannot explain it, either; I just have this sense that I know what it is. I want to see if I am right. I love this too much—all these motherly feelings.”

I felt such great pride and an even more intense love for her. After all these months it had finally happened: she was not only my love, my wife, my reason for being—now she was the mother of my child. There was a new life inside her, growing with her every breath. Thinking of it fulfilled me; and I could, for the first time, say I had an honest belief in God. Something this precious could not have simply come from our love and flesh; there must have been a higher power behind its creation.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Annora and I were standing outside the house as I prepared to walk down to the stream

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to fill some pails with water. And she looked more beautiful than ever before, I thought, as her belly was beginning to grow with the baby, who we decided was a boy. She was living the greatest, most joyous time of her life, as was I; we were madly in love with this child, even though we had yet to meet him.

Most days she sat by the hearth for hours, knitting clothes and blankets for him; while, all this time she would talk to him so that he would hear her voice, and know how deeply he was loved. Our only discord at that time was my brothers: Lucan insisted that I go with them on a voyage to Corsica—and the more I denied him, the harder he pressed. I told Annora about when it was first mentioned, but I didn't tell her how insisting they were being, as she could not bear the stress in her condition...but it was on my mind just the same, eating away at me, as I felt I was being made to choose between my wife and brothers.

“Come with me?” I said to her. “It will be for just a little—to the stream, is all.”

With a smile she nodded and began to walk alongside me. “When will your brothers be traveling again?”

“In almost a fortnight,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “I haven't heard much about it. And it is...what I told you before. I dare not say it twice.”

With a smile to ease what pained her, I said, “And you may say it again.”

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“They are your brothers, and I know you love them. I cannot poison your mind against what they do or think or say...it is not my place.”

By then we had nearly reached the stream. As we walked I was silent for a moment, realizing I was nearly at the point in my life where I would have to choose what truly mattered to me—the will of my wife, or that of my brothers. There should have been no scale upon which I set these things...yet there had been for several months, and I couldn't help but think about it. But, as I told you, I loved Annora far too much to have any conflicting emotions about honoring her wishes and being told what she disliked about my family. This should have been so simple; I should have made my decision without the slightest hesitation, but for quite some time I found I'd told myself: These are my brothers...they would do nothing to harm me. They are the only family I have now—and how could I deny that of any of us?

I stopped the mule after we veered off the path and onto the grass. I moved past her and gathered two pails from the cart. “But you did speak of it—that means you wish to talk about it. If it troubles you, I must know.”

She was quiet, following me to the stream as I knelt beside it and drew the dagger from my belt in hopes of catching a fish. I watched the stream, the bubbles and froth

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that bandied left and right as the crystal-blue water whisked past us.

“Well...,” she said, folding her legs beneath her after she took a seat by my side, “just what it is that troubles me about them, I don’t know. But it seems when they are here, things are different. I think they bring bad things to us, love, and I worry—”

“What ‘bad things’? They would do nothing to hurt me.” I took a pail in hand to fill with water. “Annora, they share my blood!”

She looked to have been hurt by how I had replied. Her expression changed, her smile drawn away by a frown. “Good and Evil,” she said. “Your brothers aren’t like you—all they care about what you can do for them.”

I was pained to hear her say such things—but this was something I already knew all too well. She had been anything but fond of my brothers, but she had kept quiet in hopes of my finding happiness, gaining strength and learning about myself.

I didn’t see them just as she did; I knew a mere inkling of what she felt. Now I opened my mind to what she offered me.

“I cannot see how they are looking out for you,” she went on. “They have not half your power! They don’t care what happens to you.”

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I set the pail on the grass beside me. Then I turned to face her and I took her hand in mine, laced our fingers. “My sweet angel, listen. I won’t let them stand between us, I promise you.”

She scooted closer to me; put her arms around my shoulders. “I never mean to keep you from them...but I just know their wills are not for your good.”

I had no choice but to yield; I loved her too much for anything less. “I trust you,” I said, cuddling her. “I’m not going to travel with them anymore.”

SEVERAL days passed before I crossed paths with my brothers. They had been preoccupied with their work—Lucan joining the local nobles on their hunts as Braden tanned hides before the last ships would depart for Corsica at the end of summer. That day we rode to the seaport, where the walled quarters of the marketplace and village centre came to an end. Being this was a blustery afternoon, wind howled and whipped against the paneled leather-and-linen sails, causing the docked ships to creak and sway as crates were brought aboard. Merchants and boatmen hastening here and there, the port bustled.

I had been thinking of what Annora said. At first I had known nothing of it, but as I pondered, I came to realize I, too, could see the negative side of their intentions and of what magic they practiced. I’d given my time to them, so desperate to learn, while looking past what should have

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been in plain sight. All along I hoped as I assured myself that, sooner or later they would tell me the things I so longed to learn. But they were going to make me wait, year after year until I would realize, either there was no comforting part of our past, or they chose not to share it with me. In the beginning I was blinded by desperation, yet now I understood I would never know what it truly meant to be part of a prophecy. I wouldn't understand what had given me such unnatural powers.

While we loosened the chains that were bound to Samson's saddle, I tried one last time to learn what had killed our parents and why. It was pointless, I knew, but I would not travel with my brothers now—and perhaps never again—so, naturally I would press once more for all I may be told.

This time I nearly begged. “Will you please tell me what happened to them?”

Lucan breathed sharply as he leaned into the cart. When he grasped a sail that had been rolled into a tube and bound by horsehair ropes, he shook his head, saying: “For the thousandth time, Rainier, no.”

Braden, dragging a wooden crate from the second cart, paused to make a gesture toward him. “Go, help him carry that. – Why do you keep asking?” I rushed toward Lucan and hoisted the second half of the sail over my shoulder. “My God! Be satisfied with what you know.”

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“But I’m not satisfied,” I said. “I cannot put it out of my mind until I know what happened.”

We walked toward the ship, the middle of the sail drooping between us. Braden drew the crate as close to the pier as he could, where the rickety and salt-doused planks met the gravel patch just outside. From there we made our way past merchants and sailors, down the walkway of the pier.

“Come off it,” Lucan said. “You know they are gone. Leave it at that.”

Over the stacked crates, ropes seemed a web, with knots and crisscross patterns stretching this way and that.

After we crossed the gangplanks and carried the sail toward the stern, Lucan paused. The ship swayed with the movements of the men who continued to move back and forth, above-deck and below.

Standing there, I let his words sink in, and I thought it seemed there was such a subtle hint—something that sprung with no intent—that he felt, somehow I was to blame.

Then I remembered I had agreed not to mention it again, yet always I pressed and they gave nothing. Maybe it was something awful...but what more, and what else? Why was I not allowed to know?

By now Braden had joined us, setting down three bundles of tallow candles atop a barrel. “It seems I have perfect

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timing,” he said, then looked at Lucan and I, who were bandying uneasy glances at one-another. “There isn’t much to lift now. Rainier, will you lend a hand with the crates?”

We were silent.

When Lucan tore his gaze away from me, I walked to where the gangplanks met the deck. Men brushed by, dragging supplies aboard where they would wait to be arranged. Why I stood there, I had not the faintest idea; I suppose I was in need of a moment to myself. I needed time to think, to reason. I didn’t want to argue with them, but I just hated how secretive they were.

“I cannot go with you,” I said, stepping forward.

They set down the bags they were carrying and shot concerned glances in my direction. “Why on earth would you say that?” Before he could finish, Lucan said: “You spite yourself.”

I had not gone about this in the ideal fashion...but I saw no other way it could be said. “It’s nothing to do with spite,” I said. “I’ve work to do—and I’m married; I cannot rush off and leave my wife.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Braden said. “It will not take long—two months or so.”

There was no need to tell them about the baby, was there? I was proud, no question. I wanted them to know, while at the same time I was thinking this was so special to Annora, maybe I’d best not mention it. But, after all, I told

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myself, it isn't a secret. Tell them. Only then will they understand why you must stay here.

I brushed back my hair with a nervous gesture, sensing their gazes search me again. "Annora and I are expecting a child."

Braden reached over to pat me on the shoulder. "Congratulations! She must be thrilled."

"Well, my best wishes to you," Lucan said, then paused. "It's understandable: now you'll not travel with us; you want to stay here. I'll wager she asks for that—and I wouldn't blame her, but what will you do?—give up sorcery?"

"Of course not; but the prophecy has not changed my life since I have met her. What is your problem? We want to have a family; we have wished for it more than anything else."

That was the first thing he had said that truly caused me pain. It seemed as though he was casting me out because my life and theirs were on different paths. Certainly I enjoyed when we traveled. I was fulfilled by all the new things I had experienced and the strength I gained...but I had little desire to do that again. I had ridden great distances, learned new healing spells, learned to hunt, helped to tan hides. What more did I need to know? I'd begun my journey in hopes of learning what my future held...and I returned with a reputation that did nothing but

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grow; I married my truelove; and I continued to practice sorcery. But these two were never going to stop being my brothers. I thought I would always be here for them as I thought they would be for me. I would never be without someone of whom I could seek guidance, help, and just a word now and again to make me remember I was not just important to Annora.

Now everything was becoming clear. I had too great a sense of self-worth to admit I was wrong at first. I hated to think that, for months I had misjudged my own brothers; more so I hated how Annora had been right about them. It would be impossible to tell her this—there would be no end to it; how all along she felt they cared more about my powers and reputation than about me.

Lucan stepped forward, and Braden leaned against the stern. “I don’t have a problem with Annora or her having a child,” he said. “My problem is with you, with the way you have been acting. Suddenly you’re above us: stronger, wiser, and are losing interest in the tournaments, the magic—everything.”

“Mother would have wanted better for you,” Braden said. “She would have wanted you to keep learning. It’s as though you have given up.”

“It’s all for selfish reasons,” I said. “You want me to go with you, to help you—that is all you have ever wanted, isn’t it?”

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What joy had been in my expression was drawn away by anger as I tried to think if there was anything I could possibly say to them. You cannot imagine how they had hurt me.

Lucan sighed, brushed past me and made his way down the gangplanks. Braden and I followed. “As I said,” he went on: “you spite yourself. Bid farewell to the life you have known.”

“What does that mean?” I said. “I have the life I’ve always wanted, and if that means I must choose, I have made my choice.”

I did just that. Not for a single second did I think or allow the idea to flash through my mind that I could have done differently.

I DIDN’T mention to Annora about what my brothers had said. It would break her heart to know how cruel they were now and how deeply they had wounded me, when it was I who had, all along, insisted they had good intentions. I could never bring myself to say either of those things, so I chose to harbor the pain alone.

I had nearly everything my heart desired. All I wanted was one more thing, something I had longed to hear ever since I learned of the prophecy. My brothers were the only people with the power to tell me why our parents had been killed and by whom.

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Now I needed to accept this, didn't I? Had I not already? Of course I wanted to ignore it, numb the pain, but I had yet to forget what happened today. *Listen to yourself; you are acting pathetic. You mustn't weep and worry over the past. Let it go—don't think about your brothers. Disown them as they have you. Live your life as it was before you met them.*

Calming what thoughts had conflicted, I vowed to myself I would worry of this no more. I would not be paralyzed by the wounds of cruel words and with what spite had laced them, its foul poison.

TWO MONTHS later, while lying in bed one night I was almost dreaming of so many things that now made sense to me. I felt foolish for having disagreed with Annora's beliefs all this time, but now I could say I honestly agreed with her about faith...for the first time. And it felt good to have these feelings and certainty; it seemed right, wise, honorable—everything a man hopes to someday know for himself. Not long ago I was certain of nothing; now I'd discovered the confidence that made her so idyllic.

I helped to give the baby life. In return he had given me faith.

In nearly a whisper I said to her, "I've found proof. I believe now."

"Believe in what?"

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“God—heaven—all of it. Before it made no sense to me; I kept trying to find faith but I couldn’t.”

She rolled over, looking at me, beaming proudly with the look of I-knew-you-would-someday. “What changed your mind?”

“I look at you and see this...life inside you,” I said. “I just feel different because of it. I always thought that life just happened; I couldn’t see where our souls came from—if we even had them. But when you told me...this is so strange—but when you told me we were going to have the baby, I thought, There is a God—she is right.”

She kept smiling the entire time, while listening to me with great intent. Tears welled in her eyes; and after wiping them she put her arms around me and drew closer. “It isn’t strange. I’m so proud of you, you don’t even know.”

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Rainier

ANNORA WAS nearly eight months pregnant and literally counting the days until the baby would arrive. When we awakened each morning she would, with a broad smile, tell me, “One day less to wait.”

I joked that I could stand with her and watch her belly grow, it was happening so fast. She was carrying the baby rather low, and often found herself resting her arm on him when she sat. But, even as she was heavily pregnant she managed to carry on her chores. In fact, she kept perfectly active, still horseback riding as she had in past months, and it worried me to no end.

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That day was like any other in November. Brittle leaves whisked across the paths, and the air had a faint crispness to it, with the dew that lingered in the fields as fog did over the sea. It was late afternoon, nearly time for supper. I was on my way to the gardens in the fields, as Annora was to drive a horse-drawn cart to the orchards.

I helped her step up to the seat. Then I stood on the board beside the wheel, kissing her and then her belly. “Be careful, please,” I said. “You worry me, riding all around like this, before the baby comes.”

“Aren’t I always?” she said with a smile. “I am going to the orchard, is all.”

“Wait there for me; I will ride home with you.”

With that I stepped down, took Samson’s reins in hand, and climbed onto the saddle. Then I rode off, in the opposite direction, pausing once to glance back at her before we continued on to the woods.

I was barely outside the village when, suddenly, two men on horseback charged toward me, waving their arms and shouting. Startled, I wrenched the reins to the left, causing Samson to pivot on his hind legs with a shrill cry.

“Come quickly!” one of them said. “Please come!”

“You are wanted—a child needs you.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said the second one. “But please come, and do make haste with it. A boy is terribly ill.”

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Acting on impulse, I didn't take time to think about this. I didn't question it. I spurred my horse into a canter, and followed them to the outskirts of the village.

Little did I know I was riding straight into a trap, foolish enough to let it happen. When we returned, waiting at the bend just past the road were five soldiers, all decked out in knights' armor, carrying broadswords and daggers. Behind them was a caged carriage; and flanking them was a small crowd of villagers, one of whom pointed at me and said, "There he is." And the two scoundrels who had led me here stood back, looking so unbelievably self-satisfied it was infuriating.

"Are you Rainier de Aaradyn?" the commandant asked.

I didn't know what to do. Certainly I shouldn't answer, I thought. What do they want of me? Why have I been led here?

My first inclination was to ride away—and I began to, thinking I'd outrun them. But they rushed after me, bringing their horses alongside mine, like predators on the hunt, encircling me until there was no choice except to halt. I fought against their barricade for a moment, until I felt their swords touch my neck and chest with a fearsome amount of pressure. That was when I realized they would sooner kill me than not, and I would be forced to yield.

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“Seize him,” the commandant said. With those words a soldier on either side of me gripped my hands and bound them in irons. Then they pulled me from my horse’s back, forcing me toward the caged carriage at the road’s end. “You have been summoned by Baron Galtier.”

I didn’t dare to speak for fear I’d be stabbed, but my mind was racing as I struggled to understand what this was about. Why would the Baron summon me? How would he even know of me?

When they led me to the carriage they flung open the door and pushed me in, with my people watching in silence.

I looked outside the carriage every now and again, but all I could see were the soldiers riding alongside me, and the forest as it never seemed to change. Dampness hovered in the air, growing thicker as we rode toward the mountains. Thunder rolled in the distance; and rain clouds had begun to cluster in the gloomy monochromatic sky.

How long we had been traveling, I couldn’t tell, but it must have been an hour or so. I struggled to think of a way to escape, though I was barred-in on all sides—and even if I could break free it would be foolish and hopeless to run from them. Now I could do nothing except wait...and wait, and wonder....

After crossing several more miles of the hillside, we finally reached the Baron’s estate. There were walls around the perimeter, and outside spanned the thicket I’d stared at

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during my journey here. When we approached I noticed the gatehouse with smoke rising from its roof, complete with two massive pillars that suspended a walkway above the wall, and a drawbridge over the moat—as one would expect to find at a castle.

The gatekeeper stepped onto the balcony, waving a torch as a signal to the guards behind the entrance. Then the drawbridge descended slowly—and once we were crossing it, I was finally able to see the estate and its sprawling grounds. From the turrets that reached toward the sky, to the jagged black rocks along the foot of the battlements—it was breathtaking. I had not seen anything quite like this before. There were gardens and courtyards and statues, with a stone path that led to the entrance. I could see that now, as the carriage had stopped before the doorway.

The door swung open in a hurry. With a dry screech, it was thrust outward, its ragged edge scraping the porch. Baron Galtier stepped outside. He was a squat and hefty man with slumped shoulders, clad in an array of fine fabrics and jewelry: silks in burgundy and cream hues, accented with little golden adornments here and there. His hair, behind a receded forehead, looked to have been brown at one time, but had faded to a dull grey. His eyes were forest-green and set deep in his skull.

I looked past him, to the twin stone pillars at the base of a long, spiraling staircase. From where I stood I was able

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to see a lighted corridor that seemed to go on for miles, where engraved wooden doors led to small bed-chambers. The ceilings were vaulted with elaborate triangular carvings and painted leaves; gold flowers with silver berries and fruit at the centre of every fresco.

I couldn't help but notice the estate was well illuminated: tallow candles were set in each and every alcove with a flickering light that moved like a butterfly as the wind touched it. At the centre of the farthest wall in the great room was a large cruciform, with wiry golden vines and thorns curling round it like bony fingers.

"Please come," he said. "Make haste! My son needs your help."

Without another word he gestured for me to step through the threshold and into the entranceway, where polished slates of marble had been laid in a puzzle-like manner, creating an almost chequered pattern that ended with the single step that led to the great room.

I pulled back the hood of my cloak and stepped inside. "What ails him?"

"Nightshade," he said as I followed behind him. From the great room I could see the second corridor, with chamber after chamber on the second story, beyond a passage with finely-carved railings on either side. I followed him to the lower corridor, until we reached a small bedroom—the third door on the right-hand side.

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He opened the door slowly, trying to be as quiet as possible. He turned to me right after he entered the room.

I was stunned by what I saw.... The child looked far worse than anyone I'd ever healed—or that I'd seen at all—even in their deathbeds. Thick white foam oozed from his mouth, and his breathing was rapid and pained. Every now and again he would writhe and cry.

“Nightshade?” I said. “You let him touch nightshade?!”

He nodded. “My servants are certain that he took to it last night. And he has been worsening since then. That is why I summoned you—you're the only one who can save him.”

He said nothing about why the child had been allowed to go near such a deadly herb, and I didn't ask.

Never before had I seen anyone as ill as this. His very presence frightened me. I hated more than anything to admit that I could not help him, he bore the mark of the werewolf which my powers could not overcome.

“I need water for him,” I said, then told him the necessary herbs and other things I would need to make a potion to ease his pain. With haste, the Baron left the chamber, locking the door so I would have no interruptions.

For a long moment I watched the child, and again an eerie feeling came over me. I knew that nightshade was not what ailed him. It was something worse, something darker.

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But I had to try, no matter what, as long as there was still hope. I couldn't let him suffer.

"I'm going to help you," I whispered, touching his forehead, "I promise."

He shivered and cried as I did this, though I went on gently, laying my hands on his chest as I summoned the healing spirits. "Keep still. I'll help you."

Then, all of a sudden, he grasped my arm, flailing violently. Startled, I drew back, just when he rolled off the bed and onto the floor, with convulsions wracking his entire body and froth oozing out his lips.

"Monsieur!" I shouted, but heard no answer. I knelt down, tried to steady him...but when I touched him, he was no longer shivering and clammy. Now he had unimaginable strength as well. Again I called for the Baron—or the guards I'd seen outside—anyone who could help me...and that was when I witnessed the transformation.

He brought himself to his feet, his eyes aglow with rage, his limbs contorting with a series of wet snapping sounds. His skin began to disappear beneath long black strands of hair, then brown and mottled-grey. His skull took new form as well: his jaws lengthened to a narrow muzzle; his teeth turned to fangs that extended beyond his lips. When he stood he was nearly my height, having grown tremendously in seconds.

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The werewolf, now a furious tangling ball of froth and fur, leapt at me, bearing his fangs. I threw him back, causing him to collide with the bedpost. I didn't know what else to do, but I had not the power to destroy or cure him. I'd never learned such a thing—and, I think—even if I had known how, I would not have been strong enough to overcome the evil in him.

As soon as he rose again, he shook his head, then slashed my arm with one ragged strike. I no longer saw him as a child who needed help, but a demon, a body possessed by a spirit from hell.

I was enraged. By no fault of my own I was brought here—and now my life was at risk. There was no way out. I rushed to the door, but he was snarling and clawing at me as I tried to hold him off. When I took hold of the door-handle, he had nearly bitten my hand. The warmth of his breath passed over my skin. His mouth grazed me as I whirled around to throw him back once more.

I turned and ran to the window, kicked it as hard as I could, watching the glass shatter. I picked up a piece, just as he lunged at me again—and I pushed it, with all my power, into his eye. In the heat of rage, anger, fear and desperation, I then grabbed his neck. Blood was everywhere, a mixture of mine and his, smeared on the walls and floor, on the bedpost, on the shimmering broken glass behind me.

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Still snarling, he pushed me against the wall, as I kept hold of him, gripping harder as rage and some sort of primal instinct overtook me. He kept forcing me backward as I fought to bring him to the ground. One of us would die—there was no way out of it. I wouldn't yield, and neither would he. When my hands began to slip from his neck I clutched it again, pushing down with all my strength. I felt his throat giving way beneath my thumbs, so I continued to bear down on it until the flesh and cartilage were breaking.

The Baron must not have been but a few steps down the stairwell...and what was I to do? He was drawing near. I heard his footsteps in the hall.

The werewolf crumpled to the floor, the hair melting away as his body re-took its original form. I ran to the window, jumped out and hid under the bushes. I could almost hear my heart leaping against my chest. I felt its throbbing movements in my neck and ears.

The Baron opened the door, seeing a pool of blood and the boy lying in it. "What have you done?" he cried, tossing aside the items. "You killed him! Murderer!"

After that he shouted my name with all sorts of curses, as I still hid not far from the window, waiting for the opportunity to escape. The wall was much too high for me to climb; my only way out would be the bridge, past the guards.

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Moments later he ordered them to search the grounds—and not stop until they found me. Some were on horseback, others on foot, scouring the path behind the estate, which led out through the serfs' village. It was too risky; I'd never escape that way. I weighed my odds of getting out of here...and when I felt the time was opportune, I dashed across the grounds, narrowly missing them as they rode south from the entrance.

When I reached the gates I released the pulley that controlled the bridge, and stopped it half-way through its descent by jamming the chain between the wheels. Then I ran, faster than I ever have; slid down the front of the bridge and onto the bank. I couldn't tell where I was headed, as there was not a star in the sky, but I kept going with no end in sight.

THE SOLDIERS searched for me for quite a while, riding into the darkness with torches and swords in hand. I crouched down behind a boulder, keeping still and silent as they approached, praying they wouldn't find me. After combing through miles of the thicket, they rode back to the estate; and I dared not to move, for fear they may wait nearby.

I spent the night in the forest, doing my best to wash my wounds using the water in a river. There was no shelter—not even a cave—anywhere in sight, so when I was too tired to go on I knelt down and leaned against a

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tree. I had no way to keep warm, for my clothes were ripped and covered in blood. My entire body ached, my legs burning from all the miles I'd run. But there was no way to tell how far I was from home. I had to keep going, keep pressing on, no matter how much it hurt, or the Baron's men would find me.

Streams coursed somewhere near here; and as I pressed on I heard every droplet rolling over the river rocks, the gentle ripples of the breeze against the waters. As I continued, I began to listen more intently, taking in the sweet earthly scent of the copse, the soft chirping of the birds, the unnatural cries of wolves.

A shudder passed through my body, which for a moment made me feel as though something ghostly was upon me—a demonic presence. I stopped, realizing my vision was suddenly sharp. Too sharp.

