

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

CYCLE #1: ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

## **Part 3: Snake in the Grass**

*For Sheila*

*Who gave a heck of a lot of midnight encouragement*

The screams echoing on Caro's heels indicated quite clearly that she was not running fast enough. With a quiet whimper, she encouraged her already aching feet to move faster.

Faster, apparently, did not equal careful, and as she tripped over a low root, she had only a moment with which to be annoyed with herself before careening down the hill.

My life -- she thought as, unable to defend herself with her hands still bound behind her back, a branch hit her in the face -- sucks.

She lay at the bottom of the hill, on top of her bound hands, trying to get the spots out of her field of vision. Which was how the demon found her.

Gazing up at the mouth full of teeth like kitchen knives, she sighed. "Okay, fine. I quit. Go ahead, do your worst." Breath scented like pickled roadkill -- with cheese -- hit her full in the face, and she gagged. "Or not."

She rolled, tumbling down another hill and ending up in a patch of brambles.

"Okay, not helping." She struggled, but the branches tangled with her clothes and held her fast, so that she wasn't able to do anything else but stare as the demon, which resembled an H.R. Giger rendition of a dairy cow, thundered down the hill toward her.

Three steps away, it gave a shriek as three deep bloody furrows appeared in its side. Seconds later, its head flew from its body, and the headless Giger-cow ploughed to a stop inches from Caro's nose.

Caro stared at it for a moment, and frowned. "Oh, shit."

"I am becoming--" clawed hands fastened on Caro's arms and yanked her out of the thorn bushes "-- annoyed." Caro yelped, but as technically it was the bushes that had been hurting her, no aid was forthcoming. Instead, she had to dangle there, a foot above the ground, and meet the enraged amber eyes attempting to glare holes through her.

"Then let me go and I'll stop annoying you," Caro retorted, attempting to kick him in the shin.

He dropped her before she could connect and stared down at her. "Do you want me to bind your feet, too?"

Caro was saved from having to answer by something that sounded like a Great Dane doing a chicken impression. She jerked around, and found herself staring at a seven-foot-tall black, naked chicken with spines.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Ayasherin reached down and tossed her out of the way as the uber-chicken lunged. Its beak sank several inches into the tree Caro had been propped against, and it struggled for a moment to pull free. Caro used the respite to lurch to her feet as Ayasherin placed himself between Caro and the chicken.

"I'll just let you deal with Big Bird's evil twin."

Ayasherin glanced over his shoulder and bared his teeth at her. "No escaping."

"Bite me," Caro spat.

He sighed. "Would that I could."

The uber-chicken jerked itself free and turned on Ayasherin with a squawk of rage. While he turned to meet it, Caro seized the opportunity to slip between the trees and start running again.

Why do these things always happen to me? Caro thought. Though, granted, "always" actually implied "the last twelve days". Still, those days had seemed like an eternity.

She stumbled, went down, and struggled to her feet again, her knees stinging where she'd ripped through her jeans.

Twelve days since the pervert who'd broken into her yard had chased her to the Iroquois mound. Twelve days since she'd inadvertently opened the gateway in that mound and been thrown -- wherever she was. She'd never gotten the chance to ask Nesha or Dano, and Ayasherin didn't exactly encourage conversation. Twelve days since her life had gone to hell in a hand basket.

She stopped short as a new apparition emerged from the trees. He looked human, but he wasn't. First off, no man looked that beautiful without several thousand dollars worth of cosmetic enhancements, and she seriously doubted that a society who still went to the bathroom in pits in the ground knew much about collagen or botox.

And second, a wave of the wrongness she was coming to associate with seriously bad demon rolled through her like a punch to the gut.

His hair was braided like Ayasherin's, and he wore the same kind of elegant robe that Ayasherin did, but he moved with an ease that Ayasherin lacked. If Ayasherin resembled a prowling wolf, the creature before her was a snake.

"Well, well," said the apparition, in a voice like mist and shadows. Caro cast an angry thought at her hormones as she started to back away.

"Sorry," she said. "Didn't know this path was taken. I'll just find another."

He hadn't moved. She knew he hadn't. But between one breath and the next, he was standing right in front of her. Caro squeaked and backed into a tree.

"Pray, don't hurry on my account." He moved from the shadows into the light and cocked his head, regarding her with eyes the colour of emeralds.

Oh crap, his hair matches his eyes. That can't be good.

He saw her discomfort, and grinned. She should have been relieved that his teeth were normal, without a hint of fangs.

But she wasn't.

"You appear to be in some trouble," he said, skimming a fingertip down her arm to stop at her bound wrists. "Perhaps I might help."

His touch raised every hair on her body. Caro wanted to fling herself somewhere, she just wasn't sure if it was toward him or away.

"No, that's okay. I'm fine. I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"No trouble." He placed a hand on the tree next to her head, cutting off her escape. "I do enjoy a good puzzle. And I would dearly love to know why you are bound, alone, in the middle of the forest." He leaned close, so close that his breath stirred the hair at her temple. She bit her lip, hard, and closed her eyes. "And I would love even more to know why you smell of Ayasherin."

