



Loose Id

AN ANGEL'S BLADE

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Chapter One

2075 AD, former Kansas City metro area

Zahra didn't believe in God or Satan, but one look in her quarry's light blue eyes made her bite back the Hallelujah springing to her lips. She'd found him. Holed up in one of Neukacee's seediest bars, Dashtu, the half-angel and salvation of all the humans in the greater tristate area, drank the same watered-down beer the humans drank. She scanned the room, thankful not to find any of the Necromancer's minions waiting in dark corners. Crossing paths with a zombie right now would be a bitch.

She ducked into the back room where the smell of stale beer and greasy food overwhelmed her. Swallowing her gorge, she snagged one of the pocketed aprons the waitresses wore. Of course most of them wore little else. In her leather pants and shirt, with more concealed cutlery than the dish rack, she didn't look like Barg's normal wait-girls. If his patrons missed the clothing, the katana strapped on her back had to tip them off. Oh well, the patrons would just have to deal. This body wasn't for sale.

"Give me a beer," she yelled to Barg. He grinned at her, revealing the gaps where he'd lost teeth during his boxing career.

"Who's paying?" he shouted back as he slid a full mug down the bar.

She caught it effortlessly. "Not me." Giving him a wink, she sashayed through the press of bodies. Several heads turned to watch her. They looked. They didn't touch.

Dashtu sat alone in a booth, odd enough in this place. Especially so considering that he looked like the angel he claimed not to be. Luminous white hair was cut close to his skull, looking as if it'd been hacked on by a dull knife. Those eyes, so pale blue as to nearly be translucent, pulled her in. This wasn't the first time she'd seen him, only the first chance she'd had to study him. The vest he wore revealed a sculpted, hairless chest. She'd worked for some bruisers. They all paled compared to Dashtu. Beneath the table, she saw only worn

blue jeans and boots, no weapons. Foolish, even if he were a half-angel. No one knew when the zombies would strike.

"Your drink, sir." She purred the words, slipping into the booth across from him. Leaning forward, she drew his gaze down into the cleavage revealed by her vest. She might not have much, but the tight leather certainly made the most of it. "You're a hard, hard man to find." She lingered over each *hard*. Something about him made her wonder just how naughty someone descended from angels could be. It'd been a long while since she'd had a good, hard fuck. Something told her Dashtu could make up for lost time.

"I didn't order a drink." In spite of the cool tone of his voice, the low words rumbled through her, vibrating every nerve ending into a fever pitch. "I asked to be left alone." He gave a pointed glance at Barg who pretended to ignore him.

"We don't always get what we ask for." She battled a stab of pain. She'd asked God why he let Spika, her mentor, die. He hadn't come through with an answer yet. "You're needed." She pushed his beer closer to him.

"Everybody needs something." Dashtu shrugged. "I can't help. Go ask someone else."

"Rumor has it you're related to the God who has completely abandoned us. He stepped out. You get to step in and fill his place." Her left hand slid to her thigh. Her fingers hovered over her blade. What she expected to do, she didn't know. The familiar gesture comforted her.

"What do you think I can do?" Dashtu gulped the beer.

"I don't know. What can you do?" Spika had told her being the people's savior wasn't easy. Her mentor hadn't told her that she'd be wrangling reluctant men to do their duty, only that she'd be killing zombies and the evil scientists-turned-Necromancers who had created them. Zahra bit back angry laughter. Truly, she wondered if Dashtu could save the greater Neukacee area.

"Lots of things." Dashtu's gaze flicked toward the entrance. A scowl tugged the corners of his chiseled lips into a frown. "Nothing that would interest you."

"Look, do I have to go through the whole spiel? I'm sure you know who and what I am. If nothing else by reputation. I assure you that I know who and what you are. Something bad is coming. I know it. You can help me stop it. Don't you care about these people? They took refuge here. This used to be a booming metropolis." She reined in her growing impatience. After spending the last three months hunting for Dashtu, she wouldn't give up now.

"And seventy years ago we thought global warming would be the greatest threat humanity faced. Times change. Bringing civilization back nearly a century tends to shuffle priorities. I know what happened, Zahra, and yes, I know who you are. I want to help. I really do. But I watched one Blade die. I won't cause the death of another." Grabbing his mug, he drained the last of it in a single gulp.

Zahra sucked in a breath. She had a lot of data on Dashtu. That choice piece of information had not been included. "We all die eventually. I won't blame you if it happens to me." She pressed her lips together. Danger came with the territory. She was a fighter and quite used to staying alive. She preferred it to the alternative. Sliding her hand across the table, she took a risk and tangled her fingers with his. Awareness sizzled through her veins. Her nipples tingled. Her clit throbbed. Forcing her breathing to slow, she stared into his eyes, daring him to look away. "Death doesn't scare me. I didn't track you down just to have you turn me away. You won't get rid of me that easily." She gave his hand a squeeze.

Dashtu stared at their hands. "I can't help you, Zahra. I'm sorry." He started to pull away.

Zahra forced his fingers to remain locked with hers. Pulling his hand across the table she leaned forward. "I didn't take you for a quitter. I don't think the man upstairs would like that very much."

Dashtu barked laughter. "The man upstairs doesn't give a fuck. I should know," he retorted.

Zahra flinched at his bitter words. "Someone should. People are dying. You can heal. I've heard the rumors." *You can fight too.* She didn't say that phrase aloud, trying to steer away from the reality of battles and death. "You haven't done that. Let me do the fighting. It's what I've been trained to do. You can heal the people and keep them alive." *Keep them from turning into zombies.*

"I can't heal everyone, no matter how much you want me to." He brushed his thumb across her cheek.

"What will you do if you're not helping me? How can you stand by and watch these people die?" She suspected he knew the score as well as she. Nearly a thousand humans huddled in a city that used to house nearly two million people. No one went to the old town anymore. Burned-out buildings and tumbling husks of skyscrapers made it prime zombie hunting grounds. The next nearest population was Miniconsin near what used to be the Twin Cities. Small pockets of humanity survived near the former Iowa-Nebraska border and Iowa's former capital, but nothing large enough to become an established city. The Necromancers had focused their attentions on the major cities of the former United States. It had been easier to carve up territory that way.

Dashtu rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'm just one man, Zahra. I worked with someone once, remember? It didn't end well. I'm too smart to wage a one-person crusade against the Necromancers."

"Someone has to fight. I'm not giving up."

"Then you're going to die. I'm sorry, Zahra. I want to help you. I really do, but I've done my time. More than you can know. I remember when the first Necromancers gained power. I remember when the bomb took out most of Washington DC. Amazing what people will do out of greed, isn't it?" He kept his voice deadpan, his expression undecipherable.

He didn't look much older than thirty. For him to have seen that -- she did some quick mental calculations -- made him nearly seventy-five years old. He looked good for being a septuagenarian. "If you saw all of that then you know why we have to fight."

Dashtu glanced toward the door again. A tall wall of a man strode in. His bald head gleamed in the lantern lights. He wore black from neck to toes, insignia along the right arm of his jacket.

Zahra's stomach fell. This man worked for the Necromancer controlling the area. She ducked her head.

Dashtu lunged across the table. Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her lips toward his. "Don't fight me," he whispered an instant before his mouth closed over hers.

She'd once watched an apartment building catch fire and burn to the ground in less than an hour. The flames igniting inside her eclipsed even the memory of that event. With his left hand, he cupped her cheek, obscuring anyone's view of her face. She did the same, tangling her fingers in his fine hair. His tongue swiped across her lips and willingly she opened for him. A hungry, needy moan erupted from her and he swallowed it.

Fire and ice. He made the combination possible, the heat radiating from him feeling strong enough to melt the worn, vinyl bench. His scent surrounded her, a mix of sandalwood and cinnamon like the incense her mentor used to burn. The scent of angels, she'd called it, and after getting this close to Dashtu, Zahra knew she was right. Not even the crudely brewed beer she tasted detracted from his allure. His spicy taste filled her mouth and made her tingle all the way to her toes. Her nipples rasped against the leather vest. Between her legs, her leather pants rubbed against her swollen clit.

No one cared about the couple kissing in the corner. Zahra tried to focus on her surroundings. The big man strode through the bar, acting as if he were looking for someone.

Dashtu's hands didn't move. He didn't reach for her breast, didn't try to caress any more than her face and neck. His tongue plunged into her mouth, a carnal acknowledgement of the attraction between them.

Zahra kissed him back. Stroking his tongue with her own she poured her years of sexual frustration into the kiss. She tucked her knees beneath her, crawling further onto the table. Distantly, she recognized hoots and catcalls coming from somewhere in the bar. She clenched her fingers in his hair, pulling him hard against her. Their teeth clicked together, the slight pain adding to her pleasure.

The need for air parted them, a momentary distraction. Even that tiny parting made her whimper and press her lips to his. Her years of self-enforced celibacy, her hunt for Dashtu, her need to save these people...it all coalesced into this moment of life giving passion. His lips on hers. His hands on her skin. His cock in her body. She wanted it all and she wanted it right now.

He pulled away. "Let's go."

"What?" Her mind reeling from the kiss, she turned to look.

"Don't look." Cupping her cheek, he turned her to face him. "Just get out of the booth and head out the back door."

Zahra nodded. She knew her way around Barg's since she'd often come here to let off a little steam, especially after Spika's death. "I'll lead." She tore off the apron and left it in the booth.

He followed so close his breath tickled the back of her neck. With him so near he swamped her senses. She struggled to listen to snippets of conversation. A woman's orgasmic scream vibrated through the paper-thin walls. Two men discussed the harvest, or lack thereof, and one boasted he found a way to repair an abandoned car. The other guffawed. Beer flowed into tankards and into mouths. The slick floor made a hasty retreat impossible.

She ducked into one of the alcoves lovers used when there weren't any rooms available in the back.

"Hurry," Dashtu growled.

"I'm trying." She poked her head out of the alcove, saw the big man still sitting at the bar. "This way." She grabbed his hand, pulling him down the hallway that led to the prostitute's quarters. Raising her hand in the air, she made a gesture for Barg. The bartender nodded and shoved another drink at the big man.

"What are you doing?" Dashtu stopped in the hall. He glanced at the curtains. Sexual sounds echoed from the rooms, from the slap of leather against bare flesh, to a man's groan of pleasure. Somewhere, a tenor voice chanted "Yes! Yes!" and squeaking bed springs made an off-tune symphony. She'd often hidden back here where the prostitutes worked, sometimes offering protection to the women. Barg helped her out with the occasional job. She knew she'd be leaving Barg with one hell of a mess. *Sorry, man*. She shoved open the back door, stepping through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"You coming?" she snarled over her shoulder at Dashtu, aware that had they been somewhere else the question would have had a different meaning. As if on cue a man gave a long, lingering moan. Zahra grinned.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Where now?"

"My place." She didn't wait for him, knew she could find her way back to the one-room hovel she called home deaf, dumb, and blindfolded. Instead, she darted into an alley and took off at a dead run. Getting out of there had been too easy.

Dashtu ran behind her. She barely heard his footfalls over the pounding of her heart. What had she been thinking meeting him in such a public place? *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid*. And why had the big man been looking for him? Dashtu seemed far more concerned about him than someone who didn't want to do anything should be.

Aside from Spika, she hadn't known anyone else who fought the zombies like she did, almost as if it were a calling. Spika had called her a Blade, made it sound as if Zahra was

special, but she'd been killed before Zahra could learn much more about what it meant to be a Blade. All Zahra knew was to fight and kill zombies. Her feet carried her effortlessly through a rat's nest of alleys and corridors. Any large streets were avoided, especially at this time of night. The moon shone overhead, too bright for her liking. Somewhere down the street she heard the wail of a zombie. A few old movies had survived, shown mostly for entertainment value. It was funny to laugh at rotting corpses, when the real zombies looked just like the friends and loved ones who had died. Their eyes glowed, a side effect of the genetic splicing that had created them. Well, that and a little bit of radiation thrown in for good measure. Other than the glowing eyes, it was hard to tell a zombie from the living. Zahra halted. She wrapped her arms around herself.

"What?" Dashtu asked, halting silently beside her. He reached for her.

She flinched away.

"Nothing," she muttered, whirling to face him. She searched his eyes though her senses told her Dashtu wasn't a zombie. Wasn't living either, at least not in the way she lived, but he wasn't a zombie. In the darkness, away from the hum of life created by the bar, she sensed an otherworldly energy emanating from him. It tingled along her skin, almost like a caress. Something buzzed in the back of her mind, almost as if she could reach out and touch...someone. Zahra shook her head.

Suddenly the thought of taking Dashtu to her sanctuary seemed ill-advised. Drawing a deep breath through her mouth in a futile attempt to avoid the smell of rotting food and human waste, she willed her nerves to subside.

"Zahra?" Dashtu laid his hand on her arm.

Closing her eyes, she leaned against the wall behind her. His touch felt so good. After so long, she had found a connection to another person. Spika's loss echoed in her soul, rattled around in the empty places and made her look in her own dark corners and see her own truths. She didn't like the woman she'd become.

"Zahra?" Dashtu whispered again. "You're scaring me."

She managed a feeble grin and opened her eyes. Taking another deep breath, this time through her nose to let the redolence of humanity fill her, she stepped away from the wall. "Sorry. I've never brought another person to my sanctuary before."

"We don't have to go there."

"And where would we go? Where do you stay when you're not at Barg's?" She thought she knew the answer. He'd been damned easy to track once she'd discovered his habits. Undoubtedly, the lieutenant believed the same thing. Otherwise he wouldn't have settled into the bar stool as if he planned to stay all night.

"Places." He evaded the question. His voice dropped to a whisper, "Ssh, someone's coming."

Zahra strained to listen. Not far away a rat squeaked as it ran through the garbage. On the other side of the wall someone slept, breathing through his mouth, his snores drowned out nearly everything.

A low whimper sounded on the air.

Zahra stiffened, instantly alert. "This way." She grabbed Dashtu to drag him back the way they came. Time to change tactics.

"Too late," he whispered. Breaking away from her, he rushed down the alley, not stopping to look as he blundered into where it met with the wide street.

Zahra raced behind him. She expected a half-angel to have more intelligence.

Three zombies mobbed him. Two on his right, one on his left, they grabbed his arms. They wore standard zombie thug fare -- jeans, boots, and grubby T-shirts. She'd fought ones like them hundreds of times.

Her katana slid from its sheath with a menacing hiss. She raced down the alley and grabbed the nearest zombie's arm and hauled him off of Dashtu. He stumbled back, eyes glowing eerie green in the moonlight. The poor kid looked barely out of his teens. Zahra swung her katana. The tip caught him from shoulder to hip, slicing the T-shirt from his skin. The tip scored his chest, red blood sparkling with green luminescence. It seeped into the black T-shirt.

The zombie looked at his wounds, showing his inexperience and baring his neck for the perfect swing. Pulling her arm across her body, she raised the katana again. It whistled through the air, slicing through flesh and bone. The zombie looked up, eyes wide. He opened his mouth to scream, but Zahra had already turned away to her second target.

She grabbed the second zombie by the back of his T-shirt, hoping, praying Dashtu would be able to take care of the last one. Behind her, the first zombie's head hit the pavement with the sound of an exploding pumpkin. The creature she'd grabbed spun around, a switchblade suddenly glinting in his hand. He slashed at her. Zahra danced away.

The zombie pursued. Older than the first by a few years, he held wary street smarts in his eyes. The zombie was most likely a former gang member. As soon as the gangs learned going zombie helped them control territory, they jumped at the chance. Their enthusiasm proved their undoing, for zombies lost most of the intelligence they had in life. Something about mutant genetics frying their brains or something. Zahra swung. Her katana caught only air. She pulled back to strike again.

The zombie lunged.

She ducked the fist, feeling the air from its passing rustle her hair.

The zombie's other hand struck out.

The blade caught her chest, just above the edge of her vest. The blade burned a path from sternum to shoulder. A thin trickle of blood erupted from the scratch.

"Fuck," Zahra snarled. The minor pain already forgotten, she brought her blade up, beneath his arm. Catching his ribs, she sliced his torso. She spun, gaining momentum and slashed again. Iridescent blood glinted off the blade and onto the glittering black asphalt.

The sounds of a scuffle grew louder behind her. She blocked the sounds of fighting out along with the zombies' wails, mourning for the life they had lost. No matter how much she tried to ignore the sounds, they always sent chills down her spine.

She brought her blade perpendicular to his chest. The edge cleaved through bone and skin. Already turning away to avoid the spray of blood, Zahra didn't wait to watch him fall. Not when she heard the all-too-human grunt of a man being punched in the face and the smack of flesh on flesh. Behind her, the body plopped to the ground.

She took a moment to assess the situation. Dashtu battled the last. Several cuts crossed his arms, his chest barely protected by the vest. A rip, but no blood, showed high on the thigh of his jeans. Sweat covered his forehead and glistened on his skin. He had no weapons, nothing concealed on his person. The weight of her knives propelled her forward. If he could manage to grab one of them...

The man needed a weapon. Fighting bare knuckled was damn macho when his life was at stake, and she had no doubts the zombie meant to kill him. It was their nature. Just as killing them was hers.

"Duck!" she yelled, bringing her blade into position.

He did, going low to pummel the beast in the stomach. Damn it, that messed up her position. The zombie wavered back and forth, acting as if it still had to breathe. Zahra struck.

The blade slid into skin and tissue, hitting the spine. The zombie jerked, pulling away, its head teetering precariously on its neck. Blood spurted from the severed artery. Sparkles of green hung in the air, coated the ground and their clothing. Zahra spat the putrid taste from her lips.

"Break its neck," she snarled, fearing her decision to find him had been the wrong one.

Dashtu stared at the stumbling creature before reaching for it, distaste evident in his expression.

"Put it out of its fucking undead misery," she yelled. "Here, I'll do it."

She raised her sword to strike.

At the last minute Dashtu grabbed it. He savagely squeezed the beast's head between his hands. A quick twist and a loud snap reverberated through the air. The zombie hung lifeless between his hands, its feet dangling off the ground. With a scowl, Dashtu flung it away from him.

"You happy?" he questioned.

When she looked up at him, her blade hovered inches from his hands.

Chapter Two

Dashtu looked from the blade to the woman wielding it then back at the weapon. Slowly, so as not to startle her, he pulled his hands back. He hated killing. The mess, the noise, the bodies left behind for someone else to clean up, he hated all of it. However, in these times it was necessary. Too bad someone didn't think about that before the Necromancers became too well established. That certainly wasn't a charitable thought.

"We better get going," he ordered, not liking the idea of Zahra doing all of the killing. She stood barely to the middle of his chest. Had she not been dressed in head-to-toe leather with a katana strapped on her back, he might have called her a precious flower. After watching her fight, she was more like deadly nightshade.

Zahra nodded. She glanced once more at the dead zombie bodies. Her attention lingered a little longer on the one whose neck he had broken than on the others. With a jerk of her head, she led him back down the alleyway they'd been using before the attack.

"Is this a good idea?" Dashtu didn't doubt her tactics. She'd stayed alive this long, and he...well, let's just say he had no fear of death. Where there was one zombie there could easily have been others, more squads, more groups just waiting to pounce on unsuspecting humans. He doubted they had the intelligence to know him as more than just another human.