What is happening? I asked myself. *Why am I feeling this way?*

Just before sunrise I stopped to drink from that stream, and collapsed on its bank. I faded in and out of consciousness, until everything I saw slowly turned from grey to black.

When I awakened I urged myself to press onward. I was impelled by anger, love, sorrow and joy; every emotion imaginable was thudding into my brain. Despite what I felt—and that was certainly awful—I tried to promise

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myself that, no matter what I'd done, I had no choice. I couldn't escape the werewolf and let him go free.

My entire body was quivering, and my heart had plunged to my stomach. I felt the most intense pain, yet it transformed to relief and a sense of triumph...because I escaped. Of course I was plagued by images of what happened. How could I not be? Guilt struck me like a tidal wave with my every step... but I needed to go on.

I tried my best to cry out for help, but no one heard me, and my lungs burned with my every breath. Then I fell to the ground once more, having to rest for a moment before I was able to continue. I could see the sunrise, the soft golden color streaming over the thicket and countryside.

Once I was nearly home I tore through the fields as quickly as I could, thought nothing of my condition and injuries. The forest and fields were but a blur in my eyes as I struggled to make my way to the path. I could hear nothing, save for my heart; and I could remember no time I had ever heard it thud against my chest with such force.

Lanterns burned beneath the purple sky, with pale light dousing the empty paths between locked dwellings, and a veil of mist clung to the fields. Not a soul was in sight, which was uncanny to say the least. A chill moved down my spine. At the time I told myself how odd it was I was alone, I'd yet to realize I had traveled only a short distance outside the thicket. I was unable to fully understand what

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had happened. And I have not the faintest idea how to begin to explain such a thing, but I felt a haunting sense of worthlessness inside myself. I felt empty, dark and cold.

My every muscle was tense, sinewy ropes binding me stock-still for a long moment. Then, from across the fields, echoed a voice—a man’s voice:

“Quickly!” he cried, making an urgent gesture for his companions to help me. “Hurry! Help him, now!”

When the three lads rushed toward me, I tried to stand...but I was much too weak.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice quivering with joy and fear at the same time. I didn’t know what to make of it, but I did know, however, that I had found shelter in his arms. He studied me, looking over the cuts and bruises on my body. “Annora has been beside herself worrying about you.”

“Is she all right?” I asked, panicked. “And the baby?”

“Yes, yes, they’re fine.”

“I was summoned...,” I said, “by Baron Galtier; and I fell in the forest. I don’t remember anything else.”

“Come quickly dear!” he shouted to his wife, who then hurried toward us. “Find Annora! Tell her Rainier has returned—”

“No...,” I said, “I must go to her. I cannot risk her being hurt by running out here.”

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“She nearly cried her eyes out,” he said, and paused when I tried to remove the broken sticks and dirt from the gash in my palm, “but she is fine.”

He tended to my cuts, fetched a bandage and wrapped it around my hand, and then he helped me make my way toward the western side of the village.

When we approached my village, a massive crowd flocked to my presence, reaching up to touch me with awe and disbelief, as though I’d returned from the longest, most perilous journey. Annora was not far away, I could see, and as I stepped down from the cart she fought her way past them. She hurried to reach me as I ran to her, encircling her with my arms. I kissed her again and again, holding onto that sweet moment as though it would last forever.

I found comfort, instantly. And I kept reassuring myself that I had made the right choice by killing the werewolf, child or not. I’d protected my family, saved my village and countless lives from being ravaged by a werewolf. Annora would find a way to forgive me and put my mind at ease, I was certain. She alone could assure me all would be well—that I had done everything within my power to turn wrong to right.

Within seconds, twice as many people had gathered round us, wanting to know about everything that happened to me. I heard a hundred questions, even more suspicions,

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and whispers that faded in and out of the background as I kissed and held my sweet wife.

“I rode out looking for you,” she said, tightening her embrace, “and someone said you had been summoned...I didn’t know why. What happened? I was afraid I’d never see you again!”

I found myself looking at her with more love and reverence than ever before, as though this were a dream and I was desperate to know it had ended this way—that we were really there, safe and together.

She brushed aside the hair that lay in front of my eyes. Then she reached for my hands, frightened by the sight of the gashes on my palms and forearms. And pain ripped through me when she touched them. “These wounds,” she whispered. “Who did this to you?”

“Baron Galtier summoned me to heal his son,” I said. “I cannot tell you here—not until we are alone.”

ONCE WE WERE HOME, she hugged me as she said again, “I was so worried...I thought I’d lost you.”

“You aren’t going to lose me.” Lifting her chin with one finger, I kissed her, deeply, passionately—perhaps even more so than I had in the past.

After the kiss ended, she looked up at me with a sad smile. “I cannot even sleep if you aren’t here. Does that make me weak?”

“No,” I said, “you are the strongest person I know.”

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“But without you I’m lost.”

“What would you do, then, if anything were to happen to me?”

“Why do you say such things?” She gestured to the tunic I was wearing. “Take it off.”

“You’ve not said that in a while.”

She laughed a little, sitting beside me when I brought a chair to her. She was shocked by the sight of my wounds, seeing there were gashes down my arms, chest and back; some with shards of glass.

“You should rest now,” I said, “and I will wash up and prepare for—.”

“Prepare for what?” She stood again before she set a few pieces of cloth and a small batch of herbs on the table. Then she set about to remove a pot of water from the hearth...but I wouldn’t allow her.

“All the questions, I suppose. Leander will be here soon enough; he will want to know about it. Here, I am able,” I said, taking it from her and pouring it into a pail. “Please, listen to me and rest.”

“After I tend to you, and after you tell me what happened.”

“I’ll be fine, love, I promise. Why can you not listen to me?”

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After I added the herbs to the water to make a remedy for my wounds, we sat together again at the table. Pain radiated throughout my arm when she began to wash it.

“Who did this?” she asked. “Tell me.”

I kept my composure and slowly explained everything. I told her about the boy I healed before I was taken to the Baron’s estate, and about the soldiers who put their swords to my throat when they demanded I go with them. I left few things unsaid...but then I paused, unable to tell her about the werewolf.

She was concerned yet so calm through this entire thing, waiting to assure me that all would be well no matter what I’d done. It served no good for me to pretend I wasn’t afraid. I couldn’t keep the truth from her any longer.

After my wounds were clean, she rubbed the dried herbs onto them and began to bandage my arm. There was concern and affection in her touch and voice. “What happened? Please tell me why he summoned you.”

“I don’t know how to tell you,” I said. “He needed me because his son was ill. That is when I was hurt, after I was taken there.” Taking a deep breath, I looked down to see I had laced my hand with hers again; and she tightened her grip. “I fear the Baron; I fear he will come in search of me. I have never been so scared.”

She stood, and then she seated herself on the bench where I was sitting. When she rested her head against my

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shoulder and ran her hand down my chest, I almost blinked back tears. “What makes you think he will be in search of you? I’ve no idea what you mean—you are making no sense. Why on earth would he do that?”

And then I found the courage to say: “A terrible thing happened last night. I did something awful, something I was made to do.”

“It will be a secret between us. But tell me—I must know.”

“He said that nightshade had made his son ill. And he was dying. I couldn’t help it; I hurt the boy.”

She took a deep breath, in timid anticipation of what I would say next. “Is it like what happened when we were at the tavern?”

“I tried to heal him. I put my hand on his chest and tried to keep him still, but it didn’t matter. I did, you must believe me—I was trying to save him. It wasn’t nightshade—it was a werewolf bite. He changed so fast, and I was locked in the chamber.”

She put her hand over her mouth, trying to stifle a gasp of shock and horror. She was without words for a moment. “My God!” she said. “Did he bite you? How—what did you do?”

“I did what I could and kept from being bitten. When I threw him back, he lunged at me—and, I’ve no idea how—but I grasped his neck...and I was so full of rage that I

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pushed down—I just kept pushing and choking until he quit fighting. I killed him with my bare hands.”

Shock, pain and horror crossed her face when she thought about what could have happened to me. Of course, she felt awful for the boy, as did I, though she knew I had no choice. I had protected her and the baby. But now we were to face even greater challenges: What would become of me? How were we to get away?

Once it all set in she began to cry. “What should become of you if the he finds out?”

“He didn’t see it, but he knows,” I said. “And his men will be in search of me, it is only a matter of time.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We must get out of here, tonight when no one will see,” I said. “If we can make it to the next township, there will be shelter. No one there will know what happened. We will leave after nightfall so we can go slowly.... I know it will be hard for you to travel this way—and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, love.”

She nodded, then looked down and laid her hand on her belly. “I just hope he doesn’t decide to be born too soon.”

“Don’t think like that,” I said as I drew her close to me. “He’ll be fine, I promise. We aren’t going to let anything happen to him; we’re going to go slowly, carefully.”

I absolutely hated myself for having to make such a decision, to tell her that our only choice was to run away

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before the Baron could have me arrested. Then it had been settled: that night we would leave, stop to rest in the next village, and then travel north until we were out of harm's way.

NIGHTFALL WAS APPROACHING. Upon its arrival we would have precious little time to get out of here. Our plan, as it were, was that after darkness had fallen I'd ready the horses, then walk them back to the house, help Annora onto the mare's back...and ride north without using the path.

That day I did my best to keep away from anyone who may ask what happened...although, as you might expect, they came to me. Too many questions arose. Too many people were wary, and rumors were spreading quickly. Everyone pried to know what had gone on, why I'd been summoned, how I escaped.

Annora wanted to stay in this place and absolutely dreaded the idea of traveling in her condition. Her life was changing because of me, yet she held no grudge. Instead she did all within her ability to offer me comfort. Even though she suffered for what I'd done, she forgave me. And I don't think—in that position—I could have such compassion, such self-sacrifice.

The burdens of getting out of here, protecting her, being able to find shelter along the way and settling into a place where she would be safe, fell like an avalanche on my

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shoulders. Yet she suffered an even greater pain, because our refuge had been torn away. Now we had no safe place to raise our baby.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said.

I did my best to keep her fears at bay, yet every time I tried to sound reassuring it fell terribly flat. “I know,” I said, taking her into my arms. “But we have time yet; by the time the baby comes, we will be settled in.”

Suddenly she winced and drew back.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“He just kicked so hard it startled me.” She took hold of my hands and placed them on her belly. “Did you feel that? He is bouncing all about.”

“He needs a name.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I want him to have a special name—something unusual.”

“Have you thought of any yet?”

“Only one,” she said, “and you mustn’t laugh.”

“What is it?”

Just then I felt him move. Although I’d felt this a thousand times or more, it was no less heartwarming. But there was no time to stand around and be sentimental. I had only a few more moments until I would leave to prepare.

She went on: “I want to name him Requiem.”

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“What? You aren’t serious, are you?” I said. “*Requiem*? That is some sort of song—thing—for Mass—not a name.”

She was more precious than ever, still childlike in so many ways. “It can be. How can you not adore it?”

“*Requiem*”—I tried to figure out what sort of name it would make—“sounds so odd.”

“It will grow on you.”

She must have had this on her mind for quite some time, judging by the fact she was so adamant in her decision. I wanted for her to realize to give him such a name would be foolish; I wanted to tell her No...but I couldn’t.

I reached out to touch her hand; in return she looked at me with *that look*—the sadness in her eyes I could never resist. How simply I’d been defeated.

“Please don’t look at me that way,” I said, unable to keep from smiling.

“I love the name,” she whispered and playfully bit my lip. “Would you please consider it?”

“But he is a nice, sweet little baby...it would be cruel to do that to him. He’ll be teased to no end.”

“Shall we name him after you, then?”

“That would be grand.”

“Oh, you. How long will I have to argue with you about it?”

The Nocturne

“Sweet,” I said, “whatever you would like is fine with me.”

She embraced me once more, having forgotten all that was sad, depressing. Now, it seemed, we were going to be all right. The baby’s name meant such a great deal to her I had no choice but to agree.

I would have loved to stay there with her, but night had just fallen and time was now of the essence. I’d been waiting for the sky to darken, and for the few stragglers in the streets to go on about their business before I would sneak to the barn to saddle the horses.

“So he has a name now?” she said, looking all too victorious.

I walked to the door, pulled it open just slightly, to see the sun had set and darkness was descending. Then I turned, stepping back to her with a far brighter smile than I’d thought possible during these times. “Do I have any say in it?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then it’s settled.” I kissed her forehead. “But it is nightfall now. I will ready the horses and come back for you.”

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Rainier

A COLD BREEZE rushed through the doorway as I stepped outside. Wind-torn trees swayed eerily, casting shadows beneath the luminous white moon.

I fastened the few remaining things to go with us, onto the colt's back. Then I unwound the tether, and began to lead him to the barn, which was quite a ways from here—in the field at the end of a long, straight path.

To my displeasure, several people were still out and about near the outskirts of the village. Careful to avoid as many of them as I could, I tugged on the rope, quickened my pace...and led him onto the soft grass in hopes that fewer leaves would be crushed beneath his hooves. Yet, of course, it was no use.

The Nocturne

Once inside the barn I wasted no time saddling Samson and Kaeya, working by nothing save for the moonlight that filtered through the threshold.

The Baron's estate was nearly a half-day's ride from here. I still had time, I thought. Yet, even as I hurried to get out of here, panic went through me. Instinct—no, something even deeper and more primal—a sixth sense—put my nerves on edge.

The lanterns along the pathways to my left swayed in the wind's grasp. When it howled, there came a sound I knew could be only one thing. I lifted my head, looking toward the light of the houses in the distance, and then I heard screams—not only of terror—but a great, fierce anger.

The more I listened, the more I silently prayed this wasn't true. It just couldn't happen like this, I told myself. No, they cannot be here already. When I stepped past the threshold I saw them, going door to door in search of me, with a number of civilians who had joined in, calling me a murderer and a liar.

I never knew people could be so disloyal, so beastly wicked as to completely turn against a person who did nothing but help them. But they became predators, on the hunt for me so they could applaud when I'm arrested, and strike me while others jeer. This was blood-sport, not

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justice. My own people were willing to burn me at the stake.

Not tonight, I told myself. Not now....Not ever.

The soldiers were riding in different directions, and some were coming toward me, which made it impossible to ride out of here.

I walked the colt to the door, let go of his halter, struck his backside and watched him gallop into the distance, past the soldiers, who immediately assumed I must have ridden right by them. Then, on horseback, they charged after him, across the field. After that I tied Kaeya's reins to Samson's saddle, led them into a stall, bolted the latch; and then I hastened to the door, seeing chaos unfurl. All I could do was hold onto my hope that Annora would be wise and stay in the house, that she would not hear all the commotion and come outside...and be seen.

Now that I'd distracted the soldiers, there were only a few moments for me to figure out where to hide. I looked in every direction, finding walls on three of four sides, and a doorway that faced a livid, growing thron. So I kicked a loose board in the wall, near the floor, figuring it was my only means of escape; but when it began to split, I abandoned that plan. The cob that held the board in place was much too thick for me to tear apart so fast—and even if it were to break, the opening would be apparent. Then I'd be no better off.

The Nocturne

By the time I heard the jangling sound of armor, a single soldier had nearly reached the barn.

I'd no place to go, so I dashed out the doorway and up the stairway to the loft, all this while praying he wouldn't see me. I scampered behind a mound of grain in the far left corner, slid down quietly and leaned against the wall.

Thankfully I'd found cover here, but when I moved—even slightly—the boards creaked. Just then he rode in, waving a torch about as he searched for me among the livestock and in the empty stalls, fortunately paying no attention to the fact that my horses were saddled. I couldn't see him after that, but I heard his every move: when he slid down the side of his steed, and walked almost every inch of that place; when he threw open the doors of the empty pens; when he pushed aside the sacks and barrels that stood in the corners and along the walls, as I sat there, struggling to think of a way to escape. Thinking of Annora and what the soldiers might do to her to make her tell them of my whereabouts. Thinking that, instead of defending her I sought refuge, like some sort of coward.

There went all my pride.

How long I hid, I don't know. It seemed to have gone on for all eternity; and there had never been a moment in my life when I was so afraid. Every second that went by I anticipated that he would see me, or walk up the staircase to continue his search, but he didn't leave the barn until he had

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climbed onto his saddle. After that he rode across the field—to the section of houses that were being searched, not to look for where I lived...but for where I may have been hiding.

I kept still for a moment or two, and caught my breath before I crawled to the edge of the plank to see if he went on. Even though there was no one nearby, I waited until he was completely out of sight before I tiptoed down the stairs, into the barn—all the way back to the stalls.

I opened the gate, took Kaeya's rope in hand, climbed onto Samson's back, and rode faster than I'd ever thought possible. I avoided the path. Instead I set out from behind the barn, along the backside of the village, on my way home.

I heard only the cold wind that rushed against my face. I felt nothing except the strange, fiery rush of panic, and the chills that followed it. A dark feeling of...emptiness came over me, for I knew there were, literally, moments left to get out of here—that is, if no one heard the horses galloping across the field.

I didn't dare to look back.

When I reached my house, I didn't wait for Samson to stop completely before I slid down his side and onto the ground. Then I hurried inside, so thankful to see Annora standing there, unharmed. She didn't appear to be frightened at first, but when she saw my expression she rushed

The Nocturne

toward me, asking what was the matter. She must not have heard the furious voices, the mayhem in the distance, or for certain she would not have stayed there.

I was much too shaken to say anything else. I ran my fingers through my hair, pacing in front of the door. “They’re here. The soldiers—they’re looking for me!”

There was a sudden crashing sound nearby, and she realized—as I did—that we no longer had moments to get out of here...we had seconds.

“The horses are right here,” I said. “You can ride across the meadow and I’ll come find you.”

“There is no time! I can stay.”

For a fleeting second I wondered if, by some chance, she would be all right here without me. If I’d run out right then, chances were I could have escaped, but I would sooner die than abandon her.

I squeezed her hand, looking into her eyes, on the brink of tears at the thought of losing her and the baby. “If they come here and find you,” I said, “they’ll kill you! Hurry; come now—there isn’t much time!”

“I’ve nowhere to go. I cannot ride fast enough to—.”

“Just go!” I said. “Anywhere; it doesn’t matter. I will go the other way, and they’ll follow me. Please, come quickly.” Then I heard horses galloping down the street, and the dreadful peal of armor...the sounds I knew all too well now.

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I was rattled. Here they had me trapped—in my own home, no less. By the time we could make our way out the door, it would be too late. This was it. This was the end for me. I'd walked straight into their trap.

Before I could move, the door sprang open and they rushed in with no warning whatsoever, bearing their swords and daggers. Annora shrieked and recoiled, instinctively clinging to me. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, trying to shield her.

I recognized the commandant who had ordered I follow the summons of Baron Galtier; I knew his black eyes, and the unmistakable indifference of how he went about this.

“Rainier de Aaradyn,” he said and then spat at me, “you are under arrest for the murder of Baron Galtier’s son.”

I took my wife’s hand in mine, clutching it as she buried her face against my shoulder to muffle her cries. I needed to hold steadfast. No matter what, I could not give in to their commands this time. I wouldn’t be taken away from her...I could not leave her alone this way.

From the stern look in their eyes and the way they approached to apprehend me, I knew my fate: I would not escape again. It had been by some stroke of luck I’d done so before, and this time the penalty would be far more severe, more evil, more frightening.

The Nocturne

They stepped forth, some with court-swords, while others bore battle swords. Though it was not only blades that were sported by these men—some of them carried shackles, as well as thick ropes. Each of the weapons was pointed at me with the inevitable truth that I'd have no choice but to surrender.

I pressed to think of a means of escape—something—anything I could do to protect Annora from what we both knew to be the end for me. But suddenly, three of the men pulled me from her embrace with their swords drawn and touching my chest.

I feared more for my wife and child than for myself. I was desperate and determined to make certain that even if it should take my life in the process, they would be kept out of harm's way. As deeply as the thought of that pained me, I realized it was all I could do. I would have no choice but to leave them behind, praying I be given the might and freedom to return home, one day.

“No!” she said, grasping my arm. “No, you mustn't take him!” She looked at the commandant, pleading now. “He is not a murderer! Please—please—I beg the Baron grant him clemency.”

This time would not end like the last, I told myself. Though I could not foresee what may come of it, I resisted the soldiers—even when two of them gripped my shoulders and steadied me as they prepared to bind me in irons.

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When the tallest and most brutish of these men tried to push me toward the doorway, I had no choice but to yield. Annora would have nothing of that. She clung to me, ignoring the fact they would think nothing of ending her life.

The commandant struck her shoulder. “Get out of my way.”

She was stunned. I saw it in her eyes, the anguish. With every passing moment she was losing me and I her...perhaps forever.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” I said, whirling round to push against his chest with both hands. In doing this I’d nearly thrown him against the wall. “You miserable bastard, leave her out of this. She’s bearing a child.”

Cupping her hand over her mouth, she was in tears as he struck me again and again, until I’d gone numb from the force of his fist. She stood opposite the bed, her entire body wracked with sobs and tremors. “No...,” she said, her voice catching in her throat as she tried to hold back a scream. “You cannot take him away, you mustn’t!”

She reached for me, and I clutched her hand. She wanted nothing more than for me to hold her...just one last time. I was torn away from her by one of the men, while another cast an open hand to her cheek.

The Nocturne

I couldn't bear to see her get hurt again; it tore me apart in a way I had never thought possible. When her hand slipped from mine—when I ran my fingers across hers, desperate to hold on to her—my heart had truly been broken.

I would, somehow or other, beg to be released, or devise a plan of escape when I would be taken to the Baron's estate. Those were my only options now.

“Keep back, love,” I said as the soldiers clamped shackles on my wrists and bound them together with chains. “I'll be fine, I promise you.”

They would just as soon kill me as not. I had no strength to fight anymore. I wanted only to keep Annora out of harm's way...and by being so aggressively beaten I had felt more pain in a few moments than most men feel in a lifetime.

“Bid her farewell,” he said, allowing me to take two steps toward her, “and make haste with it.”

Though my hands were chained, I struggled to hold her when she wrapped her arms around mine, and laid her head against my chest. “Listen to me,” I said. “I will be fine; I swear to it, I will return. But you mustn't worry”—I kissed her forehead—“and you must promise me you will not fight this anymore.”

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She ran her fingers across my cheek. “But you have been hurt. I cannot see you get hurt. I cannot keep away when they do this to you.”

“I know, but I can bear it,” I said. “Please don’t cry. You are going to be a mother; the baby needs you to protect him.”

She smiled a sad smile as she reached for my hands and clutched them, her fingers trailing the cold iron clamps. An eerie sensation went down my spine when they told me to hurry along.

She tried to lighten the sorrow with a quick yet passionate kiss. “No, don’t say such things. I’ll not hear you talk like that.”

Again, they were trying to usher me toward the door, but I could not bring myself to bid farewell to her.

When I looked into her eyes, I was stricken with the most horrific thought: What if I cannot escape? What if I would not be forgiven? As devastating as the idea was, I had to prepare her—and myself—for what may come to be.

I clutched her hands. “I love you so much—I always will. Don’t cry, love. You must look after the baby, I know you can. And if I should not return, you will take care of him; you will love him for me, as we do now.”

She shook her head, biting her under-lip. “No, it isn’t going to happen.”

The Nocturne

“I will do all I can—and I pray I’ll come home. But you must stay strong. Please, promise me.”

Her gaze was cast hell-ward, and then she lifted her chin to kiss me before they pulled the shackles yet another time. “Don’t talk that way, don’t say that. I can’t think of you not being here.”

I kissed away her tears and pressed my forehead against hers, touching her hand and mine to her stomach. “Promise me you will stay here and not worry. I’ll do whatever I must to keep you safe. Look after our little boy—do you hear me?—let him know how I loved him.”

By then the soldiers had torn me away from her, and she was sobbing her heart out as she covered her eyes with her hands. She lifted her head long enough to catch glimpse of me as I was being dragged away.

I cannot tell you how deeply it pained me to give in to this, to fall powerless yet another time. In order to keep my family safe, I had no choice but to give in to the arrest.

I went with them against my will, fighting to think of a way I could change my fate.