Caro's eyes flew open and she jerked back, forgetting that there was a tree in her way. Her head slammed against the trunk with an audible crack. Cursing under her breath, she closed her eyes until the bright spots faded from her vision.

"Aya who?"

He threw back his head and laughed; a sound like thunder, like the rolling ocean, and cold as the January wind.

"Come now, my dearest." He cupped her cheek with his hand. "Lying serves no purpose." His hand drew back. A sudden burst of pain blasted across Caro's jaw, and she found herself lying on the ground several feet away from him, blinking through her tears. "And it only makes me angry."

"Oh God." She scrabbled backward as he advanced toward her. "Please, I don't know what you're talking about."

He paused, looked sadly at her, and shook his head. "I did warn you, darling one."

Pain erupted through her. Caro screamed as her blood boiled, frothing without heat, straining to tear her apart.

And then, abruptly, the pain stopped. Caro blinked to clear the haze from her eyes. Her position hadn't changed, but she was no longer alone with the young man. There was another, planted firmly between her and the demon.

And her nerves shuddered at a feeling like fingernails on a blackboard.

"Ayasherin!" Her attacker's voice was bright with joy. "How wonderful to see you."

"What are you doing to my toy, Marahesu?"

"Oh, her?" The demon -- Marahesu -- craned his neck around Ayasherin to stare at Caro. "She wouldn't tell me where you were."

"How foolish of her."

Marahesu sighed dramatically. "That's what I told her, but she didn't listen. So I had to punish her."

Ayasherin laughed. "Thank you. I do appreciate that." Caro dutifully refrained from biting his ankle.

"I'll do it again if you like." Marahesu raised his hand.

Caro whimpered and braced herself for the pain, but it didn't come. Risking a glance upward, her eyes widened as she saw the two demons still as statues, Ayasherin's hand locked around Marahesu's wrist.

"If you don't mind," Ayasherin's casual tone sounded painfully false in the loaded silence, "I prefer to be the only one to shed her blood."

Marahesu frowned. "What's gotten into you? You never used to be this stingy." He pulled his hand free. "Come to think of it, I've never known you to get close to a human before. I thought you hated them."

"I do."

"But she's redolent of you." Marahesu's eyes narrowed as Ayasherin's hand drifted toward his sword. "Ayasherin. What is that about your wrist?"

Wind tore through the clearing, slamming into Marahesu and throwing him into the trees. Before she could blink, Ayasherin's claws were in Caro's shirt, hauling her to her feet.

"Run!" he bellowed.

"But--"

He jerked her close, baring his teeth in her face. "There is nowhere on this world where you can hide from me. I will hunt you down." He pushed her away, shouting to be heard over the screaming of the wind. "Go!"

He didn't need to tell her twice. As the trees within the depths of the forest where Marahesu had been thrown began to crack and fall, Caro turned and fled.

The thunder continued to rumble from the fight behind her, but she gradually left it behind. Only when her lungs were burning and her legs threatened to give out beneath her did she slow her pace to a walk. Giving in to necessity, she leaned heavily against a tree and dragged in several deep, shuddering breaths.

"Dammit to hell," she muttered. "Why do these things always happen to me?"

"Eeeeh," said a voice from the bushes next to her.

Caro shrieked and stumbled, landing on her ass. Hard. On top of a rock. Cursing, she eased herself up, and found herself staring into a pair of bright, inquisitive eyes. Her breath hitched in her throat.

The bushes parted, and one of the little shriveled beef-jerky monkeys emerged, shivering a little. It perched on a rock and stared at her. "Eeeh?"

"Aw, you poor little thing." She got her feet beneath her again, wincing as she reopened the scrapes on her knee. "Are you hungry?"

The jerky monkey looked at her, and its nostrils flared.

It didn't look so cute anymore.

Withered black lips peeled back from sharp yellow teeth. With a shriek, the monkey gathered itself up and leaped. Screeching to match the monkey, Caro turned and fled, the hungry demon running close at her heels.

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Two hours later, she was so tired she could barely drag one foot in front of the other. But then, so was the monkey. They continued their chase at a snail's pace, the monkey occasionally emitting a halfhearted "Eeh" as it dragged itself along after Caro.

An old lady with a walker would have left them in the dust.

"God dammit," Caro moaned. "Why won't you just leave me alone?" She aimed a weary kick at the monkey. It attempted a weary grab at her foot. Caro groaned and started to shuffle forward again.

"All right, Caro. Let's take stock of the situation. You need to find another big magic rock to bleed on so you can open another big sparkly tunnel that will take you home. The good guys are a bunch of homicidal villagers who want to kill you so they can tame a rampaging demon. The bad guy is a rampaging demon who wants to eat you, but can't, because you bound him with the world's ugliest magic charm bracelet and more of your blood. He's currently fighting another rampaging demon who wants to kill you, but would probably want to eat you too if he knew what you were. And you can't even get your frelling hands untied." She tugged at the bonds holding her wrists, which held as firm as they had every other time she'd tested them. "And you can't even stop to think because the world's saddest excuse for a monkey will bite you if you do."

