

**Demon Lord**

**Book I of the Demon Lord Series**

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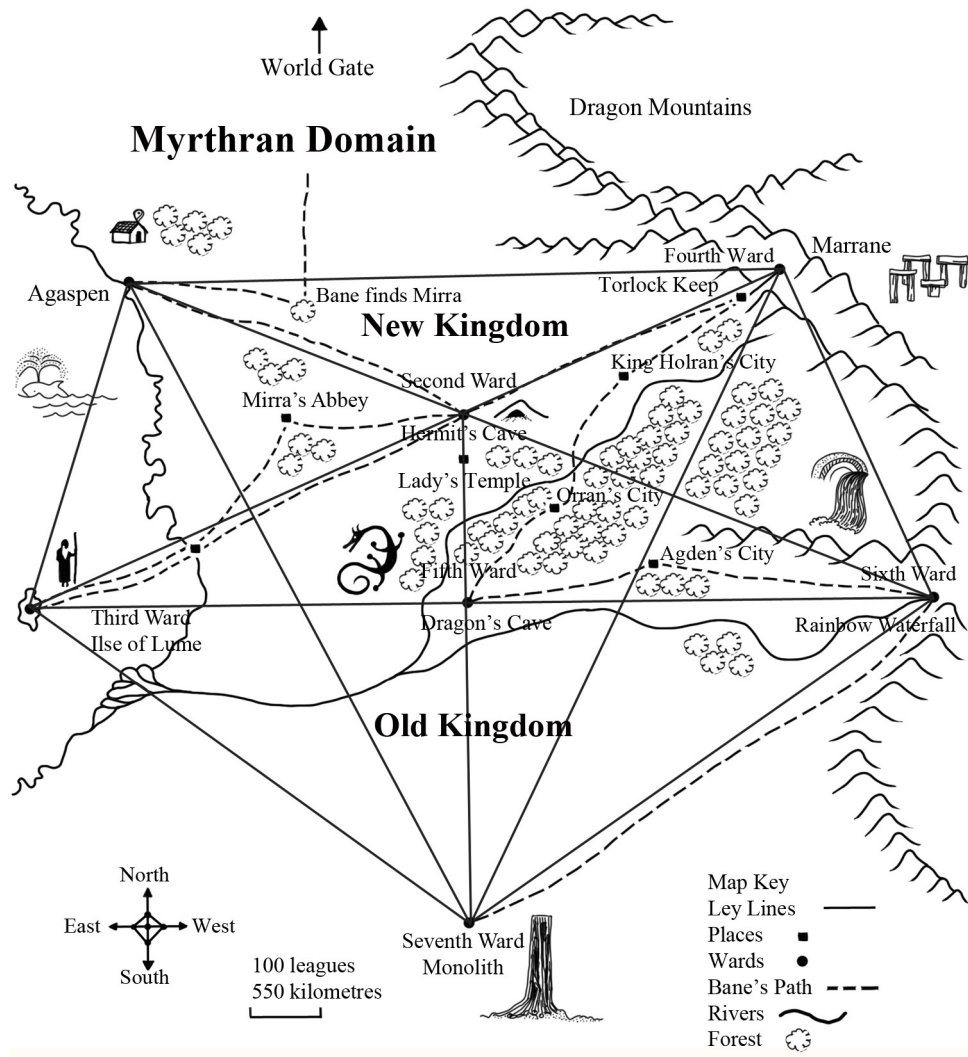
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Please note that this is the first book of a series, but the remainder of the series is not available for free.

*This series is dedicated to my mother.*



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## Prologue

The seeress gripped the edge of her scrying glass, her brows knotting as her throat closed with horror. The acolyte who watched over Elder Mother while she was absorbed in her scrying hurried to her side and put a hand on the seeress' shoulder.

"What is it, Mother?" she whispered.

Elder Mother Ellese sat unmoving, her gaze locked on the faraway event visible only to her within the glass. After several moments, she sat back and drew a deep, shuddering breath, blinking.

"The Black Lord!" Her voice rasped with dread, and she stared into the middle distance, stunned.

"The evil has finally found a way to enter this world; to break the wards that the ancient wizards set."

The acolyte's hands bunched in her dress, wringing it. "How?"

"A boy child, born below. He will be sent."

"When will he come?"

Ellese focussed on the girl. "Not for a time yet. He still has to grow; to be taught about the evil powers and their use. Twenty years, if we are fortunate. We have time to prepare, at least." The acolyte sagged, and Elder Mother added, "Do not look so relieved, child. You will still be here." She stood up. "Send a message to all the elder mothers. We must have a meeting to plan our defence."

The girl nodded and hurried out, and Ellese crossed her study to the window, her eyes blind to the thick blanket of midwinter snow that covered the garden. Gusts wafted falling flakes into swirling patterns, brushing against the windows, sliding down to gather on the ledge. She shivered, but not with cold, for the fire that roared in the hearth warmed the cosy room with its wooden panelling and thick, woollen maroon curtains.

Her desk occupied the corner opposite the stone fireplace. The scrying glass stood on it, clear now. Tidily arranged papers occupied the desk's corners, and an ink well and writing plumes stood at its centre. The cold light from the windows mingled with the fire's warm glow to illuminate the myriad ancient tomes that stocked the bookshelves. The room's normality vanished as she recalled the horrible vision she had just witnessed.

The birth had taken place deep within the Underworld, in a great cavern formed by magic aeons ago, the rock warped by the will of the god who had created it. Huge columns of solidified magma had upheld a vaulted roof of stretched, striated rock, cooled in the midst of its oozing, patterned with smears and blobs. The inner fire had shone from cracks in the walls and floor, throwing lurid light in twisted patterns. Fire demons in true form had cast green and orange light.

The demons' chanting had all but drowned out the woman's screams as she died on the stone altar, her belly torn open as the Black Lord had ripped the baby from her womb. The boy's cries had stopped when the Black Lord inscribed a dark rune upon his head, and his eyes had glazed under the evil power's influence. The Lord of the Underworld had handed the bloody infant to a minion, who had wrapped him in a cloth. By then, the child's mother had been dead, her blood pooled on the floor.

The infant stood no chance against the Underworld's corruption. He would be warped, moulded as the Black Lord wished, and none could save him from his fate. Ellese's heart ached when she recalled the tiny child, slick with his mother's blood. He was doomed to be a helpless pawn in the Black Lord's hands. She had no doubt he would suffer terribly, but far worse than his horrific birth had been the ritual the Black Lord had performed before he had torn the infant from his mother's womb.

A month later, the abbey's hall thronged with old women; elder mothers gathered from abbeys all over the land. The pillar-lined, grey stone room had been built as a dining hall, but doubled as a meeting place for the Council of Elders. Sturdy tables and chairs cluttered its polished stone floor, and stained-glass windows allowed in shafts of sunlight. The tables had been pushed against the walls, and the chairs were arranged into rows where the old ladies sat, facing a polished bur wood desk.

Acolytes and young healers stood near tables covered with pots of brewing tea and platters of

buttered scones and pastries. Others dashed in and out with kettles of boiling water and fresh confections, steaming hot from the kitchen ovens. An air of aged wisdom hung over the multitude of elder mothers. While most had faded eyes and frail bodies, they were still sharp of mind and tongue.

Ellese sat behind the desk and studied the sea of wrinkled faces. It bobbed and weaved, accompanied by sniffles, hacking coughs and wheezing breaths as the old women aired their infirmities, illnesses associated with age, which no healing could cure. Acolytes plied them with cups of milk or tea, balancing trays of pastries as they wound amidst the throng, summoned by snapping fingers and stopped by imperiously outstretched hands. The elder mothers muttered in a low-pitched hum, some probably discussing the topic on hand, and others doubtless just swapping gossip. Ellese sighed and rapped on the desk, drawing all eyes to her, some of which wandered past without pause. The majority of her audience were stern-faced matrons, but a few were truly ancient.

"You know why we are here," she said. "You all know what has happened. I ask you today for your thoughts. What are we going to do about it?" Ellese spoke loudly, for many old ladies held brass trumpets to their ears and leant forward with peevish frowns. She scanned the throng.

A robust, middle-aged woman called, "Rescue the child."

Ellese's smile was bitter. "Easier said than done, Merris, considering that he is in the Underworld. Are you volunteering?"

A murmur swept through the crowd, mixed with a few titters. Merris glowered at her grinning neighbour, and many elder mothers whispered to their friends behind withered hands. A wizened crone stood, leaning on a gnarled stick.

"Find a way to bind him when he emerges," she quavered.

Ellese nodded. "A good idea. But what?"

"What is his nature? There must be something that will work."

"He is human," Ellese said. "As you all know, the Black Lord cannot break the blue wards that trap him and all his foul servants in the Underworld. But the power of the wards will not stop this boy. He will travel freely to the Overworld, and he will break the wards. The demons will corrupt him and teach him their ways in preparation for the day when he will spread his evil over the land and raise armies to lay waste to those who do not bow to him."

Another elder mother stood up. "Then he will only be a black mage. What of preparing an army to capture him when he emerges?"

Ellese looked down at the desk, her heart heavy. All the more obvious suggestions would be worthless, and she hated to reject each as it was spoken. "He is not a black mage. He will wield the power of the Black Lord. No man will be able to stand against him. The foul creatures of the night will worship him and the dark races will follow him. The boy will be invincible by any normal means." She paused, her hands clenching. "He has been born a god."

A hubbub started as the women objected to this sweeping statement, turning to each other for support. A plump, florid-faced woman shouted, "Why call us here, and ask for our help, when there is no solution to this threat?"

Ellese banged on the desk again, subduing the uproar a little. "There is a solution. There has to be, but perhaps we are not capable of thinking of it. I had hoped one of you had been given a vision or dream, some sign from the Lady to guide us."

Silence fell as wrinkled brows furrowed, searching their memories for such a dream, and ancient eyes narrowed to inspect neighbours. Ellese scanned the assembly with growing desperation. For the last month, she had racked her brains for a solution. Surely one of these wise women knew the answer to this threat? Surely the Lady had given someone a sign, or a vision? The goddess would not abandon them in their hour of need.

A tall, angular woman at the back of the assembly rose, glancing around shyly as all eyes turned to her. A handsome healer with honey-blond hair, she was the youngest elder mother there, barely out of her twenties. She looked out of place amongst so many grey-haired matrons, and fiddled with her silver healer's necklace.

Ellese smiled with relief and assurance. “Yes, Larris?”

Larris raised her chin. “I think I know what we need to do.”

## Chapter One

### Daughter of Light

Mirra sat cross-legged on the grass in the abbey's sun-drenched inner garden, weaving a chain of bright summer flowers. Her slender fingers twined the blossoms together, and the sun burnished her flaxen hair that hung about her face as she bent over her task. Thick dark lashes framed gentle blue-green eyes in a serene, delicately featured face.

Tallis, who sat beside her, picked up her garland and resumed her work. This morning, at the celebration for Mirra's sixteenth birthday, she had watched Mirra opening her gifts, wondering how happy she would be if she knew what was in store for her. Everyone knew but Mirra, and that seemed so unfair. The secrecy puzzled her, for surely it would be better if Mirra could prepare for what lay ahead? She contemplated the wreckage she held and sighed again, trying to weave a bright yellow daisy into the disaster.

Ellese watched the girls from her study window, which overlooked the garden in the centre of the abbey. Her eyes stung as Mirra crowned her friend with the daisy chain. Girlish giggles wafted in through the open window on the warm summer air. How she wished things were different.

The Black Lord's human weapon, Bane, had emerged from the Underworld two years ago, and those unfortunate enough to have seen him had said that he was now about twenty years old, an estimate she knew to be accurate. The moment he had set foot above ground, an army had gathered around him. First to join were the dark creatures that inhabited the entrance to the Underworld, through which Bane had emerged.

The enormous cave, fanged with pillars of rock, gaped at the blasted lands around it from the side of a solitary crag rising unnaturally out of a plain far to the north. The cavern was large enough to accommodate two cities within its bounds, and its denizens had built a metropolis of mud and stone that filled almost half of it. Within its dim confines, generations of grims, wights, night crawlers and vampires had lived and died, awaiting the Black Lord's rising.

The dark power that emanated from the Underworld in a foetid exhalation had killed all life for leagues around, and only petrified forests stood sentinel on the barren plains. Any human who had ever dared to set foot in the cavern had been torn apart and devoured. The dark creatures ventured out only at night to hunt, preying on the animals that dwelt beyond the dark power's influence. No human lived within a hundred leagues of the cave, for to do so was certain death.

The monsters had braved the sunlight to leave their sanctuary and follow Bane. As he had moved away from the cavern, hordes of goblins, trolls, rock howlers and gnomes had rallied to him, all the Black Lord's worshippers. They had emerged from their underground warrens and mountain caves in droves to enlist, armed with their simple, brutish weapons. Finally, humans had joined his foul mob, swelling its ranks to thousands. Every criminal, vagrant, bandit, mercenary and outcast had flocked to his banner, drawn by the promise of riches and conquest. His army had already conquered several fiefdoms, and, as it did, more joined, some from fear, others from greed, until a huge horde of rabble now marched behind him.

With this, he swept across the Overworld in an unstoppable tide, slaughtering all in his path. Armies fell before his advance like wheat before a scythe, and those that fled were hunted down without mercy. Tales of torture, rape, mutilations and wanton atrocities preceded him; descriptions of his cruelty sickened all who heard them. The stories told of his complete lack of mercy, or any other human emotion. Apparently he revelled in death and destruction and laughed at his hapless victims' suffering. Ruined towns and fields of rotting dead lay strewn in his wake, breeding dread diseases that afflicted the few survivors, who then spread it throughout the land. Whole towns had died without ever



seeing the Black Lord's army, defeated by the sickness Bane had unleashed.

King Margorah, ruler of the largest kingdom in the Overworld, had fought Bane's army to a bloody standstill in a three-day battle that had laid waste to vast tracts of land and two towns. When at last Margorah had realised he faced defeat, countless dead had paved his retreating army's path as the dark creatures hunted within his camp each night until he had reached his citadel. There, the dead had gathered in mounds at the foot of his walls, yet still he had refused to accept defeat, determined to fight to the last man. After five days, Bane had grown bored and razed the fortress with black fire, killing all within it with a single stroke of power.

Lesser rulers, barons and lords, had fallen to the rag-tag horde in a few hours, overrun by sheer numbers. Although Bane's army had dwindled with each encounter, it had soon swelled again with fresh worshippers and fortune-seekers. Towns in his path had been abandoned as their residents fled in a desperate bid to save themselves. All mankind feared the coming of Bane, whose name was whispered with deep loathing and dread.

For three weeks, the roads past the abbey had been clogged with fleeing people carrying bundles on their backs and children on their hips, driving their few livestock before them. More affluent people rode in wagons or carriages; mostly wealthy ladies whose husbands had sent them away to doubtful safety, servants and flunkies dancing attendance. Their lordly spouses remained to gird their armies for futile war, grist to Bane's mill of unending bloodlust. All would flee until they reached the sea, then there would be nowhere to go. As they huddled in the coastal towns, the Underworld's army marched closer, bringing with it the death their flight had only delayed. Doom had settled over the land like a dull miasma, belying the bright spring days that should have been joyous.

Bane's army was just a hundred miles from the abbey now, and Ellese knew the time had come for Mirra to fulfil her destiny. She had been raised within the abbey's protection, and knew nothing of Bane. Sheltered from the world's wickedness and taught only of its beauties, she had grown up a happy, laughing child, innocent in a profound manner that sometimes made her seem simple, until a person gazed deep into her eyes and found the utter serenity there.

Ellese watched Tallis present Mirra with a lopsided garland, then they jumped up and ran into the abbey, trailing giggles. She turned away, sighing. She had never doubted Larris' vision, but, as the tales of horror reached her, she worried. Still, she could not put it off any longer. Tomorrow; it had to be done tomorrow.

The silence that greeted Mirra in the breakfast hall the next morning surprised her. A sense of doom hung in the air, and her smile faded as she headed for her seat beside Tallis. Many acolytes sent her timid smiles, their eyes sliding away. Her friend was intent on her porridge, and Mirra spooned hers with keen appetite.

"Why is everyone so quiet today?"

Tallis shrugged. "You are to see Elder Mother after breakfast."

"What about?"

"Ask Elder Mother."

After breakfast, Mirra ran to Ellese's study, bouncing in with a grin as Ellese turned from the window. The sadness in the seeress' eyes stopped Mirra's rush to hug her, and she advanced slowly, her smile fading.

"What is wrong with everyone?"

"We are all a little sad."

"Why?"

Ellese sighed. "Because today you must leave us and go out into the world. You are sixteen now, and I know normally girls leave at eighteen, but you are ready. It is time."

"How wonderful! Why is everyone sad?"

"Because we will miss you, of course."

"I shall miss you all too, but I have always wanted to see the world."

"And so you shall, my dear." Ellese became brisk. "So, when you have packed, the cart will be waiting to take you to your new home. We have a lovely place in the woods for you."

"Thank you, Mother!" Mirra flung her arms around the old seeress' neck and kissed her on the cheek. Ellese patted the girl's back, appearing sadder than Mirra thought necessary at her leaving.

"Now, now, child." Ellese disentangled herself. "Go and get ready."

Mirra skipped along bright corridors to the grey cell that had been her home for the past sixteen years. A narrow bed, small table and two cushioned stools furnished it, and it seemed poky and uninviting now that her mind was full of visions of a little thatched cottage nestled in a forest glade. She packed her few possessions into a worn leather bag, and, with a last look around at the drab chamber, ran to tell Tallis. She found her friend in the vegetable garden behind the abbey, pulling weeds from cabbage rows. Flowering fruit trees hemmed the garden and graced the warm air with their heady scent, and birdsong offset the dull rumble of wagon wheels on the road.

Mirra pounced on her friend, laughing. "I am leaving, Tallis! Is it not wonderful? I am to have my very own house, in the woods, just as I have always wanted."

Tallis hugged her back, her soft brown eyes a little moist. "That is... wonderful, Mir."

Mirra hardly noticed her friend's sadness; she was too excited at the prospect of becoming a true healer. She bounced around, avoiding the plump cabbage heads. "In two years your turn will come. It will be marvellous! I shall heal sick people, and animals too."

Tallis looked down at the wilting weeds she held. "Yes, you are so good at it. I will never be as good as you."

"Nonsense, you are just as good as me, and much better at cooking and sewing."

Mirra glanced around at the sound of footsteps to find Ellese approaching. The grey-haired seeress seemed to have aged in the last day, and her smile was tired.

"All ready, Mirra?"

"Yes." She picked up her bag. "Can Tal come with us, just to see?"

Ellese inclined her head. "Of course she may if she wishes."

Mirra turned to Tallis, who smiled and nodded.

The retired plough horse pulled the wagon beside the refugee-clogged road, his iron-shod feet clopping. The people walked in grim silence, their eyes scared and despairing. They pushed barrows piled with their possessions and drove bellowing livestock. The rumble of wheels mingled with dogs' yapping and the wails of tired children who stumbled amongst the trudging people.

Mirra smiled and waved, and a few peasants responded half-heartedly. The desolation in their eyes and the misery that hung over the throng puzzled the young healer. Dust clung to the people's sweat-streaked faces, and drovers goaded footsore oxen that bawled in protest. Some had pulled off the road to huddle around campfires, warming food for hungry children and resting exhausted beasts. Mirra sensed their fatigue in her bones, and a frown wrinkled her brow.

She turned to Ellese. "Where do they all go, Mother? Why are they so sad?"

Ellese looked away. "They go to the sea."

"Whatever for? They are all so tired."

"To feed the fishes," Tallis said, and the seeress shot her sharp, warning glance.

"Because they must," Elder Mother stated, her tone discouraging further enquiry on the subject.

Mirra thought about that, then shrugged it off. Her nature was too serene to be bothered by mysteries. She accepted things on face value, and if Ellese did not wish her to know, she was content to remain ignorant.

Instead, she gazed at the meadows and shady woodland. The carolling of birds in the hedgerows was audible over the steady rumble of wagon wheels and tramp of feet. The lush countryside basked beneath a warm blue sky in peaceful splendour, abuzz with busy insects and flitting birds. In some fields, placid cattle grazed, their bells clanking as they munched the grass. By contrast, the winding road clogged with human misery made a dismal outlook, and she wondered afresh why these people

chose to make such an arduous journey to the sea when they should be planting the season's crops and tending their farms.

Over the next three days, the throngs dwindled until the trio of healers encountered only a few footsore stragglers following the churned, dung-spattered road. Beside it, crops ripened unattended in the fields and ploughs lay abandoned on the rich earth as if the farmer had simply unhitched his team and walked off, leaving the valuable implements to rust. In empty towns, litter clogged the gutters, collapsed stalls spilt rotting fruit into the roads, and smashed pottery crunched under the cart's wheels. Precious, but useless items lay strewn amongst the rubbish. Children's toys, cheap baubles and ornaments had apparently been cast aside to lighten the loads people carried. Clearly this had been an exodus, and Mirra wondered who she would heal if everyone had left, but presumably they would be back, otherwise Elder Mother would not have brought her here. Ravens and crows gathered on the rooftops, raucous spectators to mankind's downfall.

"Why has everyone left in such a hurry, Mother?" Mirra asked.

Ellese shook her head. "You will find out soon."

Tallis' eyes were haunted as she gazed at the empty houses, where dry washing flapped on the lines. Mirra wondered why this strange exodus was such a secret, especially since Ellese and Tallis seemed to know what had happened. She found their reticence a trifle vexing, and the situation somewhat disturbing, spoiling her happiness.

When they arrived at a thatched cottage set in a leafy forest glade, it was all Mirra had ever dreamt of having. It consisted of two rooms and an outhouse, with white-washed stone walls and a freshly turned vegetable plot at the back. Nearby, a bubbling spring fed a pool in the midst of mossy stones. Ellese inspected it with an air of satisfaction, nodding and smiling.

Mirra enthused over her new home while Ellese unpacked her supplies and Tallis lighted a fire, preparing tea. Ellese smiled at Mirra's delight at the simple abode, wishing this was nothing more than a routine placement. The abbeys took in girls with talent and trained them to be healers. A village that needed a healer applied to an abbey, and were usually sent a youngster, whom they undertook to house and feed in return for her services. The lack of a welcoming crowd to greet a new healer was abnormal, however, and the desolation of the nearby village boded ill for anyone who stayed here. Usually, healers were highly respected, and in no danger of mistreatment, even from the likes of robbers and bandits. Their simple sleeveless white gowns and silver necklaces marked them, keeping them safe in their solitary abodes.

Not from Bane and his army, however. Already, three abbeys had fallen beneath his troops' tramping feet, the healers and their pupils slaughtered in horrible ways. The tales of rape, torture and burnings were enough to turn a healer's blood cold. No one in their right mind would willingly settle in the path of that fate. Ellese feared for Mirra, but this was as it had to be. The girl rearranged the few items of furniture, chattering about her first customers, and Ellese hoped she had done the right thing. She whispered a prayer to the goddess, begging her protection for this innocent girl.

That night at dinner, Mirra put down her spoon and looked at Ellese with a determined air. "What is it really, Mother? Why have the people left?"

Ellese sighed, knowing she could prevaricate no longer. She had to offer some explanation, even if it was incomplete. "There is a war, my dear. They flee from an invading army, trying to find safety."

"Oh." Mirra stared at her spoon. "I am to heal soldiers, then."

"You must help any who need it. That is our way."

Mirra nodded and ate her vegetable stew. This she would accept, Ellese knew, for Mirra had been taught that none would harm a healer. The gravity of the situation seemed to sober the girl somewhat, however, and she finished her dinner in silence.

The next morning, the seeress and Tallis left after many hugs and kisses. Mirra smiled and waved in the doorway as the cart rattled away down the road. As soon as they were out of sight, Tallis gave in to the tears that had been threatening all morning. Ellese put her arm about her, patting her back.

“She will be all right, Tallis. Do not weep. The goddess will protect her.”

## Chapter Two

### Son of Darkness

Bane strode through his army, which camped in a rolling meadow that had once been covered with wild flowers. Now it was a vast tract of trampled, muddy grass dotted with cooking fires and tents. The horde stretched from a bordering forest to distant woodland, split into its tribal groups. Wood smoke fouled the air, along with the stench of the crude trench latrines on the camp's outskirts. As Bane approached, trolls, gnomes, men and rock howlers scuttled from his path, opening a broad swathe around him, like a shoal of fish avoiding a shark.

They were having another ceremony on the hillock just ahead. Chanting and drumming carried on the misty dawn air. The horizon had lightened only slightly, and the night chill lingered. His head pounded with the drumming, which had woken him from a restless sleep and put him in a foul mood. His long black cloak, lined with crimson satin, swept the ground. The gold designs on his black tunic glinted in the glow of the many fires that lighted the ghoulish scene. Shadows seemed to trail him, as if his presence darkened the very air around him. Anger boiled in him as he reached the knoll. The chanting died away and the drums fell silent with a discordant thud. He surveyed the scene. A naked woman was lashed to a boulder, smeared with blood and other bodily fluids. She had been dead for some time, but that did not prevent the horde sporting with her.

Bane sneered, "Been having fun?"

Nervous nods answered him. He stepped towards the drummer, who abandoned his crude instruments and dived into the retreating crowd. No member of the horde would come within five feet of Bane; they knew him too well. He kicked the drums, sending them bouncing into the throng with a flat boom.

Bane glared at them, making them cower further from his ire. His deep voice lashed out like a barbed whip. "You think my father enjoys these things? Do you think he listens to your pathetic prayers? What makes you think he will grant power to a pack of fools raping a dead woman? He has no time for gobbledegook! He wants blood! Death! Souls to torture!" He paused to let that sink in, then added, "And you will not disturb my rest with your infernal racket!"

Dead silence, broken only by the shuffling of retreating feet and paws, ensued. He swung to face those behind him, causing them to surge back with gibbers of terror. "Today, you kill! You drink blood! You torture, maim and make them suffer! You burn, pillage, loot! That is what he wants!"

A muted growl of assent greeted this. Bane flicked a finger at the corpse. "You will not waste your time with corpses. Use a live woman, or go without! She cannot suffer, you fools!"

Bane spun, and a dozen gnomes ran for their lives. Ignoring them, he marched back to his tent, a half league away. Removing his cloak, he flung it over the folding chair and unbuttoned his tunic's high collar. The headache beat at his skull even though the annoying drums had stopped. He groaned as he sank onto his bed, rubbing his temples in an effort to relieve the pain. Why did his father allow him to suffer like this?

He cursed and shouted, "Mord!"

The troll entered warily, his black face a picture of trepidation.

Bane said, "Make my potion! Hurry!"

Mord scuttled out, and Bane clutched his throbbing head. The headaches had started when he was sixteen, and had mastered the great arts of magic. The more he used it, the worse the headache that resulted. At first they had been mild, a mere irritation, but now they annoyed him immensely, making his life a misery at times. His father, the Black Lord, had been unsympathetic, blaming it on his weak human body. Maelle, a fire demon, had given him the drug that soothed it, but warned him not to take too much. The demon's sly grin had angered Bane, and he had tested the potion on a human captive

before taking it himself. He knew better than to trust a demon. He tried to take the potion as little as possible. Only when the pain became unbearable did he resort to it. He had not used the dark power since yesterday, and the pain had been building since then.

Mord returned with the infusion, setting it gingerly on the table before scuttling out again, to wait within call. Bane slugged back the foul-tasting brew, then threw the cup out of the tent flap and lay back. His father was well pleased with his work so far. His visits to Bane's dreams had been full of praise and encouragement. The army had grown and advanced, almost unimpeded by the puny forces sent against it.

The Overworld had no great monarch to unite it. The land was split between many nobles, barons and lords, petty kings and princes, each guarding their demesnes with jealous fervour. Each had called upon their people for an army, but none had raised one large enough to do more than delay Bane's march. The battles had been mere entertainment, a distraction from his true purpose, though he did enjoy them. As some nobles had fallen, so others had fled, removing their armies from his path. Now they marched through empty lands, but he would catch up with the people when they reached the sea, for then there would be no escape.

Bane thought about the headaches again. He was sure the things he had been made to eat and drink in the Underworld had caused them. As a young boy, demons had forced foul black concoctions down his throat while he gagged, writhing in their grip. His skin had erupted in sores and pustules shortly after, and at one point, all his hair had fallen out. It had grown back, thicker and blacker than before, but he had been angry. For the most part, his tormentors had ignored his childish tantrums, or sniggered at them. Demands to see his father had been denied, and when he had complained to the Black Lord, he had found an unsympathetic ear. His power was now as great as the Black Lord's, and he was free to walk the earth, which his father was not until Bane destroyed the wards. First he had to find them, however, and so far he had not come across any sign that they even existed.

As the headache ebbed to a more bearable level, he rose and went outside, glancing irritably at the sun, which rose in golden glory, a point of hot white light that stabbed at his eyes. He was still not used to its brightness. He preferred the dim, warm caverns of the Underworld, which the inner fire's lurid glow lighted. Why his father wished to conquer this awful place was beyond him. He just wanted to go home. He found the sun too bright, the nights too cold, and revolting water had fallen from the sky until he had learnt to control the weather. Banishing the clouds, however, brought out the sun in renewed fury. Gathering the fleecy white puffs to block out the hated sun inevitably led to a drenching. Either way, he could not win, and now rarely bothered to interfere with the weather other than to deflect gathering storms.

Bane strolled through the camp, ignoring the creatures that scrambled from his path, engrossed in his thoughts. The killing was satisfying, he had to admit; never had there been so many victims. The ones brought to the Underworld had died far too quickly, some before they could be tortured. As he walked past a clump of trees, his eyes were drawn to a group of dark creatures around a fire. They sheltered from the sun in the trees' shade, hating the bright light even more than he did. He found their misshapen forms repugnant, yet they were his most powerful followers. They were steeped in the dark power that filled Gor Troth, the huge cavern that led into the descending tunnel to the Underworld.

They were unable to open the world gate through which he had emerged, however. The power had warped them even beyond their original grotesque shapes, yet each breed retained a semblance of its initial design. They came in a variety of species, and kept to their bands. Grims, wights and vampires generally avoided the larger nasties, night crawlers, grotesques and weirds. No two were exactly alike, some being more malformed than others, but their deformities did not seem to hamper them. Many boasted bat wings, but few could fly. They carried no weapons other than the claws, fangs or spines with which they had been born, and although the dark power had shaped them, none could wield it. They growled as they watched him pass, their eyes glowing in the firelight.

Arriving at the place where his mount was tethered, he watched some trolls toss meat to it, keeping well clear of its teeth and talons. The lesser red dragon turned baleful yellow eyes upon its master,

snapping its jaws in his direction. Armed with a formidable array of teeth, claws and spines, a dragon, even a small red like this one, was a fearsome beast. While flightless, its powerful legs and sinuous torso made it capable of remarkable speed.

Although not a fire breather, it was comfortable to ride, and it was also the only Overworld animal his touch would not kill, he had discovered. When first he had come across a horse, he had attempted to ride it, but the beast had gone into a foaming frenzy and collapsed. Irked by this, Bane had banished all horses from his army, forcing the men to march. He had captured a dragon instead, and had been well pleased with it. Not only had it been able to survive his touch, but any who ventured too close to it died, which suited Bane perfectly.

The dragon's chains clanked as it lunged at its handlers, snapping at them as they tossed meat. It preferred live prey, and would have rather have eaten live troll than dead human. Feeding it was no problem; a few humans were killed every day. Dragons did not usually feed that often. They spent most of their time in slothful basking, but this one, ridden daily, needed a great deal of food. When enough wards had been broken, he would be able to summon a demon steed, but until then the dragon would suffice.

As Bane approached, it cowered, tugging at the chains. He smiled, enjoying his power. Everything was afraid of him, and he liked that. No one had dared to touch him since he had mastered the dark power in the Underworld four years ago. Then an air demon, Yangarra, had tried to torment him by sucking the air from his lungs and sniggering as he gasped – the kind of cruel trick it had played on him for years. A burst of dark fire had burnt it to ash. He had suffered the headache afterwards, and his father's wrath, but it had been worth it. His father had not dared to punish him.

Bane picked up the cruel headgear that allowed him to control the dragon. Vicious spikes were attached to a thin chain bridle, and gouged the beast's muzzle whenever Bane jerked on the reins. He pulled it onto the cowering beast's head and fastened it so it could not be shaken off. The trolls shuffled away as he threw the thick woolly skin over the animal's back and mounted. The dragon writhed, hurt by his touch. He prodded it with a sharp metal goad, making it lurch forward into its smooth flowing run with a resentful hiss.

The army followed him through the next valley and into a town at its far end. Only a few aged livestock and an old man who died of fright when he saw the first troll inhabited it. Although expected, Bane found the Overworld people's cowardice annoying. It robbed him of his daily entertainment. The troops took some enjoyment in setting the village alight, but Bane found little satisfaction in that.

Leaving the town to burn, he led them down the road a few leagues before he stopped and turned to survey them with narrowed eyes, searching for a bold look or a defiant air amongst them. If he could find fault with one of them, he could devise a painful punishment for his amusement. The men cowered, giving him no excuse for such an action, and he snorted in annoyance. If he tortured one of them for no reason, they would leave, and he did not relish the prospect of doing everything himself. He turned and led them onwards. There had to be some old, weak, sick or injured stragglers that could provide sport for the evening.

By the end of the day, a group of trolls had found only one child lost in the woods, but had torn him apart in their eagerness. When Bane found out about this, he had them whipped for cheating him of his evening's entertainment. That provided some small measure of the amusement he craved, although it was not as satisfying as torturing an innocent. He was tempted to scry, but that used the dark power, and would bring back the headache.

By the time they camped for the night, Bane's mood had turned ugly, and he kicked Mord when the troll brought his supper. The food, a reddish concoction sent from the Underworld, was his only sustenance. He pondered it as he ate, ignoring its bitter taste. As an Underworld creature, Overworld food would be poison to him, his father had said. The Black Lord was naturally concerned for his son's health, although Bane was unsure how Overworld food could poison him when he was so powerful. His father seldom explained things, however. He simply expected obedience.

Like making Bane hate women. He must have had a reason, but he had never told Bane what it was.

Instead, he had told his son stories about witches and evil women since he had been old enough to understand them. Then, when Bane was fifteen, the Black Lord had captured a pretty girl and brought her to the Underworld. She had begged Bane for mercy, since he was the only creature there who even resembled a human. Every time he had looked at her, his father had grown angry, accusing him of weakness and sentiment. At first, she had fascinated him, but his father's mockery and the demons' baiting had made him hate her, and his father had ordered him to kill her.

Up here, he had come across many women, and found that they died as easily as men. None lived up to the stories his father had told him. Not even the healers in the abbeys. They had been the easiest to kill, for they did not even try to flee. He never doubted his father, but many things had confused him over the years.

Like all the painful ceremonies he had been forced to undergo, which the Black Lord had told him were to give him the ability to wield the dark power. Demons had cut him, collected his blood, mixed it with potions and fed it to him. Bane had vomited for days, and his father had railed at his weakness. This had confused him, for no one else in the Underworld had blood, or underwent the ceremonies. When he had questioned his father, the Black Lord explained that he had been created a certain way, so he could go to the Overworld and break the wards.

Bane flung the empty bowl out of the tent and lay down, stretching out on the hard cot. His lithe, powerful physique was also a gift from the Black Lord. Bane had undergone years of forced labour; useless, strenuous tasks that made his body bulge in odd places. True, he was strong, but he had hated the labour. He had broken rocks and dug new tunnels, which his father could create with a flick of his hand, while demons watched and sniggered as he sweated. That had stopped when he mastered the dark power. He smiled. His father had been pleased with him when at last he had been able to wield the power. After he had destroyed Yangarra, the demons ceased to torment him, and life had been good. Still pondering, he fell asleep.

Mirra dug in the vegetable garden, taking care not to harm any of the fat earthworms she found there. She had seen no one in two days. That did not surprise her, although she had expected some wounded soldiers and was disappointed that none had come her way. The deer came at her call, but seemed more nervous than usual. They stayed only long enough to snatch the sweet bread she gave them before vanishing into the woods once more.

Birds answered the call of spring, raising chicks in scruffy nests and tree holes, filling the woodland with their lilting song. Her only patient had been a starling with a broken wing. A mere moment's work, although still satisfying. The squirrels brought her nuts and a badger left tender roots outside her door each night as tokens of their friendship. For someone who had grown up in a crowded abbey, however, the peaceful forest was a lonely place.

Mirra looked up at a flash of movement amongst the trees, hope buoying her heart. A young hind limped from the woods, her eyes wide and fearful, and Mirra hurried over to her. The deer trembled and panted as Mirra examined her, and the animal's pain tingled through her. Mirra gasped when she found the black arrow that protruded from the doe's haunch, and raised a hand to her mouth. The infliction of such pain upon an innocent animal horrified her, and she realised that the purpose of the arrow had been to kill the doe. She had never heard of such a thing, since healers ate no meat. She could not fathom the reason for killing such a beautiful creature.

Mirra still had much to learn about the world, however, so she set aside her dismay for now, certain that some logical explanation would be forthcoming in the future. Her healing power flowed as she pulled the arrow painlessly from the wound, which closed without a scar. The doe nuzzled her, then trotted away, ears twitching. Mirra returned to her garden, humming. She enjoyed helping humans and animals. It gave her a warm glow.

The birds ceased their carolling, and strident warning calls rang out. A flock of wood pigeons that fed in the glade flapped for the safety of the trees. A squirrel chittered and vanished into its hole in the



spreading oak beside the garden. A misshapen man emerged from the trees, followed by three others. Black eyes darted in their wizened, nut-brown faces. Hairy ears protruded at right angles to their heads, and bulbous noses overhung slack-lipped mouths. Worn clothes, soiled with mud, hung ill-fitting on pot-bellied torsos. Each carried a small re-curve bow and a quiver of arrows on his back.

The four gnomes stopped and stared at her, apparently surprised to encounter a healer in these woods. Mirra rubbed the warm earth from her hands as she rose to her feet, and brushed self-consciously at her robe, embarrassed to be found in such a state of disarray.

Hiding her dirty hands behind her back, she smiled. "You are welcome. Do you require healing?"

One gnome started towards her, leering, but another held him back and growled, "Let's not act like trolls, Snort."

Eager for some company, Mirra asked, "Would you like some tea?"

"Uh, narr, we ain't thirsty." The first gnome shuffled his feet.

"You all look very well."

"Huh? Oh, yah, we are." He sniggered. "But you won't be fer long."

Her smile widened at his ignorance. "Healers do not fall ill."

Mirra studied them, fascinated. Gnomes were timid, secular people who stayed mostly in their vast warrens, usually found in hillsides, where they dwelt in tight-knit communities. They were renowned for thieving, mostly sheep or chicken rustling, and farmers cursed them, but rarely caught them in the clumsy traps they set. Gnomes were cunning, if not particularly clever. They usually moved in groups of five or six, and always carried bows and knives. This was a rare and welcome opportunity for her to learn a little about them, and enjoy some company, too.

"How may I help you?" she enquired.

The foremost gnome fidgeted and glanced at his friends. "Uh, well, you're coming with us. The boss will want to see you." His friends sniggered, nudging each other, and one muttered, "That's fer sure."

"Of course." Mirra was delighted. She had never heard of gnomes seeking help from a healer. "Take me there."

To her surprise, they gripped her arms and hustled her into the woods, heading back the way they had come. She wondered if gnomes always sought to aid their guests' locomotion in this way, or whether they thought she needed help for some reason.

"You are very kind, but I can manage on my own." When they ignored her, she asked, "Where are you from? I have not seen anyone for days. It is nice to meet someone at last. Do you live hereabouts?"

The lead gnome grunted. "Not exactly."

"Yuh, we just moved in," another sniggered.

"Good!" Mirra was becoming a little breathless as they hurried her along. "Is your... err, boss very sick?"

"Sick! Nah, not on yer -"

"Yah, he is." The lead gnome cuffed his companion. "Shurrrup, Snort."

Snort whined, and Mirra shot him a sympathetic look, wondering why they should be so confused as to whether or not the boss was sick. Surely that was why they had sought her out? Or had they merely stumbled across her in a stroke of good fortune? She concentrated on keeping up with the rather gruelling pace they set without tripping over roots or being bashed by low branches, which the gnomes did not notice, being only three feet tall.

Soon they reached the edge of the forest, where the trees gave way to a rolling meadow. A sea of men, gnomes, trolls and all manner of dark folk covered the trampled grassland from this forest to the next, several leagues away. Mirra estimated that there were several tens of thousands of men, more than she had ever seen gathered in one place. Most of them rested on the ground, some were engaged in cooking, or cleaning weapons, others talked, gambled or slept. They all seemed to favour a dull brown or black garb, and many wore rusted armour. A low mutter of male voices carried on the balmy air, and a haze of blue smoke hung over the scene.

“Goodness!” she exclaimed. “This is an army! Ellese told me there was a war. I am glad you found me. You must have injured men, I suppose?”

The gnome shot her a disbelieving look, his wizened face creased with confusion. They trundled her into the midst of the horde, and shouts of surprise and delight greeted her arrival. The gnomes growled and pushed away those who ventured too close or tried to grab her, and a procession formed in her wake. Mirra was surprised to see every race of dark folk represented. Usually they were reclusive, and normal people rarely saw them.

Dirty, unshaven men swaggered amongst them, leering at her, their rank stench thickening the air. She fought the urge to hold a hand over her nose and smiled at them. When she came to a man who lay on the ground, a bloody bandage around his leg, she stopped. His pain called out to her, and she slipped from the gnomes’ grip to kneel beside him. At her touch the wound healed, and the man stared at her, then the gnomes grabbed her and trundled her away.

They led her to a leather tent in the middle of the camp, which had an un-trampled area around it. The crowd of muttering soldiers followed, and formed a wide circle around the tent. A troll who stood at the door ducked inside and reappeared quickly. Considering the huge stature and massive strength of the black-haired sub-human, his darting eyes and fearful demeanour surprised her. The yellow tusks that curved up from his lower jaw pulled his face into a glum expression.

“Is this where your sick boss is?” Mirra started forward, but the gnomes held her back.

“Wait!” the leader said, looking nervous.

Mirra scanned the crowd behind her. No healers accompanied this army, and the men’s glares were distinctly hostile. She fondled her silver necklace, trying to calm her pounding heart by assuring herself that even enemy troops needed a healer’s services.

A man stepped from the tent, and Mirra’s heart contracted painfully as her gaze met his. A thick mane of jet hair framed the face of a demon crossed with an angel. His alabaster skin, which appeared never to have seen the sun, lay taut over sculpted features. Fine brows angled up sharply above long-lashed blue eyes as vivid as a flame’s bright heart. An artist striving for perfection in a godly form might have sculpted his straight, narrow nose. His well-shaped mouth was twisted with scorn.

The contrast in his face amazed and fascinated her. His deep widow’s peak and slanted brows gave him a demonic, evil look, while his skin and eyes made him resemble a fallen angel. Lines of strain and anger furrowed the skin between his brows, and his eyes were bloodshot. The layered wings of glossy hair fell to his broad shoulders, and matched the ankle-length cloak that hung from them. Flame-like patterns of fine gold embroidery decorated the front of his shirt, and silver-studded leather wrist guards encircled his forearms.

Mirra sensed the pain radiating from him, echoed in his tormented eyes, and was surprised when the gnomes scuttled away, apparently afraid of him. His aura of power did not daunt her. Healers were trained to be unaffected by such things, since even kings and queens must seek their help at times. His obvious need of her help calmed her fears, and she smiled as she stepped forward to offer her services in the manner in which she had been trained.

“May the goddess bless you, and her power heal you through me.”

His cold eyes never left her face as he spoke in a soft, menacing voice. “I doubt that, little girl.”

Mirra laughed, and he winced as if it hurt his ears. “I am certain that whatever your illness is, I can help you.”

“You were not brought here to help me.”

Mirra stepped closer, which seemed to surprise him, for his brows rose a fraction. “But I can stop your pain.”

“Really.” His eyes glinted.

Mirra reached up to touch his brow. His skin was cool and satin smooth. He regarded her flatly, his eyes gleaming with cruel anticipation. She snatched her hand away and rubbed it as she retreated a step, uncertain. Her healing seemed to bounce off him as if a barrier just under his skin blocked it, and she sensed a strangeness deep within him, which confused her.

His lips curled into a derisive smile. "Your magic will not work on me, witch. My father made certain of that. I am so glad you could join us today. Sport has been hard to come by lately, and I have missed it." He raised his head to address the soldiers behind her. "Take her and bind her."

As he stepped back, many hands gripped her arms and dragged her towards a large, upright rock. The strange turn of events perplexed and alarmed her. The tall man followed, his shadowy cloak flaring to reveal a crimson lining.

The men bound her to the rock with rough ropes, forcing her to stand with her back pressed against it. The black-clad man watched her, and she wondered what they were going to do. Surely they would not harm a healer?

When she was lashed to the stone, he walked closer. The men sidled back, and he stopped in front of her, his eyes icy.

"Now you will see what I do with witches."

"I am not a witch. I am a healer."

"Do not talk back, witch."

The man pulled a black-bladed dagger from a sheath on his belt, and she watched him with vague disquiet. He fingered the blade, his eyes raking her as if pondering his next move, then he raised the weapon and drew it down her cheek in a swift motion, surprising her. The cut healed instantly, without a drop of blood escaping. His eyes narrowed, and he peered at her cheek, then at the dagger. He cut her again, deeper, with the same result. Frowning, he turned and held out a hand to the men behind him, who shrank from it.

"Give me a brand."

A man yanked a piece of burning wood from the nearest fire and thrust it into her would-be tormentor's hand, and he swung back to her. He pressed it to her cheek, but her power healed the burn and blocked the pain. The smell of charring flesh sickened her, but she knew from childhood escapades that any injury she received healed instantaneously. Perhaps he was ensuring she really was a healer, she thought.

He removed the brand and scowled at her. "So, the little witch has real magic."

"I am a healer."

"Silence!" His hand cracked across her cheek, snapping her head around. She wondered what she had done to anger him. He was a little flushed, and his brows almost met over his nose. Mirra gasped as his vivid eyes turned black, and he raised his hands. She sensed a surge of strange, evil power. Black flames arced from his fingers and crawled over her like loathsome shadows. Her stomach churned, and she swallowed the sour sting of bile. Apart from the nausea, the fire only tingled where it touched.

He snarled and unleashed a lash that drove her back against the rock, causing her healing to flare. The crowd retreat with fearful moans, and Mirra flinched from the power he wielded. Lowering his hands, he let the black fire die. The darkness drained from his eyes as he glared at her.

"What are you?"

Mirra sagged, relieved that the sickness had vanished with the fire. "A healer."

He swung away, his expression thunderous. "I will not waste my power on a puling witch-maid. Make my father happy!" he roared at the crowd. "Torture her! We want to hear her scream!" He strode away, his back stiff.

The horde closed in on her, and many dirty hands cut the ropes and pulled her into their midst. She yelped as knives slashed her robe and sliced her in bloodless cuts that closed without a trace. Clubs smashed her fingers and snapped her arms and legs. She was beaten, pummelled, thrown down and stomped on, spat on, urinated on. They rolled her in the dirt, broke her ribs with kicks, pierced her eyes with daggers and thrust burning brands into her skin. They tore out her hair in tufts and slashed it off with knives, forced excrement into her mouth and stabbed swords through her gut. The injuries healed instantly and painlessly, but their severity caused her skin to glow with the golden power. Through it all, she gave only an occasional grunt when they knocked the wind out of her.

When they withdrew, she was smeared with muck, her hair gone, but for snarled clumps, her gown

in rags, and a bad taste in her mouth. She gazed at them with sad reproach, two tears escaping down her cheeks as she fingered the filthy ruin of her hair. The gnomes who had captured her dragged her to her feet and hauled her to their master's tent. The troll ducked inside for a moment, and Mirra pulled together the tattered remnants of her dress in a rather vain attempt at modesty, since there was hardly enough cloth left to cover her.

The black-clad man emerged and surveyed her with a grim expression. Pain radiated from him, and she longed to heal him.

"Is this the best you could do?" he roared at the gnomes, who scuttled away, to stop at a safe distance. "I want her dead! Are you so useless that you cannot kill a simpering maiden? All you have done is dirty her and cut her hair!" He clasped his brow, wincing, then turned to the troll who cowered next to the door. "Where is my damned potion?"

The troll held out the cup he clutched, and the man snatched it from him.

Mirra sensed the foulness of the brew within it and cried, "Do not drink that!"

He glared at her, his lip curling. "Why not?"

"It is bad for you!"

He stared at her in undisguised amazement. "Why should you care?"

"Of course I care. I am a healer."

"You are mad." He drank the liquid and threw the cup aside. "Tie her up!" he ordered the gnomes. "I see I will have to deal with her myself. Make sure the ropes are rough and tight. I want her to suffer." His icy gaze raked her. "Perhaps she will afford better entertainment than I thought, since she does not die so easily."

The gnomes dragged Mirra to the forest's edge and bound her to a tree, the ropes cutting into her skin. She sagged in her bonds, wondering what was in store for her next. The situation made no sense. She had done nothing to earn the strange, handsome man's wrath, yet he wanted her dead.

## Chapter Three

### The First Ward

That night, as Bane tossed in restless sleep on his hard cot, the Black Lord entered his dreams. *Anger radiated from his dark, fiery countenance. The seething blackness that Bane's father preferred, streaked with red and vivid yellow, engulfed Bane. Occasional glimpses of weird landscapes gave him a little insight into the workings of the Black Lord's mind, since he created the vistas. Barren, flat expanses flitted before Bane's eyes, some dotted with stones, others as smooth and flat as a table top, and a sickly sun shone through thick clouds with weak red light. From this, Bane deduced that his father was fairly calm, which boded well for the meeting. His father's furies were inclined to be rather overwhelming, and battered his mind with waves of senseless rage. The scenes came and went, distracting him until the Black Lord spoke in a booming voice.*

*"Bane, why did you not kill the healer?"*

*Bane turned his gaze upon his father's face, meeting blood-red eyes that glowed with dull venom. The Black Lord's visage was otherwise featureless, a reflection of his personality, or lack of it.*

*"I tried, Father."*

*"Then try harder. She must be killed."*

*"She is immune to my power. I am curious."*

*His father snarled, "Do not be curious, boy. Kill her!"*

*"I want to know why the dark power does not harm her." Bane's eyes were drawn past his father to a vision of stormy sea. A yellow glow on the horizon lighted huge black waves crested with bloody spume. The Black Lord's calm was dwindling, it seemed.*

*"This is no time for such foolishness. I tire of waiting while you wander aimlessly about, satisfying your bloodlust. Use the power and find the wards! Smash them, then we will share the final victory over those snivelling humans. And kill that damned girl!"*

Bane grew more curious as the scene in his father's mind changed to a raging inferno that leapt and writhed with the Black Lord's fury. It puzzled him that his father thought it so important to kill the witch. She was just another human female, with an odd immunity to his power. He intended to find out why that was, then kill her in the torturous manner he enjoyed. Before he could question his father further, the dream faded.

The next morning, he thought about the girl while he ate his breakfast. Her immunity angered him. She should have burnt, screaming, but instead she had merely looked uncomfortable, as if she had a mild stomach-ache. The rabble had proven beyond doubt that physical attack could not harm her, and the problem of killing her puzzled him. To add to that, she had feigned concern for him, and lied, claiming to care about his well-being when he knew full well she wished him dead, like all the Overworld humans. Her offer of help was intended as an insult, to make his men think he was weak or sick. He would find out why his power did not work, and remedy it. Until then, she offered sport to brighten his days, which made up for the irritation of her unwanted presence somewhat.

After breakfast, he summoned his captains, who gathered at a respectful distance, their eyes darting. The lone dark creature, which would carry his orders to the rest, watched Bane with glowing, baleful eyes. The grim was one of the lesser monsters, a bug-eyed horror with a matted black pelt and thin arms tipped with poisonous, razor claws. Its demeanour was worshipful, yet a deep, all-encompassing loathing underscored it. The sunlight obviously caused it pain, for it squinted, and a sticky ichor oozed from its hide. The others gave the squat, toad-like creature a wide berth, and not only because of its nauseating smell. The red fangs that protruded from its mouth dripped venom that blackened the grass.

Bane ordered the men to search for the wards, still reluctant to scry for them as his father had ordered. Scrying used a great deal of power, and the resulting headache would be excruciating. It meant a delay, however. Bane would have to wait for the searchers to return, since their absence would

seriously diminish his force. The men left looking confused. This was the first time he had ordered them to do anything other than fight. The grim crawled away, trailing its smell into the shelter of the trees to join its fellows. He watched the captains gather their men and pass on his instructions. Each captain represented his own species or tribe, and they set out in groups that comprised only their own kind. There was no mixing of the different bands; each preferred the society of their ilk. The dark creatures remained in the forest's deep shadows. They would only set out after dusk.

At midday, Bane wandered over to the tree at the edge of the forest where the girl was tied. She greeted him with a timid smile that reminded him of the pathetic friendliness of a whipped cur. It turned his stomach. Of all the humans he had encountered, she was undoubtedly the most sickening, annoying and pathetic.

He sneered, "Enjoying my hospitality, witch?"

"I am sure this is not meant to be enjoyable, and it is not."

Her flaxen hair was all but gone, filth smeared her, and a foul smell hung about her. Her ragged robe clung to her slender contours, barely covering them. Yet the calm serenity in her eyes defied him, told him not of suffering but mere confusion.

He said, "I could leave you here to rot. Are you too stupid to know fear?"

She regarded him steadily, her smile fading. Bane swung away and strode back to his tent. Her composure mocked him. She should be weeping and begging for mercy. All the humans he had encountered until now had pleaded for their lives, yet this young girl seemed able to accept her fate calmly, even when it was obvious a painful death awaited her. She must be confident that he could not harm her, but he would find ways to make her suffer. Her pain would bring him satisfaction before he killed her.

Mirra watched him leave, wondering why he had tried so hard to hurt her, and now held her prisoner in this way. The future loomed dark and uncertain, so she did not dwell on it. Instead she watched the men split up into ragged squadrons and march off, heading in different directions as if the army was disbanding. She grew thirstier as the sun moved across the sky, and was glad the tree to which she was bound at least offered some shade. By sunset, only a few hundred men remained, camped on the far side of the meadow, well away from the big tent, its lone attendant and solitary occupant.

As darkness fell, a cool wind sprang up from the east, and its chill touch made her shiver. A furtive shape flitted through the deepening shadows towards her, and she peered at it, unsure of what new peril it offered. She made out a ragged, unwashed soldier, and relaxed, sensing no threat in him. He twitched with unease as he stopped in front of her, darting fearful glances over his shoulder.

"I didn't have anything to do with the beating, healer," he said. "You healed me, so I reckon I owe you."

Mirra recognised the man whose leg she had healed, and hope surged within her. She managed a weak smile, her mouth too dry to speak. He pulled a water skin from his coat and held it to her lips. The cool liquid slid down her burning throat, bringing blessed relief. Although her healing power would block the pain of wounds, it did not prevent the pangs of thirst and hunger. She made the most of his kindness and drained the water skin.

When it was finished, she licked the last cool drops from her lips and smiled at him again. "Thank you. You are a kind man."

He shrugged, tucking the water skin away. "One good turn deserves another."

"The goddess will bless those who help a healer."

"Reckon I'm beyond redemption."

Mirra shook her head. "All can be saved if they repent."

The man grunted at her pious words and slipped away into the darkness before she could ask him to release her. She dozed for a while, drooping in the ropes, but jerked awake at the sound of soft

footfalls. Another soldier crept towards her in the moonlight, a swarthy man with a scarred face and rusty, dented armour. He stopped in front of her, eyes darting, as his comrade had done.

"Healer, I've a pain. Will you help?"

"Of course. Touch me."

The soldier laid a hand on her arm, and her power flowed into him. It found the cause of his pain, a malignant tumour in his stomach, and healed it in a few moments. The pain faded, making him sigh and smile. He pulled some bread from his pouch and tore it into chunks, which he fed to her before he stole away. Much later, a drizzle woke her again, soaked her torn robe and chilled her to the bone. For the rest of the night she shivered, and the rope cut into her arms as it swelled with the moisture.

When morning came, a warm, welcome sun edged free of pink clouds and touched her with its glorious power, banishing the chill. The black-clad man visited her, and surveyed her bedraggled state with evident satisfaction. She was struck afresh by the purity of his sun-gilded features.

"Do the bonds hurt, witch?" he asked.

"No."

"They damn well should." Scowling, he stepped closer and tested their tautness. His touch forced her to share his pain, and her healing power flowed, but again was repulsed. He found the ropes tight and asked, "Why is it that nothing hurts you, and my father orders me to kill you?"

"I do not know."

"I have killed healers before with the fire. They die like anyone else."

Sorrow blossomed within her. "Why did you kill them?"

"I felt like it! Do not question me!" He glowered at her with brilliant eyes. "I shall find a way to make you suffer before you die, and when I do, you will rue the day you were born, witch."

Mirra watched him march away, sadness settling on her like a dark shroud. There was no reason to kill healers. They only helped those in need, and never harmed anyone or anything. She had done nothing to deserve his hatred or his attempts at torturing her, and it made no sense. Even an invading army needed help for their wounded, and the healers could deny none. He was angry and bitter, and his pain was so deep it touched his very soul. She longed to free him from the darkness that hung about him, to find the reason for his suffering and cure it.

That night, two more men came to be healed, bringing food and water. One, a little bolder than the others, spoke to her for a while, and she learnt how this army had formed, gathering around the dark man. When she asked about him, the soldier could tell her little. He seemed reluctant to talk about him, even afraid to mention his name. He claimed that he had joined the army to gain riches, and she pitied him. All the while, he kept glancing at the big tent, and Mirra sensed his fear.

"Why are you so afraid of him?" she asked.

"Why?" The man grunted. "Because of who he is, of course!"

"Who is he?"

The soldier leant closer, giving her the benefit of his foetid breath. "He's Bane, the Demon Lord!"

"He is not a demon."

"Perhaps not, but he is evil. He comes from the Underworld. He's the Black Lord's son, I've heard."

While Mirra pondered this startling information, the man crept away. Once again, she had not asked him to release her, but by now she sensed that these men were too scared to defy their leader. She had been told about the Underworld and its ruler, the Black Lord, but her teachers had not mentioned that he had a son.

Mirra did not see Bane for two days, and each night two men came to be healed, bringing food and water. When she found herself healing an ingrown toenail, she realised she had won their pity. The nights were too cold for her to sleep. Her shivering kept her awake, and the drizzle that usually fell before dawn added to her misery. During the day she dozed, hanging in her bonds, and woke with a stiff neck and a nasty sensation that she was becoming part of the tree to which she was bound. The unanswered questions about Bane and her uncertain future plagued her, but her mind only ran in circles

when she thought about that. Instead, she concentrated on keeping warm at night and sleeping as much as she could during the day.

On the third day, Bane came to inspect her, and scowled at her good health. "Why are you not half dead from thirst, witch?" Before she could answer, he swung around and roared, "Traitors!"

Across the meadow, men leapt up from their campfires and sprinted for the woods. The Demon Lord snarled, and his eyes turned black. He lashed her with the fire, and she grimaced as her stomach churned. With a flick of his hand, he sent a bolt across the valley to gouge a chunk out of the ground behind the fleeing men.

"Mord!" he bellowed.

The troll scuttled up and abased himself, his face screwed up.

Bane indicated Mirra. "Cut her down. Wash the stink from her, and bring her to my tent. Those bastards will not feed her again."

Bane stalked back to his tent, the jet cloak swirling about him as if his rage had fuelled it to animation. Mord ran to find help, and returned with two reluctant gnomes. When they cut her bonds, Mirra's rubbery legs would not obey her. They carried her to a stream in the forest and washed her with coarse soap, scrubbing her ragged hair, and Mord hacked off the remaining tresses that hung from her scalp in tangled clumps. When she was clean, they wrapped her in an old, threadbare green robe and carried her to Bane's tent.

The Black Lord's son sat on the bed, clutching his head. When Mord entered, he demanded, "What took you so long? Fetch my medicine!"

Mord darted out, and the gnomes dumped Mirra and fled. Bane glared at her, his eyes bloodshot and his brow sheened with sweat. "Now you smell like a damned harlot."

Mirra sat up and reached out to him, sensing his pain in palpable waves. "Let me help you."

He smacked her hands away. "I do not need your damned help!"

"You suffer."

"Leave me alone, witch."

Mord dashed in, cowering, to place a cup on the table before fleeing again.

Mirra winced as Bane drained the drug. "That will kill you."

"Rubbish."

"It is poison."

"Be silent! All of a sudden you have a lot to say, and I do not want to hear it. Must I gag you?"

Bane threw the cup at her and lay back on the bed. Closing his eyes, he clasped his temples, his face haggard. Mirra waited until his slow breathing told her that he slept, then crept closer, forcing her legs to work a little. Her nature cried out to help him. His pain hurt her deeply, and she longed to ease it. Placing her fingertips on his arm, she sensed again the alien power that blocked her healing. She concentrated, trying to push past it.

Bane jerked awake and lashed out, struck her in the face and knocked her back against the tent wall. She turned to find him sitting up, his expression murderous.

"Keep your filthy hands off me!"

Mirra looked at her hands, which were clean. "But they are not -"

"Silence!"

Bane ran a hand through his hair, combing it into glossy, feather-like layers. He contemplated her, then rose and tied her hands behind her with twine before going back to sleep.