When they dragged me out of my house and forced me into the caged carriage, I shut my eyes, and I saw nothing until...

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Rainier

THE SECOND TIME I ARRIVED AT BARON GALTIER'S ESTATE.

He stepped onto the porch. I was being pulled toward the entranceway.

"Milord," the commandant began with a slight incline of his head, "as you requested. Here he is."

"His people will see to his punishment," another soldier said. "When they learn what he has done, milord..."

"Quiet!" the Baron said. I tried to evade his gaze. "You miserable bastard!"

"I didn't kill him," I said. "I am not a murderer."

"One of your own people heard you admit to it."

The Nocturne

“What shall we do with him?” another soldier asked, closing the door.

When he reached the middle of the entryway, the Baron paused. Awaiting his orders, they held me. “Take him to the dungeon,” he said, “while I figure out what to do with him.”

“Very well, milord. What about his wife?”

“I wasn’t aware he has one.”

“Yes sir. And she is with child.”

“Then she is of no use,” he said. “Do I pay you to work or to think?”

“To work, sir; never to think.”

“Then take him and leave me.”

They knew exactly how to hurt me, how to anger me. This was the beginning of my downfall, I knew, when he had mentioned Annora. Not only did I fear for my life, I feared for her. But I would not be taken away from her, I swore on my life. I would find a way to get home.

I kept fighting—even though I knew it was pointless. I resisted the soldiers; I was willful, still trying to escape.

I thought of Annora; how she must have been suffering. I needed to know she would not be afraid—that she would find the strength to go on...even if I wouldn’t come home.

What my punishment may be, I could not bear to think. Yet, against my will I imagined the tortures I’d heard of in

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the past: I could hear what would soon be my screams; I could feel the heat and force of the whips and chains.

They dragged me inside the gatehouse, past the iron-bolted door and down the stairwell with one soldier on each side, kicking and pushing me.

I have never felt so powerless. I had no way to save myself. Not even hellfire could get me out of this. I wanted to kill these men—all of them; I wanted to rip them apart and see their skin burn from their bodies, their blood turn to ash. I tried to remember how it happened so long ago: how four men suddenly burst into flames, because I'd reached the point where I didn't care what I had to do to escape. Yet in some half-hearted way, I felt that the skill was no longer a part of me. Or it was deep inside my mind—beneath the shock, guilt and horror—that it lay buried for all time.

They took me into an empty room, through another doorway and into the dungeon.

The staircase—not much more than a mound of broken-down, grey stone tiers—was covered with spider webs and beetles that scattered with my movements. Rats squealed as they rushed past me, burrowing into dark, damp crevices beneath the stairs.

Then it all stopped. When I reached the last step they kicked me, and I fell into a filthy puddle. A surge of pain radiated from my side, straight into my back, and I writhed,

The Nocturne

muttering a curse. I opened my eyes, to see how frightening, how empty this place.

I had begun to crawl up the staircase when they reached the door. I made my way past but two steps when it slammed shut. So much for that. “I will escape! And I swear to God I’ll make you suffer!” I said. “Do you hear me?!”

Then I slid down the steps...inevitably into the puddle, and looked around—but all around the room it was the same—a large, damp, filthy cell with nothing but the stench of death.

From the faint light of the torch on the wall beside the staircase, I caught sight of something across the cell. I could not even begin to tell what it was, but I had a strange impulse to examine it.

Whatever lay on the floor—looked to be quite large—nearly the size of a human being, but it was completely still. Cautiously I walked toward it, stepping over the pitted stone and water puddles. As soon as I drew close enough to the object to look at it, I turned away, shielding my eyes. It was a rotting corpse, wet with rainwater all sorts of leaking fluids. In its flesh were sores and deep wounds from rats’ teeth, I suppose, and the ceaseless frenzy of bugs made this poor soul appear uneasy in his rest.

Whether it was simply human nature, or some deviant curiosity, I had no idea...but somehow I took a second

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glance at this. From the sight of it, my knees brought me to the ground, where with of course no intent, I was beside it. I'd broken my fall with my hands, but as I rose I caught the scent—that horrid stench of death. Vomit gushed up from my stomach, and I could do nothing to keep it inside.

I staggered backward blindly. Then I dashed across the cell, to the corner as far away from the corpse as possible.

I made my way onto a patch of reasonably dry stone, and tried to melt the chill that clung to my bones; but I couldn't, as my clothes and skin were still wet with sludge.

I collapsed. Then my most horrible fear of all set in: what about Annora and the baby? What will become of them? I didn't know how—or *if*—they could survive without me. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the thought...not just that thought in particular—but hundreds—thousands, each more awful than the last.

I watched the rats dashing here and there, and the spiders that crept along the walls while I heard the maddening sound of water dripping from a tiny hole in the ceiling.

I walked nearly every inch of that cell, ran my hands across the stone, feeling its rough texture as I searched for any possibility of escape. I kicked the wall in several places and the found that the crevices led nowhere; so I spent the next few hours trying to figure out a way to dig beneath the stones or break through the iron-bolted door.

The Nocturne

After I tired of all my ideas, I gave up for the time being. Cold, exhausted and wracked with pain, I leaned against the wall, put my hands over my knees and wrapped my wet cloak around myself in an attempt to keep warm. Sleep was my only hope if I wanted to save my strength. So when the rats had stopped scampering around me, I closed my eyes.

I found no comfort in being still. Somehow I found the strength to stand, walking around the dungeon, almost pacing as my anger turned to fury, and fury to the most intense rage. This went on for several minutes, each a seeming eternity. After that, hours began to pass. On and on it went just the same, while from frustration and the beginnings of insanity, in vain, again I tried to find a weakness in the walls. But there were none. Without food, water or bedding of any kind, I went to sleep on the cold wet stones.

“GET UP,” a guard said, kicking me. I bit my lip to keep from cursing. “Come along; stand up!”

When I turned around, I saw two more guards and the Baron standing beside them, with a cold, vacant stare.

I did my best not to look at him, but as I stood he drew near. I couldn't help but see the chains he had set on the floor, the whip he held firmly in his hand, the rope he gave to the soldier who took off my tunic.

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They bound my wrists in shackles and tied them to the walls. All this time I kept fighting, even though it was futile. I needed to keep trying, not giving up, and holding onto my hopes.

I would not die here—now—like this. I would not let word be taken to Annora that I had been beaten to death.

The Baron's shadow moved across the wall. I saw him lift the whip before it cracked against my shoulders.

Never before had I felt anything so excruciating. If a thousand nails had pierced my back, or if I'd lain in a pit of burning coals, the pain could have been no worse.

Just as I caught my breath, he struck me again. I tried to be strong, to keep from screaming...but I couldn't. My knees bent and I fell forward, grasping the wall. When I was struck the third time, blood trickled down my back.

"I am not just trying to be cruel," the Baron said, sounding much too composed; "this is due punishment." He turned to one of the guards who gave him a dagger, which he then held before me. "It didn't have to end this way."

I gazed downward, taking a deep breath. "Please don't.... He was a werewolf. I did all I could, I swear to you."

"Liar!" he said and slashed my back. As the blade sliced into me I choked back another curse. "One of your people told me what you did; they heard your confession."

The Nocturne

My blood ran cold at the thought of what may come next.

He knew what happened, even though it I spoke the truth then and forever after: the boy was a werewolf, and I took his life before he could take mine. Except, most likely all he had been told was my admitting to killing the child.

I tried to tell him what really happened, but he heard nothing of it. He insisted that his son had been ill—and instead of healing him, I murdered him. For that he would make me suffer to no end.

This was the first time I had been tortured, and it left an indelible memory. In comparison to what happened to me that night, death looked to be a fair escape. I thought I knew what to expect; I had a distant vision of being punished. I had not imagined half of it. The beatings went on until my skin was numb, and by that time I didn't care whether I lived or died.

I fell to the ground, holding back every single tear, moan and curse. I kept it all inside, never allowing him the pleasure of seeing me cry or wrap my arms around my legs and bite myself to keep from screaming. I knew he wanted to see the anguish in my eyes and hear it in my voice, but I gave him no such triumph. No, I wouldn't die that way; I would escape this place before I could be tortured again.

He told the guards to take the shackles off my hands, which they did quickly, then departed. I lay there, beaten,

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bloody and shivering. It took every bit of strength I had to open my eyes—and at that I saw nothing except the dark grey battlement.

I tried to speak, but no words came forth.

IT HAPPENED AGAIN, day after day. I could no longer measure time, because I saw neither sunrise nor sunset. Darkness surrounded me at all hours. The days bled together with neither a beginning nor an end; and as best I could remember I had been here for seven days.

I hadn't eaten, nor had I slept. Each day I was tortured and tormented by the guards; cruelty I cannot begin to describe. My will and desire to return home were all that kept me alive. I was terribly weak, so weak that I had not the strength to try once more to escape. My hands were chained to a wall again, cold iron shackles abrading my wrists whenever I tried to move.

The Baron and his men struck me, cut me, told me things that tore apart my mind a piece at a time. They tortured me until I struggled to breathe, until all my old wounds were ripped open, until I'd become so delirious I couldn't remember my name. They said I didn't deserve to live—and I had begun to believe it.

He returned to the dungeon only once in all the time that had passed, to say that my entire village had turned against me. What he had told them was a distorted description of what happened, of course. I don't know exactly what

The Nocturne

he said, but I could envision it perfectly; his lies were no stretch of my imagination.

I was certain I was hearing the voices of my people, at times...and their responses terrified me. What must he have told them? I wondered, even though I knew what had gone on: he had told my people I was not a true sorcerer, and I murdered his son. For that I was to die slowly and painfully in this dungeon.

He made the villagers turn against me. I envisioned it as though I were standing amid the masses as they demanded I be put to death. I heard all who supported him saying:

Burn the murderer!

Are Annora and the baby safe? I kept thinking. What will become of them?

The Baron had repeated the same accusations again and again until they were seared into the minds of everyone.

Suddenly and with little effort he had caused irreparable damage to my life, my work in sorcery and everything in which I had so long believed. It made me weak, at times, to help the villagers and their children, but I did it anyhow. It was my goodwill to do so, out of kindness that I offered such things to them... and in return they sentenced me to death? I couldn't see their expressions or their frenzy, but I envisioned them perfectly: they were screaming about the

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tortures they thought I should endure—what I suffered time and time again.

I had nearly lost my will to fight. The tiny voice inside that had been telling me I would escape now faded away. There was no point in that anymore. To what purpose should I be willful? Why should I be eager to escape this place? I knew I never would, yet I continued to search every crevice and hole in the dungeon walls. If there would be any possible means of escape, I would find it.

The soldiers released me from the chains only after I'd endured the day's punishment—and then I was free to pace this miserable little chamber. I tried to conserve my strength, for I had been given only a small allowance of water each day, its purpose to prolong my suffering. I was given nothing, absolutely nothing to eat. After my first two days of starvation I had grown numb of hunger pangs; all I could feel were the wounds that spread across my body—every rip and bruise from the chains, daggers and whips. The Baron would oversee my punishments; his satisfaction came in a sort of devious amusement by drawing out this torment as much as possible—beating me and giving me but a little water to see how long I would survive.

If it weren't for Annora, I would have died the first day I'd spent there. Of that I was certain, and I kept it in my mind when there was little else to think about. I couldn't forget what I fought for so valiantly when I had been taken

The Nocturne

to this place the first time, the second...and all my torments since in this cell. She gave me the determination I needed to go on, and the thought of knowing my son was reason enough to save my strength—even if it meant it would sustain me for only one more day. There was no sacrifice too great for love.

I awakened, thinking I'd heard someone scream. It was far off, this sound, faint and broken by the time it passed through the dungeon door. There had been so little noise since I came here: the battlements kept out the voices of the guards outside—and their clanking armor, the shod horses trotting down the road, the howling wolves and rustling wind.

I couldn't help but think I would soon be liberated. Someone had come for me...and they were so close now, inside the gatehouse, straight above these stone confines. I couldn't move near the steps because my arms were chained to the wall. There was little length of the chain for me, and few ways I could move.

The door opened slowly, and after it was a thudding sound against the stairs—footsteps. I blinked and tried to look upward; but blood, dirt and tears had tarnished my eyes; I could see only broken images moving here and there. Suddenly everything changed...when I saw the Baron walk down the stairs. My heart was ripped in two as I

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realized it was not only he who moved toward me. Annora was with him, being dragged down here.

She rushed to my side, embracing me. “I couldn’t bear to go on,” she said, with tears streaming down her cheeks. “I came to rescue you, to beg you be freed.”

“I love you,” I whispered, kissing her cheek. “I love you more than anything.”

I snuggled her against my chest; and she wrapped her arms around my neck, clinging with what little strength she had left.

I was still pressed against the wall, trying to hold her. “I won’t leave you like this,” I said, trying to comfort her, even though my fear was so great I was trembling with it. “I promise we will be all right.” I looked up at the Baron with the most pleading look possible in my eyes, when I realized my wife was so dreadfully cold and frail. Yet she felt at ease when I was holding her; she trusted that I would protect her...but I was completely powerless.

I put my forehead against hers, when a single tear fell from my right eye and rolled down my cheek to touch her lips.

The Baron stood a couple of feet away from us, eyeing me. He knew just what he wanted and now he had it: Annora was here and I was trying to protect her.

This was all he could have dreamed of, all he had wanted since I had been blamed for his son’s death. I think

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that was what frightened me the most: realizing he knew no difference between right and wrong, good and evil. Everything was meaningless now, and I had not the faintest idea what to think or do, how I could escape and save Annora from being left here endure tortures I couldn't bear to imagine. I had saved her before... Damn me for not having the strength to do such a miraculous thing again!

Where was the hellfire now? Where were my hell-given powers that were supposedly so devastating?

I suppose, because of weakness and fear, all my powers and strength had left me. I felt so weak now, and my muscles had been worn so weary I could scarcely bring myself to my feet. That must have been the reason, I convinced myself; the tortures, the emotional pain that tore me apart day after day, night after night.

Though I was hurt and bleeding and in a panic, I knew I was going to kill the Baron. It was all I could do to know I would not die leaving Annora to suffer as I had. "I will protect you," I whispered to her. "I'm going to save you both, I promise." I needed to assure her, to give her a will to live and escape somehow or other—even if it would be without me. I felt rage, hatred, anger—all rising inside my heart in a devastatingly dark torrent. *No!* I said to myself. *I won't die here...I will protect her.*

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I kissed her, again, as I whispered gently into her ear that she would be all right, and that she must lie still and quiet, for I was to leave her side.

With one forward motion I grasped the sword, jerked it free of the loop before his arms thrust against my chest and jostled me backward. My hands shaking, I lifted it. The tip of the blade fell in line with his heart, as I moved with all the strength I had, to plunge it into his chest, he moved backward.

All I could think of was Annora, and as I glanced back at her, the agony that rolled through her soul had plunged straight into mine. I felt such abysmal fear; and the grimmest thought suddenly struck me: *What will happen to her? Will she be freed?* The more I let it sink into my mind, the more I dreaded that. I felt the sword rise in my hands, though they were quaking. Then I eyed the middle of his chest, and I leapt forward as he fought against it and the guard restrained me. My strength was fading, but by no means could I quit this fight. I needed to kill the Baron. The guards would be little threat without him—and I was holding onto the most distant hope that, together Annora and I would escape.

As I took a deep breath, my heart became faint; with it I began to collapse. My knees buckled beneath me, and I felt as though the world had come to an abrupt stop. Everything faded to black.

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Annora cried, clinging to me again, though I had yet to fully return from the darkness. Just what had happened, I had not the faintest idea. I could remember lunging toward the Baron... Now I had awakened...but I had no idea how much time had passed or what had happened before I opened my eyes now. I heard the sound of iron again, and I tried to stand. All I could do now was shut my eyes and await the death that drew closer and closer as the moments went by. I knew I needed to fight, but I had not the strength; and I must tell you, the thought of that, in itself was pure torture. I wanted to sob. I needed to sob. Damn it! I just couldn't. For her sake I needed to withhold my suffering, not plague her with it. She would see me die...and if she would be given the chance to be freed, she would return home to raise the child I would never know.

The Baron stepped toward us. And I knew what to expect now. These would be my last moments...and I could do nothing to change it. That was not the last time I looked upon him with the look of terror in my eyes, and an expression that begged him from the deepest, most desperate place in my heart.

Annora clung to me as tightly as she could, but it wasn't enough. I hadn't much strength, though with every bit I had, I fought for my life. I refused to let go of her. I wouldn't leave here this way.

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The wounds on my back and stomach continued to bleed, and all my bruises ached, clear into my bones. Every inch of my body that had not been torn into by weapons of some sort. But every moment that passed now, lashed at me in a way that could be matched by no weapon. I couldn't bear to watch or listen as Annora begged for our lives, for liberation and amnesty from my dreadful mistake.

As the Baron grasped my arm I clung to Annora, furious and refusing to let go. I had nothing to lose now, and in death we could be at peace...I wanted nothing more than for Annora and me to escape together, with our child out of harm's way. On and on I pressed. I begged. I pleaded. I fought with a thousand-fold the power I truly had. He punched me and I staggered backward. Ordinarily I could have withstood such a blow, but now as I rose to my feet, frail, weak and desperate for any possible way to escape, I was cast to the ground another time.

Stunned, I tried to rise again, cursing myself. Then two guards jogged down the stairwell, one helping the Baron restrain me while the other grasped Annora by her sides as he tore her from my embrace. She thrashed, fighting him as I fought when I was first taken to this place, but just the same, it was in vain.

He dragged me in the opposite direction, while I was fighting with all the strength I could pull from within, trying to reach her. I was scrambling, pulling to break free,

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though my body felt as though it was twenty times my weight, and as though I'd been pushed into a deep dark place with neither light nor air.

When the guard grew tired of holding her as she tried to wriggle free from him, he struck her and kicked her! I cried for her, pulling forward, only for our hands to grace one-another, quickly.

“She is bearing a child!” I said, pushing and fighting to get away. The more I fought the more they resisted, until I was thrown against the wall. “Don’t you dare hurt her! Leave her alone!”

The clamps were tightened, the irons put around my wrists once more. Then I was bound to the wall with chains so short I would be unable to defend myself.

Annora sobbed, still fighting, though she had become weary now. In her eyes and expression I could see she had little strength to fight anymore. And I couldn’t bear to think about how she and the baby had been hurt, how they must have been suffering...and worst of all: every bit of it was because of me. Now my hatred had become unbearable; with it every inch of my body trembled, my heart racing. Again I felt the pulse rise to a deep, booming throb in my throat.

Between Annora and I, was an outpouring of emotions I wanted to never hear or see or feel. I thought again and again of what I could do—a bargain I could strike with him.

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Nothing came to mind, but I was left with no choice but to press desperately for something—anything.

The sound of a sword could be heard again—he had drawn a blade from a loop on his belt, and now held it in his right hand. “Turn her this way,” he went on, gesturing to the guard, then Annora. “I want her to watch.”

The guard put his arm in front of Annora’s neck and pulled her to his left side, to be certain she would not be able to see anything except how I would be slain. And she looked at me with a sense of fear I had never seen in her before.

I closed my eyes. And now I heard nothing—not the Baron or Annora or the guards—not even the rats that scampered about the cell. But he stood before me now, his fingers sliding up and down the side of the blade with a deviant sort of fondness.

At the same time he stepped toward us. And I knew what to expect now. These would be my last moments; I could do nothing to change it.

“You made the choice,” he said; “you made this what it is now.” The hum of a sword could be heard again. He had drawn it from a loop on his belt, and now held it in one hand, sliding his fingers up and down the blade with a deviant sort of fondness.

The guard put his arm in front of her neck and pulled her to his left side, to be certain she would not be able to

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see anything except how I would be slain. And she looked at me with a sense of fear I hoped never to see.

He lunged toward me, taking aim at my heart....

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Rainier

WHEN HE LUNGED AT ME all I could do was give one last attempt to protect myself. It happened in a split second, so fast I had no idea what I'd done or how...but a fiery flash of light rose from my palm, bursting forward, nearly touching him. My darkest power came to life again. I couldn't control it, and only by chance did it move in the right direction. Or so I thought at first....

The next second—when I realized that the sword had bypassed me and I was safe—I realized that instead of stabbing me, he had plunged it straight through Annora's stomach. I watched the blade pierce her lungs. It ripped open the cavity just below her ribcage; and I heard the hum of steel, flesh and bones giving way as blood spurted from

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the impact. It lost momentum by the time it tore into her stomach, narrowly missing her heart as it veered to the left while moving upward. But then it broke through her ribs and finally stopped when the tip of the blade protruded from between her shoulders. Oh God, I'd seen it run straight through her. Blood came immediately, in droplets that soon turned to a full-fledged stream. It trickled all the way down her body, over her feet and to the floor. And he left it that way: the hilt jutting out from her belly, the blade lodged in her chest.

We screamed at the same time; hers of pain, mine of shock and horror. I saw her falling backward until she was positioned with her back against the wall, as I kept fighting to break away.

I lunged forward, pulling so hard I tore one of the chains. Ironically the hellfire gave me the strength I needed, but by then it was too late. I could nearly reach her now, though she had gripped the hilt already, trying to pull it free. "No, no, no!" I said. "Keep still. Don't move it—let me help you."

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at me, with devastation that no words can describe. She tried to speak; her voice was shaking—and then the tears came rushing down. "The baby...I can't feel anything!"

By the time I broke free completely, she had begun to pull out the sword, crying all this while. She struggled to

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take a deep breath...and the wheezing gasp gave her little air. Then she pulled again, harder this time, until the blade slipped through her ribs. She bit her under-lip, hunching forward and then back as she finally tore it out and dropped it to the ground, covered in blood.

I wasted no time reaching her. She staggered toward me, into my arms, too weak to stand on her own. I embraced her, holding her close to my chest; and she put her arms around me, almost still for a moment.

“Here”—I slid down with her to the floor, gently, so she could rest against the wall—“rest here. Don’t try to move; I’ll help you.” I pulled up her blouse to see the wound—and it was the most awful, gruesome thing imaginable: a gash that was the full width of the blade, gaping open. But I could—I *would* heal her.

She breathed in and coughed up a mouthful of blood. “It hurts. I don’t want to die!”

“I know, love, I know it does.... But you aren’t dying, I promise.” The words caught in my throat. “Try to be strong—it will hurt, but I can heal you.”

I lay my hand on the wound, trying to slow the bleeding. She cried and writhed against me, struggling so hard not to break down completely. Her blood oozed between my fingers as I fought to summon the healing spirits. They seemed to be gone, completely gone; I could not feel any of their energy around me, nor could I feel the warm healing

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power in my palm. As this went on, my lifelong battle between Good and Evil was coming to a conclusion. I no longer cared about being a decent person and waiting for the ultimate outcome to yield peace for me. I had no more faith that all would be well in the end. When my pregnant wife had been stabbed and left to die, I didn't care what I had to do to save her. By then I'd brought forth the flames of hell; I knew such power was mine alone, and I would embrace it no matter what. I had the ability to heal. I could still save her! We were together in this until the very end. I needed to keep trying—and believing—no matter what. I prayed for a miracle with a faith so sound no words can describe it. But it didn't come.

Despite my anger and disappointment, I couldn't believe that life was so wretched, that my existence could be this hollow and pointless, and that we suffered for absolutely nothing. No, there must be something else, I thought; there must be hope...somewhere. I must keep trying to save her. Yet she was slipping away from me, dying in my arms and I couldn't stop it, regardless of how I tried. I didn't have the ability to heal such a wound; and being that I was so weak already, I had no strength from which to draw.

Just then I heard the Baron and the guards running up the stairwell. Without thinking I picked up the sword and rushed after them, driven out of my mind by grief, rage and terror. It was all I could do. I wanted to rip them apart.

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The door slammed, bolts sliding into place just when I reached it. I swung the sword anyhow, with maddened violent motions, bearing down on it with all my weight. I couldn't give up, couldn't stop. Then, finally I swung with such force that it lodged between the straps, hardened-steel colliding with iron.

