

Part One

My delicate hands brushed the silk sheets of my bed when I climbed in. My mother's golden hair skimmed against my cheek when she tucked the wooly blanket under my chin. She held a dusty, old book in her hand.

"This one is called *The Hunter and the beast*," she gently said.

I sunk deep into my cushions.

"There once was a man called "Hunter". He was known by many titles. Marcus, the runaway prince, brutal sea raider, and The Hunter of Demons.

On one fateful night, Marcy, only 18 years old, had taken a great beating from her Aunt Ruth. Into the forest she went, to hide from her aunt. By the time Marcy thought she had lost her, she realized that she had lost herself. She wandered in the forest for hours.

It was then when she saw him, the man in a black coat, The Hunter.

"*Please help me*," she shivered in the cold. Marcy told The Hunter of her circumstances. He agreed to bring her along out of pity.

One afternoon, while climbing a mountain together, Marcy had made a wrong step. She clutched her sprained ankle and wailed. With a crack of his wrist, The Hunter healed Marcy's ankle.

The Hunter crouched down to her height, with a serious expression. He would regret his words, but she had to hear them. "*It's time for you to go back home.*"

She stared into The Hunter's dangerous eyes. Her heart became a beating drum. "*What are you?*" She knew the answer, she wanted to hear it from his mouth.

The man lowered his head. He hated the glimpse of her expression. *"I haven't told you exactly what I hunt. It should stay that way, do you understand?"*

Marcy was speechless as she nodded.

"Turn back," The Hunter commanded. *"I will no longer allow you to be wrapped in my world."*

"I'M STAYING!" she stomped her foot into the rocky mountain. *"Please, I can't go back to that woman. I WON'T."* If Marcy had known anything with such certainty, he was better than her.

"I am not your salvation," he sharply spoke.

She stared at him with Beady eyes.

He moved closer to the edge of the cliff. A sudden dread swept over Marcy. Her eyes widened at the sight of his back. In a second she would lose this man. Deep down she would regret this day forever.

"Hunter!" She shouted. *"I'm coming!"*

She raced to pursue him. Every rock on the mountain stabbed at her feet. The leaf of his coat whipped like a flag. She latched onto it. In a flash, they disappeared."

"Where'd they go?" I asked my mother.

She shifted the book in her hand. "You'll have to let me Finish.

"Although their days together had only been two months, Marcy's complexion suggested it had been four years. The young woman had blossomed in complexion. The Hunter had grown fonder of her each day.

As Marcy weaved through the marketplace, a beautiful necklace caught her eye. She reached for it, but another snatched it before she.

"You have The Hunter on your tail," the young man murmured in her ear.

"I'm aware of what he is," she coolly moved away from the young man.

"I can help you escape."

"I don't need to escape. He won't hurt me."

"Why would he spare you? Check his bag," the man called, *"you'll see."*

That night as The Hunter lay asleep, Marcy considered a bag search. After an hour of rustling in her bed, Marcy finally looked through The Hunters bag. In the side pocket, she pulled out the necklace she had seen in the marketplace.

It didn't come easily. She pulled on the chain harder. Attached to it was a small vial of poison. Marcy flinched. The bottle and necklace lunged at the floor. It clattered loud enough to wake The Hunter.

"What are you doing?" The Hunter's voice was flat.

Marcy picked up the bottle, *"Is this for me?"*

The Hunters lips didn't move. They didn't have to his eyes said it all.

"You're going to kill me," Marcy whispered.

"Marcy won't die? Will she?" I asked my mother.

"You'll have to let me read to find out," My mother continued. "Marcy had run away,

"Wait!" The Hunter called, *"don't go."* It seemed that The Hunter could no longer be without Marcy's company.

Marcy went back to the marketplace, she didn't know where else to go. The man from before caught her arm.

"Who are you?" She demanded, *"how did you know about the poison?"*

"Because that's what The Hunter does. He kills people like you and me," he jabbed a finger into her chest. *"What's your name?"*

"I asked you first," Marcy crossed her arms.

"My name's Evander," he sighed, *"now yours."*

"Marcy."

A laugh escaped his lips, *"You're Marcy? Thank goodness I found you."*

"What do you want with me?" Marcy asked.

"Truthfully, I'm your brother. I'm here to take you home," Evander extended his arm.

"No! I'm not going back to Aunt Ruth!"

"Aunt Ruth? No, I'm taking you to father."

"My mother told me my father was dead." Marcy pulled away.

"She lied," his frustration showed in his face. He brushed his shoulder-length hair back and took a deep breath. *"We better get going, we have a long journey."*

"Marcy, don't," The Hunter cut in front of Evander. His eyes softened when he looked at Marcy. *"please?"*

Marcy pushed past him, *"I've made my decision, I don't need you anymore."*

"I'll have to kill you if you do," The Hunter warned.

"You'll kill her anyway," Evander rebuked.

And so Marcy left with her new family. They journeyed for two days. A cave was hidden at the foot of the mountain. *"This is the realm of the dark lands,"* Evander told her.

"But that place is evil," Marcy backed away from the cave.

"You'll learn to like it," he shrugged and pulled her forward. She struggled under his grip. Eventually, she willingly stepped into the darkness. The cave opened up into a lively mine. Goblins and other foul creatures dug for beautiful red jewels and forged heavy weapons.

Evander lead Marcy deeper into the cave. Two men guarded a set of heavy doors. Inside was a demon, who sat on a throne. *"Excellent work my son. We will discuss your reward in private."*

"Why am I here?" Marcy demanded.

"I've been searching for you, Marcy." The demon roared. As he walked toward her, his heavy feet shook the cavern. Each step grew smaller and smaller as his horns and tail disappeared until he had turned into a decent looking man. *"Why would a demon king leave his heir with humans?"*

"Me, queen of all demons? But I am human," Marcy was baffled.

"Only partially. I can see, you are not mortal, great power runs through your veins," the king circled his young daughter.

"You can't do this, father. How can you let her be queen?" a half cat demon came out of the shadows. She was Marcy's jealous sister, who craved to be queen more than anything.

"My choice has been made," their father's voice boomed throughout the cavern.

"I'll kill that wretched demon slayer," she pleaded. *"Then you won't deny me what is rightfully mine!"*

"Freya, you know better than to ask for my kill," he calmly chastised.

"Yes, father, my mistake," she bowed but her resentment raged throughout her blood.

While the royal family discussed Marcy's terms to become queen, The Hunter had hidden himself and watched. But even he could not be overlooked by Evander.

"Father," he called, *"he's here. The Hunter is here."*

"He's finally here," The king breathed deeply. He grew larger than a four-story building. *"The one called The Hunter is standing in my court. Why have you come oh powerful slayer?"* The Demon King roared.

"I've come to end your reign of terror!" The Hunter pointed his hefty sword at The Demon King, *"and all of those to come."* His eyes had shifted to Marcy.

The king and the slayer had a long battle which Marcy could no longer bear.

"Stop!" she cried, *"stop fighting!"* She stood between the two.

"Move Marcy, I swear, I will cut a path through you," The Hunter wiped his brow.

"You don't mean that," Marcy whined.

"Dare I say it. Listen to him," the king demanded.

"Don't hurt him," Marcy cried. *"Please, father, I love this man."*

"Traitor!" Freya flew towards Marcy with a twisted knife. "You don't deserve to be queen." She lodged the dagger into her heart. Blood rushed down Marcy's already red dress.

The Hunter dropped his sword and hung onto the dying girl. His face was stained with tears and blood. *"If you would have only stayed..."*

"If she had stayed, she would have lived a lifetime trying to win your heart."

"What happens next?" I've sat up in my bed.

"I don't know," my mother closed the book, "the story was never finished."

"What do you mean, you don't you know? What happened to Marcy and her Hunter?" I curled my lip and pouted.

"I don't know dear," my mother closed the book a little too forcefully.

"But why?" I scrunch my eyebrows as if it would make her tell me.

"The author didn't write it down," she sighed.

"But why does Marcy have to die? The king even said she was immortal."

"The king was wrong. She was born from the womb of a human. That doesn't make you immune to sharp objects," she shook her head. "How do you know what that word means anyway? You're only eight."

"And three quarters," I corrected her. "Mr. Howell is a good teacher, but his books are better," I smiled mischievously and braced myself for a beating.

"Have you been learning anything in your martial arts class?" My mother groaned.

"I try," I avert my eyes and fidget with my blanket.

"Reina Oshiro, I pay good money for those classes."

"But they don't interest me much, I'd rather learn about astronomy," my voice trailed as my eyes wandered to the window.

"You want to look at the stars? Sleep outside tonight!"

"But mother, it might snow."

"Your books don't teach you how to survive in the cold?"

"No, I won't be able to see the stars, and I haven't read that one yet," I retorted.

“Good, you should be playing with the other kids instead,” she pointed at me with an accusing finger.

“But I’m only allowed to go to the martial arts school. Do you know how many girls are in my class? One, and that’s me!” I threw my hands in the air.

“What’s wrong with the boys in your class?” My mother’s eyebrow arched.

“They smell, and that’s not the least of their problems,” I bore my teeth and scrunched up my nose.

“So they’re all bad, right?”

“Yes!” Except for one, which I wouldn’t have told her even if she bribed me with sweet bread.

“Not even one good one? She arched both eyebrows.

“Well...” I scratched my burning face. I couldn’t hide it.

“Is it Chiko?” She beamed.

I shook my head.

“Hansuke?”

“No!” I turned over in my bed to prevent her from seeing my hot, rosy cheeks.
“Stop being so nosy.”

“I’m sorry. Please keep attending your classes, you’ll thank me later,” she kissed the back of my head, “Goodnight sweetheart.”

“Can you leave the book?” I pleaded. “I want to take a look at it again.”

“Alright, but I better not catch you with your light on after midnight,” my mother warned.

“You won’t, I promise.”

I flipped through the last part of the story again. There was more. By the end of it, my stomach was queasy. Evander had taken up a sword and slaughtered everyone.

I slept like the mountain that night. Its peaks were blistered by ice. Unaware of the molten simmering beneath its chambers. The smoke rose silently. Slow enough to char your lungs before feeling the heat of the...

Fire!

My house was on fire.

I jumped out of bed. Orange and red flames crackled above me. My ceiling produced endless waves of smoke. I choked as I inhaled them. I felt as though I were in the furnace of hell. My once blue walls had started to crumble. I slid my door open and made for the hall. "Mother!" I called "where are you!" I stopped by my grandmother's room. The smoke piled in when I opened the door. My grandmother lay asleep. I ran to her side. "Grandmother, wake up," I cried.

"Reina?" her eyes parted. "What's wrong? Why is there so much smoke in here?" Her voice was raspy as she waved the smoke away with her hand.

"Grandmother, The house is on fire!"

"Where's your mother?"

Her tangled grey hair sprung up when she tumbled out of bed. My grandmother stood an inch taller than me. She raced into the hallway on shaky knees, "Alaine!" my grandmother coughed between each call.

My mother came from her room "what happened?" she coughed.

"My room is on fire."

"We need to get out of this house," my grandmother wheezed.

“The book!” My mother groaned “it was in Reina’s room.”

“Nevermind the book, we have to leave,” My grandmother yelled, “Now!”

“Go, take Reina. I need that book,” my mother rushed back into my room.

“Alaine, no!”

“Mother!” I called. My grandmother pulled me toward the front door before I could run after her.

“How could she,” I cried, “for a fairytale.”

“That is no fairytale,” my grandmother huffed, “that is your ancestral history.”

“That story is real?”

My grandmother nodded.

My mother came running towards us with the book tucked under her arm. Her kimono had been cinched by the flames. Once we reached the door, my grandmother’s frail legs gave out on her. The flames had extended into the hallway and made part of the ceiling collapse. Our hands parted as a pile of wood and ash fell on us.

A bouquet of flames didn’t hesitate to flurry onto my kimono, burying deeper into my chest and arm. My mother rushed to brush the flame and debris away.

My grandmother held my shaking body as mother rushed for the door. Her fingers trembled while fumbling with the door. When she pushed it open, her whole body froze. The door rattled as she slammed it.

“How did they find us!” She screamed while rushing us toward the back door.

Glancing back at the door, I rubbed my eyes and turned around. A man was arched in the doorway. His bow was ready to release an arrow. This time the arrow flew towards me. My mother grabbed my wrist and dragged me out of the way. The arrow

whooshed past my face by an inch and pinned my grandmother to the wall. The arrow was lodged into her arm. She wailed as my mother tried to pry it out, blood gushed down the wooden panel.

Covering my ears, I squeezed my eyes shut. I curled into a ball and began to rock myself. Why would crazy men with arrows target my family? I wasn't convinced it had anything to do with my father. He was a war hero, he died that way, four years ago.

When I dared to open my eyes, a clear path to the back door was laid before me. I clutched my aching arm and chest, determined to reach the back door. I slipped on the bamboo flooring as I ran. With my good arm, I opened the living room panel. Smoke piled out, rushing into my lungs and burning my eyes. My knees hit the ground. I willed myself to look up. The back door was more than an arms width away. I coughed while I crawled. I looked back halfway through the living room. My grandmother was motionless on the floor. A man with fiery red eyes held my mother by the throat.

Smoke made my voice stifle when I tried to scream. The man crushed her thin neck in his claws. Blood oozed out her throat and rushed down her nightgown. She fell to the floor like a feather. I scurried to the door. My hand grasped the edge. My weak arms couldn't make it budge. My ears perked at the sound of heavy footsteps. The dreadful man wielded a sword.

As he approached me, my heart wanted to break from my chest. I took a deep breath, which only made it worse. More smoke filled my sore lungs. My eyes watered and trickled down my cheeks.

The door finally flew open. My mouth curved up but my heart sank when my eyes settled on the figure standing in the doorway. Their face was clouded by the smoke.

Their giant hands caught me before I jumped back into the sword of the red-eyed man. I jerked away from the smoke masked man. When I got a whiff of fresh air, I collapsed on the icy ground.

Mr. Howell pulled me to my feet, and we raced toward the road.

"I saw the smoke and came as soon as I could. Where is your mother?"

I shook my head. My tears were like ice in the cold night air. "My mother and my grandmother," I swallowed hard, "They didn't make it."

Not before long, the archer hunted us down. His arrow was ready for us. Before I could blink, Howell thrust his sword into the man.

"That was your favorite sword," I wiped my runny nose on my sleeve.

"I can find a better one," he told me.

"Where will we go?"

"Far away."

"Is Tokyo far enough?"

"Major cities are off limits."

Running along the dirt road felt like a lifetime had gone by. Snowflakes fluttered onto my eyelashes. It was no time to be smiling but I couldn't help it. I was right about the snow.

We made our way to the train station.

"Two tickets please," Mr. Howell told the man at the desk box. We were given two tickets to Ueda. The trip was long and boring. When we were finally in Ueda, there were two men dressed similarly to those at my house. They were waiting outside the train doors.

“Mr.Howell...”

“I know. Head to the back of the train.”

We ducked into the crowd.

“We should find new clothes,” Howell sighed. “Something plain, preferably.”

We passed by dress shops with beautiful kimonos. Some of them even had western styles. I stopped to admire one.

“This way, Reina. Those will make us stand out.”

Howell led me away from the poofy gown.

I settled for a traditional solid blue kimono. Howell rented a modest apartment where we could practice our fighting skills, and I could be homeschooled.

I was rarely allowed to leave the house, where I watched five winters past by from my window. When spring came around, that year, I turned thirteen.

“I suppose you are wondering why I have you train like a soldier,” Howell asked. His once seamless face, had weared down drastically.

“It’s so I can defend myself from the men who killed my mother.”

“Yes, but it’s also to prepare you.”

He paced around the training room, placing wooden fighting sticks and swords back into place. The soft roar of the river gently flowed through paper windows. A candle illuminated each samurai painting. The only thing Howell was able to recover from his studio. They hung high on the walls.

“For what?” I slouched, crossing my arms.

“When you defeat their leader, I want you to be as prepared as you can physically and mentally get.”

He jabbed my forehead with his elbow. I wobbled and tumbled to the ground.

"Their leader?" I stammered. Rubbing my elbows, I slowly rose.

"Yes, he is a creature of the dark, his name is Evander."

"I can't fight him! He's a monster."

"It's the only way for you to stop being hunted. Let's begin the next step to your success," we trudged out of the studio, "you are ready now."

I leaned into the grass green sofa. My fingertips brushed the velvet fabric. Gripping it was all I could do to keep from shaking. My eyes met Howell's before dropping to the jagged straw rug.

"But, he terrifies me," my voice wouldn't go as far as a whisper.

I took the dusty old book from where it sat on the shelf. After all the years, it smelled of smoke. A corner was burnt off. "I will never be ready." The book slipped through my fingers and hit the ground with a thud.

I went straight to my room. After my studies, I went back to the bookshelf and reread the storybook my mother had given me.

With a swipe of his hands, The Demon King and sent Freya flying. She hit the wall and died instantly. While the king and Hunter fought, Evander took his sister's sword and killed The Hunter. "A life for a life, father you're next."

I shivered and closed the book.

Howell rested a hand on my shoulder. He handed me a small book. "You might want this for what you'll be learning next."

"What's that?" I ran my fingers over the textured spine. "L'exercice," my mouth stumbled across the foreign tongue.

“Exorcism.”

“How am supposed to extinguish of evil spirits?” I threw book at the wall.

Howell retrieved it. “By reading this.” He shoved the book back into my hands. “I suggest you do it quickly. I scheduled us a gig for tomorrow morning.”

“But it’s already midnight,” I groaned.

“Read fast,” Howell went to bed.

I opened the book and began to read. Some words were indecipherable. Sounding them out was scrutinizing. I ripped Mr.Howell’s door open. “Could you please find me a book in Japanese?” I clenched my teeth.

“Learn the language. You’ll need it,” he slurred and went back to sleep.

“I can’t learn it by just reading it!” I slammed his door.

I sat down and opened the book again. I tried focusing on each individual word. As I read, my French became smoother. I bang to have a complete understanding. When dawn broke, I was on the last page.

“You’re done with the book?” Howell stretched in his bedroom doorway. “Get ready, they will be expecting you soon.”

I laid on the floor and closed my eyes “Can’t I have a few hours of sleep?” The hardwood surprisingly felt comfortable.

“No, this is the most desirable time for exercisims,” my Howell folded his arms.

“Then we can go tomorrow after I’ve rested,” I rolled over.

“Get up Reina,” he pulled on my arm. “We’re leaving now!”

The room around me swirled as he pulled me from the ground, giving me a massive headache. "Hold on," I steadied myself. "Why do I have to become a stupid exorcist anyway's?"

"It will give you insight for more important things." He moved his hands as he talked, like a crazy conspiracist.

I rolled my eyes and retrieved my hairpins. Running my hands through my heavy dark hair, and twisting it into a bun.

"Would you hurry up" He urged.

I skipped to the porch and slipped on my shoes, "I'm ready now."

"Mrs. Takashima's son is very sick. He had a bad dose of moldy bean custard," Howell informed me while walking down the street. "It was easy for the spirit to possess him."

The sound of Howell's knuckles rapping on the door echoed throughout the house. The woman cautiously opened the door. Her head whipped in all directions before leading us in.

