



Season of Blood

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Season of Blood

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Dedication

Season of Blood is dedicated to my friends and supporters in the writing industry. As unexpected as my becoming a writer was, I feel honored to be among you now and hopefully for many years to come. A special thank you to my Midnight Passions friends. Without you this story would never have been written.

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Chapter One

Pennsylvania, October 31, 2002

Boryn awoke to a crash slamming painfully through his body, and then another as his heart struggled to pump. Each beat forced blood through his desiccated remains, once again reviving him. At first, the rhythm was far from steady, but gradually the cadence improved to a slow, erratic pulse.

A thousand years have passed. Your sentence is spent. Pahele, his master's voice flowed over him, through him, like a father's touch.

He was free from his long imprisonment. His crime was finally forgiven.

Never speak of it. Never repeat it.

Even with the warning, he couldn't help thinking of the child he'd killed. It had been an accident, but *that* was the one mistake never allowed. When Tascryn demons were assigned tascs, they honored the mortal souls they were sent to transition by seeing to such duties quickly, efficiently and without mistakes. His tasc that night had been to ease the father's soul into transition, for only when a body dies may the soul move on to its next life and a new destiny. This man hadn't wanted to leave his young daughter, and in the end he hadn't. They'd gone on to the next life together.

And Boryn had paid for the mistake with a thousand years of complete solitude, bound within the earth. After the first hundred years,

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his body had shut down to conserve what was left of his flesh's nourishing blood. Nine more centuries had gone by while he waited, while the other Cyvampis demons carried on and completed tasks that should have been his responsibility.

"Master? Do the others know?" Did the other Cyvampis know of his crime, of his punishment, of his failure?

"The others have no need to know this. Now rise and take care with your needs before you return home." He felt his master's touch brush gently over his forehead. Forgiveness washed over him, then solitude once more. With the light contact from Pahele, the thud of his heartbeat found a smoother rhythm. His master was the source. Pahele's power could strengthen them all, over any distance, and never lessen. The master's light touch felt even stronger than before, yet, different in some way.

Then he understood what he had missed during his imprisonment. Pahele had finally joined with his soul mate, Sadrina. Together they would be a never ending fount of power. Pahele probably could have restored Boryn's drained body with no more than a breath in his direction, but his master also believed in justice.

Part of his punishment was to suffer when awakening. He accepted and welcomed the pain as the final payment for his terrible crime.

Even with the improvement that came from Pahele's slight gift, there was much wrong with Boryn's newly awakened body. The worst was the weakness. A terrible weight pushed at him, holding him to the catacomb shelf where he lay, and he still lacked the strength to push free. *Had the cave collapsed, entombing him, while he slept?* His body shuddered, raising dust and debris into the air.

"I think I see something up ahead. Go carefully in case the dust is from a cave in." The deep voice echoed in the cave, stilling Boryn's motion. Someone was approaching, and he had no way of escaping notice, at least not until he regained some of his wasted powers.

"What is that, Dad? Pass me the extra light." A child's voice? Good. They were probably not hunters then.

"Josh! Slow down. You know better than to rush while exploring."

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Boryn felt the burning as the light passed over his closed eyes. The boy, Josh, must have found him. "Dad, you gotta see this!" The excited voice erupted very near Boryn, roaring painfully into his sensitive ears.

"Josh?" Quiet but firm steps patted against the uneven floor. The man had entered right behind the boy. "Oh Sh-sheesh, that's a mummy. We found a mummy!"

Boryn lay completely still before them. He hadn't the strength to use his powers to conceal himself or escape yet. He would need blood before his strength truly returned. The heartbeat of the man was strong and full of lure, drawing his attention, begging him to take what he needed so badly.

"A mummy? Oh yeah! Like in the museums. This is so cool. How do we get it out?"

The child... Boryn resisted the call of the blood. With his hunger so fierce, even the man would be at risk of him losing control and taking too much. It was better to wait. It was safer to wait.

"We don't—" The clatter of rocks hitting the floor drowned out his words.

"What? Why not?"

"We can't move this body. This could be evidence in a murder. We'll have to call the police first. We have to find the proper people to come move it, so that the body won't be damaged any worse. We may have to call the city museum and see if we can find a mummy expert who knows how to do this right."

"I guess so. It's pretty bad now. How old do you think it is, and how did it get here? What if someone else finds it? We should go get them now, just in case."

"Yes, we should. But be careful." The voices faded as the two left the cave.

Escape. He had to get away before they returned with police or their mummy experts. Once away, he could focus on his return to living and his pressing need for blood.

His powers were ancient, even if they were currently depleted. He had many skills, one of which was the ability to absorb energy from his

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environment. But to do so took time. His senses expanded, felt for power he could claim as his own. Although deep in the earth where few would think to find power, there was plenty for him to gather. The rich earth, abundant rock minerals, and the flow of underground water. *Pahele chose this site well.* The energy gathered at his call and slowly soaked into his being.

An hour passed before he'd gathered enough energy to leave the stone bed. He followed the lingering scent of the humans, tracking them through the cave system, back to the entrance.

The night closed around him, welcoming him back among the living. The full moon brightened the world below his rocky hill. His eyes squinted against the painful light. *It has been so long.* Below him, flat fields stretched out with a small town near the center.

When he'd failed, there had been only two small cabins surrounded by land covered in dense forest.

As he walked down the trail, he stopped at a small stream. His moonlit reflection startled him. *No wonder the boy thought him no more than a dead body.* His clothing had mostly disintegrated, leaving only rags, and his skin was not in much better condition. He drank some of the water that could moisten his mouth but not quench his thirst. Then he splashed more water over his face to wash some of the dirt away.

He needed blood. As if the thought brought the need to his attention, the craving gnawed and tore at him. Blood of any kind would allow him to start healing and regenerating the lost skin and muscle. As Pahele had said, he would have to be careful to not take too much. It was forbidden to kill any who were not assigned as a transition tasc. *Punishment.* He would have control this time. He would not fail.

He'd have to enter the town and seek out humans for their blood, but he couldn't do so as he looked now. First would have to be some healing. He started for the nearest farmstead. Perhaps there, he'd find a way.

The first farm on the outskirts of town appeared deserted, but it still offered much to him. In the stable were several horses, and he took some blood from each. Animal blood was foul and still left him weak with

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the added pleasure of being queasy. Yet, he needed it to begin regenerating. Also it lessened the risk of him losing control of his dangerous thirst around people, and for that he was grateful. On the porch he found straw people dressed in worn clothes. The clothing he took for his own, leaving only his bare feet to look out of place.

He faced the town and breathed in the scents from the breeze while opening his senses completely to discover what to expect in that direction. He felt the pounding of the blood within the town. There were plenty of people to feed from, enough that it was unlikely he'd be noticed or left unsatisfied.

A hot spicy scent rushed over him.

Blood and sex. And more. Something wild and full of life. It called to a painful need within him, a need for more than blood. The scent was on the breeze coming from the town. *Such good fortune.* Everything he desired was exactly where he was going.

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Chapter Two

The burning, clenching need filled Catrina with desperate urgency. She needed satisfaction and she needed it *now*. Never mind the original reason she'd traveled so far north. Instinct demanded that her quest for knowledge wait. Instinct insisted this new desire was the only matter of importance, at least for now.

She paused in the shadows outside the high school gymnasium. Inside, young people danced to whatever song was playing. People young and old wandered around in a melee of festive costumes. This costume party the school hosted was probably for the children even though the adults were here, too. *Children*. No, not the children, it wasn't the children or even the teens that she was here for. They could offer her nothing of what she needed.

She looked for the man she'd followed for the last block. He was tall and strong, and she would have him. A single glance at his broad back as he walked ahead of her told her that he could give her what she needed. The man had a fine form with wide shoulders and narrow hips. With the first glance, his good looks had awoken a desire within her, a need that blossomed into desperation.

The man walked inside, and she slipped in quietly behind him. She was sure he was still completely unaware of her.

Never had she wanted someone so much. Never before had she needed like this.

