

“I was really grabbed by the narrative voice and I was fascinated by the story—
what a story!” —CHARLAINE HARRIS, *New York Times* bestselling co-author of
graphic novel *Cemetery Girl*, on Alma Katsu’s *The Taker*



THE DESCENT

Book Three of THE TAKER TRILOGY

Alma Katsu



THE DESCENT

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THE DESCENT



BOOK THREE OF THE TAKER TRILOGY

ALMA KATSU



GALLERY BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For my husband, Bruce.

Thanks for keeping things from falling apart.

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

PROLOGUE



The dreams came almost every night.

At first, I almost didn't take notice of them. When they started, Luke had been gone only a few months and I was in that black fog that follows the death of a loved one. During the day, grief would fall on me suddenly. I'd look at the clock to find that an hour had passed and yet I couldn't account for the time. Evenings were worse; I'd lie alone in the bed Luke and I had shared waiting for the night to inch by. Evening meant long hours of insomnia, listlessness, fitful snatches of sleep, and the pale lavender-gray of dawn coming too soon. The occasional nightmare could do little to impress me compared to that slow hell.

I first realized I was having nightmares when bits would suddenly bob to the surface of my consciousness: a flash of pale pink flesh, soft ochre candlelight, a streak of crimson blood. It was only by the end of the fourth month, when I started to have something resembling rest again, that the nightmares bled through, and I couldn't fail to take notice of them then.

What made them especially unsettling was that they were not about Luke but about Jonathan. I hadn't thought about Jonathan in a long time, certainly not after Luke and I settled on the upper peninsula of Michigan, in that lovely cottage where we lived together for four years. It would've been logical for Luke to be the one haunting my subconscious considering what we'd gone through at the end: his long, lingering illness; months shuttling him through rounds of treatments that all turned out to be for naught; weeks in the ICU; and the final stretch in the hospice, where he waited to die. That living nightmare had consumed my days for our last nine months together, and I couldn't see any reason why it shouldn't consume my sleeping hours as well.

I remember quite vividly the dream that made me realize something unusual was going on. It started up like the beginning of a movie I'd seen before, and sensing that I was about to have the same nightmare I'd by then been having nightly, I tried to wake myself up. But that never works in dreams, does it? No matter how hard you try, you can't make yourself wake up. Instead, it's like you're Houdini trussed up in a straitjacket and chains and submerged in a dread that's numbing and deadly, like ice-cold water. There's nothing you can do but struggle against the restraints in the hope of freeing yourself or just keep going until, by the mercy of God, you're released from the dream's stifling clutches.

The dreams always took place somewhere that was both familiar and yet unknown to me, in that peculiar way that the subconscious works. Sometimes it was in a dark, shaggy forest that could almost be the Great North Woods that had surrounded my childhood home of St. Andrew, but was not; or a crumbling castle that I might've visited during my never-ending travels, but had not; or a dilapidated mansion with broken plaster walls and ruined woodwork that could've been one of the houses I'd lived in during my long, circuitous life, but was not. Strangely familiar, familiarly strange, these settings that tried to embrace me and push me away at the same time.

The dream that struck me as too strange to be simply the normal functioning of the unconscious mind started abruptly in a new setting, a dark, narrow passage whose walls were made of huge stone blocks. Those walls gave the impression that I was in a solidly made old fortress. From the cold dampness of the stone and the tang of mildew in the air, I assumed the passage was underground. It went on and on, turning and turning again, twisting in on itself like a maze. What's more, the passage

was disconcertingly narrow: a normal-size person wouldn't have been able to fit, and small as I am could barely squeeze through. I hurried along as quickly as I could, desperate to get out of the claustrophobic space.

Finally, I came to a door. It seemed to be as broad as it was tall and somewhat crudely made, its heavy wooden planks held together with metal straps. The wood stain had yellowed with time and almost glowed beckoningly in the darkness, but up close, the lovely patina gave way to a frenzy of scratches, as though the door had been attacked by frantic clawed animals.

Although this subterranean room was likely used for storage or perhaps as a wine cellar, the knot in my stomach told me that probably wasn't the case. I knew from other dreams on other nights what I would find behind the door; something bad awaited me and I didn't want to go on. I wanted to wake up, to break the dream's horrible spell, but once I'd entered the dream world, I was locked in, doomed to play out the dream to its end.

I opened the door. Air rushed at me, damp and foul, the way air smells and feels when it has been shut up underground. There was very little light and I could see only a few feet in front of me. I sensed movement in the darkness ahead and went toward it. You might even say that I went toward it *because* of what was waiting for me, something I was helpless to resist under any circumstances.

The first thing I saw were his hands: a man's hands wearing heavy iron manacles. Then I saw his arms, drawn overhead by a chain attached to the manacles. There were nights in my dreams when the man had been forced to dangle at the end of his chain, and let me tell you, that was a horrible sight. His tendons strained to the snapping point, his arms wrenched from their sockets. Tonight, he had been allowed to stand, though his feet could barely touch the ground. Even though I couldn't see the man's face, I knew who it was; I could tell by the broad shoulders and the long torso, the elegant natural arc to the small of his back. All I could see of his face was a cheekbone and part of his jaw, visible through a tangle of disheveled black hair, but that, too, was enough.

It was Jonathan, stripped naked and bound in chains. Every one of the dreams, regardless of when it was set or how it started, always ended the same way, with Jonathan being tortured and punished by someone I couldn't see, for reasons I wasn't told. As he hung from his manacles, he reminded me of Saint Sebastian, his flesh pale and his head tilted sideways as though nobly resigned to his fate, ready to endure whatever punishment awaited him. There were bruises on his otherwise perfect body: a bloom of red and purple on one hip, a darker, larger one running the length of his right flank. His upper back bore crosshatched scrapes. He gleamed from head to toe with sweat and was flecked with grime. Needless to say, seeing him like this was a punch to the gut and made me violently ill. It also repulsed me to realize that despite his brutalized condition, I still found him beautiful—because it was impossible for him *not* to be.