I pulled back, tried again...and then it shattered in three pieces, separating from the hilt. Now it was nothing but scrap, no longer a weapon. I'd made matters worse.

I tossed it aside and hurried down the stairs to Annora. I came to a sudden stop beside her as she reached for my hand, clutching it fearfully.

I had never been one to cry, but everything changed then. I let go of the inner-strength that kept me alive so long, as well as my courage, and broke down in tears. For the first time in my life I had not the spirit to cage it all inside.

A frightful chill came over me. Everything felt so dark; shadows were dripping down the walls, it seemed, as the torch flame swayed ethereally. That, too, looked far off now, as I could see it out of the corner of my eye; and the air felt colder than before, just as my fear and panic grew fiercer. My entire life was falling apart.

When she tried to take a deep breath, I heard the ragged sound of blood filling her chest. It rose to her throat, more quickly now, and gushed out her mouth with a

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sputtering wet cough. Her lungs weakened each time she breathed. Her heart slowed as the blood poured out of her, and her hands were cold to the touch.

I knew this was the end. I knew it in the worst possible way—in the dark, chilling sense that is so primal it cannot be truly described or fully understood. But it was unmistakable. I felt the pain of her leaving me, to the very depth of my soul.

“Rainier,” she whispered as I was still trying to heal her, “do you remember when we met?”

My throat hurt from the sob I held back. “Of course, how could I forget it?”

“The way I felt inside before you saved me: it was dark and cold. I’m going there again, I feel it.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t give up—you aren’t going anywhere, I promise you.”

“All that we’ve done, I see now, in my mind,” she said, “and it grows slower. Is that death?”

“It doesn’t end like this, it can’t. And—listen to me—if there is life after this, I will be with you...and if there isn’t, there is nothing to fear.” I squeezed her hand, kissing her forehead. “I’ll do whatever I must; I will take my own life, right here if it means—.”

“No, I want to know that you’ll keep fighting until the end,” she said, and coughed once more. “Tell me again, the poem...I want to hear it.”

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I did all I could not to sob, looking at the web of blood between my fingers. Then I recited the poem, just as she wished, and it was by far one of the most difficult things I ever had to do. It brought forth emotions I would never have thought possible, breaking my heart a piece at a time. “A love that knows no end: a bond that cannot be broken by time or distance, in this world or another;

“A sanctuary hidden and held dear within, safe from fear and pain and plight.

“Here we stay in sweet serenity, together, everlasting

“To succeed our final breaths—even if not taken together,

“As we are separated in body and soul, but stay one in heart,

“Where there is neither darkness nor light, neither beginning nor end....”

Annora had such passion for life; she loved every second of it and was an optimist with an enduring faith in me. She had not let go of the chance or the hope that I could save her. This was horribly painful—I felt it as well as she did—yet instead of leaving it behind, she kept fighting for her life, just as she wanted to deliver the baby.

She began to writhe again, and tears streamed down her cheeks as they did mine. Pain wracked her entire body when this happened, as though thousands of lightning bolts crashed over her at once, faded and then returned with

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renewed strength. It grew worse each time she tried. She was much too weak to give birth, despite her heroic efforts.

It tore me apart. I couldn't let her do this.

My voice kept breaking. I struggled to stay composed. "No, love...don't do that," I said, doing my best to comfort her. "Keep still and calm."

"I want to see my baby. I want to hold him, but I've no strength." She took another deep breath, coughing up more blood. I saw it trickling from the wound in her stomach as well. "Listen to me. Listen. You must save him."

"Don't say that!" I said. "I cannot hear you talk that way; you are saying goodbye. There is none—I won't lose you! I can heal you, I know it."

"Quickly," she said, "save him. You cannot save me, but please help the baby. He's all that matters now."

Everything happened so fast I couldn't fathom it. When I looked at her again, my whole world came crashing down. I felt cold inside and out, and my hands were shaking. She was falling lifeless in my embrace, fading in and out of consciousness; her hands slipping down my sides, her pained movements coming to a slow stop.

I wanted to honor her wish and do as she said...but I couldn't think that way. I had to keep trying to change her fate; there was no time to worry about the baby. Even if I had the fortitude to save him, how would I go about it? It was over. I was losing both of them.

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“My last wish. I ask this,” she said: “save Requiem, save our baby.”

“I can’t.”

“For me, do it for me. Please, whatever you must, do it now so he will have a chance.” She clutched my hand, then fell unconscious.

Think, Rainier, think! Save the baby. Time is running out.

He was her flesh and blood, as well as the proof I needed that there was still hope. A part of her could live on, in him. I wanted this child more than I’d ever wanted anything in my entire life. I couldn’t sit there and let him die. But there was only one way to get him out: cut open her belly.

Her heart was still beating, keeping him alive. Her blood was pooling on the floor; very little could have remained in her body. There was no time for me to be afraid or squeamish.

I would need a sharp object, a blade. Then it dawned on me—the sword I’d shattered against the door—I could use a piece of it. I slipped away gently, leaving her on the floor as I hastened up the stairs and fumbled to find its shattered remnants. Within seconds I did, by the crevice where two steps met, inches from the door. I grasped the largest piece, one that was long and slanted... and in the light, still crimson with her blood. With it in my hand I

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returned, wiping the tears from my cheeks as I knelt beside her.

God almighty, I shouldn't be doing this. How can I decide between trying to save her life and slicing open her womb to save Requiem? One life for another...I must choose?! What a choice to make.

"Annora," I said, gently touching her face. She was still, losing her life as I sat there, as I paused and struggled with truly no choice and a duty to uphold. I would have to honor her wish. He was dying as I waited, and every second wasted meant a chance I took from him. This was it, the end. I swallowed hard and instinct took over. I was finally ready, trying so hard not to feel nauseous. Not only did this sicken me, I had no idea how to go about it. Midwives and surgeons knew where to cut and how deep, but I would likely do more harm to him than good. His death was certain otherwise, so I would have to be strong regardless of how I felt.

I touched the blade to her belly, shaking, teary-eyed...then I took the dreaded first step without looking back. It ripped straight across my palm, deeper and deeper until it caught in my skin, but I pressed down anyhow, ignoring the pain. This was so gruesome I cannot share every detail with you, though I don't even remember all of what happened after I began to cut. I felt ill at once; my stomach went into knots and I broke out with a cold sweat.

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At times I couldn't see how deep the blade was going, and I was afraid I may hurt the baby. So when it was impossible to see, I used my fingers to separate the skin, gently pulling open the thick flesh and muscles of her abdomen. Then I would cut just slightly more, push it apart, and cut once again.

I kept going until I sensed the faintest tremor in her body. When I did, I lay my hand on her chest, finding that her heart continued to beat. All this time I kept saying to myself, Don't wake up now; don't feel this; don't suffer any longer. I cannot bear for you to hurt. I love you too much for it to end this way.

Knowing how my son's life depended on me I pressed on. Within seconds she awakened, coughing, tensing her muscles. I nearly dropped the blade when she gasped and cried in agony, but as soon as I stopped she looked up at me, biting her lip to keep from screaming...and she urged me on. She loved Requiem so much that she was willing to sacrifice any chance she had in order for him to live.

After that, each time I cut a little deeper she writhed and cried and screamed, unable to hold it in any longer. This wounded me, emotionally, as you cannot imagine. It warped my perception and my mind. I would never be the same again.

I was sick by that point, on the verge of vomiting. I would have, save my stomach was empty. I kept spitting up

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blood, and I sobbed until my eyes were bleary. “I’m so sorry Annora,” I said. “I cannot bear to hurt you.”

With a quick, shallow breath she spoke again. “No...I chose this. There is no sacrifice too great for love, remember? Save him.”

This seemed to go on forever. At last, when I had gone far enough, I very carefully made the final slit down the centre of her womb, causing her to gasp in a crippling pain. Suddenly there were fluids gushing out, all over my hands. I reached in, felt his tiny slippery body and pulled him out as carefully as possible. But the baby—a tiny girl—was already dead. There was a stab wound, straight through her. Her body was limp, her eyes shut and still covered with blood and film from the womb. I struggled to think of a way to help her, but it was too late and there was absolutely nothing for me to do. I set her down at my side, hoping that, Annora wouldn’t see her. But she did, asking, “Is he all right? Let me see him, let me see my baby.”

At the same time I felt the baby kicking and stirring about, pushing his little feet up against the womb. More blood oozed out when he did this. I could almost see him through the cut I had made. I wanted to say something, but I was so choked-up that no words came to mind. Annora had been carrying two babies—twins; and one of them was very much alive. I pulled him out carefully. After that, I so clearly remember, I wiped the bloody membrane from his

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face so he could breathe—and within seconds we heard him cry. Annora did her best to raise her head so she could see him, but it was impossible for her to do alone. Wasting no time I pulled off my tunic and swathed him in it. Then, as I held him against my chest with one arm I used the other to help her so she would be closer to me. She could barely sit up, needing my support and the wall for us to lean on.

This was obviously not the time to fully appreciate the baby, though I'd noticed every detail about him all too quickly—without trying to do so. He weighed no more than five pounds, immature because he had been born early. His body was the length of my forearm, his hands and feet the length of my thumb. But he was perfect in every sense, so beautifully...human, with tiny perfect fingers, toes, eyelashes, lips, and round rose-pink cheeks. His head was covered with the softest hair, so faint it could scarcely be seen. His eyes were squinty and not in focus; as best I could tell they were light-blue, or perhaps grey. And he kept moving against me—crying, too—as he tried to figure out how to get his hands or mine—something, anything—into his mouth.

Looking at him, then at me, she whispered, “He’s beautiful.” She reached out to touch him and he wrapped his fingers around hers. The sight was not heartwarming, as you might expect—it was tragic in every sense, more devastating than her death to come, because we had waited

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so long to become parents...and now she had only seconds to live. I could do nothing except try to make her comfortable while keeping the baby close, for she was not strong enough hold him.

All was quiet then, with a grave dark presence coming over us. It made my heart race wildly, and beneath this grief I was furious in a way that cannot be expressed in words. Above all else I had my newborn child to look after. Annora was leaving this world, knowing that he was safe in my arms, sheltered and loved. I felt horrible just thinking of it, thinking of my failure, my broken promise to her. I couldn't keep him safe—I couldn't even keep him warm.

We both knew this was it, our final goodbye. How could I face it? How could I accept that the end had come? I couldn't bring myself to say it; neither could she. Instead, with tears pouring down my cheeks, I said, "I will make this right, I'll see to the end of it, I swear to you. Our love is not in vain and neither is this. I love you, I love you so much and I always will. No matter what. No matter where you are."

Suddenly we were drawn together for a more passionate kiss than any we had ever shared. I could feel it, not only in my body and heart, but in my soul, with the conclusion of our journey together: her death and his life. The spirit of our love had become immortal. It would live on, regardless of the distance between us.

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I was reeling after the kiss ended. She drew back, suddenly overwhelmed by weakness. One hand slid free from mine while the other fell limp at the baby's side. She was slipping away, letting go of her tether to life: the silver thread that joins body to soul. And seconds later she was gone...forever.

Annora made the most incredible journey for me, because there is no sacrifice too great for love. I had promised she wouldn't die—and in the end I failed, too weak to protect her. All of this was my fault. Thinking of it I was on the verge of madness, sitting there with her and the baby in my arms. Tears continued to rush down my cheeks, and I'd sobbed so much it was difficult to breathe.

At first I didn't realize what had happened—that it was truly over—but looking at her bloody, mutilated body was sobering. I had no choice but to accept her fate; she was gone and here was our little baby, who needed me to stay strong.

Even after all I said to her as she was dying, I'd never had a chance to truly say goodbye. There was no amount of words great enough to describe what I felt, nor had there been time for me to say I loved her as many times as my heart desired. I didn't have a chance to tell her that I accepted the name she had chosen for our baby. I hated it all along, yet now I felt so different when I said it. A haunting chill came over me, as though someone told me:

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This is right. You will honor her wish. So, at that very moment, not only did I acknowledge his name, I embraced and treasured it.

He was, in the truest sense of the word, a blessing, having been born from the darkest tragedy; but his fate was almost certain now, as was mine. Being so young and frail, even under the best of circumstances life would be a losing battle for him. But I'd granted her last wish this way, no matter how slight or great a chance either of us had. He came into the world, and I would love him with all my heart, however long we should live. He gave me hope when it no longer existed.

Try to imagine: true love, passion, happiness, more than two years together, a marriage...and a baby who would be born in just a few weeks—the most wonderful things that life has to offer. I was losing it all in seconds. Now I would have no family. No hope. No reason to go on. No possibility to settle the score. That fast, that simply...one stab wound took everything from me.

I wanted to shout and curse at God for denying me when I needed his help most. "I am innocent!" I cried inside my mind "Why were my prayers not heard? I prayed for a miracle—and you are taking them from me!" I must have already fallen from His graces, because I'd truly believed there would be a miracle of some sort, sooner or later...and I kept hoping, waiting and praying to no avail. Then I began

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to have my doubts, not only of religion, but also of my place in the world, my purpose, along with life's most perplexing question: *Why?* Even the most devout would have wondered these things if they had endured what I did.

Certainly I believed in God—I always had—but right then I faced the greatest trial of my faith. For a moment I didn't know what I believed—or what I felt, for that matter. I was numb to the core. I sat there, woebegone and sobbing, desperately trying to understand why I'd been made to go through this...and survive—why *my* family was the one to be taken. What God would give so many precious things to me and then suddenly snatch them away? Help me to understand. Tell me what lesson I have to learn. Did I take it all for granted, is that the reason? Am I not deserving of them? Is this what was in store all along—ill-fated love?

I wrapped the baby girl in Annora's cloak, and held her there with us. I decided she, too, deserved a name...and felt that Raven was appropriate, considering her brother's name.

After no more than an hour had passed, two guards entered the dungeon. If I had been given the will or power, I would have brought forth the flames to destroy them as I had the others. The first came toward me, drew his sword with a trembling hand. The blade hummed as it was drawn out of the scabbard, and I saw the faintest glimmer out of the corner of my eye. Trying not to think of it, not to

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remember the blade that took Annora's life, I didn't allow myself to look at it. I put it out of my mind, still gazing at her though I was waiting for her to awaken.

One of them shoved me against the wall and pulled her body and Raven's away from me. The other reached down and grasped Requiem, startling him out of his sleep.

Where was my rage now, you ask? Where was the hellfire, the prophetic powers that were to be mine alone? I couldn't bring such things to light anymore; for, when I had tried to defend myself with hellfire...the Baron murdered Annora. In part it was my fault. Though I was infuriated and grieving in ways I cannot begin to describe, I had lost what willed me to try to escape. I had no reason to fight anymore, no purpose, no place in this world. If anyone deserved to die, it was me.

It was unbearable to think about, but I realized I needed to let go of Annora now, and let her rest peacefully in a grave...not in this dungeon, as I needed to let go of my son so that he would have a chance.

The first gathered her in his arms, while the other carried the babies up the staircase and to a world I would never see again. I sobbed when they took my son from me, even though it was impossible for me to care for him. I couldn't bear to think of him at the hands of the Baron.

Requiem cried as they took him away, and then all was still. I lay there, covered in blood. I tried to keep from

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looking at it or feeling it, though both were inevitable. I looked down to see the drying pool, streams of crimson everywhere.

WHEN I DRIFTED INTO SLEEP, I had yet another delusion. It was different than anything I had seen before. I was in the dark, but not in this dungeon. I was wreaking havoc on Baron Galtier and all his soldiers and guards; I was tearing them apart one by one with a hellish and maddened sense of pleasure. But more than just those men—I was murdering everyone who lived in the surrounding parishes. I was tearing apart all the miserable souls who had cursed me and commanded I be sentenced to death. I was taking revenge on all of the Alpes-Maritimes—everyone except my brothers.

“Don’t forget me,” a ghostly voice whispered in my ear when I suddenly awakened from the nightmare. “I will always be with you.” Of course, I thought it was Annora’s voice, but it was difficult to hear. Then I realized it had been my mind’s eye tormenting me again. I wanted more than anything to believe it was Annora—that her spirit lingered here to keep me company and waited for me to surrender my soul and join her.

“What is that supposed to mean?!” I said. “How am I to know?”

There was no reply. I knew...I was answering the voices in my head.

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I had grown accustomed to silence, actually. The only time I knew laughter and voices that did not ring in my head with anguish, were my dreams. But they, too, seemed to have left me.

Until my death, Annora would live in my memories. I felt responsible for her death, to a certain degree.

Annora never imagined she would be killed. There was nothing for which she would have put our babies' lives in peril. She had no idea what would come from her trying to negotiate for me to be released. Yet I couldn't help but think of how I had led her to her death because of my being a failure. I had devoted my life to sorcery—and what had it yielded in the end?—death.

If I had been stronger and been able to save the Baron's son instead of causing his death, I would have never been taken to the dungeon. And if I had been in control of my powers, the sword would not have thrust into my wife's stomach.

Annora had been punished for my wrongs, and she had died out of love for me.

I thrashed around, pushed and pulled, but I couldn't rip the chains from the wall again. Even if I could have, it was impossible to break out of this place. I had explored the chamber a great deal before I was first chained...and unless I had the means to crush the stone floor and dig my way out, there was no escape.

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Now I could see how deeply, how desperately I lusted for the sweet taste of revenge.

Chapter Twenty

Von Sabre

I REALIZE we haven't yet come to know each other—you and I—but I must tell you what was becoming of Rainier's life. I will explain about myself as we go on, but this is not my story. Would it be enough for now if I tell you my name? It is Von Sabre.

After wandering the villages of southern France for several weeks, maybe months...I was drawn to this one, to the fear and scorn and fantastic tales of sorcery.

I had never met Rainier, but now I'd heard about what wondrous things he had accomplished in times past, before he had killed Baron Galtier's son, before he was arrested for murder. In little time I learned about the prophecy, about Rainier's brothers—the cowards—we no where in

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sight when he was suffering. They neither came to his defense nor plead for his release. Though I had little time to do so, I searched for them...but they were nowhere to be found.

As I said, the villages had turned against Rainier, demanded he be put to death. And from what I could gather when I traveled here, Annora had sobbed herself to sleep for more than a week without the faintest idea what to do to change her husband's fate. I wasn't here when she was still alive, but from what I was told now and from what I gathered from the energies and emotions that were still present, more than anything she feared her family being torn apart.

There was something she wanted—needed to tell Rainier, something awful. And, honestly, I have not the faintest idea what it was. My powers to read minds and snatch thoughts from mortals were of no use with the dead.

How brave Annora must have been, I told myself...and just hours after I returned to the estate I saw her in her pale, icy death. I nearly broke down in tears when the soldiers discarded her body. And as you might expect, at the sight of her, passersby were in absolute horror; some gasping and turning away, while others cried and gaped in disbelief.

For a few moments I watched the soldiers, in particular the knighted one who was their commandant—a pompous young fellow who sported a swordsman's blouse, with

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black breeches and a crimson waistcoat decked out with an engraved silver brooch and buttons. And his hair, stringy and blonde, was slicked into a ponytail and tied with a thin, deep red ribbon. Without a second glance I recognized him: Lord Camden, the one who twisted my life to nothingness...*he* who stood alongside Baron Galtier when I was made to suffer in much the same way as Annora. I knew his despicable stench, that of savageness and a monstrous ego; from a time long since passed it was burned into my mind.

And now Rainier was in need of me, dying as I waited. He could do nothing to get away, nothing to break free from the dungeon. I knew he needed to escape...and if anyone in this world could help him, it was me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rainier

THERE WAS A VOICE inside me now, saying I could have limitless strength; the power to tear apart entire villages, turn castles to dust. It went through my head a thousand times. It infuriated me. And finally I didn't care that I was speaking to someone who wasn't there. "I cannot bear this! Leave me alone!"

"No," it said. This voice did not sound ghostly, but was methodical and possessed a sort of richness I cannot describe. It seemed to be that of a man; neither a youth nor elder—but an eccentric, clever fellow with what seemed a great deal of maturity. "You know what it is about now. Revenge. Death to all who caused you this, who caused her to die. You mustn't give up so easily."

The Nocturne

How does he know about Annora? I couldn't help but wonder, casting aside the idea that this voice was something my mind had created. I was almost certain it was a delusion—a trick of madness. Yet it comforted me, offered a distraction and a means of rescue from loneliness and despair. For that I was willing to plunge straight into insanity.

I was strangely enthralled with him. Whether it was his voice and thick French accent, his mannerisms, or the fact he was company to me, I had not the faintest idea; but I was, in some odd fashion, enjoying his companionship. He was a shadowy character, with an engaging personality and strange, nonchalant way about everything he said.

I'd not expected an answer, and when it came I was a little startled. I was left lurching to hear another word, to become lost in his voice and how calm and ethereal it was; yet my desire to talk with him was soon torn away.

“And you are here to save me, are you not?” I asked.

“No, I cannot say I am. I know of no reason I should, except for your son and your wife's soul.”

“You know so much of me. What are you?”

“*Who* am I, you mean. Von Sabre,” he said. “You have summoned me, when you called upon spirits in your spell. You asked for help—and here I am.”

“It's too late.”

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“It is all in what you choose to see. For you, it isn’t too late. I am here to help you, to make things right.”

I was quiet.

“Am I frightening you?”

I leaned against the wall again, wishing for everything to fade away. “No,” I said. “For God’s sake!—my wife was murdered; my son was taken away—I don’t know what became of him...and I’m trapped here!”

“Yes, yes,” he said, grimly and with compassion, “I know. And I’m terribly sorry.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Please go.”

He was rather talkative for a figment of my imagination. “It is fine, I understand. But your life doesn’t have to end this way; there is hope,” he said. “Do you think me to be a ghost?”

“If you are not,” I said, “then you will untie me.”

“I cannot do that.”

“Why not?” As soon as I asked, it hit me. *Of course*, I thought; *because you do not exist*.

This was what madness had done to me; the result of pain and grief—of such a tremendous loss...and part of it was guilt. I could still see the blade—the gleaming metal turned crimson, blood spreading across the floor. I still heard Annora’s anguished screams as I’d cut open her stomach. Having witnessed that, I would never be the same again. And long about the same time another sad truth sank

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in: that I had been left here to rot while my son was at the hands of my greatest enemy.

“You are in my mind,” I said. “I know it.”

“Make no mistake—I am no figment of your imagination, I promise you.”

On the wall opposite me I could see a glowing orb, floating about near the staircase, down to the chamber. I watched it grow—like a beacon of light that shone from the starry heavens—and wane until there was no light save for the torch. Then, as before, I felt his presence, with his hand gently gracing mine. He was undeniably in the flesh.

Shuddering, I asked, “Why have you come here?”

“Simple,” he said. “I came to help you. Revenge is within your reach; all you must do is heed the call.”

“I have no strength left. I’m not strong enough to kill him, even if I could get out.”

“So you will lie here and die instead. The coward’s death, is that what you want? Your wife died for you—not for anyone else—but to give you freedom.”

“Leave her out of this,” I said. “Don’t use that against me. Don’t dare. I know what happened!”

“Then you know what you must do. Make it right. Make him—all of them—suffer. Stop doubting yourself.”

“Why do you taunt me?”

“Because of how badly you want this,” he said with a rich amount of certainty. “It is what is keeping you alive.

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For your wife, that is the reason. You want to escape. Would you have lived so long otherwise? You know your craving for revenge is to tear part this village and every living thing in it.”

“No!”

“Sorcery is your strength against the Baron,” he said, “as it is against everyone else. Have you thought about what has happened? Your power leading you to this—it all stands to reason.”

“That has nothing to do with it. I have always used my power for Good!”

After a brief pause he spoke again. “You do not fear me, do you?”

“You have not given me a reason to, and I don’t want to die alone.”

“Yes, but do you trust me?”

“Trust is earned.”

“I can lead you to your revenge if you trust me.”

I recoiled when he touched my hand. “Annora didn’t believe in revenge—I cannot betray her.”

“Ah, well.” It sounded that he was calculating his options, pondering as he spoke. “She is gone now. Your only hope is to bring peace to her soul. Kill him.”

