



STRANGE FATE preview

This is an excerpt that shows how Ash Redfern (who has been alerted by Aradia, the Maiden of the Witches, that the Apocalypse, due nearly a year ago and forgotten now by most, is actually going to come) begins to rescue the NIGHT WORLD soulmate couples from the enemies who, for unknown reasons, are targeting the youngest generation of Harmans and Redferns. Ash's last rescue will be of Mary-Lynnette, and will appear in the book, so the story *Those Who Favor Fire* will be finished in STRANGE FATE (which I hope to finish this calendar year). –L. J.

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“Gotcha!”

Poppy jumped high and lightly from behind a camouflaging bush and knocked over the Navy SEAL who was looking in exactly the wrong direction. He stared at her in disbelief and terror, his hands automatically going for weapons that weren't where they should be. All weapons, even rocks and branches, were forbidden in this remote military staging area in one of the wide, wild deserts of southern California,

The next thing the SEAL thought of was his hands but Poppy had thought of them first, and by now she had both his wrists locked. It must look almost comical, she thought: a petite young girl with tumbling curls of shimmering copper that fell to her shoulders, sitting on the chest of a six and half foot, two hundred and thirty pound, totally buff Navy SEAL and somehow keeping him completely immobilized.

“What the hell? What the *hell?*” The guy was staring up at her—goggling actually—and Poppy guessed that he was new to the hunting range.

“You're not real,” he choked out.

Poppy shook her head, causing burnished curls to fly into her eyes. “Wanna bet? How much you got?”

But by now the SEAL would be thinking of how lovely she was, with her eyes becoming more silvery all the time and the rising moon showing her lips becoming more full, getting that bee-stung look. And *now* the SEAL would be thinking that she was the most unearthly and exquisite girl he'd ever seen, but all that meant was that Poppy, innocent and mischievous as a kitten, had gotten her psychic probes hooked into his mind, and was changing his perceptions just for fun.

Okay. Enough fun. Poppy's had a feeling as if she needed air—which meant, since she didn't breathe, that she was hungry.

She could see into the Navy SEAL's soul now. Part of it was saying, I still don't believe she's real. I could break her neck with one karate chop. But, God, she's so beautiful. . . . I almost wouldn't mind dying at her hands. . . .

*No, you wouldn't want to die this way,* she told him sternly without speaking. Her voice in his head was pitched just loud enough to hurt—to make him remember her words subconsciously. *So if you have any sense, when a spindly little thing like me, or a boy you know you can whip gets you down and starts to examine your throat—well, actually by then it's probably too late—but you but you try to find some wood, okay?*

The SEAL didn't think, "Wood?" He just stared. But Poppy had done this before.

"Yes, wood," she said, aloud this time so that he could tell that she was real and that she had the voice of a typical American teenager. Somewhere in his soul he'd remember that, too. That she could sound like his little sister, not foreign, not strange. It might save his life.

*Wood is the only thing that can hurt us. A wooden twig is more dangerous than one of your stainless steel Mark Three knives; a twig could save your life. Oorah!* Poppy dimpled at the man under her. *And now it's O'dark thirty and you're really, really sleepy. You just let your eyes drift shut . . .* Inside the man's head she was twiddling knobs and turning levers, slowing his brain waves, making them more synchronous, heightening their amplitude. She kept doing it until the theta waves appeared, and then she couldn't wait any longer. The man was only lightly asleep, but he never felt the two little pricks on his throat. He didn't feel Poppy's mouth either as she daintily sucked up the rich red stuff that was now flowing steadily out of a small artery. Poppy kept alert for any noise or movement around her, even as her instincts tried to seduce her into giving herself completely to the experience, to indulge herself in the pure joy of hunger being sated. She had to pull herself away to avoid taking too much—far less than this healthy, husky man would miss. He'd simply wake up on his own in a few minutes, and find that his badge is gone—

Whoops! Forgot to take the badge, she thought, and without a pause in her drinking, she reached down and plucked the gilded shield from his belt. The badges were currency in this darkest of dark ops training, and Poppy wore them in a doubled belt around her small waist, where they jingled like wind chimes if she wasn't careful.

