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L. Shannon

TASCRYN:

BLOOD REIGN



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By

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Tascryn: Blood Reign

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Dedication

For the source of my inspiration... at least in certain areas (like the
bedroom!)

Prologue

Pahele watched as Grant and Jerdin crept into the room that protected the Book of the Dead. This time the boys would find the room empty. But they weren't after the book. They were opening the door set in the opposite wall, the door to the Secret Chamber of the Nine Realms. After several thousand years on the trail of their foolish quests, they actually held all nine keys that were needed to open Sadrina's cell.

Because of his aid, the boys would finally succeed. Because of his aid, Sadrina would soon be leaving hell.

And he would be left here without her.

The Book of the Dead flipped open on the table behind him, drawing Pahele's attention to the revealed pages. The Book of the Dead often shared its secrets with those it deemed in need of such knowledge. This time the open page offered a flowing poem.

*Under the sun, among the flowers,
The Queen with freedom shall fill her hours.
Without your Queen, Niflheim will suffer.
She who remains will tear hell asunder.
Flowers fade and time shall pass.
She will return to you at last.
~Reclaim her Heart~*

The Book often spoke to him, but never before had it given him a personal order. *Reclaim her heart...* Was it even possible after so much had come between them? It wasn't a question of love. Of course he still loved her. She was everything to him.

But Sadrina might never forgive him.

When the mistress of hell, also called Hel, the half dead, demanded he imprison Sadrina, Pahele had agreed. At the time it had been the better of two terrible choices. He had allowed Hel to lock Sadrina into the Chamber of the Nine Realms, believing it was for Sadrina's own good. Damn Hel with her plots within twisted schemes. The dark

mistress had known that once Sadrina was within the chamber there was only one way for her to be freed.

The Book, too, had betrayed Pafele that day. Its only advice had been to allow the deeds to flow. Its promise that all would be set right had not referred to Sadrina at all. He had sorted out the truth too late to keep her free. With all his power, he had still failed her.

Surely Sadrina would never forgive him, and if she were wise, she'd never return to hell.

Pafele closed the Book of the Dead and returned to watch for the boys. Any second they would come through on their way to offering Sadrina freedom...

Jerdin entered the hallway first. He was well grown now with his dark looks and a burning desire to control his own fate. He would understand her need for freedom.

Jerdin turned his cold blue eyes directly toward Pafele. *"I see you, Uncle."*

Pafele nodded to acknowledge his silent challenge, but did no more than that. He'd told Jerdin to call him "Uncle" as a child but at some point the honor had become an insult. He had never been Jerdin's enemy, but the boy couldn't see that. The only one Jerdin trusted was his companion, Grant.

Grant followed Jerdin. He was in demonic form as if he expected a physical confrontation. Grant slowly moved forward, while supporting Sadrina with one arm around her narrow waist. Sadrina looked so fragile. Her petite frame was almost hidden from view by her son's bulky muscles.

Their likeness marked them as kin. Their black skin was typical of the royal demon blood. Pafele's skin showed that same midnight hue. At some point Sadrina had hacked her long black tresses off into short lank hunks. Once it had flowed down her back in long thick waves just as Grant wore his now.

Sadrina's eyes flashed in fear as they began to cross the room. She cowered against her son's frame. Without hesitation, Grant lifted her into his arms, carefully tucking her long limp wings around her like a protective blanket.

"Now, Jerdin. We must go, now." Grant's voice was firm, but his gaze constantly scanned for potential threats.

Jerdin nodded once before gripping Grant's shoulder. The surge of the boy's powers sent a tremor out through the realm. The ancient spells should have kept them from leaving. None could travel into or out of these chambers, without permission. Without Pafele's permission. Even with it, Jerdin tore a hole in the fabric of the realms that would take considerable energy to repair.

None of it mattered.

Sadrina was gone.

Pafele sagged against the rough wall, adjusting to the feel of hell without Sadrina. There was an emptiness he had never noticed before. Even with her imprisoned, he had

been as aware of her as his own body. Now, he would live a half-life.

She deserved to find her freedom. Perhaps out there among the mortals, she might also feel her missing half. Perhaps her chosen half-life might bring her back to him, in time...

Chapter One

*Sixty-four years, three months, two days, six hours, twenty-one minutes and sixteen seconds later
Niflheim, 1625 AD*

Pahele shuddered as his realm of Niflheim shifted and came into balance once more. The returning balance could only mean one thing.

His Queen had returned at last.

"Master?" Sadrina entered the throne room and knelt before him in absolute submission. She was as beautiful as ever. Her sensual presence filled his senses. The mere fact that she knelt before him in the realm she had once called home told him she was desperate.

Hell simply wasn't the same without her, but what had finally brought her back to him? He reined in his physical response and opened his mind to her. As always, the connection supplied all that was lacking in his soul. His essence pulsed with power. He couldn't let her leave him again. No matter what brought her back, he would bind her here, to his side.

Her love, hate and fear crossed their tendril thin bond and filled him. She came for the sake of her son. The boy dominated her thoughts, filled almost all of her mind. Almost, but not quite.

She also feared being enslaved. Her fears filled him with regret. Not much of a surprise considering that was exactly what he had allowed to happen before.

Another slippery fast thought crossed her mind. This one gave him hope. She liked his hair long. Her thought about his hair caught him by surprise. If he had known that, he would have grown it out long ago.

"Sadrina, finally you've returned to my side." He reached toward her and used his powers to pick her up. She should never be forced to kneel, not even to him.

She allowed him to draw her into his arms.

What had changed this time? In the beginning she had welcomed his touch, but in

more recent millennia, she had flinched away from him. And the part of her mind that might have explained the mystery remained silent.

Her skin was warm and scented like the flowers he'd long dreamed of her dancing in. His body hardened while he wrestled for control. She felt so good pressed against him.

She struggled slightly, succeeding only in rubbing against him, arousing him further. His powers surged and her human clothing melting away. Sadrina should take her true form here in their home. Her skin darkened from olive to bluish black. Her silken wings flowed the full length to the floor.

She needed something only he could offer. Why else would she return?

"If you wish to have the answer you seek, you must convince me of your desire to please." He stroked his hand down her back, his fingertips trailing under the softness of her wings. Would she ever accept him without being forced? Perhaps someday, but not yet. "Please me, and your son will know the truth."

She would do anything for Grant, for the son that should have been his. Damn the politics of the gods. And damn the Norns and Fates who played them all like pawns. They had kept him and Sadrina apart long enough. But their control was limited. Sadrina was bound to him by destiny, and nothing they could do would change that one truth.

For now, the child, Grant, would be his hold over her, but soon she would be given a choice. He begged the Creator that this time she chose him.

He was demon lord over all the Tascryn demons, holding more power than most gods. Yet, staring down at the woman who had always been the second half of his heart, it all meant nothing without her. Their immortal years had been passages of pain, while a world of misplaced loyalties separated them. Perhaps this time they would be allowed the love he'd long yearned for.

He tipped her chin up, forcing her shuttered gaze to meet his. "Your weakness does nothing to please me."

Sadrina's eyes flashed fire bright red. "You know why I am here. Nothing but desperation would bring me back to my prison."

He wanted to apologize for his mistakes and beg her for forgiveness, but he bit back those words. Instead he offered her only the truth. "You will never be imprisoned again." He would see to that promise.

"What is a place, but a prison, if I cannot leave or choose to do as I wish?"

He closed his mind to her wasted anger. He could not afford to let her leave him again. Her years of freedom had cost him too greatly. "Then for now, call it a prison, but before you choose your path, be aware that I can use any being in my realm without question. I have no need for an unwilling partner." In a way it was the truth, but it was also a lie. He had no need or desire for any other. Only Sadrina's body held the promise of ultimate satisfaction.

"Bed partner you mean?" She tensed and he felt her sudden fear.

He relaxed his dark expression. She didn't yet understand his needs, but she soon would. Her disdain for sharing his bed cut him, but her fear tore him to shreds. Both drove his anger. "Bed, floor, or any other surface we find appealing."

Her eyes closed, hiding their beautiful smoke shades. "I want to be free," Sadrina whispered.

He swallowed a sigh. Her despair pained him. Anything that caused her pain would do twice the damage to him, for above all else it was his duty to protect her. "I need you here with me." She would take her place as his Queen. The time for patience had passed.

"I only returned for Grant."

She hadn't come for him. She didn't want to be with him. "I will accept that for now. If it is a barter that you offer, then I accept for as long as the merchandise pleases me."

"What about Grant?"

Grant, always Grant. How different would their lives have been if they had bonded before and Grant had been his son? "I will see that he comes to no harm."

"What drives his thirst?" She persisted, her quiet voice demanding he fulfill his part before she even considered hers.

Pahele closed his eyes and expanded his senses to all the realms they touched. Grant held onto a human woman, his soul filled with devotion and indeed, love. "His heart does."

"What does that mean?" Sadrina caught his hand in her fear. The contact sizzled through Pahele.

Finally, he could offer her pleasing news. "Your son is in love with the girl. The more powerful his emotions, the more he will yearn to be with her in every way." Pahele knew those desires very well indeed. Love led to desire and desire to hunger. Together, they were the magic that bound the realms.

She gasped. "But his cravings are dangerous. He would be destroyed if he harmed her, even by accident."

Such was the truth. The boy would need more control than his mortal form held. Grant was unique in all nine realms. He was half demon by his mother, but his father had been a mortal man. He had unfortunately inherited his father's mortality. For Sadrina, Pahele had fed the boy a sip of royal blood and with it a few vampire-like tendencies. Both Grant and Sadrina believed the blood had been from a Cyvampis demon. They were wrong. It was his own powerful blood that sustained Grant.

Pahele strengthened the connection to Grant and drew off the hunger. For now he would control the boy's need to feed and keep it gentle enough to allow him this woman.

"I have dampened the draw of his hunger. He will have full control of his desire to feed."

"Thank you." Sadrina's fingers tightened over his hand. He ached to open his palm and accept her touch as an equal, but it was not yet that time.

"It was nothing to do so little for the one you hold most dear." He cared for Grant as well and had done this much and more to see to the boy's happiness in the past.

"I leave my gratitude, but I wish to return and meet his bride."

If she left, how long would it be before she had reason to return? "No." Regret washed over him with the rejection. He would give her anything, but not her freedom. Not this time.

"Please, let me go." Her plea almost undid him. She was royalty, from the eldest, strongest blood and should never beg.

"No. If you attempt to leave, I will withdraw my control from your son and allow him to deal with the craving however he must."

"You are still a cold bastard." She pulled away from him and would have fled further if he hadn't grabbed her wrist and shackled her at his side on the dais.

"I do what I must." He restrained another sigh. "You will stay here with me."

"Here in the throne room? That could prove interesting." Her cutting wit, which was always such a pleasure, rose once more to the surface.

Now she would fight him and he couldn't wait for the battle to begin. "You will share my chambers and serve only me. All others will serve you as is proper for your rank."

She stared longingly toward the door-less exit. "So I *will* be a slave, your slave."

He caressed the soft flesh of her arm, allowing one of his claws to scrape over her pulse point. "You have never been and never will be a slave. You are the rightful Queen here whether you take up that position or not."

Chapter Two

Sadrina marveled that Pahele made it seem that she had a choice and yet none at all with the very same words. If Pahele willed it, she would be forced to accept it, and that sounded like imprisonment and enslavement to her.

Yet, she felt his gentle restraint. His domineering strength was held in check in every way. His fingers held her secure but it was a gentle prison. His powers held her within the realm but he was also allowing her to have a will of her own. For some unknown reason, he wished her to choose to stay. To willingly accept her throne at his side.

The draw between them was undeniable. From the moment she stepped into his presence, his powers pulsed over her, a loving caress and a constant reminder of his strength. She had only tasted that power once, and had hungered for it ever since, through several millennia.

"You have forgotten that I can hear your thoughts."

"Damn you, Pahele. Am I to have neither freedom nor privacy?"

"Not from me. I have always known your thoughts, from your very first breath, and undoubtedly until our last."

He had been a part of her life forever. Her father was his friend, co-ruler and equal in every way but one. Her father, Sadaen, had cast off his crown and gone rogue after her mother's death. Pahele had taken up the responsibility of ruling their world and raising her.

He continued to stroke his sharp claw point over her skin, raising tendrils of arousal with every touch. His voice was the perfect aphrodisiac. Its deep rumble vibrated through her with consuming power. "I will always cherish you in every way you will allow. Why is this such a bad thing?"

Why did she resist...? Because her heart depended on it. She fought to gather her defenses once more. "Because your favored method of cherishing is to crush with your overwhelming dominance." He had ever been the one to control her in her youth and

even later when her imprisonment had driven her nearly mad.

Pahele's expression closed and she immediately missed the swirling depths of his eyes. "I did only as I had to."

"That is the easy answer. I know I have no choice here."

"You will stay. You will become Queen. Beyond that, you have many choices. One of which is whether you wish to expand your powers and accept your own strength."

The possibility of claiming her powers was an allure she wasn't strong enough to reject. "Will that allow me to wander through your devious mind?"

"Yes. I will keep nothing from you."

He said 'nothing' but she knew otherwise. He would continue to do as he thought best. Not that she would turn down his offer to teach her. His methods of teaching were always quite enjoyable. Heat pooled through her with the memory of her first and only lesson in performing the tasc required of the Synn demons.

"You would remind me of that when I am attempting to show restraint." His hands claimed her, pulling her forward to meet his demanding lips. She swam in his overwhelming pheromones. No being on earth could resist his desire and she was no exception.

Her eyes closed with the burning contact. Sadrina's hands landed against his hard, broad chest. She could release the essence of Synn, allowing her partner to share their explosive joining to the fullest and she did so now, wondering if it would have any effect on Pahele.

Something brushed against her calf. A quick glance confirmed her suspicions. They were now in his chambers. The object bumping her leg was Pahele's decadent bed, which was a foot high and more than ten feet across. The blood red and black silk that covered it offered her temptation.

He lifted her and knelt in the center of all that silk, cradling her gently into its slick softness.

This is our destiny. She clearly heard his thoughts as they flowed through her mind and settled firmly in her heart.

Her mind rebelled at Pahele taking control over the situation so easily, but her body had a mind of its own. Her senses burst to life, sharpening every detail to the point of exquisite pain. Pahele's light touch trailed fire over her naked skin. His eyes held a flame of their own.

Her breasts swelled, nipples tightening with the first brush of his sharp claw tips. Those wonderful claws trailed down to her navel and then moved to the curve of her hip.

Sadrina pressed her body toward his, desperate for contact. Her hands clung to his shoulders. "*Touch me.*" She demanded Pahele give what he offered. Aloud she may argue about wanting to escape him, but the reality of his seduction was something no

woman would turn down.

