

THE BLOOD OF KESH

CYCLE #1: ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

Part 5: Crazy For You

"Will you *please* just tell me what's going on?"

"For the love of the four, will you be silent before I'm forced to do something drastic?"

"You can't make me, nimrod, remember? I bound you."

"Your chances of survival would be greatly enhanced if you stopped reminding me of that at every given opportunity."

"I'd stop reminding you if you'd just tell me what the hell happened back there!"

"You are out of your depth, little girl."

"What happened back there? Why was I drugged? Who's a bitch? And why the *hell* were you smelling my neck?"

"Be *silent!*"

"*Make me!*"

The strident voices shattered the idyll of the early dawn around the lake, sending songbirds to flight. The undergrowth rustled as small creatures bolted for a safe place to hide. Only the dimmest of creatures without any sense of self-preservation whatsoever would do anything to attract the attention of the demon that walked the wood.

Caro was one insult away from pelting said demon with a large heavy rock.

"Look, I just think things would be easier if you didn't keep me in the dark. I could help."

Ayasherin let out a derisive snort. "I highly doubt that."

"Did the knife lady have something to do with it? Is *that* why you went all psycho? Because I really don't think-- Hey. What are you--"

Ayasherin plucked Caro off her feet, marched over to the edge of the lake, and suddenly she was airborne. She had only a moment to cry out before the water rushed up to meet her and she struck the lake with a resounding crash. The icy water hit her like a slap in the face. Struggling back to the surface, she coughed out a lungful of water and glared at the demon standing on the bank, watching impassively with his folded arms tucked into his sleeves.

"You stupid jerk! Are you *trying* to kill me?"

"Yes," Ayasherin answered. "But not at the moment."

Anger swamped Caro, badly enough that she forgot to tread water and ended up with another lungful of the lake. "God," she choked. "I'm going to end up with salmonella or something." Steeling herself, she began to kick back to the shore.

Ayasherin leaned down when she was in range and hauled her out by the back of her kashti. "Are you quite finished?"

"You," Caro spat between clenched teeth, "are without a doubt the rudest, most arrogant son of a--"

Pain, lancing through her abdomen. Bright, searing red pain that threatened to tear her apart. She fell to the ground with a shriek, arms wrapping around her stomach in an attempt to force back the agony.

Dimly, as though through heavy layers of cotton, she could hear Ayasherin's irritated voice. "Now what?"

"The baby," Caro gasped.

"What baby?"

"It's coming too soon. It's not time. Stop it. God, please, stop it, it's too soon, it's not... it's not..." She couldn't breathe. The pain wrapped around her chest, squeezing her heart until her vision began to grey. She was going to lose the baby. She--

She was sitting in the grass at the side of a lake, shivering as the water streamed from her hair. She glanced up to see Ayasherin looming over her, regarding her with his arms folded and one brow raised. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "What happened?"

"You started screaming about your baby."

She looked up at him in shock. "What baby?"

He sent a pained glance skyward. "Is your obtuseness natural, or are you deliberately trying to annoy me?"

Caro wrapped her arms around her knees and pressed her face to her sodden jeans as memory finally caught up with her. "I was... no, *she* was miscarrying. I-- I think it was one of the villagers." She started to shake harder. "It felt like it was me. I could have sworn it was me."

"Well, it wasn't." Ayasherin grabbed her by the wrist and hauled her to her feet. "Come. If we're to reach the village by nightfall, we don't have time to indulge in your displays of hysteria."

"It's not hysteria. It's-- Wait, the shafts aren't level."

Ayasherin paused. "What?"

"The shafts. On the cart." Caro tugged against his grip. "The horses' traces will slip if the shafts aren't level, you moron. Do you want the cart to tip?"

He released her wrist and stared at her. "What cart?"

Her temper rising, she jabbed her finger at it. "That--" She stopped.

Blinked. Rubbed her eyes. "Um... where'd the cart go?"

Ayasherin eyed her warily. "Do I need to throw you in the lake again?"

Staring around at the empty clearing, Caro could only shake her head in disbelief. "What-- what's happening to me?"

"Min only knows."

"Who?"

"Min." Ayasherin raised a brow. "Goddess of Wind. Don't you know anything?"