I called his name but he couldn't hear me. It was as though we were in two separate rooms and I was looking at him through soundproof glass. It was then that I realized his wounds weren't healing instantly as they had when he was immortal, the same as I, and this meant he was again made of flesh and blood. And if he were mortal, that also meant it was possible for him to feel pain again. He was suffering.

The last I had known, Jonathan had been sent back to the underworld, to the land of the dead. This was his second trip, making him one of the select few—perhaps the only one, as far as I knew—to do so twice. Four years ago, Jonathan had told the necromancer who'd brought him back that life continued on the other side, and in this life, he'd been made the consort of the queen of the underworld. When Jonathan had been dispatched a second time, I assumed he was gone forever, that his soul had gone back to the land of the dead, the queen's domain—whatever *she* was.

Now I was having these nightmares, and they came to me almost every night. I couldn't understand why I would dream of Jonathan—and why those dreams would repeatedly be filled with him being viciously tortured. He hadn't been on my mind at all. I'd forgiven him long ago. As a matter of fact, I'd been the one to dispatch him from this world the first time, and that was only because he had begged me to. Under the conditions of our strange curse, it was the only way for him to end his immortal life, which he deeply wanted. I still felt guilty for what I'd done; after all, who can take the life of the person they love—even if it's at his request—and not be torn apart by it? Still, I would've thought that if I were going to dream about anyone, it would be Luke, so recently departed from my side.

But it was Jonathan.

In my horrific nightmare that night, I tried (as always) to set him free. The chain that the manacles were attached to fed through a pulley in the ceiling that was affixed with a padlock to a ring bolted into a stone block. First, I tried to pry off the padlock but it held firm. Then, I began to search the floor on my hands and knees, groping in the darkness for a key, thinking I might find one for either the padlock or the manacles. The entire time, Jonathan stood quietly, his arms stretched overhead, oblivious to me, unconscious on his feet.

It wasn't until I heard him make a sound, halfway between a grunt and a gasp, that I whirled back to look at him and, for the first time in any of these dreams, saw a sign of another person. A hand snake lovingly along the side of his face, cupping his jaw. It was a woman's hand, elegant and long, whiter than snow. He didn't fight her. He let her caress him. I would be lying if I said that the sight of a woman's hand didn't unnerve me. It wasn't because a woman was involved—this was Jonathan, after all; it was only natural that a woman would be involved. No, there was something strangely inhuman about that hand. I wanted to cry out and demand that she release him, but I couldn't. In that peculiar way of dreams, I couldn't scream. I couldn't make a sound. My throat was shut tight, paralyzed with fear and anger.

Then I woke up, exhausted and drenched in sweat. These dreams that continued to plague me night after night were taking a toll on me—and I was beginning to believe they were *meant* to, that they were a sign that Jonathan needed me. But Jonathan was no longer on this earth. He had gone to a place where I couldn't follow. Yet, if he needed me, how could I not go to him? And there was only one person I knew who could help me. Only one man could get me to where Jonathan was.



The sunlight glinting off the Mediterranean that afternoon was bright enough to blind, and the boat bounced hard off the waves like a broken-down carnival ride. I'd come halfway around the world to find someone who was very important to me, and I wouldn't let a little rough weather keep me from finishing my journey. I squinted against the headwind to the horizon, trying to will a rocky shoreline to appear out of nowhere.

"Is it much farther?" I asked the captain.

"Signorina, until I met you this morning, I never knew this island even existed, and I have lived on Sardegna my entire life." He was in his fifties if he was a day. "We must wait until we get to the coordinates, and then we will see what we shall see."

My stomach floated unsteadily, due to nerves and not the waves. I had to trust that the island would be where it was supposed to be. I'd seen strange things in my lifetime—my *long* lifetime—many of them stranger than the sudden appearance of an island that heretofore had not existed. That would be a relatively minor miracle, on the scale of such things, considering I'd already lived over two hundred years and was destined to live forever. But I was a mere babe compared to the man I was going to see. Adair, the man who had given me—or burdened me, depending on your point of view—with eternal life. His age was inestimable. He could've been a thousand years old, or older. He'd given different stories every time we met, including the occasion of our last parting four years ago. Had he been a student of medicine in medieval times, devoted to science and caught in the thrall of alchemy, intent on discovering new worlds? Or was he a heartless manipulator of lives and souls, a man without conscience who was interested only in extending his life for the pursuit of pleasure? I didn't think I'd gotten the truth yet.

We had a tangled history, Adair and I. He had been my lover and my teacher, master to my slave. We had literally been prisoner to each other. Somewhere along the way he fell in love with me, but I was too afraid to love him in return. Afraid of his unexplainable powers, and his furious temper. Afraid of what I knew he was capable of and afraid to learn he was already guilty of committing far worse. I ran away to follow a safer path with a man I could understand. I always knew, however, that my path would one day lead back to Adair.

Which is how I came to be in a small fishing boat, far off the Italian coast. I wrapped my sweat-soaked shirt more tightly around my shoulders and rode along with the ship's rocking, and closed my eyes for a moment's rest from the glare. I had shown up at the harbor in Olbia looking to hire a boat to take me to an island everyone said didn't exist. "Name your price," I said when I'd gotten tired of being ridiculed. Of the boat owners who were suddenly interested, he seemed the kindest.

"Have you been to this area before? Corsica, perhaps?" he asked, trying either to make small talk or to figure out what I expected to find at this empty spot in the Mediterranean Sea.

"Never," I answered. The wind tossed my blond curls into my face.

"And your friend?" He meant Adair. Whether he was my *friend* or not, I didn't know. We'd parted on good terms, but he could be mercurial. There was no telling what mood he'd be in the next time we met.

"I think he's lived here for a few years," I answered.

Even though it appeared that I'd piqued the captain's interest, there was nothing more to say, and so the captain busied himself with the GPS and the ship's controls, and I went back to staring over the water. We had cleared La Maddalena Island and now faced open sea.