And then the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

*Someone behind her. Attack alert.*

Only—

Only—

In all her nearly-a-year's experience as a vampire, Poppy had never sensed anything like what she was sensing now.

Whatever it was, it wanted her to turn, and it wanted her to view it, and she'd do that, too. The creature was sending a call directly to her sinews and muscles and completely leaving her brain out of the question. Plus, it had the loudest telepathic call she had ever picked up. The loudest . . . exponentially. She herself felt like a child who'd been brought up on the inland with an aquarium, being suddenly dumped into the middle of the Pacific ocean.

And it woke the Navy SEAL up.

Poppy was moving slowly now, trying to fight the urge, trying to see the creature's reflection in the SEAL's now hugely-open eyes. Enormously open eyes, bulging, and his mouth was coming open, too, ready to scream and shatter the silence of a night when even the crickets had stopped chirping.

Moving smoothly and stealthily, Poppy put a hand over the SEAL's mouth. She fought with the last of her strength to shake her head at him fractionally, warningly. Then she gave in to the force that was silently twisting her body around and she turned and she saw what was behind her.

It was a good thing that *Don't scream; don't scream* was still echoing in her mind from trying to warn the man. Behind her, with wings spread as wide as a football field, behind a head so large that her eyes couldn't take it in all at once, was a dragon.

It was black. But not a matte black that would simply show up as a darker darkness blotting out the stars high above. It had its own pale purple energy outlining it, demarcating its enormous limbs, its horned head. The energy moved like a two-way spitting fuse connected to an explosive. Poppy had never seen anything like it.

*Don't move; don't scream*, she sent to the Navy SEAL. *I don't think it will even notice you; not with what I'm going to be doing. You crawl away when I attack it.*

She probably shouldn't do what she was planning on doing, but she didn't have time to think it over. Poppy had one weapon that she'd never used against opponents on this test range, never used on any Night Person since she'd developed her talent in one of Circle Daybreak's safe havens for illegal vampires, mixed Night World/human couples, and witches who had seceded from the High Council, which was now called the Vampire Council.

To put it simply, while she could slide into a mind as smoothly as a hot knife into butter, or encompass it as gently as a kiss, she could also turn up the volume of her telepathy to killer levels and literally detonate it with something like an H-bomb from the inside out.

She'd never actually done it, of course. But at the end of her training her teachers had assured her that she *could* do it to anything that had a brain capable of receiving telepathy.

Poppy had never in her life seen any non-human thing that looked so capable of receiving telepathy as this dragon did. It positively reeked of magic. It also positively reeked of savage, unrestrained destruction. It was Poppy's duty as a tenant of the planet Earth to try to obliterate it before it could obliterate her and all the real estate around her.

But, again, there was no time to consciously think about this. It was all calculated at some subconscious level. Poppy simply went from registering the dragon's existence to cranking up her telepathy higher and higher—and *higher*, ready to unleash all at once.

Things had seemingly moved into slow motion ever since Poppy had seen the dragon. Now, like moving in a dream, Poppy picked out the three horns on the dragon's head and gathered her stored telepathy like a white-hot ball of energy. Horns were important, she knew. If she could just somehow concentrate all her energy there . . . yes . . . and now to let it go . . .

Something slammed into her from her left side, picking her up as it passed by the dragon, and kept going, finally sweeping her into a clump of bushes twenty yards away. Poppy was so wound-up that she almost unleashed her telepathic ball of energy at it. But the next instant she recognized what had grabbed her.

It was James. Her soulmate. He still had his outlaw good looks: silky light brown hair, a subtle, intelligent face, and gray eyes that were alternately intense and cool. And Poppy still felt a sharp throb somewhere between sweetness and pain every time she looked at him—even now, when part of her wanted to kill him.

He'd come between her and her prey. For anyone else that would spell death. Worse, she didn't understand why he had done it: surely James must realize just how dangerous that thing over there was.

