



DEMON'S PROMISE

By

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Shana peered into the cell, at the huge, black wolf lying on the floor. The wolf raised its head and stared at her with penetrating yellow-gold eyes. Shana swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry. The eyes were looking straight into hers, and the stare was intelligent ... and accusatory. The wolf's dark lips wrinkled back from long, white fangs, shining with spittle. Slowly, it climbed to its feet, causing the chains around its legs to rattle. Shana gasped softly and took a step back.

"Don't worry, my lady," said Brun. He stood beside her, large and solid, his familiar presence reassuring in the darkness of the dungeon. "Those chains are starmetal. Nothing alive can break through them, not even an unnatural creature like that."

Now that the beast was standing, she could see how big it was, far bigger than a normal wolf. She guessed it weighed more than Brun. Thick, shaggy fur covered its body, not quite hiding the ragged wound in its side. She could see a patch of dark, dried blood on the cell's stone floor. "Hasn't that wound been treated?" she asked.

Brun raised an eyebrow. "Would *you* want to bandage it? Anyone who sets foot in a cell with a beast like that risks losing a limb or his life. We've tried giving it drugged water to calm it down, but the beast wouldn't drink it, so we're just waiting for it to weaken. We figure a few days without food will take the fight out of it."

"What then?" asked Shana. "What are they going to do with him ... with it?"

He combed his fingers thoughtfully through his thick, reddish beard. "Put

it to death and let the alchemists dissect it, I imagine. Then probably have it stuffed and mounted. Then again, that might be bad luck to keep it around. Even its corpse might have some evil magic.”

Shana bit her lower lip. The wolf demon's eyes were still on her. She found it difficult to hold that gaze for long. “Is it true that they can assume human shape?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. That's what makes them so dangerous. They can move about in human form, live among us.” Brun held up his lantern, illuminating the wolf's face. Light caught in the golden irises, making them shine like coins. “You can recognize them if you know the signs, though. They all have those yellow eyes, even in man-form. And a dog can smell the difference. They spot a demon, they'll start barking like crazy, no matter what form it's in. That's how your mother's hunters caught this one. Otherwise, they might have mistaken him for a mere savage.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Quite a struggle, I'm told. When they came after him, he transformed, and they're nearly unstoppable in wolf form. The hunters had to fill him with arrows before he even slowed down. You don't want to come across one of these monsters in the woods, my lady.”

A low growl rose up in the wolf's throat, and it let out a sharp bark, making Shana flinch. Her eyes went back to the wound in its side.

This wasn't an animal. It was an intelligent being they were going to kill.

“Does it really have to die?” she asked.

“It's too dangerous to live,” Brun replied firmly.

“But he hasn't hurt anyone ... has he?”

“He might have.”

“But you don't *know*. How can you just assume he's evil?”

He frowned. “It's a demon. They're evil by nature. I know you've a soft heart, Miss, but your compassion is wasted on this creature. The world will be a

better place when that monstrous heart stops beating.”

Shana bit her lower lip, staring at the demon. Its eyes locked with hers ... and suddenly, she couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded in her throat. She seemed to feel that stare throughout her whole body. Her skin tingled.

Shana.

She gave a start. It was as if a voice had spoken from inside her head. A deep, male voice.

“Miss?”

She barely heard Brun's voice. She couldn't look away from those eyes. Nothing else existed.

“Miss!” Hands gripped her shoulders and turned her sharply away from the cell bars.

She blinked up at Brun's face as her eyes slowly regained focus. “What?”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, I'm fine,” she said, surprised at how normal her voice sounded. Her heart was still galloping, and her skin tingled with a strange, warm energy.

He frowned. “I think you'd best go,” he said. “The dungeon's no place for a young lady to be spending her morning.”

She nodded, dazed. As the guard led her down the dimly lit hall, away from the cell, she cast one last look over her shoulder, at the demon. Its eyes were still watching her, unblinking and golden.

Brun led her up a flight of twisting stone stairs, which were damp and slimy. “Watch your step,” he said, and Shana nodded. She lifted her dress to avoid letting it brush the filthy steps.

She didn't really care about the dress, but if it got dirty, her mother might see, and realize that she'd been to the dungeon. She knew that Mother wouldn't approve, but she'd wanted--needed--to see the demon for herself. She didn't

exactly know why, but it seemed terribly important. Of course, if Brun mentioned her visit to Mother, Shana would be in trouble. But her mother rarely spoke to the guards, except to issue orders, so there wasn't much chance of that happening.

They reached the huge oaken door at the top of the stairs, and Brun pushed it open. Shana blinked at the sudden, bright sunlight.

"Are you sure you're all right, Miss Shana?" he asked. "You're pale as a sheet."

She managed a slight smile. "I'm just ... a little shaken, that's all," she said. "It's the first time I've ever seen a demon up close. I'll be fine in a moment."

"If you say so," he said, though he was still frowning. "Would you like me to walk you back to the house?"

"No." She shook her head. "I'm all right. Honest. Thank you, sir." She stepped through the open door, into the grassy field outside the windowless stone building. The door creaked shut behind her and she heard the click as it locked.

* * * *

Ashrin lay curled on the floor of his cell, his stomach rumbling. He tried his best to ignore it. There was a slab of fresh, raw mutton lying in the opposite corner of the cell, but he knew it was drugged. They wanted him unconscious so the alchemists could cut him open while he was alive, and take samples of his blood so that they could run tests on him. Well, damned if he'd make it easy for them.

He growled softly and shifted. The wound in his side still ached, but at least it had stopped bleeding. Such a deep wound would have killed a mortal creature, but his body could heal almost any damage, given enough time. Without food and water, however, the healing process would be slow and agonizing. And unless he got something to eat, he would never have the strength to break out of this damned prison.

In sheer frustration, he began gnawing his chains again, though he'd done that for hours and not even dented the metal. He'd only succeeded in making his gums bleed and his jaws ache. Starmetal was the only substance in the world harder than a wolf demon's teeth. Some humans called it god-silver because of its supposed holy properties. To Ashrin, it was the most evil stuff ever mined. Its mere presence seemed to suck the strength out of him, and its cold, bitter smell made his nose wrinkle.

He heard footsteps, and his ears swiveled toward the sound ... but it was only the guard, Brun, coming to check up on him again. The man's broad, round face peered in through the bars and Ashrin's lips twitched in an instinctive snarl. These men were all so fat and soft-looking, like sheep in a pen. Ashrin had never eaten a human, but still, he was a predator by nature and the guard smelled like meat. His mouth opened, salivating.

"I see we've decided to be stubborn," sighed Brun, glancing at the uneaten meat. "Well, it won't make a difference in the long run. You can only go so long without food. You're just dragging out your suffering."

Ashrin growled softly as he watched the guard walk away. His nostrils twitched. The guard's clothes still bore the lingering scent of the girl named Shana. How surprised he had been to see a woman in this foul, stinking dungeon, and more surprised yet to smell a faint tinge of magic emanating from her.