She glared at it, and it gave her a lethargic "eeh." Caro sighed. "Damn thing'd probably give you rabies anyway, with your luck."

And on the word 'luck', she caught her foot in a hole and fell.

The monkey, still on her heels, lay its head against her calf with a sigh, turned, and sank its teeth into her leg.

"Fuck off!" Caro screamed, dredging up enough energy to try to kick it away. But the monkey was gaining strength with every second it held her. It wrapped its paws around her leg, claws lengthening and digging into the denim as it did so, and began to bite deeper.

Hollering, Caro scootched over to a handy rock and started slamming the monkey against it. The monkey didn't seem to notice. As Caro flailed, spikes began to emerge from the jerky monkey's back.

"Fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking, hell!" She punctuated each word with a bash against the rock.

"Don't move!" A new figure burst from the bushes, leaped over Caro, and slammed a broadsword into the monkey. The monkey flew several feet before landing, and the sword-wielding maniac was on it almost before it hit the ground.

"Whoa," said Caro. "It's Hercules."

"Are you all right?" asked another voice. Hands took her shoulders and lifted her, and Caro found herself staring into concerned blue eyes.

"Uhhh," Caro said intelligently.

He was gorgeous. More than gorgeous. The lunatic busily hacking the monkey to pieces had the same long blond hair and patched leather outfit, but the lunatic,

though surprisingly graceful for his size, was all brawn and bulges. He looked as though he was ready to audition for He-Man, The Broadway Musical.

New Guy was a lot younger, muscular without being bulgy, and had the kind of look that boy bands paid stylists millions of dollars to achieve.

Cute Guy frowned. "Darela?"

It took her a moment for her to realize that darela meant something like 'miss', but with overtones of distance, respect, and a vague question as to the mental capacities of the addressee. Stupid translating rock.

"Um, yeah, I'm fine." She glanced down at her bleeding leg. "A little chewed, but fine."

"Can you stand?"

She felt the colour rising to her cheeks. "Well, I'm a little tied up at the moment."

His cheeks coloured to match hers. "Of course. Forgive me." He drew a long knife from the sheath at his waist. "Let me help you." He reached behind her and efficiently cut away the leather binding her wrists.

She sighed with relief as, for the first time in days, she brought her hands in front of her. The sigh quickly turned to a squeak of pain as the circulation began to return with a vengeance.

"Here." Cute Guy took her hands in his, and gently began to rub the life back into them.

Caro's mouth went dry. She looked up, met his eyes, and smiled a little.

"Thanks. I'm Caro."

He smiled back. She was pretty sure she only imagined the heat that came from that smile. "I'm Raean." His thumbs massaged her palms, and his smile dimmed a little. "You're either incredibly brave or remarkably foolish. What on earth are you doing alone and bound in the middle of the woods?"

Caro shrugged. "Oh, just escaping from some demon."

His hands faltered. "Middling or lesser?"

"Greater."

His eyes widened. "Braver than I thought, then." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Can you walk?"

I can if my legs stop trying to turn to jelly. Stupid hormones. "I think so."

"Let's get you out of here, then."

Caro spared a glance back toward Hercules. "Um... is he going to be at that all night?"

Raean followed her glance to the big lug hacking away at what was now monkey puree, and sighed. "Moro! I think it's dead!"

Hercules paused with his gory sword raised to fall again. "Just making sure."

Raean rolled his eyes. "I'm sure. Let's go. We should get the lady to safety."

He took Caro's arm and guided her toward the narrow game trail on which he and Moro had arrived. "After you, darlesha."

That was a new one. From whatever encyclopedia Dano's rock had stuck in her head, Caro got that it was used by a man to address a woman of approximately equivalent age and rank, for whom one had a fair amount of respect.

It could also be used on a girl a guy liked.

Only trouble is, the stupid language gives no clue as to which one he means.

But he didn't have to keep his hand on her arm like that. Didn't have to stay as close as he did. Didn't have to take her by the waist to lift her over rough spots in the path.

Oh yeah, Caro thought. I could definitely get used to this.

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The aroma reached Caro first.

Ayasherin caught his own dinners and ate them raw, and when Caro had refused to touch them, he'd pointed her toward a couple of edible bushes and let her fend for herself. So when the smell of rich stew wrapped around her like a warm blanket, she supposed she was justified in picking up her pace. It was just unfortunate that speeding up caused her to trip over a root hidden by the lengthening twilight and sent her sprawling at Raean's feet.

Her stomach, not to be outdone, let a huge growl rip as Raean helped her up.

"Sorry to waste your rescue," said Caro, "but I think I'm about to die of mortification."

Raean managed to bring his laughter under control, and shook his head. "Never fear, darlesha. I don't imagine you've eaten well during your captivity. Shall we make a decent meal our first priority?"

Caro let out a rapturous sigh. "If you do, I swear I'll love you forever."

His hand, still wrapped around hers, twitched once, briefly. Her cheeks burned as she felt the blood rush to them, and she was suddenly quite unable to meet his gaze.

"Well then," he said at last. "Let's get you something to eat."