*More dangerous that you could possibly imagine.* James's voice came to her on a tight frequency that was theirs alone, but still so faintly that she could hardly make it out.

*Then I have to go back,* she began keeping to their private frequency, and quietly, but James cut her off.

*Poppy, I know you're brave,* he said, and clutched her even more tightly. *But sometimes all you can do is retreat. That— thing—over there would simply kill you the moment you annoyed it.*

*How do you know?* Poppy demanded.

*I don't know how I know—but I do know. Watch!*

There was now nothing between the Navy SEAL and the dragon. And the SEAL wasn't taking Poppy's advice about keeping still and silent. Instead, he was slowly getting up, maddened with fear, trying to scramble away.

Poppy would never forget the sound that came next.

It was a roar at a deeper bass than she could hear, even telepathically: a noise she felt deep in her bones. It came out of the dragon's open mouth, and the next thing that came out was black fire. The black fire burned as if a thousand flame-throwers had been turned on at once, but it also contained some kind of alien energy, something Poppy had never seen before.

In a micro-second, it turned the man to ash and everything around him to fused glass, as if a million-kilowatt lightning bolt had struck the grass of the hunting range.

By now, Poppy was clutching James back. Her entire body had suddenly broken out in gooseflesh. She'd never seen this particular kind of cold-blooded murder—much less so much overkill—before. The dragon hadn't even wanted the SEAL for food. It had flamed him because that was its nature: to kill whatever was in front of it.

*Now we just have to pray that it doesn't remember about you and turn this way.* James's voice came to Poppy's head in the barest thread of a whisper. Poppy didn't dare move even enough to nod, but she forced herself to send out an almost silent *Yes*, while swallowing down the enormous amount of telepathic energy she'd conjured up. It burned in her chest, struggling to explode free, wanting to unleash an attack against *something*.

For what seemed like hours, Poppy knelt in the bush, forcing herself to hang onto her telepathy, painful as it was, and praying that nothing would happen to James. He seemed like a person who was coolheaded in any situation, but Poppy knew that if the dragon tried to attack her, he would go mad and get in the way. That was simply her soulmate's nature, and she loved him for it.

Even here, even now, she pressed her cheek into the hollow of his neck, feeling the tiny movement as he carefully breathed. James was *lamia*—one of the born vampires—who could breathe and grow up if he wanted. He'd made her into a vampire to save her from dying of cancer, and Poppy loved him even more for the risks he had taken to do it.

At that moment, the dragon's head moved, as if seeking something, and to Poppy's horror it turned in the direction of the clump of bushes where she and James were hidden.

Could it see them? she wondered, pressing ever more tightly to James. Could it sense them by telepathy? By their temperature? She had to protect James. And she could feel the urgency of his mind, desperate with the need to protect *her*.

This close together, with their minds running along the same frantic course, Poppy and James surged into one being. There was an almost audible click as they snapped together like two puzzle pieces joining. Poppy was completely with her soulmate, now, and she felt James realize that even death couldn't pry them apart. They would die as Poppy-and-James, an entity that was far more than the sum of two individuals.

At the same time as Poppy felt her body relaxing, melting bonelessly against James, she felt the calm radiance of their joined minds come to a solution. Usually they each kept their temperatures at a steady ninety-eight point six degrees, simply because this was the best temperature for human-like bodies to operate. But they weren't human, either of them; and just now their joined minds had decided that the best

temperature to be was the exact temperature of the bushes around them. This decision was made in an instant, and a moment later it was as if Poppy and James were being dipped into nitrogen dioxide, flash frozen to the same cool state as the bushes.

The dragon's enormous pupils contracted, then dilated hugely. Poppy and James knew that this meant that the dragon had just seen something wink out of existence. They watched the dragon swing its gigantic head up and around, as if expecting to find prey which had suddenly leaped out and was making a run for freedom. Silently, the two vampires rejoiced, keeping their soaring jubilation tightly to the privacy of their joined minds.