For two days, she neither ate nor drank, while Bane consumed evil, reddish food and a lot of strong wine. For the most part, he ignored her while he studied his maps or left her alone when he strolled amongst his men. Apart from ordering Mord around, he spoke to no one, and seemed to wish no company. Sometimes, he glared at her as if her presence, silent and unobtrusive though it was, offended him. Apart from when Mord took her to use the trench latrine, she spent all her time curled up in the corner of the tent.

On the third day, a troll runner came in with a message. Bane sat at his table, maps spread across it



as usual, wine cup in hand. The hairy creature prostrated himself, and Bane signalled for him to rise.

“What is it?”

“Lord, we’ve found a ward, in the sea town of Agaspen.”

“Is it in a church?”

“Yes, Lord.”

With a cold smile, Bane straightened and banged down his cup, sloshing its contents and making the troll whimper.

“We march!” The troll darted out, and Bane turned to Mirra. “A bit of marching should sap your strength. Everyone dies of thirst, witch; even you.”

Mirra was unable to think of anything to say, besides which, her mouth was too dry to speak.

Amid much bustle and shouting the camp was struck, and Bane mounted the red dragon to lead the troops along the road. The army straggled after him, its ranks swelled by those squadrons that had returned from their search, overflowing the road to blacken the fields around it. Mirra walked amongst the soldiers, Mord leading her by a rope around her neck. As soon as Bane was far enough away, one of the men who walked beside her held a water skin to her lips. Mord snarled at him, but he ignored the troll, who was apparently unwilling to enter into a physical conflict over the matter. When she had drunk her fill, the men fed her biscuits and bread, which gave her the strength to walk for the rest of the day.

When they camped at dusk, Mord brought her to the Demon Lord’s tent, and at the sight of her his expression became furious.

“Those bastards!” He knocked her down with a vicious backhand blow. “They have been feeding you again, have they not? They have given you water!”

Mirra nodded, and Bane swung around. She glimpsed Mord’s fleeing hairy form.

“Mord!” Bane’s bellow echoed around the camp, causing faraway men to abandon their campfires and race for the woods. “Bring them to me! I want those men, or I will torture every one of you! You will all pay!”

“Please do not,” Mirra begged. “They were only being kind.”

“Silence!” Bane kicked her, sending her rolling with a grunt.

In a remarkably short time, two terrified men were dragged in front of him, bound and bruised, their dirty clothes torn. They struggled in the brutish hands of four rough-looking men who obviously had no intention of paying for the good Samaritans’ crimes. The ruffians pushed the hapless duo to their knees and backed away. When Bane approached them, they grovelled, whimpering. Mirra recognised them, and her heart sank. They were the men who had helped her, not two others chosen at random.

Rolling onto her side, she got to her knees. “Bane, please do not punish them.”

He turned and slapped her, knocking her down again. “I told you to hold your tongue.”

The Demon Lord stood over the men, his hands on his hips, then signalled to Mord. “Whip them, then bind them to stakes and leave them beside the road. They can suffer the same fate as the healer will, when the rest of these idiots have learnt not to defy me.” He raised his voice to address the hidden army. “When I say the witch does not eat or drink, she does not! Any who disobey will share her fate, just as these do.”

The men were hauled away, and Bane strode to his tent, thrust aside the flap with a vicious blow and vanished inside. Mirra gazed after him, distraught and miserable. Soon the men’s cries pierced the night’s hush, punctuated by the sharp crack of a lash on bare flesh. She wept until Mord returned to drag her into the tent, where Bane already slept. He appeared to remain asleep when Mord dumped her, and she curled up and fell into an exhausted slumber. The men’s muffled cries haunted her dreams, and she jerked awake several times, her heart pounding.

The following day, none of the soldiers dared to come near her, but many cast her pitying looks. She kept her eyes downcast, unable to meet their glances, dogged by guilt for those who had paid so dearly for their kindness. By midday, she stumbled, weak with hunger, towed along by the rope. Her ordeal ended sooner than she expected when they reached a coastal town just after noon. The fishing

village was a huddle of stone houses surrounded by a high grey wall, only the red-tiled roofs visible. It nestled against ancient cliffs, which bestrode the land like a huge step, dense woodland on top of them.

A chequerboard of cultivated fields surrounded the town, and livestock grazed in lush pastures. The cliff curved away from the town where it invaded the sea, sheltering a rocky cove that bristled with jetties and dozens of fishing boats. Smoke rose from the chimneys in a semblance of normality, but the town had been warned of the army's approach, and its gates were closed. The villagers had barricaded the tall wooden doors with overturned wagons outside, as well as within, Mirra guessed. Even now, the last men were being pulled up the walls with ropes, their task complete.

Bane smirked at their futile efforts, his expression contemptuous. He had no need to tell his captains what to do, but merely sat and watched his men prepare for the attack. Trolls, armed with double-edged battle-axes, went into the forest and felled several trees to use as battering rams. Ten trolls carried each ram, and they led the attack. They trotted up the road to the gates, the rams a slight burden for their strength. The rest of the horde followed, shouting battle cries and beating their swords on their shields as they swarmed across the fields like a black tide rising to engulf the grey-walled village in a foul sea of chanting, sword-waving death.

The defenders were ill equipped and untrained, but they fought bravely from the walls. Flights of arrows and spears whistled amongst Bane's motley army, killing many. When the villagers ran out of spears, they used harpoons, boathooks and sharpened stakes. At the wall, they tipped pots of boiling oil onto the attackers' heads, and many died screaming, tearing at their steaming clothes. They pulled off parboiled skin with the garments, and their shrieks made Mirra's skin crawl.

Bane's army surged back like a wave rebounding from a cliff, and withdrew to a safe distance to wait for the gates to be broken down. The trolls battered the doors with a great booming that echoed across the valley. Many died as they wielded the rams, despite the shields held over their heads to ward off the storm of arrows and oil that rained down. As soon as a troll fell, another took his place from the waiting host, and the progress of the rams barely faltered. The gates shuddered with every blow, growing weaker under the barrage, until they swayed, loosened from their stout iron hinges.

Bane sat on the dragon, smiling as the gates gave way and swung inward with a great squeal of tearing wood. His men charged into the town, and distant screaming, mingled with the clash of arms and the attackers' whoops, arose. Soon black smoke poured from the stricken town, and crammed fishing boats put out to sea, bobbing sluggishly in the swells.

Mirra was glad some people had escaped, but they were pitifully few. She prayed that the overladen boats would reach the next sea town. Already the wind stretched their sails, and they listed with their burdens. Bane's men hunted down and slaughtered the people who fled through postern gates on foot. The dark creatures that waited there ambushed those who made it to the dubious safety of the forest.

The Demon Lord watched from his vantage, his eyes narrowed against the sun. As soon as the screams died down, he dismounted and chained the dragon to a tree, then approached Mirra, who waited with Mord. The troll scurried away, dropping her rope. Bane picked it up and yanked her forward, leading her into the carnage.

Most of the fallen soldiers outside the walls lay twisted and gaping in death, some bristling with arrows, others as red as boiled lobsters, streaked with oil. A few still twitched and groaned, begging for help, others hobbled or crawled towards the town, where they might find medicine and bandages.

Mirra's heart bled for their pain. Her eyes stung, and she could hardly bear to look at them. Most, she was certain, would die from their wounds or remain crippled, and succumb to starvation or fall prey to the wolves that would come for the carrion. Bane ignored his fallen troops' despairing cries.

The hundreds of dead outside were nothing compared to the number within. Tears of grief and pity ran down Mirra's cheeks at the savage slaughter of innocents inside the walls. Children lay strangled, their thin arms outstretched in helpless supplication. Men and women had been crucified and gutted. Piles of corpses blocked streets and alleys where defenders had stood back to back. In the centre of each mound lay the women and children the village men had been trying to protect. Everything, even the horses and dogs, had been slaughtered.

Bane laughed. "Good! Weep, stupid witch. Cry like the weak human you are. Soon you will perish too."

She swallowed a sob. "Why did you kill them?"

"Because they are in the way, and if they are not with me, they are against me."

Bane towed her along a deserted street, his boots ringing on the cobbles, his cloak sweeping behind him. She stumbled after him, sickened. A young woman clutching a baby ran out in front of them, her eyes wild as she fled some unseen threat. She screamed and tried to scramble away from Bane, but he leapt after her and grabbed her long hair, yanking her back.

Dropping Mirra's tether, he drew his dagger and plunged it into the woman's belly, ripping her open in a gush of blood. She clutched her baby as she died, and Bane stabbed the child as well, ending its screams as he laughed with malicious delight. Mirra choked back her cry of horror, and Bane did not seem to notice her tortured expression as he jerked her after him down the bloody street.

Bane marched through the town to a church built from grey stone, trimmed with chalk-white rock around the windows and roof edges. A trampled garden bordered the path that led to wooden doors hinged and bound with copper. He led her into the pew-crowded interior, where a dead priest sprawled across the altar, blood pooling under him.

"Where is the ward?" Bane's voice cracked around the chapel, and the men who were busy looting the gold and silver from the altar scattered to the walls, clutching their booty. One pointed to a door at the back of the church, fastened with a stout iron lock.

"In there, Lord."

Bane ripped it open, splintering the seasoned oak as if it was balsa. He ducked through the door, pulling her after him like a dog on a lead. They entered a wood-panelled room with a stained-glass window that let in shafts of coloured light to illuminate the pale, tiled floor. A mosaic of an intricate pentagram patterned the white tiles with deep blue, and Mirra's spirits rose at the sight of it. A pure power filled the room, and its sweet tingle caressed her skin like the touch of cool water. Bane walked around the pentagram, careful not to step on the lines. Going over to the window, he pulled shut the velvet curtains, plunging the room into darkness. Glowing blue lines became visible. A second pentagram hung in the air some three feet above the design on the floor.

"Aha." He smirked. "The work of an amateur, it seems."

Despite his scorn, Bane contemplated the ward for a while, weighing up its danger. Mirra sensed the ward magic's power. A subtle frisson trickled over her skin from the warm blue light. Its friendly glow made her long to touch it and revel in the wonderful magic that kept the Overworld safe from the Black Lord's foul invasion. She knew it would not harm her, but Bane had no such immunity. The ward brightened at his proximity, as if sensing the threat to its existence. Bane's expression betrayed his hatred of it. To him, it was just one of the locks that held his father trapped in the Underworld.

Mirra shrank into a corner as his eyes darkened with shadows, glowing with evil power. He raised his hands, and the dark fire spat from his fingers to engulf the radiant blue lines. A brief, vivid battle ensued, black against blue, resulting in eerie, preternatural light. Power crackled around the tiny room, making Mirra's hair bristle and her stomach churn. The lines of blue light flared to an almost blinding brilliance, forcing her to look away, spots dancing in her eyes.

The ward magic prevailed against Bane's dark power, light against shadow, good against evil, pitted in an unequal struggle until the darkness engulfed the ward. Then the blue magic seemed to shatter with a sound like tearing cloth. It vanished in a burst of sparkles and gleams, plunging the room into darkness. Bane lowered his arms. His eyes turned blue again, the whites bloodshot. He smashed his heel into the mosaic pentagram, shattering the delicate tiles, and the ward was broken.

Its pure essence had vanished with its light, and Mirra shivered as Bane's dark aura chilled her.

He raised his head to regard her. "One down, six to go. Nothing can withstand my power."

"But it hurts you."

"That does not matter." He shrugged. "I do my father's will."

"And then?"

“Do not question me, girl.” Bane hauled her back into the church, where the looters hid amongst the pews. “The first ward is broken,” he announced, and a muted cheer went up as he exited the church, muttering, “Dolts. When my father comes they will all perish.”

Mirra trotted to keep up as he marched through the town, screams still echoing along the streets as people suffered at his troops’ hands. The clatter of running feet told of survivors trying to evade their fate, but the chases always ended in shrieks. Bane paused to watch a boy run along the rooftops, leaping from house to house with amazing agility. Two rock howlers pursued him, whooping. Mirra prayed that he would escape, but a tile cracked under his foot and he plunged to the street with a sickening thud. The rock howlers moaned, then went off in search of other entertainment.

Bane grunted and tugged her forward again. Mirra turned away when he paused to watch atrocities being performed, the pain making her sick. Churches were desecrated, the Black Lord’s worshippers using their altars as sacrificial tables. Blood ran like water in the gutters, bodies clogged the streets and thronged in houses where people had sheltered. Human troops staggered drunkenly along the streets, draped with booty and singing raucous songs.

Trolls gathered in muttering huddles to munch piles of looted meat, uncaring of whether it was smoked, cooked or raw. Gibbering goblins and rock howlers crowded the rooftops. Gnomes, like their human comrades, gathered in empty alehouses and drained their cellars. In the deepening dusk, the dark creatures skulked in the shadows, many crouched over writhing victims as they fed. Mirra shivered when she passed these beasts, sensing their hungry, baleful stares. The town stank of blood and death, a sickly smell that clogged her throat and brought a bitter taste to her mouth.

Bane chose an inn to settle in, and Mord attended him with cringing subservience. Rough tables stood on a rush-covered floor, some overturned by the struggle that had taken place earlier. Once it had been a cosy village inn, its whitewashed walls hung with cheerful paintings and bright curtains at the windows. Now it reeked of death, the pale rushes blood-stained and the curtains ripped. Corpses lay where they had fallen, their faces stretched with fear and pain.

Bane tied Mirra to a table in the corner, not bothering to loosen the bonds on her wrists. Mord brought his master the drug that eased his headache, which had already started to build behind Bane’s eyes. A deep frown wrinkled his brow as he waited for the troll to prepare his supper. This was simply a matter of decanting the foul sludge from the cauldron in which it was transported and heating it over a fire. The sight of him eating it made her stomach churn. Bane left the bodies that littered the inn where they lay, unless they got in his way, whereupon he kicked them aside.

When his duties were done, Mord vanished. Bane drank from a flagon of wine, celebrating his victory in silent solitude. This was just one of many victories, and a minor one at that, for he had not known defeat. This was the first ward he had broken, though. His solitary existence saddened Mirra, who remembered how much fun it was to chat and joke with her friends. Bane sank into an intoxicated stupor, his eyes growing dull as he mulled over the day. She did not attract his drunken rage, and he slumped over the table.

Bane dreamt vividly of the Black Lord in all his dark, fiery glory, his yellow eyes burning with triumph. A wave of pleasure washed through Bane, the Black Lord’s reward. *The vision behind him, of a smooth red desert glowing under a crimson sun, reflected his good mood, flicking out to be replaced by swirling red and yellow.*

*The Black Lord spoke in a soft, deep voice. “Soon we will rule the world, just you and me, son. The human rabble must be eradicated, and only demons will walk in the Overworld.”*

*“But Father, they will not like the bright light up here. I find it hard to bear.”*

*The Black Lord chuckled. “You think I will leave the world as it is? It will be changed to suit us, son, never fear.*

*Bane nodded.*

*“Why have you not killed that damned girl?” Black streaks appeared in the swirling background.*

*"She will die of thirst within a few more days."*

*"Excellent. I am well pleased, son. Now break the second ward, and I shall be even more pleased with you." The Black Lord smiled, and the vision brightened as he relaxed, then faded away.*

Bane woke with a pounding headache and a furry taste in his mouth. Sunlight slanted in through the ripped curtains to dapple the carnage with spots of gold. A cup of his soothing drug waited on the table, and he slugged it back. The girl slept curled up on the floor, her head pillowed on a pile of dirty cloth. He scowled, an ugly mood settling upon him to accompany the hammering in his head and the sour bubbling of his gut. She was his prisoner, yet he suffered more than her. Her bondage barely seemed to trouble her, and she even slept in his presence.

So far, she had borne her thirst and hunger in silence, denying him the satisfaction of listening to her beg. Rising to his feet, he swayed as his head throbbed and his vision blurred. Nausea overtook him, and he staggered to the door and vomited. When he returned to the table, another cup of the drug awaited him upon it. He drank it, then went over to the girl and grasped the rope around her neck.

The witch woke as he dragged her to her feet, the rope digging into her neck. The cord grew tight on the table leg, and Bane broke it with a jerk. He kept pulling, forcing her onto her toes, then the rope started to choke her. She gazed into his eyes as her breath stopped, remaining limp and docile, apparently resigned to her fate. Her knees buckled, and Bane smiled as she sagged, her skin mottled and her face swelled. A few more seconds, and she would be dead, yet still she did not suffer. With a growl, he sent her flying with a backhand blow.

The girl crashed into the furniture, unconscious, and sprawled under a table. Bane hauled her out and shook her until she came to.

"You will not escape me that easily, witch," he snarled. "I shall see you suffer before you die."

Bane's evil power made Mirra's skin prickle as he shook her again and towed her outside, wincing and shielding his eyes from the sun. Spotting a loitering soldier, he yelled, "You there!"

The man jumped and backed away. "Lord?"

"Take this piece of trash and torture her. Make sure she suffers! I want to hear her scream!" Bane shoved her, sending her to stumbling into the man. "If I do not, I will make you suffer in her stead."

The soldier took Mirra's arm and bowed to Bane before pulling her away down the street as Bane re-entered the inn. The man led her to a house several streets away, whence raucous singing wafted. In the courtyard, fifteen men feasted on looted food and wine. They sat or lounged around an ornate fountain amidst smashed furniture and ripped drapes. The fountain still played its musical tune, but the plants around it were trampled and crushed, the water filthy.

Two men snored in a corner, the rest seemed to have partied all night, and most were too drunk to stand. Glad cries arose when the soldier entered, and many rough hands dragged Mirra amongst them, plucking at her robe. Their lecherous leers and glinting eyes frightened and shocked her.

"Wait." A man by the fountain stood up and approached, and his cohorts paused while he surveyed her with bleary brown eyes. "She's the healer."

Mirra recognised him as one of the men she had healed at the camp in the meadow, and smiled. The others were strangers, presumably men who had left just after she had been captured. They growled, angered that their fun had been revoked. Several argued that she was not a healer, since she wore no white robe. A bearded man with a bandaged arm came to her, holding out the limb. She kissed his hand, healing him. The soldier took off the bandage and stared at his arm.

Someone untied her hands, and she turned to smile at the brown-eyed man, whose square, careworn face was framed by plaited black hair. He wore a motley collection of drab clothes under a rusted chainmail shirt with a rent in one side. Although short, he was powerfully built, and the copper bands that encircled his upper arms proclaimed him to be a member of a fierce warrior tribe from the far

north. He also appeared to be relatively sober, compared to the others.

The young soldier who had brought her protested, "The Lord told me to torture her. He said he wants to hear her scream."

"Does he now?" The brown-eyed soldier looked thoughtful, and said to Mirra, "My name's Benton, and I fear we'll have to oblige Bane, or we'll all suffer."

"I understand, but I do not feel pain."

He raised a hand. "No, no, I wasn't suggesting we hurt you. We respect healers, and they're much needed in a war. Many men have injuries, and we ask that you heal them now Bane has let you out of his sight. But if you scream, he'll believe we're doing as he ordered. You understand?"

She nodded. "I do, but it is dishonest, for I will not be truly hurt."

"We don't want to hurt you, but if you don't do this he'll punish us."

"Why does he want to hurt me?"

Benton gave a bark of bitter laughter. "Because he's evil, healer. He's the Demon Lord! He enjoys seeing others suffer. He loves to kill and torture. You stand for everything that's pure and good. You, he wants to suffer more than anyone."

Mirra shivered and cast an eye over the dirty, unshaven men. Most looked like they had once been honest farmers, with weather-beaten faces and hands callused from ploughing and hoeing. They were, she realised, as much Bane's victims as she was, forced to do his killing or die. Many had probably been pressganged into service; others had joined up rather than be slaughtered. Most of the men in Bane's army were mercenaries or soldiers from other armies, drawn by loot and conquest, but not this group. They had picked up some bad habits, however, judging by their initial rough handling of her.

"Then I will do as you ask."

Benton nodded. "Now, if he asks how we hurt you, what shall we tell him?"

"To hurt a healer, you must inflict pain on another, close by, without allowing the healer to help them. Healers only feel the pain of others. I suffer just from being near him; he is in constant pain."

"Him? Mord says he has headaches, nothing more."

"He does, but there is more to it than that. He suffers all the time."

Benton frowned. "Well, you'd best not tell him his presence hurts you, or he'll use it against you." He looked around. "Madick, bring that girl in here. Is she still alive?"

A soldier disappeared through a side door and returned carrying an unconscious girl who was burnt and bruised, covered with cuts and scrapes. Mirra tried to go to her, but Benton restrained her.

"No, you can't help her. If Bane comes to see why you're screaming, we'll use her, so leave her be."

Mirra yearned to help the child, unable to tear her eyes away, and Benton jerked his head at the other man. The soldier took the girl out again, and Mirra slumped.

Benton led her to a window. "Now, healer, scream."

Mirra's first attempts were not convincing. It seemed foolish and dishonest, and her screams were more like fluting cries. The men shouted encouragement, and she shrieked louder. Soon the soldiers roared and Mirra screamed at the top of her lungs, terrible, agonised sounds.

Benton grinned, patting her shoulder. "That should be music to his ears."

Mirra shrieked in unison with the men's roars, until she grew tired of it. Then she healed the wounded, whose injuries were only cuts and sprains gained in battle. A man was despatched to find more wounded, and Mirra eyed the spread of raided food on the table.

Benton indicated the feast. "Eat all you want."

She shook her head. "I cannot. He would punish you, as he did the two men who fed me when we were on the march."

He scowled, his eyes glinting. "He's determined to torture you, yet most of us will perish fighting his battles anyway. I say eat, and the consequences be damned." He glanced at his friends, most of whom looked away, betraying their unwillingness to be punished for feeding her. He went on, "He should be satisfied that we've tortured you. He might not realise you've eaten. It's one thing to avoid

punishment by faking your torture, but I'm willing to risk it so you can eat."

"No. I will not be the reason for anyone to be whipped and left to die. He means to torment me anyway. There is no need for you to share my fate."

Benton opened his mouth to protest further, but Mirra placed a hand on his arm and smiled. He shrugged and wandered away to sit with his fellows, probably thinking her hunger would drive her to eat when she could no longer bear the sight of the food. She averted her eyes from it, determined not to be tempted, and lay down on the floor, surrounded by the muttering men. One of them gave her a brocaded pillow, and she closed her eyes, the gentle tug of sleep enticing her.

The temperature seemed to drop, and she sat up, startled, as the men scattered, Benton knocking her backwards as he passed. She struggled upright again, a little dazed by the speed of events, and a shadow fell on her. Bane's eyes glowed as he surveyed the men who cowered in the corners.

"How did you torment her?"

Benton inched forward, his head bowed. "Lord. We tortured another, and she felt it worse than the victim."

Bane's malicious smile revealed even white teeth. "Of course, you know how to torture your own."

Benton cowered, and Bane dragged Mirra to her feet, his fingers digging into her arm. "Now I can have the satisfaction of doing it myself, witch."

Mirra shared his pain as he led her back to the inn, biting her lip. Throngs of corpses, and the black birds that hopped over them, were all that populated the streets, the men and gnomes all within the buildings, drinking or sleeping. Most of the trolls, goblins and rock howlers, uninterested in alcohol or loot, camped in the woods, where they were more at home. A gleam of red eyes in a shady street revealed that the dark creatures still inhabited the town, preferring the gloom of cellars.

When they arrived at the inn, Bane pushed her onto a chair and tied her to it with twine. While he was bent over her, she studied his face at close quarters, finding it hard to believe he was human. His skin was so fine, smooth and matt. His long black hair gleamed like a raven's wing. His good looks belied the tales that those who worshipped the Black Lord were ugly, mutilated and dirty, but then, he was not a worshipper, she surmised. He had no scent, and his aura of power made her hair bristle.

When he moved away to sit beside a bloating corpse and sip his wine, she said, "I share your pain, so there is no need to torture others."

His brows rose. "My pain? Oh, so my company is painful to you?"

She nodded.

"Excellent, then I will have to arrange some more for you to share." He leant forward, rolling the golden cup between his palms. "I am not talking about the headaches. Those are merely annoying. You see, where I come from, I learnt to deal with a great deal of pain, even to enjoy it." He grinned, a half snarl. "If it will hurt you too, so much the better."

He turned his head and shouted, "Mord!" The troll appeared from the next room, and Bane ordered, "Fetch the potions. It is time I had a cleansing. This foul world is softening me."

The troll scuttled into the back room again, and Bane stood up and unclipped his cloak, dropping it over the corpse, then unfastened his tunic. He stripped it off, revealing a powerful torso. Each muscle was defined, sharp-edged, rippling as he moved, but her eyes were riveted to the seven ugly scars that marred his chest in a deep 'V'. They looked ritualistic, carved in patterns of evil meaning, stark against his skin. They were runes, she realised, symbols of dark power cut into his flesh.

Bane asked, "Do these shock your puritanical little mind?"

Mirra shook her head as she tore her eyes from the scars. "How could anyone do that to you?"

"No one did it to me. I did it to myself, to gain power, girl. Power is what matters; the power to rule the world."

Bane swung away from the infuriating pity in the girl's eyes. He remembered well the cosy glow of the Underworld, and the massive, stifling cavern in which the ritual had first been performed. The

inner fire had thrown red light onto the tortured stone ceiling from the cracks that crazed the floor. The magma river that flowed under the cavern heated it to an unbearable temperature, but Bane was the only one who sweated. The scars were not self-inflicted. His father had cut the runes into him on his sixteenth birthday. Bane had been chained to a bulbous rock column, his arms spread.

The Black Lord had stood in front of him and warned, "Do not cry out, boy. Only cowards feel pain. You will learn to enjoy this, and do it to yourself. It gives power. Blood must flow, and yours is the most powerful blood of all."

Bane had panted and ground his teeth, sweat rolling down his face, while his father had cut the runes with exquisite slowness, clearly enjoying every moment of his son's pain. After that, Bane had been made to do it himself, and he had learnt to bear it.

Mord returned, cringing, and placed a flask and two pots on the table before fleeing again.

Bane smiled, drawing his dagger. "Now we shall see how much you suffer, witch."

Mirra knew that arguing with him was futile. He raised the weapon and held it poised, steeling himself for the coming pain, she guessed, then sliced into his skin with quick, precise movements, opening a scar. A hiss escaped him, but Mirra writhed, straining at her bonds as agony flooded her. Her healing power rushed through her, seeking outlet. A faint golden glow ran under her skin, and her hands tingled. Bane carved another rune with deliberate strokes, blood trickling down his belly.

As he cut on the third rune, Mirra cried out, tears stinging her eyes. Her power thrummed and her hands burnt, aglow with healing light. In an effort to stop it, she gripped the chair's arms. Bane smiled as he cut another rune. She sobbed, and light streamed from her fingers to sink into the chair. He put down the dagger, apparently deciding that four runes were enough. Mirra noted, through the haze of pain, that he had cut them in a specific order.

Bane picked up an empty cup and scraped the blood that ran from the wounds into it, and a shocking realisation dawned upon her. He was a bleeder. She sagged as the pain dulled, but her healer's instincts blazed with the awareness that he could bleed to death from those small cuts. Bane put down the cup and picked up a pot, scooped out a dollop of green jelly and smeared it on his chest. Mirra groaned as fire coursed through her, and Bane gave a harsh bark of laughter.

"Enjoy it, girl. This is the best part," he gritted.

Bane rubbed the burning ointment into the wounds while Mirra writhed and whimpered. When at last the pain eased again, she gasped, sweat cooling her brow. Perspiration also filmed Bane's skin. He leant over her, the cuts now blackened and puckered, no longer bleeding, his chest smeared with blood and green gel.

"Feels good, does it not?" he enquired. "There is more to come."

Bane picked up the second pot, scooped out a black liquid and rubbed it on his chest. After a moment, an odd sensation that she was floating out of her chair startled Mirra. She bit her lip, sickened by its evil, and sensed that the horror she had just experienced was nothing compared to what was still to come. He raised his arms, and the shadows detached from their nooks and corners and flew across the room to sink into him.

Mirra's bile rose as the room darkened, shadows rushing in from all over, gathered and absorbed by him. The runes he had cut glowed sullen red, his eyes turned black, and his hair rose and bristled with the surging power. Bane staggered under the foul burden, then stumbled to the door and vomited. Mirra echoed his reaction, retching. Dark power chilled the room, and he returned, looking sick and drawn, to lift the flask. He poured a few drops into the cup of his blood and drank it.

Again the power flowed, and she gagged. The room had grown icy, and the floor seemed to emit black light. The walls and ceiling warped in her vision, and she cringed from the maddening illusions even as screams flayed her throat. Bane stood at the centre of a dark storm, absorbing it. Mirra wept for him, crying out at the searing agony. Darkness crawled over his skin like a disease. It soaked into him, flowing through him with nauseating horror. The power swirled about the room, drawn to Bane in



shadowy streams. He lowered his arms, frowning, and the shadows eddied around him, no longer absorbed. His hands clenched, then opened, and cords stood out on his neck with the effort of controlling the magic. He relaxed, his strained expression fading, and his shoulders slumped.

The room cleared, normality returning with the sunlight that streamed in through the windows as the shadows melted away. Mirra sagged, weak and drained, her cheeks wet with tears.

Bane flopped onto a chair and raked back his sweat-dampened hair. Trickle of perspiration washed the foul potions off his chest. His eyes burnt black in a haggard visage, and he panted as if he had just run a hard race. Mirra looked down, receiving a surprise. The chair sprouted fresh green shoots. Her healing power had restored the wood to life, so intense had it been at the height of his suffering.

Bane's voice was harsh. "You bring life, as I bring death. We are opposites. But death has more power than life; always remember that. It is nice to share my little ceremony, and interesting that my power is won through pain, while yours is just there, flowing out of you. I shall enjoy draining it from you and reducing you to an empty shell, then see what is left."

The Demon Lord rose to his feet and shouted for Mord, who appeared with a cup. Bane drained it, threw it down with a clatter and stalked into another room, evidently to lie down and recuperate. Mord put away the pots, then released her, bound her arms and tied her leash to a table leg.

For two days, Mord kept an eye on her, but at first refused to untie her. The corpses swelled and began to stink. At night, blood-chilling screams echoed through the town as the dark creatures hunted. Mirra lay in the darkness and prayed as feet shuffled past and bat wings rustled over the roof. She wondered if the dark creatures hunted the conquered town's surviving citizens, or Bane's men who wandered away from the houses' safety. Yet buildings, she discovered, provided no sanctuary.

One night, the shuffle of padded feet and the soft click of claws woke her from an uneasy doze. She froze, hardly daring to breathe, a scream clogged in her throat. Against the gloomy backdrop, she made out the blacker form of a dark creature slinking between the tables. Its gleaming red eyes betrayed the swinging of its large head as it snuffled across the floor. The monster approached, then stopped.

Apparently it had encountered the Demon Lord's scent, and it raised its head to sniff in her direction. It blinked and retreated, and she relaxed. How ironic it was that, while Bane slept in another room, his mere scent was enough to protect her from the monsters that prowled in the night.

During the day, she dozed, the mutter of passing men as they wandered around the town disturbing her slumber. On the third day, she persuaded the troll to take her out to sit in the sun, her legs shaking with hunger and dehydration. She sank down in a patch of sunlight and raised her face to the warm rays. Mord squatted in the shade, holding her rope while she basked, a blessed relief after days shut up in the dim, smelly inn. The sunlight gave her a little strength, but did nothing to ease her knotted stomach or parched mouth.

Mord whimpered, and Mirra opened her eyes. Bane stood in the doorway, his eyes blue fire in the bright light. Lines of suffering accentuated his haggard appearance. He strode towards the troll, who dived into a nearby building to avoid the kick Bane aimed at him. Swinging around, Bane approached Mirra and jerked her to her feet, glaring down at her.

"So, you like the sun, do you? That is where you get your power from, is it not? Well, say goodbye to it. You will not bask in it again, witch." He hauled her back into the inn and thrust her onto a chair before pacing the room. "Those idiots still have not found another ward, and I grow weary of waiting. My father grows impatient." He pushed a bloated cadaver aside and sat on its chair. "I shall have to scry for it."

Clearly the prospect of the headache that would result angered him. Resting his arms on the table, he spread his hands, and his eyes darkened. She shuddered as the sickening malevolence he radiated touched her. He sat motionless, his eyes unfocussed, concentrating. After a few minutes, he gestured, and an image formed in the air in front of him. It appeared to be the inside of a dark cave, and a glowing pentagram hung above lines chiselled into the stone floor. Bane smiled as the image faded. Sweat dewed his brow, and Mirra sensed the pain building within his temples.

"So, we march. Stupid human wizards, each with his own notion of how to seal the wards. This one

thought he could hide it in some remote cave. Fools.”

Bane shouted for Mord, who appeared with a cup, and received the kick he had avoided earlier. Bane drained the drug and eyed the cowering troll. “Tell the captains to gather their men. We march again.”

## Chapter Four

### Fire Demon

The following morning, Mirra walked amongst the men while Bane rode ahead on the dragon. Grey clouds obscured the sun, and a chill wind plucked at her threadbare green robe, making her shiver. They traversed pleasant rolling fields, then joined a road that ran alongside a forest. Bane had allowed her to be untied, and it was a relief to be able to move her arms again. Benton walked beside her, visibly relieved to see her in one piece.

“We heard about what he did to you. I’m sorry he learnt your secret from us.”

“It was no secret. Had he asked, I would have told him myself. And even had he not asked, he would have found out eventually.”

Benton shook his head. “I wish we could set you free, healer, but you wouldn’t get far, and he’d kill us for sure if we did. We’re not all bad. Some of us are quite decent fellows, but we joined his army rather than die. There are those who enjoy murdering and torture, but my friends and I don’t.”

She smiled and patted his arm. “I know. I would not ask you to risk yourself on my behalf.”

Mirra stumbled beside him, her breath rasping in a dry throat. Benton supported her with an arm around her waist, but by midday, the last dregs of her strength ran out, and she collapsed. Benton called to a friend, and between them they lifted her, their faces grim. She knew almost nothing for the rest of the day, a vague blur of grass passing beneath her and the tramp of marching feet.

The men stopped and lowered her to the ground, moving away as the cold presence of the Demon Lord approached. She opened her eyes a slit to look up at him. A satisfied smirk curved his lips.

“Well, well. How do you feel now, witch? A little dry, maybe?” He chuckled, then squatted beside her, looking more angry than triumphant. “How easily you die, witch. So soon. Too soon. I had hoped to enjoy tormenting you a little longer.” He raised his head, his nostrils flaring, and she sensed a deep rage building in him. “My father would be pleased...” He looked down at her, scowling. “Yet I am not. No. I think not. For you, death would be a sweet release, and that you will not have yet.”

Bane gripped the front of her robe and jerked her upright. The world spun and a roaring filled her ears, then a cold sensation engulfed her and everything went black.

Mirra woke on the floor of Bane’s tent. Wetness chilled her face as liquid splashed onto her cheek. Bane sat on the bed, dribbling a cup of water onto her. She licked her lips, and he smiled.

“Thirsty, witch?”

She regarded him with deep sadness tinged with despair.

This seemed to irk him, for he frowned, and his smile vanished. “Are you not going to beg for water, girl? Do you not want some?”

She nodded.

“But you are not going to beg, are you?”

She shook her head.

The Demon Lord’s expression was unreadable, his eyes like chips of blue ice. “Very well. Sit up and take it. I have decided to let you live a little longer. This is too easy for you. I want your death to be painful.”

Mirra longed for the strength to refuse, and take the easy way out. Yet she did not want to die, and the proffered cup was so close, so tempting. Still, she was not sure she had the strength to take it.

Bane leant closer. “So, you would like to refuse and die now, would you not? Afraid of what the future holds?” He dragged her upright, and the tent spun. Darkness nibbled at her mind, then he shook her, and the world steadied. “You will drink, or I will pour it down your throat. No one defies me. Understand?”

The tin cup rattled against her teeth, and water sloshed into her mouth. After the first mouthful, she sucked at the liquid, raising trembling hands to grasp the cup. Never had she tasted anything so

wonderful, wet and soothing. When the cup was empty, she looked up at the man who held it.

His said, "I knew you would not have the strength to resist. You humans are so weak. Do not think you would have escaped me, though. I hold your life in my hands, witch. I decide your fate, not you. When I have drained every last ounce of pleasure from your torment, I shall devise a particularly horrible death for you."

Mirra bowed her head as he filled the cup again. This time she took it, forcing herself to drink it slowly, for too much would make her sick.

He dropped the water skin and a loaf of stale bread beside her. "Eat, drink and be merry, witch, for tomorrow we march again."

Bane stretched out on the bed, leaving her to sip water and nibble the dry bread. She dozed, then woke thirsty again and drank more water. Misery and sadness made her weep in the darkness until she drifted off to sleep once more.

In the morning, she learnt more of the Demon Lord's cruelties. On his orders, Mord presented her with a feast for breakfast. Grilled fowl and roast boar covered her plate, drenched with gravy. She looked away, although her stomach rumbled. Bane smiled as he spooned his Underworld food, which, she surmised, was probably made from the decomposing remains of human sacrifices made below. Her stomach clenched at the sight and smell of the stuff.

"What is the matter, witch?" he enquired. "Do you not like the food?"

She met his eyes. "I do not eat flesh."

"Ah." He chuckled nastily. "I knew that, of course. But you will eat it now. Mord made it especially. You would not want to hurt his feelings, would you?"

"No, but I cannot eat this."

"You can, and you will."

"No." She shook her head.

Bane's fist hit the table top with a terrific bang, making the crockery, and Mirra, jump. "You will obey me!"

Mirra looked down at her twisting hands. "I cannot. I am sorry."

The Demon Lord turned to call out of the door flap, "Mord, bring me the man who helps her."

Fear clutched her heart. "No, please do not hurt him."

"Then eat your breakfast, you ungrateful girl."

Mirra did not understand his wish to torture her. No one had been cruel to her before, and she wondered why it pleased him so. Her hands wound together in an agony of vacillation at the terrible choice that he forced her to make. Mord arrived outside the open flap with two more trolls, who held the hapless Benton.

The soldier stared at the Demon Lord, then his eyes flicked to her. Mirra cringed under his pleading gaze and picked up her fork. Her hand trembled as she looked at the dead remains on her plate, longing to jump up and flee. Bane smiled, his eyes sparkling. When she continued to hesitate, unable to bring herself to touch the food, he addressed the waiting troll.

"Beat him."

"No!"

Mirra speared a piece of meat and thrust it into her mouth. She forced herself to chew it and closed her mind to the taste of dead flesh. Bane chuckled and made her eat every scrap, keeping Benton on hand so she could not refuse. When the ordeal was over, he rose and flicked his fingers at the waiting trolls, who released their prisoner. Mirra fought the sickness that churned her stomach until Benton was safely away, then reeled out of the tent to vomit. Bane's sadistic, satisfied laughter followed her. He went to mount the red dragon, leaving her trying to spit out the foul taste.

When Benton returned, she sat forlorn on the grass, while Mord packed away the Demon Lord's tent. She gulped the water he gave her, washing away the last of the oily taste. As soon as she was able, she followed the tramping horde from the vale in which they had camped, Benton beside her. He gave her some bread, but the rest of his supplies consisted of dried meat, the troops' staple ration. Still, with

that and the water, her strength returned somewhat, and she only required his help a little.

Each night, Mord took her to Bane's tent, where she slept beside his bed. At times, he woke her when he tossed and turned, but for the most part he ignored her. Only when he used her for his sadistic pleasure did he pay her any attention. He forced her to eat meat almost every day, and once he made her drink wine until her head spun and she vomited.

Mirra endured it in silence, and his enjoyment dwindled, since her meek acceptance of his cruelty gave him no satisfaction. Sometimes, she would weep at night for his twisted soul and all the innocents he had slaughtered. Outside, the lupine howls of hunting dark creatures and the distant screams of their prey echoed. None ventured near the Demon Lord's tent, and after a while the blood-chilling sounds no longer jerked her into shivering wakefulness.

Each day, Bane's army swallowed up the land. They marched like a disease over fields and through picturesque towns, leaving ravaged ruins and trampled mud in their wake. The dark creatures followed in the forests' dimness, and ventured out only when they were forced to cross open stretches. Although they frightened and horrified her, Mirra pitied the beasts as they shuffled, limped and crawled to the safety of the next forest. The sky remained grim, but even its pale light seemed to torment the dark beasts. The vampires suffered least, being the only ones who could fly, while the large, slow-moving grotesques sometimes moaned as they endured the sun's hated touch.

On several occasions, they caught a luckless peasant, too stubborn, too stupid, or unable to run from the encroaching horde, and these were tortured to death. Bane took immense pleasure in making Mirra watch these atrocities, and her pain apparently brought him great satisfaction. His favourite torture method was laying the victim on hot coals, so he did not suffocate in the smoke, but died slowly. Next was dismemberment, relieving the victim of fingers, then toes, then hands, until he bled to death. Flaying was also high on his list, as was disembowelment and strangulation. Often, the unfortunate men were left to contemplate their intestines as the army marched past. Women, more rarely found, were given to the army for sport, and at times their screaming agony lasted for days before they died.

Oddly, Bane only watched these atrocities, although his enjoyment sickened her. Stranger still, the women's ravishment was also confined to the troops, and it did not seem to occur to him to torture her in this manner. She realised that she was his personal toy, and not to be shared with the rabble. Since he partook in the killing only rarely and the torture not at all, it appeared that she was safe from that form of abuse for the moment. Neither did he seem interested in using her for his pleasure. She had not once glimpsed a flicker of anything even remotely resembling lust in his eyes when he looked at her, only contempt and grim amusement. He was indeed, she decided, an extremely strange man, although she was grateful for this particular oddity.

After five days of walking, Mirra stumbled with exhaustion. The flesh had melted from her, leaving her thin and fragile. Benton gave her food, but she had little appetite, and sometimes she was too tired to eat when they stopped for a brief rest at midday. In the evening, she flopped down on the floor of Bane's tent and fell instantly asleep.

On the sixth day, they reached the foothills of a range of mountains. The steep stone slopes rose from the forest like bones pushing through the skin of a rotting carcass. Mirra waited with the troops while Bane entered the cave to which his scrying had led him. He was gone for some time, and the men muttered. Mirra flinched when a blast of blue fire belched from the cave mouth, and a hush fell as everyone waited.

Bane emerged and raised his arms. "The second ward is broken!"

An unenthusiastic cheer greeted his announcement, then the men dispersed to make camp. Benton took Mirra to Bane's tent and left her to wait outside in Mord's care. The temperature had dropped as they approached the mountains, and she shivered despite the warm jacket Benton had given her, probably looted from an abandoned farm. Mord was soon summoned inside to deliver the brew for Bane's headache, and took her in with him. The troll pushed her down, left the cup and scuttled out.

Bane sat hunched on the bed, his head in his hands. He glared at her before drinking his potion and flinging the cup aside. She settled beside the tent wall, trying to be inconspicuous. Bane with a

headache was not someone with whom to trifle. His eyes bored into her, and she studied his boots.

"The wizard who set that ward was cunning; far cleverer than the one who set the first ward. This one had a trap."

Mirra noted his bloodshot eyes and furrowed brow. She was surprised that he spoke to her, for he rarely did, and not usually in such a conversational tone.

"Are you all right?"

"You almost sound concerned, witch, but do not think you fool me. I am perfectly all right. For all his cunning, the wizard set a weak ward, thinking his trap would kill any who tried to break it. But I am more powerful than any wizard who ever walked this earth. His trap was a mere nuisance to me."

Bane's haggard look belied his words, but he grunted and stretched out on the bed. Mirra lay down and pulled the jacket around her as the cold seeped up from the ground. His occasional attempts at conversation frightened and confused her. She did not wish to say the wrong thing and send him into a rage, but was not sure of what the wrong thing was.

Showing concern always annoyed him, yet she could not bring herself to pretend to hate him as he seemed to expect. Keeping quiet appeared to be the best solution, then she sometimes escaped his notice for days, and avoided the ordeal of his malicious games. She longed to gain some insight into his life and what had moulded him into what he was, but no one seemed to know much about him, and she dared not question him.

Bane received a dream from his father that night. *The Black Lord appeared in a blaze of dark power, radiating pleasure and triumph. The swirling background of bright orange streaked with yellow indicated his good mood. Bane basked in the wash of pleasure, making the most of its rare bestowment.*

*"You have done well, my son. Two wards broken; a great achievement."*

*"Thank you, Father. I shall not fail you."*

*"No, you will not." His father spoke with unnerving certainty. "But I am displeased that the healer still lives. Kill her, Bane."*

*"She is my plaything, Father. I enjoy tormenting her."*

*"I do not care. I want her dead." The dream darkened, and red streaks appeared, with a hint of raging sea.*

*"What harm can she do?" Bane enquired. "She is a pathetic, weak thing. Can I not have my little pleasures?"*

*"I ordered you to kill her, so do it!"*

The Black Lord's bellow spiked Bane's head with pain as a huge wave of darkness loomed over him, and he jerked awake. He sat up, gasped and shivered. This was the first time he had argued with his father, or defied him. Why had he done that? The healer meant nothing to him. He could snap her neck as easily as breaking a twig.

Perhaps he was merely asserting himself. He would kill her when he was good and ready, not before. He looked down at the girl asleep on the floor, his keen night vision seeing her clearly. Why did his father so desperately want her dead? What could she possibly do to threaten him? He did enjoy making her suffer, and soon he would kill her. Soon, he promised the Black Lord silently; soon she would die, when he, Bane, felt like it.

The following day, the army rested in the foothills. Mord took Mirra out of the tent at Bane's irritated grunt, to spend the day with Benton and his companions, sitting around a campfire. Bane appeared to be in a fouler mood than usual, and glared at her until she left, his headache troubling him. She had discovered that when he had a headache he did not bother with his cruelties and torments, but preferred to be alone. She listened to the stories the soldiers swapped as she sipped hot tea and nibbled

sugared fruits and cakes looted from the larders of abandoned farms and shops in the village they had passed through two days before.

The men in Benton's group had discovered that Mirra ate no meat, and no longer offered it to her. Instead, they made a point of collecting sweets and pastries for her, which otherwise they would have scorned. The good food added to her strength a little, although her appetite remained poor.

Bane spent most of the day in his tent, but emerged in the afternoon to stroll through the army. Men, trolls and goblins fled from him. Although he stayed away from Mirra and her companions, the men watched his progress warily, their eyes full of hatred and dread. When he had once more vanished into his tent, Benton relaxed and turned to Mirra.

"I don't know how you can stand to be near him, healer. He's so full of evil it makes us sick.

She smiled. "He does not worry me, other than his suffering."

"He's a demon," Madick asserted.

"No he's not," Benton argued. "Demons can't get past the wards. He's the Demon Lord, and evil. His soul is as corrupt as the Black Lord's."

"An' what's going to happen when the wards are all gone?" another soldier asked.

Benton shrugged. "The Black Lord will rule us, I guess."

Silence fell as the men digested this. Mirra thought about Bane's assurance that they would all die when the Black Lord rose, but thought it best to keep quiet. For now, they were safe. If they knew what fate lay in store for them, they might attempt to rebel and die all the sooner.

A rock howler limped over to them, and the men let him approach Mirra so she could heal his cut foot. Rock howlers wore no garment other than their thick red pelts, and their horny feet needed no shoes, usually. From time to time, members of Bane's army came to her for healing, and she denied none, not even those whom she recognised as the perpetrators of the atrocities.

The rock howler offered her a sweet pastry in payment, which she accepted. At first, the men she healed had tried to give her looted jewels, but these she had rejected. Now they gave her only food, although some gave nothing. The first time that had happened, Benton had been enraged, but Mirra had stopped him with a gentle touch.

"Do not be angry," she had said. "He is lost, and I require no payment."

Benton had looked confused, and the man had snarled and stomped off.

Mirra shivered as the cold mountain wind seeped through her coat. Long shadows crept across the land as dusk fell. Soon she would have to return to Bane's tent for the night. Stretching her hands out to the fire, she tried to absorb more heat through her palms. The silence left by the rock howler's visit remained, the men sunk in private, morose thoughts. She gazed at the flickering flames, remembering her life at the abbey. A muttered curse from one of the men plucked her from her reverie, and she looked up to find them scrambling away from the fire.

Mirra followed their gaze, and snatched her hands back. Green and black streaked the flames. She sat frozen, staring at the sickly fire.

"Mirra! Get away from it!" Benton rasped from the shadows where he hid.

Mirra could not tear her eyes away; the awful fascination held her spellbound as the flames leapt higher, streaked with foul colours. A circle of black crept outwards from the fire, and the grass shrivelled to ash. At her feet, it stopped and crept around her.

With a dull thud, the flames leapt upwards in a column, green and yellow, streaked with purple, black and orange. The column writhed, seven feet tall, and sprouted arms and a head, vaguely man-like, only it had six arms that dripped fire. The intense evil the form emanated dazed Mirra.

Three molten yellow eyes appeared in the head, blazing like beacons. Their light fell on her, and she flung up her arms with a cry as it burnt her, her power rushing to heal the burns and block the pain. The fire demon's eyes brightened, and a black slit appeared below them as it laughed.

"You cannot defy me for long, slut! Your powers are no match for mine." It spoke in a grating hiss, like the sound of wood burning.

Mirra experienced the same sickness that Bane's power caused, but the demon's fire burnt as his

had not. The stink of charring flesh assailed her, and her ears rang with the demon's grating laughter. Regaining the ability to move, she crawled away, but it formed legs and stepped out of the fire.

"You cannot run from me, human!"

Her strength waned, and she slumped onto the charred grass as her healing power drained away. A shadow fell on her, bringing blessed relief, and she looked up.

Bane stood facing the demon. "Mealle," he murmured, and the demon's eyes dimmed. "How nice of you to visit. I did not think you would be able to yet, with only two wards broken."

The demon stepped back, shrinking slightly. "The Black Lord sent me. My powers are weak still. He ordered her death, and you have failed to obey him."

Bane turned to look at Mirra. "Is he so worried about a puny human female? I wonder why? She is my toy, Mealle, not my father's. I will decide what happens to her. She affords me a little amusement at the moment. When I tire of her, I will kill her."

"You dare to defy the Black Lord?" Mealle's eyes brightened, but their baleful glare did not appear to worry Bane.

"I do not deny my father. I will obey him, when I am ready."

"He ordered you to kill her now."

Bane shook his head. "I have done everything he has asked of me, but in this trivial matter I choose to please myself. He wants the people who stand against him to suffer, and she does, all the time. Why should I grant her the release of death? She will not go to his kingdom. She is a healer. I will corrupt her, then he will be able to torment her too."

The fire demon seemed mollified. "I understand. Your thinking is sound. I do not know why your father craves her death so much, but I will tell him what you said. Perhaps he will understand too."

Bane smiled coldly, his eyes bright in the elemental's lurid light. "Good. Now, begone!"

Mealle's black mouth rounded as it vanished in an implosion of air, leaving a sulphurous smell.

Bane looked down at Mirra again. "Get up."

Shakily she stood, offering a timid smile. "Thank you, Bane."

He scowled. "For what? Denying you an end to your suffering? Are you too stupid to see that the demon was the one who did you a favour?"

"No. I do not want to die."

Bane leant closer. "That is good, witch, because you will not until I kill you, and by then you will be begging for it. But even then it will not be a favour. You will become my father's toy after me." His slow, cruel smile made her cringe inwardly. "No healer has ever descended to the Underworld. You will be the first, and my father will enjoy having you. It will be an achievement for me, to send a healer down."

Bane towed her back to his tent and flung her down, fastening her rope to a peg. She knew the futility of trying to escape. It would only cause one or more of the men to suffer.

As he sat on the bed, she asked, "Why did you dismiss the demon?"

Bane's eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I did not have to?"

"It looked so surprised. It would have left on its own, would it not?"

He smiled. "Yes, he was about to." His smile vanished. "I do not want the likes of Mealle up here. This is my war, and until three more wards are broken, I do not expect to have them bothering me. By banishing him, I ensured he cannot return for seven days." A satisfied look settled on his features. "It is also unpleasant, humiliating for him."

Mirra nodded, her eyelids drooping from the exhaustion of her ordeal. She lay down, longing for sleep, but Bane gripped her arm and pulled her upright, his pain pulsing through her.

"I have not finished with you, witch. Why does my father want you dead?"

She shook her head, bewildered. "I do not know."

"Why can I not hurt you physically?"

"You can!"

"No. I could kill you, break your neck, throttle you, drown you, but you do not bleed, or bruise, and



your bones do not break.”

“I am a healer.”

“I have killed witches, and they bled, bruised and died like any other,” he said. “My power burnt them, but you did not feel it, and even Mealle had trouble. Do you not know that the eyes of a fire demon should reduce a human to ash, instantly? One eye should cook you very quickly, and he had three on you.”

“I do not know. It did burn me. It would have killed me. Elder Mother says I am exceptional. That is why she sent me out early.”

He pushed her away. “Really. So you are just a very powerful witch. That had better be all you are.”

Mirra nodded timid assurance, and he seemed to lose interest and unclipped his cloak. She waited while he removed his boots and lay down, pulling the blanket over himself, then she curled up on the cold floor.

The Black Lord visited Bane’s dreams again that night. *His anger manifested in dark tongues of fire that lashed out like whips. Blackness, spotted with tiny red sparks, spun in dizzying patterns around him. Bane’s mind reeled under the onslaught of the Black Lord’s fury, and he struggled to listen to his father’s words.*

*“You still defy me, son?” he boomed.*

*“No, Father. I will kill the girl. I just wish to experiment with her first. Already I have found how to make her suffer, and her pain brings me joy. Mealle told you?”*

*The Black Lord nodded, sparks hissing from him. The spinning blackness cooled to grey. “Find another healer to play with. Kill her now.”*

*“Very well, I will, as soon as I have a replacement.”*

*The Black Lord seemed to swell with rage, but controlled himself. “There is an abbey fifty miles from you. Go there tomorrow.”*

*“Yes, Father.”*

The next day, the Demon Lord rode ahead on the dragon, leading sullen, footsore troops. No one knew where they were going, they just followed Bane. He set a fast pace, and by mid-afternoon Mirra staggered in an exhausted daze, stubbing her toes on roots and stones despite Benton’s arm around her waist. A ripple of excitement went through the horde as it rounded a forest, rousing her from her stupor. She looked up at Benton, who could see over the heads of those in front.

He shot her a guilty look. “It’s an abbey. I’m sorry.”

She patted his hand. “It is all right. Healers do not suffer, and they go to a better place.”

Her sorrow belied her words, for she recognised the countryside now. This was her abbey. Benton’s next words chilled her.

“But he knows how to make them suffer. We told him.”

Mirra stumbled as her knees turned to jelly, and Benton stopped to help her. Horror made her weep, and she could not force herself to take another step. Benton picked her up, his expression grim. As they drew closer, Mirra caught her first glimpse of the abbey, dreading the pain the healers would soon endure. Flowering trees and shrubs surrounded the grey and white building that nestled in a verdant vale, and the fountain in front twinkled in the sun. The grounds were devoid of healers, but the vegetable garden was at the back, and the shrubs in front rarely needed tending.

Benton stopped and put her down. “I won’t take you any closer. Perhaps he’ll spare you that.”

As the dark army poured through the manicured gardens and entered the chapel’s open door, Mirra wondered what her sisters would be doing when they were attacked. Praying to the Lady? Had they seen the approaching army? Would they still be weeding and cleaning, cooking and sewing? Or were they prepared, assembled in the chapel, awaiting death? One thing they would not expect, and that was

to suffer. She had betrayed them.

Mord ran up and glared at Benton. "What are you playing at, soldier? The Demon Lord wants the girl with him."

The troll's deep, commanding voice and excellent human speech surprised Mirra. When Bane was absent, Mord became truer to his trollish nature, gruff and domineering. Benton stepped aside as Mord pulled Mirra to her feet and forced her to stumble after him. She tried to prepare for the ordeal, steeling herself for the coming pain. The chapel doorway loomed strangely dark, unlighted by the candles that always brightened the goddess' houses on dull days like today. Bane's men wandered around the dim interior and exited through the rear door into the inner courtyard.

Bane stood at the altar, the huddled form of a healer at his feet. As Mord brought Mirra to him, he kicked the corpse, his eyes icy.

"Where are they, witch?"

She stared at him blankly. "They are not here?"

"Only this still-warm corpse. I have never heard of healers abandoning an abbey. I have always found them waiting to be slaughtered. Did you tell them you had betrayed their little secret?"

"No."

"Are they hiding somewhere?"

"No. There is nowhere to hide."

Bane stepped forward to grip her shoulders, ignoring Mord, who scurried away. "You had better not be lying."

"I am not. I do not know why they have left."

Bane shoved her aside and stepped over the body to follow the soldiers out of the chapel. Mord hovered nearby as she knelt beside the dead healer, turned the woman over and revealed a familiar face: Balia, the oldest healer at the abbey, a sweet, harmless lady. The wooden handle of a kitchen knife protruded from her breast. Mirra's gaze flew to the altar, and fresh tears stung her eyes.

The altar flame had been blown out, signifying the abbey's abandonment. Undoubtedly Balia had volunteered to stay until the final moment before performing this last despicable act. As the men had entered the abbey, so the light of its holy fire had been extinguished, removing the Lady's presence. Then Balia had snuffed out her own flame, plunging the knife into her heart and flying to the Lady.

Mirra closed the corpse's staring eyes and touched her chest in benediction. "Fly swift and safe, Balia, the Lady bless you."

Mirra began to lay out the body, straightening the frail limbs. As she folded the withered hands on its chest, she noticed something clutched in one of them. Opening the stiff fingers, she discovered a tiny silken pouch. She unwrapped it, and a glowing golden pearl fell into her palm. As it touched her skin, the power soaked into her, bestowing well-being and strength. The pearl vanished, and Mirra bowed her head over the old healer.

"Thank you, Balia, Elder Mother."

The pearl had been left for her, concealed where only she would find it, for Bane was not interested in corpses. Elsewhere knew Mirra was with him, and would lay out Balia's body. The seeress must also know Bane had discovered the secret of harming healers, and that Mirra desperately needed the power she could no longer glean from the sun. Since the day Bane had found her basking, he had made sure the weather stayed overcast.

That was why they had left, and desecrated the chapel by extinguishing the eternal flame. That was why Balia had committed suicide, a sin, so Mirra would not be made to suffer. Silently she prayed to the Lady to forgive Balia. No doubt the healers carried the Lady's white flame with them, and one day would set it in an abbey again. Mirra smiled at this small triumph, and Elder Mother's wisdom. Alerted by footfalls, she looked up to find Bane looming over her, his expression livid.

"They are gone, all of them. You warned them, witch. I know you did."

Mirra opened her mouth to protest, but he smashed her backwards, sending her sprawling on the smooth white floor. Her broken jaw healed as she fell. Bane stalked after her and kicked her, breaking

two ribs, which knitted in a warm flash. He kicked her again, breaking her arm. By the time she stopped sliding across the floor, it had healed. The power within her, aroused by her injuries, coursed through her in a soothing glow, and her skin glimmered with her magic's pale radiance.

Bane stood over her, his nostrils flared and his eyes ablaze. He tore his gaze from her and addressed one of his captains who stood in the chapel's shadows.

"This place has a cesspit, does it not?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Put her in it, while we raze this witch's nest to the ground."

Bane strode away as the captain came forward to pull Mirra to her feet. He led her to the ablution block at the back of the abbey, where his soldiers prised open the cesspit. They gagged and recoiled at the foetor that arose, then threw her in and closed the lid. Mirra held her breath as the stinking muck engulfed her, found the slippery floor and stood. She wiped the filth from her face, but at the first inhalation her stomach rebelled, and she struggled not to vomit. When her sense of smell had adjusted sufficiently for her to stop retching, she waded to a wall and leant against it. The pitch darkness was cold and clammy. Only the squeaking of rats and the faraway sounds of destruction broke the silence.

It seemed like two days that she spent in the cesspit, but it might have been only a day and a night. Several times, she dozed off, and woke as the slime closed over her face. The muck was hip deep, forcing her to stand. Crawling things wriggled over her and invaded her clothes under the sludge, making her squirm and shudder. Hot tears overflowed as she listened to the abbey's destruction.

Rats ran along ridges in the walls, or clung to the rough bricks. She healed two that were sick, and the others kept her company. They offered to gnaw a hole in the wooden cover so she would have fresh air, but she refused. She hoped she would not be there long enough to need it. The muck dried to a hard crust, and the darkness closed in on her, making it hard to breathe at times. She prayed to the Lady for strength, and clung to the bastion of her unshakeable faith to see her through the ordeal.

At last, the cover was removed, and Mord supervised as Benton and two gnomes hauled her out. Armed with soap, they took her straight to the fountain and scrubbed her until her skin was pink, throwing away the old robe and coat. While they were busy, Mirra contemplated the ruins. Only walls remained of the once gracious buildings, and the charred remnants of roof timbers jutted from the rubble. Stained-glass windows lay shattered, and statues and paintings were smashed and burnt. The flower garden was trampled to mud and ashes, the fruit trees cut down.

The men who washed her grew still, and she looked around.

Bane regarded her from a few feet away. "Did you enjoy your wallow in your sisters' dung?"

"No."

"Good. If they know what I am doing, they now know what happens to you if they run."

"It will not stop them," she said.

"Then you know what happens to you if you tell them."

"I did not tell them."

He shrugged. "I do not really care. You see, I agreed to kill you if I found another witch to torment. So now you continue to live, and suffer, until I find one."

Benton helped her out of the water and dressed her in a healer's gown. Bane strode away, and Benton led her to his campfire, where he gave her food and water. While she ate, he talked.

"He's found another ward. Had to scry for it, Mord said, but we move out tomorrow. It's on some island, so we have to get a ship. Only a few of us will be going, but I'll try to come, to take care of you. The rest of the army will be left behind, to await his return. It's a fair step, some three days march to the coast."

