



To  
Summon  
a Demon

KIM KNOX

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# To Summon a Demon

*Kim Knox*

## Dedication

*To my own little demons, Daniel and Jack.  
And to Kell and her magical words...*

Inaeus pushed open dust-crusted eyelids, masking a yawn with his hands. Sleep had eluded him. Again. He pulled back his leather cap and scratched at his cropped hair. “Damn it,” he muttered, pushing his aching bones upright. He shivered. The fire had died hours before. “Time to start another day, Filvar.”

His horse gave a disgruntled snort in the darkness.

“You’re a miserable old beast.”

Swift fire-spells ignited the new dry twigs he’d piled into a neat cone. He rubbed his fingers. The warmth made his skin tingle. Spells for breakfast, dinner and tea. He concentrated and more spells filled the water bucket. So many incantations in so short a time. He was wearing away.

The spells, described by Valerion as units of sorcery, rushed through his mind like little silvered animals. The effort to conjure up the bright, whispering creatures was always difficult, and dangerous. The Crystal had supported, protected his mind. It still amazed him that he could shape spells, now that the Demon had the Crystal.

He stared at his reflection caught in the clear water of the bucket. Flames flickered against his blunt features. He scrubbed at his bristled jaw as pale blue eyes glistened in the light cast by the small fire. Thirty-nine years old. “I feel about a hundred and seven,” he murmured at his crusted face. “Just call me Pendagon.” A smile lifted his lips at the thought of the League’s First Father. Inaeus wiped away the dirt-ingrained lines, bringing vitality back into his eyes. “No. Nobody’s that old.”

Filvar butted at his shoulder, demanding that the man let him drink. Inaeus sighed and dipped his mug into the cold water, dissolving the image. “Here.” He planted the bucket into the ground and moved away as Filvar stuck in his silver-streaked nose. The animal was sloppy. He could do without a soaking.

Inaeus stood up, staring into the murky grey sky before glancing back at the horse as it snorted and slurped. Cold water gushed over the brim of the bucket, almost soaking Inaeus’ bedroll. A warm bath would be very welcome. Drifting for hours while soft hands massaged the weariness from his bones.

What he wouldn’t give for a woman’s sure touch. He winced and unease pushed those thoughts down.

“What’s that?”

Filvar lifted his broad head from the bucket, his ears pricked up.

The snap of thin leather cut through the silent air. He'd heard the sound before. "Harpies!"

Inaeus snatched up his sword. He hated harpies. The Demon knew that.

Charred, diseased, disgusting things.

One landed softly in the wreck of the tree beneath which he'd slept. Inaeus jerked around. Blood eyes, gleaming in the darkness, fixed him with a cold glare. The harpy flexed its sharp-clawed hands and ragged wings settled onto its narrow back. The scaled, sinuous tail was mesmerising as it idly swept back...and forth, back...and forth between two blackened branches. "Hello, Inaeus."

His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword, lifting the tip to meet his enemy. He ignored the tight knot of fear in his stomach. Hurried spells entered the metal. How many would the Demon send this time? Six? Eight?

"Good morning," he muttered.

Filvar's snort told him that more were landing and he turned.

Another harpy slid into the firelight, its tongue licking over scorched lips. "You'll die today."

Inaeus forced a grin. "Too many of you have told me that."

"We can't all be wrong," murmured the first harpy.

The air filled with wings and talons and the stink of sulphur. Inaeus lashed out. He had only instinct as a guide in the foul web of harpy bodies enveloping him. Steel gouged flesh, a trail of silver fire spattering the hard earth. The sword slashed through oily wings. Clawed limbs smacked to the ground. Creatures shrieked. Taloned feet tore along his shoulder, ripping at skin and muscle. Inaeus gritted his teeth against a swell of pain.

From somewhere he could hear Filvar screaming.

Not his horse. Anything but his horse.

His muscles fought against the strain of his sword caught in the mess of dripping harpy blood. Sharp teeth snapped at his legs, his fingers, his face. The fight was not going well.

The sword was wrenched from his hand.

Fresh power sparked from fingers tearing at sinewy flesh. Inaeus cried out when his footing slipped and he crashed to the ground in a rush of wings and blood. Bodies swarmed over him, biting and shredding. He choked as slime oozed into his open mouth, clogging his nostrils.

An oily wing smothered his face, clung to skin, sucked itself into his gasping mouth. He fought for breath. He could not, would not die. He lashed out at the leathery skin, ripping it away. Sharp nails grew out of his fingers and blindly he dug them into an arm.

And was rewarded with a grunt of human pain.

"Thanks I get," muttered a familiar voice.

Inaeus wiped the gore from his face. "Conde?" He stared up at her.

"The same." The woman stabbed a silver pick into the skull of a dying harpy then reached out for another slyly crawling up Inaeus' body. She grabbed its neck and twisted. Her face was full of grim satisfaction when the bones grated together and finally snapped. She glanced at him. "You look like shit, Inaeus."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Slowly, Inaeus lifted himself upright, offal and skin slipping off him to ooze into the earth. "Filvar!" He searched the darkness for the animal.

"Don't worry yourself," Conde said, squatting down by the fire. "That horse's got a hide like old boots. Bites like a mad dog." Her grin was feral. "The harpies didn't stand a chance."

"How did you—?" His weakened arm stretched out to the numerous dead bodies littering the ground around him. "Why did you—?"

"As articulate as ever," she said. "I'm still a sorcerer, Inaeus. The Executive...you...couldn't take that away from me when you cut me off from the Crystal." She stared at the dead harpies. "I just had to charge in with my trusty pick. And why? Well, we couldn't have the Demon denting that golden halo of yours, now could we?" Conde wiped the pick on the leg of her hide trousers, then held up the sliver of metal so that it dazzled in the firelight. "This is so much more effective than that cumbersome sword of yours. A much better conductor of energy." Her smile was grim. "More personal."

She looked back at him. "D'you need some help?"

"No. I'm happy to bleed right here."

"Only twelve harpies, Inaeus." Conde tutted. "You're slipping." Her strong arms helped him to the fire, piling his blankets behind his back for support. She opened her hand and a thick glass full of a viscous, green liquid appeared on her palm. "I spent my

time on the Outer Islands consorting with witches, learning the potions and the physical arts instead of the pure thoughts of sorcery. Are you shocked?”

“Why should I be? When have you ever conformed?” He accepted the glass. “Will this work?”

“The old woman who showed me how to mix it said it would either kill or cure. So take your pick.” She presented him with a sweet smile. “D’you want me to hold your nose?”

Inaeus was surprised to feel the old burn of irritation swell in his stomach. The woman was exasperating. “I think I can manage, thank you.”

The potion stank of rotting tree stumps. He concentrated on pushing as much of the half-liquid down his throat as possible. He trusted her. She would not save him from the harpies only to poison him. He hoped. Inaeus gagged on the last dregs. “That was disgusting,” he grated through clenched teeth.

“I’m impressed,” Conde said. “Not many can drink it down in one go.” She threw the glass into the air and watched it vanish with a faint pop.

“Theatrics.” He frowned. “You always had to show off your cleverness.”

Conde reached out to pick at a sliver of dark flesh that had caught itself on his cheek. Her fingers traced a path down the growing bristles. The light from the fire flickered over the pale scar tissue that dripped onto the back of her white hand. Demon Fire. Irreparable. His fingers tried to touch the ripple of silver skin but a slow lassitude was flowing through his body, making his limbs loose and free from pain.

“A beard, Inaeus?” Her voice seemed soft, distant. He wished he could see her golden eyes. “That’s not like you.”

Her smile grew hazy in the firelight.

Warm lips brushed his, slow, sure. He tasted Conde and his blood pounded.

She would never touch him like this. Was this a dream brought on by the foul potion? She deepened the kiss but he couldn’t move his arms and pull her to him. He couldn’t.

“Inaeus.” Her husky voice rippled over him. He groaned when teasing fingers slid along the erection straining against his breeches.

“*I had* hoped that he and I would become acquainted.” Her firmer stroke made him gasp. “But I have work to do.”



And then her touch was gone. For a moment, the old pain filled him but he couldn't fight the heavy weight of his eyelids.

Consciousness began to slip away.

"Rest now." She lifted his head and cushioned it with soft furs. "I'll see to Filvar."

Inaeus drifted off into a twisted sleep.

\* \* \*

*Inaeus stood waiting outside the central chamber, a hallowed place only the League Council was permitted to enter. A young page avoided his gaze, his thin hands twisting. All of Arcaider knew of the theft of the Crytsal. Now he, as Captain of the Guard, had to appear before the Fathers.*

*Inaeus had accepted his guilt and was prepared for the penalty.*

*The page pulled open the doors and Pendagon's gnarled hand beckoned Inaeus toward the central chair. When would he ever stand in this chamber again? Twice in his lifetime was already a rare privelege. So Inaeus couldn't help himself...*

*His gaze flicked over the nine ivory thrones carved out of the ornate wall. Seven were empty. Five Fathers lost and two, Lord Meyjes and Nugent, were only half alive. The Council was old, so old that its members could no loner withstand the loss of the Crystal's support. And without the Crystal, the League of Sorcerers would fall. They were the ones who had bound the demons and secured the land. Without them... A fist tightened in Inaeus' gut. Without them, the demons would rule again.*

*The air smelled musty, ancient with old spells and incantations. Pendagon was hunched like a battered animal on his cold, white throne, a weary old man in glittering robes.*

*"Captain Inaeus." His voice cracked in the sharp silence of the chamber.*

*"My Lord Pendagon." Inaeus nodded his head. His gaze moved to the other beaten old man huddled in the fifth chair. "My Lord Ratelband." Inaeus settled into the formal stance, hands held behind his back. He held his gold Captain's ring in a tight fist. He didn't deserve to wear it any more.*

*Pendagon let out a wearied sigh. "Conde's Demon has taken the Crystal. Without it, all of this..." twisted fingers patted the carved arm of the chair in a slow rhythm, "...is destroyed."*