Embarrassment kept her silent as Raean pulled her into the firelight, where they were met with various exclamations of surprise by the four other men in Raean's camp. But Raean quickly explained things -- with some not altogether welcome assistance from Moro -- and they soon had Caro settled by the fire, a blanket wrapped around the sorry remains of her t-shirt and a warm bowl of stew in her lap. She attacked the latter gratefully, and ate in silence as Raean and Moro filled the others in on her rescue from the monkey demon.

Raean's easy narrative had the others doubled over with laughter as Caro blushed into her stew. "It had really sharp teeth," she muttered.

Raean quickly stilled his laughter. "Forgive me," he said, gently chagrined. "I'd forgotten you were hurt." Despite her protests that she was fine, he slipped from the fireside and returned a few moments later with a bottle and a pile of reasonably clean rags.

"Really," said Caro, as he took her leg in his hands. "It's not that bad."

"Demon bites have a habit of turning nasty." He looked up at her through the lengths of his sandy hair, and Caro felt her stomach drop to her knees. "Indulge me in this."

"Okay," she said. And told herself that his hands didn't feel that good as they ran along her calf.

He gently eased the torn denim away from the wound, unstopped his bottle, and poured the contents over the bite.

That hurt. Jerking her leg out of his grasp, Caro cursed in her language and in his, so fluently and creatively that she had his campmates in hysterics again.

Caro glared at him as he recaptured her leg. "You could have warned me."

He gave her a boyish grin that almost made the pain worthwhile. "But then we might have missed that truly stunning display." He bound her leg up with the rags. "And we so rarely get such extravagant entertainment."

"Jerk," she muttered, but she found herself returning his grin.

He tied off the bandage and took a seat next to her. "Better?"

"Yeah." She wiggled her foot. "Thanks."

"And what about thanks for me?" Moro settled himself on a rock next to them. "I saved you from that demon."

Caro felt her cheeks burn again. "Right. Thank you."

Moro frowned. "Is that all?"

"It was just a little demon." Caro silently wished for the ground to swallow her up.

Raeon laughed gently and tugged on her hair. "We almost thought you a demon yourself, with this colouring." He let the strands slip through his fingers, and Caro fought back a small thrill of pleasure. "I've never seen anything like it. Not on a human."

"So how did you know I wasn't a demon?"

"No self-respecting demon would ever allow itself to be bested by a pidi."

"Pidi?" Caro blinked. "Oh, is that what you call the monkey-things?" She shrugged. "It was a really mean monkey thing."

He smiled, sending a pool of heat curling through Caro's belly. "Besides which, you didn't feel like one. When you've been demon hunting as long as we have, you get a feel for these things. You're different, but not like a demon."

Caro glanced at one of the dark brown curls falling over her shoulder. "Well, I'm not exactly from around here."

Raeon hooked a finger through one of the belt loops on her jeans and tugged. "Yes, I gathered that."

Caro blushed harder, very grateful for the night's darkness. "I'm not from this world, I mean." There were a number of skeptical glances exchanged, and Caro sighed. "See, there was this gateway, and I kind of accidentally fell through it. These villagers found me, but they didn't get to keep me very long before this demon stole me from them." She didn't add the bits about her deasha blood -- having nearly been served as a buffet for a demon snake because of it, she didn't particularly relish the thought of anyone else getting any bright ideas, no matter how cute he was. "I was running away from him when this other demon found me and tried to kill me. But Ayasherin stopped him, and while they were fighting, I got away, and that's when you found me."

She looked around the circle, and went cold. No one was laughing anymore. Every one of the men was staring at her with an expression of shock and horror on his face.

"Ayasherin?" Raeon choked.

Moro gaped at her. "Why aren't you dead?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"You expect us to believe that you escaped Ayasherin. He never takes prisoners. If he takes notice of a human, it's to kill them."

"Moro, enough." Raean placed an arm around Caro's shoulders. "This lady is our guest, and she's been through much." He pulled Caro to her feet. "We'll save questions for the morning, once she's rested."

Over the protests of the men, he led her away from the fire and toward the wagon tethered on the outskirts of the camp.

"Thanks," Caro breathed.

"I could see you were uncomfortable." He stopped, and took his hands in hers. "Though I must admit, I am insatiably curious. How did you manage to keep him from killing you?"

"Well," Caro admitted, "there was this binding..."

Raean stared at her for a long, silent moment. And then he began to laugh. "Ayasherin." He tipped sideways and slid to the ground. "You bound Ayasherin?"

"It was an accident."

He laughed harder. Caro scowled at him, drew the blanket more tightly around her, and turned to flounce off.

Raean straggled to his feet. "Wait, wait, forgive me." He caught her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I'm sorry, truly I am. I was startled. And somewhat awed." He cupped her chin in his hand, turning her face to catch the moonlight. The grin faded

from his eyes, and he regarded her thoughtfully. "You truly are as courageous as you are beautiful."

"Hey!" Caro stepped back, but stopped as she took note of his expression. "Oh. Wait. You meant that as a compliment."

Confusion spread across his face. "Of course."