Mirra smiled. "I will be all right."

Benton's craggy face was remorseful. "He shouldn't have done that to you. It must have been awful."

"Wet and smelly, that is all."

"You're amazing, healer."

She sighed. "Just tired."

He nodded, and Mirra stretched out by the fire and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Benton woke her as dusk sent long shadows to swallow the land. Mord waited to take her to Bane's tent. The Demon Lord sat on his bed, and turned glacial eyes upon her as she settled on the floor. Mirra ignored his freezing stare and fell asleep again.

## Chapter Five

### Earth Demon

In the pale, watery light of another gloomy dawn, the army broke camp. Mirra surveyed the abbey's ruins as she walked past with Benton, glad she now wore a healer's gown again. Bane rode far ahead on the dragon, a small figure in the distance, but daunting even so. Men came to her for healing, displaying burns and scrapes they had received while demolishing the abbey. Every time she healed someone, her power dwindled, and there was no sun to renew it, but she could not refuse.

A hot, humid day developed, dull but sweaty. By the afternoon, Mirra longed to bathe in a cool stream or pool. She walked on the outskirts of the armed horde in the hopes of catching a breeze that might come by. Benton accompanied her, for the army had no formation or ranks. It straggled along in clusters of gossiping men, trolls, rock howlers and goblins, each speaking their own tongue.

Bane's was the only solitary figure, far ahead atop the dragon. Swathes of close-cropped lawn bordered the road, which cut through a picturesque forest of tall ghost wood trees whose striped grey bark and pale leaves had earned them their name. Blue and white fen flowers grew amongst the golden leaves that carpeted the forest floor, along with patches of moss and ferns. Since it was easier to walk on the road and verge than amongst the trees, the army had become drawn out into a column that spanned about five leagues.

A blackened patch came into view in the grass ahead, and Mirra wondered what had caused it. Perhaps someone had camped there, but it was too big for a campfire site, and besides, it was out in the open. Benton saw it and called out to another soldier, pointing. Mirra was perplexed, for it seemed to be growing. She stopped, her blood chilling.

A brown form rose from the blackened area, twisting and expanding. It developed a head, and six long arms. Benton shouted to his companions, then he was beside her, dragging her away. Mirra needed no urging. She ran as fast as she could, her breath catching. The earth demon shook free of the soil and acquired legs, coming after them. Benton yelled and tugged at her arm, but she could run no faster. Men scattered and fled into the forest, shouting. It ignored them, intent on its prey.

Mirra risked a peek back, and found the demon gaining. Her throat closed, which robbed her of much-needed air and weakened her already rubbery legs. Benton raced wild-eyed beside her, pulling her along, and she was surprised he had not abandoned her. The demon closed the gap. Its long legs swallowed the ground in great strides, and the thudding footfalls hammered her heart. Something struck her in the back, and she sprawled, her arm torn from Benton's grip. She cried out and rolled over as the monstrosity loomed over her.

Like the fire demon, it radiated the same evil power Bane used. The waves of foul magic made her gut clench, as did its gruesome mud visage. Obsidian eyes glittered, and mud-muscles rippled on its arms and chest. One of its arms descended with a sickening thud, and Mirra's leg snapped like a rotten twig. She tried to scramble to her feet as the bone knitted, but another fist fell, smashing her pelvis. She was paralysed as the healing took place, and yet another blow struck her belly. Her skin shimmered as her power rushed to repair pulped organs, weakening her.

A movement caught her eye, and she cried out as Benton rammed his sword into the demon's side. A negligent flick of the fiend's fist sent him crashing onto the grass, where he lay still.

As the demon swung back to her, Mirra raised her arms in a futile bid to defend herself. Terror coursed through her in a flood of icy realisation that she was moments from death. Her shocked mind scrambled for a means of survival, and a name sprang to her lips in a despairing cry.

"Bane!"

Mirra screamed as the demon's fist descended again, her cry cut off in a grunt as the air was pulverised from her. Her ribcage snapped, and she thought her heart would be crushed. Her breath stopped as her power rushed to heal the damage, and her vision grew dim. She drew a shallow breath

as her lungs healed, and the demon raised its fists.

A dark figure appeared beside the fiend. The Demon Lord raised an arm, and a bolt of black fire spat from his fingers to strike the demon. As it staggered sideways, Bane stepped in front of it.

"Do not tell me, Yalnebar, let me guess," he said with profound scorn. "My father sent you to kill the healer."

The earth demon shook its head as if to clear it, bits of mud crumbling from its chest. It placed a hand on the wound and straightened. "That is right, Bane." It spoke in a deep, gritty voice.

"We had an agreement. Since when does my father break his word? I told him I would kill her when I found another, and still he sends you, cloaked against my sight."

Yalnebar shook its head. "He said she had to die; that she is dangerous."

Bane snorted, his dark eyes glaring. "A mere human girl? Next he will be jumping at shadows."

"Do not insult the Black Lord," the demon rumbled.

"Tell him to stop sending flunkies. He knows none of you are a match for me. Mealle has already tried, and Yangarra learnt the hard way. If he wants the girl killed, he must give me a better reason than that he thinks she is dangerous. I do not find her dangerous. I find her amusing, so why should I kill her now? I intend to send her below, as a gift for him."

"You set yourself against the Black Lord, Bane, you will pay."

The Demon Lord's lip curled. "I do his dirty work. I am breaking the wards to set him free. I am not setting myself against my father. I have agreed to kill her, but when I choose!" Yalnebar opened its cavernous mouth to answer, and Bane made a vicious gesture. "Begone!"

The demon collapsed into a pile of earth, and Bane turned to Mirra as the blackness drained from his eyes, leaving them bloodshot again. His pallor had increased, and lines of anger bracketed his mouth and furrowed his brow.

"I take it you will live?"

Mirra nodded, her breath catching.

Bane's eyes flicked away. "I doubt the same can be said for your gallant knight."

Mirra turned, remembering Benton's heroic assault. She struggled to her feet, weakened by the shock of her injuries and the sudden draining of her power to heal them. As she tottered over to the soldier's crumpled form, she prayed that he still lived.

Bane watched her with a cynical smile. "I am amazed that he thought he could fight a demon. He was either very brave, or very stupid. I opt for stupid. No one is that brave."

Mirra knelt and laid her hands on Benton. Her power flowed weakly, for the demon's attack had all but drained her of that which the golden pearl had bestowed. Benton had several broken ribs and a shattered arm, as well as deep bruising that would have killed him without her help. It took several minutes before he groaned and opened his eyes. Seeing Bane standing over him, he scrambled away and lurched to his feet, retreating, rather unsteadily, to a safe distance.

Bane snorted. "Is it not amazing how they actually think they are safe at a distance?" He shook his head. "What fools."

Mirra stood up, swaying. "Thank you for saving me again."

He glared at her. "Had you not called, I would have been spared the trouble. I begin to wonder if you are worth it, girl. My father will be angry. Seeing you dragged from the cesspit was amusing, but perhaps I should find other diversions. You should be glad if I let you die. I only keep you alive to watch you suffer."

She bowed her head. "I do not want to die."

"All the more reason to kill you. Your nuisance value is outweighing your amusing abilities." He paused. "And you have given me a headache." She touched his arm, flinching at the evil within him, and he jerked away. "Do not touch me! You take far too many liberties."

"I can help you. I can stop the pain."

"I do not need your damned help!" He strode away, yelling for Mord.

That evening, Mord brought Mirra to Bane's tent as usual, and she settled on the floor. Bane studied

a map, and barely acknowledged her presence. She gazed at him, fascinated by the fierce perfection of his profile and the way his eyes shone like jewels in the lamplight.

He looked at her, his brows gathering. "What are you staring at?"

She lowered her eyes. "I am sorry."

"I think the next demon can have you. You are starting to annoy me."

"No! Please, Bane?"

He put aside the map with a sigh. "Why did you call out to me today?"

"Because I knew you could help me."

"What made you think I would?"

She smiled. "You did before."

"You must be the stupidest female in the world. You actually think you can predict me? Mostly I was annoyed at that damned Yalnebar for sneaking out of the Underworld, so well cloaked I did not sense him. Mealle, I perceived, but the earth demon was well concealed. My father had a hand in it."

"Will your father be angry?"

Bane gave a bark of laughter. "He will be livid. But, you see, there is little he can do about it, and I am interested to see how far he will go with this. He needs me to break the wards. If I do not, he will stay down there forever." His eyes glinted. "And he has another problem, too. In order for me to break the wards, he had to make me as powerful as he is. But I do not wish to disobey him. I must find out what the problem is, tonight."

Mirra nodded, then her eyes widened when he drew his dagger and leant closer. She flinched as he sliced her cheek, a drop of blood escaping before the cut healed.

He smiled. "I thought so. Your powers are waning. You have not seen the sun for a while, have you? Yet you still heal those stupid men, and soon you will have nothing left for yourself."

"I must help them while I can. It is my calling."

"How idiotic. And when your powers are gone? What then?"

"Then I will suffer and die, just like them."

His smile broadened. "Good. Perhaps you will be more amusing then."

"Then you will not kill me?"

"You should be begging for death, girl. When your powers are gone, you will be at my mercy, and I have none."

She shook her head. "I think you do."

"You are wrong," he retorted, his smile vanishing. "Next you will be telling me that you like me."

"I do. I want to help you, Bane. You suffer so. No one should suffer like that." She spoke with soft sincerity.

Bane frowned. "After all I have done to you? How can you like someone who revels in your suffering? And I do, you know. Your stupidity amazes me. You may even become boring. Beware that day, for then I shall enjoy watching the next demon kill you. Already you are pathetic and repulsive, a weak mewling thing." He turned back to the map, unrolling it again, and Mirra lay down.

When the Black Lord visited Bane's dreams that night, he was oddly subdued, not in a raging fury, as Bane had expected. *His fire glowed dimly, a nimbus of evil power that did not lash out as before. The mood vision for this dream was a barren grey desert dotted with stones under a lowering sky of swirling clouds.*

*"A pity Yalnebar failed," he commented.*

*"You broke your word, Father. There were no healers at the abbey."*

*"Yes. Unfortunate." The scene behind him darkened, becoming more forbidding, flashes of red lightning illuminating it. "Had the girl not called you, she would be dead now. Also unfortunate. Why did she call you, son?"*

*Bane shrugged. "I helped with Mealle."*

*"She seems to look upon you as her protector. Interesting, do you not think?"*

*"She is a dimwit. Never have I come across a more gullible, trusting human. At times she sickens me."*

*The Black Lord's eyes flared. "Does she? That is good. Then you will kill her now." The vision became yellow tinged.*

*"No. Tell me why I should. Give me a good reason."*

*The Black Lord sighed, and the background paled. "Very well. I did not want to tell you this, but now I must, since you are being so stubborn. She is the weapon the healers have forged against you. She is the one chosen to stop you achieving your goal."*

*Bane laughed. "A fine jest, Father."*

*"It is true." The backdrop swirled into a mess of red and yellow.*

*"How can one pathetic girl stop me? She is harmless. All she does is heal the sick and injured, even those who murder her people. She cannot possibly harm me. She even wants to help me."*

*The Black Lord shook his fiery head. The abstract swirling changed to a calm black sea under a huge red sun. "I do not know how she is meant to stop you, I just know she is. Are you prepared to take the chance that she has a way to destroy you?"*

*"Yes. It should be interesting to see her try. I think the healers made a mistake choosing her. She is no warrior woman, just a girl, young and stupid. Do you seriously think her a threat to me?"*

*"I cannot force you to kill her. I ask you to, as a dutiful son."*

*"No. I am curious, Father. I will study her more carefully. Should I discover that she has the means to kill me, rest assured, I will strike first. She is not indestructible. She is weak. I could smear her like an insect."*

*The Black Lord sighed a gush of fire, and the red sun vanished, leaving blackness. "Very well, but I will not stop trying to kill her. Yalnebar was hurt. Try not to kill anyone, Bane. They are your kin."*

*Bane chuckled. "If they pit themselves against me, they will get hurt. Advise them to be careful."*

*"Yalnebar did not strike you, son."*

*"A good thing, but he was one blow from killing her."*

*"The witch will die. I will see to it."*

When morning broke on another cloudy day, Mord came to take Mirra away as usual. Bane raised a finger, making the troll freeze.

*"She stays with me from now on, Mord."*

As the troll bowed and backed away, Mirra asked, "Why?"

*"My father has sworn to kill you. He will send more demons. The only way to stop them is if you stay with me. I have no wish to expend power and suffer headaches for your sake. No demon may manifest close to me without my knowledge."*

She smiled. *"So you will not kill me."*

*"Not yet."*

That day, Bane made Mirra walk beside the dragon, and her legs burnt with the effort. She often had to trot, and exhaustion took its toll. When, at midday, she fell and could not rise, Bane ordered Mord to carry her. The troll was immensely strong, and Mirra a small burden. His pungent smell was unpleasant, and his coarse hair prickled her skin, but her leaden legs blessed him. In this fashion, they travelled on towards the sea.

Ellese sat back from the scrying glass and rubbed her temples. Tallis offered her a cup of water, and the seeress sipped it as she thought about what she had seen. Tallis chewed her lip while she waited for Ellese to put down the cup.

*"She still lives."*



Tallis sagged. "How does she fare?"

"Not too well, I am afraid. Another demon attacked her, and her power is drained, but Bane keeps her alive. He drove off the demon, and I am more confident now. Every day, her power over him increases, and her weakness helps. Already he defies his father. He will not be parted from her."

"But he still does not let her help him, and he torments her."

"Patience, my dear Tallis, this will come in good time, if all goes well."

Tallis shook her head. "Already two wards are broken, and he marches unhindered to the next."

"The Earl of Timon raises an army, but I will advise him not to fight Bane. He will lose. His land lies in the Demon Lord's path, and he is determined to face him. Even now, he marches to challenge him. The Earl is old. He does not understand what Bane is. No one can stand against him. Our only hope is Mirra."

"It seems a fragile hope."

"Do not underestimate her. She will succeed."

Tallis rose and paced the shabby room of the seaside inn where the healers sheltered. The Lady's white flame burnt in an oil lamp on the mantel, and she bowed her head to it.

"How much longer will we stay here, Elder Mother?"

"Only a few more days, dear." Ellese wrapped her scrying glass in a thick cloth. "Then we will journey to the sea coast abbey, to join our sisters there. Some of the older sisters require rest. Go now and tell everyone to meet in the common room. I will speak to them shortly."

Tallis left, and Ellese gazed out of the window at the drab day outside. Beyond the cold, deserted beach, gulls wheeled and mewled, diving for fish in the wind-tossed sea. Boats bobbed on the waves as fishermen struggled to haul their daily bounty from the grey depths. As Bane neared the coast, the weather grew grimmer, and now only occasional shafts of sunlight broke through the clouds. She hoped the abbey up the coast still received some sun. Her healers needed the power they could only obtain from direct sunlight. Many sick and injured queued outside the inn, but the healers were growing weak. Now all but the mortally ill were given only herbal treatments.

Ellese thought back to the time when Mirra had been conceived. Larris's dream had seemed ridiculous, and many elder mothers had scorned her suggestion that it was a sign from the Lady, so at first it had been rejected. When no one could come up with a better idea, however, or received any sign, it had been reconsidered. Putting it into practice had been hard. Much power was needed to make it work. First, a young healer had volunteered bear the child, knowing her daughter would never know her, nor would she be allowed to raise her. A man had been put into a deep sleep and brought to the abbey.

Ellese remembered Mirra's father well: a handsome, golden-haired youth; a perfect choice. He never knew that something had been taken from him while he slumbered, and woke unharmed where he had fallen asleep. Had anyone told him he had sired a daughter that night, he would have been most surprised. When Mirra's mother had informed them that she did indeed carry a daughter, the real plan had been put into action. The girl had basked in the sun every day, drank only pure spring water and ate the best food. She had been excused from all work, and had taken leisurely walks for exercise.

Once the foetus was firmly established in her womb, she had travelled to all the abbeys in the land. At each one, the healers had laid their hands upon her belly and poured their power into the child. Prayers had been chanted in every chapel, and candles lighted for the unborn girl, the saviour of the land. No healer had shirked the task of giving power to the child, nor shaping her with their gifts. Few healers had the gift of speaking to animals; fewer still could speak to trees and plants. Although many could heal themselves, few could do it well. Ellese herself had gifted the child with the ability to scry, although this was one talent that had lain dormant. Each one had poured their love forth with their power, ensuring Mirra was born with an innate love for all things, and judged no one.

Mirra's upbringing had been a miracle. Her birth, aglow with power, had set awe in the hearts of those who witnessed it. Ellese had taken charge of the baby as soon as she was weaned, and her mother was sent to a faraway abbey. Everyone who had come into contact with the child had been instructed

on how to behave. Mirra had never seen an argument, nor had she been shouted at or scolded. Her childhood had been peaceful and happy, and she had flourished, her joy and goodness shining in her clear blue eyes.

Ellese remembered her dread for the fragile girl, and how she had hated the day when Mirra would be placed in the path of the Demon Lord. When Bane had emerged from the Underworld, Mirra was just fourteen, too young for the task. For two years, he had ravaged the land unopposed, until it became clear that time was running out. He would overrun the land and destroy the wards before Mirra was eighteen. For the first two years, he had merely conquered, amassing a mighty army. Then, shortly after acquiring Mirra, as if she was the catalyst, he had started breaking wards.

Shaking her head, Ellese descended the creaking stairs to the common room, where her sisters waited, seated at the crude tables that served the inn. Their pale, gaunt faces turned to her, drained of power and life itself, their eyes dull. They awaited news of Mirra, and Ellese made her report clipped and concise, leaving out the distressing details.

At the end, many looked more downcast, while others appeared hopeful, depending on their natures.

Ellese held their attention. "We must help her, sisters. We must prepare another golden pearl."

A haggard woman cringed. "We have so little, Mother."

"I know, but we must do this for her. She is our hope, and even if some of us perish, as Balia did, we must help her. Anshee will call one of her wild winged friends to carry the pearl. Any who gather power will donate it. All healing will stop."

A groan went around the room at this. Healers hated to turn away the sick.

Elder Mother said, "If Mirra fails, we will all die, and healing some now will only provide more for him to torture. We will do what we can for them with herbs and potions, and use the skills taught to ungifted midwives and doctors. We must try to make the pearl in the next few days."

Bane dismounted and regarded the red dragon. It was a weak, Overworld animal, unable to withstand the forced marches and his weight. In two years, he had used up three of the beasts, and this one was now finished too. Dragons did not eat well in captivity, and liked being ridden even less. The red dragon's fiery colour had faded and the fierce glow in its eyes had dimmed. It no longer attacked the trolls that fed it, but lay listlessly and ate little. He had to goad it constantly to keep up the appearance that it was still a strong, fierce beast.

Two wards were broken, and two demons had already manifested on the surface. It was time for a mount that befitted his status. The pale girl sat where Mord had deposited her, watching him. His new mount would terrify her, which promised entertainment, and he smiled at the prospect. He pondered his idea, weighing the benefits against the resulting headache. His mind made up, he turned to the cowering troll.

"Mord, build a fire. A big one."

The troll bowed and scuttled away, an action ill-suited to his huge shambling form. Two other trolls erected Bane's tent. He preferred to be served by trolls, who seemed to fear him less than most. When the tent was up, he stood in front of it and directed Mord, who had returned laden with firewood, to build the fire close to the tent. He noticed the men who gathered in the shadows and smiled again. Many would probably flee in terror this night, but that did not bother him. His only regret was the headache this would give him.

When a blaze roared lustily, Bane ensured the girl was nearby, noting her position. She sat as close to the fire as she could, enjoying the warmth. She probably thought he had built it for her comfort, the stupid girl. He strolled over to her, and she looked up with a smile, her eyes soft with trusting gratitude. She did think it was for her. He quelled a smirk.

"Warm enough?"

"Yes, Bane, it is lovely."

He nodded. "I want you to sit right here, get nice and warm."

Her smile widened, and he chuckled. He basked in the fire's hot caress, the flames licking at his clothes. It could not harm him. The dark power protected him now as it had done in the Underworld, where any Overworld creature would perish within moments from the heat without the Black Lord's protection. Once Bane had mastered the dark magic, he had no longer needed his father's shield.

Raising his arms, he uttered a short chant, no more than a few words of command, spoken in a harsh, guttural tongue. The dark power seemed to burn his blood as it was invoked, and brought its familiar pain and nausea. He lowered his arms as it coursed through him to empower the summoning. The girl stared at him, then her gaze was jerked to the flames as they changed colour.

A black ring crept outwards from the fire, crisping the grass to ash. The flames changed to deep crimson, shot with black and green as they flared, and men scrambled away into deeper shadows. The girl sat motionless, her eyes riveted to what formed in the fire.

A delicately chiselled head arose, and a massive, glowing neck took shape, ablaze with a mane of yellow fire. Molten eyes glared, and flared nostrils snorted flame. The demon steed pranced, its hooves scattering coals as it manifested, becoming real. It stepped from the flames, its eyes aglow and neck arched, and Bane gave it its first silent command.

The demon steed advanced on the girl with mincing steps, flames jetting from its nostrils. The witch gaped at it, apparently too afraid to run. With a roar, the stallion reared over her. Its burning hooves almost grazed her face, thudding into the grass beside her. She scrambled away, raising an arm to ward off its flames as her skin blistered, healing slowly. Silently, he urged the steed closer, and it lowered its head to sear her with its fiery breath. Her shriek was music to his ears, but her next cry was not.

"Bane! Help me!"

Cold flashed through Bane like a lance of ice, startling him. His mental command made the stallion leap away with a toss of its head, glaring. He scowled at the girl, furious that her cry had sparked such a strange reaction in him. He strode over to her as she crawled towards him, holding out a hand.

He slapped it away. "You simpleton! Do not call out to me for help!"

She glanced at the steed. "It was trying to kill me."

"Perhaps one day I will let it. I summoned it, and I control it."

The witch paled even more. "You told it to attack me?"

Bane laughed, her hurt, disbelieving expression restoring his humour. "You are here for my entertainment, witch. When I have no more use for you, I will kill you. Do not ask for my help again!"

The girl looked forlorn, and he faced the steed, which was the one he wanted: Drallis, one of the more powerful steeds, a mighty creature. It bowed its head, and he smiled. Tomorrow he would ride in style, even if the men slowed him. The sooner he could do away with the rabble, the better.

Bane pointed at the chained dragon and issued his second command. The steed's eyes brightened, and it leapt at the Overworld beast. Bane took the girl's arm and dragged her closer, so she would suffer with it. The dragon woke from its exhausted sleep at the approaching thunder of the demon steed's hooves and reared up, its mouth agape to reveal its armament of white teeth. The steed tore into it with pounding hooves, and it fought back valiantly, but was no match for the stallion, whose razor hooves cut through its scaly hide like butter. The steed's fiery breath seared it, making it thrash in the chains as it tore at the steed with sharp teeth. The touch of the stallion's burning flesh only brought the dragon more pain, however, and it roared.

Bane shared his attention with the writhing girl, who gasped and whimpered. As the dragon died, she cried out with it, tears streaking her face. When only bloody pulp remained of the beast, the steed tore at the meat. The witch vomited, and Bane flung her away, surprised when she fled into the gloom. He signalled to Mord to bring her back and moved away from her mess. Well satisfied with the night's amusement, he retired to his tent and flung himself on the bed.

Only one thing spoilt it, and that was his reaction to the girl's cry for help. He should have ignored it, not been chilled by it, as if in sudden fear. The headache started, and he shouted for Mord. The troll pushed the girl into the tent, then vanished again to fetch the potion. The shivering witch's ragged hair straggled around her pale face, and her grass-stained gown was damp with dew. She huddled in the

corner, her face buried in her knees. This creature was going to kill him? Impossible. His father had to be wrong this time. She was as helpless as a baby, and little more than a child.

Mord brought Bane's potion, and he drained the cup, flinging it out for the troll to pick up. After a while, the pounding in his temples faded to a dull ache behind his eyes. He reached over and cuffed the girl, making her look up.

"Do not run away from me again," he said, "or I will put chains on you."

"I am sorry. It was just so awful; the poor dragon."

"Poor dragon," he sneered. "It was meant to be awful, lackwit. I enjoy your suffering. Why else do I keep you? Do you think I like you?" He gave a harsh laugh. "I tire of telling you, when you get boring, you die."

Bane flung himself back onto the bed, wearied by his use of the power; the ache behind his eyes a constant reminder of its ill-effects. The girl curled up on the floor, and he closed his eyes.

## Chapter Six

### Water Demon

Two days later, they reached the sea town. Bane forced Mirra to walk beside his fiery steed, which horrified her. It radiated dark power as the demons had, making her ill just to be near it. Its molten eyes sought her often, its gaze repellent.

The coastal town clung to the beaches of a cove, straggling into the countryside, where cultivated fields nestled between low dry stone walls. The whitewashed, grey-thatched houses, like toys in the distance, sprinkled a patchwork of rich brown and vivid green. Beyond them, the sea broke upon a white beach, its deep blue edged with spume. This was a proper seaport. A long stone quay bordered the cove's rocky side, where deep water came right up to the land. Warehouses lined the wharf, and several ocean-going ships were moored there.

At first, Mirra feared she would have to witness another slaughter, for this town was still inhabited, unlike those they had passed through since the fishing village. The people were prepared for the Demon Lord's coming, however; bells rang and farmers fled into the town. Within a few minutes, ships headed out to sea, laden with the city's erstwhile inhabitants.

The evacuation must have been planned and drilled, for it was achieved with remarkable speed. Bane cursed, and the demon steed leapt into a gallop towards the town, leaving a trail of scorched hoof prints. Mord swept Mirra up and ran after him, and the army followed with a great roar and rattling of weapons. The dark creatures burst from the woods, vampires taking wing to cross the cultivated land, their dark forms melting into the shadows of the buildings when they reached them.

By the time they reached the quay, the ships sailed away in the distance, the icy wind stretching their sails. Mord deposited Mirra near Bane, who sat on the stallion, gazing out to sea.

He dismounted and shot her a sour look. "Those fools will pay for this headache."

The demon steed stepped back as Bane raised his arms, and Mord fled. Mirra backed away, her stomach clenched as the dark power oozed from Bane and licked over him in black flames. She stopped beyond its influence, and he gathered the power that flowed from him in rivers of shadow and send it streaking away across the sea with a flick of his hand. The bolt of darkness split as it reached the fleet, dividing into many streaks, each of which headed for a ship. Several vessels exploded in flashes of orange fire, the muted thunderclaps reaching her moments later. One bolt of shadow spread and settled over a ship in a foul mantle, like a black fog.

The Demon Lord's hands twitched, his fingers moving in subtle motions. His ink-black eyes glowed redly, and his hair bristled, swirling as if in a spectral wind. For a time, nothing seemed to happen. Bane and the steed stood like statues, while the men who hid around the wharf muttered. The cloaked ship, however, was growing larger. Slowly, but gaining speed, it was being dragged backwards. Its sails, dim in the black fog, hung from the masts, and people ran around the decks.

As the ship re-entered the harbour, waves foaming at its stern, the passengers and crew dived off. Tar waterproofed its hull and pitch caulked its sun-bleached grey decks. Patched, yellowed sails hung from the spars amid sagging brown ropes. Gleams of copper and brass came from polished fittings and the broad bands that strapped the masts. On the bow, 'Sea Bird' was painted in white, but Bane had robbed her of her ability to fly before the wind.

Bane brought the ship alongside the wharf, booming against the rubbing timbers, and dispersed the black fog with a wave. By the time it cleared, only one man remained on board, standing beside the helm. The red-bearded giant, barrel-chested and brown-skinned, wore a sailor's leather vest and loose cotton pantaloons. Leather thongs caught the trousers at the knee and crisscrossed his calves to the sturdy sandals on his feet. Bright tattoos decorated his brawny arms and chest, and he glared at Bane with icy green eyes, his broad, weather-beaten face set in a wintry expression.

Bane beckoned to Mirra, who froze, then obeyed when he frowned. He took her arm, ignoring her

whimper, and towed her aboard. The captain watched him approach with narrowed eyes, a pipe clamped in his mouth. Bane was as tall as the giant, Mirra was surprised to note. Until now, everyone who had ventured close to him had cowered, and she had not been able to appreciate just how tall the Demon Lord was. His slenderness was misleading, for Bane had to be six and a half feet tall.

A slow, cruel smile curved his lips. The black had faded from his eyes, and bright blue met cold green. The captain drew himself up and puffed a cloud of smoke. He was the first man, in Mirra's experience, who appeared unafraid of the Demon Lord.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Bane said in a mocking tone.

The captain pulled the pipe out and blew smoke in Bane's direction. "What's good about it?"

"For you, not much. Your crew seems to have abandoned you. For me, lots. I have a ship, which I need to take me to the Isle of Lume."

"Not my ship."

"Come now, Captain, you are in a poor bargaining position."

To Mirra's amazement, the captain leant forward and poked a stubby finger into Bane's chest. "I'll not deal with the likes of you, sonny. You can go and burn in the Underworld."

Bane chuckled. "How courageous of you, Captain. You have obviously deduced that if I need a ship, I also need a captain to sail her, and you would be right. However, there are many ways to make you co-operate, so do not try my patience. Do you know what this is?" He pulled Mirra forward.

The captain nodded. "A healer."

"How would you like to see her suffer?"

"You can't harm a healer, sonny."

The Demon Lord smiled. "But I can. You see, she has almost no power left, so she does feel pain."

"Is this true, healer?" the captain asked.

Sadly, she nodded.

Bane tightened his grip, and she winced as a little pain leaked through her blocks. "You see, Captain, I know you people revere healers, so you would not like to see her suffer, would you?"

"No. But neither would I like to have you aboard my ship, sonny."

"Either way, you will take me to the island or someone will suffer, if necessary, more than one."

"Healer?" the captain enquired.

Bane was patently amazed. "You ask *her* what to do? Her stupidity knows no bounds. I hardly think her qualified to give you advice, Captain. You would do better to quiz a seagull."

The captain's brows knotted further, but Mirra put a hand on his arm and said, "He will take your ship, one way or another. I am not afraid to suffer, and nor are you, but it would be pointless. He can use your ship without you. He just wishes to spare himself a headache."

The captain's belligerence subsided, and he nodded. "I'll not argue that. But the crew's gone."

Bane said, "I have plenty of men."

"Landlubbers." The captain spat over the side.

The Demon Lord shrugged. "If a few fall overboard, what of it? I will bring some spares." He signalled to Mord, who hovered within earshot, and the troll trotted off to select men. Many fled, and Mirra knew they dreaded being aboard the same ship as Bane.

His manner grew menacing. "One more thing, Captain; if you ever call me 'sonny' again, I will kill you. Understand?" He touched the man's huge red beard, and it burst into flames.

The captain roared, beating at it as he staggered back. Mirra cried out and ran to touch him. Her power flowed so weakly that it did little more than stop the pain. As the last of it drained from her, she crumpled, and darkness slammed down.

The girl's collapse took Bane by surprise, and he frowned as the captain fell to his knees beside her. Bane kicked him aside. "Leave her! Touch her and you die."

The man moved away, eyeing Bane, whose crimson-lined cloak billowed in the sea breeze,

spreading like evil wings. He smiled and strolled along the deck, surveying his new ship. The captain leant against the helm and fingered his burnt cheeks, his eyes flicking to the comatose healer.

Bane stationed himself in the bows as his men filed aboard, casting him furtive looks. Last, the demon steed boarded at his command, the deck smoking under its hooves, and joined him. Mord delivered Bane's soothing potion, and the Demon Lord settled on a coil of rope. The soldiers fumbled in the rigging as they followed the captain's shouted instructions, and the ship left the harbour.

Water trickling into her mouth woke Mirra, and she coughed and opened her eyes. Benton regarded her with deep concern, her head pillowed on his arm. He put down the flask and helped her to stand on the swaying deck. The captain, who stood at the helm, jerked his chin at a hatchway.

"Take her to my cabin. She'll be comfortable there."

Following the captain's directions, Benton took Mirra to a cosy cabin in the stern and guided her to a bunk under diamond-paned windows. Cupboards and lockers made from polished, fine-grained wood lined the cabin, for no space was wasted on a ship. A cheap grey carpet covered the floor, and the faint aroma of bilges wafted from the corridor. Exhaustion numbed Mirra, and her head seemed to be stuffed with cotton wool. For the first time, she was utterly without power, and its lack left her weak and trembling. The soft bed soothed her aches, and she was hardly aware of Benton leaving.

Mirra opened her eyes to find Bane standing over her, burnished by lamplight, and smiled.

He scowled. "Get off my bed."

As she slid off the bunk, a roll of the ship made her stagger and grab a table for support.

Bane sat on the bed, studying her. "Now you have no more power, do you, witch?"

"No."

"Come here."

Mirra stepped closer, her head bowed. He gripped her arm, drew his dagger and sliced her skin. She bit her lip as blood welled from the wound, trying to tug her arm free.

He smiled, released her and sheathed the dagger. "So, now I can really have fun."

Mirra gazed at him, tears stinging her eyes.

He laughed. "You think you can melt my heart with your puppy dog looks? Think again, dolt!"

Bane's palm cracked across her cheek, and she staggered back. He came after her, seized the front of her gown and yanked her towards him. He slapped her again, making her yelp and raise her arms to ward off the next blow. This only made him hit her harder, and he smacked her until she fell, her dress ripping in his grip. Bane hauled her to her feet and sent her stumbling with another slap. Her head hit the bulkhead, and everything went black.

Bane lifted the girl, then dropped her with a grunt. He flung himself onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, his nostrils flared with thwarted rage. Beating her was not as much fun as he had thought it would be. She was too helpless, too weak. It was like stepping on a slug, hardly satisfying at all. It had been much more fun setting the captain's beard alight. The man had guts.

If the girl only had an ounce of defiance, he would have enjoyed it. He had given up feeding her meat for the same reason. She simply ate it without protest, then was sick afterwards. Torturing her with another's pain was equally boring. All she did was whimper and wail, beg him to stop, and weep sickeningly. If she had tried to stop him, put up some sort of physical or verbal fight, it would have been far more fun. The only reason he kept her alive now was because she was supposed to be a threat to him, and he enjoyed a challenge. Closing his eyes, he drifted into an untroubled sleep.

When Mirra woke, daylight streamed through the windows at the back of the empty cabin. She climbed onto the rumpled bed and gazed out at a grey, heaving sea. Her head ached and her swollen

face throbbed. The cut on her arm had almost healed, but she knew bruises bloomed in her cheeks, and fingered the scab on her scalp. She had thought Bane would kill her, but he had only slapped her. The blows had almost been gentle compared to the ferocity with which he had beaten her before. It seemed he did not wish to kill her yet. Now she could not even help herself. Bane's suffering saddened her more now that she had only her skills with herbs to fall back on, a puny resource compared to her power. Perhaps she could not have healed him while he carried the dark magic, but she could have eased his suffering.

The door opened and Benton entered, his demeanour furtive. He closed the door and came over to cup her bruised cheek in his rough hand.

"Why did he do this?"

She sighed. "He has so much anger..."

"He's a damned monster!"

"No. He needs help, but now I can do little for him."

Benton groaned, looking exasperated. "You're such a gentle, forgiving girl. You can't see that he's bad to the core."

She put her hand on his. "No one is bad to the core."

"I wish I could help you."

"Do not try. You will only suffer. Where is he?"

"Up in the bow, with that... thing of his." He took a paper packet from his pocket and held it out.

"Here, I brought you something to eat. I doubt he's bothered to feed you."

Mirra took it and tore it open, finding sweetbread and an apple inside.

"I must go," he said. "If he finds me here, he'll kill me."

Mirra nodded, her mouth full, and he left with a smile of gentle reassurance. After she finished the food, she went back to her perusal of the cold sea.

When Bane returned at dusk, he ignored her timid smile as she climbed off the bed. He grasped her chin and turned her face this way and that to study it in the lamplight, his fingers digging into her with unfeeling brutality.

"Most impressive. As soon as they heal, I will give you some more."

Mirra stepped back when he released her, blinking away fresh tears. He chuckled nastily and stretched out on the bed. She curled up on the floor, and the ship's motion rocked her to sleep.

The ship's drunken rolling and the howling of the wind, mingled with the distant sounds of banging doors and breaking glass, dragged Mirra from her exhausted slumber. Pale, watery light came through the windows, and Bane lay on the bunk, clad only in his trousers. The captain's faint bellow of, 'landlubbers!' mixed with the snapping of loose canvas and the thuds and cries of men as they struggled with the sails. The wind keened in the rigging, and the hull boomed as it crashed through deep troughs. The ship shuddered, creaked and groaned as if the storm was tearing it apart. Bane gazed out of the window, apparently enjoying the tempest.

He looked around when she sat up. "It seems I overdid the bad weather."

"Can you stop it?"

He shrugged. "Naturally; but it will give me a headache."

"People could be hurt."

"So?"

"The ship might sink."

"I will not let it," he assured her, scowling.

Mirra nodded and huddled against a locker. Bane stretched, yawned and rubbed his eyes, all such normal human actions that she smiled. The rune scars on his chest were still red after his last ritual. He rose and pulled on his boots, tunic and cloak before leaving the cabin. Mirra climbed onto the still-warm bed and gazed out at the wild sea, fascinated by its power. After a while, she decided to venture



on deck for some fresh air, and to experience the storm's fury. She found a warm cloak in the wardrobe and wrapped herself in it, then climbed the steep stairs to the deck.

Above, bedlam reigned. The wind shrieked through the rigging with unbridled glee, ripping at the tough storm sails. Lashing rain, mixed with spray, drummed on the wallowing ship's deck. The captain roared orders at scurrying men who slipped on the wet deck as they tripped over ropes snaking about like live things. Sheets of spray flew over the ship, drenching the men who struggled with soaked rigging and slippery fittings. Torn canvass, snapped spars and broken rigging littered the deck.

The inexperienced crewmen lashed themselves to the masts and railings as they staggered to and fro. The ship heeled and listed, reared over huge waves and plunged into deep troughs amid cascades of spray. Sea Bird ran from the wind, spilling most of the gale from her ragged canvas. Walls of water loomed over the stern, threatening to engulf the ship, but it rose up the swells like a cork, making Mirra's knees buckle with the added gravity. As it crested the swells, her weight became normal, then she seemed apt to float off the deck as the ship slid down into the next trough. Waves boomed against the hull, whipped up by the veering wind to drench the deck and crew.

Bane stood in the bows, riding the plunging ship like a mettlesome steed. His clothes were dry, for little spray came over the bows, and he was in the lee of the jib, which protected him from any that did. The demon steed stood nearby, as steady as if nailed to the deck. The captain clung to the wheel, lashed to it, his burnt face filmed with salt. A wave smashed against the ship, stinging her cheek with spray, and she revelled in its cool wetness. Clinging to handholds, Mirra ventured onto the deck and darted over to the railing, where the panorama of stormy sea and heaving ship lay before her. The wind tore at her with amazing power. Black clouds raced overhead, and distant thunder rumbled.

Holding onto the railing, she watched the men run about, lashing rigging, raising fresh storm sails and clearing away debris. A wave splashed her, making her flinch at its iciness. Deciding it was too cold and wet on deck, she started back to the cabin. As she released the railing, a massive wave broke over the gunwales and swept her feet from under her. She was washed across the deck, trying to grab something, but the water dragged her to the far railing. Another wave swept over the ship, foaming with white spume. It carried her through the railings, and she flailed wildly as she tried to seize a rope or stanchion. Nothing came to hand, and she screamed as the grey water rushed up at her.

The Demon Lord looked around when a faint scream mingled with the howling wind. He knew at once that the healer had been swept overboard. His magically enhanced senses told him so. With a distasteful look at the grey ocean, he loped back to the men amidships. They all fled but one, who slipped and fell.

Bane seized him and shouted over his gibbering shrieks, "The healer fell in, go and get her!"

The Demon Lord tossed him overboard, and the raging sea swallowed him. A smirk tugged at Bane's lips. "Not able to swim, huh? I will wager that stupid girl cannot, either." He frowned. "So be it. Good riddance."

Still, her death brought him no satisfaction, and, as he stood at the railing and stared down, a strange sense of loss came over him. Bane fought it. He did not need her. She was just a toy, one with which he was growing tired of playing. Her pain was hardly gratifying anymore, and her death would please his father. His father. Of course, the Black Lord was behind this, not a freak wave. Bane smiled. This was a challenge.

Mirra sank into the cold water, fighting to rise to the air above. The brine stung her eyes and nose as she struggled, her heart hammering. She could swim, but not well enough to survive a sea like this. She prayed that someone had heard her scream, and would throw a rope. Her head broke the surface, and she gasped sweet air, then choked as a wave leapt into her open mouth, making her cough and wheeze as the salt closed her airway. Something cold gripped her ankle and dragged her under, thrashing. She

called out in the language of the sea, joining her voice to the great Song of the Sea.

The Song wafted around her, drifting on currents, calm beneath the raging surface. If not for her burning lungs, it would have been pleasant, but cold. Her chest convulsed, trying to suck air, but she kept her mouth closed. Her stomach knotted, and no matter how hard she swam, she continued to sink. No current flowed down so strongly.

A sleek grey shape barrelled out of the blue gloom and slowed beside her. Mirra gripped the curved fin, and the dolphin lashed its flukes, powering for the surface. They broke through in a spray of brine, and she gasped blessed air, clinging to the smooth form beside her. The dolphin supported her, and its calm, beautiful Song soothed her. More grey shapes surfaced nearby, sending up gusts of spray with soft puffing sounds. She joined the Song again, singing her love for these gentle, generous animals that had come to save her.

A cold hand gripped her ankle and dragged her down, breaking her grip on the dolphin. She screamed, her air rushing out in a stream of bubbles as terror swept through her in an icy tide. The dolphins responded, concerned but frightened, and a streamlined shape stopped beside her. As she reached for its fin, a burst of dark power came from below. The dolphin convulsed, shuddering, and its air bubbled from its blowhole. A demon. She looked down, but little was visible in the gloom. The dolphin lay still beside her, its gentle eye blank in death. Mirra released its body as the Song of its companions turned to sorrow. The one they had just lost was a father, brother, son and mate to them, and their grieving Song washed over her.

Mirra added her sorrow to theirs, and they accepted her grief, another sleek form slipping up beside her. She pushed it away, crying out a warning, and in a moment the dolphins vanished, leaving only their Song behind. The dead dolphin floated upwards, and Mirra joined the Song again as she sank into the black depths, the demon's grip on her ankle pulling her down.

Bane leant over the rail and glared at the raging sea, cursing his father. Now he would not only get a headache, he would have to get wet, too. He hated water in any form, and if there was one thing worse than the accursed rain, it was this vast expanse of cold sea. This was probably part of his father's plan, to see if he would get wet in order to rescue his plaything from the depths. Cursing again, he flung off his cloak and dived overboard.

The sea held no danger for him, although he had never learnt to swim, since there was no water in the Underworld. The dark power protected him and propelled him into the depths. The Song of the Sea repelled him, its harmony a discord to his ears. Grey shapes darted past and vanished into the gloom, trailing grief. He sensed the girl's presence, and, near her, a cloaked water demon.

Increasing his power, he shot towards the fleeing demon, rapidly catching up, for its power was no match for his. All it had to do was keep the girl under long enough to drown her, however, and it would win. Spurred by anger, he moved faster still, determined to defeat it. The girl came into view, the demon towing her deeper. Bane unleashed a burst of dark magic, forcing the demon to release her and retreat, radiating triumph. Bane swept up to her, took hold of her gown and powered for the surface.

Bursting into the air, he turned her to face him. She seemed dead, her face ashen and her breath stopped, but her heart still beat. The waves hampered him, tossing him about, and wind-torn spray stung his eyes. She must breathe again, or the Black Lord had won.

Wincing at the prospect of the headache that would result, Bane rose out of the sea on a pillar of fire. Free of the beating waves, he put his mouth over hers and breathed air into her lungs. The touch of her cold lips revolted him, and his stomach heaved. Angrily he did it again, and this time she coughed, white foam oozing from her mouth. He turned her over so she spat it out, and let her choke and gag as he headed for the ship.

Mirra awoke tucked under Bane's arm, floating above the sea on a column of black fire. The immense power that coursed through him made her vomit, and he grunted, shifting his grip as if he longed to drop her. Steam swirled below, swept away by the wind, for where the fire touched, the water boiled. The Demon Lord flew towards the distant ship, apparently without effort. The dark fire suffused her with the evil he exuded now that she no longer had the power to ward it off.

Bane floated over the side of the ship, the fire scorching the deck before he cut it off and dropped onto the smouldering wood. Men hurled water on the burning deck as he quit it with his burden. He soon dumped her and raked back his hair, glaring down at her.

"Do not thank me, girl. You will pay for it."

The Demon Lord stalked away, and she wheezed, her throat raw. Benton hurried to her and placed a dry blanket around her shoulders as the icy wind chilled her even more than the freezing sea had done, making her shiver violently. He rubbed her arms and chafed her hands, encouraging her to keep moving and not retreat into a shivering huddle.

When she managed a jerky nod, he helped her onto shaking legs, and she wobbled below with him. In the damp dimness of the crew's quarters, she sat on a bunk and drank the water he gave her, the sweet taste a balm to her salty mouth. Between them, they stripped off her wet dress, and he wrapped her in a dry blanket. She shivered from shock and cold, and longed for a cup of hot soup or tea to warm her frozen insides. With all the crew fighting the storm, however, there was no fire in the galley.

Benton sat beside her. "I never saw anything like that before, healer. He just floated on that fire, like some damned awful dragon."

"He is very powerful."

"Evil, too." He touched her bruised cheek. "Look what he does to you, and then he saves you."

She nodded. "I do not understand him either."

"It's like he thinks you belong to him. As if he keeps you alive because you're his, not because he likes you or anything."

Mirra rubbed her stinging eyes and wet a cloth to wipe her face. "He is confused and lonely. I like him."

"He's a monster. He's going to free the Black Lord and ruin this world. If I could, I'd fight him, but I can't, so I'm just staying alive for as long as I can. Nobody likes him; not even his father, I'll wager."

"No, probably not, but I do."

Benton shook his head. "You're just too good. You don't know what hate and anger are."

"I am glad of it. They would do me no good."

The soldier stood up. "I'd better get back on deck. There's still a storm out there. You stay here until you feel better."

Mirra nodded, and he climbed back up the steps to rejoin the battle with the storm. She rose and reeled along the swaying passage to Bane's cabin.

## Chapter Seven

### The Isle of Lume

Bane lay on the bed, clad only in his trousers, and clasped his temples as he fought the pounding headache the potion had clearly not soothed, grinding his teeth, his eyes clenched shut. Mirra crept into the cabin, her heart torn with pity. She longed to help him, but settled on the floor to watch him.

Soon he rolled onto his side with a groan, sensed her presence and opened his eyes a slit, groaning again. "Are you an imbecile?"

"No."

"You tempt my anger, you know that? Next you will start whining about how grateful you are, and how much you *like me*." He snarled the last words.

"But I do. You did not have to save me, and now you suffer because of it."

"You are wrong. I did it because my father said he would kill you and I said he would not." He rubbed his brow and ran a hand down his face as if trying to wipe away the pain. "You are a bone between two dogs, witch. As for the pain, I am accustomed to it."

Mirra shook her head. "I have no wish to die, but there would be no shame in losing to your father."

"It is not about shame, idiot. It is about power. Now get out and leave me alone."

Mirra obeyed, although she hated to let him suffer alone, she did not wish to upset him. She sat in the passage outside his door, huddled in the blanket. Benton found her there later, and gave her an old blue robe. She thanked him and put it on.

He said, "The storm's dying down at last. Come and eat with us."

Bane's cabin door was yanked open, and Benton fled. Bane glared at her with bloodshot eyes, took her arm and pulled her inside. His lips were unnaturally red, and his black mane contrasted starkly with his alabaster skin. He looked ill, and her healer's longing to alleviate suffering burgeoned, as it always did in his proximity. The evil seeped into her from his hand, making her flinch. He pushed her against the bed and paced the worn carpet.

"What do you think this is? A damned leisure cruise?"

"No."

"Anyone would think so, the way you and that scruffy traitor carry on. Stray too far, girl, and you will die. Like you nearly did with the water demon, and yet you are so monumentally stupid you still go swanning off whenever you feel like it." He stopped in front of her and placed his fists on his hips. Mirra leant away from his anger, and he raked her with a scornful look. "You have already given me one headache too many, and I tire of it. Next time you wander off and a demon finds you, so be it. I will not rescue you again. Understand?"

She nodded, gazing up at his drawn face. The headache was obviously still bothering him, and impulsively she said, "Let me help you."

He gave a harsh bark of laughter. "You cannot, remember?"

"I could make a medicine for you."

"With what? I do not see a witch's bag."

"There must be herbs in the ship's stores I could use."

Bane's eyes narrowed, but he seemed to consider this. "Very well, do it."

Mirra's heart sang with joy as she trotted through the rolling ship to the galley. A twinge of trepidation made her pause, for she was away from him again. Was that why he had agreed, to see if she would ignore his warning? She shrugged it off, determined not to let her fear of demons keep her from her calling. At last, he was going to let her help him, and this was her chance to prove her good intentions. Once she had shown him her ability to sooth his pain with her healer's skills, surely he would soften his demeanour towards her and accept her as the friend she wanted so desperately to be?

It might seem strange to those who hated him for his evil ways, but healers made no judgements

about such things; it was not their place. A healer's mission in life was to help others, no matter who they were. She rummaged in the cupboards, finding a selection of herbs, some of which were used for healing. After several minutes, she found what she needed and steeped the dried flowers in boiling water. She made it strong to impress him, added cold water to it, and hurried back to his cabin. Bane watched her from the bunk. As she approached with the cup, he sat up and indicated the table.

"Put it there."

Perplexed, she obeyed. "It is not hot."

He shouted, "Mord! Get your ugly hide in here!"

Mord appeared in the doorway, cringing. "Yes, Lord?"

"Bring me the man she has befriended."

The troll left, and Mirra wondered what Bane planned to do with Benton. He regarded her coolly, his hard expression telling her nothing, and the silence grew strained as they waited. She stood by the wall, bracing herself against the ship's rolling, while he sat swinging a leg, seemingly relaxed, but for the lines between his brows that told of the pain in his head. At last, Mord returned with a frightened-looking Benton, who hesitated on the threshold.

Bane snorted. "I know he is too afraid to come near me, so give him the cup."

Since he had to come within touching distance of the Demon Lord to fetch it, Mord almost crawled to the table. He snatched up the cup and retreated to the door, thrusting it at Benton, who took it as if it was a poisonous snake.

Bane nodded at the terrified soldier. "Drink it."

Mirra protested, "But it is for you."

"I know, stupid. That is why he is going to drink it."

"But he has no pain."

"I do not care." He scowled at Benton. "Drink it!"

The soldier gulped the potion, his hands shaking. Mirra gazed at Bane in confusion as he watched Benton, a slow smile tugging at his lips. The soldier shifted under the Demon Lord's cold eyes, his own fixed on the floor. Mirra went over to him and laid a soothing hand on his arm.

"What was that?" he whispered, darting Bane a furtive glance.

"Just something for pain. It will do nothing to you."

He relaxed a little. "Why did he want me to drink it?"

"I do not know. I made it for him."

"Oh. I see." He sighed with obvious relief.

"What?"

Benton leant closer and whispered, "He thinks it's poison."

Mirra turned to Bane in surprise and disappointment, blurting the words Benton had whispered so confidentially in her ear. "You thought it was poison?"

He looked exasperated. "Do not try to pretend it was not. Your innocent act does not fool me. You obviously do not care for this man as much as you pretend. You did not even try to stop him drinking it. Admirable. Even healers are prepared to make sacrifices to win this war, it seems. I will enjoy watching him die. How long does it take?"

"It was not poison, Bane. It has already worked, but Benton has no pain, so he feels nothing."

Bane swung a leg, smiling. "So, it is a slow-acting poison then. Doubtless a painful death awaits him in a few hours' time. How do you feel, soldier?"

Benton bowed, keeping his eyes on the floor. "Lord, I've always had a knee that troubled me, an old wound, you see. The ache has completely gone, so I would say I feel very well."

Bane's brow furrowed, and his smile vanished. "So you are in collusion. You think she will give you the antidote. I am certain she would, if she was able, but I will not let her." He studied Benton, who remained blank-faced. "Well, you obviously think you can outsmart me, even now that I have divined your scheme. I would like to see you try. Mord, lash him to the mast."

The troll and soldier retreated, and Mirra said, "I would never harm you."

"If that was true, it would make you worse than a fool, witch. It would make you a traitor. I am your enemy, the Black Lord's son, about to unleash him upon your world. I have beaten you, dropped you in a cesspit, and tortured you. You should hate me."

"I do not. Healers do not make judgements. Our only purpose is to heal. We cannot turn away a sick person because he is a robber or even a murderer. We are not allowed. It does not matter who you are or what you have done. I will always try to heal you."

Bane rose and loomed over her. "Lies, all lies. You were sent to kill me. Admit it."

"No." Mirra shook her head, ignoring the palpable menace he exuded. Her firm assertion seemed to anger him even more, and his hands clenched.

"I should kill you now, before you try again." He swung away, staggering a little as the ship rolled. "But I told my father you would not succeed, so if I kill you I will not be able to prove that point. I have to wait until you try, then defeat you. This is only your first attempt, and a stupid one at that. Did you really think I would consume any foul concoction of yours? You will have to think up a better plan, stupid girl."

Bane shoved her aside and left, returning a few minutes later with a length of rope. He bound her hands and tied her to the table.

"Now you will not be able to feed your friend the antidote, and by morning he will be dead." He appeared to search for some flicker of remorse in her expression, and when she showed none, he shook his head with a rueful smile. "You are good, I have to admit. Is this what you were trained to do? To be such a consummate liar and actress that you would be able to fool me? This little battle may even become interesting yet."

Mirra could only shake her head. His suspicion hurt and his accusations confused her. Her only training had been in the art of healing, learning to use her power to soothe pain and mend the afflicted flesh of the injured and diseased. She had never told a lie and did not know how to act at all, but he seemed to find some other, devious purpose in her presence here, even though her capture had been nothing but an accident. She had not even known of his existence until she met him, and she wondered why Elder Mother had not told her about him. It seemed odd that such an important part of her education had been so completely neglected.

Bane flopped down on the bed, tossing and turning as the pain hammered in his head before falling into a restless sleep. Mirra curled up on the floor and listened to the ship's creaking while she tried to ease the ropes' pinching on her wrists. Bane had knotted them tightly, and soon her hands grew numb. Before long, her arms ached unbearably, and she bit her tongue to prevent herself from calling out to him for help. He would be furious if she woke him from his restless doze.

Bane's movements woke Mirra, and she opened her eyes as he left. She whimpered when she tried to move. Her joints had seized up, and the ache in her arms had spread to her shoulders. The ship's gentle swaying told her that the storm was over, and the cries of gulls came through the open porthole, which could only mean that they were close to land. Bane returned within a few minutes and stood over her, scowling. She lowered her gaze to his boots, wondering if he would kick her.

"He still lives," he said. "You had someone else give him the antidote."

She looked up. "No. How could I? He is not dead because it was not poison."

He bent and slapped her, making her ear ring. "You are lying. You sent a message to one of his cronies. I know you witches have tricks like that. You had better start telling the truth, or I will make you suffer every time you lie. Who did you send to save him? Tell me!"

"No one."

"What are you, a complete moron? You dare to defy me? You, a weak human female, dare to lie to me? Tell me the truth!"

Mirra flinched as he gripped her hair and forced her to face him. "I am! I was not trying to kill you, that is the truth."

She thought he would snap her neck, but he released her and said, "Perhaps not. Indeed, maybe you are telling the truth. This was not the poisoned cup, but a harmless one, meant to lull me into a false trust of you, so later you could give me the deadly one with impunity. A fair plan, I suppose, ensuring you would not be found out. But let me assure you, I will never trust you, and you will not live long enough to see your scheming through."

Bane strode out, leaving her tied to the table for the rest of the day. By the time he returned in the evening, she ached all over, her skin burnt where the ropes chafed her and hunger made her queasy. He untied her and made her sit on the bed, where she slumped, tears leaking down her cheeks. She rubbed her numb hands to force the blood back into them and bit her lip at the pain. Bane's eyes were still bloodshot, and he regarded her with deep contempt.

"We have reached the island. Tonight, I will break the ward, and you will accompany me."

Mirra nodded, not daring to speak lest she incur his wrath again. Bane ordered the troll to bring food, and settled down to eat his usual foul concoction while Mirra nibbled hard bread. When the frugal meal was over, Bane donned his cloak and stalked out, leaving her to follow.

The ship floated upon a calm sea, anchored close to a rocky island dark with moon-cast shadows. The full moon rose at the end of a glinting silver path, bathing the jagged land with ghostly light. Waves lapped at the barnacle-encrusted rocks that plunged into the sea, and only a few feet separated the ship from the rocky shore, a gangplank spanning the gap. The men had lassoed jagged outcrops to moor the ship, using long, stout boathooks to keep the vessel from grinding its timbers against the sharp stones. The demon steed trotted across the gangplank first, its hooves striking sparks from the rocks when it reached the shore. Bane strode after it, and Mirra followed.

Ashore, the sharp volcanic rocks stabbed her bare feet, and she hobbled. Healers did not wear shoes; their contact with the earth enhanced their natural powers, which also protected them from any harm. Now her feet bled, and she sobbed as she stumbled after him. Bane mounted the stallion and rode towards the granite cone of the old volcano. Mirra tried to ignore the pain that knifed through her feet at every step, biting her lip until she tasted blood. The steed returned with a clatter of hooves, and Bane looked down at her, chuckling.

"What is the matter, witch? Are the rocks too hard for you?"

She nodded, her head bowed.

He grunted. "I am not waiting all night for you." He held out a hand. "Come. You will ride with me."

She knew this was not a charitable gesture, and stepped back, wincing as a rock stabbed her. "I cannot."

He laughed and jumped down. "Yes you can, witch."

She backed away. "It will burn me."

"You think I care?" He seized her arm and dragged her towards the fiery stallion. She hung back, even though she knew her attempt to resist him was useless, and the rocks flayed her feet. The demon steed snorted a foul exhalation that made her gag, and its dark power caused her stomach to try to crawl into her throat. She whimpered as its flames licked her, and Bane lifted her onto its back. Mirra leant over and vomited as he leapt up behind her.

"That is a revolting habit you have, girl."

Mirra groaned, almost fainting from the evil that battered her in foul waves.

Bane sniggered. "She is sorry, Drallis, for vomiting on you."

The steed leapt forward, and Mirra clung to its mane, surprised that it did not scorch her hands. She fought a strong urge to turn and cling to Bane to escape the steed's raw evil. Although she knew nothing about demonic creatures, she sensed that the demon steed's touch would have killed her had it not been for Bane's presence, and her gentle nature found a deep font of gratitude for his protection. The rocks passed in a blur, but she was hardly aware of the amazing speed at which they travelled. Her stomach heaved, and a strange darkness clouded her vision.

It vanished when Bane pushed her off, and she fell onto stony ground, bruising her thigh and arm.

Climbing to her feet, she swallowed the sour sting of bile and gazed around at a crater. Moonlight silvered a lake surrounded by short greyish grass and stunted trees. An untidily thatched stone house huddled on the shore, a vegetable patch beside it.

Bane headed for the house, and the demon steed stood like a burning statue where he left it. Mirra hobbled after him, the grass cool under her bleeding feet, her fresh bruises aching. As he approached the dwelling, a man stepped out to confront him. Pure white hair and whiskers framed a gnarled countenance with a hooked nose and sunken eyes. A flowing blue robe picked out with intricate silver designs hung from bony shoulders, pinched at the waist by a white belt. The man's knobbly hands gripped a carved staff some six feet tall, which he used to aid his shuffling steps as he moved towards Bane, into an open area next to the lake's black beach.

The Demon Lord stopped and eyed his adversary. The old man spoke in a reedy, quavering voice. "At last you come, Bane. I have awaited you for three hundred years."

Bane spat, his lip curling. "You think to stand in my way, old man?"

"I shall strive to do what I can, be it not much. It is to that which I have dedicated my life," he stated phlegmatically.

"Then your end is nigh, mage."

The old mage shuffled to within ten feet of the Demon Lord, then stopped and grounded his staff. "Perhaps, but every time you use your power, the pain becomes a little worse, does it not?"

"What of it?"

The mage sighed, tugging at his beard with a knobbly hand. "The Black Lord planted the seeds of your destruction when he gave you his power, Bane. Did you really think he would share this world with you once he had won it?"

"I am his son."

"You are not." The mage shook his head, his long beard wagging. "You are human, like me, like her, like the people you were sent to kill. He is using you to break the wards, and by the time you have completed your task, you will be dead. He has no use for you after that. He had to make you as powerful as he is. He will not suffer you to live."

"You lie."

The mage leant on his staff. "No, I tell you the truth. You are one of us. My small effort will speed your destruction. It is all I can do, for I will surely not persuade you. Only the healer can -"

Bane raised his hands in a sweeping motion, and black fire burst from them. The frail old man reacted with surprising speed, raising the staff. Blue light flared from it and met the black in a swirling inferno of opposing forces that hissed and crackled around the mage. He chanted, his reedy voice almost lost in the sound of the warring magic, and his blue power grew brighter, forcing back the black. Bane gestured, and the dark fire became fiercer, eating away at the blue.

