

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

CYCLE #1: ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

Part 4: Eye of the Beholder

For Pyewacket

Who provides great demonic inspiration

T *here are better ways to wake up*, thought Caro as she fled from the rampaging demon.

Her muscles were still stiff with fatigue as she forced them to move faster, putting as much distance between herself and the demon's second head as she could -- the first was still busy shredding the thin blanket that had been her only protection from the cold.

She had actually managed to gain a lead on the thing when a lance of agony streaked through her leg and she fell, screaming, to the ground. The demon was on her in an instant, its beady eyes bright in the moonlight as it reared back to strike.

The head kept going, flying off to land several feet behind the demon. The head rolled a little before coming to rest against a tree.

The second head, Caro's blanket hanging from its jaws, turned to stare at the first. The head's expression was almost pathetically confused as it slid off to join the first and the decapitated body crashed to the ground.

Tears burned in Caro's eyes as she battled back the pain. She blinked them back as a dark figure loomed above her, which slowly resolved itself into Ayasherin's irritated form.

"Now what?"

She hitched a breath. "One of the villagers fell out of a tree. Broke his leg." She choked back a sob. "God, it hurts."

Ayasherin let out a sigh of disgust. "This geas is becoming remarkably inconvenient."

He gave her no time to answer, but reached down and heaved her over his shoulder.

As he carted her back to the demon-trampled remains of their camp, the pain began to fade. Evidently the *areshti*'s irritation with her wasn't enough to prevent them from dosing the victim insensible. As the poor villager slid into unconsciousness, the pain in her leg faded to a dull ache, blending into the background of pain she'd lived with for the last two weeks. Pain that wasn't her own. Pain that seriously pissed her off.

She let out a squeak as Ayasherin dumped her to the ground. "Watch it!"

He held up his wrist and shook the dangling bracelet. "It didn't hurt, did it?"

She scowled at him. "No, but it wasn't exactly comfortable."

"What do I care of your comfort?" He settled back against a tree, sitting with his elbow on one raised knee and his sword next to him. He'd stay like that all night -- he never lay down to sleep. She wasn't actually sure he slept at all.

"There are some hours yet till daybreak. Pray be silent for the remainder."

"That thing ate my blanket," she protested.

He looked at her, and even in the darkness, she could see the contempt in his amber eyes. "I repeat -- what do I care of your comfort?"

Refusing to dignify that with an answer, Caro turned on her side and curled into as small a ball as she could.

When she'd turned ten, her mother had shipped her off to Scugog for the summer. As part of a "get to know your roots" program, the tribal elders had taken her group into the woods to experience "traditional Ojibwa life". She'd known when she saw the other children -- all of whom had dark hair, eyes, or skin to at least some extent -- that she'd be in trouble. She'd spent the summer ostracized, tormented, cold, and hungry.

At the moment, she would have taken that summer with a smile on her face and a song in her heart.

Shivering, she tucked herself a little tighter, pressed a fist against the gnawing ache in her stomach, and tried to ignore the demon sitting across the clearing who was wishing fervently for her sudden and painful demise.

#

She woke to an impatient nudge in her ribs. Groaning at the awakening phantom pain in her leg, she rolled over and glared at Ayasherin's foot. "What?"

"Do you plan on lying there all day?"

Caro stretched, shaking out her sore leg. "Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Irritation flickered across his face again before he assumed his usual bored expression. "Very well. You can remain here, and I'll go stay at the inn."

"Inn?" Caro rolled over. "Did you say inn? Like, roof over your head, dry, real food kind of inn?"

"Yes."

She pushed herself to her feet, careful of the aching leg. "And we've spent two weeks sleeping in dirt and dew because?"

"Because we've been leaving the backwater territory you managed to attach yourself to," he said. "We're just starting to get into more civilized populations."

"Like cities and things?"

He glowered at her as he peeled a segment off the fruit he held. "Hardly. Jarakeshtan destroys anything he feels is too large and in danger of becoming independent. But villages, certainly. We may even be fortunate enough to find a market." He cast a pointed glance at the tatters of her shirt that she'd been forced to tie together.

"Hey." Caro tugged the shirt fragments a little closer together. "It is not my fault that various demons and perverts think ripping my shirt off is a productive way to spend their time."

Ayasherin gave a long-suffering sigh and turned his back on her. "Come on then."

She limped after him. "Say, are you going to eat all of that?"

Without pausing to turn around, he lobbed the remaining half of his fruit over his shoulder at her. She had to lunge to catch it, sending another stab of pain through her leg, but the aroma that drifted from the fruit made it worth the pain. Two weeks of living off bark and leaves may have honed her appetite to a razor edge, but she didn't think that accounted for the fruit smelling *that* good. To make it last, she peeled off a piece. The fruit was segmented like an orange, but the consistency of the fruit was closer to that of a ripe pear, and the colour was

an alarming fuchsia. Still, Ayasherin valued her blood too much to give her anything that would kill her, so she popped the segment into her mouth.

She promptly fell to the ground.

The flavour that burst through her mouth was like nothing she'd ever experienced. A little like mango, a little like strawberry, but a thousand times more intense, with a hint of something that would have made a fortune if someone had figured out how to refine it and make it into a fruit snack.

When the initial rush of colours cleared from her vision, she found herself sprawled in a heap, trembling, panting a little, with a pleasant tingle spreading through her limbs.

"Whoa," she breathed. And promptly stuffed the rest of the fruit into her mouth.

When the rush cleared, Ayasherin was standing over her again, clearly annoyed.

"Are you quite finished?"

"Oh yeah." Caro pushed herself off the ground. "What was that?"

"Eliesh."

"You got any more?"

He rolled his eyes. "Not for you."

"Aw, come on!" She lurched after him as he stalked off. "That stuff is amazing! It's like getting drunk or high or something, only it doesn't make you stupid."

"How on earth could you tell?"

She paused for a moment as the jab sank in, and scowled. "You are such a jerk."

* * *

Caro swore viciously as her hair tangled in yet another tree branch. It had happened far too often since the wind had picked up and turned her hair into one big rat's nest.

She heard a muttered oath from the other side of the brown curtain obscuring her vision, and then felt a wash of pain as Ayasherin yanked her hair free. Blinking the tears from her eyes, she stared down at him as he clutched his wrist and swore.

"Serves you right," she said, rubbing at the sore spot on her scalp.

Loathing simmered in his eyes as he overcame the pain of the binding. "Perhaps I should just cut the lot of it off."

"You'd never manage it without hurting me." She attempted to comb through it with her fingers, but just ended up getting stuck. She swore at it again as she struggled to pull her hand free.

Ayasherin sighed. "You need to tie it back."

"Thanks, I never would have thought of that. Just let me get my hairbrush and my scrunchie." He stared at her for a long moment. "What?" Caro snapped.

"You irritate me."

"Back at you."