"Apparently not when it comes to Kesh theology. I--"

The consistency of the herbs wasn't right. It needed to be finer in order to dissolve in the rest of the healing potion. She pressed the pestle harder into the-

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Her face was in the dirt. Pushing herself up on her elbows, she spat out a mouthful of grass. "The hell?" She heard a weary sigh just before clawed fingers locked around her elbow. She felt a jerk, the world spun, and she found herself upside-down over Ayasherin's shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Getting us to the village before I perish of old age."

* * *

The flames were everywhere, licking at her limbs, charring the flesh from her bones. She was screaming, screaming, but she couldn't run. Not until she found the baby. But it was too late. All that was left was a tiny blackened husk in the corner. And the screams consumed her. She was burning. She was...

Dreaming. It was all a dream. She wasn't burning. That was long ago. She was fine, in bed in her own hut with her wife by her side. She was...

She was over the shoulder of a very irritated demon.

"Are you quite finished?" Ayasherin asked.

Caro gave a little sob and buried her head in her hands. "What's happening to me? Am I going crazy?"

"Quite possibly."

"But *why*?"

He snorted. "I should think that much would be obvious. You're losing yourself in the geas."

Ice settled deep in the pit of Caro's stomach. "Why would they do this to me?"

"I sincerely doubt it's intentional." Ayasherin grabbed her about the waist and shifted her to his other shoulder. "Think about it. You speak the language well enough, you have no problems with concepts like colours or profanity, but

you know nothing of the gods, you can't tie a belt to save your life, and you wouldn't know a katash if it bit you. All as the result of the areshti's spell of understanding. What does that tell you?"

Caro thought about it for a moment. "Umm..."

Ayasherin sighed. "Let me simplify it further. Jarakeshtan has established quite clearly that he will not tolerate even the smallest threat to his power, to the point of destroying every gate he can find. And yet, the areshti pair you met emerged from the conflagration unscathed. Which stands to reason...?"

"That... the areshti who did this to me aren't very good." Caro's stomach lurched.

"Well done. So you're not completely hopeless."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

Caro hit the ground with a thud. "I spoke too soon." Ayasherin moved to stand over her. "Is it you who wants to be sick, or one of the villagers?"

"Me..." She shuddered. "Or maybe them. Or both." She wrapped her arms around herself, shaking as tears seeped down her cheeks. "Oh God. Am I going to die?"

"Now that would be inconvenient." Ayasherin folded his arms. "I know of a demon who hides in the next village. She specializes in tricks of the mind. I intend to have her break the geas."

That was enough incentive for Caro to fight through the pain and confusion. "Oh no. I'm not letting any friend of yours poke around in my head."

"She's not my friend." Ayasherin raised a brow. "And when did I convey the impression that I was giving you a choice?"

"Forget it. I'm not stupid. You take me in there to get the geas broken, and she's going to have a go at that binding, too."

"Idiot," said Ayasherin. "If she stood even a chance at being able to break this wretched binding, does it not stand to reason I would have dragged you there at the earliest opportunity?" He snorted. "There is a vast world of difference between a binding created by deasha and activated with your blood, and the bumbings of an inept areshta. Besides which," he muttered, "having her break the binding would mean revealing that I'm bound."

She knew she had to be pretty far gone, because the demon was actually starting to make sense. She rubbed her chilled arms. "How can I trust you?"

"You can't," said Ayasherin. "But, as I have mentioned before, what makes you think you have a choice?"

Caro opened her mouth to respond and panicked, too alarmed that the pot was boiling over to think straight. Concerned only with getting the frothing soup off the fire, she reached out and grabbed the handle, her holding-cloth forgotten by her side. She screamed as the heated metal seared her palm, spears of fire lancing up her--

She blinked, looking up from where her left hand clutched her perfectly unharmed right one, and met the exasperated golden gaze of the demon staring down at her.

"Okay." Her voice shook. "Brain-scrambling it is."

Rolling his eyes, Ayasherin dragged her off the ground and tossed her back over his shoulder.

Caro hadn't thought she could get much worse, but she'd been very, very wrong. By the time Ayasherin dumped her on her ass again, she'd had twelve more episodes, three of them complicated by a moment of awakening only to find herself waking into someone else's head. The more time passed, the less clear she was as to where Caro Larson began and ended. She almost welcomed getting dumped on her butt. At least that pain was unmistakably her own.

"Ow," Caro said pointedly.

"Silence," Ayasherin growled. He moved to stand in front of her, his left hand resting on her head, as though to remind himself where she was. His attention was fixed on the forest before them.

The hair on Caro's arms began to prickle as she peered past his leg into the gloom-shrouded forest. "What is it?"