His sharpened nails bit into her thighs as he lowered his mouth to her breast. The painful claws countered his soft breath to perfection. The hot air was her only warning before his lips connected with her flesh.

Each gentle suck channeled her sexual need, enhancing the pounding blood that danced to his every motion. Heat pooled in her core, tightening the need, throbbing with the desire.

“Pahele!” she cried out as his fingers slipped between her thighs and filled her, stroking her to a higher plane. Those black nails that were death to his enemies offered only pleasure to her. She knew from experience that he could control the length and shape of his claws like every other aspect of his being. And whatever he was doing now... was perfect. The motion of their blunted tips through her moist folds weakened her knees, but it was his fingers stroking deep into her center that was her complete undoing.

The tension was unbearable. She would burst apart if he didn’t soon join her. She would probably shatter when he did. Pahele held back, when she wanted him hard inside her. Her hips thrust up, her body clenching in rapture.

Her claws raked into the supple leather of his shoulders, marking him, claiming him, but even that wasn’t what she needed.

Pahele growled and threw back his head, exposing his throat. Sadrina accepted his offering, sinking her fangs into him, devouring the rich wealth that was his essence. The flood of his emotions rocked through her, an avalanche of desire.

She swallowed and clenched over his hand in a welcoming orgasm, releasing her pleasure across their connection to share with him.

“Have mercy on me.” His agonized words awoke her from the lake of sensation in which she was drowning.

His hands gently continued the quest for satisfaction while his own body was hurting and needy. His hard length thrust against her thigh. His moan blew into her hair.

He needed her.

She shifted her body, using her flexibility to evade the fire of his hand. She stroked his chest, claws scratching over his granite abdomen. Her fingers brushed over his pulsing shaft, then claimed the jumping length in her fist. He was too broad to encircle with her small fingers, so she palmed him as he continued to thrust shallowly against her.

She licked at the ragged wound in his neck, alternating with kisses pressed over the healing flesh.

A nip to his chin drew his attention above her waist. He looked down into her eyes, his gaze burning with a fiery glow. A slow sexy smile covered his lips. “Will you

satisfy me? Will you let us become one?" he asked. Then he kissed her, his tongue swiping over her lips and plunging into her with the perfect dominance that was so much a part of him.

She smoothed her slick palm over his tip. He gasped into her mouth when her claws edged around his base, sliding underneath to cup his balls with a squeeze, showing her own dominance.

"Yes, I will satisfy you." With a tug that he couldn't fail to follow, she rolled him onto his back. Her thighs straddled his, both her hands pleasuring him now.

"I will let us be one, here on this bed." She lifted her slight weight, leading him to the very gates of paradise. All the while she reveled in her power over him. "Outside this room I may have no choices, but here, I own you, your body, and every drop of your soul."

His mouth opened as if to speak and she took that moment to sink onto his shaft, impaling herself.

His eyes rolled up and his mouth shut on a growl of pleasure.

She rocked forward, allowing his hands to control her motion, while she sought out his lips.

Those perfect, lush lips of his were drawn back over his fully extended fangs. Like the Cyvampis blood demons he ruled over, he needed blood to find completion. She could ride him forever, giving them both great pleasure, but he would not climax without the taste of blood on his tongue.

She sank one hand into his long, black hair, and then nibbled on his lips. She bit down on her own lip and licked a drop, brushing it over his tongue.

His hands clenched on her hips. He drove upward into her, hard and possessive. His muscles locked with a shudder. He needed her.

She completed the binding by offering up her own blood for his desire. Her head tilted to accommodate his needs.

He growled a single breath before surging up to claim her in every way. His fangs sank into her throat. His cock swelled and rammed home. His arms locked her body to his as his mind overflowed hers with sensation beyond any other she'd ever felt.

Binding.

The binding allowed her to see into his soul. He could hide nothing from her. His every thought and emotion was bared before her.

Only one mattered. Pahele loved her. He had always loved her. He would always love her.

But in this world ruled by desire and death, would love be enough...?

Chapter Three

Sadrina lay curled against Pahele's side, tucked contentedly within his arms and surrounded by his great wings. "You lied to me."

"Probably. Are you angry?" He toyed with a strand of her long hair, sending tingles dancing across her scalp.

It was impossible to hold onto anger when so carefully embraced within the cocoon of his arms. "Perhaps I should be. I did not remember the binding words at first."

His hand stilled. "But you do now?"

"Oh, yes." *Will you satisfy me? Will you let us become one?* Those words and the sharing of blood had bound their souls together. "Their importance was in your devious mind. You never planned to let me leave here." Somehow the words didn't feel so painful or terrifying now. She almost hoped he would deny her suspicions and allow their loving to be complete and untainted.

"No, I could not let you leave me again." There was no apology in his tone but regret filled his mind.

Again, she was to be a prisoner. How much so remained to be seen. "Yet, you implied I had a choice."

"You do have a choice, even if it isn't the one you hoped for."

She needed to see clearly where she stood because as it was she wasn't sure she wanted to leave hell if it meant leaving him. She studied his face, surprised to see how relaxed he remained during this interrogation. "So I still have a choice as long as I am bound to you?"

"Yes." His eyes slid closed as did his mind.

He was hiding something, or perhaps deciding how much to tell her. "Why have you done this? Is this your plan or someone else's?"

At first his expression remained closed, but then she felt his hesitation and then acceptance. "I could wait no longer for you to return. Your presence is needed here."

"To be Queen." Or did he mean as his lover or as a prisoner? After all, the greatest

majority of her life had been spent within a locked chamber.

"Yes, as my Queen. Hell has no balance without you." He returned to playing lazily with a ribbon of her hair. "I have no balance without you."

She smiled at his romantic charm. It was a side of Pahele she had seen little of and one she hoped to see much more of in times to come. She let her hands roam and learn every nuance of his body. The drape of his wings over her made the silken flesh of his body an appealing temptation. "You have power. You don't need balance."

Pahele tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "Sadrina, everything is about balance. This realm is weak, and has been even weaker since Jerdin's fall."

She thought of the boy who was closest to her son. Jerdin had meant so much to Grant that her son had spent nearly a decade traveling with her to ease his loneliness. "Do Jormungand and Hel still grieve for the boy then?" Sadrina had no love for either but she could sympathize with their loss. At least Jerdin still lived and eventually could return. The same couldn't be said for Jerdin's young mate.

"Yes, they grieve and their frustration results in pain for all others." His low growl made it sound as if he had taken the brunt of their anger and that didn't seem very likely.

Jormungand and Hel were both sadistic and thrived on the suffering of others. "Nothing has changed. They've always been abusive."

"That is true, but now they lack hope. They are much more dangerous without it. Jerdin had been their best chance of using the prophesy to free their father. Without him, they are searching for other ways to end the mortal world."

"Why don't they just wake the boy?" She knew from Grant that Jerdin had been put to ground in a deep healing sleep after the death of his mate had left him violently unstable. Since Jormungand and Hel wanted to use the boy's destructive *daegyn-rok* powers to end the world, she figured the boy's pain would please them to no end. It had long been their evil plan to begin Ragnarok in order to free their father, Loki from his venomous prison. Jerdin being unstable didn't seem like a good thing.

"Cernunnos guards him too well. They cannot reach Jerdin."

"Well, that is good. I imagine he would be willing to do the deed since his mate was killed. What does all that have to do with me?"

His voice was calm and confident. "You give me the strength I need to counter Hel and Jormungand."

"Balance. What were you saying about balance?" She'd always thought Pahele and his magical powers were undefeatable.

"You are the counter point to Hel. Your energy is equal and opposite hers. When you are here, there is a balance to the power that holds the realm together."

"Right. So without me the place was just falling apart." She rolled her eyes, a motion she had picked up from the mortals.

Pahele might not know the meaning of the motion but he would recognize her

disbelief. He pulled her closer and nuzzled her affectionately. "Yes," he whispered sadly. "Seventeen souls were lost in the past season."

"Lost? Creator, have mercy! How could they be lost?" Souls were immortal even when incased inside mortal bodies. For a soul to be lost... It was unthinkable.

His sigh drifted past her ear. "We don't know, but they aren't the first and I fear they won't be the last."

"What are you doing to find them?"

"I continue to send out several of the Akyrn to search every realm, but they have found nothing." He paused. "I am beginning to think they may have been betrayed by a protector."

No, that wasn't possible. Surely no protector of souls would do anything to harm one. The Tascryn hierarchy existed to protect each and every soul as it journeyed through various lives. There had to be another answer. "How were they lost?"

"There seems to be no pattern. Some are lost when freed from the bodies. Others seem to be lost before they can return to the Creator. One was lost even before the Cyvampis attempted to complete the tasc."

This was horrible. She'd never heard of souls being lost like this. "So the Creator knows?"

"Yes, the Norns and Fates are desperate to find the reasons. They believe it is a sign, and I fear they may be right."

"A sign of the end? That should make Hel happy." Sadrina snuggled into Pafele's arms, accepting his affection and sharing his burdens, wondering if sleep could be found while souls were left endangered...

Chapter Four

How had she fallen under his spell so easily? After only one tumble on his silks, Sadrina was ready to accept him as her master again. No, not as her master, but now that she was in his mind, she knew he'd never wanted to be her master.

Now she knew his heart and it made a difference.

Pahele was so tempting with his power. She remembered how all the lesser demons had groveled longingly for any attention he offered and she understood that need. Growing up under his guidance hadn't been easy. He'd treated her like a child, and she'd yearned for him to see her as a woman. And when that had failed, she'd misbehaved and caused trouble to get his attention, something the lesser demons would never consider doing.

Now that she knew how he felt about her, she would never again hesitate to demand what she needed. She'd swear it to the Creator: he was hers.

This time she'd fight for him.

Sadrina trailed kisses down Pahele's rough chest. He lay dozing underneath her and she debated exactly how to wake him. For now she nibbled on one nipple, teasing it into a rigid peak. At some point he had added jeweled rings that pierced that tender flesh. The gold ring provided even more enjoyment as she tongued it with light flicks.

Pahele awoke with a flinch, grabbing her shoulders in a brutal grip. His eyes were wide and fiery, only easing when they focused on her face.

"Pahele?" she asked after giving him a chance to get control of himself.

He pulled her forward, crushing her against his chest. His lips buried in her hair and his hands trembled against her back.

What could make him react like that? She reached for his mind, but it was closed to her. Slowly the lockdown that held him relaxed and Sadrina let the mystery go for the time being.

Sadrina nibbled at his shoulder then moved down past his sensitive nipples to his rippling abdomen. Each kiss left him twitching. He was so responsive; she just had to increase her efforts. She let her fangs lengthen and scraped the tips over his flesh in short

nips.

When he reached for her, to take control, she pushed his hands firmly back to the bed. "No, this is my playtime. Lay back and take it like the good master you are."

"Sadrina... I am at your mercy." Pahele leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head as if he needed some restraint to keep from interfering.

Her head dipped forward once more to nip at his side and then hip, before swinging back toward his heavy, twitching cock. Her fingers trembled, not quite touching him, before moving on to feather light caresses up and down his length. Her nails trailed the puckered ridge down over his balls, and his flesh tightened and his hips bucked slightly.

She shifted between his thighs, freeing one of her hands to dip into her own folds and tease her clit. After finding a light rhythm that suited her body, she leaned closer to blow a breath of air over the head of his cock while using her other hand to stroke the length of his shaft.

Pahele reveled in her seduction. She was the most exquisite being in any of the nine realms. From the first he had known Sadrina would be perfect for him. After all, she was the other half of his heart and soul. But how was he to know their bodies would be so in tune as well? No, this was so much more than he'd ever expected.

His breath caught when her nails ran a path of devastation down his body. And her teeth... hell never felt so good. And her mouth, as it lowered to take his cock...

Shit.

She paused, and he was lost. His hips jerked. Did she know that he was no more than a trembling innocent within her talented hands? Her warm breath was excruciating. He was on the verge of begging—

Hel's much hated voice interrupted them. "*Pahele, come to me, now.*"

"Not now!" he shouted out loud, which was far better than denying the bitch with a mental growl as he wished he could do. Unfortunately, that meant Sadrina was bound to misunderstand.

"What?" Sadrina asked with a puzzled frown.

He leaned forward and caught her shoulders, pulling her up to sit beside him. "I have to go take care of something."

"Take care of what?" Her expression dropped from puzzled and landed fully into irritation.

How could he make Sadrina understand? Come to think of it, was there even a chance she would ever accept the twisted game he played with Hel? Not very likely. "We can talk about it when I get back."

"No, we can talk about this now. What is so damn important that you want me to stop what I thought we were both enjoying immensely?"

He thought about trying to avoid answering or possibly even lying. But she

would know if he told an untruth and avoiding it would only piss her off more. "Hel."

"What about it?"

Creator forgive him. How could he hurt Sadrina like this? "Not it. Not hell the place, but her. She has summoned me. I must go to her now."

"Oh, no you don't." She flung herself away from the bed. "You can not seriously think you can have sex with me and then run to her call!"

Pahele watched as she tried to form clothing and force her body back into a human form. Both efforts failed, showing how truly upset she was. Sadrina's emotions had always interfered with her powers. Since she still didn't want to be naked in front of him while feeling vulnerable, a feeling that Pahele understood, she grabbed up his royal robes and drew them around her petite body with a graceful flourish.

She wouldn't look at him. Her voice rasped out with a roughness that cut deep with ribbons of pain. "You can't go. Not until you show me where my room is."

He had wanted her to share his chambers, but he knew this was a time for concessions. "You can have the adjoining chambers." He motioned to the far wall where two drapes framed a wide doorway. As she stalked toward the room, trailing almost three feet of black and gold robes, he used his powers to create a chamber suitable for Sadrina to use.

She cast a final glare over her shoulder before slamming her way into the newly decorated chamber.

"I'll return as soon—" His nose was about flattened when she used her powers to slam the door soundly in his face. "As I can." Well, that didn't go well. Sadrina would have to wait until he'd dealt with Hel.

He gathered up his mental armor and prepared to face the fallen goddess. Hel was going to be a problem. As soon as she found out that Sadrina had returned...well it wouldn't be pretty.

The real problem was that Hel thought of him as a pet or perhaps a possession. A pet she might actually care for. He was treated like a toy, and she was the kind of child to rip the heads off her dolls and experiment to see how quickly the puppets would burn.

In other words, she treated him like shit.

And he took it, accepting whatever she dished out, letting her vent on him instead of the others. He wouldn't be killed by her tantrums, and he knew how to best deal with her games. Since he had taken up the position of whipping boy, she hadn't killed anyone. She dished out pain in every direction, but always reserved the worst for him.

He strode down the black marble hallway of the royal wing. None of the demons were in sight, nor were any of the lesser beings that resided in the realm. The usually busy halls were empty. Hel must have been rampaging.

