

Blood Ties



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T H E B L O O D O F K E S H

CYCLE #1: ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

Part 2: Blood Ties

For Charity

Who gave a heck of a lot of midnight encouragement

Darkness pressed close around her, wrapping shadowed fingers around her throat and slipping into her lungs, suffocating her, choking her. She bent her head to her knees, fighting for breath, for release from whatever it was that held her.

"Are you all right?" A gentle hand touched Caro's shoulder, banishing the darkness.

Caro shook her head to clear it, and smiled gamely up at Geshtan. "Yeah. Just a little freaked out, I guess."

Nesha cast her a withering glance. "Then if all is well, would you please try to pay attention?"

"Sorry," Caro said. But as Nesha started speaking again, Caro couldn't help but glance over her shoulder at the darkness of the forest beyond and wonder if the shifting shadows she saw were real, or merely figments of her overactive imagination.

"Caro!"

She jumped. "Sorry. Right. Mystic charm bracelet."

Nesha and Dano exchanged a glance, and Nesha rolled her eyes. Geshtan, from his guard position next to Caro, managed to unclench enough to snicker under his breath.

"I cannot impress upon you how important this is," said Nesha, holding the bracelet up to the firelight. She'd been saying the same thing for the entire village powwow, which had been going on since late afternoon. No matter how many times she said it, though, it still looked like a bunch of cheap glass beads

strung together with horsehair, with a few ratty feathers and bits of bone tied on for rustic charm.

"Right, okay, I've got it. Very old, very mystical, blah blah blah."

Nesha's jaw clenched. "This is the last binding charm we have, Caro. The technique for making them has been lost."

Dano sighed. "What my partner is too proud to say is that all those with not only the knowledge, but also the power to create them have been destroyed. Nesha and I were spared largely because we are not strong enough on our own to pose a threat to Jarakeshtan."

Caro felt her cheeks redden. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." He frowned thoughtfully at the bracelet. "I dare say he wouldn't have overlooked us had he known what we had in our possession."

"So what exactly does this thing do?"

"Nothing, at the moment," said Nesha. "But keyed with the blood of a *deasha*, it becomes a thing of great power. All you need do is command it, and it will bind Jarakeshtan to your will. Not even he is strong enough to break the bindings if your blood is used to raise them."

Caro wrapped her arms around her knee. "So, basically, I have to get close enough to this demon to get the magic charm bracelet around his wrist, and then bleed on it and tell him to be a good boy?"

Nesha glared at her. "You must use the traditional rites. 'By the moons, by the gods, by the elements four, I bind you to my will. I harness your power and bind it from you. From this day forth, I render you powerless.' " She held the

bracelet out to Caro. "Those words will strip him of his demonic abilities and leave him as helpless as any human. Wear this until it's time. Close contact with you will attune it to your power and make the binding easier and more complete."

Caro took the bracelet from her and slipped it over her wrist. Up close, it looked even less impressive. "And how exactly do I get close enough to put this on him without getting killed?" Her question was met by silence, and she looked at the members of the council. "Your expressions are not exactly filling me with confidence."

"Geshtan will be with you," said Nesha.

Caro looked at him. "Geshtan doesn't look too thrilled about that."

That pricked the warrior's pride. "I am the strongest man in this village. You are safer with me than with any other."

"That's really a relative measure, isn't it?" said Caro.

"Enough!" Nesha stood, effectively bringing the council to a close. "You will leave in three days' time, once we have sufficiently prepared you."

"I don't want to do this," Caro said through clenched teeth.

"I already told you," said Nesha. "You don't have a choice." She gestured, and the others rose, leaving Caro seated alone beside the dwindling fire. "Familiarize yourself with that charm. Let it grow to recognize your power. And for the love of the four, don't lose it. It's the only one we have."

"Do I look stupid?" said Caro. Their only response was to turn and leave. Caro stared after them. "Well fine. I can take a hint." She pushed herself to her feet, brushing the dirt from her jeans. "God, I would kill for a shower."

Alone, but not unwatched, Caro trudged past her keepers and into her hut.