Tears filled my eyes. I couldn’t contain my sadness any longer. “Why did she have to come for me, why did she do

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that? I told her to keep away, to stay out of it. Why didn't she listen?"

"Because she loved you," he said. "She loved you more than anything in this world—you should never question it. Do you know how brave she must have been to come here?—with child, no less."

"It should have been me who died, not her. Never her."

"But she gave birth. She didn't die in vain; and that child needs you. You have the power; I can help you harness it, if only you trust me and believe in yourself."

Before I had a chance to respond, he was gone. I sensed his presence fading away. It was then I realized how desperate I was for company and that even as I didn't believe him, I longed to hear his voice again.

"Don't leave me!" I said, sounding much too desperate. "Please, come back!"

I called him for quite some time after that, but I was too late.

I did my best to make myself comfortable. I shifted slightly, trying to move away from where the blood had pooled and was now sinking between the stones, into the tiny pits and crevices. Again I was reminded of how helpless I was and how great a failure. I wished to leave this world and join Annora, yet I felt such a primal need, a desire to cling to life as long as possible. I needed to prove

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everyone wrong, just as I needed to prove to myself that I was capable of escaping this dungeon and saving my son.

I wanted revenge...but that is a dark and forbidden thing, is it not? No civilized person would try to ease their suffering by causing more pain, spilling more blood. There is no pain that can be eased by another. I realized that was true, yet I was so determined to bring peace to Annora's soul that I was willing to risk whatever savage punishment hell had to offer.

I was dying. I felt it now, far more so than any time before. It took all my strength to fend off the rats as they were drawn to my wounds. I could feel them as they crawled across my legs now and again; and when I drifted to sleep I would awaken suddenly to find them biting me. Can you imagine how it felt to see these horrid little creatures try to eat what was left of my wife's blood? The shattered sword lay nearby as a constant reminder of how she had been murdered. I couldn't stop looking at it...and each time I did, my pain and grief were transforming to malevolent hatred. This was a score that begged to be settled, a tragic end that demanded retribution. Nothing could bring Annora back, but revenge would make peace for her soul as well as mine. Leaving the world in such a way, our deaths would not be in vain.

The more I thought of this, the more I came to see: Von Sabre is right—it doesn't have to end this way.

The Nocturne

LATER THAT NIGHT I felt he was here again; a strange, cold energy came over me whenever this happened. He would whisper in my ear, trying to motivate the vengeful side of me. When he did this, the evil inside began to control my thoughts and feelings. I was giving in with little restraint.

With every moment that went by, I grew more anguished and weary. I could feel the evil within myself. The need for revenge was consuming me, as were his words.

The torch by the stairs still burned very, very faintly. Though, of course, I couldn't see him. He was drawing near, until close enough for me to feel his cold breath against my neck. I shivered. The tiny hairs on my arms and neck rose as cold tremors surged through my body.

This was the first time I'd heard his footsteps: the heels of his boots clicking against the stone, round and round slowly as though he were pacing in front of me.

"What do you remember about that prophecy?" he asked.

"It is nothing to do with this, either."

"That is not what I asked. What I asked was: do you remember it."

"Yes, of course."

"And you remember everything else that happened?"

I turned toward him, still unable to see my surroundings. Everything was black, slightly illuminated by the

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torch, which seemed to be miles away from me. “Where do you think this will take us?”

“What the prophecy is about...,” he said.

“I already know.”

“Why must you fight that? Why do you hide from it now?”

“Because there is no reason to believe it anymore,” I said. “If I had such powers, why did Annora have to die?”

“Well, you have it, and now the rage,” he said. “It is the people who betrayed you. It is their fault you are still in this place. And they should be punished just as the Baron must be.”

I hated to admit how truthful this was, and the more I thought about them the more enraged I became. He was antagonizing me. He knew the ways to bring out the hatred that continued to feed on itself. As I sat there—chained in the very place where Annora’s life had been taken—Von Sabre awakened the demon in me that so hungered for revenge.

“You are giving up,” he said, “because you aren’t strong enough to face him. Revenge is within your reach.”

Then he vanished.

I fell asleep then, for the first time in days, and found my mind wandering about in dreams of the happy times I had spent with Annora. There was warmth, sunlight, and all the simple pleasures of the world I’d quickly forgotten. I

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remembered our childish romps through the lavender fields, along with the day when I asked for her hand in marriage; and naively believing, at one point, that I could have everything.

I awakened with a racing heart, grieving and in fear for my son's life. He was at the hands of my greatest enemy...and I was completely helpless, no stronger than I'd been when the guards took him from me. *God, what am I to do?* I said to myself. *What has become of him?*

I felt so torn, so conflicted. I didn't know what to believe anymore. One moment I was ready to do anything for revenge—no matter what the cost—while at others I couldn't bear the thought. I tried to reason with myself and realize this was not what she would have wanted, but the fight was futile. Turning to evil to avenge her would never be her wish, but she loved Requiem and I so much that she laid down her life for us. Would I do any differently? This would be a sacrifice for love, wouldn't it? I owed that to her, if nothing else. I could not think of being sent to hell for that, nor could I be certain if revenge was truly evil.

I hadn't seen how the prophecy could be a part of all of this—a part of who I had become, but suddenly I realized that only one choice remained for me now. I would obey Von Sabre, and have vengeance. He was my only chance.

There lived a burning desire in my soul now. With it, every moment I grew madder and more furious, until my

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hope for peace no longer suppressed my lust for revenge. Telling myself I'd soon be in heaven offered no comfort when my son was at the hands of his mother's murderer.

For them I had given in to the evil, the rage, the darkness—everything that begged I forget who I was in order to put an end to this once and for all. After weighing the options of leaving the world now, this way, or giving into my hunger to settle the score...I lost my battle. She had died because of my weakness, but she would be avenged because of my strength.

“I know what I want,” I said. “I want to kill them!”

He said nothing and I waited for his answer, knowing that—at any moment—the bitter silence would be broken.

“Von Sabre?” Again and again it echoed—my voice—a dull cry. Alas, there was no answer.

I tried my best to look around, to see even the shadow of the dimly burning torch across the room, or the rodents, the bugs—anything to let me I know I was not alone again.

IT HAPPENED SUDDENLY. A cold, piercing pain shot through the side of my neck, as though knives plunged into my veins, and nearly reached my spine. I struggled to get away when it happened, but soon lost control of myself in the dizzying pain.

I tried to scream, but I couldn't hear my voice. All I heard was the deep, primal rhythm of my heart as blood spurted from my veins, each throb awakening a new sense

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of faintness. I could hear it, and the idea of my life's blood leaving my body left me horrified. I fell into a sort of trance, hearing the thoughts that raced through my mind as icy beads of sweat rolled down my neck and my flesh grew numb.

I fell backwards, thrashing against the stone. The moment went on and on, and it dragged me in further and further until I wanted nothing more than death. I sobbed and screamed to be released. Chills cascaded down my body with the strength of a thousand waterfalls.

“Please,” I said, “stop! Don’t...don’t kill me.”

I began to feel even weaker. He placed one hand on my shoulder while the other held my arm against the floor. He pressed against my neck. And in no way could I escape his grasp—he was on one side, and the wall was behind me.

Somehow I had to find strength in myself...I would have no choice but continue the fight for my life.

The pain became sharper. Soon it was excruciating. But my struggle to be freed from his grasp would not end. I could scarcely breathe. I retched and choked as the pain continued. But all of a sudden I felt I wanted to live. I could not die like this. Yet within a moment the pain intensified...and as it grew, so did a strange urge—a hunger I had never felt before, one that soon overcame me; and I was breathlessly, desperately fierce with it.

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My breathing stung me. I felt as though my eyeteeth were being ripped from my skull; and my entire body convulsed in a series of spasms and twinges. Then another severe pain stung my mouth, straight into my under-lip.

Suddenly I wrapped my arms around Von Sabre's ribcage, clutching him with my fingernails as they grew and grew, becoming twisted, jagged knives that cut my hands as I struggled. Then I pushed him sideways as I turned my head and sank my fangs into his neck. I heard flesh splitting, just as I felt a small gush of something bitter and cold in my mouth. I despised the taste, but no matter of force could separate me from that strangely rich pleasure.

I wanted to end it, but I couldn't break away.

I realized what Von Sabre was, and what I had become. I was becoming a fiend who drinks the blood of human beings! It could not be happening to me... I could not believe in immortality. My God, no! It isn't happening to me...it isn't destroying every bit of life and goodness that are still a part of me. No, I cannot become such a monster.

I tried to take a breath, and as I did my chest felt as though knives were being driven through my lungs. The air felt cold to me. My entire body felt like ice all of a sudden. My heart was slowing, and instead of a pulse, I could hear blood streaming throughout my body, lifelessly. So I lay there, without movement for several minutes. I couldn't tell where he was, but I heard him moving around the dungeon.

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I began to fight against the chains again. I felt strength and muscle I had never before possessed. I lunged forward, ripping the one of them from the stone, and fell to the floor.

“How could you!” I said. “How could you have done this to me!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rainier

“HURRY,” Von Sabre said. “There isn’t much time.” When we reached the doorway, he pulled on the locked bolt, but found it had been sealed through all the channels. A human could never break so many shafts of iron, but with great ease he began to press his hands against the door, looking for any sign of weakness. Then he grasped the latch gently, and broke it half with only the faintest amount of effort. His strength was incomprehensible.

Once outside the dungeon, we were in the lower-chamber of the gatehouse. I followed the stairwell to the tower, came upon the gatekeeper and pulled him in from the balcony. I silenced him with surprising ease by covering his mouth with my hand as I forced him against the

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wall...and then I fed on his blood. It was like an elixir; smooth, warm, suffusing me with the life I needed to gain an inhuman strength. I tried not to enjoy this; I was fighting against it the entire time, but something primal inside me craved it, and I was powerless to refuse.

Afterward I put on my victim's clothes: a tunic, breeches and cloak. Then I sneaked down from the tower and stepped outside, feeling and seeing the world for the first time in weeks. It drove my senses wild.

There had been two guards at the doorway outside of here, but thankfully Von Sabre had killed them while on his way to find the keep, and before they had a chance to warn the others.

WHEN I left the gatehouse, the winter air felt like a thousand needles piercing my skin. It was so fresh and pure at first—so different from the dank air in the dungeon, that I took pleasure in breathing—but soon the cold set in, and I thought of how dreadful it must have been for my son. Time was running out, and I had no idea where to find him.

I was quiet and cautious in making my way across the grounds, and fortunately able to avoid the guards who stood watch at the gate. Behind a bank of carriages just past there I found Von Sabre.

“I cannot enter the keep without you,” he said. “It’s teeming with guards.”

“Then wait. Go the other way.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I have searched the front grounds—there is no sign of him.”

“We must keep looking. I’ll search by the stables and sheds, the other way—the west,” I said. “And if we don’t find him here, lower the bridge; we will take their horses and ride out.”

We took separate paths, scouring the grounds and courtyards. I followed the trail from the gatehouse to the gardens before the estate. There I searched frantically while Von Sabre combed through the discards, walked every inch of the passages, hideaways—all the way to where the mountain road began.

I killed every guard I came across, though I’d yet to recognize any of them. Everywhere I went I found to a dead-end. But on my way to the serf’s village, I crossed paths with Von Sabre at the archway in the court behind the castle. He looked perfectly forlorn, genuinely sharing my sorrow.

“Did you search behind the Servants’ Quarters?” I asked, and saw him nod much too quickly. “And the carriages?”

“No.”

I took two steps back, turning toward the garden. “Go check them, and I’ll search the villages.”

With that he set off in the opposite direction, vanishing as a shadow as he slipped through the wall yet again. I tore

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through the garden, finding my way down the path, over the little stone tiers at the veranda, to the final battlement that separated me from the outside world. I scaled the wall with no effort, descending smoothly to the ground on the opposite side.

I scarcely noticed my new eyesight, keen sense of touch and smell, and strangely greater awareness. Everything was in perfect sight, yet not at all as it had been when I was human; the world, though masked by night, seemed to be glowing. It was more colorful than I ever knew; each and every facet of nature was moving in perfect symmetry, with frosty, swaying branches like prisms through which the moonlight shone. I, too, had changed: my wounds were healed, every hideous scar perfectly erased by radiant immortal skin. My muscles were once again well-defined, with the strength of steel and no fatigue no matter how fast I ran.

At the end of the outer grounds stood a guard, keeping watch over the entrance to the serf's village.

I recognized him immediately. He had so brutally beaten me and spilled my blood time and time again, always finding a deviant pleasure in watching me suffer. I knew this one all too well.

Seeing me as I moved forward he stood in a stupor, at an absolute loss for how this could be—how I'd escaped. I continued on, walking more briskly as he drew his sword.

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And within seconds I heard him whistle for the nearby guards. No luck in that—they were already dead. He caught his breath, uttering my name and some foul curse. Just then I struck, throwing him to the ground as I ripped the sword from his hand and quickly pressed it against his chest.

He was helpless now. I could hear his heartbeat, blood surging through his veins, tiny beads of sweat rolling down his neck. For the first time I could smell fear, a scent like no other, so darkly chilling and primal.

“My God!” he said. “How did you escape?”

I gripped the hilt and forced the tip of the blade into his heart, tearing it ever-so-slightly for a prolonged yet certain death.

“Look me in the eyes,” I said, leaning forward to press my weight against the sword; “look at me. You and the Baron took my son—where is he? What have you done with him?”

He didn’t meet my gaze, for his guilt was much too great. There would be no absolution, he knew, and to admit his evildoing seemed far crueler than death. “Forgive me....”

I reached down to turn his head to the side. I held him there for a long moment without saying a word. Then I stood with the hilt in my hand, ready to deliver the fatal strike. “Tell me where he is, or I swear to God I will send you straight to hell.”

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He writhed, feeling his pulse grow slower and weaker. “My lord commanded it,” he said. “We left him in the woods.”

“When?”

“Moments ago.”

Even though I’d been certain my rage had reached its zenith, still it rose with fierceness I couldn’t bear. There was the most horrific image in my mind now: my son, alone in the cold...dying, if not dead already.

I wanted to torture this guard for hours. I wanted to drink his very last drop of blood while swooning in the wicked pleasure, but my child was waiting for me to rescue him.

“Pray that you’ll have God’s mercy,” I said, taking the hilt in both hands, “because you won’t have mine.” Then I bore down with all my strength, plunging swiftly and with unimaginable strength. As I backed away I caught glimpse of the vast dark thicket beyond the moon-kissed field, and I started down the path that would lead me to it.

After reaching the ridge, I leapt over mounds of jagged stones, made my way through icy streams, past tors and rocks until I reached the forest, struggling to find footprints in the soil. But there were none I could see, as the wind had covered them with fallen leaves.

It seemed unlikely the guards would have taken Requiem any great distance before discarding him. So I spent

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most of my time going over the pathway, kicking aside the leaves in hopes of finding what remained of their tracks to guide me. The trail was lost, and in no time I gave this up and proceeded straight ahead.

I heard something, a sound so faint and distant. It came from the left, I thought at first but soon changed my mind. No, it is to the right...or can it be straight ahead? When I heard it again I whirled around, rushing forward and onto the path to my right. My heart pounded so hard I felt it would shatter; my chest ached from the ice cold air and the effort it took to breathe while running so quickly.

I ran uphill, into the open forest, which was where I found Annora's body in the ditch, covered by a ragged old cloth. All I saw from a distance was the rough shape of her, covered by mud in places, with leaves, pebbles and pine needles scattered all around. Her hand was visible, ashen and limp in death, with dried blood around her fingernails.

I fought to tear my gaze away from her, but unwillingly I stared, feeling a fury like no other rise inside until they had overcome my every feeling. I kept reliving the moment when I lost her, seeing that very same hand reach out to touch our little baby, who wrapped his fingers around hers in response. This woman was the love of my life, for whom I would sacrifice body and soul—and she had been carelessly cast out here to...I cannot bring myself to say it. From the small depression in the mud I could tell the baby

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had been left in this very same place, between her side and extended arm, before someone—or something—dragged him away. Beside her were the shredded, bloody remains of the cloak...and Raven's body was gone.

The trees offered no shelter from the raging wind. The ground was silver with frost, where they had left him to die. The Baron knew, in his twisted soul, that he had murdered Annora, just as well as he knew what she had gone through to bring the baby into the world. It was impossible for him not to see what this child meant to her...and he punished him with unthinkable cruelty.

This should have never been my last memory of her. It led me down a path no person wishes to follow: a road straight into the deepest, darkest evil. I felt no mercy now. My battle against my conscience concluded at that very moment.

I finally found Requiem, lying in a muddy little ditch quite a ways off the path, surrounded by banks of stones and sludge. He kept still and quiet, so tiny and frail that he could just barely kick. His skin had turned white, corpse-like, and all his veins were visible. And his little lips were blue.

I rushed to his side, slipping in the mud as I went into the ditch and knelt down. I startled him when I did this, though he was much too weak to cry and could do nothing except whimper. First I touched him with one hand, slowly,

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gently, as I whispered: “I’m here, son. Hold fast, I’ll help you.” Then I gathered him in my arms, finding he was even frailer than I’d thought—colder, too, if possible. His body was nearly frozen-through, his skin like ice to the touch.

Knowing he needed my warmth before I could heal him or take him to shelter...or anything else, I untied the neck of my tunic, pulling it open as I brought him against my bare chest. I pulled it back into place to keep out the wind, and cuddled him so he lay directly over my heart, with his hands touching my collarbone. In just seconds he realized there was warmth so close—and he did his best to draw nearer to it, resting his head on my shoulder, trying to move his fingers.

I sat there and cradled him, sobbing because I knew, in my heart, that I was losing him. The warmth of my body was not enough to undue the damage of the cold. I tried, desperately, to think of something else I could do for him...but my strength with spells had yet to return, and I had no idea how to use my powers as a vampire (if there were any I had not discovered).

The moment came when I was certain I had lost everything; my last, remaining bit of hope was dying with the baby. But then I looked up—and right before me stood the white wolf I had seen so long ago, and had forgotten. She watched me with the same keen intent as before...and then she stepped closer, nudged the tunic aside, this time

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exhaling a steamy blue vapor over the baby. It lingered around him for a second, and seemed to have been absorbed.

I didn't have the faintest idea what was going on. Yet I allowed her to come near him because, in some way I understood she would help him. And she did, God bless her. That quickly, she brought warmth to him, and eased the pain of the cold; allowed him to breathe and cry.

I looked down at him, then back to her, to see her tail wagging with joy and her paw extended to me. I took it in my hand, so beside myself with amazement that I couldn't express what I was feeling. "I don't know how to thank you," I said. "I wish I could tell you what he means to me—what this means."

"I see it in your heart. And I will be here, wherever you are, to watch over him. Now go—you are fulfilling the prophecy."

I stood, and was utterly mystified to hear her mention the prophecy. What was becoming of me? "What do you mean?" I asked. "How did you know about that?"

She smiled (as well as a wolf can), and stepped backward. "I will find you again when it is time," she said, walking away. "And remember—she is watching over you, too."

With that she vanished into the night. I looked at the baby once more, to see his skin color was perfectly pink,

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and he was wriggling against me as well as any newborn could.

I carried him back to the Baron's estate, and entered one of the servants' quarters, where two young maids were sleeping. When I walked in I startled them, naturally, and they rushed to me, asking who I was and what was the matter.

"My son," I said as I lifted the sleeping infant from beneath my tunic. "He needs warmth and milk. Can you find a nurse for him?"

"Yes, yes," one of them said, "of course, in the serfs' village. I'll go."

"I can give you your freedom," I said to the other, "if you help me, and look after him."

She took him into her arms. "What do you mean?"

"You will never serve the Baron another day; and can go wherever you please."

Once the baby was settled with the servants and a wet nurse, I went to the keep to find Von Sabre. There was no time to explain everything, but I told him that I'd found Requiem and he was safe now.

WE SNEAKED into the estate, up the stairs, though the upper-corridor and into the grand bed-chamber, where the Baron was fast asleep. A single candle on the candelabra was still burning, delivering just enough light to see our silhouettes as we crept across the room. There was a sword

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on the floor beside the bed, as well as a belt and several daggers, which we didn't hesitate to seize.

I picked up one of the daggers and held its blade over the flame for a long moment, so it was hot, though not unbearably so. Then I sat on the side of the bed, leaned toward the Baron and touched the blade to his throat, which caused him to awaken abruptly, shocked.

“Who—who are you?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not dead,” I said; “I’m not rotting in the dungeon. I’m your Reaper now.”

“No, that’s impossible! How did you get out?”

“Quiet!” I said, pressing the blade against his throat, harder this time. “Get up, come on.”

As he stood I grasped his hands, took the belt that Von Sabre had been holding, and tied it around his hands. “Now, do you know what I’m going to do? I am going to make you regret every second that you’ve ever lived; I’m going to make you hate your life so much that you’ll rather you were dead.”

He noticed Von Sabre, and seemed absolutely shocked by his presence. “No, you’re dead!” he whispered. “How is this happening? You’re both dead.”

Von Sabre ripped the collar of his shirt and pulled it down, exposing what looked to be bruise, as it stood out in varying shades of blue, with gray and some green. Yet when I looked at it more closely, I could see just what the

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bruise was...It was in the shape of a hand! His neck had been firmly grasped for a great amount of time...

My gaze was quickly brought back to the Baron, to see his expression—sheer horror. He tried to step back, but when he did he found himself falling into Von Sabre's grasp.

"The bruise..." he said.

"I imagine it brings back some memories," Von Sabre said, "doesn't it? Remember when you forced me into the river? Yes, you were the one who drowned me. You, yourself, Baron Galtier, you drowned me for a crime I didn't commit. And let's see... it was after that you ordered me thrown into the streets with no burial at all. Improper burial and death by drowning are certain connections to vampirism."

The Baron's suffering would be prolonged for as much time as I could make him suffer and regret every moment of his life. And of course, for some pleasure it was fascinating to see the dreadfulness upon his features.

"But I saw to your death," he said. "Your heart had stopped beating..."

"Kindred magic," he said. "Listen. I want you to understand this and remember how it all came to be. Neither of us has wronged you. And you murdered Rainier's wife out of spite for him. No one else is going to die for you, ever."

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I grasped him by the shoulder and turned him toward me. And, like Von Sabre's strength, mine, too, was unbelievable. "Murderer!" I said, pushing him against the wall. "You murdered her and one of the babies! But that was not enough, was it? No. You had to let me see her suffering—and let her see me beaten and chained to the wall. And then you stabbed her—you bastard!—you killed her and you left me in her blood!"

Now he would suffer it, as God and every legion of heaven and hell were my witnesses. Now he would die, and I would avenge my wife and daughter.

We each grabbed him by one arm, took him down the hall and to the banister, then began to push him over it, ever-so-slowly. All he could see was the upside-down angle of the great room, which was quite a distance from where we were, in the middle of the upper hallway. It would not be a survivable fall. But we didn't wish to kill him yet. It was far too soon, and with nowhere near enough torment.

He did not deserve such a swift death. "Please," he was saying. "You wouldn't throw me off here."

Laughing, we held him over the banister, slowly allowing him to nearly slip from our hands every now and again.

"It was *your choice*, remember?" Von Sabre said to him, his voice rich with disdain. "Does that sound familiar? I heard that when I was dying and begging for forgiveness...for a crime I didn't even commit. Do you have

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reasons, reasons why your life should be spared? I suggest you tell us what they are.”

I let go of his arm, which caused him to sway even further over the banister, as I whispered, “It must be painful to be held up by one arm.”

“Is it painful, or is it not?” Von Sabre asked.

“And you think there are reasons you should live. And remember...never forget *my* revenge.”

“I am...sorry,” he said.

“Are you?” Von Sabre said. “For some reason, I just cannot seem to believe you. Perhaps if you beg for your life, I will be able to sympathize...” He patted the Baron’s back, mocking sympathy. “But I doubt it.”