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She caught up to the man, moved close, and trailed a long fingernail down his spine. Her nail cut into the soft white cotton with a last flick. His poor baseball player costume was ruined. *Que lastima.*

"What?" He spun around, his eyes widening in surprise then staying wide in appreciation. "Who are you?"

"Catrina." Her voice dropped, and she reached for his cotton-covered chest, running a hand up and slowly around to the fine hair at the back of his neck. She didn't want to talk. She wanted him naked and slick, and hard inside her. She pressed her breasts against his chest, almost purring as her nipples pebbled tight under her blouse with the arousing pressure.

"Have we met?" He was tense like prey about to flee. His tight muscles felt good under her hands and his fear-tainted surprise drove her predator instincts wild.

"We have met now." Her words blew over his ear, and then she nibbled the lobe with her small fangs, sucking it lightly into her mouth, flicking her tongue over it playfully.

His gasp of shock at her boldness countered his hardening body. He might be dismayed by her actions, but he wanted her. Her hand slid down to cup his hardening mass. He was well enough made. He would feel good.

"I want you. I want to fuck you." She wanted so much more than sex, but those desires could not be forced into words.

"You're not a student." His hands held her tentatively by the shoulders, but he made no effort to pull her closer or push her away.

She chuckled at his words. He knew she was no student. The foolish man was just afraid to grab onto what he wanted. Nearing the ripe age of two hundred, she looked young, but not that young. "No, but tonight I might be *la profesora*. Where can we go for some private lessons?"

He twitched under her caressing hand. His eagerness almost matched her own. He held out his hand and smiled when she slipped hers into his grip. He led her to the side of the room where the bleachers were pulled out. Under the seating was a small alcove hidden mostly in

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shadows. He must be rather forward if he thought they could have sex here and not be interrupted.

Still, he was here. Perhaps it would be enough.

He pulled her into his arms and gently kissed her. His lips moved slowly against hers.

His tentative touch did nothing. *Nothing*. She needed more, so much more.

She shoved him against the wall, tearing his shirt apart. Buttons flew free as she pulled the tails from his pants. Biting his smooth chest, drawing a moan from him, she dropped to her knees before his hard cock.

"Mr. Jones!" A woman's high-pitched voice cut through them. "Exactly what's going on here?"

"I- Ah..." Mr. Jones' voice cracked high as Catrina ran a hard nail up over his slightly less swollen flesh.

"*Nada*, leave us be." The other desire, the one that called out to maim and kill, rose within her. She stood and turned to face the one who would dare to interrupt them.

"Who are you to be crawling over a school chaperone?" The old crone glared at them with her wrinkled face scowling hard enough that the thick pancake makeup, which was hopefully part of a costume, should have cracked. "Mr. Jones, you had better have a very good explanation. We expect better from our teachers here, no matter how new you may be."

Catrina stood in front of 'Mr. Jones' as if to protect him from the crone in the pointy black hat and long purple fingernails, when all she wanted was to relieve her frustration by tearing the not-so-spooky witch into small, bloody pieces. "None of your business, woman, what we do," she said then all but growled.

"Of course it's my business!" the witch screeched. "I'm senior chaperone tonight. Everything that happens here is my responsibility."

Catrina scanned the crowd, searching for anything she could use as a distraction. "Then that scarecrow over there with all those girls is your responsibility, too?" She said it sweetly while digging her claws deep into her palms to suppress the violent need that burned through her, begging to be released.

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'Mr. Jones' tugged his clothing back to order as he finally realized the seriousness of his current predicament. "Ms. Campbell, I'm so sorry about this. I don't know what came over me."

"Why, she did, of course." She looked at Catrina with malice. "She obviously was trying to use you for completely immoral purposes." One painted-on brow quirked upward.

"No. I don't think..." His initial defense fell quiet under the witch's cold glare.

"Either she or you, Mr. Jones, will take the blame for this indiscretion and total lack of good judgment. I would like to believe you are innocent in this. Do you wish to dispute that? Perhaps you want to sacrifice yourself, your employment, and your future for this little tramp?"

Mr. Jones stepped away, guilt covering his face, even as he gave a slight nod to Ms. Campbell.

Ms. Campbell laid a withered old hand on Mr. Jones' arm, patting him in praise for his wise choice. "She's probably after citizenship. I've heard of that before. Young Mexican women sneak into the states to trap a man into marriage, just to gain citizenship in our great country."

Catrina's swallowed growl emerged as a long, low laugh. "What? Oh, hell no!" She wanted a little marriage-like activity, but marriage to Mr. Jones had the appeal of *the worm without the tequila* and to her, that was no appeal at all.

"You are Mexican, are you not?" As if every *Mexicana* wanted nothing more than to come to the US! Jeeze, surely people weren't this wacked.

"I am not Mexican. I'm Peruvian, and I have no interest in joining your little country." She was interested in the scarecrow, though. He stood inside the double door and now had more than a dozen teenage girls crowded around him. He was quite tall, but he kept bending low as if to speak to the girls. She suspected he was doing more than whispering sweet nothings.

"Whatever. Obviously, you are after citizenship. Probably not even here on a visa."

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So the old witch did get some of the facts right. She had no citizenship, no visa, and no legal right at all to be here in Pennsylvania, USA. "Did you happen to notice the scarecrow I mentioned earlier...? He's now necking with your students."

"Oh my! Ms. Campbell, we really must see to him." Mr. Jones drew the witch's attention to the crowded doorway.

Finally the school's guard dog turned to see what this new problem was. "He is far too old to be a student, and those young girls need to be removed from his influence."

Catrina studied the scarecrow as the two teachers hurried toward him. There was something not right about him. She scented the air trying to catch the elusive identity of the stranger. He wasn't human; that much she could tell even from across the room. Not human and very old, ancient like the earth. Elemental. Powerful. Enticing.

He pushed the teen from his arms, but didn't reach for another. He lifted his head, searching the crowd. His glowing red eyes flicked briefly over the dancers, then homed in on her even with her body still partly hidden in the shadows.

Their gazes locked and held. He was all power, raw and dangerous. Yet there was something tired in him as well. His tall body was lean, almost emaciated. The checkered shirt and worn jeans hung loosely on his frame. Despite the ragged outer looks, his posture spoke of a man used to being in control. Little would keep him from what he wanted.

He took a step toward her. His hand reached out as if the expanse of the gymnasium floor didn't lie between them.

That long, slender hand was so welcoming. His power brushed over her like a physical caress. It eased the desperate edge struggling within her. He offered comfort and satisfaction, and perhaps he was even strong enough to actually provide what she needed. She started toward him, certain she felt him calling to her. Certain he was here for her and only her.

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Chapter Three

The dark haired beauty was a Valàfrn werewolf, and her powers were raging out of control. Her scent overwhelmed Boryn, burning over him even stronger than his hunger for blood, but his hunger was not nearly as painful as it had been. The girls had willingly offered what he needed, though he took only a sip from each. Although Boryn was far from recovered, only time would heal him now.

And since he could do nothing to hurry his healing, he might as well see to his other needs and desires.

This wolf attracted him; he wanted her. As soon as she stepped forward into the light, he knew he would have her. Her desire burned brightly, a visible flame in a room full of dry leaves. *She is in her season and among humans!* Besides wanting to quench his own desires, he had to get her away from these people. She would be a danger to them, at least for a time, at least until her urge to mate could be satisfied.

Near the center of the floor he met her, giving her no chance to escape him. He grabbed her into his arms and claimed her mouth with his own. When he thought she might fear or fight him, she instead clawed at him nearly climbing his body to get closer.

Hands pushed at them, and he let them be moved toward the exit. He had no interest in being here, in this building filled with humans, anyhow.

Once outside he pulled free of the wolf long enough to see where they could go. She didn't let go, but burrowed deeper into his arms. Her

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possessive grip warmed some cold part of him. He looked down on her cloud of curly black hair. She felt right within his arms.

"About time!" The angry voice rose from an older woman who stood before him with a disheveled man.

The man smelled of her, of his wolf!