Mirra sat down as her legs turned to jelly, riveted by the amazing battle. The mage chanted again, raising his staff higher, and the blue magic turning a vivid, sparkling hue, as if fragments of summer sky had entered the fray. Like a war between day and night, the light and dark raged together, each seeking to blot out the other. Bane ground out two harsh words, and the dark power closed like a giant fist, crushing the brilliant blue within it. The mage cried out and held the staff up with quivering hands, warding off the black power with a supreme effort. His ululating cry seemed to spur deep founts of power from him, and flames of pure cyan lashed outwards, burning away the shadows that endeavoured to smother it.

As Bane sought to quell the mage's fire, the power he wielded seemed to escape his control. Mirra gasped as the Demon Lord transformed. Great bat wings of spectral darkness appeared over him, and his features darkened and elongated into slavering jaws lined with black teeth. His eyes flared red, and curled horns swept up from his brow. He seemed to swell, and she blinked, hardly able to believe her eyes. A monstrous form mantled Bane, as if the magic he wielded consumed him.

The creature he had become loomed over the mage. Its vast wings spread, and curled horns scythed the air as it tossed its head, stepping nearer to the cowering magician. The old man fell to his knees, his



face creased as he held the staff up with both hands, but he was clearly doomed. As the black fire ate away at the blue shield around him, he raised his head and shouted a word in a frail treble.

“Lady!”

A sob closed Mirra’s throat as his entreaty echoed around the crater, and, as it faded, his magic turned pure white. A blinding incandescence of sparkling lines tore aside the darkness and made Bane stagger. The horrible illusion in which he had clad himself warped into something so vile that it was beyond her wildest imagination. The beast’s flesh was stripped away to reveal its misshapen bones, and its eyes’ red glow filled its grinning, cadaverous skull. Skeletal wings arched over it like great bony hands clawing at the sky.

The demon steed roared and reared as Bane made a vicious, cutting gesture with a mighty clawed arm. A blast of black fire erupted from him and shredded the mage’s pure magic. The old man became radiant with white fire. His form was engulfed, and he stood like a shining statue, arms outstretched, then he transformed to a point of brilliant light. It shot upwards like a comet, trailing sparkles of white fire, and vanished into the night sky. A thunderclap rolled around the crater, and the staff hit the ground with a clatter. A deathly hush fell as the echoes faded.

Bane sank to his knees, his head bowed and his hands curled as if burnt. The monstrous illusion that mantled him writhed and lashed for a moment longer, then dissipated, leaving behind the bowed form of the Demon Lord.

Mirra rose to her feet and hobbled over to him. “Bane? Are you all right?”

Afraid to touch him, she knelt in front of him and tried to see what was wrong. His pain hurt her, and she fought the urge to run away as she had from the dying dragon. He gasped, sweat trickling down his face, his eyes screwed shut. Mirra’s hands fluttered helplessly, unable to aid him. She still cringed inwardly at the horrible memory of the creature he had become. His hands shot out to grip her wrists, and she cried out as his touch brought her exquisite agony.

“Suffer, healer,” he grated. “Share my pain.”

Mirra stared in horror at his eyes. The black had drained from them, but the whites were crimson, and she fought to break free of him. She groaned as his frigid fingers bit into her skin.

“What did he mean?” he demanded. “Only the healer can what? Finish the sentence, witch!”

“I do not know!” she wailed, writhing. “I do not know, I swear!”

“Only the healer can stop you. That is it, is it not?”

“No! Please let me go!” Mirra sagged as the agony overwhelmed her, threatening to rob her of her senses.

Bane hurled her aside with a snarl of disgust, and she curled into a ball, whimpered and pressed her arms to her belly to warm them, for his touch seemed to have frozen them. He rose a little clumsily and stood over her.

“Why did his magic turn white? Answer me!” He kicked her, making her grunt.

“He – he called upon the Lady.”

“What Lady? Who is she?”

“She is the goddess. She is good, as the Black Lord is evil.”

“You worship her?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you call upon her?”

She sat up, gasping. “I do not think so.”

“As you saw, even your goddess cannot defeat me, so do not try.”

“What if the wizard spoke the truth about you?”

“It is lies.” His hands clenched. “My father would never betray me. I am his son. He is proud of me. It is all vicious lies, just like yours, meant to turn me against him. Do you mistake me for a fool?”

She shook her head. “No. Of course not.”

“Where did he go?”

She looked across at the spot where the mage had fought. Nothing remained but his staff. “The

Lady took him.”

“Physically?”

“No, he is ash. She took his soul.”

Bane snorted and went down to the lakeshore to stare out across the water. Mirra was numbed by the shock of his transformation and the pain he had inflicted upon her. The demonic illusion had undoubtedly struck terror into the old mage’s heart, thereby weakening his magic. Yet such a beast did not come from imagination. Bane must have seen one in the Underworld. She shivered at the thought of the monsters that dwelt below, perhaps even worse than the one Bane had conjured from his memory.

The enormous power he wielded stunned her. Even what she had witnessed tonight was probably only a fraction of it. The agony that accompanied it was horrific. It seemed impossible that anyone could withstand such torture and remain sane. Her mouth dry, she hobbled to his side and scooped up the warm, sulphur-scented water to drink. A glimmer in the lake caught her eye, and she focussed on it. A pale blue pentagram shimmered deep under the water.

Bane frowned at it. “The third ward.”

## Chapter Eight

### The Third Ward

Bane rested for an hour beside the lake. The girl bathed in it, cleaning the cuts on her feet. Her slender nakedness repelled him, and he looked away when she waded out to don her dress again. Gazing across the placid water, he almost smiled at the memory of the old wizard's terrified expression when he had conjured the demonic aspect. It had been a mere trick, for he had been toying with the old man then, making him pay for his pathetic attempt to fight him. No blue mage, no matter how powerful, could stand against the Demon Lord. The greybeard's poisonous words had enraged him, and he had made him suffer for them, but the white fire had hurt. His hands still burnt, and the power he had been forced to unleash had also taken its toll.

The headache pounded his brain with mighty strokes, making his teeth ache and his eyes throb. It remained undiminished, so he stood up and stripped off his cloak, boots and tunic, wading into the warm water. The lakebed sloped rapidly downwards, forcing him to use a little power in order to travel through the water. Revolted by its hated touch, he moved out over the ward. When he dived down to it, the lines of force looked as frail as the old man who had cast them.

Summoning the black fire, he hammered the ward, and it shattered like brittle glass. Bane smiled, then frowned as the ward reappeared, the lines drawn back together as if he had struck an illusion. He shattered it again, but once more it reformed, like a reflection in a still pool. Angered, he kept hammering it, but as soon as he stopped, it reappeared.

Mirra stared at the spot where Bane had dived underwater, waiting for him to resurface, his evil task done. A flare of blue light on the shore made her turn. The wizard's staff was aglow, and she watched it, but it just lay there, shining. The demon steed roared, making her jump. It pranced, tossing its head, its fiery mane swirling about its glowing neck, and trotted over to the staff. Breathing fire, it reared and smashed its hooves down upon the radiant staff. Again and again it hammered the staff, pounding it with frenzied zeal.

The staff shattered with a brilliant flash of blue incandescence and a hissing crack, and the demon steed vanished. The staff lay dull and broken, mere splinters of grey wood.

Moments later, Bane surfaced and came ashore, noticing the steed's absence. "Where is Drallis?" "He... It... The staff was glowing, and it attacked it, then there was a big flash and it vanished."

Bane wrung water from his hair. "Well, well. A canny mage, this one. He linked the ward to the staff. That is why it kept reforming. Had it not been for Drallis, I would not have been able to break it without first destroying the staff. He did not know I would have a demon steed with me."

"Is it dead?"

"Drallis?" He chuckled. "No, stupid, you cannot kill something that is not alive. He has been banished, gone below. An inconvenience; I do not feel like summoning another now." He smiled with cold venom. "You will have to walk back."

The thought of the sharp rocks made her toes curl. "I cannot, Bane. Please do not make me."

"You idiot, how else will you get down?"

She nodded at the mage's abode. "I could look for some shoes, or something to wrap my feet in."

Bane sat down to pull on his boots. "Go on then; otherwise you will bleed to death before we reach the ship, for I will not carry you. And hurry up; I will not wait, either."

Mirra hobbled to the house and pushed open the creaking door. The interior was poorly furnished, but every bit of wood was carved, and many wooden statues decorated the tables and shelves. Most were of a smiling woman with a gentle face, her hands outstretched. Mirra recognised the Lady's image in her most popular pose of blessing the multitudes.

This was how the mage had whiled away three hundred years, waiting for Bane. She walked through the cluttered lounge into the bedroom, finding several pairs of sandals, but all far too large. She found several vests in a drawer in the intricately carved wardrobe, and wrapped her feet in two of them. As she stood up to leave, she noticed a mirror over a table in the corner. Fascinated, she moved closer, studying her reflection for the first time.

Another face formed in the mirror, making her jump back with a squeak. The old mage looked out at her, his sunken eyes sparkling with soft green light.

“Mirra. Have courage, child. Do not give up. He will not kill you. He cannot, although he thinks he can. Be strong, and your reward will be great in the end. The Lady watches over you.”

The image faded as dozens of questions invaded her mind, but the mirror was empty save for her own pale, wide-eyed reflection. She shivered. The old house made her skin crawl, and she fled back to the dubious security of Bane.

He smirked at her. “Did you see a ghost?”

“Uh... no.”

Bane grunted and set off towards the crater’s rim, Mirra following. All the way down, she wondered if she had told her first lie. The mage was dead, so it could have been a ghost, but ghosts did not appear in mirrors. If she had told Bane what she had seen, he would have asked what he had said, and that he probably should not know. If she had said that the ghost did not speak, that would have been a bigger lie. She comforted herself that the image in the mirror had not been a ghost.

By the time they reached the ship, Mirra’s cloth shoes were rags, and she hobbled. Bane went straight to his cabin, shouting for Mord, and she went in search of Benton. He was in the crew’s quarters, eager to hear her story, and plied her with sweet cakes while she told it. When her stomach was full, exhaustion made her eyes droop, and she went to Bane’s cabin, wary of hunting demons.

The Demon Lord lay stretched out on the bed, one arm across his face. Sweat dewed his skin and soaked into the black mane that spread across the pillow like ravens’ wings. He glanced at her with one red eye before rolling onto his side, turning away from her. His pain was like fiery needles, making her eyes sting. He bore it in silence, lying quite still, and she moved away to curl up on the floor and sleep.

At dawn, the ship slipped away from the island’s rocky shore, encountering large swells, and Mirra realised that Bane had been controlling the sea around the island, allowing them to moor so close to it. The wind that came up blew towards the mainland, driving the ship before it. This too, was the Demon Lord’s influence. He seemed able to control the weather with consummate ease.

After the first day, which Bane spent in his cabin, suffering the aftermath of the battle, he came up to stroll on deck, ignoring the men, who avoided him. The captain watched his languid perambulations with cold green eyes, making no effort to hide the hatred shining in them. Two days passed in peace, and Bane was remarkably calm.

The unnatural wind blew day and night, speeding the ship back to its harbour. Mirra noticed that Bane’s headache had worn off quicker than usual, and he looked healthier. His eyes cleared and his lips became paler, his skin acquiring a little colour. His mood stabilised to glum surliness, and he ignored her completely. Her bruises faded, and the cuts on her feet closed, leaving red scars.

As they approached land, Bane sank into a black gloom, staying in his cabin until the ship docked. When Mirra tried to talk to him, he ordered her out. The army waited on the wharf, but Bane only emerged an hour after the men and Mirra had disembarked. He ignored them when they chanted his name, and went straight to an abandoned inn. Mirra found him in the common room, two pots and a flask on the table in front of him.

Mirra would have fled, but Bane said, “Come here, girl.” She hesitated, still tempted to run, and he smiled. “How far do you think you will get?”

Defeated, she approached him, flinching when he gripped her arm and pushed her onto a chair. “I was waiting for you. I knew you would come, like some faithful puppy dog.” He tied her to the chair.

“Do not do this, Bane. Do not cut the runes again, please.”

“Be quiet.”

Having secured her, he stripped off his cloak and tunic, then drew his dagger. The rune scars were still raw and red, and the dagger twitched in his hand.

"I used up most of my power saving you, witch. It is your fault I must do this again so soon."

"I am sorry." Mirra gazed up into his intense eyes. "Please do not do it."

Bane leant closer, frowning. Once again, his angelic-demonic aspect struck Mirra, his clear blue eyes blazing in their black fringe of lashes, too beautiful to be evil.

"Indeed, you would like me to be powerless."

"I want to help you to get better."

His striking face twisted in a grimace. "Maybe I should carve some runes in you."

The dagger pricked the side of her neck, and she gulped. He straightened and raised the weapon to cut the first rune on his chest.

The pain was much worse this time. Bane carved the same four runes, touching her as he did so, sharing his pain. She rested from the agony while he scraped off the running blood, then convulsed as he rubbed in the green gel. Her throat grew raw from screaming, and the dark magic he sucked from the shadows made her vomit so much she thought she would choke. He was also ill, as before, but not nearly as sick as she was. Without her magic, the effect of the black power was far worse, chilling her flesh and sinking into her bones. The hallucinations added to her terror, forcing her to shut her eyes to block them out, which increased the agony.

By the time he had drunk the blood and completed the ritual, Mirra sagged, bathed in cold sweat and gasping for air. Bane squatted in front of her, untied her hands and rubbed them across the still-glowing runes on his chest, slippery with sweat, blood and foul potions. The evil within him was stronger than ever, making her flinch and try to tug her hands from his cold grip.

"Do you still think you can help me, witch?" he asked.

She nodded. "If I had power."

"That you will never have again, I promise." He cupped her cheek in an icy palm, smiling when she shuddered and turned her head away. "You do not like my touch, do you? But let us be honest, you do not like me, do you? You just await your chance to try to kill me, not so, little witch? But in the meantime, you are my plaything; my little toy."

He crooned the words, his eyes piercing in their intensity, as if he strived to see into her soul. His caress would have been seductive if not for his power's repulsion and his words' venom. "It must be hard to be my toy, poor little plaything. How I love to hear you scream; it makes it all worthwhile."

He smiled mockingly. "You claim you want to help me, so do your best to be entertaining, witch, lest I tire of you." He released her and strode out, shouting for Mord.

It took Bane three days to recover from the ritual, but even then, his eyes were bloodshot again, his lips too red, and his unnatural pallor had returned. With the dark power came his foul temper and brutality, worse than before.

The army remained in the town for several days, and Mirra was glad of the rest. She stayed close to Bane, fearful of demons, and received many slaps and blows. He seemed to relish the fact that she was forced to endure his company in order to gain his protection, and made it as unpleasant as possible. He taunted her, and slipped away when she was not watching, laughing when she came in frantic search of him.

Her pity for him grew with every jibe and blow, for she shared his inner torment as if it was her own. He seemed to find her timid smiles and constant forgiveness maddening. It made his rages worse and his treatment of her more brutal. Several times, the beatings only ended when he knocked her unconscious, and twice he throttled her until she passed out. Sometimes his raised fist did not strike, but usually the blow landed, yet even then he held back, for he had not broken a bone, only inflicted bruises, which, considering his inhuman strength, was quite a feat.

Mirra decided that this was because if she was injured, she would become a burden, so he confined himself to inflicting as much pain as he could without actually crippling her. He did not seem to draw the satisfaction from torturing her that he had done in the past, however. If anything, her suffering

appeared to anger him further, making him storm away, leaving her to weep for both of their suffering. At times, she would look up to find him watching her, his expression brooding, and when she did, he usually flew into a rage.

Bane's mood improved remarkably when a scout came in to report the approach of an army, becoming satisfied and purposeful, excited at the prospect of bloodshed. He ordered the men to ready themselves, and the houses they used for barracks rang with the clatter of steel as they cleaned and sharpened their weapons. Bane summoned another demon steed from the fire, forcing Mirra to watch and laughing at her fear and horror.

This one was as brightly crimson as the first had been black, only it seemed larger, more fearsome than the first. He pronounced its name to be Orriss, and seemed pleased with his choice. Next, he scried the approaching army, counted troops and divined his enemy's strategy, then scried another ward, rolling three potential headaches into one massive one, which forced him to rest for a day.

Mirra, one eye swollen from a slap he had given her the previous day, her neck aching with bruises, brought a bowl of cold water and a cloth to his room.

He eyed her as she approached his bed. "Get out."

She hesitated. "I brought some cold water. It will ease the pain."

"I want nothing from you."

"Please, Bane, let me put some on your brow. It will help."

He sat up, scowling. "I do not want your damned help! How many times must I tell you? Leave me alone!"

Mirra tilted the bowl so he could see its contents. "It is only water."

Leaping off the bed, he smashed the bowl from her hands, raising one of his. She gazed up at him through her tears, and he lowered his arm.

"Get out, before I kill you."

Mirra left, hurt by his constant rejection. Her nature compelled her to try to ease the suffering of others, yet when Bane had a headache, to try was dangerous. At least this time he had not struck her.

Settling down against the wall outside his door, Mirra longed to visit Benton. She missed the easy camaraderie that had sprung up between them. She was mindful of the danger of wandering too far from Bane, however, and, except for occasional forays to the kitchen for food, she stayed as close to him as she could. She thought about the life she had always wanted, as a healer in a tiny cottage in the woods. Perhaps when this was all over, she would get her wish.

A cold draught made her shiver, and she looked around for its source. The day was hot, despite the thick clouds, and until now had been airless. A bad smell wafted to her, borne on the cold air, and she wrinkled her nose. Perhaps someone had opened the door of a cellar in which a corpse lay rotting. The smell sickened her, and she swallowed, tempted to go to the window at the end of the corridor to escape it.

As she was about to, Bane's door was wrenched open, and he strode out to stand in front of her, facing down the corridor whence the cold stench blew.

"Show yourself, Yansahesh; your presence offends me."

Mirra gasped as a pale fog coalesced in the air, taking on the six-armed demonic aspect. The air demon bowed, its pale eyes aglow with a cold light.

"Greetings, Bane. Your vigilance is laudable, but in such bad taste."

"I will decide on taste. How dare you judge me?"

"Ah, Demon Lord, I am not as foolish as my brother. I refer, of course, to the wench, a worthless piece of human trash you guard so zestfully. I, of course, have the best chance of killing her, as your father so much desires, after my brothers failed so woefully."

Bane's eyes narrowed. "You challenge me?"

"Never." It gave a hissing chuckle. "You cannot shelter her all the time, like a broody hen with one chick. She has but to stray, and she will die."

Bane opened his mouth, but the demon vanished, leaving only its smell. He turned to look down at

Mirra. "Wonderful. Air demons are probably the worst of all, clever and quick to come and go."

Bane re-entered his room, and Mirra followed. He poured a cup of wine and sat on a chair, frowning. "He will return. I did not have the chance to banish him."

"I am safe with you."

He snorted. "I do not need the aggravation, and I could do without the headache too."

She bowed her head. "I wish there was something I could do in return for your protection."

"My protection! You have to be the stupidest creature in the world. I deny you the release of death, and give you suffering instead, and you thank me?"

He paused. "Tomorrow we go to battle. That is when he will strike, as soon as he thinks I am distracted. Unlike the earth and fire demons, he can kill you swiftly, since you have no power. Had you been powerless then, Mealle's glance would have reduced you to ashes, and Yalnebar's first blow would have crushed you. The water demon, Amnon, could only drown you. Water demons are not very powerful, and, even without your power, you seem immune to mine. Yansahesh can kill you in a few seconds."

"Will you let me have some power?"

"No. If you want so much to live and suffer, it is up to you to stay close to me. If you wander off, it will be your last mistake."

"But you will be riding, might you not leave me behind?"

Bane chuckled. "Where do you think I am going? You think I will ride into battle, slashing with my trusty sword? In case you have not noticed, I do not possess a sword, nor do I fight. That is why I have an army, to do the dirty work for me and spare me a headache."

She nodded, comforted. The thought of Bane, a bleeder, amongst all those sharp weapons horrified her, but he obviously knew the danger. He poured more wine and settled back, brooding.

Just after dawn, a gaudily dressed herald came to the town to deliver the challenge. It was addressed to 'The Heinous Destroyer, Slayer of Women and Children, Despoiler of the Land, Son of the Black Lord'. Bane chuckled at the well-earned titles. The Earl of Timon, it seemed, wished to meet Bane's army in the fields around the town for a glorious battle. Bane laughed at the pompous proclamation, drawing much amusement from the plight of the luckless herald, who strived to appear fearless whilst preventing his knees from knocking together.

Bane toyed with him awhile, shooting him venomous looks that made the man sweat and start. Then Bane jumped up and strode over to the herald, who appeared to be on the verge of bolting. The man seemed likely to drop dead from sheer panic if Bane touched him, so he contented himself with looming over him instead, chuckling at the poor man's quaking.

If the herald had been ordered to show no fear, he failed miserably, but Bane's behaviour gave Mirra a rare insight into the workings of his mind. She knew he enjoyed inflicting pain on others, but he seemed to revel in their fear as well, and she wondered if the two were linked. Did he torture people because they feared him, or to make them fear him? Was that why he seemed to enjoy her pain less, because she was less afraid of him than most? She longed to ask him a hundred questions, but knew she would receive few, if any, answers.

When Bane tired of his sport, he sent a terse agreement back with the ashen-faced herald. He smiled as the man scuttled away. His forces outnumbered the Earl's men three to one, and she sensed that he would enjoy the spectacle.

Mirra cringed inwardly at the prospect, wishing she could stay at the inn and not be forced to watch the carnage. The air demon's threat prevented her, however. She had to remain close to the Demon Lord, or die. He did not care either way, so he said; the choice was hers. Bane sent orders to his captains, then left the inn and rode to the edge of town. She followed, standing beside him while his troops formed up into ragged companies. They slouched into position, muttering and shuffling, adjusting ill-fitting armour and rattling rusty swords. Those who were unarmed simply stood and

scratched at lice or picked their teeth.

As Bane addressed his captains, who gathered at a safe distance, Mirra looked up at the grey sky, attracted by a raven's cawing. The bird circled above her, then swooped low, and something fell at her feet. She picked it up, and found a silk-wrapped golden pearl. As soon as she unwrapped it, the power soaked into her palm in a rush of warm joy. Her aches and bruises vanished, and she breathed a silent word of thanks to her sisters at some distant abbey as the bird winged away, its task complete. She experienced a twinge of guilt, for Bane did not want her to have power, but many would be wounded in the coming battle, and she was glad that now she could heal them.

Bane was too busy to notice the change in her, and she followed when he rode out to where the houses thinned and ploughed fields lined the road behind low stone walls. The army slouched past in disorderly ranks, giving the demon steed and its rider a wide berth. Mirra waved to Benton, receiving a sad smile. As the last of the warriors trudged past, the dark creatures slunk into the shadows of the buildings behind them, gathering at the edge of town, red eyes glowing in doorways and alleys. Any daylight would burn them, so they preferred to keep their exposure to a minimum.

The Earl of Timon's knights appeared from the woods on the far side of the green fields, clad in shining armour and bright tabards, banners snapping bravely in the wind. The warhorses, caparisoned in silver-studded harness and polished chain mail, cavorted, held to a walk by their riders. Heads decked with bright plumes tossed, and manes and tails flew. The Earl rode a tall, milk-white stallion, his blue and white livery standing out against the backdrop of bay and chestnut horses, his polished armour glinting.

Foot soldiers marched behind the line of knights, rank upon orderly rank, long pikes resting on their shoulders as they advanced to their positions. As they fanned out, they edged the dark forest with a band of bright colour and flashing steel. They were a marvellous sight in all their finery, Mirra thought, their battle pennants held proudly aloft, but no amount of courage would win this battle. They were doomed, walking dead men, and she wished they would flee, but knew they would not.

By contrast, Bane's motley rabble strode out with little ceremony. They carried no banners, blew no horns, and none rode horses. Their dirty clothes were dark and ragged, their weapons poor, dented and scarred from ill-use. They dwarfed the Earl's army through sheer numbers, however; a dark mass that spread across the green fields like a foul black and red tide. Bane smiled as his men reached the halfway mark and milled around. The trolls beat their fists on the ground, setting up a dull thudding, while rock howlers bounced and whooped high shrieks of feral glee. The men, not to be outdone, beat their swords on their shields and chanted Bane's name.

The Demon Lord's army seethed in a spreading mass across the town's grazing fields, shouting their battle cries. Beyond them, the Earl's smaller force waited, stony faced, as the last of the foot soldiers emerged from the woods and formed up into their ranks. The barked orders of their captains came faintly through the deep-throated chanting of Bane's men, and mounted men cantered up and down the ranks, waving banners and extolling the soldiers to fight the evil in front of them. As the last soldiers took up their positions, the knights returned to their commander's side.

The Earl of Timon raised his sword and brought it down in a flashing arc. Horns blared, drums thundered, and his army roared as his charger sprang into a gallop. The warhorses charged, the knights' lances lowering in a line, perfectly drilled. The Earl led them, a shining figure giving courage to his men as they thundered across the fields towards the black sea of gesticulating, stamping death. The foot soldiers raced down the hill behind the knights, beating their swords on their shields and giving vent to blood-curdling war whoops in an effort to drown out the enemy.

The two armies met with a terrific crash, and Mirra winced as screams erupted. Horses fell and men shrieked as they died on sword point or lance tip. The cavalry charge carried the horses well into the seething melee of Bane's army, where scores of slashing swords cut them down. A minute after the knights joined battle, the foot soldiers ploughed in, staying in their ranks, protecting each other with shields as they stabbed and slashed at the rabble. The dark creatures quit the shelter of the buildings and rushed to join the fray, those that could fly swooping into the battle from above. The rest slithered,



crawled or ran on strange stilt-like legs, giving chilling gibbers of glee. Since they ate human meat, today's battle would also be a feast.

The Earl wielded his sword in skilful strokes, cutting down any who came near him, a knot of knights trying to protect him. The ranks of foot soldiers pushed slowly forward, leaving piles of dead in their wake. The knights split into groups, swords flashing as they fought the swarms of men and beasts that sought to drag them down.

Sometimes a horse would fall, gutted, and its rider would vanish into the mob. Riderless, injured warhorses bolted from the battle, some to founder shortly after they reached safety. Still, the Earl fought on, a brave figure atop the rearing stallion, his knot of knights dwindling. Gaps appeared in the ranks of foot soldiers, and many formed circles of shields, keeping the mob at bay.

A sob closed Mirra's throat, and she turned away, unable to watch the carnage and longing to flee.

"What fools they are." Bane's scathing comment reached her over the battle's roar. "Fighting each other, for nothing. Especially the idiots who follow me. They fight their countrymen, but they too will die in the end."

Mord sat nearby in a house's shade, idly scratching his hairy hide, the brown leather satchel he always carried beside him, and she wondered why he was not fighting. Behind her, the battle raged on, and she was unable to block out the screams, crashes, roars and clatter of the locked armies, even by plugging her ears. Fortunately, they were too far away for her to share their pain, but she heard it. It seemed endless, and she prayed for it to stop. When her legs grew weary, she sat down on the hard, dusty earth, gazing at the empty town and the blue-grey sea beyond.

Gulls wheeled and mewled, swooping to snatch fish from the waves. Several times, she glanced around to make sure Bane was still there, sitting on the stallion, surveying the raging sea of death, where more and more, black and brown swamped the Earl's bright colours.

A faint hiss and a thud made her look back. Bane swayed atop the demon steed, an arrow protruding from his chest. Another followed it, hitting his arm, and the steed reared, roaring as one struck it, consumed in a flash of fire. Bane grasped the shaft that impaled his arm, but another thudded into his side, and he released the first with a grunt. His eyes glinted as he sought his attackers, and three men fled from the shelter of a nearby wall, their blue and white uniforms standing out against the brown earth of a ploughed field. They must have crept along the low wall to get within arrow shot of the Demon Lord, in a brave and daring attempt to kill him.

Bane raised an arm, and dark fire flashed from his fingers, burning the fleeing men to ash before they had taken three steps. Bane struggled to pull out an arrow, but it was deeply embedded, its barbs hooked into his flesh. He slid off the stallion, and Mirra sat frozen as he walked towards her. Blood poured down his chest and hip, soaking his shirt. Galvanised by his need, she jumped up and ran towards him, collided with another and fell. Mord sprawled over her, a pot bouncing from his hands.

Bane sank to one knee, his face an ashen mask of pain. "Witch! Is this how you plan to kill me?"

Mirra scrambled to her feet, anguished that he could think such a thing. Mord grabbed the pot and sprinted to him, placing it in his hand before scuttling away. Bane swayed, trying to undo his tunic's ties with shaking, fumbling fingers. Giving up, he ripped the shirt open, exposing the wound from which the arrow protruded. Fortunately, it had not been a direct hit. The arrowhead was lodged just under his skin, forming a bluish lump.

Drawing his dagger, he cut into his flesh to release the barb and pulled it out. Blood streamed from the wound as he dropped the weapon, fumbled the pot open and scooped out a dollop of the green balm to smear on it. The fresh rune scars glowed, and Mirra shook herself from the fascination of his brutal self-doctoring to run and kneel beside him.

"Let me help you."

"Get away from me," he snarled, struggling to reach the wound in his flank, ripping the shirt away when it hampered him. He dug the dagger into his skin, cutting again to release the barb.

She flinched at the pain he was inflicting upon himself. "I can reach better than you."

"Do you really imagine I am foolish enough to put my life in your hands?"

“Bane, please, I will not hurt you.”

He grimaced as he jerked out the second arrow. The runes flared, blackness seeping into his eyes. “You tried to stop Mord.”

“It was an accident! I did not see him.”

Bane rubbed the green gel into the wound in his flank, then picked up the dagger again. One arrow remained, deep in his biceps. He lifted the dagger to cut it out, but his hand shook, and he cursed. She winced as he made a savage stab at the arrowhead, gashing his skin. More blood flowed as he dug into his flesh, his gritted teeth bared.

Mirra’s eyes brimmed with tears of pity at the pain he caused with his butchery, wishing she could heal him, pull out the arrow painlessly, as she had done to the deer so long ago. Bane grunted, dropped the bloody dagger and wrenched the arrow out with a savage twist. He swayed, and she thought he would collapse, but he put out a hand to hold himself upright, bowing his head. After a moment, he straightened, picked up the pot again and anointed the last wound, sealing it.

“A nice try, girl, but I am not that easy to kill.” He glared at her, undoubtedly angered by his weakness, which the trembling of the hand that held the pot betrayed.

“I am not trying to kill you.”

Bane climbed to his feet and swung away, tossing the pot to Mord. He surveyed the battle as if nothing had happened, but the effort of standing clearly cost him a lot. Sweat sheened his brow and lines of pain creased the skin around his eyes. His blood dried on the tattered remnants of his shirt, and the runes on his chest glowed faintly.

Mirra went to stand next to him. “I wish you would let me help. Who would, if you were shot in the back? Everyone is too afraid to come near you, except me.”

He looked at her. “That is what you are counting on, is it not?”

“No! What if the arrows had been poisoned?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes, I believe you would help me.”

Mirra’s heart pounded, then he lashed out, sending her sprawling, the pain blocked by her power.

“Help me into my grave. That is what you would do, witch,” he said.

The pain of his distrust stunned her. Everyone trusted healers. No healer had ever abused that privilege, so why did he suspect her so? She rose to her feet. Mord squatted some distance away, clutching the pot. Bane even trusted Mord more than her. If the troll had refused to give him the pot, he would have died. Mord would not have outlived his master, she was sure. Fear kept the troll obedient. For all his powers, the Demon Lord could not heal himself. His power was destructive. Only good magic could heal, and the foul green salve stopped the bleeding by burning him, sealing the blood vessels. Even now, as he perused the battlefield, he swayed slightly. A normal man would have collapsed from shock and blood loss, but sheer willpower kept the Demon Lord on his feet.

Becoming aware that the sounds of battle had faded, she looked at the battlefield, wincing at the sight that greeted her. Acres of bodies and groaning, twitching wounded stretched away across the valley. The remnants of the Earl’s army fled, pursued by Bane’s men, but for a few who walked amongst the torn banners and broken lances, smashed shields and dying men, dispatching enemy wounded. Most of the dark creatures had retreated to the shelter of the buildings or trees, except for those that lay amongst the wounded.

Hurt by Bane’s undeserved wrath, she longed for the comfort of her only friend, Benton. He could be lying out there, in need of her help and eager to receive it. Mirra ran down the road towards the carnage.

“Come back here, girl!”

Bane’s angry shout followed her as she raced to the aid of the wounded soldiers lying on the torn and bloody grass. The first man she came to she healed swiftly, moving on to the next as he sat up. None of the Earl’s soldiers survived, but she healed Bane’s men, hurrying between them as quickly as she could. There were hundreds of them, and she despaired at the pain of the ones she had not yet reached. Her legs grew tired from stepping over bodies and slipping on the bloody grass. Her stomach

clenched at the stench and ugliness of the battle's aftermath.

Some of the injured required help, such as pushing spilt intestines back into their owner's gut before healing the great wound in his belly. Straightening broken limbs required a great deal of strength, although sometimes the soldier was able to help once she dulled his pain. Her heart ached for the Earl's young men, some little more than boys, who lay in twisted death, their glazed eyes staring through her. Their shaven faces and polished armour set them apart from the dirty, bearded rabble, and she wished she could save them too. She blessed them as she hurried past, her feet and hands red with blood.

The stench of loosened bowels and the metallic tang of blood seeped onto her tongue. She had healed hundreds by the time her power waned, and wandered in search of more. A feebly flapping vampire snapped fanged jaws at her, warning her away. Already, the weak light had split its black hide, and brown ichor dribbled onto the grass.

A weird with a broken back tried to drag itself towards the trees' shelter, growling. A wight flailed at the ground with useless, spidery wings, its bulging eyes weeping sticky fluid, its broken legs trapped beneath the body of a huge grotesque. A grim lay panting on its back, a sword protruding from its chest, frothy blue ichor bubbling from the wound. Others succumbed to their wounds and the watery light, but she avoided them, for only those that were almost dead did not snarl or spit in her direction.

There seemed to be no more wounded men, but in her wandering she came across a groaning horse. The Earl's grey stallion lay on his side, many wounds in his chest and flanks. Healers scorned none, men and animals were all deserving of life.

Mirra placed her hands on his flank and released the last of her power in a golden stream. As it drained, she sagged against the stallion's side, her strength ebbing. Darkness impaired her vision as the beast heaved himself to his feet, and she sank onto the bloody ground. She shivered as a cold breeze touched her, waiting for her strength to return.

The cold clamped down, accompanied by a terrible foetor, and the air was sucked from her lungs. Icy, tenuous arms clasped her, and a hissing voice sniggered in her ear.

"End of the line, wench."

Mirra was pinioned by the freezing air demon, her lungs empty. Ice formed on her skin, reddening it as it froze the top layers, causing burning pain. The cold bit into her, sinking deeper, her skin cracking, the chill invading her flesh. Blackness closed in, and the stallion squealed, his hooves thudding down nearby.

## Chapter Nine

### Air Demon

Bane looked up at a horse's squeal and scanned the field. Men who had been dying now wandered amongst the dead, pale with shock and disbelief. A grey stallion, a moment ago lying down, now reared near a white-garbed form. He frowned, wondering what she was doing, and how she had healed the men and horse without power. Had she been lying about that too? Did she have power still? His gaze sharpened. She was awfully still, sitting rigidly as if frozen, and the warhorse pounded the ground beside her as if attacking an invisible enemy. He tensed. Yansahesh! She had strayed too far from him.

Bane Moved. Instantly he was beside her, and sensed the invisible air demon. Dark power flashed from his hand, and the demon coalesced involuntarily as it was struck, its substance burnt to ash. Bane experienced a moment of remorse as the demon perished, but the girl slumped, her skin reddened and cracked, seeping blood, her lips blue and her eyes glazed.

Bane sank to his knees beside her, experiencing again the mystifying sense of loss. An icy lance of pain impaled his chest, and conflicting emotions warred for supremacy, most of which he discarded as inconsequential. Fury goaded the darkness within him while weakness drained him and his wounds throbbed afresh. The runes scars glowed as he bent over her, finding a weak pulse. The Black Lord had not won yet. She breathed in shuddering gasps, but she was dying, her heart fluttering, blood rattling in her throat. The cold had seared her lungs, and she was drowning in her own blood.

The Demon Lord flung back his head and shouted, "No!"

Black fire coursed through him, fuelled by his rage. He raised his arms and Gathered. Darkness rushed into him, filling him with its sickening power, yet even as it burgeoned, hopelessness invaded him. Only the girl could heal. His power could only destroy, and the demon was gone already. Still, the magic soaked into him, and the runes flared, burning crimson. His father would not win. Raising his arms again, he unleashed the dark fire upwards in a column of blackness so dense it appeared that a void tore the sky apart. The power struck the grey clouds and ripped them asunder.

Bane groaned as the shadows seared his wounds. The fresh injuries in his chest and flank, so close to the four burning runes, sapped his already diminished strength. With all his will, he leashed the power, bringing it back under control before it consumed him. As he trapped it within his flesh once more, he experienced the lash of agony that followed its taming. The clouds rolled back with ponderous majesty, and a shaft of sunlight shot down.

It bathed the pale girl, making her flaxen hair shine and her eyes glow. A shimmer of golden power licked over her skin, and the blood stopped seeping, the cracks started to close, the redness receding. Her eyes closed, and a soft cough racked her, blood oozing from her lips. Her flesh healed in the sun, magically restored to pale gold. Her harsh breathing eased, and she sighed.

The light hurt Bane's eyes and its warm touch made his skin crawl, yet he endured it to watch the miracle of her healing. He forced the dark power deeper within him, making it recede from his eyes and drain from his skin, leaving it coldly burning. The runes dimmed, their power leashed once more. His hand crept to the wound that had warped his magic, and he eyed the girl with fresh hatred.

Mirra woke to blissful warmth. Soft, soothing golden power glided through her, wiping away the pain. She basked in the sun's glory, soaking it up. Gradually, she became aware of a malignant presence beside her, a source of intense suffering. She opened her eyes and sat up with a shocked gasp.

Bloody tears streaked the Demon Lord's cheeks, and his eyes were blue gems set in crimson. Lines of strain and agony bracketed his too-red lips, scored his brow and framed his eyes. Mirra reached out to him, but he flinched away, scowling. With a grunt of effort, he rose to his feet, swaying a little.

"I hope you are satisfied, witch."

“Why? What did I do?” Mirra asked, perplexed.

“You wandered too far from me, as I warned you not to. I destroyed Yansahesh, and tore open the clouds to save you. I doubt my father will forgive me for this.”

“Bane...”

The Demon Lord strode away, and Mirra leapt up to run after him. She caught his sleeve, and he spun, his fist rising. It struck her jaw, the pain blocked, the injury healed even before she sprawled on the ground. She scrambled up again, and he glared at her.

“Bane, please, I can help you.”

“What have you done to me?” he demanded. “Why can I not let you die? You were sent to kill me, and I almost killed myself to save your miserable, worthless life. Why?”

His face was bitter. “You are nothing! A piece of human trash! Yansahesh was worth a hundred of you, yet I destroyed him. You lied to me, pretended to have no power when you did, tried to kill me when I was injured. You defy me, disobey me, and force me to save you from your own infernal stupidity! I hate you! I spit on you! And I will find a way to kill you. I will break your spell, witch!”

Her tears overflowed. “I am not here to kill you. I want to end your suffering. I do not have a spell on you. I -”

“Enough! I want nothing from you. I have no need of help, yours or anyone else’s.”

Bane marched off, and she gazed after him, forlorn. He was right; her presence put him in danger by luring demons to try to kill her. She had become a bone of contention between him and the Black Lord, and the resulting rivalry might lead to Bane’s downfall. Her heart cried out to save him from himself, but logic told her that she did him more harm than good.

“I will go. I will leave you in peace then,” she called after him.

The Demon Lord stopped as if he had run into a brick wall. He turned to face her, some yards separating them. “What?” Slowly he shook his head. “You are not going anywhere. I will keep you with me until I discover how to break your spell and kill you.”

“But... I have no spell.”

He stepped towards her, his expression daunting. “I should have killed you as soon as I knew how, yet I did not. I should have let Mealle kill you, but I saved you instead. I saved you from Amnon, and Yalnebar. I destroyed Yansahesh! I want to know why, witch, if not a spell?”

“I do not know. It is the truth.”

He advanced on her. “I should enjoy hurting you, but I do not. Why?”

“I do not know.”

Bane gripped her arm, his fingers digging into her. “Well I intend to find out. My father will help me, and your plan to kill me will fail.”

“I have no plan. I am not trying to kill you.” Her power reacted to his touch, but the evil repelled it. He sensed it and yanked her forward, sending her stumbling with a hard shove.

“Lies!”

Mirra trotted ahead, staying out of his reach all the way back to town. He followed her to his room at the inn, where she retreated into a corner. A cup of potion awaited him on the table, and he tossed it back in a gulp. She expected a beating, or worse, but Bane sat on the bed, holding his head. She shared the suffering that held him in its merciless grip, tearing at the delicate substance of his mind.

It had been building since he had used the power, and now it reached unbearable proportions. The strain of wielding the power when he was wounded had done far more harm than usual, she sensed. With growing desperation, she tried to think of a way to ease his pain. As he closed his eyes against the light that amplified the hammering in his skull, she crept to the door and slipped out.

This was dangerous, if a demon attacked her now, Bane would be unable to help her, but she did not think another would come so soon after Yansahesh’s demise. She ran to the kitchen, ransacking the cupboards for her herbs. Her nose wrinkled at Mord’s foul ingredients, but she found what she needed in a jar. Boiling water, she steeped the dried flowers in it.

After what Bane had put himself through, the pain in his head could drive him mad, even kill him.

The old mage had told him that the Black Lord had planted the seeds of his destruction within him, and his extreme use of his power speeded him to that end. She would have to lie, and that gave her pause. Lying was a sin, if not a mortal one. It offended the Lady, and she had always been taught to be truthful. The truth would only hamper her now, however. Bane would never accept her help, which he so desperately needed. Easing his pain was too important. It must be achieved, even if it meant lying. Silently she begged the Lady's forgiveness while she waited for the potion to brew, then added a little cold water. She took it to his room in the same cup Mord always used.

Bane tossed on the rumpled bed. Sweat sheened his skin, deep lines furrowed his brow, and his breath came in harsh gasps. She put the cup on the table, timidly approaching him.

"Bane."

"Leave me alone."

"Mord brought more potion."

His eyes flicked open. "It does not help anymore." He groaned, clutching his head.

"He made it stronger."

Bane levered himself upright, his bloody eyes finding the cup. He gulped down the potion, apparently without tasting it, then flopped back. Mirra quelled a smile while she waited for the medicine to take effect. After only a few minutes, Bane's tossing calmed, his sweating stopped, and the lines on his face smoothed. For a while he lay still, breathing deeply, his striking features relaxed.

When he sat up, he looked puzzled. Mirra was delighted to sense no pain from him at all, just the lingering corruption. Bane rose and sniffed the cup, his eyes flicking to her. Putting it back on the table, he shouted, "Mord!"

Mirra went cold. Her little subterfuge was about to be discovered. Her heart pounded, dreading his reaction.

When the cowering troll appeared in the doorway, Bane asked, "How many cups of the drug did you bring me?"

"One, Lord."

Bane swung on her, his eyes murderous. "You tricked me. You substituted your foul brew when I was suffering."

Mirra backed away, raising her hands. "I only wanted to help. It did help, did it not?"

"You lied! What else does it do?"

"Nothing. It just stops pain. It is not poison. After what you did for me, do you think I could harm you? I was never going to, anyway. I only -"

Bane punched her, sending her sprawling. Her power rushed to heal her split skin and crushed cheekbone. Bane lashed out with all his strength, breaking ribs as he kicked her across the room. She grunted as the air was punched from her lungs, then he gripped her gown and dragged her upright.

"First you ensnare me with a foul enchantment, now you try to kill me. Slut! Harpy!" He hit her again, sending her crashing into the wall, banging her head and seeing bright stars. She slumped, but Bane dragged her up by her throat. He pinned her to the wall, choking her.

"I wish I could kill you." His voice held a tinge of anguish that was not reflected in his wintry eyes. "It would be so easy."

Darkness swirled in Mirra's vision, and, with a grunt, he released her. She slid down the wall, ending up sitting with her back to it. While she gasped, he sat on the bed, raking his hair into glossy plumes with a shaking hand.

"How ironic," he muttered, his rage seeming to leave him all of a sudden. "I am forced to save you, who are my enemy, while you try to murder me."

"I am not." She drew a shuddering breath. "I swear, I would never try to harm you. The potion only stops the pain."

He groaned. "How do you know what it will do to me? I am from the Underworld. Everything I eat and drink comes from the Underworld, sent up by my father at a great cost of power. This world is poison to me."

"No, you are human, like me. Remember the old mage? It will not harm you."

"Tricks and lies. The Black Lord is my father. How can I be human? The mage was my enemy. You are my enemy. You have poisoned me."

"No, I want to help you."

"Why, so I can destroy your world?" He shook his head. "That makes no sense. You seek to kill me, to save your people."

"A healer cannot harm anyone. The Lady forbids it."

Bane stared at the empty goblet. "You try to turn me against my father. You have a spell on me to force me to protect you, and now you try to poison me."

Tears welled in her eyes at the anguish and horror in his voice. She longed to comfort him, but was afraid he would lash out again. Instead, she waited while he pondered his predicament, praying he would come to the right conclusion.

Ellese sighed and looked up from her scrying glass to smile at Tallis, who hovered at her elbow. "She is all right, Tallis, stop worrying."

Tallis forced a wan smile. "What has happened?"

"She has won a great victory, my dear. A very great one."

"Tell me." Tallis pulled up a stool, her mien eager.

"He saved her from the brink of death, after he defeated the Earl of Timon's army. The Earl is dead I am afraid, poor, foolish man. Mirra used the power we sent her to heal the wounded men of Bane's army, as she must, of course."

"But they are the enemy."

Ellese wagged a finger. "They are just men, misguided, but no less deserving of healing than anyone else. Could you deny it to a suffering man, no matter who he might be? We do not judge their worthiness. That is for the Lady to do."

"We denied good people healing to gather that power."

The seeress sighed. "I know, but none of them were dying, as the men Mirra healed were. Anyway, another demon attacked her, but Bane saved her. She has him now."

"What do you mean, 'has him'?"

Ellese smiled. "He does not know it yet, but he is starting to care for her."

"The Demon Lord?"

"Yes, my dear, a very human young man, and confused, I should imagine, right now. He has never known love, Tallis. Can you imagine what that must be like? He does not understand what is happening to him, but he does not like it."

"What will happen to Mirra?"

"I cannot say. The Black Lord will do everything in his power to turn Bane to his will, but we hope he will fail. Bane holds the key to his release, so he will have to be careful of what he does. Right now, Bane thinks he wants Mirra dead as much as the Black Lord does, but of course, he does not. She is in great danger now. The Black Lord will try harder than ever to kill her, and Bane must protect her. It pits the two against each other, but they are equally powerful. Mirra must persuade him to stop breaking the wards, but that will be difficult. She has not won his trust."

Tallis shook her head. "He cares for her, but he does not trust her?"

"Yes. Love is a strange thing, my dear. The most powerful force of good in the world, but the most misunderstood and mysterious. The goddess gave us the one weapon that will work against Bane, for his only weakness is that he is human."

Bane writhed in the grip of a dream that was more akin to a nightmare. His father was in a towering rage, with good reason, which was why Bane did not try to shield himself from his wrath. *A seething*

*storm of black fire engulfed him, buffeting him, tearing at him with lashes of burning pain. The Black Lord's inky visage twisted and his slit yellow eyes blazed, scorching Bane.*

*"You destroyed Yansahesh. I warned you not to!"*

*"She made me do it, Father. I had no choice."*

*The Black Lord's raging countenance hardened. "No choice? You fool! You protect the one who was sent to kill you. You must kill her, before she forces you to do other things."*

*"She has a spell on me, or I would have left her to die. She tricked me into drinking some strange potion too."*

*The storm of black fire turned into a red inferno that seared Bane. He knew his power protected him from fire, so the burning was an illusion, and he could have brushed aside the illusory flames.*

*The Black Lord raged, "She will do more than that! The longer she stays with you, the stronger her power over you will become. Had you killed her when I first told you to, you would be rid of her now. Your foolishness has caused this. You must kill her, or send her away so I can."*

*Bane shook his head. "I cannot. She uses me to protect her now. Her power binds me."*

*"Are you so weak?" The Black Lord's words dripped scorn. "It is an Overworld spell. You must find a way to break it."*

*"Yes, Father. But so long as her magic binds me, I cannot let her die. You were right about her, although her poison did not work."*

*The Black Lord's fury abated and the burning stopped. The fiery vision turned to a calmer vista of black smoke in which darting red sparks danced. "She will find one that does, though. You must guard yourself well. Otherwise, you have done well. Another ward broken. Only four more, son."*

*"Yes, Father."*

*"Bane, get to the others as soon as you can. Nothing else matters. Let the girl have her silly spell, it will not stop you breaking the wards. If she tries to turn you from that purpose, beware. Do not listen to her. Once I have risen, I will help you to be free of her. Do not fail me, son. I am counting on you. And do not let her poison your mind against me, either. I know she will try."*

*"She has already tried. She will not succeed."*

*"Good." The Black Lord's red maw curved into a smile. "I forgive you for Yansahesh. I never liked him anyway. Air demons are so slick."*

Bane woke refreshed, glad that his father had forgiven him. Opening his eyes, he stared up at the leather tent, enjoying the lack of pain. Only a dull ache sat at the base of his skull, even now that the girl's potion had worn off. He had grown used to the constant ache that Mealle's potion did not banish, but it had not been so slight for many months. After he had taken the healer's potion, the complete lack of pain had been blissful. He sat up and studied her, curled up asleep on the floor, and wondered how she had cast such a powerful spell on him.

Such a fragile creature, so small and helpless. He could snap her neck easily, but the thought brought a stab of some indefinable emotion, and it was not pleasure, as it should be. He resented that; it robbed him of some of his power and confused him, too. His father was right, however. It did not stop him breaking the wards, and when the Black Lord rose he would free him from this enchantment.

Rising, he stretched, the pain of his wounds flaring, making him wince and grunt. He glanced at the healer, afraid that she had seen his weakness, but she still slept, and he allowed himself a brief grimace. Good, pain was good, although he cursed the slight weakness that still plagued him. He did not need any help from anyone, least of all the whey-faced witch. He loathed her touch, her gentle pawing and soft words. That was how she had cast the spell, he was sure, and he would not let her near him again. She was always trying to touch him, he thought with a shudder. He hated being touched, ever since he had been a small boy tormented by the slaps and pinches of those who had tended him.

Bolstered by his resolve, he padded to the table and used a soft cloth to rub his eyes, turning as the girl stirred. She sat up and smiled at him, making him scowl. She smiled too much, as if something



about him amused her, and each time she saw him she was reminded of it. The thought angered him, and he longed to smash the smile from her face. He loomed over her, pleased when she retreated, faint trepidation replacing her amusement. At least she still feared him, although not as much as she should.

Mord brought his breakfast and bread for the girl. Bane watched her eat while he spooned his food. When she offered him some, he glared at her. He had told her that Overworld food was poison, yet she blatantly tried to feed it to him. Leaving the rest of his meal, he quit the tent, forcing her to abandon her breakfast to hurry after him.

Outside, Bane shouted for his captains, who ran to cower at what they thought was a safe distance, straightening their dirty finery and looted armour. He cast a scornful eye over their unshaven dishevelment, making them shift in uneasy suspicion. Finally he informed them that they marched to the fourth ward. The captains ran to gather their troops, and Bane mounted the demon steed. The girl walked behind as he rode out of town, Mord trailing with his pack of potions. Three other trolls carried Bane's tent and furniture on their backs.

The army straggled from the town, circumnavigating the killing field with its mounds of dead and flocks of carrion birds. Dark creatures had partially consumed many of the bodies during the night, exposing meat and bones. Mirra held a hand over her nose to try to block out the stench, and even some of the soldiers did the same. The bodies had not yet started to rot, but the dried blood and spilt entrails gave off singularly foul odour.

Bane seemed unperturbed, but she could only guess at his expression, since he faced ahead. He struck her as a fastidious person, and she imagined he would find the foetor as unpleasant as she did.

They had travelled about two miles when the grey stallion cantered out of the woods. He approached Mirra, trailing broken reins, his fancy harness smeared with dirt and blood. She stroked his nose, and he followed, nudging her. Laughing, she looked up as Bane glanced back.

"He wants to carry me."

He stopped the demon steed. "I suppose he told you that?" he enquired sarcastically.

She found nothing odd about that. "Yes, of course."

Bane swung the steed and charged the warhorse, which bolted back into the woods, and he returned to scowl at her. "I am not a fool. You will walk!"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes, Bane."

For two days, the army marched, pillaging villages to strip them of food and valuables. The occasional groups of refugees they encountered were slaughtered as they fled or tortured to death, their bodies fed to the dark creatures. Mirra stumbled along behind the steed, weeping for the people who died and blessing each with a swift journey to the Lady, until Bane grew tired of her mumbling and flew into a rage. He knocked her down and kicked her several times with unusual ferocity, and, without her healing power, he would have killed her.

After the beating, which drained much of her strength, he tied her hands behind her back again and gagged her. Mirra sensed that his anger was far more virulent than his initial scorn and hatred. Then, he had tortured her for fun, now he beat her with fury; incensed by the power he thought she had over him. Her bound arms hampered her, and she struggled to keep up with the steed.

The pace Bane set was almost too fast for the troops, and whenever he got too far ahead, the men would double time, loping after him, their armour rattling. Mirra could barely keep up, forced to trot more often than walk, and run when the men loped. At times she lagged behind, and Benton helped her, but he could not feed her while she was gagged. Her exhaustion grew acuter each day, for Bane only allowed her to eat a little bread at night, and the hunting howls of dark creatures disturbed her sleep. The grey stallion shadowed them in the woods, its soft brown eyes seeking her often.

In the middle of the fifth day, Mirra fell, her legs too weak to carry her any further. Benton and

Madick picked her up between them, but the slight commotion her collapse caused attracted the Demon Lord's attention. The soldiers put her down and ran as Bane rode up. He dismounted and stood over her, folding his arms.

"You are nothing but a problem, girl. I should leave you behind for the demons."

Tears of misery and shame stung her eyes. She had no wish to be a burden, nor did she want to be abandoned to the demons. She flinched as he bent and jerked the gag from her mouth.

She licked dry lips. "I am sorry. I am just so tired."

He leant closer, his eyes glinting. "We still have a long way to go. Do you think those imbeciles can carry you all the way to the mountains?"

Mirra hung her head. "I wish they did not have to. They are very kind, but it will be hard for them. Perhaps I will regain my strength and be able to walk."

Bane sighed, straightening. His hands clenched, and for a breath-stopping moment she thought he would beat her again, then he said, "You simpleton, you slow me down." He glanced at the waiting men. "You there! Go and catch that damned horse that follows us in the woods."

Two men ran off, and Mirra looked up, immensely grateful for this unexpected kindness. "Thank you, Bane."

He shrugged. "I cannot afford to waste time." Drawing his dagger, he cut the ropes that bound her wrists, then remounted the demon steed, which pranced.

Mirra called the stallion in the silent language of horses, and he trotted from the woods, the two frustrated men chasing him. He stopped in front of her, nuzzling her, and the panting soldiers returned to their group. With a word of thanks, she mounted the huge beast, which bent one knee to help her.

As he followed Bane, she unbuckled the heavy chainmail, straps and livery, letting it fall. She did not need to touch the reins, letting them lie on the warhorse's wither. The stallion would not approach within ten feet of the demon steed, and Mirra agreed with its aversion to the Underworld creature. Bane looked back and snorted, his scowl thunderous.

## Chapter Ten

### The Fourth Ward

After five more days of hard marching through peaceful dales and scenic, abandoned towns, Bane halted in the foothills of the Dragon Mountains. The grim walls of Torlock Keep awed Mirra. Carved from the mountains' granite, legend had it that giants had built Torlock Keep, and she understood why people thought so. It guarded the tunnel that led deep into the heart of the mountains, beyond which lay the peaceful kingdom of Marrane.

The mountains formed an impenetrable barrier of jagged, snow-capped grey peaks that brushed the clouds, and the pass was the only entry into Marrane from Thawnia. The castle towered over them, its battlements populated by the tiny, distant figures of sentries. Its only entrance was a huge stone drawbridge raised by massive chains, behind which were two immense stone doors.

The keep had been built entirely with magic, so long ago that no one could remember by whom or how or when it had been created. Some said that powerful mages had built it, a story borne out by the narrow, man-sized corridors that were supposed to honeycomb the keep. Whoever they were, the builders of Torlock Keep had not intended that it be taken.

Supplies and fresh troops were brought in from the kingdom on the other side of the mountains, and the impassable peaks kept the supply route safe. Mountain streams provided water, and no one could poison it without scaling the almost sheer slopes, an impossible feat even without the defenders using them for target practice.

The guardians of Torlock Keep had been warned of the Demon Lord's approach, and the drawbridge was up, the keep impregnable.

Bane gazed up at the castle, narrowing his eyes against the pale clouds' glare. The soldiers stared down, safe on their lofty battlements. A green and gold banner snapped in the wind, bright against the drab grey mountain. Behind Bane, his army shuffled and muttered as they eyed the fortress. Anyone could see that laying siege to this place was as futile as trying to halt the tide.

Bane smiled, undeterred, perhaps even pleased to face such an interesting challenge. What looked impossible for a normal man was probably a mere trifle to the Demon Lord, Mirra thought. He dismounted, and the troops made camp. Mirra slid off her mount and removed the saddle, letting the stallion wander away to graze. She had long since dispensed with the bridle, which she did not need. Mord put up Bane's tent, and he retired to it. Mirra followed, keen to get out of the icy wind.

He glanced up at her entry, his eyes glacial. "What do you want?"

"Nothing, I -"

"Then get out."

Mirra retreated, stung. Since he had destroyed the air demon, she trod warily around him, for he seemed to hate the sight of her now, and avoided her company. There were times when he spoke to her quite calmly, then rage would enter his eyes again, and she kept away from him when it did. He no longer seemed to care about the danger of demons, and did not insist she stayed near him, often ordering her to leave him alone. Forlorn, she sought Benton and Madick, who started a fire with some friends, and welcomed her company. She helped gather wood, and then sat with them. The soldiers discussed the keep and how Bane planned to overcome it, many suggestions flying about.

"I reckon he'll fly up there an' raze them soldiers," one man said.

Benton shook his head. "Nah, he'll probably order us to scale the walls, and most of us will die trying. But I won't, I'll tell you that."

"Maybe he can walk through rock," a soldier joked, then took a deep swig from a wine skin and handed it to Madick.

Madick grunted, accepting the skin. "He won't bother with that. He'll most likely bring the whole bloody mountain down around their ears."

“As long as we don’t have to fight them,” another man muttered.

Mirra listened to their speculations, wondering, like them, how many would die trying to overcome the keep.

“Perhaps he’ll start an avalanche,” the first soldier suggested, adding a branch to the fire.

“That’ll more likely bury us. Won’t harm them, they’re inside the damned mountain,” Benton replied.

“He’ll probably get his friends to help,” Madick said, and a profound silence greeted his suggestion.

Mirra shuddered at the thought.

Dusk fell while they talked and ate, long fingers of shadow sliding down the slopes, the sky reddening behind the clouds, turning them pink. She sat on the cold, stony ground, wrapped in a thick woollen cloak a grateful soldier had given to her, staring into the flames. The men’s talk was hushed and morbid, and she tried not to listen. However Bane decided to take the keep, she had no doubt that he would succeed, and that it would entail a great deal of bloodshed, since everything Bane did was steeped in blood and death. The defenders of Torlock probably thought themselves quite safe in their fortress, but they had not faced the Demon Lord before.

A sudden scrabble of boots made her look up. Bane stood on the opposite side of the fire, his lips curled in a cold, empty smile. The men fled into the darkness, leaving behind half-eaten food and slowly spilling wine skins.

“How nice it is to be so respected,” Bane said, gazing after them. “I wonder why they think I wish them harm. I have not killed that many of them, only those who were cheeky. But they go to extremes.”

Hunkering down by the fire, he stared into its depths. He had shown no sign of weakness or injury since he had been wounded at the battle, and his new black shirt hid his wounds. Mirra doubted that any of the men even knew he had been injured, unless Mord had told them. If they did, they would at least know he was human. Bane poked the fire with a stick, his eyes glowing in its light. He seemed more approachable than he had been in the tent, and she ventured a question.

“How will you get past the keep?”

He shrugged. “I seem to have few options. It cannot be stormed or starved out. The gate cannot be bashed in, and I am certainly not going to go in there and let them try to poke holes in me.” He looked at her. “I am not called the Demon Lord for nothing.”

“You are going to summon a demon.”

Bane nodded, frowning.

She shivered, following his gaze into the fire. “But it might try to kill me.”

“It cannot. If I summon it, it has to obey me. When I decide to kill you, witch, I will do it myself.”

Mirra glanced at him, but he still scowled at the fire, snapping a twig and tossing the bits into the flames. He stood up, throwing the last piece of twig into the fire, and she knew he was about to start the summoning. She rose to her feet and headed into the darkness to seek her friends, but Bane’s deep voice stopped her.

“Where do you think you are going?”

She turned to face him. “I do not want to watch. Please do not make me.”

He snorted. “Do you really think I care what you want? You stay here, or I will break every bone in your body, understand?”