Sleep, however, eluded her. Every time she began to drift off, she was overwhelmed by visions of the faceless Jarakeshtan killing her in a plethora of ways that would have made Stephen King queasy. When she was jerked awake for the fifth time, pale, shaking, and drenched with sweat, she had had enough.

"Screw this," she muttered. "Let them get killed if they want, but I'm getting the hell away from these lunatics." Gathering her tattered courage around her, she stormed out the door.

"Where are you going?" Geshtan's voice was heavy with sleep.

"Three guesses," said Caro. She'd always been teased at sleepovers for her constant late-night bathroom parade, but for the first time, it actually had its uses.

"Again?" said Geshtan. "Maybe you shouldn't drink anything after dinner."

"Maybe you should mind your own business and let me pee," said Caro. "Or do you want to watch that, too?"

Geshtan held up his hands in surrender, and Caro stalked past him into the forest, past the latrine pit, and straight on into the trees.

As soon as she figured she was out of earshot, she started running. She knew there was a road not far from the village; if she could reach it, she'd be able to follow it to a somewhat more developed town. With any luck, it wouldn't be populated by kamikaze fanatics. Or at the very least, they'd be kamikaze fanatics willing to do their own dirty work.

That was the plan, anyway. But her plans hadn't been going well lately, and ten minutes later, she was standing in the middle of a grove of trees, staring around at the profound absence of road.

"Shit," she said. "I am so lost."

"You're only lost until someone finds you," said a voice from the darkness.

Caro's heart nearly stopped as that sense of wrongness seeped out from the trees to wrap around her once more. "Oh hell. It's you."

"I'm hurt," said Ayasherin. "You couldn't show a little more gratitude toward your rescuer?"

"Oh please." Caro began to back away. "If you're here to rescue me, I'm the Queen of England." She turned and bolted for the trees.

Cold laughter floated around her. "Yes, run, little girl. I can smell the fear in your blood. It's going to be that much sweeter when I finally claim it."

"Oh, shut *up!*" Caro ducked under a branch and heard claws scrape against it. She ran faster. "Or are you planning to cliché me to death?"

"Oh, not death. Your blood is no good when it's cold."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"You left quite a bit of it behind when last we met." Claws snatched at her sleeve, and she tore it free with a rip of fabric. "By the time I got back to it, it was just ordinary blood. No, little girl, it has to be fresh."

"Do you have any idea how unsanitary that is?" She skidded down an embankment and splashed across a shallow stream.

"I'll take my chances." His voice was in front of her now. Cursing, she changed direction and forced her aching legs to move even faster.

"Meat's really bad for you," she gasped. "Wouldn't you rather have a nice salad?" His laughter reached her again, ahead and to her left. She backpedaled, and fled back up her trail. "Jesus, are you on wheels, or what?"

"Did you think that you, a mere human, could outrun me? I am the son of the wind, foolish girl. I can command it when I choose. I am not limited by the flesh, as you are."

She stopped. "Great. Now he tells me." She dug into her pockets, searching for something to help her, but all she came up with was thirty cents and a button. "Note to self. Really have to start carrying pepper spray."

Heavy weight slammed into her from behind. A clawed hand wrapped around her throat and pinned her hard to a tree. Gasping, she pulled at it, but her struggles had absolutely no effect on him.

"There, there," he said, his amber eyes bright with excitement. "You can take pride in knowing that your death will help overthrow Jarakeshan in the end."

"No," she gasped, fighting for air as his grip tightened. "Please..."

"Ah yes, beg for me," he said. "It's so nice to hear a human beg." His claws carved deep into her arm.

He choked off Caro's scream with a flex of his hand, and stared eagerly as trails of blood began to flow across her skin. She kicked at him, fought, desperate, but it only made the blood flow faster.

Ayasherin caught her wrist in his hand and pulled her arm up to his mouth, lapping at the blood with a long sweep of his tongue. "Oh, yes," he breathed against her skin. "Your blood will serve me well."