Not deigning to answer, he turned and flounced off. *Well, he's too freaking superior to actually flounce. What's the scary, dangerous version of flouncing?* Muttering under her breath, Caro followed.

"So how much further to this inn? It's getting dark."

"Tell me." He reached up and plucked a fruit from an overhanging branch. "Do you speak just to hear the sound of your own voice, or are you actually under the impression that you contribute something meaningful to the silence?"

"Tell me," Caro said, "how did that stick get so far up your--" She broke off as the smell of the fruit he was peeling hit her. "Ohmigod." Turning, she bolted back up the trail and grabbed an eliesh off the tree. "Ohmigod ohmigod." The rind was a pale mauve, with the texture of alligator skin. Her mouth watering, she dug her nails into the fruit.

She cursed loudly as two of her nails broke off. "Dammit!" She tried again, a little more carefully, and met with no success. She bit down on it in frustration. A moment later, she carefully felt her front teeth to make sure they hadn't come loose. "What the frell is this thing made of? Rock?"

"Human!"

"What?"

"If you don't hurry up, I will take you by the feet and drag you."

Glaring at him, Caro hurried to catch up to Ayasherin. "Didn't your mother ever teach you that you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar?"

"No. She taught me that my victims can't run away if I hamstring them, and that flesh tastes much better when it's still alive."

Caro paled and stared after him as he set off again. "Okay. That explains a lot."

#

She didn't have any luck with the eliesh. She tried biting some more, throwing it against trees, hitting it with rocks, and even jumping on it (all that got her was a sore ass when she fell and another snide remark from Ayasherin). Nothing even scratched the surface of that purple alligator skin. Ayasherin had long since finished his, so she didn't even get the chance to see how he'd gotten the skin off. And damned if she was going to ask him for help.

She paused as a sound drifted through the trees. "Was that a horse?"

"Yes."

"Does that mean we're almost at the inn?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sweet." She stuck the obstinate eliesh in her pocket and hurried forward.

They rounded a bend in the road, and sound and scent struck her all at once. She stared at the chaos in front of her. "I thought you said this was a village."

Ayasherin considered. "Small town, perhaps. Not nearly as large as they get, but a significant improvement on the barbarity I'm sure you're accustomed to."

"Hey," she said, but he was already moving.

The town was centred around a thriving market. Caro stayed close to Ayasherin as they plunged into the midst of it. On the corner, a meat vendor seemed on the verge of plunging his knife into the young man actively trying to convince the butcher's customer to buy some fish from the river instead. Fruit vendors stood behind carts piled high with bright wares, though she couldn't see any eliesh. Ayasherin turned a corner, and they were surrounded by men and women shouting to the passers-by from tables groaning under the weight of bright bolts of fabric. As Caro stared, one particularly exuberant man threw a bolt of blue silk over her, smothering her in its folds. She struggled for a moment, but couldn't help noticing how nice the blue silk felt against her scratched and bruised skin. But it wasn't long before she felt the light scrape of claws as Ayasherin grabbed the remnants of her collar and hauled her free.

The man was gone, the silk lying forgotten in the dust. Caro went cold for an instant before she spotted him hiding behind his table.

Ayasherin let go of her, and she noticed for the first time how people fell over themselves to get out of his path. Ayasherin, for his part, took no notice of them. He stared fixedly ahead, and could have been alone in the woods for all the attention he paid to the hubbub surrounding him -- subdued as it was in his wake.

Beyond the tables of raw fabric were boutiques filled with finished garments. Some of them were no more than wooden tables, others were enormous stalls draped in shimmering fabrics. Ayasherin took Caro's arm and

dragged her toward one of the nicer stalls, much to the dismay of the pale, shaking proprietor.

"My lord, you honour my humble establishment," said the little man, though his tone said *Dear God, please, go away*. "Do you seek a *kisha*?"

Ayasherin raised a brow. "Is there something wrong with my *kisha*?"

Caro hadn't thought it was possible, but the man went even paler. "No, no, my lord. It is a fine *kisha*. Truly the work of a master. Truly a masterpiece, fit to grace only one so fine as--"

"Enough." Ayasherin hauled her forward. "Give her something."

The clothing vendor glanced at Caro, and she had a feeling that had he not been ready to piss himself in terror of the demon holding her arm, the vendor would have been throwing things at her. "Surely not a *katash*, my lord?"

There was an icy silence. "You question me?"

"No, my lord!" the vendor squeaked. Caro checked for a puddle at his feet.

"Good." Ayasherin released his grip on her arm. "No, I do not wish a *katash*. A *kashti* will do."

Okay, what's up with the translating rock? Caro waited for a definition of the Kesh words to drift into her mind as they had with *darela* and *darlesha*, but her mind remained stubbornly blank.

"Ehli!" the vendor shouted, and the draperies at the back of the stall parted. A timid young girl wearing next-to-nothing stepped out. "See this...woman... fitted with a *kashti*."

Caro wondered what the vendor had been about to call her, but before she could call him on it, Ayasherin shoved her toward the girl. The poor thing took one terrified look at the demon and ducked back behind the curtain. Unwilling to frighten her any further, Caro followed.

The girl led Caro into a small room that practically hummed with colour and opulence. Caro stared in awe at the workmanship around her, reaching out to brush a pale, silken fabric beaded with thousands of crystals.

"If you would stand here, my lady?" the girl said meekly.

"Caro," she corrected. "Not 'my lady'." She moved to the spot the girl indicated, and her gaze was caught by the costume on the stand in front of her. Dazzling embroidered and beaded fabric tumbled to the ground in an arrangement that was not quite a dress, not quite a robe, but the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. "What is that?"

The girl, busy knotting a cord around Caro's waist, glanced over her shoulder. "That is Lady Meru's *katash*," she said.

"Did you make that?"

"Oh no." She tugged the cord up beneath Caro's breasts and tied another knot. "It is Master Kyin's creation. I merely assist."

"So what—"

"Please, my lady," she whispered, glancing toward the entrance. "I should not be speaking with you."

"Why the hell not?" She lifted her arm at the girl's prompting. The girl slid the cord down Caro's arm and tied another knot.

"It isn't my place."

Caro rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to tell anyone. So that pretty thing is a *katash*, that's for the women, right? And the one the guys wear is the *kisha*?"

The girl gave Caro an odd look, as though Caro had just announced that water was wet. "Yes, my lady."

"So is what you're wearing a *katash* too?"

She dropped the cord. "No, my lady." She blushed as she bent to pick it up. "I only merit a *kis*." She placed the rope on a table.

"I hate that stupid rock," Caro muttered. "Right, important people get the *katash* and the *kisha* and -- what's the plain one that goes underneath the fancy stuff?"

The girl glanced at her. "A *ka*, my lady?" She picked up a piece of blue fabric and draped it over Caro's shoulder.

"Right, the *ka*. And servants get the *kis*--"

"Oh, no, my lady." The girl seemed horrified. "Servants wear a *kashti*."