Mirra returned to the fire, casting him a pleading look. He gazed at the flames, probably contemplating the headache this would give him, then all expression drained from his face. His eyes blackened as he unleashed the power within him. Raising his arms, he spoke two harsh words, and the fire flared.

The black ring that crisped outwards from it detoured around her feet, leaving her standing on an oasis of normal ground. Mirra watched in horrified fascination as the flames changed colour, becoming streaked with sick, lurid hues. Dark power surged forth, making her stomach heave as a shape formed in the flames, swelling and brightening, rising up in a seven-foot column. The demon took on its six-

armed, three-eyed form, and bowed to Bane.

The Demon Lord greeted the fiend with cold words. "Mealle. How nice to see you again."

"Bane. I knew you would require my aid," Mealle sneered.

Bane smiled and flicked his fingers in a dismissive gesture. "A dirty job I cannot be bothered with, is all. Why should I, when I have you at my beck and call?"

The fire demon's eyes flared, but its voice was coolly controlled. "What will be my reward, the slut's life?" It looked at Mirra, who flinched from its burning yellow eyes.

Bane frowned. "Do not be impertinent. I do not have to reward you, and the girl is mine, to dispose of as I see fit."

Mealle sniggered. "If you can."

"Be silent! Insult me and you will pay, just as Yansahesh and Yangarra did."

The demon bowed again. "What is the task?"

"The keep. I want it cleared out tonight, the gates opened and the drawbridge lowered. Then you return here, nothing else."

Mealle's glowing eyes turned to the fortress, where men ran about with torches, alarmed by what was happening below. Its black slit mouth curved in a smile as it formed legs and stepped from the fire, turning towards Mirra, who backed away. Its gaze slid over her with a sickening touch of dark fire, and her frantic eyes sought Bane. He merely watched her, smiling, his hard stare challenging her to defy him and run. She stood her ground, the blackened earth burning her feet.

"A brave one, that," Mealle commented.

"That is what makes her such an amusing toy," Bane replied, and the demon nodded, then stepped closer to her, extending an arm.

"Perhaps I could torment her a little."

The Demon Lord said, "She is my plaything, not yours. Get on with the task. I wish to pass through the tunnel in the morning."

Mealle sniggered and turned away. Mirra sagged, shooting Bane a grateful glance that he ignored. The demon shrank, its limbs and features vanishing, becoming a flame that drifted upwards. Shouts of alarm came from the battlements as the defenders realised what was happening. Mealle ascended higher and higher, drifting like thistledown on a warm wind. Arrows hissed down as archers tried to shoot the demon, but those lucky shots that hit it merely burst into flames.

"Idiots," Bane scoffed. "Do they think they can harm a demon with arrows?"

"They are desperate," Mirra murmured.

"Of course."

"Will you kill everyone in the Overworld?"

His eyes flicked down to her. "You question me?"

She stepped back, shaking her head, knowing how dangerous it was to anger him.

He snorted, his eyes raking her. "I will not have to. My father will do it."

The Demon Lord swung away and went to his tent to take his potion and soothe the pain she sensed mounting behind his eyes. Mirra sat down beside the fire and craned her neck to watch the demon vanish into the keep, the window through which it entered flaring with orange fire. Screams erupted from within, and she plugged her ears in a desperate bid to block out the sounds. The cries were still audible, however, and her fingers made her ears ache. She eventually gave up, letting the tormented shrieks from the keep tear through her while she prayed to the Lady.

Occasional flashes of fire came from within, and soft explosions mingled with the screams of the dying. She hoped most would flee through the tunnel that led to their homeland, for to try to fight the demon was useless, and if they opened the gates and surrendered they would receive no mercy from Bane.

Many jumped from the battlements, landing with sickening thuds on the rocks below, choosing to die quickly rather than be burnt to death. Most did not have that option, however, the slit windows too narrow to climb through. Vampires flew up to join the carnage from the horde of dark creatures that

gibbered and howled with bloodlust below, and wights scaled the rugged walls and slipped in through the windows. Without the demon, the defenders would have cut them down, but now they were able to join the slaughter with impunity.

Benton and Madick crept back to the fire, and Benton put his arm about her, trying to still her shivers. The soldiers who camped around them were silent, and no one slept that night. The dark creatures' raucous cries made that impossible, even for those whom the screams from the keep did not bother. Mirra was certain the demon could have killed all the castle's inhabitants in a few minutes if it chose, and its victims' prolonged suffering was only for its entertainment.

By the time pale morning light crept across the land, the keep was silent, wisps of black smoke rising from some of the windows. Burnt, broken bodies huddled at the base of the cliff, some partially eaten by the dark creatures, and the men muttered while they waited. As the first rays of morning light filtered through the clouds and lighted the snow high above, Bane emerged, stretching and yawning as if he had slept soundly all night.

As he turned to frown at the keep, the drawbridge lowered with a rumble of chains to boom against the ground, revealing the massive doors open beyond it. The inside of the drawbridge was cut into steps, forming a steeply sloping staircase to the doors set into the rock about ten feet off the ground. A brilliant flame drifted out to halt in front of the Demon Lord. It swelled and transformed into the smirking demon.

Bane nodded. "Good. Just in time."

"What, no thanks?"

"You enjoyed yourself, did you not?"

"Naturally." The demon's smirk grew broader.

"Then do not try my patience, Mealle; one day you will anger me, and then you will be sorry, now begone!"

The demon vanished in an implosion of air, leaving a stench of sulphur behind. Bane smiled at the open keep, his eyes narrowed in the bright morning light, then signalled to the waiting captains without bothering to look at them.

"Go, take all you want."

With a roar, the men charged into the castle to claim their loot. The trolls, rock howlers and goblins remained at their campfires, eating their breakfast. They were not interested in plunder. Red eyes glowed from the shade of scrubby trees and the nooks and crannies in the rocks, revealing the hiding places of the dark creatures that sheltered from the sunlight. The vampires and wights, gorged on meat and blood, had long since rejoined them. When the men had vanished inside, Bane beckoned to Mirra, who clutched her cloak around her. She approached him, and he waved her towards the keep. At first she could not move, unable to face the horror within, then realised she would have to enter the keep in order to pass through the tunnel into the mountains.

As she stepped through the cavernous doorway, the sickening stench of burnt flesh and fear made her recoil with a choked gasp, but Bane shoved her forward. She walked along the huge, hall-like corridor that led straight into the mountain, trying to block out the foetor with a hand over her nose. Many doors led off it, but to her relief no corpses littered it, and she hoped she would see none.

Mirra's skin crawled at the dry rustle of bat wings and click of claws as weirds, grotesques and grims crept through the darkness behind her. Shivers raced down her spine, and she fought the urge to glance back at the creeping, snuffling horde that sought the sweet stench of death in the gloom. Their feast of human flesh, interrupted by the dawn outside, would continue in the keep's dimness until their appetites were sated. Bane gripped her arm and pulled her into a side passage.

"Let us go and inspect Mealle's handiwork," he grated in her ear.

Mirra wanted to run, but knew she could not break away from him, and even if she did, he would catch her in a few strides. The headache Mord's potions no longer soothed communicated itself to her as they traversed a glassy-walled passage, its curved floor slightly abraded by aeons of traffic. The walls reflected the light of the torches that burnt in sconces every few feet, but their acrid smoke could

not compete with the stench of death.

Mirra sensed the agony that had been endured in this place, and was unable to prevent herself glancing into the rooms they passed. They had no corners, and the walls appeared to be slightly concave. Nothing was utterly flat or perfectly square, although whoever had built this massive castle had striven to accomplish this. In some places, the rock strata looked smeared, as if a giant hand had squashed it into shape. Most of the rooms had no windows, for they were deep in the mountain, and torches filled them with pale golden light.

Bane went from room to room, inspecting burnt tapestries and smouldering carpets, singed furniture and charred ornaments. Mirra gave a choked cry when they encountered the first corpse, a roasted man, his mouth stretch wide in his last scream. Bane dragged her into the next room, where three bodies huddled together under a layer of ash. Ignoring her horrified expression, he led her onwards, finding more and more corpses, the sight of which made her queasy.

Women and children had died in closets and under beds, babies in their cradles or their mother's arms. Some were little more than ash flaking away from white bones, others merely looked cooked, and a few appeared to have died of fright. The shock and horror numbed her, and after a while she walked beside Bane like an automaton, her eyes unfocussed.

Bane seemed to become increasingly furious with her, jerking her arm and shoving her along ahead of him, sometimes thrusting her close to the bodies. Silently she wished them a safe journey to the Lady, knowing that if she said it aloud Bane would slap her. The crashes and shouts of the looting troops echoed through the castle, and there seemed no end to the passages and rooms.

Occasionally, men scuttled from their path. Finally they came to a room where Mealle had enjoyed some entertainment. Mutilated corpses littered the floor, obviously tortured at length. Most were burnt beyond recognition, but one moved and made a soft mewling sound. Mirra's blood chilled as she realised that the roasted man still breathed in short, bubbling gasps.

His eyes, ears and tongue had been burnt away, and he lacked skin, the raw, weeping flesh glazed. She recoiled, trying to jerk her arm from Bane's grip, but he held onto her, his face as hard as the granite walls.

"Why do you not help him?" he mocked.

"It would be no mercy. He is beyond healing."

"You would leave him to suffer?"

She tried to prise his iron-hard fingers from her arm. "I can do nothing. He requires a mercy stroke."

"You mean kill him?"

"Yes, but I cannot do it." The man's pain made her tremble.

"Why can you not heal him with your miraculous power?"

"I cannot recreate what has been lost. I could save him, but he would be without eyes, ears, a tongue, and skin." Her voice rose, tinged with hysteria, and her struggle became frantic. She looked up at him. "Please let me go. I cannot bear it."

"Would you like me to kill him?"

"Please!"

He shook his head. "Then I will not."

Bane smirked, or tried to, but he did not look as pleased as he usually did when tormenting her. Mirra gave up the unequal struggle and turned her back on the dying man. Bane contemplated her for a moment as if she was an interesting insect, and she wished she knew what was going through his mind.

At last, he led her out, releasing her arm as though her touch was repugnant. She walked ahead of him in a daze, turning corners blindly, and at times he dragged her back and steered her down another passage. She found herself back in the original hall, where some men had gathered, their clothes and packs heavy with loot. Bane sent a few running to fetch the rest with a gesture, then mounted the steed. He looked pensive, and rode down the huge tunnel without a backward glance.

Mirra called the grey warhorse and followed at a distance, keeping the Demon Lord just barely in sight. The steed gave off a red glow that lighted the way like a beacon, and the troops straggled after

them, some carrying torches, jingling with newfound wealth that would only burden them on the hard march ahead. The trolls, goblins and rock howlers carried more practical booty: meat from the keep's stores, much of which had already found its way into their copious stomachs. The unburdened dark creatures brought up the rear, gorged with human meat and blood. The tunnel curved upwards after a few minutes of travel, and a cold wind blew down it. Mirra shivered, her eyes stinging with unshed tears for the demon's victims, and Bane.

By the time they reached the end of the tunnel, which opened into a richly grassed bowl dotted with pale grey rocks, the sun descended. The men trudged to a flat area, where they lighted fires and set up camp. Grey mountains towered all around them, blocked the sun's slanting rays and made the deep bowl dim and cold. On the far side, another tunnel yawned blackly: the unguarded entrance to the land beyond. Mirra hoped some of the keep's inhabitants had escaped through it while the demon had been occupied with its foul entertainment. A small lake glinted at one end of the bowl, fed by a glittering waterfall. Miniature trees edged its far shore, clinging to the rock face.

Next to the tunnel they had just left, shrubs and flowers grew in a little garden, where the castle's denizens had undoubtedly come to picnic in the sunshine. She could imagine the soldiers' wives bringing their children there to play on the grass and swim in the lake. A few cattle grazed nearby, bells tinkling. Some men headed towards them, and she knew they would feast on fresh beef that night.

A ring of ten-foot-tall white marble dolmens stood next to the lake, joined together by the blocks of dressed stone that rested across them. Bane rode over to it and dismounted, and Mirra caught up as he walked into the middle of the ring, his eyes on the huge altar stone there. Its surface was chipped and pitted, worn from years of use by the ancient priests who had once worshipped here.

Bane wandered around the ring, studying the runes carved into the stones, grunting with disapproval and amusement. "Amateurs," he muttered. "Idiots; bungling fools. They did not even know what they were doing."

Mirra leant against the inside of one of the circle's stones, weary and numb after her ordeal in the keep. Bane approached and stopped in front of her. She wondered what he wanted, then he looked up, and she followed his gaze. There above her, beneath the huge stone block, was a glowing blue pentagram, and above it, the carved ward.

"Very crafty," he said. "Break it, and the stone falls."

She lowered her eyes to his up-tilted visage. "What will you do?"

He shrugged. "Break it."

"But the stone..."

His head jerked down, and he glared at her. "Get out of my way."

Bane thrust her aside, and she retreated to a safe distance. For several minutes, he studied the ward, muttering under his breath, then, apparently satisfied that he had worked everything out, he positioned himself under it and raised his arms. Dark fire burst from his fingers and hammered the glowing blue lines, which resisted destruction for only a few seconds before they vanished in a flash. The huge stone cracked down the middle with a grating report.

Bane dived aside, but the falling rock was faster. It struck the ground with a sickening thud, pinning his ankle. He grunted and turned to tug at his leg, his aspect fierce. Mirra ran to him, drawn by the intensity of his pain, and fell to her knees beside him, her throat tight.

A glance at his face told her that he would not let her help him, and there was nothing she could do anyway. His eyes were pits of darkness, and the fire licked over him, making her stomach churn. He grimaced as he struggled to master the pain and the fire, then the blackness drained from his eyes, and he relaxed a little.

Mirra touched his arm, but he pushed her away, snarling, "Get away from me."

"What can I do? Please let me do something."

"Fetch Mord."

"What about some men to lift the stone?"

His pale eyes glinted. "Imbecile! They will not come near me."



“But -”

“I do not need their help. Do as I say!”

Mirra ran to the camp, where Mord was erecting Bane’s tent, and panted his summons. The troll snatched up the pack and sprinted to the stones, leaving her gasping in his wake. When she arrived, Mord hid behind one of the standing stones, clutching the pack and staring at Bane. The Demon Lord was propped up on one elbow, engulfed in dark fire, which he directed to lift the massive stone. It rose from the depression it had made in the ground, and he grimaced as he pulled his foot out. Letting the stone fall, he slumped onto his back with a soft groan, extinguishing the black fire. Mord scuttled nearer, clutching the pot.

Bane held out his hand, and the troll placed the jar in it before fleeing to the safety of the stones. Mirra hurried over to Bane and knelt to examine his foot, starting to unbuckle his boot. He sat up, cursed, and shoved her away.

“How many times must I tell you? Idiot!”

Bane glared at her, then bent to remove his boot, baring his teeth in a silent snarl as he pulled it off. A deep, oozing gash marred his instep where the stone’s weight had torn his skin. He smeared it with the burning green gel, ignoring Mirra’s whimper, then shouted for Mord to bring him a cloth. The troll dug in the pack and pulled out what looked like Bane’s torn shirt, which he brought, holding it out at arms’ length and retreating as soon as Bane snatched it from him. Bane tore the shirt into strips and bound his foot, then, with remarkable disregard for the pain, pulled his boot back on and climbed to his feet, hardly touching his injured foot on the ground.

Bane limped over to the fallen stone, his brow sweat sheened, and shot her a baleful look when she followed.

“You should rest, Bane,” she said.

“The ward is not broken, lackwit.”

“Do it tomorrow.”

Bane spun as if to hit her, but she was out of reach, and he teetered. “Do not tell me what to do.”

Mirra sighed as he placed his palm upon the stone. She guessed that he was avoiding multiple headaches by using the power as seldom as possible, and had no wish to earn himself another one tomorrow. That made sense, but it did nothing to ease her concern for his health, even though he displayed inhuman strength. He summoned the power again, channelling it into the stone. A dull report came from beneath it as the ward broke, and four runes on the altar glowed soft blue. Bane frowned at them as they winked out one by one, like a countdown.

The standing stones exploded with stunning force. An immense flash of blue fire engulfed the temple, accompanied by a massive thunderclap. Great chunks of flying rock filled the air, thudding into the ground like cannonballs amid a storm of shrapnel. The blast flung Mirra several feet, and the maelstrom of flying rock would have killed her had she been powerless. She landed hard and rolled into a ball, covering her head as the bits of rock that had been flung upwards rained down in a hail of stone. The explosion’s echoes rolled away through the mountains in a harsh, deep-throated rumble, like a giant’s bellow of rage.

As soon as the rocks stopped falling, Mirra sat up. The circle of stones was gone, and where the temple had been there was now a mass of white rubble, like churned snow. It thinned as it radiated outwards, scattered over the grass. Mord writhed and whimpered a short distance away, his shaggy hide oozing blood from dozens of small wounds. Only his thick pelt and tough hide had saved him, and she ran over to heal him, then grabbed the pot and turned to Bane.

Incredibly, the Demon Lord struggled to sit up, shaking his head in a dazed manner while he gasped and clutched his ribs, the wind clearly knocked out of him. Blood soaked the tattered remnant of his tunic and trickled down his face from a cut on his temple. The shirt and cloak had shielded him somewhat, but he had dozens of gashes and scrapes, and some sharp shards were imbedded in his flesh. He plucked them out, his jaw ridged as he gritted his teeth, and flashed her an angry glance when she approached him. She controlled her instinctive urge to heal him and held out the pot instead. He

took it, smearing the gel on the oozing cuts while she marvelled that he had escaped serious injury, for he had been even closer to the explosion than she had.

When he had rubbed the burning ointment into the wounds he could reach, he glared at the useless troll, who cowered, then turned his baleful eyes on Mirra. He thrust the pot at her, and she took it with a smile, but he gripped her wrist in an icy, vice-like hold.

“You touch me with that damned power of yours and I will kill you, witch. Now is your chance to prove you do want to help, and believe me, if you try anything, you will die before I do.”

Mirra nodded, stunned. He unclipped his cloak and let it fall, and the salve stung her fingers as she daubed it on the bleeding cuts in his back. The shirt impeded her, and he ripped it apart with a vicious jerk, revealing pale skin mottled with pink bruises and deep cuts. She plucked out some slivers of rock, dabbing the burning salve on the lacerations, her fingers on fire as she hunted for more cuts.

He snarled, “Hurry up, damn you.”

“I-I do not want to miss any.”

Bane growled, but sat still until she was satisfied and handed back the jar, then checked himself again to make sure all the bleeding was stopped. There were fewer injuries on his legs and buttocks; the tougher material of his trousers seemed to have deflected all but a few larger chunks, and those cuts he tended through the holes in the material. His skin bore dozens of puckered black wounds, and one of the runes glowed, a scratch running through it. A graze marred his cheek and a bruise swelled on his forehead. Mirra wiped the burning gel off on a patch of grass. Bane capped the jar and hurled it at Mord, who whimpered.

“Useless troll!” Bane lurched to his feet, and Mord fled to the camp, where most of the army stood gazing in their direction, curious about the explosion but unwilling to investigate. Bane glared around at the destruction, his shirt hanging about his hips in tatters.

“Another sharp mage. Two traps, the first obvious, the second a surprise. Very neat.” He sat on the fallen ward stone, the only one still intact. “But I am still here, and you missed your chance, girl. You will not get another.”

Mirra’s jaw dropped, but she knew the futility of protesting her innocence and contented herself with a shake of her head. Bane regarded her until the demon steed thundered up at his command, then rode back to the camp. By the time Mirra got there, carrying his discarded cloak, he lay on his bed, an empty cup beside him. He stared at the roof with bloodshot eyes, and she settled on the floor.

Bane listened to the girl’s soft movements. He had tested her, and she had not tried to harm him. Why? Perhaps she waited for a better opportunity. How ironic that she had been sent to kill him, yet he could not even harm her now. The walk through Torlock Keep had been strange, to say the least.

The mangled bodies had not bothered him, but her horror had. His reaction had angered him, amazed that he wanted to spare her the pain. It still brought him immense satisfaction to see the puny humans die, so why did he feel so differently about her? The pain of his injuries joined with the familiar pounding of his head in an all-encompassing throbbing that kept him awake for several hours, despite his exhaustion.

Bane summoned his father into his dreams that night. Normally, the Black Lord came when he wished, but this night Bane called him. *His father seemed disgruntled, yet held his anger in check, his inky visage expressionless. The mood vision was a sullen desert of wind-blown red sand glowering under a ruddy sky in which a crimson cloud glowed with a nimbus of black fire.*

*Bane asked, “Father, how do you know the girl was sent to kill me?”*

*The Black Lord’s glowing eyes brightened. “She was placed in your path, son. Two days before your men found her, the healers from the abbey took her to the hut in the woods. They travelled towards you to leave her there. Why else would they do that?”*

*Bane shook his head. “They are strange people, but she helped me today. I broke the fourth ward*  
\_.”

*"I know; well done." The desert landscape lightened a little and the wind died, leaving rippled sand. In the foreground, the Black Lord's red maw twisted into a parody of a smile.*

*Bane went on, "But it had two traps, and the second one injured me. She helped me. I expected her to try something, but she did not."*

*The Black Lord regarded Bane with flat yellow eyes, the pupils contracted to flecks of darkness, as if Bane gave off a bright light. "Son, you are a stranger to the world of men. They can be extremely devious. She is trying to win your trust, pretending to be your ally and even helping you. No trickery is beneath her. She will bide her time, then, when you trust her, she will kill you."*

*"This worries me. Her spell grows stronger, and I cannot break it. I do not know how."*

*"Hurry and break the next ward. Once I am there, I will help you."*

*The dream darkened, swallowing the Black Lord's ebon visage, leaving unrelieved blackness. Bane fell into a shallow, restless sleep, plagued by the endless pain.*

Bane rested the following day, stretched out on his bed with an arm over his eyes. The girl sat with him, and he marvelled at her apparently infinite patience, wondering what she was thinking about. Was she lost in a daydream of the peaceful life she longed for? Questions about her role in the conflict nagged him, and he considered the possibility that at least some of what she had said might be true. She must have thought him asleep, for she looked up with a startled expression when he lowered his arm and asked, "Why did the healers leave you in the forest?"

"It was my time to leave the abbey and start my life as a healer."

"They placed you right in my path, as if they wanted me to find you."

"Mother told me there was a war, and I was to heal those in need, as all healers do. I think they simply went on with their life as they had always done, and trusted the Lady to protect me. Healers are never harmed, even by invading armies, for we heal any who come to us, so why would they kill us?"

Bane grunted. "Yet they fled themselves."

"They were afraid. You found out how to torture us."

"My father says you were sent to kill me."

"He is wrong. Who would send a healer to kill?"

Bane rubbed his forehead, frustrated by the pain that would not let him think. His father could not be wrong. The Black Lord was never wrong. The healer was devious, and was trying to win his trust, that was the only explanation that made any sense. His foot throbbed, cuts ached all over him, and he wished he could sleep. Rest was denied him, however, and he stared at the dull brown leather above him. He thought about his father and his life in the Underworld, which he still missed.

His first memories were of lying on a urine-soaked bed, waving chubby arms and wailing for attention. The droge who had been assigned to care for him was seldom about, too busy with her own concerns to worry about him. This struck him as strange, for the Black Lord's son deserved better care than that. Drogues were condemned spirits, and essentially powerless, able to form physical bodies only when the Black Lord allowed them the power. Bane had lain in his excrement until the droge chose to clean him, burnt the old bedding and provided fresh. Initially, he had lived in the cooler caverns near the surface, where the Dark Lord did not have to shield him from the intense heat below.

As a toddler, he had crawled about the caverns, scraping his knees on the rocks as he played with the scuttling creatures that lived there. Nothing had been able to harm him. The snakes' venom was useless against him, for his father had protected him. Still, their bites had been painful, and things with claws had nipped him from crannies. He had learnt to wrinkle them out and smash their shells with stones, becoming a hunter of anything that hurt him. When he was old enough, he had avenged any insult to his person by the small creatures of the Underworld, and took pleasure in it. He had stalked the dark caverns like a naked, dirty animal, his hair long and matted.

As he had grown older and ventured further afield, he had come across larger, more fearsome creatures. He had armed himself with a stone club made from a snapped stalactite and used it with great affect, the constant danger of injury honing his reactions. He did not encounter a demon until he was much older, although now he suspected that some of the attendants who had tormented him in his

younger days had been demons. The droge had taught him to talk, read and write the Overworld language, and he had received numerous slaps and blows if he was too slow, although he seldom required more than one lesson to master a skill.

No one had ever shown him kindness. Often, he was punished even when he had done nothing wrong. If he fell in the dim caverns and hurt himself, his wails went unanswered unless it was to be slapped and told to be quiet. There were other, more unpleasant memories of the tricks and torments the demons had subjected him to, but he shied away from them. Pain had always been a part of his life, and his father had assured him that strength was built on suffering. Sympathy and kindness were for the weak, and shunned by the strong.

Eventually, he had no longer cried when he was hurt, and took pride in his courage. He had even learnt to defy the demons that had tormented him and strike back occasionally at the droges who had beaten him. His childish defiance had only amused his tormentors, however, and made their games more frequent and malicious. He thrust those memories aside again, refusing to dwell on them.

It made the witch's feigned concern all the more galling and unwelcome. He needed no help or sympathy. He had learnt to live without it. Perhaps she sought to weaken him with it, trying to undermine his courage and fear the pain. It would not work, he thought grimly, his life had been too hard for anyone to change him now.

## Chapter Eleven

### The City

A kick jerked Mirra awake, and she opened her eyes.

Bane frowned down at her. "Get up, we are leaving."

Mirra scrambled to her feet and hurried outside as the tent collapsed behind her, Mord rolling it up swiftly. Pale morning light bathed the mountains and dew frosted the grass beneath a blanket of mist. Bane strode to the demon steed with hardly a trace of a limp, even though his foot was undoubtedly crushed. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. Soldiers roused from their bedrolls, shook out their blankets and gathered up their packs.

The remains of the previous day's feast lay scattered around the dead fires' black scars. The bones and hides of the cattle the men had slaughtered were piled in the centre of the camp. Evidently none had any appetite for more food, since no cook fires had been lighted for breakfast. Mirra had overslept, and her stomach rumbled. Mord loaded two trolls with Bane's furniture, and the Demon Lord headed back towards the tunnel. Benton had already saddled the warhorse, and helped her mount. She urged him after Bane, hastening into the tunnel behind him.

Most of the day was spent within the smooth tunnel, the monotonous clomp of the horse's hooves ringing above the steady tramp behind. The men were silent and glum, their booty weighing them down. The towns they had ransacked had provided slim pickings, but Torlock Keep had been rich in gold and jewels, some of its erstwhile inhabitants being wealthy nobles from Marrane's royal court.

That night, they camped in a lush valley beyond Torlock Keep, far enough away so the stench of the corpses in the vanquished castle did not reach them. As the men settled down around their cook fires, Bane spoke to Mord, and the troll hurried off. Mirra thought nothing of it. Mord was always carrying messages for Bane, but her heart turned cold when he returned with two other trolls, who dragged Benton. He looked like he had put up a fight, for he panted, and red marks marred his cheeks.

Mirra hurried over to Bane. "What are you doing?"

He turned to her, a chilling smile twisting his lips. "I have found a way to thwart you, witch."  
"Thwart me?"

"Yes. You see, I am giving you a choice. Remove your accursed spell, or he suffers."

She gaped at him. "I have no spell."

"Do not lie to me. I will cut him to pieces slowly unless you revoke your spell. Do it, witch!"

"I cannot. If there is a spell, I did not cast it, I swear by the Lady. I know nothing of spells and wizardry. I am only a healer. Please do not hurt him."

"You are lying." He drew his dagger and tested its edge with his thumb. Benton's white-ringed eyes followed his hand. He was bound hand and foot, and lay where the trolls had dumped him.

The Demon Lord said, "Soldier, tell the healer how much you want to live."

Benton cast her a pleading look. "Please do as he says."

"I would if I could, Benton. I wish I could!"

Bane glared at her. "You will!"

Bane swung and slashed Benton's cheek, making him yelp and jerk away. Mirra clasped her cheek with a whimper as she shared the soldier's pain. Bane grasped Benton's hair, dragged him to his knees and drew the blade across his chest, leaving a red line that spread over his ragged shirt. With a cry, Mirra ran to Benton and laid her hands upon the wound, healing it. Bane snarled and kicked her, but she only clung more tightly to the soldier, protecting him. Bane released Benton and lowered himself to one knee beside them.

"So, you seek to go against me?"

Mirra shook her head. "No, I just do not want him hurt. Please stop this."

"At last, you show some defiance. Good." He took hold of the coarse material of the soldier's shirt.

“Do as I say, or he dies. Even your powers cannot save him from a blade through the heart.”

“I cannot.”

“Damn you. Do you doubt me? You are wrong!”

“I know you will, and I would do as you wish if I could.”

“Liar!”

Bane’s hand rose and flashed towards Benton’s chest, and Mirra flung herself into its path. The dagger impaled her back, and Bane jerked the weapon out and leapt to his feet with a startled oath. She risked a glance up at him as she clung to Benton’s chest.

Bane’s nostrils flared. “You will not defy me. Lift the spell, now!”

“I cannot!” she wailed, cradling the trembling soldier’s head. “There is no spell, I swear it!”

Bane turned away, and for a moment she thought he had given up, but then he shouted for Mord, pointing at her. “Get her away from him, and hold her.”

Mord dragged her away, despite her shrieks and struggles. Benton writhed, fighting his bonds in a panic-stricken bid to get free, his despairing cry tearing at her heart.

“Healer!”

Bane eyed her as she squirmed and flailed against the troll’s strong, hairy arms. “Last chance girl, or he dies.”

“No!” Mirra cried. “There is no spell!”

Bane turned to the soldier, and she gave a mighty wriggle, slipping from the troll’s rough hands. She threw herself at Bane, making him step back, and gripped the front of his shirt, clinging to him.

“No! Bane, please! Kill me, if you wish, not him.” Taking his hand, she pressed the dagger to her heart. “Strike. I have little power left. A few blows will be sufficient to drain it, then I will die.”

Bane glared down at her with such fury that for a moment she thought he would do as she recommended. Then he hurled her away with a savage thrust of his arm, tearing her fingers from his shirt. She stumbled back and fell, throwing out her hands to cushion the impact. Bane stood over her, the dagger twitching.

“I would like to, more than you can imagine.” His tone was venomous. “I see you are determined to keep your infernal spell, even if I kill him, are you not?”

She bowed her head. “I cannot lift what I did not cast. I swear, if there is a spell, I know nothing about it, and that is the truth.”

Bane sheathed the dagger and signalled to the waiting trolls. “Release him.”

Mirra breathed a sigh of relief as the trolls untied Benton, who cast her a grateful look and fled. Aware of Bane still standing over her, she risked a peek up at him.

He said, “Do not ever lay your hands on me like that again. Do you understand?”

Meekly she nodded. He spun on his heel and marched to his tent, yanking the flap aside with such force that he almost ripped a peg out of the ground. For a long time, she sat and played forlornly with a few blades of grass, afraid to enter the tent and face him.

When dusk leached the last dregs of light from the sky, she crept inside shivering, chilled by the night air. Bane glanced at her as she settled as far from him as she could. He sat on the folding chair, a cup of wine on the table beside him, and appeared deep in thought. Mirra lay down and fell asleep.

Madick saddled the stallion for her in the morning, and she wondered if Benton had left, unable to blame him. They traversed the green countryside for another day and camped beside a forest at dusk.

The following morning, Mord came to the tent flap. “Lord, the men have gone.”

Bane nodded. “I know.”

The troll left, and Mirra asked, “Where have they gone?”

He rummaged in a pack, pulled out maps and discarded them. “Home, where do you think? They have all the loot they can carry, and that is what they wanted. The fools think they will live long enough to enjoy it. Those who are not slaughtered by their more moral fellows will perish when my father rises, anyway.”

“How terrible.”

“Is it?” he snorted. “It is no more than they deserve. I do not need them anymore. I still have the trolls and goblins, the creatures of darkness. They do not fight for gold. They worship my father. He might even reward the survivors and let them live. I need to move quickly, and the men would only hold me back. The dark people travel faster.” He frowned at her as if wondering why he was telling her anything, then studied the map he held.

Mirra wondered if Bane and the Black Lord would leave anyone alive; so many had died already. She gazed at his perfect profile while he was intent on the map. “Why do you want to kill people?”

He regarded her with empty eyes. “Because my father wants the Overworld, and these people are in his way. He does not want them here.”

“Then your father wants to kill them, not you.”

“You could say that.” He shrugged, looking at the map again. “I do my father’s bidding. I would rather be at home, in the Underworld.”

Since he seemed quite calm, she grew bolder. “What is it like?”

He raised his head to stare into the middle distance. “Dark and warm. A great maze of caverns and tunnels, some full of treasure. Droge slaves toil to dig out gold, silver and gems, and their cries echo through the caves. The glow of the inner fire lights everything, and warm winds blow along the passages. Sometimes spirits are brought over from the Land of the Dead to be tormented, given droge bodies so the demons can play with them. I have never been there, for my father gave me a mortal body, but he promised that I will see it when this is all over. I do not like it up here. It is too bright, and it is cold and wet sometimes.”

Mirra shuddered at the visions his description conjured up. “Will your father like it?”

“He will change it; make it like the Underworld.”

“Oh.”

Bane’s lips twisted. “I doubt you will like it then.”

Mirra nodded as he went back to his perusal of the maps, hating the thought of the Overworld, with its verdant land, blue skies and multitude of beasts and birds, turned into a dim, red-glowing world, dead and blasted by evil.

For the next few days, they travelled much faster, the goblins and trolls able to trot all day, apparently tireless. The gnomes were left behind, their stumpy legs unable to keep up. The rock howlers dropped to all fours and bounced along sideways, like apes. The creatures of darkness moved with many odd, yet mile-eating gaits, scuttling from shadow to shadow with gibbers of distress whenever the watery sunlight touched them. Mirra wondered why they did not follow at night, catching up with Bane by morning. Yet, she supposed, if they were needed in battle they had to be on hand, not miles behind. Their methods of killing and proficiency at it chilled her, but she still pitied them, malformed as they were.

They encountered only a few abandoned villages and an empty castle, to Mirra’s relief. The countryside changed little, going from rolling grassland and wild woods to tame meadows and ploughed farmland near the towns, then back to wild greenery. They crossed a marsh, but, apart from being wet and insect infested, it did not hamper the troops or Bane.

The Demon Lord scorned roads and moved across the land in a straight line, obviously sure of his destination. The sight of his broad-shouldered figure on the glowing stallion seemed to become a constant part of her life, continuing in her dreams at night when weariness sucked her into the black cocoon of sleep. She missed Benton and their talks around the fire, but was glad that he had returned to his home and perhaps his family, no longer a member of the murderous horde.

Bane hardly seemed to notice her presence, rarely spoke to her, and mostly ignored her unless she spoke to him. He sometimes snarled at her, and on occasion loomed threateningly, but he no longer struck her. His health gradually improved, his eyes growing less bloodshot with each day that he did not use his power.

On the fifth day, they crested a hill and looked down on a lush, cultivated green valley, at the centre of which was a walled city. A makeshift barrier of overturned wagons and sandbags reinforced the

massive gates, and people moved about like ants in the distance. Mirra's heart sank. Bane smiled, evidently looking forward to the coming slaughter.

Within the city walls, the houses were packed together in a jostling huddle, looming over each other and almost meeting above the streets. Washing dried on lines strung between rooftops, flapping in the breeze that swept away the blue smoke that rose from the chimneys. Never had she seen such a close-packed metropolis. It seemed that no one lived outside the walls save the cattle, horses and sheep, whose sheds dotted the verdant fields. She wondered what enemy kept these people so firmly behind their walls.

Dejectedly, she followed Bane into the vale, the troops muttering with excitement behind them. Before they reached the valley floor, a herald galloped out to them, stopping his horse some distance away. The Demon Lord halted the steed, the army bunching behind him, and listened with a cynical smile as the man read from a scroll he held in shaking hands.

"All hail the Demon Lord!" he shouted. "King Holran of Nestor bids you welcome to pass through his lands, and says you thus: if you do keep your troops in good order, and do no damage to his city or its people, he will withhold his troops and grant you safe passage. He holds that he has no quarrel with you, and bids you pass in peace."

Bane chuckled, and the herald blanched, but held his ground, rolling up the scroll. The nervous cavorting of his horse, which snorted and shied from the demon steed, spoilt his composure.

The Demon Lord said, "Tell your king I will meet him to discuss this, but for now, I agree to nothing."

The herald galloped away, and Bane followed at a trot, his troops massed behind him in a clanking black and red tide. The trolls, goblins and rock howlers numbered only about two thousand, but they were fearsome fighters. Mirra wondered what the city's citizens would make of these strange creatures that had always shunned the company of men and, until now, had rarely been seen.

The trolls carried huge scimitars and double-headed axes, the goblins were armed with short swords, while the rock howlers each had two daggers. Some wore chain mail over their fur, and the goblins sported boiled leather armour and breeches. Of the three species, the goblins most resembled men, but with disproportionately long arms and legs, pointed ears and beardless, feral faces. They had long noses, yellow skin and brown eyes; their hands four-fingered and clawed.

The trolls were the largest, with short legs and barrel torsos, long arms and huge, callused hands. The rock howlers, clad in bright red, shaggy pelts, had black, dog-like faces framed by ruddy manes. They carried their daggers in sheaths strapped to their forearms, but, even unarmed, were ferocious fighters with teeth and claws. The dark creatures defied description. They wore no garb, nor carried any form of weapon other than those with which they had been born, yet they were undoubtedly the most formidable of Bane's followers.

At the city gates, six shiny knights on huge warhorses, resplendent in plumed helmets and red and gold livery, met Bane. The horses snorted and sidled as Bane approached, rolling their eyes. One knight blocked Bane's path, but saluted smartly and addressed him in polite tones.

"Lord, if you will leave your... err... men here, we will take you to the King."

"Unless you plan to stop me, I advise you to get out of my way," Bane said, ignoring the latent threat of the red-uniformed pike men who lined the road, pikes grounded on the cobbles. The knight looked at his companions, but his horse shied from the demon steed, effectively removing him as an obstacle. The gates, however, remained closed, and the steed halted in front of them.

The knight forced his horse closer to Bane. "My Lord, we cannot allow your army into the city. There are women and children within. I must ask you -"

"Open the gates or I will destroy them, and you."

The knight hesitated, glancing at his comrades once more, then signalled to the soldiers who manned the gates. They hastened to remove some of the sandbags and pull an overturned wagon aside, and the huge doors swung open. Bane rode into the city, the knights forming up around him, as close as they could persuade their horses to come to the steed. The gibbering horde poured in behind them.



The city's inhabitants were locked in their homes, the doors and windows barred, as the Black Lord's son rode past. Mirra followed Bane and his escort along a fairly broad boulevard that ran through the centre of the city, the rabble fanning out into the packed houses on either side to pillage. The trolls and goblins helped themselves to whatever caught their fancy, mostly livestock, stealing squealing pigs and cackling chickens. Rock howlers snatched fruit from abandoned farm stalls and ripped plants from window boxes. The shadows between the houses filled with glowing eyes as the dark creatures sifted into the city, an occasional malformed flitting shape giving away their soft-footed advance.

The knights glanced back often at the seething horde, their warhorses prancing skittishly, unnerved by the padding of paws and clicking of claws, the rumble of deep voices and soft sniggering. Occasional shrieks of laughter erupted as a rock howler stole washing and donned it the wrong way, or a goblin strutted in a lady's bonnet. Smashing glass and semi-hysterical giggles told of idle vandalism. Missiles flew as goblins pelted each other with fruit, a few bouncing off the knights' shiny armoured backs, apparently by accident. The six knights sweated, but dared say nothing to the Demon Lord, who ignored the ruckus behind him.

In the centre of the city, they arrived at the broad marble steps of an impressive palace set in manicured gardens, and the six knights dismounted. Bane guided the demon steed up the steps, the knights clanking after him. Scandalised, spear-toting guards stepped aside as he rode through a gleaming entrance hall bedecked with gold ornamentation, ancestral weapons, shields, banners and coats of arms. He only dismounted when he encountered a door too small for him to pass through without ducking.

This was the door to the throne room, and the liveried flunkies who flanked it fled, leaving Bane to stride in unannounced. The gold designs on his tunic gleamed as richly as his surroundings, and his simple garb made the room's regal sumptuousness seem cheap and garish. Mighty hangings and tapestries graced the pale walls; fluted white marble pillars supported a high, arched ceiling painted with a breath-taking mural of some heroic battle. High galleries overlooked the vast chamber, dark niches in which Mirra thought she glimpsed moving shapes. Bane's steel-soled boots clinked on the polished marble floor, and his entry halted the low murmur of conversation as well-dressed nobles turned to stare at him.

Mirra stayed close behind him, aware of her dirty dress and ragged hair, awed by the palace's splendour. The Demon Lord strolled towards the throne, the nobles and courtiers who lined the way stepping out of his path. Powdered, simpering ladies in stiff court gowns fanned themselves furiously and gasped behind lace hankies. Strong incense mingled with the rich aroma of roast meat, and Mirra headed for a table groaning under a feast of good food, her stomach rumbling.

The short, mousy man on the throne stood up as Bane approached, his small brown eyes wide. So much finery covered his tubby form that Mirra wondered how the poor man could breathe. Layers of rich clothes and jewellery gleamed under a fur-lined, royal blue cloak. His plump fingers and neck bulged around gold rings and pendants, while indecently snug-fitting white breeches revealed the thinness of his legs and extent of his paunch. His soft-featured face glistened with nervous perspiration, and some lonely strands of hair were carefully combed over a shiny bald pate.

Bane strode up the four steps onto the throne's dais and confronted the King, who sat down abruptly, cringing a little.

Bane bent over him, asking, with deceptive mildness, "Mind if I sit?"

Bane heaved the chubby man off the throne and sent him rolling down the steps, then took his place. The court gasped, and two nobles helped the sprawled King to his feet. King Holran faced Bane and bowed, regaining his composure as he brushed imaginary dirt from his sleeve.

"Welcome, Demon Lord. You honour us with your presence."

"Do I?" Bane sounded bored, perusing the overdressed nobles. "Do you worship my father?"

The King spread his hands. "No, but we wish no quarrel with you."

"So you think I will just march through and leave you alone. Why should I? My army needs

supplies.”

“We will provide them, My Lord. We ask only to be allowed to live.”

Bane tossed his cloak back, revealing the blood-red lining. Mirra knew he was enjoying this immensely; it was his idea of fun. She munched a pastry, wishing the King luck.

“What will you offer me in return?” Bane asked.

The King hesitated. “What do you wish? We will give you supplies, and unopposed passage.”

“Maybe I will take all your riches.”

The portly King shrugged. “Then do.”

“Maybe I will take your daughter.”

A large, horse-faced woman clad in a bright pink gown festooned with an overabundance of red silk roses fainted dead away into the arms of a grey-haired nobleman, who staggered under her weight. Bane shook his head, his lips twisting. “Maybe not.”

“Whatever you wish, My Lord. We know we cannot defeat you.” The King spread his arms. “We ask only for our lives.”

Bane’s eyes narrowed. “I cannot be bribed to spare you. I can take all I want from your city once you are all dead.”

“No, no, I do not mean to try, My Lord. I merely say we are at your mercy, and we will only fight for our lives.”

“Perhaps I will take your throne.”

“It is yours, My Lord, even now.”

Bane sighed. “Then I will take your life.”

A collective gasp went around the room, and the plump Princess, who had been in the process of recovering, fainted again. An overweight woman with tightly curled red hair and heavily rouged cheeks emerged from the crowd and curtsied.

“I am the Queen, My Lord. May I beg for my husband’s life?”

Bane shrugged and gestured. “Go ahead.”

“He is a good man, My Lord. He seeks only to save his people. He is the father of six children, and a kind and loving man. He does not deserve to die.”

“What of it?”

The Queen blanched. “My Lord, I beg you to take me, not my husband.”

“How sweet. Is this what you humans call ‘love’?”

A low murmur of amazement came from the courtiers, for, although Bane was a striking-looking man, he was obviously human.

The Queen drew out a lace handkerchief and dabbed her cleavage. “Yes, My Lord. I love my king, and would gladly die for him.”

Bane hooked a long leg over the throne’s arm and swung it. “What an interesting notion. What if I kill you both?”

The crowd gasped again, and two noblemen stepped forward. “We will ask to take their places,” one said.

“And who are you?”

“Lord Montrage and Duke Holran.”

Bane smiled. “But I do not want you. I want them.” He indicated the pudgy King and Queen.

A young, dark-haired man burst from the crowd. Shaking off the hands that plucked at his sleeves, he strode up to the steps, his brown eyes fierce.

“I am Prince Holran, heir to the throne, and I challenge you to single combat!”

The Queen and Princess fainted. The King went grey, sending a look of despair at his son.

Bane straightened, his eyes glinting. “You challenge me, upstart?”

“You are the upstart!” the Prince shouted. “A mere peasant boy, torn from his mother’s womb by the foul Lord of the Underworld, now posturing with borrowed power, lording it over the rightful kings of this land.”

The King fainted, as did a number of ladies, and the crowd went still, apart from those occupied with helping the ladies. Mirra put down her honeyed bun, her appetite gone. Bane rose and descended the steps to halt in front of the Prince, topping the young man by six inches.

"You have a big mouth, boy. I am the Black Lord's son, no peasant."

"Everyone knows you are just a peasant boy, stolen from the Overworld by the Black Lord to be used to break the wards and free him. He killed your mother and poisoned your mind, but you are as human as we are. No demon spawn could break the wards or even set foot in the Overworld."

Bane's eyes frosted. "Is that so?"

"It is! You are mortal!" The Prince lunged at Bane, a dagger appearing in his fist. Mirra yelped, but Bane knocked the Prince down with a powerful blow. The boy skidded across the polished floor and was fielded by two lords, who helped him up. He glared at Bane, clutching his cheek.

Bane stalked back to the throne. "For that insult, princeling, I will reduce your city to ash, and you will provide my entertainment."

"No!" The King, recovered from his swoon, threw himself at Bane's feet. "Demon Lord, he is young, stupid. I beg mercy!"

"He attacked me under truce. He broke your bond and disgraced you, Holran. I want nothing from you that I cannot take. Your city is forfeit, and all of your lives."

The Prince strained at the men who held him, shouting, "Murderer! Foul traitor! You slaughter your own kind!"

Bane strode down the steps again, heading for the Prince, but stopped when swords hissed from their scabbards, and several steely-eyed men stepped into his path.

The King mopped his face. "You leave us no choice, Demon Lord. We will fight."

"Indeed. You will give me a headache, then."

The men lunged at the Demon Lord with slashing, stabbing swords, and Bane's eyes became pits of darkness. Dark power erupted from him in a wall of black flame, hurling the swordsmen back, charred corpses before they hit the polished floor. He turned, sweeping the room with a languid motion of his slender hands as the ladies fled screaming. Black fire lashed from him, incinerating some, burning others, who fell shrieking.

Arrows hissed from the galleries high above as the men hidden there let fly. Bane raised his arms, and a black shield shimmered into being over him, consuming the arrows as they struck it, allowing only ash to pass through. He gestured, razing the archers with fire, and they fell howling to smack against the marble floor with sickening thuds and splatters of blood. Within moments, the tapestries were ablaze and burning bodies littered the floor, some writhing and shrieking.

Mirra stood frozen beside the burning banquet table, too shocked by the sudden violence to do anything but stare at Bane. The stricken people's agony knifed through her like lances of fire. The blazing table set the edge of her gown alight, and she leapt away, slapping the flames out before they spread. Her stomach clenched at the dark power's touch, making her double over, clutching her gut. The brief battle had reduced the sumptuous room to a fiery charnel house, and the people who had escaped serious injury from the initial blast of fire scrambled to escape before the heat and smoke overcame them. The thickening fumes made Mirra cough, her eyes watering.

Bane walked through the inferno and found the Prince, whom he had spared, sobbing beside his father's body, crying his name. The Demon Lord gripped his arm and hauled him to his feet, thrusting him out of the room. Mirra stumbled after them, her stomach heaving. Bane glanced back at her once, his expression wrathful.

Outside, the dark army blackened the palace gardens. Rock howlers munched flowers and gnawed on the roots of ornamental shrubs. Goblins relieved themselves on the lawn, and trolls reclined on immaculately trimmed hedges. They looked up as their master appeared, and when Bane raised his fist, swept away into the city with a roar, leaving behind a trampled ruin of a garden. Just beyond the palace grounds, they clashed with the city's troops, and savage battles raged in the streets. The horde set buildings alight, forcing those who sheltered within to flee their safety.

Bane thrust the Prince at the two portage trolls who lingered with Mord, shouting, "Bring him!"

Mounting the demon steed, he galloped towards the distant postern gate, the two armies diving from the fiery beast's path. Mirra urged the grey stallion after him, but the swift steed left her behind and the combatants closed in around her. The warhorse tried to avoid the fighting men who thronged the streets after Bane passed, dodging swinging swords and stabbing lances.

Those he could not evade, he thrust aside, and Mirra clung to his mane and the pommel. Valiant soldiers fought in groups that bristled with steel, but the horde flung themselves upon the defenders in a fury of rending claws and teeth, stabbing daggers and swinging, bloody axes.

Torch-wielding goblins ran about, thrusting their brands into houses and shops, setting alight to stores of hay and wool. The smoke soon became thick and black, making Mirra's eyes and throat burn as it swirled between the houses. Fighting men and beasts loomed out of it, and the stallion swerved to elude their weapons, his hooves slipping on the bloody cobbles. She urged the warhorse to flee the city, and he seemed to know the way out.

At last, the postern gate came into view, its barricade burnt to ash by Bane's passing, and she galloped from the doomed city. Free of the smoke, blood and violence, she gasped fresh air and let the stallion go where he wished, not caring where that might be. After a while, he slowed to a trot, and she took stock of her surroundings.

Not far away, an ancient forest bestrode the land in thick a green blanket, and she headed towards it, drawn by an unfathomable sense that Bane was there. He paced under a spreading oak at the edge of it, the demon steed standing like a statue nearby. Dismounting, she waited, not daring to approach him while he still seethed with the dark power. It licked over him in shadowy flames, and she backed away when he strode over to her. Ignoring her gasp, he gripped her wrists, his black eyes boring into hers.

"It is lies! All lies! You are all in it together, you humans. You are all trying to turn me against my father. It is lies, is it not?"

"I do not know!" Mirra cried, sickened by his touch. "I know nothing about you!"

"The Black Lord gave me this body so I could break the wards. He created me. I am no peasant's get!" She shook her head in helpless confusion, and he thrust her away with a grunt. "You are useless. You know nothing. Human trash, like all the rest."

Bane leashed the fire, his eyes turning blue as he studied the black smoke rising from the city. Huge flames licked up now and then, and Mirra was glad she was too far away to share the pain of those who perished within the walls. Silently she prayed to the Lady for their swift passage to her realm. Bane waited, arms folded, as three running figures emerged from the burning metropolis, dragging another between them. They hastened up to him, Mord leading the two trolls who held the Prince. They thrust the singed and blackened young man at Bane's feet, keeping their distance.

Prince Holran tried to rise, but Bane kicked him, and Mirra whimpered. Bane glanced at her, momentarily distracted, and the Prince launched himself at the Demon Lord.

"Murderer! Bastard!"

Bane avoided the Prince's hysterical attack and hammered him to the ground, then kicked him again, sending him rolling. Mirra cried out and started forward, reaching for the injured Prince, but Bane seized the back of her dress and flung her aside with such force that she fell.

"Leave him!" he shouted. "Try to stop me this time, and I will have you tied up."

The Prince climbed to his feet and stood swaying, clutching his ribs. Bane turned to him, drawing his dagger. Prince Holran flicked a lock of hair out of his eyes and glared at the Demon Lord.

"You monster," he grated, "you murdered my father, my mother!"

"And I annihilated your city, what of it?"

"You are still human, but you are depraved; a butcher. Evil has twisted your mind. You stink of it!"

Bane laughed. "And now you will see just how evil I am, princeling. I enjoy torturing the likes of you."

The Prince spat, and Bane's hand flashed out, his dagger slashing the youth's cheek. Prince Holran gasped and clasped the wound, blood seeping between his fingers. Mirra groaned, biting her lip. Bane

raised the dagger again, but the Prince sprang at him, punching him in the ribs. Mirra whimpered as the pain of Bane's injuries flared, but he hardly flinched. His fist cracked into the Prince's jaw, knocking down again with a dull crunch of breaking bone. She cried out, clasping her arms about herself as their pain suffused her. This time, she knew she could do nothing to help the Prince. Bane beat the boy for his own enjoyment, and would not be prevented.

Bane stood over the Prince. "You have courage, boy. I like that. It is more fun."

Prince Holran shook his head, blood trickling down his chin from his lacerated lip. He struggled to his feet once more, grimacing. Bane knocked him down again, and Mirra sobbed.

Bane rounded on her. "Damn it! Leave, witch! Go and moan somewhere else."

Surprised, she sent him an anguished look and fled to where Mord erected the tent, diving inside. She curled up on the floor, trying not to think about what was happening to the Prince. Mord carried Bane's furniture inside and set it up meticulously the way it always was.

Half an hour later, Bane entered, shouting for his drug, which Mord had already prepared. After he drank it, Bane lay on the bed, his brow dewed with sweat, his bloodshot eyes staring at the leather above him.

Mirra uncurled. "Are you all right?"

His eyes flicked to her. "Why would I not be?"

"The power hurts you, as do your wounds."

"What of it?"

She sighed. "I can help. I know you do not trust me, but I could take the pain away."

"Leave me alone."

"Did you kill him?"

He raised himself on one elbow, his eyes narrowing. "Are you questioning me?"

Mirra shrank back, shaking her head.

Bane lay down again, rubbing his temples. He sounded tired as he muttered, "No, I did not. Go and heal him if you want, then I can beat him again."

Mirra's heart leapt, then sank. "Please do not hurt him anymore."

"You beg for him? You never begged for yourself."

"I do not matter."

"And he does?" he enquired.

"He is just a boy."

"He insulted me."

"Has he not suffered enough?"

Bane sighed. "Do not question me."

Mirra went in search of the Prince, who was slumped against the tree to which he was bound, his eyes closed, his face a mask of pain. She knelt beside him and placed her hands upon him, healing his broken jaw, ribs, arm, bruises and scrapes. The Prince opened his eyes, his expression amazed, as all people were when they experienced healing for the first time. Mirra smiled, and he returned it shyly.

"Thank you, healer."

"I am sorry for what has happened to you, Prince Holran. I am sorry for your family and city. Bane feels nothing for people. He only wishes to please his father."

"But he feels something for you."

"What do you mean?"

The Prince's eyes roamed her face. "He did not like it when you felt my pain. Did you not notice?"

"I think I was distracting him."

"No, your whimpering was easily ignored, yet he could not."

"He used to beat me just as badly," she said.

"But he stopped."

"Yes."

"I rest my case."

She settled more comfortably on the grass. "Perhaps he has grown used to me. I have been with him for some weeks now."

"I do not think he is the kind of man anybody grows on, but you would grow on anyone." He nodded sagely. "I would say he has a large soft spot for you."

She smiled, flattered. "I hope so. I like him."

Prince Holran frowned. "He is the Demon Lord. How can you like someone so evil? You have seen what he does. He kills... slaughters innocent people. He beat you. How...?"

Mirra cocked her head. "You should not judge, Prince Holran. That is for our Lady to do. Bane is not the Black Lord. He suffers terribly."

"He makes others suffer more."

"No." Her smile faded. "He endures pain that would kill you, every day."

"Why do you stay with him? Surely what he does is awful for a healer?"

"Yes, it is, but I long to ease his suffering. I help all I can, but I can do so little, for he will not let me. He distrusts me, you see. Those he slays wing safely to our Lady, but he suffers."

"Were you not a healer, I would say kill him. End his suffering and ours, but I know you cannot. Even if he handed you a knife and bared his throat, you would not strike."

She sighed, disliking the thought. "No, I would not. But I can help you, Prince, and I will."

Mirra untied the ropes, and he glanced at the three trolls who huddled around a fire, but their backs were turned.

"He will be angry with you," he said.

"He has been angry with me before."

"He might beat you. Come with me."

"No, I will stay. He cannot harm me, My Lord. I am a healer."

Prince Holran cupped her cheek. "You are an angel. Thank you."

"Go now, into the woods, head for another town where you will be safe."

"No one will be safe from him. When he breaks the last ward, we will all perish, even you." His expression became bitter.

"Yes." She smiled sadly.

Prince Holran took her hand and raised it to his lips in a gesture that brought a warm glow to her heart. Then he climbed to his feet and walked into the forest, avoiding twigs that might snap and give him away. Just before the trees hid him, he cast a last glance back at her. She waited for a while to give him a good head start before returning to Bane's tent.

The Demon Lord appeared to be asleep, but as she settled down, he muttered, "You should not have done that."

Mirra started, her heart thudding. "I had to, or you would have beaten him more."

Bane moved like lightning, seized her gown and dragged her close to glare into her eyes. "Perhaps I should beat you instead."

She met his gaze. "If you wish."

He pushed her away as if unable to bear her touch. "I do not wish to, and that is what bothers me." He rubbed his eyes. "Ah, well, it does not matter. He had a good beating already."

"Thank you."

"What for now?"

"For letting him go, and not punishing me."

Bane chuckled. "He will suffer more alive than dead, his family gone, his city in ruins. He will probably throw himself down a well, anyway. I begin to understand humans. They are strange, but I see their weaknesses. Their greatest is this 'love'. It makes them vulnerable and very stupid."

"Yes, but it also brings great joy. Without it, life would be empty."

"Power is satisfying. No one needs more than that."

"Power only brings sorrow in the end. To wield it, you must hurt people, and that makes them hate you. Even if you try not to hurt anyone, people will always fall prey to envy. Powerful people are

lonely. They have no real friends. Power corrupts, and one is always tempted to use it for selfish gain.”

Bane turned his head to look at her. “You have power.”

She smiled. “I have the power to heal others, and myself, that is all. It can hardly be used selfishly, even if I wished to.”

“You could make people pay for healing, and be rich.”

“Yes, rich in worldly possessions, inanimate objects that cannot love me, while those who could not afford the healing would despise me, and those who could would resent me still. It is far better to give it freely and have the love of everyone. I will never starve or freeze. Even the men of your army, who ravage the land, murder and plunder, made sure I was fed and clothed. None offered me harm.”

He grunted. “I noticed, although they did try to kill you at first.”

“Because you told them to, and they fear you, but they did not wish to do it.”

His expression was bitter. “I wish they had succeeded.”

“Why?”

His arctic eyes made her shiver. “You trouble me. You are a thorn in my side I cannot pull out. I no longer take pleasure in your pain, but that does not mean I cannot still inflict it. I do not know how you are meant to stop me completing my task, but believe me, you will not succeed.”

Bane turned away, closing his eyes, and Mirra was torn between her pity for him and her fear of him.

## Chapter Twelve

### The Old Kingdom

The seeress sat back, rubbing her eyes. Weariness weighed her down. Her back ached and her eyes throbbed from too much scrying. Tallis hovered nearby, her concerned expression telling Ellese that she was probably haggard and grey-faced. Since Mirra had left the abbey, Tallis had insisted on being the one to watch over Ellese while she was scrying, eager for news of her friend. Ellese spent a lot of time hunched over the glass these days, and her worries had lined her face and put more white into her grey hair. The healers now resided at a poor coastal abbey where the sun shone and all seemed peaceful. Only Ellese was still subjected to the Demon Lord's atrocities through her scrying. To the rest, the tales she told were far removed from their lives, even though they knew them to be true.

Tallis handed Ellese a cup of water. "You should spend some time in the sun, Mother."

"I know. I will." Ellese sipped the water. "At least we have sun, now that the Demon Lord moves away."

"Yes. How fares Mirra?"

"She is as well as can be expected." She put aside the cup and rubbed her temples. "Bane has destroyed the city of Nestor, after toying with the King. Mirra saved the Prince, and Bane declined to punish her. She was lucky. I think his headache was too bad."

"He has broken four wards now, Mother. He has but three to go." Tallis shook her head. "I do not understand how Mirra will stop him."

Ellese smiled. "Imagine two ships sailing the ocean, one pure and good, its sails as white as snow, its hull mother-of-pearl. The other is as black as the night, its sails made of shadows, its hull ebony. But there is a tiny flame aboard the black ship. A pure flame."

Ellese closed her eyes. "Imagine that they meet, come together in a mist, and crash into each other, damaging one another, but also becoming entangled. They cannot be parted, but each sails to a different wind. The black ship would sail on to the sunset and destroy the world. The white ship strives to turn away. The closer the black ship comes to the sunset, the more the white ship seeks to turn away, but they are bound together, inseparable, and equally strong. You see?" She opened her eyes.

Tallis frowned. "Either the white ship will turn the black, or the black ship will take the white with it to its destruction."

"But they are equally strong."

"Then they will tear each other apart."

Ellese picked up the cup and sipped from it again. "Perhaps. But there is one factor you forgot."

"The pure flame?"

"Yes."

"You think there is good in Bane?" Tallis sounded incredulous.

"He is human. He is not a demon, or demon possessed. His soul belonged to the Lady when he was born, but the Black Lord has corrupted it. It can be redeemed, and only Mirra can do that."

"So..."

"Mirra must fan the spark of good in Bane until it flares up and consumes him, then he will turn away of his own accord."

"But surely demons can complete the task, now that they are able to rise from the Underworld?"