"Stop," she choked, and raked at him with her nails. From somewhere deep within her, she found an untapped reserve of energy. She plunged her mental fingers into it, felt a sudden surge of strength, and started to scream. "You can't do that! *Don't hurt me!*"

Around them, the forest fell completely and utterly silent. Something like a lightning bolt washed over Caro, setting every hair on end. Faintly, nearly lost beneath the sensation sweeping through her, she felt something slither across her skin. Only when Ayasherin's hand fell away from her wrist as though burned did she realize that the bracelet was no longer encircling her wounded arm. Dumbly, she stared down at Ayasherin, who was huddled on the ground clutching his wrist and howling in pain. He shifted his fingers, and Caro caught a glimpse of the blood-soaked bracelet wrapped around the demon's wrist.

"Wups," she said.

His head snapped toward her, amber eyes blazing hatred, and he lunged for her. She squeaked and scrambled back, but before he could reach her, his hand flew to his wrist and he ended up on the ground again.

"Bitch!" Shaking, he pushed himself to his knees. "What did you do to me?"

"Excuse me?" She folded her arms. "Oh no, not thirty seconds ago you were trying to tear my throat out with your teeth. You do not get to be Mr. Righteous Indignation now."

"No..." came a low moan from behind her. She whirled to see Nesha, Dano, Geshtan, and half the village standing behind them. Nesha and Dano were staring at Ayasherin with twin expressions of horror plastered across their faces. "What have you done?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that? What about 'are you all right, Caro?' Or 'did he hurt you Caro?' Why the hell are you so concerned about *him*?"

Nesha grabbed her shoulders, fingers digging sharply in. "*Tell me you didn't use the binding!*"

Caro stared back at Ayasherin, hands still wrapped around his wrist. "Oh, fuck."

"You idiot!" Nesha shook her. "That was the only binding we had. It cannot be transferred! You have doomed us all!" Without warning, she drew back her hand and slapped Caro. Hard.

Caro reeled, falling back as she did so.

"Wonderful idea," Ayasherin growled. "Let me try." But no sooner had he raised his hand than he fell back howling again.

Dano knelt next to her, cupping her throbbing cheek with his hand. "Caro. What did you do?"

She glanced frantically from Ayasherin, still writhing on the ground, to Nesha's livid expression, to Dano's concerned eyes. "I-I don't know."

"Think carefully," said Dano. "Did you speak the incantation?"

"I--" She drew a deep breath. "I was scared. I told him not to hurt me. I didn't know it would make the binding"-- she gestured at the prone Ayasherin -- "do that."

"What?" Nesha fought against Geshtan's restraining arms. "'Don't hurt me'? You didn't even bind his powers?"

"I don't understand." She groped desperately at Dano's hand. "What happened?"

"You're bleeding." Dano pulled off his robe and began tearing strips from it to bind Caro's arm. "I can only assume that the blood activated the binding, and it took your cry as instruction. By the terms of the binding, he cannot harm you. Apparently," he glanced at the demon, "attempting to do so causes him pain."

Panting a little, Ayasherin looked up and began to laugh. "You didn't bind my power. By the four, what kind of *deasha* are you? Could you really be so ignorant?" He pushed himself to his knees, and made a violent gesture in Caro's direction. The tree just above her head exploded into splinters.

Ayasherin stared at the destruction for a moment, and nearly collapsed beneath the force of his laughter.

"It's not funny," Caro said.

"Oh, but it is." He rose to his feet. "You may have bound me from you, but I will see that you suffer for it. I will kill everyone you care for, little girl. Beginning with the children of your village."

"It's not my village," she said.

He paused, glanced at her, and shrugged. "I'll kill them anyway." With that, he vanished into the trees.

"Hey!" Caro cried. She turned to the *areshti*, waiting for them to take control, but Nesha was crouched on the ground muttering something to herself, and Dano appeared to be completely absorbed with watching her.

"Oh, for crying out..." She turned on her heel and ran after Ayasherin.

The sound of screaming reached her before the village came into view. Her heart sinking, she pushed through the remainder of the trees and stopped short.