"Okay, servants wear--" Caro paused. "What?"

"Servants wear a *kashti*." She fussed with the cloth, adjusting it to her satisfaction.

"And you're fitting me with...?"

"A *kashti*, my lady. A fine *kashti*, to be sure. My master would never dishonour yours by providing inferior clothes."

"Hold it!" Caro struggled out of the cloth. "No way. Forget that. I am *not* his servant, and if he thinks he can have me dressing like one, he is sadly

mistaken!" She thrust the cloth into the girl's arms. "Is there a back way out of this place?"

"My lady..." the girl began, but Caro caught her wary glance toward one cloth-covered wall.

"Thanks. Don't tell him where I went." She yanked back the cloth, squeezed through the poles supporting the tent, and emerged in the narrow walkway formed where the rows of stalls pressed up against the buildings behind them.

Her heart pounded. Dropping down to her hands and knees, she crawled along the wall until she reached the corner of the building. She breathed a sigh of relief when she reached it, ducked around, and sprinted toward freedom.

She emerged back in the fruit sellers' district and was quickly absorbed by the mob. Well, absorbed as much she possibly could be with hair several shades darker than the darkest of the natives'.

She scanned the carts she passed, but nowhere did she see the distinctive purple skin of the eliesh. She was tempted to go up to one of the vendors anyway and ask how to peel the damned thing, but after the way the clothing merchant had looked at her, she was a little leery of the idea.

"Excuse me," she said as, distracted, she bumped into a man who'd stopped before a laden cart. Skirting around him, she ducked between another two buildings and followed the tempting scent of baking bread toward the end of the alley.

She paused when she reached the end, breathing deep as her stomach growled, and pondered how to go about getting food without anything these people might regard as money. She glanced down at her hand and twisted the gold ring on her finger. Her parents had given it to her on her sixteenth birthday. She let out her breath in a huff.

Priorities, Caro, she chided herself. You can't live on memories, but you can probably go a day or two on a bowl of that stuff buddy over there is selling.

Gathering her resolve, she stepped out of the alley.

A hand clapped hard over her mouth as an arm wrapped around her chest and jerked her off her feet. Caro shrieked and tried to struggle, but her arms were pinned tight to her sides and her captor's grip wasn't budging. She was dragged back into the darkness of the alley as the heat of her captor's breath whispered against her ear.

"Going somewhere?" Ayasherin breathed.

Caro froze for an instant. Then she howled into his hand and flailed with her feet, trying to get him to drop her. He did, but it didn't have quite the result she wanted. He spun her before she could get her bearings, slamming her back against a wall, pinning her there with his weight while his hand remained clamped firmly over her mouth.

"Tell me," he said, "are you trying to get yourself killed, or are you just exceptionally stupid?"

Caro jerked her head, and he finally let her go, shifting his grip to her shoulders. "What, I'm just supposed to stand by and let you dress me up as your property?"

"Yes," he said.

Caro scowled. "Forget that. I am not--"

He yanked her forward and shoved her back, smacking her head hard against the wall. When the stars cleared from her vision, Ayasherin was trembling in pain and glaring at his wrist. His gaze moved to meet hers, and his claws tightened on her shoulders.

"Would you rather a *kis*?" His lip curled. "I could arrange that."

"Apprentice is better than servant," Caro said. "Even if the outfit is hideous."

Ayasherin stared at her for a minute before breaking into laughter.

"Apprentice? She's not his apprentice, you idiot. She's his slave."

Fear hit Caro like a punch in the gut. "She's what?"

"You heard me." He smirked at her. "Fortunately for her, she managed to finish her measurements for your *kashti* before you left." He pondered for a moment. "Though he may beat her anyway for letting you get away. I wasn't pleased to find you gone."

Guilt clenched around her heart. "You people keep slaves? That's-- that's disgusting." She shivered. "Those poor people."

"Think before you preach, human. You're not as far from them as you suppose." He seized her wrist and dragged her down the alley.

Caro stared at the three men sprawled on the ground. Two weren't moving, and the third was groaning feebly. "Who are they?"

Ayasherin ignored her, moving to the third man. "Ah, good, you're still alive." He grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him from the ground, shaking him until his eyes opened. They widened as the man took in the demon holding him.

"Oh please, no more--"

"Quiet." Ayasherin silenced him with a flex of his hand. He gestured toward Caro. "See that on the ground over there? Pick it up. And by the four, be careful."

Caro approached the thing on the ground, and carefully picked it up. Her brow furrowed slightly as she turned it over in her palm. It was a little leather bag that felt like it was filled with water. Caro's eyes widened a little as she saw the long needle stuck into the bag on one side. At Ayasherin's impatient gesture, she handed it to him.

He jammed the needle in the man's neck and squeezed the bag, emptying it of its contents.

The man howled as Ayasherin let him fall, letting loose with a stream of terrified profanity that went by too fast for Caro to completely understand.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

He took her wrist again and turned her to face the weeping man. "Watch."

As Ayasherin held her still, Caro watched his victim's spate of weeping cease. He attempted to get to his feet and run, but there was something very

wrong with him. He crawled for a few feet, then dragged himself a few more as his legs gave out and he pulled with his arms. And then he collapsed, lying in a sad little pile and drooling into the dirt. But his eyes remained fixed on Caro, wide and completely aware.

She recognized him. He was the man she'd bumped into in front of the fruit cart.

"Who is he?" she whispered.

"A slaver," Ayasherin said mildly. "They'll take anyone who's fit and doesn't appear to belong to anyone of importance." He tossed the empty sac at the slaver's feet. "That little dose was meant for you." He nudged the slaver with his foot. "They'd keep you helpless and docile until properly indoctrinated. Though I've been led to believe they have means of making you accept your slavery as a gift quite quickly. It's an old and well-established business in these parts."

"He would have taken me." She started to tremble. "Just like that."

"Just like that." Ayasherin glanced at her. "Do you understand now, human? People like you are fair game unless people like them are afraid to take you." He let go of her wrist and turned to watch her, folding his arms across his chest so that they vanished into his voluminous sleeves. "Now will you come along and wear your *kashti* like a good little girl, or do you prefer to hold out for a slave's brand?"

Caro stared down into the slaver's eyes. Into the horrified comprehension that lurked behind them. That could have been her. *Would* have been her.

Trapped in a body that wouldn't obey, aware of everything that was happening to her but powerless to do anything about it. Trapped in a living nightmare without end. Her trembling intensified.

"You son of a *bitch!*" Giving herself a good running start, she kicked the fallen slaver hard in the ribs. "Asshole." She kicked him again. "What is the *matter* with you people?" She whirled to find Ayasherin staring at her. "What?"

If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn that was surprise etched across his features. But the wide-eyed stare quickly turned into shrug. "Nothing. Come on."