"Thank you for coming, not many have been enthusiastic about helping my son." Mrs. Takashima walked us to the back room. Before opening the door, she fell to her knees. "Please help me, because of that spirit I can't even afford to eat two meals."

Howell wiped her eyes. He kept his head low to keep from hitting the ceiling.

"We'll do everything we can to help," he gently raised her to her feet.

Her son sat in a large fluffy chair while he stuffed his cheeks with precious fish and rice. My lips curled in disgust.

"Daichi? You have guests," his mother squeaked and cleared her throat.

"I told you I wanted to be alone!" He growled.

"But they have come a very long way. You won't turn them away will you?"

"Get out!" Daichi's face was red hot.

"Sweetheart..."

The lights began to flicker, "Get out! Get out!"

Mrs. Takashima rushed us out. "This was a mistake."

"Please let us try," Howell pleaded, "he needs help."

"Are you sure she can do it?" She looked at me hesitantly.

"I'm positive," Howell gleamed.

"I'll try," I gulped.

I shuddered, slowly making my way back to the door. It creaked as I slid it open.

"I thought I told you to stay out." Daichi didn't lift his eyes from the book he had held.

I froze, someone pushed me further into the room. I glanced back as the door was shut behind me. The boy's eyes snapped at me. My mouth quivered as I searched my mind for words. Anything would do. But they wouldn't come.

He stood. I felt for the door and tried to push it open. It wouldn't budge. Possessed Daichi stepped towards me. I spun around and began clawing at the door, gaining an abundance of splinters in the process.

"Open the door," I screeched, "I can't do this." There was no reply. Daichi turned me to meet his eyes. He pressed a hand on the door next to my head. I tried to focus on my breathing. His face came closer to mine.

"You can't kill me, you're a demon slayer, your efforts will be useless."

The stench of rotting fish paralyzed me. Word's still wouldn't come.

"You should leave before this becomes personal. Practice killing demons, instead. You're old enough." Daichi let up.

"Why do you ask me to do such things?" word's rush out of my mouth.

"Demons are spirit's fiercest competition," he glared. "It'll be a thousand times easier to find hosts with them gone."

"Neither of you should be possessing the living. You've had your turn, you should go back to where you came from," I spat.

"I've been a spirit from the beginning!" He raged in my face, fire flashed in my eyes. "And, I'm tired of people telling me to leave."

I started chanting french words I had learned from the exorcism book.

"Your words are weak," he clawed my face and threw me to the ground. "You are weak! You will never defeat the king of evil!" He laughed maliciously. "I would do a better job," he paused in thought and looked at me with a brilliant smile. A mist extracted from the ground below him. A spirit's face wisped towards me as Daichi dropped to the ground.

I covered my face and let out a scream. My whole body shook as my inside's began to burn. I grabbed my itching throat. My hand's spontaneously fell and pushed me off the ground. I ripped the door open. Mrs. Takashima rushed past me.

"He's cured," she smiled through her tears.

"I knew you could do it," Howell approached me.

"It was easy, all it took was a little convincing," I heard myself say.

"What did you do with the spirit?"

“Where he belongs.”

“Excellent,” Howell couldn’t contain his excitement, “we shall make a great feast tonight. I’ll buy a duck from the market.”

“A duck is hardly a feast.”

“Thank you so much. How can I repay you.”

“Lots of money.”

Howell jabbed me in the gut, “Your gratitude is all that is needed.”

“That was stupid of you,” I snorted once we left. “We could have made bank.”

“You won’t always be rewarded for doing the right thing,” he countered. “It’s a good lesson to learn young.”

“I’ve got my whole life to learn crummy stuff like that,” I grumbled.

“It’s ignorant to postpone positive habits. You might regret not making them now for the rest of your life.”

“I know exactly what I’ll be regretting,” I mumbled under my breath.

Part Two

That night, the spirit, in my body, snuck out of the house. He walked me several blocks before stopping outside a large fence. With a knife, taken from home, my hand's picked the gates lock.

If you break into someone's house, you're going to get caught.

"Relax," the spirit spoke, "I'm good at this."

The heavy metal gate made an eerie screech as it was swung open. I walked a stone path down a beautiful garden. The path had bamboo fences leading up to the house. Two cherry blossom trees acted as an archway at the end of the garden. Their sweet scent calmed my nerves. Walking past the lush pink flowers, I had a full view of the house. It was a mansion, three stories tall.

"This house belongs to the third richest person in Uedon. It also just so happens to be occupied by two powerful demons. Now I finally have a host good enough to match their strength." I took a deep breath, "a good night for revenge."

He snuck us into the house through a first floor-window, tiptoed up the stairs, and slowly pushed the door to the master bedroom open. My stomach twisted as I took in a whiff of strong whiskey. The wallpaper was a rich orange. A beautiful vanity sat in one corner of the room. He went to the immense bed like a ghost and unsheathed my sword. The sheets were pulled back empty. My head whipped at the creek of the door.

A tall man with little hair approached me through the darkness. "We meet again, Aiko."

"You knew I'd come."

"It didn't pass my mind. I could hear you all the way downstairs."

I moved swiftly toward the man with my sword.

"You wouldn't hurt an old man would you?"

"You're lucky that man is rich. Come out so we can have a fair fight."

"This hardly seems like a fair fight. You're going to let me hurt a little girl?" He chuckled "You really are evil."

"Argh!" A woman jumped out of the closet, wielding a giant ax. She swung it towards me and I lunged back to the bed.

"Have fun," the man waved.

I jumped off the bed. My breath was heavy as I ran towards the door. The woman jumped in front of me. She heaved the ax an inch away from my face. My heart raced as the rush of air sent me backward. The ax carved deep into the wooden floor. While she struggled to pull it free, I jumped behind her. Eyeing a path for my sword, straight through her head.

You can't kill her!

My yell rang through my head.

With her gone, I won't have to spend so much money on a wife. Came the spirit's response.

I forbid you.

The spirit ignored me and thrust the sword upward.

NO! I sidestepped away. My sword fell from my hands.

"Are you crazy? You'll lose your head!" The spirit yelled.

“You’re the one who’s about to lose a head,” the woman yanked the ax out of the floor. I dodged her blow and quickly obtained my sword. I swiped sideways and cut the woman’s skirt.

“You almost cut my leg,” she squealed.

I wanted to run away but I had no control over my own body. The woman came at me again. This time I jumped over her ax. My sword extended to her upper arm. Her ax crashed to the floor as she wailed.

“Playing dirty isn’t nice.”

The woman dropped to the floor cold. A demon emerged in her place. She grabbed hold of the ax’s hilt, almost immediately throwing it at me. My shaky knees dropped to the floor. The ax flew straight through the door. The demon grabbed my hair. My bun undid itself and I was lifted off the floor, My arm whipped the sword frantically at her.

“Do you still think this is a fair fight?” The man from before spoke through the gap in the door. “What possessed you into bringing a child to a man’s fight?” He cackled.

I swung from side to side while the demon laughed. “Put me down,” I yelled, “then you’ll see how fair this fight is.”

A red dagger flew through the window, cutting my hair free from the demon's grasp. I landed on my feet and reclaimed my sword. I lunged forward into the beast’s leg. She fell to the ground, screeching in pain. I took her moment of weakness and ended her.

“No!” the man roared as he transformed into an ugly monster. “I’m going to make you sorry for that.”

I readied my sword for him. An arrow sliced through the air and knocked it out of my hand. As I dived for it I saw a bodyguard through the window, perched in a tree.

Forget him. Let's get out of here. I pleaded with the spirit.

I'm not leaving until this house is mine.

I pounced at the Demon and he backhanded me.

We were hardly strong enough to beat the other one. I pleaded.

I can do this. The spirit forced me to my feet.

And beat the guards too?

I won't have to, they'll think I did.

They'll still go after me!

I willed myself to run under the demon's legs. The spirit stuck my sword out and cut him. I swung the door open and the spirit turned me back toward the demon. As he stomped toward me, I could hear guards coming up the stairs. I ran back towards the window. The spirit took wobbly steps away, I moved closer. The demon and arrows flew towards me, I ducked. They lodged into the wall with a thousand thuds. The spirit swung my sword toward the demon. He knocked it out of my hand. I moved backward as an arrow was shot at me.

Get out of my body! I screamed a phrase I learned in that old French book. All at once, there was peace. The spirit was gone. There was no time to rejoice. The demon lunged at me, knocking me to the ground.

I thought up a way to escape as my life flashed before my eyes. The doorway was surrounded by guards. I glanced at the window again, the path was clear. I ran and jumped. Grabbing a blossom tree branch, I dropped in the garden soil.

“After her!” The demon’s voice rang through the air.

I raced down the garden path. It wasn’t long before an arrow or two sliced through the air. As I ran down an empty street, the peaceful night became crowded with footsteps. When I turned a hard corner, somebody yanked me into a dark alleyway. Their hand gagged my mouth. Once the guards past, they let go. I turned, Howell’s pointy eyes peered at me.

“What happened?” He demanded.

“Mr. Howell,” I wiped my face but it didn’t stop the tears from flowing. “That spirit possessed me and I- he made me kill a demon. I couldn’t do anything. I was so scared.”

“You were possessed?” He blinked. “I just thought you were grumpy,” he rubbed his forehead in thought. “Well, we can’t go home now. Word of you will spread like wildfire,” He sighed “How would you feel about the ocean? Maybe we can find weaker opponents for you there.”

Although I didn’t want to leave my home, I nodded. I didn’t want Aiko to find me again.

We boarded a train to the ocean the next morning. The ocean was huge, extending farther than my eyes could see. It smells heavily of seaweed, which when I learned to hold my breath for long periods of time. The salty waves crashed against the sea cliffs so loudly, I could barely hear my own thoughts. The way the ocean swayed, was mesmerizing. Back and forth, spewing foam onto my bare feet. For the first time, in a long time, I smile.

We didn’t stay long. Howell taught me the proper way to kill demons. It didn’t take long before word about a demon slayer had washed along the coast. We decided to set

sail for Korea. The harbor had loads of boats, big and small. A lot of them were for fishing. Right before we boarded the ship, something crossed my path. A black cat.

Once we were in Korea, we purchased clothes to match the crowd and settled in a remote village. There I would spend hours, day after day, fighting and training. The cool spring season was crisped away by summer. On the hottest days, training outside was almost unbearable. Those days past too, then fall, winter, and spring again. A year, almost long enough to be completely fluent in the language.

Then, we moved again. "We'll go west, to China," Howell had said. I was comfortable where we were, the people were kind, and I had just gotten used to their customs. But as time would tell, I wasn't allowed to stay comfortable. So, we rode by buggy to the nearest barge.

"Cheer up, China won't be so bad," Howell told me. "I think you'll find it to be a great place to finish your training."

"How long will that take? And, where will we go then?" I questioned.

"Far away," Was all the information he had shared.

It was a long journey before reaching our destination. The city was magnificent. Before I could take a step towards it, something rushed in front of me. It stopped to look at me for a moment, then jumped up into a tree, a brown cat.

"Would you say cats are good or bad luck?" I asked Howell.

"They're rather good, in my opinion," He replied. "Sure, keep the mice out of the rice," he chuckled too loudly.

It wasn't long before we took our journey southwest. "India will be a wise place to end your training. But for now, we'll live in Wuhan."

Wuhan was a beautiful city, we lived there for two years before we departed for India.

“Perfect form, excellent reaction speed, killer instinct, that demon king’s as good as dead.” There was pride in Howell’s eyes.

“What if I fail?” I slumped my shoulders to look at the ground.

“You can’t fail,” he set a hand on my shoulder. “You’re ready,” he assured me.

“But I don’t *feel* ready,” I tossed my weapon shrugishly.

Howell looked at me in deep thought. “Have you been resting well?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been meditating with the monks twice a day?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. We leave for France tomorrow.”

“So that’s where he’s hiding,” I crinkle my nose.

A few days later, we had set sail for Egypt. The water was calm until we reached the Gulf of Aden. The rocking of the boat made my stomach hurl more times than I could count. The howl of the wind and chill of the storm drafted throughout the ship. After about an hour or two of swaying in the water, I went above deck. My ears perked at someone’s frantic voice. I stumbled over puddles to the railing. A girl hung over the raging waters. “Help me!” she called. I grabbed her wrist before she took a fateful dive. I mustered all my strength to pull her up. Rain and salty sea water covered me from head to toe.

“What are you kids doing in this storm?” A man barked. His large coat covered all but his scruffy black beard.

“There was a cat,” the girl quivered.

“Cats aren’t allowed on the voyage. Come on, let’s get you two back to safety,” the man lead us below deck.

My eyes wandered back to the sea. If it wasn’t my imagination, I could have sworn the boat was swerving off course. I ducked below deck. The man helped the girl find her parents. I sat next Mr. Howell on a splinter filled bench. It felt like we were on that rickety thing for hours. My stomach felt the sway of the boat too heavily.

“I’ll be back,” Howell stood. His voice was raspy, eyes puffy, and a wiry beard had sprouted from several sleepless nights. “Something doesn’t feel right,” he muttered in a grumpy tone. When he came back, he had a stern look on his face. “The captain fell asleep and now our course is way off. It will take the whole night to get back on track.”

I groaned when I felt another toss of the boat. My stomach hurled and I excused myself to the bathroom. I hadn’t even closed the door when something rabid lunged onto me and dug their claws into my skull. I wrestled with it, trying to remove it from my head. As I did so, I tripped over the toilet and hit my head on the vanity. The last I remembered, before toppling to the floor, was the flick of a grey tail.

I heard my name and opened my eyes. Mr.Howell held a towel over my head. He sighed when he saw them open.

“I think I’ve managed to stop the bleeding,” he removed the towel and immediately returned it. “I’m not much of a doctor,” his shoulders tensed.

“But we can find one who is,” I said flatly.

Howell helped me to the nurse’s room. I was almost knocked off my feet when something ran under us. A grey cat.

“That cat,” I grumbled. I almost ran after it, until I realized which direction it had come from. I glanced back at the engine room. A man ran out flailing his arms, followed by several others. “Run!” He yelled. “The engine, it’s gonna-”

A huge explosion burst them into the air. My ear’s popped as it threw me backward. I gagged at the stench of burning men. Covering my eye, so I wouldn’t lose my appetite, again. Water came spurting up through a gaping hole, and the cooking men were washed away. We ran for the exit.

“What was that noise?” a worried woman approached us. She held her two small children close.

“We have to get out of here,” I yelled.

“Go to the escape boats.”

I ran with Mr.Howell next to me. Many had already left. We trudged to the end of the row, the last boat, one spot was left.

My vision blurred while staring at the small boat. My pulse quickened at the thought of leaving him.

NEVER.

“Go” Howell nudged me forward. “You’ll be okay without me.”

“No! I need you,” I begged. “I can’t do this alone.”

“You can, and you must,” Howell squeezed my shoulder. “I believe in you.”

“I won’t leave you!” I grabbed him. Not again. Not like Mother.

He pushed me, the boat rocked and I stumbled away.

“Come on, we need to leave, now,” someone in the boat urged. The boat rocked again. “Hurry.”

I wiped away my tears and stepped towards the boat. Reaching my hand out, I glanced back at Howell. He was smiling, but his eyes weren't. Another explosion blasted through the boat. Completely devouring Howell. It knocked me off my feet and sent me hurtling into the sea. I hit the water hard. I've heard that the dead sea was too salty to drown in. As I struggled to resurface, I thought it to be a myth for sure.

In the pitch black, it became harder to tell which direction was up. As I sank deeper, my thoughts turned to mush.

"I can't leave you."

"You'll be okay without me."

I was drowning in them. As I floated, I felt as though it had been hours. I expected my lungs to give out any moment. Before they could, something shone through the darkness. I reached for it and began to float to the surface. When I broke through the water, I took a breath of the glorious humid air. The stars were beautiful that night.

The light had come from boats docked at the harbor. I swam to them. "Help me," my throat croaked. I grabbed hold of someone's hand.

The man who had helped me from the sea, fed and clothed me. He told me that I wasn't far from Egypt. I thanked him and I was on my way.

Egypt was hot and dusty. I coughed up dirt for days after walking in the desert. My dry throat ached for water. In the distance, my eyes narrowed into enormous triangles. Mr. Howell had told me about the pyramids but had never imagined them to be in such so large. As I traveled closer, a low hum came from a gathered people at the base of the pyramids.

Words cannot describe how horrified I was by what I saw. The same grey cat who had sunk the ship was sitting atop a throne. Civilians were shading him from the sun, feeding him bits of meat, and kneeling to worship.

It took everything in me not to march up to him with my sword. I kept my sword sheathed. "Why are you worshipping a cat?" I asked one of the civilians.

"He's no cat," the man snorted. "The great Khufu has returned," the man left to join the crowd.

I turned to leave. Revenge wasn't going to help me win my fight with The Demon King. But how could I let a whole society worship a demonic cat? As I watched the cat sunbathe, something about him seemed familiar. Yes, extremely familiar. I sat next to the civilian. "What makes you think this cat is a pharaoh?" I asked him.

"He said so himself."

"He can talk?" My jaw dropped.

"Yes," the man shushed her and went back to worship.

"His Majesty would like a four-story palace," a man holding an umbrella announced, "consider it done."

"Yes your excellence," chanted the crowd.

I clutched my queasy stomach, this had gone too far. "You can't possibly build a palace for this imposter."

The man grabbed my wrist and dragged me to my feet. "This woman is an unbeliever."

"A traitor!" The cat screeched, "I want her head."

The crowd stood. They looked at me with hatred in their eyes.

“I see that I’m not wanted here,” I gulped.

I darted away and the men chased. I kicked the heavy sand with each slow step. The piles made it impossible to outrun the crazy mob. One of them grabbed my wrist. Another pinned me to the ground. Everyone watched in awe as they swung their sword up and thrust it at my throat.

“Please,” I cried as I clenched my eyes shut. I only felt the cool blade on my neck. No sharp pain or hot blood drizzled down my shoulders. I opened my eyes. The civilians were staring at me with wild expressions. Their weapon’s had fallen to the soft earth.

“Are you a god?” One of them asked.

“Yes,” I heard my voice quiver. “Yes, I am,” I said, straightening my posture. “I’ve come to set things right. That cat is not your pharaoh. You need to stop worshiping him and go home.”

“That cat made us feed him all of our food,” someone piped up.

“Kill him!” they started towards the cat.

“Wait!” I commanded, “I want him alive.”

I passed through the crowd, a couple of them fell back to act as bodyguards. It may have been wrong but I couldn’t help but smile a little. They presented the wretched cat to me, he hissed and wiggled under their grasp. I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him, taking him away from the crowd.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I think you’ve already guessed, Reina.”

“Aiko,” I glared.

“Why, when things are finally going my way, you show up and ruin everything.”

“You tried to kill me!” I screamed. “Mr. Howell died because of *you*.”

“Yeah well-”

Aiko was interrupted by one of my new bodyguard’s, “is everything alright?”

“Yes, please leave us alone for a moment,” I shewed him away.

“You cursed me into the body of a cat. Do you know how many lives a cat has?”

He growled. “Nine! I have to be a stinkin cat for five more years.”

“Good! Now you know what Hell is going to feel like.”

My mouth curved into a tight smile. I gripped his scruff tighter to stop myself from wringing his scrawny neck.

“You’re not smart enough to take me there,” he snorted.

“You’re absolutely right.”