Had he imagined it? No. He'd seen her dark eyes widen when he mind-spoke her name. She had a touch of the gift, even if she didn't realize it. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to hear his voice. Mind-speaking was a lost talent among humans.

She stirred his curiosity, among other things. Even in wolf form he was still a man, and responded to the closeness and scent of a beautiful young woman. He remembered vividly the way the pale green silk of her dress had clung to those

high, firm breasts, and that small, tight....

He shook his head with a soft growl. He had more important concerns right now.

Yet his thoughts went back to her, each time he tried to pull them away. He wondered why he had felt such sadness in her mind. A woman like that, the daughter of such a rich and important Lady ... surely, she had everything she could desire. Surely he had imagined it.

Or was it possible that she, like him, was a prisoner?

* * * *

Shana slipped in quietly through the main doors of the mansion. She looked around, then crept forward into the main hall, letting the great oaken door creak shut behind her. The hall was silent and bright, sunlight spilling in through the tall, arched windows. Her boots clicked softly against the stone floor. She made her way toward the steep stairs at the end of the hall, stairs which led to the second floor and her bedroom. In the slanting rays of sun, she could see dust-motes glimmering in the air.

The mansion was huge and ancient. It had the feel of a temple, or a tomb. Her family had lived here for generations. Once, the family had been powerful and influential, with sprawling tracts of farmland tended by countless serfs, and the mansion had been filled with servants ... but the family fortune had dwindled over the past few decades. She knew this only because her mother had told her: By the time Shana was born, the household was a ghost of its former self. It was eerie at times, to see so many empty, unused rooms ... yet it was her home, the only one she had ever known. Sometimes it troubled her, to think that there was so much of the world she had not seen, that she had never ventured outside this tiny corner of the vast land of Aris, but there was no sense in regretting what she could not change.

She'd barely set foot on the stairs when a sharp voice stopped her in her tracks: "Shana."

She turned slowly.

Lady Olivia stood behind her, a tall, thin form in a dark gray dress, her long, brown hair tied back in a painfully tight braid. Her moon-pale face was expressionless and cool, as always. Shana couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Mother smile. But then, these days, they rarely saw each other at all. "Yes, Mother?" she said, keeping her eyes downcast, hidden beneath her lashes.

"You were gone for quite a while," she said. "You've been spending far too much time outdoors, lately. You should be studying your languages."

Shana sighed. She could already speak and read the three major languages of Aris: She knew Tayalese, the tongue of the great eastern cities, and Laarish, the language of the western coast ... and of course, she knew Alanirese, the ancient and revered language of the noble families. In addition to that, she was fluent in Common, the simpler tongue spoken by all people of the continent. She knew all her lesson-books from cover to cover. Her mother still insisted that she review them, though it was unlikely Shana would ever have much chance to use her knowledge. She suspected the lessons were mainly to keep her busy. "Idle hands are the sire of all trouble," as her mother liked to say.

"Sometimes I just need to get outside," said Shana. "For sunlight and air."

Lady Olivia took a step closer. Her slender brows drew together over slate gray eyes. "I see," she said. "Sunlight and air."

"Mother?"

"I suppose the dungeon is a good place to go for sunlight and air?" Lady Olivia said coolly.

Shana felt a stab of panic, but managed to keep her face blank and composed. "What do you mean?" she asked.

“Do you think I’m a fool?” she asked. “I’ve asked the servants and guards to keep me informed about where you go. I *know* you. You’re never content to stay where it’s safe. You’ve always got to go nosing around where you’ve no business being.”

Shana took a deep breath, lifting her chin, and looked her mother in the eye. “I was just curious,” she said. “Everyone was talking about the demon, but no one would tell me anything. I don’t see anything wrong with just wanting a quick look.”

She knew immediately that she’d made a mistake. Olivia’s eyes widened. “You saw the *demon*?” she asked.

Shana bit her tongue.

“By the stars, Shana, do you have any idea how dangerous those creatures are?”

“They had it locked up,” she said, but her voice was more subdued now. She could feel her cheeks growing hot. “It was in chains. There was no danger.”

“Of course there was danger! Those creatures have powers we can’t begin to understand. I can’t believe the guards even let you near it.” Olivia clenched her fists, inhaling slowly, as if to bring her emotions under control. Her face was brick-red with anger. “You must never, ever go there again. If you do, believe me, I *will* know. And there will be consequences.”

“But I don’t understand,” she said. “The guard said that it couldn’t break free, that the starmetal would hold it.”

“I pray he’s right. So far, they’ve been successful in keeping it contained. But ... Shana, demons are not natural creatures.” She leaned closer. “We know very little about them, but it’s said that some of them can read minds, or enter a person’s dreams ... or even....” She hesitated.

“Even what?”

“There have been stories of possession,” she said. “Of demons inhabiting a person’s body, directing their actions. There was one young man, I have heard it said, who set fire to a temple and killed seven people when a demon invaded his mind. The priests tried to drive the creature's presence from him, but they could not. He had to be executed.”

Shana blinked. “Surely you don’t think I’m *possessed*, do you?”

“Demons are extremely clever. He might have slipped into your mind and hidden himself. He may be laying in wait for the proper moment to seize control. I think it would be a good idea to let one of the alchemists examine you. If the creature has done anything to your mind, he will know.”

Shana tensed. “But if the demon had the ability to do such a thing, wouldn’t the guards have been affected by now?”

“They are protected by spells, and they take a great many precautions. They have protective amulets meant to keep the demon out of their minds. I don’t suppose they gave you one, did they?”

Shana shook her head.

Olivia’s mouth tightened. “I thought not. You had better report to Alchemist Sedric at once.”

Shana bowed her head, feeling subdued and a little frightened. Perhaps she had been foolish to visit the dungeon, after all. “Yes, Mother,” she said quietly. She turned.

“One more thing,” Olivia said, and withdrew a small, black, velvet box from her pocket. “A messenger brought it this morning. It is for you, from Alan of Fyrden.”

Shana's stomach tightened, and her skin went cold. Alan was her husband to be: She had been engaged to him since childhood, though she had met him only a few times. She took the box and slowly opened it. A gold chain glistened

inside. A bracelet. "It's ... lovely," she said. She lifted the chain. Beneath it lay a small, folded note. She unfolded it and read it: *To my betrothed*, it said.

"He also left a message," her mother said. "The date of the wedding has been set. It will take place in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Shana's eyes widened. "So soon?"

"You knew it would be soon."

"I thought I might have another few months, at least."

"Don't pout. Alan is a good man. And a wealthy one. He will keep you comfortable and provide for your children."

Shana stared at the floor. She remembered Alan of Fyrden as a dour man with a round, pale face, deep creases in his forehead, and tiny black eyes beneath bushy, scowling brows. His beard, she recalled, was iron gray, and his voice like the rumble of a tired and grouchy dragon. He was old enough to be her father, or her grandfather, even.

Shana's fingers tightened on the bracelet. "I hardly know him," she said. "What if I don't like him?"

"You'll grow to care for him, in time, as he will grow to care for you. That was how it was with your father and I, may his soul rest peacefully. At first I found him a terrible bore ... well, he was always a bore, but as the years passed I developed a certain fondness for him as well."