As she followed him out of the alley, she decided that she had been imagining the grin he was trying to hide.

* * *

The ornament sat on a bed of black velvet, shining like a small star. Caro knew she should have been following Ayasherin, but Shannon had always claimed Caro had been a magpie in a previous life. She moved closer.

It was a comb -- at least, she was pretty sure that's what it was. The wavy teeth looked like they were meant to hold hair, anyway. But the flowers above the teeth were like none she could identify, and exquisitely worked. Stones scattered throughout them glittered, as did the narrow pistils that arced away from the body of the comb, dangling jeweled drops from their tips.

"You like it?" asked the vendor.

Caro tugged on the borrowed dress – her shirt had been a write off, but when they returned to the garment maker, she'd persuaded Ayasherin to ask them to patch her jeans rather than fit her with the ridiculous pants that went with the *kashti*. Of course, *ask* in the Ayasherin vernacular appeared to mean *bully*, but it achieved the same result. She just had to put up with the borrowed clothes until the *kashti* and her jeans were ready.

Since it made the vendors treat her better, she wasn't exactly complaining.

"It's lovely," she said.

"You have exquisite taste, lady. It can be yours for a song."

"Oh, I can't really afford it," she said, edging away from the table.

The vendor caught her hand and dragged her back. "But to part two objects of such loveliness would be criminal!" he protested. "Though I didn't know it when these humble hands were crafting it, this comb was created just to compliment your unique beauty!" Before Caro could demur again, he was holding the comb against her hair and pointing her toward a large sheet of polished metal. "You see? It was clearly made for you!"

"Ohhhh..." Caro breathed. It didn't matter that she had a drawer full of sparkly jewelry she never wore at home. It didn't matter that she was standing in a borrowed dress that looked like a designer bathrobe in the middle of a street in a town that shouldn't exist. It didn't matter that she was bound to a demon who wanted her dead. It didn't matter that she'd just narrowly avoided enslavement.

She wanted the frelling comb.

"It's you, beautiful one," the vendor whispered, making her laugh with his melodramatic flirtatiousness. It was blatantly obvious that she wasn't the right gender to capture his interest anyway, but that made it more fun.

She stopped laughing when she caught the reflection behind hers in the mirror.

"Are you quite finished?" Ayasherin demanded.

"My lord!" The vendor whirled, no longer smiling. Caro watched the ornament slip from his hand and fall, forgotten, to the dirt.

"Come on." Ayasherin seized Caro's arm and dragged her after him. She turned to look back, but the vendor wasn't looking at her. He huddled in a corner of his stall, his eyes squeezed closed. The ornament was trampled beneath the feet of the crowd.

"You terrified him."

"Wise man."

Caro planted her feet, jerking her arm out of his grasp. "That's not fair. He was nice."

"Please." He grabbed her wrist and tugged her forward. "He didn't care about you. If you'd still been wearing your old clothes, he'd have spat on you."

"That's not the point."

"Wind and Fire, you have a point?"

"You could try being a little nicer."

"Why should I?"

"Because if everyone tried it, this world might not be so completely screwed up."

He glanced over at his shoulder. "You know, I'm amazed you've survived this long. Your world must be a spectacularly banal sort of place."

She glared at him. "You are such a jerk."

"And that might have hurt me if I cared." He turned toward one of the larger buildings and dragged her up the stairs.

The smell of food hit her straight away, and her knees almost buckled. She hadn't had a decent meal since leaving Raean, and her stomach was startled awake. She was suddenly so hungry that it hurt.

"Wait here." Ayasherin shoved her at a bench along one wall. "Don't talk to anyone."

He stalked off to terrorize the cowering inkeeper, or whatever he was. Caro sighed and sank back against the bench, trying to convince her stomach to shut up.

She wasn't having a lot of success.

Well— she scuffed at a crack in the floor. *I suppose I can always think about who hurts in the village now.* She sighed. Nobody was in excruciating pain, but all the little aches, twinges, creaks, toothaches, coughs and colds really added up. And if she let her mind drift too long, she started seeing things. Echoes of a small fire in a pit in the floor. Calloused hands wrapping thong at the base of a spearhead. Twisted fingers mashing leaves in a bowl.

She shook her head and decided that the hunger wasn't so bad. At least she knew *that* was hers. She wasn't so sure about some of the other pain these days.

"My lady."

She looked up at the owner of the tremulous voice. He couldn't have been more than fourteen, and he was shaking so hard that the liquid in the mug on the tray he held was slopping over the sides. "Who, me?"

"His lordship bids you eat this." He hadn't even finished speaking before he'd dropped the tray on the bench in front of her and bolted.

"Ayasherin," Caro sighed. "You really are a creep."

Still, the scent wafting toward her made it hard to hold on to her irritation. She pulled the tray closer and examined its contents.

The bowl held some kind of thick, dark stew. She picked up a piece of the flat fried bread from the plate next to it, and tore off a piece. Poking experimentally at the stew, she gathered that it was made from some kind of bean. Glancing around at the tables next to her for instruction, she scooped up some of the stew with the bread and popped it into her mouth.

"Holy shit, that's good," she mumbled, and took some more. The bread was soft and savoury, the stew rich and spicy. And whatever was in the mug wasn't water, but it was pretty damned good, too.

"Excuse me--"

Caro jumped at the unexpected voice and started choking on a piece of bread. A hard hand thumped her on the back so hard she nearly bashed her

face into the table. As soon as she could breathe again, Caro turned to face the woman who had taken a seat next to her, and stared.

Okay, now this is what Xena should have looked like. The woman wore a badly scuffed and mended leather tunic over equally shabby pants and boots. She seemed washed out next to the colourful fabrics that the other people of Kesh seemed to favour. None of the clothes did anything to hide the fact that the woman was practically rippling with muscle.

Every inch of the woman bristled with weapons. She wore a sword at her back, a pair of long daggers and a knife at her side, smaller knives strapped to her arms, some kind of chain and hook at her belt--

Realizing she was staring, Caro raised her gaze to meet the woman's blue eyes, and gathered that the weapons weren't just for show. Two scars crossed the woman's cheek, another graced her brow, and her jaw bore what looked like claw marks. The hands holding her mug were equally scarred. She was older than Caro -- possibly late thirties, though it was hard to tell. Her skin was toughened by what could have been weather rather than age, but the dark blond hair that had been braided and pinned in a coronet around the woman's head was shot through with strands of silver. *Not exactly jumping up and down and screaming 'harmless'.*

Barbarian Barbie raised a brow. "Yes?"

Caro swallowed and tried to breathe normally. *Easy, Larson. Don't make eye contact. Well, stop making eye contact. Get away. Don't provoke the homicidal maniac.*

"Sorry," Caro said. "I didn't know this seat was taken. I'll move." She got to her feet.

"Don't hurry on my account." One of those scarred hands clamped on her arm and yanked her down. Hard. Tears stung Caro's eyes, and she couldn't help letting out a small yelp.