Ayasherin didn't answer.

Wind blasted through the clearing, whipping Caro's hair around her face hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. The trees fared worse. Massive trunks snapped and shattered beneath the force of Ayasherin's power.

A familiar figure clad in leather and bristling with weaponry dropped out of the carnage to land before them.

Ayasherin let out a harsh laugh. "Kisume."

The woman inclined her head. "Demon."

"Knife-lady!"

Both of them turned to glare at Caro. "Silence!"

"Sheesh." Caro folded her arms across her chest. "Way to make a girl feel needed. Maybe I'll just go on my merry way and let you two jerks--" She stilled as Ayasherin's hand slid down her hair to grip the back of her kashti.

The wanna-be Warrior Princess loosed the hooked chain from her belt. Suddenly Ayasherin's leg wasn't nearly as adequate a shelter as it had been. Caro shifted to put more of the demon between her and the Xena clone.

A growl sounded low in Ayasherin's throat.

"Dude, you're *growling*?" Caro whispered.

The blond barbarian seemed vastly amused by Ayasherin's behaviour, judging by her raspy laughter. "I never would have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes." Her expression wasn't angry, but her smile wasn't exactly a happy one. It was more of a scary Pennywise-the-clown kind of grin.

"Your eyes betray their human weakness if they lead you to believe you see anything of note," Ayasherin responded.

"Nice comeback," Caro whispered. "Very verbose." Ayasherin's hand tightened further on her kashti, and Caro decided that shutting up was probably a good idea. She didn't know how far the bracelet would let him strangle her before it finally decided to kick in, but she wasn't keen to find out.

"I expected lies from you," said Barbarian Barbie. "But I admit, one so blatantly false seems beneath even you." She gestured at Caro with her spiky chain. "Or do I merely imagine the whore cowering beneath your feet?"

Caro straightened. "Hey!"

Ayasherin laughed. "You give too much credence to this one. She is merely a toy I picked up to amuse me before she dies." He shifted. "Believe me, I do not lie when I say that she is nothing."

Caro transferred her enraged glare to the demon. "Hey! Sitting right here, you know!"

"Please, demon." Barbie began to move. Ayasherin shifted again, keeping his body between her and Caro. "Look at how you protect this one. You, who know no value save that of your own life. What else could she be but the servant of your body?"

"STOP CALLING ME A HOOKER!" Finally, she seemed to reach the two of them, and they actually broke their staring contest to look at her. Caro struggled to her feet and planted her hands on her hips, trying to ignore Ayasherin's grip on her clothing. "I don't know *what* you've been smoking, but you have it completely and totally wrong. I am *not* his body-anything, and can I just say, *ew!* There is no way I'm letting his nasty thing anywhere near me. And if we're pointing the trampy-stick, I'd like to point out that I'm not the one wearing skintight leather."

Barbie's brow furrowed. Not in a cute "I'm puzzled" way. More of a "this bug is pissing me off and I'm going to swat it" way.

"You follow the demon. You let it kiss you."

"That was so not a kiss, he was drug testing me or something, and as I said, ew. Besides, there wasn't exactly any 'letting' going on. You may have noticed he's not so big on the asking."

Barbie shook her head. "You showed remorse for hurting it."

Caro snorted. "Well, duh. Not all of us are homicidal psychopaths."

"You should have come with me when I gave you the chance, but you refused. I ensnared you to give you another chance at freedom, but again, you chose the demon."

"Ensnared?" Caro frowned.

"Drugged," supplied Ayasherin.

Caro's eyes widened. "*You* were the one who drugged me? Oh, you bitch!"

Caro's attempt to lunge at Barbie was ended by a yank from Ayasherin that sent her sprawling at his feet again.

Ayasherin returned his attention to the warrior woman. "Satisfied yet? She is nothing. An amusement. You waste your time."

The nasty grin returned to Barbie's face. "She truly means so little to you, then?"

There was no warning. One moment, Barbie was just standing there smirking at Ayasherin. The next, her spiked chain was flying through the air. Directly at Caro.

Caro barely had time for a terrified *meep*. Ayasherin's grip tightened, and this time it was Caro flying through the air.

Ah, she thought, watching a tree rush up to meet her. This will break my fall.

And then everything went dark.

* * *

The baby was gone.

She huddled in the feeble warmth of the fire, staring at her hands. Hands that had yearned so strongly to hold their child. But her own body had rejected it. She had killed the baby.