"Ah, so you join me at last," said Ayasherin.

She stood frozen, unable to do anything but stare at the little blond girl who trembled before Ayasherin. The demon stood unfazed as he held the tip of his sword to the girl's throat.

"Don't do this," Caro whispered.

"But I can do anything I wish, as long as I do not harm you," he said cheerfully. "My will remains unbound." His hand twitched, and a thin stream of blood trickled down the little girl's neck.

"Stop, and I'll cut myself open and give my blood to you," she said.

That got his attention. He turned to Caro, one dark brow raised. "Quite a selfless offer, for one who claims she has no tie to this village. It is tempting." He glanced back at the girl. "But then, so is filling these streets with their blood."

"Please--" Caro began, and then the words stuck in her throat. A wave of... *something* washed over her, swatting her to her knees. She was dimly aware of Ayasherin's irritated question like a buzzing in her ears, but it was overwhelmed by the suffocating pressure of whatever was attacking her. And then the world spun and shattered into a hundred different pieces, and a sharp pain stabbed into her neck. That pain threw her back into herself, and she found herself on her knees, gasping, watching Ayasherin writhe in pain with his hand locked around his wrist.

After a moment he drew himself together and pushed himself to his knees. The hatred in his gaze all but flayed her. "Now what have you done?"

"She has done nothing," said Nesha.

Caro turned to see both *areshti* tending the wounded girl. Caro raised a hand to her neck, to the point of pain that mirrored the girl's wound. Her hand came away clean, but the pain was still there.

Ayasherin regained his feet and picked up his blade. "No."

Nesha smiled at him smugly. "I have invoked a geas using her blood. She is tied to this village. Any pain you cause us, you cause her."

His gaze turned cold as ice, and Caro fought for breath as the miasma of *wrong* emanating from him intensified. "I will kill you all," he said, very softly.

Nesha snorted and shook her head. "I highly doubt that."

He let out a howl and lunged for the *areshta*. Caro felt a small twinge, and a moment later he was sprawled on the ground again, twisting in pain.

"Handy," said Caro. "Now take it off."

Nesha cast her an incredulous glance. "No."

Caro pushed to her feet, still shaky. "There are a few dozen people in this village, Nesha."

"And?"

"And, I can feel all of them. You people aren't exactly completely healthy, you know." She wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I'm having serious trouble hanging on to the real me, here. I'd be a lot happier if you took this geas thingy off."

Nesha just stared at her.

Caro's hands slowly clenched into fists. "How the hell am I supposed to fight this demon guy for you if I can barely walk?"

"You should have thought of that before you wasted our only binding."

Frozen in incredulous horror, Caro could only stare at the woman. Behind her, Ayasherin began to laugh.

"Shut up!" She turned on him. "It's not funny!"

He continued to chuckle, leaning against a tree and folding his arms. "Not so amusing when it happens to you, is it, little girl?"

"This is completely different! I didn't do anything wrong!"

"I'd say wasting the binding we held in reserve for seven generations qualifies as wrong."

"He was trying to EAT me!"

Dano rose, pulling the little girl to her feet. "He would not have had the opportunity had you not attempted to run away." Without another word, he and Nesha led the girl into the village. With a final glance back at Caro, Geshtan followed behind.

Caro stared helplessly after them. "But you were going to get me killed," she whimpered quietly.

"Oh, they shall, make no mistake about that," whispered a voice in her ear.

Caro jerked and tried to run, but impossibly strong arms clamped around her from behind. She struggled against them, but as long as his hold merely restrained her without hurting, the binding didn't seem to have any problem letting Ayasherin do what he wanted.

"They're going to get you killed, little girl." His breath was warm against her neck. "And when they do, rest assured I shall be there to catch your blood as it falls."

His hold on her abruptly vanished. She turned, ready to fight, but she found herself alone in the middle of the clearing.

She turned in a slow circle, but he was truly gone, and the nagging *wrong* that had plagued her in his presence had vanished too. She was truly alone.

Wiping away the tears that blurred her vision and stained her cheeks, she followed the others back to the village.