A smug look appeared on the cat’s face.

“Until I am, you’ll have to be in my sight at all times.”

“I wasn’t being truthful,” He smiled. “You’re very smart. You can go ahead and send me to Hell now.”

“But I don’t know how, and I need you here for safekeeping,” I squeezed him in my arms.

I waved a goodbye to the civilians and went on my way. Aiko tried to squirm out of my arms as I walked. “This-” he pushed on my arms with his back. His claws embedded into my dress, “- is worse than Hell.”

“It’s settled, you will be my cat slave for the next five years. Only then will I pardon my teacher’s death.”

"I don't need your consent," he continued to squirm.

"Shall I cast a spell that will make you paralyzed?" I asked irritably.

Aiko went limp in my arms, "alright, I'll be your slave."

That didn't sound quite right to me. I was sure he was planning on clawing my throat out in my sleep, but I took his word for the moment.

"What am I to do as your slave?" Aiko asked when I tied him down for bed.

"I haven't decided yet," I laid down on the hard mattress, resting on top of a dirt floor. "Lots of bird catching?"

"No," he grumbled.

"What part of 'you have to do whatever I say' do you not understand? It will be a huge money saver."

"Here's a money saver. Quit staying hotels," he shot back.

"You call this a hotel?" my voice was low, I closed my eyes. As the veil over my them sent me deeper into darkness, a searing hot sensation overtook my body. My back was drenched by ocean currents. Howell stood on a sinking ship. I tried to reach for him, he was about an arms width away. The more determined I was to reach him, the harder it became to move my limbs. I opened my mouth to speak but the word was caught on my tongue. I breathed heavily as I struggled through the water. Before I knew it, I had drifted far away from him. A wave of darkness draped over me. I squeezed my eyes shut.

My eyes burst open as the wave passed. "Mr. Howell!" The ocean was gone. In its place was the Egyptian suite. I felt my tense limbs relax and sat up, drenched in

sweat. I glanced at Aiko uneasy. He hovered over my bed with a lit match. It flickered once, light moving across his mischievous face.

My eyes widened, my body paralyzed. Before I could snatch the deadly fire, he dropped it. Flames scattered along the perimeter of the bed, creating a cage of fire. My hands began to shake as I choked on the heavy smoke.

The Demon King's army burst through my door. Their swords and arrows pointed straight at me. I instinctively reached for my sword, to which I came up empty-handed. They parted for their king. He walked forward, his striking red eyes focused on me.

"You were tricky to catch, Reina, but I've finally done it."

My name rolled off his tongue like a snake. His eyes narrowed on me. "It's courtesy to have an even match, but I'd rather just kill you."

My bottom lip curled, my eyebrows furrowed. "Like you killed my mother? You'll pay for what you've done!" I stood and began to leap over the flames.

The Demon King's sharp voice sent me flying back into the wall, "you are too weak."

The flames grew taller. The heat burned my scars. I curled up in a ball, as far away from the fire as possible.

"It's your fault they died, Reina. You could have saved them."

"No!" I cried. "I was a kid."

"You were helpless and weak. You're still weak. All that training you went through, useless. If you hadn't sent that bad spirit to hell, your teacher would still be alive." In sync, everyone in the room chanted, "A life for a life, Reina, you're next."

I covered my ears and shook my head. "Get out!" I screamed.

“I’d gladly if I wasn’t chained to floor...” Aiko complained.

I sat up, swiftly grabbing my sword. Sweat drenched my back and forehead.

“If you had a bad dream it’s because you’re sleeping with a blanket in the middle of the desert,” he criticized.

“No, you just need to stay away from matches!” I growled.

He peered at me with his green eyes and curled into a ball.

I laid down, immediately springing back up, “we should go.”

“Now? But I haven’t slept yet.”

“I’m sure you’ve had plenty of cat naps during the day,” I changed into my travel attire.

“Plenty of rest makes a happy cat,” he grinned, turning his head away from me.

I finished packing my straw woven bag and dragged Aiko along by his chain. “No more napping until we reach Paris, got it?”

Part Three

With people in every direction, there was hardly a place to walk in Paris. The more of them I saw in fancy dresses and pampered hair, the more subconscious I felt in my grungy Egyptian attire. Each magnificent building, crafted with pristine detail, towered over my head. As we strode down the street, a large, grey dog snarled at us. Gnashing his rotten teeth, leash clanking against the cement as he lunged at us. Aiko leaped into my arms like a frightened child. A smirk slipped onto my face. I was about to tease him, when the angry dog ripped away from his owner and charged straight after us.

My blood pressure flew higher than a common crane. There was no time to whip out my sword. I squeezed Aiko when the realization set in. The fur on his back sprang up. Aiko's sharp claws pierced my shoulder blades. I bit my lip. Aiko hissed as the dog bounded towards us. The dog whimpered as someone jerked him back. I eased my tense shoulders when Aiko released his claws.

The man turned towards us, and my heart stopped. He wore a sharp brown coat and trousers. His chiseled cheekbones and nose sat parallel on his face. The copper in his hair shone from the midday sun. His ebony eyes peered at me and my cat.

"Are you alright, miss?"

His French was the most elegant thing my ears had ever heard. Although, I hadn't had much to compare with my own.

"Yes, good," was all I could manage.

"I'm sorry, what? Your french isn't so good..." he turned his head sideways like a confused dog.

"It's been a while," I kept my head down while tapping my foot on the hard brick.

"Are you a tourist?" he study me head to toe.

I nodded.

"May I request a name for that gorgeous face?"

"Reina," I blushed. Aiko squirmed in my arms, "and this is Aiko."

"That's an odd name for a cat," the man's thick eyebrow arched while proceeding to pat his head.

Aiko hissed. The man pulled away from the cat as Aiko snapped at him. "What a temper," he left in a hurry.

I flicked Aiko on the head, "why'd you scare him off? I could have asked him for directions."

"That's not all you would've asked him," he mumbled under his breath.

I frowned and tossed him to the ground.

"We don't need a guide. My nose is capable of finding dinner," he held his nose high in the air. "This way," he pulled me along by his leash.

I followed, until a dress shop across the street caught my eye. My feet quit working as I stared at a sea green dress. The dress reminded me of the day I escaped from my hometown, the lifestyle I was forced to adopt, and the dress I couldn't have. A

reminder to always blend in. That dress had scaled toward purple, this one was a deep sea green. The colors may have been different, but the rivet of the skirt and collar are similar. My feet carried me off as if I were possessed.

“Does it have to be now?” Aiko groaned, his stomach growled.

I shushed him and entered the shop. The seamstress greeted me. I pointed to the dress I wanted like a dumb kid. She fitted me and I was on my way to dinner in my new dress.

Aiko stopped in front of the window of a luxurious restaurant. A large sign, with fancy lettering, hung above the door. He took another whiff and made a sour face. “Let’s go somewhere else, this place reeks. Probably serves cat’s at the back door.”

“I think it smells good. You can wait outside if you’re that worried,” I went inside. Aiko followed reluctantly.

I looked around the room in awe. It was the fanciest place I had ever been in my life. Enormous chandeliers and exquisite paintings hung throughout the room. Waiters hustled to take the orders of countless people in fancy clothes. My curls bounced as I sat down at a table with a white tablecloth and an assortment of silverware. Aiko rested under my chair. I ordered a lamb and kicked my feet delightfully. Waiting for my food became exceedingly boring. I practiced holding a fork. It felt awkward in my hand due to a lifetime of using chopsticks. Voices from the crowd came in and out of focus. One voice was distinct from the others. As I listened to its beautiful tone, it became familiar. I twisted around and peaked at a booth where the man sat. The same man who rescued me from the dog.

My eyes widened, a smile raced across my face, my hand reached for the ceiling, and then I saw her. She came in like a dove, wearing a white dress and wavy blonde hair. She sat across from the wonderful man. My hand and smile dropped as if they had died. I turned around instantly, planted my feet on the ground, and stiffened my position. I couldn't help but turn an ear toward their conversation every so often. They giggled obnoxiously. I ran my fingers through my hair, severing the beautiful locks.

The waiter arrived with my food. I could feel the stares of other customer biting into my skin as I shoveled food into my mouth like a wild animal. I ate too viciously to care or savor my delectable meal, excluding the moments I stopped to drop food under the table. I wanted to get out of there as soon as I could. Aiko scarfed his dinner down faster than I could.

Before taking my last bite, I made the mistake of looking back. The man saw a glimpse of my face, his expression was recognizable. I awkwardly reached for the piece of meat on my plate. Aiko jumped up to the table and snatched. He raced through the restaurant, aiming for the exit. I jumped from my seat and chased after him. He was out the door when someone stepped on his leash. Before I took good a look at him, a waiter grabbed me by my shoulder.

"Was that your cat, miss? Cat's aren't allowed in my restaurant. There is a two dollar fee for such crimes, and three more for the broken plate.

I counted my money in my head "I can't afford that."

The man handed the waiter a chunk of change, "please excuse my rudeness, but this is my cat and I will be paying for his misdeeds."

I looked up to the same black eyes of the man in the street.

The waiter took the money and escorted us both out.

"You didn't have to do that," I sheepishly told him. "It was my mistake, so..."

"You're right," the lady in white came directly out the door. "My cousin is much too generous. I believe you have taken advantage of him. Please pay him back," her eyes pierced my soul.

I almost piped the money out when he said, "It was a gift."

The lady walked away upset. The man smiled at me and went to catch up with her.

"Wait!" I called out.

He stopped in his tracks and looked back at me.

"What is your name?"

"My name?" He looked at me as if I were crazy, thought for a moment, and gave it to me. "You, call me Ben."

"Will I ever call you that again?" I whispered.

He paused for a moment and kept walking.

"You're completely hopeless," he whined. "We should check out the hotel."

"Why did you have to make a scene?" I yelled at Aiko, "right in front of *him*."

"I was trying to keep you from being unfocused, you can chase boys after you've defeated The Demon King."

"Maybe I don't want to pursue some evil king. I don't even know what my special ability is yet."

"You can do it, Reina, you slept in the ocean for three days, and a mob with swords couldn't even kill you. That has to count for something, right?" He nudged my leg forward with his head.

"The last slayer could do all those things. Heck, he even disappeared into thin air. He couldn't defeat him, what difference will I make?"

"It takes guts," he told me. "You've got them. You stood up to me," he smirked. I dragged his sorry butt to the hotel.

"You don't have much of a strategy," Aiko looked over the map with me. "You're not going to just waltz up to the cave, are you?"

"Yup, and slice him like a piece of cake," I demonstrated with an invisible sword.

"We need to find a secret entrance or something. Trolls aren't very nice."

"*That* is the secret entrance," I took a deep breath, relaxing the urge to smack him across the head.

A knock came from the door. We looked at each other, "room services?" Aiko and I shrugged.

Aiko jumped up on the table beside the door as I twisted the knob. The woman stood in the doorway.

"Oh, it's you," shifting her feet, she stuck her nose up. "Since I'm here, I'll ask anyway. There's no soap in my bathroom and room service isn't answering... doesn't seem like too much to ask," she said, eyeing the dirt on my nose.

"Yes, you can borrow my soa-" I groaned.

"Then, get on with it."

I handed her the soap. "Is Ben around?" I had to stand on my tip toes to peeked over the towering girl.

"He doesn't need to be bothered by the likes of you. He's busy as it is," she sneered and slammed the door in my face.

"She slammed your own door in your face. I love it."

I glared at him and began practicing my sword techniques. With a swoosh and a whoosh I swiped my sword through the air. It wasn't until midnight that I had finished. With one last hurray I swiped toward the open doorway. A maid stood a hair away from my sword. Her expression chilled through my bones. The maid's lip quivered into an abrupt screech. She went down cold. I threw my sword in the closet when someone approached my room.

Ben hovered over the unconscious maid. "What did you do to her?" he asked.

"She fainted. Must be ill on rest," I tried to breathe the lie.

Aiko bound across the room when he awoke from his slumber. Instinctively hissing.

"I'll call for the manager," Ben stood to leave.

"I'll- go too," I began to stand

"Who's going to watch her in case she wakes up?"

I glanced at Aiko.

"The cat?" Ben asked. "Certainly not. I'll be back."

It felt like hours before Ben had finally arrived with security. They examined her and took her away. I prayed she wouldn't awake before she left the building. Ben shifted in his stance as if he were content in leaving.

"It's such a coincidence that we're staying at the same hotel. It must be a sign that I need to pay you back for your good deeds," I blurted.

Ben shook his head. "There's no need, even if I saved you a thousand times."

"My guilt for burdening you is great," *there must be something I could do*. My mind went to money, leaving at the first coin. I glanced up at his dark eyes, smooth jaw, and sweet smile... I suddenly felt too close. Stepping back ever so slightly, my cheeks burned from a mischievous thought.

Ben's complexion lit up as he looked over me again. "I think there is something. Meet me on the last floor at five."

Before I had a chance to answer, he was down the hall. I shut the door, completely captivated.

Aiko's stares burst my little bubble of happiness.

"Don't tell me you're that naive, right?"

I rolled my eyes and laid down on the excessively cushioned bed. I removed the number of pillows to my liking, and closed my eyes.

"No," he commanded, "tomorrow morning we head straight to the demon caves."

"Shouldn't I be the one commanding you?" I bickered. "Bring me water," I ordered, pointing at the canteen sticking out of my bag.

He held up his paw, unamused. "I'm just trying to make sure we stay on schedule." Aiko approached the bag, nudged the water out, and rolled it to my bedside.

I reached down for it, "I haven't had any time to relax." I moved the bottle in my hands. I unscrewed the cap and sipped, "shouldn't take this time for granted." *I might*

not have another chance. The lid squeaked as I tightened it. “Unless you want me to die tomorrow,” I raised an eyebrow at the cat. I could hear the gulp in the cat’s throat.

“Then, be careful,” Aiko made his way the rug to lay down “I don’t trust that guy.”

I didn’t sleep for the four hours I waited. How could I? Before the clock turned, I sprang from my bed and was out the door before Aiko could have opened his eyes. I raced up a monstrous stairwell. Breathing heavily and legs burning, every step was worth it. I came to a halt right before the door of the fifth floor, almost smacking into the thick glass. Smoothing out my dress and hair, I opened the door. I looked both ways down the endless hallway of doors, but no Ben. Did I miss him?

I stood in the middle of the hall like a stray cat. I took a deep breath, and awkwardly messed with my hair as I waited. Eventually, the undeniable sleep depravity weighed me down. I swayed in the hallway. Ketching a white stand, the potted plant nearly fell over. My eyelids glued shut and I gave into the wall to catch up on rest. After no more than three minutes, I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. I opened my eyes. A face emerged from my blurry vision. It was Ben!

I managed to stand up straight and vigorously rubbed my eyes.

“Do I bore you that much? Here comes the exciting part,” he smiled. “Come on.” He took me by the arm and lead me down the hall. We turned a corner, revealing a ladder at the end of the hall. Ben grabbed a wrung and started up.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked hesitantly, pulling on my mid necked collar. An over necessity to guard my scares.

“To the most wonderful place in Paris.”

I looked at him wearily.

“Come on, it’s beautiful,” he stretched his arm out to me. “Trust me,” he smiled.

On the ceiling was a square opening. A cold breeze drafted in when he removed it. I was almost tempted to rub my arms. I glanced down at the floor, nine feet below me. My hands gripped the rungs of the ladder. I climbed, until I passed through the hole. Until I saw it.

On the horizon of the awoken city, a splash of purples and pinks painted each building. I paused to admire the view. Ben lifted me onto the roof where I carefully placed my footing. I slid a little in my new shoes. We sat together on the roof and watched the rising sun.

“I wanted to see the city like this one last time,” Ben sighed. A hint of sadness escaped with it. “Before I go home.”

“It’s an odd place, but it is worth the effort,” I tried not to peer over the edge.

“They ought to make a special place for this kind of thing I suppose,” he rested his jaw in his hand.

I made an effort to peer into his pitch black eye, like the night sky. I gulped. I had never seen such dark eyes.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he spoke.

“They’re just regular old brown,” I shake my head.

“They’re sweet, like honey.” He looked at me for a long while before smiling, “like you.”

I look away, hiding my face with my hair. Despite the nip of the cold air and self-conscious tug of my collar, my body became a furnace.

“Hasn’t anyone told you that before?” He asked.

I was forced to think back to my childhood. Only one person, my father. It was hard to remember his strong Japanese features, but they're there. In the back of my mind, always.

"What about how beautiful you are?"

"Only you," I say under my breath.

He shifted to admire me, "I'm glad that I'm the first one." He smiled. "So..." he said after a while "have you ever- has anyone?"

"Done this?" I leaned into him so quickly he flinched. Our lips touched the moment I closed my eyes.

"No," he exhales. As Ben patted his hair down, he turned back toward the sun.

I did the same.

"Thank you, for a wonderful morning," Ben didn't take his eyes off the sunrise. "This is the finest payment anyone has given me," he gulped something down his throat. "It's time for me to go," he breathed.

I nodded as he stood. Brushing the hem of his pants as he passed me. When he was gone, the flutter in my stomach carved another vicious hole into my heart.

"How'd it go?"

"It was fine" I plopped down on the bed as my throat pushed out a low hum.

"You're ready to get back on track now right?"

My silence was yes. I closed my tired eyes and went to sleep.

"Goodnight Reina."

On four hours of sleep, I felt more awake than most mornings.

"We should be able to make it by dusk if we leave now."

Once I started packing, I noticed my traditional Chinese fighting uniform. My hands brushed the soft worn fabric. Memories of Howell's training were woven into the creases. If I can remember what he taught me today, I will be well off. I take a deep, shaky, breath.

I am ready, I tell myself.

I pulled the outfit over my head, fastened the scalloped button on the side, and peered into the mirror. Each yellow flower on the straight teal dress hung loosely over my curves. The neckline came high enough over my neck to cover my bulging red scares.

"I am ready."

As we walked through the streets, I couldn't ignore the stare I received from the French. My hand instinctively went to my sword. I clenched the hilt as I held my head high. I was determined to reach the mountain by sundown.

The journey was long, but I persevered. The wind howled in my ears, propelling purple and brown leaves. They made a whistling sound as they hit me. I trudged up the steep trail that led to the mountain. The burning sensation, mixed with the freezing wind, made my arms and legs numb. When I took a moment to catch my breath, my feet slid down the slope. My lungs wheeze out the chilly air as I forced my legs upward. I collapsed onto the ground once I reached the ledge. I looked out as hundreds of trees faded away with the dying sun. My breath was heavy as the last bit of sunlight went out.

I carefully made my way to the extended trail. My foot was on the slope when my eyes caught a flicker of light. I turned. A warm light shone through the shrub next to me. I bent down next to it. Although my efforts to muffle the sound were useless, I moved

the branches aside. There lay a gaping hole in the rock. It tunneled deep into the mountain.

“You first.”

I pulled Aiko by his leash. He took a reluctant step forward, his paw hovered over the tunnel.

“I don’t know which is worse,” he turned. “Being your slave for the rest of my nine lives, or potentially being eaten by goblins.”

“What does it matter? Just get it over with.”