Caro smirked. "I appreciate the effort, but I know I'm not beautiful."

"But you are." He seized her hands. "Who has told you otherwise?"

"No one, but I'm not blind."

"I think, perhaps, you might be." He ran his hand over her hair. She had to fight to keep from purring. "You are quite lovely, Caro." He smiled. "Slayer of demons."

"Hardly slayer," she snorted, and started moving again. "I couldn't even take care of one stupid jerky monkey."

He caught up with her easily. "Binder then."

"I told you. It was an accident." She shivered, and tried to ignore the little thrill of pleasure that ran through her as he removed the long overcoat he wore and draped it over her shoulders.

"Accident or no, you've done what many people have tried and failed to do. What they've died attempting to do." He smiled and tugged on her hair again. "I'll not have you putting yourself down over it."

She grinned. "I just wanted to make sure you're seeing clearly."

He stopped, took her hands in his, and stared at her. "On the contrary." One of his hands drifted up to caress her cheek, and he sank his fingers into her hair. "I've never seen clearer."

Her eyes closed of their own volition and she waited in darkness for that briefest of moments that stretched an eternity. Expectation grew and swelled within her until it almost became pain. And then the hand in her hair shifted, drew her closer, and she felt the soft brush of his lips over hers.

His arm snaked around her waist and drew her tight against him as the kiss deepened, still gentle, still tender, but with a growing need, a desperation that had their breath coming in gasps. She didn't ever want that kiss to end, yet he pulled back all too soon. He lingered a moment, catching her bottom lip between his teeth as he drew away. And then they stood, locked together in the moonlight, staring at one another as though seeing for the first time.

The surprise on his face gave way to a grin that might have been foolish, but it thrilled Caro to see it.

"Well then," he said, somewhat breathlessly.

His hand found hers, their fingers lacing together as he drew her toward the wagon. "You'd best sleep here tonight. It's safest, and easiest to guard you. I'll be nearby if you need me." He caught her around the waist and lifted her easily into the wagon. As he stepped back, he took her hands in his and kissed them, gently. "Good night, darlesha."

Caro sat awake, staring into the darkness, for a very long time.

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The wagon bumped and swayed as it jolted over the narrow trail. Caro kept one hand braced against the side to keep herself from being pitched against it -- again -- and tried to bring her disjointed thoughts in order.

One day earlier she'd awakened to a rude jab in the ribs by an irritated demon intent on dragging her God-knew-where through the forest in his vague mission to break the binding so he could kill her. This morning she'd awakened to a gentle, silken caress against her cheek. When she'd opened her eyes, Raean was standing over her, a gorgeous orchid-like flower in his hand and a smile on his face that turned her knees to water every time she thought about it.

This morning had been the first morning since her arrival that she hadn't felt the urge to cry.

The object of her pondering chose that moment to cross the path behind her. She watched him, and tried to hide the goofy grin she could feel sneaking across her face.

He noticed, of course. With another one of those killer smiles, he loped to the wagon and boosted himself up to sit next to her.

"Everything all right?" His smile dimmed a little. "I know it's not exactly luxury. Certainly not what you deserve--"

Caro laughed. "No, no, it's wonderful. Really. I mean, for the last five days any travelling I did was either on my own two feet or over Ayasherin's shoulder, which is not exactly my idea of comfort."

"I should say not." He traced one finger lightly along her jaw. "A woman isn't to be treated like a sack of grain. She should be cradled and cherished, like the treasure she is."

Her stomach fluttered. "Wow. You're really good."

He grinned at her. "I try."

Moro made his pass across the trail, and scowled when he saw the two of them sitting together, but he kept moving and vanished into the forest on the other side. Caro watched him go.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

Raeen's concerned blue eyes stared into hers. "You're suddenly very far away."

"I was just thinking about how weird this all is." She gestured around at his look of confusion. "This world."

"Kesh."

"Kesh. Is that what it's called?" She plucked at one of the rips in her jeans. "All these blonde-haired, blue-eyed people, like some weird medieval master race -- who are all way too pretty, by the way. All the demons, and magic rocks, and gateways, and things." She sighed. "I am very far away. Away from my home. I never really appreciated it while I was there, but dammit, I want to go back!" Mortified, she brushed away the tears that had begun to sting her eyes. "Sorry."

Raeen caught her wrist in a hold that wasn't exactly gentle. Startled, Caro looked up at him, and there was anger in his eyes. "Don't." He squeezed her wrist. "Don't apologize for being human. Do you really think anyone expects you to endure this

without upset? There are grown men who go their lives in terror of meeting a demon, and you sit before me having escaped one and bound another. You are forced into a situation like nothing you've ever known, cut adrift from aid, and you apologize for showing one moment of distress after having proven yourself the bravest woman I have ever had the good fortune to meet. No, Caro. Do not apologize for that."

"Can I apologize for pissing you off, 'cause you're kind of hurting me."

He glanced down at the hand that held her, and his eyes widened in dismay. "Forgive me." He took her hand in both of his, raised it, and feathered his lips gently over the sensitive skin of her wrist.

Caro closed her eyes. "Only if you promise to keep doing that."