*Conde the traitor. Memories flickered but Inaeus forced them back.*

*“Is it the same Demon? I thought that I—”*

*“You did not kill the first one she summoned. And it has proven easy for her to make it rise again.” Pendagon snapped out the words and paused as his breath wheezed. “She wants to destroy us, Captain Inaeus. Her Demon must be stopped before it returns on the next full moon and releases the Hoarde.”*

*“I understand, my lord” He straightened his shoulders. The gaping hole in the wall above the nine thrones reminded him of his guilt. The Crystal had sat there, undisturbed, for over half a millennium. He had brought Conde into the League. And this was how she repaid him—destroying everything to which he was loyal. “It was my duty to protect the Crystal. I’ve failed. And I’m ready for punishment.”*

*“Now is not the time for selfless heroics, Inaeus!” Irritation bristled across Pendagon’s aged features. “Conde is foul. From the instant she came through the gates of the city she stained it with her lack of respect for the League and its laws.”*

*Ratelband grunted. “And for the Fathers who only wished to guide her power.”*

*Inaeus couldn’t stop the words. “In the beginning, Conde was an exemplary officer—”*

*Ratelband’s hard, dark eyes fixed on him and something unnamed glittered there. “Yes. You were close to her, were you not, Captain Inaeus?”*

*Inaeus flushed. “Our ranks forbade—”*

*“You have always denied it.” He poked a bent finger at him and a withered lip curled. The Father slumped forward in his chair and harsh light cut across his face. “And yet I saw the way you slavered over her.”*

*“Ratelband!” The burst of anger robbed Pendagon of his breath. He visibly gritted his teeth against the rush of pain, a gnarled hand pressing against his hollow chest “Now is not the time. Conde took the Crystal. She cannot be allowed to rule in my, in our place. We are the Council. We are eternal.”*

*Pendagon closed his eyes. “You still have your sorcery. Why, I don’t know.” The old man tried to straighten his crippled body and failed. “And so it’s been left to you to return the Crystal to me. You are authorised to kill anyone or anything that gets in your way.” His eyes opened. “And that includes your former second-in-command.”*

*Something swirled around the First Father and unease washed through Inaeus. A murky cloud formed from dull little lies fused with ancient power shrouded him. His*

*decayed face twisted and flaked, clear blue eyes bleeding into dull blackness and lost in loose folds of skin—*

“Inaeus...” Conde’s voice.

He awoke with a start.

He focused on the blistered white of an afternoon sky. His eyelids closed again. Inaeus was sure he’d heard...something. An echo of sound rushed through his brain. Something. Someone. No. It was gone.

“Conde?”

Fingers probed his left shoulder where the harpy’s talons had gouged skin and muscle. Inaeus pushed back his thick shirt in surprise. He stared at healed skin and a smile lifted his lips. “Conde, your witch’s brew worked!”

There was no reply.

Inaeus pulled himself to his feet. The dark lump off to his left had to be Filvar. What had been in that disgusting concoction? The ache was finally gone from his wearied bones. His muscles were strong for the first time in what felt like years. “The League has a right to ban witchcraft,” he muttered as he exposed his forearm to the icy air and found scarless skin. “This is too much power.”

Filvar’s soft splutter brought his attention to the horse that lay sprawled on the uneven ground. The animal lifted its head as Inaeus approached, one yellow-tinged eye opening.

“And you’re fine too, aren’t you, old friend?”

Filvar clambered to his feet, shaking the burrs and twigs from his coarse coat. A dark hoof toed the clump of bright, fresh grass that had sprouted from the blood of a harpy killed by Conde. He sniffed it cautiously before yellowed teeth snatched it out of the ground. Filvar looked up, chewing thoughtfully. His eyes closed. He was almost smiling.

“Where is the woman?” Inaeus scanned the desolate landscape. There was nothing but grey, dust-blown earth, blackened trees, silence. Conde was nowhere to be seen. “What’s she up to?” He watched Filvar grab at another clump. “And you’re no help.”

The animal continued to chew, blissfully ignoring him.

\* \* \*

Filvar clattered into an easy canter, stretching healthy muscles, enjoying the exercise. The Demon's presence burned on the edge of Inaeus' consciousness—a pulsing, incandescent light. Yet, somehow, it was different. He wanted to close the distance between him and the monster. He was unsure of the day, even the year. Conde's potion could have left him sleeping for a thousand years while her Demon raged across the island.

Inaeus stared into the far horizon, trying to concentrate on the bobbing point of the wide road. He could lose himself for only a few seconds. Conde the wild woman. Conde the traitor. Why had she helped him? Healed his wounds? It made no sense. Not when she was in league with these monsters.

The wind on his face was raw as the horse pounded along the dry road. With the return of health, he found his lungs aching for something more than the desolate taste of the stale air.

A sudden choking doubled him over in the saddle and he pulled back on the reins. Hard. Filvar protested over the rough handling. Inaeus' gloved hand clutched his throat, trying to control the spasms ripping through the muscles. Vomit rose. It was more than a smell. The rot of a charnel house was almost palpable.

"What is that?" Inaeus gasped. His horse could smell it too, its nostrils flaring. Filvar began to back away.

*"Inaeus..."*

The voice was a whisper on the strong winds. He twisted around, trying to catch more of it.

*"Inaeus..."*

He slid off his horse's back. "Who are you?" Again his name, more faint, somehow more urgent. "Where are you?"

He ignored Filvar's attempt to restrain him by tugging on his frayed coat collar with broad, yellow teeth. Angered, Inaeus pulled himself free and edged his way into the dense, spiked trees lining the road. He drew his sword from its scabbard. Inaeus gained some comfort from the fact that the big horse had decided to follow him.

The stench grew. Inaeus pressed his gloved hand over his nose and mouth, closing them against the rotten stink of raw sewage. He elbowed his way through the trees. There was only instinct to follow. He had to believe he was moving in the right direction.

Inaeus burst out into a clearing.

He stared.

The ground, the trees, somehow even the air pulsed with a sludged blackness. It dripped in a slow river from the branches. Time slowed. Globules hung in the air.

Sorcery. Someone, or something, was pouring hundreds of spells into delaying the corrosive effects of the sludge.

Inaeus watched a black gobbet splat on his blade and frizzle into nothingness. He planted spells into his sword to cut a dry path. Taking a deep breath, he waded out into the greasy mass. Slime rolled back from the metal.

*“Inaeus...”*

The voice was nearer.

*“Where are you?”*

*“Help me...”*

Inaeus traced his way toward a big clump of the black pitch held fast in the centre of the clearing. He jammed his sword into its thickness, not knowing what he would uncover. A gush of acrid smoke burst from the hole his sword carved. A leg? A human leg? He strengthened the spells feeding the metal. Another leg. A torso. Inaeus’ heart jumped. He recognised the old coat. The arm.

With careful fingers, he pushed away the sludge from her cold features. “Conde.” He shook his head. His thumb delayed on her cheek. “Who have you been upsetting now? You’re insane. Ridiculous. Haven’t you heard of—”

*“You’re rambling, Inaeus.”*

He knelt down, grimacing as the sludge oozed over his knees. “I have the right.” His gloved hand wiped away the slime from her nostrils and mouth, pushed the mucus from her clogged eyes. He lifted her head out of the blackness with a sickening squelch. “Can you sit up?”

*“I don’t know.”*

“What did you think you were doing, Conde?” he asked as his sword cleared the sludge, making it easier for her to break away from the intense, sucking hold of the black pitch.

*“There’s an arm over there,”* she said, not answering his question.

*“Whose arm?”*

*“Pendagon’s! Whose d’you think? A Demon’s, of course.”*

“Calling up another to help the one you summoned?” Fire burned in his gut and he stood back from her.

She was the former Exon Conde, once his valued second-in-command. “How can your ambition justify this?” he asked, waving his arm to the horror surrounding them.

She was silent.

As silent as she had been at her trial two years before. The trial that, at its end, threw her out of the League for summoning the first Demon in over five hundred years.

She had offered no defence for creating a gateway by which the Demon could enter Arcaider from the Underworlds. Conde had stood in the dock, her arms behind her back, her golden eyes glazed, almost lifeless. The evidence against her was overwhelming. As her judge, Inaeus had offered her every legal chance to defend herself.

They found the forbidden volumes of the Dark Ones sealed in crevices in her barrack room. Blood markings stretched around the duty room she had been in the night the Demon had appeared. Black pitch had coated the walls. The stench had made him gag. Pendagon himself, called as an expert witness, testified that all of these were the signs of a Demon summoning.

Conde’s silence had only intensified her guilt. Stripped of the office of Exon, Conde was banished to the Outer Islands.

And now she was back just as the Crystal was stolen.

“I believed you had some decency in you, Conde. You were a good officer.” He paused and the old pain gnawed at him. Her betrayal still hurt. “You were my friend.”

She was on watch the night the Demon came. She had offered.

He had just returned from another Apprentice Practical in the mountains. The fifth in three weeks. He was exhausted, yet he still had his watch duties. He had thought her offer an act of kindness. Obviously Conde had needed the solitude of their duty room for her incantations. “I was wrong about you.”

Conde looked up, her face raw from scraping at the sludge. “What? You, Inaeus? Wrong?”

His chest tightened at her unrepentant gaze.

Why had she done it? How could a Demon serve anyone’s ambition?

“Think what you like,” Conde muttered. She tried to rub the pitch from her fingers, dirty nails gouging a trail along her palm. She shook the stuff from her hand, watching it

splat back into the mound that surrounded her. Stretching her legs, she looked up at Inaeus. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll be going now.”

“Oh no.” He grated out the words. “I want answers.”

Conde pushed herself to her feet, but clutched at her head. “I don’t have any answers, Inaeus.” She controlled her swaying by grabbing hold of Filvar’s bridle, the horse having offered his strength with a jerk of his broad head. Conde smiled her appreciation.

“No answers? I find you buried in black pitch—the same stuff found in the duty room—with this.” His sword stabbed the thick, taloned arm, dragging it up to chest height and subjecting it to the harsh light. It had to be over a yard and a half in length. With a metal-spell burning through the sword, he thrust it into her face. The translucent scales pulsed and flickered. Thick, black blood seeped from the severed joint. “And you can tell me nothing?”