Shana didn't reply. Her parents might have learned to tolerate each other, but she had no delusions that they had ever loved each other. Certainly there had never been any passion between them. Shana found it difficult to imagine how they had managed to conceive a child. Together they had always been polite but distant, never touching, rarely smiling. They had slept in separate bedrooms.

She had known, from an early age, that marrying for love only happened in fairy tales, that there was no handsome young stranger on a white horse coming to

carry her away. Only silly little girls believed in such things. She was twenty, now: A grown woman. Most women her age would already be married, with a child or two. She was lucky to have remained free for this long.

Yet she felt a deep and bitter ache in her heart, all the same. She had hoped, in some small and secret corner of her soul, that she might yet find a man who truly thrilled her heart, or at least one whose presence she could enjoy. But she knew now that it would never happen.

* * * *

Shana lay in bed, tossing and turning. After an hour or so, she sighed and stood, her feet touching the thick, braided rug on the stone floor of her room. Restless, she walked over to her dresser, picked up one of the silver and pearl brushes her mother had given her as a birthday present some years ago, and began to brush her long, dark hair. She stared at her reflection. She looked very little like her mother: She had her father's thick, raven hair and black eyes.

A cool breeze stirred the curtains, and she shivered. Her thin, white nightgown wasn't quite enough to keep out the chilly bite in the air.

She found her thoughts drifting back to the demon. Those staring golden eyes seemed to have burned themselves into her brain. They hovered in the darkness behind her lids when she closed her own eyes, and the memory of them sent an icy finger sliding down her spine. She licked her lips and nervously fingered the handle of her hairbrush. Why was she thinking about him so much?

Suppose he really had invaded her mind? Suppose he was there now, crouched in some dark corner of her soul, looking out through her eyes, waiting for the ideal moment to seize control and use her for some unspeakable purpose?

Earlier that day, Alchemist Sedric had examined her and pronounced her free of demonic influence ... though how he could determine that by looking under her tongue and taking her pulse, she had no idea. He'd made her drink a foul-

tasting greenish brew which he claimed would purge any taint of evil magic from her body, then sent her on her way. She knew her mother had great faith in alchemists, but she didn't believe for a moment that drinking tea made from newts' tails and owls' eyes would protect her from a demon's magic.

She wrapped her arms around herself and walked over to the window, staring out at the rolling fields and woodlands surrounding the great, stone mansion: The mansion that had belonged to her father. Lady Olivia had come here as his bride when she was a young woman, younger than Shana was now. How had she felt? Had she experienced the same fear and sense of homesickness that Shana was already feeling?

Shana's eyes wandered to the edge of the woods. In the shadows of the trees stood a low, stone house with a flat roof and a single, stout oaken door. The dungeon. Until the capture of the demon, her mother had never had the opportunity to use it. This was a relic of a darker, crueller age, when landowners could have their slaves thrown into a dark cell and tortured for a minor infraction.

She shivered and rubbed her arms. The dungeon had always frightened her. Yet right now, she had the inexplicable urge to run to it. She wanted to see it--to see *him*--again.

He is trapped, as I am, she thought.

She paced for a few minutes longer, then stopped, looking out the window, her fists clenched.

She had to do something. A demon he might be, but still, that creature had done nothing to deserve his terrible fate. Her mother's hunters had simply found him in the forest and attacked him unprovoked. The injustice of it troubled her, and she knew, in her heart, that she couldn't let him suffer and die.

She glanced at the window. It was still dark. Stars shone against the blackness, like distant campfires on a dark landscape.

She dressed quickly, quietly, slipping into a loose-fitting tunic and trousers and a pair of snug traveler's boots. She knew her mother would never approve of her wearing such boyish clothes, which was why she kept them hidden in the bottom of her pine chest, but they were ideal for moving about quietly. There was no long, trailing skirt to make noise or trip her up.

Shana picked up a lit candle on her nightstand. Then, thinking better, she set it down and blew out the flame. Someone might spot the light. She would have to feel her way through the darkness.

She left her room, easing the door shut behind her, and crept down the hall, holding her breath. Moonlight shone in through the narrow windows, falling in silver bars on the floor. The mansion was as silent as a tomb, but she knew that guards sometimes patrolled the halls by night. She would have a difficult time explaining to them why she was sneaking about at this hour, in boy's clothes, without even a candle to guide her way. She had to be alert.

She made her way down the carpeted stairs, to the main hall below. Going through the front doors was unthinkable, of course. They were enormous and heavy and kept bolted at night. But there was a window in the kitchen that was always left ajar to let in the cool night air. The window was far too narrow for a grown man to slip through, but Shana had always used it to sneak out when she was a child. She could only hope she would still fit.

She tiptoed into the dark kitchen. Moonlight glinted off of the pots, pans and knives hanging on the walls. Max, the old guard dog, was sleeping beneath the open window. As she approached, he raised his head and let out a low, gruff bark.

"Shhh," Shana said, and held a finger to her lips. Max tilted his head to one side, then rose stiffly to his feet. His tail wagged, thumping the wall. Shana smiled and ruffled his ragged ears. His broad, scarred face parted in a canine grin,

showing white teeth and a pink tongue.

“Good boy,” Shana whispered, and climbed onto the windowsill, squeezing through, legs first. It was a tight fit, but she managed.

With a thump, she landed in the clump of bushes below and picked herself up, brushing bits of leaves and twigs off her shirt. The grassy fields around her were silver with moonlight, but the dungeon was a dark shadow, cold and uninviting. Taking a deep breath, she walked toward it.

* * * *

The guard sat on the floor of the hallway, shoveling stew and bread into his mouth. It was not the master guard, but one of his underlings, whose name Ashrin couldn't remember and didn't care to. Just another human.

Ashrin lay in his cell, curled up with his nose touching the tip of his tail. He tried not to look at the guard--didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how hungry he was--but he couldn't stop his nostrils from twitching at the rich scent of beef.

The guard chuckled, dipped a crust of bread into the stew, and held it out to him. “Here, want some, doggy?” he asked, grinning.

Ashrin didn't move. He knew the guard was just taunting him. They'd all been given strict orders not to feed him anything. The drugged meat, which he still hadn't touched, was collecting flies in the corner of his cell. Half of them lay dead or twitching weakly on or around the slimy meat, but he was so hungry that even *that* was beginning to look appetizing.

The guard waggled the stew-covered crust. “Here, doggy-doggy. Ain't you hungry?”

Idiot, thought Ashrin. He rolled onto his side, turning his back to the guard, and stared at the wall.

A sudden, loud *clang* made him flinch. He looked up. The guard was

standing just outside the cell, holding a short sword in one hand. "Oh, so you like to ignore me, do you?" he asked, and banged the blade against the bars again. Ashrin pinned his ears back and began to growl. "That's right. You want to attack me, you stupid animal? Go on. The others might be scared of you, but to me, you're just a big, mangy dog." He grinned. "I've killed more wolves than you would believe. Maybe some of them were even demon wolves. Who knows? You're all the same to me." He leaned against the bars. "Once, I found a litter of pups. And you know what I did? I bashed in each of their miserable little skulls, one by one."