She felt his laugh vibrating up her arm. "You have but to command, darlesha. I am your servant in all things."

"And if I were to command you to kiss me again?"

His mouth curled as he transferred his grip to the back of her neck and pulled her close. "As you wish," he whispered against her lips.

The path behind the wagon exploded.

Raeon lunged forward, wrapping his arms around her and all but dragging her across his lap as he twisted to shield her from the rain of rock and debris. Before Caro had time to fully understand what was happening, she heard the horses scream. The wagon pitched, tilted, and toppled to its side.

Raeon held her close for all of it, but when the wagon dropped with a final lurch, Caro felt the impact run through his body and his arms sagged loose around her.

"No," she whispered, and struggled free. "No. Raean!" She clawed her way out of the debris to take his face in her hands. Blood stained his face red and matted his hair. "Oh God, please, no." Frantic, she kissed him once and pushed herself to her feet. "Stay here. I'll get help."

She'd never been particularly religious, but she found herself praying as she moved, climbing over fallen bundles and supplies to haul herself out of the wagon. "Please God, please, don't let him be dead. I'll do anything. Just don't let him be dead."

She tumbled out and ended up in a sprawl as she fell straight into the deep crater that had been blasted into the path. She groaned as she raised a hand to her head and rolled, pushing herself to her feet.

A shadow fell over her. She glanced up, and froze.

"Well, well," said Marahesu. "Look what I found."

"Oh shit, not you again."

He scowled. "You might show a little respect to a superior being, you know." He twined a lock of emerald hair around his finger. "I might have killed you quickly. Now you're going to suffer. It's always so much messier that way." He sighed and raised his hand.

An arrow blossomed suddenly from his chest. He stared down at it for a moment, irritation playing across his features. "Oh, now that is rude." He grabbed the shaft and began working it out. Two more arrows struck him before he managed it.

Strong arms wrapped around Caro's waist and yanked her away from the demon. She twisted, and the relief that washed through her upon seeing Raean's bruised and

bloody face was so great it almost made her weep. She found herself being hauled up the hill and tossed toward Moro.

"Go," Raean shouted. "Take her out of here. Keep her safe!"

Without a word, Moro grabbed her wrist and dragged her into the forest.

"We can't just leave them!" Caro tugged at her wrist, but Moro's grip was firm.

"They can take care of themselves. You can't. You'd only be a distraction."

She supposed he had a point, so she stopped struggling and let him tow her deep into the woods, until the sounds of fighting faded behind them. Finally, Moro slowed and let go of her.

Caro leaned against a tree, panting. "I really don't like that man."

"Demon."

"Demon. Whatever."

Moro stared at her. "I saved you from the demon."

"Yeah, I guess." Caro glared at her jeans, which had been shredded even more during the attack. And her shirt had really seen better days. She brushed off a clod of dirt. "Thank you. Really. I appreciate it."

Moro moved closer, backing her into the tree. She brought her hands up.

"Whoa!" She pushed at his chest. "What is it with you people and personal space?"

Moro caught her wrists and pulled them away. "Raean saved you from the demon, and you rewarded him. Now I saved you. I want my reward."

Okay, this conversation is not going well.

"Look, Moro, I really do appreciate the rescue and all, but I didn't give Raean any reward. I don't even know that you people use for money."

"You're a woman," he said, as though stating the obvious.

Caro's eyes widened. "Oh no. Hell no. Fuck that!"

"I want my reward too."

"No!" She struggled against him, but all those bulgy muscles weren't just for show. He caught both of her wrists in one hand and pulled them over her head, pinning them to the tree. "Knock it off."

"I've earned my reward," he said stubbornly, and tore at her pitiful shirt.

"No! Stop it! Please!"

His hands were on her, hurting her, his mouth wet and hard as he used it to muffle her cries.

And then she watched, dumbfounded, as Moro flew across the clearing, slammed into a tree, and dropped bonelessly into the bushes.

Pulling herself together, Caro turned and bolted for the trail. And smacked straight into the demon blocking the path.

Ayasherin glared down at her. "I am extremely annoyed."

Caro caught the sob before it could escape. "God. I never thought I'd be happy to see you."

His amber gaze flicked over her head, and disgust curled his lip. "That kind of human only thinks of one thing. He wouldn't have taken it without spilling your blood, and that I cannot have."

Caro gathered her ragged shirt around her. "Oh. Right. The blood thing."

Annoyance flickered through his eyes as he reached down and hauled her to her feet. "Come on."

"Wait!" She planted her feet, glancing back over her shoulder to where she'd left the others fighting, but Ayasherin wouldn't listen. He dragged her effortlessly, and would have pulled her off her feet if she hadn't run to keep at his pace.

"Quiet," he said. "We have to hurry." He pushed past a tree, and the sound of rushing water filled the air. Before them, a wide river roiled and foamed across the path. "We need to get over the water before--"

He didn't get the chance to finish. The water fountained upward into a geyser, and Caro found herself gaping up at a narrow serpentine head perched atop a long, sinuous neck. Green scales glittered in the sunlight, and a mane of hair like seaweed foamed down the creature's back.