“I’m guilty of everything you ever thought,” she said, untangling her slimed auburn hair with a free hand. “Yes, I poisoned Vi-Kettes Harmon. Disgusting old man. Yes, I tried to burn down the library. And if you think I was summoning another Demon here, then, yes, I was doing that, too.”

“I’ve known you for thirteen years and I’ve never had a straight answer out of you yet.”

“You want a reason for all of this?”

“Yes!”

“I can’t give you one.”

Inaeus ground his teeth in frustration. “Can you, at least, tell me if there are two Demons now?”

“There’s just the one.”

“The same one?”

“Yes.”

“And this is its arm?”

Conde was silent.

He kicked the limb from his blade. “Look at you, Conde.” His hand flicked over her boots, falling apart from immersion in the corrosive pitch, the clotted furs, her exposed arm. Inaeus crushed the pity that wanted to rise in him at the torrent of scar tissue coated

with sludge. She wasn't worthy of pity. Now he'd caught her in her evil. "Bedraggled, slimed, a tramp. Your plan to rule the League is in shambles."

She shrugged. With Filvar's assistance, she made her way slowly to the edge of the clearing, ignoring him. In her wake, black sludge splatted to the ground.

"Why didn't you let the harpies kill me?" Inaeus found her golden eyes staring at him. For an instant, he thought he saw a flicker of pain in their coolness, but then it was gone. His imagination.

"You fight with honour, Inaeus. You didn't deserve that death."

"No. You want me to die at your Demon's hands." His smile was grim as he prodded the arm, fascinated by the slime oozing out of the gouges. "Sorry. Hand," he corrected.

"Damn it, Inaeus, I don't want you dead!" Conde let go of a shallow breath. She collapsed back into the spiked branches of nearby bushes, her eyes closing. Her arm clutched her stomach. A slimed hand covered her face.

"I'm bad. I've always known that." Her hand dropped away and a smile twitched at the corners of her greased mouth. One eye opened. "You've always know that. But I've never really harmed anyone."

"Never harmed anyone?" Inaeus couldn't believe the gall of the woman. "The island is dead. Thousands of men, women and children have died, are dying—"

"That isn't me!" Conde relaxed back into the bush, taking calming breaths and avoiding his eyes. "I have to go. I can't stay here." As she tried to stand, her body crumpled.

Inaeus caught her before she hit the solid earth. "You're not going anywhere."

\* \* \*

Inaeus watched her familiar face. The smooth, sleek features still reminded him of a wild cat—somehow alert even though she was unconscious. One of her tutors had compared her mind, rather prosaically, to a steel trap. Conde had a rare gift. Not one thought ever leaked from her brain. No one ever knew what she was thinking behind those disconcertingly golden eyes.

He stretched his fingers and willed them not to shake. "All right, I can do this."

He peeled off her coat. He'd clean that afterwards. It was more important now to get the oily black pitch off her skin before it could damage her further.



He hesitated over the lacing of her grubby shirt.

Inaeus scrubbed at his jaw. What was wrong with him? He'd seen Conde naked before. However, the half-remembered taste of her still lingered, the memory of her hot tongue, slow and sure, exploring, enjoying every part of his mouth. Inaeus let out a slow breath and ignored his hardening penis.

Yes, this was a different Conde. His superior rank had always held him back. Not that he hadn't thought about having her. A reluctant smile tugged at his mouth. He had. A lot.

He couldn't have these thoughts. She needed to be clean.

Inaeus loosened the laces and tugged the shirt over her head. Black pitch stained her pale skin. Spells edged his vision with silver and he forced them into the old cloth he found at the bottom of his pack. The spells took his strength with them and he ached deep in his bones.

He scrubbed the cloth over her neck, chest, thankful that her breasts only needed a cursory wipe. He couldn't stop the short laugh that broke from him. He'd been skinny-dipping with the damn woman. But they'd never touched and cleaning her had Inaeus more nervous than facing anything the Demon could throw at him.

The warm cloth slid lower, cleaning the streaks of black that stabbed across her stomach.

It brushed the edge of her trousers.

"It's not as if I haven't seen her naked before," he muttered, pulling at their ties. Focused only on the cloth, he cleaned her hips, rushed over her blonde-red pubic hair, and moved onto her thighs. He tugged the trousers down and pulled off her boots.

Her skin warmed in his wake, spells holding the heat until he could dress her again.

Inaeus turned her over on the soft furs and attacked her back.

Then he faced the task of touching her scars. He had to scrub at the pitch that had worked into the silver bubbled tissue coating her hand, arm and spilled out across her shoulder blade. He crushed the pity tightening his gut. Conde had brought this on herself. Her lust for power had summoned not one, but two Demons.

He traced a finger over the rush of ruined skin. "I should hate you."

But it was impossible. He pulled some of his own clothes out of his pack. Not exactly fresh, but her shirt and trousers were threadbare.

Dressed and stretched out on his blankets, she looked helpless, almost fragile. He smiled at that thought. Fragility? The woman who'd bear-wrestled as a child in her mountain village? He'd never believed that myth until she provided him with a demonstration. Whatever she'd been doing in that clearing had weakened her. Perhaps he would finally get some answers.

"You think too loud."

"How d'you feel?"

"It must be all that honour and duty," Conde mused. "Your mind's so spotless, it shouts."

"How d'you feel?" he repeated, helping her to sit up, pushing up the blankets to give support to her back.

Golden eyes speared him. "Clean."

A smile twitched and his hand delayed on her jaw. "Good."

Filvar broke the moment, hanging his head over the woman. Conde batted the animal's nose out of her face. "Stop fussing over me, Filvar," she muttered. "You stink." She glared up at the horse as it playfully nipped at a lock of her hair. "Yes, I'm fine, Inaeus," she said. "Will you get this nannying horse off me?"

"He's always been devoted to you."

She relented and scratched Filvar's grizzled nose, the beast snorting with pleasure. "Then he hasn't got the sense he was born with." She accepted the mug of cold water and the bread and cheese Inaeus offered. A soft smile touched her mouth as she bit into the delicate slices. "Your food spells were always so much better than mine."

"True." To his surprise, he watched her face lighten as a memory filled her mind. She looked about to share it, until she met his gaze and the humour fell away from her eyes.

"This is not my death," she sighed, picking at the dry earth. "I never did any of it. My Demon didn't steal the Crystal." She laughed. "My Demon. Another lie."

"You? Claiming innocence?"

"You practically begged me to do so at my trial. 'Isn't there anything, anything at all, which you'd like to offer the Court in your own defence, Exon Conde?'" she quoted, her voice taking on Inaeus' deeper tone, adding heavy sarcasm. "I wanted out of the League and the trial was an easy way. The only other way's death." She took a firming breath. "And I wasn't ready for that."

“I couldn’t have conjured up that first Demon, Inaeus. I sort out witches in the Outer Islands. They’re tight-lipped buggers. But I did manage to pry some of the method out of one old woman. You need a conductor of immense power to bring a creature like that through. She called it the Eye.” Conde gave a simple shrug. “Seeing into both worlds, I suppose. She said we call it the Crystal.” She sat forward. “Inaeus, the Crystal was protected by the Ancient Spells.”

“Pendagon stated that there were other methods of summoning a Demon. Valerion’s Vow demanded his silence.”

She sighed. “You don’t believe me.” She ran a hand through her auburn hair, looking surprised to find it clean. “Why did I think it would be different? You’ve always trusted the League before me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Then why are you so carefully examining this blanket?”

Inaeus forced himself to meet her golden gaze. She’d been part of the League, a brilliant, if unorthodox, officer. When she violated its most sacred law, it was impossible for him to support her. And then the Council had chosen him, as Captain of the Guard, to be the judge at her trial. Did she see that as his betrayal? “What were you doing in the clearing?” he asked softly.

A smile creased her lips. Conde lifted her arm, pushing back the thick shirt and exposing her mutilated arm to the cold light of the late-afternoon sky. Inaeus tried to crush his mind against the rising memory. And failed.

*The courtyard blazed with Demon Fire, a contorted shape writhing within its brilliant white mass. A nightmare beast with distended limbs, a rash of claws and razor teeth. Somewhere there were eyes. Somewhere a mouth.*

*He pulled his sword from its scabbard and the soft slither of steel on leather caught the beast’s attention—*

*“Monster!” Conde staggered from the duty room. “Come and get the other arm!”*

*She lifted her arm. It was a torrent of fire-scorched flesh. Still-smoking tissue tore from her red-raw neck to taper out at the wrist. Demon Fire. Irreparable.*

*The creature lunged forward. Inaeus didn’t stop to think. With a spell searing the metal, he hurled his sword at the Demon. The steel buried itself up to the hilt in the Demon’s spine. The beast screamed down the night in its pain.*

The Council declared it dead.

They were wrong.

Conde's gentle fingers ran over the ruin of silvered skin and regenerated sinew. "It's taken years of patient sorcery to build new muscle. The skin will never heal. No spell can do that. An arm for an arm, Inaeus. A Demon took mine." Her smile was grim. "I had my revenge."

"You summoned another monster just for that?"

Conde briefly covered her weary face. She pinched at the bridge of her nose. "You're not listening. It's a waste of time. I'm going." She cursed against the weakness in her legs as they refused to hold her up.

Inaeus made her sit again, firm hands pressing her to the ground. He had to get the truth out of her while she was too weak to prevent him. "Why isn't there a scratch on you?"

"The Demon was pure Fire the first time. Now, with the Crystal, the thing's as solid as me..." her eyes were derisive, "...or you."

"And you just went up to it and hacked its arm off?"

"Something like that."

"Conde, what happened in the duty room?"

"This is not my trial!"

"How am I supposed to help you if you won't tell me the truth!" he demanded, glaring at her.