She grunted in answer, almost as if she dared him to argue with her.

Dashtu battled the grin that curved his lips. The farther away from the dead bodies, the more he could admire her slim form in the tight clothing. Her ass looked like a perfect handful, nicely rounded, unlike the rest of her muscular, angled body. His cock rose, reminding him of the interrupted kiss.

The kiss. After Ulanda's death, a death he had no doubt he had caused, he'd kept to himself. Humans were too fragile, no matter how brave they might be. These Blades, they

thought they were more invincible than most. And yet, like a moth to flame, he kept coming back. He had to, because an angel needed a Blade. They were made to work with him, her yin to his yang. Trying to help, trying to keep the humans from dying off like pitiful cattle sent to slaughter. What the Necromancers thought they could do once the humans died, he didn't know. Had it been up to him, he would think the Necromancers would need the humans. If their zombies killed them all off, not only would the human race die out, but then the battle would be between zombie armies. Eventually, they too, would fall. Being unable to procreate, the zombies needed to be replaced by the humans. Dashtu shook his head as Zahra zigzagged through another alley, making twists and turns.

She darted in and out of shadows. Her lithe movements reminded him of a dancer. Finally, she hauled open a door. "Get in." She jerked her head toward the dim interior.

He did, ducking his head to step beneath the low doorway. She closed and barred the door behind him, automatically reaching for a lantern. A quick strike of a knife to make a spark, and she lit it. The light flickered before roaring to life. With the lantern she lit others, two more, until the single room became illuminated.

Dashtu didn't know what to expect, but this tiny home carved from bits of furniture and two walls stuck between buildings wasn't it. A bed sat pushed up along one corner taking up most of the room. A low table, topped with a blade stand held several knives and a second, blue katana. Clothing, more black leathers, sat neatly stacked on the corner, and on the other a tray held mismatched dinnerware. Light blazed brilliantly inside from the three lanterns, but he saw the door fit tightly and there were no windows. Tight. Claustrophobic. He loved to feel the sun on his face, but for Zahra it probably felt safe.

"Take your vest off." Zahra pulled a box from beneath the table. "I've got to get you cleaned up."

"What about you?" Dashtu slid his arms from the vest. Zahra killed. He wondered if she'd minister to him just as ruthlessly.

She shrugged and pulled out a small, brown bottle. "This'll sting like hell." She removed the cap and the sharp scent of pungent whisky filled the room. Dousing a small rag she reached for him.

Gently, she dabbed the rag against the longest scratch.

Pain burned into his flesh. A sizzling sound filled the air, and Dashtu couldn't suppress a hiss of surprise.

She pulled away. "Sorry." She briefly touched the rag to the wound. This time he was ready. Standing in the middle of her sanctuary, with her focusing intently on his chest had him thinking of things other than wounds. A little lower and she could see another pain she could ease. He slammed the door on that thought. She was a Blade. Eventually she'd die just like Ulanda.

He hated thinking that way. Closing his eyes, he tipped his head back. Let her think he tried to elude the pain. Frankly he ceased caring about it about as soon as she'd tried to clean the wounds. He had a far deeper pain, one that went beyond the physical.

He'd help her. He'd come to that conclusion as soon as she'd sat in the booth and shoved the unordered beer across the table at him. How could he not? With his powers, he could do a lot to help the humans. And he did all that he could. Looking down at her dark hair, the pink tips of her ears peeking from the chopped strands, she looked too vulnerable to be a Blade. The column of her neck called to him. Beneath her nearly translucent skin her pulse throbbed. Her breaths tickled his naked chest.

Reaching for him, she cupped his hip. "Almost done."

He jerked.

"Sorry," she muttered again, her fingers tightening against his jeans with surprising strength. A few inches further and her thumb would brush against his erection. He reached down, intending to circle her impossibly slim wrist with his fingers then stopped. No, he couldn't get involved.

The more she touched him, the more likely it was that he would get involved. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away from his chest. "Zahra, I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You need these cuts cleaned. You don't want them to get infected." She wrenched her wrist away from his grip and went to work again.

Dashtu grabbed both of her hands. "Zahra, stop!" He set her away from him, placing her at arm's length. "I'm a half-angel. Worry about yourself."

She glanced at her chest, his attention naturally following. A long, angry cut traced a path just above her breast.

"I think you should tend to your own wounds, I'm fine." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I've had worse. I can take care of myself." She set the rag on the table. "It's you I'm concerned about." She surveyed his chest. He knew people mistook his lack of scars as a lack of experience. In fact, Ulanda had joked that he'd left the scars for vanity's sake, so he'd look like a tough guy. She hadn't been far off the mark.

"I can heal myself." He hated revealing having anything beyond normal human abilities, though she already knew he had some extra abilities, had even mentioned his healing powers in the bar. Except, if she did then why was she so determined to clean his wounds? The idea that she might have sought him out based on partial truths made his stomach churn. Who had sent her after him? And why?

"Really?" Her eyes grew wide and she picked up the rag, folding it over and over again. "You sure?"

"I don't like to talk about it, okay?" He let his arms fall to his sides. Best give her a demonstration and maybe she'd let him go. Using his powers inside the closed confines of

her room created an intimacy he didn't want. Dashtu let his breathing deepen. It slowed, his consciousness moving into an altered state. The world faded away as he went inside his body.

He heard only the sounds of their breathing. He searched along his body, channeling energy from the ether to make flesh and skin new again. In his mind, he knit the torn edges of the wound together, smoothing down through the layers until it was as if it had never happened.

His heartbeat sped with the work. Though his breathing remained slow, deep, it always felt as if his heart were trying to rattle out of his chest. His skin tingled. From the roots of his hair down his body, all the way to his feet, his body vibrated. Energies. Harmonics. He knew gurus who would try and explain it to him, even as he knew there were no answers.

As soon as he verified his body had returned to normal, Dashtu opened his eyes. Air jerked into his lungs, his heart hammering. He panted. Sweat burst on his skin, the energy still in his body seeking an outlet. In his haste, he'd forgotten to ground. "Damn it," he muttered.

"What is it?" Zahra hurried to his side. She flattened her hands on his chest, fingers searching over skin to find any trace of his wounds. "Amazing," she breathed. Her moist breath slid over him.

His cock jerked to life. It surged against the placket of his jeans. With her muscled body pressed against him, he struggled to think of her as anything more than a desirable woman. Her work as a fighter, her ability to kill, none of it mattered so long as she kept her slender fingers on him. She traced the lower edge of his pectoral, her lips hovering over his nipple.

"I can't believe it." She looked up at him.

A glib response tumbled to his lips, quickly silenced. "It's what I am." He stepped away, the backs of his legs bumping against the bed. He lingered there, let the fantasy of her tumbling him to the threadbare blankets play through his mind. His body begged for release, his traitorous organ reminding him exactly how long it'd been since he'd had sex.

Her fingers stilled. Errant strands of her hair caressed his skin.

He shivered.

"Zahra," he said, part invitation, part warning.

This time, she moved away. "Sorry. You probably don't want to be looked at like you're a freak." She reached for the rag, twisting it in her grip.

He sensed there was more behind her words than she wanted to let on and wisely said nothing.

"So why did the big guy want you? He looked like he worked for the Necromancer to me."

Thankful for the change in topic, Dashtu moved away from the bed. "Sit."

She dropped to the floor instead. "Don't like to get the bed all dirty." She grinned.

Well, there was dirty and then there was dirty. He pulled his wayward thoughts back in line. "He was. Lieutenant. Answers to the Necro himself."

"What did he want with you?" Her eyebrow arched. "Me, I could see. But you? From what I've gathered you've made yourself scarce lately. You haven't been the thorn in the Necromancer's side that I have."

"True. They want me to go work for them. They think I have some sort of sway over the humans because of my parentage."

"They know and they still want you?" Zahra shook her head. "I've heard of crazier things I guess."

Her incredulous tone amused him. "Just because I'm half-angel? Not all the angels were good guys, if you remember correctly." *And not all of them stayed in heaven either.*

She arched an eyebrow at him. "You're saying there are more of you? That's not what my intelligence said." Turning away, she heard the rasp of a zipper as she opened her vest.

Dashtu cleared his throat.

"What? Afraid of a naked woman?" She let the vest fall from her shoulders. Looking over the shoulder, she burned him with her gaze. It lingered on his chest, on his abs, on the growing bulge behind his zipper. "I wouldn't think the great Dashtu was afraid of anything. I've been looking for you, you know?"

He knew. "Turn around," he said, the edge of her breast providing a tantalizing glimpse of pale, creamy flesh. Her short hair bared her neck, the vulnerable nape just begging to be kissed. The line of her spine descended to twin dimples just above her delectable buttocks. Smooth and muscled, she presented a vision of perfect female warrior power.

She dabbed the rag across her wounds. No sounds of pain crossed her lips, no lines bracketed her eyes. Maybe for full humans, the whisky didn't sting as badly. After all, he wasn't human and hard liquor was forbidden for his kind. He guessed he should be thankful she didn't smoke, though he didn't know many people who'd honed their bodies into weapons who would pollute them like that.

He watched her gingerly minister to her large scratch. His healing ability hammered at him. Just a little expenditure of power and she wouldn't have to deal with her injuries.

"I can help you with those," he said.

"I'm fine." Her clipped words echoed.

"No, you're not. You're hurt. And you need to be at your best to fight the zombies." He focused on her mission, her work as a Blade, not wanting to contemplate the fact that he didn't want to see her flesh marred by even the slightest mark.

He stopped behind her. His height gave him a clear line of sight to the tops of her breasts. Her nipples jutted into the air, almost as if they wanted him to touch them. "Zahra," he whispered, dipping his head to draw her scent into his nose. Sweat, exertion, a calling, one whiff of her unique aroma and he sensed her soul.

“Dashtu.” The rag stilled against her chest, one end trailing over her left nipple. Her hand fell to her stomach, flattening just above the waistband of her leather pants.

He stepped closer. The hilt of a knife tucked into the small of her back pressed into him with the reminder that she killed for a living. “Let me heal you, please.”

A shudder spiraled through her stiff frame. Every muscle in her body drawn tight, she pressed her lips together. “I can take care of myself.”

It was her motto, her creed. Something she lived by and something she’d die by.

“I know you can.” He covered her hand with his. “Let me do this for you.”

She sighed. She sagged against him, just the slightest relaxing of her muscles. “Not until you tell me why you were so damn hard to find.” She stiffened again and stepped forward, putting precious inches between them. “I need to know and don’t give me that crap about the other fighter dying.”

“Ulanda. Her name was Ulanda. And she wasn’t just a fighter, she was a Blade.” He slid his hand to her shoulder, needing the contact of flesh against flesh. “Do you know how hard it is when you’ve seen what I’ve seen? Fucking nothing I could do would stop it.” He clenched his jaw so hard a muscle jumped. “I tried. I did what I could, still do, damn it. I won’t have you thinking I’m a coward.”

“Fighter. Blade. Doesn’t matter, does it?”

“It matters. Blades were meant to work with half-angels like myself. Almost as if our skills complement one another. You have senses regular humans don’t have, right?”

She nodded.

“You’re a Blade, and that means you’re a lot more than a zombie killer.”

“I know.” Her soft revelation tightened his cock. “My mentor told me about them, though not much.”

“Well then, what do you think?”

“I think.” She turned to face him, a softness in her expression for the first time. Reaching up, she cupped his smooth cheek. Her thumb brushed across his lower lip, her touch more gentle than he deserved. “I think you’re a horribly tortured man, Dashtu. I think you’re harder on yourself than you deserve. And I think, if you work with me, that you’ll be amazed how much good we can do.” Rising on tiptoe, she brushed her lips against his.

He closed his eyes, allowing himself for a moment to sink into her warmth, her hope. God, it had been so long since he’d felt hope.

She pulled quickly away, her lips parted.

“How do you know I’ll make a difference?” Her belief in him seemed larger than life. “I may be part angel, but I’m not God.”

“I didn’t expect you to be.” Heedless of her nudity, she set the rag on the table.

He took it as a sign of her acquiescence and let his healing ability flare. Keeping it in check, he wondered if she'd explain further. Silence stretched between them, rife with choices. Kiss her. Fuck her. Heal her. Walk away. He could do any of those things, and yet, he found at this moment, her sheer presence presented him from doing any of them. "What did you expect?" He struggled to keep his attention from wandering down to her small, high breasts. They'd barely fill his hands. Ulanda had been taller, broader in the hips and bigger in the chest, and yet, he suspected sex with Zahra would be ten times better.

"I don't know." Her simple honesty floored him. "I just hoped you'd help." She flashed him a smile. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish cleaning my wounds then we can talk about other things." She reached for that damn rag again.

He stopped her, drawing her fist tight against his chest. "I can heal you, Zahra. Let me. There's no need for you to fight wounded when you don't have to." Though he told her nothing more than he'd already said, he suspected this time, she heard.

Her chin dropped to her chest. "All right."

He released his breath, not even aware he'd been holding it. "Thank you." Cupping her chin, he tilted her face so he could look into her eyes. "This will go easier if you're on the bed."

"I never thought you'd ask." Uncurling her fingers, she flattened her palm against his pectoral. Her digits lingered, the soft touch promising something more.

He groaned as she turned from him and went to the bed. She stretched out, seeming to take delight in arching her back as she settled herself. Hundreds of women in his long, long life, and none had moved him quite like her. When she finally stopped moving, he stepped forward. At the edge of the bed, he halted. He lifted his hands, palms down, and hovered them over her.

Think only of healing. Don't think about how much you'd like to strip off your clothing and perform a completely different activity. Blades held some kind of allure, a sensual bearing mixed with danger that tightened his balls. Exhaling, he opened himself to the energy.

She gasped as a blue light surrounded his hands. "That wasn't there before."

"It was inside me. It's different when I heal another person." He rested his hands on her abdomen, using the unblemished skin as a base from which to start.

"And now, it'll be in me. It's a start." Letting her eyelids drift closed, she fell silent.

Thank God for small favors. He, too, closed his eyes. The power unfurled from him, coiling in her stomach before sliding down limbs and through her torso to test the strength and health of skin and muscle. In her thighs, the energy rejoiced to find strong tissues. Her honed body made his explorations easy, from the curve of her calf to the five dainty toes on each foot. In his mind, he cupped them, stroked them, turning her ankle from side to side to check for the slightest stress. He found none.

Her breathing hitched as his explorations took him past her knees. He lingered, mentally placing a kiss across the backs.

Her thighs fell open.

He smelled her cream. The musky odor of an aroused woman filled him. More than healing would happen in this bed. His skin tingled from the force of the energy surging through him. His shaft hardened. He strained toward her, trying not to force himself, yet needing to be closer.

A strained quadriceps muscle pulled his attention away from his own needs. There, something to heal. He focused his energy, smoothing it with long strokes designed to penetrate to the deepest layers of muscle. As he worked the fibers knitted back together, not merely content to fix the tear, but making it stronger than it had been before.

When he was satisfied with the repair, he forced the energy along the outside of her hips in an attempt to avoid more intimate contact. The energy dipped across her pelvis, seeking out her heat. Her life force vibrated, her personal power mingling with his.

A soft mewl passed her lips.

Dashtu stilled his exploration. His hands trembled. Move the power north and he encountered her breasts. Keep his healing where it was and her pussy made it difficult not to fill her with more than his energy.

"Dashtu?" Her soft question distracted him from his dangerous thoughts.

"Just relax," he crooned. Maybe if he followed his own advice they could get through what should have been a simple healing. Except with Zahra he doubted anything was simple.

A brush of power against her cunt sent shivers through both of them. Then, he focused on her injuries. The energy slid just beneath her skin, searching along every rib for the smallest wound. Not until the scratch on her chest did he encounter anything, and immediately he went to work. Though his eyes were closed, in his mind he saw flesh drawing together. The slash grew smaller then vanished altogether as the body returned to its original, unblemished state.

Other smaller scratches kept him occupied, a few old wounds that surely must have bothered her though she said nothing. A fine sheen of sweat covered his brow. He drew on his strength to pour healing into her.

She cried out. Her back bowed off the bed. She slumped down, panting.

"I burn. I burn." She fisted her hands in the blanket, her head thrashing back and forth.

Shit. He'd forgotten. Slowly, not wanting to cause her any more distress, he withdrew. Somehow, her abilities as a Blade made her feel so much more than a human. Whatever skills, whatever abilities she'd gained also provided increased sensitivity. And he'd forgotten.

Her eyes snapped open. "Don't stop," she growled. Finger by finger, she uncurled her fists from the blanket. Her hands slapped against the leather of her pants, working the buttons, and before he could say anything, she slid them over her hips.

“Zahra, I’m not finished.” He kept contact, his energy still beneath her skin. He was at her neck, almost afraid to finish the last sweep across her face and skull. “We need to complete this.”

“Yeah, we do.” She sat up and untied her laces. Kicking her boots onto the floor, she peeled her pants down over her legs. “We need to finish this.” She let her thighs part, and although he tried to focus above her navel, he found his attention drawn to her damp curls.

“Not that way. Calm down, Zahra. You’re not helping.”

“And damn it, neither are you!”

He curled his fingers into her shoulders, pressing her into the bed. “Let me finish,” he growled.

She snarled.

Damn if she wouldn’t sit still long enough for him to finish then he’d make her. Forcing his energy through her he cupped her chin, held her immobile as he washed his power through her.

Zahra screamed.

Chapter Three

Zahra struggled to control the raging tide of power just beneath her skin. Eyes closed, mouth open, the primal sounds emerging from her throat couldn't belong to her. She thrashed on the bed. Wherever Dashtu's power touched, it burned, but it burned like sinking into a steaming hot tub after a long workout, or your lover dripping candle wax on your heated skin during sex. Her pussy clenched, fisting around the empty space as if it could hold something, anything inside her.

His energy rummaged around in her mind, probing for weak places. *Get out of my head.* Her mental screams did no good. Still, he remained, a brilliant blue sphere of power sliding through her cranium. He touched the seat of her abilities. *No!* Her mind attempted to shove him away from her most sensitive memories. Erecting walls, she battled him at every turn.

Her mind fought a war deep inside she knew she wouldn't win. He found a recently healed cut along her jaw, his essence stopping long enough to fully repair the damage. She had him! Rushing toward where she sensed his presence, she built walls, keeping him imprisoned behind her own mental blocks. If he touched her Blade powers, she feared he might take them away. Her fears echoed in her mind, kept her fighting long after he'd ceased struggling.

Vaguely, she became aware of hands caressing her neck, her shoulders, of a crooning voice in the distance telling her it was over. She was healed.

Zahra blinked her eyes. Opening them slowly, she stared at the man leaning over her. Dashtu sat on the edge of the bed, his large frame taking up nearly all the room. He stroked her arms with long, sweeping strokes.

"It's all right. I'm finished now," he crooned to her. His low voice swept across her senses, instantly relaxing her.

She slumped against the bed. "I'm fine," she muttered, though speaking the words taxed her senses. She still felt him inside her. Behind her eyes, she sensed a pulsing blue light, too close for comfort. "Get out of my head."

With a snap, he left.

"Thank you." She lifted her arm. All the tiny aches and pains she'd carried with her for months were gone. She gasped. "Oh my God! Thank you." She flung herself into his arms, squeezing him in a hug.

