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66,600 words.

Demon on the Outside

By Fatma Alici

CHAPTER ONE

The door swings open to my bunk. A woman who wore nothing except a sheer nightgown stood in my doorway. I hold out my hand, she takes it. As we step further into the bunk a thousand candles blaze to life around us. My hands reach out to strip the silky robe off the raven-haired beauty. The candlelight making her sun kissed skin even richer. She let out a quiet chuckle that cut off abruptly.

I started to look around and everything seemed paused. The flames stopped flickering. The robe stopped falling. "Flaming Ice," I cursed as I realized it was all a dream.

Al'tari'a presence poured into my mind. As I fought against the pressure, my will drowned under her might. She stepped into my dream, as stunning and as serene as a God should be. She didn't take her normal form. Instead, her hair ocean blue, skin pearl soft, and sky blue eyes. "My champion I need you."

"Get out of my head. 'Your champion' could care less about your problems." Why can't she leave me alone? With effort, I whisked the dream away from my bunk. I put us in a blank white room.

She shook her head once. "You know I am bound to you and you to me till one of us dies. Carthin, you need to do this. It is destiny."

“Destiny and fate is all you ever talk about. What about my happiness? What of the freedom you claim to believe in? None of those mattered to you. You marked me before I was even born.” Thanks to the goddess of my ancestors, my life would never be my own.

Al’tar’ia walked over to me. Sadness pressed down on me, and I knew it was hers. “Carthin, I wish your joy and happiness could matter. It should. You were marked by fate before I choose you. Your life was never going to be your own. I am sorry for that, but I cannot change it.

“A terrible tide is rising. You must find a way to stop it. The world will drown if you don’t.” A vision of endless, black water appeared around me.

I shoved it away, “enough with all the stupid water metaphors. I’m a mercenary what do I care?”

“The Blacks will drown as well. You must stop Crasino from destroying the world with his ambition.” My sister bloody and dying flickered before my eyes. She knew my weak spots.

“I won’t remember this dream. All I’ll know is that you’ve been in my head, again.” I’d be pissed when I woke up. Every time she invaded my sleeping mind, I knew.

Those eyes that usually looked like oceans blinked once. “True, but you will need to find the demonborn.” A sharp piercing pain scattered across my eyes. An image of a beautiful woman with innocent eyes as red as rubies appeared before me. Her hair a fall of flame ran down her soot brushed pale skin.

"Why do I need her?" She was a stranger, I'd never met.

Al'tar'ia gave me a gentle smile. "I wish I knew. The answer is shrouded to me. You will wake up with a compulsion to go to where she is. For once in your life, let fate take its course."

"Yeah, great," I wanted to pull back the dream she'd interrupted, but I knew it wouldn't be the same.

"Candles so old fashioned, Carthin. We have magic lit globes these days," she said as the God faded from view.

"She's a flaming divine chastity belt," I muttered as I could feel myself waking up.

I sat up my body covered in sweat. A slight figure curled against me muttered a complaint. Her honey blonde hair entangled with my ebony. A woman whose name I couldn't remember. I didn't remember the dream either. The nightmares weren't going away. Al'tar'ia is still prodding my sleeping mind. Anger and compulsion warred in my mind. For the first time the compulsion won out.

"Get out of bed." I tapped the woman on the arm. "I've got to get dressed and leave."

The woman shook herself awake. "I don't understand. You were going to be here a week you said."

"Yeah, well I'm not now." I jumped out of bed pulled my pants and my shirt. "There is somewhere I have to be."

Her arms crossed tight over her chest. "Where?" Her lips pressed together.

I paused buttoning up my shirt. "I'm not sure." It doesn't matter the compulsion to leave is thundering in my veins. I hated it. I wanted to be free.

The woman glared. "You are making excuses to go."

I gave her my charming boyish smile. "Not true, I'll see you when I return." *If I ever remember your name, baby.* I tugged on my leather undercoat before putting on my chain mail. My sword strapped to my hip I gave her a passionate kiss. "Take care of yourself." I don't even stop for a food or my morning coffee before heading to the stables.

CHAPTER TWO

A piercing pain throbbed, as I could feel my muscle and sinew tear. My blood sizzled on the tabletop. I took this moment to reflect on my life. I had never been treated well by fellow humans, but never before had they been rude enough to stab me. My hair stiffened as anger grew. I fought and struggled with my demonic heritage as dirty, filthy man made some crack about 'I stuck it in her'.

"Take that disgusting blade out of my hand." I snapped. My tail thrashed back and forth behind me.

He leaned in his breathe sour, "Oh, I know you like it, don't ya?"

Rage boiled up and down my spine. A growl that existed only in my mind started. Oh, a part of me inside wanted to rip out his still beating heart. Drink the blood from it, and then shove it down his throat. All while laughing. I struggled for a moment, before backhanding the man. I couldn't give in to anymore violence. I wouldn't. I pulled the

knife out, and tossed it on ground.

He spit at the ground between my feet, before retrieving his weapon, and heading back to his table. My hair stiffened, I could feel my eyes glowing. Control, control, control was my mantra.

I watched him, until he had sat back down. My focus shifted to my battered hand. My blood was still boiling a bit on the surface of the table. I'd be more concerned about the stain it would leave if this place wasn't such a dump. I closed my eyes, the magic bending to my will as I knit my hand back together. The magic of growing things, and living soothed me as well. A bit of the tension abated.

To myself, I admitted, I needed to think about leaving this place. By Silt, I was tired of sleeping in the dirt. I hadn't been able to buy a new tent or bedroll since I lost my gear a month ago. I buried my face in my hands, as I felt my horns press against my fingers. A loud clang, and a splash of ale on my arm, I glanced up. The server who dropped the dented mug next to my arm was already gone. It spoke to the quality of the bar, that a patron getting stabbed is par for the course.

Ale smelled of horse piss and honey. My fingers shoved the mug away. A rumble in my stomach made me think of dinner. However, the ale didn't inspire much confidence in the kitchen. Not the first time I had gone to bed hungry. As I started to get up, there was commotion at the door.

The room was too filled with smoke from the nasty old hearth for me to see anything. I settled in my chair. I called the magic up from the core of my being. Tendrils of nature slithered across the floor. They faded once I sensed the energy. Angelborn, I couldn't

believe my luck. The only luck I had seemed to be bad. It was unfortunate, because in theory I should have gotten along fine with Angelborn. My whole save the innocent, protect the weak fit in with their general platform. Angelborn tended to force me out on principal. There was something odd about this one, but I put it aside for now.

I put my feet flat, braided my fingers, and waited. His appearance surprised him. He had the black hair, burnished brown skin, and downward slanted eyes of someone of the Southern Kingdoms. Yet, he had the strong jaw, the cleft chin which is pure Northern Kingdoms. Angelborn were the least common of all the planeborn. And, the combination of all three was intriguing. To say the least he was beautiful, I had never met any of the planeborn who weren't. He looked rather dashing in the partially unbuttoned saffron shirt, and bronze colored leather pants.

Without a word he pulled out a chair, and sat down. It annoyed me. He smiled. I could wait him out. Minutes started to tick by, and he leaned forward. I caught a deep blue tattoo to Al'tar'ia, the Goddess of water, at the hollow of his neck. I filed the information away.

"Do you enjoy tattoos?" To my surprise, his voice was deep, and compelling. I, for some reason, expected it to be soft, and delicate.

I lifted my brow. "Not in particular."

"Into males, then that's good." He responded smoothly, and gave me a very obvious wink.

I felt myself blink. What was going on? He was flirting with me of all things. "Can I help you with something?"

He grinned, and gave me a long once over. "Oh, I think you can help me with a great deal."

Against my will, I blushed. I had been flirted with before, but this was utterly ridiculous. We both knew he was here to toss me out. And, I admit this guy was really good looking, more than I let on earlier. "Excuse me." I blurted out.

He leaned back showing his palms. "I don't mean to offend. Surely, men have declared themselves in love with on the spot." There was no smirk on his face, but I sensed a smirk.

"Are you trying to work your way up to an evening out?" To be honest, I didn't believe for a second that was his motivation. But, I really wanted to stop talking about how I looked.

He gave a half shake of his head. "Afraid not, my lovely," He motioned his head back toward the bartender. "That fine gentleman over there has declared you came into this fine establishment, threatened him, attacked his patrons, and generally made a nuisance of yourself. I doubt his story." This little speech had layers, upon layers of sarcasm. Inwardly, my demonic heart purred.

"So, unfortunately, you'll have to go." His words completely stunned me.

I started to get heated. "Why? You don't even believe him, but I have to leave. He is the one with the problem not me."

"I have a reputation to keep up, you see. I realize the unfairness of the situation, but alas not much I can do." Most of me want to spit on him, and call him a liar. But, the part of me that could always read people, knew he was not lying.

I squeezed my eyes shut to cut off all the noise, and sound. I had to think. But,

something else came to me. "If your reputation means so much to you, you shouldn't kick me out."

He lifted a black brow, his face curious. "Oh, why is that?"

"Because, I'll tell them you're not a pure angelborn." I whispered to him. Funny thing is almost no planeborn are, but humans didn't quite understand it.

His eyes widened very slightly, almost unnoticeable. Then, he chuckled. "Aren't you a fascinating creature? You must be a magic user of some kind. I suppose you are right, it would not be to my advantage to toss you then, would it?"

I gave him a stern nod. "You may leave."

He didn't leave. His eyes swept over me, in a more calculating manner than earlier. Behind those golden orbs I could see his mind turning, the intensity of it was a bit off putting. A slow smile curved his lips. "What is your name, demonborn?"

"Aslair Vrail." I had never hidden my name, no need to lie.

He pressed his hand against his chest. "I am Carthin Black."

"Black?" I asked my voice a bit higher than I wanted. I knew of only one Black family with angelborn, who worshiped Al'tar'ia.

He gave me an amused little smile at my outburst. "Does the name seem familiar to you?"

"Family Black is the longest running family of crusaders, and paladins for the Al'tar'ia. They are known to have more angels, and other divines being breeding with them, than any other line." I managed to keep myself calm.

He seemed pleased. He gazed over me, which made me feel all tingly, to Silt with him.

"You are more educated the usual demonborn I meet. All of that is true, yes."

It wasn't very usual for angelborn to meet a lot demonborn. Unless, he was a criminal, but I didn't quite get that vibe from him. "I grew up in a religious Covent." As I spoke, another connection formed. "If you aren't pure angelborn, your father must be Rigmon Black." Even as I said it, awe filled me. Rigmon Black was a paladin, a very famous one. He commanded the armies of Al'tar'ia.

Carthin furrowed his brow. A flash of anger filled his face. "Yes, well. I've never heard of a demonborn being raised in in religious seclusion before."

"My mother was the High Priest of the Unbidden." If he knew anything at all, I knew I wouldn't have explain the 'was'.

He started to shake all over, as he leaned back in his chair, laughter bubbling out. He slapped his hands on his knee. The other patrons were looking in our direction. I dropped my gaze to the table. A choking laugh, as he managed to calm himself down. "A woman from an order of virgins birthed a demonborn. Oh, that is classic, my dear. Suppose she is bitter being used by a demon."

I shrugged. As if wanted to go over family matters with a stranger, who threatened me.

He nodded. "Sensitive topic, excuse my tactless manner." His gaze stared off in the distance, as his mind seemed to working again.

"Well, this was a fun talk, but I'm going to bed." I got up, and turned toward the stairs.

His voice was sharp, causing me a jump. "You can't stay here."

I whipped around. "We already established I was going to stay here."

He grinned and shook his head. "No, we established I wasn't going to throw you out."

I cocked a hip, and rested my hand on it. "Are you going to explain where you are going with this?"

He moved like water, to stand next to me. "You'll come with me, and share a room."

My hand moved to slap him. I stopped short of hitting him. "Flame you. I can't believe you. I may look like a Seducer, but I'm not a cheap whore." My demonic self was conflicted. It liked the idea, but was insulted about how easy he thought I was.

He leered for less than a second. "As pleasant as your suggestion is. I meant to share a room, in a platonic sense, my dear. I must retain my reputation of removing you, but my hotel is vastly superior. There is no advantage for me to displease you. If you grow angry with me, all you have to do get your revenge is to tell anyone in town about me."

"I suppose you have a point." I took a moment to calm down. "Alright, let's go."

He bowed, and with a great deal of trepidation, I followed.

My eyes fluttered open to muted light. I lay in the plush bed, wrapping the downy, soft comforter closer. Oh, so badly I didn't want to get up. Never before could I curl up in such luxurious surroundings. My stomach cramped up in protest, it was hungry. I shoved the curtain aside, letting light flow into the bed. Very carefully, I wrapped the comforter around myself. I didn't have bedclothes, and Carthin wouldn't let me sleep in 'those disgusting, dirty leather. They need a good washing, and they'll get one.' I hopped out, peering around.

Carthin was twirling, and parrying in sitting area of the room, the furniture pushed out of way. He was shirtless, wearing the undyed linen pants I saw him with last night. Fine scars were strewn across his chest. The elegance of his display stopped me from interrupting to ask where my clothes were. Each move seemed to be part of dance. Finally, he stopped, not even panting. He looked over his shoulder. "You had a question."

How he knew that, I couldn't guess. "Where are my leathers?"

He jerked his head to a small door, "Hanging in the bath. I'm going to dress while you're in there, no peeking."

His voice sounded grave it caught me off guard. I started to stutter out a disclaimer, but then I noticed his smirk. I muttered, "Jerk" under my breath. I shut the door tight. When I saw my leathers I teared up a little. They were clean, and they had been conditioned. It wasn't necessarily, they were magical, and would not rot. It did improve how comfortable they were though. My fingers ran down the embossed nature designs of trees, flowers, and animals as I felt the magic renew itself. With a smile I pulled them on. I looked in the mirror, and wished, once again, they were more modest. They hugged my generous curves, and bared most of my skin. However, I learned trying to cover up caused them to rip when my body shifted in anger, or fear. *Plus the constant heat always running under my skin.* I appreciated the powers my blood gave me, but I really hated the disadvantages.

"Are you decent?" I called through the door.

He let out a warm laugh. "No, never been decent. I am dressed."

I pushed the door open, and he stood in midnight blue pants, and coat. They were tucked around maroon shirt. "We have got to get you a more diverse wardrobe."

"Wandering adventurers are not known for a diverse wardrobe." I rebutted a bit stung.

He laughed. "You need to learn when I'm teasing. To think, a delicate demonborn. You are the most strangeness I have met."

My brows knit together, as I pursed my lips at him. "I don't why I need to learn anymore about you."

"Ah yes, I have something I wish to speak to you about. But, I find myself hungry, shall we eat first?" His spoke in a casual and friendly manner. My instincts flared to life. He wanted something, something he had to build up too.

Yet, he was being friendly. Nice even, it was pretty rare. Other planeborn tended to act cool around me. And, it was hard to refuse anything asked in that pleasing voice, "Alright."

He pushed open the door, and held it for me, "You first, lovely."

I attempted to maintain my dignity, but my tail whipping back and forth gave me away. My feet stepped onto the rich, lacquered spiral staircase. My fingers enjoyed the polished railings. Carthin's steps seemed far too light for such a tall man. As my feet hit the carpet I stopped. *By Gorinth's beard am I really this lonely? I don't even trust him.*

Carthin swept past me. He passed the well-appointed seating area, into an open room across the way. Once he crossed the threshold, he turned to me. "Aren't you coming?"

I grumbled. My feet reluctantly pulled me in his direction. He moved out of the way, allowing me to step inside. The room was bright and sunny. The walls were lined with booths, and long tables. At the far wall, a man was behind a long counter polishing the bar.

With the irritating swagger, Carthin slid into the booth.

I did the same, but across from him.

"Have to look at my beautiful face?" His pretty lips quirked up in grin.

I couldn't think of anything witty, I frowned instead. Trading witty barbs wasn't something I did at the convent. And doing it myself seemed one step away from crazy.

The man, who had been polishing bar, interrupted us carrying a tray of food. "Excuse, Sir Black, I can't be let a demonborn stay at my inn. What will people say, and they can't be trusted."

He was very rude, and I wish I could say I was stunned. But, it wouldn't be true.

Carthin reached out, and put a light hand on the man's arm. "Oh, my good friend, do not trouble yourself. We'll be out and about before any of other guests get up. And, she is under my control." His voice dripped with utter sincerity. Those golden orbs widened enough to be believable, but not enough to be naive. I'll say it, it impressed me.

The man nodded. "I understand, Sir Black. Anyway, here is the breakfast tray." He put down the tray and all the items jingled together. He executed a quick bow, before going back to the counter.

"Any other magical powers, I should know about?" My mouth said, before my head could tell it to be quiet.

He lifted up a mug, and poured, what I assumed to be tea, into it. He set the other mug by me, and poured into as well. "It isn't a magical power. It's called tact, clearly you have not heard of it." A cutting remark delivered with a wide smile.

"Ha, ha, you are hilarious." Okay, yeah, I'm not witty.

He lifted his head basking in my sarcasm. "Oh, I know. Besides he had no intention of throwing you out, he brought two mugs. Observe, my dear."

I ignored him, and examined my teacup. It was beautiful. Delicate painted blue flowers, on the glazed white surface. The inside was midnight blue. The smell was intoxicating, the herbs smelled of deep forests. I swallowed the tea and it glided over my tongue. Loamy, with a hint of sweetness, I began to speculate about what herbs they used. If I was more familiar with area, I would have known what the herbs were. I wondered if they were local, or imported.

The warm, deep laugh of Carthin's shattered my thoughts. "Are you going to actually eat something, or stare at the tea?"

I scowled at him. "I am enjoying my tea."

He shook his head back and forth. He got a few pieces of bread, piled on some ingredients, and took a big gaping bite. "I'm very refined." He said with his full of half chewed food.

I made myself a sandwich, diverting my gaze. The bread had a delicious crust, the cheese sharp, and the meat very briny. Super delicious, I started to look around the room.

"You don't talk much do you?" Carthin again invaded my thoughts.

I shrugged. "Sorry, I'm usually alone."

He lifted a brow, I was starting to get it was a habit of his, and gazed at me. "I would think someone as beautiful, and exotic as you, would never be alone." There was huskiness in his voice that I had no desire to deal with.

To my shame, I blushed. "Most people wouldn't call me beautiful."

"Perhaps..." He trailed off. "They would probably not admit it. You could always travel with other planeborn. They don't have unnatural biases."

To this, I had nothing to say. When I first left home I was determined to do everything by myself. When I finally realized, I didn't like being alone, I had gotten used to it. My social skills aren't up to par and never found anyone to adventure with. Also, the level I looked like a Seducer tended to make even planeborn nervous.

He kept his mobile face still, until he gave up. "Hmm", He went back to eating.

I ate a few more sandwiches, and drank a lot more tea. Together, we ate a considerable amount of food, as is true with all planeborn.

"Come on, I want to show you something." There was a bit of suggestive leer to his voice.

I glared. "What?"

He chuckled, "So suspicious." He hopped out of the booth.

I slide out. I wave to him to lead the way.

He gave an ironic little bow, before trotting off.

Not given a chance to object, I was forced to follow along. I resented it. However, I preferred it to being reviled, and ignored. It is odd what one comes to enjoy. I followed Carthin outside, as we took a side path from the inn. From the smell on the air, the river was near. Carthin skirted between some trees, I took the same path, and smiled. An old, gnarled willow tree dominated the tiny clearing. The wind pushed the leaves of the tree back and forth, and a bed of wild flowers surrounded it, all off set by the river behind.

Carthin plopped himself down on the roots of the willow tree. "Tranquil. I travel this

way often, and I never miss the opportunity to visit the old gal." His brushed the tree with a great deal of affection.

"I can see why," I closed my eyes. The power of Gorinth spindled out caressing the tree with green tendrils. My heart beat in peace the chaos of demonic energy beat down for a moment.

Carthin raised an eyebrow. The gesture was already becoming familiar. "You follow the neglectful God, do you?"

"That's not a very respectful way to refer to Gorinth." I couldn't deny it was true. Gorinth helped you if you believed in the sanctity of life. Otherwise he didn't. Unlike the other Gods he did nothing directly.

I sat on a dirt patch a distance from the tree and Carthin. "What did you want to talk about, that you couldn't mention in the inn?"

He smirked. "Not as naive as you appear." All appearance of mirth fell away. "You say you are a wandering adventurer. I can tell from your smell alone, you are more than a regular demonborn. Much like my family, we may have angelborn, but with all the divinity in it, most of them are more than regular angelborn. In addition, most spell casters cannot tell that I am not a direct descendent from an angel, because of how much angel blood runs in my family blood. I'm close to being a true angelborn, most can't tell the difference. Also, you seem to be on one woman crusade to right the wrongs of the world. I don't particularly approve of such a thing, myself."

"How do you know that? You just me yesterday." Honestly, we talked for less than thirty minutes.

He smiled a smug, annoying smile. "Do you really think a demonborn as strong as you could pass unnoticed? I've heard rumor, the planeborn keep tabs on our kind. You saved a slave from the gallows. You stopped a man from beating his life. And, you got between a demon cult and the small town they were praying on. All for no money. Not my preferred way to make my way through life.

I cut him off. "Oh, and what is your usual method of existing."

"I'm a mercenary." He golden eyes focused with great intensity, and became lost in thought. He snapped out of it, and continued. "I don't care for right, or wrong. I don't support unnecessary cruelty, but accept as ends justify the means. That brings me to my point. You have obvious skills, abilities, but no partner. My last partner died during a mission. And, the group I work for does not allow solo missions. There are other people apart of the band, but I don't care to partner with them, for varying reasons. Even though, you may not work out, I'd rather try something I don't know, and then go with something unacceptable."

A line of tension formed in my neck. I rubbed the sore spot, as I mulled over his words. "Who do you work for?"

"The Ethereal," He didn't need to explain further. The Ethereal were practically legendary. They had contracts with royalty, celebrities, and religious orders. Elite of elite mercenaries, but more importantly they only hired planeborn. The Ethereal always wanted more recruits, yet they wouldn't hire just anyone. You needed to either have a reference, or be sponsored by a current member. The recruiting officer I'd spoken to had been very dubious about my application. I desperately wanted to get in, because I'd no longer be harassed, or stabbed. Ethereal were respected and no one would mess with them.

Of course, his offer made me suspicious. "Why would you offer someone utterly untried a position working with you? I don't trust your kindness."

He gave a half shrug. "Working for the Ethereal is dangerous. Plenty of people die, my last partner included. For all your goody good behavior, the rumors point to your competency. You take risks. Yet, you still manage to get out alive. In the end, that's what I care about most getting out alive."

I blushed, though I couldn't tell you why. "I can't imagine other planeborn, the few I've met, haven't had anything nice to say about me. I often stop whatever they are doing or refuse to work with them." That wasn't a hundred percentage true. Mainly, I found his whole proposal odd and questionable.

"Believe what you will. I can only tell you what I know." He closed his eyes, and leaned against the tree.

I didn't know where it was, but I sensed a lie. What he was lying about, I had no idea. Or, even what could be motivating him to lie, eluded me. In the end, I went with my instincts. There was one way I could always tell the measure of another, "Carthin."

One eyes opened. "What?"

"Kiss me." I did my best to retain my dignity. It most likely failed.

He opened his other eye, he blinked, leaned back to stare at me. He did an absent shrug, got up, and walked over to me. "My wish is your command."

As he stood in front him, I summoned my willpower. The darker part of my nature needed to be with me, but I couldn't allow it to take over. A kiss would tell me what I needed to know, but it might do other things. I wrapped myself in the warm, gentle magic of Gorinth.

The barrier would prevent my dark impulses from taking over, and making this go farther than I wanted. And, I kissed him. It was a good kiss, right amount of pressure, a touch of tongue. His energy pulled into mine. A warm ecstasy and heat filled my veins. The deep sensuality caused the Seducer within to wake up. I stopped it before it went too far.

And, now I had a measure of his soul. He was a liar, a flirt, a morally gray person, but he didn't know why he asked me to join him. Something, probably dealing with his divine heritage, told him to, and he was a creature of impulse. My answer obtained with little effort. Except for the risk of going all demon on him, I suppose. Being a Seducer had its benefits.

When I switched my attention back to him, he had a bemused expression. "Any of my other paces you would like to try out?" He asked in the most arrogant tone, I've ever heard.

"No." Before he could ask any other questions I jumped in. "I'll go with you. But, I reserve right to change my mind at any point. Understood?"

"You're a woman. It is always understood to be true." Outwardly, he seemed calm, but his eyes seemed to turn. He suspected something, or perhaps even knew. "We should get going. I'll get the horses."

Horses, I never got along with them. They always sensed my not quite human nature. "I can't ride a horse."

He chuckled. "These horses are born and raised for my father's cavalry. They don't mind the scent of planeborn. Besides, we have a long way to go, and I am not walking." He took off at a jog.

Of all things, horses. I made my way back to the inn steps, and sat down. I remembered the first, and one time my mother tried to put me on a horse. The tall, black

creature started kicking up dirt, and neighing the moment it smelled me. My mother in her flowing priest robe spoke words of Tranquility, and it settled. She pointed at the horse, and I trudged over. As soon as my foot went into the stirrup, it started to bolt. I hung on as my heart thudded in my chest. The horse threw me, and I hit the fence hard enough to break my shoulder. She never tried to get me to ride again, and I avoided them.

The clopping sound of horses shook me out of my reverie. Carthin led a group of horses toward me. Two of them, the ones in front, had rippling muscles, furry feet, and were tall. The rest of them were horse smaller, and a bit dainty. "The beige one is yours." Carthin motioned at ones of huge horses. "Let's mount up."

I stood up before I even realized it. "How can I? It's massive!" I blurted out.

He laughed with a shake of his head. "Sweetness, can you do my favor and lay down." He made some motions with his hands. Sweetness, apparently, laid down.

"Look, I have to pick up something from the Blacksmith that is outside town." My feet were already pulling me down the steps.

He rubbed the forehead of his mount. "And, I'll help you down, once we get to the blacksmith. Come on, Aslair. You a powerful, dangerous demonborn, you can be afraid of a big softie like Sweetness." He snapped his other hand.

I steeled my resolve, and accepted my fate. I headed down the stairs, and got on the horse. A few hand motions and she stood up. My body wobbled back and forth, but I managed not to fall off. Sweetness moved forward pulling me along.

The big black horse led Sweetness, and other horses down the road. People greeted Carthin as we went down the road. Most of them were casual, 'Hello Sir Black', 'Greetings

Friend', and 'How are you?' variety.

A young man waved him down as got to the edge of town. "Sir Black!"

His horse stopped, and waited for the kid to rush over. "Greetings, do you have news?" The smooth voice was warmer, richer than I had heard before. The big smile plastered on his face felt fake to me.

The tan kid, laughed. "Oh yes, sir. I special grain order Calvary Master Isha ordered will be arriving soon. More than her usual shipment as well, we had a fantastic harvest. Do you think she'll mind paying a bit extra?" There was a bit of mercantile glint in the young man's eye.

"No, not for your families' grain. I'll let her know the good news." He pressed a hand against his heart. "I apologize for my behavior, but my companion and I must be on our way."

The young man bounced from one foot to the other. "Are you sure you should be traveling with a demonborn. Look at her. She looks like a real demon." He sent me a furtive look. The urge to whisper, come here little boy, nearly overwhelmed me. Okay, I had a tiny vein mischief in me.

I caught Carthin's lip twitching, but his expression remained sober. "She is no demon I assure you. I will be fine, but your concern warms my heart."

"If you say so, Sir." He gave a quick bow, and ran off.

My horse jolted forward, I tipped forward. Already, I knew I was going to be sore. "Carthin," There was a touch of panic to my voice.

He didn't even turn to look at me. "I haven't forgotten your need to stop at the

blacksmith, Horis isn't it? I'm surprised. I don't know many casters who use armor, or weapons."

"Yes, it is Horis." If he wanted more information, he'd have to wait. For reasons, which I couldn't even say, I felt vindictive. He didn't respond. We rode in silence until I could smell the fire, and smoke. I spotted the strange round building, with scrapped creations surrounding the field around his shop.

Once, we reached the door. I stared down at my horse. I slipped my foot out of the stir up. I chewed on my lip considering the different ways I could get down. None of them seemed very sound.

"Sweetness, lay down." Carthin voice bellowed out, in which she neatly complied.

The motion caused me sway back and forth. The thudding in my chest slowed once she was down. At that point it was easy to get off. I went inside. The place was dark, but my vision could see more than a regular human. Horis huge hammer banged on helpless red metal on his magiforge. Blue, yellow, and green light mixed as the magic kept it heated to the same temperature. Enchanting was one of my many magical fascinations.

It always struck me how huge Horis was. He towered over everyone I knew. He was wide, with rippling muscles, and a loud, jolly voice.

He stopped striking mid stroke. "Ah, Demon whore, you are a day early girl! Come in, come in. You are so big, a wee thing last time I saw you."

With a groan, I stepped forward as the whole room lit up with magically lit globes. My tail curled around my leg, as I crossed my arms. "Can we dispense with nicknames?"

Horis roared with laughter, and folded me in a rib-bruising hug. "Now, now, I haven't

seen your mama brought you here, looking for answers. Let me get a good like at ya." He held me out, squishing my arms in place. "You grew up to be such a pretty thing. Much prettier than your mama. More like your father, I'd say."

"Horis..." I tired not get annoyed with him. But, it always went this way. I suspected he had fallen in love with my father, when he had stayed with Horis. I also suspect that is why my father never came back to visit. Funny thing is, as far as I know, Horis until my father, was strictly for the ladies. I wasn't sure if that was a Seducer thing, or something else. "Give me the bracers."

His bear paws let go, as he wandered into the back of his shop. The whole time he was muttering to himself.

Behind me, I heard a throat clearing. I twisted around in time to catch a smile on Carthin's face.

"Care to explain any of that?" He asked in a mild tone, his eyes large, and innocent.

It felt like all my skin blushed to a burning red. "No, I don't." I snapped as I heard Horis come in. He dropped the bracers past my face. I caught them before they hit the ground. I stomped out, while barking. "They better be what I asked for Horis."

I brushed past Carthin, into the light outside. I held the bracers into the sun. Metal bracer cuffs over soft leather. Impressed designs of leaves, small harmless woodlands creatures, and the indents were smooth. I told him to make sure it wouldn't catch weapons, I didn't know enough to judge, but I doubt if Horis would lie. And, he was the best blacksmith I knew.

My eyes closed, as I summoned the magic from my deep well. I heard myself chanting,

as the green, and yellow tendrils wrapped around the bracers. The first of many spells I would cast.

"Magical rah ha out here hmm?" Carthin's voice flowed over me, as the magic faded.

"Alright, let's get a move on." I shot him a stern. "No questions."

Carthin gave a board smile, with a twitch of his brow, "Oh, of course."

CHAPTER THREE

The sky rained the entire way to Thane's Watch. Aslair seemed to enjoy it. I suppose she enjoyed being covered in mud. It hid her. I, however, preferred to be noticed for the delightful creature I am. She had come to some notion that her beauty was a curse. Or, something more complicated, I wasn't sure. A curious creature, she was. I remembered everything about her. Flame colored hair dark red flowing to orange, and changing to yellow, I never seen anything like it before. Fine white skin brushed with ash, shaped into a perfect hourglass, and both trying to escape the barely there tight leather. Her face dominated by innocent red eyes with pouty lips, resting in soft curves, and strong cheekbones. And, the kiss, it kept me warm, through the rain, I'll tell you.

Leopard didn't enjoy the rain either. He kept blowing air out of his nostrils. I itched his neck. "Don't worry, boy, we'll be in the family stables soon, out of the rain." In my bones, I felt home getting closer.

The mist thinned. It revealed the white washed walls. I let out a whoop, and Leopard took a lunged forward. It caused all the horses to race after. Aslair's shout of dismay made me smile. I motioned for Leopard to slow down, as we got closer to the main gate. I glanced over my shoulder. "Beautiful. I'll handle the gatekeeper."

"Is this the Ethereal base?" Her voice was filled suspicion. The woman didn't trust anything. I loved it.

I faced Aslair. "No, I need to drop off the horses. I have no use for them." Leopard snorted, he was displeased I stopped.

She tugged her hood down more than it already was. "Then, where is this? Why here?" Her tail twitched back and forth. Her voice never rose above normal, but the tail always gave her away.

I stretched my arm out, at the sign down the road. "Thane's Watch, The home base for Al'tar'ia's army. For their families anyway, as I'm sure you know the Al'tar'ia religion is everywhere in the Northern Kingdoms." I watched her. I don't know what entirely urged me to invite her along. But, I was enjoying her company.

I waited for her to respond. Since, none followed, I continued on my way to home. As I went by the sign I had to smile. It seemed my sister had commissioned a new sign, with carved symbols of Al'tar'ia, and stained, instead of painted. The gate had been updated as well, reinforced all around. I wondered at all the extra security. Thane's Watch had never been attacked.

All of this was in the back of mind, as I slid off my horse, and trotted up the gate. My hand ran over the rough, gate bell rope, and I tugged. A low pitch toll from the other side, as

the window opened. A grizzled, half-shaved face peered out. "Hello, Gregory."

"Thunder my balls and call'em pretty. You didn't need to hurry back here, fancy boy, in rain season. Look at you as muddy as a slug." Yes, I looked horrible. My outfit was ruined.

The door swung open, I led Leopard. "Yes, well it was not raining when I left town. I needed to drop off these horses. Is Isha here, or did I miss her?" My sister spent half the year traveling. Typically during the rainy season, she would have left.

"Nope, she's staying home longer this year." Gregory wiped his brow, as his eyes ticked over the expensive riding horses I'd acquired. "She's getting married."

The news should have surprised me. Or, if nothing else upset me, because as much as I loved my sister, we were divided. And the divide was my father, "To Thomas?" Thomas, oh how he annoyed me. Isha had been dating him for several years. *To my complete and utter irritation*, I thought

Gregory dipped his head, but he focused on Aslair. "Who's that?"

"A companion," I missed my home, but I disliked how they felt they must judge my every decision.

Gregory frowned at me. "What kind, a girl, or something?"

"Aslair," I could see her readying a spell. "Take your hood down." She lifted one hand, and pushed her hood down.

A clink of sword pulling out of a scabbard as Gregory growled at me. "Carthin! Flame and Ice, Carthin you shouldn't be bringing another demonborn here. Do you remember what happened last time?" The town, full of military, had people rushing out, weapons ready.

"Of course, I remember." How could I forget the event that lead to me leaving home.

"Are you going to blame the action of one demonborn on every single one you meet?"

Gregory shoved his blade back into the scabbard. "No. But, she's your responsibility Carthin. You should have announced her presence."

"I think not. I may not be a part of Al'tar'ia, but I own a home here. I pay my taxes, and dues. And, I allow you to rent out my home, without charging any fees. I do not need permission to enter." I stalked toward Gregory. Thanks to good breeding I towered above him.

Gregory shoved me back, though he looked a bit concerned. "Fine, Carthin. Go drop off your horses, and manage your guest."

I remounted, and took off. I forced myself to view the town to cool off. As blood thrummed in my ears, I noticed streets had been repaved. They were now setup to have water run below them, instead into side channels. More houses had acquired glass windows, as opposed to oilcloth, and all the buildings had a fresh coat of whitewash. It seems Thane's Watch had prospered in my sister's care.

Aslair caught up to me. "What was all that about?"

"Hmm..." I weighed how much I wished to tell her, with how much she needed to know. "Before I left home, I befriend a demonborn. She attempted to assassinate my father."

We rode in silence a while. One thing I enjoyed of Aslair's company, she did not feel the need to talk to fill the void. I talked enough, for both of us, in any case. We reached the sprawling stable complex. Leopard started to prance, making all sorts of noise at his siblings, and herd.

"By Silt!" Aslair uttered a near silent curse, in that sweet, husky voice. "There is a

whole tribe there."

I let Leopard take me the rest of the way there. Some of the boys opened the swing gate, as I got the mud from the yard all over my boots. A small platform sat connected to the buildings. I climbed off Leopard in time to see Aslair chewing on her lip.

"Need help?" I batted my eyes at her.

As expected, an immediate frown. "No. It won't be elegant." She sort of fell off Sweetness, but managed to catch herself upright. Her tail stuck straight out, like a cat's for balance.

I found myself laughing, "Too true, delectable one."

She rolled her whole upper body in exasperation, before scratching beneath her horns.

"I am glad I amuse you."

An enraged voice cut through our banter. "Carthin, what are you doing here?" I knew the voice. It was Thomas.

I spun around to face him. The same plainer than dirt face and duller than rock eyes I remembered. My hands held far away from my weapons. "Thomas, I am here to talk to Isha that is all."

His face tightened into hard lines, and his fists bawled up against his thighs. "Like last time. She ran off with you, and almost got killed. All to save your ungrateful ass," His heavy boots, stamping hard he got into my face. "This time, maybe you're hoping she doesn't make it."

The anger, which I always carried with me, boiled up inside. I knew little of it showed on the surface. Thomas should be thankful I loved my sister. Otherwise, he would have been

dead a long time ago. "I have no interest in taking Isha anywhere. And, I have less interest in getting her killed. You of all people should know that."

A beautiful, bell-like voice chimed in. "Please, Thomas, my brother never means me any ill." My sister rounded the corner. She looked like an angel. Golden hair in rippling waves, large eyes dark gold like ancient coins, skin that stayed a pure, soft white, and wide, sculpted bone structure.

"Isha," Thomas whipped around. "He is trouble, he always has been."

She gave a slight shake of her head. "Please. If you cannot be civil, than you need to go. I will not tolerate anyone speaking poorly of him." She shot me a smile, "Except me." Ah, one of the many reasons I loved her. Her wicked sense of humor.

Thomas threw up his hands. "Fine, do whatever you want with your silt-spawned brother. If I don't have to spare a kind word, I won't." He stormed off.

The three of us stood without speaking. Isha broke the silence. "I'm sorry. He is terrified."

I made a rude gesture. "I'm sorry, he's a puking infant." Even I winced at the harshness of my tone.