"Holy Inaeus helping an Outcast?" Conde laughed. "What would the League say?" She collapsed back against the piled blankets, the anger obviously exhausting her. "The Demon is weakened," she murmured with some satisfaction. "I'll get it the next time."

"Conde?"

She was unconscious again.

Had Conde changed in the years since she'd been expelled from the League? Was she adding liar to the long list of her sins? Conde never lied and she had certainly never lied to him. Yet how could he believe her claim that she had not summoned the Demon?

Inaeus fell back against the flaking bark of a dead oak, his eyes staring up at the blasted branches. Conde had always been a problem. For as long as he'd known her, she'd confused, vexed, irritated. The record of emotions felt endless, was endless. He crushed a powdery piece of wood between his fingers, flicking it into the winds twisting around the death-ridden grove.

She'd remained silent at her trial.

Why?

\* \* \*

He couldn't have left her to the elements, weakened as she was.

Once, Conde had been his friend.

It was still a strange fact to admit. For eleven years, Conde had always been there, receiving his orders with some acidic remark that had inevitably brought shock to the faces of the young apprentices. He'd chosen her to be his second-in-command when the senior officers of the League had clamoured for her expulsion.

It'd been the simple fact that, somehow, they worked well together. Why, he couldn't explain. *Holy* Inaeus—he smiled to himself, she'd always attached that label to him—and the wild and wicked Conde.

Inaeus prodded her shoulder. Filvar snorted at him, tossing his head in warning. He glared at his horse as they walked along the dusty road, Conde slumped on Filvar's back. Filvar had always been fiercely protective of her, biting and snapping at anyone who said a harsh word against her. Inaeus wondered what the fascination was. Perhaps it was a meeting of minds—one cantankerous spirit meeting her perfect horse.

"I know you're awake."

"I'm not," Conde muttered.

"It'll be getting dark soon," Inaeus said, squinting into the hazy sky, seeing the familiar gathering of murky greyness that now marked sunset. He stared into the stillness of the dead forest enveloping the road, the wind rattling the dry branches of a host of petrified trees. "We'll have to set up camp soon."

"Fascinating."

Inaeus glared at the heap of furs. She'd been back in his life only a day and a half. His anger-knotted stomach tightened. It seemed another thirteen years at least. He took Filvar's reins and led the horse. She irritated the hell out of him. He wasn't thinking about the other need. As she'd said, they had work to do.

"The Crystal? How was it lost?" Her head emerged from the furs, her cheek resting against the horse's thick neck. "Tell me."

"Why?"

“To pass the time.”

Inaeus shrugged. “Nobody’s certain. They even had a hunt for you, to see whether you were in the Compound. Up to your old tricks.”

“That’s nice,” she murmured. “I presume they didn’t find me?”

“Don’t be funny.”

“You never know.”

“D’you want to hear this or not?” Inaeus grated.

“Go on. I’m riveted.”

He took a calming breath before beginning. “There was a huge eruption of noise and Fire in the Main Hall. The walls shattered. It rained fire, the stuff eating the surrounding Halls.”

His mind pushed itself back into the smoke-filled night.

*The screams. The overwhelming rush of terror. Apprentices ran from the Demon Fire roaring over the flagstones, lapping against the cindered walls. Young boys caught, terror-stricken, their legs melting into the floor. He cursed Conde, damning her to the Seven Hells for repeating her appalling crime.*

“I saw the Demon erupt out of the dust of the Main Hall. Pure Fire. There was a brilliant point of light at its centre, steady in the chaotic roar. Somehow, I knew it was the Crystal. It seemed to...suck...in the Fire, giving the Demon a stronger structure than last time.”

The image remained.

*Two blistering eyes stared directly at him, seeming to eat his soul with their hatred. A mouth stretched, revealing row after row of glistening teeth, dripping with rancid saliva.*

Inaeus snapped his mind shut against the vision. “It was like a harpy...”

“...only more so,” Conde added unhelpfully as his description faltered.

“Thank you.” He paused “It spread immense wings and burst into the night sky. Every clump of vegetation died in its wake.”

“What did the Council think?”

“That my sword hadn’t exorcised it the first time. That it’d been festering in the earth beneath Arcaider, waiting for the chance to be free.”

“And nobody knows what chance presented itself.” She resettled her face against Filvar’s rough neck. “I wasn’t there to blame.”

“There’s a clearing over there,” Inaeus said, pointing to a side track. He recognised the deadness. The forest was Old Cotter’s Wood, no more than four leagues outside of Arcaider. The Demon wasn’t yet devastating that city. Inaeus could feel it festering on the edges of his mind, grumbling to itself over its wound. They presented the only threat to its existence—of that he was sure. It would try to destroy them before it ended its spree and returned to the centre of the island to free its brethren.

“Help me off,” Conde muttered as Filvar stopped in the centre of the wide, barren circle.

“How are your legs?”

“Still corroding.” He blinked. “Joke, Inaeus. It takes more than a little Demon pus to kill me off.”

“Obviously.” Inaeus watched her pull her weakened legs along the dust-packed ground, the dull daylight rapidly vanishing in the spiked blackness of the surrounding trees. He listened to the wind as it chased itself through the bare branches. He hated forests. “Does anything frighten you, Conde?”

She didn’t look up. “Yes,” she admitted to his surprise. Her golden eyes met his, yet seemed to see beyond him. “One thing terrifies me.”

Inaeus peeled his eyes away from her unblinking gaze. His mind couldn’t imagine a creature so hideous as to scare a woman like Conde. She’d tracked trolls as a child, snapped the necks of harpies, attacked a Demon...not once, but twice. He had to know. “What?”

She shrugged, brushing the sharp twigs from the ground as they needled the hide of her trousers. “It could be considered a silly little thing.”

“Conde...”

“You’ll find out just before I die,” she promised and then lay down and refused to say any more.

“Nice,” Inaeus said “I hope it’s nothing important.”

With practised ease, Inaeus set up his camp—stretching out his bedroll, sparking a fire from deadwood, creating the ingredients for a soup that bubbled in an old, cast iron pot. He glanced up at his horse. Filvar had his feedbag and the heavy saddle lifted off his back. They all had to rest in the few hours’ peace before they had to move on.

Almost full moon.

The Demon would be waiting.

Inaeus stirred the steaming pot, pushing his mind away from thoughts of the confrontation. Conde settled beside him, staring off into the darkness of the forest.

Could he believe her?

Conde had no reason to lie to him. Never had. She was already an Outcast, shunned by the League. She couldn't damn herself any further. And Conde was the one person he trusted implicitly.

"Inaeus, shut up. I'm trying to sleep." Conde twisted over in her blankets. "I'd forgotten how annoying that habit of yours was."

"The Witches were silent?"

"The Witches didn't trust me either."

"I trust you, Conde."

"Yes," her laugh was bitter, "of course you do." She presented her back to him. Firelight burned over her red hair and he itched to stroke its smoothness. However, his fingers curled in his palm. "Still can't do it, can you, Inaeus?" She pulled the furs and blankets tight around her body. "Night."

"Our status has always stood between us. Even now."

The fire cracked and spat in the silence. Inaeus closed his eyes. He was an idiot. They probably had only hours left to live and he still couldn't break through the walls he had built around himself.

"Honouring the League comes first with you. I always knew that." She paused. Inaeus thought he heard a sigh. "Accepted it." She thumped the pile of furs and resettled her head. "Never understood it, though. Bunch of rancid old men never had my loyalty."

"I'm sure they never noticed."

Her spluttered laughter made him grin. She turned her head back to him. "D'you think I might have been too subtle?"

Light flickered over her sleek features, her golden eyes sparking with fire. How had he resisted this woman for so many years? "I'm an idiot," he murmured.

"No argument from me."



“Conde.” His finger pressed against her surprised mouth. “Shut up.” She grinned and her teeth snapped at his fingertip. Blood started to move south and he shoved her blankets to one side. “If that’s how you want to play it.”

Her grin was feral. “You have no idea, Inaeus.”

He pinned her arms above her head and felt her body arch in response. “I think I might.”

“Not so rough. My bones—”

He weakened his hold instinctively and the damned woman flipped him. She straddled his hips.

“—aren’t *that* fragile.”

Irritation burned...but then she pressed, took a slow, slow slide along his erection and nothing else mattered. He dug his fingers into her hips, letting her think she was in control. He grinned and his fingers moved, sliding over the flatness of her stomach, until his thumb rubbed up against the soft hide of her breeches, just there...

Conde gasped and returned his grin. “You’re not playing fair.”

“Oh I am. If I wasn’t, I’d do *this*...” In one fluid movement, she was flat on her back again. Inaeus pinned her to the furs with his body. “Now, Conde.” His face was only inches from hers, her warm breath brushing his face. Her darkly golden eyes blazed. “We play my way.” His smile was sharp and the slow shift of his hips made her bite at her lip. Oh, he liked besting her. “Or we don’t play at all.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

Inaeus smirked. “Isn’t that the point?”

She glared at him. “What about denting that precious halo of yours?”

“You know what? I think you talk too much.”

His mouth took hers, hot and wet and hard, held her, crushed her, his fingers working at the ties to his breeches, to hers. He found her hand between them. It would be fast and hard.

“Yes.” She growled the word against his neck. His callused fingers scraped over her smooth, exposed skin, then lower and found her wet. His thumb pad worked that little nub of flesh and he groaned when her trembling hand curled around his penis. Conde moved it, slipping, sliding it over her wet heat again and again.

White hot fire burned through him. He had to...

“Inaeus. I swear, if you don’t fuck—”

Yes, Conde had to leave that threat hanging, had to arch her spine, had to cry out, because he’d thrust deep. She was hot and tight. So tight. Pressure built at the base of his spine and spells flicked silver at the edge of his vision.

What the—?

But Conde’s mouth scorched over his, her thrusting tongue matching the thrust of his body. Her hands grabbed at his buttocks and forced him harder, faster, her groans lost with his. Faster. Shaking. Conde’s mouth ripped away and her cry broke the silence. Muscles contracted hard around his penis, dragged him, swept him over.

Spells burst over his brain in a silver sheet of fire, burning the air.