Before long, a black speck appeared on the horizon. "Santa Maria," the captain muttered under his breath as he checked the GPS again. "I tell you, signorina, I sail through this area every day and I have never seen that"—he pointed at the landmass, growing in size as we approached—"before in my life."

As we got closer, the island took shape, forming a square rock that jutted up out of the sea like a pedestal. Waves crashed against it on all sides. From the distance, there didn't appear to be a house on the island, nor any people.

"Where is the dock?" the captain asked me, as though I'd know. "There is no way to put you ashore if there is no dock."

"Sail all the way around," I suggested. "Perhaps there's something on the other side."

He brought his little boat around and we circled slowly. On the second side was another cliff, and on the third, a steep slope dropped precipitously to a stony and unwelcoming beach. On the fourth side, however, there was a tiny floating dock tethered to a rock outcropping, and a rickety set of sunburnt stairs leading to a stone house.

"Can you get close to the dock?" I shouted into the captain's ear to be heard above the wind. He gave me an incredulous look, as though only a crazy person would consider climbing onto the floating platform.

"Would you like me to wait for you?" he asked as I prepared to climb over the side of the boat. When I shook my head, he protested, "Signorina, I cannot leave you here! We don't know if it is safe. The island could be deserted . . ."

"I have faith in my . . . friend. I'll be fine. Thank you, Captain," I said, and leapt onto the weatherworn wooden dock, which bucked against the waves. He looked absolutely apoplectic, his eyes bulging as I climbed the staircase, gripping the railing as I struggled against the wind. When I got to the top, I waved to him, signaling that he should go, and watched as his boat turned back the way we had come.

The island was exactly as it had appeared from the sea. It seemed carved from one lump of black stone that had emerged directly from the ocean floor. It had no vegetation except for a stand of scraggy pines and a bright chartreuse carpet of moss spread at their roots. A few goats ran by and seemed to regard me with an amused, knowing air before they scampered out of sight. They had long, silky coats of many colors and one had a frightening pair of twisted horns, wicked-looking enough to be worn by the devil.

I turned to the house, so ancient and solid that it seemed to have grown straight from the bedrock of the island. The house was a curious thing, its stone walls so sandblasted by weather that it was impossible to tell much about it, including when it might've been built, though it resembled a fortress—small and compact yet just as imposing. The front door was a big slab of wood that had been thoroughly dried and bleached by the sun. It had elaborate ironwork hinges and was decorated with iron studs in the Moorish style, and gave the impression that it could withstand anything, even a battering ram. I lifted the knocker and brought it down once, twice, three times.

When I heard nothing from the other side of the door, however, I started to wonder if maybe I had made a mistake. What if the captain had misread his charts and left me on the wrong island—what if Adair had moved back to civilization on the mainland by now? I'd tracked him down through a man named Pendleton who'd acted as Adair's servant until Adair chose to go into seclusion. When Pendleton wasn't sure what had caused Adair to withdraw from the world, he gave me coordinates to

the island, which he admitted was so small that it appeared on no maps. He warned me there was no easy way to get in touch with Adair, as he didn't use email and didn't seem to have a phone. I had no intention of alerting him to my arrival anyway—force of habit made me wary of Adair still, but I also didn't want to risk being put off or dissuaded from coming.

I knew Adair was somewhere in the area, though, because I felt his presence, the unceasing sign that connected him to each of the people he'd gifted with eternal life. The presence felt like an electronic droning in my consciousness that wouldn't stop. It would fall off when he was far away—as it had the last four years—or grow stronger when he was close. This was the strongest it had been in a long while—and was competing with the butterflies in my stomach in anticipation of seeing him again.

I was distressed to hear that Adair was living by himself, particularly because it was such a remote location. Now that I saw the island, I was more worried still. The house looked as though it had no electricity or running water, not unlike where he might've lived in the eighteenth century. I wondered if this return to a way of life that was familiar to him could be a sign that he was overwhelmed by the present and couldn't cope with the never-ending onslaught of the new. And for our kind, retreating into the past was never good.

I sought out Adair now after four years apart only because I'd been seized by an idea that I wanted to put into action, and I needed his help to make it work. I had no notion, however, if he still cared for me enough to help me, or if his love had dried up when it went unreciprocated.

I knocked again, louder. If worse came to worst, I could find a way into his house and wait for Adair to return. It seemed an arduous trip to make for nothing. Given my immortal condition, it wasn't as though I needed anything to live on, food or water, or that I couldn't deal with the cold (though there was split wood stacked against the side of the house and three chimneys, each with multiple pots, visible on the roof). If he didn't return after a reasonable length of time, I had my cell phone and the harbormaster's number, though the captain had warned me that reception was nearly impossible to get this far off the coast. If I was lucky, however, I might be able to flag down a passing boat . . .

The door flung back at that instant, and to my surprise, a thin woman with brassy blond hair stood before me. She was in her late twenties, I would guess, and though pretty, she was worn around the edges in a way that made me think she'd worked hard at enjoying life. She had on a wrinkled sundress and sandals, and hoop earrings that were big enough to wear as bracelets. Unsurprisingly, she regarded me with suspicion.

"Oh! I'm sorry—I hope I'm not on the wrong island," I said, regaining my wits in time to remember to be charming, all the while thinking: *In seclusion, my ass, Pendleton*. "I'm looking for a man by the name of Adair. I don't suppose there's anyone here by that name?"

She cut me off so sharply that I almost didn't get the last word out. "Is he expecting you?" She spoke with a working-class British accent. Over her shoulder, a second woman stepped into view at the other end of the hall, a full-figured woman with long dark-brown hair. Her skirt came down to her ankles and she wore embroidered Turkish slippers on her feet. Aside from their shared displeasure at seeing me, the pair of young women was physically as dissimilar as two women could be.