He snarled at him, hissing his anger that the man had dared to touch her. When the man scrambled back so quickly he almost fell, Boryn realized his error. His fangs had shown, giving away his nonhuman nature.

"What are you?" The older woman asked without so much as a tremor. The man, however, retreated another step.

There was no safe way he could answer that question. One of their most important laws disallowed his ever revealing his true nature to humans. "I am taking her, and you will not follow us."

"What are you?" she asked again, this time stepping closer and reaching toward his hand on the wolf's shoulder, a hand that was still far from healed. His skin was still cracked but, with the blood he had taken, it was smoothing out even as the human watched.

"I cannot answer that." So newly released from his imprisonment, he wouldn't break another law. Surely Pahele's eye was still upon him. He knew Pahele wouldn't be too displeased if he took some time to recover fully, but to break any laws while he dared to claim the lovely wolf might anger his lord past his usual tolerance.

"Will not, you mean?" The woman was dressed in an elegant black cloak and a tall pointed black hat. She smelled of ancient earth, but not the healthy scents of healing nature. There was a broken, rotten feel to her. He remembered the scent and knew it to be a basic kind of evil, one of illness and desperation.

"Will not, then." He accepted her words. There was no point in arguing with her over a topic that could not be discussed. He only wished to be away from her before his wolf lost control of herself once more. Already she trembled within his grasp.

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"You're not human." Her black painted lips parted, baring her teeth, with the expression of a hunter who has spotted prey after a long time afield. She wanted something from him.

His wolf must have sensed the threat, because she struggled slightly in his grip. "We must be going. It's not safe for her to stay here." He pulled his struggling armful tighter and stepped away from the crone.

"So she is dangerous?" She motioned at the man, who wisely stayed well back from any of them. His shirt still hung partly open because of the missing buttons and torn cloth.

"Not with me." He hoped. A wolf in her season could be quite dangerous and, if he had all his strength, there would be no risk at all. But weakened as he was, he could be harmed, while she was possessed by her wild passions.

"Not as dangerous as you?" She pressed on with her questioning. He stepped back toward the nearest shadows so he could leave without having his methods seen. But the crone moved with him.

"Perhaps." Yes, that was a good way of looking at it. Perhaps she would relent once she understood he was dangerous. After all it was his job, the sole purpose of his unending existence, to kill mortals. And if he was lucky, maybe this woman would develop some healthy fear of him.

"You are Nosferatu." Again there was hope in the accusation instead of fear.

"I am not dead." Technically true. Only the converted had to die to become a being somewhat like the Cyvampis. Humans called them vampires and thought that the vampires were the worst thing that hunted them. The truth was that the demons were much more deadly killers, more dangerous than any vampire could aspire to be. The demons often hunted vampires for sport and amusement.

"Undead." She stepped closer and reached out as if to grab a hold of his ragged clothing.

"I am going. Do not follow." He moved away. He'd seen her kind before. The desperation made sense, but he had nothing to offer her except a quicker way to die than the old age that was already working its destructive ways on her body.

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“Wait! I want the blessing that only you can give. I want eternal youth! You must change me, make me immortal!” Her dry voice cracked with her misunderstood requests. She thought she could have all the benefits and none of the costs, but that wasn’t the way the world worked. Balance. For every gift there is a price.

Boryn held his wolf within his embrace and called the darkness to disguise their forms. His powers shifted to allow him the energy needed to carry them away from the woman and her demands.

The woman’s shocking words faded as he lifted off into the air and carried the she-wolf away from the town gathering.

* * * * *

Dios mio! Would the crone ever shut up and leave them be!

Finally they were gone. The voices stilled, and Catrina was alone with him. His strong arms held her against his warm body. He was every bit as lean as she thought, but also as powerful as she’d guessed. His muscles were like corded iron. He had the feel of a man who usually carried more weight on his large frame, and she wondered what caused him to be in this lean condition. Catrina peered up at her scarecrow to ask, but froze when she saw the strain on his face. She looked over his shoulder to see nothing but the night sky. *We’re flying!*

Then they were falling! Slowly, but not as slowly as she would have wished, the grassy field rose up so they could crash into it. His heavier body pulled beneath her like a long, bony landing strip. Once they finished rolling and sliding, she assessed how bad off they each were.

She had a few bruises and a bloody nose. She’d live. In fact, she’d be completely healed in a few minutes. Her scarecrow though, fared a bit worse. He lay beneath her, his old clothes torn even worse than before. His eyes were closed and his breath ragged. A cut along his temple sealed closed as she watched. Then he opened his dark eyes, and she was lost in the pooling desire she found in their depths.

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"Are you all right, Scarecrow?" She tried for a light tone but to her disgust, the words still emerged as a low sexy drawl. She stood and offered a hand to help him up.

"Yes, well enough." He took her hand and sparks shot up her arm at the contact. "Why do you call me 'scarecrow'?"

His eyes glowed in the dusky light, drawing her in, trapping her with their warm depths. She pulled her hand free and shook her head.

"Well, we haven't exactly introduced ourselves, have we?"

"I guess not." He stood unsteadily. "I am called Boryn."

"Catrina." Even with her first glance, she knew he wasn't human or wolf. "What are you, Boryn?" Her experience was limited to only humans and her own lost family.

"I am Cyvampis." He looked tentative with his eyes shadowed, as if waiting for a comment or put-down. When she offered none, he added, "A blood demon."

She still had no idea what that meant. "Do you have a job description?" She wanted to climb back into his arms, but thought a detailed answer might be important.

"Cyvampis are the third most powerful of the Tascryn demons. We take the lives of those who are marked for transition into the next life."

"Nice description. By blood demon, you mean you drink blood?"

He nodded slowly.

"You kill people by drinking their blood?" *Was that guilt in his expression?* "But only those marked for death. I think I got it. And yeah, Boryn, I think I can deal with it, as long as I'm not one of the marked." That would totally suck big rotten eggs, finally finding a guy who shot fire straight into her veins only to have him drink her dry and 'transition her butt into the next life'.

"You are not marked." He shuddered. Whatever ghost danced on his grave, moved on. He reached out, trailing his finger over her lower lip. "Catrina does not fit you well. Do you go by another name?"

"No. Well, my family called me Kitty when I was a child." But that was several lifetimes ago, when she had family. Her Papa had called her the little Kitty who conquered their wild pack, the one who would tame

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them. Her Mama had said she was wild enough to drive them into civilization, her wild little Kitty. *Why did I tell Boryn about the name?*

"Yes, I believe Kitty fits you very well. Can I call you by the name Kitty?" His eyes held her gaze and offered something she didn't quite understand.

"Call me anything you like if you can stop the burning inside me." Being near him eased the need some, but not enough.

"You don't understand it? Is it your first?"

What the hell was he talking about? "First what? All I know is that I want to rip people apart and need something I can't find."

"Kitty, where is your family, your clan?" He sank onto a tree stump.

"Dead. Gone. I've been alone since I was a child." How could the words and the facts still hurt after almost two hundred years?

"How have you survived? Were you taken in by another clan?"

"I was alone, and it wasn't easy." Especially the earliest time, just after her family had been killed in a stupid territorial squabble. She'd been twelve at the time. When her mother had told her to run, she'd obeyed. She'd run, and she had lived. Her parents, three sisters and two brothers had all died. She went from youngest to only in the course of one terrible night.

"I'm sure it was very difficult, and the challenges have made you stronger than you know."

"Yeah right. Whatever doesn't kill you...makes you really pissed off, right?" She had crawled out of a coyote burrow as a wolf and had been trapped in that form until she finally figured out how to control the magic needed to shape-shift. Forty years as a wolf among a small family group of coyotes had definitely offered her a unique view of ecology. "Now, tell me just what the hell this ache is inside of me, and how do I fix it?"

"It is your season." He said the words slowly, yet put together they meant nothing.

"My what?" Well, at least it wasn't VD.... That was probably a 'different' kind of burning.

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"Your heat cycle."