I rushed him forward, giving him a gentle push for good measure. A squeak escaped his mouth on the way down. He made a loud thud at the bottom. I waited and listened. After a few seconds without hissing, I pushed myself through the small opening. I skidded slowly down at first. As the tunnel became steeper, the momentum of my fall squeezed a whimper out of me. My heart pounded as I rushed toward the ground. I braced myself for the drop. For a few short seconds, I was in the air. The floor came just as quickly. Dust flung in the air as I skidded to a stop. I rubbed my rear end as I rose from the ground.

To my surprise, the cave walls merged into a thick coat of wallpaper. The ceiling was sculpted with symbols of fire. I stood a foot away from an, almost spotless, black tiled floor.

Something rose from my throat, for I stood on the doorstep of The Demon King's palace. I gulped it down.

With Aiko’s leash tightly secured in my hand, I strode down the hallway.

“You really think you have a chance?” I can hear the uncertainty in his voice.

“Luck or skill,” I exhale. “Both will do.”

“You can’t be serious.”

A low conversation had caught my ears. I shushed Aiko and slipped down an intersecting hallway. We listen as goblins pass by.

“Why do we gotta be the lookouts?” one complained.

The other smacked him over the head. “Lord Evander is expecting a guest. It’s our job to make sure their visit goes smoothly.”

“He knew I’d come,” I said under my breath.

In one swift move, I slam the closest goblin to the ground. Bringing the hilt of my blade to the back of his head. My bloodthirsty eyes search for the next one. Rushing forward, I pin him to the wall with my blade on his throat.

“Where’s that slum under the earth hiding?” Aiko scurried toward us, his chain clanked across the floor.

I rolled my eyes, “Aiko, shut up.”

My focus was back on the goblin. “tell us the way to the throne room and you’ll live.”

“Down the hall and to the left,” He blurted.

“You’re not too loyal are you?” Aiko spat.

“Yes I am!” The Goblin shouted.

“You just told us where The Demon King is,” Aiko growled.

“No, I told you where to find the throne room.”

My blade pushed deeper into the goblins neck, drawing blood. “Where is Evander?” I breathed through clenched teeth.

The Goblin's eyes went wild "He's in the dining room," he slurred. "He's prepared a feast for his-" He looked us up and down again, "guests?" His face lit up only for an instant.

"I'm no guest," I glared, biting back the urge to punch his face.

"I'm the guest," Aiko cut in, "tell me where the king is."

"The dining room is past the mines on your next left, through the oversized lounge, and a left after the kitchen."

I let go of him and slammed him to the ground. I thrust my arm up.

"Please," he whimpered. "I won't even receive a dime if you do."

My hand gripped the handle of my sword. It went down and stopped right before it reached his head.

"Ugh!" I stormed down the hallway.

"I never understood why humans have to be so strange."

As Aiko and I turned left, sounds of metal against rock and cracks of whips came within earshot. The gorgeous tile became a dirt pack floor. We raced by screeching elevated reins. The reek of metal burned my nose. As we ran, the hall veered to the left. A set of large beautifully crafted wooden doors came into view. The perimeter of the doors held intricate design carvings. The door knobs were stunning golden curved s'. I silently peered through a crack in the doorway.

My gasp came so fast, I didn't have time to cover it. I ducked behind the door and whisper a dreadful curse. Taking a moment to catch my breath, I dared to take a second look. Inside the lounge room, sitting on a velvet couch, was the woman in white. Behind her was a towering bookshelf. Thick blonde hair hung in waves over her

shoulders as she read a bulky novel. My eyes widened as I counted more books than I'd had ever seen. I pried my eyes away from them and took in the rest of the room. Four more couches sat around it with a roundtable on the side. Ruby's dangled from a dazzling red chandelier, hanging in the middle of the room.

"I knew there was something strange about those two," Aiko growled.

"Just her," I shook my head. *Not Ben, I won't believe it.*

"I'll handle this," like a ghost, Aiko bound across the room, jumped behind the black couch, climbed it effortlessly, and scratched the daylights out of Sylvia. I raced through the room and smoothly sailed toward the kitchen. My stomach empty stomach grumbled. The doors flew open, letting out steam and mouth-watering smells of turkey and mashed potatoes. I backtracked into a hallway. Peering as chef's, carrying mountains of food, piled out of the small doorway. Once their backs were turned, I swiftly followed.

I raced toward the dining room. I waited for the last chef to exit, before I slid through the, rapidly closing, metal doors. This was the moment I had trained my whole life for. I was about to meet the demon who haunted my dreams, the man with red eyes. I felt the rush of air on my back as the doors slammed. I stood up straight to faced the man who tried to kill me, who ordered my mother and grandmother dead. My eyes rested on the malicious creature. I sucked in an unsteady breath. His eyes weren't red at all but black like shadows. They were the darkest eyes.

They were Ben's eyes.

The sight of Evander in his cloak and crown made my vision blur. When he stood, I felt my body shake. His black tunic fell below the knees. Golden patterns

swerved down his chest and glistened from the candlelit table. Light from the crystal chandelier reflected off of His silver boots. Evander pulled his red cloak with puffy white fur closed, and I snapped out of my trance. I widen my stance, gripping my sword with two hands. It doesn't matter that he wasn't who I thought he was. He was The Demon King. I had to fight him, and I was determined to win.

"Take a seat, Reina," he motioned to the chair across from him.

I looked down at the delicate meal placed neatly on the sturdy oak. Every dish was pleated with patterns of gold. I bit back my emotions when my eyes fell upon the meal provided for me. A meaty lamb.

"I didn't come to have dinner," I spat.

My eyes darted at each guard in the room. I inched my sword to my face.

"My sword won't unsheath until we've had a proper discussion."

He motioned to the chair, fit for a queen, once more. Could it be a trap?

"I didn't come to talk either."

"I know why you're here, dang it!" I flinched as frustration quickly rose in his voice. "Sit in the chair, would you," his eyes took a hard second to plead at me.

I resheathed my sword, "very well." My stiff hands twitched at my sides. I hoped I wouldn't regret it. Each step was heavily weighed down by betrayal. Gripping the arms of the chair and sat.

"Eat, if you wish. It's not poisoned," he glanced at me before sitting.

I stared at the roasted lamb on my plate. A glass of crimson wine sat next to a loaf of bread. I stared at it as Evander spoke. It swirled around in the golden cup. I couldn't strain my thoughts from my mother's blood trickling down her spotless dress.

“Why are you doing this?” I snapped.

“I don’t want to fight you if I don’t have to,” Evander shook his head.

“Is that why you sent your henchmen to trap and burn me alive in my own house?” I pulled my collar down, my left sleeve, revealing the burns left on my chest and arm. “To give me this!”

The Demon King looked away. A scowl overtook the scruff on his face. Only then did I see the bags under his sleepless eyes.

My voice cracked in an effort to strain my tears. “And murder my mother,” I whispered.

Evander rubbed his temples, mumbling something under his breath.

He has a headache? My nails poked into my palms. I rose from my seat but his guards shoved me back down. They pinned me there with their curved staves.

Evander’s eyes were lifeless when he finally spoke. “A Demon King’s place,” he paused, “is to keep men in line. Throughout my life, I was taught that The Hunter was the cause of all our problems. Now I see, your purpose, to keep demons in line. It’s what’s keeping this world from crumbling.” He looked me dead in the eyes, “Tell me, Reina. Have I crossed that line?”

My eyes stung, my nostrils flared from uneasy breathing. I glanced at the handsome man. The man I adored. Whom I believed adored me back. That connection crumbled in this very room. I couldn’t look at him when I nodded. “Yes,” I hissed.

His voice came out coarse, “then no agreement can be made.”

When I looked up at him, I saw the demon in his eyes. It turned to something more, a man of flames. I blinked away my tears. The guards swerved out of the way as

Evander lunged towards me. I ducked under the table just as his sword came flying into my headrest. My breath quickened as I crawled. I could hear his heavy footstep above me. He jumped down and thrust the table into the air. I was on my feet by then. Our swords clashed together. The heat from Evander burned my skin. I itched to run.

My breath was heavy as I jumped back. My vision became foggy but I had to keep going. For my mother, grandmother, and for Howell. I sidestepped toward him. Jumping into the air, I leaped over him. Crashing my sword into his.

Rats.

When I landed, a dull pain rose in my chest. I clenched it as blood rushed out. I staggered, using my sword to keep me from toppling over. I thought I was hallucinating when Evander's sword fell from his hands. It clanked on the ground before being silenced. When his flames went out, so did he.

"I can't do this," there was a sort of terror in his eyes. "I can't just slaughter you."

"You slaughtered your family *just* fine," I spat.

"I didn't-" he shook his head, "not me."

"Pick up your sword," I commanded. "There is no surrendering."

"No, I won't kill you."

I struggled to stay on my feet. I couldn't even lift my sword. "Coward," I wheezed.

He nodded, "my father's dying words ring true this day. I couldn't save him. But maybe..." he looked at me.

"I thought-" I coughed, my mouth tasted of blood.

"I didn't kill him. After my father killed The Hunter, Freya got to him. He could have taken the blade out, he would have lived." Evander's head sank, "he pushed it

deeper, and I stood there, like a coward. I don't deserve this." He tossed the black, diamond studded, crown to the ground "I didn't want to be kind but I couldn't let Freya destroy this kingdom. Maybe I should just-"

Someone burst through the doors. "Sire, the goblins are having a riot, they're completely destroying the mines."

"What?" Evander jumped from his lowly state. "Why?"

"It seems they dislike their wages."

"How much have I been paying them?" His voice squeaked at an awkward pitch.

"Not enough, apparently." He glanced at his feet.

"Arsenius!" Evander grabbed the man by his robes. "What have you done?"

Evander ran from the room. "I trusted you with my kingdom while I was away!"

"Your mistake, not mine," Arsenius murmured while approaching the doors. He looked out. Instead of leaving, he quietly closed them. Arsenius trod toward me.

"Judging by your condition, you didn't win."

My eyes narrowed in on him when I noticed the red eyes in his crude expression. Like a hawk focused on its prey, I gripped my sword, hard enough my knuckles popped.

"You killed my mother," I growled. I lunge at him with my sword but the searing pain in my gut brought me back down.

"I wasn't going to at first, and then I had a thought," he spoke. "I wanted the crown, why not use you to get it for me. It was perfect. But you failed." He gnawed on his bottom lip. "Let's see how well the goblins are doing at your job."

I kicked him as he dragged me by the collar. "Stop squirming," Arsunes threatened with a dagger. The cool blade pressed against my neck. My eyes caught on its fiery red patterns when he pulled away.

"You saved me from being clobbered by those demons," I gasped.

"I couldn't have you dead before you had a chance to face the king," He spoke as if it were obvious.

The woman in white came bounding in, "I've got the slaves riled up for you."

"Thank you my sweet," his lips met her soft cheeks.

"Where's Aiko!" I bore my teeth.

"That mangled thing? He's probably goblin food by now."

"You little-" my voice became distorted as Arsenius pulled my collar tight around my throat. He dragged me out of the dining room. The shouts of angry workers became louder as we exited the lounge room. Hundreds of goblins marched towards the mines. Arsenius unlocked a secret door, leading to a balcony overlooking them. In less than an hour, The Demon King's palace had turned into Hell. Goblins and guards battled in the dirt. Abandoned carts poured precious gems and coal onto the ground.

"Isn't marvelous?" Arsenius beamed.

"It really is, Arsenius." The woman in white was a little too cozy next to him.

"It's finally ours, my queen."

"Now that I think about it," the woman's smile curved into a set of sharp teeth. Her pupils flattened into tight slits. Two pointer ears popped out of her head. "You're a slob." Freya grabbed him by the robes and tossed him into the abyss. Arsenus' shrieks

echoed throughout the cavern. She stepped towards me with bared claws. My pounding heart rang through my head as I crawled backward.

“Once I’m queen, I’ll give the humans what they deserve. Don’t worry, you won’t have to wait!” She lunged at me with bared claws.

Aiko’s chain flew through the air. He wrapped it around her legs and she fell to her knees.

“Run, Reina!”

I grasped the railing to pull myself up. My legs were useless, they couldn’t keep me on my feet. Freya batted Aiko with her dagger-like claws. He was flung off the railing into the servants’ bloodshed.

“NO!” I screamed, crawling towards the spiral staircase. I missed a few steps as I slid down. Aiko lay limp on the ground, unable to move amidst the squabbling goblins. I snatched him in my arms before he was crushed by a guard’s wandering foot.

“Reina,” Aiko parted his eyes, “kill that crazy cat lady.” He smiled at the thought as he fell asleep.

“No-” I shook him, “wake up.”

Evander pushed me out of the way of Freya’s pounce. He took up a fallen sword. “It’s me you need to fight, sister.”

As they battled, I cradled Aiko in my weary arms. The gash along my chest tingled as it healed, and my curious mind wandered to the Demon King. Goblins swarmed Evander, pinning him into a corner by Freya direction.

“You should help him,” Aiko struggled to breathe.

“I won’t leave you to help *him*.”

“People change,” he exhaled. “I would think you’d know that better than anyone,” he wheezed a laugh. “I was a ruthless spirit, now I’m just a cat who can’t even walk.”

I grunted, shaking my head.

“Go,” he nudged me away with his head. “I’ve still got another five lives.”

I gently placed Aiko on the ground and slowly rose. With a sword in hand, I approached the crowd of goblins. They had entirely closed in on Evander. Before they could lay their sticky hands on him, Evander blasted them back.

“No!” I yelled as he blasted again, rocks exploded from the ceiling. The coal around me puffed up in flames. I was trapped in a cage of fire.

Through the flames, I could see Evander’s struggle. There were too many goblins. Even with his power, Evander couldn’t fight them all. It didn’t take long before they were upon him. They bound him in chains and sprawled him against the wall. Freya took her time as she strode to him. My heart pounded at the sight, while my whole body shook in a blistering oven. My breath caught on the rising smoke, and I dropped to my knees in a fit of coughing when. I would smother to death if I didn’t get out of the fire. My eyes flickered. There was an opening in the flames. If I could get enough height, I could steer clear of them.

I stood on wobbly knees and swayed against uneven footing. I inhaled, immediately regretting it. Wheezing out smoke, I took a leap of faith. Another wave of fire exploded in my face. I screeched as I was sent backward. The heat of red-hot flames stuck to my skin. I screamed, scurrying away from the fire. As I examined my palms, I croaked out a laugh in disbelief. They were spotless. I had gotten my helpful ability! Fire was no longer my enemy.

I ran through the flames. Snatching a misplaced sword, I jumped onto a goblins head and dropped into the pit to meet Freya. She pushed me down, I twisted her leg with my own, shoved her up with my knee, and flipped her. With a swoosh, she fell to the ground. Using those few seconds of her struggling to her feet, I sliced Evander's chains.

He swung the chain around a handful of goblins and threw them out of the way. Freya's sword flew up to meet them. Tossing some goblins aside, I ran to Evander's aid. Freya whipped around, her cat eyes an inch away from mine. The stench of rotten fish on her breath stung my nostrils. She flinched away from me when Evander sliced into her back with his chain whip. I shoved her to the ground with my foot as her sword slipped through her hands.

Freya ricocheted off the ground with her cat-like reflexes. Her tail whipped angrily in the air. The way was parted for Freya and closed again by a swarm of goblins. They walked toward us with swords and pickaxes. I looked over them to where Freya made her escape.

"Evander!" I yelled, glancing up. I pointed to the hundreds of stalactites hanging from the ceiling. "There I yelled. Shoot them down!"

Evander's eyes traced them down to Freya's path. They glistened from an understanding. His skin became a fiery hot furnace. Flames burst from a sinister rage. The stalactites punctured the floor. Freya was no exception. My eyes lost focus as the many goblins stormed toward us. We weeded through them, eyes fixated on the exit.

We were almost there, then my eyes wondered. A grey feline lay limp on the floor. A gash ran down Aiko's spine. A combination of my legs giving out, and my feet

stumbling over rocks, sent me tumbling to my knees. My hands reached for the lifeless cat. His fur was softer to the touch than ever before.

"I'll find you," I whispered, burying my face into his thick coat. My eyes ran like a river.

Evander grabbed my shoulder with one hand and thrust an angry goblin with the other. "We need to leave."

I nodded as I wiped my burning eyes with the back of my hand. Evander pulled me to my feet. We ran up the stairs and into the hall. We started toward the exit when a rough, scaly hand grabbed my wrist. My eyes narrow on the goblin. The one I had spared.

"Not that way," he pulled me to another hallway. "Too many goblins."

We ran down the hallway.

"Wait," Evander stopped at a set of heavy doors.

"The demons hoard." The goblin rubbed his scaly hands together and licked his lips excitedly.

"This is no time to be greedy!" I jumped in front of him.

"Move," he pushed. "This could save our lives." He removed a set of gleaming keys from his robes. They clinked together while he searched for the right one.

The footsteps and howls of goblins echoed through the chamber. They became louder while Evander thumbed through his keys. He shoved the right one into the lock. What The doors burst open, revealing a giant room full of gold and jewels of every kind.

Evander motioned me to stay as he grabbed a couple of sacks for himself. The goblins were in sight. I itched to run at them with my sword, but I held my ground. I nervously glanced into the hoard room. My jaw dropped as I stumbled to the floor.

Evander ran from an avalanche of gold. It rolled towards us, shaking the ground. He yelled at me to run but my legs wouldn't move an inch. A goblin snarled with his sword aimed at me. Evander shoved him to the ground and pulled me to my feet.

I looked back as my legs pumped forward. The gold shot out and slammed a hand full of goblins into the wall. I ran faster when a couple of heads peaked over the mound. Their faces were filled with joy as a shower of coins, they had tossed, fell upon their heads.

"That was generous," I couldn't hide my smile from Evander.

He snorted playfully as we raced up a flight of stairs. A light single light glowed in the darkness. I reached for it. It was like diving into a pool of freezing water. My stomach dropped as I felt for a nonexistent ground. The forest was a blur of greens and blues as we tumbled down the mountain.

Evander grabbed hold of a branch. My hand was next. He slowly lowered me down to a ledge. I sprawled onto it, breathing heavily. The ground shook when he dropped, and my heart.

I sat up next to him, resting my head in my knees. My eyes widened, taking in his strong features. Beads of sweat rolled down Evanders rosy cheeks. His complexion was rough. I found I liked him better that way. I almost smiled. Diverting my eyes when he looked at me.

"What now?" I said coolly.

Evander peered over the ledge. "We make very small progress down to the trail, and-

"No," I laugh "what's our next adventure "

His expression softened, with a small smile across his face. "I would gladly share my final adventure with you."

I sat up straight, "where to?"

"A new world, with no kings. We'll live as you please, freely."

"And no rules? like the sound of that."

Evander shook his head. "There are rules... but we make them." He gleamed.

"That sounds like another monarchy," I said, frowning.

"Not us, everyone."

"When can we go?"

"As soon as we get off this cliff."

My happy expression faded. "But we're supposed to be enemies."

He brushed my hair away from my eyes. "Let's put our responsibilities aside."

"And then what? The whole world declares peace?"

His expression hardened. "Once I leave my kingdom behind, someone else will rise in my place. The greed for power will always be strong," he stood. "But that will be for another to take care of."

"What do you mean? I'm the only demon slayer."

"Not if you stop hunting." He said, reaching for my hand, "come on, it's almost sunrise."