Did she already know about Sadrina?

A door opened ahead of him. The sight of Nail, at the door to the boy's library, stopped Pahele. Nail was a special case. He had been Hel's victim until Pahele had

bartered for his freedom. Now Nail was under his protection.

Nail? Are you well? Pahele asked mentally. Nail was very self conscious about his inability to speak aloud. He was always more at ease when spoken to silently.

Yes, Master.

Do you have everything you need?

I have no unmet needs, Master. I... Nail paused and pushed his long silver hair back. *Hel is very angry.* Fear flashed in his strange silver eyes.

So the boy was still afraid of her? Not much of a surprise after all she'd done to him. The day he'd found out she had Nail the poor boy had nearly been ruined. *I will see to her. She will not bother you.*

I know that, Master, but the others are not so lucky.

Who has she hurt? He stretched his senses and immediately felt the demons who had fallen under Hel's wrath. Damn, she was a violent bitch. *I will see to them once I have dealt with her.*

Can I help?

Not with her, but you can see to the others while I am busy. Take Ariun with you. If there are any injuries that he cannot handle, I will see to them later.

Nail gave a short nod and faded from his vision. He was reliable and would see to what needed done. And the Daelyn demon, Ariun, was one of the few who did not look down on Nail for being a Kindred Spirit instead of a born being.

Now came the unpleasant side of his duty. He advanced to Hel's chamber.

Pahele didn't bother to knock. Even through the door, he could hear Hel screaming. Upon opening the door saw her victims were two of his Cyvampis demons, Mykael and Gaybriel. The two blood demons knelt before her in subservient postures that didn't suite them at all. But their shredded wings showed that they hadn't much choice in the situation.

"Ah! Pahele, how good of you to finally join us." Hel spun her whip lazily in the air over the kneeling demons.

When he stepped between Mykael and Gaybriel, he placed a hand on each of their heads. Drawing from his power and that of the realm he restored them completely. "Go help Ariun in the throne room." His first responsibility was to his demons. They blinked out to safety before he turned to face Hel.

"That wasn't very nice, Pahele. You stole my fun." Her thin lower lip stuck out in a pout.

The dark goddess could never be called pretty. But she had a seductive beauty that might have held an attraction if not for the ugliness of her nature. "You remember our bargain?"

"Remind me." Hel paced around him like a predator looking for weakness.

He ignored her stalk. She would do as she wanted whether he reacted or not.

"When I took Nail from you, I offered my flesh in his stead." It had been a good bargain, selling his flesh more than once. Even before taking Nail he had been subject to her whims and after she felt freer about her infliction of pain.

"Yet Nail wasn't yours to protect." She trailed her fingers down the back of his wings. The sensation was like a touch of ice over the marrow of his bones.

"Nail is mine now." He forced his body to become like stone, letting none of his revulsion betray him by flinching from her touch.

"You offered to take on the playtime for all your demons, but you were not available when I needed you. How fair of a bargain is that?" Her breath blew into the back of his hair. He hated her being behind him and so close, but then...she knew that.

He kept his breath slow and steady. He felt her draw power to materialize something, a weapon, her favorite, onyx-handled, scytari blade. He knew what was coming but it made little difference. "I came when you called."

She fisted a handful of his hair and dragged his head back. "You were with her," she screamed.

Then the slicing began.

The rending of his wings and back went on and on until he felt the knife blade snap under her violence and against his shoulder. Hel snarled in frustration and flung herself away, panting from the exertions.

Pahale straightened his back and let his flesh knit back together. It wasn't over. He still had to diffuse her anger. "Yes, I was with Sadrina."

"So the little brat has returned. Good, I missed tormenting her. She was such a good sport about my pastimes." His expression must have changed. Hel let out a laugh. "She never even told you of all our fun times, I'll bet."

He hadn't known that Hel had abused Sadrina. If he had he would have found a way to free her from such cruelty. But that explained why Sadrina didn't want to be here.

"Unlike so many of the others, Sadrina screamed for me."

His hands ached to wrap around Hel's throat at the pleasure she voiced. He lowered his gaze to the floor, knowing his eyes had gone red with the burning need to retaliate, to protect his mate. Now wasn't the time.

"Does the brat intend to stay?"

He ignored her taunting. "Yes."

"So has she agreed to bed you yet?" Hel laughed. "Never mind, I can smell sex on you. It makes delicious cologne, doesn't it?"

Pahale regretted not cleaning Sadrina's scent from him. Such careless oversights could be costly when playing these games with Hel, and he wasn't willing to put Sadrina in a position of payment if it could be avoided.

"What do you plan to do with her? Besides fuck her brains out?"

This was the part he dreaded. Not that Hel could really do anything to him or

even Sadrina anymore, but the bitch knew how to make a situation difficult. She wasn't going to like this news but it would be better if it came out here and now, when he could take the brunt of her anger. "Sadrina will take up her duty."

"Take up her duty?" She laughed and moved in front of him. "As what, a dream demon? That's all she's qualified to do! You hardly need any more of the useless little imps. She's a waste of space. Just send her back to wherever she came from."

"Sadrina will be a Tascryn Royal, as is fitting." He spoke in Sadrina's defense before he realized his mistake.

Hel leaned in, her hands running over his body. "Then she will have to go through the testing, will she not?"

And that was the trap. Sadrina had technically failed her first Synn tasc. That meant she truly was considered no better than an Akyrn dream demon. At least not until she successfully completed one tasc from each level. She would have to be tested and damn Hel for seeing the truth. "Yes."

Hel laughed her deep sultry laugh. "How wonderful! I can't wait to see her fail again. And I can't wait to comfort you like I did last time—"

A quiet gasp drew Pafele's attention to the doorway, where he caught sight of the tail of his robe swishing past the entrance. Damn Hel and her antics. He pushed her aside and rushed after Sadrina.

Hel's maniacal laugh followed him down the long marble hallway.

Chapter Five

"There is absolutely no way that I will stay with you while you service that bitch."

"Sadrina..."

"Don't you even dare to say it!" She raised her voice mockingly, "*I only do as I must*. That has always been your catch phrase. It's a load of crap and you know it."

"You can't honestly believe that I want to be with her? That I enjoy her abuse? I have no choice. She is hell's mistress."

"Yours, too, apparently." She wiped at the unwanted tears that threatened to flood her burning eyes.

"Sadrina, listen to me. I have no control over this." Pahele's hands fell to her arms like prison irons. His hands shook through the painful grip.

She wasn't going to let him break her heart. She wasn't. It wasn't going to happen. Sadrina pulled free of him and backed up, holding him off with a raised hand. "You can order the universe to satisfy the whims of the Norns. You will find a way to lose that entanglement."

He looked doubtful.

"This will indeed be a cold place to live until you figure your way out of this. And you can bet that your chambers just became the coldest place in hell."

"We need to work together..." His voice was low and full of the dark promise of them being together and on the same side of whatever they faced.

But all that was on hold. "As of now, we are associates. There is no "we" until there is only you. How can you think I would share you with the woman who imprisoned me for four thousand years?"

Pahele's mouth snapped shut. His glowing eyes darkened and his wings ruffled with an angry flinch. "I will do what I can."

When her hand ached to reach for him she balled it tight in his robe. "That's just not good enough. You will do what you must."

Silence stretched and became a chasm between them. All the closeness they had shared was gone and what was left crackled with pain.

"Do you understand what she expects of you?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. I will have to complete the three remaining levels of tascs. The first will be Synn."

Pahele wanted to grab her and shake sense into her. How could Sadrina stand there as if there was nothing binding them together? *The first would be Synn...* Did she think nothing of sharing her body with another man? Was it nothing more than a job to her? Perhaps she would then understand why he had to accept Hel's demands.

His stomach churned with jealous rage. The thought of her seducing another man was impossible to tolerate now that they had bonded, now that he'd claimed her.

Did she understand the bond? Was that why she objected to Hel so strongly? If she had finally claimed him then he would be forced to escape from Hel's demands immediately.

The moment she returned to him, he had allowed his own bonds to form. If she were ever to experience another man he would feel her pleasure and be torn apart by the agony of her choosing another. He could never knowingly put her through such pain.

And Pahele knew he no longer would be able to show tolerance for those she touched. If she went through with the Synn task, he might utterly destroy whatever man she was sent to. Driven by such anguish he might even do the unthinkable and destroy the man's eternal soul.

Yet, Hel was right, even if he hated to admit it. Sadrina needed to pass each Tascryn level before she could hope to rule at his side. Only with the successful tasc would she develop the powers of that level. Until then she was in limbo between the Akryn and Synn levels. And if the Cyvampis failed to obey her then the Daelyn would set lose chaos in order to eliminate what they saw as a weakness.

He had to find a way around this situation.

Pahele started to follow Sadrina into their chambers only to have her slam another door in his face. When he reached to open it, he felt her powers seal the room. He could easily burst in though the block she had made, but to do so would leave her magic in shreds.

Surely she knew he would never harm her. This show of defiance was only her idea of fair play. He reached past her powers to see what she hid.

Then he nearly fell to the floor.

Sadrina was crying. She had climbed into his bed, hugged his pillow and was sobbing into the soft bag of feathers. Her pain wracked his body. Her sorrow and betrayal filled him.

There was nothing he wouldn't do to make this right.

Nothing.

Hel was as good as gone. He wouldn't hurt Sadrina and letting Hel continue to use him was causing Sadrina pain. Hel would never be allowed to harm Sadrina,

especially not through him. He would go see Hel and see what chance he had of escaping her coils. And if she couldn't be reasoned with, then she could be eliminated and damn the repercussions.

Chapter Six

Pahele entered Hel's receiving room once again and waited for the dark mistress to dismiss the young man she spoke with. The room glowed with the strange blue lights she and Jormungand seemed to prefer. Through the dim flickers and the smoke from her scented candles, he could see she was being less than kind to the boy. If he'd allowed her to vent with him earlier the boy wouldn't be so endangered. The candle scent twisted through his stomach keeping company with guilt.

"So, little Díolain, what did my brother wish from you today?" Hel leaned close as if to kiss the boy's cheek.

"Nothing, Mistress Hel."

Hel slapped the man, sending him sprawling to his knees. "Tell me the truth. I know he summoned you for a reason. Now tell me what he wanted!"

Slowly the man rose back up before her. He should have stayed down. To stand was only to ask for more abuse, which he quickly received.

"Bow down you useless dog." Hel rained a series of fisted blows onto the man, punching and adding brutal kicks until he remained on the floor, motionless. "Someday, Díolain, you will learn your place."

Pahele almost laughed when Hel's unwilling subject growled what sounded like "not today..." and began to rise once more.

He had to admire the boy, for now he could see that this was indeed only a boy, within the body of a man. What Hel called a dog was actually partly Valàfrn werewolf and partly something more. Whatever his true age, he was barely out of adolescence, but he was already attempting to stand up to Hel. The boy was stupid but courageous.

And if he continued to antagonized Hel this way he would be dead.

Pahele cleared his throat, drawing Hel's attention to himself as a more worthy opponent.

Hel's cold smile slid in place. She waved a hand at the boy, negligently flinging him against the far wall with a resounding crash. Then she glided toward Pahele. When

she would have slithered up against him, Pahele stepped back and raised a hand to stop her advance.

"Hel, we need to talk."

"You need to get on your knees and cheer me up. Jormungand's little toy over there causes an aggravation that needs soothed." She pushed aside his hand and oozed up against his chest. Hel dipped her head to tongue his nipple ring into a painful twist.

"I said talk. This can't continue. Now that Sadrina is home —"

Hel bit down on the ring and tore it free of his flesh, spitting it to the floor. "You are mine, Pahele! Never forget that. You can play with her for a while, but you will always belong to me."

He knew better than to push her back, so he crossed his arms, flexing his wings and tightening his muscles to remind her that he was every bit as strong as she was if not more. "The rules are changing in this game between us."

"Nothing changes unless I say it does! The Norns created you to aid me in this hell hole. Just because your bitch returned does not free you from your responsibility. You serve me. And you will serve me forever!" She screamed wildly while shaking her fist inches from his face, but she made no attempt to touch him.

Pahele kept his voice level, letting the darkness draw in around him. "I have bound Sadrina to me. The situation has changed whether you will it or not."

She gasped. "You haven't! You lie."

"I have."

Her face hardened. "It changes nothing."

"It changes everything. The second throne will soon be filled. The balance of power has already shifted. The realm has accepted her."

"No! You belong to me. I rule here. You can't take that from me. You can't." Hel slapped him hard and fled the room. No doubt she was running to her brother for comfort.

This first confrontation had actually gone better than he had expected. Pahele stooped to sweep up the nipple ring. After wiping off the bit of his blood that clung to the bar, he slid it back into place. The hole had closed while healing and the quick pierce was a reminder of the pain Hel was so good at bestowing on her possessions.

A low growling moan drew Pahele across the room to the battered young man. "I can heal you and send you back where you belong," he offered as he helped the boy sit up.

"Is she gone?"

Pahele reached out with his senses and found the hallway empty. Hel was already with Jormungand in his chamber. "Yes, she's gone, but probably not for very long."

The Valàfrn pushed Pahele's hands aside. "I can heal myself. I just didn't want to do that in front of her."

"Very wise."

"I can't leave on my own yet, though. Can you really send me through the realms?"

"Yes. I can breach any of the realms easily enough. You would wish to return to Mitgard?"

"Bron Fadoc, Wales if you can." The boy stood and dusted off his leather clothes, and then he stuck out his hand. "I'm Díolain of the Eagle Clan. I'd be glad to know the name of anyone who can piss Hel off so well."

Pahele grasped his hand and the contact felt good. The boy was strong and filled with honor. "Kyr-Synon-Cytl-Daeyos-Pahelysius, but you may call me Pahele."

"That is quite a mouthful. Pahele, it is. The only demons I have ever seen here with Hel have groveled before her. I will take that to mean you must outrank most of them."

He smiled as the boy met his eyes straight on like an equal. "I outrank all of them."

The boy broke eye contact. His gaze dipped to the floor then skittered around the room. "I see. Thank you for helping me to get home. I won't waste any more of your time."

"A bit of advice before I send you home. Avoid Hel for a while. The changes about to happen here will not leave her content."

"Hel has never been content," he growled, "and I have never come willingly to her before."

"Then fare well, young Díolain." Pahele shifted the folds of the realms and opened a path for the young Valàfrn man. With a deft push, he dropped Díolain back to Mitgard in the glen behind the vast estate known as Bron Fadoc. Any other land and he might have had to search for the location, but this Welsh land was known well to him. For it was here that Jerdin's son lived and his fate was one to be watched closely.