He buried his face in Conde’s shoulder and took shuddering breaths. Slowly, the dizzying rush faded. His lips moved to drop soft kisses on her neck. “A complete idiot for not doing that years ago.”

“Yes.” The word was almost a sigh. “You are.”

Inaeus chuckled and reluctantly disentangled himself from her body. He collapsed and chill air washed over him. Still-shaking hands pulled at the furs and he covered them both.

“Spells?” she murmured.

His gaze slid to her. She stared up at the dark, murky sky, face flushed, but a smile still lurking on her mouth. “A new one on me.” He ran a hand over his short hair. “Might have something to do with you being so tight.” That had been a shock. This was Conde. A woman like Conde, a virgin? He tried to clamp down on a burst of smugness.

Her face reddened further. Was she blushing?

Fire-filled golden eyes fixed on him. “When this is over, I’m going to get you for being that smug.”

“Yes, dear.”

She thumped his arm. Hard. He winced. “And *that*, too.” She twisted her body, worming beneath the furs. She yawned.

“Rest, Conde,” Inaeus murmured and closed his eyes when she put her head on his chest. His arm came around her, fingers idly stroking her shoulder. He forced his eyes open. “I’ll keep watch.” Her slow breathing told him she was already asleep.

*When this is over...*

Inaeus stared into the darkness and tried not to think about losing her again.  
He failed.

\* \* \*

“Here.”

He pressed a bowl of soup into Conde’s cold hands, bringing her out of her light doze, tightening her slack fingers around the warm wood. He’d let her rest, but the thought of what they would face and how he could lose what they had just shared had him up, working, pacing.

She smiled her thanks. “Why have they sent you tearing around after this thing?” she asked through a yawn. “Why not wait until it tries to bring other Demons through?”

Inaeus rubbed at a weary eye. “Good question. I tried explaining that. Ratelband would have none of it. He wanted me on the attack.”

“Going to do battle with our ancient foe?” Conde asked with a wry smile.

Inaeus grinned. “You know the man too well.”

She grimaced. “He used to *concern himself with my progress*, as he put it.” Conde rubbed at her neck, avoiding his eye. Was she embarrassed? “He cornered me in the barrack rooms one morning and promised me that he could, as Keeper of the Oracles, tell me my fate.” Conde’s golden eyes were derisive. “For a price, of course. Namely my mouth and a certain part of his anatomy.”

“Ratelband?”

“He’s a lecherous old sod, had most of the apprentices in the Academy.”

“But Ratelband...”

“Were...are you still blind? Everyone knows.” She drained the last of her soup, wiping at the residue with a thick slice of bread. “The all-powerful, holy Council, corrupt to a man.”

“And did you...” Inaeus found himself suddenly angry as he met her clear, golden gaze. She’d never told him. He bit out the rest of the words. “...agree to his price?”

“Inaeus!” She laughed. “You think that I’d go anywhere near that festering piece of...” Conde shook her head, still chuckling. She leaned over him. “What I did was this. I pressed my trusty pick against that beautifully taut throat of his. Here.” Her voice was

soft, threatening, as she demonstrated on him, pressing the cold metal against his skin. “Just above the major artery and I vowed that I’d gut him from throat to belly if he even looked at me again.”

Her eyes were feral at the memory. The skin on his neck itched. “I can be very persuasive.” She blinked. “Did I scare you, Inaeus?” She looked surprised.

“I should be used to you by now,” he murmured, resisting the urge to rub at his throat.

“I wasn’t interested in my fate,” she mused. “But then I had only to wait a month and the news was out anyway.” Conde smiled at him. “We were both destined for greatness.”

“Yes, the Oracles.”

The Oracle that had burst over his life had been only three years before.

Lord Ratelband consulted the Oracles once a year and, as usual, the rumours were rife. The Prophecies were always bland things—who’d advance through the ranks, who would marry, the size of the harvest.

Yet that year had been different.

A new page, an over-inquisitive boy of nine, started the rumour that Ratelband had Seen a great change coming, that the Council would have new members after four hundred and seven years. It was a rumour that swept through the Academy and onto island itself. There were clamourings for the truth...and so one day Inaeus found himself called into the hallowed central chamber for the first time in his life.

He stood silently before the nine ivory thrones, his body formal but relaxed. His eyes stared straight ahead, focusing on the soft sheen of the Crystal imbedded in the patterned wall behind Pendagon’s throne. So much power contained in a stone that could fit into the palm of his hand. Inaeus had no doubts, no worries. He’d been faithful and meticulous in the performance of his duties. The Council would tell him why they’d permitted him entry.

He’d been a blind fool.

*“Where is that bloody woman?” Ratelband grated, a heavily ringed finger scratching through his blond hair. “Did you get the message to her, Meyjes?”*

*The man next to him shifted in his chair and muttered under his breath, “Of course I did. I’m not stup—”*

*The doors slammed back, the sudden winds snagging on the ageing silks draped along the curving walls. Exon Conde strode into the Chamber. Tall, beautiful,*

*intimidating in her Exon's battered armour and long green-grey coat. Her hair, caught in the shafts of dusty sunlight, was the colour of blood. The familiar twist of rage was on her sun-browned face. "Why was I dragged back?" she demanded.*

*"Conde!" Inaeus glared at her. "Have respect."*

*"No." She met his gaze and fire burned in her golden eyes. Her attention returned to the Council "What's so important that you have to dispatch two Apprentices to scour the mountains for me?"*

*Ratelband's steel-blue eyes flickered over Conde. "The Oracles have been read..." he began in the ceremonial voice he always assumed.*

*"Tell me something I don't know."*

*Inaeus watched Ratelband's hand clench into a fist and a flush mottled his jaw and neck.*

*"Get on with it," Pendagon muttered. "The sooner this is over with the better."*

*"Captain Inaeus. I have seen that you could hold a Father's chair."*

*Inaeus still remembered the shock that reverberated through his system. It was impossible. The nine men sitting before him had denied finer sorcerers than him the promotion, even to Vi-Kettes. To become a Father...?*

*"As with any Oracles, I cannot see all. The pattern is never set. I can tell of only one possible future. There are others." His chilled eyes moved to an uninterested Conde. "And in this future we are also afflicted with Exon Conde as part of the Council."*

*"Me?" Conde barked. "Me? Join your old bunch of vultures? Not a chance!"*

*"On this we finally agree," Ratelband grated.*

*"When would this happen, my Lord?" Inaeus finally found his voice in a dried throat. Eyes turned on him, seeing only the impertinence of his question.*

*"Soon," Pendagon murmured. "Very soon."*

*"What was that?" Conde sat up, her eyes scanning the darkening skies. She cursed under her breath as she tried to move her weakened legs. "Get your sword, Inaeus. Something's coming."*

*"What?" He pulled his weapon from its scabbard and his mind reached out to search the surrounding area. It couldn't be. His pulse quickened. "The Demon."*

“Right.” Conde grabbed a stick and levered herself onto unsteady feet. “It’s coming in from the lake. Full height. No half-measures now.” She grinned at Inaeus, a feral look in her shining eyes. “This is more warning than I usually get.”

“You call this a warning?” Inaeus asked.

His neck craned up to the shattered treetops as a huge, taloned hand ripped the branches from an old elm. Another followed. And another. “You never said it had four arms, Conde!” His throat dried as the face of the Demon loomed, the beast dropping its sinewy neck into the clearing. Wide wings arched, plunging them into an inky blackness. Vaguely, he heard Filvar’s terror. He could only concentrate on the Demon’s eyes.

Pure Fire glared at him.

“Inaeus!”

One thought chased through his mind. What could possibly scare Conde more than this monster? Its remaining three arms cleared a path for a muscle-packed body mottled by the single spark of his campfire. A thick snake’s tail lashed through the brittle undergrowth.

The wound. The upper right arm was gone, a gaping hole revealing snatches of the Fire within.

“Inaeus!”

It was Conde’s voice. He broke from his stupor. “If we can get spell-metal into its arm or eyes!” he shouted above the grinding roar of the winds.

“Time to slash a hamstring or two,” Conde grated. In the darkness, he could dimly see her hobbling away.

Inaeus found the Demon’s angular head glaring at him, a thin tongue coursing over reptilian lips. Its Fire eyes were unblinking. A sudden rush of sorcery from the Crystal filled him, his senses swaying at the fierce surge of salt-ridden air that enveloped the clearing.

The Demon created a barrier, gorging the dead trunks with obstruction-spells. There was no escape. He tried to contain his pounding heart, blood and fear creating an unstable mixture in his brain.

He needed control.

Conde would perform her duty; he had to be ready to strike.

“You’re an interesting creature,” the Demon mused, its head twisting as if fascinated. “Power flows out of you. Not like the woman.” Its features contorted into a rush of

hatred, scales cracking and writhing. The sharp horn on its snout gleamed with brilliant white Fire. “Tight-minded, detestable human!”

Inaeus’ grin grew. Conde even had the ability to aggravate Demons. “She’ll take more than your arm this time!”

The Demon bellowed its rage at the reminder of the shredded hole carved in its flesh. Eighteen feet of vengeful Demon lunged at him. The head snapped, straining to bite him, saliva dripping. A gobbet splattered against his cheek and Inaeus cried out.

Pure acid.

Talons slashed, gleaming in a sudden burst of light. The odour of salt and the stench of rotting meat were overpowering. Inaeus bit down on the rising vomit.

The trees. Fire dripped from the dead wood ignited by the thrashing of the Demon’s tail. Crystal-strengthened tissue continued to hack at the remaining darkness, unaffected.

Where was Conde?

Inaeus snatched his head out of the Demon’s limited range, its wings trapping it in the trees. He had to keep moving. Agility was his finest attack. His sword slashed at the slaving mouth, at taloned feet.

Again the tail lashed the trees. Fierce whiteness implanted an image on his staring eyes.

Conde.