Kitty gasped in surprise as his words sank in. "You're shittin' me! Like a bitch in heat?" She'd spent plenty of time in the wild with animals and knew what it meant. Paired with season, she had the meaning entirely too well. The uncontrollable urge of the female animal to copulate and reproduce with any mate close enough to use. No way was that happening to her. She had higher reasoning. She wasn't ready to breed for any species, let alone the one she was only learning as her own now. Kitty slid to her knees before him.

"Like that, but different." His hands dug into her arms, and she realized that she was shaking all over.

"So what I need is a good lay?" Just how much like an animal was she? How long would this 'season' last? Would she conceive? Would she have a litter? She didn't know shit from Shinola when it came to her own kind. Just what was normal when it was all a terrifying unknown? Why couldn't this all happen after she met the guy she'd come north to find, the one who promised to help her, to teach her... She was close to tears, and she hated that, too.

"Yes, sex will help, but it can be dangerous. You will be dangerous." So this was what he was offering? He was volunteering his services. *How totally degrading and yet...appealing.* She remembered the coyotes fighting during the breeding season and how some of them were very violent. Was that what he meant she would be like?

"You mean I could hurt you? Kill you?" Even battered as he was, he hardly looked fragile. Surely she couldn't hurt him. And he was offering. Maybe, just maybe, it would satisfy that wild need, and she could get back to focusing on why she was here. Not to mention, she wouldn't kill any poor human in an accidental rutting.

"Probably nothing lasting. I am rather difficult to kill, and I am more than willing to help you with this." He smiled down at her with a predator's gleam. "Indeed, it would be my pleasure."

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Chapter Four

More than Boryn's pleasure... At this moment, having Kitty was all that made breathing worthwhile. Her scent wrapped around his senses and demanded he give her exactly what she needed.

"We should find a better place than here in the middle of this park. Come, I think I saw a small cabin nearby." His heart raced as her warm fingers laced through his. She was so accepting of his nature. But did she understand what he was? *Or does her season drive her past caring whom she is with?*

"Let's find the cabin quickly then." Her husky voice pooled over him, hurrying his stride.

He led her in the direction he thought the building would be, and they found it. He opened the unlocked door and stepped in to be sure it was unoccupied. The cabin was filled with ground keeping tools but also had a small bunk built into one wall.

"Can you tell me what to expect?" she asked with a bit of hesitation.

"From us being together, I hope you can expect pleasure. If you mean from your season, I'm not sure. I know only that some have killed while the heat is upon them." He only knew that because he'd been sent to tase two different wolves who had gone into killing frenzies. But that was long ago when her kind had been very young.

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She stepped into the room behind him and closed the door. "Boryn, I don't want to hurt you." She pulled her hands free and clasped them together as if to restrain herself.

"You won't. I won't let you." He braced his hands against the door on either side of her body, caging her, and touching only her lips with his own. His lips brushed over her then descended to claim her.

Her hands rose against his chest, parting the shirt and feathering over his ribs. They settled lightly on his chest, her right hand directly over his heart. For a breath he thought she would push him away, that she'd reject him. Instead she relaxed in his arms, claw-like nails scraping his skin as her hands moved across his ribs and to his back.

He deepened their kiss, challenging her to let her desire free.

A challenge she met with passion and fire. She pressed against his long frame, her right leg lifting to wrap around his thigh. Her motion pressed the heat of her center tight to his hard shaft with only their thin clothes to separate their hot skin.

Without breaking the kiss, he shifted his arms to swing her up into his embrace, lightly moving her to the small bunk. Despite his attempt, the motion of setting her down forced them apart, and they used the freedom to throw off all of the clothing that was suddenly in the way.

Kneeling on the bed, Kitty shimmied out of her jeans, but fell back on the bed as the fitted legs caught on her feet. Growling her impatience, she tore the material free.

As he moved to help her, she snarled in his direction. When he didn't draw back, she dragged him down onto her naked body. Her touch burned through him. She clawed at his flesh. There was a certain exhilaration added with the knowledge that she could hurt him as few could. The hot violence within her drew him as much as his body's desire for sexual release.

Their lips met in hungry desperation. The fast and hard fight for dominance was as erotic as any slow and passionate moment. Each touch brought pleasure and pain, and each kiss preceded two bites.

Their moans and growls filled the air as their human bodies were filled with their animal desires. Her claws and teeth, as well as the sweet

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scent of their mingled blood, wreaked havoc on his control. With a fierce grip on her thighs, he thrust hard and deep into her. He plunged deep again and again. Her tight body clenched on his in almost immediate rapture. Her body's contractions and spasms of pleasure sent him over the brink far too quickly.

His momentary satisfaction was blown away as she demanded more. Without slipping free of her lovely body, he moved to nibble at her right breast while roughly caressing the left. With a sharp nip, he suckled blood from her in tiny drops that reawakened his body to all possible pleasures.

The sharp tips of her nails biting into his hips encouraged him back to motion, and he obliged in powerful slams that brought her to crest once again. With her second release she clung to him with a howl of culmination. Her legs holding him still within her as her body continued to work him in time with her panting breaths.

Still buried deep within Kitty, Boryn was overwhelmed by sensation and emotion. It was more than he expected. He felt a sudden connection to this woman and ached to bind her to him, regardless of the rules it might go against.

He braced his weight with one elbow and settled slightly to one side. He explored her body, caressing her small curvy form. Her full breasts tightened with continued arousal under his possessive touch. Her back arched, pushing those lovely mounds toward his attention.

He trailed kisses down the tempting curve of her neck, over her collarbone and to her waiting tit. There he suckled until she moaned and writhed under his grip. Her motion pushed his cock the rest of the way out of her body, which allowed him much more freedom to pleasure her.

While his mouth continued to lavish attention on her perfect breasts, his hand stroked over her entrance, feathering over the lips and dipping between her slick folds. Each touch deepening the pleasure, drawing out his play, he entered her with one finger. The moisture from their earlier passion left her body wanting more and ready to take anything he had to offer.

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He stroked his finger into her, added another, and flicked his thumb over her clit.

Her body quivered. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Kitty whimpered and thrust up for more. Her wet sheath tightened.

He waited for Kitty to ride this wave of pleasure out then slipped his body lower to indulge his own tastes. He knelt between her thighs to better allow him to taste her.

"Boryn? I can't take any more." She reached for him, but could do nothing other than sink her fingers into his hair.

He licked over her center then pulled back enough to blow his words over her. "I will taste you." His dark growl of possession had exactly the effect he had hoped.

Kitty's fingers scraped over his scalp shooting tingles of pleasure through him. She fell back onto the bed with a whimper of submission.

And he ducked to claim his prize, letting his lips and tongue worship her, licking at her juices and suckling on her swollen clit.

Within minutes she was screaming out her pleasure, and he was aching to once more sink his cock into her and find that sweet release. In one smooth motion he shifted and thrust deep into her. She cried out and rose upright against his body, gripping his shoulders for leverage and claiming his mouth for a flash fire of a kiss. She clung to him tightly as if to climb inside his skin, as if to melt them into one being.

Boryn drew back, rocking onto his heels to keep them balanced as he continued to thrust into her in strong shallow bursts. Her thighs wrapped around his waist like a hot vise, grinding them together. She found his rhythm and deepened the motion by rocking her hips to counter his.

Kitty screamed and thrashed as her body spasmed in orgasm at the same moment that Boryn joined her in release. Together they fell to the bed in a perfect tangle of sated limbs.

Her face turned to the side, baring her throat to him. The pulse of life blood in her throat roared with the call to feed. *So much need... Too much need...* His fangs sank into her vein as his body revived, still deep within her body. He claimed every ounce of her, through her passion

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emblazed blood and her writhing body. He drove them both to the very brink once again. So hard, so deep, so alive.

She bucked beneath him. His hands held her down as completion fell, and he drowned in her taste...deep in a satisfaction he had never felt before, only to be brought back by the terrible growl. Such a sound was one of pending violence. A violence that he needed to control if possible. He pulled back to calm her. She lay still with hands fisted into the light blanket. Her eyes pinched closed in pain. *Had he hurt her? Taken too much blood?*

No, he was sure their loving had been good for her. This must be the result of her season.