Chapter Seven

Sadrina paced the floor of Pahele's chamber. She was through crying and now she was pissed. The shit in hell never changed. Just when a tiny glimmer of hope began to shine, just when she became delusional enough to think she and Pahele could actually be happy...That's when all hell, or in this case Hel, chose to strike.

And damn the bitch for being right. She would have to do exactly what Hel said. She had to complete the tasc. If she didn't there was no way she could ever live up to Pahele's high expectations. She'd never take the throne and he would be the one to suffer for it.

Damn, damn, damn.

It took three tries but she managed to form a sleek sheath of a dress. And over it she wrapped the decadent plush robe. Fully armored, she threw open the chamber door with a crash and stormed down the glossy black marble halls to Hel's royal chambers. She crossed the threshold and slammed straight into Pahele's broad chest.

"Oh! You're still here?" His chest felt really good under her hands, making it that much harder to pull back. But she did. Then she skirted carefully around his big body to enter Hel's chambers fully.

"Why are you here, Sadrina?"

"I'm going to rip Hel a new ass. That's why I'm here." Not exactly the truth... Even the thought of confronting Hel still left Sadrina shaking like a leaf. Damn Hel for all she'd done and damn her some more for all the unwanted, lasting effects. Someday she'd make sure the bitch would pay, but thankfully not today. Hel wasn't in her chambers.

"You can't do that... What are you doing?"

She paused to give him a look of surprise at the question. Obviously, she was searching the room. "I'm looking for the Book of the Dead. It has to be here, and I will need the Book to find out what my tasc is, right?"

"Your tasc?"

"Have you not been paying attention?" She'd searched the whole room. The Book

of the Dead wasn't here. "I need to do the tascs so that the bitch won't get her jollies off on you anymore. Because if you can't or won't get yourself free then I intend to kick her ass all over until she thinks better of bothering either of us. So...where is the Book?"

"The Book of the Dead is kept in the chamber of power..."

She sighed and waited for him to continue. But after the space of three heartbeats his stubborn silence left her willing to prompt him some more. "And where is the chamber of power?"

"I —"

"Just show me." At his doubtful frown, she continued, "Look I might as well get to it. You know as well as I do that Hel won't rest unless I complete the tascs. And as much as it pains me to say so, you also know she's right. If we have any chance of staying together I need to at least be close to your equal. And to do that I have to complete the tascs. So let's go. Right now."

She almost laughed at the stunned look on his usually stoic face. He hadn't expected this and yet she also felt his acceptance. With a simple graceful motion of his hand, he led her back out and away from Hel's chambers back toward his own.

"Where is this chamber? I thought it would be near to its mistress." But instead he was leading her back toward his chambers.

"No, the chamber is nearest to its master." And the doorway that was only six paces away from his own door opened as if it welcomed him.

"But I thought..." She swallowed. The chamber through this door suddenly looked very familiar, terrifyingly familiar. "This is the way to the prison chamber..."

Pahele clasped her hand within his rough grasp. "Relax, Sadrina."

She couldn't breath. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was the narrow door on the opposite wall. "Please don't put me back in there..."

And then there was only Pahele in her vision. "You will never again be imprisoned there or anywhere else. That is my promise, *m'lan*."

With each breath, she gradually regained control. What finally broke her free of those terrible, past fears was the more immediate agony she felt roaming in Pahele's mind.

"I'm so sorry, Sadrina." Pahele's soft words blew into her hair as he held her tight in his arms. "I did what I thought was right and it wasn't enough. My failure is the reason for your suffering. I'll never let that happen again."

"Pahele..." How could she forgive him for something so terrible? And if she couldn't, could she at least forget that it had happened? "It is over and in the past." She pulled back from his embrace. "Now I need to face the first tasc. Will you show me to the Book of the Dead?"

He looked down into her face for what felt like ages and then finally responded. "Yes." He let her draw away but claimed her hand to tangle her fingers with his own. A

single wave toward the center of the room revealed a secret pedestal, on top of which lay the powerful book.

She crept closer and peered at the blank pages. This book held more power than any would guess by its cracked leather and crumbling pages. The words that appeared were said to be those spoken by the Creator, but what would it hold for her?

The pages remained blank. "I thought it would tell me what my tasc is to be..."

"You haven't yet claimed the power needed to have it speak to you. First you must complete those tascs."

"So how will I be assigned a tasc then?" Her initial rush of impatience was quickly fading into a more healthy measure of apprehension. "Can you assign the tasc, even to me?"

"I and only I can assign you a tasc." He offered her a small smile of encouragement then stepped forward to face the book. "The tasc of synn is given to Sadrina." Words flowed across the pages. "Your synn tasc is given. You will transition this man known as David of Southshore."

A spattering of whispered voices came from the shadows. The Synn, sex demons, had appeared in the chamber. Several made signs of support to Sadrina as if they understood and hoped she would succeed.

"How did they know I was back? How did they know I would be taking a tasc?"

"Most can feel the subtle shifting in the realm."

With a little hesitation, Sadrina smiled at the synn demons who gathered in chattery little clusters. "They seem to be happy for me?"

"Of course. Once you succeed you will be one of them. And once you rule it will help the realm regain its balance."

His mention of the disturbed balance worried her. It must weigh heavily on him and yet she had no sense of it at all. "Am I the only one who can't feel this imbalance?"

"You will in time."

She cut her gaze away from the excited Synn demons, who were doing what excited Synn demons did best. They were making out. And the effect of the pheromones that thickened the air were immediate. "So, ah... when do I see to the tasc?" She tried to focus on forming words and gathering thoughts, but her body had other plans. Her gaze roamed over Pafele, while her hands reminded her of the pleasure found in the simple act of touching him.

He growled and the short sound sent the Synn demons scurrying away. "Soon, but first you will see to me."

His need pooled over her, leaving her knees weak and her sex damp. She couldn't help the triumphant purr, knowing he needed her just as badly as she did him. "See to you? Shouldn't I see to the tasc first?"

He drew her back into his arms and materialized them beside his bed. "I have needs that cannot wait."

"Yes master." She moaned into his deep kiss. Nothing in the world mattered so much as serving him. *Nothing*. She sank into the emotions and sensations that crashed against her mind and body. Pahele's hands cupped and caressed. His tongue licked and lavished. And damn the beast for being exactly what she needed, craved, demanded.

No... that wasn't right.

It's right.

No! She fought him. She fought herself. She fought the very nature of their universe until she was free of his arms and despairing the loss.

"Wait... please wait."

Pahele complied but the cost was evident in the way his eyes glowed and muscles trembled. Then with a crackle of power he changed before her eyes. Body expanding, his power shifted the realm to accommodate him. His wings stretched outward, filling the room around them with a sweeping darkness. Pahele became what he often hid from others... this was his most intimidating form. His long curved horns drew in the black shadows. The black mottling of death shadows crept over his skin, moving, crawling, entrancing. And the truest sign of his mental state, his tail, so often hidden, flicked out with his whip-like mood. The snapping black end left a trail of smoke and char wherever it moved.

"I cannot wait." The words growled out in the low gravelly tone that spoke of a being not like any other. The pure monstrous power was what left mortals dying of fright alone. That power was what kept rogue deities in fear of the coming end.

And that power drew her almost as much as the man.

It was all she could do to keep from falling at his feet. She dragged air in and forced her mind past the fear and desire to what she needed to know.

"Hel." The name was a whisper, but like a talisman, it drew her out of the trance and strengthened her resolve to face Pahele before falling under his spell again. "I will not be with you. Cannot. Not until you swear to never be with her again."

His eyes flickered and a low dangerous growl rumbled through his body. The vibration was reflected though the realm, trembling the marble walls. There was something wild about him.

Perhaps she pushed too far? Could she ask this of him? Could he give it?

The walls and floor continued to shake. Then, with a roar of anguish, Pahele released all the power in one surging wave that knocked Sadrina from her feet, flinging her backwards onto the bed.

She scrambled up to her knees, but before she could regain equal footing to face him, Pahele fell to meet her in a crushing embrace.

"I swear —"

She cut off his words with a hand over his mouth, pushing against his engorged fangs. "Don't swear it if it cannot be." For if he promised and then was forced to break

his word, the realm would suffer a heavy blow.

He pressed a kiss over her restraining fingers. "It can be. It already is. I swear it to you here and now. There will never be another for me. You and only you. Forever."

Chapter Eight

Pahele didn't know how she'd done it, but at some point while he was too sated to be completely alert, Sadrina had slipped away. Only the ripple of her passing from the realm awoke him to the fact that she was well on her way to ending the world.

He flash-surged his powers, searching the nine realms, and easily found the trail which would let him follow her to the awaiting tasc. Already he could feel her determination to complete the tasc and return to him, but it wasn't enough.

What was wrong with him, that he couldn't accept her need to complete a synn tasc? She was more than able and yet the thought of her hands on another man's body tore him to pieces. He couldn't let her do it.

He had to.

There had to be a way to allow her success without causing him torment...

A sudden thought shot through him. What if he took the place of the tasc? Was such a thing possible? Would it put the tasc at risk? Could he save his sanity by taking such a risk?

Pahele rarely had reason to leave Niflheim, but doing so was as simple as breathing. He followed Sadrina's trail and passed through the realms to the room where she and the tasc lay.

The sight of her hands on the man's body stabbed shards of pain through him. And his decision was made.

By extending his senses he felt that she had already succeeded in her duty. Her presence alone was enough to relax the man's soul into the coming transition. All that remained was her personal satisfaction. Synn demons were just as affected by their pheromones as the tasc were, and it was the release found in sexual orgasm that freed them from their own spell.

He shifted his ethereal form to take over the body of the tasc. By doing so, he was exposed to her influence and was without the protection of his powers. The unexpected backlash of pheromones left Pahele panting within the body of the mortal. She stroked

and caressed him, arousing him past the point of pleasure and into the beckoning arms of pain. It was then he realized that she hesitated to take what she so desperately needed from this mortal man. Was it because of him? Would she suffer here because of his greedy desires?

Was this suffering something he could allow her to do?

No.

He forced the mortal arms to lift and grasp her, rolling Sadrina beneath him. He would offer her the pleasure that she needed. But even this effort was costly. He felt his powers wither under the influence of her synn desires. And all that was left was to plead with her.

"I need you. Please, you must make love to me. You must or I will surely die."

"You will surely die," she whispered as a tear slipped from her eye and slid down her cheek. Then the compassion that was so much a part of her lightened her dark expression. "But I will share pleasure with you." And with that she rolled him once more, taking the top.

From that position she slowly pleased them both and together they found a quiet release that was nothing like what they shared in his bed in hell.

And long after Sadrina left, Pahele lay trapped with the tasc, waiting for death.

* * * * *

Sadrina returned to hell with her heart full of turmoil. Completing the tasc had been her duty, and the mechanics of it hadn't been difficult at all. The part that left her confused was why she'd hesitated to have intercourse with the mortal... It made no sense at all.

It was true that she loved Pahele, perhaps she always had, but he was far from her only lover. She'd married the mortal she was sent to tasc more than five thousand years ago and lived with him for many decades as man and wife. And there had been many men in the past few decades. Well, not too many, never more than three in one night...

So why did she feel... guilt now?

Maybe it was using her Synn powers to relax the mortal into death? Was that what she felt guilty over?

No.

The duty was required. If the mortal's soul had been allowed to reject the coming death, then it might not follow the true path. Without her, the man's eternal soul might be lost.

So why...?

Her mind returned to Pahele. The part that was bound to him hung heavy and still. That had to be wrong. Pahele was never ill or weak. She expanded her senses to feel where he was and what might be wrong. The resounding emptiness assaulted her mind.

Where was he?

A pounding at the chamber's door sent her racing to answer it.

"Pahele?"

At the door stood an Akyrn dream demon. "No, mistress. It is only Phyr."

"Phyr..." She looked past him and gasped at the sight beyond. The glossy black marble of the hallway's walls seemed to be melting. And dozens of demons ran past.

"What's happening?"

"They are panicking. The Master must stop the weeping walls. He must do it quick."

Weeping walls... She didn't even know what could cause that. "But... Phyr, the walls are fine in here."

"Of course they are mistress. Your royal blood holds the realm around you steady. But the Master is what holds the rest. He is the one who must stop the realm from failing."

"What do you mean? I don't understand!" She didn't mean to scream at the demon but she was at a loss to see why this was happening.

Phyr jumped back but then hopped away from the strangely warping wall before he came into contact with it. "No time to explain. You must tell the Master to return." His hands fluttered while his gaze darted to the chamber behind her where the walls remained as they should be.

Sadrina stepped back into the room just in time to see the hallway ceiling begin to drip. The first splash hit the floor beside Phyr sending him bolting after her. "But, Phyr...I don't know where Pahele is."

The Akyrn's mouth fell open in surprise. "You do not know Master well. Today you do a tasc, yes? Which was it?"

"My tasc was of synn."

"The Master must have followed. He is dying. You must save him. Only you can save him."

"Dying!" How could... He couldn't... Could he? If he died, it was unthinkable. "Do you really think he went to Midgard? Why would he do that?"

"Please Mistress. You must hurry."

"Tell me on the way." She grabbed the imp by the arm and shifted them through the realms to the room where the mortal still lay. "Now tell me where he is."

"He is inside the mortal. Can't *you* feel the Master?"

Sadrina couldn't stop her gasp of surprise. Yes, she felt him just fine. And she could only think of one reason he would be inside the mortal body. *Pahele, you rat bastard. I know you're trapped here and I should leave your worthless hide to suffer the mortal death.*

Sadrina...

Don't you "Sadrina" me. You thought I would fail and decided to control the mortal so I

couldn't mess up.

No.

Liar. I am perfectly capable of completing my tasks without your help or interference. I may not have...

"Mistress, please! You must draw him from the mortal. It is almost too late."

"Oh fine." The imp had a point. She couldn't very well beat any sense into him while he was stuck within the frail human skin. "Um... any ideas on how I do that?"

"I don't know! I'm no sex demon into kinky body swapping."

Sadrina...

"You just wait until I get you out here. You are so in big trouble."

Sadrina, give me satisfaction to set me free.

"What? Oh yeah, I guess that does make sense in a warped Tascryn sort of way." She moved closer to the mortal and leaned down as if to kiss him.

No!

"No what? I'm doing what you are telling me."

Draw me out first.

"You are awful bossy for being just about dead..."

"A good reason to hurry Mistress." The Akym said from behind her.

"Oh... Phyr, I think you should head back now. I think we have this problem almost fixed now and you don't really want to hang around for this boring part."

"But Mistress, he is still trapped and how did you say, 'Just about dead'. How is this fixed?"

"Look Phyr, this is about to get pretty kinky. Stick around if you want but stay out of the way. Okay?" Then she turned her entire focus onto Pahele and the ethereal essence that was him separate from the mortal's flesh.