Part One

My delicate hands brushed the silk sheets of my bed when I climbed in. My mother's golden hair skimmed against my cheek when she tucked the wooly blanket under my chin. She held a dusty, old book in her hand.

"This one is called *The Hunter and the beast*," she gently spoke.

I sunk deep into my cushions.

"There once was a man called "Hunter". He was known by many titles. Marcus, the runaway prince, brutal sea raider, and The Hunter of demons.

On one fateful night, Marcy, only 12 years old, had taken a great beating from her Aunt Ruth. Into the forest she went, to hide from her aunt. By the time Marcy thought she had lost her, she realized that she had lost herself. She wandered in the forest for hours.

It was then when she saw him, the man in a black coat, The Hunter.

"Please help me," she shivered in the cold. Marcy told The Hunter of her circumstances. He agreed to bring her along out of pity.

On one afternoon, while climbing a mountain together, Marcy had made a wrong step. She clutched her sprained ankle and wailed. With a crack of his wrist, The Hunter healed Marcy's ankle.

The Hunter crouched down to her height, with a serious expression. He would regret his words, but she had to hear them. *"It's time for you to go back home."*

She took a step back from The Hunters dangerous eyes. Her heart became a beating drum. *"What are you?"* She knew the answer, she wanted to hear it from his mouth.

The man lowered his head. He hated the glimpse of her expression. *"I haven't told you exactly what I hunt. It should stay that way, do you understand?"*

Marcy was speechless as she nodded.

"Turn back," The Hunter commanded. *"I will no longer allow you to be wrapped in my world."*

"I'M STAYING!" she stomped her foot into the rocky mountain. *"Please, I can't go back to that woman. I WON'T."* If Marcy had known anything with such certainty, he was better than her.

"I am not your salvation," he sharply spoke.

She stared at him with Beady eyes.

He moved closer to the edge of the cliff. A sudden dread swept over Marcy. Her eyes widened at the sight of his back. In a second she would lose this man. Deep down she would regret this day forever.

"Hunter!" She shouted. *"I'm coming!"*

She raced to pursue him. Every rock on the mountain stabbed at her feet. The leaf of his coat whipped like a flag. She latched onto it. In a flash, they disappeared."

"Where'd they go?" I asked my mother.

She shifted the book in her hand. "You'll have to let me Finish.

"Although their days together had only been two months, Marcy's complexion suggested it had been four years. The little girl had blossomed into a young woman. The Hunter had grown fonder of her each day.

As Marcy weaved through the marketplace, a beautiful necklace caught her eye. She reached for it, but another snatched it before she.

"You have The Hunter on your tail," the young man murmured in her ear.

"I'm aware of what he is," she coolly moved away from the young man.

"I can help you escape."

"I don't need to escape. He won't hurt me."

"Why would he spare you? Check his bag," the man called, *"you'll see."*

That night as The Hunter lay asleep, Marcy considered a bag search. After an hour of rustling in her bed, Marcy finally looked through The Hunters bag. In the side pocket, she pulled out the necklace she had seen in the marketplace.

It didn't come easily. She pulled on the chain harder. Attached to it was a small vial of poison. Marcy flinched. The bottle and necklace lunged at the floor. It clattered loud enough to wake The Hunter.

"What are you doing?" The Hunter's voice was flat.

Marcy picked up the bottle, *"Is this for me?"*

The Hunters lips didn't move. They didn't have to his eyes said it all.

"You're going to kill me," Marcy whispered.

"Marcy won't die? Will she?" I asked my mother.

"You'll have to let me read to find out," My mother continued. "Marcy had run away,

"Wait!" The Hunter called, *"don't go."* It seemed that The Hunter could no longer be without Marcy's company.

Marcy went back to the marketplace, she didn't know where else to go. The man from before caught her arm.

"Who are you?" She demanded, *"how did you know about the poison?"*

"Because that's what The Hunter does. He kills people like you and me," he jabbed a finger into her chest. *"What's your name?"*

"I asked you first," Marcy crossed her arms.

"My name's Evander," he sighed, *"now your's."*

"Marcy."

A laugh escaped his lips, *"You're Marcy? Thank goodness I found you."*

"What do you want with me?" Marcy asked.

"Truthfully, I'm your brother. I'm here to take you home," Evander extended his arm.

"No! I'm not going back to Aunt Ruth!"

"Aunt Ruth? No, I'm taking you to father."

"My mother told me my father was dead." Marcy pulled away.

"She lied," his frustration shown in his face. He brushed his shoulder-length hair back and took a deep breath. *"We better get going, we have a long journey."*

"Marcy, don't," The Hunter cut in front of Evander. His eyes softened when he looked at Marcy. *"please?"*

Marcy pushed past him, *"I've made my decision, I don't need you anymore."*

"I'll have to kill you if you do," The Hunter warned.

"You'll kill her anyway," Evander rebuked.

And so Marcy left with her new family. They journeyed for two days. A cave was hidden at the foot of the mountain. *"This is the realm of the dark lands,"* Evander told her.

"But that place is evil," Marcy backed away from the cave.

"You'll learn to like it," he shrugged and pulled her forward. She struggled under his grip. Eventually, she willingly stepped into the darkness. The cave opened up into a lively mine. Goblins and other foul creatures dug for beautiful red jewels and forged heavy weapons.

Evander lead Marcy deeper into the cave. Two men guarded a set of heavy doors. Inside was a demon, who sat on a throne. *"Excellent work my son. We will discuss your reward in private."*

"Why am I here?" Marcy demanded.

"I've been searching for you, Marcy." The demon roared. As he walked toward her, his heavy feet shook the cavern. Each step grew smaller and smaller as his horns and tail disappeared until he had turned into a decent looking man. *"Why would a demon king leave his heir with humans?"*

"Me, queen of all demons? But I am human," Marcy was baffled.

"Only partially. I can see, you are not mortal, great power runs through your veins," the king circled his young daughter.

"You can't do this, father. How can you let her be queen?" a half cat demon came out of the shadows. She was Marcy's jealous sister, who craved to be queen more than anything.

"My choice has been made," their father's voice boomed throughout the cavern.

"I'll kill that wretched demon slayer," she pleaded. *"Then you won't deny me what is rightfully mine!"*

"Freya, you know better than to ask for my kill," he calmly chastised.

"Yes, father, my mistake," she bowed but her resentment raged throughout her blood.

While the royal family discussed Marcy's terms to become queen, The Hunter had hidden himself and watched. But even he could not be overlooked by Evander.

"Father," he called, *"he's here. The Hunter is here."*

"He's finally here," The king breathed deeply. He grew larger than a four-story building. *"The one called The Hunter is standing in my courts. Why have you come oh powerful slayer?"* The Demon King roared.

"I've come to end your reign of terror!" The Hunter pointed his hefty sword at The Demon King, *"and all of those to come."* His eyes had shifted to Marcy.

The king and the slayer had a long battle which Marcy could no longer bear.

"Stop!" she cried, *"stop fighting!"* She stood between the two.

"Move Marcy, I swear, I will cut a path through you," The Hunter wiped his brow.

"You don't mean that," Marcy whined.

"Dare I say it. Listen to him," the king demanded.

"Don't hurt him," Marcy cried. *"Please, father, I love this man."*

"Traitor!" Freya flew towards Marcy with a twisted knife. "You don't deserve to be queen." She lodged the dagger into her heart. Blood rushed down Marcy's already red dress.

The Hunter dropped his sword and hung onto the dying girl. His face was stained with tears and blood. *"If you would have only stayed..."*

"If she had stayed, she would have lived a lifetime trying to win your heart."

"What happens next?" I've sat up in my bed.

"I don't know," my mother closed the book, "the story was never finished."

"What do you mean, you don't you know? What happened to Marcy and her Hunter?" I curled my lip and pouted.

"I don't know dear," my mother closed the book a little too forcefully.

"But why?" I scrunch my eyebrows as if it would make her tell me.

"The author didn't write it down," she sighed.

"But why does Marcy have to die? The king even said she was immortal."

"The king was wrong. She was born from the womb of a human. That doesn't make immune to sharp objects," she shook her head. "How do you know what that word means anyway? You're only eight."

"And three quarters," I corrected her. "Mr. Howell is a good teacher, but his books are better," I smiled mischievously and braced myself for a beating.

“Have you been learning anything in your martial arts class?” My mother groaned.

“I try,” I avert my eyes and fidget with my blanket.

“Reina Oshiro, I pay good money for those classes.”

“But they don’t interest me much, I’d rather learn about astronomy,” my voice trailed as my eyes wandered to the window.

“You want to look at the stars? Sleep outside tonight!”

“But mother, it might snow.”

“Your books don’t teach you how to survive in the cold?”

“No, I won’t be able to see the stars, and I haven’t read that one yet,” I retorted.

“Good, you should be playing with the other kids instead,” she pointed at me with an accusing finger.

“But I’m only allowed to go to the martial arts school. Do you know how many girls are in my class? One, and that’s me!” I threw my hands in the air.

“What’s wrong with the boys in your class?” My mother’s eyebrow arched.

“They smell, and that’s not the least of their problems,” I bore my teeth and scrunched up my nose.

“So they’re all bad, right?”

“Yes!” Except for one, which I wouldn’t have told her even if she bribed me with sweet bread.

“Not even one good one? She arched both eyebrows.

“Well...” I scratched my burning face. I couldn’t hide it.

“Is it Chiko?” She beamed.

I shook my head.

“Hansuke?”

“No!” I turned over in my bed to prevent her from seeing my hot, rosy cheeks.

“Stop being so nosy.”

“I’m sorry. Please keep attending your classes, you’ll thank me later,” she kissed the back of my head, “Goodnight sweetheart.”

“Can you leave the book?” I pleaded. “I want to take a look at it again.”

“Alright, but I better not catch you with your light on after midnight,” my mother warned.

“You won’t, I promise.”

I flipped through the last part of the story again. There was more. By the end of it, my stomach was queasy. Evander had taken up a sword and slaughtered everyone.

I slept like the mountain that night. Its peaks were blistered by ice. Unaware of the molten simmering beneath its chambers. The smoke rose silently. Slow enough to char your lungs before feeling the heat of the...

Fire!

My house was on fire.

I jumped out of bed. Orange and red flames crackled above me. My ceiling produced endless waves of smoke. I choked as I inhaled them. I felt as though I were in the furnace of hell. My once blue walls had started to crumble. I slid my door open and made for the hall. “Mother!” I called “where are you!” I stopped by my grandmother’s room. The smoke piled in when I opened the door. My grandmother lay asleep. I ran to her side. “Grandmother, wake up,” I cried.

“Reina?” her eyes parted. “What’s wrong? Why is there so much smoke in here?”

Her voice was raspy as she waved the smoke away with her hand.

“Grandmother, The house is on fire!”

“Where’s your mother?”

Her tangled grey hair sprung up when she tumbled out of bed. My grandmother stood an inch taller than me. She raced into the hallway on shaky knees, “Alaine!” my grandmother coughed between each call.

My mother came from her room “what happened?” she coughed.

“My room is on fire.”

“We need to get out of this house,” my grandmother wheezed.

“The book!” My mother groaned “it was in Reina’s room.”

“Nevermind the book, we have to leave,” My grandmother yelled, “Now!”

“Go, take Reina. I need that book,” my mother rushed back into my room.

“Alaine, no!”

“Mother!” I called. My grandmother pulled me toward the front door before I could run after her.

“How could she,” I cried, “for a fairytale.”

“That is no fairytale,” my grandmother huffed, “that is your ancestral history.”

“That story is real?”

My grandmother nodded.

My mother came running towards us with the book tucked under her arm. Her kimono had been cinched by the flames. Once we reached the door, my grandmother’s

frail legs gave out on her. The flames had extended into the hallway and made part of the ceiling collapse. Our hands parted as a pile of wood and ash fell on us.

A bouquet of flames didn't hesitate to flurry onto my kimono, burying deeper into my chest and arm. My mother rushed to brush the flame and debris away.

My grandmother held my shaking body as mother rushed for the door. Her fingers trembled while fumbling with the door. When she pushed it open, her whole body froze. The door rattled as she slammed it.

"How did they find us!" She screamed while rushing us toward the back door.

Glancing back at the door, I rubbed my eyes and turned around. A man was arched in the doorway. His bow was ready to release an arrow. This time the arrow flew towards me. My mother grabbed my wrist and dragged me out of the way. The arrow whooshed past my face by an inch and pinned my grandmother to the wall. The arrow was lodged into her arm. She wailed as my mother tried to pry it out, blood gushed down the wooden panel.

Covering my ears, I squeezed my eyes shut. I curled into a ball and began to rock myself. Why would crazy men with arrows target my family? I wasn't convinced it had anything to do with my father. He was a war hero, he died that way, four years ago.

When I dared to open my eyes, a clear path to the back door was laid before me. I clutched my aching arm and chest, determined to reach the back door. I slipped on the bamboo flooring as I ran. With my good arm, I opened the living room panel. Smoke piled out, rushing into my lungs and burning my eyes. My knees hit the ground. I willed myself to look up. The back door was more than an arms with away. I coughed while I

crawled. I looked back halfway through the living room. My grandmother was motionless on the floor. A man with fiery red eyes held my mother by the throat.

Smoke made my voice stifle when I tried to scream. The man crushed her thin neck in his claws. Blood oozed out her throat and rushed down her nightgown. She fell to the floor like a feather. I scurried to the door. My hand grasped the edge. My weak arms couldn't make it budge. My ears perked at the sound of heavy footsteps. The dreadful man wielded a sword.

As he approached me, my heart wanted to break from my chest. I took a deep breath, which only made it worse. More smoke filled my sore lungs. My eyes watered and trickled down my cheeks.

The door finally flew open. My mouth curved up but my heart sank when my eyes settled on the figure standing in the doorway. Their face was clouded by the smoke. Their giant hands caught me before I jumped back into the sword of the red-eyed man. I jerked away from the smoke masked man. When I got a whiff of fresh air, I collapsed on the icy ground.

Mr. Howell pulled me to my feet, and we raced toward the road.

"I saw the smoke and came as soon as I could. where is your mother?"

I shook my head. My tears were like ice in the cold night air. "My mother and my grandmother," I swallowed hard, "They didn't make it."

Not before long, the archer hunted us down. His arrow was ready for us. Before I could blink, Howell thrust his sword into the man.

"That was your favorite sword," I wiped my runny nose on my sleeve.

"I can find a better one," he told me.

“Where will we go?”

“Far away.”

“Is Tokyo far enough?”

“Major cities are off limits.”

Running along the dirt road felt like a lifetime had gone by. Snowflakes fluttered onto my eyelashes. It was no time to be smiling but I couldn't help it. I was right about the snow.

We made our way to the train station.

“Two tickets please,” Mr. Howell told the man at the desk box. We were given two tickets to Ueda. The trip was long and boring. When we were finally in Ueda, there were two men dressed similarly to those at my house. They were waiting outside the train doors.

“Mr. Howell...”

“I know. Head to the back of the train.”

We ducked into the crowd.

“We should find new clothes,” Howell sighed. “Something plain, preferably.”

We passed by dress shops with beautiful kimonos. Some of them even had western styles. I stopped to admire one.

“This way, Reina. Those will make us stand out.”

Howell led me away from the poofy gown.

I settled for a traditional solid blue kimono. Howell rented a modest apartment where we could practice our fighting skills, and I could be homeschooled.

I was rarely allowed to leave the house, where I watched five winters past by from my window. When spring came around, that year, I turned thirteen.

"I suppose you are wondering why I have you train like a soldier," Howell asked. His once seamless face, had weared down drastically.

"It's so I can defend myself from the men who killed my mother."

"Yes, but it's also to prepare you."

He paced around the training room, placing wooden fighting sticks and swords back into place. The soft roar of the river gently flowed through paper windows. A candle illuminated each samurai painting. The only thing Howell was able to recover from his studio. They hung high on the walls.

"For what?" I slouched, crossing my arms.

"When you defeat their leader, I want you to be as prepared as you can physically and mentally get."

He jabbed my forehead with his elbow. I wobbled and tumbled to the ground.

"Their leader?" I stammered. Rubbing my elbows, I slowly rose.

"Yes, he is a creature of the dark, his name is Evander."

"I can't fight him! He's a monster."

"It's the only way for you to stop being hunted. Let's begin the next step to your success," we trudged out of the studio, "you are ready now."

I leaned into the grass green sofa. My fingertips brushed the velvet fabric. Gripping it was all I could do to keep from shaking. My eyes met Howell's before dropping to the jagged straw rug.

"But, he terrifies me," my voice wouldn't go as far as a whisper.

I took the dusty old book from where it sat on the shelf. After all the years, it smelled of smoke. A corner was burnt off. "I will never be ready." The book slipped through my fingers and hit the ground with a thud.

I went straight to my room. After my studies, I went back to the bookshelf and reread the storybook my mother had given me.

With a swipe of his hands, The Demon King and sent Freya flying. She hit the wall and died instantly. While the king and Hunter fought, Evander took his sister's sword and killed The Hunter. "A life for a life, father you're next."

I shivered and closed the book.

Howell rested a hand on my shoulder. He handed me a small book. "You might want this for what you'll be learning next."

"What's that?" I ran my fingers over the textured spine. "L'exercice," my mouth stumbled across the foreign tongue.

"Exorcism."

"How am supposed to extinguish of evil spirits?" I threw book at the wall.

Howell retrieved it. "By reading this." He shoved the book back into my hands. "I suggest you do it quickly. I scheduled us a gig for tomorrow morning."

"But it's already midnight," I groaned.

"Read fast," Howell went to bed.

I opened the book and began to read. Some words were indecipherable. Sounding them out was scrutinizing. I ripped Mr.Howell's door open. "Could you please find me a book in Japanese?" I clenched my teeth.

"Learn the language. You'll need it," he slurred and went back to sleep.

"I can't learn it by just reading it!" I slammed his door.

I sat down and opened the book again. I tried focusing on each individual word. As I read, my French became smoother. I began to have a complete understanding. When dawn broke, I was on the last page.

"You're done with the book?" Howell stretched in his bedroom doorway. "Get ready, they will be expecting you soon."

I laid on the floor and closed my eyes "Can't I have a few hours of sleep?" The hardwood surprisingly felt comfortable.

"No, this is the most desirable time for exercises," my Howell folded his arms.

"Then we can go tomorrow after I've rested," I rolled over.

"Get up Reina," he pulled on my arm. "We're leaving now!"

The room around me swirled as he pulled me from the ground, giving me a massive headache. "Hold on," I steadied myself. "Why do I have to become a stupid exorcist anyway's?"

"It will give you insight for more important things." He moved his hands as he talked, like a crazy conspiracist.

I rolled my eyes and retrieved my hairpins. Running my hands through my heavy dark hair, and twisting it into a bun.

"Would you hurry up" He urged.

I skipped to the porch and slipped on my shoes, "I'm ready now."

"Mrs. Takashima's son is very sick. He had a bad dose of moldy bean custard," Howell informed me while walking down the street. "It was easy for the spirit to possess him."

The sound of Howell's knuckles rapping on the door echoed throughout the house. The woman cautiously opened the door. Her head whipped in all directions before leading us in.

"Thank you for coming, not many have been enthusiastic about helping my son." Mrs. Takashima walked us to the back room. Before opening the door, she fell to her knees. "Please help me, because of that spirit I can't even afford to eat two meals."