But then Poppy and James learned something about dragons. The creatures were not brute beasts, as hideous as they might appear. Because now the dragon's giant muzzle was swinging back down again and its eyes were gleaming in the darkness with a vast and ageless malicious intelligence. Then the mammoth jaws opened and a rumbling sound came out, more frightful than anything Poppy and James had heard yet.

The dragon was laughing.

And then it breathed in and the leaves of the bushes shook as the great lungs filled themselves, and all the while the cruel yellow eyes were laughing.

That was when Poppy knew.

A tiny part of her mind separated itself from James's, just so it could have one last look at him. One moment to appreciate the dear lines and planes of his sculpted features, and to feel the strength of his lithe, hunter's body. One moment to sense the force of his love for her, and to know that he was drawing back to see the petite, green-eyed, copper-haired girl he had risked everything to rescue from pain and death once before.

*Poppy!* His telepathic voice was wracked with pain. *I love you! But—*

Inside her own mind, Poppy shook her head very slightly. *Jamie, I love you*, she told him. *And . . . that's all. It's enough, isn't it?*

*It's enough*, James said instantly. He knew that Poppy wouldn't fall for any trick that he might use to try to get her away safely at the cost of his own life. There was one last thing they could do together, and that was die well.

Silently, united, they turned from contemplating each other to facing the black fire. The dragon's great mouth was open again and now they could both see the eldritch power that was, in slow motion gathering at the back of the wicked sharp-toothed jaws.

*Love you*—the hum was all around Poppy now, her cool cheek against James's. And that was all that had ever mattered. Somewhere, far away, there was a shout, but Poppy knew that nothing could save them. Nothing human, nothing on this hunting range. The important thing was to keep the ongoing chant in her head alive.

*Love you, love you, love you—*

And then there was the roaring of the fire.

There shouldn't have been anything after that. But there was. There was a snarl in the most bass and bestial tones imaginable. And the roar was going on, and suddenly it didn't sound like a fire as much as . . .

Helicopters couldn't fly here! It was far too sensitive an area. The military didn't give a damn about the lives that might be wasted here; only about the new ways to attack and defend they might squeeze from people with very different kinds of background and strength.

And civilian helicopters were even more forbidden. If word of this operation got out, it was going to mean that humans would have a sudden and unpleasant introduction to what the people who lived under its umbrella of protection called the Night World. Humans finding out that all the things they thought were just good ole horror stories were real . . . from witches to zombies to two distinct kinds of vampires.

Bad, bad idea.

However, it did sound a lot like a helicopter, and Poppy-and-James, miraculously not deceased, began to assess how that could help them get out of this situation, when a voice came out of the roar, quite close to their ears.

“Do I have to physically carry you away to rescue you?”

It was a familiar noise and once Poppy would have spit at it and clawed her fingers like an angry cat’s, just on principle. It belonged to Ash Redfern, the smiling, lazy, blond *gorgeous* lamia cousin of James’s who had once tried to abduct her and reveal her as an illegally-made vampire in front of a bunch of Night World elders.

But then something had happened that had caused her wrath to abate somewhat. Apparently, the same thing happened to Ash that had happened to James and her. Ash had found his own soulmate, and she was no part of the Night World. She was human. Worse, while Poppy had been in love with James for years before they found out they were soulmates, Ash’s soulmate didn’t even like him. She was reputed to be an intelligent, independent sort of person, who hadn’t been amused by the sort of things Ash had spent his life doing—dallying with human girls’ affections in order to get their blood—and worse. Much worse, Poppy guessed. In any case, she had given him one chance, or at least he’d given it to himself. If he could somehow atone or make amends for all of the wicked things he’d done, then maybe she’d reconsider.

Poppy hadn’t realized that he had actually been serious. But then she thought about James; about how she would feel if she had done something so terrible that James didn’t *want* to love her: that gave him enough strength to defy the soulmate principle itself. She would want to die, she thought.