"You brought me. You have to send me," Phyr said quietly.

"Here." She put a hand on Phyr's forehead, ignoring his slight flinch. Then she gave him a mental shove, back through the realms. Sadrina didn't want to be rough but she felt the strain that Pahele was under. And it worried her.

How was he even vulnerable to this? Why hadn't he known better?

She'd have to ask him, after she drew him out, and beat him.

Sadrina turned back and reached again for his essence. His soul came to her call like a happy puppy, and she easily pulled him from the mortal. But once free, he didn't regain his physical form.

"Shit. I'm going to have to make out with your essence, aren't I?"

Sadrina, it will be... pleasant. His ghostlike body drifted around hers. The contact was like fire and silk all at once. The powerful sensation was beautiful and terrifying.

Promise? She tried to caress his cheek but her hand couldn't touch his immaterial form. Instead the edges of his being crept tendrils over her skin.

Oh, yes. I promise this will be very pleasurable.

He wasn't kidding. The caress of his essence tingled through her, touching the deepest part of her being, her soul. Her knees buckled, letting her sag to the hard floor.

Her eyes closed under the onslaught. But they flashed open once more as she felt the world shift around them. She was no longer on the floor of a mortal's bed chamber but now back on Pahele's bed.

Pahele was still without physical form.

His essence flowed over her and through her, caressing her very cells, leaving her gasping against the pleasure. Her clothing dissolved. She sprawled under his touch accepting all he had to offer while wishing she could do more for him. The thought awoke possibilities. She loosened her control and reached for him with more than her hands. Her spirit touched his, but where his body was hard, his spirit was not.

They tangled together with the edges blurring between them. How could one move without the other? Thoughts of his and hers were lost. They were one being. Together. Like two shadows merging to form one darkness.

His soul settled in her body and the contact was beyond her imagination, such a sense of being filled and part of another. A connection past any she'd ever felt with her body and yet so much like being loved that her body reacted with surging desire.

And his responded. Pahele's body took form above her. A shadow which grew sharper with each gasp. A ghost reclaiming a form. His features softened and hardened. She had to touch him.

He understood the need. Before he was fully physical, he plunged between her parted thighs. Sending them both past pleasure and into a shattering orgasm.

Minutes, hours, years later, as Pahele's weight settled on her and a glance showed the realm was back to normal, Sadrina had an unpleasant thought.

She still had to beat Pahele senseless for putting the nine realms at risk by acting like such an idiot.

Chapter Nine

"How could you!"

Pahele rolled off of Sadrina, flipping over while she continued to pound on his back-to-normal chest.

"I trusted you and you just couldn't help but interfere anyhow."

"I—"

She cut him off. "Don't you know what you did? Everyone was in a panic here and I didn't know what to do. Why would you do that? Why?"

"Sadrina..."

"You had better have a good reason. No, better yet, you'd better have great reason, a straight from the Creator kind of reason."

He blanched. No, he hadn't had the Creator's blessings. If he had, he never would have been trapped in the mortal body.

"Pahele! I came back and you were gone. I came back to you, needing you and you had... you had betrayed me by... How could you do that? Does the tasc even count now? It was hard enough for me to face another when all I want is you, but what if I have to do it again because of what you did?"

The tears glistening in her eyes tore at him, raising a guilt like no other. And with it rose his jealousy as well. "You can't have another. Never again!" He turned her beneath him, using his mass to pin her in place. "I shouldn't have gone. I know that. But damn it, Sadrina..." He panted and blinked through the red haze that covered his vision. How could he explain it? He dropped his head to her shoulder and whispered into her long hair. "I pictured you with another and it drove me past reason. I couldn't help but go to you. I had to be the one you touched. I'm sorry."

Her hand cupped his jaw, pulling him up to meet her gaze. "That I understand." She kissed him with sweet forgiveness. But that sweet kiss bloomed into gentle passion which burst into possession.

Desperation warred with dominance. And their passion became something one step away from violence. Then it stepped over the line. There was no time to do other

than demand and meet what was demanded. Pahele's hands molded her, his teeth claimed her and she was possessed.

But she met him as an equal. As his fangs sank into her neck, she sank hers into his forearm. And as he slammed his shaft through her body, she rose up and clutched him, absorbing the motion.

She came in rush of pleasure and a scream of completion. He followed with the bull roar of a satisfied animal. And together they slowly found the world they'd left behind.

The silk charred black beneath them. The gray ripples that shot through the black marble walls glowed brighter than any in hell ever had before. Power shimmered in the very air. The world had been reborn with their passion.

* * * * *

"I'm ready for my next tasc, so let's get to it."

Those weren't the words Pahele had hoped to wake up to. No, he'd been dreaming more along the lines of Sadrina whispering sweet nothings in his ear. Maybe nibbling certain parts of his anatomy.

"Come on, Pahele. I know you're awake."

He rolled over and was shocked to see she was already dressed in a long black sheath and matching leggings. Over that she had a lovely red cloak. "Why are you suddenly in such a hurry?"

"I have a bad feeling about Hel. I want to get this done before she has time to plot anything." She adjusted the velvet cloak on her shoulders. "I'd really hate to make it easy on her, after all. Will you get dressed so we can get my next tasc?"

"Good point." He stood and materialized his usual leggings. He didn't bother with a shirt and did no more than shake his hair and wings out. "I'm ready, let's go."

"Before we do, I want you to swear that you won't interfere with the Cyvampis tasc, like you did for the Synn one."

"I have no reason to."

"You had no reason to with the last mortal either. At least not a good reason."

He wanted to argue, but she was right. He'd let his emotions control him. Jealousy had no place in their world, even if it still came naturally. "Fine, I swear that as long as you don't attempt to have sex with the Cyvampis tasc, I will stay out of your way."

"Why would I have sex with him? It might even be a her."

"If it is a her, you may have sex with her, only if I can watch." He chuckled at her thoughtful look.

"Um, no. Now, why would I have sex with the Cyvampis tasc?"

"The taking of blood for some is very erotic. If you become excited in that way, I expect you to bring those feelings back to me, not share them with some stranger."

"So you think I have sex with every man I meet?"

"No—"

"That's pretty low. I can't believe you would think that."

"I didn't—"

"Well listen here, buster. I will have sex with whoever I like, whenever I like, with or without your permission. If this is because I slept with the mortal during the Synn tasc, you know damn well I had to. I didn't want that man, but I certainly didn't have much of a choice."

He caught her by the shoulders before she could storm past him again. "I know." He pulled her into a tight embrace to keep her from struggling. "I feel what you feel. I love you, Sadrina, and I'm still learning how to deal with all the emotions that includes. I was crazy with jealousy and did something stupid during your last tasc. I'm sorry."

She stared up into his face for a moment when time stretched to accommodate eons. Then she pressed upward, fighting his strength to kiss his chin. "I love you, too, Pahele." When he released her enough, she kissed him again more fully. Only when his head swam and his body rose in arousal did she pull back. "Now, can we go?"

He sighed. "Yes, let's get this over with, so that I can lock you in here to serve me and satisfy us both." He opened his arms, letting Sadrina step back, but didn't completely release her. He held onto her hand, leading her to the room with the Book of the Dead. He stepped forward, almost dreading the name that would be chosen. Who would the Creator send Sadrina to transition? Who would be her first kill?

Such as Sadrina should tasc only those deserving the honor. Her tasc will be the King at Whitehall Palace.

He faced Sadrina where she waited to hear what the book would say. "Your Cyvampis tasc is to transition King James of the English and Scottish throne." After this tasc she would be able to read from the book herself, just as he and the Daelyn could. At that point she would still be considered a Cyvampis but she would have the power to do more than they could.

"The King?"

"Yes. Are you ready?"

"Better now than when she has more time to plan."

"Good luck."

"Who needs luck?" Sadrina faded out in a cloud of twirling smoke.

He knew she was right. Hel wouldn't sit by idly while some of her power was usurped by Sadrina's rise. No, she was definitely going to try something, but what? And more importantly, what could he do to keep it fair for Sadrina?

Her Cyvampis tasc shouldn't be all that difficult. The mortal was well within her abilities, so how could Hel sabotage it? He expanded his senses and felt nothing amiss.

Hel was with her brother and all the Tascryn were about the business that they should be. Nothing was wrong, and yet, something was about to happen.

Nail, come to me.

Nail materialized in front of Pahele. *Yes, Master?*

"I need you to follow Sadrina and watch over her during her tasc. You know the rules and cannot interfere with her duty, but watch over her to be sure no one else interferes either. Do you understand?"

I do. I will keep her safe for you, Master.

Nail faded out and Pahele pushed aside his uneasiness. Nail would do as he asked. And after all this was settled he'd have to talk to the Kindred Spirit about his calling him Master. Nail was more than just one of his subjects. Nail was... it was hard to put into words, but somehow the boy had become almost like a son to him. He'd taken Nail away from Hel and from now on the Kindred Spirit was under his considerable protection.

Chapter Ten

Sadrina stared at the man who lay quietly in his royal bed. He looked tired and ill but she felt his forceful personality even from across the room. This one was ready to transition, but too stubborn to let go of this life.

She would help him.

She would drain away his misplaced willpower and release his soul to move on to his next destiny. She drifted closer to the bedside and was surprised to see the man was awake.

"Don't be afraid," she said when she realized she hadn't changed into a human form before entering his chamber. He saw her as she truly was, a Tascryn Royal demon.

"Why would I be afraid? You are only a dream." His words were slow and careful but clearly spoken.

"Yes, I'm only a dream, your Majesty." Just as Sadrina was about to sink onto the bed beside him, she felt a disturbance in the air behind her.

Mykael, one of Pahele's Cyvampis demons, materialized near the wall. His tall, lean body had a golden glow to it that was cut only by the intricate blue patterns that covered almost half of his exposed flesh. His cape-like wings rose aggressively.

"Why are you here, Mykael?"

He snarled. "I was sent to stop you."

"Oh? So Pahele has suddenly changed his mind about this tasc?"

"No."

"Then why are you here, Mykael?" She had a strong suspicion she already knew.

He advanced toward her with an undeniable menace. "I can't let her kill him."

She met him halfway across the room so that whatever came, it wouldn't happen on top of the king who was watching his dream with so much interest. She pooled her power around her, building it and drawing earth energy to amplify what she had on her own. "Listen to me, Mykael. I won't let anything happen to whoever Hel is threatening."

He hesitated. "You're not strong enough to stop her."

"If I'm not, then you know Pahele is."

"I can't risk it. He caters to her whims." And that was the end of conversation. Mykael leapt the last couple feet toward her. His hands curved into razor sharp claws and his face became a mask of rage, filled with fangs.

As deadly as those fangs and claws could be, Mykael hadn't raised any power to use against her. Either he wasn't serious about his intention to harm her, or he felt he could bully her without any true effort. Either way, he was not a threat. She lifted her hands before her and wove a net of power which she hurled at him. The magic slammed him against the far wall and bound him there in place.

That was when she saw the tiny creature that was wrapped around Mykael's neck. The draconic beast known as a hiiskyn blinked at Sadrina with Hel's fiery red eyes. Its serpentine body tightened as if to choke Mykael in punishment for his failure. "That's just not nice." Sadrina reached into the power and grabbed the little beastie by its throat, pulling it free of Mykael's neck. "Mykael, I have a task to complete. Hold on to this while I do." She lifted his bound hand and wrapped his fingers around in place of her own.

Now for the task.

She glided back to the king's side. "Your Majesty?"

His eyes were clear and his gaze steady. "I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"What do you want from me?"

At this point she considered answering his question honestly. But that wasn't the way this was meant to work. She sank onto the bed beside him. "I will be the Queen of my own people before long, and to do so, I need to place my lips on your royal skin. I promise it won't hurt, but it must be done."

"Very well. You may." He spoke with a courtly air that impressed Sadrina.

She moved in to where his dressing gown rose over the lower part of his neck and there she placed a gentle kiss. The scent of his illness repulsed her, but she easily called her blood thirst and felt her fangs slide out. With a single smooth motion, she sang those fangs into him, drawing out his life, helping him on to the next life. When she had taken enough, she carefully drew back.

As she did, the king met her gaze with a sad smile. "You have killed me." His voice whispered out on fading breath. His eyes blinked slowly with the weight of death descending. Then a light filled his face. The light of the Creator, welcoming his soul back into the fold. In that moment his body, so full of sickness, was forgotten.

The moment held a beauty so pure that Sadrina had to blink away the tears.

She was jerked back to reality by Mykael's cry of pain. The hiiskyn had freed itself and bitten onto Mykael's hand. Cute as the draconic creature was, it was also extremely poisonous. Without treatment, Mykael would suffer terribly during the years it would take to recover.

Tearing the binding away from him, she caught the hiiskyn before it could blink

back to Hel. She grabbed Mykael's sagging body in her other arm and folded them back through the realms directly to Pahele's chamber.

By Pahele's shocked expression she knew he hadn't known all this was happening, which meant he hadn't saved whoever Hel was using to control Mykael. She shoved Mykael into Pahele's arms. "Here, I have to go see Hel. Mykael was bitten by one of her hisskyn." She handed him the black scaled pet.

Pahele had yet to utter a word, so she kissed his cheek and blinked out of the room, rematerializing just inside Hel's preferred room for entertaining guests. But once there, she froze.

She'd suffered here for centuries. The memories beat at her even before Hel's beaded whip turned her way.

"Little Sadie! I'm so glad you joined us. Now you can share his pain." Hel's whip cracked at Sadrina. One of the stone beads cut across her cheek in a painful slash.

The pain freed her of the paralysis brought on by her fear. *I can't face her, not yet!* She spun away from the whip and threw herself toward the bloody heap at Hel's feet. Whoever it was wouldn't die here on this floor. But when Sadrina would have pushed them through space away from Hel's chamber, her powers weren't enough.

Shit... Her only option was to gather power, and when she reached for the static power that formed the fabric of the realm it surged into her easily as if the energy wanted to join with her. Hel's scream of anger faded as Sadrina carried her victim back to Pahele's chamber.

Pahele's heart stopped as Sadrina materialized back into his chamber. "You're bleeding."

"Hel hit me with her whip, but it's nothing." She wiped a hand over the small streak of blood revealing the already healed skin under it. "Your demon here is a much bigger worry."

He knelt next to the blood covered body, and gently turned the demon over. "It's Gaybriel." The demon was in a bad way but already his wounds were healing. "You've healed him some and I can finish the job now." He poured his power into Gaybriel, using it to completely heal him.

Sadrina touched his shoulder lightly. "What did you mean when you said I healed him some?"

"You began the healing. Your touch can channel the Creator's power to help all those we protect. By touching him, you must have desired his healing, and therefore the energy began to do just that."

"But I didn't try to heal him."