With a frantic shove she pushed him from her. She fell to the floor even as her body shimmered and shifted into her wolf form. She leaped for the door and only his unnatural speed kept her from escaping the cabin.

Without the choice of freedom, she turned her anger on him.

"Kitty, you don't want to do this." He said the words quietly, hoping to calm the beast within her. Despite the soothing tones, she advanced with only menace in her eyes. He retreated slowly, until his legs bumped into the low bunk.

Then she pounced.

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Chapter Five

Blood! Hot copper flooded Kitty's senses. *So good, so thick and rich!* Her jaws bit deep again and again. Her claws tore into the soft flesh pinned beneath her.

Then the world twirled out of control and fell into darkness. A familiar burning passed over her body signaling the return to human form. Inside the smothering blackness she could neither feel her body nor sense her surroundings. A fierce tightness bound her with tender, unbreakable bonds. She was lost and yet held safe within the iron arms of a god. Those hands she could feel, but not see, crushed her breath from her. Her soul gasped for release.

Painful knowledge filled her. She had sinned against the world. She, a lowly youngling, had attacked a protector of souls. She would pass on to the next life where she would be given a chance to redeem herself.

The arms released her and she fell, without knowing how far, only to land and lack the strength to stand. She felt the center of her being, her very soul, tearing from her possession. She would lose everything. There was no air to draw, no world to touch. This was death.

No!

She was not yet judged.

The light rose around her to a dim misting glow. A man and woman stood before her. The woman argued that Catrina was ready to move on. The other asked with humble dignity that she be allowed to

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stay. He had a use for her in this lifetime. She could, and would, redeem herself within his service.

She was pulled before the woman, facing the one who would condemn her.

The woman's voice penetrated her mind. *Do you know who I am?*

Until that moment she hadn't, but now... The woman had gray green skin and a long mane of thick, corded, smoke-colored hair. Her large, dark eyes bore into Kitty's soul, judging her worth. Catrina feared she would be found wanting. This woman held the right to judge her. She was the green goddess of the ancient religion. Orejona, the goddess from the faraway stars who set forth the land for the Inca. Catrina dipped her head at the shame of her crimes.

Very well. You may stay to serve the young one.

She should thank Orejona. Her parents had told her childhood stories of the alien goddess' cruel nature. She should grovel for the kindness of this second chance, but still the wolf rose within her. She fought to control the beast.

The man's voice interrupted them. *She will need control if she is to have the chance to learn about her abilities. And strength to overcome the poisonous Cyvampis blood.*

She will have it. The goddess reached out a long slender hand, tipping Kitty's chin up. Her finger brushed over the still long fangs, and a single pearl of Orejona's bitter blood dropped onto Kitty's tongue.

The world faded and spun once again. She felt the hard floor under her hands and knees. The spinning dark and bitter taste filled her senses. She retched to rid her body of the burning that tore at her throat and stomach. Strong arms supported her until the nausea passed.

"Easy, Catrina. You're safe now." It was the voice of the man, the one with Orejona.

"Who are you?" Who was this man who'd argued with a goddess for her survival and won? He was tall, slender and blond, and looked very young. *Orejona called him the young one.* Was he a god, a young god? What was he?

"I am the one you came north to find."

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"Dàn?" How could that be? She'd found him on the Internet, during her most recent, desperate search for information about her kind. After several e-mails and much shared information, he'd offered her a job and a chance to learn about her kind.

She thought he was a wolf like her.

Still filled with wolfish suspicion, she sniffed at him. *Strange*. He smelled of the sea and the wind and the sky. Yes, if the morning sky, over the springtime ocean had a scent, this surely was it.

He smiled gently, and his pale blue eyes sparkled. "Yes, now we must see to Boryn."

"Boryn!" Catrina looked to the small bunk, and there lay Boryn covered in blood. There was blood everywhere, sprayed across the walls and dripping from the ceiling, pooled on the bed and floor. And Boryn wasn't moving. "*Dios*, I've killed him." She sobbed as she ran to the bedside.

"No, be calm. We can make this right." Dàn wrapped a long cloak around her and belted it when she made no move to do so herself.

She stared at Boryn's neck and chest, where the savagely torn flesh had tried to knit back together. "What have I done?"

"You were wild, and Boryn wasn't as strong as he thought. First we must help him to heal. He was too weak to lose this much blood, so his body shut down."

"He can have my blood."

"That won't be necessary." Dàn bit into his own wrist and placed it against Boryn's slack lips.

She held her breath, waiting for any evidence that Boryn might live. A tremor of desolation threatened, until Boryn finally moved to accept the gift of blood. Within moments, Boryn sat up, and Dàn sealed his barely seeping wrist wound. Only minutes after that, his wounds were closed.

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Chapter Six

Boryn's gaze darted to the thin door as it shook under a fierce knocking. "I know you're in there. Open up!" The old woman's voice screeched through the hardwood door.

"How did she find us here? Maybe if we ignore her she'll go away." Kitty's hopeful words sounded unlikely to him.

Boryn was impressed with the old crone's determination. Not impressed enough to turn her into a vampire—but impressed none the less.

"She won't give up so easily." This was from the one who'd offered him the strong healing blood. Then the blond man pointed a hand at the door with a look of acceptance on his face.

The lock turned, and the witch threw open the door. "I knew you were hiding here!" She stepped into the room and advanced toward Boryn while ignoring the others in the room.

"What do you want?" He found his ragged pants and pulled them on as some protection from the witch, who stood before him, wide eyed.

"I want to be like you are! Not a man, of course, but young and immortal. You must change me so that I, too, can have such wonderful powers." She ignored the presence of Kitty and the other man, looking only at Boryn.

"No." He drew on the shreds of his bloodied shirt. There was no way in *his workplace* that he'd ever change one of her ilk. He'd never changed any human in the past and would never give that much power to

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one like her. She practically reeked with her unrealistic desires. She wanted to live forever, but would she still yearn for eternity if she knew it would include her ancient bones and weak muscles as they currently were?

"I can be your minion. I'll do your evil will, anything you wish of me. I must have your magical powers."

"No." *Great. Just what I need...an evil, crazy, decrepit minion.*

"It costs you nothing and offers me so much. You cannot be greedy with your abilities. With them I can be young and beautiful again. I'll be able to take animal forms and control the minds of weaker people. You will see. I can be loyal and useful. I will--"

Her mouth froze in an open O as the blond man said some quiet command.

A flash of smoke covered the crone from hat tip to boot heel, and then she was gone. There in her place was a small black bat that fluttered, struggling to stay in the air. A tiny screeching voice cried out, "I'm a bat. I'm a bat." Then the bat, too, disappeared, leaving only quickly thinning smoke.

"Oh, shit! What did you do?" Kitty asked. She stared at the place where the witch had been only moments before.

"I gave her what she wished for and nothing more." Dàn turned his back to her and ran a hand through his blond curls in a restless way that showed his agitation.

"What was that? She wanted to be a bat? Well, I guess she was a bit batty but now, I mean, she's a bat!"

What was this man that he held such powers? He turned back and looked slightly guilty but still... What if she ever bothered him? What would she be turned into or where would she be sent?

"Yes." His simple one word answer said quite a lot.

"Where is she now?" She looked to Boryn, but he was studying Dàn with as many questions as she had.

"The Pittsburgh Zoo." A grin flickered briefly over his face before the guilt returned.

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Suddenly the absurdity of it was too much. He had changed a very pesky woman into a bat and put her into a zoo for safe keeping. "You didn't! Oh, Dàn, that is so cool." Really how could she fault him after Boryn's miraculous recovery? Not to mention he'd gotten her another chance, a chance to redeem herself in his service.

"Not so cool. I shouldn't have done it." His guilty expression was worse for the lines of strain around his eyes.

"Really, it was cool." She tried again but saw he was convinced of his guilt and failure.