Her eyes dimmed. I hated when I made her sad, "Carthin, please. Do it for me."

"Fine," I said terser than I wanted.

Isha gave me of her many looks. She smiled at Aslair. "I greet you in the name of Al'tar'ia. Are you Carthin's partner in the Ethereal?"

Aslair gave a quick shake of her head. "No. He offered to sponsor me." She tugged a strand of hair behind her left horn.

Ayisha lifted a brow at me. The same gesture I always made. "What happened to your partner, Vera?"

"Vera died on my last mission. That's why I had a free warhorse." I had no desire for Aslair to know that, but I was incapable of lying to my sister. Aslair red eyes were already burning a hole in my skull.

"That is quite unfortunate, Carthin. You are going to stay around a few days? I don't get see my baby brother, often enough." She rubbed my shoulder with a little smile.

"Excuse my rudeness, I'm Isha Black."

Aslair kept moving her hands around. "Aslair Vrail." Her whole demeanor subdued.

"No need to be intimidated by me. I got my position by pure nepotism." She let me go, took a step and enfolded Aslair in a hug. "In case you were not aware, but he is a notoriously smooth, but a liar." She took a step back.

Aslair smiled. This caught me by surprise, because until this point her smiles were quick. "Thank you for the warm welcome. I just met Carthin, in Tiranburg."

"Oh that is what, a week away." Isha spoke in a distracted manner. I could see another thought was running in the back of her mind. "I'll have someone drop off food for you to eat. I will not have my brother eating field rations."

"Isha..." She cut me off with a look. Why did I always let her win?

"Carthin, you will stay at least a day. Besides you need to tell me about these lovely riding horses you acquired, and how many people had to die to get them." She was the only person in the world who could make such a statement nonjudgmental.

I gave up. I fanned my hands out. "You win." I motioned at Aslair. "Come on,

we'll go through the side gate my attire has been ruined enough already." I let my boots thumb against the wood floor as I walked past all the military offices. Aslair's heavier gait hurried behind me.

A deep breathe of clean air filled my lungs as soon as I was outside. I took a swift turn west heading back into the housing. Already, imagining clean clothes and warm bath my stride lengthened. Soon I made it to my home. I decided to wait outside, to see what kind of impression it made on Aslair. Two stories tall, with real glass windows, many of them stained glass. The doorframes, doors, and window seals were done in decorative borders, and stained. Heavy stone steps, which had been carved to match the double door entrance.

"Some house you have there." She wheezed out, still catching her breathe.

I grinned. "Yeah, humble like me."

Even she had to laugh at that.

The mudroom, the memories I had. I wanted to share, but decided against it. The light filtered in in colored steams from all the windows. "The windows impressed you the most, right?" I had to ask.

Aslair paused. I could also feel her thinking over the question. "Yes."

"I wouldn't be my mother insisted we all have glass windows, since she never had them in Amak." I could still remember eye shinning when she realized we could have glass windows.

Aslair turned to give me an odd look. "I don't understand. They make glass windows there. Why wouldn't they have any?"

Stepping into our living room robe shrugged over my body. "Because, Amak resides in the desert. During the day it is very hot, and during the evening it is very cold. The mages there spelled the city to stay cool during the day and hot during the night. Therefore the windows couldn't bare the contrast sharp temperate shifts. All their windows are merely cut out in the mud brick. My mother knew the spell, but she wouldn't reveal it." I grinned. "Since, she's related to Queen, they sold us windows at a severe discount."

Aslair eyes raised up the red depths puzzled. "Your mother was a foreign princess."

"Hardly," imagining my mother in a dress, and prancing around court was incomprehensible. "She's a bastard."

A flicker of something in Aslair's eyes I couldn't read. Then, it faded. "Oh, I see."

That seemed to be a pretty unusual comment, but I let it go. The loose dressing robes hung up, fresh, and bright. I eyed Aslair with a grin, and started to strip. I won't lie. I enjoyed her wide-eyed stare.

"What are you doing?" She contained it to a shout, but not by much.

I flicked my hand up and down. "Strip down, put on a robe, and we can put on fresh clothes I have upstairs. Someone will come by, and get our clothes clean." I noticed the frown. "Do you want to stay in your muddy clothes?"

Her chest puffed out. "No, I don't. Have the common decency to turn away at least."

"So modest," I spoke over my shoulder, as I continued to strip down.

A harrumph came from behind me. I had expected more out of a seducer. Teasing this modest little thing was quite fun.

Soft, warm robe felt wonderful against my skin, as I stepped into the living room. Little

had changed, since I was home last. The same expensive, if not well matched furniture, glowing in multiple hues were the magic lamps, and luxurious fabric pillows, carpets, and curtains. The lights brightened as my fingers ran over the wall switch. My body eased gazing at my collected wealth.

"Nice place." Aslair flopped down in one of the chairs. She looked no less seductive in her ordinary white robe. "Who purchased all this?"

To that, I grinned. "I did. Ethereal is dangerous work, but it pays well."

She shot me a deep and powerful look, before settling back in her chair. "I never made much money."

I oozed into my favorite green chair. "You are an adventurer, my sweet. You slum it with people who can't pay you. Me? I work as a mercenary, my goal is do the job, and get paid. Different mindset."

"Ethereal don't help you people?" The way she spoke with a mournful undertone, and big eyes, I knew she was reconsidering joining. For some reason, I didn't want that to happen.

I waved my hands out. "Of course, they do. The founder wanted a certain amount to be done on charity to, how that saying goes." My mind flicked back to the papers I signed when I joined, "'Balance the scales.'" But, what jobs you get are based on what you want to do. It's somewhat convoluted. Most of the time I pair up with people who don't care either way. Since, I'm paired up with you they'll probably give us more of the heroic, or morally upstanding sort of work. They get lots of different jobs."

"What kind of job got your partner killed?" The words seemed to burn out of her with intensity. She'd been stewing on it awhile.

My fingers crossed as I thought about how to answer. I know exactly what killed her. How Aslair would receive, the story is the details. "I'd prefer to keep the details under the vest, if you don't mind. The captain really must be informed first. In short, we on a job, and Vera got a bit sloppy. On the way out, we got attacked. I got out. She didn't."

That left a great deal out. I attempted to look as if it was hard to talk about. Vera was all right, but she was somewhat standoffish, and this was our first mission together. I'm never happy to lose a partner, but I hadn't ever found one I really liked either. I wondered what Aslair thought about it.

For long time she seemed to think and sit. I starting to understand that was her normal state of being. Quiet was her safety net. I took the opportunity to look at her. My curiosity as to why she hated any talk about her beauty. Perhaps, people focused too much on her seducer nature. People often focused too much on my angelborn nature, I could relate. Often, it helped me get things I wouldn't normally get, however, I couldn't exactly complain. I wouldn't have this house, or all my beautiful things, if people didn't easily believe me their best interests at heart.

She shifted her focus to me, and I stilled my thoughts. "I see. I went on the road to help people. I am a lot stronger, tougher, and magical than others. I feel it should be used to create good in the world. If I join the Ethereal those are the sort of jobs I want to do."

I failed to prevent my frown. My fingers pressed into my forehead. "I understand that. But, surely you wish to be paid for your work. Don't you want fine clothes, and such?"

She pulled on her flame colored hair. She tilted her head to the side. "I don't mind being paid. Mercenaries are paid. I just wanted to state how I felt outright."

Thank all that was holy in Vita. "Okay, I'm done lounging. Want to head upstairs and put on some clothes?"

"Are there clothes," She swallowed, "For me?"

A push and I was up, "Of course, lovely. When I'm not in residence they use my home as guest house. All the rooms are furnished, and have a variety of garments for use. And, there is a heated bath room over there." I pointed at large double door on the north side of the room. "Don't worry about messing things up I pay for some to housekeep for me whenever I'm in town." I held out my hand.

She clasped it, and I pulled her up. "Stairs are through the kitchen." Her skin was hot in temperate and otherwise it was amazingly soft, and supple. I let go her hand and headed into the kitchen. As I entered, the white and brown decor was as I had left it. My sister had upgraded the magical stove, and refinished my dining table in a darker stain. The stairs twisted up in a tight spiral upstairs. I ran up it, taking two steps at a time.

The black wood floors and cream walls greeted me. A plush maroon rug ran the entire length of hallway. In total there were seven doors. The one in the far wall was my room. Nobody used it besides me. I strode forward, and went in my room.

I leaned against the door and basked. The energy flowed into me. I wouldn't have to feed at all while I was here. The power, the admiration, the envy was wrapped up in every object here. It was more than strange to be addicted to admiration, envy, and desire. I stepped toward my dresser and pulled out a few garments at random.

The robe went flying, landing in a lump on the bed. As I twisted toward the bed, my door flew open. My head whipped around to the door. Standing in the doorway Aslair

blinked. She took a step back, and slammed the door shut.

I burst out laughing. Tears leaked out of my eyes, as I fell against the bed. Several minutes went by before I could compose myself. Lucky for me, it was one of my favorite outfits. A black silk outfit with heavy embroidered in black, the shirt had no buttons, and was open all the way to my waist. The pants flowed around as I walked, but the hem stayed in place.

I jaunted down the stairs. I could hear Aslair in the room on the right. The smell of fresh bread spurred me forward. The first meal of the day, and it would include food that hadn't been packaged, and processed months ago. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, my heart fell.

A tall, spare frame of a woman placed a basket on the dining table. Her patterned skirt swirled around her as she faced me. "Hello Carthin, it has been a while." Her voice was low, and a tad rough.

The shock of seeing her again, stung. Her oval face was neither beautiful nor ugly. "Beth." The name ripped out of my heart. It took all my self-control to not grab her, and hold her close. How dare she come to my home? The rage boiled out of me. "Beth, what are you doing here?"

Beth gave a half shake of her head. "Oh Carthin, I live here. It was my turn on the rotation to take care of the guests staying here. No one told me it would be you. I know how you loathe seeing me."

My fist clenched, as I pressed them to my sides. "You know that isn't true. I offered to stay here, and marry you. Don't lie to unburden yourself from breaking my heart." My

face felt hot, and each word hurt. Long ago we were playmates. I used to consider her my best friend.

Her brown eyes flicked away from me. "You hate to see me, because it hurts you."

"Why wouldn't let me stay, Beth?" She answered the question over and over. I couldn't help myself from asking it one more time.

Her hands ran down her dress straightening it. "I've told you before, Carthin."

"Tell me again."

Her eyes met mine. "You will never be content living the simple life of fresh bread, and homely comforts. And, you will never be content with a single, not beautiful woman. Your father may not understand that, but I know you Carthin. You are an admirable, wonderful person when you let yourself be. There are things you will never be fine with." She dropped her gaze. "It would break your heart more than mine, if you mistreated me in any way."

I slammed my fist into the table. "I would never hurt you."

"Oh, Carthin, You would. It would kill you, but you would." Her words paused. I wanted to turn around and look at her, but I couldn't. "I'm leaving now. I'll have someone else take care of the house." Her light steps grew quieter, until I heard the front door open, and close.

I fell onto the bench, and started to mechanically make a sandwich. All I could concentrate on was Beth. True, she was no beauty by any standard. Her inner light outshined any of those vain, pointless outer coverings. My heart felt much better the few times I forgot she existed. I took a big bite out of my food. It had no taste. I took a

moment to calm myself, and to push the feeling back down where they belonged.

A creak of the steps caught me unaware. Aslair was taking careful steps down, wearing a simple, dark red dress. Her cheeks turned red. I remembered earlier. I flashed up a leer.

"I'm sorry, I should have apologized earlier." She rushed down the stairs, her head drooping. "I don't know why I just ran out."

I tipped my head to side, and lifted a brow in utter amusement. "My dear, I wouldn't mind if we both walked around in the nude all day. You are far more embarrassed about than I am. Besides, plenty of lucky women everywhere have seen it all."

Her head jerked up. "What makes you think they were lucky?" I could tell the moment the sentence left her lips she was surprised by her own audacity.

"My own over inflated opinion of myself." I motioned at the basket of food. "Sit. Eat. I'm sure you're hungry."

She put together a sandwich fast, and devoured the first one even faster. I often sat with woman, even though in the Ethereal, concerned what men thought of them. They ate a lot, but in a very dainty manner. A bit refreshing to see one choke down her food like it was her last meal. "What?" She noticed I had been watching her.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself." I couldn't keep from smiling.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "My mother always said I had manners like a pig in a sty."

"I can see what she means." I laughed. "Your manners aren't that bad, in truth. You just don't eat like a delicate princess is all."

She gave me an odd look. "How long are we going to be here, exactly?"

I rubbed my chin, in thought. "At least until tomorrow morning. My sister would be most irritated with me, if I left earlier." I winked.

Aslair chewed on her food for a bit. She took a swallow. "Aren't you on a time limit, or have to be back at the base?" She swung the sandwich back and forth. Her tail copied the motion in lazy strokes.

"We finished the job far ahead of our sanctioned timeline. The job paid huge fee, precisely because they had no contacts within the base, or in the outlying towns. They also thought it would be a bad idea to have too many planeborn hanging around." I got up and poured both of us a glass of water.

Aslair took a long drink with me. She played with her glass sliding it back and forth between her hands. "You don't seem broken up about it."

I took my time in answering. The right answer eluded me. A part of me wanted to lie, as I often did. But, another part knew it would be a mistake. Two sides of my mind duked it out for a bit. I went with my instincts. "I'm not. A lot of people die in this business."

She took a drink. "You said there was a bath room, can I use it?"

I raised a brow at the swift subject change, but decided to not comment. "Sure, towels, and robes should be stocked." It took all my willpower to keep from suggesting we go together.

She shot me a brief smile. "Thank you."

CHAPTER

I stretched wide, and put a towel on my head, and dried my hair. My pants tugged against my damp skin as I stepped out into the living room. Aslair sat in the window reading an old leather chair. I opened my mouth to ask what she was reading, but I saw Isha walk in. "Isha," Whenever I saw my sister a sense of ease fall over me.

A huge smile crossed her face, as her light lit up my hair. "Carthin how was your bath?"

"Almost perfect," I replied, as I flopped down in one of the couches.

"Well, it couldn't be perfect without some women to join you." She winked at me. "Hello, Aslair." She greeted her in her soft voice.

In response, Aslair tipped her head. Her eyes were locked onto the pages.

I cleared my throat. "I wish you had thought to tell Beth to not clean today."

The joy fled out my sister's eyes. Her hand brushed across her eyes. "I did not she was on the current rotation." She reached out and placed a hand on my foot. "I would never bring you pain intentionally." Honestly, I didn't believe her. She wanted me together back with Beth. Isha was convinced I could win Beth back. Beth wasn't as convinced. Women.

I gave her a shrug. "Just encourages me to move on."

She gave me a smile, "Any new prospects?"

"Nosey much?" As usual she was prying into my personal affairs.

Her honey coated laugh filled the air. "You have to get married someday, baby brother. You can't sleep with every lovely set you lay your eyes on forever."

"Who's to say I can't?" I motioned up and down. "I mean look at me, who could

possibly resist?"

Aslair snorted from behind her book.

My sister brushed back her curls. "Eventually, you'll be old and wrinkled. Besides, mother would love you to see you with kids."

I glared at her. I hated when she brought our mother. "Maybe."

"I'm sure she would Carthin." Isha said with utter conviction. "Besides, it would traumatize the whole town to have a bunch of tiny Carthin's running around."

A chuckle escaped my throat. Finally, I asked what I had been avoiding. "How is father?"

"Wave General Rigmon is doing quite well. He took down a cult of blood worshipers. And, he has considered starting to date, again." She answered in reply. Her tone kept predictably neutral.

I forced to myself to nod instead of scoff. "Any likely prospects?" The rage crept in between the words.

"Wave General is as beautiful as you, and mother has been dead for ten years." She admonished me in a light tone.

I rubbed my cheeks. "Hmm, I suppose."

"He loved mother, you know." Isha snapped.

"Yes, he is so lovable that you don't call him father, instead you call him Wave General." When she got harsh with me, it always annoyed me. She wasn't my parent, she was my sister.

"I'm in the army. It would be strange if I called him daddy." She snipped back at me.

Tension mounted as seconds ticked by. "Well, never mind. We shouldn't argue

about it."

"Oh, alright." Isha sighed, and squished back in the chair.

A light thump as the book was set down. "You ahead of the cavalry, correct?"

Isha eyes focused on Aslair. "I am, indeed. Nothing beats the smell of hay and horseflesh in the morning."

"Except for everything in the whole of Elenmitis," Horses were great for transportation. And, I had amount of affection for Leopard, but they did not smell good.

"I never really learned combat. My father is a warrior. At least, my mother said so." Aslair looked down and toyed with the spine of the book.

Isha folded her hands together. "You should learn combat. In mercenary work, you never know what you'll be up against. Carthin should train you, or he might be out another partner."

Aslair's usual tranquil appearance rippled with doubt. "I don't know. I always relied on my magic."

"It would be a good idea, Aslair." I piped in. "You would look very compelling with a weapon hanging on her hip."

A blush spread across her skin in soft lavender. "I don't care about that."

"True enough, you could have any man you wanted." I teased her, with a touch of leer.

Isha delighted laughter cut off our banter. "Carthin leave the poor girl alone. I apologize for my brother, he doesn't know any better."

"I hope someday he learns his not as charming, as he thinks he is." She replied a slight

curve to her lips. She and Isha exchanged a look, a woman's look. Women, though as much I loved them, and could charm them, had their own special mysteries.

My fist pressed against my chest. "Oh, my darlings, I am as charming as I think I am, maybe more so." I pushed up from my chair as they laughed. I wandered into the kitchen, I could hear them talking. A glass of cool water refreshed my throat. I walked back in. Aslair stood up.

"I'm going to take this book." Her oddly pointed fingernail tapped a book in her hand. "And read it upstairs. I'll see you later." She bowed to Isha, and gave me a quiet nod.

I sat in the puffy chair near Isha, watching Aslair as she worked her way back up the stairs. From the corner of my eye, I could tell Isha's eyes were trained on me. After Aslair faded, I smiled at my sister. "What did want to talk about without Aslair listening?

Her lips tipped upward as she wound her finger together. "What makes you think that?"

I rolled my eyes. We often played the game of who could fool who. Isha was good at it, far better than most. But, I knew her better than anyone. "Please, she rushed out here like you had the plague."

"Father has a mission for you. He has sensed an uptick of demonic energy being spooled out. As well as other strange occurrences," She kept her tone low, her ancient eyes serious and grave.

Normally, I could care less. Al'tar'ia problems were her own. My desire she to help her was statically indecipherable from zero. However, my father didn't go around trying to hire me. "What kind of occurrences?"

"There is some kind of corrupted healer running around. He is harming people to gain strength. And, we believe he has joined the Demonari." Isha's eyes were intense.

The Demonari was a very old cult that worshipped demons. Not illegal in the Northern Kingdoms, but they weren't much threat. More like pandering, sycophants than anything else. A corrupted healer was a new kettle of fish. They were rare, a healer selling part of their soul to a demon for power. Healers were powerful casters they hardly needed more. "Quake woman, spill it all out."

My sister's face scrunched up. She didn't like my use of what she considered 'unattractive' language. "A demon, we don't know who has been reaching out looking someone. It is giving many of the priests' bad dreams, and visions. There has been a huge increase in demon sacrifices as well. The Demonari claim it is legal, but everyone has their doubts. Father is investigating. But, I have a feeling he'll be coming to you to finish it."

This news struck me as little odd. He didn't trust me. Not the way a parent would normally trust a child anyway. "Why do you think that? He doesn't mind endangering my life maybe?"

Isha didn't dignify it with an answer. "On a purely magic counter point, our grandmother keeps coming around and asking nervous questions. I'll tell you a nervous Arch angel kind of terrifies me on a whole new level. Admittedly, she isn't a Vita angel, only a Water one, but still."

"You might be right." I didn't care for my grandmother. She was a bit cool, not cruel, but not warm. There are many different kinds of angels. She happened to be a warrior one cold and unrelenting. They aren't the warm, hugs, and kisses types. She always disapproved

that I didn't embrace my heritage. "I'm not sure what I could do to resolve an epic battle between Silt and Vita." I flashed a grin.

Isha let out a wonderful, sun-coated laugh. "What you don't think you could charm, seduce, or trick gods into falling into line? Has your ego actually shrunk since I last saw you? What a surprise."

I let out a long, long sigh, "And, the rest."

A big doe eye look, as she blinked her eyes in puzzlement. "I told you his still investigating, I don't have much else."

"You touched Aslair. You would only do that for one reason." I let a moment go to see if she would give it up. "To gather some physical material to scry about her, or her family. You are the scryer of Al'tar'ia. Your job is to monitor Elenmitis and inform her if you see something she hasn't. On top of that you are way too nosey, and pushy to not look into it. Considering you didn't rush over here I know you already did it."

She chuckled. Her beautiful eyes glimmered in the morning light. "You win. I miss talking with you. You are the only person that doesn't mind a little mind games. Everyone else thinks I'm trying to trick them. You see it as good fun. I do miss that. Probably makes me not a very good angelborn, I suppose."

I reached out and patted her arm. "Perhaps not, better than me. We all have burdens. Personally, I like my addiction, and yours seems to be a huge pain in the ass." Isha was compelled to understand everyone she encountered, the less she understood the more she desired to needle them. It made people think she was empathic when in reality she had no choice.

She gripped my fingers and squeezed them before letting go. "Aslair is daughter of a succubus and priest. Her mother was High Priest of the Unbidden, an order that is against vice, or pleasure of any kind. It must have been difficult for a young demonborn to grow up there. They all need vice, usually it is what they crave. Her mother had her trained by a druid, and she worships Gorinth. It is all over her aura.

"Her father is not a normal Seducer. He was thrown out of Silt, very rare for a demon. The reasons are obscured, I suspect the demons themselves did it protect their reputation. They wouldn't anyone to know..." She trailed off with a guarded look.

"Isha Tima Black, what is it?" I growled. Sometimes my sister could be such a pain.

A swat of her hand on my arm with a glare made me grin. She didn't think I should be allowed to say her full name. As if I cared about rules. "He wasn't a regular Seducer. Though, why that is, I can't say. He was the Glim."

"Glim?" Demonology isn't something I bothered to study.

"A kind of heir to the Seducer leadership," She waved her arm absently. "The position is won and lost with frequency. All it really means that he is powerful."

"Go on," Isha would hold information if I let her.

"He left, travelled a bit met Aslair's mother. The woman was immediately taken with him. Their relationship lasted only a few weeks before she was discovered, and he fled. I couldn't figure out why. I'm using Aslair to figure it out, so I'm not surprised. The only other thing I was able to get is that is on Western Kingdoms serving a king, or whatever they call it, as a body guard. Pretty unusual job for a Seducer, but maybe he doesn't like seducing people."

That seemed like lot information. "You got a hair didn't you?"

Isha grinned. "There was a loose hair on her hood collar."

It reminded me of happy times with my mother, or when Beth, Isha, and I used to play together. "Yes, you are very clever."

"Oh, very generous of you," She teased back. Then, her eyes turned more solemn. "What is your interest in this demonborn, Carthin?"

My lips tightened at the question. Generally, my sister did not inquire into the reasons behind my actions. She allowed me that privacy. "What do you want to know?"

Isha seemed to consider this her fingers making random patterns on tabletop. "It seems out of the character."

"Picking up beautiful women seems out of the character?" To that I had to laugh. "You don't know me very well do you, sister?"

A baneful look of displeasure swept over me, as she shook her head. "Don't deflect me. You aren't any better at the art of conversation than me." This statement was purely fact. Our mother was the only person able to redirect us with any ease. "You don't make a habit of picking up wandering adventurers. Especially not girls with a desire to help the poor and destitute."

I lifted my brow. "I'm cruel and uncaring now."

She waved her elegant, calloused hands. "Please, spare me. You know what I mean. What prompted you to gather up this girl, who isn't in the Ethereal, whose timing will be suspicious, and who isn't in to make gold."

A grumble rumbled in my chest. I didn't want to admit my reasons for not taking this girl were fairly unclear. "There was a whisper in me telling me to take her." Truth was I knew

Al'tar'ia talked to me in my dreams, but I preferred to ignore it.

She twisted her head to the side reminding me a dog, before she nodded. "Yes, I've heard such whispers myself. You seem like you take the ignoring them. As you have with every other power that you were born with."

She always needed to dig about the same issues. "Really, Isha. Can I not visit once without you reminding me of my neglected duties? If that is even what they are."

A flush crept over her fine porcelain cheeks. "My apologies," Her gaze dropped from mine. "I only want what is best for you."

"You aren't my mother. We had one, she was marvelous." Even as I said it, I knew it was uncalled for.

"Do not talk to me like that." Her hair lit up of its own accord. The light shimmered on every strand of hair.

My eyes looked away. "I'm sorry. I didn't need to say that. You know the whole Al'tar'ia," I paused to gather my thoughts, "thing is a touchy subject."

Her fingers took my hand forcing me to look at her. "I know." She squeezed my hand. "A voice within convinced you to take her along. A powerful one?"

To be honest, I didn't think about it much especially not after the kiss. I know the kiss was a way to figure me out in some way. But, the heat, the deliciousness would be with me a while. "Deep more like."

She let go, her hand moving back to her side of the table. "Anything else you'd like to interrogate me about?" Her eyes crinkled a bit as she spoke.

"The cure?" A bit of pain lanced at me at the question. It hurt to ask. For years we

worked to free ourselves of our planar compulsions. Every planeborn was born with at least one.

Isha lips turned white from the pressure she put on them. "I would have contacted you if, if there had been any huge strides."

"Tell me what there is to tell." My shoulders felt weighed down. I snorted internally at my morose wallowing. Being crushed by my own hope.

"The serum had almost no effect on most of the patients. It did not work on a single angelborn, even though we were testing mostly on them." The reflected pity in my sister's eyes stung. "It only worked on a windborn. After taking the serum for several days he lost the compulsion completely, and within in a month it didn't return even after going off the serum."

A little hope snuck back in my heart as I sat up straight. "What was his desire?"

"Excitement. He'd thrown himself from cliffs, indulged in unnecessary fighting, and many forms of intoxication. He was in bad shape. But, there is something else."

Hesitation in her made him feel a deep worry. She wasn't the type to worry over her words. "What is it?"

"After a month, his blue streak skin vanished, his twirling gray and white eyes faded to grey, and his hair no longer continually floated. He became human, no longer planeborn." The last sentence came out as a pained whisper.

Without realizing it my eyes shut. "I see. You'll keep testing see if you can remove the compulsion without turning them into humans?"

"Forever for you," Isha voice ached with sincerity. "I have my doubts that it will ever

work. They two are tied together."

"Al'tar'ia, save me," I reverent whisper welled up from inside. The pain crashed down on me. "I need to find a woman."

Isha eyes turned glossy, "I'd do anything for you."

That look reminded me too much of Sethila, my mother. Even after all these years it still brings me pain. "I know," I said even as I slammed the door to outside. My freedom would once again, come at too high of a cost.

CHAPTER FOUR

The book, *Elenmitis - Legends, Lore, and Myths* I had never read before. However, I found it only a few tales I didn't know. Still, the moldy old stories and twisted tales always enthralled me. It was a tale of a wood spirit, and a fire spirit who tried their hand at friendship. Doomed, of course, such relationships always are, but a compelling story in any case. I was fully absorbed in the book the door slamming shocked me. The cover slipped from my grip.

Did Carthin and his sister fight? Siblings were something I'd always wanted. The reason was simple why I didn't. My mother broke her vows for love. As stupid, and foolish as it sounded, it was still true. She wasn't interested in other men, and she still believed in the Unbidden.

A sudden desire to know gripped me. Then, I realized, it was more ache of loneliness. Until a week ago I'd been alone, but Carthin changed that. Even our quiet evening in the mud were better than endless solo tracks in the sun.

I shut the book, my finger brushing over the embossed cover as I padded downstairs. To my surprise Isha sat in the colored lights from stained glass on her skin. Even from here I could tell she was pretending to be distracted. She was waiting for me.

The curiosity as to why brought me into the main room. As I put the book away silently, I saw her start from surprise.

A soft, sweet laugh as she pressed a hand to her chest. "You startled me, Aslair."

Sure, I did. The heat of a demon wrapped around me. This time I didn't brush it off. I wouldn't be the mouse to Isha's cat. It would warn me of her intentions not allow me to drop my guard. "Sorry, the book is a complication of legends. I know most of them. I decided to put it back."

A genuine smile her smile spread wide. "Carthin mentioned something about growing up in a convent. You must have time to study."

I shrugged. My tail made swept behind me, "Nothing special about that."

"Unbidden Priest, Carthin was impressed with your sire's gumption." A real laugh, throaty, as her fingers ran through her golden curls. "Why don't you sit? I don't usually have much chance to talk to people who work with my brother. My own duties keep me running ragged."

"What are you duties?" I asked. Her gentle nature didn't fool me. Those questions were arrows fired at very precise targets.

"Aside from training, I also manage the horses. Such thing as their food, health, state of readiness, and many other boring, uninteresting details. General Rigmon doesn't like if I go on missions." A shadow crossed her face. "Thomas worries about it as well."

A knowing filtered to me. As much as she loved Thomas she resented his fear. Isha was no wilting flower, she fought men, killed them. She wanted freedom, but her love for him allowed her very little. "Fairly normal, loved ones usually worry."

I sensed Isha caught onto the fact I'd turned the table on the game. "I'm sure your mother loved you a great deal to keep you. Not many women would keep a demonborn child. Especially not one of the eternal virgins of the Unbidden."

A fair exchange, I decided. I knew one of her secrets seemed only right to give her one of mine. "They were in love." Many people mocked those words. They didn't believe a demon could love.

For some reason Isha took this statement very seriously. "You don't tell many people that do you?"

The silky desire of intrigue brushed over my skin. "No, I can tell you want to know about me. Why, I'm not certain. Are you trying to figure me out? Does a demonborn interest you? Are you worried about your brother? I can tell you want information. I really don't like games. Let's be honest. Answer for answer."

That fine porcelain skin paled a touch, and then her cheeks flushed. To my surprise there was a delighted light in those dark gold eyes. "You are right. Let me answer your questions now. I am trying to figure you out. It is my weakness. I must understand, I must know about others. The more I comprehend the more stable I am. You being a demonborn is only a bit interesting. What I find interesting is the nature of your birth. A virgin and a Seducer is expected, but not them having a relationship." Those eyes watched me with a depth of thought I had never would have associated with a fighter.

Her whole face darkened. "I am worried about Carthin. I am always worried. Ever since he left."

"Why did he leave?" The answer and answer game was forgotten. I really wanted a bit of mystery of Carthin Black revealed.

The darkness fled her face. "Not my answer to give." She gave me a long look. "How do you know your parents loved one another?"

That was an easy question. "With my mother she still misses him. Someday she hates him, and others she cries for him. For my father he left his first layer of shed skin." He also left a letter. But, the skin was telling enough. It could be used against him. A spell with it could bind him forever. To prevent that I turned it into my armor, the leathers I wore. "Why do you worry about him?"

"Because, I failed him." The words cracked a bit on the end. "He loved our mother. Not for anything would have left her here. If I'd been a better sister he might have stayed. She wouldn't have allowed my father to push Carthin away. Sometimes I think she was the only thing holding this family together." I could taste a bitter edge to her words. Who Isha was bitter with was uncertain.

This part of the story I knew, due to rumors. Sethila the Star Mage had died in battle a while ago. People still made amulets to her, and a statue of her stood in Al'tar'ia main temple. "You weren't much older."

"He's my little brother." She let out a pained breathe. "What do you want with my brother?"

The question felt weighty. For me the answer wasn't, "To get into the Ethereal."

All the kindness in her face faded. Those eyes far too old for her face narrowed on me. "Are you sure?"

"Maybe friendship. Our relationship is new. For now that's what I want." I could feel her fear. As to why she was afraid I couldn't read. "Why are you afraid?"

She brushed the question off. "I'm not afraid."

There wasn't enough to tell if she truly lying or not. People don't always understand

how or why they are feeling. I decided to move on. "What did you need to talk to Carthin about that you sent me from the room?" If she didn't think I could feel the delicate tendrils of her powers she was wrong. I felt them, but didn't want to be somewhere no one wanted me. She tried to send me away, and I let her.

"Don't I get to ask a question?" There was mischievous edge to her smile.

"You asked me two." I managed a half smile, "And, now a third."

Isha leaned back. I let her emotions flow over me. There was genuine like, and a touch of respect. And, she was considering giving me the answer. None of it showed on her face. A friendly, at ease mask hiding what I suspected was a keen mind. "If you really want to know I'll tell you." I doubted it. This woman wouldn't be convinced of anything she wouldn't want to do. "There is a demonic magic in the air. Demonari are up to something. Have you sensed it?"

Generally, I wouldn't. Demonic energy flowed around me always. Magic was too much a part of my being for me to fully see it. "I haven't communed for a while." The only time I would have noticed in Gorinth's gaze.

A careful nod before she continued, "There's too much sacrificial magic in the air. A corrupted healer is wandering around. His pledged to a demon I'm sure. The torn bodies are obvious. And, there is a demon invading dreams, giving people nightmares. I don't know the demon's goal. My father is planning on contacting both of you. He might have an assignment."

A lot went unsaid, I knew. It didn't seem a good idea to bring it up. "Demonari are an old demon cult. They are mostly for show drinking blood, eating richly, and having orgies.

Hardly, demonic. I wonder what the shift is."

"Silt-healer must be the change." Isha golden eyes brightened and dimmed in a spilt second. The presence of a god touched the room.

Silt-healers are serious problem. They could heal like any healer. What they gained from the demon was for every drop of pain, suffering, corruption, and death they caused the gained back twice the power. What is truly dangerous about them isn't so simple. They are corruption given physical form. "Yes, most likely."

"Do you think the demon would come to you if you called?" Isha voice broke through my thoughts.

"I could try." I didn't bother to warn her. I dived deep in my mind. Gorinth green leaves wrapped around me as I spun out a thread to Silt. I cut the tether off it couldn't be connected to me directly. A moment I could feel the pulse of dark energy. A mind roved sensed me grew closer, and closer. A strong power crackled around the presence. The twisted darkness rippled with the stink of rot. It wouldn't reveal itself. I cut the ties. "It won't."

"How do you know?" Her eyes crinkled up in thought. Strange that I could sense her talking to Al'tar'ia yet she couldn't sense Gorinth.

With a small extension of will the green leaves and vines of Gorinth climbed across my skin. The gnarled tree symbol of Gorinth floated above my head. "I used Gorinth power to search it out. The minute I reached out my power the silt-healer went hunting for me. If he comes to my call it will be take me over, not talk."

Isha eyes ran over the sign of Gorinth without much comment. "I wonder if the

silt-healer knows about you."

I shrugged. "It wouldn't surprise me. I summon a lot of planar creatures for information." And, I can guarantee all of them would share information about me.

She made no comment to that statement. Instead, she stood up and brushed her leggings off, "I think I'll retire for the night."

"Where did Carthin go?" This house felt too big for me to enjoy reading in the soft bed upstairs.

She gave shake of her head with a soft snort. "Out to find a woman I suspect. Or, to get drunk at a friend's. I gave him some bad news. He probably won't be back till late." There was a small very well hidden edge of disappointment and sisterly worry in her voice.

"Have a good evening." My thoughts were already turning. There was nowhere here to research the Demonari, the silt-healer, or demons. There is supposed to be an expensive spell that allows one access to all the resources of a library with a blank book, but I didn't know it. Isha said night, but I barely heard her.

A yawn wrenched my jaw as Isha shut the front door. The casting took a bit out of me. Not to mention the grueling pace we took getting here. "Early to bed, early to rise," I quoted Unbidden at myself as I made my way to bed.

A few quick movements and I put on a loose shirt and slide into bed. As my mind slipped into the sleep, a demon tried to reach me. Thick, black strands wrapped around my mind. I fought the sticky, black webs off. My demon nature cackling with joy, it wanted a fight. It lived for fighting. The connection never quite formed, but I sensed it was a Seducer. A final burst of power as I cocooned myself with life. Cool, smooth feel of leaves wrapped

around me, and the sunlight protected me. Gorinth always stood with me. The surge of power woke me up.

The smell reminded me of my father. Except my father's smell lacked the sickly sweetness of this Seducer. I quickly dug through my packs and pulled out small, wrinkled letter. The same deep, exotic, intense scent stronger on the letter than the tanned hide I wore. Where was he, I wondered. Did he know he had a daughter, would he care? Unfolding the letter, I read it.

My Heart of My Hearts Lillian,

I have left as you requested. The pain I feel for causing your demotion will stay with me always. If I had a god to pray to, I would pray you would forgive me one day. My heart aches, an emotion I'm unfamiliar with. Even though, I shall never see you again, I want you to try to remember me fondly. You will be carried in my memory forever.

The Lover of Your Soul Always, Zerian

I don't know why I bothered. The words were imprinted on my heart. A stupid misunderstanding my mother explained to me one cold, afternoon over her special tea blends. The rain pelted the window with an icy chill. My mother was very intimidating. The blocky face with fierce dark eyes filled with fire, and determination. No one would ever say she was beautiful, compelling, but not beautiful. "Why did my dad leave?" Even as a child at ten I was shocked at my own audacity.

"Young love is stupid." She laughed, she had the sweetest voice. Birds would

actually fly into her hands if she sung. "An argument, a pointless one. We were both on edge, and it got out of hand."

My face scrunched up, as I lacked reference. No one in Unbidden argued ever. "I don't..."

"I know. There aren't any relationships here. The innkeeper isn't even married. When there are two people sometimes they yell at one another because of frustration, guilt, upset, and not for a real reason. Fights happen to anyone. Zerian didn't know that. I suspect demons don't war. They give sly smiles, joking tricks, and underhanded attacks. I only knew from my parents. I, at least, had a frame of reference. Youth was why I made such a mistake."

"You told him to go." My young self-realized it was the only thing that made sense.