"You are their rightful Queen, Sadrina. By going to Hel's chamber to protect Gaybriel, you accepted your responsibility to him. The Creator offered you the ability to fulfill your role and protect him. It is as it should be."

Sadrina sank onto the bed and drew up her legs. She didn't ask any more

questions but seemed thoughtful.

Both Mykael and Gaybriel were healed, so he sent them back to the Cyvampis with a warning to stay away from Hel. Now he needed to hold Sadrina and put this task behind them. Pahele settled onto the bed beside her and drew her into his arms.

"Why didn't you interfere? I thought for sure you would be in the king's chambers when Mykael showed up."

"I thought about it, but you had it all under control."

Here gaze was suspicious. "How did you know for sure? You were watching weren't you? I would have felt that."

"I sent Nail to watch over you. He assured me that you were in no danger."

"He did, did he? And what about when I went to Hel's chambers?"

"He followed, and was impressed."

"I see." She pressed a kiss to his chest, assuring him that she wasn't really angry at his involvement. "So how did you help Mykael? I didn't know the treatment for hiiskyn venom."

"The blue rose in the night garden produces a form of anti-venom that is almost instantaneous."

She drew back, putting some space between them before using her powers to dissolve her clothes. "I didn't know you still had the night garden..." She slid back into his arms.

"Oh, yes. I kept it for when you chose to return. It was your joy as a child and can be yours again whenever you wish to claim it." And she finally had returned. He'd wandered the empty garden for too many years alone. Now they could once more share them. "I hope you don't mind, but Nail has taken a liking to the gardens as well."

"I don't understand what Nail means to you, but I don't mind sharing the gardens."

"I protect Nail, like I would a child foundling."

"But he is a Kindred Spirit..."

He froze at her tone. Was she going to look down on Nail like so many others? "I know what he is, but it makes no difference."

"He has no soul —"

"You're wrong. Nail has a soul. It has grown with him and is strong now, like he is."

"He has a soul? How strange. I didn't know that Kindred Spirits could have souls."

"They don't usually, but for some reason Nail is unique. I think perhaps the Creator has special plans for him. And even if he is no more than he appears, I still couldn't leave him in Hel's grasp, when she saw him as nothing more than a means to experiment with new torture techniques."

Sadrina snuggled against his chest. "You are a very compassionate ruler."

"I try to be."

"I... I'm glad I came back. I love you, Pahele."

"Sadrina, I can't tell you how long I have dreamed of hearing those words on your lips."

"You don't have to. I already know." She pressed feather light kisses across his collarbone, each sending radiant tingles through his skin. "How did I ever stay away from you so long?" As she reached his shoulder she nipped him with a long fang and licked over the drop of blood that welled up.

He relaxed and stroked his fingers down the smooth flesh of her back, holding back his arousal to let her have control over their love play.

Sadrina levered herself above him. How had she stayed away so long? Now that she was with him and bound to him, all the screwed up past seemed insignificant. Even the eternity she'd spent trapped in Hel's prison lost its power to hurt her. Pahele's heart was open and showed how those long centuries had been hard for him as well. Not like it had been for her, but having his hands tied and being unable to save her had brought its own kind of suffering.

With him laid out before her like a decadent buffet, she was in heaven here in hell. She nibbled her way down his chest and noticed the curious way he tensed with any attention to his nipple rings.

He liked it but hated it as well. She was in his heart, in his mind and nothing was kept secret. A flick of her tongue caressed one ring and the memories opened painfully.

"The bitch," she growled. How dare she hurt him? Why would he let her? Then those memories filled her as well. Always he took Hel's abuse to save others. "No more. None of use will pay in blood to her ever again." She reached down and released the rings from his nipples. She dipped her head back down to meet the healing beads. With licks and nibbles she worshiped the puckered flesh until he grew tense in the way she wanted, the way that didn't include memories of being hurt.

And from there she exorcised his entire body. From now on, she wanted only memories of her body between them. She trailed kisses down his body until she knelt between his thick thighs. Then she settled in to tempt him as never before.

His massive staff twitched with even the touch of her breath. And his hips bucked upward to the chorus of his moans as her lips feathered over the length. With the slow need rising like the tides, she kept at him, tempting him with long rasps of her tongue as well as with short nips with her teeth until he was pleading for more.

Only then did she take him into her mouth and ride him from tip down. He was too large to take in from above and even by moving lower and working up, she couldn't take him all. But she used her hands to cup his balls and stroke his neglected length.

"Sadrina..." he all but whimpered. "I want — I want release."

She laughed deep in her throat and let the sound roll through him. He needed

blood before his body could let go. And so did she.

Come when you wish and I will join you. She sent out the thought and wondered if he trusted her enough. After all, her fangs were currently framing his cock. And while he could choose to bleed himself for release, she would have to take his blood.

But she would have to do it without muddying their pleasure with too much pain.

Did he trust her enough to do just that? She sucked him deep once more and felt his surge a moment before he cried out.

The sweet smell of copper met the taste of Pahele's satisfaction. Jets of his hot essence filled her and she savored them all greedily as her own need swelled and rode her blood thirst to a dangerous fever. Her fangs throbbed against him and she couldn't resist the desire to feed on him. A turn of her head freed her fangs and she turned her open mouth on his thigh. The beat of blood through his femoral artery burst into her, flooding her senses and pushing to join him in completion.

Chapter Eleven

Sadrina held her breath while Pafele's head dipped over the Book of the Dead. When he looked up and met her gaze she knew whatever he'd read in those ancient pages boded ill. His mouth opened then closed as he swallowed. And finally he gave the name of her next tasc. "Sadaen."

Hel looked at Sadrina with glee. Her voice was high pitched with excitement as she spoke the formal words that Pafele hadn't been able to. "Your Daelyn tasc is given. You will transition Sadaen."

His name held more than power. Sadaen was the father who had abandoned her so long ago. How could the Norns be so cruel?

"No, this can't be."

Hel laughed maliciously. "You will have to kill your own father and to be honest, I doubt you even can." She turned to Pafele. "And don't you even think of helping her. This is her tasc and it is an appropriate one. If she's strong enough to tasc the one who held the throne last, then maybe she is meant to hold it now."

Sadrina watched as Hel sashayed out. The bitch was cocky and with good reason. Sadaen was too strong to be killed by his daughter. He was a font of power just like Pafele. She couldn't do this. She let Pafele lead her back to his chamber. He didn't comment but she knew he felt as defeated as she did.

As she sank onto the bed, she stated the obvious. "I can't do this. I can't tasc Sadaen."

He sighed and sat down next to her. "I don't know how this could be. How could his name come up as the tasc? It just doesn't make sense."

"I didn't even know he had a soul. I assumed it was held in the Chamber of Souls with the others belonging to the Tascryn."

"No, it never has been. Neither of us surrendered our souls. We royals have the strength to transition the souls of tascs while we still hold our own souls safely back. Didn't you ever wonder why you were not asked to give your soul up?"

"I didn't really think about it. Guess I should have."

"So what will you do?"

"I take it you mean besides let my father kill me?"

"He wouldn't kill you. What I don't understand is why he is being tased at all. I have tried to watch him, but he's gotten much better at evading me."

"So you think he will let me walk up and kill him? What is our kind even vulnerable to?"

"Very little, actually. One thing you need to know is that you don't have to do this tasc alone. The Daelyn often work in teams or gather others to form an army when they face more difficult tascs and I believe this qualifies."

"I can take others against him?"

"Yes."

"You?"

"No, but you can take the Daelyn, who will make a formidable force."

"Enough to defeat Sadaen?" Sadrina asked.

"If the Creator has forsaken him, then yes." Pahele paced across the room, his only show of anxiety. "If the Creator asks you to do this then you can. Don't doubt that wisdom, even if you doubt all else. As much as I hate to say so, you need to see to this tasc immediately. If Hel intends to try anything this time, she will need as little time to plan as possible."

"How will I even find him?"

Pahele didn't meet her gaze. His concern only made her own that much more real. "I don't know that I can offer you any help with that."

"I know. I'm going to take a walk to sort out my thoughts before I call the Daelyn."

"They already know, and are awaiting your command."

"Oh. Okay," she whispered as she left the safety of their chambers.

When did Pahele's rooms become mine?

When you accepted your place at my side. Pahele's voice filled her mind. His strength became her own. His belief in her and in them was a balm on her nerves.

Thank you, Pahele, for everything. She brushed a mental caress over his cheek. *But I need to be on my own for a while.*

She felt his sigh of acceptance. *Very well. I have demons to command. Be careful, love.* And he was gone from her mind, leaving Sadrina completely alone for the first time since they'd made love and bound themselves together. The separation was at first terrifying. She'd never felt so alone. Then after she took a few breathes to calm the panic, she concentrated for the part of her that was and always would be connected to Pahele. That was intact. He was still with her but quiescent and passive. Very un-Pahele-like.

Sadrina intended to do her planning in the throne room where she would have more space to walk off her nervous energy, but instead her step faltered in front of the

chamber where the Book of the Dead waited. The room was now empty and at first she couldn't even see the stand that held the Book. After only a moment of focusing on the place where she knew it would be, the stand and Book appeared into view.

Her feet carried her forward and her voice betrayed her fears. "Why Sadaen?"

The Book of the Dead opened and words flowed across the page in an elegant blood red script. *An easy task would not prepare you for duties to come. You will rule over many and command them through difficult times. They will trust you to know the best path. You must be ready to do more than obey. To be told is not the same as to know.*

"What does that mean?"

"It means you have a choice."

Sadrina spun around at the deep voice. The speaker was the Daelyn named Ariun and flanking him were his two brothers in arms, Eios and Ivry. All three were in human form, which was creepy considering they were just about the top of the food chain here in hell. "Why are you in human form?"

"To keep the little ones from pissing themselves," Eios answered, his very white teeth shining out from his rich brown complexion.

"Don't talk about the others like that."

Ariun shrugged. "Why not? We are what they have nightmares about. If we hope to have any kind of interactions with them, we have to maintain these ridiculous bodies."

The third Daelyn remained in shadow, but his quiet voice drifted out lazily. "Our Queen has never seen us in our true forms. She will not understand until she does."

The other two nodded in agreement, and Sadrina had to agree with Ivry's conclusion. She'd been a demon all her life, lived in hell almost all of it, and never seen the Daelyn this closely or in any other form. "So show me."

She almost regretted the request when inky darkness flooded the already dim room. The three Daelyn swelled and morphed into giant monstrosities, the likes of which she'd never even imagined before. They were very different but there was a certain uniformity to the energy that almost overwhelmed the room. As their forms settled she studied each. Ariun was enormous and beastly with his lionic head and saber like teeth. Even standing hunched over balancing on warped hands, he was more than fourteen feet tall.

To his right was Eios whose new form reminded her of a bull. His snarling, twisted face was crowned with widespread horns and his broad shoulders and back stood upright over tree trunk thighs which led down to cloven feet. His arms weren't so different, just much larger with a silky black pelt and long claws designed for ripping flesh.

Ivry was a different bag of worms. *Literally*. His demonic form was as large as the others but not beastly in the same way. He glowed eerily with a shroud of death, a

horrifying hopelessness that stole the will to live. She recognized his power without being affected by it. Still, he was by far the scariest of the three.

"You do well, our Queen, to not flinch from our appearance. Few have that strength," Ariun said as the three morphed back to their human forms. "It would be my honor to do battle at your side, Mistress." Back with his tanned skin and dark eyes, Ariun dropped to one knee before her. The other two followed his lead.

"Do you know who we are to tasc?" Sadrina asked while wondering if the answer would change their allegiance. After all, they had served Sadaen long before she was even born.

"We know, and trust your decision. Where you lead, we will follow." Ariun spoke for them once more. "If you do not yet have a plan, we could discuss strategy with you."

"Thank you." Their help was certainly welcome in this tasc.

Chapter Twelve

Sadaen absorbed the silence of the darkened woods into his soul. She was coming for him again. Her angelic scent, so like the roses from his garden, flowed over him. Even though DeLyna was coming to kill him, he welcomed the coming battle. In truth, their conflict was all that made his continued existence worth the bother. Perhaps this time he would let her kill him. And if the Creator saw fit, he would finally be able to rest.

The wind shifted, dragging DeLyna's scent away, leaving Sadaen alone. Would she still come or had something delayed their conflict? If she was leaving, should he hunt her? He couldn't bare the thought of the years or decades it might be until she picked up her vendetta once more.

A sudden insistent tug tightened the almost forgotten mental connection that bound him to his brother. No, Pahele wasn't a brother by blood or birth. He'd been created for the same duty, filled with the same purpose. Always the bond pulsed between them, but Pahele hadn't reached for him like this in centuries. In his surprise, Sadaen dropped his guard.

Sadaen?

Sadaen shook his head clear. *Yes, my brother?*

Thank the Creator that you answered.

That caught him off guard. Pahele had little reason to contact him and even less to be happy about it. *Why? Why would you care so much now?*

Sadrina. She is coming to find you. I didn't want you surprised.

Pahele at least remembered how little he liked surprises. *So what does she want from me? It is a shade late for me to play father to her.*

That is for her to say. I just wanted to be sure...

You wanted to be sure I didn't accidentally kill my own daughter. Thanks brother. Was this how Pahele saw him now, as nothing but a heartless killer? Was he right?

Yes.

And that breathy thought cut through Sadaen's pain, revealing the truth. *She has*

bound herself to you.

Yes, she finally agreed.

A tingle of contentment touched his mind. Sadrina would finally be mated to Pahele as was right. About time. I wondered how long you would let her remain alone or frolicking among the humans.

I did as I thought best. Perhaps I was wrong, but it matters little now.

How long was she gone from hell?

Sixty-four years. Or do you want the exact months? Or perhaps the number of seconds she was gone?

I'm sorry. I know how hard it must have been with both of us away. I'm glad you were able to hold the balance. And I am happy for you both to finally be together. This was the truth. He regretted increasing the burden that Pahele had carried so long. A burden meant for two, and yet, Pahele had shouldered it alone until Sadrina was ready. He should have gone back to help his brother, but he couldn't face the place where so very much had gone wrong.

Sadaen felt Pahele pulling away.

She is coming. The words filled his mind even as Pahele eased out of it.

Chapter Thirteen

Sadrina stared at the woods ahead of her. The dark groaned with the ominous dread of what was coming. Somehow the land knew this wasn't a good place to be tonight. Even the trees whispered their dreams of pulling up their roots and moving to somewhere safe. Would it be that bad? Would it come to battle? What did the trees know that she didn't?

The Daelyn had offered all their wisdom to her. They seemed confident that she would not fail in the task. Either that or they didn't mind the idea of their former lord killing her to escape transition. Yeah, that was possible. After all, Sadaen had been their lord long before she even existed. His fall from grace might mean little to them.