Slowly, reluctantly, his arms closed around her. "You're welcome," he breathed against her skin.

Once in his arms, her reservations about his powers fled. Instead, his energy surrounded her, wrapping her in his scent, his being. With her eyes closed, she pressed her cheek against his chest, and she swore she saw blue light enveloping her in a warm cocoon. She breathed deeply, surprisingly uncertain in her actions. Her naked chest pressed against his.

His hard planes provided a place for her to rest, his chin against her hair a comforting gesture. She curled her fingers into his deltoids. Had he been any other man she'd have him flat on his back and buried inside her by now. With Dashtu, it was different. Not his angelic nature though it made her think about things like heaven and sin that she'd pushed out of her mind long ago.

"You wouldn't have taken my powers away would you?" Her words slithered across his skin, her worry a palatable essence around her.

"Why would you think that?" He pushed her away from him long enough to look into her eyes. "Healing doesn't change anything about you." Before she could answer he pulled her against his chest. He rubbed her back with long strokes of his hand, his fingers lingering along the dimples in her lower back. He brushed the top of her buttocks.

"Because of what happened." Her hands slid lower, fingers dipping beneath his jeans to brush the tops of his buttocks. Damn, he had a hard ass, and she couldn't resist curling her fingers into it.

"I don't want to talk about the past right now." He swept his hands along her sides, brushing the edges of her breasts.

"No, no talking." Turning her head, she pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his pectoral. His energy lingered inside her, turning her cunt wet with need. In the back of her mind, something buzzed. She dismissed it in favor of the hard muscles beneath her searching fingers.

His muscled back provided terrain to be mapped, the line of his spine and flexing muscles inviting hollows and planes. With touch and tongue, she explored him. Each taste, each whisper, provided new experiences, perfectly made for just the two of them. He pushed her back to the bed, and she didn't mind at all when he moved over her.

He stretched out alongside her, most of his body tantalizingly out of reach. Not hers, for he closed his hand over her breast. He massaged the globe, rolling her nipple against his palm. Each caress created an answering pull low in her stomach. Her legs moved restlessly on the bed, her pussy soaking wet.

His reverent touch pulled her into the act, made her painfully aware of every nuance. The bed shifted beneath his weight, the cot-like mattress creaking as he rolled toward her. Closing his hand over the outside of her hip, he leaned down to nuzzle the hollow of her collarbone.

Zahra let her head fall back. His warm breath caressed her skin with moist heat. With licks and nips he kissed a trail to her breast then drew her nipple into his mouth. He sucked softly, savoring her like a fine sweet. He slid his hand beneath her buttocks, rolling her hips against him.

He tormented her, his actions anything but angelic. He'd been in her mind. It felt as if he'd been in her soul too, his actions then far more intimate than any twining of bodies. And still, Zahra wanted him. She whimpered as he increased the suction on her nipple. His silken hair teased her fingers. Tightening her fingers against his scalp she urged him to take her harder, faster.

His thumb brushed her cunt. It slid along her slick labia, never delving near enough to soothe the ache in her clitoris. She bit back hungry moans, the urge to grab Dashtu by the shoulders and haul him over her nearly overwhelming. Why wouldn't he give her the release she wanted?

Because it wasn't in his nature. And she suspected if she forced the issue, he wouldn't give her anything. Her position made it awkward to stroke his cock, though his jeans must be painfully tight by now. She lifted her hips in a futile attempt to coax his fingers deeper into her pussy.

He retreated.

Zahra reared from the bed. She curled her fingers around his biceps, noting the hard muscles. "Fuck me, damn it," she growled. She dropped her other hand to his jeans and cupped him through the denim. His shaft filled her palm. She stroked it, once, twice then maneuvered the button open one-handed. A gentle tug of the zipper had him free and his cock surging through the opening.

She marveled at his erection. Thick and long, it promised pleasures of truly angelic proportions. She reached for it, curling her fingers around the girth. They barely met and her channel pulsed just thinking about it deep inside her. She rubbed her thumb across the end. A drop of fluid emerged. Wiping it away, she brought her fingers to her lips. A swipe of her tongue captured the salty essence. She made a show of swallowing it.

Dashtu groaned. "Don't." To his credit he didn't reach for her. Didn't grab her wrists or try to stop her stroking.

"Don't what?" She twisted her hips to drive his finger deeper. The tip brushed against her clit. Gasping, she undulated against his digit. "Please. I need you -- I need *this* inside me." She squeezed the base of his shaft.

Dashtu leaned over her. "I wanted to let you savor the energy," he whispered.

"Later. I'll savor it later." If they worked together, no doubt he'd be healing her quite often. They'd have other chances and right now if he didn't fuck her she'd die. Pulling him down on top of her, she spread her legs.

He speared her with his fingers, curling them to touch her G-spot on every stroke.

She lifted her head just far enough to kiss him again. Taking the lead, she brushed her tongue against his lower lip. At her gentle query, he opened his mouth, and she used her tongue to tell him exactly what she wanted. Her rocking hips forced his fingers deeper inside her. He added a third, and yet, it wasn't enough. Her breasts brushed against his smooth chest, the contrast of hard and soft making her want him even more.

The need to crawl on top of him, bury him inside her and never let go hummed just beneath her skin. His energy lingered, blue-tinged pulses just behind her eyes and deep in her womb. Wrapping herself around him, she forced the kiss deeper. The need for air forgotten, she kissed him as if joining their mouths could join their bodies.

His thumb swirled around her clit. So wet, so swollen, the sensitive organ hurt to touch, but oh, it hurt so good.

Dashtu pushed her back to the mattress.

"Yes," she whispered as he stood long enough to shed boots and jeans. Then he stood before her, beautifully, gloriously naked. She drank in the sight, his form eclipsing that of the most hardened warriors. Feathering her fingers down between her breasts and over her navel, she parted her thighs. "Fuck me, Dashtu."

She stroked her pussy, unable to withstand the temptation of so much sensitive, wet flesh. She loved her clit, so engorged with blood even the slightest touch had her pumping her hips and seeking penetration. Her gray eyes were half-lidded, her nostrils flaring as she masturbated while he watched. Bending her knees, she let her thighs fall to the side, giving him a greater view. Two fingers in her slit, the heel of her hand against her clitoris, she worked her pussy as she had so many times when a fight had left her revved up with no outlet for the energy.

"Come for me, Zahra." Dashtu's soft order heightened her pleasure.

She tried to stave off her release. The idea of orgasming at his command made her want to hold out even longer. Slowing the thrusts of her fingers, she held herself at the peak, muscles tightening, the all-too-familiar tingling in her lower back beginning. Every muscle held taut with anticipation, she stroked her clit one final time.

She came hard and fast, body strung tight, eyes squeezed closed as wave after wave of her orgasm pounded through her. Her panting breaths echoed in the small room. Over them,

she swore she heard Dashtu's low groan. She opened her eyes to find him standing there, staring at her cunt, his fingers tight around the base of his cock. She pulled her fingers from her pussy with a wet sound and used the glistening digits to beckon him to the bed. "Your turn," she gasped.

He muttered something that sounded like "Thank God," his knee already on the bed. The mattress dipped beneath his weight and then he was there, between her legs, his cock brushing against her folds. Her thighs wrapped around his hips, heels digging into his buttocks. A single thrust of his hips sheathed him inside her, and Zahra screamed with the pleasure.

His residual power inside her body clicked into place like a completed circuit. With his weight braced on his arms, he didn't crush her. Zahra wanted to be crushed, wanted to feel the power in his body pinning her to the mattress. She clung to him, tucking her forehead against his sternum, her lips working on his salty flesh.

As he pulled out, a part of her suspected that this was more than a simple joining. She shoved the thought aside and focused on the exquisite pleasure of his cock filling her, stretching her. The tip of his cock bumped against her cervix. She welcomed the slight pain, for it added to her pleasure. Her nails curved into his back, the crescent indentions welling with slick blood. The coppery scent mingled with the thick aroma of sex. Adrenaline and fear. Fight and fuck. The primal impulses darted through her, punctuated by the slap of flesh against flesh.

Dashtu surrounded her. He lowered his weight onto his elbows. Fingers tangled in her hair, he tucked her underneath him. Zahra burrowed against him, trying to get him deeper inside her. Each thrust pulled them closer together, each withdrawal creating a void that only he could fill. His chest muffled the tiny, whimpering cries emerging from her throat.

She came again, tiny explosions darting along the length of her spine. She open-mouth kissed his chest in an attempt to restrain her scream of pleasure. Tightening around him, she rode the orgasm. Still, he fucked her. His thrusts grew harder, deeper, his moans lower.

In her arms, he stiffened. His entire body went rigid. For a long moment he hung there, suspended between need and release. Then with a guttural cry, he came. Hot spurts of seed filled her, the warm rush reminding her they hadn't done anything about protection. Shit! Too late now, and she hoped whatever changes he'd made to her body hadn't fixed anything that had already been broken.

He hovered over her, breathing heavily. Sweat slicked his skin, and she uncurled her fingers from his back. She hoped he could heal the scratches she'd made on his back and smiled at the memory of their making. He rolled to the side, squeezing between her and the bed. He pulled her into his arms and against his chest.

She snuggled. Her heartbeat slowed and her breathing evened out. Processing what had just happened would take more brain power than she wanted to use, so she simply enjoyed

the moment. The feel of a hard, male body next to hers, his hand lazily sweeping the length of her spine, his partially hard cock pressing against her thigh.

Curled next to him, her mind began to wander. His cryptic answer about why the Necromancer's lieutenant wanted him hovered front and center. She wriggled away afraid she'd be tempted by him once more. The stickiness between her legs reminded her that they hadn't used protection. Damn, she really hoped he hadn't fixed her infertility. Bringing children into this world wouldn't help her, and it wouldn't help the remaining human population. She shivered.

"Cold?" he asked. He fumbled for a blanket.

She rolled to the floor, standing in a smooth motion. She grabbed another rag and cleaned up before pulling on her leather pants and vest. Fully dressed, she faced Dashtu again. He lounged naked on her bed and she made no show of hiding her gaze. "I'm fine. So, tell me again why the Necromancers want you to work for them?"

He sat up, flipping one end of the blanket over him to cover his nudity, and stared at her. "Why is it so important you know? Everybody wants me. Including you."

In more ways than one. But she kept the crude words silent. "It's important, all right?"

He snarled, tossing aside the blanket to dive from the bed and grab his jeans. He pulled them on before shoving his feet into his socks. He donned his boots and tugged on his vest. Fully dressed again, he faced her. "They want me for the same reason you do. They think I can help them."

"Can you?" She knew he could help her. Though he may not be much of a fighter, his healing abilities alone would prove invaluable to her. She didn't know what other kinds of powers he had. He'd spoken about another woman he'd helped, so he knew what he could do for her and to her.

"Yes. I can't heal zombies. They're mutated dead, but I can heal the human officers, and I can heal the Necromancers."

"So they want you just for your healing ability?" If that was the only thing, she doubted they would pursue him as devoutly as she had.

"Let's just say I have other skills that might be useful to either side." He dodged her question.

She let him. Fighting now, especially on the heels of the fantastic sex they'd just shared, wouldn't be productive. "Then I think you should do it. The more we learn about them the better we can fight them." She grinned in spite of the betrayal stabbing through her. Of course he wouldn't want to tell her everything. They'd known each other less than a day. She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand.

"I won't get another Blade killed." Stepping forward, he reached out and caressed her chin with his knuckles.

Zahra flinched away. His belief that she couldn't take care of herself, especially after the fight they'd just been in was growing tiresome. "Puh-lease. You saw me fight. You know I can hold my own."

"So could Ulanda." He fell silent.

Zahra decided not to press him on the issue of her safety or lack thereof. "I still think you should go. If I weren't in the picture would you still go?"

His nod provided all the answer she needed.

"Then go. I'll still be here doing what I do. Perhaps you'll come back with some useful information." *Perhaps you won't and then I'll be glad I hadn't given you any more than my body.* She shrugged off the sadness that seized her at the thought of his not returning.

"I'll return when I can." Reaching for her, he caressed her cheek once more then hurried out the door.

She watched him leave, hoping she'd see him return. Her hand fell involuntarily to her womb. She curled her fingers against the skin, feeling her pulse beat against her palm. The door closed with a muted click. Staring at the blank square of wood, she reached out and closed her fingers around the knob. Every cell in her body screamed to go after him. She wouldn't. Not tonight.

Taking a deep breath she sagged against the cool surface. Resting her forehead against it she wracked her brain to try and find out who she could speak with. She'd used Holt as a source of information in the past. She'd go to him.

Straightening up, she arranged her vest, finding small red marks above the swell of her breast where the wound had once been. She rubbed them, unsure whether the healing or Dashtu's kisses caused them. She pulled her fingers away and sighed. She'd go talk to Holt. Then, she'd decide what to do next. She opened the door then scurried into the dark night.

She found Holt in his usual place beneath one of the old interstate bridges. A dog, his mottled brown and black coat, sat hunched next to Holt's feet. Tufts of hair fell into the dog's eyes, giving him an even more decrepit look. Holt grinned at her. One grimy hand clad in fingerless gloves held out a beat up tin can.

"Alms for the poor." He cackled at his own joke.

"Put it on my tab." Zahra squatted in front of him. Holt didn't look any better than his dog. Clad in an old overcoat tied around him with a bit of twine, boots that held more holes than a strainer, and a mud-colored knit cap pulled down over his ears, he looked like the homeless person he sometimes masqueraded as. "So what do you know about the Necros wanting a certain male I found?"

To his credit, Holt didn't blink. She couldn't guess his age. In some guises he looked barely twenty, in others older than Spika. "What do you think they want with powerful people? You know better than to ask that kind of question."

She stiffened at the rebuke in his words. Holt had been her informant for the last few years. "But he's an angel?" She leaned forward.

The dog growled.

Holt soothed the beast with a pat on the head. "You think just because they do evil things they won't corrupt the powers of good. I can't tell you what Dashtu's powers are. If he hasn't confided in you..." His words trailed off as he gave an audible sniff. "You've fucked him, haven't you?"

Zahra didn't need to answer for heat crept over her cheeks and she knew Holt had seen.

"Damn it, Zahra, that's not how you go about getting someone like him to help your cause. You thought with your pussy and not your head." Holt rose to his feet in a rustle of dirt and cloth. He paced in front of the overturned barrel that served as his bench. Back and forth, the ragged hem of his overcoat fluttering behind him, he stormed. The dog growled then fell into place beside him, turning to glare at her.

Zahra straightened and stepped back. "He healed me and the energy..."

Holt turned to glare at her. "He healed you?"

She nodded slowly, not quite sure if he was angry at her or at Dashtu for their actions. "Yeah. Is that a bad thing?" She thought of how she'd feared him getting to the source of her powers. Everything she'd gained, every fighting move, every ounce of strength, she had worked for it. Maybe things came a little easier for her, but as far as she knew she was still human. At least Spika hadn't told her any differently. "It didn't change me, did it?"

"Not in any way that you'd care about, no. You're still a Blade. He didn't repair things that never worked to begin with, though he probably knew that when the two of you had sex. Half-angels don't heal easily. If he did so, it wasn't just because you were a pretty face." Holt stopped his pacing. "I won't reveal all of Dashtu's powers to you, but I will tell you that the Necros are moving on something big. The one here in Neukacee, and I've heard rumors from out-city too. Something's happening, something big, and if we have any chance at stopping it, it's going to be right here. You sent Dashtu to them, didn't you?"

Zahra nodded, the sinking feeling in her stomach growing by the minute. It dawned on her that Holt had used Dashtu's name, yet he'd never given it to her before now. They had known each other. "You sent me across Neukacee and you knew who Dashtu was?"

"You're a smart girl. And you're a Blade. I'm sure you figured something out." He resumed his seat on the barrel and stared at her. "I can't give you everything, honey. That was the deal I made with Spika."

Her jaw dropped open. She gasped for air. Trying to wrap her mind around the concept of Holt knowing her mentor made her head ache. And he'd called her a Blade, too, yet she'd never told him anything. She pressed her fingers to her temple, willing the pain away. Drawing a deep breath, she turned away. "If I want the information about whatever's

happening I have to get it from Dashtu, that's what you're saying? You never really tell me anything do you?" She started to walk away. "The next time I see him, I'll ask."

Holt's chuckle sounded like the rasping cry of a hoarse crow. "If you see him, honey, and if he doesn't try to kill you. You want to know what the Necros want with him? They'll take anything that will take your ass out." She swore his mocking laughter followed her all the way back home. Yeah, that was typical Holt. Give her hints and shadows, then let her wade into her own damn mess.

Chapter Four

Dashtu kept to the shadows as he made his way across the ruins of what once had been a bustling town. Memories superimposed over the reality filled him with the pangs of loss. The suburban hospital once served several thousand people. Now, the burned-out shells of homes and businesses, and a perimeter fence marked with razor wire, demarcated the Necros' territory and that formerly belonging to the humans. He slid through the silent night, jumping from shadow to shadow. If the humans were smart, they stayed far away from this place.

He saw his first zombie several blocks away. The hospital rose in the background, dark and imposing. Moonlight glinted off the wire fence surrounding the compound the Necromancers had created for themselves. The creature didn't look in his direction, merely continued on the path down the middle of what had once been a main street. As soon as it was gone from view, Dashtu ran across the street and ducked into another alley.

Three blocks later, his luck ran out. A pair of zombies stood at the end of the alley. He charged. That which could be used to heal could also harm. He grabbed the first one on either side of its head. Glowing green eyes bored into his blue ones, the phenomenal stench overwhelming. Dashtu forced his power into the creature's brain, a quick stab of healing. The zombie's whining cry escalated, its fetid breath washing over Dashtu. Its comrade reached for him, pulling on his arm.

Still, Dashtu fed his power into the beast. One more minute and the creature went limp in his arms. Dashtu forced him aside. Severing the head or turning the brain to mush, either way it killed a zombie. He whirled on his opponent.

The zombie stumbled back, instinctively moving out of harm's way.

Dashtu lunged. He grabbed the zombie by the arm, pulling him back into the alley. Spinning it against the wall, he jammed a knee into its lower back to keep it immobile. Just like its partner, he boxed its ears, sending his healing energy deep into the beast's cranium.

Its inhuman wails echoed in the close confines of the alley. Dashtu blocked out the noise. He focused on only one thing -- sending the energy into the creature's brain. The beast began to writhe. From beneath Dashtu's fingers, smoke rolled. The cries faded into blessed silence and Dashtu let the zombie crumple to the ground.

"Halt!" A male voice echoed down the alley.

Dashtu whirled to face a young human soldier. Not as well-placed in the Necromancer's hierarchy as the big guy at Barg's, the man looked to be barely first, maybe second level. They were all called lieutenants in the Necros' army.

"Lieutenant. I'm so glad I found you." Dashtu stepped away from the fallen zombie to stand in the middle of the alley. He left his hands loose at his sides, palms open, wanting to portray the image he wasn't a threat. Whether they believed it or not, knowing his reputation, he didn't know.

The soldier leveled a rifle at him. "Stay where you are."

"As you wish." Dashtu forced an easy smile to his lips. "If you'll check with your superiors you'll find that they're looking for me. In fact, they want me to work for you. I'm just here to check myself in."