Ellese shook her head. "Bane is far more powerful than a demon. He is the Black Lord's equal. The mages who set the wards thought they had made them strong enough, for the only one with the power to break them was the one they imprisoned below."

Tallis shuddered. "Until Bane."

"Yes, Bane is the Black Lord's answer to the riddle, but he has one small weakness we can use. The



very thing the Black Lord needed in order to send him above to break the wards: his humanity.”

“So Mirra was sent to save him.”

Ellese smiled, rising to her feet. “I shall go and sit in the sun awhile.”

Mirra stared at the huge, muddy brown river that swirled past, sucking at its banks. Rain sleeted down in cold sheets to soak her gown and make it cling to her slight curves. Her hair, slicked to her head, dripped water onto her face, forcing her to wipe her eyes continually. Bane sat on the demon steed, his thick mane sleek against his narrow skull, frowning and plucking at the shirt that clung to the muscular contours of his chest. Clearly, he hated the rain, yet it seemed to wash some of the evil from him, even reduced his stature as the gleaming palace had not. The water ran down his face, making his long lashes stick together in thick spikes as he brushed water from them. The steed pranced; the rain hissing against its burning hide seemed to cause it great discomfort.

Bane scowled at her. “This is your fault. This is the result of causing the clouds to follow us; eventually they had to drop their foul burden.”

Mirra bowed her head, accepting the blame.

He snorted. “You bore me with your humble ways. You would be more interesting if you showed some spirit.”

Mirra kept her eyes downcast. Bane was in an exceedingly foul temper, and she knew better than to rile him further. He rode across the little clearing to the trolls who waited at the edge of the forest they had just travelled through. He stopped before they retreated and issued orders in a hard voice, accompanied by curt gestures. Mord unpacked the tent, and Mirra dismounted, letting the warhorse graze. Scores of trolls went into the forest and started felling trees. So, he planned to cross the river on a raft. The spate, however, looked far too swollen and strong for that. She shrugged mentally. He was the Demon Lord; nothing was beyond him.

As soon as the tent was up, Bane entered it, and Mirra hesitated for a moment before joining him. He sat on the bed, towelling his hair. She settled next to the wall, striving to hide her shivers. Bane had shucked his shirt and cloak, now he put down the towel and pulled off his boots, wincing as he tackled his injured foot, which was badly swollen and discoloured. She was amazed that he was able to walk on it. The torn skin had healed, but the broken bones would not, for he gave it no rest. Her longing to heal him flared once more. He studied the appendage, then went back to drying himself.

Mirra hugged her knees, trying to warm up. She sneezed and wiped her nose, shooting Bane an anxious glance.

He eyed her. “If you are going to start sniffing, you can go and do it outside, not in my tent.” He flung the damp towel at her. “Dry yourself, you are dripping on the floor.”

Mirra dried her hair, then draped the towel around her shoulders for warmth, since she had no dry gown. Bane donned a fresh shirt, this one patterned with vivid blue designs that matched his eyes. The injuries from the temple had faded to pale pink scars, but the rune scars stood out, angry red. He caught her studying him and glared, his eyes flicking over her, noting a shiver she was unable to hide.

“Cold, girl? Even you do not like this world, although it is your own.”

“No one likes to get wet in the rain.”

“Least of all me.”

Mirra nodded, rubbing her arms. She jumped when Bane threw a blanket at her.

“Stop sniffing and shivering.”

“Thank you.” She smiled.

Lying back on the bed, he said, “Give the wet things to Mord to wash and dry.”

She gathered up his shirt and cloak, heading outside to find the troll.

Bane’s voice stopped her at the flap. “Yours too.”

Mirra stripped in the forest, wrapped herself in the blanket and gave the clothes to Mord before hurrying back to the tent before the blanket got damp. Settling down again, she thought Bane was

asleep, then noticed the gleam of his open eyes.

Emboldened by his mellow mood, she enquired, "Why are we crossing the river?"

"The next ward is in the Old Kingdom, idiot."

"But is it not forbidden to go there?"

He smiled. "The people of the Old Kingdom worship my father. They will welcome me."

"At least you will not have to fight them."

"No, but I doubt they will like you."

Mirra tried to imagine what manner of people inhabited the Old Kingdom. The Black Lord's worshippers had driven the good people from the Old Kingdom long ago, and the river had become the boundary. The prospect of crossing into that place frightened her, although she had only been told that the good people had been forced to leave by others who followed the Black Lord. She wondered what level of depravity they had sunk to over the many decades of isolation.

Knowing the Black Lord's son, she dreaded meeting them. Her history teacher had skipped over the time of the Great War; only mentioning that many bloody battles had been fought, after which the Lady's worshippers had left the Old Kingdom. At the time, she had not given it much thought, a few words during a dull history class had held little weight, but now she knew what evil was all about; her eyes had been opened to its abominations.

For a long time, she lay awake, listening to Bane's breathing while her mind whirled with imagined horrors. Perhaps the dark power had warped the Old Kingdom's people, as it had the creatures of darkness that shadowed Bane's army. As if to confirm her thought, a howl shattered the stillness, muffled by the forest but sharp over the river's soft rushing. It might have been a wolf, except that a burst of high-pitched gibbering followed, like insane laughter. She shivered, and Bane tossed and sighed. Reassured, ironically, by his presence, she pulled the damp blanket closer and forced her eyes closed, blanking her mind. Slowly she sank into a deep, exhausted sleep.

In the morning, they crossed the river on the huge raft the trolls had fashioned during the night, Mirra clad in a clean, dry gown Mord had somehow laundered. Although it remained overcast, no rain fell as they entered the gloomy forest on the far bank. Bane set off immediately, leaving the army to catch up. Mirra started at shadows, imagining dark shapes flitting between the trees all around them, hidden by the gloom. She told herself that these were vampires that had flown across the river, following as they always did, but closer now that they travelled within the dim forest.

Wet humus squelched under the horse's feet, loud in the unnatural stillness. Thick mist hugged the ground, and the black tree trunks that loomed out of it created an eerie atmosphere. Strings of grey moss hung from the branches, brushing against her with soft, spidery tendrils, leaving icy damp trails. She was glad that the demon steed preceded her, for its fire burnt away the huge cobwebs that appeared out of the mist.

Water dripped on her, making her jump, imagining cold leeches and biting insects. The blighted wood seemed devoid of wildlife, and grey fungus mottled the trees' rough bark. The ground sprouted pallid growths that reached up like dead hands from under the black leaves. Bane brushed aside the streamers of hanging moss, and she urged to stallion as close to him as he would go.

By the time dusk drew near, Mirra was convinced that the trolls and night creatures were not the only ones following them. Her nape hair prickled and goose bumps rose. Despite her precognition, she swallowed a shriek when a hunched figure stepped from the gloom and bowed to Bane.

"Welcome, Master." The man prostrated himself, pressing his forehead to the ground.

Bane stopped the steed and frowned. "I was wondering when you were going to show yourselves."

The man cringed, twisting his neck to look up at Bane while remaining on his hands and knees.

"Beg pardon, Master. We should have realised you would see us."

"Yes, you should. Now take me to shelter. I am tired."

The man nodded and rose to his feet. He appeared to be middle-aged, with thinning hair, a prominent nose, and horrible disfigurements. His large, jutting ears were cut to points, and ritualistic scars covered his leathery cheeks. His breath whistled through a slit, flattened nose, and dark tattoos

writhed across his chest, face and arms. Clumsy ornaments made of stone, bone and wood pierced his ears and the skin of his neck, and his hair, twined with gold wire and rough gemstones, hung in limp dirty plaits. His only garb was a leather loincloth, and his callused feet were bare.

He bowed again. "I am Orran, high priest of the Black Lord, and it is an honour to serve you."

Bane gestured, and the man trotted ahead, beckoning to the trees, whereupon others emerged to form an escort around the Demon Lord, glancing up at him with fawning, worshipful eyes. All were thin, dirty and scarred, the young men aged by the disfigurements, alike in their mutilated ugliness. There were only about a dozen of them, armed with long spears. Many shot frowns at Mirra, who shivered at their baleful gaze. They padded beside the demon steed, unmindful of the moss that brushed them or the cobwebs that clung to them. They seemed deformed, their joints knobbly, ribs prominent and backs hunched. All had dark eyes and black hair, as if they were members of the same race or tribe, unlike the people of the New Kingdom, who came in many shapes and colours.

At sunset, they rode into a village that was no more than a cluster of crude huts around an ancient stone temple. Here, the forest humus gave way to hard-packed earth, worn by many feet. The badly thatched mud huts had soot-stained roofs with ill-cured hides draped over them that gave off an unpleasant stench. Clay pots and stone implements were strewn in front of some, and a pile of bones and rotting remains at the edge of the forest added to the smell. Filthy children played in the dirt, and small forest creatures, either tied up or in cages, provided sport.

The temple was built from black, red-streaked stone. Great, carved pillars supported a flat roof, and dressed blocks formed the floor and steps. It loomed huge in the gathering dusk, lighted by torches that gave off acrid black smoke. Carved gargoyles and demon faces adorned its walls; evil runic symbols covered the pillars. A fire in front of the stained altar threw leaping light that brought the horrific sculptures to lurid life.

Trees had invaded the temple grounds, pushing the stones aside, slowly destroying man's creation with nature's unstoppable power. Walls were collapsing, their foundations undermined, and cracked pillars leant drunkenly. Moss grew over the ancient stones, and fallen leaves formed rich humus in every nook and cranny. Clearly the people who had once lived and worshipped here had been master builders to construct such an impressive edifice, but the current inhabitants were slovenly and backward, too lazy or ignorant to maintain it.

Men and women clad in rough cloth and leather emerged from the huts and raised their hands, hissing in welcome, their crude baubles clanking. They pressed forward, their matted hair falling into their faces, jerking and bouncing as they danced in celebration. Many held out children and infants, perhaps hoping for Bane's blessing, but he ignored them, the demon steed snorting fire as he forged through them. They parted before him like a foul sea, their savage grins revealing brown, filed teeth, their glinting eyes rabid with worship.

Bane stopped at the temple steps and dismounted, surveying the crowd. Mirra gave a frightened cry as many hard hands dragged her off the grey horse, pulling her away from Bane.

He frowned. "Leave her!"

The men released her, and she edged through the snarling crowd to his side. Its members' unwashed stench and skin that glistened with animal grease and soot made her stomach heave. Bane cast her a malicious smile, then turned as Orran approached, grinning and bowing.

"Is she for sacrifice, Master?" he enquired.

"If I say so. Until then, leave her alone."

The high priest leered, showing pointed yellow teeth. "A healer will be a powerful sacrifice."

"Indeed, but not now."

"We have prepared a feast in your honour, Master."

Bane grimaced and shrugged. "Very well."

Leaving the crowd to its hissing chant and obscene dance, Bane followed Orran into the temple. Passing the altar, they entered an open paved area surrounded by high, crumbling walls. Human skeletons and decomposing corpses decorated the walls, hanging from rusted iron rings. The grinning

skulls of those that had long ago lost cohesion lay amongst the bones at the base of the wall, forming a macabre border, a necromancer's flowerbed.

Mirra turned to find a half-rotted corpse hanging near her and recoiled, stumbling into Bane. He shoved her away, scowling. She shivered at the strong atmosphere of death and suffering within the walls, the silently screaming skulls that gaped in their shackles. Once the area had been roofed, the broken pillars dotted around it bore mute testimony to that. The smashed roof stones had been cleared away, leaving only some fallen pillars too heavy to move. Wooden carvings of fearsome creatures stood against the walls between the skeletons, their repulsive shapes adding to the hideous ambience.

Orran guided Bane to a row of low seats draped with animal skins of rare beauty, although badly cured, judging by their smell. As he settled on one, a deep booming issued from two mammoth drums hammered by muscular men. Mirra sat on the floor beside him, receiving a dark glance, probably for her earlier gall. Priests and dignitaries filed in, prostrating themselves to Bane before taking their seats.

Lesser officials lined the walls, muttering amongst themselves. The huge fire in the centre of the walled area radiated sweltering heat, and smaller cooking fires ringed it, over which whole animal carcasses hung on spits turned by sweating men. Other men tended to the fires and carved the meat onto platters that they placed it before the seated priests, and Bane.

Bane waved away a proffered platter, turning to Orran, who sat next to him, but out of reach. Even these people were afraid to come close to the Demon Lord, it seemed.

"I do not eat the food of the Overworld."

Orran looked awestruck, and Mord entered, as if on cue, to place a bowl of foul reddish food and a flagon of wine on the low table before he fled. Mirra rose and handed it to Bane, settling at his feet again. Orran gazed at the food with jealous fervour, as if he longed to try it, probably expecting it to have some special powers. Bane ate with no great appetite, but the priests fell upon the meat and tore at it like dogs. Bane looked bored, and Orran put aside his meat long enough to clap.

A line of naked male dancers entered, their faces painted in a parody of demons, and cavorted to the drumming. Bane watched, uninterested, until nude women entered and paired off with the men. Then his eyes flicked to Mirra, and he watched her as the dancers became frenzied, then sexual. She hid her face in her drawn up knees, and he chuckled.

After the feast, Mirra followed Bane as Orran guided him to a room in the temple, the only one that remained intact. A fire warmed it, and soft furs covered a huge bed. Carved furniture dotted the floor and gargoyles glared down from the corners. Bane surveyed the room, then turned as another priest entered, leading a string of young tattooed girls.

Orran beamed like a hungry shark. "For your pleasure, Master. How many would you like?"

Bane's brows knotted. "Get out!"

They fled, the girls squealing, and Bane slammed the door behind them. "These fools always think that evil is dirty, diseased and mutilated."

Mirra squatted by the fire. "Is it not?"

"Demons are not dirty. They are made from the elements."

"They smell."

"Yes, but they certainly have no diseases. That is for mortals, and demons are not mutilated, either."

Mirra sighed, poking the fire with a stick. "These people are lost."

"They are not lost, they worship my father, but they have fallen into foul habits."

"Like the dance?"

He smiled. "No, that was quite amusing. I mean trying to resemble demons. They do not even know what a demon looks like. They are not ugly, just different, and no man could ever look like one."

"He would need six arms and three eyes."

Bane shucked his cloak and flung it on a chair, then sat on the bed and eased off his boots. "A demon may take on any aspect he chooses, although he cannot change his substance." He stretched out. "The filth and mutilations are stupid. They do not know how to worship."

"So you will teach them?"

He grunted. "I would not waste my time. My father will wipe them out when he rises anyway."

"But they worship him."

"They are stupid, dirty humans."

"Is there anyone he will not wipe out?"

A short silence fell. "No. All mortals are worthless. This will be a world for demons. Now be quiet."

The floor was exceedingly hard, but Mirra slept a little.

Bane woke her when he opened the door to admit the cowering troll with breakfast. She ate the sweet bread and pastries with keen appetite, having consumed nothing the night before. Bane picked at his food without much enthusiasm, leaving most of it.

Orran and three other priests waited outside, and prostrated themselves when Bane emerged. Their soot-smeared, tattooed faces were more repulsive than ever in the daylight. Bane ignored their effusive greetings and marched outside, leaving them to scuttle in his wake. People scattered when he emerged, and only then did he turn to the high priest.

"Gather your men. You will help me to fulfil my task."

Orran fell to his knees. "Yes, Master! You honour us with your presence. Your need of us is most gratifying."

"I do not need you. I only make use of you."

Bane left the grovelling priest and mounted the demon steed, but the grey stallion was nowhere around. Mirra called to him, finding the warhorse waiting in the forest, unwilling to enter the village. She followed Bane on foot to the trees, and there mounted the horse. The horde gathered their few possessions and fell in behind her, the men of Orran's tribe bringing up the rear. Orran led them, grinning and swaggering. Mirra pitied them, for she had no doubt that Bane was leading them to a grisly end. The dark creatures that slunk through the forest around them drew many fearful glances from the new recruits, but the malformed followers kept their distance.

The Demon Lord led them far through the gloomy forest, up hills and through valleys. Orran's enthusiasm wilted in the damp heat of the day, as did his men's. As they travelled away from the river, the forest grew less gloomy and damp, and younger trees replaced the looming, moss-draped giants. The dimness gave way to dappled grey light, the overcast sky grim through the leafy canopy. Occasionally, they came across an ancient, rough-barked tree standing alone in a clearing, as if the rest of the forest shunned it. The trees thinned, and they crossed glades of bracken and grass, catching glimpses of deer. The last giant tree they passed lay fallen, blasted by lightning, and saplings sprouted from its rotting remains as the forest reclaimed the glade from which the massive tree had kept it.

At midday, they arrived at the lip of a deep chasm, where Bane stopped. Mirra rode up to the edge and looked down. Bones covered the bottom of the gorge in jumbled piles, heaped against the rocky sides. The huge bones of dragons mingled with human and animal skeletons, the bleached skulls of former adversaries piled together in death. Older bones pushed through the vegetation, grey and crumbling, newer ones gleamed ivory white. A broad swathe down the centre of the chasm had been trampled to grey dust, as whatever creature lurked below traversed to and from its lair. More recent kills mouldered, rotten flesh peeling from bones. A few fat crows feasted on them, but they were making slow work of it, and no larger, four-footed scavengers braved the chasm, it seemed.

Orran came over, puffing, and stopped at a respectful distance from Bane, the soot on his face streaked with paler runnels where sweat had washed it off.

"Master, what do we do here?" His black eyes darted.

Bane smiled. "You are going to kill the dragon."

"We? Master, it'll slay us all. You have the power, but we're mere mortals."

The Demon Lord looked down at Orran with something akin to loathing. "I will not waste my power slaying a beast. You will do it, so I can break the fifth ward."

Orran fell to his knees. "Master! I beg you, spare us! That's a great dragon. Men cannot slay it."

"I know what it is, and it can be slain, if there are enough of you."

Mirra's eyes stung as the ugly little man raised pleading hands, his face ashen beneath the dirt and garish tattoos.

"Lord, I beg you, have mercy!"

Bane frowned. "I have no mercy, fool. If you serve the Black Lord, you will do my bidding, if not, I shall kill you myself."

Orran cringed, his eyes wide, then abased himself. "It shall be as you say, Master. We will die for the Black Lord, with honour."

Bane gazed into the chasm again. Orran hastened back to his men, clutching the purported honour he had so quickly gained under the threat of death, and a keening arose from them. Bane's captains, who had come closer to hear his words, took his instructions to the rest of the army. The trolls and goblins muttered, and the rock howlers howled and jabbered. Mirra had not heard the rock howlers' banshee wailing before, and it made her hair stand up.

Bane's lips twitched into a slight, cruel smile. "This should be entertaining."

The doomed men filed into the chasm, their faces drawn. All hoped, Mirra knew, to be amongst the lucky few who survived and might be rewarded for this day's work. They crunched over the strewn bones, hefting their long spears, eyes scanning. The trolls walked bent-legged, their axes trailing, while goblins and rock howlers howled and gibbered.

Grims and weirds flitted through the shadows amongst the vegetation, wights found shady crannies in the rock walls. The leaders paused for a brief consultation, then dispatched some troops along the sides of the canyon to hide in the undergrowth, joining their red-eyed comrades. A smaller group of about fifty men continued up the centre, clutching their weapons in white-knuckled fists. At the far end was a dark area, partially hidden by trees, which must be the lair.

The men sidled closer, poised, crab-like, to flee, and the tension mounted as they neared the cave. Some bolted prematurely, and their jeering comrades called them back. When they were almost at the entrance, the air reverberated with a huge hiss. Something silver and gold shot from the cave like a flood of precious metal. The dragon emerged into the daylight in a burst of flashing colour, and its beauty awed Mirra.

Brilliant silver, gold and red copper gleamed in swirling patterns on a sinuous body that was still emerging from the cave when the soldiers had fled halfway down the gorge. Shining gold striped a rich copper head, while silver rimmed the glaring, slit-pupilled emerald eyes and flaring red-lined nostrils. A crown of silver spines sprouted between silver-trimmed ears, continuing down its back in ever-smaller protrusions that became mere lumps near its tail. Short, gold-striped legs, tipped with silver claws, propelled the great dragon along the chasm at an amazing speed.

It opened tooth-lined jaws, and its throat swelled like a bullfrog about to croak. A great blast of yellow fire seared from its mouth, and the fleeing soldiers died shrieking, only a few escaping by diving into the scrub on the canyon's sides. The dragon's beauty and the horror of the soldier's deaths transfixed Mirra. It slowed and approached the corpses, sniffing them. Its scales flashed, and it filled the chasm like a river of precious coins swirled artistically by a frozen current. Its chiselled, dished head lifted to gaze around. There was nothing evil about this ancient, wise natural creature.

Mirra could not bear to see it slain, and sent a silent warning in the flute-like dragon tongue. The beast glared at her in arrogant disbelief, then the troops boiled out of the undergrowth, charging it with spears poised, daggers raised and axes swinging. The dragon reared, its long neck arched towards its puny attackers. Its throat swelled, and bright fire razed the troops, killing dozens. Others reached it, daggers and axes ringing on golden scales, spears seeking passage between the armour. The dragon spun, spouting fire, its brilliant eyes darkening as its pupils dilated. More soldiers died, but others still attacked, some sliding their weapons between the scales to draw blood.

Deep crimson stained the copper-gold scales, and the dragon hissed. It reared up higher, raising its forefeet off the ground, and men rushed to attack its exposed belly. The beast dropped, crushing them,

and turned its head to burn more with a blast of fire. Trolls swung their huge axes in mighty blows, clanging against the metal scales. Rock howlers swarmed over the dragon like a red pelt, stabbing their daggers between its scales. Dark forms sprang, shambled or loped to join the fray, and vampires took flight. The dragon thrashed and hissed, throwing off the dark creatures that clung to it, tearing at its bright scales with claws and teeth, even as they keened and bled in the hated daylight.

Mirra's bile rose and she turned away, unable to watch anymore. She sensed the dragon's fury, mixed with confusion and surprise, thankfully too far away to share its pain. The screams of dying men, trolls and goblins, mixed with the dragon's hisses and explosions of fire, drifted up from the ravine. Bane remained on the rim, watching with cold interest.

Mirra dismounted and sat with her back against a tree, silently urging the dragon to flee. At first, only its fury answered her, but as time passed, this changed to grudging respect. Still it fought on, unwilling to be driven from its home. The rabble was like ants to it, easily killed, but too many to slay before they defeated it; sheer weight of numbers won victories of sliced hide and torn off scales from unprotected flanks. It grew desperate, fear overtaking its fury. A great dragon was a formidable beast, capable of defeating large groups of men, but this one fought an army. Smoke rose from the canyon as it burnt men and vegetation, its hisses turning to a high whining of frustration and pain.

Shouts of victory came from the gorge, and Mirra's eyes stung. With a harsh rasping, a glimmer of copper-gold slid past through the trees, moving with astonishing speed. The dragon had fled. Her heart leapt, and she jumped up, craning to see how badly it was injured, but it vanished in a flash of silver. Bane urged the demon steed over the rim, and she mounted the grey horse to hurry after him.

In the gorge, burnt bodies and crushed, bloody cadavers lay in jumbled piles. Golden scales glittered amongst them, testifying to the dragon's injuries. Mirra jumped down and hurried over to those who still twitched and moaned, eking out her healing amongst so many. The triumphant soldiers stood about in dazed relief, some nursing wounds or helping friends to bind theirs. Injured dark creatures crawled towards the safety of the shadows, black ichor oozing from their skins. Some merely flapped and kicked, unable to drag themselves along, but Mirra avoided them.

Bane rode through the carnage, barely glancing at the fallen men as he headed for the cave. Mirra hurried amongst the dying, trying to save as many as she could. More than five hundred men, trolls, goblins and rock howlers would never rise again, and the sweet stench of burnt flesh sickened her. The black, misshapen bodies of grims, weirds and grotesques evoked less pity, for these might very well be better off dead. She found Orran's body under a pile of goblins, half of his chest ripped away by the dragon's claws.

By the time she finished and sat on a rock, exhausted, her power mere dregs, Bane had been gone for some time. Realising that she was alone and vulnerable to demon attack, she hastened after him.

The demon steed guarded the cave entrance, and stepped into her path when she approached. Evidently Bane had instructed it to let no one enter, and she knew she would not win past. The steed snorted fire at her, and she retreated, looking about with deep unease for the tell-tale black circle that heralded a demon. None was in evidence, so she settled down to wait. Further up the ravine, the soldiers rested on the bones and opened their packs to extract wine flagons and dried meat, muttering.

Bane gazed up at the ward, searching for traps. There seemed to be none, but he hunted for them all the same. The ward hung innocuously under the cave roof, its solid symbol carved into the rock above it. He frowned, unable to find a trap. Surely the mage who had set it had not relied solely upon the dragon to protect it? The beast was daunting, but not enough to deter him. He reached up and ran a hand through the blue fire, which brightened at his proximity and stung his fingers, but he was still unable to sense the trap.

Of course, the best traps were undetectable, like the one that had injured him at the standing stones, and that experience made him wary. Each ward was stronger than the last, and each trap had proven more dangerous. Since the wards had to be broken in the opposite order of their creation, it stood to

reason that this one would be worse than the last. Slipping a little on the golden-copper scales that littered the floor, he wandered about, searching the walls, but still found nothing.

Annoyed, he stopped under the glowing blue pentagram again. He would just have to take the risk, since the ward had to be broken, whether or not he could find the trap. His frown deepened. Had the healer not been there to rub green gel into the wounds on his back, he might have bled to death at the standing stones. He shrugged it off, telling himself that he would have managed somehow. This time he was alone, however, with no help at hand should he be injured. Angrily he thrust the thought aside. He did not need anyone's help, least of all the simpering witch's.

Senses alert, he raised his hand and summoned his power. It surged through him with the usual ill feeling as he drew it from his flesh and bones, channelling it into his hand. Focussing on the ward, he unleashed it in a concentrated stream that struck the glowing lines and engulfed them in a shadowy fist. The ward shimmered, its lines wavering and pulsing.

The ward's strength surprised Bane, and he was forced to increase his power several times before it dimmed under the barrage. The glowing lines weakened and separated, then drew back together with amazing tenacity. It shattered with a brilliant blue flash and a hissing crack, its light vanishing in a shower of bright sparkles and fading gleams. Bane paused, blinking spots from his eyes as he waited for the trap to reveal itself. The cave remained still, except for the steady drip of water further in.

Bane raised his arm again and smote the carved pentagram with a burst of black power. The symbol shattered, showering him with bits of rock and dust, then a deep rumble echoed deep within the cave. He turned to run as the floor shuddered, but within three strides he realised he would not make it to the entrance. The cave's roof crazed with cracks that shot through the stone, spraying dust and splinters, accompanied by sharp reports. The giant rocks above him hung poised for an instant before they plunged downward with a mighty roar. Bane flung up his arms and shouted a single word of power. The dark magic surged through him as the rocks hammered him to the floor.

Mirra jumped up as a deep rumble shook the ground, and the cave entrance collapsed. A blast of air, laden with dust, pushed her back, forcing her to close her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, the cave was gone. Only a jumble of fallen rocks, raw from the earth, marked the place where it had been. Dust billowed around her, and she squinted as grit stung her eyes. The wound in the chasm wall bled pebbles that rolled past her feet.

"Bane!"

Mirra ran to pull stones from the immense pile, blinking away tears that were not dust inflicted. The demon steed stood immobile, its silver eyes blazing through the haze. Mirra slumped against the rocks, sorrow rising like a black tide. Bane was gone. The troops gathered to stare at the collapsed cave, murmuring in astonishment. Some scowled at her as if blaming her for the Demon Lord's demise.

Mirra bowed her head, an odd emptiness tempering her relief that the slaughter of innocents would stop, and two wards still bound the Black Lord below. She knew, deep in her heart, that she had lost something precious. The fact that Bane's suffering was finally ended brought a little consolation, and she wiped tears from her dusty cheeks.

The soldiers shouted as a black circle formed on the ground in front of the rubble, spreading with a soft hiss of burning soil. Mirra stared at it. Could Bane travel like a demon? Would he rise from the circle? The troops backed away, and a mud-form thrust up; an earth demon. The soil writhed, forming six arms, and the demon swelled as it rose. It pushed forth stony eyes and pinned her with a glare. Yalnebar.

"So, wench, we meet again," it grated, its voice like rocks rubbing together.

Mirra clutched at a desperate hope and indicated the tumbled stones. "The Demon Lord needs your help. You can get him out!"

Yalnebar laughed, a gravelly sound. "Bane does not need my help, stupid child."

Mirra's hope died. He must be dead. She recalled the last time the demon had attacked her. Now



that she no longer had power, its first blow would be fatal.

Yalnebar advanced. "I have come to finish my task."

Mirra backed away, wondering if she was fleet enough to outrun the ponderous demon. The fiend was indefatigable, however, and her defiance hopeless. Still, she could not simply stand there and allow herself to be pounded into the earth. She would avoid that grisly fate for as long as she could, no matter how fruitless it was in the end. As she was about to sprint away, the demon steed stepped between them, surprising her. Yalnebar glared at the fiery stallion with flinty eyes.

"He told you to guard her?" The earth demon sounded incredulous.

Evidently Yalnebar was privy to Orriss' silent communications. The demon's gritty mouth dropped open, then snapped shut in a grim line.

"The Black Lord himself has ordered her death, Orriss. Get out of my way."

The steed snorted fire, its flaming mane writhing hotly. Yalnebar tried to push the stallion aside, but the steed dug in its hooves, holding the demon back. The strange conflict that was arising amazed Mirra. A demon fighting a demon steed. The situation was hopeless, however. Bane may have ordered the steed to guard her, but he had not known he would perish in the cave. In time, more demons would rise to kill her, and the steed could not fight them all.

Yalnebar heaved against the steed. "Orriss, I do not have a lot of time. The Black Lord will be furious with you. I know Bane summoned you, but the slut must die."

Orriss snorted, shaking its burning mane, and the earth demon brought more arms into play, grasped the stallion's neck and twisted. The steed lowered its head and shoved the demon, making it stagger back, scorched earth crumbling from its arms as the stallion slipped from its grasp. Yalnebar brushed the loose earth off, obviously annoyed, and charged the demon steed, which lunged to meet it, the two thudding together. Both recoiled, Yalnebar shedding clods of soil, Orriss' fiery hide hissing. Mirra wondered what she should do. Fleeing was pointless. The demon would find her, and no one could protect her from it, save Bane. The steed would not be able to hold the earth demon back for long, and then more demons would come.

Mirra winced as the two clashed again, Yalnebar losing more soil, Orriss' fire dimming. She wondered if they would destroy each other, but surely a demon was more powerful than a steed. Mirra watched the diabolic battle with a sick feeling that her time was running out.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Revelation

Bane moved an arm, amazed that he was unharmed. A veritable river of dark power flowed through him, being consumed rapidly just to keep him alive. Using mind and body, he sat up, his flesh passing through the rock as if it was treacle. Rock walking was something his father had forbidden him to do, and he had only tried it once before. The strain was immense, already his temples pounded and his flesh burnt. He must get free before his power ran out, for he could not perform a Gather whilst rock walking. He wished his first instinct had been to Move and not run; now it was no longer an option.

Bane forced his incorporeal body through the stone, rising to his feet. The spell had worked just in time. He only hoped he was not bleeding. Not breathing was strange. His lungs longed for air, but in this state he did not need it. He waded through the rock, which required more effort than walking along the seabed. The stone was far harder to penetrate than water, even when he was magically transformed to a ghostly state.

One he could only maintain for a short time. The dark power surged forth to sustain the spell, and he tried to walk faster. Pockets of air allowed him spurts of speed, but then he slammed into rock again, moving through it in ultra-slow motion. The runes burnt, ignited by the need for power, adding a little fuel to his dwindling strength. He tried to remember how far it was to the cave entrance, but he was not sure how far he had run before the rocks had hit him. Not far, he assured himself.

Mirra stared at the two combatants, her heart lodged in her throat. She knew that when the demon won it would kill her, but the fight Orriss put up surprised her. Why did it bother? It was only a matter of time. Why did it fight so fiercely, its fire dimmed to a dull red glow, its burning mane and tail gone? Yalnebar had lost chunks of soil, and one arm had crumbled away entirely while another was missing half its length. She would have thought the demon would fight carefully, preserving itself while exhausting the steed, but it appeared to be battling with increasing desperation.

Yalnebar lashed out with a hammer blow, knocking the weakened steed aside, and advanced on Mirra. The demon steed picked itself up and raced between them again, but a sudden urgency seemed to galvanise Yalnebar. The demon thrust Orriss out of the way almost contemptuously, and the stallion was unable to hold it. Mirra retreated. It was one thing to realise that she was about to die, but quite another to actually stare death in the face. She turned and ran, then stopped, knowing it was useless. Yalnebar hurried after her, its remaining arms reaching for her.

Mirra tried Bane's trick, flapping a hand at it. "Begone!"

The demon smiled, its lips dribbling soil, and lunged for her, its fingers sliding off her shoulder as she spun away. She ran towards the soldiers, who scattered, diving into the shrubbery. Yalnebar staggered as the steed charged it, slammed into its side and threw it off balance. It growled and pushed Orriss away, its stone eyes locked on its prey. Mirra knew she was merely buying time, darting to and fro, but she could not give up. The steed's head was still proudly raised, but it was transparent, its power exhausted.

Mirra dashed away as the demon lumbered up to her, trying to think of a way to escape it. The soldiers watched the spectacle, crouched amongst the shrubs at the edge of the gorge. She turned and sprinted towards the cave on aching legs, gaining a little ground before veering towards the canyon wall. The demon was fast when it was allowed to gain speed, but too ponderous to change direction as quickly as she did. By scurrying back and forth, she stayed just out of its reach. She prayed for some sort of miracle, not knowing what, but despair spread cold fingers through her as she tired. She shrieked as the demon came perilously close, its fingers brushing her shoulder, leaving a smear of dirt.

The troops murmured and stared past Mirra and the demon, but she was so intent on escape she

barely noticed.

“Yalnebar!”

Mirra jumped as Bane’s voice cracked around the canyon, and the demon stumbled to a halt. With a glad cry, she ran to Bane, amazed that he stood in front of the rock fall, although his appearance frightened her. She stopped a few feet from him.

Bane was chalk pale and the whites of his eyes crimson. Sweat streaked his face, mixed with dust and blood, and his hair hung in lank, filthy strings. The rune scars glowed redly through his tunic, and he swayed a little as he glared at the demon. He ignored her, waiting for Yalnebar to face him.

“How dare you?” His voice was low and hoarse. He glanced at the demon steed, a pulse beating at his temple, his breath deep and rasping. “You fight my steed? Disobey my orders?”

Yalnebar appeared to shrink. “I obey the Black Lord.”

“It seems my father is prepared to go to any lengths, even waiting for something to befall me, then rushing you here.”

The demon nodded. “It seems so.”

Bane placed a hand on the rocks to steady himself. “I thought you had learnt your lesson last time.”

Yalnebar’s jet eyes glittered. “You seem a little... weak, Bane. Did you have a difficult time in the cave?”

“Would you like to try me?”

The earth demon shrugged. “Perhaps you cannot stop me.”

Bane smiled crookedly. “I can always stop you, demon.” He made a curt gesture. “Begone!”

The demon slumped slowly, its form blending and its face smearing. It tried to speak, but its mouth crumbled as it slouched sideways and collapsed. Bane leant against the rocks, closing his eyes, and she thought he would pass out.

“Bane? Are you all right?” She took hold of his arm.

He jerked free. “Do not touch me, damn you.”

Mirra retreated, but noticed that the sensation of evil within him had diminished to almost nothing.

Bane pushed himself away from the rocks, tottering. “Mord!”

The troll scuttled up, holding out the jar. Bane smeared green gel on the cut on his temple, then threw the pot at the troll.

“Fetch the potions, now!”

As Mord ran off, Mirra asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I am powerless, you moron. I had to walk through rock to get out of that damned cave. My father will send another demon, and if I do not perform a Gather I will not even have the strength to banish him.”

“But you need to rest.”

“Do you want to die?”

“No.”

“I will not let my father win. He has sunk to low tactics. I will not allow it.” He sat on a rock, and Mirra squatted beside him, placing a hand on his arm again.

He shook her off. “Will you stop pawing me?”

“It is the power,” she whispered, renewing her hold. “That is what makes you sick.”

“I know that. Let go of me.”

Mirra held onto him this time, sensing that he was too weak to do anything serious about it. “The evil I have felt in you, the power that pushes me away, it is gone.”

“It will soon be back,” he said, prising her hand off his arm.

“No! You must not.”

Bane glared at her. “Do not presume to tell me what to do.”

“Please, Bane. It is killing you.”

“Get away from me, witch.” He pushed her hard enough to make her sit down in the dust, jarring her tailbone. Mord raced back and placed two jars and a bottle on the boulder beside Bane. Mirra

longed to argue with him. The troll retreated to join the men, who watched from the safety of the bushes. Bane scowled at them, and she sensed that he preferred to perform a Gather in private.

He raised his voice to a hoarse shout. "You men, leave! If any of you watch this, I will strike you blind!" He gestured towards the edge of the chasm. "Go!"

The men bolted down the canyon in a willing stampede, pushing and shoving in their haste to get away, and soon Mirra and Bane were the only ones left. He shot her a cold look, but could hardly object to her staying when he had forced her to witness his ritual in the past. He stripped off his cloak and shirt, then drew his dagger. Dirt and sweat streaked his skin, and the rune scars glowed faintly still, flaring when he sliced into them. She tried to endure the pain, gritting her teeth while he carved the first rune, but hot tears trickled down her face, and she whimpered.

He glanced at her, his expression scornful. "If you do not like it, leave. Go and whine somewhere else. I have no wish to hear it."

Mirra wondered if he no longer wished to torture her, or simply found her an annoyance. When his power was depleted, he was definitely less vindictive, calmer and more approachable. It was as if the dark magic warped his reason, gave him loathsome thoughts and a love of torture and death. His anger remained, however, as did his faith in the Black Lord, causing him to take up the power again.

Mirra moved away, so she would not share his suffering too much. As he Gathered the dark power, his lips became an unhealthy shade of red again, and his eyes lost most of their humanity. Even from where she sat, it sickened her, the shadows becoming a part of him, where they did not belong.

When at last the Gather ended, Bane sagged, the empty blood cup falling with a clatter. Mirra hurried over to him, his sick pallor and the lines of strain and pain on his face worrying her. When she tried to touch him, he pushed her away and straightened. She knew that sheer willpower and pride fuelled him now, and his brow glistened with sweat.

"He comes."

A black circle formed on the ground, which sizzled as it burnt. The earth demon that rose from the soil, formed out of it, was a stranger. Mirra had been expecting Mealle, since Yalnebar was banished.

Bane waited until the demon was fully formed. "Draynabesh."

"Young Bane," the demon grated. "I was told you needed help."

Bane's lips curled in contempt, and he raised his chin. "Did my father send you?"

"No. Yalnebar said you were hurt."

Bane's sneer became a mirthless smile. "I, hurt? Impossible."

Draynabesh stepped closer. "May I aid you?"

Bane nodded at the steed. "Give Orriss your power."

The demon sidled towards Mirra. "You did not summon me."

"You refuse?"

"I came to help you, not Orriss."

"I do not need your help."

"But you do. You need to be rid of a problem."

Mirra quelled her longing to flee the demon's looming presence as it approached, so intent on her that it failed to note the significance of the pots, or Bane's lack of a shirt.

"Leave her alone," Bane said.

Draynabesh raised a huge fist, and Mirra yelped and grabbed Bane, releasing him with a scream as dark power surged through him. His eyes blackened, and he gestured, fire arcing from his fingers to strike the earth demon, burning a chunk of soil from its chest. Draynabesh staggered back, gaping, and Bane rose to his feet, his hands clenched, his expression menacing.

"You dare to defy me? Disobey me? You will pay!"

The demon cringed, opening its mouth, but Bane banished him with a harsh command. Then he spoke the curt words of summoning, and Draynabesh rose from a third black circle.

Again, Bane waited until it was fully formed. "Grovel, Draynabesh."

The demon fell to its knees and abased itself.

“You are dirt, Draynabesh. Dirt.”

“I am dirt, Demon Lord.”

“When next you feel you can defy me, remember this. I have but to summon you, and you will serve me.”

“I will serve you,” Draynabesh echoed.

Mirra sensed that the demon seethed with impotent rage, and wondered at the advisedness of Bane’s cruelty.

Bane was merciless. “Give Orriss your power.”

The demon rose, walked to the steed and touched it. Dark power flowed from it, thickened the steed’s translucent form back to solidity and ignited its burning mane and tail. Draynabesh returned to stand in front of Bane, some of its gritty substance falling away in a shower of dust.

Bane glared at it. “I am the Demon Lord, Draynabesh. Do not forget it.”

The earth demon bowed. “Yalnebar needs to be reminded.”

Bane nodded. “I shall do that. Begone!”

The demon was sucked back into the Underworld, leaving behind its soil in a foul heap. Bane leant against the rock. Mirra’s hands tingled from the touch of his dark fire, and her stomach remained a tight knot. Her sickness must have shown on her face, for he eyed her sourly.

“That will teach you to stop pawing me, will it not, witch?”

Mirra hung her head, nodding.

Bane turned away. “Mord!”

The troll appeared within a few moments to gather up the potions while Bane issued curt instructions. As Mord scuttled off, the steed approached, and Bane mounted with some difficulty, but growled when she tried to help. She mounted the grey stallion, following the Demon Lord to a glade where his army waited and his tent was pitched.

Under the eyes of his men, Bane stalked into the tent, but Mirra found him prone on the bed, an empty cup on the floor. He seemed oblivious to her, clutching his head, his eyes shut. Mirra winced at the pain he radiated, but knew he would reject her help if she offered it. Bane tossed and turned, unable to escape the pounding in his head, his face ashen.

His jaw muscles bulged as he ground his teeth, but he bore it in silence. She found it difficult to stand by and do nothing, so great was her longing to help him. From the words of the old mage on the Isle of Lume, she guessed that Bane had used too much of his power and taken a long stride closer to death. After all the times he had saved her, unwittingly quickening his doom, she had to do something, no matter what his reasons had been.

Mirra left the tent and searched the forest’s grassy glades for the wild flower she needed, and found a clump after half an hour. Picking a bunch, she ran back to the camp and borrowed a pot and a fire from some trolls, who watched curiously as she brewed her remedy. Even if Bane was angry, even if he beat her for it, she would somehow get him to drink it.

Bane still lay on the bed, his hair rumpled and eyes sunken. Gathering her courage, she went to him and touched his shoulder. His eyes opened, and the suffering in them made her recoil.

She held out the cup. “Mord made a stronger brew. I asked him to.”

Bane looked hopeful, then suspicious. “You tricked me before. You will not do it again.”

Mirra’s eyes stung at his mistrust and impending rejection. She knelt beside the bed. “Bane, I cannot stand to see you suffer so. Please drink it. It is not poison.”

He stared at her as if trying to plumb her soul. “You drink it.”

“I am not in pain. You need it.”

Lines of weariness scored his face as he closed his eyes. He had not slept well for days. “You drink some first.”

Mirra nodded, eager to comply with any condition he stipulated if it persuaded him to take the potion. She took a gulp of the sweet brew, which tasted of flowers, a pleasant flavour. Bane watched her, as if expecting her to keel over or change colour. She held out the cup, but his eyes remained

suspicious.

“Poison would not work on you, would it?”

She slumped. “I am trying to help you.”

Bane frowned, then sat up and took the cup. She thought he would hurl it across the tent, but he slugged it back, driven by the pain. Mirra suspected that death would have been a merciful release at that moment, and he was almost beyond caring. He rubbed his face, pushing back his thick mane. She waited for the miracle. It only took a few minutes. He sat with his head in his hands, waiting, she suspected, to strangle her the moment he felt something strange.

Mirra sensed his pain abate, slowly at first, then faster, washed away as if by the waves of a rising tide. When the last torturous clamp released his brain, he drew a deep breath and raised his head. The lines of suffering faded and his brow smoothed. He regarded her with a hint of confusion, then his expression hardened.

“So, this time it was not poison. Do not think you have gained my trust.”

She shook her head, smiling. “No, I will not.”

Bane raked back his hair and lay down again, relaxed now, but still exhausted. The sweat and dirt that had covered him when he had emerged from the cave were gone, burnt away by the dark power. She left him to sleep, happy that she had at last eased his suffering. Wandering outside, she joined some trolls playing knucklebones and happily losing a fortune she did not have, and they did not want.

As dusk fell, she spotted a light in Bane’s tent and quit the circle of players to enter it. The Demon Lord sat at the table, studying his maps again. He looked better than he had for weeks, and she smiled, well pleased with the result of her skill. He shot her a quick, blank glance, then went back to his reading, ignoring her as she settled on the floor.

Politely she waited until he put aside the map before asking the question that had been burning in her mind all afternoon. “What happened in the cave?”

Bane stared at her with hostile eyes, as if debating whether or not to tell her, then said, “Another clever trap. I was expecting something, but I could not find it. I broke the blue ward, and nothing happened, so I broke the solid ward, and the roof fell in.”

“How did you get out?”

“I used the magic of rock walking, and walked out.”

“Through the rock?” she asked, amazed.

He shrugged as if it was a minor matter they discussed, and not the use of stupendous amounts of magic. “Yes. It is not pleasant, cold and dark, like wading through thick treacle. That is what used up all my power. It requires a lot, and I cannot Gather at the same time.”

Mirra nodded, remembering again the haunting words of the mage on the Isle of Lume. “I think that is what they want.”

“Who?”

“The mages who set the wards. They foretold your coming, and planned for it.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“Remember the old mage? He said that each time you use your power, you come a little closer to death.”

“That is a lie.”

Mirra quailed a little, not wanting to enrage him, but her concern drove her on. “Maybe, but every ward you break forces you to use more power, does it not? The mages want you to use it so much that it kills you before you reach the final ward.”

“The mage also said my father planted the seeds of my destruction, and he would never do that. It is a lie.”

“Perhaps that is. Maybe your father does not know what it is doing to you.”

He looked pensive. “If that is true, you were also planted in my way to help kill me.” He glared at her. “I have used plenty of power to protect you from the demons.”

Mirra’s heart sank. She had not considered that. “But your father is sending the demons.”

"Then he cannot know it is harming me. He does not want me to die."

"No," she agreed, her mind racing. "At least, not until you have broken the last ward. Perhaps that is why he stopped sending them for a while, until you were trapped in the rock."

"My father does not want me dead. He has spoken of us sharing this world. Why would he kill me? Your fellow healers plan my death, after all, it is their world, and they are trying to protect it. They must have known the power would make me sick, and placed you in my way so you would cast your spell, forcing me to protect you. My father has been trying to save me by getting rid of you, and I should have heeded him."

"If that is true, I am causing your death." She shook her head, horrified. "I cannot believe healers would do that."

"This is war."

What he said made a lot of sense, and she raised her eyes to his, flinching at the hatred in them.

"Then I should leave, so you do not have to protect me anymore."

"My father will have you killed. I should be glad of that, but I am not. You will stay with me. Your vile spell has bound me to you. I cannot let you die, or kill you, until the spell is gone."

"But if he sends more demons, you will have to use the power."

"Then release me from the spell, if you are truly so concerned about me."

"There is no spell."

"You are lying. Your magic forces me to protect you every time something threatens you." His nostrils flared. "I will speak to my father. When he learns that the power is harming me, if it is, he will find a way to stop it. When he rises, he will break your spell, and I shall kill you myself." He ground the last words out.

She shrank from his vehemence. "Please do not. I do not want to die."

"Your spell is powerful, witch, but once it is broken, nothing will stop me killing you, and I shall enjoy it."

Mirra wondered what spell he was talking about. She had thought that Prince Holran was right, and Bane had come to like her, yet he railed against his gentleness towards her as if it was evil. That he thought her capable of using magic to force him to be kind to her was abhorrent. All she had done was try to help him, yet he hated her. Surely healers could not cast such a spell, but it made sense if they planned his downfall by forcing him to protect her. They were trapped. She was afraid to leave his unwilling protection, and he could not leave her, or harm her. The situation was diabolical.

"I am sorry."

"You are always sorry. What good does that do me?" He motioned to the tent flap. "Get out."

Mirra scrambled up and stumbled into the cool night air, her heart leaden. The only way she could save him was to leave; yet she wanted to stay with him. She did not know why, but it was not only because of the demons. Perhaps it was because she so desperately wanted to ease his suffering, yet her whirling mind rejected that idea. Her presence put him in danger. He could die because of her. Certainly that would end the threat to the land, but her heart contracted painfully at the thought of his demise. Healers were forbidden to kill, yet indirectly, she would if the plan worked.

Mirra wandered amongst the shadows under the trees, where moonlight dappled the ground with flecks of silver. If she left, perhaps the spell would be broken. It did not matter if the demons killed her. She would die when the Black Lord rose anyway. If she stayed, Bane might die, leaving the Black Lord trapped in the Underworld, but with Bane's death on her conscience. Yet surely the Black Lord would find another way to break the two remaining wards? He could have another son, or, if Prince Holran was right, kidnap another hapless child. In twenty years' time, another man would emerge from the Underworld and break the wards.

Perhaps if she left, the Black Lord would not bother to send a demon after her, for then Bane would be free of her. Maybe they would both live longer apart. She did not want to be the cause of anyone's death, especially Bane's. The healers, if they were responsible for this, were wrong. Killing Bane to save the world was wrong. It broke the healer's rule to preserve life. She could not countenance it,

much less be a part of it. Death was not something to be feared, and if the Black Lord destroyed the world, the good people would fly to dwell with the Lady and the bad would be rightfully punished.

Her mind made up, Mirra looked around, discovering that she had strayed far from Bane's tent. Deep shadows and moonbeams patterned the forest, where red eyes glowed, making her shiver. The dark creatures seemed to be stalking her, but perhaps they only watched her pass, their acute sense of smell detecting Bane's scent on her. She contemplated running back to his tent, but discarded the idea and gathered her courage. If she could reach an abbey, she would be safe, for demons could not tread on holy ground, but she was deep in the Old Kingdom.

The warhorse approached, snuffling and nudging her in welcome, as horses did. Using a fallen tree as a mounting block, she pulled herself onto his back and urged him to head for home, clinging to his thick mane as he raced through the shadows, his hooves drumming on the damp earth. Aboard his warm back, she felt a modicum of safety. The powerful surge of his muscles and the swiftness of their passage imparted a sense of security. Passing trees whipped her with thin branches, and the cold night air bit into her bare arms, making her huddle close to the stallion's warmth. An owl, ghosting overhead, hooted mournfully, as if in gentle warning of the course she had chosen.



## Chapter Fourteen

### Sacrifice

Bane woke slowly from a more peaceful sleep than he had enjoyed for months. His father had not visited him, so perhaps tonight he would brave the Black Lord's wrath and call him again. He needed answers. For a while he lay still, revelling in the lack of pain. Even his foot did not throb as much as usual. He yawned and stretched, wincing at the stab of pain from the healing wounds in his chest and flank as the surge of his muscles tugged at them. Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes and looked down at the girl, surprised to find her gone. She must have risen early and gone for a walk. His enhanced senses informed him that she was not in the camp, and he frowned, expanding his awareness.

A pang of anxiety went through him when he still could not sense her, and he stood up, pulling on his shirt, boots and cloak. The stupid girl had fled. Cold pain stabbed his chest as he stepped out of the tent into the pale dawn light. He hated the new feelings, cursing his inability to let her go. A demon, or Orran's people, would kill her, freeing him, yet the thought brought a fresh stab of pain and a deep sense of loss. Her spell still held him powerfully, and he could not resign himself to her loss. He had to get her back, but only to thwart his father. He would not let him win.

The demon steed came at his command, and he mounted. Turning its fiery head towards Orran's temple, he urged it to its best speed. She would retrace her steps right into their midst, of that he had no doubt, and he knew exactly what would happen to her when they caught her. The steed flew over the earth at a speed no mortal horse could hope to match, its hooves barely touching the ground, its tail streaming out in a plume of fire, scorched hoof prints smoking in its wake.

Mirra shifted in the cramped cage, the thin slats digging into her. Orran's people had ambushed her only a few hours after she had left Bane's camp, leaping from the undergrowth with screams of glee, causing the warhorse to shy. She had slid off into the crowd of warriors, who had laughed and toyed cruelly with her, pushing her from one to another, slapping and pinching her, dragging her upright by her hair. Their rough hands had groped her in a way that had sickened her. Bane, when he had beaten her, had not added insult to injury in that manner.

The stallion had returned to the fray, biting and kicking the tattooed men, but they had driven him away with clubs and spears. Afraid that he might be injured, she had told him to flee, knowing he could do little against so many. When the warriors tired of their cruel sport, they had bound her and forced her to walk back to their village in the gloomy forest.

There, they had pushed her into the cage and gone to celebrate, leaving her to spend the rest of the night curled up in its confines, trapped like the innocent forest creatures whose fate she now shared. Her plan seemed foolish now, for it had only hastened her death. At least Bane was free of her, and whatever spell the healers had cast. Whether he succeeded or failed, she would not be the cause of his death. She prayed until dawn's rosy streaks brightened the eastern sky, then the drums started their monotonous beat, drowning out her fervent whispers.

As the sun rose, people came to stare at her, poke her with sticks and taunt her with cruel insults. Mirra pitied their depravity, especially the children. The sharp sticks pierced her skin, but there was neither pain nor blood. What little of her power remained protected her, but the cutting out of her heart on the sacrificial altar would certainly kill her. Her lack of pain spoilt the people's enjoyment, and many resorted to spitting at her. She bore it stoically, using the hem of her dress to wipe it away.

The sun had barely risen above the trees when the warriors came for her. They dragged her out and shoved her towards the temple on numb legs. A hissing, chanting crowd watched her pass, undoubtedly imagining the favours they hoped to gain from her death. The warriors sent her stumbling forward with rough pushes, and she narrowly avoided colliding with a young boy who darted out of the

crowd to kick her shins. Many of those who lined the road were armed with thin switches with which they lashed her.

The temple loomed ahead, more frightening now that it was to be the place of her death. The gargoyles leered at her, mocking her helplessness, and the crowd's chanting, set to the drumming, rose in a frenzy of anticipation. Terror robbed her of the serenity her prayers had imparted, and she fell to her knees in the dust. The crowd laughed, jeering as the guards dragged her to her feet and half carried her up the steps into the temple.

At the altar, a priest stepped up to her, his eager, beady eyes roving over her in a way that made her skin crawl. The stained stone altar oozed the sickening pain of its many victims, and the priest shouted arcane words she did not understand, making the crowd roar. Her heart hammered, and she tried to calm herself, thinking of the Lady waiting to welcome her to an eternity of happiness in the light realm.

The chanting went on and on. The drums pounded in her ears and dancers cavorted about the temple, extorting the crowd to new heights of ecstatic worship. The thick, cloying smell of sweat and incense stung her nose, and the torches' acrid smoke made her eyes water. The scene became mercifully blurred as the narcotic smoke dulled her senses, but when two priests lifted her onto the altar, terror spasmed her gut and bile stung her throat. They bound her arms to rings set in the stone, and she stared at the temple roof.

Mirra's thoughts turned to Bane, wishing she had seen him laugh just once from joy, instead of bitterness and malice. What would he look like, without the perpetual sneer that twisted his mouth or the lines of rage and suffering that furrowed his brow? She sobbed, fighting to quell the hysteria that bubbled in her breast, choking back the scream that longed to burst from her. Around her, the chanting, drumming and dancing mingled into a dull roar that beat at her like storm waves upon a beach. Her chest was cold, her throat dry and burning, and the chill stone jabbed into her back.

The priest stopped raving, and the drums and chanting ceased at the same moment, plunging the temple into a deathly silence. For Mirra, the world seemed to recede, leaving only evil smells and lurid, flickering shadows. The priest stepped up to the altar and loomed over her, holding a knife. A ripple of excitement went through the crowd as it anticipated the blow, and she closed her eyes. In her mind's numb blackness, a small, frightened voice cried in fear, calling upon the Lady for mercy and redemption. The priest's robes rustled as he raised the knife, then a wave of cold power made her stomach heave, and she opened her eyes.

Bane stood over her, holding the sacrificial knife poised above her heart. She thought her eyes were playing tricks on her as she scanned his furious features, then he brought the knife down in a flashing stroke. Mirra cried out, bracing herself for the shock of the blow, but instead the blade shattered on the stone with a crack, a hair's breadth from her ribs.

The Demon Lord leant closer, his eyes brilliant. "You deserve to die, you infernal imbecile, but I cannot let you. Did I not tell you that? Did you think you could escape me? I am the Demon Lord! I will decide your fate, not you!" Drawing his dagger, he slashed the ropes that bound her wrists, took hold of her arm and jerked her upright, almost nose-to-nose with him. "Did you think to flee back to your precious little abbey and hide there?"

"Yes," Mirra whispered, still stunned by his sudden, impossible presence. Her eyes clung to his pale features, all else a blur. His frigid eyes sliced into hers, tearing away the warm pleasure of his rescue and bringing the rest of reality into focus again. Orran's people were all prostrated, foreheads pressed to the floor in the presence of the Demon Lord. Hot tears of shock and relief spurted into her eyes.

His voice was a low, furious growl. "Nowhere in this world is safe from me. Nowhere!"

"I wanted to hide from the demons, not you." A sob closed her throat, and she gulped. "I do not want you to die protecting me." She reached out to him, begging for understanding, for a gentling of his expression to tell her that he appreciated her concern and was moved by her selflessness.

Bane slapped her, sending her rolling off the altar. He strode around it and straddled her, leaning down to shout, "Fool! Imbecile! You cause me nothing but trouble! You would never have reached an abbey. The only reason you are still alive is because these people captured you before my father sent a

demon. When they took you, he did not need to, knowing they would do the job.”

Although the blow had not hurt, she raised a hand to her cheek, blinking. “I am sorry.”

“Damn you!” Bane swung away to kick an unfortunate priest. Mirra had never seen him so enraged. He was frightening, demonic, yet he kept the dark power leashed. He turned back to her, and she cringed. Gripping her arm, he yanked her to her feet and dragged her from the temple, kicking at men who did not move quickly enough from his path. The crowd remained prostrated as he threw her onto the demon steed with bruising force, mounting behind her. The stallion’s foul power made her retch, and Bane snapped a curt command. The power vanished, and the stallion’s fire dimmed.

The steed’s speed as it raced back to the camp amazed Mirra. The earth blurred beneath its flying hooves and its flaming mane licked harmlessly at her. She sat forward, avoiding contact with Bane, who radiated rage and resentment. His fury dampened her elation at his timely rescue, yet her heart warmed, disregarding his past cruelties and present brutality. He had saved her. The Demon Lord had ridden back to rescue her. Even though she believed him when he said he merely rose to his father’s challenge, and would one day kill her, she was still honoured to be rescued by such a powerful man.

At the camp, he pushed her off and dismounted to haul her into his tent. He flung her down and sat on the bed, his anger fading somewhat. Picking up a pot, he opened it and smeared green salve on his hand, which bled where the sacrificial knife had cut him when he had smashed it. A pregnant silence fell, and Mirra stared at his boots.

Finally he said, “You should long for my death. You cast the spell to cause it, now you try to prevent it?”

Mirra licked dry lips and raised her eyes. “I cast no spell. If there is one, the healers must have done it, and I am just their tool. But I do not want your death.”

His brows rose. “I am destroying your world, breaking the wards to free my father. How can you want me to live?”

“Killing cannot be justified. To kill you is just as evil as your killing other people. If healers start to kill, even to save the world, we are all doomed. Armies may fight you, soldiers may try to kill you, but the Lady forbids healers to cause death.”

Bane raked back his hair, making it sweep from his temples in blue-black feathers. His mood, typically, had now gentled entirely, as if the spurt of rage had temporarily cleansed him of the bitterness and anger that always hung about him like a dark cloud.

“What would happen to one who did?”

She shrugged, lowering her gaze to his boots once more. “Some say she would suffer the death herself, not her victim, and the Lady would reject her. Some say she would lose her powers. Certainly she would be cast from her abbey.”

“If this is true, how can the healers plot to kill me?”

“They do not. They cannot. It is impossible. Yet even if they do not, the result would be the same, and I do not want to be responsible for your death.”

“Because of what would happen to you?”

She glanced up, startled by this suggestion, so far from the truth. “No, even if nothing happened to me. Even if they gave me a medal and the Lady congratulated me for it, I have no wish to kill you.”

“Even though I intend to kill you.”

“Even so,” she agreed.

“Even though, by killing me, you could save all the people in this world?”

Mirra hesitated. “I would die to save them, but I will not kill for it.”

Bane shook his head. “I cannot believe you. Your pious prating smacks of lies, and my father said you were sent to deceive me. You have tried hard. Many would have been misled by now, but I have faith in my father. I trust him, not you.”

“Then you do not believe that the power will kill you, or that the food you eat, the wine you drink is poisoned?”

“Poisoned!” He snorted. “You are the poison, and the poisoner. But you will fail. You bide your

time, thinking to gain my trust, but you will not.”

“If that is so, I am running out of time. You have only two wards to break.”

“Yes, you will be getting desperate soon, but I will watch you. Perhaps this running away to save me was all a ploy to make me use the power again, since you think it will kill me. But you failed. I did not use any.” He leant closer. “I could have been there long before, had I used it. You were lucky I was in time, or perhaps unlucky.”

She closed her eyes. “I was lucky. But I was not trying to make you use the power.”

“We shall see how lucky you are.”