She patted me on the hand. She lifted the bright yellow mug. She took a long sip from it. "Unbidden threatened to remove me, if I kept him as a mate. Unbidden believe in denying oneself. There are exceptions, of course. Marriage was one. The relationship was too new, I thought for that. Yet, I wanted him in my life forever. Torn, I lost my temper. I told him he was taking my life, and giving me nothing back. He struggled to understand. My fear overrode my sense I told him to leave before he took everything." A deep sorrow welled up in her dark eyes. "He took me at my word."

The only time my mother ever spoke of him. Shortly, after I left the convent I had dreamed of finding him, and dragging me back to my mother. Together, they would be happy. If I were to be honest, I still dreamed it could be true.

I crawled into the covers. My desire was to wake up with less somber thoughts. I

wouldn't have guessed being around others would make me so reflective.

My muscles burned in places I didn't think I had any. The sun seemed to always be in my eyes no matter where I stood. Carthin swung his sword back and forth lazily in front of me. I spit at him.

He hugged his chest as it quivered with laughter. "Come on, Aslair, training is hard work. Did you expect it would be easy?"

I straightened, my whole body screamed at me to stop it. "I didn't doubt the difficulty. I was merely assuming you'd be less of an ass about it."

"Ha!" He fell down, his face pressed against the ground.

I stalked forward my stick rubbing against my sweaty flesh. I raised it to bring it down on his unprotected head.

He flashed up fast, knocking it out of my hand.

A let out a shriek as two of my blisters burst on my hand. "Jerk," I grumbled, pressing my hand against my leg. The warm blood was already oozing down my thigh.

He lifted a brow with a smug little smile. "Oh please, you attacked me. We are going to leave in a couple of hours. It is the last session until we reach the Ethereal."

"Fine, but I didn't get any of the cooked sausages this morning. You have been eating way too many of them." He made a face, I giggled. "Learn to share."

He mimed a sword to the chest. "Oh, you wound me. My sausage is valuable to me."

"Shut up." I hated when he turned anything into a dirty joke. "I'm done. Let's go eat."

A long stride took him past me in a blink. He called over his shoulder. "Good, I'm hungry."

Once again, I had to rush to keep up with him. People might find me intimidating, and frightening, but I was a bit shorter than average height. Carthin, in contrast, was tall, dark, and charming.

He called out happy hellos to various people. I managed a few token waves until we reached his house. The young woman from the last few days stepped out holding a large woven basket. Carthin tensed, whenever he saw her. I passed them, into the house. Carthin made it past me, and jogged into the kitchen.

The table had hardboiled eggs, fresh cooked bacon, a few smoky sausages, and chopped fresh fruit. A quick shoulder shove sent Carthin off balance enough for me to swoop in for the sausages. "Victory," I declared.

He plunked up a few boiled eggs, taking a generous bite of one. "At eating maybe. Pig."

"Smug bastard," I responded with a grin.

"No bastard here, my parents were married, and sanctified." He finished off the egg.

I snacked on a grape. "Not willing to deny the smug, hmmm?"

"Why lie?" He asked before tackling an orange.

The witty banter stopped as we dug into our breakfast. For the next few days there would only be travel rations, which were more than a bit unpleasant. I had already packed my supplies, and set it by the door. Carthin beautiful, leather tooled pack also waited by the door. Part of me was sad to go, but the rest of me was excited to join the Ethereal. A

devastated pile of food debris meant it was time to go.

Carthin motioned toward the door. He made it the door before I even got out of my seat. An easy jerk on his pack settled on his back. "I miss Leopard." He looked at me, to flash a grin. "Even though, he doesn't miss me."

"Can't say I miss Sweetness." Nothing against the horse, but my backside still hurt from riding her.

With a quick quirk of a brow, he eyed me up and down. "She has the gentlest gait of any horse. You're lucky I didn't make you ride Leopard."

I harrumphed. My pack felt like a comfortable familiar as we headed out the door. The trip was quick back to the stables, before we mounted, and left.

The road was still a touch muddy over the next week. It sprinkled a bit, but there were no more heavy rains. My body ached a little bit less each day. I chatted a bit with Carthin at night. His conversations were always fun, but shallow. It made me wonder about him. I could sense his trust would come in time. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part.

Large, shimmering walls appeared on the road. Sweetness stopped following Demon. "What is that?" To my shame, my voice was a bit high.

Carthin clicked his tongue and Sweetness started to walk after Demon. "That's the Ethereal Base. It's not made out of metal, it's an illusion. Impressive, though."

I swallowed, and nodded. The walls grew larger, and larger. Once we stood about twenty feet from the gate, the illusion became apparent. The walls were made of stone, and the color enchanted on top of it. The gate itself impressed, runed with thousands of glowing magical glyphs. I felt a pulse of magic from behind the walls. Surely they had an active source

there. It shouldn't have surprised me.

Planeborn have more access to magic. And, they would have more enough inactive magic to run their spells. All that excess magic would turn into a massive spell crystal. I would bet the Ethereal would make a nice profit selling to less magical settlements.

A squeak of leather from my right caused me to notice Carthin dismounting. I copied the gesture, but with far less ease. He stepped up to a scrying mirror. It lit up. A dark skinned man with a shaved head appeared. "Carthin is that you?"

He rolled his head with a short laugh. "Of course, who else do you know half as good looking?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever you say. Who's that?" A finger appeared point in my general direction. "And, where's Vera?"

Carthin let out a long sigh. "Vera's dead."

"Are you serious?" The other man asked his black brows making to angled lines above his eyes.

"I don't want to get into the details, in public, I'm sure you understand. That is Aslair Vrail. She wants to join up with the Ethereal." Carthin tapped a finger on the scrying mirror.

The man swallowed hard. It seemed, to me, anyway, he was a bit afraid of Carthin. "Come on in, I'm sure the Captain will want to speak to you."

The gate let off a deep rasping sound as it opened. Carthin didn't wait before walking in, both horses followed him.

I took a moment to compose myself. My nerves were singing. The moment I stepped through the gate into the base, I remember something I had forgotten. Planeborn

are not human. Humans think planeborn wear odd colors, speak funny, and are weird because they want to stand out. That isn't the case, planeborn are different. Humans also don't realize planeborn considered anyone with enough of the blood to be one. One could have only had a relative five generations ago, but if they have enough of the blood it will show.

All around me planeborn thrived without restrictions of human convention. Hairstyles done in wild designs, various levels of clothes, tattoos, piercings, and other oddities were everywhere. As I suspected from appearance, and from my magical senses, nearly all of them were elementals. Demonborn and angelborn were rarer.

What drew me in was the large, clear gem dominating the square up ahead. It dawned me that the diamond like construct was a spell crystal. The color and size spoke to the sheer amount of magical energy it contained.

Without realizing my feet had taken me down the road past the rainbow dwellings, and interesting decorations. I stood in front of the spell crystal. Inside my mind I howled with need. All the stored energy of the ambient magical energy of the Ethereal floated in front of me. My body shook as I pushed the compulsion to absorb it. My knees hit the dirt. The power I craved it. I wish I had told Carthin about my energy addiction, it seemed it would be the end of me. My tail made lazy strokes behind me as my finger curled.

A rough grip hauled me up, spun me around. Carthin golden eyes filled with an emotion I couldn't name. "Aslair, by all the Vita, what are you doing?"

Everything ached to touch the stone. Instead, I leaned into Carthin wrapping my hands around him, and my tail followed suit. "Thank you." If I had tried to absorb that much power, I would have died. My own sobbing surprised me as my legs gave out.

A shift in his weight, and Carthin picked me up. "Aslair, you should have told me you're a magic eater. I would have warned you."

I heard a rustle of feet and sounds of people approaching from all angles. Several different people began speaking all at once. The words felt too fast for me to follow. "I felt it, I should have prepared myself." The words couldn't have been louder than a whisper against his chest.

He let out a long whistle. His boots thumped against the paved roadway, as he strode away from all the noise. The elevation changed as made our way up a creaky stairs. A thump, and bang as a door swung open. Carthin shifted my body, and placed me down on a soft bed. "I'll get a physician." To my surprise, there were deep lines of concern etched on his face.

"No, no, I'm fine." I leaned on my elbow, propping myself up. "I need time to recover and focus."

The intensity of his gaze struck me. His dark brows met making a fine black line. "Are you certain?"

I flopped back down on the bed. My eyes shut as I wrapped myself in strength of the earth. "I'm certain. I didn't absorb any of it yet."

He stepped over to a chair and dragged it across the floor. A clap of his hands, and light filled the room. A groan and he settled into the chair. "Why didn't you tell me, you were a magic eater?"

I didn't know how to answer. My eyes flick around the room as I gathered my thoughts. Two beds, a small dresser, and a few oil paintings. "I'm not sure. I don't

mention it to anyone." I couldn't meet his eyes. "I'm used to being on my own."

The frown faded a bit. "I understand."

I descended back to the flow of natural magic. Magic flowed over me, blocking the desires. Warmth descended over me, as my eyes opened. A soft gold and blue woven blanket had been draped over me. Carthin paced back and forth. I watched him as he stalked back and forth. "Why are you worried?"

He paused. "I'm not sure. Are you well enough to talk to the Captain?"

With a twist I rolled off the bed, and onto my feet. "Let's go."

He quirked a brow at me, then opened the door to step out. I could hear the thud of his boots on the steps. I followed behind him. To my utter relief by the sun, it seemed only an hour had passed. For once, Carthin waited for me. I smiled at him, and waved at him to continue onward.

The paved road winded a bit. A tall house, gorgeous house dominated the end of the road. A tall, woman stepped out wearing a flowing thin dress, and covered head to toe in blue tattoos. "Carthin Black! Come inside, I need to talk to you, and your new recruit." Her voice was powerful as the wind.

Carthin dipped down in an elaborate bow. "Lady of My Soul, and Heart, I'll be right in." He gave a lopsided grin. The stone stairs covered in runes swept up to the door. We made it up the stairs.

The woman flipped her long, flowing white hair. The door flew open of its own accord. Her eyes swirled like twin windstorms. "We need to talk." She made a quick turn into the pale blue hallway.

A sideways glance from Carthin told me this was not normal procedure. The hallway seemed to last forever until an open door led to a gray office. The woman stood behind the desk the light making her seem like a ghost.

"Carthin, Did you let Vera die?" The chill to her voice reminded me of a winter gale.

He cocked his head to the right, "No, of course not."

She blinked once. "I know you were not fond of her, Carthin. Do not lie."

His face contorted into a snarl, and he clenched his fists. "Are you messing with me? I might not have liked her very much, but I didn't get her killed. She got herself killed. You believe whatever you want, but that is the truth."

The woman, who now I assumed was the Captain, stay composed. She looked over at me. "Both of you sit."

The snap of her voice caused me to do so with haste. I managed to bang my elbow on the chair. My skin itched with the desire to manifest demon skin.

In contrast Carthin stood lip curled, a cold look in his eyes. "What am I your lapdog now, Esper? Because, I don't heel so easily." His hand rested on the hilt of his long swords.

She folded her hands over her stomach. "I apologize for my short temper, Carthin. Several people have died in missions lately. Blaze has been going out on missions due to the rash of deaths. Please, be comfortable." She sat down neat, with her back straight.

The tension reduced as Carthin sat down. "Is that why you are here to meet us, instead of the Captain Blaze?" I was wrong, whoever this woman was, and she wasn't the captain.

"Yes. Blaze will debrief you, once he wakes up." She pulled out a tablet. "Now, young woman tell me about yourself?"

I swallowed.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm not staying here for this, I'll go wake up Blaze myself." I stomped out, and left Aslair with Esper. The anger shimmered underneath the surface. Esper should learn to keep her mouth shut. The pulse of rage sustained me until I stood in front of Blaze's red door. I forced myself to breathe and relax. The door opened to my touch, because I visited enough the magic lock was attuned to me. The tiny entrance way led upstairs and to kitchen.

"Blaze, get Silt up!"

A thump, as Blaze came down the stairs. Short, black, with blazing orange hair and eyes, he as usual, was shirtless. "Did you need to wake me? I was sleeping."

"Esper is pock ridden whore." I tried for a lighthearted slur, but it came off jagged.

Blaze gave me a reserved frown. "Carthin, could you control yourself?" He rolled his head. "Of course not, stupid question." He thudded down the stairs.

My jaw worked back and forth. "I need a drink."

He padded me on the shoulder. "Did you get killed Vera?"

"Flames," I spat at his feet. "I need a drink, first."

Blaze chuckled. "Okay, into the kitchen we go." I stepped into the small kitchen with a two-person table. He motioned to the chair.

I settled in. Blaze, even I admitted, was far too tolerant of me. But, I am a lovely, and charming, "Drink."

"All I have is Demon's Gut." He pulled out six shot glasses lining them up in two precise even rows. From the cabinet above the table he pulled out a tall bottle filled with red liquid, and poured each shot without spilling a drop. He yanked out a chair, in front of his row, and sat. He scratched one of the fire tattoos across his chest. "Out with it."

One, two, and three shots down as neat as he poured them. "She got herself killed."

He poured three more shots for me, and drank one of his. "Tell me the whole story, Carthin."

"As far I had known the job was going fine. The lady of the house was quite enamored of me, and the lord didn't much care if she was sleeping around. She had provided him two male heirs, and a daughter. And, he was busy sleeping with whatever lovely he ran into." I ran my fingers on the top of one of the shot glasses. "Vera was playing a closet womanlover, because the Captain of the Guard was a manlover. She played at being my on and off lover

due to fact she wasn't interested in men, and I acted annoyed with her attitude."

"Hmm..." He toyed with his glass. "Overall, good plan."

I grunted deep in my throat. "As far as I knew, everything was going occurring to plan. Vera seemed antsy to me. She wanted to rush the job, I don't know why." Even talking about it brought back irritation of her whole attitude toward the operation. Espionage was her area of expertise, not mine, but she treated the whole job like an amateur.

Blaze took a shot. He sat down the glass with a bit of force. "Any theories as to why?"

"Theories," At first I wanted to snap at him. I am a liar, but I hate being accused for lying, when I'm being honest. After thinking about it, he probably was curious as to her state of mind. "Maybe she had started to like the Captain of the Guard, he was a decent guy. Or, maybe someone in the barracks, she was posing as a guard, was trying to get her pants. The lord of manner might have decided she was a good prospect, she was a beautiful woman. Maybe, she missed her boyfriend, I'm not certain. In truth, it could have been anything. We only met a few times to straighten out details, and only briefly. The operation had just began neither of us needed to be caught talking."

He took a shot, and poured another round of his own shots. "To Silt. What got into that girl? She was always so logical."

To that I had no answer. I took all my shots, and Blaze refilled them, generous of him. "Vera was a waterborn, they are mutable." I sighed. "Not that it makes either of us feel better."

"Well, out with it." The way he said it made wince. He must have liked Vera more

than I thought.

"Third week into the job, she sends me a message to start prepping for clearing out." The timing of the message had been poor, I was about to enjoy a tryst with the lady of the house. "I started my prep work, filling out the documents, and setting up the lie. My plan, I never knew Vera's, was to act as if my mother died, leave most my clothes, other important items there, giving me the opportunity to return if needed."

"I don't understand. The job was under Esper control. Why would you need to return?" I figured as much. Blaze and Esper were pretty much opposites in every which way. And, knowing one another strengths spilt clients and jobs as needed.

The moisture on the glasses beaded up toward the bottom. He must have gotten cold enhanced shot glasses since I was here last. "No one was told what information we needed to retrieve. Nor were we supposed to open up the sealed letters, or other documents we might find. The Lord was forcing another lord to marry his dowry poor daughter to him." I couldn't contain my snort of contempt, "Politics."

A long silence followed my statement. Blaze didn't ask any questions, so I continued. "We were supposed to leave separately, and then meet on the road out of town. One of us might have to blow cover, but there was ample room for one of us to return. I met Vera on the road out she seemed jumpy."

"She snapped at me right away. 'Where have you been?' I told her, doing my prep, and work. She turned, and started to head off. I asked what is going on, but she didn't respond. The sound of hoot beats caused me to stop, and she hissed at me to keep running. Eight guards rode up out of the trees, and demanded she turn herself over, after knocking out

the Captain, and stealing his private records.

"I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, but I shouted. 'You did what?'" The guards started to yell at me demanding to know if I was involved. I tried to play coy, to salvage the situation, but then Vera charged them. I couldn't watch her cut down. As I killed some, they managed to gut wound her. By the time they were all dead, I needed to leave. I got her body out of the hostile territory, and marked the grave." I could remember standing over the grave, confused. How everything had happened, I had no idea. "I headed home, to drop off the guards horses. My cover still intact and the information retrieved with my tack. I met Aslair on the way home."

Blaze face scrunched up. "Aslair?"

I had forgotten I came in and woke him up. "Aslair Vrail, a demonborn sorcerer. I thought she might make a new recruit and a good partner." No point in lying to Blaze, I'd have to ask to be partnered with her anyway.

"What kind of demonborn?" He kept his face neutral, but I could hear the touch of suspicion in his voice. Most planeborn tend to look down on angelborn, and demonborn. It took a long time before Blaze realized I was reliable.

"Seducer," Even thinking about Aslair caused me to smile.

"Seducer, how pure?" Seducer tended to be rare, they slept with mortals, but few survived.

I enjoyed the worry on his face. "She's the most empowered demonborn I've ever seen. It wouldn't surprise me if mundanes mistake her for a real demon." Mundanes, the rest of humanity suspicious creatures, they did not even understand what planeborn were.

Blaze took a drink, and bounced the empty glass between his hands. "Beautiful?" He sounded even more worried. In general, Blaze did not appreciate my love of women. For some odd reason, he thought it a liability.

I gave a quick chuckle at his expense "She's a daughter of a seducer with very pure blood. What do you think?"

"Carthin..." The undertone of interest I heard and I ignored the rest of it. "A seducer could play you very well."

"Hardly," I shake of my head. "I seduce women, Blaze, not the other way around. And, she isn't like that."

"How do you know? She's a seducerborn, Carthin. Anyone can be played." Blaze thudded a big meaty fist on the table once. He always did that when I was being too irreverent.

I raised a brow and shot him a half smirk. "Don't trouble yourself. Besides, I can tell you want to see her. She's your type, sweet faced, but enthralling." The reward was a deep blush going across both his cheeks.

He got it, shoving his chair back into place. "I'll talk to her after Esper is done debriefing her." A fiery glare shot in my direction. "And, not to seduce her either. Not everyone is thinking of their next tumble."

I finished off my shots. "Sure, they are. No one likes to admit it."

He grunted. A few quick gestures and he cleared away the shots, and put up the drink. "There is something I should tell you." Another penetrating frown, before he continued. "Even though, I should let you suffer. Your father will be in a few days. He had a job, he

would only offer to you. Esper was to alert him the minute she saw you. Which, I'm certain she did, especially, because she didn't bother to tell you about it."

The urge to rail about the uptight bossy ice queen made me start to open my mouth. To stop myself I recalled every single time that had happened Blaze punched me. I settled for a disgruntled growl.

"Don't be petty, Carthin. You aren't any nicer to her." Blaze wagged his finger at me.

"I am petty." I snapped.

Blaze chuckled. "Perhaps, but as your Captain I command you to be less so."

"When in Silt do I listen to anybody?" A bit of acid left my voice, but I grinned. "What does the illustrious Wave General Rigmon Black say he wanted with his misbegotten progeny?"

Blaze shrugged, his molten eyes already elsewhere. "He didn't say. He would only speak to you." A gave off a soft grunt. "Apparently, I'm not worthy of his trust."

"His judgmental, paranoid old man, ignore him Blaze." With a flash of a smile, I switched subjects. It pleased me to no end that I knew and Blaze didn't. "The packet is on Leopard. If you want it. Otherwise, I think I'll grab a meal to go, and hit my bunk room."

Blaze's expression filled with all sort of questions, I could tell. "Carthin, be honest. Are you involved with this Seducer?"

"Nope," I refrained from adding my usual, 'not yet'. Really, he worried like mother hen. I'm not sure why he was so concerned about it. I wrapped woman around my fingers not the other way around.

He dismissed me with a wave of his hands. "Be careful, Carthin, not every woman falls for your false charm."

"It's not false, it's flawless," I bowed, and went home.

CHAPTER SIX

I watched Carthin's back move steadily down the hall. As strange as it may sound, I felt betrayed. How dare he leave me here alone, with this stranger? But, what does he care. He wouldn't want someone weak as a partner.

A throat clearing caused me to jerk around and face Esper. "Excuse my manners."

Esper watched me her strange pale eyes seeming to swirl. The delicate skin was rippling ever so slightly. "You are young. Are you now ready for the interview?"

Her challenge hung in the air, and my blood roared to accept. The sound of ripping flesh beat in my ears. I ignored it. A bland smile forced onto my face. "Of course," I folded my hands in my lap to prevent my nails from becoming claws.

A scratch of pen against fine paper her writing was elegant and precise. "Why do you want to be in the Ethereal?"

"Why does anyone?" I rebutted with irritation. The blood got louder in my ears.

Esper watched my finger still holding the pen. "If you are going to deflect every personal question this interview will be quite tedious." A long pause as she tapped the pen twice, "And pointless."

I could feel myself swallowing hard. The uptight bitch knew she was needling me. A scream joy, and madness as my mind knew I was close to breaking. But, no. Sorry, she won't break me. "My apologies. The Ethereal hire high quality for well-paying jobs. They get respect. People turn to them for aid. All three things I don't have."

The pen moved up and down. "From the incident in the plaza I see you are a magic eater." Her eyes never lifted, "Are you a glit?"

A hot flush heated my cheeks, as I bit back a growl. It was an under handed nasty insult and she knew it. My skin didn't glitter and my eyes didn't glow. Therefore it was patently obvious I was no glit. "Do I look like a glit to you?" I may absorb excess magic, but I don't do it get a high off it.

Esper lifted those cool eyes and swept them over my body. "You don't glitter. But, even you must admit magic eaters aren't the most reliable people of society."

The desire to squirm in my seat almost overwhelmed me. She was right, Silt her.

There wasn't much chance I'd work with a magic eater. "I didn't eat magic at the plaza. I won't unless I need to. I have it under control." My will broke as I gave her smile filled with liquid heat. "We all have our weaknesses." I cursed at the husky pitch.

She wrote some more. "Yes, we do. Magic eating is a dangerous one. Once, I saw a magic eater kill a wizard, sucked him dry. The town he powered died."

Must have been a small town, I thought. Usually the wizard didn't need to stay by once he got the magic flowing. The people themselves should generate enough ambient magic. "I cannot help it. It is my nature. I assure you. I've never killed anyone, or destroyed anything more than minor elements of magic." Besides, using magic itself feed me. The taste of the arcane soothed me.

"Carthin helped you, this time." A cackle of greed, and desire echoed in my head at those words. So badly, I want to knock the arrogance out of her voice. "How will you keep yourself under control without him?"

An answer bubbled to surface a remembrance of my mother's words. "My blood desires."

She blinked, her pen stopped moving, "Desires?"

"Everything, anything, something, nothing. It is a constant. I'm used to it. The risk with me is the same as there is with every planeborn." Truth, it hurt. A wrenching pain seemed to beat in my chest. Every day I wished to be something else besides a Seducer. If only could have been happy staying with Unbidden forever.

A mental probe hit my borders. She couldn't breach them. A faint flicker of pain that she didn't believe me. "I understand, or have a glimmer of it. History?"

"Personal." My hair rose up like the hackles on a dog. My past wasn't for interview talk.

Esper set down the pen. "A few years ago you helped some of our organization. They didn't recommend you to me. They only mentioned you in the report. They didn't think you wanted to join, and they didn't think you were ready to join. What is difference now?"

"Time, experience, skills learned, I grew up." I fought the burning in my eyes. The flames wanted erupt from them. Control, Aslair, control. You need this.

She gave a curt nod. "Come with me. I want to see your abilities for myself." Esper got up, and opened a side door passed her immaculate organized office. Inside there was a circle cut into stone. As I stepped in I realized it wasn't a summoning one. "Stand inside. it will prevent harm as I test you."

A swallowed a growl as nails cut grooves into my palms. A wave a shame as pitter patter of blood drops hit the floor. The sizzle sound as my blood burned the stone showed my slip. Esper didn't comment as I stood in circle.

"I can smell the magic all over you." A whirl of blades closed around me.

In reflex my hands snapped across my chest as protect shield twisted around me. The blades flew off in a wave shimmering sparks. A wave of green tendrils grew up around me covering me in glowing, translucent vines.

Esper stalked around the circle. "Interesting. A priest of Gorinth. Odd choice for a demonborn. Odd choice for an adventure as well. He's hardly the most attentive deity. Good defensive shields. Fast reflexes."

Everyone had to mention Gorinth apathy. No one commented on the other gods less admirable traits.

My tail made lazy turns spikes growing of it. Flame erupted around me. "Frita" I spoke so fast the ice encasing me actually hurt. The flames pounded against my protection. The ice started to drip down, into wet puddles under my feet. Tension started to rise how long would the flames burn. A few more nervous moments before the flames dropped. Relief flooded me.

"Interesting, not immune to fire like many demonborn. And, your grasp of elemental magic is quite proficient." There was a touch of admiration in her tone.

An actual blade flew off the wall and came at me. A flare of pain as my skin turned hard, and red. The blade deflected off me. It attacked again, and again being deflected off my skin. Finally, it floated back to the wall. "Good, now pick this up." A massive metal rod showed up in the circle. I lifted it with no trouble, as heavy as it was.

"Do you have any mundane skills, demonborn?" Esper voice was cool, and disinterested as earlier.

"I can make tonics and bind wounds. I am a proficient researcher and I can read every plane language, and I speak Angelic, Demonic, Firen, and Waavil. Also I know my religions, history, and lore fairly well." It is one of the few benefits of growing up in a convent, plenty of time to study.

She snapped her fingers indicating I should go back to the room. Most of me resented the order, but logic overrode it. I settled back into my chair.

Esper handed me a book. "Read the first line."

It was in Aiern. The barely there fine lines, and elegant flourishes. "By the winds, all the souls blessed me."

She handed me another with a line in Earnil. Heavy dark lines surrounded in dark dots. "The earth moved, gods cried, and souls wept."

The next was a piece of paper with four languages on it. The sharp, angry lines demonic, graceful swirls angelic, thick flowing lines, Waavil, ragged slashes Firen. "Demons hope to true gods, whereas Angels only hope to hold back corruption. Water, Al'tar'ia holds the gate. Fire will be usurped by destructive impulses of demons."

Esper took the paper, and books back. She settled into her chair and took a few more notes with her pen. "You meet the requirements. The lack of melee abilities is worrisome. Magic won't always save you. Even with your enhanced healing and ability to manifest demon skin."

Did I hear an actual note of true concern? "Carthin has been teaching me the blade."

"Carthin... I hope you do not trust him." Coldness in her voice that went beyond artic.

I shrugged. A small part of me trusted his motives, but not him. "I hardly know him."

"He's dangerous to know, dangerous to trust." She bit out every word, her eyes filled with anger.

It dawned on me, her arrogance, and attitude had little to do with me, and everything to do with Carthin. "What did he do to you?"

A delicate wave of her fine boned hand. "To me, nothing. The moment I saw him, I knew was trouble. He is charming, charismatic, interesting, but there is a hunger there. A darkness. However, the women of Ethereal could only see the allure. He bedded a good

amount of them, including my daughter. He broke her heart. She says he never promised her anything, but with that kind of man everything seems to be a one. They are friends now. I can't forgive him regardless."

A lot of pain buried in her words. I could taste her hunger for vengeance. She wanted to crush Carthin. She wanted to see him pay. "Why didn't you remove him from the Ethereal?"

She looked at me. "That's Blaze's decision. For some reason, Blaze likes him. I won't gainsay my partner." The icy shield went back in place. "How do you know so many languages?"

"I grew up in a convent." That was all she would get. My other half no longer occupied by fighting started to wake up.

Esper tilted her head. "Curious place for a seducerborn to live. Didn't get to practice your blood skill much then."

Of course, it always came up. My ability to deceive, seduce, make anyone's desires come true. Rarely, did anyone realize there was more to it than sex and blood. I knew what people wanted, what they hid, what they dreamed off too. The sex was a lot more interesting to most. "I can use them, when I need too."

"Aren't you a bit underdressed?" The tone implied that I must use them a lot to be dressed in so little.

To that I grinned. "I'm never cold." Thanks to my blood that boiled under the skin.

Scratch, scratch went Esper's pen, as her eyes narrowed on me. "Do you not speak any other languages, of the different Northern Kingdoms?"

This whole interview she'd been playing with me. Now, I wanted to play back. "I haven't the need."

"You travel, that much I know from my mercenaries." She said mercenaries which such possessive ownership. Fierceness in her I didn't think she'd have. "You have seen most of the provinces, towns, and cities. Yet you do not speak any language, but your own?"

"All-tongue spell, my mother engraved it on my heart when I left home. As long as they are of Elenmitis, I can understand, and speak their language." My mother, as difficult as she was, loved me.

Esper dropped the pen this time. Her eyes widened, her brows raised. "That's a very expensive spell."

I shrugged. The Unbidden had my spells and knowledge than anywhere else. They had advantage of not any ego. They merely tried to acquire the knowledge. As long as Esper knew the spell was expensive that is all I wanted her to know. "Are we done?"

"You may go." Esper picked up the pen. A contemplative look graced me before she went back to writing.

Irritation, anger, and desire hit me in waves. Rip, tear, destroy, make her beg, make her heel. "Did I pass?"

She didn't even bother to look up. "Not my decision. That is wholly up to Blaze. I am finished with you."

Irked by the brutal dismissal I stepped out. The office door shut tight as I took a moment to regain my control. Her authority was probably what got me riled up more than anything. Nothing a demon hates more than being told what to do. I breathed in and out.

Finally, I was ready to go.

After getting outside I plagued a few people to give me directions to where Carthin might have gone. I wanted to head somewhere to sleep, and I was a little unclear as to where I should go. All the buildings the same squat squares. Each one covered in gray-brown clapboard with brown doors. The more I walked the more lost I got. My frustration level started to rise when I saw Carthin strolling down the road.

"Aslair, why didn't go back to the bunk?" He quirked a brow his voice was a little rough. It seemed like something, other than me, had upset him.

I managed to not snap at him. "I didn't know where it was. Believe it or not but this is not easiest place to get around."

Carthin flashed me a condescending grin. "Oh, well. You poor, naive thing, let's get you warm, and in bed."

My teeth pressed into my tongue. The warm, metallic blood trickled from it. It soothed the demon inside. I trod after him. His half smothered laugh did little for my irritation. The sky had darkened enough on our walk for the magically lights to flicker on illuminating the streets. The lights with the finely wrought metal sparkled beautifully. By the time we got to the bunk, I'd forgotten my earlier annoyance.

A yawn as I stumbled toward the bed. The thick, heavy quilt looked very inviting. I glanced over my shoulder to frown at Carthin.

He paused getting undressed, his brow knitted in confusion, and then he shook his head. "For a seducer you a very big prude. You should be ashamed of yourself." He continued getting undressed, I looked away and waited to I heard his bed springs creek.

"Fine, I am struck with endless waves of shame. Now cover your eyes, so I can get into bed." I didn't dare look at him.

He gave a hearty chuckle at his response.

I took it, undressed and crawled underneath my covers. The bed proved to be as comfortable and wonderful as I imagined. The room itself had the same level of quality, but a bit bland.

Somehow reading my mind, Carthin responded to my unasked question. "I upgraded a few months back. I previously stayed in the group barracks. But, I prefer my solitude. I'll start improving and decorating soon." He took a moment of silence before he continued. "I don't lack the funds. Also, my father is coming to see me about a job."

"I thought you didn't get along." I did my best not to inflect too much into statement. His family seemed to be a very delicate subject. Isha also mentioned a Silt-healer. Apparently, she didn't tell Carthin I knew a bit about the job.

A grunt followed by a lingering sigh. "We don't. In any case, whatever the job may be, it will be dangerous. If you don't want to go after hearing his proposal, then feel free to back out. I won't hold it against you."

I wanted to reply, but instead my eyes closed, and knew nothing more the morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A few days went by and father had arrived. Most of this time was spent training Aslair how to fight. I also indulged in some of ladies who had missed in the last few weeks. The Ethereal base set a buzz with the great paladin, Wave General Rigmon Black. As I pulled on my clothes, I barely held back a snarl. If my mother was here, she would tell me to be fair. Not having her around to remind me to be nice my father was the only good part about her being dead. It didn't balance with the aching hole of her loss, but at least it was something.

Aslair agreed to meet me later, she wanted to get showered, and dressed without me. I strode to the meeting hall. I called out greetings to people I felt friendly toward. Each step I forced all my resentment down, if I was lucky perhaps I'd choke on it.

Blaze stood talking to him, looking far shorter to Rigmon's broad shoulders, and towering height. His gold eyes were sad, as always, as they locked onto my face. "Son."

My teeth clacked together. "Father," I managed before giving Blaze a terse nod.

Blaze eyes danced between us before he bowed, and left.

"Let's sit." Rigmon's voice full of music of angels threatened to soothe away my anger. I sat across from him in the sturdy wood chairs. His strong jaw worked back and forth once. "I hear you have a new partner, a demonborn."

Rigmon, regardless of what I might imply, was never a racist. Several attempts on his life and many cults he broke up did have a lot of demonborn in them. They made him cautious. "Yes, she is."

"I'm sorry." My eyes closed against the words. Father apologized often, and never for anything specific. Every time it seared my soul.

I held out a hand. "Enough. I don't want to hear." I failed to mention I couldn't bare it. "If you want to talk to Sethila, talk about her. Don't dance around the subject." I couldn't call her mother out loud, not to him. <edit>

His large, calloused hands rubbed his face. "You are right. I wish things were better between us. I came to offer you a job. I hesitate to do it." He shifted to look past me. "It could get you killed."

I raised a brow. This speech was odd even for him. He'd never risk my life. "Then, why offer? I don't mind read. Spit it out, already."

"Mind your manners." He snapped a fire glowing behind his eyes. The man of my youth returned with a single insolent sentence. The look dropped away. "There is a cult that needs to be infiltrated. A lot of terrible things happen there. I need to find out the source of their powers, and what kind of rituals is being performed. Most people I know who I could trust to not be corrupted couldn't bear to watch the suffering they create. You are the only exception."

Anger boiled out of me. "Do you think I am uncaring, and cruel? By Silt, we might not agree, and not even get along, but I don't condone cruelty. You should know that." I spit at his feet, and knocked my chair over getting up.

"Carthin, please," His voice pleads with me. The desperation writ in his gaze astounded me.

A mental shove sent my emotions skittering away. "Explain." I could stand here long enough for that.

"I know what kind of jobs you have done. You can endure sorrow others cannot. You

have a keen sense of right and wrong. You can endure it. You are strong Carthin." He gave a smile, I remembered from my childhood. "You won't fall prey to someone messing with you, Carthin. Glory of Al'tar'ia. You made up your mind when you two years old and not even up to my knee. You have the personal convection of paladin, if not the moral proactive."

Of all the things I thought he would say that wasn't one of them. His love of me always seemed like an abstract concept. Strange to see that love in the flesh and in person. "I see."

"Sit down." There was only a touch of command in his voice.

I settled back into my chair. "Aslair might be a while."

"Good." Rigmon had a bit of grin. "I wanted to hear about her from you. Such as do you think she'll be suitable for a job like this one?"

Visually, Aslair would fit in. She seemed a bit soft hearted. "I'm not certain. I don't know enough about her. I assume you are going to explain the job in full when she arrives."

A bellowing, deep laugh erupted from him. I could only stare. When he settled down, wiping his eyes. "Isha did not lie, when she said you were getting shrewd and over cautious in your adult years. I have hard time imaging the boy I knew."

"If I still that reckless, I'm fairly certain I wouldn't have made it as mercenary." A benefit to not having either parent around surfaced in my mind. No one trot out embarrassing stories about you. That benefit is definitely under sold.

A noise caused me to turn, and Aslair had entered in her leathers looking for all intents and purposes a seducer. I suppressed a groan knowing this wasn't going to be fun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Like a rude peasant I stared at General Black. Even sitting down he was massive. His skin was fair. Like mine it was dusted with a color except his was gold. In fact his hair, eyes, and clothing were all gold. In contrast to Carthin, he looked a Northern hero-god statue. I reigned in my surprise and made my way over. "I apologize for being late."

"Your mother or father a seducer?" Rigmon asked right away. A subtle tension ran under his features.

The urge to blurt out the answer overcame me. That voice I could imagine people laying down their lives to hear it again. I wondered if angels sounded that beautiful. "Don't you think that is a bit rude?"

"My manners suit military life, excuse them." No real repentance in his words, a general at heart.

I took a sit next to Carthin. "It is fine. Besides, I'm sure Isha already told you."

A smile forced a contrast between the whiteness of his teeth and his golden flesh.

"You are no one's fool are you?" The question seemed rhetorical to me, so I didn't answer.

Carthin broke in, "The job?"

"I have made an arrangement with Esper, and confirmed it with Blaze before you arrived. A nearby organization calling themselves Demonari sent a runner here a while ago trying to acquire guards. Many religions have been keeping an eye on them. They do human sacrifice, as you know is not illegal, unless it is unwilling. We are not certain either way. Everyone who has entered the compound has either been found out before really knowing anything or joined. Esper didn't want to get involved in anything shady.

I found out they had been sniffing around for mercenaries. Most companies are unwilling to stand the way of one church much less several. However, I saw this as opportunity. They wouldn't try to turn mercenaries, because their presence would be brief. In addition, they wouldn't be looking for them to be true believers. I offered Esper a job to go under cover with them, if they reoffered.

They did recently. What I know of this place is awful. Blood rituals and demon summoning might be the least of it. The worse part of my plan, there isn't any guarantee I can get anyone out. Both you would have to rely on one another to get out. Trust would have to be essential."