"No, he doesn't know I was coming, but we're old friends and—"

The two of them crowded the doorway now, shoulder to shoulder, a barricade of crossed arms and frowns set on lipsticked mouths. Up close like this, I could see that they were very pretty. The blond was like a model, thin and boyish, while the brunette was lush and womanly, and a picture of them in bed with Adair came to my mind unbidden, the three in a tangle of bare arms and legs, heavy breasts and silken flanks. Their lips on his chest and groin, and his head thrown back in pleasure. A wave of hurt passed over me, tinged with that particular sense of belittlement rarely felt out of adolescence.

fought the urge to turn around and flee.

~~Had I been wrong to come here? No, knowing Adair hadn't changed and had returned to his sybaritic ways made my task easier. There would be no strings, no possibility of reconciliation. I could forget about everything except asking for Adair's help.~~

"Look, girls," I started, shifting the weight of the knapsack in my hands. "Would you mind if I came inside to get out of this wind before I'm blown off a cliff? And if one of you would be so kind as to let Adair know that he has a visitor? My name is—"

"Lanore." His voice rang in my ear, rushing to fill a space left empty. And then he appeared at the end of the hall, a shadowy figure backlit by the sun. My heart raced, being in his presence once again. Adair, the man who'd hurt and deceived me, loved and exalted me, brought a man back from the dead for me, given me all of time in the hope I would share it with him. Did he still love me enough to help me?

As I stood in Adair's magnetic presence, everything that had happened between us rushed back to me in a tumult, all that passion and anger and hurt. The chaos of the strange world I had known when I'd lived with him tugged at me. I stood at his door ready to ask him to take a journey with me— a journey that wasn't without risk. The bond between us might be ruined forever. Still, I had no choice. No one else could help me.

A new chapter in our history was about to begin.



The girls stepped aside without a word, making room for Adair as he approached the front door. I could see him better as he moved out of the sunlight. I knew, of course, that physically, he would be unchanged from the last time I'd seen him. He was the same height and weight. His face was the same, with those arresting, wolfish eyes of green and gold. He wore his beard a little thicker, and had grown his curly dark hair to his shoulders, though at the moment it was held back in a loose plait. The only change—and it was striking—was in his manner.

Adair was one of those people who came off from the first as aggressive and intimidating, the kind of man who naturally set other alpha males bristling. Menace always seemed to crackle just under the surface, and once you got to know him, it only got worse. His moods were changeable and you were never quite sure where you stood with him. Remarkably, that tension was now nearly gone. His natural aggression was nearly undetectable. He was subdued, though I suppose it might've been from the shock of seeing me.

"I can't believe you came back—" Adair began, his voice full of emotion, but then stopped himself. He reached for my hand and drew me over the threshold, continuing in a more restrained fashion. "Come in, don't stand outside. A person could be killed by the wind out there."

"I hope I'm not intruding," I said as I squeezed past the two women, who stared down on me coldly.

"Not at all. We don't often get visitors—as you can imagine, given the isolation—so your arrival is a surprise, that's all." Adair closed the door, and the four of us looked at one another awkwardly. "Well, I should introduce everyone. Robin, Terry, this is Lanore McIlvrae, an old friend of mine. And, Lanore, this is—"

"Robin and Terry, yes." Terry was the brunette, Robin the blonde. They took turns shaking my hand limply, as though the last thing they wanted to do was to let me into their house.

"How long has it been since you last saw each other?" Terry asked, arching an eyebrow at Adair, her arms folded over her ample chest.

"Four years," I answered.

"It seems—longer," Adair offered.

The women made no attempt to mask their hostility, and I started to feel that I'd made a bad mistake by coming without warning. They both oozed sexuality—you could tell by their dress and body language—and I could only speculate as to what I might've interrupted. Before I could sputter another apology for the intrusion, however, Adair asked, "Will you be staying?" and gestured to the knapsack I was holding before adding, "Oh, of course you will. I shouldn't even bother to ask: unless you have a boat at the dock or someone coming back for you soon, you'll need to stay overnight, at least. Though you're welcome to stay as long as you wish."

"I realize this is terribly inconvenient of me, showing up unannounced," I said, looking gratefully at the girls before turning back to Adair. "This isn't purely a social call. There's a reason why I'm here, Adair. I need to talk to you."

His expression darkened immediately. "It must be important for you to have made this journey. Shall we do that now? We can go to my study—"

Robin sighed irritably, shaking her head as she reached for my knapsack. "For pity's sake, di

someone die or something? Surely that can wait till later. We should get you settled, find you a room first.” ~~She then started up the stairs without waiting for anyone to agree. He gave me a nod, indicating I should follow.~~ I was sorry to leave him so soon but followed the blonde, the soles of her sandals scraping on the treads.

I glanced into the rooms we passed as we walked down the hall, mildly curious about the interior of this odd domicile. Adair was a rich man, after all, and could live in luxury and comfort anywhere in the world, so why had he chosen to hide away on this rock in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea with these two women? The fortress was built in a rustic Moorish style and seemed as unimproved on the inside as it was on the outside. There were no clues in the bedrooms, as each was plainly decorated and obviously unoccupied. Wooden beams spanned the low ceilings, and the walls were white-washed stone. The furniture was all rough-hewn and probably had been made on Sardegna or Corsica a century ago. Simple woven blankets covered the beds.

Of all the rooms we passed on the second floor, only one appeared to be in use. In it, a huge feather mattress lay directly on the floor, the tangle of white sheets hinting of wanton abandon. Old Moroccan lanterns fitted with candles circled the bed, which faced a high, wide window dressed in gauzy curtains through which you could see a panoramic view of the sea. Discarded clothing lay all over the floor, including a pale pink brassiere—Terry’s, by the size of it. Two more Turkish slippers sat at odd angles to each other, as though they’d been kicked off in a burst of bad temper. Adair’s unmade bed stirred something near my heart, but the casually tawdry display of the women’s clothing extinguished that stirring as easily as one might squeeze out the flame on a match head.

“Looking for something?” Robin asked, suddenly beside me, catching me gawking outside the bedroom. “You can’t have this room. It’s already taken,” she said in her sharp way.

“I didn’t mean to pry, but the door was open,” I said apologetically.