Another thick silence fell, and Mirra drooped. After her sleepless, uncomfortable night, she was exhausted, hardly able to listen to him, much less hold an intelligent conversation. He left, and she lay down, longing for sleep. It seemed only a second later that he shook her awake again.

“Get up, we are leaving. Your horse has returned.”

Bane left her to shake off the sleep that tried to drag her back into its soft black folds. As she tottered from the tent, it collapsed behind her as Mord packed it away. The grey horse awaited her, saddled, and she climbed onto his back. Bane set off aboard the demon steed, Mirra following, and the grumbling army trudged after them.

Mirra hardly noticed the day pass. Her weariness blanked her mind and dulled her perceptions. The open woodland gave way to thick forests that slowed the pace to a walk, and the horse’s plodding lulled her with its gentle swaying. The stallion followed Bane, Mirra sagging on his back, dimly aware that they had once more entered a gloomy, dripping forest. At times, she nodded off, but the horrible slipping sensation as she started to slide from the saddle jerked her awake. Only when they arrived at a city did the stallion’s tension jolt her into wakefulness.

The forest’s mighty, looming trees ended abruptly, as if the soil beyond that point had been poisoned, for not even a blade of grass grew in it. Dead brown earth, trampled to rock-like hardness, surrounded the Old Kingdom city. Once a mighty metropolis, the ancient city’s huge stone buildings crumbled into ruin, and the streets, wide enough for ten horses to traverse abreast, were cracked and worn. Statues of demons, heroes and gods, some forgotten, others recognisable, and a few that had never existed, lined the broad roads. Guttering flames and foul offerings clustered at their feet, bird droppings streaked their impassive stone faces.

A great procession of red- and black-robed priests, wearing gargoyle masks, met Bane as he rode into the city. A hissing chant of greeting rose from the crowd that gathered around him, and while these people honoured their evil lord with cleanliness, they still had tattoos and disfigurements. They performed a reverent prostration, their arms outstretched in abject worship, until Bane made an impatient gesture that brought them upright, heads bowed. When the high priest had read a long oratory of welcome, the priestly procession parted to admit the demon steed into their midst, forming around Bane in an honour guard. Soldiers in smart green and black armour held back the crowd as the Demon Lord rode past, and the priests, carrying long staffs tipped with tiny torches, strode beside him.

Mirra was shocked by the number of crippled beggars that fringed the crowd. Never had she seen so many people with missing appendages, eyes, ears and even noses. Some wore leg chains or iron collars, and all carried a tin cup, which they rattled at the people who watched the procession. Filthy rags covered them, and their eyes gazed hopelessly from sunken sockets in emaciated faces. She guessed that they must be slaves, perhaps captured over the river and brought here to live out their lives in misery, or sacrificed when occasion demanded it. The sight of their mutilations aroused her pity, and she longed to go amongst them and give what help she could.

The grim city was devoid of greenery; the mostly windowless brown stone buildings stood in ugly rows, unrelieved by any ornamentation save gargoyles and carved runes. Crows perched atop walls and statues, watching the people below with glittering black eyes. Their hoarse cries echoed amongst the monstrous buildings, adding a taint of corruption to the malevolent atmosphere. Mirra thought it fitting that carrion birds would inhabit a city of evil worship. The ride through the metropolis seemed interminable, but eventually the procession halted in front of an enormous temple set atop a shallow

stepped pyramid.

Columns held up a flat stone roof, much like the one Orran's people worshipped in, only this one was larger, grander, and intact. Mirra wondered how the huge slabs of stone, fifty feet long and at least three feet thick, had been raised to balance on the columns. The grey rock had a smooth, glazed surface, similar to that of Torlock Keep, which made her think magic had been used in its construction.

Stone serpents coiled up the columns, their eyes set with emeralds. Deeply etched runes, meaningless to her untrained eyes, covered the roof slab's edge. The honour guard chased away a huddle of human misery on one side of the steps; another group of mutilated slaves chained together. Many were so weak they could barely walk, and their fellows helped them as the guards lashed them with long whips. Mirra swallowed a whimper at their pain. Bane seemed oblivious to them.

The Demon Lord halted the steed at the bottom of the steps, where two lines of torch-bearing priests flanked the route upwards. She thought he would ride into the temple, but he dismounted, and she followed suit. Bane flicked the edges of his cloak over his shoulders, revealing the crimson lining, and mounted the steps. She hesitated before following, acutely aware of the priests' eyes upon her. Bane traversed the torturously steep ascent with ease, but Mirra's legs ached by the time she was halfway up.

At the top, she followed him across a vast stretch of black marble floor flanked by the seemingly endless ranks of red-robed, tattooed priests. All of them had a third, glaring red eye painted on their foreheads, and their cheeks bore long scars from blood lettings. Torches cast dancing golden brilliance, banishing almost all the shadows that tried to gather now that the sun had set. Ugly black statues huddled in niches, and gargoyles leered from corners.

The clicking of Bane's boots was loud in the hushed, reverent atmosphere, and Mirra's skin crawled. The priests' trappings and rich clothes made it clear that this was a prosperous people, secure in their city, righteous in their worship of the Black Lord. Many wore tarnished copper nose rings and huge golden earrings that pulled their ears into long, sagging flaps. All glared into space, their expressions blankly fierce, but as Bane passed them, each prostrated himself, causing a wave that followed the Demon Lord the length of the temple.

A tall, lean man rose from a golden throne behind a wagon-sized black marble altar. He wore black robes, and gold glittered at his throat and winked on his fingers. His bald head gleamed in the torchlight, and his dark eyes glinted in a cadaverous, hook-nosed face. Stepping aside, he bowed to Bane, indicating the vacated throne.

"Welcome, Demon Lord. I am Emperor Agden, and your presence here honours us."

Bane stopped a pace away and regarded him, resting one leg in a relaxed manner. A dozen high-ranking priests flanked the throne, gold-trimmed cowls hiding their faces. As Bane waited, the silence grew oppressive, only the spluttering hiss of the torches disturbing it. Mirra found it hard to breathe as the tension grew acute; the air seemed too occupied with animosity to enter her lungs. The priests stood as if carved from stone, but the Emperor shifted, his eyes darting.

"Do we give offence, Lord?"

"You do. Do you think to meet me as an equal?"

The Emperor's brows knotted. "You are only the Black Lord's son, and I am emperor of the city that was once his, and is the greatest city to worship him."

Bane's lip curled. "You are a mere human, yet you presume to make no obeisance to me, as even the demons do."

"The demons are just minions of the Black Lord. I lead his loyal people." Agden drew himself up.

Bane's mien was threatening. "I will not tolerate your disrespect. Prostrate yourself, or die."

The Emperor's scowl deepened, but he sank to his knees and pressed his face to the marble floor.

Bane set his boot against the man's neck, holding him down. "Do not think to defy me, human. You are nothing to me." Turning away, he stalked over to the altar and leant against it.

Agden rose to his feet and motioned to the throne again. "Take what is yours, Demon Lord."

"It looks uncomfortable." Bane yawned. "I am tired. Show me to a room."

Agden appeared shocked. "We have planned a sacrifice in your honour, Lord."

Bane shrugged. "Get on with it then."

Mirra shuddered. They were about to slaughter some hapless person, and she would have to watch.

Agden bowed again, his face now set in respectful lines. "First we have prepared a feast and dancing to celebrate your arrival. The city waits to hear the drums signal the start of the revelry."

Bane scanned the priest-lined temple and the silent crowd that gathered at the bottom of the steps. "I do not eat Overworld food, Agden. I will dine in my room, and return for the festivities and sacrifice. Bring the troll who bears my packs to me there."

Agden's jaw dropped, but Bane turned his back on him, and a senior priest came forward to guide him. Once again, Bane was led to a sumptuous chamber at the back of the temple, decorated with rich velvet and carved gilt chairs. Deep crimson silk covered the vast bed, and several tapestries depicted the Underworld. The huge fireplace held a cheerful blaze, and thick rugs warmed the floor. Lines of runes ran around the walls, angular characters that meant nothing to Mirra. She had not seen such opulence since King Holran's palace. A feast of rare delicacies was spread on a table in front of the fire, and red wine glowed in cut-crystal decanters.

Bane surveyed the room and nodded to the priest, who bowed and left. Mirra sat beside the fire and sampled the food while Bane studied the runes on the walls.

When he joined her, he frowned. "This Agden thinks too much of himself. I do not trust him."

Mirra bit into a honey cake. "Surely he can do nothing to you?"

"This place is a nest of vipers. He might think to try to kill me. He does not know my power." He settled on a chair.

"Why would he do that? He worships your father."

Bane stared at the fire. "It is easy to worship my father while he is trapped in the Underworld, but a man like Agden would not like to have to grovel before his lord in the flesh. He would rather the wards remain, so he may have his petty power in my father's name."

Mirra gazed at his profile. "You think he will try to kill you?"

"Probably."

"Why not summon a demon to guard you?"

He looked at her. "Do you think I need a demon to guard me?"

"No. Of course not." She glanced away, flustered. "But it would stop any attempt, so you would not have to worry about it."

He smiled. "I am not worried about it. I am looking forward to it. I shall enjoy killing that arrogant bastard. I could order him to be the sacrifice tonight, but I think I will let him try."

Mirra concentrated on her food. "May I stay here, while you go to the ceremony?"

Bane's eyes narrowed, a look of contempt entering them. "I suppose it would not be to your liking." "No."

"Very well; I shall set the runes to prevent any demons entering, so you will be safe. This place has power these fools do not know how use. The very stones are steeped in it."

Mirra had been wondering why her hackles had risen when she entered the city, and still bristled, but that explained it. She munched a vegetable dish bathed in sweet sauce. Bane watched her with a kind of fascination.

"Why not try some?" she asked.

He frowned. "Still trying to poison me?"

"It is not poison. It is good food."

"To you, not me."

A knock came from the door, and Mord entered at Bane's command, carrying a bowl of the reddish stew and a flagon of wine. When he left, the Demon Lord poured a glass of wine and sampled the stew.

Mirra eyed at it. "That *is* poison."

She jumped as Bane's fist crashed down on the table, making the crockery and glasses rattle. "My father sent me this food."

She met his glare. "What does it taste like?"

He shrugged. "Food. How would I know? I have not eaten anything else. They go to a lot of trouble to provide this for me, since demons do not eat, and nor do the dead."

"Is your father a sort of demon, too?"

"No. He is a god."

Mirra coughed and took a gulp of water. Bane returned his attention to his plate.

"How can he be a god?" she asked. "This is the Lady's domain."

"Do you think your goddess is the only celestial being in this world? Arkonen is a god too. Once he was a man, then he was sent to the Underworld and became the Black Lord."

"He was human?"

He nodded. "A long time ago. He cast aside his mortal body when he became the Black Lord, so he is not human anymore."

"People cannot become gods."

"Not usually, but he did."

"How?"

"I never asked him."

Mirra recalled her lessons about the birds and the bees. "If he has no mortal body, how can he be your father?"

"He created me with his power, stupid girl. I had no mother."

"But you are mortal."

"I had to be, to break the wards." Mirra shook her head, and Bane frowned, spooning his stew. "You seem unconvinced."

"Your power cannot create. It only destroys."

He seemed to consider this for a moment, then shrugged. "He must have found a way."

"Prince Holran -"

"No!" Bane banged the table again, making her jump with the crockery. "I am no farm wench's whelp."

Mirra knew arguing with him would only put him in a foul mood. He finished his stew, then rose. Picking up the wine flagon, he wandered about the room, running his fingers over some of the runes on the walls. The runes he touched glowed faintly red, and he turned at the door.

"You will be safe in this room. Do not venture out of it."

Mirra nodded. She had no intention of going anywhere. Her eyelids drooped, and she longed for sleep. When the door closed behind him, she contemplated the big, soft bed, which was a great temptation, invitingly empty.

Unable to resist, she stretched out on it, revelling in the forbidden luxury. Even at the abbey, her bed had not been this comfortable. She sank into it with a blissful sigh, cradled in its silken folds. She would wake before Bane came back, she decided. His ceremony would no doubt be long, maybe lasting all night. There was no harm in napping for a while.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Betrayal

The murmur of conversation died away as Bane entered the hall, and the priests who sat around the banquet table pushed back their chairs with a great scraping of wood on stone and prostrated themselves, as did the servants who attended them and the priests who lined the temple's perimeter. Bane experienced a trickle of pleasure, more so now than when that damned girl watched with horrified eyes. Agden's forehead hovered several inches above the floor, and Bane strolled over to the Emperor, who bowed a little lower at his approach.

Bane placed a boot on the Emperor's neck and pinned him down with a merciless heel. "You try my patience, Agden. You have been warned, so beware, lest I punish you."

"Yes, Lord," Agden croaked.

Bane lifted his foot and walked away, signalling to the priests to rise. Agden rubbed his neck, his hatred ill-concealed. He clapped, and the servants cleared the platters, passed fingerbowls amongst the priests and refilled empty wine goblets. Evidently the banquet table had been brought in especially for the feast, because a quartet of strapping men carried it out and others removed the chairs. The priests moved to the cushioned marble benches that lined the temple just inside the pillars. Bane filled a cup with his wine and sat on the high-backed throne. The crowd that waited outside the temple murmured, a distant buzzing, like a hive of bees.

Agden clapped again, and drums began to beat. Dancers filed into the temple, oiled, muscular men and scantily clad girls. The crowd outside cheered as its members initiated their festivities. Bane watched the dancers gyrate, undulate and pirouette, finding it rather boring.

It did not match the Underworld's ceremonies, where hundreds of naked droges would cavort with demons in man form, the great booming of the huge human-skin drums beaten by earth demons echoing around the massive chamber. The dark magic swirled around the cavern and the Black Lord himself would preside, clad in a handsome droge form, his dark presence adding to the excitement. The inner fire's lurid glow lighted the scene, the temperature rising as fire demons took true form, their bright flames winding about the dancers, the man-shapes melting into forms that would give these priests nightmares.

Then the condemned souls would be brought in and endowed with droge bodies at the Black Lord's gesture. The demons would torture them in the most horrific ways conceivable, their screams the music to go with the drums. The dark magic would thicken the air until Bane found it difficult to breathe, the shadows drawn from their niches to clothe the scene in gloom.

How had his father created him? The question popped into his mind unbidden. The girl was right, the dark power could not create life or heal, only destroy. What was he, really? He had always wondered why he was not like the demons, but trapped in a weak mortal body. His father had assured him that it was necessary, so he could break the wards, but where had the body come from? He had grown up in it, yet his father had always told him that he was not human.

Bane could still remember his words.

*"I had to give you a human body, son, but that is temporary. You are not human. You are my son."*

The drums stopped, interrupting Bane's thoughts. The sweating dancers ran off, and the priests stood up.

The sacrifice was brought in, a slender, tattooed girl of about the same age as the healer, who stared blankly ahead. Long black hair flowed down her back, and her face was painted to enhance her beauty. Her floating, diaphanous white robe did almost nothing to conceal her lithe figure. Robbed of fear by drugs, she walked calmly between two priests, a dreamy smile on her lips. Bane had no doubt that she had been preparing for this moment all her life, and was honoured to die for the Black Lord.

As the girl reached the altar just a few feet from Bane, the priests began a droning chant, punctuated



with clapping and gong ringing. The priests lifted the girl onto the altar, where she lay, her eyes closed, relaxed and vulnerable. Bane's mind flashed back to the morning, when he had entered the temple and found the healer stretched out like that, the priest poised to plunge the sacrificial knife into her breast. His fury and fear had almost made him blast the priest to a crisp, and he had Moved, appearing beside the man and nearly giving him heart failure.

When he had plucked the knife from the priest's fingers, he had wanted to kill her; the urge had sickened him. He could not, however; his warring emotions had turned the knife aside and smashed it on the stone, overcome by a strange horror at the thought of her dying. Never had he experienced such confusion before, and her diabolical spell had defeated him yet again. He had struggled against the urge to show her kindness, give her comforts, and try to please her. He could not help talking to her now, nor did he like to see her suffer, but he would do no more than that. The humiliation was immense, and he longed for the day when his father would break her spell and he could look at her with only a strong lust for her death. He had lied about not using the power to save her this time; he had not wanted her to have the satisfaction. The use had been slight, anyway, and the headache that followed had been negligible.

The chanting died away, and the priest stepped up to the altar, raising the knife. He called upon the Black Lord to accept the girl's soul and grant his people protection and prosperity in return, then plunged the weapon into her breast. She died silently, her blood running into the altar's carved gutters, which channelled it into braziers to be burnt. Bane sensed the faint surge of dark power that was drawn up through the altar stone, taking the girl's soul down to the Underworld. His father would find her uninteresting, and quickly consign her to the Land of the Dead. Agden's soul would bring him far more pleasure. No doubt he would milk the last drop of enjoyment from the arrogant bastard's agony.

The sight of the dead girl sparked a sudden, irrational fear for the healer, and Bane stretched out his senses to find her asleep in the room. Relaxing, he watched the priests file past the altar, dip their fingers in the blood and daub it on their faces while they chanted praises. He cursed himself for worrying about the wretched girl, forced to by her foul spell.

The gold throne jabbed his tailbone, and he shifted. At least the discomfort kept him awake, but he looked forward to retiring. He rested his chin in his hand and leant on the throne's arm as they cut out the girl's heart and burnt it, not caring if he looked as bored as he was. Agden shot him baleful glances when he thought Bane was not looking, and Bane promised himself that the Emperor would suffer when he died.

By the time the dancers came back, Bane had had enough. Rising to his feet, he motioned as everyone prostrated themselves. "Carry on without me. I am tired. Agden, you can have your seat back. You undoubtedly have the calluses for it."

Agden radiated hatred, and Bane chuckled as he strode out. The music started up behind him again as he walked along the torch-lighted passage, pushing open the door to his room.

The girl was stretched out on the bed, and he strode over to it, intending to order her off, but when he reached her side he could not bring himself to wake her. She looked so peaceful and innocent, breathing softly through parted lips, like a child. Then again, he reflected, she was little more than a child, a mere girl, not a woman yet. With an annoyed grunt, he swung away to stoke the fire.

Sitting beside it, he pulled off his boots and inspected his blackened foot. He was certainly not going to sleep on the chair or floor. The huge bed still had plenty of space. The situation, he thought angrily, was becoming unbearable. Her spell was so strong now that he could not even get her off his bed if she chose to occupy it. He had no wish to sleep so close to her, but nor did he want to disturb her. At least he would have some satisfaction from her horrified reaction when she found him beside her in the morning.

Bane removed his cloak and shirt, returning to the bed. Lightly as a cat, he climbed onto it and settled down on his back, still some two feet from her, yet uncomfortably aware of her presence. It kept him awake for a while, but eventually he fell asleep.

*The Black Lord appeared in an inferno of dark fire, bright sparks hissing from his visage. The*

scene behind him was of a raging red sea, a firestorm lighting the foaming waves from below. Bane knew he was furious, but faced him unafraid.

*"Bane, you are falling into a trap."*

*"Why does the dark power make me ill, Father?"*

*"Because I had to give you a human body, of course."*

*"Where did the body come from?"*

*The Black Lord shook sparks from his hair. "I took it. What has this to do with anything?"*

*"Is the power killing me?"*

*"No. It makes you sick, that is all. You have been listening to that witch's lies again."*

*Bane nodded. "She gave me a medicine for my headache. The one Mealle gave me no longer helps, and the pain becomes unbearable."*

*"You must not consume anything from the Overworld." The Black Lord's eyes flared, and the burning sea behind him darkened, growing wilder. "You can live with the pain. I taught you how. Have you forgotten your lessons?"*

*"No, but the pain increases each time I use the power." Bane met his father's glare. "The mage on Lume said that you planned my death."*

*The Black Lord sighed, his eyes dimming. The mood vision changed to a calm sky of deep red streaked with glowing yellow clouds. "Do you believe these lies? I told you they would try to turn you against me. How else can they win? They cannot defeat you, so they try to subvert you. I formed your spirit myself. I created your soul, and housed it in that body so you might perform this task. Once it is over, you shall have a dark form, like mine, and we will rule together. Have I not always told you that? Do you doubt me?"*

*Bane shook his head, ashamed of his doubt, slight though it had been. "No, Father, you are right. I should not listen to her. She is our enemy."*

*"Good. You are doing well, son. I am pleased. Only two more wards to go, then I can free you from the witch's spell. After that, we will change the Overworld together, and make it a pleasant place to inhabit. There will be much sport, killing humans. Beware the girl. She weaves her spell powerfully upon you. Do not let the human emotions of that body contaminate your soul. Fight it. It is a trap."*

*"Yes, Father." Bane bowed his head, reassured of his father's reliance upon him. His father was not trying to kill him, the healer was.*

Ellese wandered in the garden, soaking up sunlight while she thought about Mirra, trapped beneath the grey clouds with Bane, who hated the sun. The poor girl was confused now. Bane had convinced her that she had been sent to kill him. Indirectly, she could, if the Black Lord kept sending demons after her, but only if Bane continued to refuse her help. Her attempt to leave Bane might have been disastrous, but luckily the Demon Lord had reached her in time. Ellese was well pleased with the way Bane's feelings were progressing. He was outstripping her expectations.

Plucking a flower, she pondered the terrible things that had started happening all over the land. Demons were rising, no longer bound now that only two wards remained. They terrorised villages, burnt and killed, took human form and tricked people, slept with women disguised as their husbands, tortured children in the form of a parent. Possessions happened every day, and lay preachers had their hands full performing exorcisms. Her heart bled for their suffering, but she was helpless to do anything other than heal their wounds and pray to the Lady for guidance.

Mirra was in more danger now than ever. If the wards were so weak that demons could rise and take human form, they could trick her too. Ellese must contact her soon and explain everything, so she would know what to do. While she was close to Bane, it was impossible, however, and if she strayed, she was in peril. Sighing, Ellese tucked the flower into her bodice and watched two young acolytes digging up weeds in a flowerbed. The abbey was safe, for now, but if the Black Lord rose, nothing would be.

Ellese headed back to her room. She must stay close to her glass, so she would be there when the opportunity came to contact Mirra.

Mirra woke enfolded in luxuriant softness. Stretching, she opened her eyes and froze. Bane lay beside her, so close that she had almost brushed against him when she stretched. Her heart skipped a beat and pounded. Her first impulse was to jump off the bed and get away from him as quickly as possible, but then she realised that no dark power emanated from him.

Mirra edged away, her eyes fixed on him. He was fast asleep, and looked oddly vulnerable. In repose, his face lost a lot of its fierceness. The sharply angled brows and widow's peak still gave him a demonic look, but his mouth was gentle, and his long black lashes lay innocently against his cheeks.

Mirra smiled. The Demon Lord looked like nothing more than an extremely handsome young man. How strange, she thought, that he should have such an arresting face when he should be ugly to match his deeds, and the evil within him. With his tormented eyes closed, he appeared innocuous. His eyes were the source of her fear. The hatred in their clear blue depths chilled her, and when they turned black they terrified her. The rune scars were the only outward sign now of the evil power within him.

Bane's eyes flicked open, and she recoiled, slipped off the bed and landed on the floor with an inelegant thud. The bed creaked as he sat up and peered down at her, his sneer back, his eyes cold with contempt. She scrambled to her feet, backing away, and he smiled.

"If I had known that you wished to share my bed, I would have invited you."

Her cheeks warmed. "I do not. I fell asleep, by accident."

"What were you doing on it in the first place?"

"I just wanted to try it. The floor is very hard."

Bane snorted. "Well, stay off it in future."

"I will. I am sorry."

Bane slid off the bed and stood up, favouring his blackened foot. When he was dressed, they ate the breakfast already waiting on the table, no doubt served by the ever-faithful Mord.

Mirra blew on a spoonful of steaming porridge. "Are we leaving today?"

"No. I would like to, but I want to give Agden a chance to try his luck. No doubt he will have planned a day of entertainment, and will seek his opportunity during it."

"Why do you want to do this?"

He shrugged, as if killing a man was no more important than swatting a fly. "He annoys me."

A timid tapping on the door heralded a grovelling priest, who informed Bane that Agden had organised a day of games, fights and orgies for his pleasure.

Bane pretended to consider. "What manner of fights?"

"Gladiators, Lord."

"Do they kill each other?"

The priest shook his head awkwardly, still prostrated. "Not usually, Lord."

"How boring." The Demon Lord yawned. "You tell Agden, if he wishes me to stay, he will have to have a lot of bloodshed in his arena, or I will be displeased."

The priest scuttled away. Even they had lost their dignity, Mirra reflected. Bane inspired fear in all those around him. Perhaps it was the aura of dark power that hung about him like a cold shroud, or the icy glint in his eyes, which informed everyone that he was a cold-blooded killer. She swallowed a sour taste. The thought of watching men fight to the death sickened her. She had already seen more of it than she could bear. There was nothing glorious about a sword in the gut, nothing heroic about blood spurting from a sliced throat. The smell of gore and excrement was hard to forget, its sickly taste stayed in her mouth for days, as if the cloying stink clung to the inside of her nose.

She asked, "May I stay here?"

Bane frowned. "No."

Mirra's heart sank, but she knew it was useless to argue. He was clearly in an unbending mood.

The arena's huge stone blocks looked newer than the rest of the city, as if it had been a late addition. The stepped interior provided seats for the masses, and a crowd was already in attendance when Bane arrived. Most people wore drab tunics of black, brown or crimson; some were clad in dull green, but gay colours like yellow, blue or pink were absent. The murky grey sky dampened the festive air somewhat, since bright, warm sunshine would have added to the crowd's enjoyment of the day.

When the Demon Lord appeared, a muted roar of welcome greeted him, which he ignored. A priest guided Bane to a lone chair on a platform cut into the side of the arena, above and separate from the common folk, set aside for royalty and the priesthood. Agden sat a few feet to his right, and the priests were ranged behind them. A rich black velvet parasol, edged with gold, shaded them from the weak sunlight. Mirra settled beside Bane's chair, trying not to attract unwelcome attention.

The games began immediately, but it soon became obvious that the Demon Lord found foot races intensely boring, judging by his yawns, and the athletes were shooed off, giving way to the fighting. The gladiators fought slaves, who had no idea how to use the weapons they had been given. It was little more than butchery, and the arena soon stank of blood and death. Bane seemed to enjoy it, although even Agden looked mildly sickened, and Mirra refused to watch, plugging her ears.

At last, lunch was served, and the men gravitated to the laden tables behind the royal grandstand. Mord brought Bane his Underworld food, which the priests eyed with the same greedy glint in their eyes that Orran had displayed. Mirra could eat nothing, her stomach in knots, although the others had no such qualms and tucked into the succulent spread. Agden kept glancing at her, and finally plucked up the courage to ask about her.

"Lord, who is the girl?"

Bane glanced at her, and his lip curled. "Nobody."

Agden's eyes gleamed. "She is your captive?"

"Yes."

"Why do you keep her?"

Bane shrugged. "Entertainment."

"Ah." Agden smiled. "I too, enjoy such pleasures a lot. Perhaps I could borrow her sometime?" He leered at Mirra.

Bane's spoon hit his plate with a clatter, and everyone froze. He glared at Agden, who shrank back. "Agden, your stupidity is only outstripped by your arrogance. What is mine is not for the likes of you to borrow, not even to ask for, ever."

Agden nodded vigorously, athen. As Bane turned away, the Emperor's eyes became glacial, and Mirra shivered as he shot her a promising look.

After lunch, Bane led the clutch of dignitaries back towards the grandstand, passing through a knot of young priests waiting to clear away the remains of the feast. The hard-faced youths prostrated themselves as Bane passed them, but Agden hung back, and Mirra paused, watching him. A faint smirk tugged at the Emperor's lips, and his eyes darted, then he gave an imperceptible nod to the young priests Bane had just passed.

She shouted, "Bane!"

Four priests charged Bane, drawing daggers. The Demon Lord spun, his eyes turning black as dark fire poured from his hands. Two priests were flung back, engulfed in flames, the other two exploded with dull thuds, splattering the senior priests near Bane with blood and guts. They recoiled with muffled cries, backing away as Bane watched the screaming youths burn.

As the last one stopped writhing, he turned to Agden. The Emperor gaped at the corpses, his eyes wide. Everyone else had moved away from Bane, but Agden stood transfixed, perhaps frozen by the enormity of his betrayal and the realisation of what his failure would cost him. Bane scowled at him, and Agden raised his hands, backing away. Bane's eyes remained black, and dark power emanated from him in sickening waves.

Mirra retreated, burning with the agony from the stricken priests, which had punched the air from her lungs and robbed her of the ability to scream. Bane advanced on the Emperor, and she dreaded

what was to come.

The Demon Lord enquired, "You arranged that bit of entertainment, not so?"

Agden shook his head. "No! I swear I had nothing to do with it!"

"Do not lie to me, fool." Bane loomed over him. "I know you do not want my father to rise. It would rob you of most of your petty power, would it not? You do not want to show me proper respect, so you certainly would not want my father here."

Agden fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground. "Lord, I did not send them, I swear!"

Bane's expression became scornful. "Do not beg for mercy, Agden. Pleas for mercy only fill me with contempt. You are supposed to be an emperor, a high priest, charged with the worship of the Black Lord. Instead, you are a grovelling, snivelling pig who thought to challenge me, the Black Lord's son. Did you think your minions could kill me?"

"You are a powerful black mage in your own right, granted that power by my father. A big mistake, it seems. You will pay dearly for your effrontery, and my father will enjoy tormenting you. He will show you the meaning of pain. Your puny powers will avail you nothing down there." Bane studied the cringing man. "Raise your head."

Agden obeyed, his hands clasped in supplication. "Spare me, Lord! I -"

"Be silent." Bane reached down as if in benediction and touched Agden's head.

"No! Please, Lord!" Agden's cry ended in a strangled scream as the burning power flowed into him, boiling his insides while he thrashed and shrieked. His skin blackened and smoke rose from his hair and smouldering robes. With a strangled cry, Mirra fled.

When she reached the room with its softly glowing runes promising safety, she flung herself onto the bed and wept. Bane's penchant for pain and death dismayed her. How could a man enjoy inflicting it so much? Every time he killed, it grew more unbearable for her. The more she liked him, the more his evil ways hurt her. No wonder the men of his army feared him so much. No doubt they had witnessed just that sort of exhibition, and that was why they would not come near him. Until now, she had not realised the true horror of his power; that he could kill so terribly with a mere touch.

"Girl."

Mirra scrambled off the bed at the sound of Bane's voice. He stood in the doorway, scowling, his eyes blue once more. She backed away, not wanting him near her after what she had just seen.

He closed the door. "I did not give you permission to leave."

"I could not bear it." She pressed her back to the far wall, wishing she could sink through it.

Bane approached her. "Now you know why no one comes near me."

"Yes."

"So will you scuttle from me too, now?"

"No."

He stopped in front of her. "Why not?"

"I do not fear death like they do."

"Still, it is painful, as you know. Now you have seen what happens to people who try to kill me."

She edged away along the wall. "I am not trying to kill you."

"So you say, but I know you are." He took hold of her arm, and she cried out, shuddering at his touch, which had just killed a man so monstrously. Bane smiled wryly. "Your spell protects you. Why do you fear me?"

"Because I have no spell."

"Why do you keep lying? I know you have a spell, because I feel it. If you did not have it, you would be dead long ago."

She gazed up at him. "What do you feel?"

"I have told you, and I shall not repeat it. The entertainment is over, so we are leaving. These idiots can amuse themselves finding a new emperor. I have two more wards to break."

Bane pushed her towards the door, and she gladly moved away from him. Mord waited outside, the Demon Lord's pack strapped to his back. He scurried down the corridor, and Mirra followed,

uncomfortably aware of Bane exuding cold anger behind her.

The Emperor's death had thrown the city into confusion, for the people in the arena had spread the news. Priests prostrated themselves as the Demon Lord passed, but the populace stayed away, peering from the shadows of doorways and windows. The demon steed pranced and snorted fire, eager to be off, and the grey stallion was just as keen. The dwindling army straggled behind them, unhappy about leaving the city, where its members had been made welcome in every possible way. Bane would win no popularity contests, Mirra mused. He had come to a city that idolised him, and left one that only feared him. She was undoubtedly the only person in the world who liked him.

Unlike the previous day, she sensed the forest's malevolent gloom, with its towering, ancient trees and dripping moss. To her relief, after a few hours they journeyed into more normal woodland. She put the horror of what she had witnessed from her mind, since dwelling upon it did no good, concentrating on the passing scenery as they traversed a rocky, mountainous land thickly wooded with conifers.

Many swift streams chuckled across their path on mossy beds, the icy clear water providing refreshment for the weary, footsore troops. The grey stallion snatched mouthfuls of grass when they crossed pretty glades sprinkled with wild flowers and bracken, and little waterfalls cascaded down the rocky slopes above them. Only the occasional glimpse of red eyes and malformed shapes shambling through the shadows spoilt her enjoyment of the scenic landscape, a constant reminder of whose company she kept. When they camped at night, the woodland resounded with screams and howls as the creatures of darkness hunted, making her shiver on the floor of Bane's tent.

For two days, they travelled through the mountains, encountering only hardy mountain deer that fled from their path. Bane hardly spoke to her unless she asked him a question, which, more often than not, he answered with grunts, his mood gloomy. For a day, his eyes remained bloodshot, and she knew the headache troubled him again, but he took nothing for it this time. His use of the power had been slight, so the pain was bearable, by his standards.

When they stopped to rest at noon on the third day, Mirra found a pool in a rocky hollow near the campsite. She knelt to drink, contemplating a wash as well. Before her hand broke the calm surface, her reflection changed, and she looked into Elder Mother's eyes. Mirra recoiled with a gasp, but the image smiled with gentle reassurance.

"Do not be afraid, Mirra. It is I, not a ghost. This is the last of your talents, untried until now." Ellese's voice came faintly from the water.

Mirra crept closer. "Elder Mother?"

"Yes, my dear."

Relief and joy made Mirra's eyes brim with tears. "Oh, Mother, I am so glad that you are all right. I have been worried about you! How is Tallis?"

"She is well. We all are. There is no time for chatter, listen carefully to me now."

Mirra nodded, and Ellese went on with solemn gravity, "Bane goes to break the sixth ward. He is perilously close to completing his task. He is human, Mirra, not some creation of the Black Lord. His mother was taken and killed when he was born. He was reared in the Underworld. It is the only home he has ever known. You were sent to turn him from his purpose. That is why you were placed in his path. It is your destiny. He feels something for you, and you must use that to persuade him to renounce the Black Lord. You must not tell him that you were sent to stop him, only that you want him to stop."

Mirra shook her head, knowing this to be impossible. "He will not listen to me."

Ellese smiled. "He might. You have not tried, but you must now. We are all depending on you. The power of good cannot stand in direct confrontation with evil. It will fail. The Lady herself cast the Black Lord into the Underworld, and she gave the mages the power to set the wards. Now we pray to her constantly, but she has not revealed her purpose. Perhaps this time it is our task alone. You must try to stop him eating the Underworld food. It helps to keep him evil."

Mirra glanced around, nervous that Bane would see her. "It has been horrible, Mother. He kills people. He enjoys the suffering of others."

"I know, my dear. I have been watching. Try to turn him, Mirra, please."

Elder Mother's image faded, and Mirra took a quick drink before returning to the camp. That night, when Bane retired to his tent and lay staring at the ceiling, she broke into his reverie. "Bane, what would happen if you did not break the last two wards?"

He shrugged. "My father would stay in the Underworld."

"He would not... punish you, or anything?"

"He would be furious. He would send me back to do it."

"What if you stayed in the Overworld?"

He turned his head to look at her. "I have no wish to stay here."

"Why not?"

"I do not like it here. I belong in the Underworld."

"But you do not. You belong here."

Bane sat up, swung his legs off the bed and faced her. "Why all the questions?"

Mirra took a deep breath. "I spoke to my elder mother today, the leader of my abbey. She told me the truth. Bane, you are -"

The tent flap flew open, and a woman entered as if she had lived there all her life. Long, curly red hair framed a perfect face with melting brown eyes and a wide, smiling mouth. A graceful, forest-green velvet gown hugged her voluptuous curves, and gold earrings and a sapphire necklace glowing against her creamy skin. She grinned and spread her arms as Bane rose to his feet.

"Bane, darling! I'm here at last!"

The Demon Lord looked stunned, and Mirra glanced from one to the other, confused.

Bane said, "Dorel. What are you doing here?"

The woman stepped up to him and slid her arms around his waist, pressing herself against him. His arms remained at his sides.

She pouted. "Bane, dear, your father sent me to help you. With only two wards left, he could, just. He said that you were ill, and needed someone to take care of you, so I volunteered, naturally. He's worried about you, darling, surrounded by all these pathetic humans and trolls. He felt you needed some decent company, and moral support too, of course. It must be ghastly for you, rubbing shoulders with trash."

Her gaze fell upon Mirra, and she frowned. "Why, there's one in your tent, darling. What's she doing here? Oh, I know." Dorel turned limpid brown eyes on Bane. "You won't need her anymore, dearest."

Bane stepped back, disengaging the woman's clinging arms. "She is not -"

"Oh, Bane," she crooned. "I've missed you. We have a lot of time to catch up on, don't we?" Dorel glared at Mirra. "Get out, human, and take your lice and filth with you."

Mirra rose and slipped out into the chilly night air. The woman's throaty laughter followed her as she stumbled into the moonlit forest. She did not go far before sitting next to a tree, out of earshot of the tent. The cold made her shiver after the warmth of Bane's tent. She gathered some wood for a fire, then realised that she had no way of lighting it.

Huddled against the tree, she hugged herself and scanned the darkness for red eyes, thinking about the strange woman. How odd that she did not fear the Demon Lord. She treated him like an old friend, and even interrupted him. Agden's lack of respect had enraged him, yet this woman took unheard-of liberties with his person and went unpunished. She had not thought Bane capable of the kind of emotions this woman seemed to credit him with, calling him 'darling' as if she was his sweetheart.

As her thoughts whirled in ever-increasing circles, Bane emerged, a tall shadow in the moonlight, and walked straight to her. He dropped a blanket beside her and squatted, spotting the pile of wood. Placing his hand on it, he channelled a tiny dark flame into it, and the wood caught fire with a whoosh. He removed his hand unhurriedly, rubbing off a little soot. In the orange light, his face was tense and broody as he stared into the flames.

Mirra pulled the blanket around her. "Who is she?"

He glanced at her. "She is a droge. She was one of... My father sent her."

“A spirit?” She shivered. The woman looked so human.

Bane smiled. “Of a sort. She died, and came to the Underworld. My father has given her a body, although it is not flesh and blood, but a kind of solid illusion. She is not human anymore, but she is not a demon. She has no power.”

“Do you like her?”

He chuckled. “I do not like anyone. She has her uses, though.”

“I am glad you will have company that agrees with you; one of your own kind, at last.”

Bane stood up, his face shadowed. “You will be all right here. You are close enough to the tent.”

Mirra nodded, watching him stride back to the tent before lying down next to the fire. How was she going to speak to him now? No doubt the droge would be with him all the time, and she clearly did not want Mirra around.



## Chapter Sixteen

### The Sixth Ward

Bane entered the tent and stopped. Dorel lay on the bed, naked, voluptuous and inviting, her red lips smiling. She raised her arms, beckoning to him. Bane unclipped his cloak and dropped it, then unfastened his shirt. Dorel licked her lips, her expression eager. He stripped off his shirt, sat on the bed and started to remove his boots. Dorel sat up and wriggled closer to run her hands over the rune scars.

Bane watched her, part of his mind urging him to do what he had done so many times before, with her, and others. She was not real, another part of him protested. No blood coursed in her veins; no pulse throbbed at her throat. Her invitation was tempting, but she was not alive. Not human, like the healer, like him. Even if his father had created his soul, his body was human, while she was truly a creature of the Underworld. Strangely, the healer repelled him, perhaps because she was his opposite, yet now Dorel did not appeal to him either. No surge of the lust she had awakened in him so often in the past arose. If anything, her lewdness disgusted him.

Dorel was pressed to his chest, her hands sliding over his shoulders, caressing him, tracing the runes of power. Bane gripped her long hair and pulled her head back to stare into her hot brown eyes that glowed red in their depths. He thrust her away, sickened by her touch. She smiled and started back towards him, licking her lips again.

Bane stood up. "The bed is too small, and I am tired. You can sleep on the floor. Since you chased the girl out, you can take her place."

Dorel eyed him. "You don't want me?"

"No."

Her mouth twisted in a sneer. "You'd rather jump on that dirty little human, wouldn't you?"

Anger boiled in him at the thought. "If I did, I would have by now."

"She's trash, human filth!"

"Like you once were?"

She glared at him. "At least I'm not that anymore. You're letting your human body rule your soul. You never were human."

Bane gripped her arm and yanked her off the bed. "This has nothing to do with the girl. I am tired, and you are starting to annoy me."

The droge settled on the floor, glaring at Bane as he removed his boots and lay down. For a long time, he lay awake, staring into the darkness, wondering why he no longer desired the droge, and grew angry at the thought of ravishing the healer. Indeed, no human woman had awakened any desire in him, yet he had not objected to his soldiers having their way with them.

Why had he not given them the healer to play with? He put the thought aside, unwilling to delve any deeper into the possibilities. He listened for the soft sounds of breathing, then remembered that droges did not breathe. He thought about the girl who lay beside the fire outside, and stretched out his senses to assure himself that she was all right. With a soft grunt of disgust at his concern, he rolled onto his side and forced himself to sleep.

In the morning, a smiling Dorel served him breakfast, polished his boots and cleaned the tent. Bane sent Mord back to his fellows in the army, not needing him anymore. Dorel chattered incessantly about nothing, and he tuned her out, brooding. It was good of his father to send a droge. It must have taken a great deal of power with two wards still in place. At least now he had someone apart from the girl who was not afraid to touch him, should he need something done. He suffered her to brush his hair, but shook her off when she started to get intimate again.

The girl joined a group of trolls at a fire, and he watched her, not knowing why he did. Perhaps his father had sent the droge to break her spell. He shrugged it off. Dorel would be useful, anyway.

When it came time to travel on, he allowed Dorel to ride behind him, her arms tight around his

waist. He could have made her follow on foot, since droges were tireless, but she might have caused trouble. Dorel pressed herself against his back all day, and he was glad when the journey ended at mid-afternoon.

They arrived at the lip of a huge canyon that a swift river had carved in the mountains' bedrock. The soaring, snow-clad peaks stabbed the sky to one side, the birthplace of the river that ran down through the foothills the army traversed. Further upstream, the spate ran a normal course between rocky banks, bubbling over a stony bed softened by green moss. Here, soft rock had given way to the water's endless eroding power, and the torrent plunged into a massive gorge, digging it deeper as it crashed against the rocks far below.

The mighty falls thundered, and mist hung in the chasm, hiding its depths. Stunted trees, dewed with droplets, clung to the cliffs like desperate mountaineers. Near the gorge's edge, the forest thinned, the trees vying for soil in the rocky ground, their roots snaking across it in search of sustenance. On the far side, the forest continued, a mass of green stretching away into the hazy distance.

Bane gazed at the waterfall, but he did not see the hurtling white water or the drifting vapour. His eyes were fixed on the ward that hung in front of the falls. Despite the day's dullness, a rainbow streaked the mist with vibrant, glowing colour, and trapped within it, the faint lines of the sixth ward shone. He cursed the mage who had set it, for the ward was far out of reach, hanging a hundred feet from any solid ground. Sheer cliffs rose on either side, black and wet with spray.

Dismounting, he let the demon steed retreat. Vapour settled on his skin with a cool, feather-light touch. Dorel, standing beside him, grimaced at the falls.

"I'd forgotten how wet this damned place is."

Bane looked over at the girl, who sat on the grey horse, both apparently enjoying the falling mist. Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at the waterfall, as if she found it a thing of great beauty. He looked at it again, trying to see the wonder of it, but to him it was just a lot of cold water.

He turned to the droge. "Set up my tent."

Dorel pouted and walked off, swinging her hips. Droges were extremely strong. She had none of the female frailties she had possessed when alive. Bane contemplated the ward, his eyes constantly straying to the healer, who had released her horse and stood at the edge, the breeze from the cascading water ruffling her hair. He frowned, remembering when he had thought her weak and pathetic. Now he realised that she was beautiful, especially when compared to Dorel, whose outward loveliness masked a dark and savage soul. The spark of life that burnt within the healer was pure and untarnished, and if she died her soul would fly to her goddess as a white light like that of the blue mage on the Isle of Lume, not the red glow of the souls that were sent to the Underworld.

The same dull red light that glowed only in Dorel's eyes, while the healer's soul was still a part of her flesh, shining all through her. He tore his eyes from her and studied the ward again as Dorel's heavy tread approached. After this, only one more ward remained, then the healer and all the Overworld's people would be at his father's mercy. This ward would take a great deal of power to break, more than the last, as that had taken more than the one before. Still, he could do it. He had to, for his father. He would endure the pain that followed, for his father had trained him well.

He looked down at Dorel. "Prepare Mealle's potion. I will need it when this is over."

The droge flounced off again, managing to make all her assets bounce. Bane jerked around at a touch on his elbow. The healer gazed up at him with clear eyes so full of sorrow and fear that a pain shot through his chest. The power of her spell angered him, and he snapped, "What do you want?"

"Please do not break the ward." Her voice was almost a whisper, barely audible over the thunder of the falls. "You condemn an entire world and all its people to a horrible death."

"Do you think I care?" Bane sneered. "Why should I feel anything for this world? It is not mine. My father will make it mine, and his, then it will be worth living in."

"But it is yours. You were stolen from your mother when you were born. You are human, Bane."

Rage bubbled up in him at her insolence. Anyone else, he would have roasted on the spot for such slander, but her spell protected her. "I will not listen to any more of your lies, witch. I am my father's

son. He might have given me a human body, but he created my soul. If I am not his son in flesh, I am in spirit.”

Mirra touched his arm, but he jerked away. “Please listen to me -”

“No. I have listened to you enough. You stay away from me, and keep your pious opinions to yourself. I have no wish to hear them. Do you understand?”

Pushing her away, he strode along the edge of the canyon, his cloak flaring. She gazed after him, a hand still lifted in a gesture of pleading.

Bane raised his arms and invoked the power, which rushed through him in a sickening tide. How good it would be to shuck this frail body when his father rose. His anger at the girl’s suggestions fuelled his longing for that day, when she would pay for her audacity and lies. Unleashing the burgeoning fire, he sent it downward, rising on a pillar of black flame. He drifted out over the yawning abyss, secure in his ability, the magic thrumming through him.

The rainbow shone in the mist, shimmering as the vapour swirled through it. Elusive, as rainbows were, it retreated as he neared, then faded, taking the ward with it. He turned, finding it behind him, tantalisingly close, yet out of reach. Again he tried to move closer, and the soft, vivid colours vanished. He found it again, to the side, but even as he turned, it faded, leaving only cold, damp mist. Already water dewed his face and his cloak grew wet. A dull throbbing started in his head, a mild reminder of the pain to come. Power rushed through him, holding him in the air, being expended at a terrific rate and wreaking its unnatural havoc on him as it did so.

Bane swung about again, and the rainbow slid into his vision, close now, a faint smear of colour. Raising an arm, he blasted the ward that hung in its glowing arch. The fire burnt away the mist, and the rainbow vanished. Satisfied, Bane searched the black cliffs for the solid ward, carved somewhere in this chasm. As he turned, he found the rainbow glowing beside him, the ward safe in its shining stripes. Angered, he blasted it again, burning it away, but as he turned it appeared once more, hanging unharmed behind him, the ward still there.

Bane’s power ebbed, his stores depleting rapidly and the headache increasing with every moment, becoming agonising. Air walking required even more power than rock walking, and he could not maintain it for long. Already he had been airborne for too long, and he burnt with the black fire, which drained his strength as it poured forth to sustain his flight. The rainbow mocked him with its fragile, indestructible beauty, and he rose towards the edge of the ravine, the runes on his chest igniting to supply the power he needed, without which he would plunge to his death on the slippery rocks below.

Excruciating pain pounded his temples, and his eyes burnt as if hot pokeres resided in them. Water, mingled with sweat, ran down his skin. Floating over the rim, he leashed the power and dropped to the ground. His legs buckled, and he fell to his knees, clasping his throbbing temples. The strain had been too much, and he burnt all over. Footsteps approached, then Dorel’s hard voice spoke in his ear.

“You didn’t break it.”

“I know that, imbecile!” He thrust her away. “Where is the potion?”

Dorel placed a cup in his hand, and he gulped the familiar sour liquid, almost gagging. Pain lanced his eyeballs, hammering on the inside of his skull like an earth demon trying to get out. He sagged, his vision dim, a roaring in his ears. Not wishing to pass out in the open, where the army could see him, he forced himself to his feet and staggered towards the blurry tent. Hands helped him, and he did not care whose they were, intent only on reaching his bed and collapsing on it. This major feat he achieved, then blackness closed in, shutting off the pain and consigning him to oblivion.

Mirra ran towards Bane when he fell to his knees, almost recoiling from the lash of his pain, but stopped before she reached him, unable to bear more. The droge glared at her with baleful eyes while Bane drank the potion, then he staggered to his tent, leaning on Dorel. His face was ashen, the whites of his eyes crimson, and blue shadows marred the skin beneath them. Mirra stood irresolute, longing to help, but afraid of the droge who now guarded him.

Berating herself for her cowardice, she thrust aside the flap and entered the tent. Dorel rose from Bane's bedside, scowling, but his sickly face riveted Mirra. He was unconscious, his breathing fast and shallow, blue veins showing through his pale skin.

"Get out." Dorel stepped towards her.

"He will die. I must help him."

"He doesn't need your kind of help. Your potions will poison him. He needs rest, that's all."

Mirra shook her head, desperate to get past the droge. "The power is killing him. He cannot use it. He is human."

Dorel snarled, "I'll tend to him, human trash. Now get out!"

"Please let me help him."

The droge lunged at Mirra, hit her in the chest and sent her stumbling backwards out of the tent to sprawl on the grass. Picking herself up, she stared at the tent, confused. The woman was amazingly strong. What was she to do? Bane needed her more than ever, and she needed help, someone Dorel might trust. Turning away, she ran down to the army camp, where trolls and goblins sat around their fires, playing games or idly chatting.

"Mord!" Mirra yelled, making all the trolls look at her. One rose from a nearby fire, and she hurried over to him. "Mord, you have to help me."

Realising that they stood in the midst of the camp, she grasped his hairy arm and pulled him aside. He followed, his mournful face wearing a bewildered expression.

"Mord, I have to give the Demon Lord a potion. He is sick."

Mord shook his head. "The Demon Lord sent me away."

"Please, he needs our help."

"That woman dislikes me."

"I know. Just take a cup of potion to her, and tell her you made it for the Demon Lord. Tell her he needs it, that it is stronger than the potion she gave him. Will you?"

The troll shrugged and nodded.

Her heart buoyant, Mirra hurried away to scour the rocky slopes for the flowers she needed, then brewed the medicine at Mord's fire. When it was ready, she sent him on his errand, following to hide behind a tree and watch. He scratched on the tent flap, and Dorel appeared, scowling.

The huge troll held out the cup. "Strong potion, for the Demon Lord. He needs it. The other one is too weak."

The droge took the cup and sniffed it, her face twisting. "Filth!"

Dorel flung the cup at Mord, who retreated, dripping sweet brew. Mirra groaned, sinking down to sit with her back against the tree. How could she help Bane when she could not get near him? The only idea that seemed to have any merit was to wait until the droge was asleep, then sneak in and give Bane the medicine. Once more, she went to gather flowers amongst the bracken and brew potion as darkness fell.

Mirra waited, fighting off sleep, while the moon rose and the troll army snored around her. The trolls camped closest to Bane's tent, a privilege won through dint of brawn and numbers, consigning the goblins and rock howlers to less prestigious, more distant campsites. This, she had learnt while playing knucklebones with them, a point of pride, it seemed, to brave the Demon Lord's proximity.

Mirra fed the fire to ward off the night chill, listening to the night creatures' howls as they hunted. Several times, she nodded off, jerking awake as she slumped. When the full moon reached its zenith, she picked up the wine skin that contained her potion and crept to the tent, her breath steaming in the chill air. No sound came from within, and she hoped the droge was a deep sleeper. Cautiously she pulled the tent flap open, scanning the darkness. Dorel huddled against the side of the tent, her chin sunk on her chest, her eyes closed.

With infinite stealth, Mirra crept into the tent, not daring to breathe. A lamp that hung from a hook on the tent's central pole threw a pool of light on the bed, and she gazed down at Bane, her heart aching. Even in the soft light, he looked ashen and gaunt, his eyes sunken in blue shadows. She bent

over him, reaching for the wine skin's plug.

Something hit her on the side of the head and sent her staggering back, to bounce off the hard leather wall and slide out of the flap. She sprawled on the grass outside, and looked up at the triumphant droge's as Dorel stepped out after her.

Dorel said, "We of the Underworld don't sleep, human dung. We are tireless. Didn't Bane tell you that, hmmm?" She kicked Mirra, forcing a yelp from her. With so little power, she had no defence against the droge's blows. Dorel loomed over her, sneering, "Stupid little witch. You think you can poison Bane? You think I'll let you?"

Again, her foot thudded into Mirra's ribs, and she cried out, trying to roll away, dazed by the blow to her head and the speed of events. Dorel came after her, laughing at her attempts to escape the kicks that pummelled her ribs, buttocks and thighs. The droge gripped the front of Mirra's gown and dragged her to her feet. Her strong hands closed around Mirra's throat, and she knew the droge would kill her if she could. Without Bane to protect her, Dorel might even succeed where the demons had failed. With a violent twist, she broke free and ran into the forest, tripping over roots and rocks, branches scratching her and snagging her dress. Dorel's heavy tread pursued her, crashing through the undergrowth.

Mirra rebounded off a tree that loomed out of the darkness and fell, clutching her face. Blood oozed from her nose, and she sobbed, dazed anew by the collision. Dorel's noisy progress continued towards her, but she could not summon the strength to run any further. Hopelessness sapped the last of her energy. Everyone was against her. She had no friends since Benton and the men had left; no one cared about her. Bane hated her, Dorel wanted to kill her, and the demons wanted her dead too, at the Black Lord's behest. She was utterly alone and despondent, exhausted by her ordeal at Bane's hands. He kept her alive only to torment her, and would kill her when he could. She bowed her head and wept.

The droge pushed through the bushes and smiled. "So, human, Bane can't protect you now. The Black Lord will reward me well for this night's work."

Mirra scrambled to her feet and retreated, shaking her head. Dorel smirked, clearly savouring her moment of triumph. A flash of bright crimson caught Mirra's eye, and the demon steed thrust through the foliage, prancing between her and the droge. Dorel cursed foully, glaring at the steed, which glowered back, snorting fire. Mirra stared at the steed in confusion, then realisation dawned. The beast still had orders to protect her. It had no choice but to obey Bane.

Dorel muttered in angry frustration, glowered at Mirra and stormed away. The steed turned baleful eyes on Mirra too, then moved off into the forest. Her shaking legs buckled, and she sank down on the leafy floor, holding her aching ribs. The scratches that branches had inflicted on her face stung, and not even enough of her healing power remained to stop the pain.

For a while, she hugged herself and wept, raging at her inability to help Bane. So much hatred surrounded her, from Dorel, the demon steed, the loathsome dark creatures that crept through the night, and even Bane, especially Bane. His hatred hurt more, for she cared about him, and did not deserve his animosity. If only he would accept her as his friend and let her help him, it would give her existence meaning. Just as he had been starting to listen to her, even treating her with a modicum of kindness, the droge had come between them. How could she persuade him to give up his evil quest if she could no longer talk to him? At night, she missed his soft breathing and the sounds of his restless tossing, and her rest had not been peaceful the previous night, when she had slept alone beside the fire.

When at last her tears subsided, she made her way to Mord's campfire and curled up next to it, fatigue numbing her bruises. Her worries kept her awake for a time, fearing demons now that Bane was unconscious. Her eyes kept flicking open to scan the darkness for the malformed shape of an earth demon's gritty form or the sickly flames of a fire demon, until a dull crimson glow amongst the trees told her that the demon steed stood guard over her. Reassured, she drifted off to sleep.

The trolls' deep voices woke Mirra as they relighted the fire to prepare breakfast. The cold light of another grim grey dawn silvered the trees' pale bark and bright green leaves sheened with sparkling dew. Her clammy robe stuck to her and she ached all over, one eye swollen and probably blue. She clutched the damp blanket that someone had thrown over her, shivering. A troll gave her a bowl of hot

porridge, which she ate with hungry relish, not caring that it was watery and tasteless. Her eyes strayed often to the tent. Miraculously, she still had the wine skin of potion, which she tied to her belt.

The morning passed slowly, the falls' thunder underscoring the mountain forest's peace. She joined the trolls in a game of knucklebones, her concern for Bane distracting her. If only she could do something. The droge was immensely strong, however. It would take a number of trolls to keep her at bay. She toyed with the idea of asking them to help, but if Dorel stayed close to Bane they would not approach, and they certainly would not enter the tent. Apart from Mord, who seemed to care about him, these troops probably did not believe that Bane could die, since he was the Black Lord's son.

Late in the morning, raised voices came from the tent. Mirra's heart pounded, and she wished she could go there. Dorel's voice was shrill, and Bane's deep tones cut through it. The tent flap opened and the Demon Lord appeared. He tottered stiffly, his eyes red and pallor deathly. He tried to shake off Dorel, who strived to drag him back into the tent, but barely held his own.

"Girl!"

His shout cracked across the camp, making Mirra start. She stood up, and he beckoned to her. Mirra ran up to him, stopping a few paces away, frightened by the fury in Dorel's eyes. The droge started towards her, but Bane caught her arm, halting her.

"Leave her alone."

Dorel glared at him. "She wants to poison you."

"She will not." Bane studied Mirra, and then crooked a finger at her. "Come here."

Mirra sidled closer, wary of Dorel. Bane kept the droge in check, even though he swayed and sweat dewed his brow.

"Make your potion," he said.

Mirra untied the skin and proffered it. "I tried to give you some last night, but Dorel stopped me."

"Poison!" Dorel shouted.

Bane sighed, wincing. "Drink some."

Still, he did not trust her. Mirra took several gulps from the skin, and then handed it to Bane. Dorel tried to knock it from his grasp, but he held it out of her reach. The three waited, Dorel panting and scowling, until the Demon Lord was satisfied that Mirra had not drunk poison. Then he drained the wine skin, defeating Dorel's efforts to snatch it away. She turned on Mirra, trying to reach her with claw-like hands. Bane staggered a little, but held her back.

"She's poisoned you!" Dorel yelled. "She probably took the antidote already."

"Be quiet," Bane growled.

"She's a witch. It won't kill her!"

"She has no power."

Dorel hissed, but this statement seemed stump her, and she shot Mirra a look of deep loathing. Mirra's aches and pains vanished, and Bane's frown eased, his colour improving. He raised his head and breathed deeply, letting it out in a long sigh. With a rough push, he sent Dorel staggering away.

"Make me some food."

Dorel tossed her head and stalked off, hips swinging. Bane took Mirra's wrist and towed her into the tent. Releasing her, he sat on the bed, waited until she sat at his feet, and then inspected her again.

"Dorel did that to you?"

She nodded. "She was angry."

Bane smiled bitterly. "My father sent her to stop you giving me the potion. He believes it is what weaves the spell, but I know better. You will make a flask and give it to me."

Mirra smiled, her heart buoyant. "Of course."

"Mord will drink some first."

She shrugged, a little of her joy evaporating. "As you wish."

He leant closer, his manner intimidating. "Do not think that I trust you, because I do not."

"It does not matter, as long as I can help you."

"You make no sense, helping your enemy."

“Healers help any who need it.”

He shook his head. “Stupidity. But I will use that foolishness. You will aid your downfall.”

“Bane, you are not -”

Dorel thrust open the tent flap and entered, carrying a bowl of red stew. The food bubbled from the fire, but the droge held it as if it was lukewarm. She snarled at Mirra, “Get out, slut!”

Bane stood up, already stronger now that the agony had gone, and frowned at her. “I give the orders around here, droge. From now on, you will leave the girl alone. Touch her again, and I will punish you. Now leave us.”

Dorel smiled and held out the bowl, and Mirra yelled, “No!”

Bane had already taken it, not realising that it was boiling hot. Unprepared, his power failed to shield him. With a grunt, he dropped the bowl, which smashed.

Dorel’s spiteful smile widened. “Too hot to handle, Bane? Your weak human body always lets you down, doesn’t it?”

He loomed over her, his expression daunting. “You damned lifeless piece of walking corruption. You insult me? You dare? Who do you think you are toying with, droge?”

She sneered, “You can’t harm me.”

“Oh no? Think again, Dorel. I can destroy you, crush you to dust and send you to oblivion.”

“The Black Lord would tear you apart.”

He snorted. “You overestimate your worth. My father might be a little annoyed. I have destroyed two demons already, and received a token berating at best for it. I am as powerful as the Black Lord, and you would do well to remember that.”

Dorel shrank back, but her air was defiant and her eyes spat venom. Bane thrust her away. “Make more food, and if you ever try to harm my person again, you will pay. Understand?”

Dorel nodded and slipped out.

Bane sank back down on the bed, running a hand through his hair. “Unfortunately, physical punishment is useless on her. I would have to use power. Drogues like her feel no pain. They must be endowed with special bodies for that.”

“Can you not banish her, like the demons?”

“No. She cannot be summoned or sent. My father asked her to come. She did not have to. The droges are my father’s concubines, chattel, but they are dead souls, beyond the power of anyone save my father and me. I can only tell her to leave. I can rescind her form, but that would take power. She does not even have to obey me, and she does not fear me as demons do. She is one of my father’s favourites, and that has made her bold. Most do fear me.”