I pulled him back, over the banister and threw him to floor of the hallway. Then, as Von Sabre held him to the ground, slowly drawing tears to his eyes, I kicked him, with all my strength, in the side. But it wasn’t just once; I did it again and again. After this went on for some time, we dragged him to the top of the stairs—and as fast as we could, we forced him down the steps. Head-first, he slipped down to the entranceway, one step at a time. I stood back in the hallway, watching, feeling triumphant as I heard his muffled outcries fall further and further down. I looked toward Von Sabre and I smiled, glancing back to the staircase, then to him again. But we weren’t finished yet. No, we were only beginning....

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We dragged him out of the estate. I tied a rope around his feet, then tied the other end of it to a horse's saddle, rode into the thicket...and stopped when I reached the river. Von Sabre rode along behind me, carrying the weapons from inside the chamber.

I untied the rope from the horse, and dragged the Baron closer to the river, until he was lying in the mud and could feel the icy water rushing by. He protested the entire time, fighting to get away, though we easily overcame him. I ripped off his shirt, took two daggers in hand, and knelt at his side.

When I stabbed him the first time, it was slow, easing the blade into his side, for I didn't want to kill him quickly. This needed to drag on, and on, until I felt his suffering matched mine and my family's—only then would justice have been served.

He let out an agonized scream. Then I twisted the blade, and forced the other in, pulled it out, and did so another time. I stabbed one of his lungs, so he would have a true appreciation for what Annora went through in her final moments of life. Blood was filling his lungs, drowning him, and I went on, cutting here and there until I had nearly exposed his insides—and by then he was too weak to fight back. Then I reached in, twisted his innards with my hand, and shoved him into the river.

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“My wife was tortured and murdered, and my daughter was stabbed,” I said, watching him sink into the icy-water, “and there is another innocent little baby who almost froze to death—all because of you. Remember that on your way to Hell.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rainier

THAT NIGHT we buried Annora near a hill that led north, to the mountains. There was a cemetery close by, but I wanted for her grave to be separate, make it a shrine to her. It was then I was made to realize this was it—this was my wife's tomb, her coffin being lowered into it, covered by dirt. I would never see her again. She was right there, in her eternal sleep, unable to hear or see me, unable to feel my touch.

I sat there remembering all the times we spent together, all the times I held her: when I ran my fingers through her hair; when I looked into her eyes and saw my entire world in the sweetest, most fulfilling way. When those memories came into my mind, I felt tears in my eyes. I just...couldn't

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hold them back, no matter what. Our happy times—the memories I truly cherished—had begun to fall away already. I wanted to remember the joy she brought to me, the unforgettably magical moments we spent together, the love we shared...but all I thought of was how she died and what were her last words. I kept telling her to hold on, and that I loved her, yet I never said what truly mattered: that I'd give anything to be with her again, and in this life we were saying goodbye, but it wouldn't be forever.

I looked down, running my fingers over the rough stone at the head of her grave as I read the epitaph I had etched for her:

I WHO AM LAID BENEATH THIS MARBLE STONE:

Annora de Aaradyn, slain by the Baron Galtier;

Where I died in the arms of my husband

And was forced to yield my earthly soul.

Of my two children, I take a daughter and leave a son;

And fore'er may we be as one.

Reader, whoe'er thou art, thy prayers bestow

T'atone my sins and ease my pains below.

I stayed there most of that night, trying to fully understand what had become of my life. Inside me there was hatred I longed to tear out; and it caused me to keep asking myself: *How could I have done this?*

I couldn't think that way now, I just couldn't! My God! I did not kill her! How, in all this world, could I blame

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myself for such a thing? I didn't know...but in a forbidden place in my soul, lay the part of me that would make me blame myself forever.

I had been fated to become what was written in the prophecy: a sorcerer with hell-power of both legend and magic. And in that, I had found a greater purpose in life...but it seemed my sacrifice for the greater good had been the very beginning of my destruction. And although I could not bring myself to accept it, Annora's death was, in part, my fault. I found that I was thinking of so many things—even the most miniscule things—I had taken for granted. Everything seemed to matter to me now, and what I once thought to be useless memories were now ringing like chimes in my mind—the din of desperation, sorrow and guilt. I remembered what I said to Annora when I returned from the Baron's estate after I had first been taken there; I remembered telling with her about what I had done, and how all would be well and I would protect her.

I heard the ravens and owls, just as I heard horses trot around the pastures, their every movement causing my body to quake. That night, though I knew I should have been—as expected now—mercilessly killing for vengeance, I lay here instead, sleeping, dreaming of what my life should have been.

WHEN I AWAKENED, I turned toward where Von Sabre had stood, but he was gone.

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Once I was on my feet, I tried to summon him; I cried his name several times and was given no answer.

I am a vampire, I said to myself, *and nothing else*. And there I stood, more lost than ever before. I had never imagined death could seem as inviting as it did at that time in my life. I wanted it more than anything as I longed to forget the prophecy.

I left her gravesite, following the path that had taken me there. I walked through that cold and miserable place, in hopes of stumbling upon the truth about my destiny—you know—something like the tales my brothers had shared with me, but that would be truly meaningful. I thought about finding them to explain what had happened...but they must have known already, and I couldn't face them now.

I returned to the village I once called home, the place where I'd believed I was free from the prophecy and the evil that fell in its wake.

Though it was long past nightfall, a number of workmen took the livestock to pasture while their wives and children brought in the tanned hides and various other things the day had yielded. I almost pitied them, for they seemed so content and innocent...but, when I looked at them, I was overtaken by hatred. There was a chance that, if it had not been for such demands, such hatred from these people, I would have still had such a life. Maybe, if it had not been for them, Annora would have been able to

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negotiate for me to be released. Maybe she would be here right now, in my arms. There was neither man nor woman nor child here who had not turned against me. Now I was ready to settle the score.

I had just entered the village centre when I caught sight of my perfect prey. Flanked by two young children, there stood a woman. With great speed and dexterity I lunged at her, pinned her against the wall. I grasped her neck, with the messy little tendrils of her golden hair curling over her shoulder, leaving every vein before my eyes. Certainly I was not going to murder a woman, you might think. But I couldn't stop. I *wouldn't* stop. She screamed, and I shushed her. I spoke to her, quietly, assuring her that she would be all right, while I drew her toward me and the children dashed away, screaming. And I did not quit with just one victim.

I moved through the shadows in the village—and of course I was unseen. The devastation that followed me would not be noticed until dawn. The village would awaken and discover my wrath. Then, and maybe then they would mourn *my* loss.

I had always been a kind, loving, caring person...until that night. It was when my fangs sank into a child's tender flesh, when I saw I had been consumed by evil.

The Nocturne

Was I doomed to this? I wondered. Was it the Baron who led me to become what I am? Or was I just not meant to love?

I couldn't help but think that perhaps it might have been better if I had never met Annora. When I had pulled her from Death's grasp I had fated her to her death. It was because of that moment—the fateful moment when I had first seen her—that I became immortal, and was now deprived of the love I sought more than life itself.

My existence depended upon my drinking mortal blood, lest I fall to the fiery depths of hell. And as much as death seemed inviting when I was tormented with memories, I could not release the bit of hope that remained with me—the hope that, possibly, one day I would be reunited with her and Raven. I admit, it was bleak... but it was all I had left.

The Baron had murdered them—and it was all because of me, because I was not in control of my own powers. Annora and I both begged and pleaded with him, and yet, he killed her right before my eyes. I knew she could see, from whatever spirit world she was in, how I was suffering without her, and why I made the choices I had thus far. And I had done just as I had vowed.

My conscience had been destroyed. And when I wanted to stop, to regain control of myself, I could do nothing to calm the savage voice in my soul. Each time I

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tried to realize I'd finally put an end to it—justice had been served—I longed to use my darkest strengths more and more. It was futile to resist the call of hell.

If Annora were somewhere in the heavens watching—if she could see what I had become and what I was going to do—would she be able to forgive me? But the people of these villages had turned on us, had they not? Did they not demand I be put to death? And was I wrong for wanting to lay that part of my life to rest once and for all, for wanting to destroy every life that tore mine apart? Maybe this was evil in a sense, but was it not a settling of scores?

Now I was beginning to understand that I would live forever. It was an awful feeling, a horrible thing to accept. This guilt for what happened to Annora would be with me for all eternity. And the only time I felt truly alive was when I fed, and such rapture was not meant to last.

I made my way down the street, longing to see my old house even though I knew I could not bear to go near it. Hunger did not come upon me again for several hours. I was still aching from the changes I'd endured. Besides, the blood of two women would sustain me for the time being—it brought color to my face, darkened my eyes to their natural brown hue, warmed me and relieved the dull ache in my muscles.

From the village I heard the ocean as it caressed the moonlit shoreline, with ships rocking back and forth at the

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port. And I remembered the caverns, so quiet and romantic with their jagged peaks, sandy floors and dark moist walls. For a moment I thought I had found the courage I needed to go there again—to see the places that meant so much to me when I was human—but I hadn't. Avoiding my house, I walked along the backside of the village, where livestock was either penned or tethered. The part of me that enjoyed animal companionship had yet to change. I admired the horses as I petted them...but the scent of fear in my victims' blood made them uneasy. I was in hopes I would find Samson, but I had no idea what had been his fate. Yet by the work of irony, as I was thinking of him, he found me. I paused, listening for another sound ...but my senses had deepened so greatly, I was already moving toward him before I realized it. And there he stood, tethered to a post with Kaeya at his side, both of them perfectly forlorn and glassy-eyed.

I rushed toward him, trying to soothe him by running my hand down his neck...but when I did, he let out a piercing cry, nostrils flaring. "Easy, Samson," I whispered, gently touching his back while Kaeya was anxiously pulling at the tether.

Then the scent of blood filled my head. I stepped closer and touched his shoulder, causing him to jolt sideways and lay back his ears. "Hold still," I said; "let me have a look." When I lifted my hand and it caught the moonlight, not only

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did I smell fresh blood, I could see it on my fingers, along with a thick clear fluid. There were cuts and scratches all over his body; deep puncture wounds in his chest, and a great slash down his flank. I was horrified to see him like this, to know he must have been suffering this way.

Now you might say: *How can you feel so awful about an animal when you murder your own people?* The answer is simple—I was murderous and seeking revenge, yes—but this was *my* horse and we had a sort of psychic connection. He had taken me to Annora...and that was something I would never forget.

As I began to untie the tether, a pale beam of light flashed from within the village. I stopped abruptly, hearing footsteps come across the gravel. The light was moving toward me as though it were suspended in the air, floating like some great luminous firefly. I had yet to notice the cloaked figure who carried it—the lantern, I mean—but within a second I heard him shout for me to get away.

I did not fear him, of course, but I would have preferred not to have been seen right then. This is just perfect, Rainier, I said to myself. Now you must kill him.

He rushed toward me. As you might expect he was boisterous, calling attention to where I stood and what I was doing. I tried to untie the tethers, but had no time...and in my zeal to get out of here with Samson, I had failed to notice there was also a chain that wrapped around the post

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and between the halters of these two horses. Then came the noises, villagers searching for whatever weapons they could find; while the approaching man—a short, thin fellow with straggly brown hair—cried, “Get away from there, thief!”

I let go of the ropes. The horses stomped and reared. The hood of my cloak cast shadows on my face, and if I were to keep my distance from this man and others, I wouldn’t be recognized. But I was forced to kill all of those people anyhow

I no longer thought of the afterlife, for I was certain that for a vampire, I was already living in it. *Is there life beyond this, I thought. It doesn’t end here, does it? Eventually, I will die—somehow—I am just not sure of how. But I know I will. I must.*

Even though my heart could beat no longer, I knew it still held my soul, my life, and my memories. My soul was, at every moment, slipping into the grasp of the spirits that loomed in my mind. My love for Annora did not lessen, but the love for myself, and appreciation for the good deeds I had done in my mortal life—was slowly dying as I felt myself dying whenever I considered the fact that I was, in part, at fault for her death. And thinking of it I became furious all over again...and I would kill until the pain was melted away, for the time being, by blood

The pain of Annora’s death continued to plague me, and when it was coupled with the sorrow I felt for that of

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my daughter, my grief was beyond any amount of words. I cannot even begin to describe it. And I cursed myself for being so senseless. Again and again I cursed my failure as a sorcerer, my life, and my inability to protect them.

It was nearly dawn by the time I returned to the estate. The moonlight had faded from the darkened skies, more silver now than white. Nothing appeared alive to me anymore; I dwelled in a barren world, stained with blood and tears. There was no such thing as love anymore, nor was there sympathy.

Tree branches occasionally swayed to and fro, letting brittle, warped leaves fall and scatter across the dewy earth. When I heard the clicking of the leaves sweeping across the ground, I recalled in particular the night when I introduced Annora to my brothers. The thickets looked almost exactly as they had that night, though they seemed darker, of course. I saw no beauty in anything, any longer.

A light haze hung in the air and seemed to create a barrier for the gentle breezes that crossed it. The air had a fresh, clear smell—if the stench of death had not been on my mind, and the world would have seemed pleasant. But what could be pleasant when every single thing around you saddened you, or haunted you with one memory or another? Everything reminded me of the graveyard. I thought of the cold, damp grave where Annora had been laid to their eternal rest. The entwined branches above me and the new,

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emerald growth developing below them reminded me of the life with my family, which was snatched from my very grasp. But I assured myself that in time, they would all fade away.

I made my way through the mist, letting my vampiric senses guide me back to the estate, where Von Sabre and Requiem awaited my return.

THE NEXT NIGHT, I did exactly the same thing. I was merciless. I thought nothing of what I was doing or if it mattered anymore; and not once did I pause to think, to reason with myself and say this was cruel and would yield no peace. But even if I had, it would have made no difference. I didn't care and I wanted nothing except vengeance. That was the reason I was still here, still trapped in my body in the human sense. If there would be an end for me, I reasoned, this was it. Revenge was all that mattered. I killed in ways I could have never dreamed: I set fire to people's beds while they slept; or I drank their every drop of blood, and afterward I left the bodies in the road with the word Murderers written in the dirt at their feet. I did the wickedest and most despicable things imaginable, and it gave me a sense of satisfaction I cannot put into words.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rainier

NEARLY TWO YEARS PASSED, and I still saw death at every turn. I felt its monstrous weight upon my shoulders each time I returned to the estate, my clothes stained by the blood of my victims, my heart filled with the dark energy of their tortured souls. My future seemed so bleak. I hated to think of the prospects of being a vampire, for there was no beacon of light waiting for me, no solace at the end of my time.

Come off it, Rainier, one might say; you have grieved so much already...you must move on. I wish it were that simple. I wish there had come a time when my life was just a distant memory and all I loved had faded away. But love did not allow me to forget, and happy memories soothed no

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pain. My love for Annora transcended life and death, and not a single moment passed when I didn't think of her. Let me tell you: the clichés—"she will be in your heart," "she will always live in your memories," and "think of what joy she gave to you while she was here"—did absolutely nothing to help me.

Not even little Requiem was able to ease my pain. I loved him with all my heart—I had since long before he came into this world, and I appreciated what a miracle he was, but I couldn't bring myself to grow close to him for fear of another loss. Still mourning Annora's death, my mind and spirit were much too fragile to partake in the joy of bonding with him. So during the first year of his life, it was seldom I was near him, which was the only way I knew to cope with this. But, as I began to see, he was all I had left—the very last thing in which Annora lived; he was her flesh and blood, with her personality and passion for life.

One night, after I hunted I returned to the Baron's estate, stayed beside the bed and watched my son for hours as he slept. Von Sabre sat nearby us, occasionally glancing at me from behind the book he was reading by the light of a candelabrum. "Don't look at him that way."

I tried to stay calm and not let him hear the pain in my voice, but I'd reached my threshold for despair. "I can do nothing else," I said. "I'm so afraid I will lose him, too...."

Chapter Twenty-Four

He stood, tossing aside the book before he stepped toward me. Once at my side he laid his hand on my shoulder, though the gesture offered me no comfort. “You are all he has,” he said. “Make him comfortable, hold him.”

“Tell me why that seems wrong.”

“You know exactly why—you’re afraid. But being kind to the baby doesn’t mean you love Annora any less.”

I thought revenge would be the conclusion of my destiny. I embraced it the very first time, reveling in every second of its raw pleasure. I went on killing without a single concern about what may become of me. Death was not the fearsome force of pain and despair; I had already known a far deeper suffering than that...and from the very beginning of my journey as a vampire—when I didn’t care whether I lived or died—I realized my ultimate destination would be hell. Yet I thought nothing of it, selfless enough to put aside my freedom for a higher cause—deliverance and peace for Annora’s soul. I could not leave her death without vengeance, nor could I surrender after she had lost everything for my liberation. I didn’t want to do this forever; I wanted to be a decent person and let go of my rage...but each night it consumed me, luring me into the rush that for a while slaked my lust for revenge. Soon I would not have the will to resist at all. I would do whatever was bade to me by the very heart of evil, for I’d be powerless against it. I had already made the transition

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between life and death; I crossed from light to darkness in one moment—and I did so because there was no other choice.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rainier

SEVERAL NIGHTS LATER, just after dark I perched on an oak branch that outstretched on two sides from the trunk, simply sitting there, looking over the thicket. It was at a height that no human could reach. My back was against the limb that adjoined the right branch. I sat halfway up, my legs resting on the knotted limb. The hellhounds lay just beneath me, my faithful guardians. I felt as though I was cradled in the tree, and the mixture of brown and green leaves concealed me almost perfectly.

My senses captivated me as I listened; absorbing all that went on in the village beneath me, as I deciphered words, thoughts and movements with a limitless amount of senses I had not discovered when I was human.

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Then the scent of blood caught my attention—and even that brought warmth to my body. Then I heard a mortal’s heartbeat—quick, uneasy. Suddenly the hellhounds rose, but before I could call out to them, or jump toward them, they broke into a rapid gallop, and disappeared into the darkness. I heard their paws thump against the earth as they transitioned back into Hell.

I could feel the mortal drawing near, approaching my forest. Not one of his steps faltered. There was no increase or decrease in speed; his pace remained steady.

I rolled onto my stomach, where I crawled to the end of the largest branch adjoining the trunk that had, until then, cradled me. It is remarkable how weightless I felt, like some mysterious creature, waiting for my unwary prey to come close enough for a swift kill. Finally, my victim-to-be, had drawn near to me, and there he stood, stock still in the middle of the pathway, glancing back and forth, frontward and backwards, though never upward. I wanted to make my presence apparent before I would deliver the kill, but I didn’t.

I slid to the end of the tree branch, and onto another. Then I jumped down, and took cover behind the tree, and waited there to observe his movements.

He was dressed in a peculiar manner, which is the only way I can think to describe it. His clothing was of dark shades, and fit him slackly. I could not see his face because

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he wore a hooded cloak, as I had when I was mortal. A bow and quiver were strapped to his back. And he wore a belt loop and bracers that was decorated with an array of blades of varying lengths and contours and sharpened shafts of wood....and then I knew what he was—a vampire hunter!

A sensitive and keen look searched the branches, the spaces between leaves blending with the black night behind them, but I thought he could not see me. His eyes darted about frantically as a bird would, fluttering if trapped. The bow and quiver suddenly dropped from his back. An arrow was quickly assembled with the bow, and then pointed towards me.

He fell back as I lunged forward. Just as I began, and as my fangs curved to their snakelike shape, the arrow was released from the bow, aimed directly at my heart! I watched it flying toward me, and in a split second I recoiled, wrenching sideways. Yet, even with my remarkable speed, the arrow had grazed my upper arm. I felt no pain from the wound, but I had been injured by...a mortal had injured me! I felt like such a failure. I was ashamed of myself, of how I'd been hurt.

Impossible, I thought. Impossible!

This was no ordinary mortal; his skills were beyond any I had encountered before. I decided to learn more about this vampire hunter before our paths crossed again, so I

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disappeared into the dark as the hellhounds had done. I went back to the estate, and would hunt no more this night.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rainier

ONE NIGHT, not long thereafter, I awakened with an understanding for my newfound strengths, and some degree of control over the evil that had run rampant in my heart. I longed to learn the secrets of which Von Sabre had nearly spoken, so many times. There had been hints that would not be noticed except by the most perceptive mind. But my mind could be very discerning, especially in regards to my beloved Annora.

I had, for the time being, gained control over my rage; and I used every moment I was free to question Von Sabre.

“You know more of Annora’s death than you tell me,” I said. “I can feel it.”

“Perhaps.”

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“I must know.”

We walked along a path beneath the frosty glow of the winter moon, en route to the village I had once called home. I knew little of where we were going or why...but it didn't matter. I was trying to lose myself in the world's beauty, its serenity – everything that was now part of my kingdom. Odd that. As a mortal, I had never been able to truly appreciate the beauty of the darkness, though I had always fancied it.

The hellhounds trotted alongside us.

Here I ravaged nearly every night. Without mercy I drained the blood of those who turned against me when I needed them the most. And now it was they who would lie sleepless, quaking, and unable to defend themselves.

The entire village lived in terror of me now, and I marveled in every minute of it.

“The Baron never planned to release you,” Von Sabre said. “Annora did not know that, of course, when she came to make an accord for you to be released.” His hand grazed the back of the largest hellhound, Abaddon. The tension in his voice was palpable, even though he whispered almost silently. As he described to me, in painfully vivid detail, the events that took place right before Annora's death, I envisioned it as though I were watching it happen. And the lurid details were ripping me apart, while at the same time they brought to my mind what I'd long needed to learn.

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Perhaps this was what could change me, what could mend my broken heart.

We stopped in the open forest. I wandered between the trees as icy winds flew through the coppice, and ran my fingers across an old oak tree, where Annora and I had carved our names in one of our romantic little havens near the lake. I loved this place, and I remembered everything about it: how passionately Annora and I had kissed and then together carved our names in a place we promised we would visit one day when our son would be of age to appreciate it.

VON SABRE CONTINUED telling the dark tale. But I could not stand in one place, nor look at him directly as he said such things...it was too painful. His voice was drowned out by my vision of it as though it was happening at that very moment...

...Freezing and soaking wet, Annora arrived at Baron Galtier's estate. The sun failed to rise to the grayish skies, shrouded by black clouds and rain. Her entire body ached from hunger, sleepless nights, the sobbing that kept her awake, and traveling miles and miles, completely alone.

She knew she had put her son's life at stake. As she had been told by all who opposed her quest to save her husband, there was a chance of death to both she and the child she was bearing. Her heart was ripped in half at that thought. She had shed every tear her eyes would allow

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through the morning hours she spent quaking and crying as she desperately tried to figure out what to do in order to protect her family. Although it was excruciating, Annora faced the decision she had made with ten times the courage of any man, for there was no sacrifice too great for love.

Annora dismounted from her mare's saddle, leaving her and Samson tethered to an oak tree near the path that led to the estate. She glanced around nervously, fearful of who may be nearby, as she walked toward the entranceway. She took delicate steps to avoid the clicking sounds made by the heels of her boots, for she knew this would draw attention to her arrival. And when she neared the doors of the estate she was awestruck by its magnificence, but agonized by the fact that her husband had been there for so long, undoubtedly being tortured. And she couldn't bring herself to forget what he had told her about the first time he had been taken to this place. Yet with undefeatable courage she cast all her fears aside.

She had not been able to think things through carefully. It had been her intention to devise a plan for how she would go about negotiating for her husband's release, but her mind had gone numb by that point.

She stepped into the courtyard in front of the grand entranceway, breathing sharply as she looked toward the flower path in the centre where the path rounded a perfect circle. She saw no one, heard not a sound, though was not

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unnoticed. She came to a halt as two guards who had been standing alongside the two pillars at the entrance to the Estate, jogged toward her.

“Halt! Stop there,” a stern male voice shouted in the brusque, yet monotone way that guards usually speak.

Startled, she stood immobile for a moment. If she were to oppose them, she would be killed... but that didn't stop her from protesting when they grasped her by her arms and dragged her through the doorway. Raising the volume of their voices to ring out over her protests, the guards summoned the Baron.

She had been able to make it inside the estate, though that was not what crossed her mind as she lashed out and protested frantically.

“You may release her,” Baron Galtier said, stepping down the staircase; and they wasted no time in letting go of her. “Now leave us.”

As he neared the steps closest to where Annora stood, he spoke yet again. “Who might you be?”