Boryn stepped forward and laid an understanding hand on Dàn's shoulder. It wasn't hard to see the fear and guilt within Dàn. He, too, felt those same things over his own past mistakes. "But irresponsible." Boryn meant no censure by his comment, but he knew there was no forgiveness he could offer to this one.

Dàn shrugged. "Yes." He closed his eyes. "Slash. Burn. Come to me." He whispered the summoning command into the room.

Two very strange people materialized before Dàn. Both immediately bowed deep in respect. The dark-skinned man, who Boryn assumed was Slash, was a typical dark elf. *So that race still existed. What a shame.* The elf was lean with black skin and white eyes. This one made no effort to hide his completely white eyes, which were odd even for his kind. Burn was just as interesting even if she was now the only being within the room who'd ever been human. She stood firm beside Slash, her hand resting on his arm in as much a show of possession as affection. Her hair was all the varied shades found in fire, and her skin only a shade lighter than Slash's.

"What's up, boss?" Burn's voice was both reverent and mocking as she spoke to Dàn. Despite her less than subordinate manner, Boryn had no doubt of her loyalty, as her mismatched blue and green eyes showed only deep devotion.

"Catrina is considering joining the Low Key project. She needs training, and I need to see to some local and not so local clean up."

Slash sniffed delicately. "She is wolf?"

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"Yes, but she's had little chance to learn about her people or her powers. Teaching her how to use her abilities will have to come first. Take her to the Shaggies and let them begin her training. Then she may decide if she wishes to stay with us or not."

"What of him? He does not belong here." Slash's words were a cool disdain as his strange eyes flashed in Boryn's direction. The animosity between their kinds was more natural than breathing. It took considerable restraint to keep from hissing at the low elf.

"I will return to my tascs," Boryn began. At Kitty's pained look, his heart turned over. *She wanted him to stay?* "But I have some time yet before I am recalled. If I may, I would like to go with Kitty to this place of training." Kitty smiled up at him. Now that her sexual frenzy was past, she still wanted him. The wonder of it felt alien and unreal like a dream that was about to be shattered by waking. He reached out, and she took his hand, moving closer.

"Done," Dàn said, before he disappeared. *Now, I'll see to our wayward witch and correct my own wrongs.*

"Kitty...?" Burn's laughter escalated from giggle to side-splitter. She hung onto the elf's arm to keep upright as she continued to laugh.

"Oh, Slash..." She cut her words off as another deep laugh rolled out again. "I can't wait to tell the others. The Shaggy twins will love it! She's a wolf named Kitty!"

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Chapter Seven

Kitty couldn't believe her good fortune. She'd finally found people who could teach her what it meant to be what she'd always been. And even better than that, she'd found Boryn.

The dark man interrupted her thoughts. "Well, fun as this all is, we should be going before more of the locals come to investigate." His attention remained on the woman he'd arrived with, his expression gently indulgent as she continued to giggle.

"Where will we be going?" Kitty asked.

"Low Key Industries has a training center in California. We will be taking you there."

Kitty spoke to the strangers, but kept the rest of her attention on Boryn. Was he really going with her? How much time would they have before he was sent back to wherever he came from? "So, will you just be materializing there like you did here, because I don't think I can do that?"

"No, and neither can we."

"What? But I saw you."

Boryn squeezed her hand, sending tingles up her arm at the possessive touch. "They were summoned. It wasn't their powers that brought them here."

"Oh. Ah, okay. So how are we going? And are you really coming with me, Boryn?"

The dark man said, "No, he won't be on the plane that we'll take to Los Angeles."

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"Slash, darling," Burn interrupted. "You heard what Dàn said. The fanged one will come with us. You know how the boss feels about romance and all. He wouldn't want them parted for even the flight." Then the woman turned to Kitty. "Never mind their chest pounding and growling and such. Elves can have long memories when it concerns injustice." She winked her blue eye.

"Elves..."

"Why yes, that's what Slash is, even if he never claims it aloud." She tweaked Slash's long black hair, tucking it behind the man's delicate, *pointed* ear. "Don't tell me that you're hanging out, doing the nasty with a blood demon, and even thinking of disbelieving in elves?"

"Well, put that way, I guess not." *Doing the nasty?* Well, the doing was not nasty at all. Doing Boryn was something she wanted to do again and again.

The *elf* caught the woman's wandering hand. "Burn, you steal a man's dignity with your words and actions. Why do I put up with this?"

"Because you can't live without me, and because you like when I..." She leaned in close and dropped her voice low enough that even Kitty's keen ears couldn't make out the words. But whatever she said had Boryn chuckling the whole way to the Jeep that was waiting outside the cabin, and left a decidedly flushed look to Slash's midnight skin.

Burn took the driver's seat and Slash slid in beside her, leaving the back for Kitty and Boryn. Once they were all in, the Jeep roared to life and tore out at a death defying pace.

Slash and Burn cranked up the radio and immediately began bickering over the station and music. Only Slash didn't seem to say much, but Burn continued the argument anyhow.

The music left her and Boryn with a kind of privacy in the backseat. The things that she didn't exactly have the courage to say hung between them awkwardly. What was the right thing to say to a man you almost killed after he pleased you beyond your wildest dreams? More appropriately, how could she apologize?

Boryn reached over and pulled her against his side. Her body fit against his warm length perfectly.

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“Boryn?”

His chest rumbled under her cheek in reply.

“I’m sorry about what happened. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

There, it was said, but it wasn’t anywhere near enough.

He tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. “I know. It was only the wildness brought on by your season. I have no regrets.”

She hesitated in asking the other part of her concerns aloud. But how else would she know? “Boryn, was the rest because of the season, too? Was any of it just us?” She pinched her eyes closed and bit down on her lip to keep it from trembling. What if he said the season had caused their attraction? What if that was all they had, one night of incredible passion? What if...this was the end?

“Kitty...” Boryn’s breath sighed over her lips just before his mouth claimed hers with a gentle possession that stole her breath. Silently, he showed her the spark was still there waiting to ignite. His kiss deepened and went on and on, leaving her panting when they finally parted.

She fought for control of her overactive senses. She had to know the truth no matter how much it hurt. “Oh, Boryn, is this still the season?”

“Your season has passed. Once it’s been satisfied, your need eased. It won’t come like that ever again.”

Passed? What did he mean never again? A cold fear sped up her heart. “I don’t understand. Does that mean that if I didn’t conceive this time, then I never will?”

“No, it doesn’t mean that at all. Only the first season is as overwhelming as you just experienced. You’ll experience a season every one hundred years or so, but they will be more gentle and easier to bear without violence.”

“I’m really sorry, Boryn. It was like I was lost within the wolf and wasn’t even aware of what it was doing. I don’t know what I’d have done if you died.”

“But I haven’t, and it’s unlikely that I ever will.”

Another sudden fear rose within her. What would happen when he had to return to wherever he was from? “Why did you come with me?”

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"Because I think there might be something between us. I believe that kiss a moment ago proves it was more than your season, and I know that such things are precious, especially for one like I am."

Her heart swelled with joy at his words, yet the pessimistic side of her life cast its shadow. "Do we really have a chance? I mean, how often can a wolf and blood demon make a go of a relationship?"

"In truth, I've never heard of such a thing, but I also believe that if we both want it enough, then we will find a way." He pulled her into a kiss that heated quickly.

The Jeep slid to a stop. "Listen here, kiddies... If Slash and I can make a go, then I can't picture a thing that could stop you both. After all, Slash is a dark elf with a long standing prejudice against blood demons, and I'm a vampire, a secondhand cast off created by Cyvampis blood." She drilled Kitty with a hard stare. "You have nothing to worry about, and I see the gleam in the eye of your demon, so I think I will leave you both to consider your options." True to her word, Burn turned back to the front and continued driving.

Kitty thought about Burn's advice while settling back into Boryn's embrace. "She does make sense." She feathered light kisses along his collarbone.

"She does indeed." Boryn lifted her across his lap, placing her lips on a level even with his own. "My only fear is that I will be recalled far too soon. I don't dare go against my master's will."