Ashrin's growl grew louder, building in his throat.

"Then I waited for the mama to come home," said the guard. "I let her get a good look at what I'd done to the pups, then I shot an arrow through her throat. I made the pups into mittens, and their mama into a rug."

Ashrin lunged. The chains snapped taut, and his teeth snapped shut a foot short of the thick bars. The guard tensed for a moment ... then he laughed, relaxing as he saw that Ashin could go no further. "You may be big, but you ain't too bright, are you?"

A low growl bubbled up from Ashrin's throat as he stood, fur bristling, teeth bared. He lunged again ... and felt the chains snap. He watched the foolish grin melt from the guard's face, to be replaced by a look of wide-eyed terror. The man screamed, jerking backwards. Metal clattered against stone as he dropped his sword. The smell of fear filled Ashrin's nose. He thrust his snout between the bars, snapping and snarling at the guard who fell with a thump, and scrambled backwards with his face white as a sheet. Grabbing his sword, he stumbled to his feet and ran.

Ashrin glared after him, his growl dying in his throat. He began to pace the cell. He'd broken the chains, but he was still too weak to force his way through

the bars.

He sank to the floor and closed his eyes. His ears twitched as he felt a flicker of ... something. His eyes snapped open, and his ears lifted, swiveling forward. It was the girl. He felt her presence at the edge of his mind. She was close.

* * * *

Shana approached the door of the dungeons, heart pounding. She realized she didn't have any clear plan how to get in. She hesitated, thinking, then knocked twice.

A long moment passed, then Brun's confused, drowsy face appeared.

"Excuse me, sir," she said.

"Miss Shana?" he murmured, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "What in the world are you doing out of bed at this time of night?"

"I ... I'm sorry to trouble you, but I left something very important in here. I think I must have dropped it on the floor. It's a ring my father gave me before he passed away," she said. She was amazed at how easily the lie sprung from her mouth.

Brun's forehead furrowed. "Couldn't this have waited for tomorrow morning?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't stop thinking about it," she said. "I won't get any sleep tonight if I don't find it. It's very important to me. But I think I know where I might have dropped it, and if you'll just let me in, I'll go look for it and I won't trouble you anymore."

He shook his head slowly, like a sleepy bull trying to dislodge a fly. "Just tell me what it looks like and I'll find it for you. Your mother said you're not to come near...."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of asking you to find it," she said, slipping past him.

"I've bothered you enough. I'll just be a minute or two." She smiled at him, then started down the steep steps, her pulse in her throat.

"Miss, wait!" Brun called after her.

"I'll be right back!" she called.

She half-expected him to follow, but he didn't. Her heart thundered as she made her way slowly down the stairs, feeling her way through the darkness, until she came to the stone hall below, lit by torches and lined by barred cells. Most of them were empty. It wasn't difficult to spot the one that wasn't. She approached, holding her breath, and peered in.

The great, black wolf lay on the floor. He was awake and looking at her with those bright golden eyes. She dropped to her knees, so she was level with him. "I want to help you," she whispered, "but I don't know how. Tell me how I can help you."

And his voice was in her mind suddenly, deep and velvet-soft: *Lend me your strength.*

She blinked. "What?"

He stared into her eyes, and his voice resonated again through her mind: *I need to absorb some of your energy.*

"But how...."

There is no time. Just relax.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat as she felt something pushing into her mind. A shiver ran through her body as a sinuous stream of dark energy wove its way through her very soul. She felt her muscles weakening, felt a heavy fatigue stealing over her. At the same time, the wolf rose to his feet. He loomed larger and darker than ever, his eyes blazing a brilliant fiery yellow. The bars of his cage glowed a sudden, bright white. A thin hum filled the air and then the bars shattered. Shana ducked her head, shielding

her face with one arm. She expected the explosion of metal fragments to slice her skin to ribbons, but when she lowered her arm, she saw the fragments had not come near her. They littered the floor, covering the stone like glittering silver snow, but there was a circle of untouched stone around her, as if an invisible wall had sprung up around her body the instant the bars shattered.

Ashrin stepped out of his cell. His paws, nearly as big as a lion's, touched the stone of the hall outside. His mouth opened in a feral grin, showing curved white fangs.

Shana shrank back, eyes huge. She tried to stand, but her legs quivered and gave out beneath her. Her body was still weak. It was an effort just to breathe.

What had she done?

Ashrin's eyes stared into hers. She trembled under his gaze. Those eyes seemed to burn into her, seeing parts of her that no one was meant to see.

Ashrin suddenly raised his head as the thunder of guards' footsteps echoed down the hall. He growled, fur bristling along his spine, and turned to face them. Three guards rounded a bend in the hall and stopped. The color drained from their faces. Two of them turned and ran. A third stood frozen in place and trembling like a frightened hare as Ashrin advanced with jaws dripping. He crouched and sprang, knocking the guard to the floor. Dark lips peeled back from long, sharp fangs.

"No!" Shana cried. "Don't hurt him!"

Ashrin looked up, meeting her eyes. Then slowly, he backed off of the guard, who scrambled to his feet and ran, panting raggedly in terror.

Ashrin turned, still staring at her. His enormous, dark, imposing presence seemed to fill the hallway. Then suddenly, it was a man standing there in the wolf's place, naked, but no less impressive for it. It was a man like none she'd ever seen, tall and lean, cords of muscles standing out beneath bronze skin.

Shana tried again to stand, but she couldn't find the strength. Whatever he had done to her, it had left her as weak as a newborn. She sat with her back against the wall, staring up at him with wide eyes as he approached. He bent and lifted her easily. His golden eyes were the last thing she saw before darkness slipped over her.

* * * *

Shana woke slowly to soft birdsong and the sigh of wind through leaves. She felt the warm touch of sunlight on her cheek. Her lashes flickered open and she looked around, brow furrowed with confusion. Why wasn't she in her room?

She sat up ... and gasped.

A naked man sat across from her, watching her with bright golden eyes. His dark hair was long and tangled, making him look like a woodland savage, but he had no trace of a beard. A long, diagonal white scar cut across his broad chest. His appearance was human, but there was no mistaking those demon eyes.

A jolt of fear shook her. She tried to stand, but her legs wouldn't support her. She sank, trembling, back to the ground.

He stood. "Be still," said a deep, smooth voice. "You are still weak." He approached and crouched beside her. He plucked a large, cup-shaped leaf from a nearby plant and murmured a few words under his breath. The leaf filled up with water. He held it to Shana's lips, but she didn't move. "Drink," he said.

She hesitated. Her throat ached with thirst, but she wasn't sure she wanted to drink something created with a demon's magic. She was not given a choice, however. He slid a hand under her neck, his fingers warm and firm against her nape, and held her head in place as he trickled the water between her parted lips.

She pulled away and spat it out. Her heart pounded.

"I'm not trying to poison you," he said. "You've been unconscious for hours. Had I wished to hurt you, I could have done it then."