Howell wiped her eyes. He kept his head low to keep from hitting the ceiling.

"We'll do everything we can to help," he gently raised her to her feet.

Her son sat in a large fluffy chair while he stuffed his cheeks with precious fish and rice. My lips curled in disgust.

"Daichi? You have guests," his mother squeaked and cleared her throat.

"I told you I wanted to be alone!" He growled.

"But they have come a very long way. You won't turn them away will you?"

"Get out!" Daichi's face was red hot.

"Sweetheart..."

The lights began to flicker, "Get out! Get out!"

Mrs. Takashima rushed us out. "This was a mistake."

"Please let us try," Howell pleaded, "he needs help."

"Are you sure she can do it?" She looked at me hesitantly.

"I'm positive," Howell gleamed.

"I'll try," I gulped.

I shuddered, slowly making my way back to the door. It creaked as I slid it open.

“I thought I told you to stay out.” Daichi didn’t lift his eyes from the book he had held.

I froze, someone pushed me further into the room. I glanced back as the door was shut behind me. The boy’s eyes snapped at me. My mouth quivered as I searched my mind for words. Anything would do. But they wouldn’t come.

He stood. I felt for the door and tried to push it open. It wouldn’t budge. Possessed Daichi stepped towards me. I spun around and began clawing at the door, gaining an abundance of splinters in the process.

“Open the door,” I screeched, “I can’t do this.” There was no reply. Daichi turned me to meet his eyes. He pressed a hand on the door next to my head. I tried to focus on my breathing. His face came closer to mine.

“You can’t kill me, you’re a demon slayer, your efforts will be useless.”

The stench of rotting fish paralyzed me. Word’s still wouldn’t come.

“You should leave before this becomes personal. Practice killing demons, instead. You’re old enough.” Daichi let up.

“Why do you ask me to do such things?” word’s rush out of my mouth.

“Demons are spirit’s fiercest competition,” he glared. “It’ll be a thousand times easier to find hosts with them gone.”

“Neither of you should be possessing the living. You’ve had your turn, you should go back to where you came from,” I spat.

“I’ve been a spirit from the beginning!” He raged in my face, fire flashed in my eyes. “And, I’m tired of people telling me to leave.”

I started chanting french words I had learned from the exorcism book.

“Your words are weak,” he clawed my face and threw me to the ground. “You are weak! You will never defeat the king of evil!” He laughed maliciously. “I would do a better job,” he paused in thought and looked at me with a brilliant smile. A mist extracted from the ground below him. A spirit’s face wisped towards me as Daichi dropped to the ground.

I covered my face and let out a scream. My whole body shook as my inside’s began to burn. I grabbed my itching throat. My hand’s spontaneously fell and pushed me off the ground. I ripped the door open. Mrs. Takashima rushed past me.

“He’s cured,” she smiled through her tears.

“I knew you could do it,” Howell approached me.

“It was easy, all it took was a little convincing,” I heard myself say.

“What did you do with the spirit?”

“Where he belongs.”

“Excellent,” Howell couldn’t contain his excitement, “we shall make a great feast tonight. I’ll buy a duck from the market.”

“A duck is hardly a feast.”

“Thank you so much. How can I repay you.”

“Lots of money.”

Howell jabbed me in the gut, “Your gratitude is all that is needed.”

“That was stupid of you,” I snorted once we left. “We could have made bank.”

“You won’t always be rewarded for doing the right thing,” he countered. “It’s a good lesson to learn young.”

“I’ve got my whole life to learn crummy stuff like that,” I grumbled.

“It’s ignorant to postpone positive habits. You might regret not making them now for the rest of your life.”

“I know exactly what I’ll be regretting,” I mumbled under my breath.

Part Two

That night, the spirit, in my body, snuck out of the house. He walked me several blocks before stopping outside a large fence. With a knife, taken from home, my hand’s picked the gates lock.

If you break into someone’s house, you’re going to get caught.

“Relax,” the spirit spoke, “I’m good at this.”

The heavy metal gate made an eerie screech as it was swung open. I walked a stone path down a beautiful garden. The path had bamboo fences leading up to the house. Two cherry blossom trees acted as an archway at the end of the garden. Their sweet scent calmed my nerves. Walking past the lush pink flowers, I had a full view of the house. It was a mansion, three stories tall.

“This house belongs to the third richest person in Uedon. It also just so happens to be occupied by two powerful demons. Now I finally have a host good enough to match their strength.” I took a deep breath, “a good night for revenge.”

He snuck us into the house through a first floor-window, tiptoed up the stairs, and slowly pushed the door to the master bedroom open. My stomach twisted as I took in a whiff of strong whiskey. The wallpaper was a rich orange. A beautiful vanity sat in one corner of the room. He went to the immense bed like a ghost and unsheathed my sword. The sheets were pulled back empty. My head whipped at the creek of the door.

A tall man with little hair approached me through the darkness. “We meet again, Aiko.”

“You knew I’d come.”

“It didn’t pass my mind. I could hear you all the way downstairs.”

I moved swiftly toward the man with my sword.

“You wouldn’t hurt an old man would you?”

“You’re lucky that man is rich. Come out so we can have a fair fight.”

“This hardly seems like a fair fight. You’re going to let me hurt a little girl?” He chuckled “You really are evil.”

“Argh!” A woman jumped out of the closet, wielding a giant ax. She swung it towards me and I lunged back to the bed.

“Have fun,” the man waved.

I jumped off the bed. My breath was heavy as I ran towards the door. The woman jumped in front of me. She heaved the ax an inch away from my face. My heart raced as the rush of air sent me backward. The ax carved deep into the wooden floor. While

she struggled to pull it free, I jumped behind her. Eyeing a path for my sword, straight through her head.

You can't kill her!

My yell rang through my head.

With her gone, I won't have to spend so much money on a wife. Came the spirit's response.

I forbid you.

The spirit ignored me and thrust the sword upward.

NO! I sidestepped away. My sword fell from my hands.

"Are you crazy? You'll lose your head!" The spirit yelled.

"You're the one who's about to lose a head," the woman yanked the ax out of the floor. I dodged her blow and quickly obtained my sword. I swiped sideways and cut the woman's skirt.

"You almost cut my leg," she squealed.

I wanted to run away but I had no control over my own body. The woman came at me again. This time I jumped over her ax. My sword extended to her upper arm. Her ax crashed to the floor as she wailed.

"Playing dirty isn't nice."

The woman dropped to the floor cold. A demon emerged in her place. She grabbed hold of the ax's hilt, almost immediately throwing it at me. My shaky knees dropped to the floor. The ax flew straight through the door. The demon grabbed my hair. My bun undid itself and I was lifted off the floor, My arm whipped the sword frantically at her.

“Do you still think this is a fair fight?” The man from before spoke through the gap in the door. “What possessed you into bringing a child to a man’s fight?” He cackled.

I swung from side to side while the demon laughed. “Put me down,” I yelled, “then you’ll see how fair this fight is.”

A red dagger flew through the window, cutting my hair free from the demon's grasp. I landed on my feet and reclaimed my sword. I lunged forward into the beast’s leg. She fell to the ground, screeching in pain. I took her moment of weakness and ended her.

“No!” the man roared as he transformed into an ugly monster. “I’m going to make you sorry for that.”

I readied my sword for him. An arrow sliced through the air and knocked it out of my hand. As I dived for it I saw a bodyguard through the window, perched in a tree.

Forget him. Let’s get out of here. I pleaded with the spirit.

I’m not leaving until this house is mine.

I pounced at the Demon and he backhanded me.

We were hardly strong enough to beat the other one. I pleaded.

I can do this. The spirit forced me to my feet.

And beat the guards too?

I won’t have to, they’ll think I did.

They’ll still go after me!

I willed myself to run under the demon’s legs. The spirit stuck my sword out and cut him. I swung the door open and the spirit turned me back toward the demon. As he stomped toward me, I could hear guards coming up the stairs. I ran back towards the

window. The spirit took wonky steps away, I moved closer. The demon and arrows flew towards me, I ducked. They lodged into the wall with a thousand thuds. The spirit swung my sword toward the demon. He knocked it out of my hand. I moved backward as an arrow was shot at me.

Get out of my body! I screamed a phrase I learned in that old French book. All at once, there was peace. The spirit was gone. There was no time to rejoice. The demon lunged at me, knocking me to the ground.

I thought up a way to escape as my life flashed before my eyes. The doorway was surrounded by guards. I glanced at the window again, the path was clear. I ran and jumped. Grabbing a blossom tree branch, I dropped in the garden soil.

“After her!” The demon’s voice rang through the air.

I raced down the garden path. It wasn’t long before an arrow or two sliced through the air. As I ran down an empty street, the peaceful night became crowded with footsteps. When I turned a hard corner, somebody yanked me into a dark alleyway. Their hand gagged my mouth. Once the guards past, they let go. I turned, Howell’s pointy eyes peered at me.

“What happened?” He demanded.

“Mr. Howell,” I wiped my face but it didn’t stop the tears from flowing. “That spirit possessed me and I- he made me kill a demon. I couldn’t do anything. I was so scared.”

“You were possessed?” He blinked. “I just thought you were grumpy,” he rubbed his forehead in thought. “Well, we can’t go home now. Word of you will spread like wildfire,” He sighed “How would you feel about the ocean? Maybe we can find weaker opponents for you there.”

Although I didn't want to leave my home, I nodded. I didn't want Aiko to find me again.

We boarded a train to the ocean the next morning. The ocean was huge, extending farther than my eyes could see. It smells heavily of seaweed, which when I learned to hold my breath for long periods of time. The salty waves crashed against the sea cliffs so loudly, I could barely hear my own thoughts. The way the ocean swayed, was mesmerizing. Back and forth, spewing foam onto my bare feet. For the first time, in a long time, I smile.

We didn't stay long. Howell taught me the proper way to kill demons. It didn't take long before word about a demon slayer had washed along the coast. We decided to set sail for Korea. The harbor had loads of boats, big and small. A lot of them were for fishing. Right before we boarded the ship, something crossed my path. A black cat.

Once we were in Korea, we purchased clothes to match the crowd and settled in a remote village. There I would spend hours, day after day, fighting and training. The cool spring season was crisped away by summer. On the hottest days, training outside was almost unbearable. Those days past too, then fall, winter, and spring again. A year, almost long enough to be completely fluent in the language.

Then, we moved again. "We'll go west, to China," Howell had said. I was comfortable where we were, the people were kind, and I had just gotten used to their customs. But as time would tell, I wasn't allowed to stay comfortable. So, we rode by buggy to the nearest barge.

"Cheer up, China won't be so bad," Howell told me. "I think you'll find it to be a great place to finish your training."

“How long will that take? And, where will we go then?” I questioned.

“Far away,” Was all the information he had shared.

It was a long journey before reaching our destination. The city was magnificent. Before I could take a step towards it, something rushed in front of me. It stopped to look at me for a moment, then jumped up into a tree, a brown cat.

“Would you say cats are good or bad luck?” I asked Howell.

“They’re rather good, in my opinion,” He replied. “Sure keep the mice out of the rice,” he chuckled too loudly.

It wasn’t long before we took our journey southwest. “India will be a wise place to end your training. But for now, we’ll live in Wuhan.”

Wuhan was a beautiful city, we lived there for two years before we departed for India.

“Perfect form, excellent reaction speed, killer instinct, that demon king’s as good as dead.” There was pride in Howell’s eyes.

“What if I fail?” I slumped my shoulders to look at the ground.

“You can’t fail,” he set a hand on my shoulder. “You’re ready,” he assured me.

“But I don’t *feel* ready,” I tossed my weapon shrugishly.

Howell looked at me in deep thought. “Have you been resting well?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been meditating with the monks twice a day?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. We leave for France tomorrow.”

“So that’s where he’s hiding,” I crinkle my nose.

A few days later, we had set sail for Egypt. The water was calm up until we reached the Gulf of Aden. The rocking of the boat made my stomach hurl more times than I could count. The howl of the wind and chill of the storm drafted throughout the ship. After about an hour or two of swaying in the water, I went above deck. My ears perked at someone's frantic voice. I stumbled over puddles to the railing. A girl hung over the raging waters. "Help me!" she called. I grabbed her wrist before she took a fateful dive. I mustered all my strength to pull her up. Rain and salty sea water covered me from head to toe.

"What are you kids doing in this storm?" A man barked. His large coat covered all but his scruffy black beard.

"There was a cat," the girl quivered.

"Cats aren't allowed on the voyage. Come on, let's get you two back to safety," the man lead us below deck.

My eyes wandered back to the sea. If it wasn't my imagination, I could have sworn the boat was swerving off course. I ducked below deck. The man helped the girl find her parents. I sat next Mr. Howell on a splinter filled bench. It felt like we were on that rickety thing for hours. My stomach felt the sway of the boat too heavily.

"I'll be back," Howell stood. His voice was raspy, eyes puffy, and a wiry beard had sprouted from several sleepless nights. "Something doesn't feel right," he muttered in a grumpy tone. When he came back, he had a stern look on his face. "The captain fell asleep and now our course is way off. It will take the whole night to get back on track."

I groaned when I felt another toss of the boat. My stomach hurled and I excused myself to the bathroom. I hadn't even closed the door when something rabid lunged

onto me and dug their claws into my skull. I wrestled with it, trying to remove it from my head. As I did so, I tripped over the toilet and hit my head on the vanity. The last I remembered, before toppling to the floor, was the flick of a grey tail.

I heard my name and opened my eyes. Mr.Howell held a towel over my head. He sighed when he saw them open.

"I think I've managed to stop the bleeding," he removed the towel and immediately returned it. "I'm not much of a doctor," his shoulders tensed.

"But we can find one who is," I said flatly.

Howell helped me to the nurse's room. I was almost knocked off my feet when something ran under us. A grey cat.

"That cat," I grumbled. I almost ran after it, until I realized which direction it had come from. I glanced back at the engine room. A man ran out flailing his arms, followed by several others. "Run!" He yelled. "The engine, it's gonna-"

A huge explosion burst them into the air. My ear's popped as it threw me backward. I gagged at the stench of burning men. Covering my eye, so I wouldn't lose my appetite, again. Water came spurting up through a gaping hole, and the cooking men were washed away. We ran for the exit.

"What was that noise?" a worried woman approached us. She held her two small children close.

"We have to get out of here," I yelled.

"Go to the escape boats."

I ran with Mr.Howell next to me. Many had already left. We trudged to the end of the row, the last boat, one spot was left.

My vision blurred while staring at the small boat. My pulse quickened at the thought of leaving him.

NEVER.

“Go” Howell nudged me forward. “You’ll be okay without me.”

“No! I need you,” I begged. “I can’t do this alone.”

“You can, and you must,” Howell squeezed my shoulder. “I believe in you.”

“I won’t leave you!” I grabbed him. Not again. Not like Mother.

He pushed me, the boat rocked and I stumbled away.

“Come on, we need to leave, now,” someone in the boat urged. The boat rocked again. “Hurry.”

I wiped away my tears and stepped towards the boat. Reaching my hand out, I glanced back at Howell. He was smiling, but his eyes weren’t. Another explosion blasted through the boat. Completely devouring Howell. It knocked me off my feet and sent me hurtling into the sea. I hit the water hard. I’ve heard that the dead sea was too salty to drown in. As I struggled to resurface, I thought it to be a myth for sure.

In the pitch black, it became harder to tell which direction was up. As I sank deeper, my thoughts turned to mush.

“I can’t leave you.”

“You’ll be okay without me.”

I was drowning in them. As I floated, I felt as though it had been hours. I expected my lungs to give out any moment. Before they could, something shone through the darkness. I reached for it and began to float to the surface. When I broke

through the water, I took a breath of the glorious humid air. The stars were beautiful that night.

The light had come from boats docked at the harbor. I swam to them. "Help me," my throat croaked. I grabbed hold of someone's hand.

The man who had helped me from the sea, fed and clothed me. He told me that I wasn't far from Egypt. I thanked him and I was on my way.

Egypt was hot and dusty. I coughed up dirt for days after walking in the desert. My dry throat ached for water. In the distance, my eyes narrowed into enormous triangles. Mr. Howell had told me about the pyramids but had never imagined them to be in such so large. As I traveled closer, a low hum came from a gathered people at the base of the pyramids.

Words cannot describe how horrified I was by what I saw. The same grey cat who had sunk the ship was sitting atop a throne. Civilians were shading him from the sun, feeding him bits of meat, and kneeling to worship.

It took everything in me not to march up to him with my sword. I kept my sword sheathed. "Why are you worshipping a cat?" I asked one of the civilians.

"He's no cat," the man snorted. "The great Khufu has returned," the man left to join the crowd.

I turned to leave. Revenge wasn't going to help me win my fight with The Demon King. But how could I let a whole society worship a demonic cat? As I watched the cat sunbathe, something about him seemed familiar. Yes, extremely familiar. I sat next to the civilian. "What makes you think this cat is a pharaoh?" I asked him.

"He said so himself."

“He can talk?” My jaw dropped.

“Yes,” the man shushed her and went back to worship.

“His Majesty would like a four-story palace,” a man holding an umbrella announced, “consider It done.”

“Yes your excellence,” chanted the crowd.

I clutched my queasy stomach, this had gone too far. “You can’t possibly build a palace for this imposter.”

The man grabbed my wrist and dragged me to my feet. “This woman is an unbeliever.”

“A traitor!” The cat screeched, “I want her head.”

The crowd stood. They looked at me with hatred in their eyes.

“I see that I’m not wanted here,” I gulped.

I darted away and the men chased. I kicked the heavy sand with each slow step. The piles made it impossible to outrun the crazy mob. One of them grabbed my wrist. Another pinned me to the ground. Everyone watched in awe as they swung their sword up and thrust it at my throat.

“Please,” I cried as I clenched my eyes shut. I only felt the cool blade on my neck. No sharp pain or hot blood drizzled down my shoulders. I opened my eyes. The civilians were staring at me with wild expressions. Their weapon’s had fallen to the soft earth.

“Are you a god?” One of them asked.

“Yes,” I heard my voice quiver. “Yes, I am,” I said, straightening my posture. “I’ve come to set things right. That cat is not your pharaoh. You need to stop worshipping him and go home.”

“That cat made us feed him all of our food,” someone piped up.

“Kill him!” they started towards the cat.

“Wait!” I commanded, “I want him alive.”

I passed through the crowd, a couple of them fell back to act as bodyguards. It may have been wrong but I couldn’t help but smile a little. They presented the wretched cat to me, he hissed and wiggled under their grasp. I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him, taking him away from the crowd.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I think you’ve already guessed, Reina.”

“Aiko,” I glared.

“Why, when things are finally going my way, you show up and ruin everything.”

“You tried to kill me!” I screamed. “Mr. Howell died because of *you*.”

“Yeah well-”

Aiko was interrupted by one of my new bodyguard’s, “is everything alright?”

“Yes, please leave us alone for a moment,” I shewed him away.

“You cursed me into the body of a cat. Do you know how many lives a cat has?”

He growled. “Nine! I have to be a stinkin cat for five more years.”

“Good! Now you know what Hell is going to feel like.”

My mouth curved into a tight smile. I gripped his scruff tighter to stop myself from wringing his scrawny neck.

"You're not smart enough to take me there," he snorted.