I stole a glance at Carthin. His smooth features ruffled, "Rigmon. Carthin and I just met. I'm sure either of us could trust one another enough to make it in."

"Why is Al'tar'ia concerned?" Carthin asked something in his tone made me look at him. A thought had occurred to him.

A weight seemed to settle on Rigmon's shoulders. "The Goddess herself believes they are sacrificing children, and innocent to control the minds of others. You know one of Al'tar'ia domains is free will."

"How far reaching does she think it will go?" Carthin sat forward, his body strained. I didn't realize free will was something that mattered to Carthin. I knew now.

Rigmon closed his stunning eyes for a moment. His lips moved. A bit of shock ran over me, he communed directly with Al'tar'ia one of the four most powerful gods. When he spoke Rigmon spoke in Al'tar'ia words. "Lost one of my blood I sense the threat spreading. It will dominate more and more minds. It must be stopped before the danger grows too

much. I and Rigmon can only trust you." A bit of a liquid laugh, "I trust that who has disdained me the irony." Her presence faded.

Carthin fell backwards over his seat. He got up and started pacing. "How dare you. You shouldn't summon her around me. I told you I hated it. I hate it." Carthin ranted his movement's jerky.

Rigmon walked over to him, and enfolded him. "I didn't know she was planning to do it. I only asked her to give me her full reasoning. I know the divine upsets you."

I didn't expect this. Never in my life working in a temple, had traveling had someone practically acted allergic to the divine. An event had happened which changed Carthin profoundly, and made him terrified of the divine. At this point in time, I couldn't even hazard a guess as to what it was.

Carthin pulled himself out Rigmon's grasp. "I am not a child. Let go of me."

"Excuse me for interrupting, but this quest seems worthy to me. The threat seems grave and real. I may not be suited to the task, but I commit to it. I will not go without Carthin." A goddess thought he was needed for this quest. Who was I argue?

Rigmon inclined his head toward me. "Thank you, Aslair. Your heart is good."

"I'll go, but I need to get out of here. I can still smell her." He fled without another word. Carthin must have a strong connection to Vita. It did explain why he never trained in magic. When you have a strong connection to a plane you need a god to help you channel the excess power you summon up, or it will kill you.

Rigmon let out a sigh. He gave me a deep, unreadable look. "He'll be upset you witness that. Can you make me a promise, Aslair?"

I made my way over to him. "It depends on what the promise is. I don't dare promise something I couldn't keep."

Rigmon didn't look at me. His eyes stayed on the door Carthin took leaving the room. A hand pressed against his heart. "Promise me you'll do everything in your power to keep him safe." He looked at me. "I have already lost enough of him. I couldn't stand to lose the rest."

Against my better judgment, my years of wandering alone, I did it. "I promise you Rigmon Black, I will do everything in my power to keep Carthin Black safe." As I said it, I knew it was foolish. Under the weight of his pain, I couldn't do anything else.

CHAPTER NINE

That condescending, self-righteous prick, how dare he. The anger twisted behind the frustration, and fear. He knew how I felt about Al'tar'ia. To summon her, with me right there. I know he loved her, how could he not, her champion. Still, I was there. Right there.

These thoughts occupied my mind as I hacked away at training dummy with all my might. Bit of wood flew off in the air. My mind realized everyone at the training yard gave me area a wide berth. I didn't care.

A rumble in the back caused me to turn before I realized why. My father was talking to people near the entrance. It seemed guard wouldn't let him in. I stabbed my blade into my belt, and marched over. Last thing I needed to do was to drop a mess at Blaze's feet.

"What?" I sharp, striking sound directed at my father.

He stared at me, "Son."

"Don't," After that display how dare he? Sometimes my father's arrogance knew now bounds.

"Carthin, then," I could tell it pained him, but he swallowed it. "Can I talk to you? Without you spitting at my feet, or trying to slice off my head." The warm humor in his words faltered.

My fists clenched, as my teeth rubbed together. "Fine, let's go." I shoved past him.

At first I didn't even know where I was going. But we ended up at the only tavern in town. The food market didn't serve alcohol, so this was the only place go. The garish decorations failed to affect me as I grabbed the small booth in the back.

Rigmon went to the bar and got a pitcher before making his way over. With even movement he set it down, and poured two even tankards. He sat one in front on me before sliding into the booth. He watched me. "She is my goddess." He held up a hand to stop me from ranting. "I know you have your problems with her. I have never renounced her. She is my only solace after Sethila died. Can you not even allow me that? Do you desire for me to suffer always, and forever?"

"I don't care what you do. All I want is to keep Al'tar'ia away from me. You cannot even give me that. Everywhere you go, you carry her with you." I scoffed batting my hand against the tankard. It sloshed a bit of drink onto the roughhewn table. "And, you wonder at the poor state of our relationship."

He took a drink of the liquid, and made a surprised smile. It didn't offend me. I knew

the taste of it was an unexpected pleasure. "Al'tar'ia is with me always. If you want I can promise as part of payment for this job to not attempt to see you anymore." As he spoke his voice grew quieter.

Involuntarily my eyes closed. A memory came lancing forward My mother in her youthful glory. We had the same skin, and same eye shape, but hers were an olive green that could cut your soul apart. She kneeled in front of me, cleaning a bit of blood from a cut on my lip. "Carthin, you are such a terror." A smile lit every feature on her face.

"Trevor looks a lot worse." Even as a child I said it with a great of satisfaction.

A few more dabs with her silk cloth. "Proud of yourself are you? I'd be more impressed with restraint. Be stoic, my heart."

"You want me to boring like papa." My voice scrunched. "I don't wanna to be boring."

A jerk, as she compressed me in her arms, her laughter buried in my hair. "Be kind to your father. He is heart is just prickly." She lean back and ruffled my hair.

My eyes opened. "No." A strangled sob escaped my throat. I couldn't look at him. "She'd never forgive me." I believed it be truth as well.

"I don't warrant any regard, without her, do I?" There was something to his voice, and expression I could place, rue perhaps.

"Not to me." I wouldn't lie.

"Drink the damn beer." He took another drink of the tankard.

I took a sip savoring the favor. The layers of honey and spicy chilies went beyond delightful. "Do you only come here for the job?"

"I didn't need to come here for that." He pushed the drink back and forth between his hands. "Are you going to go your sister's wedding?"

"To celebrate her and Thomas ability to lean over the kitchen counters, no thanks." I loved Isha. Never would I agree marrying Thomas was a good idea. A spineless worm had more of my regard.

Rigmon's golden brows became straight lines over his eyes. "Don't be crude."

I shrugged. If he didn't want me to be crude, he was out of luck.

"She'd never ask you come, but you know it would mean the world to her. Isha is careful of your pride. You could be careful with her heart, for once at least." He finished off his drink, and poured a little more.

One thing my father always managed to do was plunk at my guilt. I gave myself some time by drinking a bit more from my mug. "Most of the time I am. Do you expect me to lend my support to her marrying Thomas? I can't even believe you approve such a thing."

"I hate to tell you, but our approval isn't required, requested, or relevant." He rumbled at me. "I don't like Thomas either. Isha loves him. You aren't conveying your approval. You are saying 'I love you, Isha'. I don't have to even ask if you love her. I ask you again, are you going to go the wedding?"

"When is it?" You caught me, I was delaying.

"Six months." He lifted a brow indicating he was aware my tactics.

"Oh right, honeymoon first, then wedding. I forget the traditions of the Southern Kingdom. I'm surprised Thomas didn't object." My sister honored my mother in anything ritualized.

He laughed a deep hearty one. "As if it would matter if he did. Your sister gets what she wants, when she willing to push. On something that important, she'll push."

"True." If I could avoid it, I always did. A fight with my sister was rarely worth it. The causalities simply were too high. "Fine, I'll go. And you tell only because I don't want her holding it over my head for the rest of my life."

Rigmon eyes danced. "I will, Carthin, I will."

CHAPTER TEN

I left Rigmon to his pain. How he could bare it I had no idea. I had no wish to bare it for him. I decided to get researching right away. Squirreled away I had stacks and stacks of plane related contacts who I could gather information from. I noticed a pile of planeborn not far away. "Do you know where the research center is?"

A tall, pale man leered at me, "At the Chapel, by the Library." He looked me up and down. "I can show you a special place in the back."

I made a gagging sound. "Please, I want to learn something new, not see something old."

The man flushed red, and his friends laughed. One waved down the road. "Keep going straight you'll see it. Big place can't miss it."

A few minutes of walking and I did see it. A huge sprawling building covered with symbols of various religions as well as symbols for learning. The inside is all I could hope for. The building was segmented into four large rooms, with spell components, rituals, preset containment spells, and shelf after shelf of written research. One room devoted to written

research filled with comfortable furniture, and devices to magnify and clarify text.

The magical catalog that floated near each bookshelf helped me find the reference books I needed. *Kakos Theory of Memory Linkage* and *Binds of Blood Transference* were the main ones. A grab of eye glass tools as I settled into a high back stool resting the books on tall table.

I spent a few minutes opening and placing each book so I could quickly reference them when needed. I inked out a few of written words, and symbols from the page. None of them were overly familiar, but not a bit surprising. Each little religion had symbols, and rites to worship the particular deity or being. To hazard a guess the spell went something like this: *Demon of Blood spattered nightmares, take the souls of the north, east, south, and west. Reach into the heart of the land, and poison it with the beauty of your vision. May we all rise up to worship in your shadow.* Now that I knew the spell I could figure out if it was even remotely viable. As well as whom 'demon of blood-spattered nightmares' was.

I considered what I should look into first. If I looked into the possibilities of the spell it might lead me to the demon, and all sorts of information about what kind of artists worked, and thrived in the cult. However, if I looked into the demon first, I might be able to get a direct line on their overarching goals, and who would be willing to work with them. Both options seemed good, but the finding out the name of the demon might be faster. A few demons owed me favors.

My eyes darted around the room looking for an attendant. A few people in plain linen ran back and forth carrying books for people working. I motioned with a finger.

A tall, slight boy, not quite a man ran over. "Can I you something mistress?"

"First, don't call me mistress." The memory brought back my years carrying book for the priestess at the convent. "I used to do the same job you're doing. Is there anywhere here sanctioned for demon summonings?"

His big round eyes got bigger. "Summoning, but not demons."

I chewed on my lip. There wouldn't be much threat to me to summon a demon, but if the area wasn't sanctified it cause others trouble. "Has the area been cleansed by high ranking member of a clergy?"

"I don't know. But, I could ask our priest of sun to do it. Do you think that would help you?" His young voice broke a touch.

In a swept of my arm, I gathered up the tomes, and hopped of the stool. "Yes, that should be sufficient." I waved my hand out.

With a jump he took off, weaving past the tables to the hallway. I followed as we made our way down the middle hallway to series of smaller offices. He knocked on one the doors. An older man wearing a pale gold robe with sun appliques cross it opened it. "Yes?"

"This person," He motioned back to me, "needs you to sanctify a summoning circle."

The priest looked at me with a calm unmoved expression, "Whatever for?"

"I need to summon a demon, and it may not be threat to me, but I worry for the rest of the people here." Most people didn't realize those only one step removed from a demon couldn't be affected by demon magic against their will. Of course, it only meant demons would play more complex tricks to gain someone's willing compliance.

The priest nodded as if he knew. "Sure, it is no trouble. You may go." He spoke to the boy. The boy bowed his head, and shuffled away.

"Lead the way." I didn't want to answer any questions about the demon summoning. I hoped if I forced the issue he wouldn't ask.

He turned and headed back toward the four large rooms. "Why are you in need of a demon?"

I repressed the sigh. "I need to ask him questions about a spell I found. The spell is from a cult, I want to know who they are bargaining with. I'm not asking him for any material return or anything that dangerous."

The priest didn't respond. Either it didn't concern him, or he had nothing to add. We took a turn to a room full of summoning circles. He stood in the middle of the room. His voice intoned deeply. "By the Power of the Sun, I protect this place with Light of the Glorious Sun!" The holy magic spread outward, tugging against my demonic nature before moving on. A sense of peace pervaded the room. Priest nodded at me and ambled out.

I went over the spell component table and grabbed a few materials to prevent the demon from being too tricky or escaping. The holy aura would make it difficult, but why take a risk I could avoid. I spread gold shavings, and fresh rosemary around the circle. I stood still and raced down to core my mind. In demonic I cast my thoughts outward. **"Rikritar, I summon thee. Rikritar, I summon thee. I bound thee by the favor given, and favor returned. You must bow before my demands. Rikritar, I summon thee."**

And explosion of fire, and light appeared in the circle. A scream of high pitch shattering portion boomed. "Aslair Vrail, I'll eat your soul." He stood in his tall, lithe red glory covered in spikes, and golden eyes blazing in defiance. A Fiend, this particular one is of great pride and folly. A powerful demon who, unfortunately for him, owed me many favors.

"Hello old friend, how has Silt been treating you?" Never let a demon ever think he has the upper hand in anything. Even if I had been afraid of him, I'd never admit.

He spit at me. It hit the containment spell and sizzled. "Whore daughter, what do you want of me?"

I lowered my head, and looked up at him through my lashes. "Perhaps, I missed you. Sometimes I want the company of my own kin." Fiends thought themselves much higher the race of Seducers. An extreme insult calculated to piss him off.

A rant in demonic filled the air. A tail appeared as he thrashed it about in his cage. A few minutes of ranting until he stopped to glower at me. "You are not going to release me. I hate this plane. You keep me here against my will. Tell me what you desire so I can leave."

I waited. Rikritar did hate it here. I saved him from being indentured to a wizard at the beginning of my free adventuring life. Not to benefit the demon mind you, but because he was causing a great deal of havoc. However, he had to offer me a great deal to let him go back home. "I only need some questions answered. Surely, it is not too much trouble. If it is, I'll have to use your true name."

He hissed. "You swore to never use it out loud. I could not tolerate for another one of your filthy kind to use it. I could not stand it."

"Who said I would use it out loud? I am more than capable of using demonspeech, as you well know." Rikritar originally thought I was a demon by the power of that voice. Every time I reminded him of it he squirmed, and became a bit more cooperative.

He slumped, and sat on the ground. "Ask your pointless, mindless drivel already."

"There is a cult, a few days ride from here. They are worshipping a demon. The

reference to the demon in their books is one I haven't heard before. 'Blood spattered demon of nightmares'?

He shrugged. "I have never heard of a demon referring to himself as such. Or any rumors of one."

"Are you certain?" I tapped my thigh showing my impatience.

"Never," He lifted his head a bit, "In my name, never".

An expected turn of events, however I had more questions to ask. "Is there any demon, or demon lord who is interested in mind control or some form of mind manipulation."

"A few," His sounded a bit terse. "Are you going to keep fishing, or is this going somewhere?"

I stepped away, and got a drink of water. From the outside the room I could see him blowing flames at the seal, to no effect. It did manage to terrify a few of the other summoners in the area. I walked back. "Of course I am going somewhere. You should know better to think I would waste my own time." I set down the loaned books and flipped to the page with spell. "Do you recognize anything here?"

He peered at the page for several minutes. He snorted, "Crasino."

"Is that his true name?" I doubted it, but it didn't hurt to ask.

He snarled before moving away from me. "No, you idiot. He's a minor demon lord of lies, and nightmares. Trivial in the extreme. Why anyone would bother worshipping a dropping like him is beyond me."

I smiled. "I'll let them know. Maybe they'll start worshipping you instead. You are clearly worthy of such admiration."

"Are you going to let me go for now?" He snapped. He didn't enjoy being mocked.

"Tell me about Crasino."

"He got some notoriety for waging a war on plane of fire a few hundred centuries back.

He gained enough followers to become a very minor lord. His vain, arrogant, and over estimates his own power often. Most of the higher demons won't associate with him."

There are two different kinds of demons. Lower demons were the four races that weren't as prevalent or strong as other half of their race. Crasino, by Rikritar affection for him, must been from one the other rankings. "Where did he spawn at?"

"Lower demon," He spoke in a low whisper.

They higher demons didn't like to think anything of value could ever come out of the lowest rank. "I see. Well, that is enough torture for one day. I might summon you again on this topic. I'd suggest you look into it, so maybe this time you won't have to stay as long."

"I don't take orders from you." His teeth gnashed together.

"I dismiss thee Rikritar. I dismiss the Rikritar. I still bind you to my will. You shall be summoned if I should need of you again. Find out about Crasino. I dismiss thee Rikritar." The demonspeech cast out, as he melted away returning to the plane of silt.

I got some good information there. But, now I had a few days of rummage through tomes for information. I turned to get to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning air tickled my nose as I wrapped my dense cape around me. I detested early mornings. Mornings are for sleeping. Aslair sunny and bright mood caused me to frown

as we rode out of town. Even though she looked stunning in the skin tight leather affair she wore, I could not enjoy it. At least soon we'd be at Demonari camp soon. The smell of old blood was already lingering in the air.

I found it odd that blood sacrifices were still legal in the Northern Kingdoms. From my mother I learned in the kingdoms it was either illegal or only allowed on animals. I suppose it a sign of my general apathy I never wondered until now. The heavy wood doors loomed closer, and I waved Aslair over. "Any last words before we go in?"

She seemed to tilt her head in thought. "No. I know all I can know now. We are supposed to be sharing a quarter correct?"

I nodded. I didn't feel up to talking.

"I'll proof the room from trouble. As long as we have time to talk in the evening we can keep each other updated." A cool competence pervaded her. My confidence at having her as a partner rose.

One thing did trouble me however. "Won't they be able to tell you've 'proofed' the room?" I wasn't certain of what proofing was but it did make me nervous.

She smiled at me, her eyes lit up in amusement. "Why don't you leave the magic to me, and I'll leave the seducing to you."

I gave a bit of a growl at her before settling back on Leopard and continuing onward. Normally, it might have entertained me. Today I didn't have coffee and I didn't get to sleep in. "I have other skills."

She laughed as the doors to the Demonari swung wide to let us in. That was a serious deficit in defensibility of the structure. Sweetness must have smelled fresh feed and shot

past Leopard into the muddy yard.

Several cloaked figures walked out bowing in front of us. One figure stood out, he wore black leather with chain mail, but no weapons, unlike everyone else no hood. "Identify yourself." His voice was deep, and seemed to slither over me. Immediately, I felt trapped in my own skin.

He let us in without knowing, curious. A shift and I dismounted before holding my gloved hand. He stared at it. "I am Carthin Travin." I try to avoid using my last name. Anyone with any knowledge would link me to Rigmon too easily. "The lovely lady there is my associate and we are here from the Ethereal, but do you understand the arrangement?"

"Walk with me." He turned taking slow ponderous steps through the mud.

Aslair managed to not fall into the mud as she dismounted, an accomplishment. We hurried after him.

A low slung stone archway led into a poorly lit stone walkway. The urge to roll my eyes nearly overwhelmed me. If screaming, chained men hanging from rusty manacles appeared, I'd have to laugh. It opened to a large room with a cheery fireplace at one end, and a bar on this one. I eyed the people in black robes at the various tables. None of them seemed aggressive.

The man in chain mail broke in his low pitched voice. "I wanted you to put through a test of loyalty."

"I have plenty of loyalty." I bowed my head, "To Ethereal and myself."

I sensed him shifting position. "And you?" He asked Aslair.

"I'm sorry am I here for a job, or be question about my motives?" The surly arrogance

took me by surprise. I caught myself before I jerked my head up.

The man cleared his throat. "You dare speak to me like that, demonborn?" His voice snapped in irritation as flame flickered in his dark, fathomlessly eyes. Another tingle went up my spine, what it was with this man that made me so unsettled.

"You think you can speak to me anyway you want? I am a demonborn, with thick, rich, and pure demon blood." The purr she put into it did make me tilt my head. Her tail wrapped the man's leg as she leaned in her tongue nearly touching his face.

A burst of power, unwound her tail sending it whipping back. "Don't play your games with me, Seducer. Powerful or not, I do not play." He stepped forward his eyes riveted on Aslair's neck. "Understood?"

She tossed her hair back. "No, and who are you to demand anything from?" Her tail waved in lazy loops behind her. There was an amused little grin on her face.

He stayed close to her. "I am Tobias, I'm the healer devoted to my god, and master." With a lazy swipe a line of fire traced across Aslair's neck. To my shock it didn't seem to have an effect. "At least you did not lie. The demon blood in you is very pure." He snapped his fingers as a younger boy in black shirt and pants led us down another typical hallway, and opened one of the many identical doors. The room quite lush with two decent sized beds, and two nice dressers. The boy waited to we both stepped in before fleeing.

"Quite a show," Aslair acting was pretty spectacular almost as good as mine.

She flipped hair behind her ears. "That is the silt-healer. He is full of darkness, and the blood of the innocent, he reeks of it." She pulled out a scrap of cloth and rubbed her nose with it.

I sprawled out on the bed. Since Aslair had removed the need to bring in my bags I considered taking a nap. "So, why did you decide to play up your demon attributes?"

"Demon cult. They have been drinking demon blood based on what I gathered from my research. Most of them would love to drink my blood I'm sure." She went over to the washing basin and cleaned her hands and face. "They smell wrong, can't you smell it."

I snuggled in the warm covers. "My senses aren't that acute. Not enough angel blood. They all smell like blood, old blood. You are, probably, smelling corruption, Isha and my father can smell it." It made keeping bad apples out of Al'tar'ia military easy.

"I'm already regretting this job." She flopped onto the bed. From the angle I got a good long at her low cut shirt. I didn't react to the complaint. It was a simple airing of grievances.

My eyes felt tired, but I knew I couldn't nap. "I'm not feeling too excited about it either myself. These people are making me a bit nervous." The fact they attempted to intimidate us did not bode well. Generally, people leave mercenaries alone.

"How do you want to play this?" Her round beautiful red eyes seemed filled with an emotion I couldn't place.

I stretched forcing myself to sit up. "Play what?"

"Are you subservient to me? Are we friends? Rivals?" Her voice raised a bit, her finger clenching into the bed.

"Oh." I hadn't thought about it. "I think we should remain fluid. If you think you can manage." A bit of challenge added my words.

She gave a large obvious blink at me. "I can manage."

One could only hope.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Even in my head I strive for politeness, however I'd had have to say Carthin looked like death warmed over. His skin, which generally seemed to glow, pretty much had zero luster, and his whole appearance seemed duller. "Are you alright?"

He shrugged. I fought the urge to grind my teeth together. He'd been this uncommunicative this whole morning.

"I need to cast the proofing spell. Can you watch over me and the room while I do it?" There wasn't anything specific for him to do, but I couldn't be interrupted.

A brow lifted as he blinked at him. "Okay, I can manage lying around the room. Should I leave and keep them distracted or something?"

I shook my head. "Just be quiet and don't leave. And if anyone comes in, make sure they don't talk, bother, or touch me."

He rolled his golden orbs and put his back against the wall watching the door.

With it settled I crossed my legs sinking into my own mind. I crawled to the center of my being breathing in and out. I pulled at strands from my own mind. I left alone the jagged pieces filled with emotional damage. I opened my inner vision to spot Carthin's aura. It glowed with sensual energy, though waning a bit. As I yanked a few stray strands I realized why. He wasn't feeding himself. Food sure, but not the inner need all planeborn craved. Whatever it was, he had pushed itself and ignored it. Still, I wove him into the spell.

As I wove I could feel other forces trying to intrude on my work. Demonic energy shot little bits of energy at me in an attempt to distract me. There were suffering souls of people who died wailing. They ran at my aura. All of them could sense the magic I was letting off. I knew they would keep at it until I was so distracted my spell failed.

I grinned on the inside. I'll give them a real show. I linked myself to the Silt, a small strand. I used to make a cage around me. Barbed metal appeared around me crackling with pulsing red energy. The ghosts fled, the lingering demonic energies dispersed.

The spell continued to build. I sensed a tingling. My link attracted something much more powerful. Fear pounded away at my spell, but I pushed it away. A demon crawled up the link. The spell last few strands finished. A bit of elation hit me as I realized I finished before the demon got to me. That was before I realized the cage wouldn't dispel. "Flame and Ice."

The demon manifested before me. He was stunning. Flowing black locks covered his naked form. Deep red eyes glowing with an inner fire swept over me. "It is so nice to finally meet you, Aslair."

My heart crawled in my throat. The seductive curl in that voice had no effect on me. It did tell me what he was. "You're a succubus."

He smirked and bowed in acknowledgement. "Not any succubus. I'm an uncle, you might say. I took your father's place after he thrown out of Silt. Duikian Golim, you may have my true name. I come baring an offer."

I banged my hand against the cage. "Excuse me if I don't take your offer in the best light." And, he wasn't in any kind of circle of protection either. He could lie if he wished. He

could lie about his true name as easily as human.

"I knew you wouldn't answer my summons willing. I knew where you were going after you summoned that demon at the Ethereal base." He licked his lips showing off his fanged teeth. "I won't let you go until you agree to hear the offer, my little niece."

"Don't you call me that, ever!" The volume shocked even me, I screamed with weight of my entire soul.

A frown crossed his perfect face, "As you wish. Do you agree, little demonling?"

There wasn't a chance I could get free of the stupid cage I built myself. There wasn't a word to express my annoyance at trapping myself with my own magic. "I agree to listen, but I agree to nothing else."

"Thank you, I appreciate your honesty." It sounded sincere, but he was a demon of seduction. "You wish you were not a demonborn anymore. I came to offer to take the demon out of you. Before you ask we will leave your magic, and any of your other skills."

My nostrils flared everything about this offer reeked, "And the price?"

He waved his hand as if it didn't really matter. "Is it not enough we take back our energy to its home plane? It is ours, we didn't give it away. Your father did so foolishly."

"The price?" Demons are never generous. And considering they are other demonborn I don't think they worried that much about their energy either.

He smiled brushing aside his long hair from his face. "You are a clever thing. When you find your father you must reveal his location, any magic he has, and any protections he may have."

Alarm blazed across my mind. Not because that is what they wanted. It made a

certain amount of sense. What worried me was the fact they knew I would meet my father. He must have a guarantee. I smothered my concern with a laugh. "Do you think I betray my blood, so you could take my power? You must have very little regard for my level of intelligence or loyalty."

He tsked. "Your father betrayed his blood. He killed his own kin. And then, he would not fulfill his repentance either. I thought perhaps the disloyalty might have stayed in the blood. It happens with planeborn. What your parent is tends to define you more so than other children. Besides what do you owe him? You abandoned you, your mother?"

"He loved her." I could feel the warmth of that love every time I read his letter to her. "And, you only want him to bolster a weakening position. The most powerful one of you betrayed the family, and left Silt." I slammed my hands against the cage. "I listened to your worthless deal, and now let me go."

He snarled scales springing across his skin. "Fine, the offer still stands demonling. If you change your mind, call my true name and we'll hammer out the details."

A tearing feeling as my soul was sent flying back into my body. I bit hard on my tongue to keep from screaming in agony. Carthin's warm arms were wrapped around me. "Water," I managed after a moment.

The warmth left and a cool glass appeared in my hand. I gulped the whole thing down in a few seconds. "Thank you, I needed it."

"Al'tar'ia's foot, what did you do to yourself?" Intensity filled his eyes.

I leaned back wiping sweat off my face. "I made a really stupid mistake. I got too cocky, and as result I got my ass kicked thoroughly." I smiled. "I'll recover. I got into a fight

with a demon is all."

Carthin flopped back down his bed. "Oh, a demon is that all. Here I thought it might be something serious." He made a face at me. "If it was this dangerous perhaps we could have lived without it."

I laughed I realized it was a tad hysterical. I could see Carthin's concern ratchet it up. I calmed myself. "The spell wasn't dangerous. There is a lot of latent energy here, it was distracting. To build a better barrier I connected my mind to Silt. It was small, so I didn't think anyone would notice. I'm very unpopular in Silt. They found me, and exploited it."

Carthin rubbed his temples. "Well, that was stupid."

"Yep," I slipped off the bed. A knock at the door interrupted my next few words.

A graceful slide as Carthin opened it. "What?"

"The master wants you to look at something. Come with me." The black robed man stood impassively.

We grabbed our gear, and we followed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As I sat waiting on Aslair spell I realized I needed some attention, or affection. I didn't have enough my expensive things to stave off the craving, the need. I grumbled under my breath. I'll admit, but only to myself, I wasn't always picky about women I found, but insane cultist was a little low for me. The forced myself to stay alert. The hallway was predictably ominous - Dark wood, with a few sputtering lights, and a heavy stone under foot. He stopped

in front of an iron bound door. He swung it inward. "The master waits."

I let Aslair go first. She swept in head held up in a contemptuous line. I make sure I didn't smirk at the image. The room had an altar stained red, sweeping frescos of torture, and benches everywhere but a narrow walkway up to the altar and around it. A tall man tattooed in red demonic runes wearing a heavy robe without a hood stood behind the altar. "Carthin, Aslair welcome to our chapel. I'm glad the Ethereal finally decided to accept our contract. I've needed loyal people devoted to the pursuit of money for a while."

Aslair sniffed. "Why did you want to see us? We barely have gotten settled in."

A narrow little smile as he leered at her bit. I think her attractiveness had little to do with it. If she was right and they drank demon blood she'd been tempting. "Yes, I realize. I wanted to show your duties, and meet you. You'll be working closely with me opposed to the rest of the temple. Take a walk with me."

He headed out the back door. This hallway was mostly dirt with a few rocks packing it down. The smell of death, blood, and sorrow filled the air. Before we reached I knew where we were going, the slave pens. The door swung open as pits with metal grated covers filled the room. I could feel the 'master's' beady little eyes all over us. "I cannot trust my people to watch them anymore. They tend to become overzealous."

"Frankly, it's disgusting." Aslair had a piece of cloth up to her nose. "Is there some reason you have to keep your sacrifices in such a pitiful state?" Her lip twisted it up.

The master nodded. "Yes, of course. Our lord enjoys sacrifices who have endured the most suffering possible before killed. He wants all hope extinguished. It's an added bonus since almost all of them are volunteers they are already damaged people. We keep our lord

well fed."

My stomach turned a little at the description. These people were already so desperate they were willing to be demon food, but also put themselves through this. I reminded myself not all of them willing, but it made me sicker to imagine. "What will be doing exactly?"

The man eyes stayed on Aslair. The master licked his lips as his eyes traced down her body. "Guard this room, take care of the prisoners, mainly I wish you to keep track of how many there are make sure we don't loss any. My people are neglecting them and letting them die." Darkness rippled over him making me take a step back. "If any of them let anymore die, report them to me. I'll take care of them. Simple duty, all and all."

Aslair snorted. "Is there anything else for us to do?" She managed to sound insulted.

"No," He reached out resting his hand on her arm. "There are other duties for you, but this will be the focus, at least until I find out who is letting my sacrifices die too early. Easy job for something as powerful, and wondrous as you."

Her eyes turned languid, her body shifted closer. "Compliment all you want, but you'll never have me."

"Give it time, demonborn." He responded with deep satisfaction.

"When do we start guarding?" I wanted to pull his gaze from Aslair.

To my relief he turned around to face me. "The night shift. Most of them are dying at night. I suspect it is either someone indulging their cravings, or someone whose soul is too soft. Either way report it."

"I request Aslair and I get some food in our quarters and we'll report for duty at nine."

I kept my tone level, but I wanted to rest badly. And Aslair probably needed to recover from

her little fight with the demon earlier.

He frowned at me. "You don't order me around, mercenary."

I loosened my most charming smile. And, I flashed my golden eyes. "I didn't mean it like that, friend. I'm just tired and hungry. I enjoyed some company a bit too much to last night. I'm sure you're familiar with it."

He smiled back. "Oh, alright I see." His gaze glanced over at Aslair. Her expression was same annoyed contempt as earlier. "There is no rush. I let them know our lord is watching. I gave a rousing ceremony there seems to be fewer deaths shortly afterward. Enjoy your evening."

We managed out way back to our rooms a platter of food sat on a portable table. All the food had roasted from the meat to the vegetables, with a pile of flat bread. Also two mugs filled with condensation dripping off them. And a huge jar with more drink rested between our beds. "Okay, that looks good."

"I wonder why they are feeding as so well." Aslair eyes narrowed.

I shrugged. "I should care, but I'm starving. And I could kill someone for a nap."

"You need to be more careful, Carthin. These people are evil, and not in a fun sense either."

I gave her a smug little smile. "You worry too much." I popped some seared delicious beef into my mouth. I took a deep drink of the mug. Sweet mead filled my mouth. "Ooooh, that's good."

Her lovely hands lifted and took a small sip. "You are right, it is fabulous."

As usual we are both starving. The food was basic, but good. I leaned back on the bed

considering napping until our shift. Aslair's honey voice broke into my thoughts. "Carthin, you aren't looking well."

I opened one eye looking at her. Her eyes poised in worry and concern. "I haven't fed my addiction in a while."

"I never feed my directly, don't you have indirect way to feed it?" Funny, she didn't bother to ask what it was.

"I do, but I don't have the ability to do it here. I should have thought about it, but I didn't."

Her red brows knitted as her full lips pursed in concern. "We can't have you sick, Carthin. The longer you go without it, the worse you'll get."

"There isn't any advisable way to resolve it right now." The idea of bedding some demon worshipper cultist made my stomach turn.

Her eyes turned as I could see thoughts turning in her head. "I'll probably regret asking, but what is your addiction?"

The desire to lie dug in hard. I almost blurted it out before I stopped myself. If we didn't figure it out, I'd be no shape to protect either me. I'm not going to die performing some stupid job for Rigmon Black. "I'm addicted to people respecting me, admiring one, thinking well of me. I can push it off by having expensive items, or pursuing devotion, romantic or otherwise. I don't want to get involved with these people. First of all it's risky, and second of all they are disgusting."

"Completely disgusting," She shuddered all over her eyes filled with anger. "Those people's pain, it actually hurt to look at them."

I had avoided looking at them so far. I knew if we went back I'd have to, I was not looking forward to it. "Well, I'm going to sleep. I should at least be rested for tonight."

"Carthin," Her voice snapped at me.

"What?" I started to feel irritated.

"There is easy solution this problem." Her arms tugged around her chest as she stared at the floor with obvious unease.

"Oh are you offering yourself to me? That's sweet of you." I clucked with my tongue.

"Jerk," She flowed upward looking as demonic as one could manage. "I meant a kiss. It should hold it off for a few days."

I swayed off the bed. I wrapped my arms her and pulled her into a passionate kiss. As I held her I felt her heat rise and her skin harden. I let her go. Immediately, I felt better. "I think you might have enjoyed that." I winked at her

She grumbled and sat down on the bed her eyes glowing. "Go to bed."

I curled up and did exactly what she suggested.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Carthin looked up much better when he awoke. I felt about the same. We made our way to our guard duty. As we scanned the area Carthin looked a bit queasy. The smell alone made me sick. The other two guards watched us wary. I smiled letting my teeth sharpened and lengthen. I decided to press my acting to a new level. I strode over. The pit beneath us filled with bloody people covered in their own waste, and half starved. The desire to kill both of them and free these people nearly overwhelmed. "Hello boys." I purred drawing on

my nature.

One licked his lips, but the other, probably the smart one, kept his narrowed eye gaze on me. "What do you want, demonborn?"

My fingers trailed down the dumber one's arm. "I'm letting you know, I'm watching. Your master is very concerned about your behavior. I hope you've been good."

"Silt off." The other guard said. "You think you're clever, you're cheap and obvious."

The welling of life magic washed over him. I grinned. "Well earthborn we can't all be natural, and pure. Some of us have a role to play." The guys jaw swung open, I sauntered away.

Carthin kneeled and observed several cages. His expression was neutral. I wondered how he felt. He didn't seem nearly as upset by the conditions as me. But, he was hard to read. He stood up and snapped his finger. "These two here are nearly dead. Are they scheduled for sacrifice soon?"

The earthborn guard walked over. He waved a carved piece of metal over them. "No, they aren't. Do you think they need medical care?"

Carthin rubbed his chin in thought his golden eyes standing out more in the gloom. "Possibly, mostly they need to be feed. I'm not a healer. I kill things. If you have one, they should look at them."

"We got one." The earthborn faced his fellow guard. "Hey, go get Tobias. We might have a problem." The normal guard trotted off.

"I'll check for more sick slaves." I strode into the middle my boots planted firmly against the ground. Before I could descend into my magic a voice interrupted me.

His lips brushed my ear. "Aslair, make sure you don't give yourself away. Use something other than plants or trees." His words came out brittle.

I tipped my head to look at him. He had a smug little smile, but fear filled his eyes. I found it even more shocking his posture was of casual ease. I smiled in return. I closed my eyes and sunk deep inside living torrent of magic inside. I pulled at the demonic strings and sent them spinning around me, I could sense them slithering through the dirt, and brushing over the slaves. Several more had been poisoned, a small amount of a long period. And, several had been given treatments to reduce their pain. I wondered at that. Since, they wanted to keep them alive, but not well, it didn't fit. I'd leave it out my report.

A throat clearing caused my eyes to open. The silt-healer had arrived. Those dark eyes of his burned as he swept the room with intense focus. The healing energy practically shimmered off him. Underneath it all loomed the presence of a demon god. "Tobias," I did my best to mask my fear and utter the phrase with pure arrogance.

He dipped his head, "Report."

"Several others have been poisoned with a mild poison for a while." I waved to the two pits with them.

His black eyes narrowed as he looked us with the guards. "They are not to be touched by anything, but misery. You will kneel before our lord tonight, and you will beg for his forgiveness." He spoke in such a calm tone I felt fear tingle every part of my body. He moved over to first pit, with a heave shoved off the first cover. A prayer on his lips as he entered the rank pit.

I glanced over my shoulder to look at the guards. Their faces were drained of color. I

suspected kneeling before their demon lord wasn't a simple matter of forgiveness. "Carthin, I think there is a spy here, is your father's?" I spoke in Angelic.

He whipped his head around. "Oh, why do you say that?" He responded in the same language. All angelborn know it. Same reason I knew Demonic.

"Someone is treating them with medicine. We need to find them, and try to get them on our side." I paused to give a little amused laugh flicking my eyes up and down his form. Best to keep up our appearances. "You don't think whoever it is your father's?"