She had a funny way about her, guileless, like a child. She stared at me flatly, as though she was trying to tell what was going on in my head. “You came here hoping to get back together with him—that’s why you want to see if we’re sleeping with him, isn’t it?”

Heat rose up my neck and across my cheeks. “Not at all. He’s a friend. I’ve come to see for myself that he’s happy.”

“You’ve come an awfully long way just for that.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “That’s not the only reason you came.”

“No,” I murmured. I saw no reason not to tell her the truth. “I need a favor from him.”

“Must be some favor,” she said, then stuck a lock of hair in her mouth and began sucking on it, although she was simpleminded. It was an unnerving gesture.

“It is.” The same anxiety I’d felt when I’d made up my mind to find Adair rose up in my chest, beating frantically like a bird was trapped inside me.

“And after you get what you want from him, will you leave us alone?” She practically spat the words at me. I didn’t know what to say, but before I could gather my wits to answer, she spun on her heel and started down the hall again, my knapsack banging against her shins.



Before Adair and I could speak in private, there was dinner with the girls to endure. The meal was served at a dining table that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a castle. The chairs were as ornately carved as thrones, the windows covered with long, heavy drapes of burgundy and gold. The walls were still fitted with iron brackets meant to hold flaming torches, now made obsolete by a huge crystal chandelier.

was too grand a setting for our small party, and made for a strange, off-kilter meal.

For dinner, Terry had roasted squabs and fresh greens tossed with olive oil. I assumed all the food came from their larder as the island appeared to have neither a chicken coop nor a garden. Adair and the girls ate with their fingers like hedonists, and their mouths were soon slick with squab fat and oil. The girls kept Adair merry, joking and flirting, and something was going on under the table, too, no doubt, a bare foot nestled in his lap or an eager hand stroking his thigh. They did their best to make me feel like an intruder, but I would be damned if I would let them intimidate me.

“How did you two meet Adair?” I asked as I picked at my salad with a fork.

Robin and Terry exchanged looks before the blonde answered. “It happened here on the island, actually. We were staying on Corsica, on holiday. Terry and I always go on holiday together, ever since we were kids. We go anywhere there’s sun and heat . . .”

“And pretty men,” Terry added, winking at Adair.

Robin poked tentatively at a piece of arugula. “Anyway, by the middle of the second week, it was getting sort of boring—”

“Too many German tourists,” Terry interrupted, rolling her eyes. “Hans and Franz with their wives and their little Hanslings in tow. And the men all squeezed into Speedos. Too much white, middle-aged flesh on display for my taste. And, besides, it’s not a proper holiday unless you find a completely stranger to shag. . . .” Terry watched to see if she’d managed to shock me, but I betrayed nothing.

“We hired a boat to take us out on an excursion, you know, to explore the little baby islands off the coast,” Robin continued, fishing a segment of tangerine out of her salad between thumb and index finger, “and we came upon the black beach below. We’d never seen anything like it, so we talked the captain into dropping us off for an afternoon of sunbathing.”

“Oh, but it was too bloody cold for sunbathing,” Terry said.

“We thought the place was deserted. So there we were, lying topless in the sun,” Robin went on as though she hadn’t been interrupted, “when we see *him* wandering toward us, head down, all lost in thought. I couldn’t believe my eyes at first. I mean, we thought this place was deserted. Who’d have thought someone was living here on this rock all alone?”

“He invited us in for a drink, and one thing led to another . . .” Terry grinned wickedly at me, to make sure I understood what “the other thing” had been.

“ . . . and we’ve been here ever since,” Robin finished.

“How long has it been now? Three months? Four?” Terry touched Adair’s arm lightly to get his attention. There was something possessive about her gesture and he didn’t seem to care for it, but he didn’t say anything to her. He was a gentleman—up to a point.

“Four months? That’s an awfully long holiday,” I said, looking from one woman to the other. “What about the people back home, your family, your jobs? They’re okay with the fact that you seem to have—um—checked out?”

“I suppose they’re wondering if we’ve gone mad.” Terry laughed raucously, throwing her head back and appearing not concerned in the least what anyone thought of her. “But they know we’re adventurous girls. We couldn’t turn down the opportunity. There’ll be time enough to settle when we’re older. In the meantime, will we ever get another chance to have an island all to ourselves, and to live in a fortress—with a man like Adair? Not bloody likely.”

Adair pushed back from the table and rose. From the smoldering look on his face, I could tell that he’d had enough. “If you don’t mind, girls, I think Lanore and I have something to discuss in private.” He helped me up from my chair. “Let me show you the island.”

The wind had eased since the sun went down, making it mild enough for a stroll. We were finally

alone together, Adair and I. I was curious: in the house, he had seemed so changed, but maybe that was an act. ~~Maybe he didn't want to lose his temper in front of his guests. Now that there was no one~~ nearby, he could say what was really on his mind. Given how we'd parted, Adair might do or say anything—he might take me in his arms and kiss me, or he might chastise me for leaving him without a word in four years. He could even keep me here against my will, as he'd done once, though I sense that he'd lost that kind of fire. I tingled from head to toe with wild impatience, waiting breathlessly to see if Adair would do something—or if *I* would be the one to do something impetuous. It felt like a devil was whispering in my ear to open the door to trouble and tell him that I'd missed him, that I had feelings for him that I'd never confessed. I kept my hands shoved into my pockets and my arms pressed tight to my sides until the feeling passed, until I could be sure that I wasn't about to do something I'd regret later.

There wasn't much to see on the island or far to go, and before long we were at the black-pebble beach watching the last wisps of periwinkle sky sink into the sea. For all its roughness, the island was stunningly beautiful. Stars were just starting to emerge from the velvet canopy overhead. There wasn't the least bit of Italian coastline visible on the horizon. We might as well have been a million miles from the sea and staring off the edge of the earth into infinity.