"You're absolutely right."

A smug look appeared on the cat's face.

"Until I am, you'll have to be in my sight at all times."

"I wasn't being truthful," He smiled. "You're very smart. You can go ahead and send me to Hell now."

"But I don't know how, and I need you here for safekeeping," I squeezed him in my arms.

I waved a goodbye to the civilians and went on my way. Aiko tried to squirm out of my arms as I walked. "This-" he pushed on my arms with his back. His claws embedded into my dress, "- is worse than Hell."

"It's settled, you will be my cat slave for the next five years. Only then will I pardon my teacher's death."

"I don't need your consent," he continued to squirm.

"Shall I cast a spell that will make you paralyzed?" I asked irritably.

Aiko went limp in my arms, "alright, I'll be your slave."

That didn't sound quite right to me. I was sure he was planning on clawing my throat out in my sleep, but I took his word for the moment.

"What am I to do as your slave?" Aiko asked when I tied him down for bed.

"I haven't decided yet," I laid down on the hard mattress, resting on top of a dirt floor. "Lot's of bird catching?"

"No," he grumbled.

“What part of “you have to do whatever I say” do you not understand? It will be a huge money saver.”

“Here’s a money saver. Quit staying hotels,” he shot back.

“You call this a hotel?” my voice was low, I closed my eyes. As the veil over my them sent me deeper into darkness, a searing hot sensation overtook my body. My back was drenched by ocean currents. Howell stood on a sinking ship. I tried to reach for him, he was about an arms width away. The more determined I was to reach him, the harder it became to move my limbs. I opened my mouth to speak but the word was caught on my tongue. I breathed heavily as I struggled through the water. Before I knew it, I had drifted far away from him. A wave of darkness draped over me. I squeezed my eyes shut.

My eyes burst open as the wave passed. “Mr. Howell!” The ocean was gone. In its place was the Egyption suite. I felt my tense limbs relax and sat up, drenched in sweat. I glanced at Aiko uneasy. He hovered over my bed with a lit match. It flickered once, light moving across his mischievous face.

My eyes widened, my body paralyzed. Before I could snatch the deadly fire, he dropped it. Flames scattered along the perimeter of the bed, creating a cage of fire. My hands began to shake as I choked on the heavy smoke.

The Demon King’s army burst through my door. Their swords and arrows pointed straight at me. I instinctively reached for my sword, to which I came up empty-handed. They parted for their king. He walked forward, his striking red eyes focused on me.

“You were tricky to catch, Reina, but I’ve finally done it.”

My name rolled off his tongue like a snake. His eyes narrowed on me. "It's courtesy to have an even match, but I'd rather just kill you."

My bottom lip curled, my eyebrows furrowed. "Like you killed my mother? You'll pay for what you've done!" I stood and began to leap over the flames.

The Demon King's sharp voice sent me flying back into the wall, "you are too weak."

The flames grew taller. The heat burned my scars. I curled up in a ball, as far away from the fire as possible.

"It's your fault they died, Reina. You could have saved them."

"No!" I cried. "I was a kid."

"You were helpless and weak. You're still weak. All that training you went through, useless. If you hadn't sent that bad spirit to hell, your teacher would still be alive." In sync, everyone in the room chanted, "A life for a life, Reina, you're next."

I covered my ears and shook my head. "Get out!" I screamed.

"I'd gladly if I wasn't chained to floor..." Aiko complained.

I sat up, swiftly grabbing my sword. Sweat drenched my back and forehead.

"If you had a bad dream it's because you're sleeping with a blanket in the middle of the desert," he criticized.

"No, you just need to stay away from matches!" I growled.

He peered at me with his green eyes and curled into a ball.

I laid down, immediately springing back up, "we should go."

"Now? But I haven't slept yet."

“I’m sure you’ve had plenty of cat naps during the day,” I changed into my travel attire.

“Plenty of rest makes a happy cat,” he grinned, turning his head away from me.

I finished packing my straw woven bag and dragged Aiko along by his chain. “No more napping until we reach Paris, got it?”

Part Three

With people in every direction, there was hardly a place to walk in Paris. The more of them I saw in fancy dresses and pampered hair, the more subconscious I felt in my grungy Egyptian attire. Each magnificent building, crafted with pristine detail,

towered over my head. As we strode down the street, a large, grey dog snarled at us. Gnashing his rotten teeth, leash clanking against the cement as he lunged at us. Aiko leaped into my arms like a frightened child. A smirk slipped onto my face. I was about to tease him, when the angry dog ripped away from his owner and charged straight after us.

My blood pressure flew higher than a common crane. There was no time to whip out my sword. I squeezed Aiko when the realization set in. The fur on his back sprang up. Aiko's sharp claws pierced my shoulder blades. I bit my lip. Aiko hissed as the dog bounded towards us. The dog whimpered as someone jerked him back. I eased my tense shoulders when Aiko released his claws.

The man turned towards us, and my heart stopped. He wore a sharp brown coat and trousers. His chiseled cheekbones and nose sat parallel on his face. The copper in his hair shone from the midday sun. His ebony eyes peered at me and my cat.

"Are you alright, miss?"

His French was the most elegant thing my ears had ever heard. Although, I hadn't had much to compare with my own.

"Yes, good," was all I could manage.

"I'm sorry, what? Your french isn't so good..." he turned his head sideways like a confused dog.

"It's been a while," I kept my head down while tapping my foot on the hard brick.

"Are you a tourist?" he study me head to toe.

I nodded.

"May I request a name for that gorgeous face?"

“Reina,” I blushed. Aiko squirmed in my arms, “and this is Aiko.”

“That’s an odd name for a cat,” the man’s thick eyebrow arched while proceeding to pat his head.

Aiko hissed. The man pulled away from the cat as Aiko snapped at him. “What a temper,” he left in a hurry.

I flicked Aiko on the head, “why’d you scare him off? I could have asked him for directions.”

“That’s not all you would’ve asked him,” he mumbled under his breath.”

I frowned and tossed him to the ground.

“We don’t need a guide. My nose is capable of finding dinner,” he held his nose high in the air. “This way,” he pulled me along by his leash.

I followed, until a dress shop across the street caught my eye. My feet quit working as I stared at a sea green dress. The dress reminded me of the day I escaped from my hometown, the lifestyle I was forced to adopt, and the dress I couldn’t have. A reminder to always blend in. That dress had scaled toward purple, this one was a deep sea green. The colors may have been different, but the rivet of the skirt and collar are similar. My feet carried me off as if I were possessed.

“Does it have to be now?” Aiko groaned, his stomach growled.

I shushed him and entered the shop. The seamstress greeted me. I pointed to the dress I wanted like a dumb kid. She fitted me and I was on my way to dinner in my new dress.

Aiko stopped in front of the window of a luxurious restaurant. A large sign, with fancy lettering, hung above the door. He took another whiff and made a sour face. "Let's go somewhere else, this place reeks. Probably serves cat's at the back door."

"I think it smells good. You can wait outside if you're that worried," I went inside. Aiko followed reluctantly.

I looked around the room in awe. It was the fanciest place I had ever been in my life. Enormous chandeliers and exquisite paintings hung throughout the room. Waiters hustled to take the orders of countless people in fancy clothes. My curls bounced as I sat down at a table with a white tablecloth and an assortment of silverware. Aiko rested under my chair. I ordered a lamb and kicked my feet delightfully. Waiting for my food became exceedingly boring. I practiced holding a fork. It felt awkward in my hand due to a lifetime of using chopsticks. Voices from the crowd came in and out of focus. One voice was distinct from the others. As I listened to its beautiful tone, it became familiar. I twisted around and peaked at a booth where the man sat. The same man who rescued me from the dog.

My eyes widened, a smile raced across my face, my hand reached for the ceiling, and then I saw her. She came in like a dove, wearing a white dress and wavy blonde hair. She sat across from the wonderful man. My hand and smile dropped as if they had died. I turned around instantly, planted my feet on the ground, and stiffened my position. I couldn't help but turn an ear toward their conversation every so often. They giggled obnoxiously. I ran my fingers through my hair, severing the beautiful locks.

The waiter arrived with my food. I could feel the stares of other customer biting into my skin as I shoveled food into my mouth like a wild animal. I ate too viciously to

care or savor my delectable meal, excluding the moments I stopped to drop food under the table. I wanted to get out of there as soon as I could. Aiko scarfed his dinner down faster than I could.

Before taking my last bite, I made the mistake of looking back. The man saw a glimpse of my face, his expression was recognizable. I awkwardly reached for the piece of meat on my plate. Aiko jumped up to the table and snatched. He raced through the restaurant, aiming for the exit. I jumped from my seat and chased after him. He was out the door when someone stepped on his leash. Before I took good a look at him, a waiter grabbed me by my shoulder.

“Was that your cat, miss? Cat’s aren’t allowed in my restaurant. There is a two dollar fee for such crimes, and three more for the broken plate.

I counted my money in my head “I can’t afford that.”

The man handed the waiter a chunk of change, “please excuse my rudeness, but this is my cat and I will be paying for his misdeeds.”

I looked up to the same black eyes of the man in the street.

The waiter took the money and escorted us both out.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I sheepishly told him. “It was my mistake, so...”

“You’re right,” the lady in white came directly out the door. “My cousin is much too generous. I believe you have taken advantage of him. Please pay him back,” her eyes pierced my soul.

I almost piped the money out when he said, “It was a gift.”

The lady walked away upset. The man smiled at me and went to catch up with her.

"Wait!" I called out.

He stopped in his tracks and looked back at me.

"What is your name?"

"My name?" He looked at me as if I were crazy, thought for a moment, and gave it to me. "You, call me Ben."

"Will I ever call you that again?" I whispered.

He paused for a moment and kept walking.

"You're completely hopeless," he whined. "We should check out the hotel."

"Why did you have to make a seen?" I yelled at Aiko, "right in front of *him*."

"I was trying to keep you from being unfocused, you can chase boys after you've defeated The Demon King."

"Maybe I don't want to pursue some evil king. I don't even know what my special ability is yet."

"You can do it, Reina, you slept in the ocean for three days, and a mob with swords couldn't even kill you. That has to count for something, right?" He nudged my leg forward with his head.

"The last slayer could do all those things. Heck, he even disappeared into thin air. He couldn't defeat him, what difference will I make?"

"It takes guts," he told me. "You've got them. You stood up to me," he smirked.

I dragged his sorry butt to the hotel.

"You don't have much of a strategy," Aiko looked over the map with me. "You're not going to just waltz up to the cave, are you?"

"Yup, and slice him like a piece of cake," I demonstrated with an invisible sword.

“We need to find a secret entrance or something. Trolls aren’t very nice.”

“*That* is the secret entrance,” I took a deep breath, relaxing the urge to smack him across the head.

A knock came from the door. We looked at each other, “room services?” Aiko and I shrugged.

Aiko jumped up on the table beside the door as I twisted the knob. The woman stood in the doorway.

“Oh, it’s you,” shifting her feet, she stuck her nose up. “Since I’m here, I’ll ask anyway. There’s no soap in my bathroom and room service isn’t answering... doesn’t seem like too much to ask,” she said, eyeing the dirt on my nose.

“Yes, you can borrow my soa-” I groaned.

“Then, get on with it.”

I handed her the soap. “Is Ben around?” I had to stand on my tip toes to peeked over the towering girl.

“He doesn’t need to be bothered by the likes of you. He’s busy as it is,” she sneered and slammed the door in my face.

“She slammed your own door in your face. I love it.”

I glared at him and began practicing my sword techniques. With a swoosh and a whoosh I swiped my sword through the air. It wasn’t until midnight that I had finished. With one last hurray I swiped toward the open doorway. A maid stood a hair away from my sword. Her expression chilled through my bones. The maid’s lip quivered into an abrupt screech. She went down cold. I threw my sword in the closet when someone approached my room.

Ben hovered over the unconscious maid. "What did you do to her?" he asked.

"She fainted. Must be ill on rest," I tried to breathe the lie.

Aiko bound across the room when he awoke from his slumber. Instinctively hissing.

"I'll call for the manager," Ben stood to leave.

"I'll- go too," I began to stand

"Who's going to watch her in case she wakes up?"

I glanced at Aiko.

"The cat?" Ben asked. "Certainly not. I'll be back."

It felt like hours before Ben had finally arrived with security. They examined her and took her away. I prayed she wouldn't awake before she left the building. Ben shifted in his stance as if he were content in leaving.

"It's such a coincidence that we're staying at the same hotel. It must be a sign that I need to pay you back for your good deeds," I blurted.

Ben shook his head. "There's no need, even if I saved you a thousand times."

"My guilt for burdening you is great," *there must be something I could do*. My mind went to money, leaving at the first coin. I glanced up at his dark eyes, smooth jaw, and sweet smile... I suddenly felt too close. Stepping back ever so slightly, my cheeks burned from a mischievous thought.

Ben's complexion lit up as he looked over me again. "I think there is something. Meet me on the last floor at five."

Before I had a chance to answer, he was down the hall. I shut the door, completely captivated.

Aiko's stares burst my little bubble of happiness.

"Don't tell me you're that naive, right?"

I rolled my eyes and laid down on the excessively cushioned bed. I removed the number of pillows to my liking, and closed my eyes.

"No," he commanded, "tomorrow morning we head straight to the demon caves."

"Shouldn't I be the one commanding you?" I bickered. "Bring me water," I ordered, pointing at the canteen sticking out of my bag.

He held up his paw, unamused. "I'm just trying to make sure we stay on schedule." Aiko approached the bag, nudged the water out, and rolled it to my bedside.

I reached down for it, "I haven't had any time to relax." I moved the bottle in my hands. I unscrewed the cap and sipped, "shouldn't take this time for granted." *I might not have another chance.* The lid squeaked as I tightened it. "Unless you want me to die tomorrow," I raised an eyebrow at the cat. I could hear the gulp in the cat's throat.

"Then, be careful," Aiko made his way the rug to lay down "I don't trust that guy."

I didn't sleep for the four hours I waited. How could I? Before the clock turned, I sprang from my bed and was out the door before Aiko could have opened his eyes. I raced up a monstrous stairwell. Breathing heavily and legs burning, every step was worth it. I came to a halt right before the door of the fifth floor, almost smacking into the thick glass. Smoothing out my dress and hair, I opened the door. I looked both ways down the endless hallway of doors, but no Ben. Did I miss him?

I stood in the middle of the hall like a stray cat. I took a deep breath, and awkwardly messed with my hair as I waited. Eventually, the undeniable sleep depravity weighed me down. I swayed in the hallway. Ketching a white stand, the potted plant

nearly fell over. My eyelids glued shut and I gave into the wall to catch up on rest. After no more than three minutes, I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. I opened my eyes. A face emerged from my blurry vision. It was Ben!

I managed to stand up straight and vigorously rubbed my eyes.

“Do I bore you that much? Here comes the exciting part,” he smiled. “Come on.” He took me by the arm and lead me down the hall. We turned a corner, revealing a ladder at the end of the hall. Ben grabbed a wrung and started up.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked hesitantly, pulling on my mid necked collar. An over necessity to guard my scares.

“To the most wonderful place in Paris.”

I looked at him wearily.

“Come on, it’s beautiful,” he stretched his arm out to me. “Trust me,” he smiled.

On the ceiling was a square opening. A cold breeze drafted in when he removed it. I was almost tempted to rub my arms. I glanced down at the floor, nine feet below me. My hands gripped the rungs of the ladder. I climbed, until I passed through the hole. Until I saw it.

On the horizon of the awoken city, a splash of purples and pinks painted each building. I paused to admire the view. Ben lifted me onto the roof where I carefully placed my footing. I slid a little in my new shoes. We sat together on the roof and watched the rising sun.

“I wanted to see the city like this one last time,” Ben sighed. A hint of sadness escaped with it. “Before I go home.”

“It’s an odd place, but it is worth the effort,” I tried not to peer over the edge.

“They ought to make a special place for this kind of thing I suppose,” he rested his jaw in his hand.

I made an effort to peer into his pitch black eye, like the night sky. I gulped. I had never seen such dark eyes.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he spoke.

“They’re just regular old brown,” I shake my head.

“They’re sweet, like honey.” He looked at me for a long while before smiling, “like you.”

I look away, hiding my face with my hair. Despite the nip of the cold air and self-conscious tug of my collar, my body became a furnace.

“Hasn’t anyone told you that before?” He asked.

I was forced to think back to my childhood. Only one person, my father. It was hard to remember his strong Japanese features, but they’re there. In the back of my mind, always.

“What about how beautiful you are?”

“Only you,” I say under my breath.

He shifted to admire me, “I’m glad that I’m the first one.” He smiled. “So...” he said after a while “have you ever- has anyone?”

“Done this?” I leaned into him so quickly he flinched. Our lips touched the moment I closed my eyes.

“No,” he exhales. As Ben patted his hair down, he turned back toward the sun.

I did the same.

“Thank you, for a wonderful morning,” Ben didn’t take his eyes off the sunrise.
“This is the finest payment anyone has given me,” he gulped something down his throat.
“It’s time for me to go,” he breathed.

I nodded as he stood. Brushing the hem of his pants as he passed me. When he was gone, the flutter in my stomach carved another vicious hole into my heart.

“How’d it go?”

“It was fine” I plopped down on the bed as my throat pushed out a low hum.

“You’re ready to get back on track now right?”

My silence was yes. I closed my tired eyes and went to sleep.

“Goodnight Reina.”

On four hours of sleep, I felt more awake than most mornings.

“We should be able to make it by dusk if we leave now.”

Once I started packing, I noticed my traditional Chinese fighting uniform. My hands brushed the soft worn fabric. Memories of Howell’s training were woven into the creases. If I can remember what he taught me today, I will be well off. I take a deep, shaky, breath.

I am ready, I tell myself.

I pulled the outfit over my head, fastened the scalloped button on the side, and peered into the mirror. Each yellow flower on the straight teal dress hung loosely over my curves. The neckline came high enough over my neck to cover my bulging red scares.

“I am ready.”

As we walked through the streets, I couldn't ignore the stare I received from the French. My hand instinctively went to my sword. I clenched the hilt as I held my head high. I was determined to reach the mountain by sundown.

The journey was long, but I persevered. The wind howled in my ears, propelling purple and brown leaves. They made a whistling sound as they hit me. I trudged up the steep trail that led to the mountain. The burning sensation, mixed with the freezing wind, made my arms and legs numb. When I took a moment to catch my breath, my feet slid down the slope. My lungs wheeze out the chilly air as I forced my legs upward. I collapsed onto the ground once I reached the ledge. I looked out as hundreds of trees faded away with the dying sun. My breath was heavy as the last bit of sunlight went out.

I carefully made my way to the extended trail. My foot was on the slope when my eyes caught a flicker of light. I turned. A warm light shone through the shrub next to me. I bent down next to it. Although my efforts to muffle the sound were useless, I moved the branches aside. There lay a gaping hole in the rock. It tunneled deep into the mountain.

"You first."

I pulled Aiko by his leash. He took a reluctant step forward, his paw hovered over the tunnel.

"I don't know which is worse," he turned. "Being your slave for the rest of my nine lives, or potentially being eaten by goblins."

"What does it matter? Just get it over with."