She was silent, looking up at him uncertainly. He did have a point.

Again, he filled the leaf-cup and held it to her lips. This time, she drank. It tasted sweeter than any water she'd ever had, and slid down her throat like cool silk.

"Better," he said, nodding slightly.

Shana sat up slowly. He supported her with a hand on her back. "Where am I?" she asked.

"A safe place," he said. "This clearing is guarded by a powerful magic. We cannot be found here, either by men or wild beasts." He looked into her eyes. "You did a very daring thing, helping me," he said. "I owe you my freedom."

"I did what I had to," she said, a flush rising into her cheeks. The way he looked at her made her feel odd. "It was wrong, what they were doing to you."

"Not many humans would have come to the aid of a demon."

"I suppose that's true," she said.

"You look rather nervous. Perhaps you're wondering, now, if you've made a mistake in freeing me?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "You're ... you're not evil, are you?"

He chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound. "I suppose that would depend on what you mean by 'evil.' I am lethal to those who would seek to imprison me, but I would not harm an innocent." He reached out, brushing a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Corrupt an innocent, perhaps. But not harm."

She looked away, trying to ignore the inviting little smile on his face, trying not to think about what it might mean. That was a dangerous path. "I have to go back now," she said. "My mother is going to be worried if I don't return soon." And, she thought, there was the wedding. Two weeks from now, she would become Alan's bride. If she didn't return before then, the consequences would be disastrous. Her mother would be furious.

When the demon didn't move or reply, she met his eyes and said, "At least tell me where we are so I can find my way."

"I'm afraid you'd never be able to find your own way home. We're too far, and I daresay you're not accustomed to travel."

"Then take me," she said ... then added quickly, "back home, I mean. Show me the way."

"You wish to go back to that place?" he asked.

"Of course. It's my home. Why shouldn't I want to go back?"

"You are unhappy there."

She recoiled slightly, eyes wide. "How would you know?"

"I feel it in your mind," he said.

"You can read my mind?"

"Of course."

Her cheeks flushed. "Well, don't!"

"Why?"

She clenched her fists. She was probably insane, arguing with a being like this. "I didn't give you permission," she said, "and it's an intrusion."

"It's difficult to avoid hearing your thoughts," he said, sounding slightly amused. "Human minds are very noisy."

"Well ... at least *try* not to listen in." She crossed her arms over her chest, though in truth she was more frightened than indignant. Her heart pounded. She was alone in the forest with a demon, a creature of unimaginable powers, a creature whose eyes could strip her of all her secrets with a glance. She wondered what else he could do. "Take me back," she said again.

"I don't understand," he said. "Why should you wish to go back to a place where you are unhappy? You have often dreamed of leaving, haven't you?"

"It's not that simple," she said.

He crouched, arms crossed and resting on his knees, looking at her intently. "Then explain it, if you will," he said. "I am curious."

"For one thing, where would I go? I wouldn't have the slightest idea. I've never lived anywhere but my home."

The demon leaned closer. "You could stay with me," he said, his voice deep and soft, his lips moving close to her ear.

Her breath caught in her throat. "I most certainly can't. I--I barely know you!"

His lips brushed her neck, and a small, startled moan escaped her. "Then perhaps we should get to know each other," he said.

She shivered at the warm, husky tone of that voice, so very appealing. What was wrong with her? This man wasn't even human. Why was she responding to him like this? "No," she said, reaching out to grip his shoulders and push him away. The heat of his skin against her palms was surprisingly pleasurable, but she tried not to focus on the sensation. "I can't," she said. "I'm betrothed. If I'm not pure on my wedding night, he'll be angry."

Ashrin frowned. "Who is this man?"

"It doesn't matter who he is," she said, a hint of bitterness creeping into her voice. She let her arms drop to her sides and looked away. "Mother has already decided that I'm going to marry him."

His frown deepened. "Best for whom? You, or your mother?"

"For ... for the family. It would be a disgrace to the family if I didn't marry. And it's important that my husband be able to provide for my children. I may not love Alan, but...."

"But he is wealthy."

"It isn't like that! I don't care about wealth. But if I were to marry below my station, it would ruin the family name, and my mother would be devastated."

It's just what I have to do. It's a duty. It has nothing to do with what I want."

Shana clenched one hand into a fist. She felt tears prickling at the corners of her eyes, and wondered why. "I don't even know why I'm telling you all this, why I'm trying to justify myself to you. It's none of your business. I freed you. Shouldn't that be enough? What more do you want of me?"

"It's because you freed me that I wish to help you. I don't wish to see you surrender yourself to a life of misery."

"I told you, it's not my choice."

He shook his head. "Foolish," he muttered.

She tensed. "What gives you the right to judge me? You don't even know me."

"It's foolish," he said firmly. "Your mother has been filling your head with this nonsense since you were a child. Otherwise, you would never have accepted such ridiculous notions. Why should you care about the family name, or about what your mother thinks? As for your children, how do you suppose they'll feel, knowing that their mother and father are only together out of a sense of duty? Do you really think that's what's best for them?"

She paused, caught off guard. "It's how things have always been."

"Humans bind themselves with so many chains," he said, "and they never seem to grasp how easy it would be to throw them off."

Shana exhaled a breath through her teeth. "You're awfully arrogant, making all those presumptions," she said. "It's just not that simple." And yet, his words had the ring of truth. She'd had similar thoughts herself, hadn't she? She'd wondered if there was another way to live, yet she'd always dismissed such questions as childish. She'd always assumed, on some level, that it was her fate to carry on the traditions of the family.

"This is all so strange," she murmured. "I'm still trying to get used to the

idea that I'm talking to a demon ... no offense," she added quickly. "It's just that right now, the notion of leaving home for good is just too overwhelming."

"Perhaps I can give you a good reason to stay." His lips grazed her ear, trailed down her neck.

Shana's heartbeat quickened, and she felt her skin growing warmer. "Did you ... cast a spell on me?" she whispered breathlessly.

He chuckled. "Of course not. Why would I need to do such a thing?" His finger trailed lightly over her cheek.

She was suddenly very aware of how tight her shirt was. Her breasts strained against the fabric. She wanted to undo the lacings, let it fall open and feel the cool forest air wash over her skin.

He gripped her shoulders gently, turning her to face him. He was sitting very close to her. She could feel the heat rising from his bare skin. His eyes burned into hers. "You are beautiful," he said softly. "And you are remarkable as well. You have a gift which is almost lost among humans."

"Gift? What do you mean?"

"There is magic within you. That is how I was able to connect with you and to absorb your energy."

She shook her head. "You are mistaken. I don't have magic."

"You have never been aware of it. In time you will come to accept and understand your gift," he said. "I feel sure of that. But for now, there is no need to worry about it." He ran his thumb lightly over her lips. "You deserve a reward for freeing me," he said, a slight smile on his firm, full mouth. "I will give you pleasure, if you will allow me. I will show you the secrets of your body."

"I told you, I must be a virgin on my wedding night," she said, but the protest emerged half-heartedly.

"I didn't say I would take your virginity," he said. "There are many things

I can do that will not break your maidenhead.” He pushed her to the soft grass.