The woman instantly let go. Reaching out, she captured Caro's chin and turned her head so she could see her eyes.

Crap. More eye contact.

The woman's brow furrowed, and she let go. "You're human."

"Yeah." Caro rubbed at her arm. "Painfully human. The hair and the eyes are just... well, a long story."

"I see." The woman was still staring. "Are you in trouble?"

Caro blinked. "Huh?"

"You came in with that demon. But you're human. Do you need help?"

She was completely earnest. Some of the fear leaked away, and Caro shook her head, tearing off another piece of bread. "Not really. I mean, I do, but there's nothing you can--" She cut herself off and scowled. "This isn't coming out right."

But the woman couldn't take a hint. "How did you come to be travelling with a demon? And that one in particular. He has quite a reputation around these parts."

"That's an even longer story." Caro glanced over at the door through which Ayasherin and the innkeeper had vanished. *Stupid demon. Never around when you need him.*

The woman placed a hand on Caro's shoulder, and her expression softened. "I can see I'm making you uncomfortable. I'm sorry. It's just-" her hand drifted toward one of the scars on her face before she could catch herself, and she looked away. "It's something I can understand."

Guilt twisted through Caro as she took in the scars again. "You were..."

"For a time." A feral grin crossed the woman's face. "Until I learned to take care of myself." She looked back at Caro. "And others. All you need do is say the word. I can help you get free."

"Thanks. I really appreciate the offer. But it'd seriously piss him off, and I swear, he's not about to hurt me." She held out the plate. "Hungry?"

The woman smiled. "Thank you." She tore off a piece and dipped it into the stew. "What's your name?"

"Caro." She dipped into the stew again. God, it was good. "So, you fight demons?" Another man approached the bench on Caro's other side, and she shifted to make room for him. He was one of those certain individuals that made the lack of showers in Kesh plainly obvious.

The woman laughed. "Do I look suicidal to you?" She grinned and took a drink from her mug. "People pay me to take care of their problems. Occasionally they involve lesser demons, but I'd be a fool to take on the greater for any but a very good cause." She eyed Caro expectantly. "One such as yours, perhaps?"

Caro grinned. "You're very persistent."

"It helps, in my line of work." Sobering, the woman took out a sheathed knife. "If you won't accept my help, will you at least protect yourself?"

She stared at the knife, and back at the woman. "I--"

"Please."

Caro sighed. "Thank you." She took the knife and tucked it into the waistband of her dress, arranging the second layer of the top to cover it. Maybe it was a good thing the people here were obsessed with layers. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do." The woman's gaze went distant. "Sometimes it eases the nightmares. Knowing I've done something to help. Even if it is just a little."

"Oh." Caro polished off the last of her stew and looked sadly at the bowl. She dipped her hands in the bowl of water provided on the tray and, lacking anything better, wiped her hands on her skirt. She paused as her hand encountered a bulge. "Say, are any of those knives good for cutting really tough food?"

The woman raised a brow again. "Yes." She unsheathed a thin, sharp knife and handed it to Caro.

"Beautiful." Caro grinned and pulled out the eliesh. "Take that, you son of a bitch."

"Wait!" she heard the woman cry, as the knife glanced off the cobbled lavender skin of the fruit and ploughed into Caro's hand.

"Oh, shit," said Caro, staring at the deep wound. And then the blood welled to fill it and the pain hit her. She hissed and squeezed her wrist.

"*Shiiiiiiiiit.*"

"*Idiot!*" Clawed fingers locked around Caro's wrist and hauled her out of her seat.

"Ayasherin--" she protested, but the demon ignored her. Heaving her up under one arm, he carted her out of the room. "Wait--" She craned her neck, peering back toward the table.

The woman was gone.

Not that Caro could blame her. Ayasherin was clearly furious, and since he couldn't take his rage out on Caro, the person who'd given her the knife would have been fair game.

Still, it would have been nice to learn her name.

Ayasherin hauled her upstairs, opened a door, and dragged her inside. Once he'd slammed the door behind him, he dumped her to the floor. "What were you thinking!" He held up something. Caro's eyes widened as she recognized her blood soaked eliesh, just before he pitched it at her.

Caro ducked as the fruit hit her shoulder, and heard Ayasherin howl and fall to the ground.

"Serves you right," she hissed, her teeth still clenched against the pain.

Ayasherin struggled off the ground. They stared at each other for a moment, kneeling opposite each other, both holding their wrists, before Ayasherin dropped his and lunged for hers. "Don't just let it bleed, you halfwit!"

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry, I'll just turn the blood off then," said Caro.

He yanked her hand toward him, reached out, and tore a strip off the bottom of her dress. "Was it your plan to leave a trail of your blood? Why not make it easier and have the butcher parcel you out to them."

Caro's retort died in her throat. "What do you mean?"

"Deasha blood, you idiot. Any demon with a nose will want to find the source." He examined the wound. "I suppose we can make due without stitches. You're fortunate the knife didn't hit any lower or you'd have laid your palm open. That sort of wound isn't easily healed." He bound her hand roughly with the rag he'd torn from her dress.

Caro winced. "There are demons here?" He stared at her, and she frowned. "I mean besides you."

"Who could tell in all this stink?"

"I could." She paused. "Or, I think I could. It was easier before this stupid geas. Even you're kind of fuzzed out by the pain now."

Caro hissed as he tied off the bandage, and examined it. He hadn't been gentle, but at least he was thorough. It was a good dressing.

"If there are any other demons here – ones who pass as human -- you've just sent up a signal fire calling them to you." Ayasherin stood and folded his arms. "It will take hours for the scent that marks you as deasha to fade from the blood you spilled."

"I though you said this place stank."

"It does." He sat on the bed. "That's how strongly you smell."

Caro hugged her arms around herself. "Crap."

"That's one way of putting it."

"Oh, shut up." She glared at him. "Anyway, it's not like I did it on purpose."

"So you were flailing a knife around for the fun of it?"

"No, I was trying to peel my eliesh."

He stared at her for a moment and started to laugh. "You really are an idiot." He picked up the fallen, blood-stained fruit. "Humans can't eat eliesh."

"Why not?"

"Because they can't open them." He flexed his hand, and his claws sank deep into the purple skin. Fuchsia droplets welled from the punctures as he withdrew them and slit the fruit up one side.

"Oh," Caro said quietly. "I guess that would explain why the fruit sellers didn't have any."

"Brilliant deduction."

"Shut up." She pressed her back to a wall and drew her knees up to her chest. "I didn't know. I thought the knife would work." She looked at her bandaged hand. "It certainly didn't have any trouble cutting through human flesh."

"Neither do I." He freed the fruit from the peel and popped it into his mouth.

She shuddered and looked away, taking in the room for the first time. By Kesh standards, it was a really nice bedroom. It was clean, anyway, and roomy. The bed was huge.