He eyes dipped down for a bit before he stopped himself from frowning. "Maybe, he didn't mention it. He may be trying to keep the agent safe. Is there a way you could find them?"

"If I can get into the pit and connect with the slave. I can use that connection to find the person fairly easily." I responded my tail flicking behind me in graceful strokes.

He leaned back against the outer door frame with a pleased expression. I could see his eyes on the pit Tobin went into. "How come they haven't done it?"

I circled away covering the opposite side of the room. "They have to know what one is looking for first. We better stop talking in Angelic before someone notices."

Tobias crawled out of the first pit. "They were poisoned. Good job, demonborn. You aren't as stupid as you look."

I hissed I felt the hard ridges of scales rise up across my skin. My hair shifted into spiked strands. "A condition you're very familiar with I'm sure." I spit at his feet.

He only lifted the edges of lips up. I should call it a smile, but that word didn't work. "I want both you to escort the slaves to the Master's chamber in an hour." He motioned to

Carthin. "I want you to check the slaves with your magic. I want a full report on all their conditions." His words came out rapid dictation.

"That will be exhausting." I blanched. The idea of being that tired in this situation terrified me. My magic would be practically gone until I rested.

"You say that like I give a flame, demonborn. Do as you're ordered." He pointed out before lifting up the grate of the other pit. "Get to it. Angelborn make sure no one bothers her."

I grumbled. Then, I almost smacked myself when I realized he handed me gift. "You two lift that grate." I didn't want anyone to know I could lift a great deal more than my own weight.

They rushed over struggling to lift it. I made me wonder if Tobias was a planeborn or only gifted by a demon. With a frown I climbed down into the pit. The stench caused my nose to seize in pain. I summoned a parchment and a quill with ink to hover beside me. I stared at the smeared floor covered in all sorts of bodily fluids. Okay, I'm not going to sit down. I closed my eyes and sunk into myself. The smell faded. I dug into the body of each one and wrote down every detail of their condition except that they were free of pain. I opened my eye and three sheets of parchment floated beneath the quill. A quick check revealed it didn't use as much of my energy as I thought it would.

One of the quivering bodies shook and lifted its head. "Are you the Lord? Have you come to take me into your embrace, Lord? I want to feel your cruelty, your touch, give me anything, My Lord. I'll take it, anything." His words grew more hysterical as talked. He tried to lift himself up but he slide back down with a squish into the muck.

Another next to him laughed. "Crazy fool. That's a demonborn." The others seem to be waking up. I wanted to question them about who helped them. But, who knows which ones were unwilling. I didn't dare risk it.

I used the ladder and climbed up. "Put the grate back down." I looked over myself. A groan escaped my throat, I was filthy. "Is there water around here?"

"No, there's not. Sides don't you have to go down in the other cages." Earthborn had grown a definite dislike of me. Not that I cared what the sick little bastard thought.

I frowned as I waited for them to open the next grate. "Where's Tobias?"

"Gone, he seems quite unhappy about the poison. I suspect it makes them lesser sacrifices." Carthin broke in from the door. "Also he informed me we are not allowed to speak Angelic in public areas. It may upset people." I gave him a mock pout. Carthin licked his lips in response.

The next pit wasn't nearly as gross. There was even a chamber pot, crude but effective. I stared around surprised at the contrast. The slaves were more aware as well. "Hey, look gentlemen they sent us a final good bye."

"You wouldn't enjoy it." I replied absently summoning my writing materials.

The man chuckled looking at his mates as they laughed. "We aren't poor excuses for sacrifices, so I doubt that's why your here. We are going to be hanged. The nasty little sadist who runs this outfit bought us. They don't much care what you're going to do with murderers."

I shrugged. I wasn't much interested in murderers either. "If you're a Seducer don't you feed off people?" A quieter, desperate face asked from the gloom. A touch of hope hung

on his words.

"Idiot, she's a demonborn. You aren't going to get out of this sacrifice so easy." They laughed again.

Pity struck my heart. They didn't even care if they died anymore. His only hope was to die in a less horrible way. Still, they were murderers. I swung my tail back and forth.

"Quiet. You're interrupting my work."

It didn't take nearly as long they were barely sick. Mostly underfed, and deprived of light, and movement. I climbed out took a breath of slightly better air before descending to the next set of people. The pit was as disgusting as the first one. However, the slaves were unconscious and I could sense the poison had been cleansed. I ended up with several more papers cataloging their condition. I found the next pit to about the same.

As I climbed out Carthin stood next beside two slaves, "Time to escort them. Aslair and I will take them. Is there any place she can get cleaned up?"

"Nope, there's a big communal bathing room, but you shouldn't stop there with prisoners." Earthborn seemed too amused at my expense. I hope he tripped on his sword.

I had energy left, and I refused to wander the halls in this condition. A wind and water summoned twisted and twirled around me, it spun away and flew into one of the pits returning the filth to them. I stood clean, though still a bit smelly. "Not perfect, but it will do. Let's go, Carthin."

He lifted a dark brow at them as we stepped out. The slaves hands were tied, but I could tell it wasn't needed. Both the skinny, dirty bodies were keyed up excitement. The large grins and big eyes bothered more than a bit. "The guards told me where to go. Follow

behind them."

I felt a touch tried with my flashy display, but I kept alert. Being in this Silt bedamned place made me nervous. The door made of onyx. Carthin pulled a silken, black rope with one smooth tug. The door opened halfway filling the air with bright crimson light and incense.

The dark robed Master clapped his hands together. "Thank you, you are right on time. I also wanted to let you know you are not allowed to attend any our rites. If you wish to, when I can trust you, let me know." His eyes floated up to me. Don't throw up, I repeated internally over and over.

"Where's the baths?" Carthin decided to not to comment.

He nodded. "Go to the main hall and take the far left room. You can pick your food from the bar if you're hungry, if not we'll bring it to your room in the morning. The rest of your night is free." The slaves tumbled in and then the door shut.

Carthin let go of a breath. "I suppose you want to bath."

"Oh, like you don't. Don't be cute." I wanted to frown at myself. I knew he was messing with me, but I couldn't seem to avoid walking into it.

He gave me a round eyed look of utter innocent. "Not my fault I'm utterly adorable." Then, he laughed wrapping his arm around my shoulder guiding me back to main hall.

As we passed through a shiver ran up and down my spine. I almost jerked my head around to figure out what startled me. Carthin's grip prevented me from doing so. "Don't. You're supposed to be used to people staring at you, remember." He spoke quieter than a whisper.

We made it to the bath room. It was a series of stalls with showers. At least they were

curtained off. I saw towels, no robes. "I'll summon clothes. Do you care what?"

He gave a shake. "Not really, I can't wait to get clean. Though, I don't think anything will ever get rid of the smell." I had to agree. It seems to linger everywhere. This place itself was foul. *Carthin shifted uncomfortably. "You should take the stall furthest from the door."

I blinked at him a bit stunned, then a let out a long chuckle. "I'm not a wilting flower. You don't need to protect me."

He rolled his golden orbs in the most boyish, attractive way. "You're not wilting, that is a guarantee. I don't trust them. I can see it all over them, Aslair. I think they'd be willing to insult the entire Ethereal for a taste." He swallowed hard. "We made a mistake sending you here."

For a moment, I worried. Since I met him he failed to be serious about anything. "You may be right. I'm here already. It worked. They barely pay you any attention." I patted him reassuring on the arm. "I'll use the last stall. Don't worry about it."

His eyes watched me until I stepped into the stall. I stripped off my gear. I stuffed into the waterproof sack hanging from the wall. And the fresh, hot water was exactly what I needed. I took a far longer one than I intended pulled a towel from behind the curtain. I dried myself and got redressed.

Carthin stood at the end of the stalls stance loose, with his long sword resting in his hand. He looked bored, and detached. But, I could see a subtle tension running between his shoulders. My heavy tread alerted him right away. Yet, he didn't around. "Took you long enough. I'm starved."

"I thought you wanted me to indulge in my more feminine nature." I managed to keep a straight face as I reached him.

A nudge of his shoulder and he bounced off the wall. He flipped me a grin. "Yeah, you know I meant different. My stomach is trying to eat itself, I'm serious, Aslair. I'm dying." He wilted pressing his fist against his belly.

"For the Love of Vita," I sighed and we trotted back to the main hall.

Carthin strode up the counter and I followed. He put in an order so fast I couldn't catch what we were getting. He plunked down onto a stool. He twirled around on it flashing a smoldering smile at a few of the ladies present. They ignored him.

I took a seat and kept a casual glare. I had to admit there was an inordinate amount of interest in me. Most of the men's eyes stayed with me no matter what they were doing. Some the women's followed me as well. For the first time I thought it would be great to be a shape shifter.

"Aslair got the food." Carthin held a huge jug, and basket. I smiled and went back to our room in silence.

The food was excellent as before. It didn't take us long to finish off our meal. "I haven't felt the presence of whoever has been taking care of the slaves. I might need to wander the halls and figure out who it is."

"Not a good idea. If they catch you alone they will drain you of blood." His golden eyes were whirling with the intensity.

I frowned. I did things on my own. The working with another person still didn't fit right. But, Carthin seemed pretty insistent. "Well, someone is going to have to do it. And,

both of us doing it would be extremely suspicious."

"I should it then. Can't you cast some kind of spell that would allow me to find the person?" He waved his hand around a bit as he spoke.

I didn't respond. Instead I swept my mind through the possibilities. Magic wasn't a straight road to any answer. Instead it is a blending of concepts and designs. "I'll have to connect you to Vita. Otherwise the spell won't have a strong enough anchor to hold. Your raw planeborn power isn't refined enough."

His eyes whirled again, much like a golden river rushing around his pupil. "Is there no other way?"

"There might be. I can't think of one. I suppose I could start researching, and looking into alternatives, if you like."

His shoulders slumped. "Do it."

I wondered again what his negative reaction to Vita was. Some planeborn couldn't go to their home planes, but I doubt Carthin would even want to. I shook of those thoughts and focused. I plunked the different elements, blending them together before sending them flowing over Carthin. The spell held by my mind as I pulled at his connection to Vita. Strangely enough, it seemed to be much stronger than his heritage would suggest. A twist as I meshed it to the rest of the casting. With a few adjustments it seemed sturdy. I tug on it with magic and assured myself it was set. Then, I deepened the spell so it would not be easily noticeable.

"I'm going to go exploring then." He flashed me a cocky smile. It was a bit strained. "Don't worry if I come back."

I rolled my eyes, "As if I would."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I kept the smile on my face as I stepped outside. Inside me could feel the light, and joy of Vita touching every part of me. I took a second to relax. The feeling remained, but I swaggered down the hall making my way back to the main hall. With Aslair's presence gone several more people seemed to notice me. I smiled a languid smile and tapped the bar with my knuckle.

The bar tender turned toward me. "You'll have to pay if you want more."

A dropped a coin on the counter, "More of that luscious mead."

He grunted, filled the mug, and set it before me. I took a deep drink hoping it will settle my nerves. I leaned back looking disinterested and lovely at the same time. I didn't want chat up any of them. It would best if they came up to me.

A woman in loose robes with dark hair and eyes stepped up to me. "Where's your friend, planeborn?"

"Resting," I teased my gaze sweeping over her. I forced my eyes to whirl with interest. I made flame-sure I didn't reveal the fact she was very 'eh' to me.

Pleased with my little inspection she took the stool next to me. "You are quite the specimen aren't you? Why don't you tell me about the demonborn?"

My expression didn't alter as I groaned internally. What were they so fascinated about with Aslair? It went beyond her being beautiful, and powerful. "She's a seducer, not much to say." My voice growing cold, as I flicked my eyes away with irritation.

Her expression quivered. "I don't mean to offend you. She's been on the mind of our master." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "We need to keep track of what our master is interested in."

"I don't like playing second to an easy slut." I snapped. I needed to find the spy, ally, idiot, and she wasn't it.

Her eyes widened, as she slipped off the stool. "I thought..." She bit her lip. "Never mind," she fled.

A few of the cultist looked upset. One figure moved toward me, and I braced myself against the bar. I would fight if I had to, but I refused to lose. As he got close a humming reached my ears. He's the one, I realized. I kept myself firm. Without a word he went for my arm. I glided off the stool and out of his grasp. "Hold still." His voice was thready.

"Sorry, friend, but I like the ladies." I spoke loud enough to spark the laughter of several other people.

The man gave me an odd look. I could see he was trying to figure what I was doing.

I flicked my eyes the other cultist before giving him a slight nod. "I don't like it rough, either." I paused to bounce my finger on my jawline. "Well, maybe under the right circumstances." Come on, idiot, follow the trail.

He took a step forward and took a swing. I blocked the blow with ease. However, his other fist came up slapping me hard on the side of the head. I rolled with it pretending it was a

punch careening into the bar. I grunted with the hit. "Watch your mouth."

"Only if you promise to stop first," I did a half hop back from his grasping hands. I pretended to get tangled up on the bar stool.

He wrapped his huge hands around me. "I'll show you." The words were loud enough to hurt my ears. In mind his words were as strong. *"Punch me. I'll meet you in your home in an hour."*

A twist of my shoulders I was free, and I punched him hard enough to send him landing with a thud. "Well, thank you, sir, I think I learned my lesson." I bowed and headed back the room.

I entered with Aslair curled up with a few books. She lifted her head. "Couldn't find him?"

"I found him, he'll be here soon." I checked my fist for bruises or blood. A faint bruise close the knuckles, but it will heal soon enough.

Aslair sat up. "Why do you seem so nervous?" Damn, that woman saw too much.

"He trusted me real quick, makes me think the worst." I tried to calm myself. "Can you take this spell off now?"

Her fingers waved and I felt the pressure fade. Her fingers tapped a quick pattern onto the books. "It makes more sense for him to be a spy working for The Wave." The Wave was the official name for religion of Al'tar'ia.

I nodded. The silence stretched on for a while. I didn't feel like talking, and it never seemed to occur to Aslair in any case. My thoughts wandered back to Beth. I remember the good times when we got stuck in a cave while training some still green horses. Isha, Beth, and

I spent the whole night laughing, and eating our snacks. The horses got into the apples and were more than happy. A grumble deep my throat. I glanced at Aslair to make sure she wasn't paying any attention to me. It's why I wanted the cure. I wanted to be free of my addiction maybe then I could convince her I was worth the trouble.

The door opened and I jumped out blade ready. The spy threw back his hood as the door shut. "Sorry, I ran late. I acted out and damage some furniture, and then it followed a lecture. Anyway, Carthin Black what in Silt are you doing here?"

I hesitated to answer, because I didn't recognize him. But, he knew my real name so not much point. "Rigmon Black sent me." I snorted. "I wouldn't come for Al'tar'ia."

The man sat down the edge my bed. "And, I assume she's working for Rigmon as well?"

"Well, I'd be pretty stupid having this conversation in front of her, if she wasn't." I flopped back. I wonder if I knew him, but I couldn't place him.

"Your father and mother always spoke highly of your intelligence. I'm Pullus." He paused as if he was waiting for something.

The moment stretched on and none of us said anything. Aslair cleared her throat. "I haven't any idea who or what Pullus is. Perhaps, you can explain why you've been giving pain dulling medicine to the slaves kept here. Or, why you haven't reported to the Wave General, or why you didn't introduce yourself earlier."

He frowned in thought. I had to admit he had bland, uninteresting features. Good thing for a spy, I'd imagine. "Rigmon must have thought I died. I haven't reported in several weeks. They killed that last person they thought was spying. I know for a fact the man

wasn't, but I couldn't risk it. Only about half of the slaves here are willing, or allowed. I managed to gather evidence of it. I haven't been able to leave the compound to give it to Rigmon, so he can bring it to the proper authorities." He locked his gaze onto Aslair. "Also, I'm not sure you should be here."

I sent Aslair a look. She rolled her eyes at me. "I know, now. We weren't aware of it before. I can't imagine they'll let me leave so easily. Otherwise, I'd pack up your evidence and leave. Still," She paused as her fine fingers rubbed together. "I'm sure we can use their obsession against them."

Pullus pinched his lips together. "It is your life at risk. Do you as you wish."

"Oh, well now that I've acquired your permission I'll do that." Aslair hair started to stand on end. Her fingers clutched tighter around her book.

I suspected Pullus was about to insert his boot into his throat. "Would you say such a thing to Isha, Pullus, I can't imagine it." I winked at Aslair and put a twinkle into her eye.

Pullus thin brows mashed his eyes flat. "I would not. However, I know Isha a great deal more than I know some random demonborn."

"I don't know you either. I have no reason to trust you. I suggest you take your crude assertions and stuff them." Aslair's skin shimmering turning to harden red surface as her red eyes blazed.

I swallowed feeling a bit nervous. The last thing we need was for Aslair to lose her temper. "Calm down."

She hissed at me. "Don't tell me to calm down. I hate when people do that." Her eyes closed as she sucked in some air. The skin faded and her hair flattened. "Pullus how is

the information stored?"

His eyes flicked at me, as he swallowed. *Yeah, I bet you're nervous*, I thought with a bit of glee. "On some papers mostly it's a list of where to obtain the proof elsewhere."

"Is there a reason you haven't mentally sent it?" I cut in.

"All mind magic has been sealed in once you enter the compound, unless it's demonic in origin. I don't want demons roving around in my mind. Also, I haven't been allowed to send communications out. Perhaps, they let you send messages to the Ethereal." Even as Pullus said it, I knew he had little hope of it.

Aslair looked down and flipped through the book quickly. "I might have a way to store the information safely on my person." She lifted the book showing us a page.

A bunch of words written in language I couldn't understand. Mainly an illustration occupied the page. A naked man stooped over with another man writing onto his back, as blood ran down pooling on the floor. A few other words were scrawled underneath. On the margin a few notes written in Angelic, "This could be useful for storing information, or perhaps other uses make a note of it." The words were sharp, and perfectly set. I suspected it was Aslair's handwriting.

Pullus leaned into the page his eyes scanning it. "I'm not sure what that has to do with our problem."

"Simple, someone must write the information in my back in my blood as I speak the ritual. Once we leave here I can manifest in a physical form taking it off my body." She said as if it wasn't going to be painful, or difficult.

"Won't it appear as the written information, which someone might see at some point.

Especially with how much they keep an eye on you." The idea had merit. However, that would be a fatal flaw.

Aslair lips flicked up in an impish little grin. "I can make the words look like whatever I want once the ritual is over. A tattoo, a scar, whatever might fit our needs. Would you both be willing to do it? The faster you write it, the easier it will be for me to focus."

I looked at Pullus. He nodded. "I think that will work. When do you want to do it?"

"As soon as possible. I'm not sure how long I can be here before they try to keep me here, or drink my blood." Something sharpened my interest. Another concern lingered on her mind, one she didn't want to voice. She was so secretive. Not that I could complain since I was a liar.

"I'll return as soon I am able. I'm guessing after your next shift. Do your best to avoid Tobias." Pullus opened the door and ducked out.

A few moments after he left Aslair sighed. "I'm screwed then. Tobias already has me on his radar."

I nodded absently. Worry wormed itself in my brain. The mission was turning out to be pretty complicated. Great Rigmon Black may have overestimated my abilities. "We should try to rest who knows what the 'Master' will having us do tomorrow." I dropped down in my bunk and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A loud banging caused my eyes to pop open. I saw a flash as Aslair threw open the door. "What?"

I lifted my head to see a scrawny little man holding a basket of food. "Sorry, the master told me bring you food. He wanted to make sure you're well fed." His head bowed so loud it brushed the ground. The basket dropped from his fingers. He backed away. "Sorry to awoken you." After a few steps he fled.

A grumble in her throat as she swept up the basket. She slammed the door. "Silt bedamned ass. He knew we would be sleeping." She tossed the basket in the middle of the floor before flopping onto her bed.

I smiled. "Well, at least you are terrorizing staff, good way to keep your cover." With a groan I pushed myself up resting my feet carefully around the basket. "You realize his probably going to show up soon to insist we do something. Otherwise, he wouldn't send someone to wake us up. A power play, pure and simple."

"You're right." She glared at me, which looked impressive with the red eyes. "You being right in the morning is unacceptable." She flicked her hand her magic opening the basket. She summoned up what appeared to be a sandwich into her lap.

I held up my hands in a helpless gesture. "I can't help I tend to be accurate. A sign of good breeding I cannot erase." A quick lean over and I had a sandwich as well.

She snorted but ate her sandwich with her usual cram in the mouth style. I ate my

sandwich in much the same way. It wasn't nearly as good as yesterday's food.

I started to toss off my armor so I could change into some fresher clothes. I packed mostly simple loose clothes which my jerkin rested on comfortably.

"I never get used to you stripping randomly." A disgruntled voice came from behind me. I could hear Aslair changing as well. As much as I wanted to turn around I thought better of it. She already seemed cranky.

As I finished tightening my braces I turned to see Aslair casting some kind of spell on her bracers. She wore a different outfit today. The outfit was tight black fitting leather with enough space for her tail to poke out, and her arms exposed.

I whistled. "You look delicious."

The magic faded from her bracers as her eye lids slide upward. "I'm starting to regret on letting someone else pick my outfits. This isn't helping them not notice me."

"Unfortunately, I think it wouldn't have mattered."

Her head drooped. "I know. Carthin, if I don't make it out of here can you do me a favor."

I opened my mouth. She sent me a look that caused my teeth to clack shut.

"If I don't make it out of here," She let out a long breath. "I want you to see my mother and explain what happened. I have a will tied to my life force that will be delivered to her with a letter, but I want her to hear what happened in person. It is a lot to ask, but I worry her guilt would kill her."

Not even I could make a glib funny remark to that. "Will you tell my father the same?"

She gave me a very solemn dip of her head, "Of course."

A knock at the door broke up the terrible tension. I really didn't want to think about dying any more than I had to. I opened the door and the same dour fellow met us. "The master needs us I suppose?"

He nodded and headed down the hall. I rolled my eyes at Aslair putting a smile on her face. This time he took us to a small parlor, which I suspected was a part of Master's actually chambers. I rested in a large armchair while Aslair leaned up against the stone walls.

The Master strolled out wearing a loose shirt and pants. "I'm glad you aren't too upset with me waking you up early. I had special task for you."

I could feel Aslair's tension. I forced myself to relax into the armchair. "Oh, what's that?"

He walked up to Aslair standing very close to her. I locked my eyes onto hers. I mouthed, 'Keep calm'.

A look of contempt came over her features. He ran his fingers up arm before resting them on her shoulder. "I'll tell you what it is for a kiss."

She leaned in her eyes burning close to his. "Do seriously expect me to give you a gift, so you can tell us what you want us to do? Why don't you offer me something for your kiss?"

A dark chuckle slithered out of his throat. "What would you want for a kiss, little seducer?"

"An evening with one of your little disciples. I'll teach them what true terror is, and I want it tonight." Her warm laugh made me tingle. "Trust me. They'll never look at your god the same."

The master panted a bit as he rolled back on his heels. He seemed to be taking a

moment to collect his thoughts. "I agree I lose nothing. But I want a succubus kiss, not something you would give to anyone."

I wondered why in Silt she was accepting this deal. I did know better not to say anything.

Her hands snapped up around him as red mist surrounded them, her lips pressing into his. A flowing white mass seemed too pulled from him into her. She released him shoving him to the floor. "Was it good for you?"

"Oh yes," He pulled himself up. "Wish granted. I want you to escort some slaves in. Last time a similar shipment got away. It will be outside, don't attempt any mental communication it is blocked. Understood?"

"Easy enough," I pushed out of the chair. "I'm ready when you are." I shot a significant look at Aslair. Her eyes flickered with worry.

A shove of his large hand the door swung open. "Your escort will take you to your assignment."

For the most part I ignored the dour and predictable hallway and kept my focus on Aslair. Her skin looked whiter under the gray coloring than normal, and her body seemed tenser. I wish I could send mental thoughts at this point. I didn't dare speak Angelic. If Tobias heard about it, we'd be in serious trouble.

We approached to wide doors which our escort shoved open. I squinted against the bright light unable to get my bearings. After a vigorous round of blinking I was able to see. An unfamiliar wave of pity settled over me. There were children tied together in a line. They were, perhaps, all around ten years old. I shoved aside the memories I had at that age, the

year my mother died.

Aslair strong fingers pressed hard on my arm. I dipped my head once. Children aren't allowed to be enslaved or sacrificed. This is probably one of things Pullus found that was illegal. The urge to free them nearly overwhelmed me. I forced a casual frown on my face. "Children, really?"

Several guards surrounded them. One wearing a helm with a plume broke away. "I don't like it much either myself. I already agreed to this contract. The master probably sent you here, because last week I had to cut a man down for freeing them." His dark eyes filled with self-loathing. "I don't feel good about it either. There were all criminals or orphans, but still little ones. It doesn't seem right."

A swirl caught my attention as Tobias stepped out from, what I would guess was an invisibility spell. "Guard-Captain, I had hoped you wouldn't have any sympathetic leanings." His words felt like spiders against my skin. Isha told me silt healers were corruption given life, but I hadn't really believed her.

Guard-Captain eyes widened and I could see sweat bead around the edges of his helm. He turned to face Tobias. "I'm doing my duty, sir." He squared his shoulders. "Their kids you know, it doesn't seem right."

Tobias leaned forward a bit. "How do you think you were hired to work for the Demonari?"

"Well, you had some recruiters, pay was good, and I needed to feed the fam back home." The bright red plume seemed to wilt during this conversation. My eyes flicked to Aslair. She'd let got and was feigning disinterest by watching the rows of kids being lined up,

and sprayed down with a hose system. The magical spell on the hose glittered in the bright sunlight.

Tobias voice drew me back. "You think we hire anybody who might be qualified for the job? We find people as dark as us. It made it harder for them to resist the money, harder for them to leave once they're here. I could feel your corruption, and with some work I found it. You're secret little vice." A light flared in his eyes red and intense. My hand shifted to the hilt of my weapon.

"What are you talking about?" Guard-Captain shifted backwards. He'd already given himself away, the stutter in his voice, the backing away.

"Why is always pretty girl, not quite adults that you take? Why not younger ones? Or, older ones? It seems so oddly specific." With each sentence Tobias stepped forward, and the Guard Captain stepped back. "And, all the abusing and sex," Tobias clucked his tongue. "You'd think you wouldn't have much of a libido with all those kids of yours."

"Why are you asking me these things?" Guard-Captain shouted as finally held his ground.

Tobias paused and ran fingers across his jaw. "Simple. I want you to know, you pleas for these children fall on death ears. Everyone here is as repulsive as you. Don't try to talk anyone about the morality of what's going on here." Tobias slide one foot back and started to fade away. "My eyes are always watching."

The whole yard of guards went still. They'd probably been still since Tobias appeared. Guard Captain walked over to me. His skin looked clammy, and slick with sweat. "You go stand by the gate. Demonborn, why don't you cast some spells to prevent them from running

if they do get free." He kept his eyes downcast unwilling to look at her.

She stepped outside further and settled on a bench. "Give me a moment to cast it." Her eyes shut, and her fingers clasped together. A red mist pulsed around her as tendrils broke off gliding on the ground surrounding the children. Many of them let out cries and tried to run. All it did was pull the kids down on top of each other. I winced. The tendrils pulsed and tightened around the line then faded. The mist curled into her skin, and then her eyes opened. "Do you need any other spells cast?" Her calm demeanor didn't fool me for a second.

The captain glanced around a bit. "Can you make them stop panicking?"

She pursed her lips. "I'll have a spell or two." This time she planted her feet her hands extending out as blue streaks shot from her hands. Each streak broke into smaller ones until one hit every child. Immediately, they ceased to struggle and stood still. "Easy spell. Anything else?"

"No, I think that's good. Thanks, demonborn." The captain still wouldn't meet her eyes. He waved by the large gateway. "Go stand with him, and keep an eye on them."

She twisted her lip at him before taking a swaying walk to the opposite the gate. Her tail twitched back and forth as her eyes gazed over the children. Her expression didn't change, but I heard her voice in my head. **"Carthin, this whole thing disgusts me. We are not going to leave them here to be sacrificed are we? Not even you can be okay with that."** Her demonic voice rang in my mind.

I did my best to think so she could hear me. "Yeah, well, who would be? But, we can't do anything right now. It's more important we complete the mission."

Her arms crossed as the children approached. **"Sometimes, I cannot believe your father is Rigmon Black."** You and him both, Aslair I thought to myself.

The gate swung inward as I realized something. Most of the children were planeborn. "Aslair, was there anything about that spell dealing with the planeborn?"

Her gaze flicked over the children, and then her gaze turned inward. I managed to contain my worry enough not to pester her. For again, I did wish she was more communicative. Patience is a virtue I reminded myself as I waited.

"It could accelerate the rate in which they finish the spell. Still, I think they are too far away from completing it. To make sure I'll summon a demon and inquire more tonight."

The spade tail wrapped around her leg as her scanned the area.

Several minutes went by before I realized that was all she was going to say. The next few hours were grueling. I did my best to avoid looking at the kids directly. The misery surrounding them was agonizing. As the gate swung close I held back a sigh of relief.

The captain strode over. "Alright, you can head back to your room. I'm telling you to be on guard duty tonight at the pens."

Aslair nodded, and grabbed my arm. She pushed the iron door open and yanked me inside. We stood silent for several minutes letting our eyes adjust to the dark. Another tug as she marched me down the hall, and back to our room.

Once we inside with the door shut. "The Master said mental communication was blocked, but I was able to slide around the block." She blurted out.

Oh, he had said something about it. I never thought about it. "That's good though, it means we can talk when they think we can't."

She shook her head. "It means my demonic magic is not being blocked by theirs. This means that Crasino, the demon leading this little cult, is siphoning all the magic to himself directly. They aren't doing what they think they're doing."

I know nothing about magic. "Okay, what are they doing?"

"I don't know." She faced her eyes wide. "And, it terrifies me. I know what they aren't doing. They aren't channeling magic to mind control anyone. That magic has to stay on the plane you are going use it on. Their god is keeping them in the dark."

"Well, do you need research what they are doing then? You brought some tomes I know." I motioned at the four cases she brought of luggage. "Can you do that tonight while we tattoo the information on your back?"

She paused and tipped her head to side. "How did you figure out that's what I was going to do?"

"I can't imagine any other reason you'd want a disciple anywhere near you." I batted my eyes at her. "Especially, you have this tasty slice of manilessness right here."

She burst out with a laugh holding her sides. As restrained herself she winked at me. "I'm glad you aren't as stupid as you appear."

"Did you want to research now, or sleep?" We had about twelve hours until our shift nine. But, we still needed to tattoo her back, and talk shop with Pullus.

She chewed on her luscious lips. "I need sleep. Otherwise, I won't be able to cast the spell. It is very complicated. If I make mistake then it won't work. And the whole effort will be wasted."

"Bed it is. Want to curl up with me, I'm warm." I ran my hand back and forth across

my bed cover.

She rolled her eyes. "Go to sleep, you're starting to fantasize out loud."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I stretched waking up from a deep slumber. Carthin still curled up with his pillow his black locks resting over his eyes. He looked almost normal without his golden eyes. I summoned the only luggage that was filled with books instead of bricks onto the bed. I flipped it open. My sleep addled mind started to pull books up. "No, idiot cast a spell." I held my hands above the books. The white light shimmered over the book as I thought about the topics I needed to research. Four books emerged from the pile and landed on the bed.

The spell light turned yellow and the books opened and pages flipped at an accelerated rate. I told it mark and highlight what I needed, then let active nature of the spell go. I let out a sigh and started to read the yellow pages, and paragraphs. I summoned the quill and

paper again to write my notes as I thought them.

I took several notations before realized the spell had been too broad. I summoned it back and had it go after planar life energy used in the plane of Silt. The pagers whirled faster and faster until it pulled an old tome out of my bag and dropped it in front of me.

One side was the image of a demon, horned figure with grotesque visage, hovering above an altar covered in blood. Around him was nimbus in an array of colors. The whole page surrounded in glowing magical light. The language was old, and made it hard to follow. I flipped the book over. The title caused me to gasp, "Demonic Religious Myths". I cast a spell to modernize the language as I turned it over.

I read each line my alarm growing with each word. After I finished the page, and the bit that continued to the next page I sat back and felt bit gather at the bottom on my stomach. "Carthin, wake the Flame up."

Two slow blinks as he looked at me. "Is it time for the ritual?"

I shook my head. "I know what Crasino is trying to do."

He sat up rubbing his eyes. "Don't keep me in suspense."

I held back a smile. For some very perverse reason I enjoyed that Carthin wasn't a morning person. "He's trying to harvest energy of the living to cause him to ascend up the demonic ladder. He wants to be a true demonic god. In one of the four top ranks."

Carthin head jerked back and he stared at me blinking. "Are you messing with me?"

"If I were to start, this isn't what I'd start with." I kept my finger in the book as I showed it to him. "Right here. I don't know if what his trying to do will work. It's an extremely complicated spell, and it might be beyond the expertise of Crasino. It is what his

trying to do."

His fingers pulled the book out of my grasp. His eyes flicked down the page. "How close is he to finishing his spell?"

"I haven't a clue. The book isn't sure how much energy one would need. And, it isn't something where you'd be able to test, and then gather more if you didn't have enough. He'll probably end up killing a lot of people before his ready. In fact, he might have been using demonic energy from the war he fought in as his beginning source." I itched under my horn. "I'm not really sure devious he is."

Carthin eyes swirled in his sockets as they took on a slight glow. "This isn't good. The balance between Silt and Vita is very delicate. Another god would throw everything off."

That surprised me. I agreed that another god would not be good. And most likely would start some very nasty infighting among the planar races. It wasn't something I thought Carthin would care about at all. "You seem concerned." I attempted to keep my tone bland.

He lifted a black brow. "If a war breaks out between Vita and Silt my sister and father would both be fighting. As well as all the people I knew when I grew up." He twitched his lip. "And, I don't have any desire to see the world ripped apart either. So, what are we going to do?"

That was the question. There wasn't much we could do about a demi god trying to become a god directly. We were not heroes out of legend. "What we can do is shut down the cult. Let your father know about Crasino's plans. We can't let him sacrifice those kids. The power from them alone could push him to godhood."

Carthin grunted. He dropped back down on the bed. "Nothing is ever get in and then

get out is it?"

I didn't answer. It seemed to be a very rhetorical question. A loud banging at the door saved me. I jumped up and opened the door a crack. The Master was there. I opened it the rest of the way.

He stepped in a smile on his lips. "What disciple did you wish to punish?"

For a second I forgot what he was talking about. "Oh, the one named Pullus. He was very rude to my companion. He could use some much needed humility."

The Master gave a nod. "It will be done. Also, I've changed your assignment. You'll be watching over the children sacrifices. You are both planeborn. They seem to be sick and lacking something. I want to you make sure no one is screwing with them." He puckered his lips. "And, befriend them. They'll be more likely to speak to their own kind." He ran his fingers up my arm, then left.

"He makes me sick." I spat at the door. Then, I sat back on the bed. A few flicks of my fingers and I had a chalice and blade. I flipped my wrist upright making a fast cut down the vein. The pain burst across my skin in waves. A thrill rushed through my body. It begged me for me blood. As usual I ignored it. I held the chalice under my bleeding wrist. Flames licked up from the blood before it settled down. Inconvenient having blood that is always on fire.

"What are you doing?" Carthin sounded a bit alarmed. When I glanced up his eyes were huge.

I smiled. "Remember for the spell you need to write on my back in my own blood. Don't worry I won't die. And, I'll spell the chalice so the blood doesn't dry or coagulate." I

let the blood flow a bit longer before I sealed the wound. I set the chalice on the dresser.

The spell wrapped around in a green shining thread. It struck me as a bit amusing as I'd learn the spell to keep chicken broth warm and ready to go.

Pullus opened the door and walked in. He slammed it shut. He inclined his head.

"Very smooth, demonborn. I couldn't have done it better myself. You do well in playing into their expectations."

"Have the notes?" I didn't enjoy being called 'demonborn' instead of my name, but I let it go.

He patted his breast pocket. "Do you have some of your blood?"

"Of course, Alright I'm going to strip so both of you turn around." Neither of them moved. "I'm serious. I've been covering up my back this entire time by sheer dumb luck, so that's the best place to do it." My face flushed. "The other parts are even more private."

Carthin rolled his eyes and turned toward the wall. Pullus looked cross but faced the door. A few quick pulls and I was topless. I grabbed the chalice sitting it beside me. I knelt down with my back facing them. "Once you start writing, I'll start casting." I summoned two quills.

"We might run out of room." Pullus said as I felt someone kneel behind me.

"Don't worry about it. As I'm casting the words will be sealed in. Write from top to bottom. When you get tired have Carthin take over. We only have four hours so if your hand gets worn out, don't wait to switch."

I felt a warm sweep of blood against my back. Sharp pricks as each word was scratched onto my skin. The words started to mutter under my breath. The words didn't mean

much, they only helped me focus. As the demon magic worked it's my body, I wanted to writhe. The urge to cackle, and celebrate filled my head with noise. If Pullus and Carthin were talking I couldn't hear them over the racket. I imagined bright, red words on paper as Pullus scratched away. I never imagined it would be so maddening. I closed my eyes convincing myself I was writing the words on fine parchment. The irritation fell away. At one point I felt them switch places. Carthin writing was quite a bit smoother.

"It is done. With an hour to spare." Carthin deep tone broke through the fading laughter in my mind.

I nodded, but didn't speak. The words twisted, and formed into a sprawling serpent with intricate details and sinister appearance. I could feel the blood moving around on my back. A startled sound came from behind me. My fingers curled in as I set the spell. A longer shuddering breath as I summoned a new top over it. I turned around. "That was far more draining than I thought it would be."

Pullus grim face frowned. "Now, what?"

I pushed off the floor. I gave him a half smile. "I have to make it look like you played with a succubus."

"I'm not going to sleep with you." He did a half step back. *Well, that's rude.*

"As if I wanted to sleep with you, idiot. Take off your robe." Men, sometimes they drive me insane.