“Annora,” she said.

He stepped toward her, extending his hand in a helpful gesture, it seemed. “’Tis my pleasure,” he said. “I am—”

“Baron Galtier,” she said tersely, disdainfully, to say the least. “My husband—you have had him under arrest for weeks.”

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“Your husband? On what charge have I detained him? What is his name?”

“For the death of a werewolf,” she said. “But Rainier is not a murderer! I promise you that...and please, will you free him?”

“That bastard,” he said. “Absolutely not. He killed my son!”

She took two steps toward him, and he still refused to face her. “Please. You must release my husband. I need him! Please, Monsieur, I beg you!”

After a moment he turned toward her, striking her cheek with an open hand. And his voice was stern, unyielding, without even the slightest fragment of compassion. “He will never be released.”

She was jostled backward, holding the side of her face as blood rushed it with a searing pain. She was close to the door and to her own freedom, but she could not leave Rainier behind. There was absolutely no way she could leave him at the hands of the Baron.

“But I assure you, my husband is not a killer!” she said, wiping away her tears. “I beg you to free him!” Every muscle in her face continued to sting, and fear nipped at her mind. “I have ridden all this way in my condition to plead for his release. – He has a family! Please, Monsieur, find the mercy to forgive him. I ask this of you.”

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“How would you feel if your child were to die right before your eyes? Would you have mercy for the one who killed it?”

He grasped her by her arm, dragging her into the great room. She knew better than to protest now. “You say he saves lives, heals children?” He began to pull her forearm sideways, turning her wrist with every second of silence that passed.

“Yes,” she cried when her wrist was wrenched even further, no longer able to withstand the pain.

He released her, and blood rushed to the throbbing wound, spiraling through her.

“Please. Monsieur,” she said. “I am begging you! My husband is innocent!” She trailed off as the Baron began to speak:

“I summoned him because of his reputation,” he said. “But he killed him.”

“No,” she cried. “No. That cannot be!”

She gripped the table as her back leaned against it, searching for something she could use to defend herself. A knife...a candleholder...a small iron rod—anything she could use to defend herself.

He turned and walked toward the entryway, muttering inaudibly. And as his gaze left her, Annora seized the opportunity – quite possibly her last chance to escape. She had been able to feel the dagger that lay upon the table,

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almost touching her lower back. Grasping it, as she kept a steady watch upon the Baron, whose back was still turned to her, she sliced into backside of her skirt, inserting the blade into the fabric; it slid against her leg, and as secure as though it were tied to her thigh. Only the handle protruded.

“Grant my husband amnesty,” she said. “Free him in exchange for me.”

“Amnesty,” he said. “He is going to suffer, and if it involves you, then so be it.” He took slow footsteps from the entryway, into the great room. But what was she to do at this moment? Was it in her best interest to kill him swiftly with the knife she had just obtained, and then attempt to find where her husband was held captive? Or was she to dash out the door at the moment she saw fit? No matter what she considered, all her choices were frightful, most likely impossible, and unquestionably perilous.

“Please. Please!” she said. “Find the compassion to release my husband.”

He pushed her back, against the table. The pain of his fingernails in her sides, and the piercing wooden corner splitting through her back was agony she could no longer endure.

“Please let me go,” she said, her voice thick with pain. “I beg you, Monsieur...free my husband and I. This baby is all I have! Don’t hurt him, don’t hurt my baby....”

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When it was too late, she realized that she had made the wrong choice. After struggling and fighting with courage she could narrowly comprehend, Annora had come so close to escaping when it was a single stab wound that changed everything...

Is immortality worth such a sacrifice?

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Rainier

AFTER I hunted one night I readied myself for sleep in one of the upper-chambers in the estate. There was an open window beside the bed, with curtains waving and blowing about with the breeze. I was nearly asleep when I heard a voice, a familiar one, which was feminine, agreeable and accented British. I opened my eyes, seeing Béja as she stood at my bedside...and she startled me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“You must come to one of the Temples,” she said, “now, as soon as you can.”

“What Temple? Why?”

“I need your help,” she said, pawing at one of the chains around her neck. “Look at this—do you see this

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jewel? It is from the rose at your wife's grave. It means the prophecy is coming true."

I was too stunned to speak.

"And you are the key," she went on, "to saving the Lamps. Do you remember them, in the tomb when I found you? Now it's time—we need you."

I, of all people, should not have thought it strange that the wolf wanted something of me now, after we had met twice. Yet it was too dreamlike, too fantastic to believe.

"How do you know I am the one you need?" I asked, sitting up in bed.

"The Gods have chosen you. There is a red mark on you, isn't there?"

I was silent, trying to understand why the Blood Amulet and I meant so much to her. I must say, when she spoke of so many things which involved it, I could not help but wonder, by some chance, if it *was* part of my fate. But that was much too farfetched, was it not? What if it was truly magical?

I looked straight at her, and saw she had the most amazingly colored eyes—crystal-blue—like shattered ice. "I'm sorry," I said, and then turned toward the entry, "but how can I help you."

From what I had noticed, the more questions I asked, the more she changed the subject or carried on, insisting I yield and go with her to the Temples. I pushed apart the

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curtains and stepped back without offering another word to her. I was curious to see her reaction, in hopes it would help me to realize her purpose and mine.

After pondering for a moment, Béja trotted after me. And cheerily she said: “I will bring you right back afterward! What do you say to that?”

“Tell me why it is so special to you,” I said.

“Are you going to help me?”

This could go on forever. I decided to humor the wolf, tell her what she wanted to hear. “Fine, you have my word. Now, I want to know all about this—the amulet and why you’re here.”

“What do you know of pyramids and temples?”

“A little.”

“Do you know of the Gods?”

I laughed nervously, anticipating what she would ask me next. “No.”

“Well, there are the Guardians of The Spirits,” she said, “and we help them. We watch over the Lamps and protect them.”

It seemed hours went by as I listened, taking in a vast amount of secrets of ancient kingdoms. I could have drifted into a deep dreamlike state, with the vivid imagery of a thousand years’ time flowing through my thoughts until I realized what immortality had nearly taken from me: I was

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a part of a prophecy, a long-foretold fate toward which my love for Annora continued to take me.

Béja explained about the people of ancient Egypt and of Rome, the mystifying tale their hieroglyphs told...and the hidden magic within the tombs. The people in past centuries spent their entire lives preparing for death, for immortality; and, with the light to the spirit worlds at their fingertips, it was possible.

“In the tombs, there are paintings of wolves in battle,” she said, “fighting alongside your kind. People say they aren’t wolves—they’re men in wolf armor. But we are spirit guardians, and you can find us as you can find temples and pyramids. ”

She went on to tell me nearly everything about her kingdom, the Island of Seven Cities, where great palms towered high above and lush green meadows were home to wolves, humans and megalithic statues. There were hieroglyphics as well, each telling another chapter of the legends and tales of the ancients.

I had made an accord with her, because by then I knew what power the Blood Amulet had—and that it was something to do with me. I was not going to let her go without me.

The wolves’ beliefs seemed absurd to me, but I was in no position to offend any gods or spirits, so I kept quiet. They believed in far more than God and the Devil, heaven

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and hell...they were concerned with pleasing the lesser deities. It made no sense, but there was something about what Béja said—and thinking of earth's gods and goddesses, spirit guardians, rebirth—made me see, once and for all, that this was my place to find my answers.

I had fought plenty of wars already—all my inner conflict, my battle between darkness and light, finding where I belonged—and the last thing I wanted was to defend a cause I didn't even understand. But the wolves needed me, I realized, and without the Eternal Lamps there would be no way to reach an afterlife of any sort, save for hell, with a certain place in its deepest inferno waiting for me. I didn't care about their reason for needing me or why they guarded the Eternal Lamps. I could care less about where they came from, their pagan gods and rituals, and why they battled the demons. Make no mistake, it was interesting, I admit, but this was my time to be self-seeking; I cared about the prophecy, and I wanted to know if I could ever escape it. I wanted answers. And more than anything else, I wanted inner-peace.

In a way, I wished to do as they asked, help them win their war, but part of my soul told me: I don't need to do this; it isn't my fight; why worry about it. Let them go, Rainier; you have your own troubles. I had a sort of allegiance to hell by then, and when I thought of opposing it, the demons quickly brought shadows over me—a feeling

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of such worthlessness, that I wanted nothing except to do their work, to keep killing. The hellhounds had come to earth to seduce my soul, to offer me a nonexistent sense of comfort. And several times I felt myself nearly give in....

Caught in the middle of this, unfortunately I had something to do with the Blood Amulet—the key the demons fought for so desperately. I could end this war once and for all—summon the hellhounds and rip apart every single temple, every shrine and tomb to find the Eternal Lamps, and take them back to Satan; sell my soul for the ultimate power. I alone had such strength. But I wanted a much different victory than that. I understood what I needed to do—and by no means did it involve any more evil-doing. Although, the thought of saving myself from hell seemed so wondrously fulfilling that my fate mattered a great deal less than before. I considered it, wondering if I needed no more answers now—if my curse no longer mattered, if my sacrifice would yield joy in the end. Ah, well, that is pointless just the same, I thought. If I turn against these wolves, I will have only fallen deeper into hell. I will have made a pact with Satan...and there goes my vision of reuniting with my family.

The demons were still fighting inside me. It took tremendous mental power to overcome them, and with every fight they seemed to strengthen. But with great perseverance I went on, holding them back, not allowing myself to

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see their horrid images: the eyeless ghouls, the bloodied tormenters, the hellhounds with their venomous fangs. Not thinking about life after death. Never truly knowing whose side I was on.

Béja's eyes flashed, and for a second I felt as though her thoughts were coming to me; but I had not the power to take them in, yet. Then she said, "We need you to help us fight the demons."

Suddenly I remembered: demons—the creatures from my dream so long ago. Oh, now I knew, if I had not known before, I *am* connected to this.

Now my mind was racing. "Demons?" I said, entranced. "You fight them?"

"I plan to. We need to read the scripts, and then I will be able to battle. Without that I won't know what is going to happen."

"But...why should I help you?"

She stood, drew closer to me, and then she bowed once again, extending her right foreleg to the floor and pressing her face against it. There must be something you would like to know or see, in the Temples." Then, suddenly she jolted back as a soft howl rung through the night air. It was somewhere in the distance, but her keen hearing and mine caught it before it had a chance to resonate off the stone or wood, before it could be heard within twenty miles of here. "The Alpha calls," she said. "Come with me, hurry."

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Béja insisted I follow her. I did so, grudgingly at first. Yet when I thought of the life I had now, I accepted the challenge with some distant hope that, maybe there was still a chance I could change my fate...redeem myself.

I walked with her for miles, it seemed, until we came upon a glade, where there was a slight hill, from which a monstrous old oak stood towering overhead. The moon waxed in the grayish sky, until tiny shards of light flickered between the trees and into the clearing. A soft breeze came up, and for the first time since I had become a vampire, the crisp essence of winter was not at all unpleasant. In fact, the air was lovely; sweet as all the gardens in the world.

She brought me before her king, a wolf which was perched on the flat sprawling limb of a tree at the crest, so elegant and poised, looking down at me with the most intense yellow eyes. He seemed catlike, almost, being the size of a tiger, with a long, muscular body and the plushest black fur one can imagine. Spiraling bands of silver, brown and white encircled his neck and chest, blending smoothly together, all the way to the crown of his skull, and to the white spot at the centre of his chest. Even his paws were massive, bear-like; and his tail was so long it touched his hind paws. On his hind legs and underbelly were thick tufts of cream-colored fur; and, stretching outward from his back was a pair of feathery black and silver wings.

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Flanking him were the two guardians, Tierney and Murdock, like statues with gemlike eyes, quietly keeping watch over their king. What I hadn't realized until then was that, Béja, too, had wings—they all did, except they weren't visible when tucked against their backs.

Mathias's voice was deep, husky, commanding and noble, accented British. "Greetings," he said, jumping down to a graceful landing before me. "I am Mathias; and you must be Rainier."

"Yes," I said. "But what do you want of me? I know—the Temples, the Lamps and all—but what, exactly? I have no idea what I'm doing here; all I know is what Béja wants and that she told me to come with her."

"It is nothing to do with me!" she said, sounding disgusted. "It is about doing what is right. But you wouldn't understand that."

When I began to speak, she had already galloped into the forest. I searched every one of my feelings for something I could say to put her at ease, to help her...but nothing came to mind.

Tierney looked at me, shaking his head in disgust. Then he turned to Mathias, who was now seated regally on a stone slab beside the tree, neck arched, shoulders tense, tail twitching occasionally. "She's wrong," Tierney said. "She wants to believe everything she hears or thinks."

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Mathias's eyes became cloudy. And his fur, like downy feathers, rippled with the breeze. "But she is trying. She just goes about things the wrong way."

"I'd not think she was 'trying' when she brought us a vampire. If I were you, I would be right furious. We cannot even trust him."

"What choice do we have?" he said. "Pray to the gods, he can help us."

"But it is not his will. He does not want to be here...or there"—Tierney lifted his paw, gesturing to the path"—or anywhere else with us. Come off it! We are wasting our time. Let him go."

"Go; fetch Béja."

"But he—"

The king leapt off the rock, exposing his fangs as he toppled the scrawny wolf over a nearby tree trunk. "Do as I say." Then he turned to face me, giving a slight incline of his head as Tierney trotted away in shame for having challenged him.

I stepped forth. "Yes, my lord..."

"The gods and demons are fighting for you," he said, "as they fight for our Lamps. All I ask of you is to go with us so we will have our answers."

"You want me to fight," I said, "because I am your debt to your gods."

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“Whelp, we need your powers to keep hell from coming here.”

Several moments later Tierney returned with Béja trailing along behind, her head hanging in shame. Mathias watched as she approached, and all were silent.

“Well, gentlemen”—Tierney smiled, seating himself beside the king—“what have I missed?”

“He wants nothing to do with it,” Béja said. “He’ll not go with us.”

Their gazes fell on me, everyone awaiting my answer. Either I could go with them and sabotage this entire thing...or I could simply agree to help win the war, neither of which would put me at peace. I needed time to figure out exactly how to go about saving my soul, escaping from my life as a vampire without falling to hell. It seemed impossible for me to prevail no matter which path I’d choose, and heaven knows how much time I had to do it. But I’d been left with no choice except to go to the Temple.

“Very well,” I said. “I’ll go with you.”

Mathias agreed to lead me to the Temple, while the others would follow. I rested my hand on his neck, leaning in as I pulled myself onto his back. I bent my leg as I swung it over his side, struggling to find my balance when he stood. I held his fur for support, but his movements made me feel as though I would slide off at any second. His body seemed leaner and longer than ever, his muscles in an ever-

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rippling motion. Béja and Tierney were standing by. Mathias lifted his wings, stretching them as he turned his head to the side to ask me, “Are you ready yet? We should get a move-on.”

“Yes.”

“Do you see those mountains, out ahead?” he asked. “You’ll need to hold tight as we go over them—the clouds are close.”

When he began to trot across the field I found that his gait was much different than that of a horse, for he moved in a rolling, rhythmic stride so different from that of a horse. I felt him rising from the ground, very slowly, as Béja raced alongside him and bounded upward with her wings outspread. And we followed right behind her.

His speed was very similar to that of a falcon or eagle—his wings moved in long, powerful strokes that propelled him smoothly through the sky. And he navigated merely by the direction of the wind, finding a gap between the upper and lower gusts. Before I knew it, we were soaring above the forests and the snow-capped Alps. I could see the world in its slumber from here; and the people, the plumes of smoke and raging rivers vanished beneath the cloak of night. The moon seemed close enough for me to grasp, and the clouds around it were like swirling feathers just above us. I closed my eyes and felt the heavens.

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WHEN WE REACHED THE TEMPLE, I was in control of the demons inside myself. I had overcome them for the time being. This place was not a great deal different than the one that Lucan and I had visited so long ago; in fact, the hieroglyphs and cave-like chambers beneath the Temple were nearly identical to those we had seen before. It sat, nestled between two jagged snowy mountains. Everything that surrounded it was completely white, with neither rock nor tree nor path in sight.

“I will stand watch,” Mathias said. “Béja, lead him.”

From the first room, she and I made our way through the narrowest passageways and down several stairwells before we reached the main corridor. I walked to the very end of the channel, found there were walls on all sides, no doors, and tiny air shafts along the ceiling.

At first I withheld my urge to touch the hieroglyphs, but as soon as I drew near the wall, I could not help but glide my fingers across it. I touched thousands of years of history: the rough texture of the carved stone, with tiny grains of sand crumbling beneath my touch; the berry juices that colored the wolf’s body and armor; and the thick black dots that were his eyes. Fascinated, I stepped closer, gazing at the amulets and their bands of color that touched the painted sun.

“What do you see?” Béja asked. “Can you read them?”

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I shook my head, and then stared at the painting, separating the colors in my mind.

“The ancient ones thought there was a god for each color,” she said. “So they made sacrifices and built the temples and amulets as keys to keep the demons out.” She stepped backward, and then she began to carefully nudge the stones along the wall, pausing for only a moment before trying it once again. As you might expect, I assumed there was some sort of hidden door here. “This is the only way we can win the war. And I need you to help me”—she pawed at another stone—“you need me to help you. Then you can leave.”

“I cannot help you fight,” I said. “I don’t even know whose side I’m on.”

She paused, looking at me; sadness in her eyes. “But you said you wanted to change. Why do you deny it?”

“It’s exactly that,” I said; “I must be reunited with my wife...but I belong to hell. If I betray it, she’ll be gone forever.”

My gaze shifted back to the painting. I was awestruck, no question—but I also felt an eerie chill in my bones. It made my spirit uneasy to be in or near a tomb; and again came the distant shrieks and calls of my fellow troubled souls, who taunted me by saying, “What are you?—a ghost? No. A man? No.” Or: “You don’t belong in any sacred place. You ought to be burning in hell for what

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you've done!" All too many times I had heard such things. For the most part, the voices were faint and garbled; but there were times when they rang like church bells inside my head, on and on and on—whining—crying—screaming until I was so certain I'd gone insane, that I was simply waiting for it to all come to an end. But when I was rational I would want nothing of that. Death would mean my spirit could go to hell, where I belonged...and my fear of losing my family forever was so great that, no matter how painful life was, it would be worth living as long as I had a distant hope of liberation. Maybe I could redeem myself, renounce vampirism, never kill again. Maybe I could forsake all the hatred in my soul, all the darkness and misery...and surrender. Could I? My God, I hoped. I needed to look deeper inside myself. I needed to find the answers that were left behind by her death; to my own satisfaction I needed to make peace with my soul. I would always be a vampire, but there was still a chance I could see Annora one last time. I wanted only to tell her I love her; I am sorry for what happened; and that everything I did anymore—whether it damned my soul or not—was out of love for her. And I wanted to hear her voice, see her face...if just once more.

We nearly crawled through the next passageways, and came to a stop at a door that opened onto a ledge, from which a crisscrossed walkway led to a short pillar at the

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centre, where a glowing orb-like lamp burned. Opposite where I stood, there was a towering statue before the farthest wall.

As soon as we stepped in, one of the stones under Béja's paw wobbled, triggering the door behind us to shut and lock. On all sides of the walls except the doorway were long bony spikes. And below us was some great well, in which icy shards floated round.

Carefully following the ledge, we made our way to it. I was not exactly sure what was expected of me, so I waited for her instruction.

She had just begun to look over the inscription on the orb when suddenly the tomb shook, as though boulders were crashing into it from the outside. Seconds later, another sound echoed deep within the well, the pedestal quivering ever-so-slightly with tiny pebbles rolling off the planks. I wanted to get out of here...but I quickly remembered there were no doors that led from here to the outside.

I tried desperately to figure out how to reach the doors or shafts on the second level. I was not so brave as to walk up these walls, as they still quaked intermittently and the passageways were impossible to reach.

When I began to speak she looked at me, her ears pressed against her skull and her face robbed of everything except horror.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“What is it?” I asked, stepping toward her. “What did you see?”

She swallowed hard; and shivers were moving up and down her spine, causing her hair to turn to thousands of tiny barbs. “The end.”

“Of what?”

“It says two will defend the treasure,” she said. “This prophecy will save magic from its destruction. And one will make the sacrifice.”

I tried to reel in everything she had read to me. This was too great a shock. And just when I’d thought it was finally over I learned that if I did not do right by the wolves, I would most certainly find myself in hell.

The tomb seemed to be spinning round and round, planks shaking and crisscrossing over the well. There was a great undulating force beneath my feet, jostling me against the wall as soon as I rose.

“Come here, quickly,” she said, glancing at me and then the pillar.

I gripped the wall for support, then stood and cautiously made my way across the planks and to the centre of the tomb. I moved with catlike precision, looking straight ahead until I reached the pedestal. “What is it?”

She laid her paw on the slab beneath the orb, saying: “Look at the pillar—see the wolves fighting demons...and the fire between them?”

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I stared at the text, trying to understand it, even though I already knew what it was going to mean, how it related to me. This was the last riddle of the prophecy—and I would soon put an end to it.

“Yes,” I said, “but what does it have to do with me?”

“You are what will end the war—you control the fire.”

When I looked at the hieroglyphs more closely, I saw weapons buried in the wall of fire and strong gusts of wind bringing them toward the wolf armies. Demons fighting wolves in war torn fields, temples falling to the ground, and nonstop bloodshed beneath a black sky, it was hell in a whole new sense. I had been expecting to see my true fate ever since I began to believe the prophecy. I’d known for a long time that something of great mystery and significance awaited me. It was not at all unanticipated but certainly not my desire, considering the path it had chosen for me. I didn’t want to be any sort of conqueror or become a spiritual relic whose name would be etched in these very walls someday.

This...battle—whatever you wish to call it—was by no means my idea of a finale. But it seemed I had no choice, and I would do nothing to let myself fall any closer to hell.

I will have to fight—and pray I will be able to help the wolves save the Eternal Lamps...or never have a chance to see my family again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

There came a quake again, the walls shaking as she lunged forward to grip the pedestal. Her claws were grinding against its surface, her eyes bright with fear. I had no time to be afraid.

All of a sudden it felt as though the temple would sink into the ground. Icy water splashed onto the walls—and like a spring it came upward, drenching the planks and filling the air with a dark mist. Lamps fell from the sconces around the room, a thick silver fluid oozing over the crumbling stone slabs. Ancient gems and treasures ground against bones in the sarcophagi. Vases spilled their precious contents across the floor, and the walls in the burial chamber were collapsing as I struggled to hold on.

I crept blindly through the mist, feeling for the edge of the plank as I shouted Béja's name. Then I listened, but I heard nothing except the roiling water in the well. I tried to stay calm, but the fear and excitement filled me with a rush I'd not felt since I became immortal. I was desperate to figure out how I would get out of here. And, being utterly furious and confused, I readied myself to meet any challenges.

Another quake rocked the temple, jostling me so close to the edge of the plank I felt the misty touch of the water. It splashed more furiously now, twisting this way and that.

I made my way to the centre, and when I reached it I climbed onto the pedestal in hopes of finding her....But

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there was nothing except darkness below. The pillars were giving way to the pressure. As the temple shook, the roof began to collapse; stones were crashing to the floor like a meteor shower, followed by giant shards of ice that drilled straight through the walls. We had caused an avalanche...and in a matter of seconds this entire temple would sink into the earth. I was scarcely able to avoid the falling rocks, and dashed as far away from there as I could, stopping where a great towering statue would keep the wall from descending upon me. And then, Béja emerged, only to slip back, her wings hooking on the spikes that protruded from the wall. Then she began to bleed as she fought to break free. By the time I saw her fall and reached for her she had leapt forward, her claws etching the plank.

“I won’t let go of you,” I said, taking hold of her paws as I tried to bring her to safety. “Try to pull yourself up, I’ll help you.”

She inched toward me, but lacked the strength to climb up the ledge. I gripped the fur on her shoulders and did my best to drag her onto the planks, but it was no use. The temple was turning to ruins: rocks were cascading down, narrowly missing us both, and in the other chambers, walls were giving way every few seconds. I heard the snow rushing in, breaking down a path with a thunderous crash through each corridor and burial chamber.