* * *

She'd thought she'd had it bad before. Everything that had happened to her had been a cakewalk compared to what she had to put up with now.

She couldn't even go to the bathroom anymore without an escort. The complete loss of privacy would have been bad enough, but the vague awareness of the entire village wouldn't go away. It was like having a hundred voices whispering in her ear twenty-four hours a day, and it was driving her insane. She was completely alone, and yet never allowed to have a thought to herself.

The villagers, for their part, barely acknowledged she existed. Her guards only paid enough attention to let her know she wasn't going anywhere, and everyone else shunned her like some kind of leper. For seven days she endured the silence, a small part of her dying each time she passed the night huddled on her hard, lonely cot.

All she could think about was how badly she wanted to go home.

She rolled on her side, huddling beneath the thin blanket Dano had given her, and wondered if anyone even knew she was gone. Something in her ached as she realized that Shannon would probably be the first person to notice she was missing. She could be stuck here for months without her parents ever knowing she hadn't come back.

It was that thought that truly struck home and set the tears to flowing. Once they started, she couldn't stop them. They came faster, turning from pathetic sniffles into deep, wracking sobs. She called for her mother and father, weeping until the anger inside her bled into a deep, hollow void, leaving her empty and bereft. But still the tears wouldn't stop.

She was still crying at dawn, when Geshtan came for her.

Sometime during the night, she'd wept out her resistance along with everything else that mattered, and she followed meekly as he led her to the meeting circle, where the villagers were waiting.

When Caro was seated in the middle of those watchful, accusatory gazes, Nesha rose from her place and came to stand above Caro.

"You have caused us quite the dilemma," she said.

"I'm sorry," Caro whispered.

"Sorry does not return the binding," said Nesha. "That was the last sure hope we had of defeating Jarakeshtan, and you squandered it on a half-breed bastard who posed no real threat to us." She began to pace an even circle around Caro. "We have been long in discussion these past seven days, trying to find hope in the face of this betrayal."

"I'm really sorry," Caro said. "It was an accident. I didn't mean it." She stared beseechingly up at the *areshta*. "I was scared."

"As was Lina." Nesha gestured at the little girl who had nearly died at Ayasherin's hands. "Does that make it right?"

Caro stared at the ground. "No." She knotted her fingers together. "But it's done, and I'm sorry, I really am, but you don't need me anymore without a binding. You can let me go home now, right? I mean, I know there aren't many gates, but there has to be one that Jarakeshtan missed."

Nesha sighed. "You still don't understand, do you? You were sent to us, *deasha*. We cannot waste this gift that the gods have sent to us. For send you

they did, and you remain our best hope for survival." Her lip trembled a little before she steeled her face again. "For the survival of the village. For the survival of our children."

Caro stared at them. "But I can't fight this guy."

"No," said Nesha. "You cannot. But we have not been idle these past days. We have searched what few records survived Jarakeshtan's purge, and we have found a ritual in their pages." She knelt next to Caro and caught her chin in a calloused hand. "Your blood had the power to activate the binding. But it may also have the power to bind."

Ice crept along Caro's spine. "What do you mean?"

"The greater demons are beyond our power without the skills that forged the binding," she said. "But the middling demons might be bound to our will. All we need is the proper ritual." Her grip tightened. "And the proper blood."

Caro didn't want to understand, but she had seen the desperation in Nesha's eyes. The *areshta* was a wise, cunning woman who would do anything to save the lives of her people. Caro just hadn't realized how far she would go in order to do it.

Jerking her head from the *areshta*'s grip, Caro bolted to her feet and lunged toward the circle, frantic to escape. But the warriors were prepared, and she hadn't gotten far before they brought her down, struggling and screaming at the top of her lungs.

Geshtan approached slowly and she gazed up at him from where his companions had her pinned. Tears streamed down her face. "Please," she whispered.

There was remorse and pity in his eyes. She could see it. She grabbed at it like a lifeline, hope stirring in her breast.

She was still hoping when his staff came down on her head and sent her careening into darkness.