I looked back over my shoulder in the direction of the house. "I don't think the girls are happy that we went off by ourselves. I didn't mean to cause a big disruption. I hope this won't make trouble for you later . . ." I began, but then realized the absurdity of my words, to think that Adair would let himself be bullied by two angry women. The Adair I knew had once fearlessly surrounded himself with murderers and thieves, keeping these villains as his servants, and not one of them had ever dared cross him. How had he changed so drastically that he couldn't handle two jealous girlfriends?

He shrugged. "If they don't like it, they can leave at any time."

"Have you made them—companions?" I asked as delicately as I could. "Companion" was the term we used to refer to ourselves, those whom Adair had bound to him through the gift of immortality. That was what we called ourselves in our more discreet moments; we'd also used "captives" and "concubines," but mostly "others," because, by taking our mortality away from us, Adair had made us something apart from humanity. We were the others, no longer human and not like Adair, either.

"I have no need for any more companions. I only let them stay because, well . . ."

I raised an eyebrow. "I've *seen* them. I can imagine why you let them stay."

He looked at me with mild annoyance. "Don't tell me that you're jealous. You have no reason to be—*you* were the one to leave *me*, as I remember. You didn't expect me to be celibate after you left and I went back to that man, did you?"

I turned into the breeze to cool my cheeks. "Of course I'm not jealous. Look, we haven't seen each other in four years—let's not start off with an argument, okay?"

He let his hands hang in the pockets of his greatcoat as he, too, turned into the wind. The loose strands of his long dark hair whipped behind him. "Of course. I don't want to argue with you, Lanore."

I longed to tuck my arm under his as we used to do when we walked along the streets of Boston many, many years ago, but I knew it was one of those crazy urges I had to guard against. It wouldn't do to get too close to Adair; I could lose my perspective, and it would be that much harder to do what I came to do. Instead, I asked, with forced cheer, "How did you end up here, anyway, after Garda? I would've thought you would've gone to see the world."

He nodded at the endless horizon. "Don't you think it's lovely here?"

"Lovely in its way, I suppose . . . but so isolated, stuck out here in the middle of the ocean. Tell me you haven't been here alone the entire time since I last saw you."

He shrugged, a little bit embarrassed by my pity. “Yes, for the most part. After you left, I stayed at the castle at Garda with Pendleton, but I couldn’t stand living there. Your ghost was everywhere: in the mezzanine where we sat in the evenings and you told me about your life, in the bed we had shared. You must admit, when you left I had a lot to think about. I wasn’t going to continue living the way I had before. . . . So I sent Pendleton on his way and came here to be by myself, and every day I circle the stone path and stare at the ocean to clear my head.”

That meant he’d been on his own on the island for nearly four years, if the girls had joined him only recently. “Weren’t you lonely?”

“No, not really. I needed the solitude. I needed to understand myself better and I wouldn’t have been able to do that surrounded by others.” He turned back to the fortress and we started to wander inland again. “What about you?” he asked. “What did you do after you left Garda?”

The wind was at our backs now and blew my hair over my shoulders and into my face and I had to brush strands out of my eyes. “Do you remember, when you’d finally caught up with me, the man who came to my rescue?”

“The doctor. Of course I remember him. I almost killed him.”

“His name was Luke. You made me try to send him away so we would be together, you and I. But I’d already told him about you, and he didn’t believe that I’d stay with you freely and refused to go. So you made him forget me, took away all his memories of me.” Adair had made that part of my punishment for betraying him, for walling him up and leaving him entombed for two hundred years. He’d meant to strip me of everything, property, freedom—but especially love, the love of the man who had given up everything for me.

In the end, however, Adair couldn’t go through with it. When he saw that I’d never come to love him as his prisoner, he set me free and told me to go after Luke. To find him and tell him who I was and what we had meant to each other. “I knew he’d go back to be near his daughters,” I said, “and that’s where I found him. I begged him to remember me. And because it was meant to be—just as you said—he listened, and he forgave me.”

Adair flinched. “So, you have been with him the whole time we’ve been apart. And was it as you hoped? Were you happy together?”

I bowed my head. I didn’t want to hurt him, but he should know the truth. “We were happy, yes.”

He started to turn away from me. “So why have you come here—”

“Luke died a few months ago,” I said, cutting him off. “It happened very quickly. When he took me back, we ended up living near his former wife so he could spend time with his daughters. He was practicing medicine again, and we’d just gotten the house remodeled the way we wanted.” The words spilled out though I hadn’t planned to tell Adair these details. But once I started, I couldn’t stop. I suppose it was because I’d had no one else to tell. “The illness came on very suddenly. He went into the hospital and never came out. First there were tests, round after round, until they found the problem. A brain tumor.” I swallowed and stared at my feet. “His doctors argued whether it was operable or not, but by then it was too late. Everything started to fail: memory, speech, vision. He had seizures. It was hard to watch.” And hard to relive now in the retelling.

Adair stared at me intently. “I am sorry.”

“I stayed in the house for a while. I’d gotten close to his daughters and his ex-wife. They’ve been nice to me, but I think they were beginning to wonder why I was still hanging around. After all, Luke was my only connection to the area. Aside from the three of them, I had no one else, no friends. I’m sure it seemed odd to them, based on what they knew of my past life. They thought it was so glamorous, the home in Paris, all the travel, and after Luke died, I think they expected me to go back to

it.” Adair knew, however, that my Paris house was gone: he’d burned it to the ground when he’d been trying to find me, to flush me out, to burn everything I owned as part of my punishment for what I’d done to him.

“So, your man is gone and you’ve come to see me,” Adair said. There was a tiny uptick in his tone, a hint of expectation.

“It’s not like that. I’m not ready to be with anyone yet,” I rushed to tell him, wanting to be honest with him. Believing that I was being honest. I was still raw from Luke’s passing. It had been only a few months.

Oh, but it was the wrong thing to say to Adair. His face crumpled a bit, and I felt his mood deflate almost unperceivably. He took a moment to compose himself. “Then why are you here? Don’t play games with me, Lanore—why did you come looking for me?”