I rushed him forward, giving him a gentle push for good measure. A squeak escaped his mouth on the way down. He made a loud thud at the bottom. I waited and

listened. After a few seconds without hissing, I pushed myself through the small opening. I skidded slowly down at first. As the tunnel became steeper, the momentum of my fall squeezed a whimper out of me. My heart pounded as I rushed toward the ground. I braced myself for the drop. For a few short seconds, I was in the air. The floor came just as quickly. Dust flung in the air as I skidded to a stop. I rubbed my rear end as I rose from the ground.

To my surprise, the cave walls merged into a thick coat of wallpaper. The ceiling was sculpted with symbols of fire. I stood a foot away from an, almost spotless, black tiled floor.

Something rose from my throat, for I stood on the doorstep of The Demon King's palace. I gulped it down.

With Aiko's leash tightly secured in my hand, I strode down the hallway.

"You really think you have a chance?" I can hear the uncertainty in his voice.

"Luck or skill," I exhale. "Both will do."

"You can't be serious."

A low conversation had caught my ears. I shushed Aiko and slipped down an intersecting hallway. We listen as goblins pass by.

"Why do we gotta be the lookouts?" one complained.

The other smacked him over the head. "Lord Evander is expecting a guest. It's our job to make sure their visit goes smoothly."

"He knew I'd come," I said under my breath.

In one swift move, I slam the closest goblin to the ground. Bringing the hilt of my blade to the back of his head. My bloodthirsty eyes search for the next one. Rushing forward, I pin him to the wall with my blade on his throat.

“Where’s that slum under the earth hiding?” Aiko scurried toward us, his chain clanked across the floor.

I rolled my eyes, “Aiko, shut up.”

My focus was back on the goblin. “tell us the way to the throne room and you’ll live.”

“Down the hall and to the left,” He blurted.

“You’re not too loyal are you?” Aiko spat.

“Yes I am!” The Goblin shouted.

“You just told us where The Demon King is,” Aiko growled.

“No, I told you where to find the throne room.”

My blade pushed deeper into the goblins neck, drawing blood. “Where is Evander?” I breathed through clenched teeth.

The Goblin’s eyes went wild “He’s in the dining room,” he slurred. “He’s prepared a feast for his-” He looked us up and down again, “guests?” His face lit up only for an instant.

“I’m no guest,” I glared, biting back the urge to punch his face.

“I’m the guest,” Aiko cut in, “tell me where the king is.”

“The dining room is past the mines on your next left, through the oversized lounge, and a left after the kitchen.”

I let go of him and slammed him to the ground. I thrust my arm up.

“Please,” he whimpered. “I won’t even receive a dime if you do.”

My hand gripped the handle of my sword. It went down and stopped right before it reached his head.

“Ugh!” I stormed down the hallway.

“I never understood why humans have to be so strange.”

As Aiko and I turned left, sounds of metal against rock and cracks of whips came within earshot. The gorgeous tile became a dirt pack floor. We raced by screeching elevated reins. The reek of metal burned my nose. As we ran, the hall veered to the left. A set of large beautifully crafted wooden doors came into view. The perimeter of the doors held intricate design carvings. The door knobs were stunning golden curved s’. I silently peered through a crack in the doorway.

My gasp came so fast, I didn’t have time to cover it. I ducked behind the door and whisper a dreadful curse. Taking a moment to catch my breath, I dared to take a second look. Inside the lounge room, sitting on a velvet couch, was the woman in white. Behind her was a towering bookshelf. Thick blonde hair hung in waves over her shoulders as she read a bulky novel. My eyes widened as I counted more books than I’d had ever seen. I pried my eyes away from them and took in the rest of the room. Four more couches sat around it with a roundtable on the side. Ruby’s dangled from a dazzling red chandelier, hanging in the middle of the room.

“I knew there was something strange about those two,” Aiko growled.

“Just her,” I shook my head. *Not Ben, I won’t believe it.*

“I’ll handle this,” like a ghost, Aiko bound across the room, jumped behind the black couch, climbed it effortlessly, and scratched the daylight out of Sylvia. I raced

through the room and smoothly sailed toward the kitchen. My stomach empty stomach grumbled. The doors flew open, letting out steam and mouth-watering smells of turkey and mashed potatoes. I backtracked into a hallway. Peering as chef's, carrying mountains of food, piled out of the small doorway. Once their backs were turned, I swiftly followed.

I raced toward the dining room. I waited for the last chef to exit, before I slid through the, rapidly closing, metal doors. This was the moment I had trained my whole life for. I was about to meet the demon who haunted my dreams, the man with red eyes. I felt the rush of air on my back as the doors slammed. I stood up straight to faced the man who tried to kill me, who ordered my mother and grandmother dead. My eyes rested on the malicious creature. I sucked in an unsteady breath. His eyes weren't red at all but black like shadows. They were the darkest eyes.

They were Ben's eyes.

The sight of Evander in his cloak and crown made my vision blur. When he stood, I felt my body shake. His black tunic fell below the knees. Golden patterns swerved down his chest and glistended from the candlelit table. Light from the crystal chandelier reflected off of His silver boots. Evander pulled his red cloak with puffy white fur closed, and I snapped out of my trance. I widen my stance, gripping my sword with two hands. It doesn't matter that he wasn't who I thought he was. He was The Demon King. I had to fight him, and I was determined to win.

"Take a seat, Reina," he motioned to the chair across from him.

I looked down at the delicate meal placed neatly on the sturdy oak. Every dish was pleated with patterns of gold. I bit back my emotions when my eyes fell upon the meal provided for me. A meaty lamb.

"I didn't come to have dinner," I spat.

My eyes darted at each guard in the room. I inched my sword to my face.

"My sword won't unsheath until we've had a proper discussion."

He motioned to the chair, fit for a queen, once more. Could it be a trap?

"I didn't come to talk either."

"I know why you're here, dang it!" I flinched as frustration quickly rose in his voice. "Sit in the chair, would you," his eyes took a hard second to plead at me.

I resheathed my sword, "very well." My stiff hands twitched at my sides. I hoped I wouldn't regret it. Each step was heavily weighed down by betrayal. Gripping the arms of the chair and sat.

"Eat, if you wish. It's not poisoned," he glanced at me before sitting.

I stared at the roasted lamb on my plate. A glass of crimson wine sat next to a loaf of bread. I stared at it as Evander spoke. It swirled around in the golden cup. I couldn't strain my thoughts from my mother's blood trickling down her spotless dress.

"Why are you doing this?" I snapped.

"I don't want to fight you if I don't have to," Evander shook his head.

"Is that why you sent your henchmen to trap and burn me alive in my own house?" I pulled my collar down, my left sleeve, revealing the burns left on my chest and arm. "To give me this!"

The Demon King looked away. A scowl overtook the scruff on his face. Only then did I see the bags under his sleepless eyes.

My voice cracked in an effort to strain my tears. "And murder my mother," I whispered.

Evander rubbed his temples, mumbling something under his breath.

He has a headache? My nails poked into my palms. I rose from my seat but his guards shoved me back down. They pinned me there with their curved staves.

Evander's eyes were lifeless when he finally spoke. "A Demon King's place," he paused, "is to keep men in line. Throughout my life, I was taught that The Hunter was the cause of all our problems. Now I see, your purpose, to keep demons in line. It's what's keeping this world from crumbling." He looked me dead in the eyes, "Tell me, Reina. Have I crossed that line?"

My eyes stung, my nostrils flared from uneasy breathing. I glanced at the handsome man. The man I adored. Whom I believed adored me back. That connection crumbled in this very room. I couldn't look at him when I nodded. "Yes," I hissed.

His voice came out coarse, "then no agreement can be made."

When I looked up at him, I saw the demon in his eyes. It turned to something more, a man of flames. I blinked away my tears. The guards swerved out of the way as Evander lunged towards me. I ducked under the table just as his sword came flying into my headrest. My breath quickened as I crawled. I could hear his heavy footstep above me. He jumped down and thrust the table into the air. I was on my feet by then. Our swords clashed together. The heat from Evander burned my skin. I itched to run.

My breath was heavy as I jumped back. My vision became foggy but I had to keep going. For my mother, grandmother, and for Howell. I sidestepped toward him. Jumping into the air, I leaped over him. Crashing my sword into his.

Rats.

When I landed, a dull pain rose in my chest. I clenched it as blood rushed out. I staggered, using my sword to keep me from toppling over. I thought I was hallucinating when Evanders sword fell from his hands. It clanked on the ground before being silenced. When his flames went out, so did he.

"I can't do this," there was a sort of terror in his eyes. "I can't just slaughter you."

"You slaughtered your family *just* fine," I spat.

"I didn't-" he shook his head, "not me."

"Pick up your sword," I commanded. "There is no surrendering."

"No, I won't kill you."

I struggled to stay on my feet. I couldn't even lift my sword. "Coward," I wheezed.

He nodded, "my father's dying words ring true this day. I couldn't save him. But maybe..." he looked at me.

"I thought-" I coughed, my mouth tasted of blood.

"I didn't kill him. After my father killed The Hunter, Freya got to him. He could have taken the blade out, he would have lived." Evander's head sank, "he pushed it deeper, and I stood there, like a coward. I don't deserve this." He tossed the black, diamond studded, crown to the ground "I didn't want to be kind but I couldn't let Freya destroy this kingdom. Maybe I should just-"

Someone burst through the doors. "Sire, the goblins are having a riot, they're completely destroying the mines."

"What?" Evander jumped from his lowly state. "Why?"

"It seems they dislike their wages."

"How much have I been paying them?" His voice squeaked at an awkward pitch.

"Not enough, apparently." He glanced at his feet.

"Arsenius!" Evander grabbed the man by his robes. "What have you done?"

Evander ran from the room. "I trusted you with my kingdom while I was away!"

"Your mistake, not mine," Arsenius murmured while approaching the doors. He looked out. Instead of leaving, he quietly closed them. Arsenius trod toward me.

"Judging by your condition, you didn't win."

My eyes narrowed in on him when I noticed the red eyes in his crude expression. Like a hawk focused on its prey, I gripped my sword, hard enough my knuckles popped.

"You killed my mother," I growled. I lunge at him with my sword but the searing pain in my gut brought me back down.

"I wasn't going to at first, and then I had a thought," he spoke. "I wanted the crown, why not use you to get it for me. It was perfect. But you failed." He gnawed on his bottom lip. "Let's see how well the goblins are doing at your job."

I kicked him as he dragged me by the collar. "Stop squirming," Arsunes threatened with a dagger. The cool blade pressed against my neck. My eyes caught on its fiery red patterns when he pulled away.

"You saved me from being clobbered by those demons," I gasped.

“I couldn't have you dead before you had a chance to face the king,” He spoke as if it were obvious.

The woman in white came bounding in, “I've got the slaves riled up for you.”

“Thank you my sweet,” his lips met her soft cheeks.

“Where's Aiko!” I bore my teeth.

“That mangled thing? He's probably goblin food by now.”

“You little-” my voice became distorted as Arsenius pulled my collar tight around my throat. He dragged me out of the dining room. The shouts of angry workers became louder as we exited the lounge room. Hundreds of goblins marched towards the mines. Arsenius unlocked a secret door, leading to a balcony overlooking them. In less than an hour, The Demon King's palace had turned into Hell. Goblins and guards battled in the dirt. Abandoned carts poured precious gems and coal onto the ground.

“Isn't marvelous?” Arsenius beamed.

“It really is, Arsenius.” The woman in white was a little too cozy next to him.

“It's finally ours, my queen.”

“Now that I think about it,” the woman's smile curved into a set of sharp teeth. Her pupils flattened into tight slits. Two pointer ears popped out of her head. “You're a slob.” Freya grabbed him by the robes and tossed him into the abyss. Arsenus' shrieks echoed throughout the cavern. She stepped towards me with bared claws. My pounding heart rang through my head as I crawled backward.

“Once I'm queen, I'll give the humans what they deserve. Don't worry, you won't have to wait!” She lunged at me with bared claws.

Aiko's chain flew through the air. He wrapped it around her legs and she fell to her knees.

"Run, Reina!"

I grasped the railing to pull myself up. My legs were useless, they couldn't keep me on my feet. Freya batted Aiko with her dagger-like claws. He was flung off the railing into the servants' bloodshed.

"NO!" I screamed, crawling towards the spiral staircase. I missed a few steps as I slid down. Aiko lay limp on the ground, unable to move amidst the squabbling goblins. I snatched him in my arms before he was crushed by a guard's wandering foot.

"Reina," Aiko parted his eyes, "kill that crazy cat lady." He smiled at the thought as he fell asleep.

"No-" I shook him, "wake up."

Evander pushed me out of the way of Freya's pounce. He took up a fallen sword. "It's me you need to fight, sister."

As they battled, I cradled Aiko in my weary arms. The gash along my chest tingled as it healed, and my curious mind wandered to the Demon King. Goblins swarmed Evander, pinning him into a corner by Freya's direction.

"You should help him," Aiko struggled to breathe.

"I won't leave you to help *him*."

"People change," he exhaled. "I would think you'd know that better than anyone," he wheezed a laugh. "I was a ruthless spirit, now I'm just a cat who can't even walk."

I grunted, shaking my head.

"Go," he nudged me away with his head. "I've still got another five lives."

I gently placed Aiko on the ground and slowly rose. With a sword in hand, I approached the crowd of goblins. They had entirely closed in on Evander. Before they could lay their sticky hands on him, Evander blasted them back.

“No!” I yelled as he blasted again, rocks exploded from the ceiling. The coal around me puffed up in flames. I was trapped in a cage of fire.

Through the flames, I could see Evander’s struggle. There were too many goblins. Even with his power, Evander couldn’t fight them all. It didn’t take long before they were upon him. They bound him in chains and sprawled him against the wall. Freya took her time as she strode to him. My heart pounded at the sight, while my whole body shook in a blistering oven. My breath caught on the rising smoke, and I dropped to my knees in a fit of coughing when. I would smother to death if I didn’t get out of the fire. My eyes flickered. There was an opening in the flames. If I could get enough height, I could steer clear of them.

I stood on wobbly knees and swayed against uneven footing. I inhaled, immediately regretting it. Wheezing out smoke, I took a leap of faith. Another wave of fire exploded in my face. I screeched as I was sent backward. The heat of red-hot flames stuck to my skin. I screamed, scurrying away from the fire. As I examined my palms, I croaked out a laugh in disbelief. They were spotless. I had gotten my helpful ability! Fire was no longer my enemy.

I ran through the flames. Snatching a misplaced sword, I jumped onto a goblins head and dropped into the pit to meet Freya. She pushed me down, I twisted her leg with my own, shoved her up with my knee, and flipped her. With a swoosh, she fell to

the ground. Using those few seconds of her struggling to her feet, I sliced Evander's chains.

He swung the chain around a handful of goblins and threw them out of the way. Freya's sword flew up to meet them. Tossing some goblins aside, I ran to Evander's aid. Freya whipped around, her cat eyes an inch away from mine. The stench of rotten fish on her breath stung my nostrils. She flinched away from me when Evander sliced into her back with his chain whip. I shoved her to the ground with my foot as her sword slipped through her hands.

Freya ricocheted off the ground with her cat-like reflexes. Her tail whipped angrily in the air. The way was parted for Freya and closed again by a swarm of goblins. They walked toward us with swords and pickaxes. I looked over them to where Freya made her escape.

"Evander!" I yelled, glancing up. I pointed to the hundreds of stalactites hanging from the ceiling. "There I yelled. Shoot them down!"

Evander's eyes traced them down to Freya's path. They glistened from an understanding. His skin became a fiery hot furnace. Flames burst from a sinister rage. The stalactites punctured the floor. Freya was no exception. My eyes lost focus as the many goblins stormed toward us. We weeded through them, eyes fixated on the exit.

We were almost there, then my eyes wondered. A grey feline lay limp on the floor. A gash ran down Aiko's spine. A combination of my legs giving out, and my feet stumbling over rocks, sent me tumbling to my knees. My hands reached for the lifeless cat. His fur was softer to the touch than ever before.

“I’ll find you,” I whispered, burying my face into his thick coat. My eyes ran like a river.

Evander grabbed my shoulder with one hand and thrust an angry goblin with the other. “We need to leave.”

I nodded as I wiped my burning eyes with the back of my hand. Evander pulled me to my feet. We ran up the stairs and into the hall. We started toward the exit when a rough, scaly hand grabbed my wrist. My eyes narrow on the goblin. The one I had spared.

“Not that way,” he pulled me to another hallway. “Too many goblins.”

We ran down the hallway.

“Wait,” Evander stopped at a set of heavy doors.

“The demons hoard.” The goblin rubbed his scaly hands together and licked his lips excitedly.

“This is no time to be greedy!” I jumped in front of him.

“Move,” he pushed. “This could save our lives.” He removed a set of gleaming keys from his robes. They clinked together while he searched for the right one.

The footsteps and howls of goblins echoed through the chamber. They became louder while Evander thumbed through his keys. He shoved the right one into the lock. What The doors burst open, revealing a giant room full of gold and jewels of every kind.

Evander motioned me to stay as he grabbed a couple of sacks for himself. The goblins were in sight. I itched to run at them with my sword, but I held my ground. I nervously glanced into the hoard room. My jaw dropped as I stumbled to the floor.

Evander ran from an avalanche of gold. It rolled towards us, shaking the ground. He yelled at me to run but my legs wouldn't move an inch. A goblin snarled with his sword aimed at me. Evander shoved him to the ground and pulled me to my feet.

I looked back as my legs pumped forward. The gold shot out and slammed a hand full of goblins into the wall. I ran faster when a couple of heads peaked over the mound. Their faces were filled with joy as a shower of coins, they had tossed, fell upon their heads.

"That was generous," I couldn't hide my smile from Evander.

He snorted playfully as we raced up a flight of stairs. A light single light glowed in the darkness. I reached for it. It was like diving into a pool of freezing water. My stomach dropped as I felt for a nonexistent ground. The forest was a blur of greens and blues as we tumbled down the mountain.

Evander grabbed hold of a branch. My hand was next. He slowly lowered me down to a ledge. I sprawled onto it, breathing heavily. The ground shook when he dropped, and my heart.

I sat up next to him, resting my head in my knees. My eyes widened, taking in his strong features. Beads of sweat rolled down Evanders rosy cheeks. His complexion was rough. I found I liked him better that way. I almost smiled. Diverting my eyes when he looked at me.

"What now?" I said coolly.

Evander peered over the ledge. "We make very small progress down to the trail, and-

"No," I laugh "what's our next adventure "

His expression softened, with a small smile across his face. "I would gladly share my final adventure with you."

I sat up straight, "where to?"

"A new world, with no kings. We'll live as you please, freely."

"And no rules? like the sound of that."

Evander shook his head. "There are rules... but we make them." He gleamed.

"That sounds like another monarchy," I said, frowning.

"Not us, everyone."

"When can we go?"

"As soon as we get off this cliff."

My happy expression faded. "But we're supposed to be enemies."

He brushed my hair away from my eyes. "Let's put our responsibilities aside."

"And then what? The whole world declares peace?"

His expression hardened. "Once I leave my kingdom behind, someone else will rise in my place. The greed for power will always be strong," he stood. "But that will be for another to take care of."

"What do you mean? I'm the only demon slayer."

"Not if you stop hunting." He said, reaching for my hand, "come on, it's almost sunrise."