Somehow, she’d leapt over the frantic whip and slashed the tendons on the back of the creature’s inner thigh. The beast roared at the torture. Its head tried to lunge at its attacker, teeth tearing at empty air. She struck again and again, shredding the flesh, ignoring the splatter of hot pitch that spurted out from the wound. Its muscles strained. The knee buckled. Inaeus could see the feral grin on Conde’s face, hear the crack of bones in Demon wings forced to take the weight.

“No!” The cry ripped from his mouth.

Her body bore the full force of the thick-muscled tail. It wrenched the silver pick out of her hand and smashed her against the wall of spells. Flame erupted. The stink of charred skin hit him.

Conde fell to the ground in a heap of blackened furs.

The Demon bellowed its triumph, rattling the branches with its roar.

“For Conde!” Inaeus charged at the beast, his sword blazing with power.

With one swipe, a two-fingered claw smacked to the ground. The sword slashed and ripped at the Demon's stomach, chunks of rotten meat oozing away from jagged flesh in the glow of silver fire. All of the Demon's weight lurched to one side, straining the solid muscle of its left leg. The right side was weakened, unprotected; the power thrown into the wall monopolised its sorcery.

He just had to get past the threat of the snapping teeth.

Inaeus screamed.

The creature had thrown all of its strength into one last, desperate effort. The splintering of the wings gave him only a second's warning before the tail ripped his feet out from under him and he crashed to the ground. A rush of muscle and wings and Inaeus was dangling from the Demon's left hand.

Idly, the beast swung him back and forth. Inaeus could see its face twitching with the pain of its injuries. Yet a grin stretched around dry lips. Limp wings dragged across the ground, bleeding thick, black slime, the ragged skin flapping in the fierce winds. His vision blurred as he was forced to look at the offal sliding out of its shredded stomach. Callous talons dug deeper into Inaeus' thigh, forcing out a thicker run of blood.

"Captain Inaeus." He was jerked up, grunting against the fresh agony of ripped sinew, until his head was two yards away from the packed earth. "The one he was so afraid of." The sneer in its voice mocked him.

"Who?" Blood rushed into his face. His sword lay gleaming in the dust. He was going to die. He wanted to know the one to curse in his final seconds of life. Inaeus' gaze returned to his inverted vision of the monster. "Who was it?"

The Demon ignored him. "You came for this." Its right claw tapped the Crystal embedded in the flesh just below the throat. A film of translucent scales glowed around the soft pulse of the round stone, trapped for the Demon's lifetime. "It will be the last thing you see."

"Who summoned you? Who betrayed the League?"

The Demon laughed. "Die in ignorance, Inaeus."

From out of the trees came a wild burst of horse and sword.

The blade pierced the Demon's open jaw, pitch boiling up around the glittering metal. Momentum thrust it deeper and embedded it in the Fire of the right eye socket.

Its howl of terror shook the air.

Muscles thrashed.



Inaeus crashed to the ground and, body straining, managed to drag himself away from the writhing monster as it lurched into the fiery wall. The roasted steam of dying skin billowed, enveloping the grove, blinding him. Legs buckling, the Demon fell to its knees with a heavy groan. The acrid smoke parted. Inaeus found himself in the shadow of an unsteady mass of ragged muscle. Desperation hauled him across the ground.

Where was Conde? Where was Filvar?

He snatched his legs away as the Demon toppled to the ground, churning up a cloud of choking, grey dust. The air whipped in a whirlwind around the grove, dragging the sulphur-stench of the monster into its heart.

Inaeus stared.

The Demon began to dissolve. It oozed into the earth, limbs, wings, neck, claws, stretching out in a bubbling mass of translucent liquid. The winds died away and Inaeus breathed again. The soft slurp of the Demon's dissolving flesh was the only sound in the clearing.

Gone. Finally gone.

Inaeus laughed out loud. "Conde, you did it!" There was no reply. "Filvar?" Worried eyes searched the darkness. "Conde?"

"Here."

He half crawled to an old tree stump. Filvar's head was low over Conde, a strange, soft moaning coming from his slimed throat. The horse moved away as Inaeus collapsed beside her. "Are you all right?"

"You always ask the stupidest—" A ripple of pain cut off her acidic tongue. "Fine," she managed to gasp. "Just fine."

"What..." He lifted the charred remains of her patched shirt. His words drained away. Her stomach had been torn wide open, blood, slime and organs mixing in the half-light. "No," he murmured.

"I'm dying, Inaeus."

"No. We can—"

"Inaeus, I'm dying," she repeated. "I can't work spells. I've... I've tried." Conde reached out to take the hand that clutched her ragged coat. A smile twitched at her lips. "It's strange." Her hand crushed his as a fresh well of pain rushed her. "I never thought I'd die." She swallowed in a bloodied throat. "And now I have something to tell you."

"Save your strength. I know some healing-spells. It could take a while."

Conde sighed. “Impossible man,” she murmured. “In the duty room. The first Demon. It came for you, Inaeus.”

“For me—”

“Don’t...” Her hand lifted to silence him. “It spoke your name. I couldn’t let it take you.” Conde looked up, her teeth biting at her upper lip. “I just couldn’t. And so I tried to kill it. It has to be the work of a Father—”

Spasms contorted her shredded skin and Inaeus held her. “Why didn’t you tell me? The trial.”

Conde opened dimming eyes. Her hand reached up to his smeared face, her voice barely a whisper. “They would have killed me if I pointed a finger at the Council. I wasn’t ready to die. You weren’t safe. I had to know you were safe.” She swallowed. “They want you dead, Inaeus and they wanted to blame me. Both of us removed.

“So I let them blame me. With me gone, they didn’t have another obvious candidate to summon a Demon.”

She winced and bit at her lip. “Then I heard another was loose. I came almost too late. Its creatures could have killed you.” She fought against the pain. The knowledge terrified him. He could feel her thoughts, taste her fear. But he *shouldn’t* know Conde’s mind. “Inaeus. Destroy the Crystal. Protect yourself.”

“That’s your job.”

Filvar butted at his arm and he looked up. The horse had left a wide swathe of new, green grass as it pushed the recovered Crystal from the heart of the Demon to the edge of the clearing. “What...?” A sudden ache filled him. “Conde?” Her eyes had closed and her body was a dead weight. “No.”

With one hand, he lifted up the cold slab of clear Crystal. It gleamed on his palm, pulsed with life. “The League be damned.” And he pushed the stone into Conde’s gaping wound.

New skin grew over the Crystal, trapping it, making it a part of Conde. Silver fire coursed along her veins, infusing her muscles with a new energy.

“Conde?”

He pushed her slimed, auburn hair from her face. She was breathing. A finger pushed back her eyelid. Nothing.

In the time before the First Sorcerer bound the Crystal it had performed wonders, a wild tale holding that the stone had actually brought the dead back to life. Inaeus expelled a heavy sigh. His fingers stilled on Conde's cheek. It'd been worth a try.

However, the body was alive, nothing more.

Suddenly, the earth shifted.

Inaeus pulled his eyes away from the soft, persistent glow of Conde's new skin, following the slow rush of silver Fire spidering across the cold soil.

Fire seeped into the dry, barren earth.

Mists drifted up, enveloping Inaeus, catching him immobile in the smooth, glittery stuff, rubbing against his skin like warm silk. New blades of grass unfurled, their slow curls creating eddies in the rippling haze of active Fire. He could only stare as greenery clawed up the blackened bark, biting deep into the charred remains, forcing new life into the wood. Leaves sprouted out of smooth branches. Beyond the blasted circle, new saplings erupted. Life was returning.

Sound.

Crickets. The whirr of insect wings buzzed above the bustle of small animals through the new, summer-lush undergrowth. He could even hear the ripening swell of wild fruits. Inaeus watched a small, red-speckled bird burst out of the bushes, each down-stroke creating a strange after-image, shimmering shapes evolving into one species after another. Sparrows, wood pigeons, hawks, eagles were a blur of feathers and joyful cries as they streaked up into a sky softening into the rosy glow of dawn.

"It's beautiful, Conde," he murmured, turning his head through the mist. His eyes caught again on the soft pulse of the Crystal shining through her translucent skin. "Finally to see your soul."

The mists lifted. Colour and life had washed over the earth and sky. Inaeus stood, staring up into the newness, the swelling pain of his torn thigh gone. There was a vigour rippling through every living thing, a bright, shining aura of strength. It was all Conde. The Council had smothered the Crystal, crushing the fierce joy of being alive that was now Conde's core.

He pushed the past tense from his mind. His lungs drew in the sweet-scented morning air. "A new day. A new life," he promised. His eyes rested on Conde's clear, peaceful face—a breathing corpse.

Life without her.

He turned away.

How had he officiated at her trial? Holy, honourable Inaeus. She was right. He'd always put the League and its Council before her. Conde had been unable to tell him the truth, to tell him that she'd lost the use of her arm trying to save him. The blame for the crime of summoning a Demon could then only point to the High Offices. And he would've disowned her for such a scandalous charge. Conde left the League so she couldn't be blamed for another Demon, protecting Inaeus, yet again, from the schemes of the one who would break the League in trying to kill him.

He spent two whole years cursing her name. Shame rose up through his grief. Conde had given her life, willingly, for his. And he'd been too honour-bound, too stupid to see her devotion.

No more Conde.

Inaeus wept.

\* \* \*

He was going back, going back to finish what they'd started.

Inaeus stared back to the litter he'd fastened to Filvar's saddle. Conde lay there, still a softly breathing corpse. Tendrils of new green grass were pushing themselves over the fresh wood frame of the litter, curving slowly towards her hands and face, needing to touch the power within her.

She had the Crystal now, Inaeus thought grimly, and he wanted the entire Council to see how their elaborate schemes to destroy him had created a nightmare more terrible than they could ever imagine. Conde would... Inaeus faltered and pulled his eyes away from her pale face. Conde.

Why had he never realised the tight animosity of the Council? His duty blinded him to the all-too-human natures of the old men who had ruled the island for nearly five hundred years. Fear of the Oracle had forced them into action. But to release a Demon...two? Had they feared him, them, that much? Feared the natural power they contained?