Bed. Singular.

"Where am I sleeping?"

Ayasherin threw a blanket at her. "It's a large floor. Pick a spot."

"But you don't even lie down when you sleep!"

He raised a brow at her. "Given the choice between your comfort and the chance to see you inconvenienced, which do you think I will choose?"

Her hands clenched on the blanket as she glared at him. "I hate you. So much."

"The feeling is, I assure you, mutual." He lobbed something else at her.

Seething with rage, Caro caught it, ready to pitch it right back at him. But the texture stopped her. She opened her hand and stared at the segment of peeled eliesh. "Oh."

Ayasherin heaved a weary sigh and rested his head against the wall. "I'm hoping that will keep you silent for a while."

But Caro was sunk too deeply in the raptures of the fruit to answer him.

#

She remained in a blissful heap in her corner until a knock on the door heralded the arrival of her clothes and Ayasherin prodded her with a foot

"Mrrf?" said Caro.

Ayasherin dumped the pile of clothes on top of her. "Here. Get rid of what you're wearing. It reeks of your blood."

Pulling herself together, she begrudgingly complied. She didn't like obeying him without a fight, but she wasn't particularly enjoying wearing the blood-encrusted dress, either. She pulled out her jeans first, and couldn't help a thrill of delight as she saw the ornately embroidered fabric the clothier had used for patches. She struggled into them, got rid of the skirt, hid the knife under it, and stared at the *kashti* in confusion.

"Umm..."

"Now what?"

She held up the bewildering array of fabric and ties. "How do I get into this?"

"Oh, for--" A soft thump told her he'd left the bed, but she still had her back to him, so she wasn't expecting the claws that sliced the remainder of the dress from her.

"Hey!" she howled.

Ayasherin snatched the *kashti* from her hands and jammed it over her head, muffling any further protest. He guided her arms through the profusion of layers, tugged on something or other, and suddenly she could see again. Ayasherin stood behind her, fastening the ties at her shoulder.

"Best let me do this," he sneered -- that was really the only word for it -- and began wrapping the belt around her waist. He did something to it, but she lost track around the second loop. Eventually, though, the entire ridiculously long

length of fabric had been woven around her waist without making her look bulgy at all. "There."

She turned to the sheet of polished metal on the wall, and felt her brows raise despite herself. "Wow."

The *kashti* was... well, pretty. It hung down to her thighs, the belt done in an elaborate knot at her hip and trailing down to her knees. The *kashti* itself was a dark hunter green in contrast to Ayasherin's blue *kisha*. The garment still looked like a designer bathrobe, but the folds and ties gave it shape and cling. The sleeves were long, starting out narrow at the shoulder but quickly opening out into the same voluminous cuffs that Ayasherin sported.

And all the seams were trimmed with delicate gold embroidery, like twining vines, set here and there with a tiny sparkling stone.

It wasn't quite fancy dress -- the material was rough and durable, obviously meant for work -- but she loved it.

Damned if I'm going to tell him that.

"It meets your approval, I trust." Ayasherin's dry voice broke into her thoughts.

Caro blushed and turned away. "It'll do."

"Splendid. I'm so thrilled. Get those other rags out into the hall and get to sleep. We've work to do in the morning."

"What kind of work?" asked Caro.

Ayasherin sniffed. "If I thought telling you served any purpose, I would."

"Jerk," Caro muttered, and knelt to gather the remains of the bloody dress. Sparing a quick glance to make sure Ayasherin wasn't watching, she slipped the knife into the waistband of her jeans.

Better not to take chances, after all.

* * *

Caroline...

Caro moaned, twisting in her blanket. Her leg ached, still healing from the break... And the arthritis in her hands always ached more when it was about to rain.... And her head burned from the fever that had taken hold of her... And her little tummy felt as though it were about to burst because Mommy hadn't burped her...

Caroline...

The spear wasn't perfect. It wouldn't fly straight. The stew needed more spices, but there weren't any left anymore. The records gave no clues, no way to save her dying people...

No...

The deasha was the key. They would have to send Geshtan to find her. The blood was the only way to stop it...

Leave me alone...

The thong binding her to the stone cut into her wrists. The evil approaching her clogged her nose, her throat. She couldn't breathe, couldn't scream, couldn't do anything as the demon bore down upon her...

She bolted upright. "No!"

Something thudded against the floor next to her. "Will you be silent, human!"

Caro rubbed her nose and pushed her blanket off, kicking Ayasherin's boot aside. Shaking, she fumbled her way toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Ayasherin's voice came from the darkness.

"Bathroom."

She heard him shift. "Again?"

"Shut up." She tugged the door open and slipped into the hall. The bathroom -- such as it was -- was at the end of the hall. Apparently the height of luxury in Kesh, the toilet was essentially a big hole leading outside, and a cistern full of water above it to wash the refuse away.

Caro stared at it sullenly. *God, I miss plumbing.*

Caroline...

She froze. Paused. Pinched herself. Rubbed the welt. Nope, not dreaming.

Caro...

Wait. She knew that voice...

"Mommy?" She moved out into the hall.

Caro, honey...

"Mom," she whispered. With a furtive glance back down the hall, she tiptoed down the stairs and slipped into the street.

"Caro."

"Mom? Where are you?" She slipped between the inn and the building next to it, and found herself facing the forest.

"Caroline!"

"Mom!" She started to run. "Mommy, I'm coming! Where are you?"

"I'm over here, baby. This way."

Branches slapped at her face. Roots reached up to trip her. She didn't care. She kept running. She felt the dampness on her cheeks that told her she was crying, but she didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but this...

"Caroline!"

She burst through the trees, leaped over a small creek, and barreled straight into her mother's arms.

"Mom." She had to force the words past the sobs. "Mommy, is it really you?"

But she already knew. Her mother's arms were warm and very real as they held her close and rocked her. She could smell the perfume -- her mother's own line -- that she had always hated. Smelled the fainter scent of *mom* beneath it that she had always loved, even though she'd never actually admitted it. To anyone.

"I'm here, Caro. I've got you now." Gentle hands brushed the hair away from her sodden cheeks, tilted her head up, and she found herself staring up into her mother's eyes.

It was really her. Same black hair in the style that thousands of young girls had tried to copy the summer before. Same warm brown eyes that had plastered billboards across the city last Christmas. But the smile was different. It wasn't the wide, beaming smile that had captured the hearts of the world. It was the smaller, more private one that her mother had always reserved just for her.

"I can't believe I've finally found you." Tears welled in those perfect eyes and spilled down the flawless cheeks, and suddenly she wasn't perfect anymore. She was just Mom.

"Mommy." Caro buried her head against her mother's chest. Somehow, it didn't surprise her that her mother was wearing a *katash*. Nothing but the height of fashion did for her mother, even if this was Kesh. "How did you find me?"

"It's a long story, baby." She kissed Caro's brow and took her hands.