His questions set my heart pounding hard in my chest. The time had come to tell him, to throw myself on his mercy. It felt too soon; I’d expected that we would’ve spent more time catching up, that I’d have a better chance to see where I stood with him, to find out if he’d forgiven me for breaking his heart. I couldn’t risk that he’d refuse me. I needed him. He was the only one who would be able to help me get to the cause of the nightmares.

The goats chose that moment to come over, staring at us as though they’d never seen humans before. The one with the huge set of horns snorted under his breath as though making up his mind about something, but he didn’t run away when I petted his shaggy head.

“You’re right.” I dropped my gaze, cowardly. “I’ve come for a reason. There is something I need to ask you to do for me, Adair.”

Before I could utter another word, however, we were hit by a sudden gust of cold air. A huge dark cloud was sweeping toward us from the sea. It unfurled across the entire horizon, black thunderheads roiling like a cauldron at full boil, lightning bursts blinking deep within the gray swells. A heavy sheet of rain dropped from the sky and swept across the waves, heading in our direction. I’d never seen a storm break so swiftly, especially one that size.

“That looks dangerous,” I said, pointing to the sky. “We’ll have to go in.”

“It’s nothing to be worried about. We get weather like this all the time.” Adair tried to sound nonplussed, but I noticed that, for some unknown reason, he seemed to be looking at the dark clouds with suspicion. The first huge gust rolled in off the water, sending the goats running for the shelter of the pine trees. Adair placed a hand on my back to gently guide me to the house. As we approached the French doors off the dining room, I saw the two women silhouetted in the yellow light watching for our return, the brunette twitching with impatience. As we stepped through the door, the downpour started behind us in earnest.

I brushed my windblown hair back into place while Adair bolted the door. The women glared at him. “We wondered where you were. You’d been gone so long,” Robin said to Adair in a whiny child’s voice.

“Quite a storm out there, wouldn’t you say? And strange that it came on us so quickly,” Adair said under a furrowed brow. He seemed to be probing for something.

“That’s how it is here, on the water,” Terry replied breezily. Of the pair, she was the bold one, the one who would stand up to Adair. “Good thing you came in. Winds could blow someone as small as her right over a cliff,” she said, nodding coolly at me.

Robin took Adair’s hand and began to tug him toward the stairs. “C’mon, Adair, say good night to your guest. She must be tired after all that traveling,” she said, though plainly it wouldn’t matter to her if I keeled over from exhaustion at that very second. Adair opened his mouth to protest, but I shook my

head.

~~“That sounds like a good idea,” I said. “Robin’s right. It’s been quite a day, what with the travel and~~ all. We can finish catching up tomorrow.” I needed time, anyway, to make sense of the strange situation in which I’d found him.

Adair capitulated, tucking the blonde under his left arm and the brunette under his right. Thus propped up, he turned away from me. “I guess this is good night, then. We’ll see you in the morning.” I watched them walk away, three abreast, the girls’ hips swaying as they climbed the stairs.

THREE



I waited a few minutes before heading to bed. I didn't want to run into any of them again tonight. It seemed fitting that I be alone, for that had been my choice, to leave Adair for Luke. Still, I'd been jarred by the sight of Robin and Terry; I don't know why I hadn't thought Adair would be with someone else by now, but it honestly hadn't occurred to me, and I was left feeling unsettled. I climbed the massive staircase and padded by the closed door to their shared bedroom, their muffled voices rising and falling as I passed. I imagined they were talking about me. I started a fire in the tiny fireplace, changed quickly, and slipped into the chilly bed.

I was smothered by a sense of incredible melancholy. I should've known that talking about Luke would stir memories, bringing to the surface everything that I'd tucked away in the back of my mind. It was the first time I'd spoken about Luke's death with someone who hadn't been directly affected by it: namely: his children, Jolene and Winona; his ex-wife, Tricia, and her husband; and the doctors and nurses who'd worked with Luke at the clinic. Of all those people, I was the one who was least entitled to anyone's condolences. Sure, Luke and I lived together as though we were husband and wife, but we'd been together for only a few years. I was practically a newcomer. Tricia had more of a claim on him than I, let alone his children. The sympathy belonged to them.

The first sign that something was wrong came when Luke collapsed at the clinic. He didn't tell me until he got home that night. "I passed out today," he said casually at the dinner table, not even looking up from his plate. "I woke up on the floor of my office. I don't recall how I got there." He tried to claim it was only light-headedness, because he hadn't eaten lunch or because he was dehydrated, but after a few minutes of cross-examination he admitted that he'd been having headaches for days. I begged him to see a specialist, but being a man, and a doctor, he wouldn't listen. I think it was because he had a vague idea of what was wrong and he didn't want to have it confirmed.

I've been with a lot of people as they were dying and can attest: it's not like it is in the movies. It's not antiseptic or tidy. It is absolutely the lowest point in any person's life. They're either old and their body is starting to irrevocably fail, or they're young but very sick or have had an accident. In either case they're afraid of what's coming, afraid and confused. I've learned through experience that there's nothing you can do for someone at the end except to try to keep them company so they don't have to make that passage alone. No one wants to die alone; I've held the hand of many a dying man. That's the price of immortality. It hasn't meant that death is a stranger to me; if anything, we are reacquainted frequently at the deathbeds of others.

As a matter of fact, I'd been through the death of a close loved one so many times that, during those last weeks with Luke, I went into a kind of autopilot. I knew what was expected of me in those situations. The dying wanted unfailing support. Luke wanted me to be stoic in the face of his emotional ups and downs. He wanted me to be practical and logical, to be a rock at a time when his life was falling apart. He wanted me to be in the waiting room while he was undergoing tests. He didn't want me to freak out when he suddenly couldn't speak or use his right arm. He never had to ask for any of this; he just knew it was what he needed from me. He was too smart to worry that I would be unhinged by his passing; he knew I'd lost plenty of others before him.