Nothing had ever challenged the Council, no one had ever threatened their exclusive club.

Until now.

\* \* \*

The land around him burgeoned with new life. People spilled out of the City to gather the harvests that had appeared overnight. Song lifted on the light breezes, drifting off into blue skies. Children laughed as they tumbled and scrambled through the tall grasses lining the trade road, unconcerned with the slowly plodding horse and its dishevelled rider.

Inaeus ignored them all, his gaze fixed on the walls of Arcaider, gleaming in the late summer sun. He'd left only twenty-eight days before, determined to secure the honour of the League and destroy Conde and her Demon horde. Again, he'd been a fool. What had someone as glorious as Conde seen in someone like him? "No self-pity," he murmured. "I have to be strong. Conde must be avenged."

The gates of the city rolled back. They revealed the wide tunnel that led into the main avenue and down toward the market place. Inaeus stared at the familiar blackness, marking out the chips and cracks on the smooth brickwork of the tunnel. Arcaider had been his home for thirty years and the thought of it made him sick.

The clean streets bustled with noisy life. The hunger and terror could be forgotten, the day was one of celebration and feasting. The smells of baking breads, cakes, of roasting meats floated on the afternoon air. Preparations seemed to be underway for a great party, as long, colourful streamers stretched out from one house to another, snaking their way along the broad street. Filvar butted his way through the mayhem of the market square, startling those who were setting up the broad tables, pushing them aside with his broad, angry chest.

"Who goes there?"

Inaeus stared up at a bored sentry who stood on the Academy walls. The celebrations of the city would soon be in full riot and the man didn't seem pleased with the duty of guarding the Academy compound. No doubt the Council were enjoying the strength of youth once again. They wouldn't be pleased when they learnt of the new source of their power. "It's Inaeus."

"Captain Inaeus?" Immediately, he saluted and disappeared from the wall.

"Not any more."

Inaeus slipped out of the saddle. He stretched aching muscles, resisting the urge to rub through the tough hide of his trousers to his healed leg. The skin still itched. He straightened his spine. Inaeus refused to appear weak before the Council. "Back again, Filvar."

The horse snorted his contempt.

"My thoughts exactly." Inaeus stared at the familiar white brickwork. He'd been brought to the Academy as a young boy of nine, devoting himself to the League, vowing to uphold all of its laws to the best of his ability.

And he had. Once.

Inaeus squatted down by the litter, brushing back Conde's clean, auburn hair. "How are you feeling?" Her face was pasty in the strong sunlight, pasty and lifeless. "Wake up, Conde," he murmured. "Please."

The gates drew back into the courtyard and Inaeus looked up. His gaze narrowed as he found what remained of the Council hurriedly running out of the re-established Main Hall, their sandals flapping against the worn stone. The four were young men in their glittering robes. "They're here," he told the silent woman. "Time for your final surprise."

Filvar dragged the litter into the compound. The gates stood open behind him.

"Captain Inaeus!" Pendagon exclaimed, grabbing his hand and pumping it enthusiastically. The First Father's dark blue eyes skirted over him, searching for the Crystal. They moved to the saddle with its ancient blankets and pots. "Where is it?"

Inaeus feigned innocence. "What?"

"The Crystal, man!"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "The Crystal." Inaeus took up a stance mocking the formal correctness he'd always assumed before those who considered themselves his superior. His head lifted, eyes staring straight ahead. "I have to report that on retrieving it from the Demon I placed the Crystal inside the body of the former Exon, Conde."

"You what?" Pendagon demanded. "What are you playing at, Captain?" The Father spied the litter fixed to Filvar's saddle. "That woman? The Crystal in that woman?"

Inaeus' sword swung up to block the hand that reached out to Conde. "No," he said.

The Father's eyes were malevolent. "And what are you going to do with your...corpse?"

"Why didn't I see through you," Inaeus' gaze moved to include the rest of the muttering Council, "through all of you, years ago? Which one of you sent the Demon?"

You, Ratelband? Or you, my Lord Meyjes? Terrified by Oracles that would destroy your centuries-old club.

“Conde realised, but she stayed because...because of me.” The thought still amazed him. How had he inspired such devotion? “She died fighting to save my life and I was fighting for the honour of the League.” His sudden laugh was harsh. “What a wasted death.”

“Honourable Inaeus,” Pendagon mocked. “Do you think we’ll allow our Crystal to stay in your warm corpse? We are the Council. Our combined power will overwhelm you. With you dead, nothing can prevent us from ripping it right out of her guts.”

Inaeus lifted his sword, preparing his soul for the fight. “Then try. I’m ready.”

“You can’t keep out of trouble, can you, Inaeus?”

Hairs prickled the back of his neck. Inaeus turned. “Conde?”

Her hand reached out to steady herself, finding Filvar’s obliging rump. She shook her head, trying to focus her mind. Fingers dug into her healed stomach. “Thanks for the unexpected gift.”

“You’re alive.”

“Sharp as ever.” Conde scratched at her untidy hair, stretching newly charged limbs. She stared at her fingers as fresh sunlight made the healed skin glow. No scar. Her eyes swept over the clear, clean skin of her forearm, golden hairs lifting in the light, scented breezes. The rippling mass of silver scar tissue had been a constant reminder that Inaeus was in danger. Now she had the Crystal.

The smile she turned on the shocked Council was full of vicious charm. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she said, nodding her head. “Nice to see you all again.”

“This is impossible,” Pendagon muttered. “Valerion—”

“—proved that resurrection didn’t work. But he didn’t count on someone like me. A real sorcerer.” Conde prodded at the hardness of her stomach, felt the soft, living throb of the Crystal. “Inaeus and I don’t need your little artificial conductor to create the magic. It took me so far. I could do the rest. Our powers are inherent, natural. A strength of will that you have always lacked. So tell me who sent the Demons for Inaeus, or I absorb this thing inside me.”

“That would release the Demons from their binds.” Ratelband stared at her. “We’ll all die!”

“We’re used to fighting Demons,” Inaeus said. “We’d survive.”

“This woman summoned it, you fool!” Pendagon grated, his young face glittering with rage, the anger blistering the spells that kept his flesh taut and clear. “See the truth in her, Inaeus. Your fixation has always blinded you to her insanity.”

Conde stared. “You.” The heel of her hand smacked into Pendagon’s shoulder, jerking him back. “You knew about Demons. You had access to the books. And the Crystal. You saw Inaeus as a threat to your position as a Father.” She punctuated each statement with a sharp punch, startling the man back into the nervous knot of Fathers. She fixed each of the men in turn with a hard glare. “And who helped you? Meyjes? Nugent? Was it a Council conspiracy?”

“Inaeus, listen to her madness,” Pendagon demanded.

“The Crystal knows,” Conde said, her voice soft, reflective. “It knows who lost control and left it to the abuses of the second Demon. I’ll let it punish the offender for me.”

“Punish? You credit the Crystal with conscious—”

Pendagon got no further.

He stared at his feet, too incredulous to scream, as sinew and bone melted into the ancient stone floor. His ankles ballooned and then burst, his leg bones splintered. The Council backed away, staring in horror at the death of their leader. The crowds gathering at the gates murmured their rising panic as Pendagon’s desperate, clawing screams rushed over the courtyard, sentries scrambling out of their barrack rooms to come to his aid.

It was already too late.

Pendagon’s ribs snapped away one after the other. The guards yanked at his thrashing arms, demanding help from the watching Council, shouting for the silent, unmoving Inaeus to help them save the screaming First Father as Pendagon was pulled further into the stone floor, leaving a bubbling rush of bloody tissue.

“You used Valerion’s Vow of Constraint to bind the Crystal to your will. The island has suffered for centuries because of it.” With satisfaction she watched the old man’s chest and throat dissolve into thickened, pink sludge. “And you couldn’t stand the thought of Inaeus, a hill farmer’s son, joining your club.”

“I should have killed you!” Pendagon screeched. “You were the threat—”



They were his final words as his jaw fell away and his wrinkled head smacked into the vomit his body had become. Brain, ears, eyeballs floated and then sank slowly into the half-liquid.

The courtyard was silent.

Pendagon and his rule of the League were dead.

Inaeus caught Conde as she swayed. He held her tight against him, his arms wrapped over her wearied body. The warmth of her healed skin, the soft scent of her hair. Alive. She'd fought death to save him again. "Are you all right?"

Conde expelled a heavy sigh, her head falling back against the arch of his throat. "I'm glad it's all over," she murmured.

He laughed. "It's only just begun, Conde. Now you're the First Father."

"What?" Her head twisted to stare up at him in disbelief.

"Look at them," he said, turning her face toward the old men who were sinking to the ground. Extreme age hollowed their bones, their roughly jewelled vestments too heavy for weakened muscle. "They're nothing without Pendagon. You can work with the Crystal, make this place into something fine."

She laughed and pulled his arm tighter around her body. "Always trying to convert me to your ideal League."

"No, Conde."

Inaeus could feel the power of the Crystal pulsing through her.

He grinned. They'd been offered the chance to start all over again. To do it right. "It's our League."

## About the Author

To learn more about Kim Knox, please visit [www.kim-knox.co.uk](http://www.kim-knox.co.uk). Send an email to Kim at [kim@kim-knoxco.uk](mailto:kim@kim-knoxco.uk) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Kim! [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/daughters\\_of\\_circe](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/daughters_of_circe)

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Nimue's Price

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7% and Rising

*Not all faeries have wings. Not all goblins are green. And not all wars are fought on the outside.*

## Blood of Eden

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Larry Cresswell, a disillusioned twenty-something, moves back in with his parents after college, gets his young girlfriend pregnant and ends up in the Oakland barrio, drunk and on welfare. Not as much of this is his fault as he'd like to believe.

His girlfriend is a Changeling, left on Earth from the dimension of Faerie during a long and bitter war.

One day she learns this, leaves and takes their daughter to Seattle, during the WTO Protests of 1999. This disaster, it is foretold, will punch a hole between dimensions and send her home as Queen of the Sluagh goblin-folk.