Just then a mental call broke into Kitty's thoughts. *Boryn, you will have one hundred years together if she has the courage to claim your soul. To do so, you must both come before me within the time of the next full moon. Until then, be together and be happy.*

"Was that your master?"

"Yes, and I believe we have his blessings." Boryn pulled her close for a lingering kiss. "Will you ask for my soul? We have nothing to lose."

If he asked, she would happily fight the devil for his soul. How bad could Pahele be? Did it even matter? Even if he was a devil, she was sure a month from now she would be standing before him with a request. She

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kissed Boryn, caressing his lips before pulling back. "That's not exactly true. I have already lost something, Boryn."

"And what is that?" One of his brows quirked upward in question.

"I've lost my heart," she whispered.

"Then we shall call it a fair trade, as I am sure you have found mine."

THE END

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Author Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. In the time Shannon doesn't spend 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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Chapter One

Washington, D.C. 2005

"Blurry walls. Nothing but stinking, blurry walls."

Kelly Greene shook her head, clearing it of the confusing, useless images. The mental connection sometimes gave her clues to where a kidnapped child was hidden. Unfortunately, what she saw through Sarah's mind did nothing to help find the missing toddler. Attempting to hold the connection and sort through the images surged her already raging headache up another level. She pushed aside the pain and fought to regain her focus. The child's life depended on her psychic talents, which were currently failing them both.

Her instincts told her she was close, but she couldn't get an exact location. She'd circle the block again, *for the twentieth time*.

She might be psychic, but there were limits to her abilities, and this case was pushing every one of them. The police had dropped her from the case an hour ago when she wasn't able to give any specifics, but she'd tracked this child for the past twenty-four hours, and there was no way she'd give up now.

While her eyes watched the road, she let her other senses relax and accept the connection that bound her to Sarah.

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Sarah was tired, hungry, and very scared.

Everything was blurry and confusing through the toddler's mind. *Probably tears.* There was no way to gain any information from her this way. Kelly only knew of one other way to find her. A really yuck-tastic way, as her son would say.

Through the mind of the kidnapper.

She pulled the car out of the thin traffic. Why, oh why, could it never be easy? She'd have to do it. There was no other choice. She had a feeling that time was running out for little Sarah, that death or worse was approaching fast.

This case had a bad feeling to it from the beginning. Some perception of natural and unnatural. Several times, she had completely lost the connection to Sarah as if something prevented her from reaching the toddler's mind. Darn it, she was good at tracking and didn't just lose the thread that bound her to the individual. So why did it keep happening with Sarah? Why was this case different? Wasn't natural...

Ridiculous. What was natural about anything she did? Not one blasted thing. Her own abilities had been called unnatural or supernatural more than once. Natural, unnatural or whatever, it changed nothing.

She still had a chance, admittedly a slim one, to save this child, and she was darn sure going to try. If it were her son, Patrick, she'd never give up. This time, the grieving mother was a stranger named Sally, but it made no difference. She remembered the terror of losing her child, and she'd never let another mother go through that. For Sally's sake, she would climb into the mind of the devil himself. She'd found Patrick. She'd find Sarah.

That left crawling into a sick mind. Each kidnapper might be different, but every one of them was dangerous and unpredictable. And each one had a mind that she had no interest in entering.

Kelly rolled her head, trying to loosen knotted neck muscles and ease the pounding headache that using her abilities always caused. Nothing would help but deep sleep, what Patrick called her reboot time. That wouldn't happen until she had little Sarah back in her mother's arms.

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She shut out the sound of traffic as it buzzed past, turning her senses inward. She reached out for Sarah's immature mind and strengthened the link between them. Sorting through her mind revealed a single new detail; *he called her 'baby, nice baby'*. That was all the connection she needed to grasp at the ominous presence so close to little Sarah.

There. A man. She slipped into the man's mind and was stricken by what she found.

Scared, no he was terrified. He hated and he hurt. A burning, ripping agony of hurt. Images of needles. Blood. Chains. Bars. Pills. Weapons. Fighting.

The pain and terror rushed through her, knocking the breath out of her chest. His emotions were so powerful they hammered into her mind. Kelly panted through the confusing thoughts and overwhelming pain, ripping herself free from the kidnapper's mind enough to allow her to at least function.

None of it made sense. The images were fragmented and had little connection to thoughts or memories. A kaleidoscope with no way to focus the direction. She pulled back to her own mind, holding onto only a thread of the contact. He hadn't given a single clue as to their location. It was as if he wasn't able to sense his own surroundings through his pain.

His terrible pain.

She could use his pain, track its psychic trail to the source. She threw the Jeep into gear, then roared back into traffic, cutting off a dark colored sedan before taking the first right to swing into an empty lot behind an industrial building. Abandoned, of course. She'd been so close, and the kidnapper's cracked mind was like a beacon to this place. They were inside this building. She'd found Sarah.

With the Jeep parked and silent, she dug through the clutter on her passenger seat, grabbing her cell phone. Her unofficial partner, Captain Rook, was on speed dial, and he'd back her up even when the rest doubted her.

He answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Rook, it's Kelly. Listen, I'm at 32nd and Long, the empty red brick building. Get here as fast as you can. I need you."

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"You found her?" Although said as a question, she heard the confidence in his voice.

"Almost. Just get here. This one could be messy." She snapped the phone shut, dropping it in favor of the thirty-eight caliber pistol which she put under her denim jacket in its shoulder holster. Good thing she wasn't a size two. Her natural curves hid any bulge that might be seen otherwise.

On second thought, she slid the phone into her jacket pocket and picked up a picture of Sarah cradled lovingly in Sally's ample arms. It was another possible tool to negotiate with the kidnapper. She'd use anything she could to get the child to safety. Playing on a kidnapper's conscience worked sometimes; at least it did when they had one. The thirty-eight worked with the rest. Either way, Sarah was leaving here with her.

She closed the door quietly and moved toward the source of wild emotions through a broken door and into the empty lobby.

Muffled crying came from a back room. She moved that way while using all her senses to home in on the man whose thoughts were no more than an incoherent jumble of negative emotions. He wasn't sane, that much she knew.

She'd stall as long as she could to give Rook time to get here and take control. Otherwise, she might have to kill the kidnapper. No one in that much pain could be rational. She tucked the useless picture into her back pocket and drew the thirty-eight. She moved to just outside the door where she could hear Sarah's reaction to what was going on in the room. If any sound signaled a change, she'd be close enough to get to her, hopefully.

The minutes crawled by as her heart beat louder. Each beat thundered through her pounding skull. Sarah's cries subdued into baby whimpers. Then the whimpers stopped, leaving only silence.

Ominous silence.

Kelly glanced at the gun in her hands and offered a short prayer to any god that would listen. Crossing the entrance, she scanned right and left before moving forward.

"Sarah? Where are you?" she whispered. A short whimper answered from the far corner where Sarah sat in a bundle of blankets.

L. Shannon

The room was empty of kidnappers, but was still filled to the point of choking with the man's pain. Wherever he was, he hadn't gone far.

She crossed the room and stooped to pick Sarah up, which left her back exposed for a second too long. A huge arm dragged her back against a rock-like body, crushing the gun and one of her arms to her own chest.

"Who are you?" His voice huffed over her ear as he spoke, dry and panting.

"I just came for Sarah." She tried for soothing, but barely managed to gag out the words past his tight grip.

"Did they send you? I won't go back. I'll never go back." He was terrified. The emotions rolled from him into her, causing her stomach to clench and lurch wildly.

"No one sent me. I just want to take Sarah to her mother." She gasped the words out. She had to get out of here, get herself and the child to safety before he lost whatever restraint kept him from snapping her in two.

"You're n-not one of them?" His confused words stuttered out. "Sarah who? Where am I?"

"I don't want anything but the baby. Just the baby." He was hurting so bad, and the pain filled her to the point she wanted to curl up and die. Or was that his wish?

"Baby? God help me. What have I done?" He sobbed out the words and dropped his arms, releasing her.