It seemed that immortality—rather than make me more sensitive to the pain of losing a loved one—

had robbed me of the ability to feel real emotion in the face of death. When my lovers and friends die, my feelings were always muted and distant. I'm not sure why this was. It might have been to protect me from being swamped by grief, so I wouldn't relive the sadness I'd felt for each of the people I'd lost over the course of my life. Or maybe it was because I knew from experience that, soon enough, another person would come along and—if not take Luke's place, not exactly—at least distract me from missing him. Because I had no choice but to live on and on.

Immortality had made me less human. Instead of giving me greater perspective on what it meant to be human, which you'd think would happen when you had such a long life, immortality had put me at a greater distance. No wonder Adair grew to be insensitive to the suffering of others: immortality forced you to become something other than human. I felt it happening to me, even though I didn't like it. It came to see it was inevitable.

That night as I lay in bed, I thought back to one afternoon in the hospice. The doctors didn't expect Luke to last more than a couple of days, and he was unconscious most of the time due to the morphine drip easing his pain. He wore a knitted cap for warmth as almost all his hair had fallen out from chemotherapy. What was left had turned shock white. He'd lost a lot of weight, too. His face was shrunken like an old man's and his arms seemed too thin for the IV needles and the sensors that fed his vital signs to the monitors.

I'd taken to curling up in a lounge chair by the window, reading or knitting while he slept. I was grateful for the sedatives and painkillers making his last days more comfortable. After all, I'd sat with loved ones dying of tumors and tuberculosis with nothing stronger than Saint-John's-wort and fortified wine to see them through it. The nurses, when they came in to check on him or change the drip bag, would invariably comment on my seeming calmness—backhanded compliments all; I think they thought I should be more upset, like Tricia and the girls. They couldn't understand how I could be so detached. I'm sure they thought me cold-blooded. I wondered if Luke thought so, too.

This one afternoon, however, Luke was more lucid than usual. When I saw him shift restlessly in bed, I put down my book and went over to him. "How are you feeling?" I asked, taking his hand gingerly to avoid jarring the IV needle.

His eyes were feverishly bright. "I have a question for you. Are we alone?"

I looked through the open door toward the nurses' station down the hall. They were engaged in their work. "Yes. What do you want to ask?"

He licked his lips. He seemed to be looking past me, as though he could no longer focus his eyes. "Lanny, I was wondering, now that I'm dying . . . if you had the power, would you make me like you?"

I hated that question. It wasn't the kind of thing I would have expected from Luke, either. He'd always seemed too sensible, too down-to-earth. I tried not to miss a beat, however. "But I don't have the power. You know that. . . ."

He was impatient with my evasiveness. "That's not what I asked. I want to know if you *would*."

I reached up to tuck a few loose white hairs under his cap. "Of course I would, if that's what you wanted."

He snorted and closed his eyes. "You're just saying that."

"Where is this coming from?" I asked, trying not to sound as tired as I felt. I knew why he was being peevish: he was afraid and exhausted. It was the end. It hovered in the darkness every time he closed his eyes. The waiting could bring out the worst in people.

His breath grew louder, ragged. "You know who *could* make me like you. Adair. He'd do it if you asked him."

This time, I paused. Was Luke asking me to track down Adair and beg him to give me the elixir of

life? It made me see Luke in a completely different light. Not only had I never suspected that he cared about living forever, I thought he would have sooner chosen death than ask me to go on his behalf. This man who frightened me so much. But death plays us cruelly at the end. "Is that what you want?" asked, waiting.

But he'd slipped into unconsciousness. His hand went lax in mine. By the time he woke a few hours later, he'd forgotten ever asking me and I was spared from having to come up with an answer.

I remembered Luke's question that night in the fortress, though, as I tossed and turned in bed. For here I was at Adair's house not for Luke's sake, not to beg for Adair's favor so that Luke could spend eternity with me, but to ask him to help Jonathan, a man who was dead and gone and surely beyond our help.

And I did not want to ask myself why.



The house was very quiet when I rose the next morning, though I wasn't surprised, not after listening to women's voices and squeals of delighted laughter late into the night. I trotted down the stairs to the kitchen and made coffee, looking forward to time alone to sort out my thoughts without being reminded that Adair was finding ways to pass the time without me. My disappointment was understandable, then, when I found Terry lounging at the old farmhouse table in a pair of men's pajama bottoms and a tank top too small to do much besides decorate her breasts. As the coffee brewed she watched me out of the corner of her eye and popped tangerine segments into her mouth. Once the coffee was ready, I slid into a chair opposite her with a mug in my hands.

"There's coffee," I said, to be sociable.

She said nothing.

"It's a lovely day," I tried again, taking a sip from my mug.

She snorted and tore off another segment. "It's bloody windy and cold, same as it is every day."

"At least it's sunny."

"It is that," she said, looking down at the tangerine peels, flicking them with a fingernail. Then she fixed her merciless stare on me. "So, don't take this the wrong way . . . it's not that Robin and I aren't delighted to have you stay with us so completely out of the blue and all. But what made you decide to come looking for Adair, anyway?"

I could've pointed out that it wasn't her house and it didn't matter what she and her friend thought of me, but I reminded myself to look at it from her point of view. They'd all been having a wonderful time until I showed up. "I got the urge to see an old friend," I said.

"Old friend, eh? How far back do you go, you and Adair?" Okay, that probably was the wrong excuse to use with her, given that I looked to be in my early twenties on the outside, and Adair not much older than that. As a matter of fact, we both appeared to be younger than Robin and Terry. "Are you childhood friends, then?"

"He was one of my first lovers." It was the truth; I hoped that by letting her know we were intimate once but no longer would satisfy her. There was a time, in the beginning, when life with Adair had been thrilling. When I came to him, I was a young girl from a small, isolated town of people with Puritan forebears. I had been raised to work hard, not to question either my elders or the Bible, and to have few expectations of life. I knew nothing about desire or physical pleasure. Life under Adair's roof turned all that upside down. Adair taught me about pleasure and showed me that it was possible to enjoy my body as well as other things in life—beautiful clothes, a fine wine, a good book, gay company.

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