He pulled off the robe tossing it on the bed. He wore a simple white shirt, and loose pants underneath. "Are you going to use magic to make me look wounded?"

"I was thinking about it, maybe some bite marks, and burns. Why?" Pullus was a

patronizing jerk, but he wasn't stupid.

"Do it for real. You don't have to inflict them personally. If you make it a spell that breaks it would immediately cast suspicion on you and me." He looked a bit nervous as he said it.

"It will hurt." I wanted to point out before he agreed.

"That's fine, get it over with." He closed his eyes leaning against the door.

I was impressed with his level of commitment. However, I didn't want to inflict the damage personally. I feared my inner demon more than I could say. With magic I could achieve the same effect.

I cast bruises on his body as he groaned in pain. I darkened some, and lengthened others. I did a series of burns down one arm. He let out a hiss pain. "Sorry, I don't have the ability to numb it." He nodded, so I kept going. I added whip marks on his back, face, and chest. And, last I put a bit mark matching my teeth pattern on his neck. A bit mild for a succubus, but I'd let him assume I did other things. "Done," I handed him his robe.

With a few stiff movements he pulled it on. "The information is yours. This will probably be the last time I speak to you."

"Then, did you know about them gathering specifically planeborn children to sacrifice?" Carthin asked speaking for the first time in a while.

Pullus shook his head. "No, it has been very recent. The Master claims Crasino thinks our progress is going to slow. He needed beings with stronger inner energy. I don't know anything else. I'm nobody. Therefore I'm not given much in the way of information."

Carthin narrowed his eyes. "Do you know where they are coming from? Northern

Kingdoms aren't known for having that many planeborn. They are more common elsewhere.

"No, but if I'd have to guess from looking at them earlier, I'd say the Eastern Kingdoms. They don't like planeborn there. They see them as corrupting the natural order. They have a very high rate of them being born. But, their religion, and magic does focus on the four elemental planes, so it doesn't surprise me." Pullus winced as he set back his shoulders.

"Anything else?"

I could tell his pain was great. "That's all I wanted to know. You Carthin?"

"I'm good. Good bye, Pullus." He said as he flopped onto the bed.

Pullus left limping out. I let out a sigh. I felt terrible for what I had to do. I couldn't think of another way of getting him here.

"It's not your fault. He chose it. Don't punish yourself for something that you had nothing to do with."

I looked at Carthin. "He came here, because of my actions. I also the one who hurt him."

"He came here, not sure if he would live or die. He wants to serve the Wave in his own way." Carthin shrugged. "Everything was his choice."

"Why didn't you tell him about the ritual?" I didn't tell him, because I didn't want to cause a panic. The spell may not even work, or operate in any real well. I knew Carthin's motives had to be different.

"I don't trust him. The less he knows the less he can betray if caught." He rubbed his chin in thought. "On top of it I don't like him. You still have to summon your demon, don't forget."

I grumbled to myself. Demon summoning was my least favorite magic. "I don't think I'll have time before we have to report to the pens. I'm going to have to make the circle in here. Therefore it's going to be a bit tricky."

"Can you start setting it up, at least?" Carthin expression seemed veiled. He kept his eyes from looking into mine. I wondered what was going on in his head.

I eyed the chalice of remaining blood. "Move the beds." I backed up the door.

He jumped off the bed and pushed it up against the wall. Then he easily repeated it with the other bed. He climbed up on the dresser. "You could have moved them."

I frowned at him. The room lacked the square quality to build an appropriate circle. My will swirled into the blood as I pulled it out drawing a circle and protection in my own blood. I imagined building deeper layers lengthening the protections. The demon would not be as controlled as earlier. The ground wasn't concentrated, and we were in a building surrounded by demon magic. This wasn't what I would call ideal room to summon in either. I looked around my progress. Blood marked the ground, and walls in layers of various arcane languages. It seemed secure enough. With a flick of my hands the beds sat back down. "Time?"

"You have about fifteen minutes." It's wonderful to work with someone who knows what you're talking about.

I whispered of a spell sealing, to get it properly set. The blood darkens, and grew brownish in color. "There, I wonder what they'll think when they come to fetch us."

Carthin rolled his eyes and hopped down.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aslair magical workings left tingles on my skin that kept my spirits high even as we reached the Pens. She blanched at the sight and I did as well. Children kept in cages with barely enough space to move, the light was little my planar vision took over turning everything to shades of black and white. They were being sprayed down with water as walked in. "Do you need to keep them like this?" I nearly slapped myself for opening my mouth.

Our escort nodded. "Oh yes, children aren't like adults. They do not understand death and many adult problems the same. Their suffering must be more acute." He faced me. I felt a welling of relief he hadn't noticed Aslair stricken expression. "It won't be a problem will it, angelborn?"

I straightened. I took a moment to formulate the right response. "No, it won't. I don't have to like it to do my job."

The motioned guard captain and Tobias standing near the entrance way. Our boots scuffed over the dirt floor as we made our way over to them. Tobias dark eyes narrowed at us. "I smell demon blood and magic."

"Am I not allowed to do what I wish in my off hours?" Aslair asked with perfect level of ruffled arrogance. Silt the woman could act.

Tobias leaned forward closing his eyes and taking a long sniff. Then, he leaned back with a grin. "It is your blood that smells like that. Interesting, demonborn." Then, the grin faded and eyes flicked to the guard captain. "Planeborn children here are dying. I don't know what's causing it. I suspect they may be willing themselves to die. That makes them a bit of resource drain. You are outsiders. You have no loyalties to anyone here. Keep your eyes open. Find out what's happening."

I started to turn, when I realized Aslair wasn't following. Her dark red eyes peered at Tobias. Worry bloomed in my mind. What did she think she was doing?

"Who exactly are you in this organization, Tobias?" Her hands dropping to her hips as she leaned forward slightly.

My eyes closed in defeat. She really couldn't afford to attract more attention.

Tobias tilted his head. "I'm the Master's First." He jerked his head at Guard captain. The man nodded before taking off. Tobias watched him till the guard captain was out of sight. "I'm not here for the master, demonborn. I'm here for Crasino." He hand snapped out running down a length of her multicolored hair. "Whatever power games you think to play,

you won't beat me. My god and I are bonded."

Her hand slapped his away, as her hair spiked up into points and her eyes glowed.

"Don't touch me."

Tobias rubbed his hand. "I hope you make a mistake. I'll enjoy punishing you for it."

He waved an arm. "Walk the cages. Demonborn, I want you to check their energy levels. I'm sure you can manage it."

Aslair hair hadn't relaxed her expression stayed riveted on Tobias as he turned away to follow the path of the guard captain.

I grabbed her arm. "Flaming Silt, what is wrong with you? Actually, never mind I know you're stupid."

Aslair wrenched her arm from my grasp. "Don't start." Her teeth snapped together with that statement. "He's the one we need to be afraid of."

"I know that, but do you?" After all she is playing cat and mouse with him.

Aslair lips twitched and her hair smoothed out and her eyes lost their glow. "I need to get his measure. If I don't, I can't prepare."

"Prepare? Prepare for what? We are only supposed to do get information to The Wave."

The job had gotten a little over our heads.

She shrugged. "I need to start casting before he gets back. You should probably start your patrol."

"Sure, you're the boss." I managed a mischievous smile. Aslair rolled her eyes. I took a step and started to patrol.

The guards moved in a same pattern so I cross cut it. I'd step out between the cages catching them off guard. The second guard snapped at me. "What in Silt are you doing?"

"I'm supposed to be watching the watchers." I leaned back my hand resting on my hilt of my long blade. "Does that make you nervous?"

"I don't see why you are jumping out on me." She plucked at her side.

I smiled, "To catch people off guard, of course. Don't worry your pretty head about it." As I took off and I could feel the venomous glare at my back.

A hurt the grunted sounds of pain. I slowed to take careful steps as I walked. Two guards had swung open a cage and were stepping on a small body. Before I realized it I knocked one of them back and stabbing the other with hilt of my dagger.

One I only knocked back charged me weapon out. My sword in hand as I knocked the blade aside sticking the dagger in his stomach. I twisted it. "Are you going to try something as well?" I snapped at the other guard with dagger sticking out his thigh.

"No, no, I'm sorry, please don't tell the Captain. He'll tell Tobias or the Master." The

man crawled on his knees up to me.

"I'm only doing my job." I paused I heard a sound behind me. I rolled sideways a blade flying slashing over where my head had been. I reversed planting the blade deep into my attacker's side. It was the guard from earlier. She stared at me in shock before touching my blade in her side.

With a yank it pulled free as she dropped to her knees. I stabbed her hard where her heart should have been. "I'll not report you, if you keep your mouth shut about all this. Hear me?" Last thing I needed was to get Tobias interested in me.

His head flopped up and down. I ignored him.

I knelt down to look at the child. His breathing was shallow. "Go get my partner, the demonborn. This child is very weak." The guard scrambled up as I stayed with him. "Boy, what's your name?" I lit a small light.

He shook as shock set in. "I never had one."

"Why don't you have a name?" I checked his bones with a few quick prods. Nothing seemed to be broken, but his skin was mosaic of purple and blue. I wrapped my arm around and pulled him into sitting position against the back of the cage.

He let out a cry as I moved him. "My parents died, and no one wanted me. I lived under a bridge." He answered his warm sun kissed skin losing color. I need to keep him awake.

I wish I'd been wearing my cape to keep him warm. "What was the bridge like? Anything interesting there?"

His gray eyes grew wide as he grasped my hand. "People used to paint things on it.

About freedom, and about nature. Sometimes they painted colors. A lot of times they'd bring me food."

"That must been nice, a free meal," I rubbed my stomach.

I heard Aslair's heavy tread. A ray of golden light bathed the kid. He howled in pain. His body went limp.

"Aslair?" I knew she wouldn't deliberately hurt the kid.

She dropped down. "His fine, his internal injuries are healing. He's in bad shape. Captain, you'll need to give him a few days to heal up." I could see her swallow hard. "Unless they want to take him tonight."

Captain hose's boots I could see cleared his throat. "I'll put him in the infirmary we have. Are these the two you caught beating him?"

My eyes barely grazed over the bodies. "Yeah, I disabled them physically without harming them. They responded by drawing their weapons." I raised my eyes up. "If I'm threatened with a blade, I will respond with the same behavior."

Captain nodded. His eyes flicked back and forth betraying his nervousness. "You were doing as ordered. The infirmary is against the north wall. If you'd take him there I'd appreciate it. Then, you can both get back to work."

Before the Guard-Captain could walk away, Tobias stepped out of the gloom. "Is there any end to your incompetency?" The tone cutting enough I flinched.

Guard Captain straightened. "I told them the captives have to stay alive, and in good condition. When we find them, they are punished."

"Since, we keep finding them I'd say you aren't doing your job. This week I've found

poisoned slaves, slaves escaped, and now beatings. I have no use for waste." Tobias waved out his hand absently.

The Guard-Captain dropped to his knees. "Please, don't. I beg you." From the corner of my eye I could see the guard I stabbed backing out of sight, slowly. This didn't bode well.

"No, I think I'm done with you." Tobias reached down and took off the plumed helm. He tucked it under his arm. "I'm sure we can find someone as competent as you to promote. "They might work a little harder, knowing what happened to their predecessor."

Aslair nudged my foot. I looked at her. Her eyes were wide as she spayed her fingers across the kid. Her powerful voice echoed in my mind. **"What is he going to do?"**

"Tobias, please spare me!" Guard Captain lined face screwed up in a panic. He pressed his head against Tobias's shiny boot. "Anything, I'll do anything."

Tobias let out a sigh, as if bored. "All you had to do was your job. Clearly, you won't do anything. Its over accept it." Words emerged from his throat in what I recognized was demonic, but I'm no scholar. Streaks of red and black shot into Guard Captain as his mouth wrenched open in a soundless scream. Fracture lines went through his skin, and he spilt apart spilling his insides. Blackness twisted from the guard-captain's body and settled into Tobias skin. "There, done. Take the child to the infirmary north wall." Tobias vanished into a swirl of smoke.

My arms slide under the kid and I carried him. Aslair followed behind. Once we had gotten out of the range of the others. She spoke. "Carthin, this place is horrible. Do know what that was?"

I shook my head. A spell, not a nice one, but beyond that no. "What was he saying?"

"Take the corrupted one. Consume him, my god, my lord, my guide. Crasino, I give you this feast, of my own will." Aslair shifted her eyes hooded. "That is one of the darker rites. He has definitely sold himself. All these people are going to suffer in their final moments."

"I know, but we have to stay firm. Otherwise we won't be able to get out ourselves." I wanted to free the kids as well, but I wasn't sure if we could.

"The children?" Her fragile heart was bleeding. I could hear it in her words.

I looked at her. "We'll try."

Two large swing doors dominated the north wall. I stepped into them backwards to not wake up the boy. There were several large, cots holding small bodies with lights floating above them. "I have a new patient."

A worn down woman walked forward. Brands encircled her arms as two burly men walked up with her. "What happened to him?" The caring concern did not match general vibe I got from this place.

"I found two the guards beating him. Where do you want me to put him?" She motioned to one of the cots nearby. I bent down slowly and placed him. A few movements as I pushed his hair out his eyes.

"Thank you for being so kind. Most people here are animals." She snapped at the men beside her.

I got up and looked at her. "There keeping you here against your will."

"What healer would willing be here?" One the men slapped her hard on the side causing her stumble into the other.

"Shut your mouth, no one wants to hear you talk." He shook her roughly and slapped

her again.

My hand whipped out and grabbed his. "Don't treat her that way. She's someone's daughter or mother." I snapped.

He gave me a nasty grin. "Yeah, I know."

"Carthin, we need to get back to work." Aslair injected in a bored voice.

I nodded and went back out. A long breathe worked itself out of my tightened throat.

"What were you doing?"

"Doing another medical evaluation. These poor things are in worse shape than the people from earlier." She chewed on those plump lips. "I worry you've over played your hand. They are going to start thinking you are too soft Carthin."

"You're right. I'll try to calm down a bit. I never pretended to agree with them for me it's a job. At least this plays into it. You're doing really well." Part of me resented the fact she was playing the role better than I. Never before had my resolve been so tested. I suspect my father did not know the extent of abuse here. He would never have sent me.

Aslair smiled. "Carthin, it's nice to know somewhere in in there you have a soul." She ribbed me with one elbows. "I'm having a hard time remaining calm myself. Focus on the mission as I quote the great Carthin."

Against all odds she made me laugh. "Thank you, Lady of the My Most Wondrous Dreams." I winked at her and went back to patrolling.

The rest of our shift didn't do much. The guards must have heard about me killing those two. I did leave me time to think, however. We needed to get this area cleared out at least. The Wave had enough resources to care for hundred odd children and a few healers.

And, the idea of leaving them here turned my stomach a bit. I'm not too soft hearted, but this was repulsive. And, most of the planeborn. I'd never seen so many at one place outside of the Ethereal.

The whole experience grated on me as we met up and headed back to our room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The stress of tonight's work caused me to forget I'd turned our room into a summoning circle. I let out a hiss before slamming the door shut. Carthin leapt out of the way. "I'm delicate."

"Ground rules: Demons aren't your friends. Don't try to play mind games with them. Avoid talking to him if you can." I put a hand on my hip. "Actually, don't talk that would be better."

He grinned even though I could see the red around his eyes. "I'll do my best. I do like to hear myself talk."

I settled down to summon my old friend, Rikritar. The worries and cares dropped always as I projected my thoughts. **"Rikritar I summon thee. Rikritar, I summon thee. I bound thee by my own blood, the liquid of my life. Favor returned for favor given. Bow before me. Rikritar, I summon thee."**

Fire roared in the center of the room as he stood in his glory. "Aslair..." He sniffed the air. He flipped around to face Carthin. "What is this? Did you bring me a tasty sacrifice?"

"I doubt he'd be much interest to you, his not pure of heart. But, I suppose you're used to lesser sacrifices." I responded in my usual disregard.

His eyes glowed turning a bit orange in color. "He is no normal angelborn. Did he not tell you? Interesting." I almost asked about what he was talking about, but I stopped myself. I could only summon him so many times before he wouldn't answer my questions anymore. Better to not waste it on something I didn't really need to know.

"Rikritar, don't make me use your true name. I'll do it." I lifted a brow and tapped my side.

Red smoke curled out of his mouth. "Fine, I know what you want. More about Crasino. I hope you'll resolve your little issues so you can stop summoning me."

"Do you know his performing the Ritual of Ascension?" I lifted up the text showing him the page.

Rikritar growled. "That bug wouldn't dare."

"Oh, I think he has dared." I tossed the book back on the bed. There is great difficulty in telling whether or not a demon is lying. I think Rikritar was quite annoyed with flames licking at his skin. His form faded for a moment.

Rikritar came back blazing with fire and fists curled. "Crasino gathered the life force of many living humans. He doesn't have nearly enough to ascend, if you're concerned." The way his jaw clamped down he was trying to keep his mouth shut.

My tail waved back and forth. "Spill it all, Rikritar otherwise you'll be here a while. I find your company tedious, as you know." Carthin choked down a laugh from behind him.

Rikritar whipped around. "So speaks the one marked by a god he will not speak to.

Are you still so amused, Carthin Black?"

Carthin paled. Then, he sat up and spat at demon. The spittle bounced off the shield and landed on the ground.

"Rikritar, listen and obey. Answer my questions now." My whole power sent into the demonic tongue as I forced him to talk.

He dropped to his knees and pulled himself around to face me. "Fine, whore daughter what do you want!"

"Crasino," I crossed my arms and waited.

Rikritar's whole body shuddered before he pushed himself up. "He is sending demons under his power to be fed on. Usually one at night at a late night ritual. And, he is planning on killing more and more people. A demon who left his service found the nature of sacrifices to be in poor taste has been gossiping."

"The fact they are sick, dying, tortured, or that they are children?" Very little upset, or bothered Demons, so I wanted to know the specifics.

Rikritar eyes flicked away in Carthin's general direction. "You've never summoned in front of friends, Aslair. Are you and this Angelborn growing close?"

A twist of my wrist caused a shimmering white light to flush over him. His scream almost pierced my ears. "I'm not the one being questioned, Rikritar. You are."

Fire blasted at my circle trying to ruin it. "You are a half breed. I don't have to listen to you."

"You do. Let it go, Rikritar. Answer the question and I'll let you go back to Silt." Now, I wanted to know why he wanted to keep it a secret. If he thought he was going to a

battle of wills, he was incorrect.

The flames ended. "Most demons want healthy sacrifices who only know fear for a few moments. However, he wants his bathed in fear, horror, and pain. Low quality sacrifices, other demon didn't enjoy them so they left."

"I dismiss thee Rikritar. I dismiss thee Rikritar. You are bound to me until the favor is repaid. I will summon you when I need you. Accept and learn. I dismiss thee Rikritar."

He vanished from sight as my circle faded off the walls. I dropped. For whatever reason Rikritar fought me more than ever before. I'd not summon him for a while.

"Aslair are you alright?" Carthin peered down at from the bed.

I kept my eyes to the ground. "Carthin, what was Rikritar talking about? How are you bound more so than your family to Al'tar'ia."

A very long pause happened before he spoke in a rush. "His talking nonsense he's a demon."

"He can't lie to me, Carthin. That was the whole point of binding him to my will. For once in your life try to not to lie." My eyes locked onto his. And, for the first time they were filled with panic.

He glanced away. "It's none of your business."

"It is my business. Tell me what the in the Silt is going on." The demon was trying to dodge my question. And, now Carthin was trying to dodge them as well.

His face tensed up he pressed his back to wall. "Drop it." Those beautiful eyes narrowed and filled with ire.

If he thought that would deter me, he was desperate. "That isn't a tattoo is it?"

Al'tar'ia marked you herself." I should have known all along, but what can I say his good at distracting me.

His fingers gripped his blade. For a moment I worried he was going to attack me. "Are you happy you figured it out?"

I pulled myself onto the bed with him. "Not really, I just want to know the truth. Why does it upset you?"

"When I was a child, maybe five years old, She marked me as her champion. Whether I tried to use my magic, or visited Vita she was there waiting to tell me about my destiny. I hated her. She decided what my life would be. She was determined to take my free will away." He curled his fingers up. "And, my father was so proud. My mother understood. She knew what it meant for fate to toy with you. The great Rigmon Black would never understand. He loved that fate had a purpose for him.

"It's always been a fight between us. Father wanted me to accept Al'tar'ia. I was destined. My mother wanted me free to make my own choices. Neither would override the other. Then, my mother died and there was no one to balance my father's desires." His whole body tensed. "Isha took his side. She wanted me to accept the reality that Al'tar'ia picked me. Then, Beth left me." His nostrils flared. "Now, you know. I can go to Vita anytime I want. And, Al'tar'ia would gladly grant me her assistance if I asked for it."

I hadn't expected such a confession from Carthin. I suppose in the grand scheme of things it was no secret. Most people in hometown and everyone in The Wave knew. However, it caused him a great pain. "Carthin, its fine. But, if we really want to get the planeborn children out of here we might need to call in all the favors we have."

The golden orbs flicked close. He swallowed hard, twice. His fingers let go of the blade in his hand. "You're right. I could live with not freeing them. I wouldn't like it. Another demon god I couldn't." The eyes opened and he managed a lopsided smile. "You said this job wouldn't involve any heroics. I guess you were wrong."

For some perverse reason it made me laugh. "You don't have to seem so pleased with my mistake."

"I never make mistakes, so I have get all the enjoyment I can of others errors." A bit of tension drained from his expression. "We need to formulate a plan. Do you want Pullus in on this?"

I jumped off the bed. Best not to encourage Carthin in anyway other than was necessary. "No, it is going to be risky no matter what we do. If we fail we need someone here in order to get the information out to The Wave. Plus, as you said before we don't know anything about him."

"True, we might need a diversion of some kind. We may need to figure out weaknesses, or more of the layout." Carthin rubbed his chin in thought.

I sat on my bed, head on my knees, and tail around my feet. Perhaps, if we could figure out how the ceremonies went that could be helpful. "You need to wander around the place. I'll cast a spell on you when we aren't tired and have time. Once we know where everything is planning an escape will be much easier."

He quirked a black brow at me. How did he always seem to know when I was keeping things to myself? "Aslair, what are you thinking?"

"I told you. The spell, wandering?" I don't deflect well.

He smiled with cool amusement. "Aslair, don't try to lie to the liar."

"Maybe, I should try getting more on the Master's good side. I need to check the ceremony out, see how long it lasts, how distracted they get, maybe set up spells to make sure they don't know we are escaping. Those sort of things."

A frown creased his fine features. "That isn't a good idea. You realize they kill tortured, battered people on an altar to a Demon? Do you really think you can sit there, with a pleased smile on your face while they do that? Not to mention they probably drink demon blood as part of it. Imagine demon blood in your mouth. You already disgusted by the smell of corruption on them, do you think you could swallow something that smells like that?"

"We all do what we have to." The proverb of Unbidden, I can quote things.

"You don't have to. That is my point. You could blow your cover. This will lead to you dying." He attempted a grin, but it fell flat. "Dying would really interfere with our whole escape plan."

"I'll try to restrain my suicidal urges." Nice of him to be sarcastic but not offer any suggestions.

He threw up his hands. "We might be able to come up with another plan. You can butter up to the Master, but save the ceremony until we have no other choice." He cocked his head to the side. "I don't think I even could make it through a ceremony."

I held up my hands casting the spell on Carthin. "There, simple spell low power. As you move around it will draw a map on some parchment I have. After we get down a layout, we'll make a more organized plan. Agreed?"

"Sure, whatever you desire exquisite creature." He gave a glance over.

"Shut up."

CHAPTER TWENTY

I rolled out of bed before Aslair. She probably wore herself out with the demon yesterday. It was pretty cute how she hugged her pillow in her sleep.

A blade on my hip I stepped out on the way to find food. As I walked I thought about our talk yesterday. I wish she hadn't figured out what the mark of Al'tar'ia meant. In addition, I wish I'd been able to keep my mouth shut. Usually, I would. Somehow, Aslair always seemed to get under my skin. In a way it reminded me of Beth. And, that was not good. Beth was the love my life. The way her eyes sparkled when she laughed. How no matter how difficult she'd help those who needed it. I put the thoughts of Beth away. I couldn't risk my life in thinking about her right now.

The main hall stood empty. A different guy stood behind the bar. I rolled up the bar. "Some mead and whatever is hot."

He pulled out a mug, slapped it on the counter. Then, he disappeared through the door. I took a refreshing sip and eyed a few people sitting around the fireplace.

I heard the slap of a plate. The smell of grilled sausages wafted up my nose as I picked it up. Some hash eggs, sausage, as well as some kind of cooked grain. The only thing I enjoyed about this job was the food. Without asking I moved over the group at the fireplace and sat down.

Both of them were young, one girl and one guy. "Morning, the food is great here."

The girl, who was just my type, easy, smiled up at me. The guy gave a nod.

I started to cut up my sausage dipping it in the yolk, and scooping it up with the hash.

"You already eat?"

"Oh, not yet. I'll finish my tea and get some." Her eyes swept over me. "You one of the Ethereal mercenaries right? The angelborn?"

"I am." I took another bite and winked at her. "You look as if you came from Vita yourself."

She blushed, even though it was pretty sad line. "You're funny." No, I'm not.

The guy frowned at me. Ah ha, he was interested, but hadn't gotten in with her yet. Or, maybe she'd blown him off.

I winked at him causing him to start with a glare. "Not need to be rude."

The girl patted him on the arm. "He's not being mean. He's just playing around. You need to relax, Coop."

Coop put up a very fake smile. Then he stared down at his cup sloshing his tea around.

"What's your name, angel?" I put on my biggest, brightest smile.

She let out another giggle. I started wonder why she was falling for my crap so easily. Don't let her trap you, Carthin. Women are sneaky things. "Elena, pleasure to meet you...?"

"Carthin, I'm surprised you haven't heard my name in the rumor mill yet." I held out my hand.

She shook it with a firm grip. "Oh, we don't work for the temple. We are a part of the staff. Technically, the Demonari are renting the complex from our businesses holdings. They had a smaller faculty, but upgraded some time last year."

Oh, this is good information. I put on my 'listener' face. Eyes a bit wide, face in a serious line, and focus only on them. "That is interesting, what business it?"

"The Guardianship, we often maintain castles, and other keeps while lords, and others travel. My father is ahead of this area." She spoke with a modest beat her head bowed down.

I'd heard of them before. My father used them to watch over his lodgings when the troops were moved from location to location. "That's makes a you a pretty important lady."

Her porcelain cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink. "Not really, I'm only learning the business now." Her eyes looked up. "I'll be back to get some food. Come on, Coop." She motioned at her companion.

Coop sent me a stinging glare, before following after. I smiled on the inside. Too late little boy, she's mine.

A few swigs of mead, and a few more bites before they returned. Elena graced me with a beautiful smile with her sultry lips. "You are the nice test person I've met here. Everyone else is pretty odd."

"They do worship a demon." I circled my head for the universe symbol for crazy. "Not the most normal of people."

Her laugh was sweet, full of life. Her brown eyes were shining. She leaned in to rest a hand on my knee. "Ha, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

I nodded my eyes resting lightly on her hers. The blush deepened. "Hey, could you do a favor, if you don't mind?"

"Depends on the favor," She returned with another short laugh.

"Could you show me around the place? I haven't been able to seen most of it. And what've seen hasn't been pleasant. I don't go back on shift until this evening." Carthin you are a half-witted mercenary. Play the role.

"Sure, that's sounds great. Coop and I have the day off. I can use this as excuse to survey how much damage the Demonari is causing. My father's been worried about it." She gave Coop a big smile. "Are you okay if I abandon you for today?"

Coop gave a brittle smile. "I can hang out with your brothers. Don't worry about me." I could hear the frustration, and despair in his voice. It did not, of course, move me to pity. We both played the game for the girl. I was the better player. No surprise to me at any rate.

The rest of breakfast conversation contained bland small talk. It didn't bother me. I was being feed my deeper desires. The boy admired me as much as he hated me I could feel it. And the girl already had the crush the size of a mountain. The food filled my body. After we finished she gave me a little bow. "Come milord, I shall show you around your grand castle."

I stood and bowed in the same manner. "Thank you, kind lady. Your gracious offer is much appreciated."

She giggled and took my hand hauling down the hall.

The rest of the day was filled with flirting, and veiled glances. My suspicion remained. Contrary to my sister's opinion I am not blind when it comes to women. Maybe, when I was a under twenty, but not since Beth. *Don't think about Beth.* I admonished myself as the day wound down.

"Have you been the stables yet?" She asked still holding my hand.

"Nope," Her pulse moved fast. I made a note to keep track of it. Either she liked me a great deal, or this was a trap.

The stables were reached through the hallway I could feel the spell scribbling away.

"The horses are well taken care of." She noted pulling me along.

I wonder if she'd be as happy if she knew I was only using her. "It is a nice stable."

Play stupid and pretty Carthin. That's what the girls love.

She flutters her lashes at me. "You can stop playing dumb. I saw how you beat Coop."

Not as dumb as you look are you are you Elena. "Don't you like me like this, Elena?"

"A bit," She laughs. "But I can see you sizing up the situation."

The surge of anger and panic hits me. I keep my sweet smile on my face. "I sure convinced your friend Coop, didn't I?"

"Oh yeah, but he stuck in the friend zone, mostly cause his too afraid to make a move." She shrugged. "I might be interested, but he has to say something. I don't have the patience to take the lead."

"I know all about taking the lead." I say huskily my eyes gazing the stables. The tack is hanging, well cared for, and the smell of sweet, fresh straw in the air. No danger, as far as I can sense.

She blushes, and she gazes at me with a smile. "Do you?"

I dragged her into an empty stall, and showed her how I take the lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The map finished as I waited for Carthin. As the minutes tick by I started to feel anxious. What if they caught him? The spell is pretty minor, but I don't know. What if I didn't seal it well? In a bit of a panic I jumped when the door swung open.

Carthin is standing there his brows arched in surprise. He curls a lip up a smile and stroll in. "I didn't intend to run so late."

Something is different. His energy level is back up. I swallow. I know what that means. Anger flickered through me. How could he risk our cover like that? "Carthin, I thought you said the people here make you sick."

His forehead wrinkled a bit, as he tipped his head at me. "I found an exception. Are you upset?"

"I didn't know where you were. I was about to venture out looking for you." I felt my hands on my hips. I dropped them. I must have gotten that from my mother. She does that when she's upset.

He started to laugh. "You're jealous."

"I am not." Am I jealous? No, I can't be. "Jealous of the poor girl," I sniffed, "you rolled in the hay with. Hardly."

He gives me a warm look before shaking his head. "No, it's cute, Aslair. No reason to be ashamed."

I felt my hair rising on end. Silt, I'm not jealous. "Carthin."

"I'd save all of me for you, tasty thing you are, but it seems cruel to deprive all those

women." His smirk had become way too smug.

"Carthin," My tail thrashed the air behind me. "Can you be serious? We have to figure out get out of here, with the children."

He sobered up right away. That's unexpected. They must have really gotten to him. "You are very easy to tease, Aslair. I apologize. What do the plans tell you?"

I felt a bit better. He could be such a conceited jerk sometimes. I took a few steps to my bed as I laid down the map. "It looks like the clear exit is from the back entrance to the pens where they are keeping the kids. Also, it seems they pits are behind only the altar. We may be able to get the sacrifices out as well. The two areas meet up and we'll be able funnel them out. We might have to settle for a distraction as they bring people in."

Carthin's eyebrows turned into flat, black lines across his face. "I'm not fond of leaving those people to die, but we don't know who volunteered. They could pose a threat. And, at least they are adults. We shouldn't risk it."

I'd like to argue his point, but I had nothing. A risk, a really bad risk. "We'll see. What do you think we could do for a distraction?"

"I think you are right." He winced. "We'll probably have to do something while they doing their nightly ceremony. Also, I'm thinking about calling in my father to do a raid. I'm not sure how to get the information to him. If he attacks from the front, we could use that as good distraction. We get the planeborn ready to run, he hits with a full assault. While the raid is going on we smuggle them out the back. I don't know how loud the ceremony is. Or, what exactly they do in it."

"I need to butter up the master and get in." Terror twists my stomach into knots. The

Master and his pet Tobias scare me. Still, I couldn't live with myself leaving those kids here.

I put on a brave face, "Easily done."

Carthin's eyes closed as he looks even more worried than earlier. "Aslair, be careful.

And, don't forget we have a shift tonight. He won't allow it right away."

"We need to figure out how to get your father the message, and how to get him here."

I knew of a way. Carthin did too, I'm sure. He only had to go to Vita. Would he do it was the question.

His eyes start to whirl with intensity. Never before had I see him stand so stiffly.

"You weren't going to mention the solution were you." It's not a question.

I shake my head. After his confession earlier, how could I? I smile a bit. We both can't go to planes that run in our blood for very different reasons.

All a sudden his face twists in anger. "Do you find this funny, Aslair?" He stalked toward me. "Does my predicament amuse you?" His voice grew lower, and more vicious.

I step back into the dresser my hands out. "No, Carthin I didn't smile because of that." I've never seen him pissed before.

"What then?" His eyes whirling as his gripped the hilt of his dagger.

"I only found it ironic neither of us can go the planes where our blood is from. That's all." My voice takes on a pleading, calm tone. A bit like how I might talk to wild animal.

He backed off. His eyes seemed less intense. "Sorry, it's a touchy subject. I've never told anyone outside the Wave about this." A hand waves over his 'tattoo'.

Note to self, Aslair - Do not bring up Al'tar'ia. "It's fine. I would never mock you, Carthin." Part of me is bit annoyed he would think so little of me. The rest of me tells me to

get over myself.

He nodded his entire expression distant. He was not really listening to me. "You should probably go talk to the Master, alone at some point."

"Do you want to be alone?"

"I need to go to Vita. I'd rather no one was here. Can you magically seal the door?"

His tone is flat, without the vibrant wit I'm used to.

I nod. "I'll leave you to your work, then. I'll try to make sure the Master doesn't have his way with me."

Carthin leered giving me a once over. "I worry more about him."

I chuckled, there's the Carthin I remember. "I'll be careful." I winked, and step out into the hall.

The echo of my heavy boots on the stone makes me worry more than before. I block out the sound making my way quick to the Master's room. I knock on the door making my tail sway back and forth behind me in slow strokes. I hate this. Probably, not as much as Carthin hates Vita.

The door swings open. The Master stood in loose shirt and pants and smiled. "Hello, Aslair. Do you need something?"

"I wanted to speak with you." My voice turns throaty as I channel the power my father gave me.

A leer as he runs his eyes down my body. I wore tight fitting top and pants that barely covered me. My nerves were on enough edge I worried about shifting and shredding some of my less revealing outfits. "Come in, my dear."

I stepped in. The main room is as broody as before. My eyes adjust and soon I can see things in clear detail. "I heard a rumor."

"What kind of rumor?" He tries to be seductive with a little smile and deepening of his voice. Ugh, try again, I think, but don't show my disgust.

I look down. And then I slowly bring up my eyes to his. "That you drink demon blood, is that so?"

"Yes, it is. We also have a few demonborn who live here. They donate some of their blood from time to time. Our Lord only grants demons to us if our sacrifices are particularly good." A deep fervor overtakes him, a true zealot.

I licked my lips. "I was curious if I'd be able to attend a ceremony some evening. It sounds delicious." I walked my fingers up his arm to his shoulder.

He watched my fingers. "What do I get out of it? That's quite the honor to attend our ceremony without being anointed."

My lips form into a pout. "What would you want for it?"

He ran his hand up my arm. I tell myself not to slap him. Stay calm, Aslair.

"A taste of yours," His pale eyes try to burn into me.

That's not what I expected. I run my tongue across my lower lip. His eyes watch the movement. I smile as I pull a dagger from my side. "Do you have a goblet?"

His eyes widened as his breath comes a little fast. Ick, I can't wait for this mission to be over. "Yes," he whispered as he disappears into one of his back rooms.

I steel myself for the inevitable repulsiveness. He comes back a glossy black goblet in his hand. "Hold it." I flip my wrist over the goblet and take a slow, painful cut across it. The blood

lands in big, flat drops. "Drink," The sudden powerful urge to swipe out with the dagger nearly overtakes my good sense. With effort I shove the feeling away.

The Master eyes me, his face flushed. Need I say nauseating? "I'd rather drink from the source. Lick your glorious skin." He actually panted that.

"I don't think you've been a good enough boy, have you?" I ran my eyes up and down him. "Or, maybe not bad enough? Drink." If my mother saw me acting this way, she'd ground me for a year. I think I want to ground myself for year.

He lifted the cup to his mouth, and drinks. His eyes close with intensity, and flash open. "Delicious. The power, I can feel it. You are half breed, aren't you? More than a half breed." He swayed toward me reaching out.

"I don't think so," I wagged the knife in the air in front of him. If he touched me, I'm certain I'd stab him.

The Master stopped with a frown. "If you insist. You can attend two days from when you'll be guarding the pens."

Clearly, he doesn't like me denying him. I need time anyway. "Of course, I understand. I still need to earn my pay."

"You could earn it another way." He keeps his eye on my wrist which is still dripping blood.

I let a bright light run down my arm, and healed my cut. "The Ethereal won't like it. And, I'm not sure you earned it." My tail curled around him.

"Ah yes, would you like to join me for dinner before your shift, Aslair?" The flush has faded.

I think about how long Carthin might need. My lips flick up as I purr. "Of course, Master." This is going to be awful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aslair leaves me. Am I really going to go into Vita? Al'tar'ia would be waiting for me. She's always waiting. My fists clenched together. I hate that woman, god whatever.

Aslair was going to offer herself up to the Master. Could that be worse than Vita? I have no frame of reference. Still, that boy earlier they'll kill him. I remember his wide, frightened eyes. If I don't do this, I'll be responsible for him dying. I wish I lacked the morals like everyone believed I did. *You win, Al'tar'ia.*

I closed my eyes and focused. The world dropped away as a welling of soft, warm emotions surrounded me. I knew I was there. Irritation started to rise as I got here easier than ever before.