“I can’t move my legs,” she said, “or my wings.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I shouted for Mathias, though I knew he would never hear me through all the commotion. “Mathias, get us out of here! Someone, help me!”

She took in a deep breath, raised her head and let out a deafening howl.

There was a rather wide opening in the roof now, letting in the filtered light of the moon. From there, a giant fissure was forming across the entire length of the temple, slithering along like some massive serpent.

Béja was letting go of the ledge, as her claws began to slip from it at a more rapid pace. I planted my feet just slightly in front of me, using them to brace myself as I pulled back with all my strength. But then, through the opening, Mathias hurtled downward and pulled me up, so I was able to grab onto his back and bring myself up on his shoulders.

“Help her!” I said, pointing to Béja. “Let me pull her up.”

He shook his head, suspended in the air, wings flapping. “There’s no way.” And then he sprung forward and up, gaining speed as he dashed through the opening, soaring miles above the avalanche. I turned to look back, and saw snow and falling rocks engulf what remained of the Temple, swallowing it all at once.

“Go back!” I said. “We can’t leave her! I’m not finished!”

The Nocturne

“I know that,” he said. “We’ll go back for her when the time is right, and you can finish then. Her fate was not written by the gods—yours was”

He was quiet, carrying me back.

Having reached the countryside, he landed smoothly on a rock, high above the estate, from which I could see all the forests and fields nearby. Once I stepped down I glanced at him, to see tears in the corners of his eyes; and from the way he was carrying himself—with a downcast gaze and his shoulders slumped forward—I knew he felt about Béja’s fate as I did.

“Go, now,” he said, “go back to your son, and wait for me to return for you.”

I began to step down from the rock, onto the hill upon which it sat, when he said, “Rainier, wait. There is one thing I haven’t told you: it was Béja’s secret.”

“What?”

“Your daughter...,” he said, “do you remember when she died?”

The sudden rush of memories caused me to shake my head in hopes of ridding myself of them. After that I nodded. “I’ve tried to forget it. Why?”

“When they cast her and the others out, Béja waited for you and watched over your son. And she said she heard the baby girl crying. When she went to her, she was healed.”

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“I don’t believe that,” I said. “How could—how would she? She was dead, I know...I tried to help her.”

He gazed forward blankly. “She healed herself, as you did before. But she did it at birth—she is far more powerful than you already; she is stronger than all of us together.”

“Then what happened to her?” I asked anxiously. “The cloak was ripped up and she was gone.”

“Béja took her to safety; I cannot tell you where—I was sworn to keep the secret.”

“Why keep her from me and not Requiem?”

“Because she was too strong already. We didn’t know what would happen if she was left with you. Please, try to understand—we did it for her sake.”

“So you kept her from me,” I said, “all this time? I have been grieving...and suffering, while she was alive somewhere and you knew it?”

He stepped forth, drew back his lips to expose his fangs. It was not an invitation to a challenge; rather, it was a warning. “With your fate as it is, yes.”

“Tell me where she is.”

With a fierce snarl, one that was so loud it was nearly a roar, he leapt onto the rock and glared down at me. Then in a low, seething tone he said, “Know that she is alive, and she is the key to your fate.” With that he vanished, neither flying nor walking away from me; he was simply...gone.

The Nocturne

I didn't find him after that, but when he disappeared he left certain visions in my mind—memories, if you will—of the beginnings of Raven's life....

HE TOLD ME, it happened two days before Annora was murdered. She paid a visit to the marketplace. I could have never imagined what would be revealed that day. Not even Annora could bring herself to believe it, for it was too great a shock. You cannot conceive of how it felt to learn this once disaster struck. I had already lost everything...yet I saw this as though it were happening now.

I wanted to always feel as though Annora's presence would, in a way, continue to exist. Much like what I said when I was in the dungeon: the trickery of madness would have been a blessing by this point. And to be perfectly honest with you, I didn't care where this memory came or why; I wanted just to learn what Annora struggled to tell me with her very last breath. Now I knew.

She had just entered the marketplace when she paused to rest for a moment, with Kaeya at her side, laden with sacks and saddlebags as though she were a pack mule. As Annora was going from one booth to another, she never took notice of the strange little old woman—a witch, to be precise—who was following her. The old woman so keenly watched Annora's every move...just waiting for the opportune moment to speak.

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“I beg your pardon, miss,” the witch said, peering out from beneath her hood. “Might I have a word with you?”

Startled and uncertain what to say, Annora turned to face her. “I—I...Oh yes”—she drew away from the booth—“yes, of course.” She paused as a sense of uneasiness came over her.

The witch drew closer. Then she pulled back her hood to reveal what was once light brown hair that had become silver and wispy with age, and was wound tightly into a bun. “Your name, dear?” she asked, extending a ring-adorned hand. “I am Catherine Morreaux.”

Still finding the situation to be most curious, my wife was not pleased to introduce herself, and did so tentatively: “Annora de Aaradyn.”

“Well,” she said, smiling faintly, “’tis a pleasure.”

“What do you want of me?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I want only to warn you. Come along, will you? Please. It will take just a little.”

The sense of uneasiness grew over Annora, until she knew: the witch was a messenger of something dark and devastating. “Warn me of what?”

She waved it away, gesturing for her to come to a quieter, more secluded area—an alleyway—where passersby would not be such a nuisance. “Come along and be quiet. I will tell you.”

Annora shook her head.

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This was madness, stress she didn't need. Yet she wanted to know what it was...and the old woman's strange, evasive nature demanded an explanation. If there was something worthy of this—of approaching someone she had neither seen nor spoken to before—it must have had a point.

“Can I not be told here?” she asked in little more than a whisper. “Tell me. If you will not, I must go.”

“I cannot stay here much longer,” she said. “But, while I am, I will be near the marketplace—you can find me here.” Annora re-adjusted her saddlebags, loosening the straps around her horse's middle.

The witch stepped backward, slowly fading into the bustling progression of horses and carts, with the occasional man and woman who carried pails at their side. “I can tell you about your baby.”

Her blood ran cold. Everything that was going on—what she had thought, what had just been said, how eerie the words that lingered after the witch vanished into the mêlée—seemed perfectly dreamlike.

“Wait!” Annora said. “Please...” Hastening through the street once again, she was in a desperate search for the old woman, who soon beckoned her to a small quiet alleyway. “Why did you do that? What about my baby?”

“I have your attention. Now, I haven't much time—”

“Why did you mention it?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Without question, this was puzzling. My wife had not the faintest idea what to think—and I would have been just as lost—perhaps more so—if I had been there. But I would have demanded answers...and been given them, one way or another. She was much different, much less skeptical.

She wanted Annora's attention, fear and curiosity all at once. She needed to capture her with intrigue—and did so cunningly.

"I can see through you—not as you might think—but in a way," Catherine said. "It is a boy."

Astonished and troubled, Annora struggled to think of an answer. All along she trusted her instincts, the senses that had, over the past few months, become a mother's intuition; and she had sensed we would have a son. "How can you—. Is that...all you know of him?"

"No, I am afraid not."

"Please, I must know."

The old woman made no efforts to avoid the truth, no matter what it might have been. She never hesitated—not even paused to gather her thoughts. "Promise me that you will not be angry with me. I only see things—I do not make them what they are."

She was slightly confused and still reeling in what she had just been told. But she nodded in agreement.

Catherine was quiet for a short moment, glancing outside the alleyway to make certain no interruptions would be

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made. Her voice faded to a whisper. “It is about your daughter.”

My wife’s face paled, all her joy washed away by shock. “My *daughter?*” she said. “I have none.”

“But you will.” She stepped forth to take Annora’s hand in her own. She seemed so detached when doing this—revealing such a wonderful thing. It seemed as though she was devoid of emotion, knowing neither delight nor regret, neither pain nor pleasure. Annora, on the other hand, endured a multitude of feelings—from disbelief, to happiness, to fear and anger—everything imaginable was going through her mind. “Listen to me. There is not one baby in your womb—there are two.”

Her body quivered with excitement, even though she had not the faintest idea what to believe “Twins?!” she said. “No, that’s impossible.”

Catherine waved her hands nervously, then pulled her further into the alleyway. “Shush! Do you want the whole village to know about it? Be quiet!”

“No! No, I cannot.” She took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, lost in the whirlwind of questions and feelings. She envisioned our life, the future she and I had both planned and dreamed, which was nearly gone by then—and by no stretch of her imagination did it involve twins. But of course, that would be wonderful, she thought, and could not help but smile. Twice the joy. Could it be?

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Was it too much to hope for? She was perfectly delighted with the idea of this, and could not wait for me to know about it.

“Can it be?” she asked, wistfully gliding her fingers over the amulet she was wearing. “I will have twins?”

“Yes, you will...but I fear that’s not all.”

“What more?”

“There is more about her; but this is not the place to go about it. Come”—Catherine moved forward, gesturing to her—“follow me.”

She had no permanent home, but for the time being she lived in a small ramshackle house on the outskirts of the village, where the pathways ended and silky emerald meadows began. It was quiet there, with few horses and carts passing by—and without the hourly ringing bells of the church or the noise of the marketplace.

Annora seated herself at the table, gazing curiously at the rows of clay pots and glass bottles—potions, herbs and elixirs that lined every shelf. Storage chests lay open; charms and tiny bones spilling onto the floor. A frothy grey substance boiled over the lip of a blackened cauldron, causing smoke to billow in the hearth.

As Catherine sat at the opposite side of the table, Annora asked: “You take all these things with you?”

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“I take what I can,” she said. “The witch-hunters would find me if they knew who and where I am, so I burn what I cannot carry.”

“It must be awful,” Annora said, placing her hands on her knees. “My husband is a sorcerer—”

“I know of him.” The old woman tapped her fingers against the table, and was quiet for a moment. “The one who went to prison.”

Annora couldn’t hide the fact that this offended her, and was simply quiet.

“I fear for her,” the old woman said tensely. “I do not mean to ruin your joy; but please listen to me. She is troubled.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean—*troubled*?”

“There is evil in her.”

Her voice caught in her throat. “No, I don’t believe it. How could she be?”

“I know you must be afraid,” the old woman was saying, “but please hear me. She is evil—she will do terrible things. I know she will.”

When Annora began to wipe the tears from her cheek, she couldn’t help but sob. After a moment she looked up, sounding frightened and hurt as she said, “It can’t be! That’s not possible.”

Catherine stood, then walked across the room. “Satan is destroying her, as he will destroy your husband.”

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Annora paid no attention to the fact the old woman knew things she shouldn't have—and I am not speaking of the twins—but evil being a part of our daughter. She knew exactly what to say and when to say it, to evoke the deepest fear in my wife, to confuse her to such a degree she was afraid to believe anything but those words, and she was too naive to realize it.

Annora stood quickly. “How can you say that? I don't believe it.”

She said nothing and continued to evade my wife's gaze.

Annora grasped the old woman's shoulder, frustrated and wanting answers. “You can see so much, you know these secrets...why, if she is evil, can I not feel it?”

Finally, Catherine looked at her. “If I had not told you,” she said with the faintest hint of irony, “what would happen?”

“I would be happy, not upset!”

“She is going to hell. When the curse begins, there will be no way to stop it. But for your sake and your son's, you must know this.”

Annora felt her heart in her throat. I think that is when it all began to make sense; that was the beginning of the end. Certainly it was impossible to think we were going to have an evil child—that something conceived by our love

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could be stolen by the Devil...but she remembered the prophecy and all the things I had done without knowledge or intent: the hellfire, the way I had saved her, the power I didn't fully understand. Everything made sense now.

"I don't believe a word of it," she said. "I don't believe I am bearing twins." She stepped toward the door, frightened, angry and still in tears. "You...do not *dare* to come near me ever again!"

She recalled the day I'd saved her—that I'd done something no one else could do. *No, it couldn't be*, she told herself. Yet she still could not bring herself to tell me, for fear *if* by some chance, it was true and if anyone should know, they would take away the little girl when she was born. The people in this village were brutal, and if someone thought a child to be evil or cursed, it would be destroyed.

The curse was in Raven's blood, without question ...but it was in mine just the same. And now I knew she was alive, going on about her life somewhere, quite possibly with no idea that her brother and I existed.

Then I saw a fleeting glimpse of what would be—how my children would look during their childhood and young adult years—but everything seemed almost dreamlike. Both were slender, rather tall, fair-skinned and dark-haired. Requiem had a sort of rugged charm—a charismatic smile, pale grey eyes and rich feathery brown locks that framed his face. Raven was gorgeous, with long and straight black

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hair that cascaded over her shoulders, eyes the color of sea foam, and the faintest freckles across her nose and cheeks.

That moment it hit me: they were both alive—there was still hope, while here I was, on the same ill-fated trajectory with no idea how to redeem myself. And there was nothing to preserve my memory or to remind anyone of who I used to be. I would have to change it, no matter what; for Annora, for my children, for Béja and Mathias—all of them.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rainier

I REACHED the estate, furious beyond all reason and belief. I was, yet another time, free-falling into madness, straight toward the desolate void of grief and confusion. What was I going to do? The life was just beginning to build and understand—my life with Requiem—was taken from me that night. Now the wolves were dependent on me; and Béja, my only savior and friend, was deserted and left to die. It was all because of me, I thought; if I had been stronger none of this would have happened. And Raven survived? How? And where was she taken to safety?

The evil within me was so devastating that I felt myself grow weak with it, as though spiritually I was dying once and for all. What would survive were my long-forgotten

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memories of who I was....and even then I would be too consumed by hatred to see them.

When I returned my brothers were waiting for me inside the estate; and the scent of fear was fiercely powerful around them. I sensed it the second I stepped in and saw them standing there, as I had not in more than two years.

“Why did you come here?” I asked without much emotion.

“To reason with you,” Lucan said. “We know what you’ve done, what you will keep doing.”

I walked past them, into the great room. I had not been there for more than a moment when the door of the bedchamber in the first hall slowly opened and Requiem stepped out, then rushed to me as fast as he was able. I gathered him up and held him so that his legs rested on either side of my hip, and he was close enough to snuggle against my shoulder, which he loved to do. He was fighting off sleep, barely able to keep his eyes open; though he wanted, more than anything, to be with me as often as he could—and for me to hold him.

They both stared at him, as though to ask, Who is this?

“Requiem, look,” I whispered and pointed to my brothers. “These are your uncles. Say hello.” He glanced at them, lifted his hand ever-so-slightly in acknowledgement, though he was too shy and tired to do anything more.

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“He’s beautiful,” Braden said, though the same awkwardness continued between us. “He looks just like his mother.”

I didn’t want to hear what they had to say; I simply wished to know why they were here, though instinct told me when I first saw them that night. Something wasn’t right; they were not here to talk to me or reason with me. There was a darker motive at hand, I could feel it.

“I need to put him in bed,” I said as I walked toward the bedchamber. Requiem fought against me, as he hated to go to sleep alone. The moment he realized where he was going, he clung to my side, begging me not to leave him there.

“I’ll come right back, son,” I whispered, laying him on the bed and arranging the blanket so it covered him. I kissed his forehead, and he giggled before returning the gesture. “As soon as I tell your uncles to go home, I will come back for you, I promise.”

“No,” he said breathlessly, “no, Papa, stay! Stay....”

“Requiem, listen,” I said: “if you close your eyes and relax, it will make me come back sooner. And then we’ll do whatever you like, how is that?”

He smiled and nodded. “Tell s—story?”

I stood and stepped toward the door. “Of course. Hurry, close your eyes so I can come back faster.”

The Nocturne

Loving this game, he did just as I said, and I slipped out of the room, quietly.

When I returned to the great room, Lucan and Braden were standing there, exactly as they had been. Yet as I walked past them, through the entranceway, out the door and onto the porch, suddenly there was this...white-hot sensation in my back, as though a series of knives was plunging into it with tremendous force. I turned around, finding that same vampire hunter standing behind me, holding a wooden stake in his hand, with blood dripping down its tip.

“No, wait!” Braden said to him as he rushed to my side. “Don’t.” Then he turned to Lucan, with a fiercer rage than I thought I would ever see in him. “You said you wouldn’t! I told you to make that promise!”

“Leave us,” he said to the vampire hunter, and he did, reluctantly.

“Keep your promise,” I said. “Finish it, go ahead. I have nothing to live for.”

Braden took a step closer, motioning at the chambers in the corridor behind me. “Does your son mean nothing to you? All that you told me—what Annora went through to give birth and what you had to do...how could you leave it behind like this? How could you forget?”

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We kept our voices low, so as not to disturb Requiem, though our simmering anger and hatred could be heard all the same.

“I’ve not forgotten,” I said, raising my voice and hands. “Let me tell you: you have no idea what I have seen, what I have been through. Don’t you try to remind me of what happened. Do you think I can ever forget it? She died in my arms! And she told me her last wish: to save him, and I did; I cut her and myself opening her womb—for both of them—not for anyone else! Everything I’ve done has been for them, so don’t use that against me. Don’t tell me I have given up fighting for her, because it will never end. It will never be over!”

“Oh, that merits a medal,” Lucan said. “The killings, the bloodshed—what is that for, then? Is that for her, too? Or is it for the baby, do you drink blood for him? No, you kill for pleasure, some sick pleasure. I will put an end to it if you cannot.”

There was such disdain, such hatred in my voice, that it consumed everything within me that was still human. “Coming from you, the biggest pleasure-seeker of all. Go ahead, put an end to it. Kill me, right here. If you had the guts you would. Go on. It will make us all murderers, and let history remember that.”

“My cause is noble,” he said, “it has always been. How long have I stood back, Rainier, how long? I wanted for you

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to come with us and learn, but she stood in the way of it. Had you gone, maybe things would be different now. But I tried to be understanding, I tried to listen to what you wanted. I've not said a word for more than two years."

Caught in the moment, my deepest grief overtook me. With one quick movement I ripped the curtain from the window, tossing it aside. I tore apart everything nearby, furious and raging. "So you knew, all along, what would happen—and you did nothing. You betrayed me....why? Why did you not help me, if you knew?"

"I didn't say that," Lucan said. "You knew everything we did. There was nothing more."

"And there was no way to tell what would happen," Braden was saying. "Come now, be reasonable! You were satisfied, being a healer and all. You didn't want more power, or use it in a bad way. We didn't know what to expect—no one did."

"What about our parents, then? I begged both of you for years. All I wanted to know was what happened to them, and you"—I came closer to Lucan, gesturing at him with wild nervous motions—"you denied me."

He pushed past me, walked to Braden and stood beside him, in a united front against me. "Maybe we were trying to protect you."

"Oh, I am supposed to believe that. How can I believe a word from either of you?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Years from now,” he went on, “when your son is older and asks you why he doesn’t have a mother, what will you tell him? Will you give him all the gory details—that she was pregnant, got stabbed and kept suffering when you ripped him out of her? Of course not! You will tell him that she is gone, and leave it at that. Why?—because it’s best left unknown. It is the same with our parents; I was sparing you the horror we went through.”

“Look at you,” Braden said: “you’re wickeder than all of hell; you put Satan to shame. Can’t you see what you’re doing? The reason you did it makes no difference—you are still a killer, and there is a child involved. Without you he has no one. Is that what you want for him, to be an orphan?”

I spoke without thinking, without stopping to reason with myself or to realize what an awful thought had just passed through my mind. “Then Annora shouldn’t have died and left us this way. I never asked for any of this to happen!”

The looks on their faces were, simply, absolute shock. Lucan was more furious than surprised, while there was sadness in Braden’s eyes that I’d not seen in the past.

“I can’t believe you,” he said; “I cannot believe what you just said. What would she think if she could see you now? She would regret giving her life for you, I am sure of that. She wouldn’t even know you.”

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“All she can see is her grave!” I said, choking back a sob. “That is it: her coffin; dirt, water, the earth. She has no eyes anymore, because there is nothing left of her. Nothing. And I wish that we—all of us—the baby, too—were dead and rotting with her!”

“If you wish that on yourself,” Lucan said, “I’ll do it. You don’t deserve to have that child. He ought to have a chance to live a normal life, and you will never give him that. I’ll say it: I never liked Annora; we both wanted different things for you, but my God, she loved you.” He paused, catching his breath. “When she got pregnant I thought it was a mistake, because she wanted even more of your time to get ready for the child. You put everything aside for it. But, even as I felt about the whole thing, I could see what it meant to both of you.”

We spoke in quieter tones now, hinted with sorrow and the simmering anger that willed us on.

“Then why did you quit speaking to me?”

“I went my way, you went yours. You had what you wanted. But now, here you are—a killer—and here is her baby, on his own, more or less forgotten because you’re too in love with yourself.”

“He is my flesh and blood,” I said. “I gave him life, I brought him into the world...I will raise him. I don’t need any help from either of you. The time for you to help me was years ago—but you didn’t.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I fell apart with the realization of what I had done and said. I staggered backward until I touched the wall.

Then I slumped down with my hands on my head, able to cry for the first time in two years. I was having the most serious breakdown one could imagine, trying to pull myself from the world that had, for so long, consumed me. As I fought it, my old memories—my happiest moments—came to mind: I was reliving my wedding day; I could see Annora, as though she was standing before me now, smiling as she always did; and then I went on to the day when she told me we were going to be parents, with all the sweet sentimental moments thereafter...and I remembered watching the baby grow, feeling him, and talking to him even though he couldn't hear me. These things snapped through my memory, one after another, in a series of events that led me to this day. But it was not madness—I wasn't cracking up—I was, with great pain and effort, coming back to my old self, the one who was loving and gentle, and who would do anything to protect his family.

So when I thought it was completely over—that my lifelong battle and my struggle for vengeance had come to an end—I was given a final chance to redeem myself. I could be liberated, and on some level, find redemption. There was still a chance for me.

The Nocturne

At that moment I made a decision I thought I'd never live to see. This was my judgment day. Fighting the malice, hatred and evil inside me, I would finally seize whatever peace there was going to be. It was too late for me to escape immortality, but I could set things right in this life and do everything in my power to put Annora's soul to rest. I could renounce evil, make the most of my time with my son, and go on to the afterlife with a clear conscience. And, with God as my witness, I was ready to do this.

Braden approached me, extended his hand and waited for me to take it. I stood, wiped the tears from my eyes and took a deep breath. I'd managed to calm myself, though it was slight; and Lucan, the stern one, now seemed to have a deeper understanding of me.

"Greater things are going to happen," he said, "and there is no way to stop them. But you can have another chance. What if something could be done?"

"What do you mean?"

"First tell me if you would. Renounce this, start fresh, find a new beginning."

I was silent, going over this with a myriad of questions I couldn't answer. Why would my brothers be willing to help me, if at all? Why would Lucan ask such a thing? And, above all, can I still be saved?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You can,” Braden said with renewed hope. “Remember how you loved Annora, who you were. Think of going there again, living it.”

“But I can’t.”

Lucan eyed me, not ready to surrender his position, not ready to quit opposing what I did. “Tell me now, what is your answer. Would you give up these powers?”

“You aren’t the first to ask me.”

Then he surprised me with the answer, “I know. Tell me, so we can end it.”

Neither of them had the faintest idea what decision I had made or what may be the outcome. I felt more awful then than I had moments ago. The weight of the things I had said began to weigh down my thoughts, and with them came the most dreadful sense of guilt. I didn’t mean what I’d said about wanting to die or about wishing death on my son as well, nor had I meant any ill will against Annora...but I felt like the most despicable person on this earth just the same.

My brothers were right—I did have something to live for: my dear little boy, who thought the world of me and loved me unconditionally. Annora lived on in him, in more ways than he would ever know. But it was going to end that night. I would never again do wrong by my family. In a way, he saved me, for it was my love for him that made me

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remember who I was and who I should become. And Lucan, who spent his entire life in search of power and greatness, did not have the heart to kill me...and instead drew me away from darkness.

“Rainier, please tell us,” Braden said.

“If all is forgiven,” I said in my soft-spoken tone from long ago, “then yes. I am with you.”

“For all time,” he went on.

“Then I suppose I should tell you now,” Lucan said. “Annora’s grave is not the end for her.”

To Be Continued...