She awoke to find herself stretched out upon cold stone. Terrified, she tried to sit up, but her arms and legs wouldn't move. Craning her neck, she saw that she had been bound at wrists and ankles to iron spikes driven deep into the stone.

"No," she moaned. "Please. You can't do this."

"I am sorry, child." Dano appeared above her, and reached down to brush the hair from her face. "Truly sorry. We have no other choice."

"Yes, you do," Caro gasped. "You can let me go. I'll find another way to fight this guy. Please, I promise, just please let me go!"

"We cannot." Nesha appeared on Caro's other side. There were dark circles under her eyes. Caro might have felt more sorry for her if she hadn't been holding a very sharp knife in her hand. "There are no paths left to us, save this one. It is our only hope."

The deep throbbing of drums rose from around her. Craning her neck, Caro saw the villagers ranged in a half circle around the rock, beating their drums

and watching something past Caro's feet. She struggled to sit up as much as her bonds would allow, and saw a rocky cliff about twenty feet away from where she was bound. Directly ahead of her, a dark cave yawned black in the face of the cliff.

She did not want to know what was in there.

In answer to the drums, a deep growl rumbled from the depths of the cave.

Caro began to fight, jerking against the rawhide thongs that bound her until they cut into her wrists and the blood flowed, but they wouldn't budge. Beside her, Nesha began to mutter in the old words that Dano's rock wouldn't translate.

Caro's breath froze in her lungs as the sense of *wrong* flowed out of the cave to envelop her. It was like what she felt around Ayasherin, but worse. Much worse. Whatever she felt around Ayasherin was like fingernails on a blackboard. The thing in the cave was darker, fouler, its essence coating her mind like oily sludge until the bile rose in her throat and she had to fight not to throw up.

"It's evil," she whimpered.

"We know," Dano said quietly, careful not to disturb Nesha's incantation.

"But it's strong. With your blood, perhaps strong enough to fight Jarakeshtan."

"No." Two points of red light burned in the darkness of the cave, and the tip of a dark, scaly muzzle emerged into the light. "No!"

The demon emerged, black and sinuous, all teeth and spikes and talons. It stood a good fifteen feet tall, and had eyes only for Caro. A forked tongue emerged from its jaws, tasting the air, and Caro glanced in horror at the blood coating her wrists. The creature threw its head back and bellowed, a sound like shrieking metal, and began a charge toward her.

Nesha raised her knife.

Caro was swamped by a sense of *wrong* like fingernails scraping down a blackboard.

It happened so fast that Caro almost didn't register what she was seeing as the dark blur darted between her and Nesha. She watched the knife arcing above her like a glittering star. Nesha and Dano were thrown back with twin cries of dismay. And as the demon bore down upon her, she stared dumbly up at Ayasherin as he leaped onto the stone to which she was bound.

He sheathed his sword, and Caro caught a glimpse of a feral grin as he raised his hand, his claws curved. The demon screamed, and Ayasherin struck.

The demon was still a good ten feet away, nowhere near Caro or Ayasherin, and yet four deep furrows opened in the demon's side. Black ichor spattered the ground, sending up small clouds of steam where it met the dark rock. It staggered, and Ayasherin gestured again. The demon went flying, and lay still where it landed.

Only then did Ayasherin turn to look down at her, and Caro had to stifle a cry when the fury in his eyes hit her. He reached down and tore the hide binding

her as though it had been no more than thread. And then Caro was upside down over his shoulder, listening to the cries of the villagers fading behind her.

They were in the forest almost instantly. Caro's mouth was dry with fear as she watched the ground racing by beneath her. She understood now why she hadn't been able to outrun him before. He really did move like the wind. She could feel it running beneath them, guiding his footsteps. When he leaped, the wind buoyed him so that he could stay aloft for almost a minute when he chose.

He is the child of the wind demon Danaraeshka.

Caro shuddered. He had so much power -- too much. And all that kept him from using it on her was a few beads strung on horsehair.

He stopped without warning, and Caro found herself dumped unceremoniously onto the ground. Before she could so much as move, his hands were on her wrists, binding them behind her back with the remnants of the thongs that had tied her to the rock.