"Carthin, I haven't seen you since you were a small boy, how nice of you to visit, my champion." Al'tar'ia voice sounded like water over rocks, soothing, and deep.

My eyes flickered open as I stood in a cascading room of water. The room silent as water rushed all round me. A single chair sat on ice next to a throne of flowing water, where Al'tar'ia sat. She was as I remembered flawless deep blue skin covered in silvery scales, with

clear ocean eyes, and hair made of kelp. She is beautiful in a way that cannot be described.

"Yeah, well I didn't come here to listen to you babble on about fate."

She smiled her teeth as glossy as pearls. "Of course not. You're nearly as stubborn as your mother." She motioned to the chair.

"Who you got killed," I snapped back. I had absolutely no intention of sitting down.

Her eyes rounded a bit. "I had no desire for your mother to die, Sethila was a beautiful person. One of my greatest followers. If Rigmon is my hand, Sethila was my heart."

Pain lanced through me. Her pain I could feel in every word. I couldn't bare it. "Stop," My fingers pressed against my temples.

It stopped, and ebbed away. "Carthin, I apologize. I forgot how connected we are on Vita. My emotions touch you. Will you please sit?" Her fingers brushed back her hair from her face.

"No, I won't sit. I'm here to deliver a message not talk about my demons, my feelings, your feeling, or anything else. How long will it take my father to get here to raid Demonari base? If he can provide a distraction, we can free some planeborn children the Demonari are going to sacrifice." Al'tar'ia was always like this. She wanted me to join her ranks. To serve her. She would try to draw me into conversation. I'm not going to be beholden to yet another woman.

Her kelp brows knit with concerned. "Why are they sacrificing planeborn? There are no mind control rituals that involve using essence of the planes."

I blinked a few times. A god did not know what was going on? For the first time a bit of true terror touched me. I shook it off. "You don't know." A chuckle worked its way

through my throat. "You really don't know?"

She tilted her head with a small twist of her lip. "My ability to interact with the mortal plane is very limited, unless it is by a natural body of water. Did you discover what Demonari's true purpose?"

"They think they are channeling life force in order to spread their god's power on to the world." The desire to string this out overwhelmed me. For once, I would have upper hand in our conversation.

She smiled. I know she could feel my triumph. I'll never understand why she was unfailing patient. Maybe, that's how gods are. "I'm impressed. Did the girl, Aslair, figure it out? She is very clever. She knows how to be efficient, and careful with magic."

"She thinks she knows." I replied leaning against the rushing wall of water. It didn't feel as if it moved.

Al'tar'ia stepped out of her throne. "Oh, she is not certain?" She tapped her forefingers together. "I have confidence in her ability to understand magical theory. I'd like to hear her guess. No doubt it will have a high chance of accuracy."

"How do you know so much about Aslair?" I suppose, I shouldn't push my luck, but I'm a contrary ass.

She clasped her hands together. "You were fated to meet her."

"Why?" Anger blazed through me. Fate again, it was always fate with me.

"That is clouded. The reason for you meeting has not been clarified to anyone. It was fated at birth. I have followed her since she was an innocent child, as I have you."

Al'tar'ia looked almost contrite with eyes gazing at the ground.

"When can he be there?" I asked. I don't see why I should give her answer before I got mine.

"Three days. I'll connect your minds when he arrives so you can figure out timing." She replied. "Carthin, please. I know you dislike me. I do not wish to harm children, or help demons. I'll give whatever information you give me to Rigmon. I swear upon The Wave." The whole room echoed with intense power.

My knees weakened for a moment I almost knelt to her. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. "She believes Crasino is attempting to become a true god."

Her pale eyes narrowed as walls burst back revealing an ocean filled with creatures I couldn't identify. "That is terrible news. I shall investigate this. It makes sense. Thank you for coming to me, Carthin. I know you do not like, desire, or enjoy our connection. I realize it comes at great personal cost. I wish you would serve. It would be easier on both of us."

I snorted. "You can say it all you want. My interest in kneeling before a God is very low, Al'tar'ia. And, I'll never kneel for you."

A laughter the same as bubbling brook filled the air. "Why do you ever think I wanted you to kneel before me? Good bye, Carthin."

The world tugged as I spun back into the world. A flash of pain as I readjusted to my body. Al'tar'ia thinks she's so clever appealing to my rebellious nature. It wouldn't work. She can change tactics all she wants. There will never be any benefit of serving her to outweigh being hers to command, and control.

I shook my head as drips of sweat scattered everywhere. My whole body ached. It

seemed I could get Vita easier as an adult, but it was harder on me.

The door opened as Aslair walked in. Her whole posture tense, her eyes haunted. I'd never seen her like that before. "Are you alright?"

Her jaw dropped. "I should be asking you. You are so pale, and you're drenched in sweat." She rushed forward. Glowing green tendrils dug into me as some my fatigue faded, and my heart slowed down. "You went to Vita, then?"

"Yeah, I did." I didn't want talk about this. Why did I tell her about it? How did she manage to convince me? Perhaps, this whole fated to meet nonsense.

Her full, plumb lips paled as she chewed on them. "When can he be here?"

"Three days." My eyes closed as I rested against the wall. The act of breathing started to feel more normal.

"Good timing, I'll check out the ritual in three days and see if we can plan around it." She shuddered. "I let the Master drink my blood."

I couldn't drum up the energy to open my eyes. "Oh yeah?"

"He drank my blood, Carthin." Part of my mind, which still worked clicked on. My eyes flew open. "Aslair, that was stupid."

"It was that or sleep with him. I could sense it." Her whole face shut down. "I'll never sleep with anyone again."

A brow lifted as I stared at her. The fear on her face about well, one of my favorite activates was rather unsettling. "I guess you didn't have much choice."

Aslair beautiful red eyes shut as I felt a brush of something. Her eyes opened as she let out a sigh. "Going to Vita drained your plane energy. You need to get it back. That's why

you look so awful."

I smirked. "Don't bruise my ego, or anything."

"Carthin, I'm being serious." Her hands moved to her hips.

"I know that's why I'm teasing you." My eyes closed against my will.

Aslair hissed as I felt a smooth, muscular limb wrap around me. Then, her lips pressed against mine. I could feel her channeling her energy into me on top of the kiss. Energy filled me as I opened my eyes and she removed her lips. Her tail wrapped around me keeping me upright.

"Aslair, stop it. You need your energy as well." I managed untangle myself. "Doing this is not a great idea. Neither of us wants the complication in our relationship."

Her tail let go as she hopped off the bed. "I'm only trying to keep you alive. You need to keep a better access to you energy, Carthin. This is beyond the pale. Do you generally go on jobs with almost no energy, and no way to restore it?"

She was right. Beth had been too much on my mind. Those brown eyes haunted me. "I'm idiot."

"No need to state the obvious." She snapped back.

I held up my hands. "You win. I'll try to find another source before the final assault. I'm sure I can get someone here interested. There is a lot I have to offer." My tone took on it's my usual seductive edge.

Aslair threw up her hands. "Yes, yes you'll weld your body to get what you desire. I get it. I'm going to nap before our shift."

I frowned. She must be rattled about her encounter with the Master. Usually, she'd

quip back. "Are you okay?"

She gave me a weak smile. "No, but I'll live."

Her confident demeanor was gone. "Aslair, what is it?"

"It's a private agony." She warded more off a bit.

"I shared mine."

"Because, it affects the mission. How I feel about flirting, blood, and using succubus powers isn't." Her eyes glowed bright. "I'm not into show and tell."

A grin broke across my face. "Oh, I have a lot to show you if you want."

She choked on a laugh. "That's not what I heard." She winked at me as she snuggled in bed.

I was pleased that I managed to break her out of her dark mood. It was good to see her smiling again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next few days were, thankfully, uneventful. Carthin took himself off the evenings to fulfill his 'needs'. I spent my free time researching ways to protect my mind from demonic invasion. At this point in time my mind shields had never been stronger. I also finished the final touches on my bracer spell. A last resort, a very desperate one, I hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

In an act of sheer self-preservation I wore a long flowing gown that covered most of my body, but revealed my back. The tattoo with information made me a bit nervous. We still needed it, Rigmon would still need the evidence to proof his raid was warranted. I frowned.

"Do you want me to escort you?" Carthin eyes seemed strained with lines of red running

in them.

I consider it for a moment, and then shook my head. "No, you have been acting as if you don't like all the demon stuff and we haven't acted friendly. This close to the end, I don't want to take any risks."

Carthin rubbed his eyes with a great deal of tension in his shoulders. "I still not sure this scouting mission is wise."

"Oh, well I can tell you it's not." I smile in attempt to ease him.

He glared. "Aslair, this isn't really an appropriate time for joking."

"Sure, it is." A few flicks of power and my long hair piled up on my head. "Carthin, nothing bad will happen."

He lets go of the glare. "If I believed you, I would not be concerned. They are blood drinking demon worshippers who have been eyeing you since we arrived. And, what if you go there and they are sacrificing a child? Will you save it? Will you watch it die?" He threw up his hands.

I'll admit it has a bit of a point. "We need to know if the ceremony is distracting enough, Carthin. And, I can spend my time there to place a spell to keep them occupied. It needs to be done."

A deep grumble in his chest as his shoulders slumped. "I should have known a Seducer would be a risk taker."

"I'll be careful." For reason a smile tugged at my lips. He seemed so callous, and now his worrying at me.

"Don't think I've gone soft. I like working with you Aslair. I hate getting new

partners." He huffed. "They always stick me with either guys, or fresh meat."

"I'll see you later tonight." I stepped out before he can object.

After I shut the door I let my emotions free. The ceremony had me on edge.

However, Carthin didn't need to be pacing back and forth in our room. The last thing I need is an exhausted worn out back up. And, on top of it he was going to have mentally link Rigmon once he arrived. Mental connections are tiring and distracting as it is.

I arrived at the door, and the Master greeted me with a kiss on my hand. Don't throw up, Aslair. I, barely, managed a sultry smile as he escorted me to a bench near the wall. "I apologize we couldn't put you elsewhere, but you are here as a favor to me. If you stay, perhaps you'll be able to join the rest."

"It is no trouble, Master. I realize I'm here only due your generosity." I licked my lower lip my tail making lazy turns.

He rubbed his chin his eyes running over me. "Yes, please sit."

I shifted my tail so I could rest on the bench then let it lay down. The Master hovered for a few more seconds before heading to the altar. The room was deep red, with black accents. The stone floor lined with heavy kneeling cushions. The altar reeked of pain and blood. Around it was moody candles that flickered as bright beacons in the dark room.

Some of the Demonari entered eyeing me with interest. After a few minutes they settled on cushions with bowed heads. Tension rose as I clasped my hands together. A low hum filled the air as red lights sprung up around the ceiling casting a grisly light on everything.

A wail made my back go stiff. Two guards dragged a dirty, skeleton like figure into the room. The slave head jerked back. "Yes, glorious yes! Take me, take away my pain."

Bile crept up my throat with sheer will I forced it back down. Focus, figure out the spells here. I sucked down deep into my being as I kept a vaguely interested expression on my face. The Master seemed seal this room to interruptions. Most likely because summon the essence of powerful demon lord is dangerous to disturb. With a tug and a pull I wove a spell to keep the guards, anyone who aligned with the Demonari from hearing an alarm during the ceremony. Anyone who had drunk demon blood in this chamber would not realize the danger until it confronted them directly. Not a perfect spell, but would give Rigmon the edge in the initial attack.

A high pitch scream tore me out of my spell. A ripping in my mind as I redirected flow. Thank Gorinth, I wasn't in the middle of casting I would have fried my brain.

The wailing continued as I realized they were bleeding the slave out on the altar. His body had thousand swallow cuts across his dirt encrusted body. The Master pulled up the man's hand. With a press of his thumb he sprayed out the man's fingers. A round metal clip was slipped down his forefinger. With a quick press, I could hear the snap of bone. The finger fell and pounced on the altar. The sacrifice screamed in agony, "Take me, Crasino, take my flesh.

A moan stifled in my throat as I have to acknowledge Carthin was right. If that had been a child, I couldn't watch them do this. A part of me exalted in the horror. That made it even harder on me.

The air smelled of blood, lust, and death. My body itched to shift, to be ready to defend itself. I bit my tongue to keep control. The light extinguished as a dark, throaty voice echoed in my ears. "My beloved children, who kneel before me. You shall have blood, the

blood of demons. This sacrifice loved me, so I love you return." The man's body bleeding and twitching faded.

In its place a huge jug sat. A stream of blackish red liquid poured into it. The Master let out a cry of pure elation. Shivers ran up and down my spine my heart beating fast. I wish I never came on this mission. "Our Lord has honored us with glorious blood." He grabbed a goblet and poured blood into it. "Come, sip in our lord's beneficence."

The lust coated the walls. Each of them took a sip of the blood. And after each sip their eyes turned to me. The pulse of my heart sped up higher than it had ever been. None of them moved. I didn't dare flee.

The Master voice rang over the crowd. "Come Aslair, drink what you have helped save. Without you this slave would have died from poison." Next to him stood Tobias. Shadows seemed to crawl around the wall, and wrap around the Silt-healer.

With effort I put on arrogant gaze. I waved my hands outward, and by some miracle they parted. A twist of my tail caused it to lash back and forth. I gave the master a smoldering gaze my hand out awaiting the cup.

The Master's eyes lit up as he handed it to me. "Drink, drink the blood of your ancestors."

The stench burned my nose. Corruption ran strong in it as well as evil. I lifted the cup and took a sip. My stomach jerked up and down attempting to reject it. Too bad, body, you are going to have to deal with it. A croon rumbled out of my throat. As every fiber of my being screamed not to do it, I rubbed the side of his face. "Yes," I word turning into a pleased hiss. Never before had my acting had been so tested.

"And, yours was better somehow, Aslair. Is it because your succubus, or some other reason." He whispered into my ear.

In an unscripted moment my eyes widened. "What?"

"Oh, you don't know. Hmmm, curious my dear." He rubbed my cheek once.

Blood raced in my veins. Never before, I'd been this afraid. A pure demon's blood should taste better, stronger, fuller than mine. I need answers. I don't dare summon a demon to ask. This information was a threat hanging over me. I wish he hadn't told me.

Tobias took a step forward. His dark eyes swept over the crowd. The shadows around him twisted from him and laid over the crowd. "Crasino walk with you, his children."

Master waved out his hand absently. "Leave the demonborn be, it would please me." For a moment I was glad for the Master's interest in me.

"Thank you for the delightful evening, Master."

"Anytime, my dear." He attempted to flirt with me.

I smiled back as if it worked. I took the agonizingly long way back to Carthin and mine room. A shove and I walked in. "Spell set. it should give your father's army an advantage. Striking during the ceremony will be best option. In fact, I'll go back tomorrow, and make sure the spell goes off correctly." I kept my words steady. Fear threatened to overwhelm me.

Carthin narrowed his luminous eye at me. "I took care of my problem, while you were out." He frowned at me. "Is something wrong?"

"The ceremony was revolting. I dearly hope it is the most disgusting thing I ever see." I collapsed onto the bed.

He gave me a small smile. "Remember it will be over soon."

"Not in my mind it won't." I covered my face. Then, the worse thing happened, I started to cry. Not sure what set me off specifically. It could any number of things -the ceremony, my blood, the flirting, or some combination of all of them. The whole thing had a surreal quality, because there was only one time I cried before. The only time I ever slept with anyone.

Calloused hands rested on my shoulders. "Aslair, Aslair tell me what's wrong? Did they hurt you?"

"No, everything is too much is all. Sorry, I'm not given to crying." I sit up and wipe my eyes.

His head tilted to the right. "Aslair, it makes sense to cry. This whole situation has gotten worse each day. Don't for a second think you've fallen to feminine pique. People can only deal with so much at one time." A rueful smile popped up on his lips. "Besides, we are planeborn. We don't follow standard convention. We're all special and flame."

A laugh managed bubble out of me. "Thank you, Carthin." Some people would have taken the opportunity pry for information. Other would have offered sympathy. Carthin made a crass, inappropriate joke.

One shoulder lifted and fell as he sat back down his bed. "Nothing to thank me for."

Carthin seemed to imply I was mysterious, and too quiet. He was much more a mystery. I knew from brief flashes he interior was not as calm as he pretended. My brain ached. No chance I'd solve the riddle tonight. "I think I'll go to bed. There is nothing more to do."

"Waiting is always the worst part. Is this the most dangerous mission you've been on,

Aslair?" He seemed as tired as I.

"No, working on your own leads to some pretty scary moments." I leaned against the wall letting out a deep sigh. "But, I'd never seen torture in front of my eyes before. I drank demon blood. I've been making eyes at man I'd prefer to kill. Rough week."

"Bed, tomorrow is probably not going to be any better." He climbed into bed.

"You really know how to cheer a girl up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A deep, voice echoed in my head. "Carthin, wake up. We need to discuss when the attack will happen." This was only a few hours after I'd been asleep, of course.

"Silt, I've been working the night shift here." My mind bellowed back.

I could feel his wince. "Apologies I didn't know."

"Ceremony tonight three hours before the final hour of the day Aslair has some spell set up to prevent easy detection, gives you an opening edge. But, she needs to distract them to set it off." I could feel his mind thinking. "I don't know how the magic works. I never learned."

"Your sister's here. She has a horse cavalry ready to take them on." A long pause as I could feel him talking, but I can't hear him. "She tells you to be careful, and not to get yourself killed."

The voice faded a bit as I dropped my head back on the pillow. A few more hours sleep managed. A knock on the door woke me up the second time.

Aslair opened the door in her. The door shut and she placed a basket of food on the tray. "Look sandwiches. I think I might miss the food here."

A feel a bit touched, she's trying to cheer me up. "We'll, I'm starving."

We divided up the food and ate all of it. I could the rumble of Rigmon's mind the whole time. I would have never agreed to this if I realized how continual it would feel. I drank down a glass of mead. "What do we need to get ready for tonight?"

Aslair's whole body tensed. A frown marred her lovely brow. "I'm not certain. The spells are in place. Perhaps, I should request to check over the planeborn pens. Maybe, I can come up with some kind of spell to facilitate getting them out of there tonight." Her lips pouted in thought.

Several minutes passed before I finally asked. "What are you thinking?" Times like this I wish she knew how to communicate.

Her eyes rested on mine for a moment. "It is only a thought."

"What is the thought?" Aslair spit it out.

"I may be to set a spell to knock out the guards, open their cages, and get them to leave in order out the back." Her voice trailed off as she pouted her lips again.

Before I could ask further my father's boomed in my head. "Carthin, are you going to get those children out. I can sense you talking about them."

"That's the plan."

"How are you going to do it? It will be dangerous for them to wandering around in the middle of battle. And, it will also be dangerous for them to unattended." The anxiety pounding against my brain caused me wince.

"I know. Believe or not I've been in battles, missions, and other type things many times since I've left home. You can stop screaming at me. I can hear you loud and clear. We are sending them out the back if you to send someone there to escort them, be my guest. Aslair will be occupied, and I'm not certain how everything will go down, so I can't guarantee I'll be able to do it. There are only two of us surrounded by enemies." It was always like this with him. Everyone else was never good enough. He had to oversee everything.

"I worry for them." He replied.

I rolled my eyes. "Rigmon, I can't protect them. If you want someone to do it, then do it. Get your spy to do it."

"You know about him?"

"He contacted me. I didn't tell him about this. If you have some way of getting in contact with him, I'd suggest you do it."

"Do you have the information to prove this raid valid?"

A smile as I remember inking it onto Aslair's back. It was pretty hot. "Yeah, Aslair has it."

I could feel him being embarrassed through the link. "How does she have it?"

For the first time in years, I blushed. He could sense my thoughts that well. "We did a spell where they are stored on her back as a tattoo. It tells you where to find all the information you need to prove it. It was a precaution in case Pullus couldn't get out."

"Carthin," I could feel his hesitation. "Have you given up on Beth then? And, moved on with the demonborn?"

Shock hit me first, then rage. "Are you seriously asking me relationship questions right

now?" My jaw worked back and forth. "Are you asking me about Beth, right now before this very dangerous mission goes down?" This isn't the time for an in depth father son talk.

A flash of annoyance, but it faded. "Sorry, you're right. It's none of my business. I'll probably send Isha to watch the children. Her Calvary can move quick, and quiet."

"It's resolved then. Did you want me to go talk to Pullus, let him know what's going on?"

"Yes, if you would. Also be careful." An overwhelming wave of love, and fear hit me. I jerked back in utter surprise. Is that how he felt about me? In a lot of ways, it was impossible to believe.

I shuffled the connection to the back of my mind. Before my father had interrupted my thoughts, I'd be stewing on something.

Aslair chewed away mechanically on a sandwich. This whole time she'd been sitting quietly, without responding. She could probably clearly see I was talking to someone in my head. "Aslair, doesn't it bother you?"

She blinked a few times, her face smoothing out. "Oh, you were talking to your father. No, I knew it would probably go like this. Often in convent we would connect with one another to share experiences."

That opened a lot of questions for me. It seemed unfair to subject a demonborn succubus to additional sensory overload. Also, I thought that the Unbidden all about depriving oneself to achieve true enlightenment. "Wait, why were you sharing experiences? Isn't that counterproductive to the Unbidden viewpoint."

A dark red blush appeared on her cheeks, neck, and chest. "Well, ah, we weren't

supposed to be doing it. We, ah, would borrow the connection stones they used for mediating to see what each other saw."

I pressed my lips together to stifle a laugh. They had been sneaking around. "Oh, I see. Much like any half grown kids getting the family drink when no one's around."

She smiled back. "Maybe, I don't know. Most of the girls I used to talk in those days left. Stoic, committed types remained." There was a flicker of sadness in her eyes.

"What I meant was not talking to you, and leaving you out of the loop."

She rested her elbow on her knee, and then her head on her hand. "I don't mind. I'm not used to all the talking. No one really talked much when I grew up. Except for..." She trailed off her expression looked pained. "You don't need to fill the air with noise."

Aslair always seemed to keep her thoughts to herself. Maybe, that is one the reasons I found her interesting. "What were you saying earlier about your idea?"

"I think I'll do it. I'll take the risk." Apparently, she'd been stewing on it this whole time.

"Risk?" Earlier she didn't mention any risk. "What risk?"

She brushed a few strands of her hair behind her curled horn. "It will use a lot of magic. I'm not sure how much, because I've never cast a trigger spell before. I might be running low on magical reserves." Her whole face darkened as her eyes turned glossy. "I couldn't leave with myself I didn't get them out, Carthin. I really couldn't."

I'm not Rigmon. I don't tell people what they should do. "It is your life, Aslair. If you want to risk it, go ahead." My eyes picked up intensity as she stared at me. "There isn't any guarantee that anyone will be there to help you. There's a good chance you'll be on your

own. We are partners I'll try to help, but I can't promise you anything."

"I understand. I'm used to playing by my own rules. It's unnecessarily risky, perhaps."

She shot me a strange expression. "I'm used to men trying to protect me, or assuming I can't figure out my risks. It's nice to have someone who lets me do what I want to do without too much fuss."

"My mother was a paladin, warrior, and a captain. The idea a woman can't do something is pretty much the opposite of my role model. I've got to go see Pullus. My father wants him informed of what's going on."

"See you then. After I eat, and center my mind I'll be at the pens. If you need me, I'll be there." Her gaze was unfocused. Clearly, she was thinking of what she'd have to do.

I slipped out and made my way toward the general quarters. On my way there, I saw Pullus. He walked by the tugged me into a utility closet. He didn't bother to turn on the light. "No offense, but you're not my type."

A snort from beside me as the light stuttered on. "You find yourself quite humorous don't you, Black."

"Don't call me Black." I didn't need to remind of my lineage.

"I know Rigmon is here. Al'tar'ia told me to look for you. What do you know about it?" Pullus grim face seemed darker.

For a moment I wanted to keep our plans a secret. However, if Al'tar'ia didn't know who could be trusted we were screwed anyway. "Aslair and I did some further research. I wasn't sure if you could be trusted, so we kept it ourselves."

Pullus nodded. He didn't seem offended. "What do I need to know?"

"Rigmon is going to raid here at the moment the ceremony begins. Aslair has already set up some spells to off during it. She'll be in the room with them. Therefore, she'll be at the most risk. Also, we are trying to set it up get the planeborn children out the back without much fuss. Isha will meet them in the back with her troops."

"I see." His eyes narrowed. "Planeborn children?"

"You don't know? The Master must have trusted us more than I thought to let us see them." Even as it I said it didn't sound right. He didn't trust us. Once we were done with his tasks here, he was clearly going to kill us. At least me, Aslair he'd probably keep around to bleed.

Pullus tried to pin me with a look. "Well?"

"I'm not comfortable talking about the rest while here. After we get out I'll debrief Rigmon. If he wants to tell you about it, that's his business." Not true, but fair and at least reasonable sounding, I didn't need to be honest.

"I'll see what I can do. I recruited a few people here to my side. They don't know I work for the Wave. I'll try to place them in vulnerable area within the compound. I'll try to have one in the ceremony tonight."

"Aslair in more danger than I think isn't she?" Silt that woman. She was far too good at keeping her own council.

"Perhaps," He frowned. "The problem is she'll be in the ceremony during the attack. Maybe they won't link it to her. Maybe they won't realize the spells she used. Maybe, they won't decide to drink her blood, because they need more power. Maybe it will work out. You see what concerns me is the maybes. Does she realize how dangerous it is?" What he

meant was did I explain it was dangerous, or talk her into it. No one in the Wave fully trusts me.

"She knows." I suspect Aslair knew better than anyone.

He shrugged. "What else do you need to do?"

"Replenish my energy." I needed to find that girl and have a quick romp if she'd let me.

Pullus eyes went wide. "What is your addiction anyway, Carthin?"

"None of your Flaming business." My voice was sweet and light as I stepped out the door. Yeah, I needed to find Elena.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I feel a bit guilty. I didn't tell Carthin the whole truth. During this spell, which I was a little familiar with would drain me, physically, and magically. Yet, I couldn't let those poor children suffer. It needed to be done. I'm a demonborn anyway. We aren't really expected to have long lives. An hour or so of mediating allowed more energy flow. It thought it would be enough.

My mind elsewhere as I entered the pens. Immediately, my heart sank. The cages so small, their little limbs cramped so tight. This was worse than pits.

"What are you doing here, this isn't your shift?" A guard barked at me.

I turned lifting a brow, tipping my head back. "Do think I need to explain myself to you?"

The man stepped back sneered. "Just cause you got in good with the Master doesn't mean you can wander around however you want."

A smile curved my lips as I showed off my sharper than normal canines. "I can walk around how I like, because of what I am. Your Master has little to do with it."

He bounced back and forth on his feet for a moment. "I still need to log a reason your here."

I rolled my eyes holding up for a moment. "I want to check the containment spells. Last time I was here they felt as if they were slipping. Besides, I rather be working then hanging out in my room."

The guards tongue flicked out for a moment. "I'm going to off shift soon, if you want to come back to my room."

No matter how I behaved people felt it appropriate to hit on me. I swept my eyes up and down him. I shot him a sideways grin. "Sorry, you are below par."

His face went crimson as he stuttered out a reply. "Sorry. Sorry." He turned away to hide his face.

A tinge of remorse hit me. I reminded myself that these people were supporting torture. With that issue resolved I worked my way back to the infirmary.

As I stepped in I was accosted earthborn guard his partner and from earlier. "You don't have any reason to be here." The other pinned my arms.

I focused and he let go as my flesh had burnt him. "I go where I want. I have already explained this to several guards. I don't see why none of you can get through your thick skulls. I need to check the containment spell. I already told one idiot, I'm no mood to explain to

another." The scathing acid in my tone surprised even me. Either I was getting better at acting, or these people had really gotten under my skin.

They exchanged a look before backing off. I managed to not grin at two huge mountains taking careful steps away from me. "Ah, do you need anything?"

"Where are your healers for this section?" I needed them to agree to the spell before I cast it.

"In the back room. They are resting." One burly fist motioned at a skinny door to the east.

One more withering glance before I swayed my way into the door. A small room with three cots, a table, a small magical stove, a cold box, and three exhausted looking women. The defiant from earlier glared at me. "What do you want, demon?"

I pressed a finger against my lips and shook my head. Their eyes flicked to one another, but they didn't talk. A spell twisted its ways out my fingers. The room was sealed. "I'm here to stop the Demonari."

There defacto leader didn't lose the glare. "How do we know that? You could be trying to catch us doing something wrong. We already had one healer taken away, and killed. I don't like the other idea of being the next."

They were killing healers, this cult had lost it. The rarest of all gifts, mine was god gifted. I dropped my protection as the vined symbol of Gorinth hovered in front of me. All three let out a gasp. Gorinth disciples believed in the sanctity of all life. They would never be involved with a cult. "We didn't know about the children until we got here. I want to get them out. But, I need your help to do it. I won't be able to escort them myself."

The leader frowns at me. "I'm Lillian."

I blinked in surprise. Lillian is my mother's name. "I'm Aslair. Excuse my poor manners."

"We can't fight. I don't see how we could help you." Lillian responds her tone attitude is a bit more thawed.

I motioned to one the chairs. She nodded in ascent. I sat down resting my elbows on the rough, misshapen surface. "You won't need to fight. I only need your cooperation."

Lillian looked at her fellows before staring back at me. "What are you going to do exactly?"

"Do you know much of magical theory?" Most people didn't even casters like me. I loved the science behind the art. Others seemed to think of it more a tool than apart of whole they are.

Lillian shook her head. "I know more than my fair share about healing, but I know next to nothing about the other Arts."

Arts, I wondered about that. Most Northerners didn't call magic 'Arts'. "I'm going to cast a spell that will keep them from noticing you in this area. And, direct you where to get once the spell is triggered. I'll also be opening the cages freeing the children. They will line and follow you. All you have to do is escort them where the spell pulls you. What I need you to do is allow me to cast the spell on you." Confusion was evident on all their faces. "More simply put, don't use your natural ability to deflect magic. I can even show you how to turn it off if you don't know how. The less resistance I have the better I'll be able to keep some reserve power."

"I know how to turn it down." Lillian glanced at the other two who both nodded.

"You are taking a large risk to do this aren't you?"

I shrugged. They didn't need to know the other spells I needed to cast. Lillian knew more than she let on. "Doing what I'm being paid for."

Lillian shook her head. "I find that hard to believe, Aslair. I know how mercenaries work. But, if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. Your life, your business."

Everyone seemed so, nonjudgmental it was bizarre. Typically, everyone questioned my actions. Of course we were surrounded by an insane demon cult. Anyone looks sane and reasonable compared to the Master and his flunkies. "Once you have the resistance off let me know, and I'll start the spell."

They held hands as I could see energy gather around them. I allowed my thoughts to drift. The ceremony part of the plan really bothered me. Seeing another person tortured to death, might be too much for me. Even with the tears, I managed to sooth Carthin's worries over my mental state. Not enough, I knew, but some. People's lives were counting on it. I'd have to do it.

"We are ready." Lillian's words cracked a little.

Perhaps, they weren't sure they could trust me. I raised my hands palm up as I gathered the spell there. Bright, crackling ball of blue energy built, and built until they were nearly the side of my head. I raised my hands so they faced the three healers as energy blew out settling around them. A bit of lingering resistance, but minor compared other occasions I had dealt with healers. A twist of my fingers as I wove all the details into each layer of the spell. Sweat ran down my face dripping onto the table. Pain ached through my shoulders as

channeled all the energy into flat bands. I plucked on them to check on the flex. They were set as good as I could manage. Pressing my hands together as I forced the rest of the power into the bands reinforcing them. "Put up your protections." I croaked. Dryness touched every part of my body, like a rung out sponge.

Lillian jumped up, and shoved a cold mug into my hand. "Silt girl, don't kill yourself."

My whole body shook as the mug made its shaky way to my lips. I took a long sip. It wasn't water. It was cold herbal concoction. "Not trying to poison me, are you?" I tried for glib, but my raw voice wouldn't carry it.

Another impressive frown as Lillian shook her head. "No, are you going to be alright?"

"In a few minutes", A flick of a finger I took down the sealing spell. "They can hear us now." A little strength returned to me.

Concern filled Lillian's eyes as she waited for me to say something. There was nothing for me to add. They knew all they needed to know. And, nothing could help me, except luck at this point. "Let's put our protections back up." Lillian barely whispered as she took her fellow healer's hands.

The tea, potion, or whatever it may be tasted delicious. As I slipped away I could feel my throat being soothed. Lillian wasn't some low level healer. She was top quality. I wonder where they had gotten her. "Thank you for the tea, Lillian." I said once they finished.

She inclined her head. "You're most welcome. Will anyone meet us outside?"

"Wave Guard Isha Black will meet you outside. Her and her troops should be there." I'm glad Carthin told me about Rigmon's plans. In all honesty, I wouldn't felt okay with leaving them without any protection. The spell would dissipate once they left the building. The

guards might still be out there, or decide to pursue them out there.

Her eyes fluttered open and close, "Sethila the Star Mace's daughter."

Since, I knew my genealogy, I nodded. "Yes, Wave General Rigmon will be leading the assault."

"Oh, how did that happen?" Lillian face blanched of color and her brows half way up her forehead.

"Rigmon hired us to find evidence of the cults illegal activities. As you know we found much worse. We let him know and we arranged the assault." I didn't want to say more. For the most part I trusted them, but the less people know the better.

"Thank you so much. The pens and the pits. So many have been sacrificed already. I know its legal here, but I don't think they were all willing. And, what they do them, it's sickening." Lillian face fell with despair.

"What do you know about Tobias?" The only person who made me nervous about tonight's attack. The Master was a sycophant. The guards were low rate, and there weren't that many. Tobias was the true power here.

"Tobias," her lips curled up in contempt. "He has a healer's gift, but he sold his services to a demon. That demon sold him to Crasino. He comes here sometimes to do some healing. His is so cold, and he has no heart." A burning rage in her cool, dark eyes caught me off guard.

I couldn't blame here. Healers rarely went dark, but when they fell it wasn't pretty. "I need to cast the rest of my spell. I'll talk to you later." I pushed up out the chair and strode out.

The two guards eyed me nervously as I made it back to the pens. I winked at them, and blew them a kiss. I wandered around the pens finding an empty cage and started my next casting. This time I pushed the magic through my feet into the ground keying the spell to unlock, and hide the children with my ceremony spells. This one wasn't as intricate, but required a lot of power. My body throbbed in agony as I pulled as deep as I could go. It contrasted to the unmatched joy of so much pure power flowing through me. As I closed off the spell my knees gave out, and I dropped.

My head pressed against the empty cage. My heart beat so fast it felt as if would explode. I sucked in air, as I panted rapidly. This is it, Aslair. You finally managed to kill yourself. After what felt like hours everything began to slow down. The spell settled down, quiet and hard to detect.

I pulled myself upright using the cage. A quick glance around proved no one noticed. I reached into my side pulling a cloth to wipe the sweat off my neck and brow. "Okay, okay, I need to go get a drink and something to eat." Never before had I craved to eat magic so badly. Perhaps, I should take Carthin up on his offer, I laughed to myself.

It didn't take me long to make it to the main hall. I kept my guard up last time I was here I could feel everyone's eyes on me. A very uncomfortable feeling to say the least. "A drink and something to eat."

The man eyed me before disappearing in the back. He came back dropping a bowl of stew. He poured me mead. I swept them up and tucked myself away in a corner. My persona would have taken center stage. That person was also arrogant to the point of stupidity.

After glancing at the exits I lifted the bowl up for a long, deep sniff. No dangerous additives and it caused my stomach to rumble. I dug in enjoying the favor. The mead didn't quite fit the hardness of the stew. Not as if I was going to complain. A foot fall of footsteps getting closer caught my attention. I readied myself and stayed focused on my food.

"Well, well look at the filthy creature hiding in the corner." The Earthborn from earlier towered over me.

I lifted my head a touch. "That is no way to talk about yourself. Silt off."

"I don't have to take anything from you. Everyone can see what you are." A smug little smile on his lips.

A loud laugh from the bar broke our tense conversation. Carthin was pounding the wood as a petite pretty thing hung off him. Must be where he was going to replenish his energy. "If you're looking for a lay, maybe you should try him." I let my eyes linger on him. "Seems more your type."

"Whore!" He swung at me.

I didn't defend myself. His fits bounced off my shielding. "I'm a caster, not a fighter. Go away."

He spat at me, his face flushed red. "This isn't over between us. You just wait." With a quick step he strode away.

To try for nonchalant I went back to my stew. Carthin eyes rested on me for a moment. A shake of my head, told me all was well. He shined a brilliant smile on his companion.

As I finished my stew, I cast my last spell of the day. The last simple enchantment to

bind the spell to my bracers. The magic tucked in around me and into them. I took a moment to make sure all was well. "Done, finally," Nothing I enjoyed more than enchanting, but it was a tedious hobby. Each day do a little, and a little more until it finished.

I hefted the mug and swallowed down the mead. Carthin made a flicked his finger. The urge to roll my eyes overcame me. I have been summoned. I left the dishes where they were and walked over.

"Aslair, this is Elena. Her family is in the Guardianship, they are renting this faculty." He kept his arm wrapped around her.

I spoke into his mind. "What is this about, Carthin?"

"Be careful to not harm them. They are just merchants. They don't know what's going on here." He let the words float in his head.

I gave the girl a leering smile. She leaned away from me. "Hello, Elena. Aren't you delicious?" I cooed.

Elena swallowed several times, her eyes looking at Carthin. "Hey, Aslair. Nice to meet you too."

My tail waved back and forth. "Oh, it is more than nice to meet you. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer my company to Carthin's?" The glowing aura slowly filled my eyes. "I know more secrets than he ever will."

Her fingers turned white as she gripped onto Carthin. "No, I like Carthin's company, thanks."

"Pity," my tongue running over my lower lip.