The man glanced at the two zombies. "You don't act like you want to join us."

"Hey, they attacked me. A man can defend his life, right?" He held out his hand, as if wanting to shake.

"Don't move!" The barrel of the gun wavered.

"Not moving. Check with your superior officers. Tell them Dashtu wants to see them. I think they'll be a bit more hospitable." Dashtu nodded toward the walkie-talkie that the man held. The older model crackled, muffled orders and locations coming over the airwaves.

The young soldier stared at Dashtu for a moment longer. Lifting the device to his lips, he waited for a lull in the conversation. "Got a man here. Calls himself Dashtu. Says you want to see him." He drawled out the words into a mocking tone.

A brisk response came through the walkie-talkie.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir." The soldier straightened up and clipped the communications device back on his belt. "You're to follow me." The soldier fastened his rifle into a sling. With a flick of his wrist, he urged Dashtu forward.

He glanced at the eastern horizon as the soldier led them through the streets on a direct path to the old hospital. Streaks of pink and orange heralded the coming dawn. As they neared the building, Dashtu saw electric light pouring out of several of the windows. Interesting... The last he'd heard the Necros were still trying to get the old power plant back up and running. Apparently he'd gotten some bad information. Too late to back out now. He

sent a silent prayer that Zahra remained safe. He doubted she stayed behind after he left. Instead, he figured she took a little postcoital tension out on the zombies. He just hoped she had made it back to her room all right.

Then, he couldn't think about her at all, for a large chain-link gate rolled back to admit him and the little soldier. They stopped at the front door.

Two guards holding rifles across their chests stood before the revolving door. They wore the same uniform of generic green camouflage and a black beret and boots that the young officer had.

"This is Dashtu?" one of the guards asked.

The young man saluted the door guard and stepped forward. "Yes, sir. I found him while out on patrol."

"You found him." A smirk crossed the man's face. "You search him for weapons?"

"He wasn't using any weapons."

"That's not what I asked, soldier. Did you search him for weapons?" The guard stepped forward, towering over the young man by a good six inches.

"No, sir." The officer seemed to shrink into himself.

"First levels. They won't survive their first year. Go on. We'll take care of it," the guard barked. He moved in front of Dashtu, surprisingly light on his feet. His companion remained at the door, seemingly oblivious to what was happening. "Against the door," he barked.

Dashtu complied. He flattened his hands against the glass door and spread his legs.

The guard kicked his heels even farther apart. He shoved Dashtu against the glass so hard his lips and nose left a smear on the pristine surface. Some minion would have to clean it off and for a moment, Dashtu wondered if the guard would get in trouble. After a rough pat-down, the guard pulled him away.

"All right, you're clean. Who sent you?" The guard stepped into place once more. His companion didn't even blink.

Dashtu didn't have a name, at least not one given to him willingly. "Don't know. Big guy. Bald. Dressed all in black. He came into Barg's looking for me. Told me the Necro wanted me to come work for him." He kept his stance loose, muscles ready for whatever the guard threw at him.

"If you're going to work for them, you got to treat them with respect." He stepped aside so Dashtu could pass through the revolving door. "Go inside. First desk you come to, she'll give you instructions."

Dashtu didn't bother to thank the man. He was just doing his job, and he had been a bit rough with the search. He stepped through the revolving door. It creaked as it turned on its spindle, the rubber seals chewed along the bottom of the door. Dashtu didn't look back, though he wondered how many people actually left the building.

The interior of the hospital hadn't changed though the carpet had been worn through and the wallpaper showed signs of repairs and peeling. Large pale spaces on the walls marked where pictures had hung. Dust collected on venting and cobwebs grew in the corners. He hoped the floors where the actual zombies were made were kept better. Otherwise it wasn't a surprise why some zombies came out crazy.

Following the guard's instructions he found the first desk. At one time it would have held the information desk. Now, a bored looking young woman sat behind the desk filing her nails. With her hair pulled back in a chignon and more sparkling danglies than a disco ball, she looked better suited to the stage than to a Necromancer's compound. She turned her attention to him, batting her heavily made-up eyes at him. "How can I help *you*?"

He stared at her for a moment wondering just how candid to be. "The guards told me to come here and said that you'd give me instructions for where the new applicants go."

She looked him over. "Leadership material, right?" She grinned and licked her lips.

In his mind, he compared her to Zahra and the woman sitting before him fell quite short. "Yeah," he replied. She wouldn't get a piece of him, not if he had anything to say about it.

The desk sat at the junction of several hallways. To his right, he heard the muffled sounds of booted feet. Glancing in that direction, he watched as another lieutenant, again looking far too young to be an officer, led a string of zombies down the hall. Toward the end he saw a tall, willowy woman, her chocolate skin striking. She had a shorn head, and though she never glanced in his direction, she had the regal bearing of someone comfortable with her body and her skills.

His heart tightened. Ulanda?

The lieutenant barked an order and his squad jogged down the hall. In an instant, it stood as empty as it had before. The zombie he'd seen couldn't have been Ulanda. No, she'd died. He'd watched her fall, held her lifeless body in his arms. Blinking his eyes, he turned back to the receptionist, suddenly aware she'd been speaking to him.

"...straight down this hall and take the stairs up to the third floor. You'll see another desk like this one on the right. She'll get you started in basics. Welcome to the team." The smile she flashed promised him a more personal welcome just as soon as she could.

"Thank you," he said, forcibly keeping his abilities under wraps. Seeing the naked lust in her eyes made him certain he did not want to look into her mind. He hurried away, hoping he looked like an eager recruit.

Easily he found the stairs and jogged up the two flights to the third floor. Just as she'd explained, the desk was easily found and the woman sent him down the hall to what once had been a surgery recovery area. There he was led to a bay with a gurney, stripped, put through a series of medical tests, all of which thankfully showed him well within human parameters. Satisfied with his physical health, a young man dressed in a military uniform led

him down another hallway to a hall marked with a faded sign that read Intensive Care Unit. He was led through a sliding glass door to a room.

"These are your quarters. Stay here. An officer will come and give you orders," the young man said before turning on his heel and leaving. He pulled the door closed behind him. The snick of a lock echoed.

No sooner had the man left then Dashtu inspected the drawers and wardrobe. Even the cupboards above the sink were bare. With the exception of a small cupboard in the bathroom that contained a few small squares of cloth and extra bars of soap. His search of the room complete, Dashtu lounged on the bed. Dust covered the television situated on a shelf above the door. The curtains were pulled back, his east-facing window showing the impending sunrise.

The lock clicked and a burly man slid open the glass door. It slammed into its housing, rattling enough to shake the entire glass wall. "On your feet," the man yelled.

Dashtu snapped to attention like the green recruit he was supposed to be.

Unlike the others Dashtu had seen, this man wore a black shirt with black jeans tucked into black jungle boots. "You will be within these walls by or before sunup. The doors lock and then, soldier, you will not be allowed inside. You will stay in this room unless told otherwise. If you will not stay in your room, you will be locked in it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Dashtu saluted sharply.

"Good. We're very glad you're here. We have a very special mission for you. Kill the fighter who calls herself Zahra." The man grinned. "Think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir." Dashtu's stomach plummeted. He kept a blank façade, hoping the officer didn't notice his diminished enthusiasm for the job. "I can do that, sir," he added with a bit of forced glee.

"Very good, soldier. Welcome aboard." Turning on his heel, he went over to the glass door and exited.

The sliding door slammed closed behind him.

Dashtu sank to the bed. He glanced at a small opaque glass square near the ceiling where a camera might have once been. For all he knew it still might be. The dim row of lights, fading now as the new day arrived, testified to the fact that the Necros had more technology than they should. Standing again, he tugged the tattered curtain closed across the glass. He had his mission. Now, to see if he could complete it.

* * * * *

Unable to sleep, Zahra sat cross-legged on the bed, her katana balanced on her knees. Palms together, hands exactly in front of her heart, she breathed deeply. She held the breath to a count of three and then exhaled. Drawing her breath in again, she repeated the meditation Spika had taught her for becoming one with her blade.

It failed.

Her mind raced, following Dashtu on his path through the streets toward the Necro's headquarters. Damn him for going. Damn her for letting him. A soft buzzing filled her head. The more she focused on it, like a raindrop into a puddle it slipped away. Shaking her head, she curled her fingers around her katana's hilt. She swung it before her, wide, sweeping arcs as she leaped from the bed. She fainted to the left and spun to the right. She sheathed the sword, bowing to it before she rose to her feet. She promised herself a catnap then she'd get to work.

An hour later, she did exactly that. Refreshed from her sleep, she began sharpening her blades. She started with the smallest knife, working her way to both of her katanas, she worked until every blade gleamed. Her tools once again razor sharp, she put them aside to work through stretching exercises. The series of movements based on a combination of yoga and tai chi normally helped her to focus. Instead, her mind wandered.

Dashtu needed her.

She didn't know how she came by that information, she just knew it. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he needed her help. Sliding back into her starting position, palms pressed together in front of her heart, feet together reminiscent of mountain pose, she automatically reached over her shoulder for the katana that wasn't there. She lunged across the room to strap on her weapons.

The wailing of zombies sounded close, too close. She stiffened inside her tiny hovel, Dashtu's words haunting her. If he went to the Necromancers he'd have to kill her. And she'd sent him to them.

Closing her eyes, she sent a silent prayer to whoever cared to listen that no one in her small neighborhood would be hurt by her actions. She'd brought the zombies down upon them all. When she opened her eyes, the wails sounded closer. Pulling her katana from the sheath, she held it before her and raced out the door.

It didn't take long for her to find the source of the incursion. People raced down the street, children tucked beneath their arms. They pointed behind them in the direction the wails originated. Darting through the crowd, she followed the sounds.

She found them standing around a deserted open-air market. Awnings flapped in the wind. The zombie wails filled the air, the shifting, lifeless bodies going from stall to stall, overturning tables and goods. She didn't see any lieutenants or Dashtu, just leaderless zombies. In broad daylight.

Leaping over a table, she engaged the first zombie. A swing of her katana cleanly sliced its head from its shoulders. She scrambled into the next stall and slashed down, nearly severing the next zombie's arm at the elbow.

It gave an inhuman shriek, stumbling away. It tumbled into a table, knocking over a display of newly harvested turnips. The vegetables rolled underfoot. She jumped over them,

wrapping her arm around the zombie's neck to bring him to the ground. A quick slash of her knife and it was over. She vaulted to her feet.

The wails grew louder. More zombies, hundreds of them, poured into the open-air market from every available opening. She looked around, the market suddenly clogged with bodies that had once been human. Dashtu might have orders to kill her, but it looked like the zombies might complete the job. Yelling a blood-curdling battle cry, she leaped into the fray. If she went out, she'd take as many of them with her as she could.

* * * * *

After a few hours sleep, Dashtu was awakened by a soldier ordering him downstairs. When he arrived in a converted waiting room he found the senior lieutenant who'd been stalking him at Barg's. His orders were simple -- find Zahra and kill her. Keeping a neutral expression, he hurried out the door and past the soldiers drilling for battle. Several formations of zombies practiced in what once had been a parking lot and the sounds of fighting came from a converted parking ramp. He ignored them and focused on Zahra.

The Necros couldn't have known just how right he was for the job of finding the Blade. Once he passed beyond the fence and disappeared into the jumble of streets and crumbling buildings, he used his mind to search for her. He had healed her and they had sex, so he carried a part of her inside, almost like a locating beacon. With it, he could find her, could even talk to her mentally if she opened the ability. He grinned, thinking about her reaction if she knew. He focused on Zahra and he found her up to her eyeballs in zombies.

"Shit," he muttered as he poured on the speed. Focusing on her location, he willed himself there. Legs churning, his ground-eating stride going faster and faster, he raced through the streets so fast his figure was but a blur. Not even slowing, he burst into the market.

"*Zahra, I'm here!*" He forced the words along the mental pathway leading to her. Near the center of the market, he saw her fighting for her life. Her katana swept and dove through the crowd. Gore splattered her. The wailing of those trapped in the suspended animation offered by the Necromancers, nearly deafening.

Grabbing the nearest ones, he started breaking necks. The snapping of spines echoed like gunshots. Fingers reached for him. Nails tore at his vest and arms. Dashtu ignored them.

"*Hang in there, Zahra. I'm coming.*" He threw the bodies to the side, hoping their bulk might stop their comrades. His ears rang from their incessant wailing. With a snarl of rage, he propelled himself through the crowd. Iridescent blood covered his fingers.

Shoving aside his latest victim, he charged through the throng, using his superior strength to push them aside. He ducked beneath the swing of her katana and pressed his back to hers. "I'm here," he said, reaching for another zombie.

“You’re going to die.” She sliced the head off the one before her, and two more fell in to take its place. Blood ran down her temple from a scratch, her arms, marked with trails of blood and sweat. Green gore dripped from her blade, the splatters shiny against her black leather pants and vest. She swung again. Another zombie fell.

He needed more than his bare hands to defeat the sheer numbers of zombies. He concentrated on his weapons, twin swords with angelic runes emblazoned on the blades. He hadn’t used them since before Ulanda’s death. The weapons reminded him of his duty, of the imperative that he work with the Blades. They hadn’t been needed -- until now.

His swords materialized in his hands with a swirl of light. On the blades, the runes blazed, the light so intense several zombies fell back. He set the swords to twirling like scythes, one after the other. Zombies fell around him.

“About fucking time!” Zahra screamed as she claimed yet another victim.

Dashtu stepped forward. He hated to leave an opening at Zahra’s back, but with the angel runes on his sword in full force the zombies wouldn’t come close enough for him to fight. She snarled something as he moved into the fray, her words lost as more zombies closed the gap between them.

Each moment burst into clarity. Spinning, he took care of the foes at Zahra’s back, determined not to let her die like Ulanda had. An image of the last battle, of them surrounded, too many to count, filled his mind. “No!” He wouldn’t let her go, not this time. If anyone watched, they knew he wielded the angel blades. They’d know he’d deviated from his mission.

No time to worry about that now. He narrowed the gap between them, their numbers dwindling as he ended existence after existence. The bodies piled in the courtyard and Dashtu found he had to search behind piles of corpses to find the remaining enemies. Then, there was only one engaging Zahra. She fought valiantly, her strength clearly waning. Vaulting over the pile of dead separating them, he landed behind her attacker.

One swipe of his sword. Her blade met his, and together, they cleaved through the zombie’s neck. Its head fell from its shoulders, and Zahra stumbled to her knees.

Chapter Five

Zahra caught herself before she fell completely to the ground. Exhaustion dragged at every fiber of her body. Sticky gore covered her hands, her arms, splashed the legs of her pants nearly up to the thighs. She doubted she could lift her sword more than a few inches. Her shoulders ached. Drawing breath into her lungs, she tried to breathe through the stench of dead zombies.

Strong hands caught her shoulder. "Stay with me, Zahra. You need to get home and get cleaned up." Where his swords had gone, she didn't know, and right now she hurt too much to care. Dashtu scooped her into his arms. "Which way?"

Her head ached like a storm of wasps had invaded. Moaning, she turned her face into his chest. It felt like they were moving fast, too fast to be human. He was a half-angel, she remembered. She'd fucked him. A giddy laugh bubbled from her chest.

She heard him bark to one of the nearby residents for water as she was being laid down on the bed. "No," she protested, feeling her comforter beneath her. "Not on the bed."

"Easy." He smoothed her hair back away from her face. "She'll be all right. I have her," he said to someone else. Her door closed.

"Wait." Zahra mustered the strength to sit up. She slid to the floor, landing with a bump on her rear. Stripping off her vest and pants, she reached for the rag he held. She dipped it in the basin, the cool water soothing on her scraped hands. With a sigh, she started sponging off the blood.

Dashtu watched her. Without speaking he grabbed a second cloth and began to bathe her. Starting at her feet, he worked upward, over her calves, his fingers massaging as much as the soothing caress of the water. Slowly, his ministrations woke her. Each touch stoked her senses, bringing nerves dulled by fighting to life. Warmth seeped back into her limbs, centering in her womb and breasts. Drawing a deep breath, she arched, reaching above her

head to stretch her back. It popped satisfyingly, and with a groan of pleasure, she let the rag drop back into the bowl.

Against her thigh, Dashtu's fingers stilled.

Leaning forward, she cupped his cheek. Its smoothness tantalized her, made her wonder how he'd feel between her legs if she leaned back and parted her thighs. Rising onto her knees, she watched as his hand fell to the floor. She swayed toward him. An indelible pull drew them together.

A warm sigh filled the back of her mind. She wondered if he'd given in to their bodies' needs to reaffirm life. "Yes," she whispered a moment before her eyelids fluttered closed and she kissed him.

The first brush of lips ignited the heat deep inside. With a hungry moan, she curled her fingers into his cheek, pushing him back. The rag hit the edge of the bowl. Precious water spilled onto the floor, seeping between cracks in the boards to soak into the ground.

Zahra crawled over him, wanted to crawl inside him. Nestling her naked pussy against the crotch of his jeans, she undulated against him. His denim vest abraded her sensitive nipples, right now the pleasure mingling with the pain of battle to remind her she was alive.

She whimpered with a craving for his touch. His fingers remained resolutely on the floor, never coming any closer to her. Pumping against him, the edge of his fly slid against her slick clitoris. She moaned into his mouth.

In an instant, he flipped her onto her back. Balancing his weight on one hand, he ripped open the button on his jeans. The rasp of his zipper sent shivers down her spine, and then he was there, hot and hard, the tip of his cock pressing against her labia. She lifted her hips against him, loving the way he slid along her pussy, just barely dipping inside. His strong shoulders grounded her, gave her something to cling to as her world spiraled out of control.

He looked down at her and his face twisted into a mask. "Damn it," he snarled, rolling away just as quickly as he'd pulled her beneath him.

Zahra cried out. She reached for him, her fingers trailing through the air as he pulled his jeans back into place, zipping and buttoning them without a word. "Dashtu, wait."

"No!" He bolted to his feet then reached for her pants. He picked them up and grimaced. "Don't you have some clothes?"

"Dashtu? What's going on?" Her body ached. Not just from the battle, but for the promise of the kind of oblivion only lust could bring. She'd nearly died. She'd expected to die. But he'd ridden to her rescue like some kind of, well, guardian angel, and saved her. She needed to feel his cock plunging into her, her legs wrapped around his hips, her heels digging into his buttocks urging him harder, faster, deeper, anything to realize that she was alive. She had survived!

"Don't you want me?" The question squeaked out, borne out of the insecurities of one who had grown up on the streets. Until Spika had found her she'd been well and truly alone. She needed Dashtu to help her battle the Necromancers. And maybe, he'd help her fight her inner demons too.

She stared at the broad wall of his back. If she removed the denim, what would she find there? Did he have the mark of wings like his angelic parent must have had? The palm of her hand tingled. She strode forward and flattened her palm on his back. "Dashtu?"

He flinched. "Zahra, we can't."

She laid her other hand across his shoulder blades then pressed her cheek to the middle of his back. Closing her eyes, she inhaled his scent. "Why not?" With him standing before her, so strong, so vital, she couldn't think of any reason why they couldn't bow to the demands of the adrenaline. Even now, with the battle far behind them and her skin clean of zombie blood, the need to mate, to reaffirm life hummed in her veins. Her hands slid around his arms, to his chest, and she squeezed him in a hug.