“Relax.”

She closed her eyes, shivering. “I shouldn’t be allowing this,” she whispered.

But she wanted it. She couldn’t deny that.

She opened her eyes and saw his strong, tanned fingers deftly undoing the lacings of her shirt. It fell open, freeing her breasts.

Everything she’d ever been taught told her that she should have pulled away. Instead, she held still, her breath frozen in her throat, as his fingertips brushed ever so lightly over the pale curve of one breast. His skin was warm.

A large hand covered her breast. It fit perfectly into his palm, filling it without overflowing. His skin looked darker against hers, which was a soft milky white from a life spent mostly indoors. She watched as he very lightly squeezed her breast. Shana’s lips parted, and she drew in a soft hiss of breath. No man had ever touched her this way, much less a near stranger.

His arms surrounded her, pulling her closer, until the length of her body pressed against his. She felt all of him, hard and warm and so alive. She felt the movement of his broad chest as he breathed and her own breathing quickened in response. “I don’t even know your name,” she whispered.

“Ashrin,” he said. He pronounced it strangely, with an accent she had never heard before. Somehow, those two syllables rang with an ancient power. They seemed to hold the weight of centuries.

“Mine is....”

“I know,” he said, smiling. “Shana. A beautiful name.”

She looked into his eyes. “Somehow, I feel that you understand me,” she said quietly, “more than anyone ever has. How is that possible? We’ve barely spoken.”

“My people do not need to speak to understand,” he said. “We know without words. We see beneath the surface. I see your hunger. Do not deny yourself.”

“And what do I hunger for?” she asked softly.

“Freedom. Passion. A life without the gray, suffocating weight of others’ expectations.”

“And you think you can give me that?”

“I know I can.” His hand slipped down to caress the curve of her firm bottom, then squeeze gently. He touched her so knowingly, as if he were already well-acquainted with her body and its needs. Her own hands reached up tentatively to touch his shoulders, then trailed over his back, over the ridges of scar tissue that crossed and crisscrossed his skin. She wondered where those scars had come from. Not the hunters who had captured him. These scars were very old enough to be a permanent part of him. They would not fade with time. What could leave such scars on such a powerful being?

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, responding to the unspoken question, and his lips twisted in a bitter smile. “The one who made those scars is long dead.”

“I asked you not to read my mind,” she murmured, but she couldn’t muster any real indignation. Not when her skin was tingling with life and warmth.

“I don’t need to,” he said. “I can tell what you’re thinking just by looking at your face.” His mouth touched the place where her neck joined her shoulder, and she felt his long hair tickling her breast as his firm hands moved slowly over her skin, over the curve of her hips. He undid the lacings of her trousers, then pushed them down, exposing her sex. The feel of the cool forest air on that sensitive flesh made her shiver.

She felt his palm brush her flat belly, felt his fingers moving lower ... until one finger traced the moist slit between her soft, pale thighs. Her breath escaped

her throat in a soft, shuddering gasp. She clung to his shoulders for support as his fingers pressed more firmly into her wet folds. A wave of sweet dizziness washed over her. Looking down, she saw his thumb brush over the tiny, pink bud of flesh protruding from between the darkly-haired lips. He took the delicate bud between a thumb and forefinger and rubbed it carefully, until it tingled with an almost unbearably sharp pleasure. She panted softly, her cheek resting lightly against his chest, where she could feel his thunderous heartbeat. She looked between his legs and saw his shaft hard and erect, the veins standing out in sharp relief. The sight of it sent a tremor through her whole body.

His hands gripped her thighs, pushing them wide open, exposing her to his eyes. He leaned closer, and she felt his warm breath stirring the downy curls below her belly. His thumbs parted the soft outer lips of her sex, opening her. He stared into her, and she seemed to feel the touch of his gaze as it roved over her sensitive inner flesh. His broad palm covered her aching mound, cupped it possessively, then began to massage it. His eyes met hers.

She trembled beneath his touch, moaning, as he continued to grind his palm against her wet, slick folds. She had never imagined such pleasure was possible. She panted, pushing upward against his hand, needing more. "Please," she gasped out, though she didn't even know what she was asking for. "Please...."

His palm pressed harder against her. One fingertip teased the opening to her sex, without penetrating it, while the heel of his hand rubbed deliciously against that velvety little nub near the top of her cleft. Her breathing quickened, until at last, she let out a sharp, gasping cry. Her thighs shuddered and clenched together as a wave of intense pleasure swept through her. Then she went limp, panting softly, her skin damp with sweat.

He sat, smiling knowingly down at her. "I promised I would give you pleasure, did I not?" he asked.

At first, Shana couldn't speak. Her mind was spinning. "That was...." She trailed off. She couldn't find words.

He kissed her mouth softly.

She blinked, surprised ... then looked away. "But now that I know how it can be ... how good it can feel ... having to endure it with a man like Alan will be even harder," she said. "I can't imagine that he will have much consideration for my pleasure." Shana rolled onto her side, drawing her knees up to her chest, like a child. "I'll always think about how it *could* be."

"Then stay." He brushed her hair gently from her face.

She looked up at him. "Why are you so intent on me staying?"

He paused ... as if, she thought, he were wondering how much he should tell her.

Shana sat up. "I won't want to stay unless I know your reasons," she said. "How can I trust you, otherwise?"

"Very well." He looked off into space. "There are very few of my people left in the land," he said. "Very few. And our numbers continue to dwindle. It is very difficult for us to find mates. However ... it is possible for us to form mating bonds with humans, and even to breed with humans. But not any humans: Only those who have a spark of the gift. As you do, Shana."

Shana jerked backwards as if she'd been slapped. "So that's it? You want to use me as ... as breeding stock?"

"No," he said, "I wish to have you as my mate. There is quite a difference."

Shana took a deep breath. Her heart raced. Was she actually considering this as a possibility? Had she gone mad?

"It has been a very long time," he said, his voice low and steady, "since I have slept beside a woman. My last mate died a long time ago. She...." He

paused, looking away. "She was killed by a hunter, along with my young daughter and son. She was still weak and vulnerable from giving birth, or she would never have fallen to a mere human, no matter how skilled he was. I killed the man who did it. I made him suffer for each innocent life he had taken ... but it was a small, cold comfort."

"I'm sorry," Shana said softly. She reached out to touch his cheek.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "Centuries."

"But you loved them very much. You still love them. I can tell."

"Yes." He met her eyes. "But I accept that I cannot bring them back. For the sake of my people and our continued existence in this world, and for my own sake, I cannot afford to wallow in my grief and memories forever."

"You want me to be your mate," Shana said.

"My lifemate."

"That's like marriage, isn't it?"

"If you were to put it in human terms, yes. But in some ways, it is even more binding."

"I hardly know you," she said. "How can I possibly make a decision like this?"