Larry goes after his daughter, but to win her back he must first surrender...to himself. Only when he faces his own true origins can he hope to survive.

It's snowing in Arkadia. The King and Queen are imprisoned, and the Sluagh are on the march. Pass with Larry under the shadow of the storm, along with him for the hell-ride of his life...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Blood of Eden*:

The stink was the first thing to hit me. The trash had been taken out the night before, but this was no dirty Rubbermaid foetor. If two respectably-sized land mammals, say rhinoceroses, had been in there bumpin' uglies for a few hours, it would smell pretty much the same, a hot, nasty zoo reek of pheromones and bacteria with something underneath it that had rotted too long in the sun.

I entered the apartment. Here was all our endless jumble sale of Stuff, laid out in order of function. I couldn't believe I'd carried most of it on my back from our parents' houses to couch-surf after couch-surf, to our apartment, to the plane, to cabs and transient hotel after transient hotel, and finally here. Here that meant nothing. I couldn't believe the weight I still carried, slung across my back, hoisted over both shoulders, stuffed into all pockets, tied around my waist, knotted off in my shirtfront, secured in my coat, rammed through my earring holes, capped over my teeth, jammed down my throat and up my ass.

Here was the little foyer and its alcove in front of me, books and tapes and old papers spilling out from the bottom shelf. Here was the bathroom with cutout magazine pictures of babies and ducks and flowers on the walls and cabinets. To my left was the strip of “kitchenette”, the counter, the sink piled high with dishes.

H.R. Giger’s “The Magus” high on one wall above a long yellow strip of pizza coupons and phone numbers in Poly’s infuriatingly ornate handwriting.

There were art supplies on the shelf beneath the Giger poster, but Poly practiced different arts now. The phone was her new medium. As soon as she got home and began the night’s dial-fest, I would go and sleep on the floor in Una’s room. Una was always much more pleasant company. I wanted to hide there forever, make a nest and board the door.

Facing the file cabinet was Una’s toy box and the thrift-store loveseat, now big enough for only one person. Beyond that, the window blinds were drawn. Mercifully.

I had no idea how to lay my burden down. But I couldn’t carry it any farther. Nothing was real in there. Not even Poly. In the middle of the room was the sofa bed. One look was enough.

*These are all dummies, I thought. Poly will bounce off the bed and cry “Fooled you!” and we’ll go down to El Farolito and get dinner.* The last place I wanted to be was in my own skin at that moment. I wanted Calgon to take me away. But Calgon’s temple had fallen. There was only the herd on the bed, and the hand on the door.

I wanted to be a poet of Richard Brautigan’s caliber just then and rewind the bullet back into the gun. I wanted to be cloaked in any deliberate disguise I could find: a brick in the wall, a cockroach beneath the stove, a dead leaf in the street going where the storm winds took it.

I couldn’t handle one iota of what I was seeing. Not this final meeting in our state-subsidized apartment, not the cold sweat beading on my forehead and trickling like leaky faucets from under each arm.

*Let me out, I thought. Take this away from me.* On the floor in the middle of the room, beyond the bed, several unusual-looking gas masks lay where they had fallen, along with several brightly-colored knit bags and a big, old, green hiker backpack. Something that was either a walking stick or a didgeridoo lay just beneath the bed itself.

On the bed was a tangle of flesh I didn’t want to sort out. That wasn’t what really concerned me. I’d kind of been expecting to walk in on Poly and half the Forty-Niners starting lineup for quite some time.

What they were all doing on my bed had nothing to do with my first assumption. (Well, not much. I can still see it now when I close my eyes.)

In her playpen just beyond the bed, Una was awake and groggily watching it all.

On the bed sprawled four pasty, nominal humans covered with ciliate green fur like swamp moss, writhing like predatory sloths, heads half-lengthened to bullet shapes, shiny foam at their muzzles, their chops, their... Honest to God, had these things devolved so much I automatically saw them this way? Was it simply the writer's all-seeing eye, or... But this had all gone beyond speculation.

Poly looked as she had that day in my parents' house and every time afterward when she showed me her true shape while we were by ourselves, out of the light and unafraid. Her skin was still silver, her wing-nubs still webbed, her craggy teeth still sharp behind full, black lips.

The others on the bed looked a lot like her, but she was clearly a queen among goblins. All their hands were webbed. They all stank the same, like burning film scraps and smothered hope. *You found your real family*, I tried to croak. Nothing came out but air.

A fragment of H.P. Lovecraft's writing danced through my horrified brain and I nearly blew my breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack across the carpet... *And they will don waxen masks, and robes that hide, and come to this world to mock...*

They had big liquid eyes, lashing, coated tongues, big fangs, a gargoyle grab-bag of interchangeable parts and green dreadlocks that wavered like Gorgon cilia in the gloom. Their shoulders were badly hunched. Their three-fingered hands, whirling at their bad-witch work, were radioactive looms of poison light.

Any of them could pass for human, given the proper hoods or gloves. But their inner skins were fungal, fruiting terror and I found myself making a noise in my throat like razors on a chalkboard, ready to lash out with teeth and fists and feet at anything that got anywhere near me.

The poison light seemed to come from the backs of their necks, a place just up under their hair where the light began to warp. I wondered, with that wonder that gets me in trouble, what kind of backlash could roar up to meet such induced mutation? The light bent around them in varying degrees, making them appear more human when I didn't look straight at them.

Poly's head was down. Her friends had lifted up her short red hair. One of the others pulled something apart, put something together, pushed something through the skin at her nape. The tiny device hummed and began to glow pale green.

Poly never looked up. None of them made any move to cover themselves when I walked in the door. The moment had vulcanized, stretching like melting rubber. I felt a wound that would never heal open all the way in my mind.

My head should have simply exploded, the moment stopping, jump-cutting up off the film. But none of that happened, and in the sudden absence I was left with a bright choir of memory ringing my head like a concert amplifier, making my ears nearly bleed, the sounds...

*...of folk like these, webbed hands softly flapping up onto my windowsill like sudden mushrooms, circling the house and grounds with the nearly-silent flap and slap of bare footfalls and spring-loaded knees at the ends of thighs as thick as tree-trunks, built for leaping from mountain crag to mountain crag, hunched lurkers unfamiliar with the lower elevations, feeling, smelling for Auberón's twin scions and only heirs, me and Bronwyn, my brave big-sister-by-one-minute who screamed for me when the black thing tore open the shutters and threw up the sash and I was yanked vertically from my crib—*

I remembered my fear of these creatures by smell, and that alone gave me a handle on the moment, something to hang the rest of it on, a sense of familiarity where none should ever, ever be, except...

Except that I'd seen these things before, and I hated everything about them. That by itself kept my head from exploding. That, and very little else...

*Smelling like an overcooked pig was only the start of a bad day...*

## Nimue's Price

© 2007 Kim Knox

Nimue enters the shining city of Camelot with her order plain: seduce Merlin or lose her family.

She knows his magic, how he can slip under a woman's skin and work his charm. It's there in the shine of his dark eyes, eyes that see through to her soul. Merlin knows what she is.

In the searing light beneath the Round Room, Merlin discovers that the Lady Nimue is the same as him: a Seer. Now he must resist their attraction to save his own sanity. But a new enemy threatens Camelot with a weapon so destructive, he is forced to join with her and reach into the far future to save Camelot.

Merlin has always known that knowledge has a high price. But will Nimue be willing to pay hers?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nimue's Price*:

Nimue lay on the stuffed hay mattress and stared up at the curve of the ceiling. The torch cast a weak golden glow over the smooth stones and left most of the room in thick darkness. Merlin had dumped her there and bolted the door, fixing one of his devices. One that clicked and twisted and secured her better than stone and mortar.

She turned and punched her pillow.

"Saved by an invading army." She let out a slow sigh. "Well, saved for now."

At least Merlin had let her eat, bathe and rest.

"Not exactly going to plan, is it." A bitter laugh escaped her. "Seems I'm not that irresistible after all."

"You are to him."

Nimue's heart stopped.

A Voice. A Voice in her head. Inside her head.

Her neck tightened, a dull throb of pain spreading over the base of her skull. Nimue breathed against it and willed herself to be calm. There was something familiar about the voice. She'd heard it in a dream... No. The memory of searing white light and endless pain rushed over her. Not a dream, a nightmare.



“You’re...you’re Them.”

She felt the twist of a smile as if she wore it herself. “One of Them.” The press of quick spikes into her skull, sharp, fleeting, forced a gasp. “A new mind. Fresh. Free from Merlin’s fixed paths. Yes. You’ll do very nicely.”

“What do you want?”

A grin ran a saw across her brain. “We know what you’re doing here.”

“I...”

“Don’t bother to lie, Nimue. We know all, We see all. Your little scheme with Morgan is open and obvious to Us.”

Nimue bit into her lip and tasted her own blood. Fire surged down her spine and she curled her body tight, trying to deny the pain. “Please...I...”

“We have plans for Merlin. And you are a vital part of them.”

Nimue groaned against the rapid pulses of sharp pain scraping through every nerve, every muscle. “What do you mean?”

“You will take everything that Merlin has. But not yet.” A short pause and the pain washed over her and away. “He is coming. Remember. This is our secret. Or I will come to live in that sweet body of yours.”

Nimue breathed in and out. Slowly. So slowly. She slid her knees down from her chest, stretched and found the agony gone. She rolled onto her back and let the tears slip down her face into her pillow. Damn it. And damn the Iselin Dal to whatever hell They—

She cut off that thought.

If They knew everything, They had to know that Morgan had her sisters. That part of the bargain she had struck was for their safety.

Nimue sat up and wiped her hand over her mouth, wiped away the evidence of the Iselin Dal’s invasion of her mind. Her bare feet curled into the cold stone of the floor. Well, now she had two masters.

The clank and clink of the lock broke into her thoughts. A hiss and then bolts shot back. The door groaned.

The bright flare of a torch burst over the cell and Merlin glared at her. “They said I need you.”

A bitter laugh escaped her. “Nice to be wanted.”

Yes, two masters. And now Merlin made three.

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