"I'm supposed to kill you, Zahra. We can't get involved."

She laughed. "It's way too late for that." She curled her fingers around the edges of his vest and started to tug it off his shoulders. "Besides, you can't kill me. I'm a Blade." She grinned against his back.

"They don't know that. And if they think I won't kill you then I'm useless to them. As if my stupid display of power didn't already give away that I wasn't working for their side." He shook his head.

"The swords? Where'd they go?" She looked around her room just to be certain he hadn't tucked them in a corner somewhere.

"I sent them back to where they came from. One of my powers, you could say, calling items bound to me."

"What kind of swords were they?" She shifted her weight, the talk of weapons almost as arousing as being kissed by Dashtu. Flattening her palm on his chest, she slid it down to his navel.

"I don't think they have a name. Just my angel blades. Forged in heaven with angelic runes on them. Someone told me once they had belonged to my father." His clipped words clearly said he didn't want to talk about it.

She decided to pursue a far more pleasurable topic. Caressing his abs, she flipped open the button on his jeans. Beneath her palm, his erection stretched the denim. She glided around him, dropping to her knees before him. Closing her eyes, she leaned forward and pressed her face against the fly of his jeans.

Dashtu groaned.

She leaned back just enough to grip the tab of the zipper in her teeth. She pulled it down, listening to his swiftly indrawn breaths. His cock sprang free, full and hard, right into

her waiting mouth. Fresh cream drenched her pussy as she wrapped her lips around the tip. She tongued him, sliding the tip along the slit, caressing the knot of nerves just beneath the head.

He wasn't cut, and she took her time exploring his textures and tastes. She cupped his ass, loving the feel of the hard muscles beneath her palms, as she took him deeper into her mouth.

"Zahra, don't," he growled.

Don't what? she wanted to ask, but with her mouth full, she couldn't. Instead, she hollowed out her cheeks, increasing the suction as she drew her lips toward his base.

One hand cupped the back of her head.

For a moment she feared he'd push her away. Instead, he held her in place, letting her fuck him with her mouth. She shoved her hands down his pants, sending denim falling to the floor. His hair-roughened legs rubbed against her chest. His scent surrounded her, drew her in with the promise of prime male. Squeezing his buttocks, she focused her entire being on the sole purpose of making Dashtu come. It was war. Not for life and death, but for pleasure. Hers and his. Drawing her tongue along the length of his cock, she smiled at his ragged groan.

"I can't do this. I can't play both sides and watch a Blade die...again."

Her lips stilled on his cock. His words, his voice, they filled her head as if he'd spoken aloud, but her ears told her she hadn't heard him. She cupped one of his testicles in her hand, gently fondling the sac. *"Yes. You. Can."* She focused on making each word in her mind, imagined them going to Dashtu, sliding into his brain just as his words had come into hers.

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I did." The more she focused on Dashtu, the easier this mind-to-mind communication became. *"Things may get ugly. I want us to make good memories to hold us through."* She stopped talking then, letting her actions speak louder than her words, mental or spoken. Releasing his cock, she made a production out of licking the length, of cupping it and sucking on it like a lollypop. She pulled her lips from it then stood and ran a hand along the length of her body.

At her damp curls, she couldn't stop. She stroked her labia with a single finger, her breath catching, eyelids fluttering closed at the subtle wisp of pleasure. Her folds parted easily, allowing her to stroke the hood of her clitoris. So wet, so swollen; she stepped backward to the bed, tumbling onto it and parting her legs.

Boots and jeans went flying as Dashtu dropped to his knees before her. He cupped her hips, drawing them to the edge of the mattress then buried his face between her thighs. A keening wail bubbled from her throat. Grabbing the blanket, she tilted her head back and rode the powerful desire erupting inside her body.

His tongue speared her.

She cried out, needing his thickness deep inside her. When he took her clit in his mouth and sucked on it, she screamed at the pleasure rocketing inside her. *Yes. Yes.* He must have heard her mental chant, for she felt him smiling against her flesh. After the blood and the gore, she craved the hard pounding drive of his cock buried deep inside her body.

Dashtu thrust his tongue into her one more time then pulled away. He swept her off the bed, down over his body, and impaled her on his cock.

Zahra braced her hands on his chest. She looked down at him, marveling that they were once more where they'd started from, only this time she'd get what she wanted. Wriggling her hips, she inched him deeper inside her. His crown brushed against her cervix.

She leaned forward and kissed him. Lips and tongues mingled in a give and take that mirrored the long, slow pumps of her hips. She rode him, trying to embed every nuance, every ridge of his cock, every breathy sigh and moan into her memory. In the back of her mind, she tried to tell herself that she'd caused this by looking him up. That if she hadn't, she'd never have known him or what they were capable of together.

Already she felt too much for him. She knew it. And, in some small part of her mind, so did he. After all, he'd come to her aid. Somehow, through the Necros' organization he'd heard of the attack, and he'd risked everything to come.

Their lips parted and she drew in a ragged breath. His palms caressed her skin, tracing the length of her spine, rubbing her ass. He rolled her hips, urging her faster.

Zahra sat up. Her small breasts bounced with each thrust. Drawing breath from between clenched teeth she struggled not to give in to her release so soon. Only Dashtu had ever made her feel like this, all light and pleasure, each thrust driving the darkness from her soul. In his presence, she was something more than a killer. More than the fighter she was trained to be. He had to help her, had to help the humans.

Dashtu stroked his hands down her arms, finding her hands and tangling his fingers with hers. Palm to palm, she leaned into him, supporting her weight on her arms. He pushed back, keeping her upright, providing the counterbalance she needed to keep on riding him.

In her mind, she saw snippets of images. Of Dashtu, looking up at her, loving the way her breasts moved, the look of rapture on her face. He marveled at her flat stomach, her narrow hips, and strong legs. Her pussy wrapped around his cock, guiding it home on each stroke, and he watched a droplet of sweat trickle over her shoulder, down over her sternum. He wanted to lick it off.

His pleasure, hers, they both mingled in her mind. The base of her spine tingled as her release neared. The mental images combined with the feel of his hard body beneath hers. Bending his legs, Dashtu thrust even deeper. She leaned back against them, his hands still supporting her, and moaned.

"I want to watch you come."

He had a thing for that, she realized, and grinned at the thought of how her screaming orgasms must stroke his ego. "*Maybe I don't want to.*"

His husky laughter echoed in her thoughts. Transferring both her hands into one of his, he leaned forward enough to reach between her legs. He circled his finger around her plump clit, coming ever so closer, yet never quite close enough. "*Say you don't want to come now.*" He flicked his finger across the organ.

"Dashtu," Zahra screamed as the first spasm hit her. Through the images he sent her, she watched herself come. Her head tilted back, a look of extreme concentrated pleasure on her face. Her panting breaths making her chest rise and fall. The sheen of sweat on her skin catching the light like a halo. His own private angel.

Pounding waves of release tore through her. Dashtu thrust again, hitting something high and deep inside her that sent her completely over the edge. His name degenerated into a wordless, primal scream of pleasure. Her channel tightened, making him feel so big, so hard inside her, and she whimpered as he increased his stroking of her clit.

Never giving her a chance to take a breath, he continued his thrusts, driving her over the edge again and again. Beneath her, he stiffened. Lost in her own pleasure, she barely felt the pulse of his orgasm, though she knew every muscle in his body had gone rigid. She felt him come, unable to separate the mental images and thoughts from the physical ones. The wet, tight sheath around his penis had to be her, though the sensation of knowing what a man felt like inside her made her marvel. As she tightened her muscles around him, he twitched, the pleasure in her brain spiking another notch.

"I can't get enough," he breathed as he relaxed his fingers. His hands slid down to her hips.

She could only nod as he rolled her over onto her stomach on the floor. He moved over her back, his chest solid above her. His still hard cock probed between her legs, and with a palm over her stomach, he raised her into position. Somehow, pillows thrust beneath her, and she rested on a cushion.

He stroked her labia, drawing her juices up toward her anus. "I want to take all of you," he said. His fingers swirled around her puckered bud, coating it liberally. The tip of his finger slid inside.

Zahra moaned as millions of new nerve endings burst painfully to life. He barely rested inside her, and yet, she hungered for him there, a place where she'd never let another man go. Dashtu was...different. He took everything she threw at him and then some. "Yes," she breathed.

"Good." He slid down her back, his chin resting just above her buttocks then lower. "Because when I'm done with you, you won't even be able to think straight."

She murmured her approval. His tongue snaked out and followed the path of his finger. She imagined warriors coming together to be just like this. All pleasure given and received, each one knowing the limits, and the desires of the other. Having a man strong enough to

take her like this, with one lick, one touch, and make her come hard and fast, turned her on like nothing ever would. That he was strong enough to fulfill her every fantasy and not flinch away...she wondered how they'd ever top this.

He lipped her clit and she had the distinct impression that he knew her thoughts and had filed them away for later use. A shudder wound down her spine. Her juices soaked the edge of the pillow beneath her.

He tongue-fucked her, the relentless plunge in and out of her pussy driving her to writhe beneath him. His fingers, liberally coated with her juices, resumed their stroking. He circled her anus, once more dipping first one then a second digit inside her as he tested her readiness.

"Please. Please." Her harsh pants brought home the reality of her situation to her. Face down on her own floor, a man she'd fought with eating her, his fingers at her clit and her ass. She pumped against his face.

Abruptly he pulled away.

She cried out at the sudden loss of contact. A cool breeze caressed her, sending goose bumps along her arms and legs. She lifted her buttocks until he cupped her hip. She heard him moving behind her, and then his lips pressed against the back of her neck.

"Easy," he crooned. The broad head of his cock sought entrance to her. "Relax."

She tried to do as he said, the blunt invasion of her body arousingly new. Slowly, so slowly she thought she might die, he pressed into her. Her body stretched, a bit of pain, and then he was there, just the tip of his cock inside her. Reaching beneath her hips, he coaxed her legs even wider apart so he could stroke her pussy.

With each caress, he pushed deeper, inch by inch until she had taken his entire length.

He filled her so full from behind, he left her pussy wanting. He stroked and rubbed her clit, yet that wasn't enough.

Suddenly, her pussy stretched to accommodate a second cock. As thick and long as Dashtu's, it completed the empty places inside her channel. So full, so wanting, and then, surprisingly they both began to move. The mechanics, the hows and whys, eluded her. She knew Dashtu still fucked her ass. She had no idea what was in her cunt. Only that it felt so damn good.

The twin cocks moved in perfect harmony, one thrusting as the other retreated. With both hands on her hips, he held her steady for his relentless surge into her body. Oh yeah, this was what she wanted -- to be surrounded and commanded. She gave herself over to his mastery, the sensation of dual penetration too much for her to focus on. Instead, the slide of his cock past the tight ring of muscles and the sensitive tissues he caressed consumed her.

Spots swam behind her eyes. The top of her head pounded, her entire body curling against Dashtu. Zahra struggled to keep her breath, to stay grounded on the hardwood floor

against her knees, the weight of their bodies pressing her against the pillows. And then, she couldn't hold on any longer.

She let go, throwing her soul to the winds as the first stirrings of yet another orgasm pulsed in her womb. Trusting Dashtu to keep her from floating away, she rushed headlong into the pleasure. Her body convulsed, ecstasy pushing a low, keening wail from her chest. Dashtu never tired. He thrust through her orgasm, pushing her into another and another until she could do nothing but try and hold on as the riptides threatened to pull her under.

Her head swam. Blackness loomed behind her closed eyelids. With a roar, Dashtu stiffened. His cock jerked, his hot seed splashing inside her. Her muscles twitched, the need to take his essence into her so strong she clamped down on his cock. Her screams of pleasure faded and she slumped onto the floor.

Dashtu followed close behind.

She lay there, panting, his cock finally softening within her. She felt him pull away, the chill air drying the sweat on her body. A cool cloth bathed her, and still Zahra struggled to find consciousness, find breath. She lay on the pillows as limp as the rag he cleaned her with, until his strong arms scooped her up and lay her on the bed.

She managed to open her eyelids and looked at him, knowing a goofy self-satisfied smile covered her face. "You're good." She managed a giggle as his weight dipped the mattress and he curled up beside her.

He kissed her temple. "In case we don't see each other again..."

His trailing words forced her into complete wakefulness. What did he mean if they didn't see each other again? Surely he was coming back; he was helping her. Wasn't he? "We'll see each other." She reached for the blanket, wrestling a portion from beneath Dashtu's body to wrap around herself. "You're on my side."

"I have to go back, Zahra." He expelled a harsh breath.

She knew. Damn it, she knew what she'd asked him to do. "We can meet at Barg's. Two nights from now, okay?" She threw the offer out there. Perhaps a plan to meet would distract her from the twist of pain the thought of his not returning caused.

Dashtu didn't answer.

She leaned forward and cupped his cheeks in both of his hands. "I'll leave this place." She glanced around, not wanting to walk away from the memories they'd just created. For his safety, and for hers, she had to. "Go somewhere where the zombies and the Necros can't find me. Give me two days to get moved and set up. Then I'll come to you at Barg's. We can go from there. Just don't say you're not coming back." She shook and pressed her lips to his, as hard and desperate as any kiss she'd ever given.

After long moments, he pulled back. "Two days. At Barg's."

At her nod, he slipped from the bed and pulled on his jeans and vest. In a flash he was gone, leaving her alone with her fears.

Chapter Six

It had taken her most of the rest of the day and some fitful attempts at sleep to get her thoughts in order. Her secondary hideout should be sufficient for her needs right now. She put her meager belongings into a backpack and tied her blankets in a bedroll beneath. The former hiking frame she'd found and restored had come in handy more than once, though never for an occasion as bittersweet as this.

She stood in the center of her empty room, the furniture as bare as when she'd found this place. As soon as she was gone, she'd let the neighbor know the spot was empty, though the zombie's attacks had frightened away the few people willing to rent. Her mind wandered to those displaced by the vicious fight a few days ago. Several families hadn't returned. She couldn't dwell on them. Every time she did, she found her throat tight, tears stinging her eyes. Those were very people she'd pledged to protect, and her actions had only driven them away.

She sniffed. Too late for tears now. The cost of her calling weighed on her, though unlike her katana, she still felt the burden. Spika had told her there would be moments like this, when she'd have to turn her back on what she knew and start fresh. Spika hadn't mentioned that they'd hurt like hell.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned and opened the door.

A woman, her face scarred by battles, stood there. She appeared at least part Asian, though of what nationality, Zahra couldn't say. Twin katanas sat in sheaths across her back, her black leather outfit nearly identical to Zahra's own. Her black eyes looked darker than night, her dark hair shorn close to her head. A long scar ran the length of her right forearm above the fingerless gloves she wore.

Zahra unfurled her senses just enough to touch the edges of the woman's power. Fighter.

“Zahra Soliel?” the woman asked. No trace of an accent colored her words.

She tried not to flinch at the use of her full name. She stepped back and gestured to the empty room. “Yeah. You are?”

“Eko.” She stepped inside, her movements like a shadow. “You trained with Spika, right?”

“How do you know Spika?” That this woman, this fighter, could know her mentor sent a flare of jealousy through Zahra. “Why are you here?” *Why did you come now?* She hadn’t seen another Blade, hadn’t known another one was in the area. Even if the woman hadn’t worn clothing and carried weapons nearly identical to her own, even if she hadn’t mentioned Spika’s name, Zahra still would have known she was a Blade. A sense of personal power, a deep-seated core of self-assurance surrounded the woman. So why now, after enough zombies had ambushed her to kill her a hundred times over? It made no sense, especially as Spika had told her they didn’t have any organization, no “headquarters” to call on to ask for reinforcements. Zahra had heard the larger-than-life tales sometimes told in the hushed hours of the night, but mostly she ignored them. She knew what it was like being a Blade and it sure as hell wasn’t like the stories.

“My teacher was a friend of Spika’s. She mourns her loss. As to why I’m here, I’m here to watch over these people while you and your man finish battling the Necromancers.” Eko made it sound so complete, as if she really had a plan.

“You were sent here?”

“Yes.” Her clipped words betrayed her displeasure.

“You didn’t want to be.”

“I will do what I must. Isn’t that what we do?” She paced around the small room, tsk’ing at the furnishings.

Zahra pressed her lips together. For a moment she heard Spika’s words echoing at her.

“Spika always was a dreamer,” Eko replied. She dropped the small pack she wore to the floor. “Anyway, I’m here to watch over these people. You can go.”

Eko appeared young, though she had to be about Zahra’s age. Such world-weariness resided in her dark eyes, an almost defeatist like attitude. She wondered what Holt would think of the young woman. The two of them seemed perfectly made for each other.

“I didn’t ask for you to be here, but I’m glad you are. I’m not sure who sent you, but please, thank them for me.” Not quite comfortable with leaving her sanctuary in this new fighter’s most likely capable hands, Zahra lingered by the door.

“Go. It’ll be okay. In a few days the scattered families will have returned and the zombies will have turned their attention elsewhere. It always happens this way.” Eko sat on the bed and stretched out a foot. “I’ve been up for nearly twenty-four hours straight. Lock the door on your way out.” The fighter leaned back on the bare mattress and closed her eyes.

Zahra knew she'd just been dismissed from her home. Her former home, she corrected as she closed the door behind her and latched it. Her new sanctuary lay several miles across town. The sun rested low to the horizon. Soon, zombies would sweep through the streets. Breaking into a jog, she headed to her new home.

She found it less than an hour after full dark. The old lady who lived downstairs -- Zahra thought she might have once been a fighter, but not a Blade -- had thoughtfully lit a lantern. The two rooms boasted more space than the home she'd just left, and if she hauled water up from downstairs she'd have a quasi-functioning indoor bathroom, though she noticed the community latrines and showers just a couple of blocks away. Still, the thought of the tub filled with steaming water made her wonder just what powers Dashtu possessed, and how they could experience them together.

She shoved thoughts of him out of her mind. The wailings of zombies sounded distant, and Zahra checked her weapons. She doused the lantern. If she couldn't get in and out of her new apartment in the dark then she didn't need to be in it. Raising the bathroom window, she stepped out onto the fire escape. It creaked beneath her weight.

She paused, hands ready to pull herself to safety should the aged metal fail. It didn't. Testing her weight on it, the metal still held. She scurried down the stairs, her boots making little noise on the wrought iron treads. Near the middle of the first floor, the ladder ended abruptly. She dropped to the ground, certain she could return later.

The wailing grew closer as she scurried between connecting alleys and down short, quasi-residential streets. Apartment buildings, some toppling with age, sat cheek and jowl next to aged storefronts. GUNS AND PAWN said the big letters in one window where a single bulb lit the barred door. Lights glowed from inside, the silhouettes of people against the pulled shades visible. At least some weren't afraid to be out after dark. Foolish people. Their guns wouldn't do any good against a zombie unless they could sever the spine completely. Few people had that kind of accuracy.

Zahra ducked into an alley. Listening, she heard the zombie wails growing closer. She counted four, a small patrol. For a moment it sounded too small, but yet, she hadn't seen many humans. Just at the pawn store and the building where she had a place above the old woman's apartment. Maybe a few others, certainly not the families and thriving community she'd seen before. Another thing to make the zombies pay for. Ducking back into the street, she drew her blade and ran toward the source of the sound.