"What the fuck is that thing?"

Ayasherin planted his hand on her chest and shoved her back as he drew his sword with the other hand. "Too afraid to face me honourably, Marahesu?"

"Hardly," said the water snake, with Marahesu's voice. "Merely choosing to be expedient."

Caro sat down abruptly.

Ayasherin let out a brief, mocking laugh. "You never could stand against me."

The enormous snake rolled its eyes and sighed, setting the branches of the nearby trees waving madly. "Very well. If you insist."

And Marahesu, with his fancy robes and green hair, suddenly stood on the riverbank.

"He's a big snake," said Caro. "Great. As if he wasn't already badass enough."

"Be silent," Ayasherin snapped.

Since he and his sword were the only things standing between her and the obviously pissed off Marahesu, Caro obeyed.

"I cannot understand it," Marahesu said. "You defend this human as though you actually care about her."

"I hate her," Ayasherin spat between his teeth.

"Hey," Caro protested. "I'm not exactly fond of you, either."

"Will you be silent?"

And in that moment, when Ayasherin was distracted, Marahesu struck.

Caro bit back a cry as Ayasherin brought up his sword, nearly too late, to deflect Marahesu's blade. She heard Ayasherin's hiss of pain as Marahesu's sword grazed his arm. Then the attack began in earnest.

Ayasherin was faster, but Marahesu more agile. And, Caro suspected, just a little bit stronger. They circled almost faster than Caro could see, their blades carving flashes of light as they struck, filling the forest with the harsh song of metal singing on metal.

Now, Caro realized, would be a very good time to escape.

She pushed herself to her knees and began to edge slowly toward the underbrush. The two demons were far too involved in their battle to pay attention to her. She raised her arm, gripped a branch, and began to pull herself to her feet.

Sharp teeth sank deep into her wounded leg.

Caro shrieked, reached down, and tore the pidi from her leg -- still a young one, judging by its size. With a howl of rage, she hurled it away.

The demons broke apart and it landed between them.

"Oh, shit," Caro said.

Marahesu watched in fascination as the jerky monkey bucked and heaved, spines erupting from its back. Slowly, those emerald green eyes left the morphing pidi and locked on Caro.

"I don't believe it," Marahesu breathed.

The monkey whirled and launched itself back at Caro. It had almost reached her before Ayasherin's strike hit it. It landed in pieces at her feet.

"You bastard." There was awe in Marahesu's voice. "You've found yourself a deasha, haven't you?"

Ayasherin turned on Caro, fury blazing in his amber eyes. "You stupid idiot! Do you have any idea what you've done?" Unthinking, he drew back his hand to strike. Caro cringed.

An instant later Ayasherin was on the ground, hand clamped around his wrist, shuddering in pain.

Marahesu watched the proceedings in mute astonishment. He planted his blade in the ground, leaned on it, and began shaking with restrained mirth. "I don't believe it. I would never have believed it." He placed a hand to his stomach, fighting to stay standing, choking out the words through his laughter. "This human has bound you!" He threw back his head and howled. "Wait until Keraneshta hears of this!"

With a strangled cry, Ayasherin lunged at Marahesu.

Caro bit her lip as she watched. Ayasherin's attack on her had hurt him. Had weakened him. He and Marahesu had been fairly evenly matched when they started,

but now Marahesu was clearly winning. Ayasherin made no sounds of pain, but she could see the blood falling as Marahesu's sword found its mark.

So what do you care? The bastard tried to eat you. Twice.

But, given the choice between a demon who was incapable of hurting her, and a demon who intended to do exactly that if he won, there wasn't much choice at all.

She had to do something.

Moving slowly, trying to escape notice, Caro crept to the trees and slipped into the undergrowth. Once out of sight of the river, she took to her feet and ran, until she burst back into the clearing.

She made her way to the bushes and pushed through them, to find Moro groaning and trying to regain his feet.

"Oh no you don't." Caro drew back her foot and planted it squarely between his legs. Moro went white, let out a breathless squeak, and fell to the ground again. Caro crossed her arms and glared down at him. "Asshole." She reached down and pulled his bow and quiver from his back. "I'll take these."

Weapons in hand, she headed back toward the river.

When she reached the battlefield again, Ayasherin was losing. Badly. Marahesu was only toying with him now, drawing out the end.

"Hell. I don't even like the bastard," Caro muttered, but dumped the quiver down, plucked an arrow, and nocked it to the bow. "All right, Larson," she told herself, "you got an A-minus in archery. Let's make this one count."

She drew back the bow, sighted, and fired.

Ayasherin howled as the arrow left a deep bloody furrow in his leg.

"Shit! Sorry!"

Marahesu broke off his attack, too busy laughing to press his advantage. "Oh, Ayasherin, the champions that you choose." He wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "Darling girl. Haven't you seen that human weapons don't concern me?"

He raised his hand, ready to strike out at Caro, but Ayasherin was there first. The two locked into battle again.

White-faced and shaking, Caro let the bow fall from her fingers.