Tears blurred her vision for a moment. Gently, she stroked the veins showing so prominently through the skin of her wrist.

Geshtan pretended to be strong. Pretended that they could try again. But she new better. She had heard the areshti when they thought her sleeping. There would be no more children. She was barren. And now they would send Geshtan off to pursue the deasha and meet his death at the hands of the demon.

Geshtan would die, and she would be utterly alone.

She was so cold. The blood ran like ice through her veins. She would never be warm again. Geshtan's warmth would die beneath the demon's claws for the sake of the traitor deasha.

The knife felt so light in her hand, and her skin parted soft as flower petals beneath it, bursting open for the welling red buds that pulsed beneath her skin.

Red rivulets coursed down her arm as the knife cut deeper, opening the way for her chilled blood to be warmed by the fire.

She wasn't warm exactly, but the faster the blood ran, the less she cared about the chill wrapping her bones. The less she cared about the emptiness within her.

A shadow fell over her, and she heard a cry from an impossible distance. The shadow drew nearer, and she focused on Geshtan's beloved features as he gathered her into his arms.

Geshtan. I'm so sorry. I killed our baby. I'm so sorry, my love.

His arms would have hurt as they crushed her against him, had she not been so numb. He was crying. But his pain would fade. And she was going first. She would not have to watch him die now. And he could pursue the deasha without worrying about leaving her behind.

The darkness closed in and Caro welcomed it. She was barren, and childless, and her lover had betrayed her, but now would no longer feel that pain and she woke, screaming, and her head throbbed and her stomach rebelled and she had barely enough time to roll over as the contents of her stomach welled up her throat and she retched into the grass, each heave sending waves of agony coursing through a body that hurt far too much to still be functional...

The dry heaves subsided and Caro collapsed, sobbing, onto her back.

After a few moments, a shadow fell over her and she blinked through the tears. "Geshtan..."

"Every time I think you cannot possibly disgust me more, you manage to prove me wrong."

Oh. Right. Sarcastic demon. "Shut up," Caro moaned.

"You're filthy. It's really a remarkable stench."

"And yet you keep wanting to put me in your mouth." Caro noted his expression and blanched. "Not like that! Ew!" Another wave of nauseated agony rolled through her, and she clutched at her head. "Owww..."

"Not that I care," Ayasherin said, "but what exactly was that?"

Caro's eyes widened as she remembered. "I killed myself."

Ayasherin snorted. "I wish."

"No, I did, I--" She attempted to push herself off the ground, but pain swatted her flat again. She groaned. "No...she did. The one who lost the baby." Caro curled on her side and wrapped her arms around her abdomen. "We lost the baby, so we killed ourselves."

Ayasherin knelt next to her, his hand pressed to his temple. "You make no sense, human."

Caro breathed deeply, trying desperately to reconnect with the body she knew to be her own. "You have to understand, it's not like I was seeing things through her eyes. I remember it like it was me." She raised her gaze until she could see the annoyance in his amber eyes. "She lost the baby and... I think it was postpartum or something..." she saw his confusion and shook her head. "Never mind. But she was going through this depression after losing the baby and then Geshtan--" She broke off, her eyes widening. "Geshtan!"

Her attempt to bolt upright was defeated by a crippling surge of nausea and she fell back, moaning. "He's coming after me. The areshti are sending him to bring me back." The tears began again, but this time they were exclusively her own. "They want to bring me back. So they can sacrifice the traitor to their cause. They really, really hate me for what I did." She choked on a sob. "Oh God."

Ayasherin sighed. "As amusing as your distress is, may I point out that in order to bring you back to use your blood for themselves, I would have to allow it? Which, I don't think I need to remind you, I have no intention of doing."

"I know," Caro whispered. "That's part of why she did it. Because she was sure Geshtan was never coming back."

"She was not completely stupid, then."

Caro struggled to focus on his face. "You really, honestly, have no compassion at all, do you?"

He raised a brow at her. "I'm a demon."

"Yes, but..." She buried her head in her hands. "Forget it."

"I would, but the stink of your fear is overwhelming. I told you, I won't let him claim your blood for himself."