"You're forgetting that we were connected very intimately," he said, "when you gave me a little of your life-essence. You let me into your soul. And you touched my soul, as well. There is already a bond between us. Do you doubt me? Look." He touched her cheek lightly, looking into her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared back. She felt herself drowning in the gold of his eyes. A flurry of images spun through her mind, images of running through the forest beneath a full moon, of hunting beside a beautiful, white she-wolf, of watching the small, fragile structures of human civilizations rise and crumble. She felt the weight of years behind those eyes. He was old, as old as the forests. He looked

like a man, but he was far more than that.

Shana closed her eyes, overwhelmed. The images evaporated from her mind, but the sense of him remained, like an impression on her very soul. "I ... I saw your memories."

"Yes," he said, "as I saw yours when I entered you. Even before that, I already knew that I wanted you as my own, but that made me certain. I wish to claim you as my mate."

His eyes never left hers. She felt naked before that golden gaze. A small shiver ran through her, but she lifted her chin, straightened her back and met his eyes. "How will this be any different than belonging to Alan?" she asked. "You claim to offer me freedom, but if I accept your offer, I'll belong to you, won't I?"

"Ah, but I will belong to you as well."

"I have trouble imagining you belonging to anyone."

He smiled. "I will not be held against my will, not by any man or woman, but I would willingly give myself to my life-mate. I know it is not a decision to be made lightly, however. You needn't make up your mind now." He stood. "Wait here. I'll bring you something to eat."

"*I am hungry....*"

Ashrin turned, and as he did, his body flowed into wolf form. Shana let out a small gasp. The transformation was sudden and smooth. One moment a man stood in front of her, and the next, a huge, sleek black animal, yellow-gold eyes shining with intelligence. His mouth opened, showing white teeth in a grin, then he loped into the forest.

* * * *

When Ashrin returned, he carried a leafy branch in his mouth. Three shiny, reddish-gold apples dangled from the branch. He sat on his haunches, laid the branch in front of her and transformed again, so that a man crouched before her.

"Tonight, I will hunt," he said, "but this should be enough in the meantime."

"Thank you," said Shana. She plucked an apple from the branch and bit into it. The juices flowed into her mouth, sweet and tart.

He watched her as she ate, his eyes alert.

Shana finished the apple, plucked another one, and looked up. "Will you allow me a week to decide?" she asked.

"You may take as long as you wish. In the meantime you can stay with me or return home, whichever you desire. I daresay you'll find it more pleasant to stay with me, though." He smiled, showing a slight glint of teeth. "I can show you more of the delights that await you if you become my mate. What I gave you was only a small taste. I can introduce you to a world of pleasures beyond anything you can imagine."

"Well, you have no false modesty," she said. "I'll say that for you." She stared down at the apple in her hand. "All right," she said. "I'll stay here a week. Only, is there some way I can send a message to my mother? Just to let her know I'm all right?"

His eyes turned hard. "It wouldn't kill her to worry a little."

"Ashrin...."

He sighed. "Very well." He held out an arm and gave a low whistle. A moment passed, then a huge, black crow fluttered down from the treetops and landed on his arm. For a moment, bird and man stared at each other, and a silent message seemed to flow between them. Then the crow launched itself into the air again and flew away. "He will carry the message to Lady Olivia."

"A crow? But how?"

"That was no ordinary bird, but a friend of mine."

"You mean a demon crow?"

He laughed. "You might say that." Ashrin stood. "And now if you've

finished eating, I have things to show you.” He gripped Shana’s hand and pulled her to her feet.

“What sort of things?” she asked.

His lips brushed her cheek. “Well, that would depend on what you would care to see first. I can show you the secrets of the forest, the hidden waterfalls and glens, the places where unicorns go to rest, or the trees where fairies make their home. There are wonders in this world more remarkable than anything humans can build. I can take you to them. Or....” His lips touched hers, a light, teasing caress, then pressed against them more firmly.

Shana pressed against him, moaning softly against his mouth. When he pulled her against his warm, hard body once more, she didn’t resist.

* * * *

Lady Olivia paced, hands laced together behind her back, heels clicking sharply on the floor of the entrance hall. Max, the old guard-dog, lay nearby, his ears twitching as he watched her through solemn brown eyes. Olivia aimed an irritated kick at him and watched him skitter away, claws scratching on the floor. He walked to the other side of the hall and lay down again, eyeing her warily.

Shana had been missing for the past week. The day after she disappeared, a raven had landed on Olivia’s windowsill, a rolled piece of bark in its beak. Written on the smooth, white underside of the bark was a simple message: *Your daughter is unharmed. She will return in seven days’ time.*

Had she been kidnapped? No, otherwise the kidnapper would have demanded a ransom. This was Shana’s doing, Olivia was sure of it, some wild scheme of hers. “That girl,” she hissed softly, and clenched her fists. Shana had always been willful, but this!

A week had passed. If the letter had indeed been sent by Shana, then she should be arriving today. “She had better,” Olivia muttered. Her wedding day

was growing perilously close. If Shana missed that, she would jeopardize the chance at sealing the marriage arrangement. Lady Olivia glanced out the window for what must have been the hundredth time.

Just then, she heard the door open, and whirled around to see her daughter stepping inside. Olivia's hand flew to her mouth.

"Shana!" she cried.

Max rose to his feet, panting, his tail wagging. He let out a short woof of greeting.

"I'm home, Mother," said Shana. "As I promised."

Olivia strode toward her. Relief gave way to thunderous anger. How dare she? How dare--?

She stopped. There was something different about her daughter. Shana stood, facing her, back straight and chin lifted. She wore a long, forest-green dress, striking in its simplicity, and around her neck was a delicate silver chain with a large, perfect oval of amber stone. "What's wrong?" asked Shana.

Olivia's mouth opened and closed several times. Then she forced herself to straighten and scowl sternly. "Shana, this is preposterous. You vanish into thin air, and now you come marching back as if nothing has happened. How could you behave so irresponsibly? Haven't I taught you better?"

"I'm sorry, Mother," she said, though there was nothing sheepish or apologetic in her face. She walked over to Max and ruffled his ears. "I needed some time to myself, to make an important decision. You see, I've decided to leave home."

For a moment, Olivia couldn't speak. She could only stare, jaw hanging. "What?" she gasped out at last. "Absurd!"

"I've lived in this place since I was a small child. I've scarcely left its walls. I need to see more of the world," she said firmly. "And ... I've found

someone I care for very much. Someone I intend to be with.”

“You’re already betrothed!”

“To a man I scarcely know, and without my permission,” said Shana, her eyes hardening. “I’m afraid Alan will have to find some other young bride.” She smiled suddenly, looking almost proud. “I don’t believe he would accept me any longer, anyway, since I am no longer *fully* virginal.”

The words were like a slap. Olivia recoiled. “This is completely unacceptable!” she snapped. “I’ll have the guards take you to your room, and you’ll stay there while I decide how to deal with this.”

Shana shook her head. “No, Mother,” she said. “I am no longer a child, and I will not be treated as one.”

“Guards!” Olivia shouted.

“Is there a problem?” said a deep voice, and a man stepped into the hall.

Max bristled and began to bark, showing his teeth. The man glanced at him, and he whined softly and lowered himself to his belly, wriggling like a puppy ... as if the glance alone had cowed him.