"Stop it!" She struggled, but the hide held fast. "What are you doing?"

"Not harming you, obviously." He turned her and dangled the bracelet in front of her eyes. "Quite literal, is your little toy."

Caro stared at him, shaking. In the light of day, he was no less frightening. In fact, with his alienness made so much clearer, he was worse. His hair was half bound up in a series of thin, intricate braids before flowing free to stream down his back, exposing the long points of his ears. The beads, crystals, and claws dangling from the leather thongs binding the braids should have seemed girly, but they didn't. Three slashing lines, almost like claw marks, were

tattooed in dark red-brown across his right cheek, curving down to his jaw. For a brief moment, she wondered what it meant. Then, as he grinned, showing those sharp canines, she decided she didn't want to know.

"What do you want?"

He let out a sharp bark of laughter. "You, dead, your blood in my veins," he said. "But I've not yet determined how to accomplish that part without harming you and setting off your charm, *deasha*."

Her eyes were wide as he moved toward her. She backed up until she ran into a tree. "Then why did you save me?"

"I've been thinking," he said. "Your little binding keeps me from harming you and taking the blood I need. But it does nothing to stop others from harming you, as that little escapade so eloquently proves." He loomed over her, his claws skimming over her tangled hair. "Now, if another demon were to gain possession of your blood, it would give him strength. Perhaps make him stronger than I. And that," his hand knotted in her hair, "would annoy me."

His hand tightened, but before it actually reached the point of pain, he shuddered and released her with a curse.

"I realized then," he continued, "that the only way to ensure than another upstart does not claim what is mine would be to see to it myself."

"Oh, no..." Caro took a step back. "No." She bolted. She hadn't gotten more than two steps before he was in front of her. Unable to stop herself, she slammed into him and crashed to the ground, floundering helplessly to regain her feet with her hands bound behind her back.

"Oh yes," said Ayasherin. He reached down, grabbed a handful of her shirt, and hauled her to her feet. "Where would you go, little girl? Back to the villagers who wished to sacrifice you to their cause? Or to another demon who will kill you for the blood in your veins? I assure you, the middling or lesser demons can be quite messy in their kills. It would take you a very long time to die."

She pulled free of him and glowered. "And I'm supposed to believe that you're going to protect me?"

He laughed. "Protect you, no. I merely protect my interest in that which will let me defeat that bastard Jarakeshtan." Too quickly for Caro to follow his movements, he lunged for her and tossed her over his shoulder. "And you, little girl, have no say in the matter."

She fought him, but she was less able to move in his grip than she had been when tied to the rock. After a few fruitless minutes, she sagged against him in defeat as he bore her through the trees. Apparently, the binding didn't equate kidnapping with harm. Who'd have thought it would be so damned literal?

So, she'd gone from the custody of kamikaze fanatics who wanted to sacrifice her to a big dragon snake, to the possession of a homicidal half-demon who would do whatever it took to find a way to claim her blood for his own.

"Out of the frying pan, into the fire," she muttered. "At least it can't get any worse."

At that moment, pain like a dagger of fire stabbed through her. Through the red haze of her agony, she had a brief impression of Nesha, her face hard

with fury, wielding a knife. Geshtan, his face stony, sat and endured as the *areshta* carved lines into his flesh.

"Well," Ayasherin said cheerfully. "It would appear the *areshti* have found a way to use your geas to punish you. How nice."

Caro moaned as the pain subsided, and shook her head. "One of these days I am going to learn to keep my big mouth shut."

"It would save you a great deal of trouble."

"Shut up."

"You, *deasha*, are not in a position to tell me what to do." He grabbed her by the feet and lifted until she dangled with her head just above the ground. It didn't hurt, but it was infinitely more uncomfortable than being slung over his shoulder, and he didn't show any sign that it was inconveniencing him at all.

She sighed as he continued on whatever path he had chosen, trailing her from one hand like a fish on a line.

Wherever they were going, it was going to be a very, very long trip.