"I know!" She managed to push herself up on her elbows without falling over this time. "That's exactly why I'm so upset. I mean, it's not like I *want* to feel sorry for the guy who wants to drag me back so those two mayors of Crazytown can cut me open, but I remember her memories like mine! She *loved* him with everything she was! And when you say things like that, it's her memories that make me want to die rather than watch you kill him. Not that *I* actually want you

to kill anyone, either. I mean, I wouldn't be in this mess... well, in this much of a mess, anyway, if you weren't such a homicidal jerk." She sniffled. "I can't stand it that anybody could hate me the way they do."

"As I may have mentioned," Ayasherin said, "I am a demon."

"So demon equals homicidal jerk?"

"I wouldn't put it in quite those terms."

Caro flopped back on the grass. "Terrific." Her brow furrowed. "Hang on. Did you throw me into a tree?"

He gave a soft bark of laughter. "I threw you out of the way. The tree conveniently broke your fall." His laughter died and he glared at the bracelet.

Caro sighed and closed her eyes. "Well at least you didn't get away with it."

Claws fisted in the fabric of her kashti, and Caro squeaked as Ayasherin hauled her up toward him. "Yes," he growled, his breath warm against her face. "And because of your little binding, you made me expose a weakness to an enemy."

He let her go and she fell back hard. "Ow." She rubbed the back of her head. "You know, killing *her* I could almost be okay with."

"How magnanimous of you," Ayasherin said. "Unfortunately, she's... resourceful. I could have killed her, of course, but you probably would have bled before I could have managed it, and that's more trouble than I care to go through."

Caro frowned. "Who was that psycho, anyway?"

"Kisume," he said.

"And who the hell is Kee-sue-may?"

"She hunts demons."

Caro rolled her eyes. "Well, duh. But she really seemed to have a hate-on for you."

Ayasherin grinned in the most unpleasant way possible. "We've crossed paths."

"Obviously." Caro sighed. "I liked her better when she was trying to turn me into psycho junior. What was up with all the whore talk?"

"She believes no woman would willingly spend time in the company of a demon unless she's either enslaved, little better than a demon herself, or being well paid for the inconvenience."

"Ew," said Caro. "Paranoid much?"

"Hardly," said Ayasherin. "It's the predominant sentiment amongst humans."

Caro met his scornful amber gaze, and her voice softened. "That's really sad."

For the barest heartbeat of a moment, his eyes widened. Then he flowed to his feet and reached for Caro. "Enough stalling. The hunter will be on our tail if we keep up this idleness and I'm not about to wait on your comfort." He hauled Caro roughly over his shoulder, which was about as far as he got before his touch reawakened pain over every inch of her body. Caro's cry was echoed an

instant later by Ayasherin's, and they both went down, Ayasherin howling and clutching at his wrist.

Caro laughed as much as the pain would allow. "You know, that was almost worth it. That's what you get for throwing me at a tree, you bastard."

Ayasherin glared at her through the pain of the binding. "I should have let her bleed you."

* * *

Caro was very, very sick of being hauled around over Ayasherin's shoulder. Yet she couldn't argue that it was the most comfortable option given the condition of her ankle after meeting the tree at high velocity, and Ayasherin's preference to touch as little of her as possible.

"So who exactly is this demon we're going to see?" Caro asked Ayasherin's back.

"Larakessra. She specializes in illusion. Addling the minds of humans is one of her specialties."

"Hey," Caro protested, "I don't want any addling going on."

"You're already more addled than any creature I've ever known."

Caro frowned. "Okay, point. But I don't want her making me worse, or making me think I'm a baby, or something."

"There you go thinking you have a choice again."

Caro struggled for a moment until Ayasherin leaped and the ground suddenly dropped about twenty feet. She took the hint and didn't start fighting again after he landed.

It wasn't long before the trail became a bona fide road and they began to pass farmhouses. Occasionally she saw people in the fields, but they always fled at the first sign of Ayasherin, giving little care to the prisoner draped over his shoulder.

"Bastards," Caro muttered under her breath.

"Live bastards," Ayasherin reminded her, and slowed. "And on the subject of living--"

"Ha," muttered Caro.

"If you wish to continue to do so, you will say as little as possible in Larakessra's presence. Say nothing at all about the binding."

Caro braced her hands against Ayasherin's back and pushed herself up enough to see at least the side of his face. "She's not going to know?"

"No." Ayasherin shuddered as a gentle breeze teased a few strands of his hair. The ornaments braided into it whispered softly as they brushed together. "She is not strong enough to see through the spell of deasha magic. But she is strong enough to kill you. Which she will, if she sees that you have made me weak."

"Because she'd be mad that I bound you?"