The man was tall, broad-shouldered and bronze-skinned, with long, dark hair and brilliant golden eyes. He wore a dark shirt and vest, black trousers and leather boots. The last time Olivia had seen him, he’d been a wolf, but still, there was no way she could mistake those eyes.

She took a step backwards and felt the blood drain from her face.

Shana approached the man and took his hand. Though she looked tiny and vulnerable next to him, there was no fear in her eyes. She smiled warmly up at him, and he smiled back before leaning down to plant a soft kiss on her lips.

The world seemed to be turning inside out.

Shana looked at her mother. “This is my betrothed,” she said.

There was a dull thud as Olivia’s head struck the floor. She had fainted.

Shana sighed. "She didn't take that very well."

Ashrin smiled. "I think it went all right," he said. He took her hand. "Let's go back to the forest."

* * * *

Not long after, Shana lay on her back, feeling the cool grass against her naked skin. She shivered lightly as a breeze moved over her. Ashrin gazed down at her, heat in his eyes ... but there was a strange solemnity there as well, beneath the lust. "Are you sure you want this?" he asked, his voice a low, rough whisper.

"I've never wanted anything so much," said Shana. She leaned upward, and her lips touched his.

He kissed them, nibbling her full lower lip lightly ... then slid his tongue into her hot, wet mouth. Meanwhile, one hand slid down to cup the mound of her sex. She moaned softly against his lips. Gripping his shoulders harder, she began to grind her sex against his palm. He laughed softly. "You're very eager." He pushed her to the soft grass below and straddled her body. Lightly, he bit one of her hard, pink nipples, then ran his hot tongue over it. He trailed slow kisses over her stomach, his mouth pressing firmly against her skin. She felt the warmth of his lips lingering everywhere they touched, like a brand. She moaned as he kissed his way from her knee down to her soft inner thigh, tantalizingly close to the aching center of her need. One finger traced the wet slit, teasing her folds, brushing over the tiny, protruding pink nub near the top of her cleft. She squirmed, wanting more.

"Hurry," she panted. "I need you...."

"Patience. If I move too quickly, I will hurt you." He pressed a fingertip against the opening to her sex. Then, slowly, he pushed a finger inside her, easing it between her hot, slick walls. She let out a tiny gasp. He waited a moment ... then carefully inserted another finger, stretching her a little wider. She wriggled

slightly. "Is there pain?" he asked.

"No," she lied. It did hurt, just slightly, but she didn't want him to stop.

"Look into my eyes," he said. "I can ease the pain for you."

Her eyes met his.

"Relax your mind," he urged.

She felt his consciousness moving within hers, felt the pain easing, fading away. Her eyes widened. "I didn't know you could do that."

"There are advantages to having a demon around, sometimes," he said, a playful spark in his eyes. He withdrew his fingers, then positioned himself over her and slid his cock slowly, smoothly into her body.

She gasped softly, fingers tightening on his shoulders. The sensation of being filled was new and startling. The walls of her sex seemed to stretch impossibly wide to accommodate the length and girth of his hard cock. For a moment, he held it still within her ... until the discomfort faded completely and was replaced with a sweet, tingling warmth. He began to move within her, rubbing deliciously against that slick, sensitive flesh.

The pleasure built and increased, ebbing and flowing like the tide, as his movements quickened. Before long, she was moaning, low and long. She wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him tightly, clinging to his heat, his life, needing more of him, needing him deeper within her. She pushed upwards, against him, their sweat-damp, naked bodies sliding against each other, until at last, she felt a sweet, sharp sting somewhere deep inside her. At almost the same moment, he released his seed into her and she felt it, hot and liquid, trickling into the depths of her body.

She went limp, panting. He lay close to her, stroking her hair back from her forehead. "My Shana," he murmured, his voice low and close to her ear. He curled around her, protectively, like a wolf protecting a cub.

“Is this real?” she breathed. “It’s not a dream?”

“No. Not a dream.”

She closed her eyes, letting the perfection of the moment wash over her, afraid to do or say anything, lest she disturb that sensation of warmth and peace.

She wondered if she would ever be able to go back to the human world, and she realized she didn’t care. For better or worse, she had chosen this, and she would never look back.

After awhile, she rolled onto her side and lightly began to stroke her new lifemate’s thigh. She watched his spent cock beginning to rise again. She touched it with her fingertips, shyly, at first, then with growing boldness, caressing the head, running a finger along the underside. The skin sheathing the organ was smooth, almost velvety, but the flesh beneath it was hard and solid.

He chuckled. “Are you hungry for more, already?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “I want to feel you thrusting into me again.”

One finger lightly circled her nipple. He watched it stiffen, then rolled it between a thumb and forefinger, tugging lightly. “How shall I take you?” he asked, turning his attention to the other nipple, teasing it until it was hard and jutting. “Gently, or hard?”

“Hard. I want to feel all your passion. I want to know that you hunger for me as much as I do for you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you certain? I’ve only just relieved you of your virginity, after all. If you wish to rest and recover, I won’t take offense, you know.” Even as he said it, his gaze moved down the length of her body, lingering on the patch of dark, downy curls between her legs.

She gripped his cock, feeling it hard and alive in her hand. “I want you now,” she breathed, her lips moving close to his.

A grin spread across his face. “I can see that I was right,” he said. “We’ll

be well-suited to each other.” He pushed her to the ground again.

* * * *

That evening, they washed the sweat from their bodies in a cool stream. Shana stood waist-deep, the water rushing past her, small water-plants tickling her ankles as she waded deeper. Ashrin stood behind her. He dipped his cupped palms into the water and trickled it over her hair.

A little shiver of pleasure went through her as the cool water trickled down her spine. Beads of water rolled over her breasts, dripping from cold-hardened nipples. She gazed up at the stars. “Ashrin? If we have a child, will that child be a human or a demon?” she asked quietly.

He hesitated. “Both. And neither.”

“What will life be like for such a child?”

“Not easy, I’m afraid. Neither humans nor demons fully accept or trust a child of mixed blood.”

She stared down at the water. “I suppose this is something we should have talked about earlier.”

“Do you think it would have changed your decision?”

She thought a moment, then shook her head. “No. I don’t think so. Still ... it worries me. I want our child to be happy.”

He placed a warm hand over her belly, as if even now, a spark of life grew there. “Our child will have the love of his parents. Or hers. That is more than many have.” He stroked Shana’s hair. “But let us simply enjoy the night, and not worry about what the future may bring.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer and she let out a little sigh, her eyes slipping shut.

Their child would have love. That would be enough.

Had Shana’s own parents ever really loved her? It was something she wondered about, at times. The one time she’d dared to ask, her mother had simply

told her to stop being silly.

She didn't realize she was crying until Ashrin wiped a tear from her cheek. Feeling foolish, she turned her face away. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just...."

"I know," he said gently. "But that time is behind you." He leaned down. His mouth captured hers in a kiss, and her sorrows and worries melted away like icicles in springtime. This was what she had wanted, what she'd hungered for her whole life.

She was free ... and loved.

The End