A boisterous laugh shattered the tension. "Come on, Aslair play nice. She's messing

with you Elena." His golden eyes were warm, and disarming.

She managed a weak smile. "Ha, joke's on me. You are very intimidating."

"Ah, yes. I can see your point." I let my eyes linger longer than necessary. Once she blushed I turned to Carthin. "I'm going to get more food, and rest in our room. If you need anything let me know."

The bar man already disappearing in the back. I speak into Carthin's mind. "I don't trust the girl."

"I don't either. I'm keeping an eye on her. I'll keep my father informed." His contended expression didn't slip once.

A sandwich is handed to me, wrapped in brown paper. "Wasn't it awkward bedding the girl with your father in your head?"

"I'm trying to not think about it thanks." He replied with bite as I walk out the room.

My plan was to devour this sandwich, rest, and hope I survive the ceremony.

Carthin wasn't there when I woke up. Not that it surprised me. Rigmon had been in his head all day I'm sure it was aggravating in the extreme. My energy felt a bit better, but weak. For a moment I considered not going to the ceremony. These people were already in trouble, why risk my life. I couldn't do it. The hope in healers eyes, the pain in the prisoners. I needed to do it. If I left them to their fate, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

A few minutes to change into travel worn leathers enchanted as far as it could go. The bracers enchantment still held as I stepped out into the hall. To my surprise the Master was waiting.

"You are very prompt, Aslair, I was about to knock your door." He had an oily little smile on his face.

I sneered. "I don't wait for any man."

He bowed his head. "Of course not. I've tasted your blood. You a magnificent creature, pure blooded, and powerful."

A queasy feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. This conversation felt a little too intimate for me. "We shouldn't be late."

"You are correct." He walked down the hallway escorting me. Each step brought my fear higher. I made a face at myself. I couldn't believe I was being such a coward. This sort of situations happened before, why did this one terrify me so?

Before I could think of it to long we arrived at the ceremony chamber. I waited until the Master walked in before stepped over the bench in the back.

"Why don't you join me up front? You can stand beside me." His eyes filled with lust as he gazed at me.

Cold chill ran up my spine as I stared at him. I ran my fingers over my horn. "I'm not sure that would be appropriate. I'm not a member of the Demonari."

He shrugged. "Tobias speaks highly of you, and I believe you would be a wonderful addition. Look you at you, surely you consider yourself above the typical rabble."

The words trap screamed in my head. He knew something. I'm not certain as it what he knew, but he knew something. Still, I had to be in the room. I curled my tail around him as I parted my lips. With a seductive whisper, "I'd prefer to not be under the eyes of your Lord, while I'm undeclared."

"Stand with me, I'll guarantee your safety from my Lord." He motioned with two fingers as he made his way to the altar.

Flame, frost, and quake, I cursed in my head the whole way up. The altar reeked of unpleasant things as I stood to his far left. My fingers fluttered feeling eager to cast spells to protect me.

"Sit, as a guest." He stared at my tail which flicked back and forth in sharp motions. "Don't be nervous. It isn't your first time is it?"

I glared in pure annoyance. My tail curled around my leg as I sat on the small stool. The room started to fill up with people. They settled down, a few them exchanging words as they noticed my presence. At least whatever the Master was up too, seemed to be between him and Tobias, I hoped. Tobias, my skin crawled thinking of him.

As if I summoned him Tobias swept in. He smiled up at me, as he stood on Master's right side. "Greetings Master, I see you have put our guest in proper place."

To my surprise he spoke demonic. "A demon of your bloodline contacted me. He wanted information on you. Does that surprise you?"

I turned and responded speaking in true demonic, not just the words, but with everything. **"It doesn't. My father, the succubus, was cast out of Silt. His brother is over eager to kill him. This is old news to me, but apparently new to you. Why do you bring it up, silt-healer?"**

I could tell my words, at full power hurt his mind a bit. He also frowned when I called him a silt-healer. He continued in demonic. "Your voice is strong. Your father must have been a powerful demon. I wanted to know more about you, but your shields are quite strong.

Made me quite suspicious. That's why I wanted you here. To keep an eye on you."

"Do what you wish. You won't be able to break through my shields, or my seal on the room." I decided to nettle him with a common demonic insult. **"I wish you luck of the sun."** I turned from him to stare at the room. Only then did I realize the whole lot of them stared at me.

Master touched my arm. "You sound and feel like a demon. It's amazing. You are a sign of our Lord."

I really doubt that. Crasino would not be happy with what I'm about to do. They began their chant which I tuned out. There are many ways to summon a demon, and I only ever did it against their will. The air crackled with power as the voice of Crasino filled the air.

"My people, my children. Bring me my due." Short, and needy, something was going on with him, I could feel it in my bones. I lifted a brow as the doors flew open.

Pain hit my heart. A scrawny, brown child was there. His skin glowed a soft gold I knew he was a planeborn. He sobbed as they pulled him to the altar. They were going to kill this child, this innocent child. The world seemed to be moving in slow motion. I couldn't watch them torture him to death, and kill him. My allies needed to be warned. "Carthin, I'm going to trigger the spell earlier than I planned. Be ready."

I could feel the concern in his mind, but he only replied, "Alright."

They put the kid on the altar. I closed my eyes and jerked out my hand opening the palm. The whole room exploded with energy, it filled with streaks of lightening, and echoed off the stone walls. Even as I was blinded, I picked up the boy, he barely weighed anything. I opened the door, casting a guiding spell on him. "My magic will guide you. Run, if you don't,

they'll kill you." I shook him. "Do you understand?"

He nodded his head up and down. His body went stiff as he stumbled away. I waited until he started to run. A piercing pain caught me in the side as I felt my body tear. Tobias whispered in my ear. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you, Aslair Vrail."

"Don't kill her." The Master snapped from behind me. "We can use her."

Tobias attempted to cast on me, but the spell failed. He shook me.

I turned around shoving him back. I fired a spell back knocking him back onto the ground. The crowd surged up around me. A shield sprang up around me. I tried to push out the door, but it wouldn't move. "Let me go."

Master leered over my exposed body. "I think not. If you won't join us, then we'll keep you. We'll just tell the Ethereal you died in the line of duty."

I spat at him. "You do that." My skin scaled, and my hair stood up stiff. "I'm sure they'll believe you. Are you going to kill, Carthin as well?"

"Who knows, we'll see. Depends on how much he cares whether you live or die." Tobias replied.

"Chant!" Master called and together they spoke together. My spell began to flicker and fail. I didn't have enough magic to keep it up. My mind dug in for more and more power. Light danced in front of my eyes. Power rumbled up from deep inside. It spilled over and my shield reformed glimmering red.

I let out a laugh as I turned to grab the door. Then, a bolt of demonic power slammed into me. The connection to that demon cracked wider open and my power drained away. The shield started to losing power rapidly. In desperation I pulled on the door, but it wouldn't

budge.

As the shield vanished Tobias reached forward twisting the blade in my side. Tears blurred my vision as I fell. My kidney was damaged, I could feel it bleeding. "Carthin, I'm caught. The spells are fired. Be safe." I called out with last of my strength.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Damn that woman to Silt." What in the world could prompt that woman to make such a stupid risk. I thought even as I slashed my sword across a guard's neck, his blood spraying across my chest. The hallway clear as I thought about my course of action. "Rigmon." I thought at my father.

"What is it?" I could feel his arms swinging. They must have started the assault.

"Do me a favor and have Isha cast a spell to find Aslair's location. She triggered the spell, but she didn't get away. I don't know why. I need to get here out." Even as I thought, I found it bit strange. Usually, I'm not that concerned about the welfare of others.

A pause as I felt his mind spin outward. "Done, she'll contact you. Be careful."

"Everyone needs to stop telling me to be careful. Stone." I cut the connection and ventured into the hall, heading toward the pens. I heard a racket as I hit the door. The cages

sat open, and I smiled at the efficiency of Aslair's spell work. "What happened?" I shouted, infusing as much panic into my words as I could manage.

Two guards rounded the corner at me. "Don't know we can't contact the Master or Tobias." They made it up to me.

I looked down and in a smooth motion pulled both daggers out their sheaths. With twist upward I buried them in their necks. I yanked out the daggers as I moved down the line. The foot prints indicated the children had walked out their own. I followed the tracks making sure there weren't any guards. Once I reached the back door the three healers stood hovering over some of the kids, while guards surrounded them.

'I don't know how you did it, witch. But, you'll put them back now. Or, I'll kill each and every one in front of you," One of the big, stupid guards from earlier.

Before I knew it I was running, and sliced across his legs dropping him with a yell. The other three came at me. I blocked with a bracer, and dodged from a blow. I countered hitting one hard as he moaned. I block again, and again. I rolled. A quick cut as I got back to my feet. Only one left staring at me panting. "What are you doing, you work for us." He bled from a cut on his arm, but otherwise seemed steady.

"No, I work for the Ethereal." A half step as I stood in front of the healer. "You can run, or I can kill you. Your choice."

His eyes went wide he dropped his sword and ran. I listened to his retreating footsteps until I couldn't hear them anymore.

"Thank you, thank you." The woman breathed behind me.

I kept my blade ready and faced her. "It's over. You need to get out. They'll

probably catch on soon, and send more. If you head outside Isha should be there soon."

She nodded rapidly. "They took the demonborn somewhere here. I saw them dragging her shortly after the cages opened."

Aslair, what did you do. "I appreciate the information. Go." I motioned with the sword toward the back door.

They women hauled up the children. Together they stumbled out to safety.

A honey sweet, warm voice entered my head. "I located your friend, brother. I'll send you the tracking spell. The healers are still missing from the back can you find them."

"Already on their way out. I'll go find Aslair. They are pretty shaken up some guards nearly killed them." Again I was grateful for my sister's skill at magic and war. Her mind faded.

I stepped to the north and a cold spike hit me. Wonderful, she made a temperate spell instead of traditional tracking. I headed west warmth hitting me with movement. The cages stood empty as I walked soft. I heard a scream of pain, high pitched, and somehow still lovely. "Aslair," I whispered.

I kept my pace steady. It wouldn't do her any good if I rushed in and got us both killed. Then, I saw them. The Master, Tobias stabbed spears into a suspended cage, as she bled freely. Her eyes glowed, her skin turned deep red, still the spears cut. "I'll kill you both." Aslair screamed her voice so brutal it stopped my heart.

Tobias laughed. "You are ours, little demon. We'll keep you alive don't worry. We like your blood, it's tasty."

She spat at him, as she rattled the cage. From where I stood I could hear the cage burn

her flesh. "You can't keep me here forever."

"We'll see," The Master answered with a grin, his lips stained red. "Come Tobias, let's go. We can't bleed her too much."

The spears dropped as the grasped up cups of blood. Both of them swayed as they walked north out the pens. Their voices were loud and enthusiastic. I counted to a hundred, before making my way over. As I got closer, I saw a small boy huddled near the cage, a fine silver chain wrapped around his throat.

"Aslair, you still awake?" Her skin had returned to pale ash, but bruised, cut, and bloody.

She opened one eye, all the spark of life gone out of it. "Carthin, you should go. You can't free me."

I cocked a brow. "Please, sweet thing, I can do anything."

A weak smile perked up her lips for a moment. "No, that boy, the cage is spelled as long as alive, the cage won't open."

There wasn't much I knew about magic, so I knelt down. My fingers wrapped around the chain, as I smiled at the boy. "It's okay." In my mind I called to my sister.

"What?" Tension wrapped around the word fraying her words.

"How do I break this spell without killing the boy?" Even I had to I'd kill him. I refused to leave Aslair here.

A minute ticked by. "Carthin, don't hurt him. Go, you can get a caster to break it later."

"Aslair," I shook my head. "If you saw what you looked like right now, you wouldn't say that."

"Knock him out, and snap the chain with a blade, it will drain his planar energy, but he'll live. Leave him I'll get him once the back is secure." This time her mind cut off abruptly. They must be encountering resistance.

I looked the kid in the eye. "I'm sorry for what I'm about to do, but my friend needs help. It won't kill you." His shrugged. What did they do to this boy? Anger flashed inside. I pulled him into my lap and put pressure on his throat. His heart beat went erratic, and he started to struggle in my arms. I held on till he went slack in my lap, I pulled out a heavy hilted blade and smashed the cord.

A cry as I heard Aslair hit the ground behind me. Very carefully, I sat the boy down. I lifted up Aslair, and I ran. My sister was in trouble, and I needed to get Aslair out here.

She sobbed me. "How could you kill that boy? He could have you, he could have been Blaze?" Her fingers were tightening on me.

"He's not dead." I felt rattled. Aslair always seemed tough. She was tough, they tortured her, beat her, and she still was awake. She even spat on them I thought with a smile.

A horrible pulling sensation hit all my limbs at once causing them to ache. Yet, a warm, euphoria started to take its place. My feet skittered to a slow walk. "Aslair," I bounced her in my arms to get her attention. She was feeding off me. This was not good. Her skin was already healing. "Aslair," I snapped louder, her lashes lifted once.

Nothing I could do, so I took a risk and ran. A steady draining feeling as I got closer, and closer to the exit. I barreled through the doors, as her eyes flew open. A weakness hit my knees as I dropped her.

She rolled to her feet. "Oh no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." She trailed off as some

Demonari guards stood around us.

Tobias stepped out the air dark energy crackling around him. The mace rose up a lazy circle. "Did you really think I wouldn't know when you cut the whore free?"

"Aslair, now it's your turn to be selfish, go." I gave her a boyish grin. With will alone I managed to stand, I pulled a blade out my sheath. "I'll hold them."

A bright green vines shot out and strangled two of the guard, but five remained. "I can't Carthin. I promised your father I'd keep you safe."

"What am I a child? Go, Aslair." The audacity of my father, really.

Black lighting struck at my feet throwing me down. Pain splintered across my back as smacked hard into the earth. "Run, little demonborn, this fool won't save you." Tobias said as he stalked forward. As he moved black metal formed around his head. He brought down the mace.

With a grunt I blocked, and kicked hard into knee. The crunch was loud enough to be heard even over the screams of the battlefield. I grinned up at him. "I'm not dead yet."

Bone bent out place as Tobias dropped the mace. It landed next to me as black spikes shot out of him into me. White spots danced before my eyes as I could feel my energy being sucked out of me. "Don't worry angelborn. I'll be fine in a moment."

Green tendrils ran up his feet and he let out a shriek before stepping back. I glanced over to see Aslair rolling out of the way of guards' blades. A crimson spray told me they had nicked her skin. She turned her skin darkening to blood red, and her hair spiked.

Tobias swept back forward. I lifted my blade blocking his hand. A reeking, black mist swarmed around my blade into my face. My lungs were burning. I coughed as black mixed

with red splattered on the ground. A crunching sound from beyond as I feel myself being jerked up. The blade ripped my grasp dropped below my feet dangling in the air.

"My leg is all healed." Tobias wiggled his gloved hand and the mace flew into it. He balled up his other fist. "Too bad it has to end this way. I really wanted to drink your blood."

I coughed again. My eyes could barely stay open. My energy, I realized he was still draining it. Then, I grinned. "You talk too much."

An explosion of green leaves slammed into him throwing him into the entrance. Aslair snapped forward catching me. Her mouth and chest was covered in thick coating of blood. My eyes flicked around and I realized she had ripped some of the guards' throats out. "Ice of Al'tar'ia, what you done?"

Her eyes glowed bright, too bright for the mid-day. "It doesn't matter."

A shout as we turned to see the Master kneel beside Tobias. "Tobias, may our god spare you."

Tobias smiled an evil little smile. "Oh, may he spare you in another life."

The Master jerked as his skin began shrivels, and he aged before our eyes. Tobias injuries faded, lessening by the moment. Master croaked out as he collapsed. "I am the Master."

"You are the Puppet." Tobias got up and brought his foot down on the Master's neck. "One less mess to clean up."

Aslair let out a sob. I turned to her. Tears filled her eyes as she pulled out her only weapon, a short blade. "I promised." She stepped forward and shoved her blade deep into my chest. My eyes blinked once, and everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tobias laughed, it felt like oil slicking over my skin. "Well, well aren't you sneaky thing." The guards stood around me stunned.

I felt weak even with the energy I'd siphoned from poor Carthin. I couldn't kill this silt-healer. The demon part of me was against my skin purring and begging to be let free. Some it had leaded over already my senses sharper and body craving blood. And, for the second time in my life I cut the leash.

A mocking laugh rippled out my throat as my hair turned from looking like flame to actual flames. Claws ripped out my hands, my skin tightened stretched to a dark shimmering red. "Are you ready to dance with a demon, corrupted one?"

A flare of the deepest black and brightest red around Tobias as his nostrils flared. "I knew you were no ordinary demonborn." Tendrils struck out with speed.

I didn't defend against them. Instead I leapt onto one the guards, knocking him down, and ripping off his helm. My teeth came down on his throat ripping out his throat. Red liquid poured down my throat, energy welling inside. Elation ran in my veins even as the part of me who was human wriggled in self-contempt.

A blade deflected off my hardened skin as I ripped the blade away plunging it into him. My hands slipped under him. With a shove I threw the corpse at Tobias. Metal on metal rang out as I chased after the body.

Tobias was kicking it off him as I lunged at him. Blood lust rose as I could smell

delicious demonic taint. Human thoughts buried under a tide of blood. Growling I snapped at his face, scoring it with gashes.

"You've lost your mind." Spikes and strands in black and red ripped and pulled me away.

A snarl as warm blood trickled down my chin. My back slammed into a guard, and I felt the crunch of my bone. Warm flesh rending under my claws as shorn away the metal armor. My tongue licked across his face as he tried to struggle in my arms. With a jerk I brought up my knee into human's back and a crack resounded. Joy, I never felt such joy. I dropped him, he no longer amused me.

More black spikes flew at them, and this time I seized them. "You're using demon magic against a demon." I wagged many finger back and forth. "Not very smart, silt-healer."

Tobias flashed his teeth jerking on the guards in, slicing through him and sends bits of him everywhere. I wanted to close my eyes, feel that guard die. Tobias was feeding off him his life force.

Instead I raced forward and jumped on Tobias. Magic sparked between us. Death perfumed the air with the most delightful scents. My teeth sliced into soft human flesh, it heated and burned down my face. My claws felt slick and wet as I slashed. The ground slammed into me as we rolled in the dirt.

A burning flash shot through my shoulder. Pain radiated outward as I could feel flame of my blood spring outward. I chortled with glee. Free, I was free of Aslair's chains. The silt-healer pressed against my flesh, eyes wide in terror.

Cold metal sliced into my side, I felt my life blood drain out. I balled up my fist and snapped into his face. My leg struck out behind knocking the man behind me down. A roar

erupted from him as I pounced on him. A rip, his armor was torn wide. He screamed the most delicious screams as I dug into his chest. The pulsing beat under my palm drew all my attention. Crackle, pop of bone was music to me. My blood burned him turning his skin red and blistered as I ripped out his heart. Once, twice it beat, the heart stopped. I stood and downed the heart in gulping bites.

The power flared out in me. I turned to Tobias, my tongue licking over my lips. His fear was acid in the air as a rippling black shield wrapped around him. "You are a demon. I can feel it." The shields thicken, and darkened. Black fire pounded at me.

I giggled as I absorbed into me. "Feed me more, silt-healer. Let me taste you." A dark red flame washed over his shield. It shattered into thousands shards of black glass.

He scrambled back. Glittering magic smacked against me. My skin burned and ached from each hit. I didn't stop. I strode forward and my claws raked across his chainmail. Blood burst outward. Tobias started to muttered, "Crasino, protect me, Crasino, raise me up."

A strike up lightning hit me throwing me back into grand melee of battle. I snapped up, but he was gone. "Coward. A puking coward," I hissed. My nose lifted and I could no longer smell him. He truly fled me. A roar wrenched out of my throat. I earned that kill.

My eyes shifted to the battlefield. And, I realized there were bodies to tear and rend. I clawed, attacked, and laughed. The Demonari cultist died, their blood caressing my skin. Their organs were filling my mouth. Their cries for mercy enriched my soul.

A knot of blue, sliver, and white drew my attention. Wave warriors, they'd provide more than a moment of entertainment. I charged, but one caught my attention. A golden warrior, wearing gleaming armor, enameled with blue. I knew him, "Rigmon," I said. A

paladin, an angelborn who was more, who made me promise to protect his spawn. Yes, he would be fun to play with.

I raised my voice to a shout that echoed across the field. "Rigmon, come here and prove your worth."

The massive claymore paused as he turned to me. He rode over on his massive warhorse. He came closer. "Aslair, what has happened to you?" His voice dripped with concern.

I sneered at him. "Aslair is gone, angelborn." If I had my way, she'd never come back. She was soft and weak. With screech I leapt onto the horse slashing at his helm.

A heavy, gauntleted hand wrapped around my arm. The bones ground down, cracking. A painful wash of golden power made me scream as he tossed me to the ground. As I fell I took the helm off jerking him back.

The horse kicked out, catching my hip. The bone snapped. It rang in my ears over and over. The blade whistled passed me. In an awkward lurch it missed me and cut through the muck. "Flame it." He sheathe massive blade and got off the horse. He grabbed the mace that swung at his side. "Let's dance then demonborn."

I lunged forward as the spikes cut into my flesh, my claws scored across his face. I licked the claw and spat. Angel blood's too rich in flavor. "You don't taste as good as I hoped."

He smirked at me. "I apologize for my lack." And the mace swung out again.

I caught it and threw it back at him. He compensated and swung again. Back and forth and muscles began to ache, and feel sore. In an act of desperation I drove at him. We

slammed together, but he kept his feet. Huge arms crushed the air out of my lungs. I struggled to escape. My claws dug in. The world darkened and dimmed. Before it was gone I heard a soft, feminine voice, "Where's Carthin?"

CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT

A horrible ripping sensation tore through my mind as I sat up. My shirt covered with blood where Aslair had stabbed me. "That whore." I whispered.

A relieved sigh caught my attention. Rigmon knelt beside me pressing Aslair's bracers to my chest. "Carthin, are you alright?"

"That quaking, flaming bitch tried to kill me." I'm not a trusting person. But, never would I imagine Aslair would betray me. At least she could have done a better job at killing me.

Isha's dark gold eyes regarded me with a shake of her head. "She wasn't trying to kill you Carthin. The bracers are enchanted. When she hit you, it put you into a deep coma, and healed you as well." Her fingers brushed black strands of hair out my face. "I'm so glad you're alive." A sudden lurch her arms wrapped me. To my utter surprised she sobbed

against my head.

My father stood up and peered at us, his eyes glossy. "Aslair, didn't kill you, or try to kill you." He frowned a bit. "Though, why she felt it necessary to stab you such a dramatic way, I don't have an answer too."

"You right, I'm far too beautiful to die in such a depressing way." I untangled myself from my sister grasp. In a purely impulsive action, I kissed her on the cheek.

Rigmon scowled this time. He never enjoyed my humor. "Do you know why?"

"Oh, I understand women enough. They like to hurt what they love." He detested not knowing why something happened. His need to control, to lead overwhelmed with his nearly pure blood. My compulsions were bad, his were something else.

"Carthin," He started.

"I want to talk to Aslair, before I say anything. I nearly died today. Can I not have one iota of privacy?" The magic words that always worked for my mother. Privacy, the only thing she ever asked from him.

A deep blush formed under the gold dusting on his body. "Fine, it is your life. You made it clear long ago I have no say in it." Then the blush faded and his golden eyes, so much like my own held me a steady gaze. "You can't see Aslair now."

"Why in the Silt not?" If she didn't try to kill me, why did he care? "Everyone needs to stop controlling me."

Isha shook her head the ringlets bouncing. They even shined in the dim light in the tent. "Carthin, not everything is about that. Aslair did something to herself." Her hand tightened around mine. "I'm not sure she'll recover."

What could have sedate, scholarly Aslair done to herself. "Explain," I said.

Rigmon brushed a finger across a gouge on his face. "She attacked me."

"Well, that's not a surprise given who you are." I've attacked him. Even for a Paladin of Al'tar'ia he was smug.

Isha narrowed her eyes at my father. The look could have set a lesser man on fire. "Go, I'll talk to him. You two will end up circling each other, and getting nowhere." She pointed at the exit with a tossed her head.

He shook his head and strode out. The tent seemed darker with him gone. "He's awfully shiny," I said in a dry voice.

"You are almost adorable, Carthin." Isha settled beside me in a folding, field chair. "Are you ready to listen?"

The first tendril of worry uncurled. Isha wasn't really the serious type. "Alright, tell me."

"I know Aslair had a lot of demon in her. What I didn't realize how close she kept that part of herself. After she stabbed you, she was forced to fight Tobias on her own. She isn't awake yet. If I had to guess she did it so she wouldn't accidentally kill you, when she let the demon out."

"What?" I shook my head. "That doesn't make sense. We aren't separate from ourselves. I'm not an angel and a human. I'm both."

"I'm certain for Aslair it is. For some reason, the demon isn't full apart of her. I don't know if it was because she grew up in the Unbidden, or some other reason. She let it out, and she was lost." Isha swallowed. Her slim finger flicked a strand of hair out of my face. "She

ate a man's heart. She cackled with glee as her bones were broken. Does that sound like the Aslair you know?"

I could feel my face cool as the blood rushed out. Aslair always seemed so thoughtful, quiet even. "Cackling?" I murmured I barely saw the woman laugh. In fact, only in short glorious bursts did she laugh. Eating a man's heart, I couldn't even summon the image in my mind.

Isha nodded. "Yes, for whatever reason the demon in her subsumed her. I hope. And, honestly, I would have sensed such corruption if it was truly her personality. The scrying spell would have definitely uncovered something. I'm sure she is torn in two, if she even realizes it, I can't tell you."

I was pissed about being stabbed in the heart. And, on top of that I was pissed that she didn't feel the need to tell me about it. A flash of memory of a dream, and my teeth grit together. Al'tar'ia had meddled. I knew it from the beginning, but still. She could have gotten me killed, either of them, "Flaming woman."

Isha lips twitched. "You say that with such contempt." Only my sister would find that amusing. "She might not realize that is a different from other planeborn. How much exposure did she have to other planeborn?"

"Not much," I admitted. "She might be insane permanently." It wasn't exactly a question. If a person was two people, but only in their mind that sounded like insanity to me.

Her eyes flicked away and came back somber. "I really don't know. I wish I could give you answer. We need to figure out more about Aslair's father. I never heard of a succubus who was not only fathered a child and was tossed out of Silt. Aslair might be the only one her

kind."

Nothing else really to talk about, I'd have to wait till she woke up. And from there my family would know if she was Aslair or demon. "How were the losses?"

"Less than we projected, the planeborn children got out fine. Also, several the employees, and some staff that didn't work for the Demonari surrendered after we the fighting died down. We lost fifty or so troops." Certain remoteness came into her voice. From before I knew she had to distant herself from it.

"Tobias, last thing I remember is fighting him?" The memory had suddenly burst upward from my subconscious.

Isha shook her head. "He took off. Aslair terrified him." She let that sink in. A silt-healer scared off something as mundane as a demonborn. That told me more than anything else.

"He was one sick bastard." I'd like to have been able to spit on his corpse. "Don't I have any injuries?" It dawned on me I didn't have any bandages, and I didn't really ache.

"We told you. The spell on her bracers it healed you. It seems she was relying on the magic for emergencies. She simply redirected it from a defensive spell to an aggressive one.

You can get up if you want. I bet you're hungry." Isha said with a grin.

"Right," the early conversation wiggled in my brain. "Yeah, I'm going to get up and get something to eat."

Isha held me out with strong arm and we walked out together. Field tents were scattered across the area. I could see a large mess hall with planeborn children stuffing their races nearby. As we made our way there I got companionable looks from the Wave members.

"That's unusual."

"I'll warn you now," Isha said. "They think the fact you did this mission, and almost died as a sign you are starting to embrace your scion status. Even father," She added.

A rage boiled up inside me. Of course, I did something good, so that meant I wanted to be a slave. This is why I couldn't talk to him. He couldn't just accept me the way I was made.

Mother always did. I remember her words. "My beautiful boy, you couldn't be more perfect."

"Daddy thinks I'm broken."

Mother hugged me and laughed. "He doesn't know what perfect is."

A warm hand hugged my shoulder. "Hey, what's wrong?"

It dawned on me I had stopped walking and clenched my fists. "Nothing, the usual sensual brooding I usually do."

"You are an idiot. Let's eat, and we can talk to the priest watching over Aslair." The scents wafting from the tent drew me in, and it wasn't long before I was settled in eating.

I saw the poor planeborn kid I'd choked unconscious and the one I cradled in my arms. A strange sensation settled on my chest thinking about it. The food was choked down quickly, and we headed out with Isha leading.

"Stay calm," Isha said as she steered us toward a silvery blue tent.

"The way you talk about me, you'd think I was unstable." I said in return. It wasn't going to run in and demand answers. And, I wasn't the type to get into a fight with a priest.

She gripped my arm with an affection squeeze. "You're impulsive, I worry is all." At

least, she tries to take the sting out of her distrust.

The tent has six guards around it. The flap is open as a priest wearing blue silver clothing of the Wave sits on a stool eyes closed. As we get closer I realize it is divided into two parts. A glowing ward is over separator. Al'tar'ia's tits they must think she's dangerous. The priest eyes flutter open. "Carthin, I am glad to see you well."

He was the same priest I'd known most of my life. The high priest of Al'tar'ia, Barin, is actually my half uncle on my mother's side. "Hey Uncle B, you know I'm far too pretty to die."

He smiled. "I don't think I do know that. When I saw earlier my heart almost stopped." Pain flickered across his face. "I truly thought you died. And, how would I explain that to your mother on the other side?"

I'll admit the thought sobered me up. Barin and Sethila had escaped politics in the South together, they were close. Those dark eyes watched me knowing I understood. "Yeah, she would gut punched you to start."

"Sands, how right you are." His accent thickened. Then, he settled down the dark Southern Kingdom features adding gravity to his expression. "Your friend, I'm keeping her in a coma for now."

I swallowed. "What do you think, will she come back sane?" For some reason, I'd grown too really like Aslair. It is probably why I took her apparent betrayal so hard.

Barin looked downward. Magic sparked at his hands a few times. "Her will is strong. It is fighting her demonic nature. There is purity to her, a golden purity, but there is something unnatural about the division. If she makes through the night, I suspect she'll awaken herself. At some point to she'll need to meld her two halves back together. A

person is not meant live as two halves."

Tonight, I thought, tonight I'll pray to Al'tar'ia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

My mind was a battlefield. In this black empty void, I stood with myself and the demon inside me. I wore the robe of the Unbidden. The demon naked skin dark red, eyes glowing red, and blood splattered across her flesh. "The power we could have."

"I don't want that kind of power." My stomach roiled. What I did when the demon had control? Never again had I wanted this to happen.

She laughed throwing her head back. "You knew what I would do. Just like when you took your first lover. The power washed over you. It was so good. Deny it all you want. I know the truth."

"You know your own truth, nothing more." Here I was in my mind, arguing with myself. I'd truly lost it.

"I won't go away, Aslair. I am you." The demon could always sense when I was weak.

"You have nothing to do with me." I wasn't a foul creature who ate human flesh, and drank blood. "I am mother's daughter."

Demon smiled, her full pouty lips mocking me. "You are your father's daughter. You always will be. I'll let you have control, because the Al'tar'ia 'children' won't let you wake up if I'm in control. But, eventually, you'll give in. A part of you knows I don't lie, because we are the same."

She faded from my mind. I knew she didn't lie. We were the same. Yet, we weren't. And, I did crave the power. I craved too much, I craved everything. That was my weakness. I dropped to my knees and started to bawl. I so very tired of fighting. I wanted to simply be. Other demonborn seemed serene compared to me, why was so hard to hold onto my humanity? I wanted my mother to be proud of me. I wanted to be proud of me. Was I always to destined to fail?

Finally, I sat up on my heels and the world shifted. Now, I was dreaming I could feel change in the texture of my mind. The priest released the spell keeping me under. I must have fully returned to myself.

Then, everything shifted again. The red skinned seducer stepped into the space. "Well, how good to see you back to your old self, Aslair."

"Go away, get out of my head." By Silt, could I never have any peace?

He smiled. The silky trail of raven hair flowed behind him as he walked toward me. "You didn't need my help after all. What resourceful thing you are." Those red eyes flicked over me. "Your little episode has kicked Gorinth out of your head. I can't sense him at all. Interesting, I wonder if you are really two different people in one body." He knelt down beside me.

The desire to touch him nearly overwhelmed me. My energy must be low, because I naturally repelled seducer powers. "Leave," I summoned up my magic to toss him out. Nothing happened, "Thundering flame of Silt," I cursed.

"You are too worn out to get rid of me so easily. Besides, you did allow me to tie us together. Sloppy on your part, but since it is to my advantage, I won't complain." He

sounded so damn companionable. As if he was not invading my mind at the darkest moment of my life.

"What do you want?" Never before had I felt so trapped.

He reached for me, but I jerked back before he touched me. "I want to get to know you. You are quite fascinating. Too bad we demons breed in a brood. I'd be nice if I could truly call you my niece." Duikian tipped his head to the side. "You even realize how much life would be, if you simply gave in. Yet, you prefer fighting what you are."

"I am not a demon." My mind shuddered with the force of that statement.

He chewed on his lips. "Are you so sure?"

A wave of black anger hit me, and I threw him out. "I'm not a demon." I screamed and sat up in a field cot. My heart beat like a caged bird in my chest. Agony existed in every limb. The panting sounded harsh to even my ears.

A quiet conversation, and the flap opened and a man who looked more Southern Kingdom than Carthin stepped in. He wore the outfit of an Al'tar'ia priest. "You kept me in the coma."

"Yes, I did. I thought it best. Your mind was beyond frail." There was something very soothing about his voice. You could hear it settle into your bones.

No point in arguing, my mind remained fragile. "Why didn't you kill me?" That's what I wanted to know, needed to know. I'd become a monster. The things I did could never be removed from my head.

The man came closer and sat on the stool next to me. "Many reasons," He gave me a solemn smile. "Do you think you think you deserve death?"

"I'm a monster." For years I fought becoming a demon, and today I gave in. To save Carthin, to defeat Tobias, which I failed to do. And, I didn't know if it was worth it.

Warm, wrinkled hands too mine, and the man shook his head. "You are no monster. You the daughter of a Glim, you are a unique creation. What we must discover is why you are in two parts."

"How do you know whose daughter I am?" I might be distraught, but I'll wasn't stupid.

The man grinned. "Carthin did not tell you, but Isha is the scryer for Al'tar'ia. Nothing about you will ever be hidden from her. Are you ready for visitors? Carthin has have been antsy to see you since he awoke."

Part of me screamed no, never again. I wanted to slip out in the night and never come back. Yet, I needed to explain to him what happened. I owed him. One might not see me saving his life that way, but I'd taken away his choice.

The man stood up and let Carthin in. They exchanged a look full of hidden meaning. Even though, I didn't know what any of the meanings were. Carthin looked good, better, he must have found to way to feed his planar addiction. He settled on the tool and let those beautiful, golden orbs burn into me.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you everything." He didn't respond. "The becoming a demon thing wasn't in my plans."

"Oh good, you aren't a completely foolish. I'll note that down." The words brittle as he jerked his head away. "Do you think it is a good idea to go into a dangerous situation and not tell your partner all of it?"

"It's personal." Anger rose up, I knew in the wrong, but Carthin wasn't perfect. "And,

the fact you didn't tell me you were a scion of all things. A flaming, thunder headed scion, was what? A miscalculation?"

We were both quiet breathing hard. Then, Carthin laughed. That really pissed me off. "Do you find so amusing about this conversation?"

"We are kind of a like. Each of us keeping our secrets. Yet, we both trusted the other. And, we were really irritated when we found the other to be lying." He gave me his lovable lopsided grin. "At least our secrets are out. Be easier to work together next time."

"You want to keep working with me?" As embarrassing as it was the octave of my voice went several pitches. I couldn't believe it.

Carthin eyes whirled and in the tent his scion mark glowed. "You got me out of their alive. Not many people would have bothered. And, as much as I hate her," He swallowed. "She's been whispering in my dreams. All those whispers are about you."

"What does she say?" What did the Goddess of Water want to do with me? I can't imagine any reason for it.

His eyes closed as in pained. "I can't remember." He opened them oh so very slowly. "You saved my life. And you risked your sanity to do it. Do you think I'd really hold that against you?"

"Alright, no reason to quit the Ethereal now. I did I take down the Demonari." My poor attempt to lighten the mood.

"Right, we are heroes now, time to enjoy the fame." Carthin said. His eyes wrinkled at the edges. "To the future," He picked up a canteen took a sip. And, then he handed it over to me. I sipped and I felt a bond growing between us.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Al'tar'ia stood in front of a twisted humanoid with blacken flesh. His eyes glowed red and his teeth jagged mess. "Your pet got in my way." All around them silent waterfalls crashed behind them.

"He isn't my pet his is my scion, the heir to my moral power in the world." Al'tar'ia replied her cool eyes serene.

Crasino snarled. "He cast you aside. He hates you. He doesn't want you. Yet, you coddle him like a dog. He's your pet, God of Water. A pet."

"I'm the god of freedom. He has to choose to serve." She waited her hair waving gently in the air.

The broken line of his teeth flashing as he snarled in contempt. "You still whisper to him, I know you do."

"Are you offering advice on how to take care of my scion?" Her eyes crinkled as she lifted a brow.

Crasino stalked back and forth, his fists curling. "And, that seducer who is frigid of all things. You know about them both. And, you planned this."

"I did not. I offered guidance, and I let them determine fate. Elenmitis wrote the decree. Humans make their own fate, each human is a god. That is part of your code as well, since they created demons and angels." She held out her hands palms up.

Fire flared up around Crasino's body. "Do you think this is over, Al'tar'ia? It's not. My last breath will be used against you." He growled. "I won't forget this." He burned up and vanished.

Al'tar'ia smiled to herself. "No, It is merely the beginning."

<<The End>>