She found them two blocks down. Muted music blasted through the wall, the multicolored lights flashing inside announcing it as a club of some sort. A man wearing an old army uniform stood at the door, grappling with one of the zombies. Two more flanked him. The fourth stood at a window, trying to reach through the metal bars. Every once in a while crashes and a woman's screams emanated from inside the club.

Zahra caught the bouncer's attention just enough to let him know she was entering the fight. He ducked a blow, blood trickling from a cut at his temple. He smacked the zombie

with a solid roundhouse, sending the creature staggering backward. One of its companions took its place.

Zahra glided across the ground. The dim lighting left plenty of shadows in which she could hide. Coming up behind a zombie, she lopped its head off. Its companions turned to face her.

The bouncer didn't give thanks or acknowledge her actions. Instead, he grabbed the zombie in front of him and twisted its head. Its neck broke and it fell to a heap on the concrete stair. The bouncer ducked back into the club.

Just great. She struggled to take care of the zombie in front of her. Though its arm bled enough to drop a human to his knees, the zombie kept on fighting. A fierce glow in the creature's green eyes.

Strong arms grabbed her around the middle. Not wasting energy on cursing, Zahra jabbed her elbows at her captor. The thin male zombie stumbled. He didn't release her.

"Dashtu." She flung her thoughts at him, not knowing if she'd even be able to make a connection. She dropped, bringing her weight low and forward.

"Stay strong." Suddenly, Dashtu appeared in her mind. He lent her strength, vitality flowing into her limbs.

Zahra threw herself back and up, toppling both of them.

The male zombie hit the ground with a thud. His arms loosened enough for her to shimmy free. She rose, katana in her right hand, knife in her left, to face the zombie bitch looming over her. Zahra thrust her knife into the zombie's abdomen. The bitch fell back, hand clutching the spurting wound. Dropping her knife back into its thigh sheath, Zahra grabbed her blade and prepared for the killing blow.

Strong hands grabbed her arm, yanking her around. "Fuck," she growled. She whipped her katana back hard enough to sever the male zombie's neck. She didn't have time to gloat, for she turned to face the zombie bitch once more.

The two danced around each other like wary warriors. The zombie's abdomen had ceased to bleed, whatever genetic enhancements she had already sealing up the wound.

Waves of assurance filled her mind. Dashtu's steady presence helped her to focus. Drawing her katana back, she swung it in a perfect arc toward the zombie's head. A soft hissing sound filled the air, the breeze from the weapon's passing ruffling Zahra's hair. As if in slow motion, she watched the zombie turn, mouth open in a silent wail. The katana slid through flesh and bone. The zombie toppled. And Zahra stood alone on the empty street.

Her bloodied blade still in her hands, Zahra leaned forward. She rested her hands on her thighs. Drawing air into her lungs, she willed her heart to slow.

"Very good." Dashtu's presence filled her mind for a moment longer then he slipped away.

"Don't go." She thought the words at him, but it was too late. His comforting presence had fled just as stealthily as it had arrived. Loss punched her in the gut. She hiccupped, all too aware she was getting too attached to him, too emotional. Straightening, she cleaned her blades on a clean scrap of the zombie's clothing.

She strode to the door, fist raised to knock. From inside the club music thumped. Women's voices mingled with the gruff calls of men. No one looked at the battle, not even the bouncer whom she'd helped. "Bastards," she muttered under her breath, spinning on her heel. She hurried back to her sanctuary, the need to be alone and quiet making even the diluted club noises unwelcome.

She darted through the streets, the few humans she saw quickly ducking into alleys or out of sight. Not the upper crust of humanity, she knew that, especially when she witnessed money and goods, drugs no doubt, changing hands. Not even here a full day and she missed her old neighborhood. She missed the children playing in the street, the sight of families and of hope.

That life wasn't for her. She knew it the moment Spika had taken her in and named her fighter. Longing for that life now wouldn't accomplish anything. Drawing a deep breath, she grabbed the fire escape and swung onto the ladder. Scurrying to her window, she lifted it and climbed inside. She closed it behind her and stood in the bathroom, letting her eyes adjust to the dark interior.

She made her way by feel to the bedroom where she slid her weapons off and laid them on the floor beside the bed. Too keyed up to go to sleep, she lay there.

Dashtu. Her thoughts always returned to him. When she'd first heard about the half-angel, she'd been so damned determined to get him on their side. Finding him had been a bitch. Then she had and remarkably, he'd agreed to help. He insinuated himself into the Necromancer's organization and into her heart.

She growled, her fingers automatically reaching for her katana. Gripping it, she held it above her, except the only threat she faced at the moment was herself. She laid the weapon back within reach and drew her hands down into meditation position, palms pressed together directly in front of her heart. Deep breaths didn't calm her, nor did mentally rehearsing the training movements she should be practicing.

Dashtu feared he'd kill her. If something happened to him, it'd be worse than death for her. She was a killer. He was an angel. Well, not quite, but the sentiment was still the same. And that left them with nothing but damn good sex between them. A man like him couldn't be with a woman like her.

Thoughts of Dashtu brought warmth into her cold soul. Her pussy ached, labia slick with desire, clit engorged and sensitive. Behind her leather vest, her nipples hardened, anxious for a touch. She unzipped the vest and pulled it aside. Night air whispered around her breasts, the barest hint of a caress that brought a soft cry to her lips. She circled her

nipples, her small, calloused fingers no substitute for Dashtu's larger ones. Her legs scissored on the bed, the press of leather against her sex not enough to soothe her need.

With one hand she continued to stroke her breasts, pinching her nipples and rolling them between her thumb and forefinger. Her other hand dropped to the waistband of her pants, unfastening them. She slid them lower on her hips, her fingers dipping to her cunt.

She fingered herself, her hips rising and falling with the movement.

Dashtu.

God, she needed him. His cock, his lips, his body...him. Her hand stilled, two fingers buried in her channel all the way to the second knuckle. Her palm flattened over her nipple, cupping her breast in her hand.

His voice rasped in her mind, thick with hunger. "*Let me.*" She caught a flash of him sitting in some kind of cubicle, one foot on the mattress of a hospital bed, the other flat on the floor. A closed curtain promised privacy.

She tried to see him, wanted to know if he was dressed. He chuckled. "*I'm dressed, my Blade, but I see you're not.*" Something clicked in her mind as he fully connected with her, the sensation of his large hand covering her breast, the fingers of his other hand trailing over her ribs nearly too much to bear. She removed her fingers from her pussy and reached for him. Her hand curled around the steely length of his cock, and though a part of her knew he was fully dressed in the Necromancer's compound, in her mind, he knelt between her legs completely naked.

She turned her face away, even though he wasn't in the room with her. Just looking at him, even if only in her mind, forced feelings to the surface.

He placed a reverent kiss in the hollow of her collarbone, his warm breath soothing her. She swore she heard him tell her it would be okay then nothing but her own blissful sigh filled her ears as he traced the slope of first one breast then the other. She'd intended to have a little fun, to work off some of the tension. Instead, Dashtu had turned the tables on her.

He cupped her breasts, plumping them so he could nuzzle her flesh. He nibbled, moving ever so slowly toward her nipples. As he did, he pulled away, his cock sliding from her grip. She cupped his shoulders, needing to touch him, to feel him beneath her, even if it was only in her mind. She'd take what she could get.

And then, blessedly, he pulled her nipple into his mouth. He rolled it over his tongue, drawing it deep. She lost herself to the heat and the suction. His musky aroma filled her nose, his body heat radiating into hers. She shifted restlessly on the bed.

A wide, blunt object pressed against her labia. She spread her legs, welcoming the invasion. Thicker than his cock, it filled her, every ridge along its surface coming into intimate contact with her. A mental toy. She shivered as it filled her, the tip coming to rest next to her cervix. A second dildo, already lubed and ready, penetrated her ass. Slowly, so

slowly she whimpered, it slid into her, barely bigger than his smallest finger. It, too, had ridges and a sensitive knob at the end. It filled her, the dual penetrations too intense to bear.

Heedless of the mental connection, she reached between her legs and stroked her clit. Swollen with need, it poked from beneath the hood. She caressed the organ, her channel tightening around the imaginary cock.

"That's it, baby, make yourself come."

As if she could stop. Zahra laughed at the mental encouragement. Warm, wet suction surrounded both nipples. Wait...how could he be...her head fell back. She lifted her hips in an offering to the invisible cocks filling her and her mouth opened in a wordless cry. So close. Her panting breaths filled the air around her.

The mechanics eluded her. All she knew was Dashtu was so very expertly taking care of the adrenaline and excess energy her fight had created. The thick dildo began to move. This slow, gentle fucking brought tears to her eyes. She squeezed them closed, not wanting to take her fingers from her clit long enough to dash them away. *"What are you doing to me?"* she asked, her mental voice little more than a breathy gasp.

"Loving you."

Not love, anything but love, but she didn't have time to argue for her orgasm welled up from somewhere deep in her soul. Her pussy tightened around the dildo, the base of her spine tingled. Her release poured up and through her, the surges of pleasure triggering tiny quakes in her muscles. She moaned, unable to contain the sheer sensation. And still, Dashtu was there. His fingers, his lips, always giving; never taking.

Her orgasm rolled through her, each wave building on the last. She struggled to find some way to stay grounded. She saw him, Dashtu in his cell, one hand wrapped around his very hard cock then he was naked, still kneeling between her thighs, his erection pointing toward her already filled pussy. Imaginary dildos, hands, and tongues; they swirled around and around in her mind until she couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't anymore.

And over it all, she heard his mental words echoing again and again. *"Loving you."*

No! He couldn't love her, just as she couldn't love him. A mission, nothing more. Yet from the instant she'd seen him something had clicked between them. Never had she mentally communicated with anyone before. She struggled to draw air into her lungs, the waves of her orgasm subsiding.

"What about you?" she managed to ask, her mind still showing him fully erect. The sensation of the dildos slid from her, fizzling away into nothingness. *"I'm waiting."*

"So am I. Two days, you promised. We meet at Barg's."

Then, just as quickly as he had entered her mind he left.

Zahra curled into the fetal position, her knees tucked against her chest. She walled her mind from him, not wanting him to know the extent to which he affected her. Spika had

told her that the man who brought a fighter the greatest pleasure would also bring the greatest heartache. Until now, Zahra hadn't known how true those words would be.

She rolled into a seated position, determined not to lay there and wallow. She stood, balanced on the balls of her feet and shed her clothing. A quick trip to the bathroom cleaned up the evidence of Dashtu's mental lovemaking. Naked, she returned to the bedroom. Not bothering with clothes, she picked up her katana and worked her body through a series of exercises.

A fighter couldn't afford love. Holt had directed her to Dashtu. He told her he could help her against the Necromancers. He'd spoken of a destiny and made it sound like this was something she was supposed to do be doing. She doubted falling in love came with it.

Except Dashtu was everything she had wanted in a man: strong, determined, adventurous, and an excellent lover. When they'd first fought the zombies she'd thought him weak. His coming to her rescue in the market square erased those thoughts from her mind.

Whatever happened with the Necros had to happen fast. She eased her body into the motions that were as familiar to her as breathing. Her katana swept through the air, cleaving imaginary enemies. She moved to the end of the series of exercises and began again. Over and over, until sweat glistened on her skin and the dawn sun painted the eastern sky in shades of blue and pink.

She sank to the bed, weary in body if not in mind. One more day, and then she'd see Dashtu. *Loving you*. His words echoed in her mind and she fought against the chill creeping through her. Everyone who'd loved her had died. She prayed he'd be the exception.

Chapter Seven

Dashtu's head pounded. The incessant zombie wails of his squad, no matter how muted, grated against his nerves. Every fiber in his body demanded he turn around and destroy the four abominations. He couldn't. Not if he wanted to return to the compound and stop whatever the Necros had planned. Not if he wanted to find out what really happened to Ulanda. And not if he wanted to return to Zahra.

Just thinking about the Blade brought him to full hardness. Gritting his teeth, he ducked into a dark alley and willed his body to behave. *Later*, he promised. His mental lovemaking early in the morning hadn't dulled his carnal appetites.

He'd been given orders and put in charge of four zombies, all male. Apparently a young human gang had made several successful attacks on zombie patrols in the area. His mission was to find the men and kill them. His stomach churned. Killing zombies was one thing. They were already dead. But killing men who were on his side? He shoved the thoughts aside.

He'd do what he had to do to keep the mission going. He just hoped he didn't have to do much of it.

He held out his hand and the zombies behind him stopped. At least their wails were barely audible. The Necromancers called it a side effect of the process, but to him it sounded as if the bodies were crying for the life they'd lost. Closing his eyes, he searched for signs of human life.

He found them, four young men nearly two blocks away. "*Go away. It isn't safe for you here.*" He sent the thoughts at them, muddling the words but keeping the intention. A mental push accompanied the desire that the men leave. He felt them hesitate and stay.

Damn. Motioning the zombies forward, he sent them toward the young men. His stomach twisted. "*Get out of here.*" If he had any pull with a higher power, he would have

asked for it to intervene. The men roused themselves with a cry, and the zombies rushed forward, while Dashtu hung back as he'd been told to do.

He noted fighting styles, anything that the Necromancer might ask of him. The men moved as an organized unit, though as Dashtu watched the zombies gained the upper hand. If the tide of the battle turned, he'd have to fight.

"C'mon," he muttered under his breath, willing the young men to flee.

Moonlight glinted on a switchblade. More knives flicked open, the four men now armed against the zombies. Not good. Not good at all.

Dashtu gathered his power. All he needed was a quick burst, enough to stun the men into unconsciousness. If the men fell down, the zombies would think they'd been defeated. He held it close, preparing for the surge of energy.

A zombie stumbled back, glowing green blood on its sleeve.

The young man held up the knife triumphant, a feral grin twisting his face. With a snarl, he charged again, this time catching the wounded zombie.

Dashtu released the power with a rush. Wind whipped down the street, sending the young men stumbling backward. They didn't fall down.

Smelling blood, the zombies redoubled their efforts.

"*Don't get involved in the fight.*" Dashtu's orders grated against his sense of right and decency. The lieutenant had been clear though. He didn't fight. He guided, leading the zombies with hand gestures that had been programmed into their mutated DNA. How they knew, or how they saw, he didn't know, but a flick of his wrist sent the nearest zombie to pair up with its neighbor against two young men. The human faltered, falling back enough to allow a zombie to scratch him along the chest.

The other two humans took one look at their comrades and ran.

Four zombies against two humans weren't good odds on any night, but with the zombies' blood lust enraged and the humans growing weak, the fight wouldn't last long. Dashtu couldn't let that happen. He channeled a trickle of energy to the humans, enough to heal their superficial scrapes and cuts. He sent them strength to battle back, hopefully to free themselves and follow their brothers-in-arms.

Their strength renewed, the humans fought back. Dashtu stepped into shadow, hoping they hadn't seen him, just the zombies. The four creatures closed in on the humans. First one then the second one fell to the ground.

Dashtu poured his strength into both men. He felt the first recover. "*Play dead,*" Dashtu ordered, not caring if the human heard his mental voice.

The second man laid still, blood gushing from a slash across his neck. Dashtu tried to stop the flow, tried to lend healing, but the man's life force ebbed at an alarming rate. He gave the command to pull the zombies off of both men.

Snarling, the animated corpses obeyed. Dashtu rushed to the men, ordering the zombies to stay back. He checked the first one, hands covering the wound and coming away drenched in blood. Pouring his healing energy into the man, he willed flesh to close and the body to heal.

It was too late. The spark of life, the man's soul, had fled. Whether because of true death or scared away by the zombies, Dashtu didn't know. He turned his attention to the other man. "Stay down. They won't come after you if they think you're dead."

"Bobby. Is he --" The man groaned and rolled to his side.

Dashtu pushed him back down. "I'm sorry. Stay put." He rose, giving the signal that told the zombies they'd killed the men and directing them back to the compound. He walked away, head high, struggling not to look back at the fallen men. Bobby. The dead had a name. Maybe a family too, and it weighed on him that he couldn't save them all. *I'm so sorry*. He kept his mind shielded, not wanting to connect with Zahra and have her see his failure. This was why he hadn't wanted to be found. Damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

His thoughts haunted him all the way back. The guards at the gate let him in the compounds, his zombies automatically returning to wherever they stayed. He hadn't visited the barracks, a converted parking garage if he recognized the other building. Just thinking about the zombies living there sent chills down his spine. He returned to his cell, stripping and walking to the shower.

Twenty minutes later, clean and in a fresh uniform, he found himself sitting in a small, windowless room, facing a high ranking officer in the Necromancer's organization.

The short, balding man looked more like someone's uncle than a monster in charge of armies of animated corpses. His pale skin and beady eyes marked him as someone used to working indoors, buried away in a lab.

"We've debriefed the zombies and I don't like what I saw. The men appeared to have been healed during the battle? Do the humans have new technology?" He spoke as if he weren't one of the humans anymore, and after living with the zombies for so long, Dashtu figured he wasn't.

"Not that I'm aware of." He kept his face neutral. Did they just pump the zombies' brains for information? If they reported everything that they saw... Dashtu didn't like the implications for his goal of keeping as many humans alive as possible.

"Then how did they do it?" The officer narrowed his eyes.

Two lieutenants, both armed to the teeth, sat in chairs on either side of him. Dashtu didn't look at them, but he knew if he so much as breathed out of line, both men would be on him in a flash.

"I don't know," Dashtu lied. "I followed orders and stayed out of sight, directing the zombies. If you could show me what they'd seen, I'd be happy to give my opinion."

"I didn't ask for your opinion. I asked for facts. Which you don't seem to have. Four humans should have been no match for my soldiers. And yet, they were. I'm healing wounds those *men* inflicted. I shouldn't have to heal my army. They shouldn't need healing when out with someone of your caliber." Flattening his palms on the table, he leaned forward. "I have great hopes for you. I would hate to be disappointed."

"Yes, sir." Dashtu read the warning in the man's words. Do one thing to piss off his new boss and he might find himself discovering if angels really could become zombies.

"You'll have your next assignment this evening." He strode toward the door, followed by the two guards.

Dashtu waited until they were gone then rose to his feet. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he left the small room, taking the twists and turns back to his cubicle in the former ICU ward. Other glass doors were pulled closed, curtains drawn. He went into his own, wondering about the men who lived behind those walls. Were they like him, drawn to protect the humans and doing what they can? Or were they so completely on the Necromancers' side that they turned their back on their own kind?

He wished he had the answers.

With the glass door pulled closed, he went to the window, parted the curtain, and stared out at the darkened ruins of what had once been a bustling city. Bracing his palm on the glass, he stared down, sensing humans and zombies alike. Whatever he had to do to get into the Necromancer's good graces, he would have to do. Even if it cost human lives. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against the cool window pane. He swallowed hard.

This was why he didn't get involved. Too much pain, too much suffering. Zahra's image filled his mind. "*Be safe.*" He hoped his message got through, because if the Necromancers had their way, he wouldn't.