That was why she'd asked them to stay out of the confrontation unless and until she actually needed them to back her up.

That and the slim hope that this would not come down to a blood and death kind of battle. The truth was she didn't want to kill her own father. She'd put together the Daelyn's hints and the Book's advice. Both had led her to believe she might have chance to resolve this situation another way.

The first step was to find her father. He was somewhere here in these black woods, but why and where were still mysteries. She should open her senses and go in. She could track him through the blood she'd inherited from him. All she had to do was feel where he was.

So why was she rooted in place better than the trees?

Because this was her father, the mysterious man she'd only seen a few times from a distance since she was a child. She didn't know what to say to him or how to treat him. After all this time, would he recognize her? Would he give a shit who she was? What did she even know about him?

Nothing but rumors. He'd left almost immediately after her mother's death. *I was only five...* She remembered he was huge and angry all the time. He and her mother had fought and screamed when she'd seen them together. Then mother died. She'd thought

maybe he'd killed her, but no one had ever said anything of the sort. He'd come to her and told her that her mother was gone. Then he'd left as well.

Pahele had held her while she cried and comforted her through the grief. Pahele had told her that Sadaen hadn't killed her mother but had left because of her death. She hadn't understood then and still didn't.

Sadaen left her behind and she couldn't think of a single good reason.

And if she could get her feet to carry her into the woods and face him, she fully intended to ask him why he'd abandoned her.

* * * * *

Hel laughed as she watched Sadrina falter at the edge of the woods. It was perfect. Sadaen would kill his own daughter and Pahele would be free to perform his duties once more. She waved her hand at the silky wall and it shimmered to show a new scene. Sadaen waiting in the shadows. He was so beautiful. *Damn shame he never gave into my demands.* No, Sadaen had been far too besotted with that bitch, RyLina, and she had made him miserable. She laughed at the irony that Sadaen had objected to her whippings but welcomed his wife's tongue lashings.

He would have recovered better from the whippings.

As it was, Sadaen was weak and bitter. Perhaps now was the time to invite him to come home?

"What are you up to, my devilish sister?" Jormungand strolled into the room and stared at the wall for a moment. "So it has worked out to your favor after all."

"You knew it would. I don't take chances with my plans."

"You couldn't know that Sadaen would be assigned as her tasc. Even you can't control that."

"You think not, brother?" She drew out her words, wanting him to wonder at her abilities. She hadn't known about Sadaen but she wasn't about to tell him that. Wouldn't do to let him think he could control her. Not that he could. Jorm was just about useless here in his false form while his body was imprisoned in the world ocean. No, he could never match her, but she wanted him to know it with every fiber of his being.

"You can hint all you want, but I don't believe you can control the Book of the Dead. You should be careful how far you go in your blasphemy. Even you will not be spared if you dare to go too far with your games."

Anger rolled through her. "What do you know of it? I can do as I wish. The Creator will not strike me down for doing as I was made to do. Only with the Will of the Creator am I able to enjoy these games that I play and with that blessing I will continue to do so."

Jorm looked at her with his empty eyes. She thought he might back off but instead his hand shot out in a quick slap that whipped her face hard to the side. "You think only

of your suffering when you have it the best of all Loki's children. You are little more than a spiteful child and don't deserve your seat as ruler. Someday justice will fall and we will all pay for our deeds."

With that speech he stalked out of the room.

As his back turned the corner out of sight, Hel straightened and turned back to the scene playing out on the wall. Jorm was an asshole but he was right. They all suffered and she at least had her freedom. None of the others could say as much, except for their eldest sister, Einmyria. She might not be a prisoner, but all the others who still lived were.

A shifting in the shadows on the wall drew her attention back to the drama about to unfold.

Sadrina had found her courage and stepped boldly into the dark woods. Behind her two dark shadows flanked her movement. They would ensure that the plan went as planned.

Chapter Fourteen

Sadrina shivered as the darkness soaked into her bones. She loosened her wings, letting them fold about her like a cloak to hold out the oppressive chill. The woods stretched out before her, an endless land of shadows where the trail blended seamlessly into the undergrowth and enormous redwood trees spread high above.

He was here. But she had no hope of finding him unless she opened her mind to his invasion and risked him attacking through the connection. It was a risk she was willing to take.

She opened her mind and let the night flow into her. The flood of sensations washed through at such intensity it left her singed. In that moment she felt everything that was here, every animal, every plant, every mineral and every demon.

Sadaen stepped from behind one of the tree trunks with a hesitation that surprised her. She hadn't known what to expect from him but hesitation wasn't it.

"Sadrina."

"Sadaen."

"Once you called me father."

"Once, you acted like one."

A spark of shame lit his face. "I would beg forgiveness but I fear you're not ready to offer it. So perhaps I will only ask for a new beginning or at least a truce."

"Do you know why I am here?" She hadn't meant to blurt the words out, but they burst free anyhow.

"At first I didn't, but right now I can only think of one reason for you to track me down and it isn't to rebuild our broken family. You are here to tasc me, aren't you?"

Pain shot through her at the answer. "Yes."

"Your hesitation does me honor." He cocked his head to one side and looked over her shoulder. "Or perhaps you were only waiting for reinforcements, though I thought you would at least bring the Daelyn with you."

But she had brought the Daelyn, so he must be speaking of the others. She glanced behind her in time to see two Cyvampis demons fly at her from opposite

directions. She ducked and they swooped around with only glancing blows to her back.

Why were they attacking her? "Mykael! Gaybriel! What are you doing?"

Gaybriel landed lightly to one side and Mykael hovered to the other. Mykael spoke first. "We've come to tasc you, Sadrina. Are you ready to return to the Creator's waiting arms?" His wild eyes flashed everywhere but where they would have to meet her gaze.

"What are you talking about?"

"They can't explain. They have the soul madness." Sadaen's low voice carried easily to Sadrina.

"What the hell is soul madness?" She'd never heard of it, but then she hadn't been a working demon for very long. When the Cyvampis charged again she raised her powers and deflected them away before they got close enough to cause any damage.

"Somehow they have reclaimed their souls. The return of their souls has left them unstable. The only living cure is for them to be bound to a mate, but they have no mates."

Sadrina focused on Mykael and confirmed what Sadaen had said. The demon had his soul and carried it within his body, like none but the royals were strong enough to do. But who would do such a thing and why? "How did you get your soul back, Mykael?"

His only response was to flail against her powers, attempting to attack. For a second she wondered if her powers could take this kind of abuse and if they could how long did she have before they weakened?

Whatever was to happen would have to happen soon.

What did the Creator want done with them? Could they be sent back to hell for punishment? Would taking their souls away be enough to return their sanity? If it didn't help, would they have to be imprisoned? No, she would not imprison them.

She was a Tascryn demon. She would tasc them and let their souls free so that they might be reborn clean of the madness. Her mind and heart filled with light. This was the right answer.

But how could she tasc them properly? She could bind them as she had with Mykael before. She did so, binding the two deranged blood demons side by side against one of the huge trees.

"Daughter?" Sadaen called to her. "You need this more than I do." He held out a large pendant hanging from a fine almost transparent chain. "It was your mother's and should be yours now."

She held her hand out as an ancient memory bubbled to the surface. Her mother had always worn this pendant. It slid onto her palm and warmed her skin with a kind of rightness she'd never felt before. "It's beautiful."

"No! Not the Tascryna!" Gaybriel screamed.

Whatever a Tascryna was, it caused a powerful fear in the blood demons. Both

struggled frantically against their bonds. Their efforts tore at her powers painfully. If she didn't stop them now, they would break free and attack again.

Suddenly she knew what the Tascryna was and she knew exactly what to do with Sadaen's gift. She rushed forward with the pendant outstretched.

Gaybriel flinched back with a cry of fear. "No, Mistress. Please don't." He couldn't pull away. Neither demon could move more than an inch or two within her restraints. That didn't stop Gaybriel from trying with all his strength to escape.

She pushed into him, pinning him even more tightly between her powers and the ancient tree. No matter how Gaybriel struggled he would not get free. But he did struggle and it took nearly all her strength to hold him while lifting up the pendant. As she pushed it toward his forehead, words from long gone days filled her mind. "*Pykisiss a drin lowyn. Daevyn tol rysnu-rok*" Which translated roughly into, *The power is mine to judge you wanting. Now you must die so that you may be reborn clean of all sin.* Sadrina paused as the darkness was cut away by a gleaming white wave of power flowing out from the pendant within her hand. Gaybriel cowered and attempted to cover his eyes from the bright light. His whimpered pleas tore at her sympathies. But it had to be done. The rightness of this judgment filled her with confidence.

She pressed one tooled side of the pendant against Gaybriel's forehead and spoke the ancient language again. "*Pahaesys tol.*" *Be at peace.*

And he was. Gaybriel's fight fell away, leaving him with a soft sigh of gratitude. His soul eased free of his form and curled about her like a caress before being drawn back to the arms of the Creator. The demon's body, now nothing more than a shell, relaxed and sagged into her no longer needed restraints.

Part of her wept with sadness over his passing but at the same time she rejoiced for his safe transition. How could she have so much power to wield and still be in awe of it? She lifted him free to cradle his form to the ground and just as she was about to settle Gaybriel's body...Crash!

Mykael tore free of her bonds and hit her with enough force to send her flying. Worse yet, the pendant tangled and pulled free of her hand, immediately plunging the woods back into darkness. For the space of a breath, as she was being flung toward one of the huge tree trunks, she feared being unarmed.

But she was very well armed. She swept her wings out, adding her own darkness to the deep shadows. With a twist, she spun and countered his headlong rush, capturing his muscular body in her slender grip.

Physical muscles would not be what decided this outcome. In fact she was about to let the natural rules of their world work in her favor. She let him turn her in his embrace, revealing her bare neck. She let him savagely bite her throat and feed on her blood.

She let him try to kill her.

Try, not succeed.

Mykael's first few swallows were accompanied by satisfied rumbles. Those happy sounds silenced while he shifted to bite deeper. Even that wouldn't give him satisfaction. It would only give him death.

Mykael ripped free and sagged to his knees. "How? How can this be? You are Cyvampis..."

She smiled gently down at him where he clutched at his stomach. "I haven't been Cyvampis for several minutes."

"Gayb."

"Transitioning Gaybriel offered me the right to be called Daelyn and a Cyvampis cannot feed off of death. The poison will kill you and it will be painful, possibly causing damage to your soul when you pass on. I can ease your transition if you will let me." The truth was she would ease him through it whether he asked for the aid or not. She wasn't about to let him suffer something so horrible as this death could be. "All I ask is who sent you to tasc me?" She stroked the top of his head as he retched painfully from the poison blood that ate away at his body from the inside.

Mykael sat up, gasping with the pain. "Hel."

It was enough. She picked up the pendant, the Tascryna, then stepped behind him and lifted it with a single smooth motion to press against his forehead. "*Pahaesys tol Mykaelysis.*"

Mykael fell back into her arms as his soul pulled free and hovered for a moment. Perhaps he offered her some last honor or perhaps some last insult, but a breath later he faded away and she felt his safe return.

* * * * *

Pahele sank onto his throne. Sadrina was safe and she was the Queen. The return of the Tascryna was a surprise, but a welcome one. How had Sadaen carried the holy relic so long? Only the rightful Queen or her chosen warriors could carry it without being burned alive or driven insane from the pain.

Sadaen appeared to be neither.

Though many might believe insanity ruled him, Pahele had felt his brother's mind and knew it to be as strong as ever.

No, Sadaen was not insane.

But he also was not the pillar of strength that he once was. His craving for vengeance and thirst for retaliation had transformed him into a different being, a darker being.

How had he managed to carry the Tascryna? And other questions worried Pahele; where had Sadaen been and what had he been doing for all this time? Each time he'd checked on his brother he had found him in the same anguished state. After a thousand

years of unending pain leaked through the bond between them, Pahele had made the painful decision to distance himself from Sadaen.

After that, he'd had little knowledge of what Sadaen had done or where he had been.

That left a power beyond imagination running loose to cross the realms and do as he pleased.

* * * * *

"You did well, my daughter."

Sadrina turned to face the man she'd come to kill. His compliment softened some of her anger over his leaving her. "Thank you, Sadaen." She wasn't ready to dance around the family heirlooms, run into his arms or call him daddy just yet. "How did you get the Tascryna?"

"I took it from your mother."

Had he killed her mother to get the relic? She had pretty much put aside that fear, but now... She had to wonder. "How...?"

"I took it after she died—when I found her."

She wanted to believe him, but too many questions remained. "Why?"

"I don't think I can explain that."

Why wasn't she surprised? Sadrina had other duties to concern herself with. She still had to deal with the two dead bodies and clean up the area. "Then tell me about the Tascryna."

"It is the holy relic used by the Tascrina. You are the Tascrina, as was your mother. You will be able to use it to help restore the balance."

"How can I do that with one little pendant?" It wasn't little but she was feeling a bit overwhelmed by this new unexpected duty she seemed to be bound to. Instead she focused using her energy to burn the demon bodies. While the dim glow of power did its work, she walked slowly around the clearing and put nearly everything back as it was before they'd arrived. Finally when she could delay no longer, she returned to face Sadaen.

"The Tascryna is more than a pendant. It's a locket."

She lifted the item in question. "What's inside?"

"I don't know."

Sadrina stared at him. Would he lie to her or even try to? "You've had it for all this time and don't know what's inside?"

"It does not open for me."

"Oh." Then maybe whatever was inside wasn't meant to be seen by him. She should open it somewhere private.

"You did come here to tasc my soul, did you not?"

A great deal had changed since she'd begun this task. "I did, but I don't think that will be necessary."

"You should do as the Creator asks."

He wanted her to kill him. She wasn't sure how to react to that terrible truth. Her head might be confused but in her heart she knew he wasn't meant to die yet. She wasn't meant to kill him. "The Creator asked me to judge you. I have and I do not find you ready to be tasked."

"If it isn't time for me to die, then what is left for me here?"

She caught his arm when he would have stepped back. "Maybe it's time for you to live once more." Sadrina let her hand fall away from his massive arm.

A wave of energy knocked Sadrina from her feet. Then came an angry cry, "Nooo!" The attacker was a dark angel, one of the Creator's special legions. This angel's exquisite beauty was marred by the hatred that twisted her expression. "You have to kill him!" She screamed and launched herself at Sadaen.

He caught the angel in his enormous arms and pinned her thrashing body against his broad chest. *Thank you, my daughter. I think I may take your advice.*

Even before the words faded from her mind, Sadaen disappeared with the death angel still clasped firmly in his arms.

Sadrina stared down at the locket with its deeply etched trinity symbol. It was the first personal possession of her mother's that she'd ever held. And the wonder of it held her transfixed.