"Oh Mom, it was awful. I fell on the rock in the yard and I was bleeding, and my blood did something and it opened this tunnel and now everybody's trying to kill me--"

"I know, Caro." She stroked Caro's hair. "Remember, it's my blood too."

Caro pushed back to stare at her mother. "You mean--"

Tamyra Larson pushed herself to her feet. "There's no time now, baby. We have to go. We're not safe here."

"Right." Caro got to her feet and took her mother's outstretched hand.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safer. Somewhere we can be alone. A place where no one will bother us."

"Is it far? I'm so tired, Mom."

"Not far at all. And you can rest when we get there. You can rest for as long as you want."

She was so tired. But her mother was here. Everything was going to be all right now. Somehow, her mother would take care of things. Tamyra was always in control of everything she had a hand in. Caro let herself be pulled to her feet and led deeper into the forest.

"Mom?"

"Hurry, Caro."

"I love you, Mom."

She glanced over her shoulder, and smiled. "I know, baby."

Tamyra was still smiling when the dark shape barreled from the trees and collided with her.

Caro had the briefest of moments to register the form looming over her mother. The raw fury etched onto Ayasherin's face as he drew his sword. And then he let the sword fall.

"No!" Caro screamed, but her mother had already ducked out of the way. Caro blinked in astonishment. Tamyra rolled to her feet, darting out of range as Ayasherin struck again. "Ayasherin, stop it!"

She didn't know why she'd expected him to listen, but he ignored her, driving after her mother with bloody, single-minded intensity. And yet Tamyra continued to evade. *Damn, that stunt training really paid off, Mom.*

They were moving so fast. Caro staggered to her feet and followed. Her mother hadn't been hurt yet, but Ayasherin was slowly driving her back. Not far away, the ground vanished, dropping down several dozen feet to the river below.

"Mom, behind you!" Caro cried.

Tamyra glanced back, quickly, but just long enough to stumble. She went down, and Ayasherin struck.

Caro was screaming. She could feel it raced toward them. Feel it as it tore her throat raw. But she couldn't hear it. All she could hear was the sounds of the combatants and the raging of the river far below.

The sword hadn't connected. Somehow, Tamyra had caught hold of Ayasherin's arm. And held it.

But it took both of her hands to hold his arm back. His other hand was free. As Caro closed the distance between them, he raised it, claws poised to strike.

Everything was too slow. Too sharp. Too clear. The handle of the knife bit deep into her hand as she jerked it free of the sheath. Her breath echoed in her ears as she threw herself at Ayasherin. Felt fabric tear. Felt flesh part. Felt steel strike bone.

Ayasherin jerked. Faltered. Fell.

Caro stared down at her hands. They were bright red. Ayasherin lay on the ground beside her. In the light of the two moons, the blood that slowly seeped from his body was almost black.

"Caro..."

She stared up through her tears. "Mom?"

"It's okay, baby. It's over. You did it." Caro felt her mother's hand close over her bandaged one. The wound hurt, a sudden sharp stab of pain. "Come on, baby. We have to get away from here."

"I'm so tired, Mommy."

"I know." Tamyra pulled her forward. "Not much longer, baby. Then you can rest."

"It hurts, Mommy."

"Not much longer--"

Wind tore through the bushes and slammed into Tamyra. Caro screamed as her mother's hand was torn away from hers. Screamed as her mother's body was thrown into the air and over the edge of the cliff.

"No!" She bolted toward the embankment, dropping to her knees. "Mom!"

At the bottom of the ravine, her mother was still moving, crawling across the stones that bordered the river, trying to make it to safety. But she was so hurt. So slow. She wasn't moving fast enough to get away. Caro saw him coming before Tamyra did, screamed a warning, but in the end it was useless. She could do nothing but watch as Ayasherin reached down and tore her mother's head from her body.

#

She was running. No thought in her head but to get away as the sobs tore through her. It hurt to move. Hurt to breathe. But she had to get away.

She was dead. Her mother was dead. Ayasherin had killed her.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

She had to get away. Had to run. Had to push forward, no matter how badly it hurt.

Something dropped into her path too quickly for her to stop. She slammed into it, and it sent her sprawling. She looked up into Ayasherin's amber eyes, and started to scream.

"Be silent!" He reached for her.

She pushed back, scrambled to her feet, tried to run, but his hand was around her arm, claws digging through the cloth, pricking her skin. The same claws that had torn her mother apart. She couldn't stop screaming.

He shoved her, throwing her back against a tree. It was far enough back that she could see all of him. See what he held in his other hand. See her mother's dead eyes staring at her.

She couldn't do anything but scream.

"Will you listen to me?"

Ayasherin dropped Tamyra's head. Caro hadn't thought she could scream any harder. She'd been wrong. She struck out as he reached for her, but he

was too strong. He grabbed her around the waist, hauled her to her feet, heedless of her struggles. His claws easily parted the fabric of her bandage. As easily as they'd parted her mother's flesh. The wound on her hand was open and bleeding freely again. She hadn't felt it happen. She hadn't cared.

"Wind and Fire, will you be quiet!"

He dragged her forward, caught her wrist in his hand, and forced her to touch her mother's head. Her hair was so soft. Caro had loved to wrap her hands in it when she was a baby. Her hand left a bloody print against her mother's cheek.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't stop screaming. Ayasherin reached forward. Dipped his hands into Caro's blood. Smearred it over Caro's eyes. She squeezed them shut, but it didn't make any difference. She could still see her mother's dead, glazed stare.

"Look at it, damn you!"

Ayasherin was shaking her. She wouldn't look. Couldn't look. But her eyes opened as he shoved her forward, a reflex as she reached out to break her fall, hands planted on either side of the head--

--that wasn't her mother's.

Under ordinary circumstances, being faced with the six-eyed, scaled, fanged monstrosity that lay just beneath her nose would have been enough to send her into a fit of hysterics. As it was, the scream died in her throat. The sudden silence was almost deafening.

"Wh--" her voice was raw. She swallowed and tried again. "What..."

"That." Ayasherin said, panting a little, "Is not. Your mother."

She twisted. "What did you do with her?"

He rolled his eyes and made a sound of disgust. "I didn't do anything. She was never here." He kicked the head, sending it flying into the trees. "Just that."

"But it was her!"

"Look." Hands locked into the fabric of her *kashti* and dragged her to her feet. He hauled her back to the river. Caro stared down at the body below. It certainly wasn't Tamyra's. Tamyra hadn't been seven feet tall, with four legs and--

"Are those tentacles?"

Ayasherin stared at her. "One would think you would have noticed that earlier, seeing as you had one wrapped around your hand, feeding on your blood."

She glanced down at the open wound in her hand. The edges did look a lot more ragged than they should have been from just a simple knife wound. And there were dozens of little pinpricks dotting hand. Like the impressions of a dozen little teeth. She stared down again at the body. And the smell hit her.