The arrows the hunters had fired had done nothing. She'd seen that. It must have been a full-demon thing, because Ayasherin could clearly be hurt by them. It was her fault he was limping now. Her mistake that had cost him any chance he had at winning. But there had to be something she could do.

She bent, picked up an arrow, and stared at it. And an idea slowly dawned upon her.

Caro turned the arrow and plunged the head into the wound on her leg.

"Jesus," she hissed. "God, if this doesn't work I'm going to be seriously pissed off."

She pulled out the arrow and reknotted her soiled bandage around the wound. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she pulled herself to her feet and waited.

Ayasherin was faltering. His swing went wide and he staggered, falling to his knees. With a grin of triumph, Marahesu raised his sword.

Caro launched herself toward him and threw herself on his back.

For one frozen moment, none of them moved. Then, slowly, Marahesu toppled forward.

Caro rolled free, and came to rest on her back next to Ayasherin. He stared down at her for an instant, and then shifted his gaze to Marahesu.

The arrow that had been tipped with her blood stuck up from Marahesu's back like a flag.

As they watched, the body convulsed once, and began to shrivel, until Marahesu resembled little more than an overlarge jerky monkey in a nice robe. Caro, who had propped herself up on her elbows, flopped down on her back and let her breath out in a whoosh.

"What in the name of the four did you do?"

She glanced up at Ayasherin. "I remembered the big centipede I killed when I first got here and figured this guy wasn't so different." She shrugged. "So I coated an arrow with my blood, stuck it in him, and wanted very badly for him to die." She glanced at the shriveled body. "Looks like it worked."

Ayasherin's only response to that was to fall back into the grass.

Caro scowled at him. "You're welcome."

\* \* \*

"So why'd he turn into a big water snake?"

Ayasherin finished tying off the dressing on his thigh where her arrow had grazed him. "Because he's a water demon."

"Ah." Caro sat back and watched him. "And that means something because?"

He glowered at her. "Greater demons can change form, but they have one shape into which they were born. That was his."

She thought about that for a moment. "He was a water demon... so that's how he made my blood boil?"

"Correct."

"And you're a wind demon. So that ginsu thing you do to cut things apart from a distance is actually wind?"

He smiled at her, showing far too many teeth. "The winds can be incredibly versatile to one who knows them well."

"Okay," she crossed her feet at the ankles. "So if you can do the ginsu thing, and he could do the blood boiling thing, how come the two of you didn't do anything but hack at each other with swords?"

He paused in the act of removing the embroidered over-robe he wore, and stared at her. "Do you know nothing of honour?"

Caro rolled her eyes. "No. I'm a stupid ignorant human and I obviously know nothing about it. Enlighten me."

"We were in human form. We use the blades."

"Ah. So instead of using the big powers that dice the lesser demons into teeny pieces, you won't attack a greater demon unless you get to hack at each other like civilized people."

"Precisely."

"I see. That's much more sensible. I mean, God forbid you actually get the fight over with in a quick, easy to -- holy God, you have a tail!"

He raised a brow as he set the embroidered robe aside and the aforementioned appendage uncurled from around his waist.

"Yes. And?" He pulled the lighter white robe he wore under the embroidered one off his shoulder.

"Nothing. Forget I mentioned it." She picked up the bow and unstrung it.

Ayasherin looked up from the wound on his arm and frowned. "Where did you get that?"

She gestured at the trees. "From Gonad the Barbarian back there." She paused, turning the bow in her hands. "Um...thanks, by the way. For stopping that creep."

"Unbelievable." He tied off his bandage and shrugged back into both robes. His tail curled around his waist again and disappeared beneath his hem. "I nearly get cut to pieces by a greater demon, and she thanks me for swatting one insignificant human." He pushed to his feet, stalked over to her, grabbed the bow, and broke it over his knee.

"Hey!" Caro cried.

He handed the pieces back to her. "Your aim is atrocious."

She looked at the broken bits and tossed them aside. "Jerk." She sighed. "So who's Keraneshta?"

"Are you never silent?" He hauled her to her feet. "Come."

She blinked at him. "You're not going to tie me up again?"

Annoyance filled his eyes. "Do you want me to?"

"No."

"Then come on."

He turned and stalked toward the river. Caro remained, and glanced back through the trees. Toward the battlefield she had left. Toward Raean.

She had no idea if he'd lived through Marahesu's attack, but the image of him lying in the wagon, blood matting his sandy hair, was etched into her mind. If she found a way to escape Ayasherin, if she went back, there could be other demons. Others who wanted the deasha, who would think nothing of tearing Raean and the others apart in order to get her.

Including Ayasherin.

She couldn't go back. Not yet. Not while the strangeness in her blood remained a mystery to her. Because the next time Raean got hurt, he might not get up again.

"Wind and Fire, woman, will you hurry up!"

On the other hand, she didn't give a damn about Ayasherin.

She turned and hurried after him. "So is it true what they say about the length of a guy's tail?"

"I don't see why I bothered fighting Marahesu. Five minutes in conversation with you would have had him falling on his sword to save himself."

"Oh, eat me."

"Don't think I haven't tried."