“You grab him; I’ll carry her,” came a new voice—a very familiar voice—in the darkness, and Poppy’s eyes made out the face of her twin brother Phillip. She had only seen him three or four times in the last year.

Ash turned on him. “What the hell are you doing out here? You’re just a liability.”

“No he’s not!” Poppy’s brain was suddenly racing at fantastic speed. “Phil—do you remember the Synergy Yell? That godawful ullulating thing with the weird harmonics? The one we weren’t allowed to point at anybody?”

“Remember it? I wish I could forget it. That thing felt as if it could slice through bone.”

“Do it and aim it at the dragon’s horns! Do it with me! Three-two-one-*NOWWWWWWWWWWWW!*” The last word trailed off into the telepathic yell.

And then she vaguely realized that James had grabbed her hand and was pulling her away, and that Ash was pulling Phil, but she and Phil kept hammering away with the Yell, which was somehow not just her twin brother and her yelling together. The whole was far greater than the sum of its parts. That was why her telepathy instructor had said it was so dangerous—something about amplifying waves and reverberations. She had just been trying to get her straitlaced brother to let out his emotions for once, but what they’d discovered had been classified by Circle Daybreak as a weapon, especially after it knocked down a brick wall about five hundred feet from where they were directing it.

It stunned the dragon.

Poppy saw the large, malicious eyes glaze over. She reached into the farthest depths of herself and found a new wellspring of power. She had to protect her brother. She had to help Ash rescue people.

She raised the volume of the Yell up to a shriek. The dragon fell back, stunned. Violet light was crackling between its horns in thick, flickering bands.

“Get Phil buckled in! Teagan, take us up! Now!”

Poppy was aiming by memory now, and she could feel Phil with her. But he was faltering in the Synergy Yell. He hadn’t had nearly the practice with telepathy as she had; he was going on raw instinct.

Because James had put on headphones, Poppy could hear a stranger's voice reporting, "Dragon not following us, sir! Should I take us home?" and Ash's voice saying "Yes, Teagan!"

Then someone was shaking her and saying, "Turn it off! Poppy, you can stop now! Poppy!"

But it wasn't until Phil slipped into unconsciousness and James had wrapped himself around Poppy physically and mentally and assured her that there was no reason to keep on screaming that Poppy could make herself stop. Then she just sat, blinking and dazed and icy cold but triumphant. She had cheated death itself. She and Phil, who were so unlike, and had spent so much of their lives fighting, had joined to create a weapon that could stun a dragon without touching it.

"And what a weapon!" Ash said when Phil had been put in a sort of silver thermal cocoon and Poppy was clutching a cup of hot chamomile tea—not that she really was going to drink it, just because the warmth and smell was like being wrapped in a fluffy blanket and didn't put so much strain on James. Ash's face was glowing. "Poppy—"

But James interrupted him. "Ash, why were you there? Did the dragon chase you? Or was it just after Poppy?"

"None of the above," Ash said.

Watching him through careful, narrow eyes Poppy concluded that Ash had changed unbelievably. He wasn't the lazy, lounging playboy he had been. His face was too thin—almost gaunt. But the light of purpose was in his eyes and his chin was set.

"The dragon was after *you*, James. The Maiden, Aradia, called me and said she'd had a premonition. Whoever is controlling the dragon don't want you around—you're a Redfern of the youngest generation able to fight them. Not that there's much Aradia knew of that you could fight them *with!*"

"But I didn't fight this one: Poppy and Phil did."

“Yeah, and imagine they’re on the dragon’s top ten to be eliminated list now. But for some reason the dragon doesn’t want Redferns or Harmans—especially ones with human or ex-human soulmates.”

“But why? What do they want to do with us?”

Ash gave him a bleak look. “I don’t know, kid, but I’m in the same boat with you.”

Poppy pounced. Not physically, but a pounce just the same. “Mary-Lynnette!” she cried. “You’re doing this for Mary-Lynnette!”

Ash looked away, and said something almost inaudible. But Poppy had excellent hearing.

He’d said, “Everything I do I do for her.”