He sighed. “I still have to break that infernal ward, too. I must find the real one. The one in the rainbow is an illusion; a clever trick.”

“But you are too weak. You need to rest. The dark magic is harming you. If you use it too much, it could kill you.”

“I have to release my father, then he will free me of this weak body. The power will not kill me. It only makes me sick. Go and prepare the potion now.”

“Bane -”

“Do not defy me too. Go.”

Mirra rose, longing to talk to him further, but unwilling to incur his wrath. He seemed exhausted, almost despondent, and she pitied him. Just then, Dorel entered with another bowl of food, and sneered at Mirra as she passed her.

Mirra went in search of more flowers, Bane’s newfound willingness to accept her help lifting her spirits, even though he did not trust her. If it was the only aid she could give him, she would do that, at least. Her search took her to the edge of the chasm, where lush plants grew in the cool spray, and there she found a clump of the herb.

As she plucked the flowers, her eyes were constantly drawn to the wonder of the cascading, roaring water and the lovely rainbow that hung in the mist. The ward glowed brightly, its delicate blue lines

forming a pentagram, an arcane symbol that could summon and guard against evil. She filled her skirt with blooms, watching the falls when she rested. The plummeting water fascinated her, and her eyes followed it into the mist-shrouded depths. A glint of blue caught her attention, and she tried to discern what it was. Almost at the very bottom of the falls, revealed only occasionally by the swirling mists, a second pentagram glowed.

For a long time, she contemplated it, then gathered up her full skirts and headed back to the camp to make the potion. The mage who had set this ward had indeed been cunning, as had the one on the Isle of Lume. Knowing that creatures of the Underworld hated water, he had set the ward where no one could reach it without getting soaked. The illusion was intended to make Bane expend his power needlessly, speeding his doom so if Mirra failed to turn him from his purpose he would die trying to break the last ward.

Even now, he skirted close to death. The evil power sickened him more each time he used it. Now she could not heal him while he carried the darkness even if she had the power to do so, for he was too weak and ill. When he was drained of the magic, he regained some of his health, but all too soon he gathered more again. Her potion only took away the pain, and every day he grew sicker, a little closer to death. How could she persuade him to stop when he refused to believe her warnings and rejected the truth about himself? The droge made it almost impossible to speak to him, and her constant carping reinforced his suspicions.

As she knelt by the fire, stirring the boiling pot in which the blue flowers turned white, Bane emerged from his tent, Dorel close behind. The droge carried a pack, and Mirra knew it contained the two pots and flagon of potion he used when performing the dark ritual of the Gather. If only she could free him from the dark web in which he was ensnared. The droge was not only here to try to stop him taking Mirra's potion, she was also meant to keep Bane on the path the Black Lord had set for him.

They vanished into the forest, Bane seeking privacy for his ritual. Mirra took the pot off the fire and let the flowers steep, then strained them out through a cloth and set the potion aside to cool before decanting it into a wine skin. When her chore was done, Bane returned, and pity closed her throat. His strides were jerky, his brow furrowed, his eyes bloodshot and shadowed, and his lips too red again. Mirra picked up the skin and hurried over to him, calling Mord. When she reached the Demon Lord, he stopped, and Dorel hissed. Mord hovered a short distance away, forcing Mirra to walk back to him. Bane watched her give him some of the medicine, waiting until it was proven to be harmless.

When he nodded and held out his hand, she gave him the wineskin, and he drank from it before tucking it into his tunic. Gradually his brow cleared, and he relaxed as the pain subsided, but his eyes remained bloodshot and his colour did not improve much. The freshly cut runes glowed through his tunic, and the dark power in him added to his sickly pallor. He walked to the edge of the crevasse and searched it for the real ward, ignoring the illusion in the rainbow.

Mirra followed and stood beside him. Bane glanced at her, his weariness written in his eyes.

"Bane, please do not break the ward -"

Dorel snarled, "Hold your tongue, slut. Do you think the Demon Lord will listen to your whining?"

Bane closed his eyes, his brow furrowing. When he opened them again, he looked at Dorel. "I can speak for myself. I do not need you to champion my cause. I have managed well enough without you."

The droge glared at him and flounced off, tossing her fiery hair. Mirra touched Bane's arm, desperate to get his attention, but he pulled away.

"Please -"

"Leave me be. Dorel is right, you waste your breath."

Mirra met his cold eyes. Moisture dewed his skin and settled on his raven hair like a veil of tiny diamonds. His brows were knotted and his stare was as fierce as a hawk's. She looked away, unable to hold his gaze for long, and her eyes drifted to the glowing ward at the bottom of the gorge.

"Then I will tell you, the ward is far below, at the base of the waterfall."

Bane's eyes flicked down, and he smiled, a slow, hard expression of triumph and contempt. "You are a traitor to your kind. Your help will speed their downfall."



“You are the one who is killing your own people. The Black Lord is not your father. He uses you to free himself.”

He shook his head. “I do not care what you say. I do not believe it. You are the liar, and the traitor. Do you expect to be rewarded?”

“No!” Mirra gasped at the unfairness of the suggestion. “I am no traitor. You would have found it, but it would have cost you more pain and brought you closer to the death the Black Lord has planned for you, which I am trying to save you from.”

His piercing gaze seemed to probe her soul. “Why? If you really believe that my father wants me dead, you should not try to stop it. You are only ensuring your destruction.”

Mirra lowered her eyes. “I would rather sway you than watch you die, for only you have the power to stand against the Black Lord. If you are killed before you break the final ward, he will send another, and we will still lose.”

“You think I will stand against my father?” He chuckled. “You dream, girl. I would never betray him. Never!”

“Even if he betrays you?”

“He will not. He is my father, and proud of me. Why should he?”

Mirra shook her head, saddened by his faith in the monster he thought was his father. “Because you are as powerful as him, and a threat. Because he will not want to share his power with anyone, and you are not his son, but a human, which he despises. Because -”

“Enough! None of that is true. You do not know my father, but I do, and I say he will not harm me.”

“Bane, why would he want a son, even if he did create you? He is immortal. He made you what you are only to break the wards. Once you have done that, he will have no more use for you.”

Bane snorted. “My father raised me. He was lonely before I came. Demons are tedious company.”

Mirra gazed at the ward, elusive in the thundering mists. She was failing, but how could she convince him of the truth when he dismissed everything she said as lies? The fate of the Overworld rested upon her, and she had to find a way to reach him, even though it seemed hopeless. She tried another angle, one in which she had little faith.

“What of this world? What of the people he will kill?”

“That is up to him.”

“What of me?”

The falls thundered in the short silence, and he shifted, his boots creaking. His red-lined cloak flapped lazily in the breeze, but she could not look at him, even though she was certain that he studied her, for she could sense his stony gaze.

“Perhaps I will keep you.”

She shuddered. “I do not want to be the only human alive in this world.”

Bane stared across the gulf as if it was a hurdle he had to cross. Abruptly he turned and strode off, and her hope flared, but then he swung to face the ravine again, his expression resolute as he raised his arms and summoned the power. With a groan, Mirra walked away.

Bane closed his eyes as the power surged within him, burning his raw flesh, still unhealed from the last time, and the Gather. The memory of the girl’s despairing eyes intruded, but he banished the image, recalling instead his father’s fiery glory and the booming words he had spoken on the night Bane had left the Underworld.

*“You are my son! Never forget that! Complete this task and we will rule together, forever. We will share the glory, the power!”*

Channelling the black fire downwards, Bane stepped over the canyon’s edge and floated down. The mists closed over him, and vapour settled on his skin and soaked into his clothes. He would not betray his father. He would free him from the trap that had held him prisoner for aeons and raise him up to walk the surface of the Overworld, lord of everything.

The ward shimmered within the foaming water, and he had no time to waste. A mighty blast of black fire smashed it, scattering the blue lines into prisms of rainbow glimmers. The carved ward was beyond it, and he moved forwards, passing through the thundering falls. The water beat down on him for a moment, then he hovered before the carved ward, and a blow shattered it. Moving swiftly as the pain in his head increased, he retreated and powered upwards to the chasm's rim.

As he leashed the power, agony spiked his brain like red-hot slivers, and he staggered, clutching his head. Fumbling in his tunic, he pulled out the wineskin. Dorel grabbed him, trying to wrench it from his hand, and he shoved her away. She staggered back, teetering on the edge of the gulf, her arms wind-milling, rage on her face, then toppled over. Bane smiled and drank from the skin.

The time it took for the potion to work seemed interminable. Bane faced the gorge, hiding his pain from the troops until at last it faded away, and his shoulders slumped. Opening his eyes, he gazed at the mist veiling the far side, remembering all the years of suffering in the Underworld. Demons loved to taunt, and he had grown to hate them, even to the extent of destroying one when he at last had the power to do it. Even after they had stopped tormenting him, his hatred had not waned. Then again, hatred flourished in the Underworld, everyone seemed to thrive on it.

The droge who had raised him had hated him, and he had grown to detest her too, eventually persuading his father to send her to the Land of the Dead. He remembered how satisfied he had been when his father had revoked her body, and he had watched her fade. At the last, her ranting had stilled, and she had returned his malicious smile. Her words stayed with him still.

*"He made you well, Bane. You have nothing left in you but hate."*

Only his father had been exempt, for the Black Lord had not taunted or been unnecessarily cruel to him. He had remained aloof, watching, sometimes teaching, but never attracting Bane's hatred. The cruellest thing he had done to Bane was cutting the runes. Then he had met Bane's fierce glare, shaking his head.

*"Do not hate me, Bane. I am your father, and this is necessary."*

So Bane did not. Until recently, the Black Lord had been the only person, living or dead, Bane did not hate. Now there was the girl. How could he hate someone who just wanted to help? Who did help by taking away his pain? Who showed him where the ward was, so he could break it and destroy her world, just to spare him more pain?

Bane jumped at a touch on his arm, turning to find the girl gazing up at him with her innocent eyes.

"What happened to Dorel?"

He shrugged. "She got pushed over the edge."

"Down there?" Her eyes widened.

"She has been dead for over two hundred years. She will be back, when she manages to climb out." He turned away, becoming aware that he was soaked, and walked back to his tent. The girl followed, sitting quietly while he dried himself and donned fresh clothes. He sat on the bed, rubbing his face.

"Have you ever hated anyone?"

She looked startled. "No."

"Not even someone who was cruel to you?"

"No one ever was, until..."

"Until me," he finished for her.

"Yes."

"But you do not hate me, either."

"No."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "You enjoy hurting because you have been hurt. It is not your fault, but the fault of those who hurt you."

Her perception surprised him. "How do you know?"

"I can see it in your eyes, and I feel it. You want people to suffer the way you have. That is why you were so angry when you could not hurt me."

Bane nodded. "Yes."

The girl looked expectant, but he had no more questions for her. Lying back, he gazed at the leather roof. One more ward, and the hatred of the Underworld would be unleashed.

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Seventh Ward

Dorel reappeared the next morning, wet and subdued, merely glaring at Mirra when she found her curled up on the floor of Bane's tent. He despatched her to bring food, and she was busy until the time came to leave, when she rode behind Bane, arms tight around him. Mirra followed on the grey horse, and they crossed the river above the gorge, then turned away from the mountains. After a day of riding, they quit the forest and descended onto vast, rolling grasslands that seemed to go on forever. Mirra was relieved when the creatures of darkness halted at the edge of the wood, unable to venture onto the plains. Bane did not seem to notice, or care, that he had lost several hundred of his troops.

Mirra stayed away from Bane and Dorel, seeking solitude to mourn what was to come. She had tried to talk to Bane, as she had promised Elder Mother, but it was useless. He was determined to free his father, and nothing would sway him. Her grief grew with each passing day, for she knew that she had failed, and the hopes of the entire world had been pinned upon her. Guilt and remorse plagued her, sowing her sleep with unpleasant dreams and darkening her days with self-recrimination and misery.

The days passed uneventfully. The trolls and goblins grumbled when their food ran out, but found plenty of game to hunt. The rock howlers ate the tough grass and dug up roots. Mirra had to forage each night for roots and nuts, wild vegetables and herbs, which she cooked for herself. The pickings were scarce, and she lost weight. Bane seemed to be avoiding her, which added to her unhappiness.

It seemed as if weeks had passed when a huge stone monolith appeared on the horizon and grew closer each day. Mirra guessed that this was the site of the last ward. In a few more days they would reach it, and Bane would break the seventh ward, allowing the Black Lord to rise. Every day, she prayed to the Lady, but it gave her little comfort.

As the monolith towered over them, she noticed its oddity. The granite pillar was over two hundred feet tall, rising out of the flat plains as if it had been extruded during some violent displacement of rock from far beneath the land, thrust out by the core of the world, unwanted and alone.

Mirra admired the wizard's choice. At its summit, stone and soil had been worn away to reveal a heart of solid crystal, its cracks and natural facets splitting the light into rainbows. Had it been a sunny day, the peak would have sparkled like a mammoth diamond, but now it merely glimmered in the overcast sky's dull light. The megalith's sides were sheer cliffs that still bore the scoring of its violent birth, and rubble littered its base, piles of stones that had fallen from it over the aeons. Tufts of hardy grass grew in the cracks and crannies of its pitted flanks, furring its harsh greyness with soft gold.

As they rode around it, Mirra noticed that it had five distinct sides. This was not a rock into which a pentagram had been carved; it *was* the pentagram. On each side, arcane runes were deeply etched, symbols of immense power that held the Black Lord below. A faint blue glow emanated from within the giant crystal on the monolith's summit, and Mirra's heart lifted as she gazed up at it in awe. Surely Bane would not be able to break this ward? The Demon Lord contemplated the gigantic stone with narrowed eyes. If only she could persuade him not to try. The most powerful mage had set the seventh ward, and he had spared nothing in its creation.

They made camp at its base, and Mirra longed to speak to Bane, but Dorel's presence kept her away. The fact that he did not tackle it immediately, as he had done the previous ones, told her that the task daunted him. The night was warm, and she left the trolls' company to enjoy it alone, the danger of demons almost forgotten. She lay in the long grass and stared at the stars, wondering if this would be her last night alive.

Footsteps made her sit up. Bane approached, and she relaxed. He unclipped his cloak and threw it down, settling on the grass. Mirra thought it odd that he should seek her company, and wondered what he wanted. He sighed and looked up at the monolith, then back at her.

“So, this one is supposed to kill me.”

“You think it will not?”

He shrugged. “It might.”

“Do you really think you can destroy that?”

He smiled, but his eyes were hostile. “You have not really seen my power. The only time I used more than a little was when I tore open the clouds so you could heal yourself.”

“You were exhausted after the ward at the waterfall.”

“Yes, air walking is very strenuous, as is rock walking. But during neither of those disciplines can I perform a Gather at the same time, so I run out of stored power.” He rubbed his chest. “When these start to burn, I need to draw power, but I cannot always oblige. That is when it really hurts.”

Mirra shook her head, emboldened by desperation, for this was likely to be her last chance to persuade him. “No. The evil power is killing you. You are human, not a demon or the Black Lord, who is no longer human. Only a human can touch the wards, and no one ever thought a man would be able to wield such power, never mind want to. You cannot stand the power you hold. It is evil, unnatural, and your body rejects it.”

Bane gazed at the sky as if he was ignoring her, but she knew he was listening. The moonlight shadowed his face, throwing its lines into sharp relief. He looked truly demonic, the angel washed from him by the night.

“Even if I die breaking this ward,” he murmured, “it will not matter, because my father will gather my soul to him and clothe me in a dark form like his, then I will be immortal.”

Mirra’s eyes stung, and she bowed her head, unable to bear the thought of him dying, lost to the world, and to her. His faith in the Black Lord was unshakeable, built upon a lifetime of ill-treatment by all but the Lord of the Underworld. She could not undermine that in such a short time. He had barely grown to tolerate her, and she was trying to turn him against the only being he had ever trusted. How could Elder Mother be so cruel? She was trying to tear him apart, and being torn apart herself. How could she convince him that the Black Lord was evil, when evil was all he had ever known? To him, the Black Lord was his father, his idol, and a dark god of immense power who had entrusted him with a monumental task.

Bane was not fickle. He did not turn every time the wind changed. He remained faithful, an admirable, but rare quality. How could she convince him that he was loyal to the wrong side? Mirra looked up at the huge mountain of stone and knew he would break this ward or die trying. Then the Black Lord would reward him by stripping away his handsome human body and endowing him with a foul dark form. This he would welcome, believing it to be his destiny, as he believed the Black Lord was his father. Warm tears ran down her cheeks, and Bane eyed her.

“Why do you weep?”

She sighed. “For all of us, but especially for you.”

“I do not need your pity.” His voice hardened.

“It is not pity, but sorrow. You destroy a world you never really knew, and were not able to appreciate, because you were poisoned against it. If only you had seen the beauty in it, instead of only ugliness and death. It is your world, or it would have been, if the Black Lord had not stolen you from it. I weep for my sisters, who pray for us all, and soon will perish. I mourn all the unborn children who will not see this world, but most of all I grieve for you, who will destroy it unwittingly.”

In the silence that followed, Bane sat as still as a statue.

She whispered, “Last of all, I weep for myself, for tomorrow I will die, and I do not want to. I am only sixteen, just starting out, but I cannot live in the world the Black Lord will create.” She tried to read his face, but it was a mask.

“You will die only if I let you.”

Mirra looked away, letting her tears flow, her throat too tight to speak. *You cannot stop me dying, Bane. You may be able to control the stars, but you cannot stop me dying.*

Bane rose to his feet and stared down at her, then walked away. His cloak lay where he had left it,

and, after a little while, Mirra curled up in its soft folds.

The morning dawned grey and cold, a chill wind whipping the grass. Mirra woke in the soft warmth of Bane's cloak, and pulled it close as she sat up. The grey horse grazed a short distance away, while the demon steed stood like a statue in the distance, the wind swirling its burning mane and tail. She untied the water skin from her belt and sipped from it, then ate some roots she had cooked at Mord's fire the day before. Birds sailed upon the icy wind with shrill, wind-torn cries, and the grass rustled as small creatures foraged in it. She wondered if this was the last day for the Overworld and all its creatures, her heart heavy.

Dorel ran errands between Bane's tent and the army, then the trolls, goblins and rock howlers rose and trudged away. They retreated until they were a black mass in the distance, when the smoke of campfires rose once more.

Bane emerged from the tent, stripped to the waist, his jet hair whipped by the wind. He gazed at her for a moment before turning to Dorel. Mirra's throat tightened when he drew his dagger and pressed it to his skin. Blood streaked his chest as he carved five runes, opening a long-healed scar. She wanted to scream at him to stop, save himself, save the world, but she knew it was futile, and sat hugging the cloak about her as he completed the ritual of the Gather, drawing the foul magic into his flesh.

The droge wiped off the blood, and he dressed in a fresh black shirt patterned with silver, pinning on his spare cloak. He drank from the flask, then faced the monolith and raised his arms, summoning the dark power. Rising on the column of fire, he ascended to the summit and settled beside the crystal. Mirra knelt and prayed that he would live.

Bane stood beside the crystal and studied the ward glimmering deep within its translucent depths. A thousand facets held a thousand wards, each a reflection of the real one, or each other. To find the real ward, it seemed that he would have to enter the crystal, an unexpected problem. Rainbows of refracted light imbued it with glorious, delicate colours, shining in the watery sunlight's pale radiance. Bane stepped forward. As he touched the crystal, he spoke two words of power. His hands sank into it, the sensation much like cold water, only it was within his flesh. Slowly, he pushed his arms in and advanced, moving now with mind and body to enter the resisting stone.

Within the crystal, a fantasy world of light and reflections awaited him, with no hint of what lay outside. Aware that his power was being used up rapidly, he pushed on, the crystal flowing coldly through him. Blue pentagrams glimmered all around him, ethereal, beckoning, reflections of reflections, elusive and unreal.

Bane reached for one, his hand passing through it with no sting of power, and he reached for another with frustrating torpor, his flesh creeping through the stone. Flaws leapt at him, bright with ward reflections, mirrors within the crystal. Clear passages opened ahead maddeningly, trapping him in illusory paths, guiding him in circles and using up his power in useless searching. He was lost in a maze of twisting crystal pathways, turned aside by flaws, led on by images, side-tracked by reflections.

A sense of hopelessness came over him. There was no way to find the real ward, perhaps there was none, or perhaps it had been split into a thousand so he would die trying to find the right one. Pain pounded at his temples as his power drained from him like water down a hole. He had to do something soon, or he would die as Mirra had predicted. Bane looked behind him, finding only more meandering, faceted paths and endless reflections.

The crystal had trapped him like a fly in a web, with no way out. He stopped, holding back the remnants of his power, the cold crystal melding with him, becoming a part of him. Slowly, against the stone's resistance, he raised his arms. The runes on his chest ignited as he called for more power, and it welled from within him, sucked from his bones.

A word of power echoed in his mind, and he flung the magic forth, every last shred of it, in a wave of dark force. The crystal cracked with a sharp report, and pain lashed him as flaws appeared, radiating out from him in dim corridors lined with images of the ward, multiplying, dividing, smashing into

fragments, splitting into shards. A thousand wards became a million; splintering, fracturing, countless mirrors shattering, filling his head with the chiming, tinkling, crystalline pealing of a trillion tiny bells. His vision dimmed as the last of his power left him, and the crystal exploded, flying through him, out of him, ice through his flesh.

Bane fell to his knees as the huge crystal disintegrated around him with a massive thunderclap, inhaling as he became solid once more. Crystals fell all about him, smashing against the rock, flying outward to vanish into the void, plunging down to a final shattering far below. The thunder rolled away across the plains, and he opened his eyes. He knelt in the centre of the ward, the pentagram's glowing lines surrounding him, a trap set for a mage. He placed his hand against the invisible barrier above the ward, as solid as glass and as cold as ice, impervious to the Gather. He was trapped again, powerless.

Two traps so far, how many more? Bane rested, hot slivers sliding through his head. He sipped from the flask to dull the pain. Now he could not Gather dark power from the world, the ward barrier shut it off. A mage would have been doomed, but Bane was no mere mage. He possessed the Black Lord's power, abilities forbidden to lesser men.

Bane placed his hands against the rock on which he knelt and began to Gather. The runes on his chest flared, five glowing blood red. Dark magic seeped upwards through the stone, drawn by the power of his call. Sweat beaded his brow and ran down his face to gather on his chin, the icy wind chilling it. His father must sense his struggle, for surely they would feel the drain in the Underworld. Drogos would fade and demons shrink, perhaps even the inner fire would dim.

There was no lack of power below, but it was locked within the rock, as difficult to extract as water from desert sand, especially in such vast quantities as he required. His eyes bulged with the effort, and burning tears streaked his cheeks. He strained, pulling, calling, Gathering with all his strength. The runes glowed brighter, a sixth beginning to shine. Then the power dammed in the stone flowed into him, released from its bonds. Bane gasped and shuddered, his flesh burning as the power soaked into it, his stomach clenched with the familiar revulsion the dark power engendered.

Bane slowed the flood of magic, controlling it before it gathered too much momentum and overflowed him, but drawing on it until he had accumulated a sufficient amount to complete his task. It eased, and he relaxed, the runes darkening as the flow ebbed under his hands. As it stopped, he sat back, the dark fire seething within him, trapped by the skill he had learnt below. Sickness crawled in his belly like a writhing snake, and he swallowed hard to prevent stinging bile from creeping into his throat. When he regained control, he invoked the power. It surged at his command, and he flung it at the ward with a striking motion of his hands.

The pentagram brightened under his attack, resisting him, forcing him to increase the power manifold. Its shimmering lines became incandescent, almost too bright to look at. Black fire fought with blue, striving to overcome it and quench its brilliance with shadows. The ward pulsed as its power weakened, unable to sustain so prolonged a defence. It flared one last time, then shattered in an explosion of crackling, vivid blue magic that hurled him, arms flailing, into the air.

The monstrous thunderclap that accompanied the explosion stunned him, then he fell. Three traps. Air rushed past him, sucking the breath from his lungs, slashing his eyes with icy knives. He plucked at its cushioning force, which grew stronger as he fell faster and faster towards the earth. The brown and gold ground rushed up at him, and he shouted a word of power.

Black fire burst from him, igniting the runes on his chest, and he directed it downwards. Instants before he slammed into the unforgiving earth, he slowed. The fire cushioned his impact, but still, he hit the ground with stunning force, the last dregs of air punched from his lungs with a soft grunt. A cloud of dust billowed around him.

Bane rolled onto his back, his mouth open as he strained to draw air into his burning lungs. The world spun and dimmed, and he closed his eyes, becoming aware of someone thumping his chest. At last air rushed in with a whooping gasp, and he opened his eyes. The girl knelt beside him, stroking the hair from his brow, her worried countenance wet with tears. Annoyed by her unwanted ministrations, he pushed her hands away and sat up, only to find Dorel kneeling on the other side of him. She tugged

at him, and he shoved her away too.

"Leave me alone."

Bane's cheeks were wet, and when he wiped them, his fingers came away bloody. A little strength seeped back into him, and he shook his head to dispel the shock and confusion of falling so far, so fast. The girl chewed her lip, and, with a grunt of irritation, he pushed Dorel aside, staring up at the monolith. The healer's distressed expression left him in no doubt that he looked a mess, but he had broken half of the last ward.

Smashed crystal lay all around, great chunks and tiny shards, some stabbed deep into the earth, like spears. The droge was unharmed, of course, but the girl had a cut on her head, clotted with dried blood, and another in her shoulder, which still oozed. He checked himself, for he had landed on a sea of razor-sharp crystal. Cuts covered his thighs and chest where it had sliced through his clothes.

"Fetch my jar," he ordered Dorel, who hurried away.

While he waited, his shirt gradually soaking with blood, he cast a triumphant look at the girl.

"Halfway there, and I am still alive."

"Just barely," she replied. "The potion I made for you stops pain, but that is only a symptom of the real injury. How much pain would you be in now, without the medicine?"

"A lot."

"That is how close you are to death."

"There were three traps," he retorted, as if that justified his state. "That damned mage was crafty."

"I do not want you to die."

He scowled, angry that she spoilt his triumph by carping about his health. "Leave me alone. I am well enough."

She glanced up at the great stone sentinel that towered over them, crowned with jagged crystal shards. "At least rest for a while, please?"

"I was going to, anyway. I do not need you clucking over me like a damned mother hen. In fact, I do not know why I put up with you at all."

She placed a hand on his arm. "I care about you."

He glared at her. "You would like me to believe that."

"It is true."

The droge returned, and Bane ripped open his shirt, revealing the oozing cuts on his chest. Dorel rubbed the gel on, running her hands over him with unnecessary enthusiasm. Bane tolerated it for a moment, then shoved her away and did it himself. The girl retreated, but Dorel remained, her avid, hungry expression sickening him. The droge worshipped power, and coveted any who possessed it.

He thrust the pot at her. "Go and make my food."

Dorel pouted and flounced off, shooting a killing look at the healer. Bane strived to quell the shivers that racked him while he pondered the task ahead. Tomorrow, he would destroy the great block of stone and free his father. The back of his skull throbbed, the only pain the healer's potion had failed to ease, but it was trifling. He rubbed his legs, making no attempt to stand because he knew he was too weak. His frailty irked him, delaying his triumph by forcing him to rest. He must perform another Gather soon, for he had hardly any power left.

Bane only rose at sunset, and even then Dorel had to help him, for his legs buckled at every step. In the tent, he flopped onto the bed, closing his eyes as exhaustion sucked him into sleep's soft arms.

Mirra sat in the darkness and gazed at the tent. Bane was dying, but he neither knew it, nor cared. He still believed the Black Lord would resurrect him with honours and install him as a beloved son, but she was sure he would not. She pitied Bane's misguided wish to please the foul creature that had tricked him into breaking the wards. The Black Lord had timed it well. Bane's use of the power tomorrow would be the last straw, and he would not survive it. She had failed to turn him from his purpose, and now he would destroy the world.



“Mirra...”

The whisper made her jump, fearful of demons sent to ensure her demise while Bane was so weak. A piece of crystal glinted in the moonlight, and something seemed to move within it. She crept closer, startled by the sound of Elder Mother’s voice.

“Mirra, come here.”

Mirra hurried over to a chunk of crystal broken on a flaw, its mirror-smooth surface turned uppermost, and knelt on the sharp stones in front of it. Ellese’s image filled it, worried and haggard.

Mirra cried, “Mother, help me! Everything has gone wrong. He would not listen. I tried! He will break the last ward tomorrow, and it will kill him.”

“Hush, child,” Ellese soothed. “Trust me. You can still save him. You must, now more than ever. He is our only hope.”

Mirra shook her head, bewildered. “How can he be our hope? He is utterly loyal to the Black Lord.”

“Do your duty, Mirra. Heal him.”

“I have no power. And even if I did, his evil stops it.”

Ellese held up a calming hand. “Think, child. He needs strength, stamina. There is another way to give him these things, not only with magic.”

Mirra was aghast. “But he is exhausted.”

“He can do it. He is very strong, far more so than a normal man. Find some dragonroot, give it to him tonight.”

“He will not eat it. He does not trust me.”

“Find a way!” Ellese’s voice cracked with authority, then softened. “I know you can, my dear. We are all counting on you.”

Mirra sagged back, horrified by the enormity of Ellese’s order. Dragonroot strengthened the body and gave vitality for a while, but when its effects wore off the penalty was grave. Bane might survive his ordeal tomorrow with its help, but would he live through the after effects? The crystal was empty, and she scanned the dark plains. Dragonroot was fairly common, but it would be hard to find in this expanse of grass, in the dark. If it was going to help him, he must have it tonight, for dragonroot was slow acting. It would take until the morning to work, and it might take a while to persuade him to eat it.

Galvanised by urgency, she hurried into the gloom. The ground around the monolith was strewn with sharp-edged crystal, and dangerous to navigate in the dark, so she moved beyond its edge before she began her search. The danger of demons made her nervous as she hunted amongst the grass for the small, fleshy-leafed bush. The moon rose, and Mirra grew frantic as the time seemed to fly past.

Just when she was starting to despair, she stumbled upon a tiny bush and dug it out, unmindful of the stones that bruised her fingers or the scratches from its thorny branches. When at last she freed it, she studied its distinctive shape. Dragonroot was aptly named, with its long, tail-like taproot and four short roots that were its legs, above which the head swelled, then tapered to a narrow muzzle.

Breaking off the superfluous stem, she ran to Bane’s tent, slowing as she approached it. At the flap, she hesitated, afraid of the droge, then gathered her courage and went inside.

Bane slept on the bed, and the droge sat on the floor, guarding his slumber. At Mirra’s entrance, her head snapped up and her eyes pinned Mirra with a baleful glare.

“Get out!”

Mirra shook her head. “I need to speak to Bane, alone.”

“He’s asleep, stupid, leave him be.”

“I must speak to him, now.”

Dorel rose, her hands clenching as she advanced, clearly intending to chase Mirra from the tent if she did not leave. Bane’s eyes opened, and he sat up, frowning at Mirra. Dorel froze, eyeing him.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“I must speak to you,” Mirra said.

“I am tired. I must rest. Come back tomorrow, if you wish.”

“It is important. Tomorrow will be too late.”

Dorel growled, "Don't listen to her."

Bane's cold gaze flicked to the droge, his irritation becoming anger. "Do not tell me what to do, Dorel. Wait outside."

Dorel's lip curled, and she pushed past Mirra, making her stagger. As soon as they were alone, Mirra moved closer to Bane, fiddling with the root.

He regarded her with weary, bloodshot eyes. "What is it? If this is another attempt at talking me out of it, you can leave now."

"No, it is not that." Mirra bowed her head, then lifted it. "Will you trust me?"

"No."

"But I have not tried to harm you, have I?"

His eyes narrowed. "Not yet, but I would say that now would be a good time to try."

"If I told you that I have no intention of harming you, would you believe me?"

"No."

Mirra sighed, but persevered. "My potion helps, does it not?"

"Yes, but that was just a ploy to gain my trust. If you think you have succeeded, you are deluding yourself. Get to the point, I want to sleep."

Mirra held out the dragonroot. "Do you know what this is?"

"No. It looks disgusting."

She glanced down at the dragonroot's grey, flaky skin, silently agreeing with him. "It is called dragonroot, and it gives strength if you chew it."

"What of it?"

"You will die tomorrow when you break the ward. If you eat this, you might survive."

Bane leant forward, his brilliant eyes intense. "You are asking me to trust you?"

She met his gaze, secure in her innocence. "Yes."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want to help you."

Bane snorted. "I do not need your help. Even if I die tomorrow, my father will reward me with a dark form."

"I thought you might like to choose your own time for taking the dark form, not have it forced upon you."

He considered this. Mirra had appealed to the one thing she knew he had in abundance: pride.

He said, "And for this, you think I will risk my life, before I have completed my task. How stupid do you think I am?"

Mirra hung her head, tears threatening. He would never trust her. He had no reason to now that he was so close to achieving his goal. His suffering had driven him to take her potion, but all she could do now was plead with him, and that had never worked. She glanced up when he spoke softly.

"Give me a reason. One good reason I should trust you in this; something that makes sense to me."

Mirra was struck afresh by the angelic aspects of his countenance, his brilliant eyes and alabaster skin. Rarely was the good side of him so strikingly visible, only when he lacked the evil taint that usually held him in its dark thrall. His lack of power had opened a brief and fragile window of opportunity, one she could not afford to miss. She did not consider her words before they tripped off her tongue, and her lack of thought made them ring with truth.

"Only you can save me. Without you, I will die."

A faint, mocking smile curved his lips, tainted by a cynical twist. "Ah. That, I understand. A selfish trait at last, just when I was starting to think you were utterly inane. Yes, you are right, without me, you are dead. But the only reason I have been protecting you is because of your damned spell, otherwise you would have been dead long ago. When my father comes, he will break your foul enchantment, and I shall be free to torment you." He shrugged. "So why should I risk your poison to save you when I will not want to?"

She searched her mind for a reason. "What if he cannot break the spell? What if he does not want

to? You have angered him many times. He might punish you for that. Will you suffer if I die?"

He frowned. "Only if your spell still holds me."

"Exactly. What better punishment could he inflict for your defiance of his orders than to kill me while the spell still harms you?" Mirra cringed inwardly at the slight deceit in her words, a twisting of the truth to suit his way of thinking.

Bane considered this, but it did not seem to worry him. "My father has never punished me. Why should he start now?"

Mirra cursed the Black Lord's devious planning. He had ensured Bane's undying loyalty with his token generosity, making Bane believe himself too important to incur his father's wrath. As long as he had faith in the Black Lord's affection for him, he would not doubt his immunity.

She tried another angle. "All right; but what if he cannot break the spell, and kills me out of revenge for all the trouble I have caused, then what?"

He chuckled. "The Black Lord will easily break your silly enchantment."

"So why can you not? If you are as powerful as he is, you should have been able to do it yourself."

"I am not as well versed in magic as he is. He has promised to break your spell, and he will."

"What if he does not?"

"He promised."

"He has never broken a promise?" she asked.

"No."

"What if he cannot? He might think he can, but if he is wrong, you cannot let me die, can you?"

"Give it up. You cannot turn me against my father."

"I am not trying to. I know that would be futile; but what about your choice? Will you let him dictate your future, and take the chance, no matter how slight, that he might decide to punish you this time? If he does, you will be helpless to stop him unless you live. Once you are dead, he will rule you, for he can decide how much power to give you, if any. As long as you retain your mortal body, disgusting as it is to you, you are beyond his reach, for he cannot rule the living." Mirra wondered where all the knowledge came from.

Bane looked thoughtful. "You have a point, I suppose. But if you kill me now, I will lose that choice, and fail my father too. That is a big risk to take just for the sake of ensuring my powers after his rising. I trust him, but I certainly do not trust you."

She sagged, despondent. They were right back where they had started. "But I do not want to kill you. You cannot save me if you are dead."

Bane smiled, his eyes shining in the lamplight. "Yes I can. I shall be just as powerful in a dark form as I am now."

"If your father grants you one."

"Why would he not?"

"Why would he? Or, more to the point, what if he does not? You will be at his mercy once you become one of his own kind; a dead soul. Will you take the chance that the enchantment cannot be broken, and you will be helpless to prevent your suffering if he kills me? Would it not be better to ensure I live, in that case?"

He pondered this with a bitter expression. "You seem very sure that your spell cannot be broken, yet you claim not to have cast it."

"I did not. But if the healers cast it, I doubt that your father can break it, because we use different kinds of magic."

"So, you have sought to enslave me with this spell, ensuring your safety with it. Very well then, I shall accept your argument as valid. It does make sense to me. But I promise you this, witch. If my father cannot free me of you, I will find a way to do it, I swear. And when I do, you will suffer for your tricks and lies, more than you can imagine."

Mirra suppressed a shiver. Certainly this was just the sort of thing that would appeal to him, but at the same time it made her own argument seem really stupid, for by saving his life, she ensured her

suffering at his hands, or so he thought.

Bane watched her, looking amused. "Do you still want me to live?"

She raised her eyes to his. "Yes, but not for your reasons. I believe the Black Lord will betray you, and you will turn against him. Keeping you alive is the only way to save the Overworld."

"You think so?" He laughed. "Believe what you will, it seems we both have reasons for wanting me to retain my mortal form. You will regret this, I promise." He took the root, rubbing the dirt off it.

She snatched it back. "I will wash it."

Mirra scrubbed it clean in a bowl of water, aware that his eyes followed her every move. When she was satisfied, she held it out, but he shook his head, and her heart sank. Had he been toying with her?

"You first," he said.

Mirra nodded. "There is one thing. It has an after effect, when it starts to wear off."

"What sort?"

"Unpleasant. Cramps, fever, nausea and headaches."

He shrugged. "Nothing new to me."

Mirra broke off a leg root and chewed it, grimacing at the burning, acidic flavour, which stung her mouth. He waited for a while, then chewed the root. He pulled a face, and she thought he would spit it out, but he persevered.

"It tastes rather like my food."

She shuddered. "It is foul."

It took him some time to consume the entire root, and she was relieved when he finished it. He lay back, closing his eyes once more, and Mirra rose to leave, but his voice stopped her.

"Stay here. If you have poisoned me, I will take you with me."

"You will not have to. I have eaten it too."

"True."

Mirra lay down on the floor, hardly able to believe that she had persuaded the Demon Lord to take her advice, albeit not for the best reasons. Apparently he feared her death more than she did, which puzzled her. Then again, perhaps he merely wished to retain his independence, which he could do only if he lived. Once Bane was dead, the Black Lord could do whatever he wished with him; even consign him to the Land of the Dead. Or could he? Was Bane just a powerful black mage, or something more? Ellese had said that he was stronger than a normal man, which hinted that he was not normal, in which case, what was he?

If he was anything more than a normal man, he evidently did not know it, which had worked to her advantage in this instance. Bane's trust in his father was unshakeable; his only doubt seemed to be whether or not the Black Lord could break the spell he believed himself to be under. She was certain that the healers had not cast any spell, for they did not use that kind of magic, but if not, who had, if anybody? Whatever the reason, she was thrilled that he had accepted her help. She could not bear to think of him dying tomorrow. Satisfied with the night's work, she fell asleep listening to Bane's soft breathing, comforted by his presence.

Mirra woke when he did, sat up and rubbed her eyes while he stretched, joints cracking.

He looked down at her. "So, you told the truth, it seems. I have not felt this fit since I left the Underworld."

Mirra smiled, glad of the vigour the root had imparted to her as well, for she had a nasty suspicion she was going to need it today. Pale, cold sunlight filtered in through the flap, flaring as Bane pushed it aside and stepped out. She followed, finding him considering the monolith with eyes narrowed to slits against the grey sky's glare. Dorel glowered at her with fresh venom, clearly furious at being evicted from the Demon Lord's tent and replaced by what she considered to be a smelly human. Bane sent the droge to prepare his breakfast, and Mirra chewed some roots she had collected and stored in her pockets, while he ate. Afterwards, he ordered the droge to bring his pack and turned to Mirra.

"Go away, girl. I am going to perform another Gather."

Mirra nodded and left to find a comfortable spot in the grass where she could view the monolith, not

wishing to watch Bane's ritual. Despite her resolve, her eyes were drawn to him constantly. Again he cut five runes, which she assumed meant that he did not plan to use his full strength. She wondered if he had ever used all seven runes, and what would happen if he did. Even with only four or five, his power was awesome. She could not imagine more. When he finished the Gather, he sent Dorel away and turned to face the giant ward, whose mighty presence dwarfed him.

Bane gazed at the seventh ward for a long time, pondering its might and gauging the power that would be required to destroy it. The mage who had created it had been powerful and wise. The seventh ward had been created first, and had held the Black Lord below on its own until the other six had been put in place to ensure his entrapment and prevent demons from entering the Overworld. Its power was such that even now his father was locked below, with half the ward broken.

The reason he had broken the wards in the reverse order of their creation was because they were linked in a complex magical web that allowed them to strengthen and protect each other. When one was attacked, it drew power from the others, so if he had come here first, the seventh ward would have been impervious with the support of the other six. Now it stood alone, but even so, it was a formidable adversary, one that, unlike a living mage, had no fear of death and would not accept defeat easily.

Bane walked up to it and stopped amid the rubble that cluttered its base, considering the mammoth stone sentinel that would be his final challenge. The chiselled rune, the first of five he would have to break, was about a hundred feet above him, forcing him to use the dark power to reach it. Invoking it, he drifted upwards until he stood on the air in front of the arcane symbol. Reaching out, he placed his palm on the rune and channelled his magic into it. With a muffled crack, the rune crumbled under his hand, a layer of stone breaking away to slide down and smash on the rubble below with a rumble.

Dropping to the ground, he pulled out the flask and sipped some potion as the first shafts of pain spiked his brain, then picked his way through the moraine to the next side of the five-sided stone. There, he once again drifted up and placed his hand upon the second rune, causing it to crumble into dust, destroying its power.

Mirra knelt in the grass and prayed that she had done the right thing by helping the man who was destroying the one thing that could keep her world safe from the Black Lord. She had told the truth when she had said that she wanted to live, she did, but not in the world the Black Lord would create.

Ellese sat back and rubbed her eyes, horrified by what she had seen in the scrying glass. The sisters of her abbey, who had gathered to hear her news, held their breath as they waited for her to speak, their faces worn by worry and despair. Ellese quelled a strong urge to break down and weep, stiffening her back as she raised her head and faced them.

"He is breaking the seventh ward."

A great groan rose from them, and some of the younger girls burst into tears, their sobs tearing at Ellese's fragile control.

"Hush now. Mirra has failed, yes. The black ship was too strong; the wind that blew it too powerful. She tried, sisters, she did her best, but perhaps she was sent too late. She should have been with him much longer. His faith in the Black Lord was stronger than we ever imagined, and that was what defeated her in the end."

"We are doomed!" an acolyte wailed, weeping on her neighbour's shoulder.

Ellese drank from her glass of water, unable to meet her sisters' anguished eyes. "Perhaps; but Mirra has ensured Bane will survive this last ward, something the Black Lord had not planned on. We have one last hope, dear sisters."

The sobbing subsided a little as the healers grew intent, listening.

“Bane is our hope now.” Ellese scanned their shocked, disbelieving faces, and smiled. “Yes. Bane. If the Black Lord is true to his nature, we have hope. It is our last chance, but one to which we must cling. Remember, Bane is as powerful as the Black Lord, and human. He is a mortal dark god.”

“But how can the Demon Lord save us?” an old healer asked.

The seeress shook her head. “I will spare you the details for now. Very soon, we will know, and then we will have a difficult task ahead of us, one that many of you will not want to undertake. If I am wrong, we are indeed doomed, and must prepare to meet the Lady. Let us hope, until then. Go about your duties. Gather sunlight and store it, as much as you can, for when the Black Lord rises we will not see the sun.”

## Chapter Eighteen

### Ascension of the Black Lord

Bane stood beneath the last rune, sweat dewing his brow, his flesh burning. The strength that the dragonroot had bestowed was severely depleted, but he was not finished yet. Wearily, he unleashed the fire and floated up to the rune, then stretched out his hand and laid it upon the carved symbol. As the rune broke, a thunderclap rolled away across the plains, reverberating from the distant mountains in a great, resounding rumble that made the ground vibrate. A deep chime rang out, as discordant as a cracked bell, a peal of doom. The rock crumbled beneath his fingers, breaking away and starting to fall. He followed it down, pain lancing his head again.

On the ground, he gulped the potion and walked away from the monolith as the stabs of fire receded, then turned to study it once more. Although bereft of runes, the pentagram still stood, solid and seemingly indestructible. One last effort, he promised himself. One last burst of power, albeit a strong one, then he could rest. The girl huddled some distance away, her pale face turned towards him. He had experienced several twinges of doubt when he had consumed the root she had brought him, realising, a little belatedly, that it might only become a poison when he used the dark power, or it might weave some other spell on him, not merely kill him. Perhaps it was only to strengthen her spell, so his father could not break the enchantment.

The arguments she had offered had not been terribly convincing, yet he had believed her when she had told him it was only to save him. If that was true, however, his father had lied about her, and she had not been sent to stop him breaking the wards. Then again, perhaps the Black Lord had only been trying to protect him from any possible threat. Yet it seemed that she had not lied, and the root had given him the strength he needed to break the last ward, which was puzzling. Once he was free of her spell, he would decide what to do with her.

Bracing himself, he raised his arms high and summoned the power, sending the black fire that surged from him flashing across the gap to strike the base of the monolith. Another great rumble shook the ground, and shards of rock broke away from the ward, crashing down onto the rubble below.

Bane concentrated the power, using the years of painful lessons he had been forced to undergo to control it. The black magic constantly strived to elude him, writhing in his grip like a dangerous ebon snake. Bane knew all the skills required to tame it, however; his schooling had been lengthy and thorough. Closing his eyes, he looked deep within the earth and found the crevasse that had birthed the megalith, and, beneath it, the vast cavern formed by its rising. He tore at it, widening it, causing the huge tectonic plates far beneath the surface to shift.

The earth twitched like the skin of a fly-bitten horse. He poured shadows into it, using the existing stress to increase the potency of the destruction, channelling the magic into every flaw and crack, forcing them to widen and weaken. Rock grated and groaned, and cracks appeared in the soil, crazing it with sharp reports. The ground shook, causing the monolith to tremble and shed chunks of stone.

Bane's power ebbed, and the rune scars ignited, burning with sullen light. Yet the earth still resisted him, and he flung back his head, starting to Gather. The runes flared to bright crimson, searing him. Hot pain stabbed his brain, and flashes of agony cut into his eyes as the shadows rushed into him, filling him with their awful power and the illness that came with it. He channelled it into his hands and unleashed it at the ward in a crackling arc of pure blackness that split the air like a river of night, blasting the ward's foundations, tearing rock and soil. The earth bucked, and chunks of stone the size of houses fell to smash all around him, filling the air with whizzing shards that his power deflected.

Still, the ward stood. Bane raised his arms higher, increasing his Gather, the sixth rune starting to glow, growing brighter. Blackness rose from the ground, seeped from the air, and crept from the shadows amongst the rocks. It poured into him, filling him, and blasted from him into the bedrock. The earth shuddered, and a deep rumble came from far underground, growing to a muted roar. Bane

became a conduit through which the black magic flowed, the sixth rune now burning as brightly as the rest. Mind-bending agony transfixed him as the dark fire burnt through him in a torrent that would have incinerated a black mage.

The seventh ward tottered as its foundations crumbled, pieces breaking off and thundering to the ground with resounding booms that shook the earth. Slowly, it leant, dust and pebbles cascading from it, crystals smashing. For a moment, it hung, defying gravity, then, like a mighty tree, it fell. The massive, grating boom rocked the ground, rolling away in a thunderous roar that echoed off the distant mountains and reverberated around the world. Rock smashed, crumbled, broke into sheets and chunks, crashed to the ground and broke again. Dust billowed up to veil its death in a pale shroud.

Bane staggered, struggling to keep his feet as the earth heaved, cracks snaking across it, fissures opening to swallow streams of soil and grass. He strived to leash the power, dispersing what he could not hold, forcing the rest into his bones, his stomach churning. His vision became red-tinged as he bent and retched. He fought the weakness that invaded him, but sank to his knees. Drops of blood fell on the ground in front of him, dripping from his eyes. The agony of the fire's aftermath made his flesh burn as if his skin was packed with hot coals. Lances of pain split his skull, and the power leashed in his bones became an instrument of exquisite torture, forcing a cry from him as he tasted blood, and wept it.

Dark fire licked over his hands, beyond his control, and he fought to leash it. His lungs burnt and his heart laboured. He had absorbed too much. He could not contain it, and he had not dispersed enough. Now he was too exhausted to master it, and it was consuming him, breaking free to ravage his flesh.

Cool hands gripped his arm, and the power flowed into them, reducing his suffering immensely. A soft cry made him turn to find the girl kneeling beside him, her expression agonised. Bane wrenched free, and she crumpled as his pain redoubled. He had control again, however, and leashed it savagely, the agony fading as the power subsided, trapped within him once more. His heart slowed, and cool air put out the fire in his lungs as he blinked blood from his eyes. The healer lay motionless, dust settling on her skin. He wondered if she was alive or dead, wishing he had the strength to find out. His vision dimmed, the world tilted, and he collapsed.

For a long time, he lay barely conscious, racked by shivers and spasms. Dust settled on him and his temples pounded, but he was too weak to drink from the flask. He studied the blood-spotted soil under his nose, unable to lift his head. Waves of blackness washed over him, lulling him, and finally he surrendered to the mercy of its numbness as it rinsed away the pain.

Mirra jerked awake, blinking gritty eyes. She ached all over, and was amazed that she had survived. Raising herself on shaking arms, she looked around. Bane lay on his stomach beside her, his head turned to the side, as still and waxen as a corpse. Despair squeezed her heart, and she touched his brow, its warmth assuring her that he still lived.

After a brief struggle, she rolled him onto his back, grunting. His limbs flopped, yet his eyes were open and his muscles twitched. Bloody tears ran down his cheeks, washing runnels in the dust on his skin. His pale eyes stared sightlessly at the blackening clouds, and his chest rose in shallow breaths.

"Bane! Bane, can you hear me?"

His eyes closed.

Digging in his tunic, she found the nearly empty flask and held it to his lips, trickling the potion into his mouth. He coughed a spray of it out, then swallowed. Bit by bit, she fed it to him, careful not to waste a drop. When the flask was empty, she set it aside and placed a hand on his chest, snatching it back as a frisson of cold power shot up her arm. Alarmed, she undid his shirt and pulled it open. Six runes glowed dim red.

"Bane, leash the power. Bane!"

His head lolled to the side, and the runes faded to embers. There was no sign of the droge. Mirra climbed to her feet and tottered away in search of more dragonroot. She soon found another shrub, and tore her nails in her frenzy to dig it out, then ran to the tent and crushed it in a cup of water, squeezing



the juice from its tough fibres. Stumbling back to the Demon Lord, she knelt beside him and lifted his head onto her lap. She trickled the fiery liquid into his mouth, persevering even when he gasped and coughed, knowing that it might still not be enough.

When he had swallowed most of it, she wiped his face with the hem of her dress. His limp jet mane covered her lap like dusty raven's wings, his deep widow's peak and sharply angled brows at the mercy of her exploring fingers. She had often longed to trace his striking features and caress his silken skin, but had thought she would never get the chance. Now he was unable to evade her, and even his lashing tongue was stilled by the half-death that held him.

The clouds thickened and blackened into an ominous shroud, and distant lightning flickered to earth, followed by soft rumbles of thunder. The fallen seventh ward lay crushed and broken, its power gone. The Black Lord was rising. She could taste a cold tang of iron in the air and smell corruption in the wind. Bane's crimson-lined cloak lay about him like a pool of black-edged blood, and his breathing was a laborious hiss. He clung to life by a thread, held only by the dragonroot and his perverse spirit.

Gently she traced his fine brows and stroked the glossy hair that had always bristled with life. The runes had faded to angry red scars, yet somehow remained menacing. Leaning over him, she allowed her tears to overflow and splash onto his skin.

"Do not die, Bane, please do not die."

The Demon Lord coughed, his lips drawing back to reveal white teeth. His eyes opened, vivid blue against the crimson whites, releasing more bloody tears that trickled into his hair.

He whispered, "Damned... mother hen."

Her heart leapt. "Thank the goddess. How do you feel?"

He blinked. "Half... dead."

"Then you are half alive."

Bane grunted, and his eyes drifted closed. The landscape darkened. Black clouds blotted out the sunlight, and an eerie tingling in the air made her hair bristle. Lightning illuminated the clouds with silver flashes, and the wind plucked at her with cold fingers. The Black Lord was rising, here, and now.

She looked down at Bane. "The Black Lord is coming."

"Good."

"He will kill me."

Thunder rumbled as Bane's eyes opened again, allowing more blood to escape. He gazed at the stormy grassland, and Mirra prayed that the dragonroot had started to take effect. Time was running out. The tension in the air was like a silent scream as the Overworld struggled against the Black Lord's rising. Clouds raced across the sky and lightning flickered constantly. The very fabric of the Overworld protested; the air stiff with electrical animosity.

The Black Lord rose with terrifying suddenness. A black circle appeared not twenty feet away and spread outwards at an astonishing speed, the grass hissing as the dark fire consumed it, the soil whining. Natural fire flared as the grass caught alight, and dozens of smaller circles began to form. Fire demons manifested in blasts of sick light and earth demons erupted all about the huge blackened circle, heaving upwards swiftly. Mirra's heart pounded, and she clutched Bane's shirt. A black form rose from the centre of the huge circle, red sparks spiralling within it, exuding evil power in chilling waves.

The Black Lord took a man-shape, and opened yellow eyes. Slit pupils contracted, then his fiery maw curved in a malevolent smile. Mirra wanted to run, but was riveted by the awful sight. The demons surrounded their master, larger than him, yet far less powerful. Shadows seemed to gather to him, and Mirra's stomach heaved.

Bane smiled and whispered, "Father."

The Black Lord laughed. "So, you survived, Bane. What a tenacious human you are." His deep, powerful voice boomed across the space between them. He wagged a finger. "You were supposed to die. You have been a bad boy."

Bane frowned. "So I could have a dark form?"

"No, my boy. So you could go to the Land of the Dead, with the rest of the humans; for a little

while, anyway.”

“What are you saying?”

The Black Lord shook his head, red sparks cascading from the blackness. “I am not your father, boy. You are the misbegotten son of a love sick peasant girl and a lusty woodcutter.”

Bane’s eyes grew icy. “You lied?”

“I lied.” The Black Lord threw back his head and laughed. “I am the father of lies! I needed you to break the wards. I made sure you would not outlive your purpose, but a meddling healer has prolonged your suffering.” His eyes burnt Mirra. “Not that I mind. You brought it upon yourself. You disobeyed me, and now you will pay. Lie in the dust and die, boy. I go to conquer my new land.”

“You bastard.”

The Black Lord sniggered. “Ah, your mother screamed so delightfully when I tore you from her belly. A pity it was over so quickly, and then I had to care for you, a dirty human brat. What a trial it was, dealing with your messy upbringing, your wet, Overworld ways.”

“I shall destroy you,” Bane rasped.

“No, you will not. You will lie there and die. You have done well. You fulfilled my expectations excellently. Now, you are expendable.”

A fire demon moved towards the fallen Demon Lord, and Mirra recognised Mealle.

The Black Lord turned his midnight head. “No. Even now he is more powerful than you, Mealle. Let him die slowly.”

The fire demon hissed and withdrew. The Black Lord motioned, and a demon steed rose from a grass fire to bow to him. He mounted it. “Farewell, fool. We will visit you in the Land of the Dead. That, I promise.”

With a malicious guffaw, he urged the steed forward, and it sprang away in a flash, hooves drumming. The fire demons shrank to flames that trailed him in a swarm of sparks, the earth demons pounded behind on long legs, diving into the ground as they were left behind, to travel below. Invisible air demons fluttered the grass with their frigid foetor as they raced after him.

Mirra relaxed as the black power waned. Bane’s brows knotted, and he covered his eyes with a shaking hand, his mouth grim.

“Bane, it is not your fault. He tricked you. He is the Black Lord. You stood no chance. You were just a child. You must help us now, please. We need you.”

He let his hand drop. “I am useless.”

“No, you are not. He expected you to die. He planned it. But you lived through it, and only you have the power to stand against him.”

Bane closed his eyes and shook his head, his expression despairing.

“Do not give up now,” she pleaded. “The Overworld needs you. Fight for us. Fight for goodness, and truth, and purity, redeem yourself, avenge yourself.”

He groaned, “Damn you, let me die.”

“No! That is what he wants. You can beat him. Without you, we are lost, all of us. And you promised me. You said you would save me.”

Bane made a feeble attempt to rise, but flopped back, cursing under his breath. She cradled his head, stroking his hair until he jerked away with a growl. He closed his eyes, and she waited as the sky blackened further. Distant lightning illuminated it with garish flashes, and almost constant thunder boomed. Bane lay so still that she kept checking his pulse to make sure he had not slipped away to the Land of the Dead. The sky grew blacker still as night fell, the moon and stars hidden.

Mirra waited, growing stiff from sitting on the hard ground. The wind rose and prodded her; the earth sucked the warmth from her legs. The night seemed interminable, and she wondered if it would ever end, but at last dawn greyed the clouds, and Bane woke, coughing. He attempted to sit up, and fell sideways. Mirra tried to help him, but he pulled away, sprawling again as his limbs failed him.

“Leave me alone.”

His voice was stronger, and she rejoiced. His struggles were painful to watch, yet seemed to give

him strength. Soon, he sweated and shivered, but he levered himself upright and scowled at her.

“See what I have become; a puny, grovelling human, unable even to stand.”

Mirra met his fierce eyes, which held the helpless defiance of a trapped wolf facing the hunter. Yet his evil majesty remained. Even though he lacked the strength to stand, he was still the Demon Lord.

“You can still win,” she murmured. “You still have the power. You just need to get better.”

Bane gave a bitter, husky chuckle. “I am defeated. The Black Lord has risen, and you were right. You told the truth. How stupid you must have thought me.”

“No. You could not know. He raised you, spun you lies. It was all you knew.”

He bowed his head, wings of hair sliding forward to hide his face. “Let me die.”

“I will not. I cannot, any more than you could have left me to perish, or killed me.”

Mirra rose and staggered on stiff legs to the tent, where she found his Underworld food. Lighting a fire with flint and iron, she heated it and took it to him.

He glared at her, trembling with the effort of sitting up. “Leave me alone.”

“No. You must eat. I will force it down you if I must. It is not good food, but there is nothing else.”

Fury flared in his eyes. “So now you think you can give me orders?”

“You have not the strength to fight me. Right now, I am stronger than you.” She scooped up a spoonful and held it poised before his grim mouth. “Open up.”

For a moment, she thought he would lash out, and dreaded the tussle that might ensue, but then he smiled wryly and took the bowl. She plied him with wine, which he slugged back in copious amounts until his eyes drooped. By the afternoon, he had consumed most of the wine supply, and stared at the fallen ward while she gathered more dragonroot and flowers for the pain potion.

When she finished her tasks and returned to him, he appeared stronger, but exceedingly drunk. His eyes had stopped bleeding, to her relief, but the whites remained crimson and his lips looked like he had eaten fresh blood. He was still too weak to walk, so she spent a second night at his side, unable to leave him alone. Bane’s exhaustion was so profound that he slept through it, and the wine helped. Mirra curled up in a blanket beside him, and woke several times, afraid of the things that crept about in the pitch blackness, but nothing came near her.

Morning dawned grim and grey, black clouds locked together in an endless blanket. After eating a little more stew, Bane struggled to his feet, leaning on her, his knees buckling at every step. She staggered under his weight, and the corruption in him sickened her. Inside the tent, he sank down on the bed and stretched out. She spread a blanket over him and removed his boots, wincing at the sight of his swollen, blackened foot.

Leaving him to rest, she went to the tent flap and gazed out at the brooding sky, wondering if she would ever see a blue one again. Many questions plagued her, foremost of which was whether Bane would cast the Black Lord back down into the Underworld. Only he could do it now. The Lady did not have the power to intervene. If he refused, the Overworld was doomed, and all its inhabitants would perish from starvation when the vegetation died, those that the Black Lord did not slaughter.

Unless Bane chose to fight him and won, the Overworld would become a dead world under a pall of perpetual clouds. Only demons and the dead would inhabit a haunted wasteland. The Black Lord would banish the rain and allow the soil to become dust, and the wind would blow it away into the sea. Even the dark creatures would succumb without sustenance. The fate of the world rested on the shoulders of the Demon Lord, who hated it.

Although wounded by the dark power he wielded, scarred by the betrayal of the only being he had ever trusted and weakened by the seeds of destruction the Black Lord had sown in him, Bane alone could save the Overworld, with the help of a powerless healer.

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The tale continues in Book II, *Dark God*, followed by Book III, *Grey God*, Book IV, *Lord of Shadows*, Book V, *God Realm*, Book VI, *Son of Chaos*, and Book VII, *Dark Domain*.

### **About the Author**

T. C. Southwell was born in Sri Lanka and her family moved to the Seychelles when she was a baby. She spent her formative years exploring the islands – mostly alone. Naturally, her imagination flourished and she developed a keen love of other worlds. The family travelled through Europe and Africa and, after the death of her father, settled in South Africa. T. C. Southwell has written over thirty novels and five screenplays. Her hobbies include motorcycling, horse riding and art.

All illustrations and cover designs by the author.

Visit the Demon Lord Blog: <http://www.demon-lord-book.blogspot.com>

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