* * * * *

The sun hadn't even started to set again when a lieutenant flipped the latch on his cubicle and slid the door open. "Get ready to go in five minutes. Full combat gear."

Dashtu lurched to his feet, blinking his eyes to clear away the remnants of sleep. "Yes, sir," he said in what he hoped was a convincing voice and gathered his gear from where he'd stowed it in the wardrobe. It took him less than five minutes to be ready and down in the front lobby. A second soldier stood there with a squad of eight zombies. A second squad awaited Dashtu's command.

Showtime. He strutted out as if he owned the yard and everything in it. "My orders, sir?"

The second lieutenant pointed to his walkie-talkie. "We're to head to the market district and take care of some troublemakers there. We'll get further orders once we arrive."

Dashtu nodded and ordered his squad to line up in formation. "We'll watch your back."

The soldier nodded, though he looked none too happy about having Dashtu behind him, and headed out. Dashtu followed, his unease with the mission increasing the farther away from the hospital they marched. Buildings gave way to homes and apartments; wherever they were heading there were bound to be a lot of civilians and that meant a lot of lives to protect.

It smelled like a trap. Keeping in mind the Necromancer's words, Dashtu feared he'd come face-to-face with more civilians this evening. Whatever happened, he hoped Zahra stayed far away. He'd made the choice to come here and find out more information. That he hadn't been able to gnawed at his nerves. Time was ticking away, precious time that the humans didn't have.

The senior soldier motioned for his squad to stop and Dashtu did the same. Static crackled across the airwaves, followed by orders. The soldier nodded then without saying anything further hurried off again. Dashtu followed. Jaw clenched, he watched the back of the soldier, wondering if his superiors simply wanted him killed. Around him, the zombies kept their wails low, though a crowd this large certainly would attract unwanted attention. Maybe that's what the Necros wanted. A bloodbath.

Well, he didn't. Without communication he was forced to rely on the other soldier, a man who looked far too young and far too jaded to be in command. Dashtu stared at the streets, the conglomeration of apartment buildings and jumbled houses devoid of signs of life. The soldier stopped his troops and hurried back to Dashtu.

"We're clearing out a building the bosses want. I want you to cover the back door." He motioned around the back of the building.

Dashtu nodded, hoping he wouldn't have to get too involved. "*Leave now and be safe.*" He sent the thoughts at the building, sensing only a few humans. Taking his squad down an alley clogged with trash, he went to the back door. A crash from the front announced the other squad's entrance.

Dashtu made the guarding motion with his hand as he tested the doorknob. Unlocked. Opening it, he peered into the dark hallway, not sensing any humans. His orders had been to watch the door. He didn't need to go inside, yet he knew if he didn't, humans would die. Motioning for the zombies to stay put, he ducked inside. From the front of the building, the soldier and his squad roused a few stragglers from their homes.

Dashtu ducked toward the back door. He nodded to the soldier as he rounded the corner and tramped to the second floor. Over his head, Dashtu heard the pounding of boots, the cries of families as they were torn from their homes. A young woman raced down the stairs.

Her gown torn, her bare feet dirty, and her hair hanging in limp strands around her face, she clearly didn't pose a threat to anyone. Dashtu blocked the door, not wanting the zombies to see her. He gestured to a partially open apartment door.

"Go in there and get out the window. Don't make a sound," he whispered to her.

She stopped and stared at him.

“Go!” he snarled.

She gave a startled squeak and scurried down the hall like a frightened mouse. A few moments later he sensed her opening a window and climbing out into the night.

More thumping sounded from upstairs. Dashtu directed two young men to the apartment and out the same window. He sensed only a small human life sign above him. A child?

Dashtu started up the stairs.

The lieutenant came barreling toward him. “Did you see anyone?” He puffed for breath, his cheeks reddened from exertion.

“No, no one came down the stairs except you,” Dashtu lied.

“Damn. Well, get your crew up here. I want the top two floors searched. I’m going after them.” He brushed past Dashtu on the stairs.

The half-angel followed just enough to motion for his zombie squad to follow him. The human life sign remained elusive above him. He took the stairs two at a time, following the sensation into the first apartment on the left. There, a closet door sat closed. He heard the small whine of a dog.

Dashtu told the zombies to stay at the doorway, not wanting to frighten whoever was behind the door. He slowly opened the door. The dim interior concealed a small form sitting in the corner. The *thump-thump* of a dog’s tail against the floor alerted Dashtu to the small boy sitting there. He knelt down and held out a hand. “Hello?”

The figure cringed even closer to the wall. “You’re not my mommy,” a soft voice said, thick with tears. Though the bare windows let in enough moonlight to provide some ability to see, the boy had crawled into the furthest, darkest corner of the closet.

“No, I’m not. But I won’t hurt you.” He crept forward, hand still outstretched. “You can come out now.”

The boy scooted forward, the small terrier still clutched in his grip. A stuffed teddy bear was tucked beneath the other arm, an eye missing and stuffing coming from a hole in its foot. Behind him, he heard the zombie wails grow louder as they sensed the human’s presence.

The child froze.

“It’s okay. They won’t hurt you.” Dashtu held out his arms, aware of the body armor and military uniform he wore. He certainly didn’t look like one of the good guys.

The child rushed forward into Dashtu’s chest. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around the child, the puppy squirming between them. Tears rolled down the boy’s cheeks, and Dashtu hoped the young woman might be the young man’s mother. But then why leave without her son?

He cradled the boy to him as he rose to his feet. He turned, holding out fingers and keeping the zombies at bay. He signaled that the child belonged to him now and for a moment, regretted that he'd told the young woman to run. Where would he take her child and how would he reunite them?

He led the zombies back into the hall, directing them to search the other apartments, though he knew they wouldn't find anyone else. The third floor passed quickly. The child and puppy fell asleep in Dashtu's arms. He led his team back downstairs.

The other soldier came up to him. "What'd you find?"

"A child."

"We have our orders. Clear out the building. Kill him."

"What?" Dashtu stepped back. With the child in his arms he couldn't fight, and if he put the boy down, the zombies would be on him in a minute. He searched, hoping the boy's mother may have stayed nearby. The sight of three corpses, the people he'd directed out the window, dissolved the notion that the child's parents might have survived. "He's only a child."

"Who can grow up to fight us. Kill him or I will." The soldier stepped forward.

"No. He comes with me." What he thought he could do with a boy maybe six years old and his dog, Dashtu had no idea.

"You can't take a child with you." The soldier raised his hands, signaling to the zombies. "Now give him over to me. You're already in trouble with the Necromancers. Hand over the child and I don't think they'll care about this deviation from orders."

"No. I am not turning this child over to be killed. He's a boy." Dashtu kept his voice low, though the sleeping child stirred. He summoned power, preparing to erect a shield around them should the zombies attack.

"It's your death warrant."

"I don't think so. What will the Necros do once the humans are all gone? They'll send their zombie armies out to fight and when they're gone? What next? Will they level the planet because they happened to kill off all the people? You need a new generation of humans, one raised to believe in the Necros world that they've created. I don't think you want to kill this boy." Saying the words sickened him. Having the child brainwashed into working for the Necros wasn't in Dashtu's plan either. *But what choice do I have? If I die then the humans won't have anyone but the Blades. And Zahra won't have me.*

The soldier stared at him for a moment. The walkie-talkie crackled, pulling the soldier away from the argument. After a series of "yes, sir" and "right away, sir" he clipped the device back on his belt. "We're called back. Seems there's been an attack and we're needed. I'm sure our superiors will deal with this." He made a harsh motion with his hands and the zombies followed him.

The soldier moved out at a brisk run and Dashtu followed in spite of the burden he held. Sending soothing thoughts to the boy, he kept him as quiet as possible on their run back to the Necromancer's compound. They passed through the gates without incident. A soldier at the door directed the zombies to where they were needed.

"What do you have there?" he asked as Dashtu came to the doors.

"An orphan."

"Surprised Stony let you bring him here. He's big on killing the humans." The soldier laughed and waved his hands in the air. "Cept if you kill all of us who would be left? Take him inside. Shera will introduce him to the others."

The puppy wriggled against the boy.

"A dog too? Oh, the kids will be happy to see that." The soldier chuckled and stepped out of the way, waving Dashtu inside.

"Thanks." Dashtu breathed a sigh of relief that no one wanted to shoot the child on sight. But others? The thought conjured the images of children raised in a militaristic atmosphere. He shuddered and hurried through the door.

Shera sat behind the information desk, the same woman he'd seen when he first arrived. She took one look at the little boy in his arms, gave a squeal and hurried to her feet. "Oh, you found another one!" She held out her arms. "I'll take him."

The pup took that moment to scramble to the floor. He barked, running around the two of them and wagging his tail.

"A dog too. Oh the children will be so happy. Thank you."

Dashtu stood there, the child in his arms, and looked from Shera to the dog then back again. For a moment, he debated about not letting her have the child. She seemed thankful, but what if she did something when his back was turned? Lightly, he scanned her mind, sensing only welcoming thoughts. "All right," he replied, still reluctant to hand over the child.

Shera smiled. "Tell you what, why don't you follow me? The little guy is still kind of sleeping. I'd hate to disturb him." She glanced toward the doors, but the guards had their backs to her. With a shrug of her shoulders, she started down the hall.

Dashtu followed, thankful to have at least one ally within these walls when it came to the child. She led him down a hall, toward what may have at one time been an emergency room. Now, the metal tracks where curtains once hung stood empty. Beds were pushed against walls, a large table and play area setup in the middle. Children ranging in ages from toddlers to teenagers milled in the open area, and when Shera entered, a girl, nearly an adult, stepped forward.

"Another one?" she asked, bending over to pet the puppy.

Several children saw the dog and squealed, rushing the ball of fluff. The teen turned around. "Wait until he's cleaned up."

The children looked at her; a few pouted then turned and went back to the play area. This teen was in charge.

"Thanks, Kira. Think we got a soldier here with a soft heart. I heard he battled Stony for the boy."

Her eyes widened and she grinned at him.

The boy stirred awake.

"It'll be all right," Dashtu said. "You're safe now." He set the boy on his feet.

"Rufus?"

The pup yipped and bounded toward his owner.

The boy smiled. "Thanks, man!" He raced off to join the other children.

Kira reached out and grabbed his hand. "Thank you. Some of the other soldiers don't understand that without us, they don't have anything." She smiled, looking far older than her years then with a nod to Shera followed the boy back to the group of children.

She turned to face him. "Thank you. Not all the soldiers would have been as nice as you. Better get back outside. I think they're going to send you out on another mission."

Dashtu nodded and turned on his heel. Children, dozens of them trapped inside the Necromancer's compound. He never imagined and now wished he had. Suddenly, there were a lot more innocents who needed to be helped.

Chapter Eight

Dashtu raced through the streets, every muscle in his body aching. After nearly nonstop runs and almost twenty-four hours on his feet, he was ready for some serious downtime. He skirted a zombie squad not far from Barg's. He scanned them, wondering if he'd recognize anyone. After dropping the boy off with Kira and Shera, he'd been sent back out into the training fields. He'd shadowed several lieutenants, watching them put the zombie soldiers through their paces.

One zombie, a tall statuesque woman with dark skin, caught his attention. Ulanda. He'd watched her die, held her lifeless body in his arms. And yet, there she was, eyes glowing green, fighting in the zombie army. He paused, ducking into shadows. The more he watched her, the more he felt certain she was Ulanda.

He reached out with his senses, skipping over the humans and the other zombies. Even though she wasn't human any more, she still retained some semblance of humanity. The instant his energy touched her, he knew. Ulanda had been turned into a zombie.

He staggered forward and toward Barg's. He yanked his attention away, drawing his powers back inside and locking them down tight. Watching the zombies sickened him. Memories assaulted his mind, of Ulanda fighting the zombies. She'd used short knives, blades flashing as she took out her enemies. He remembered her as the Blade she'd been. Seeing her as a zombie tore his heart out.

He stumbled, thinking of Zahra brought to the same fate. Going into the Necromancers' organization to learn their plans and stop them wasn't enough. Not now. He wanted to bring this Necromancer down. Pouring his anger into movement, he raced toward Barg's. The sooner he got to her, the sooner they could figure out what to do, together.

If they wanted to win, he couldn't push Zahra away. Dashtu stumbled, his thoughts sending him reeling. Stopping, he bent over, the heels of his hands rubbing his eyes. History had a chance to repeat itself.

Looking over his shoulder, he stared at the empty road, thankful he couldn't see anyone. It was time to stop playing solo and start being part of a team. After seeing Ulanda, it proved that anyone could become a zombie, possibly even him.

He straightened, more determined than ever to talk to Zahra. Forget about infiltrating, forget about trying to ferret out secrets. He wanted to bring the Necromancers down and bring them down now. Perhaps if he ridded Neukacee of the Necro then they could work outward until all the Necros were gone. Where there was one Blade, there had to be others. And if they knew Ulanda had been transformed, he knew they wouldn't stop until all Necros were dead. A feral smile curled his lips.

Three zombies hovered near the back entrance of Barg's. Taking it as a sign, Dashtu sprang forward. He toppled two of them, breaking their necks before they even had a chance to move. The third circled, wary as Dashtu engaged him in the fight. He tuned out the zombie's wails, the thud of flesh against flesh music to his ears. In the darkness of the back alley, it was only him and the zombie.

A familiar blade snaked out the back door, taking the zombie's head with it. Zahra pushed the corpse aside, wiping the blade on its clothing as she did so. She sheathed the sword then leaped into Dashtu's arms.

"Took you long enough," she growled a moment before she kissed him.

Dashtu stumbled backward, his hands going to her ass to haul her against him. He slammed into the wall, leaning against it while he slanted his lips over Zahra's. To him Barg's unique bitter brew tasted like heaven on her lips.

His hands roamed her back, her thighs, drawing her close to him. His cock throbbed, full and hard from the instant he'd seen the moonlight flash on her blade. His warrior. His Blade. A low groan rumbled from his chest as her lips slid along his jaw. She drew his earlobe into her mouth and suckled gently.

"Zahra." He breathed her name as she wriggled against him. He managed to slide his hands between them and unfasten first his pants then hers. Darkness surrounded them and provided the illusion of privacy. Right now, he cared about nothing except getting inside her.

She murmured encouragement against his neck, her teeth marking him as she sucked on his flesh. Her hand flattened on his chest, sliding inside his vest to stroke his skin. Each touch inflamed him.

His Blade. Possessiveness welled inside him. He shoved her leather pants down, tangling them around her legs. A quick flip had her back against the wall, his hands beneath her ass holding her in place. His jeans fell, and he plunged home in a single stroke.

Heaven.

Wet heat surrounded him, her cunt tightening around his shaft. Her muscles stroked him, rippling along his length tight enough for him to feel every nuance of her body. So hot, so alive, he drank in the sensations of each stroke, fucking her hard and fast.

The muscles in her thighs tightened. Her tongue tangled with his, as aggressive as his cock inside her. Almost as if they both needed this, needed to know that they had survived. His fingers traced over new scratches, the injuries too fresh to have fully healed. Pouring energy into her, he sped the process along.

Burying her face in his shoulder, Zahra bit him through his vest. Her orgasm hit fast and hard. A quick series of contractions fluttered through her channel, tightening around him like a glove. Wordlessly, she screamed against his flesh, the vibrations racing straight to his groin.

His balls tightened. A part of his mind told him to slow down. Things were happening too quickly. He couldn't and his release exploded through him like a runaway train. He groaned, his body shuddering as his seed shot into her. Still, she twitched, each tiny aftershock wringing even more from him. Finally, they slumped together, braced by the wall.

Their panting breaths mingled, his body slowly softening inside her. He relished the feel of her in his arms, the sweat on his skin. Alive. They were both alive. She made no move to leave, and he hated to separate them. From inside the bar, someone laughed, the crashing of beer mugs reminding him they weren't exactly in the best place to linger.

"I suppose we can talk now." Zahra licked a bead of sweat from his neck and wriggled in his arms.

He released her, gently helping her steady herself. In silence, they pulled up their pants, arranging clothing. She reached out her hand and he entwined his fingers with hers.

"Yeah, I suppose we can." He grinned, a moment of tenderness passing between them. Nothing, not even the distant wails of zombies could break the moment as she led him in Barg's back door and up the stairs to the rooms above.

He watched her lead him up the stairs, her ass swaying tantalizingly close before him. The sounds of sex floated down the hall to him and his cock hardened thinking about getting the chance to make love to Zahra again.

Except she was right. They had to talk.

She directed him to a room with an actual door, not just a hastily drawn curtain. She closed it behind them then locked it. The room had a bed, barely big enough for two, and a single, straight-backed chair. No windows, and frankly he'd seen closets bigger than this place. Still, it offered privacy and a chance to see Zahra.

"The Necros have been getting aggressive," Zahra said without preamble. She turned the chair around and sat in it, her arms resting across the back. "Lots of people been kicked out of their homes."

Dashtu nodded. "I know. Some of the soldiers have been bringing back orphans. There are probably thirty or forty of them stuffed into the headquarters. We've got to take this Necro out and get the kids away."

"Children?" She frowned, her eyes going distant.

"Yeah. They look well cared for even though I hate to think of them in the Necro's hands." He stopped before her and rested his hands across hers. He didn't need to hear her story; he saw it written on her face. He squeezed her hands and knelt down so he looked her in the eyes. "I'll get them out. I promise."

"Thank you," she whispered. A shudder went through her, and when she looked at him again, any traces of her painful past were gone. "What are your plans?" She'd returned to business mode.

He released her hands and went to the bed. He sat down and stretched his legs in front of him. Having her in this room, the sounds of sex fading to background noise, made him want her again. Plans first, sex later. "I say we go in there and take them out. Go in. Save as many as we can and kill the Necro." The words felt odd in his mouth, and he knew, no matter how celestial his father's origins, he'd fallen far from the mark. At one time he'd thought his half-angel status made him better, higher than those around him. Now he knew he might have more powers, but they could kill just the same as a human hand.

Zahra straightened. "Sounds good to me. What do you propose? Frankly, all I've been doing is taking out small patrols, nothing big enough to worry about."

"You know other fighters, right?"

"Maybe," she replied. "It's not like we have a signal or anything we can flash in the sky, and I sure as hell am not a chosen one." She snorted. "All scale attack."

"Someone has to get the humans out of here. I propose you muster as many resources as you can. If things go south, I want the people gone. Then we go in and we take them down."

"Just the two of us? You're talking a suicide mission." Zahra shoved to her feet, kicking the chair out of the way. "I thought you said you didn't want to get me killed."

"And I thought you said you could handle your own." He rose to his feet, drawn to her beauty, drawn to her power. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he stilled her movements. The bed called to him, a place to lay her down and love her the way she deserved. Something squeezed in his heart and twisted.

"I can. It's you I'm worried about." Zahra swayed toward him.

Dashtu pulled her the rest of the way. Tucking her head beneath his chin, he swept his hands over her curves. With each caress, he memorized the detail of her body, her curves, and her muscled form. She worried about him, a half-angel who pretty much couldn't die. What had he ever done to deserve a Blade like her?

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. "Don't have to worry about me. It's you I'm worried about. What have you been doing?"

She shrugged. "Just taking out a patrol here and there."