"Holy shit, I know him." She checked again. "It." She looked up at Ayasherin. "He was sitting next to me at the inn--" She broke off.

Ayasherin snorted. "Right before you cut your hand open? By the four, woman, why didn't you just serve your blood to it in a chalice?" He raised his

hand to his side. "It would have saved me a great deal of trouble." He tugged off his *kisha* with a jerk.

Caro's gaze shifted to the red stain spreading across his *ka*, and drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, God..." She dropped to her knees next to him. "Oh God, I'm so sorry..."

He smacked her hand away and grabbed her around the waist. Caro shrieked as he hauled her to her feet and leaped off the cliff with her.

"Would you stop that?" He dropped her next to the headless corpse. The stench was even worse at the bottom of the ravine. "One would think you'd done that enough for one evening." He sank to his knees and began tearing strips from the dead demon's robe. "Make yourself useful."

Caro took the rags gingerly. "But--"

"The stench is from the body, the cloth won't stink when we get away from it. Hurry up." He pulled the *ka* off his shoulder.

Caro bit her lip as she began to bind the wound she had made.

"Ayasherin, I'm sorry..."

He snorted. "If you hadn't stabbed me wrong, I might be angrier. This will only take a few days to heal." He paused as she tied off the bandage. "How is it no one's ever taught you to kill?"

"It's not generally a skill people look for on a resume," she said. "And I'm sorry I did it."

He grabbed her wrist roughly and started to re-bind her gnawed hand.

"How fortunate for me that you're an idiot."

Caro bristled. "I am *not!*"

"You just *stabbed* me!"

"You were *killing* my *mother!*"

"No I wasn't!" He knotted off the bandage harder than necessary. A moment later he was on his side, clutching his wrist and cursing.

Caro frowned down at the bloody bandage. "I thought it was my mother." She grunted a little as Ayasherin jerked her up under one arm and leaped back to the top of the cliff. She breathed a little sigh of relief as the stench lessened.

"Your mother is a four-limbed, tentacled demon?"

"No!" She gestured down at the body. "She – he -- it didn't look like that before!"

"Yes, it did!" He dropped to his knees, grabbed a fistful of her *kashti* and jerked her close to his face. "It didn't look any different when it was dragging you after it than it does now." He paused. "Except that the head was attached."

Caro attempted to pry his claws out of her shirt. "But it did. I swear it did. It was my mother. It looked like her, it talked like her." He let her go and she thumped back on her butt. "God, it even *smelled* like her."

Ayasherin sat across from her, one arm slung across his raised knee. "That, I don't understand." He glanced into the ravine and frowned. "I know that type. It's just a middling earth demon. Illusion isn't in its realm of ability."

Caro crawled to the edge of the cliff to look down at the body again. "It looked pretty human at the inn. At least, nobody was jumping up and screaming about the scaly thing with tentacles."

"Passing as human is one thing. Several demons of middling strength or greater can do it. Making you think it's one human in particular..." He shook his head. "Earth demons don't have that power."

"So it shouldn't have been able to mess with my head?"

"Oh, that it could have done. That particular type specializes in persuasion. You'd have stripped yourself naked and jumped into its roasting pot if it had bid you to." His hand fisted, clawing deep furrows into the hard earth. "But somehow it accomplished more."

"You sound like that's an insult."

"It is!" He glared at her. "I'll not have any middling demons becoming stronger than I." He picked up her hand and examined it. "I'd almost believe your blood was the cause of it, but if what you say is true, you saw it as your mother before it got a taste of you."

Uncomfortable with the look he was giving her hand, she jerked it away.

"What difference does it make?"

He raised a brow. "If you hadn't thought it was your mother, would you have stabbed me?"

She flinched and looked away. "No."

"You're not completely stupid then." He rubbed at his side. "Where did you get that knife?"

"Um..." She tried to think of a good excuse, but none came to hand. Clawed fingers seized her chin and turned her face to meet his penetrating amber stare.

"Well?"

Caro sighed. "I met this woman when you were off pushing the innkeeper around. She said she wanted to protect me, and when I wouldn't run off with her, she--" Caro broke off as Ayasherin leaned in closer, sniffing her breath. "What--"

Ayasherin jerked her close, pinning her against his chest with one arm and fisting his other hand in her hair. Before she could protest, he pulled her forward and sealed his mouth over hers, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth.

Shock, mortification, and the need to gag ripped through her. She shoved against his chest, but knew she wasn't strong enough to make him let go. So when he instantly released her, she sprawled back in the grass, choking.

"What the *hell* is the matter with you?"

Ayasherin loomed over her. "From now on, you'll not accept any food or drink that I have not personally handed to you."

Caro blinked up at him through her tangled hair. "What?"

"You were drugged."

"You're kidding." She pushed herself somewhat shakily to her feet. "The demon drugged me to get me to think it was my mother?"

"That's a possibility," said Ayasherin. "But I've never heard of a demon using--" He broke off and narrowed his eyes at her.

Caro took a step back. "What- Oh, no..." She backpedaled as he came after her, but he was on her before she got one step. He grabbed her and pulled her to him, but this time he buried his face against her shoulder and breathed deeply.

She felt the shock run through him, and his arms abruptly loosened. A growl -- A real honest-to-God growl -- rumbled through his chest. "That little bitch." Without warning, he tossed Caro over his shoulder and took off at a run.

"Hold it!" Caro pounded on his back. "What the hell is going on? Ayasherin! Answer me!"

But he ignored her as though she were little more than an annoying insect. He bore her deep into the trees, and her cries faded into the darkened forest around them.



She watched from the bushes, safe in the knowledge that the stench of the corpse in the ravine concealed her from the sharp nose of the demon. Her throwing knife was in her hand when the demon snatched the girl up, but she didn't throw it, watching instead as he bore the protesting girl into the trees.

She had botched the job with the girl. Sheer dumb luck that the creature had happened upon the girl first. Misfortune that the girl had followed the creature instead of her. She hadn't meant to inflict the girl with that kind of pain.

This girl -- this Caro -- perplexed her. She clearly had no love lost for the demon, and yet seemed truly repentant that she had wounded him. And the demon...

He'd done something. Something to make the girl see through the spell the drug had woven over her. She didn't know what he'd done, or why. At the moment, she didn't much care. What concerned her more was the fact that he'd done it at all.

It almost seemed like compassion. But the demon didn't know the meaning of the word.

Her eyes narrowed at the spot where they'd vanished, and she sheathed her throwing knife. He was up to something. She couldn't kill him -- not yet. Not until she found out what he was planning.

And as for the girl... Well, she'd get to the bottom of that, too. And if she found out that the girl followed the demon willingly, she'd just have to kill the girl as well.

Course decided, she rose to her feet and struck out along their trail. The girl was human. They'd have to rest sometime. When they did, she would find them, and do what must be done.

THE END