In one motion, she grabbed up Sarah and bolted for the door. That was when she heard the scream. That anguished scream would fill her nightmares for an eternity. She tripped at the stabbing pain that shot through the mental connection, numbing her legs, locking up her muscles.

Kelly fell and covered the baby with her own body. The slight roll left her looking at the room behind her. The bulky, muscled kidnapper was on hands and knees before another man. Lean and light, the new man gripped a huge needle, withdrawing it from the big guy's neck.

Whatever was in the syringe was powerful. His eyes glazed over, and he fell forward to the floor. "Help me, brother. Please, don't take me back." The whispered words hurt. Everything hurt.

Season of Blood

The connection burned out, and she was left watching the scene though a hazy numbness.

The lean, blond man stared down at the kidnapper. He did nothing but watch until the childlike brute remained motionless on the floor. Then he turned her way.

His obsidian stare was empty of any humanity. The terrible, empty eyes that were found only in someone who'd long ago lost that part that made them human.

A siren wailed close by.

The blond returned the syringe to a small case and pushed it into the pocket of his black fatigues. Then he lifted the unconscious man, who was probably twice his size, with seemingly no effort, settling him over his shoulder and walking out without a word. He looked back once from the darkened hallway. Those blank orbs shone back at her from the dark.

* * * * *

Agent 027, Sergeant Samuel, carried the target out of the building. Mission priority one: complete. Target acquired. Mission priority two: return target to retrieval point.

Brother, help me. The words filled his mind, briefly blocking out the mission priorities. Then they faded away once again.

Did those words have meaning? Were they necessary for mission success?

The police blocked access to his vehicle and the exit routes. Covert motion was stopped. He would wait. Observe.

The woman came out of the building carrying the child. She was armed, but had shot nothing. *Why?*

Two of the officers took the child and left in one car. The woman stayed. She spoke with one of the officers, a suited, dark haired human. Together they went into the building. *She is debriefing the man.* How much did she understand? Did her knowledge make her a threat?

Brother, help me, the thought whispered again.

L. Shannon

Brother? He had a brother. No, he had two brothers. Two brothers who were now gone. *Gone where?* Once he'd had more family. Now he had no one.

Mission directive was of all importance. Or was it? Dosage must be maintained. He had missed his dose. The pill helped him think. He was overdue. With a flick he dropped two pills into his palm. *Brother?* The pills fell into the debris under the hedges where he and the target were concealed.

The still flashing police lights hurt his eyes, distracting him. The light was the pain. Always with light came pain. But success made the pain go away. Failure brought light and pain.

"No more pain." The words were raspy and quiet. The target was waking. He nudged Daniel with a toe. "Please, no more," came the pitiful response.

He reached into his fatigue pocket for a second syringe and vial. One should have been enough, but he believed in being prepared. A second dose could kill the target. But the mission required containment and secrecy above survival.

"I'll be g-good." The broken promise connected to some memory from his own past. He had said those words. He had begged for pity and been denied.

He put the syringe and vial away. There was time yet. He could wait before administering another dose.

"Thank you, my brother. Thank you."

Irrelevant to the mission. Only the mission mattered. Brothers... Once it had meant something, hadn't it? No, only the mission mattered. "Silence." He punctuated the command with a shake. Optimum success included the target's survival. Success was all that mattered.

Another police car left the scene. Only two officers remained on the scene. One was outside with the woman's battered Jeep. The woman was still within the building. The man in the suit returned from the building. After he spoke to the uniformed officer, the uniformed one left the scene.

Had Daniel left anything behind that could endanger the operation? He should go closer to sweep the area for possible evidence.

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With the target still immobilized, he could return for up to ten more minutes without risking his escape. Paralysis lasted from forty to sixty minutes with this dosage of liquid Silvertide.

"Do not make a sound or you'll be punished." He left Daniel hidden in the shadows as he moved to the back of the building to see where the woman was.

Moving without making a sound came easily. He crept forward and found the woman inside Daniel's hidden den. She gathered the blankets and searched through the items that had been with the child.

A sweep of the room showed it was empty of any evidence. There was nothing here to expose them to the world. Daniel's deranged state hadn't endangered them. He could return without punishment.

The woman froze. Her stillness betrayed her awareness of his presence.

He should remove her. *But she is no threat.* Mission secrecy. *But secrecy is not compromised.* He slipped back further into the shadows.

One hand brushed a strand of brown hair behind one ear. She knew he was here. Why didn't she face him? She waited. Non-threatening. Her body was tense, but not rigid. She was prepared, but not panicked. *Interesting.*

Finally, she spoke, breaking the silence. "I know you're there, but I don't know what you want." Her honey warm voice slid through him.

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. He had no response to offer.

Slowly, she turned to face his corner of darkness. Her jacket bulged, barely noticeably, with a concealed firearm. Her hands were clearly visible, making no effort to reach for the weapon. "He called you 'brother'."

Some puzzle clicked, triggering a question from the confused muddle of thoughts that filled him and fought for control against the mission parameters. "What is a brother?" Deep down he knew that he had brothers, but when he tried to force his mind to understand what it meant, he came back to the mission parameters.

Her gaze flicked to his in surprise.

L. Shannon

Was his question wrong? Would he be punished? He clenched his jaw to keep his begging pleas silent. He needed to know. Would she answer? "What is a brother?"

"A brother is family. Family gives you strength."

Strength was good. "A brother gives you strength?" Was that the connection?

"Yes. Is he your brother? Will you help him?" She sounded concerned for Daniel.

How could that be? When he'd found Daniel, he had been attacking the woman. Why would she want to help him now? Would he help Daniel? "He... No. They will take him." He could only do as he was told. They would bring the light, the pain and the punishment, if he failed in his mission.

"He needs help. I know a place where you can take him." She made the offer and he sensed no trick to it.

But it didn't matter. Only the success of the mission kept the pain away. "He must go back. I—"

"Kelly, are you in here?" The man's voice broke into the room only a moment before the suited policeman walked in.

The moment was long enough to be gone. He moved silently back to the target. To Daniel. To his...brother. *Mission priorities...*

He shook his head, trying in vain to push back the insistent voice that commanded he obey the mission directives. *No mission, no mission, no mission.*

His brother wasn't named Daniel. They'd named him that. His brother was named Dain. He moved quickly to where Dain lay, just as he had left him, the same and yet different. He knelt next to his brother to check his vital signs.

Dain lurched upward, slamming a fist into his ribs. The powerful blow knocked him from his feet. Landing hard, he scrambled, but not fast enough.

Hit after hit came, and then Dain broke free. "Nooo..." Dain's voice began as a low wail and fell to a whimper of pain. He dropped to his knees, tearing at his clothing, while tiny flashing sparks erupted from his

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body. In seconds, he was in nothing but rags, his panting breaths turned to growls.

He was pain-shifting. His natural wolf body was reclaiming the space that Dain held, reclaiming it by force.

This wasn't good for either of them or the mission. He backed a few more feet from Dain even as some part of him wanted to help his brother.

Dain lost his control in a shower of hazy gold sparkles. Then there was only the enormous wolf glaring with cold, black eyes, lips raised in snarled hatred. The wolf pounced, tearing into any part it could reach, rending clothing and flesh alike.

Then the wolf ran, leaving behind more wounds than man. He would die here by his brother's fangs. Perhaps this was right, perhaps he deserved this. *Brother, help me...die.*

But no answer came to his plea. He might lie here and bleed, but he probably wasn't going to die.

And when he lived, they would come for him. And he would be punished for his failure. He had to find a place to heal. When he recovered, he would be able to complete the mission.

He had to succeed, or he would suffer. He would not return with another failure.

He breathed in shallowly. With one hand, he pressured the freely bleeding wound where his neck met his shoulder. His jacket was soaked down that side. From where he lay, he could see the woman's vehicle.

She'd offered to help. He wasn't sure why, but he wanted her to be as good as she seemed. No other had ever offered to help one like him. 'Kelly' was what the human had called her. She'd offered. Kelly knew of a place. He gasped in the thick air and struggled to his knees and then to his feet.

If he could reach her Jeep... If she would help...