Chapter Fifteen

Pahele waited for Sadrina's return with something less than his usual patience. The throne room crowded around him, every sound and silence becoming a new irritation. He knew Sadrina was fine. She wasn't hurt or even overly stressed at the moment. She had tased not one but two demons, which more than fulfilled her duty as a Daelyn. And she had judged Sadaen as was fit for a royal demon. She was ready to be Queen.

But where was she? Why hadn't she returned directly to his side?

Pahele stood and paced across the smooth marble floor. She would return any second now. Surely she wouldn't try to flee back into the world at this point? The rightful Queen of Niflheim living among mortals... Ridiculous.

No, she had nothing to run from anymore. Sadrina would return to him. What if Hel had some other plot planned that was keeping Sadrina away? Did she have anything that could do that? Could she cause any more harm than she already had?

It wasn't possible. Now that Sadrina was fully a royal, she was connected to the Creator, same as he was. There was nothing Hel could do to her that wasn't the Creator's will. No being tied to the Creator could be destroyed without the Creator's blessing. Although Pahele did not know the reasons behind the Creator's will, he did trust that judgment.

And Sadrina would return to him safely. Still...

Pahele offered up a prayer that Sadrina be held safe in whatever was to come.

A motion of the air signaled the arrival of the three Daelyn. All were in their more human forms and appeared at ease, which helped to relax Pahele somewhat.

"Why have you returned without your Queen?"

Ariun dropped to one knee before him. "She ordered us away, My Lord. We were not needed. She is strong and fearless. She is more than worthy to be both Queen and Tascrina."

He wanted to ask why she hadn't returned, but to do so would be to put his own powers into question. He could reach out through the realms and check on her, but

knew to do so would make Sadrina believe he doubted her abilities.

So instead he focused on touching that precious bond that tied them together. It was a miraculous thing to feel a partner so close even when worlds separated them. With a flick of his hands, he dismissed the Daelyn. He wanted to be alone until Sadrina returned.

But after only five minutes of being alone, Pahele was desperate for a distraction. The waiting might kill him like nothing else could. Any distraction would do. Even reprimanding Hel.

It would also be an excellent power play to have Hel and Jormungand here in the throne room when Sadrina returned triumphant and accepted her crown. With the Creator's blessing it might even be enough to stop the worst of the games they insisted on playing. He extended his senses to include their wing and found both in her enormous chambers. Jorm was relaxing with a couple of their winged pets, while Hel raged over her recent failure.

But how could he get them to actually come to his call?

Technically he could probably force them, but to do so would not make the situation any better in the long run. Still they needed to be set straight before they caused more trouble for Sadrina.

He could only think of one thing that could draw Hel out. He'd have to let her believe she'd won. Pahele projected out to Hel, *Please come to the throne room. Bring Jormungand. A decision must be made regarding Sadaen's tasc.*

Hel responded immediately. *What about his tasc?*

He was not transitioned as was expected. This may affect us all, so I request you both be present. Will you come?

Her satisfaction flowed over him like acid. *Yes.*

Pahele sighed and settled back into his throne. Hel had given in almost too easily. Did she have some scheme already in place? Perhaps he should meet with them before Sadrina returned.

Then the chance for deciding was past. Jormungand and Hel arrived in a flourish of scented smoke. Her ever present stench of decay was overlaid by nauseating lilac perfume. She stomped forward and with every motion demonstrated how pissed she was at failing with at least part of her plot. Her thin lips turned up just enough to hint at a surprise.

And any surprise Hel might be happy about was sure to ruin his day.

"So you think she might have failed at her tasc. How wonderful!"

"I did not say she failed. I only said that a decision would have to be made. However, it is not our decision to make."

"Bah!" She threw her hands up in the air and spun away dramatically. "You make excuses for her failures. She is no child to coddle any longer. If you wish her to be Queen

then she must prove her own ability to rule."

A wave of power signaled Sadrina's return. "I never asked to be coddled."

"You!" Hel staggered back before catching herself. "You failed!"

Demons of all four lesser levels materialized along the walls of the room. The smaller Akyrn perched in crowded groups along a raised balcony circling the enormous room.

Sadrina straightened her back, determined to face the woman who made this place the hell of legends. "Did I fail?" She wasn't absolutely positive that she'd done her Royal tasc, since that one was never talked about. Pahele stood in front of his throne, but she didn't want him to help her this time. Well, she wanted him to, but knew it was time to stand up to Hel on her own. "Why do you think I failed?"

"You failed. You can't bluff your way out of this. The demons won't follow a master who hasn't proven herself. Your precious Pahele says that all the time."

A murmur broke out among the demons. Ariun spoke up from his post behind the thrones. "We will follow her. Sadrina is our Queen."

Jormungand settled into one of the smaller thrones with a bored slouch. "So how can she prove it one way or another?"

"You want me to prove my power? How would you propose we do that?"

"Sadrina," Pahele growled and for once, she understood his reasoning. He wanted her silence to speak louder than any arguments. Pahele had a plan. "She has no need to prove what will be clearly known soon enough."

"What does that mean?" Hel screeched. "I know you, Pahele! You'll twist the rules for her. You always have!"

Sadrina met his gaze and with a sudden clarity realized that Pahele always cushioned her from as much of their harsh reality as he could. This time he wouldn't have to. "Pahele won't interfere with the coming ceremony. I will be on my own and if I fail you will have the pleasure of watching the Creator char me into ash for my insolence."

"The ceremony?" Hel moved over to her throne between Pahele and Jormungand. "You mean the crowning ceremony. Yes, that would satisfy me."

"Good, because after I am crowned, you and I will have something to settle."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" Hel asked.

"You won't get away with using my demons as you did Mykael and Gaybriel. After I'm crowned, it will be my right to seek justice on their behalf."

Hel's eyes widened then she let out a wicked laugh. "We shall see. I have little to fear from a pile of ash."

Jormungand clapped his hands with a crash of sound. "Excellent! Then let the games begin."

Pahele stood and raised his hands. Power crackled though the air as he channeled the Creator's energy to mold the room into a more elegant design. The black marble

rippled with colors more fitting for silks as brilliant torches flared to life producing a golden glow.

The floor under Sadrina's feet shifted from black to a circle of blood red, marked with an enormous golden trinity symbol.

"What foolishness is this?" Hel jumped from the red marble as if burned by the circle of power.

Sadrina touched the Tascryna and knew the floor had formed for her. "There is no trick to this, Mistress Hel. I am the Tascrina."

"But the floor... Pahele, what have you done?"

"He did not do this. The floor only reflects the will of the Creator. This is as it should be."

Pahele lifted his hands before him and a delicate black crown appeared. The front of the crown was embedded with glittering stones, what looked like rubies, diamonds and beautiful black jewels. "I am lord here. I command the legions. I am Ayr-Synon-Cytl-Daeyos-Pahelysius."

Every demon within the room, thousands of them, spoke as one. "Our Master, the Master of all."

He continued, "I have chosen this woman as my mate and as your Queen. Do you accept her as your Mistress as I am your Master?"

"She is our Mistress, our mother, our Queen."

"Akynsa-Synisz-Cyna-Daeryna-Sadrina tol a Tascrina."

The demons echoed, "*Tascrina*."

"My heart claims your love. My soul binds to your soul." He glided to the edge of the red stone circle.

At his approach the power of the circle swelled and she knew that if she willed the power to keep him out, it would hold even against Pahele. But she didn't wish to be separated from him, not now, not ever. The energy parted, allowing him to step within the circle to stand before her.

"I offer you all that I am so that we can rule as one. Will you join with me? Will you be my Queen?"

"I will." Instinctively, she dipped her head, but Pahele caught her chin and raised it back up before settling the crown on with his other hand. As the weight settled she felt the warmth of acceptance. Not only from the Creator, but also through a link to every demon in the room. All were now bound to her, same as they were bound to Pahele. Responsibility so great might feel like a burden to some, but to Sadrina, it felt like the stars aligning. This was the part that had been missing from her life before she'd even known anything was missing.

"*Our mistress, our mother, our Queen*." All the demons chanted in a rolling rumble that resounded throughout the cavernous room.

The moment was perfect. Joy lit up her soul and she waited on a pinnacle of rightness. Her gaze focused on Pahele's face as he waited for her to enjoy her moment. He would understand even if she barely grasped the importance of this feeling of oneness. Before she could ask him how long it would last, she knew. He shared that it would last forever. Nothing could break the bonds that were built on this day.

Slowly the chanting voices fell away and the echoes shivered before allowing silence to claim the room once more.

But the rightness and balance remained. Sadrina let out the breath she'd unconsciously been holding. Pahele's handsome lips quirked up. He knew her thoughts and felt her relief just as she did.

"If you are through mooning over each other, I have better things to do with my time." Hel flung herself from her throne as if to storm from the room.

Sadrina willed the Daelyn to block the door and they appeared before Hel even before her words finished echoing. Sadrina nodded to Pahele and he returned to his throne, leaving her to deal with Hel. She could feel his concern but that was overshadowed by his confidence and pride.

"Out of my way!" Hel screamed.

Sadrina turned to face the fuming goddess. "Hel, we still have matters to settle."

"What do you plan to do? Stop me from leaving? How ridiculous!" Hel attempted to dematerialize but when that failed she glared at Sadrina as if to melt the floor out from under her.

"Is it? You and I need to determine a just punishment for what you did to Mykael and Gaybriel. When that is done you may leave."

"What are you talking about? I did nothing to your little blood drinkers."

"Don't bother lying. I know that you offered them their souls in exchange for their service. Your actions led to their deaths.

"So what if I did? There is nothing you can do to me."

"I believe there is. You see, part of being Tascrina is the responsibility of protecting the world from cruelty, injustice and evil. That seems to apply here."

Hel's bluster increased. "And what exactly can you do about it?"

"You will choose a fitting punishment or I will transition you from this life."

She gasped. "You can't!"

"Indeed I can." Sadrina brushed her fingers over the Tascryna which warmed to even that light caress. "And for you, Hel, being transitioned would mean you cannot be reborn during this age of man."

"But..." The bluster was gone, leaving only sullen anger.

"Choose your punishment."

"How can I choose? If I go too easy on myself, you will use it as an excuse to kill me!"

Part of her wanted to ease Hel's fears but nothing she said would be believed

anyhow. "Choose and consider well the pain and deaths that your actions caused."

Hel squared her shoulders. "If my punishment is to equal pain and death, I offer my two most loyal servants to be whipped or killed as you see fit."

Sadrina couldn't believe Hel had the gall to suggest another suffer for her actions. Worse yet, she appeared to think it was actually a fair punishment. "That is not acceptable."

Hel threw her arms up in the air. "I don't know what you want!"

Pahele gently nudged Sadrina's mind before standing to draw attention. "An appropriate punishment might be to withhold her entertainment."

That didn't seem harsh enough by about a million times. Like chastising a child for burning down a city. And Sadrina was about to say as much when the wash of thoughts and emotions flooded over her from the demons she now ruled. They wanted her to ask for this, to protect them from He's cruel attentions. Would it truly be enough? She longed to see Hel suffer but not quite as much as she needed to keep the others safe.

"What do you mean by entertainment?" Hel arched a brow in question.

Thank you, Pahele. I'll take it from here. Sadrina made her decision. This was the right choice. "Hel, you will be confined to your wing and have no contact with any of the demons regardless of your needs. That is your judgment. Do you accept it?"

"For how long?"

Eternity? As much as Sadrina longed to say the word, it would never be agreed to. "Your punishment will continue until the Creator returns both Mykael and Gaybriel to us."

"But that could be years, or even centuries!"

"Or it could be today. There is no way to know how long the Creator will wait before returning them to this life. Your justice is no longer in my hands." And with that statement, Sadrina released the binding spell which held Hel locked into the room. Then with a less than gentle shove, she pushed Hel's body through mid-realm to land in her own chambers.

Jormungand's laugh cut through Sadrina's sigh of relief. He stood and sauntered down to the edge of the red circle. "Well done, little one. You really showed her."

She faced him warily. How would his serpent tongue use the compliment to cut her?

"You worry too much. And you must learn to hide your feelings a bit more, but I am impressed with the grace you managed to best Hel with today."

"She's your sister." Why was he saying this?

"She is, but she also is her own person. I love her for being my sister, but I often disagree with her choice of entertainment." His smile was little more than a sneer. "I had nothing to do with her use of the blood drinkers. She enjoyed torturing them and only took it one step further."

"What I don't understand is how she retrieved their souls."

"That would not be so very difficult, but she didn't have to. She tricked them into doing it for her."

"Does she have anything to do with the missing souls?"

"Not that I know of. She does keep secrets from me sometimes." He bowed slightly and dematerialized.

Although the last rang of a lie, Sadrina let it go. She and Pahele could get to the bottom of the missing souls together.

The lesser demons seemed to take Jormungand's exit as a sign they should leave as well and began to disappear. In moments only she and Pahele remained. He lounged in his throne looking very much as the ruler of hell should. His sweeping black horns needed no crown but the black and gold cape draped over his shoulders was royal to every fiber. Somehow it looked perfect on his blue-black skin and blended in with his long hair and silky wings. The gold hem resting over one leather clad thigh drew her gaze.

His fingers flicked idly at the edge. She was truly blessed to be bound to such a vision of masculinity.

Need pooled through her, sinking below her belly and becoming a craving to touch and taste that delectable bare chest.

"You did wonderful, my mate and my Queen." The rumble of his voice ground through her.

She didn't truly think she'd done all that well, but she had succeeded anyhow. Now all she wanted was to settle in and spend time with her mate and her King. "Are we done here?"

"Oh, yes."

She stepped between his thighs and caught his hands when he reached for her. "Can we go back to our chambers?"

"We certainly can." He pulled her down onto his lap, where she could easily feel his aroused body pressing eagerly up at her weight. "You do know how proud I am, don't you?"

She tucked her head against his chest, relishing this simple contact. His words were a balm, even though she could feel his every thought. "I know." Her hand slipped under his robe and caressed his bare chest, feathering over his ringless nipples and settling over the slow thud of his heart. "So is that your pride I feel pressed against my thigh or is there more that you feel for me?"

"Oh, there is more. So much more."

"Then I recommend we retire so you can show me all you feel. Perhaps we can find a proper way to celebrate all we have to be grateful for."

He shifted slightly as they materialized on his bed. The motion lifted her allowing him to claim her mouth for a long, deep kiss.

When they both came up panting for air she knew this was the way it could be forever. He would always be with her, part of her and together they could face any trial. There was much to be thankful for. And much to celebrate.

“Let the celebrating commence...”

The End

Author Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. When Shannon isn't bothering hubby, she shows dogs, gardens and watches over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. Writing started off as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a war against reality. Her friends kindly say reality never stood a chance.

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