"Because she can." He turned off the path onto a small trail that wound through the woods.

-- pain, sudden and blinding as father struck her across the face, furious that she had dared suggest taking up arms to fight against the demon, her fingers still stinging where the blow from his staff had disarmed her --

Caro blinked, and heaved a weary sigh. "Right then. How much farther?"

"We're here."

Ayasherin dumped her without ceremony to the ground. Caro glanced around as she untangled herself from her painful sprawl. The trees crowded thick around the little cottage that sat before them, and there was nothing cozy or quaint about the dwelling. There was no paint on the walls, the bark shingles on the wall hung in disarray, and a plethora of sharp and spiny weeds crawled across the ground toward all sides of the building.

It wasn't a home, so much as an afterthought. A thin veneer of humanity.

"What kind of demon is she?" Caro whispered.

"Earth," he replied quietly, and then raised his voice. "Larakessra!"

The door opened a moment later and a tousled head crowned with hair the colour of slate peeked out. "What?" After a moment, the door opened wider. "Ayasherin?"

"I would speak with you."

Larakessra snorted. "I'm sure you would." But rather than inviting them in, she just wandered away from the door.

Caro glanced up at Ayasherin, and noted his expression with surprise. She'd thought she was the only one who could get him to look as pained as that.

Wordlessly, he reached down and hauled her to her feet, dragging her after him into the demon's house.

Larakessra was surprisingly short, Caro noticed. The demon huddled before a cauldron on the fire, muttering a little as she dropped a rock into a bubbling vat of something that smelled like a garbage dump. Caro tried not to gag. A moment later, she was crowding as far away as Ayasherin's grip would allow as Larakessra, redolent of her fireplace crap, appeared before her and grabbed Caro's face in a taloned hand.

"What is this gift you have brought me?" Larakessra asked. Her breath smelled worse than her cooking.

Ayasherin tugged Caro away from the other demon. "Not a gift," he said. "A dilemma."

Larakessra turned her eyes, a blue too intense and pale to be human, upon him. "I'm listening."

"I need this human for a game I'm playing. But she is broken."

"Broken how?" Larakessra reached for Caro again.

Caro gasped, backing up as the demon reached for her, struggling, struggling to reach the surface as the river current bore her down, down, too far, too fast, she would never surface in time, why hadn't she *listened* when Baru told her the river was too swollen for fishing--

She blinked up from the floor at the two demons standing over her.

"Ah," said Larakessra.

"You see?" said Ayasherin. "She will not fool anyone in my little game if she keeps doing *that*."

Larakessra picked up a sprig of herbs from the table and hit Caro over the head with it. A cloud of pollen rained down around her, and she had to fight to keep from cursing at the demon as she sneezed. "How did it happen?" Larakessra asked.

Ayasherin sighed, folding his arms and leaning against Larakessra's table. "An incompetent areshti pair got wind of my plans and attempted to stop me from using her. They were, however, incompetent as humans are wont to be, and this geas is the result."

"Mmm." Larakessra grabbed a hank of Caro's hair and yanked. Caro bit her lip as the demon hauled her head back. "What's in it for me?"

"You remember the unpleasantness of seven months ago?"

Larakessra cocked her head. "Yeeeeesssss..."

"I'll tell Keraneshta you did it."

The demon witch's face split in a grin that gave her an alarming resemblance to a wolf. "That," she said, "would be delightful." She peered down at Caro. "It's tricky. But I think I can manage it."

"Excellent," said Ayasherin.

"But I need you to fetch something first."

Caro felt her stomach sinking. That did not sound good.

Ayasherin, to judge by his expression, felt the same. "Which is?"

"These sorts of things need a stone, a focus. Areshti bungle it often because the deasha-made stones are so old and abused that the magic is going wrong. I had a good one, but it was taken last month. Bring it back, and I can do it."

"Who took it?" asked Ayasherin.

Larakessra grinned, distorting her face so badly that Caro found herself scooting back behind Ayasherin's leg without even realizing she was doing so.

"Jarakeshtan."

She heard Ayasherin's muttered curse, but her mind was screaming at her too loudly to make out what he said. One thought, and one alone, reverberated through Caro's head.

We are so frelling screwed.



Kisume cursed as an ill-placed branch whipped back to smack her in the face. She spat out a leaf and glowered at the trail in front of her. It was cold, but the demon and the girl were still ahead of her.

She would catch up with them eventually. And when she did, she would have her payment in blood.