Dashtu stilled his hands just above her waist. "These don't feel like a patrol 'here and there.'" He traced the scratches beneath her clothing, wanting to perform another full heal on her. "I'd like to make sure you're healed before I leave." He pressed his lips to her temple.

She started to shake her head, and he tightened his hold on her. His stubborn little Blade thought she could battle the world and win. Perhaps, she might be right, but he'd feel better if he gave her a bit more help. "Okay," she breathed against his chest.

He relaxed his hold, letting her step out of his arms. She strode to the bed, shedding clothing as she went. "I know what happened last time." She winked at him and lay down.

He drank in the sight of her fearing that it might be his last. His plan -- his crazy, most likely suicidal plan -- circled in his mind. Deep in his heart he sensed that others in the compound would help. Shera. Kira. Maybe even the guard who had let him bring the boy inside. Surely he wouldn't complete his mission only to find that he and Zahra perished in the process.

She held out her hand. "Don't think about the future."

Her soft words pulled him to the bed. He slid off his vest. They'd both end up naked by the time this was over with anyway. Sitting next to her, he closed his eyes and stilled his thoughts.

Zahra sat. She moved behind him, flattening her palms against his shoulder blades. "Maybe it's you who needs the healing." She leaned forward to press a kiss to the nape of his neck. Stroking his back, paying special attention to his shoulders and neck, she rubbed the tension from him. "It's almost like you have wings." She caressed his unblemished flesh, the two darker lines where wings might have erupted through the skin had he been worthy of his angelic parent.

Dashtu let his head fall to his chest. It was his curse. "I should have had them." He swallowed hard, remembering the anger in his mother's voice that he'd been unwinged. According to her, his father had stayed with them only a year, she'd said. And Dashtu had vague memories of a lullaby his father used to sing. Then, one day he had muttered something in his angelic language before turning aside, large white wings erupting from his back as he soared toward the heavens and out of their lives. His disfigurement had driven his father away.

Her hands slowed, fingertips tracing the muscles just beneath the blades. "I think you're beautiful without them." She leaned forward again and trailed kisses along the length of his neck. "Besides, if you had them then you really would be an angel, and I'd probably be in big trouble." She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

The tender gesture tightened his gut. He didn't deserve his Blade. Under his watch men had died. Many lives had been ruined because he'd lacked the ability to save them all. He was an angel, supposed to bring peace, joy, all those things spoken about in the tales. They didn't exist anymore, not in this world.

But maybe, just maybe, if his plan worked, he could help bring a bit more light into the world. Dashtu smiled, his soul at peace for the first time in a long time. Zahra crawled from behind him and lay on the bed.

"Thank you." He turned to face her, focusing his attention on the fresh lines across her ribs and down over her buttocks and thighs. She might have said she'd been clearing out some zombies, but from the looks of the wounds, she'd been a hellcat bent on fighting as many as possible. Perhaps he wasn't the only one to drown his sorrows with violence.

"One of the things I learned a long time ago was that you can't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. You might be part angel, Dashtu, and I might be a Blade, but we can't save everyone. Not this time. Now why don't you work your magic?" She rested her hand on his thigh.

Heat burned from her touch. Her vibrant energy surrounded him. It coaxed his healing and his cock to life. Ignoring the pounding in his shaft and the naked flesh just inches from his fingers, he focused on her life force. Good and strong, it blazed with light as complex as the woman herself.

Dashtu rested his fingers on her abdomen, just above her waist. The palms of his hands and the soles of his feet burned with the energy flaring to life inside him. He watched as she closed her eyes, her chest rising and falling with each deepening breath. When he sensed she was as relaxed as she'd be, he slipped into her.

Like before, it was only a merging of energies, and yet it felt as intimate as if he'd plunged into her pussy. Immediately, he went to work, finding the injuries and working to heal them. He frowned at the appearance of several new injuries and the strains in muscles that weren't visible on the outside. They were two of a kind, pushing themselves to the limit. He wished humanity appreciated what they did.

He shoved the morose thoughts aside, wanting to focus his energies specifically on Zahra. Working on healing her, he sensed the twisted organs that prevented her from conceiving a child. He could heal them. He paused, his energy hovering around her womb. Thoughts of a child with Zahra, the two of them raising a new generation of Blades nearly swayed his hands. No. Not yet, not until they secured the future and he talked to her. He pulled his energies aside, forcing them up each rib, healing minor bruising and muscle tenderness.

Dashtu released a sigh. If she had known how close he'd been... A wave of protectiveness washed over him. Watching her grow round with his child, knowing they brought something good into the world...just thinking about it nearly made his decision for him.

His fingertips brushed the undersides of her breasts. The contact jolted him back to the present. He skirted the round globes. The taut peaks of her nipples called to him. Her breathing hitched as he caressed the sides then the tops. Curling his fingers into her

shoulders, he struggled to keep his attention on the healing energy. A long scratch on her arm drew him back into his work.

Finally, a sweep of power through her head, thankfully with no signs of trauma, and he pulled away. His fingers straightened, palms sweeping down until he cupped her breasts in his hands.

Zahra covered his hands with her own. "You could have fixed me," she whispered.

Dashtu nodded and waited for her anger.

* * * * *

Dashtu's fingers on her breasts made it difficult for her to think. As his energy swept through her, all she could concentrate on was his cock plunging deep inside her. Each stroke of power hit something inside that made her focus on wanting to wrap her legs around his hips and taking all of him. Her clit ached. Her labia swelled, pussy wet with her desire for more physical penetration.

Inside her body, hell inside her soul, she felt his power searching, trying to find things to make right. Heat surrounded her womb. The twisted tubes and dead ovaries hummed then as quickly as the sensation started, it ended, and she knew he'd left her as he had found her. Her stomach fell. Just thinking about him fixing her, making her whole sent equal parts of longing and despair through her. This wasn't a world in which they could raise children. She didn't want her child to end up like her, an orphan, thrust on the streets by a cruel act of the zombies.

Yet, thinking about Dashtu, standing by his side, raising another generation of fighters, she wanted it so bad she hurt. Was this what was meant by falling in love? He talked of it, spoke of loving her and making love to her, and she knew deep in her heart there wasn't room in her life for something as beautiful as love. In spite of that, Dashtu sat next to her, his hands soft on her skin, his body hard and ready.

"Why didn't you?" she asked. Her voice shook.

"Because now isn't the time and it has to be your decision." Dashtu slid his hands back down to her stomach, flattening one over her navel. "I think we can both agree there are plenty of orphaned children in the world right now. As much as I want to watch you grow with our child, making that happen a few days before a major strike on the Necromancer's compound isn't smart. But it will happen, Zahra. I promise you that." He leaned forward and pressed his lips to the smooth flesh where his hand had just been.

Zahra shivered, his words sending a chill through her with their finality. "So you think we can survive this thing?" She sat up and tucked her legs beneath her. Lying naked on the bed while he sat, fully clothed, next to her left her feeling utterly exposed -- especially given that they were discussing *her* body.

Dashtu shrugged. "I have to believe we will. I think we'll have more help inside than we think."

"From who?" Zahra wrapped her arms over her breasts. She glanced at her clothes. Her body still hummed from his healing, and the last time they'd done this, they'd ended up having sex. She hoped it'd happen this time too. The quickie in the alley had done little to diminish her appetite for him.

"I don't think everyone is as devoted to the Necros as they think." He shook his head. "Give me a few days to scope a few things out. Then we'll know."

She sensed him pulling away from her. "*You mean like this,*" she said in his mind in an attempt to reinforce their connection. One minute he talked about the future, the next he acted as if he wasn't sure they'd have a future. She pushed against his chest.

Dashtu fell back, and before he had a chance to move, she straddled him and unfastened his jeans. "I think you worry way too much about me," she said. "It's that other Blade, isn't it? She's the reason why you go from hot to cold. One minute talking about the future, the next talking about how the world is going to end. It's been this way for a while. Even if we fail, and I trust we won't, someone else will come along and kick those Necromancers' asses."

His gaze dropped to where her hands hovered near his erection.

She cupped him, stroking him from base to tip. "You can't stop us. One might fall, but then another will take her place. We're everywhere." Eko had come when she'd needed someone to watch over her old neighborhood. Holt had ways of getting information; perhaps he could call another fighter if she died. She shook her head. She wasn't going to die. "I want a little of that angel magic." She tightened her fingers around his base.

"You want this." Dashtu closed his eyes, his features a study in concentration. A slender object, a tiny knob on its end, pressed against her anus. Already slick with lubricant, the bulb easily penetrated her.

Zahra gasped. Automatically, she reached behind her and encountered only air. "How do you do that?" With one hand around his cock, she fingered her pussy with the other. Her cream coated her fingers, her clit swollen and ready.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He bucked his hips, his cock sliding through her fingers.

"Yeah, I would. You have your special powers, and I have mine." She scooted back enough to lean over and lick the head of his cock. A salty drop of precum lingered on her tongue and she savored it. He might be worried about a Blade from his past, but she was determined to show him this one was alive and ready for action.

Chapter Nine

Torn between talking and fucking, Zahra drew Dashtu's cock into her mouth. Closing her eyes, she savored him. His musky aroma tantalized her senses, and the thought that there might be a day when she couldn't experience this had her lavng him with her tongue, drawing out every nuance from his body that she could. She had to prove to him that she was a Blade without compare. Ulanda's death still haunted him.

She loved him with her mouth. Her lips and tongue moved over him, licking and sucking. If she could pour her heart into her actions, she would. She tried. Drawing him deep into her mouth, she hollowed out her cheeks. Every husky groan, every encouragement pushed her onward.

Dashtu fisted his hand in her hair. He held back, his hips rigid on the bed. Mentally, she reached for him, tenderly probing their fledgling telepathic communication. The pressure in her ass increased, the toy working in and out of her as if he wielded it with his hand instead of his mind. Around his cock, Zahra whimpered.

"This is for you." She sent the words at him. Determined to ignore his counter-seduction, she released his cock with a pop. They should talk. Haunted eyes stared at her, the secrets he'd revealed no less deep than her own. Children stuck in a Necromancer's stronghold. A possible suicide mission. Her calling pounded at her until she shook her head and shoved it all aside.

If she were going to go into a deathtrap, she needed to tell Dashtu how she felt. Not with words. She doubted she could voice them, and he...well, he probably wouldn't hear them. Not with Ulanda's ghost hovering between them. But her actions could speak for her, far louder than anything she might say.

Zahra crawled over his body. Straddling his abdomen, she reached up and feathered her fingers through his hair. "Whatever you're doing to me feels so good, but this is for you,"

she whispered against his lips. The feeling of the toy left her wet and aching. Determined to ignore her own needs, she focused on him. She drew his lower lip into her mouth and suckled. He sighed and parted his lips.

She kissed him, taking her time to thoroughly explore his mouth. Their tongues met, danced, and plundered like two warriors seeking treasure. Though she rode high on his body, she sensed his cock, hard and ready for her should she just slide down a bit further. Not yet, not until she made him as mad with lust as he made her.

The need for air parted their lips, sending her trailing kisses along the line of his jaw. She savored the masculine structure, the taut skin of his neck, the muscled hollow of his collarbone. Working her way along a corded muscle just beneath the flesh, she found her way to his earlobe and suckled. Beneath her, his hips jerked.

"Easy," she crooned, sliding her palm over his chest.

His hands cupped her waist, his body rigid with the effort it took not to take over the seduction.

Zahra grinned against his chest. She swirled her tongue around one of his nipples, drawing the bud into her mouth. Her hips rocked against him, the delicious feeling of the strong male between her thighs ratcheting her arousal even higher. She palmed his other nipple, thinking of how it felt when he did that to her. Her breasts brushed against his abdomen.

He growled her name as she trailed kisses from one nipple to the other. A love bite on his upper pectoral left a red mark and evoked a moan. She wriggled on him, her legs sensitized to his hair-roughened thighs, her pussy all too aware of his strength. Around them, the carnal sounds of frenzied sex added to the mood.

She tried to love him as if she had all the time in the world. In her mind they did. Any attacks had to wait until they were both vertical and dressed. From her position, she controlled when, or if, that happened. She slid down his body, his cock bumping against her ass.

Zahra moaned. How much longer she could keep up the teasing, she didn't know, but she'd be damned if she was going to give up. She swung her leg off of him, turning around to stretch out along his body. Her position gave him an up close view of her pussy. She grinned, contemplating his cock. She skimmed it with her hands, choosing instead to venture along the length of his muscled thighs. She crawled along his body until she cupped a foot in her hands.

Men's feet fascinated her. Though many parts of the male anatomy drew her eye, she had a fetish for feet. She drew her fingers along the backs of each toe, the pressure just hard enough that it wouldn't tickle. Wrapping one hand around his arch, the other on the opposite side, she began to massage. He groaned as she started at the ankle, her long, sweeping strokes moving toward the toes.

"Like that?" she asked.

Fingers wrapped around her thighs, spreading her. "I like this more." He swept his knuckles from her clit to the skin just beneath her anus. "And this." He dipped two fingers inside her.

Zahra struggled to keep her focus. "No mind tricks?"

"Not this time." Another thrust, and her channel tightened around him. He rotated his wrist so it rubbed against her clit.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her forehead to his feet. She swallowed hard. A lump sat in her stomach. His touch reminded her of what she'd found and what she'd lose. Dashtu sank his fingers deep into her and the pleasure rippling from her core drove all thoughts from her mind.

She pumped her hips against his fingers, fucking his hand the way she'd like to take his body. Between her legs, his cock throbbed, full and hard. Each stroke of his fingers sent it twitching against her stomach. Straightening, she reached between her legs and cupped him. She varied her rhythm, her strokes matching his. Though they were two people, pleasuring each other with their hands, it was like they were one person, a rise and fall of pleasure that crested ever higher. A subtle push on her mind had his thoughts entering hers, and suddenly, she felt both Dashtu's body and her own. As if it were her, she relished the fingers tightening around his cock, stroking, squeezing. His balls hung full and heavy between his legs, and her pussy tightened with the addition of a third finger.

Beneath it all, Dashtu believed this would be the last time he'd see her, make love to her, and he vowed to make it last. Zahra squeezed her eyes closed as they watered with the true depth of his emotions. Though it had been she who'd instigated this, he felt as if he were a condemned man given one final moment. A lump formed in her throat.

No. It wouldn't be that way. No matter what happened today, tomorrow, in the future, he'd be there for her. He had to be.

She whimpered as she slid away from his fingers, the loss so acute she ached with it. Poising herself over his cock, she sheathed him inside her until their bodies were flush. Flesh against flesh, soul against soul, they were joined. Zahra took a deep breath and flexed her inner walls around him.

"Zahra," he whispered, his word at once a caress and a benediction. With their thoughts merged, his exhalation floated through her mind. His hands on her hips, he held her steady.

She looked down at him, memorizing his sharp features, his white-blond hair cut close to the scalp. Eyes closed, pale lashes fanned against his cheeks, he looked like the angel he claimed to be. Half-angel, she mentally corrected as he began to pump his hips.

His parentage really didn't matter because he fucked like a god. His short strokes sent him rubbing against her G-spot with every thrust. Tiny frissons of pleasure exploded deep inside her body. Like the grand finale of a fireworks display, each blast built on the one before, until she could only close her eyes and rock as her body detonated with release.

The convulsions raced through her. Her moaning cries mingled with the ones coming through the wall, until the entire floor was alight with a cacophony of sexual pleasure.

Dashtu wasn't finished.

He sat up, his lips fastening onto one of her nipples. Pressing her forward, he bent her backward. Her heels pressed against her buttocks, her body stretched open for his invasion. Still, he teased her with those same, shallow strokes.

Zahra whimpered. Tension strung her tight. How dare he torment her like this? She wanted a good solid fucking, a release that would make her scream his name. Every shortened stroke only took her that much higher and gave her farther to fall. She curled her fingers into his shoulders.

Leaning forward, she buried her face in the crook of his neck. "What are you doing to me?" she growled against his skin. Every battle had a victor. A winner and a loser, and she'd be damned if in this case she lost control before he did. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

"Loving you." His mental whisper underscored his lips moving across her nipples and breasts. He laved her skin, each stroke of his tongue across her flesh like the caress of a whip. *"I'm loving you."*

"I. Want. To. Come." She enunciated each of her words with a thrust of her hips. The angle left her wanting and she felt Dashtu smile against her skin.

"Not yet." He nuzzled her neck, his hands sweeping down her spine to cup her buttocks. He enfolded her in his arms, surrounding her with his strength. The corded lines of his muscular, male body underscoring the differences between them. In physical form he might be hard and she soft, but when it came to the emotional realm he was far softer than she. Zahra smiled. She liked that about him.

She nipped his neck, soothing the red mark with her tongue. In the cubicle next to them a woman reached her peak. A male guttural groan accompanied the woman's screaming orgasm, and Zahra envied the couple. She writhed on Dashtu's lap. The pole of his cock and his strong hands kept her from going anywhere and she railed against his restraint.

Dashtu pushed her back to the mattress. More than ready for him to deepen his strokes, she let him bend her knees toward her chest. He braced her feet against his chest and kneeling, thrust into her in a long, smooth stroke.

Zahra screamed with pleasure. Yes! This was what she wanted, the hard and fast pump of his cock deep inside of her. The head brushed against her cervix, hitting that place high and deep inside. Pulling out nearly all the way, he gave her his entire length.

The bed rattled against the wall. The banging headboard played counterpoint to each thrust. If this were the memory that she took with her, she'd gladly do so. Burying her face against his chest, she burrowed against him. Her nails scored his back.

Her thigh muscles burned. She struggled to find breath and yet wished that this would never end. And then her muscles tightened as she raced toward that elusive, final, heart-pounding release. One more thrust, and as his cock slid home she exploded. Muscles convulsing, her head tipped back, mouth opened in a silent scream, she let the release explode through her.

Dashtu followed her over the edge. His muscles stiffened and his cock jerked inside her.

Zahra relished the warm splash of his seed inside her. His sweaty skin slid against hers. His musky aroma filled her nose. She drank it in, every sound, every sight, every breath, all of it. She wrapped all those memories and tucked them into a far corner of her mind.

* * * * *

Dashtu closed his eyes and struggled to regain control. The woman beneath him surprised him on every level. He leaned back, unfolded her legs, and straightened them out. Rolling to the side, he gathered her in his arms. Fully sated, he couldn't muster an image of Ulanda, but her nonexistent ghost hovered in the back of his mind.

If he could slip out and complete this mission without getting Zahra hurt, he would. He knew the moment he tried to do anything like that, she'd be on his ass like a bee on a flower. "So how do you want to do this?" he asked when he could breathe normally again.

She rolled to her side and propped up her head on her hand. Once again he was struck by her beauty. Short, black hair framed her face. Her upturned nose gave her a pixie look, and as he surveyed her slender frame, she looked far too fragile to be going up against the Necromancers.

He knew better.

And that was why he loved her.

"What do you think? You're the one who has been in the Necromancer's compound." She shifted on the bed.

He watched her. The round globes of her breasts distracted him, the hard nipples begging once more for his lips. His mouth watered. His cock jerked to life. *Down!* He cupped it, stroking himself from base to tip and willing his erection to subside while they talked tactics.

They needed a concrete plan. "I go back, work to insinuate myself into the Necromancer's organization. When I get a chance to hit at the top, I will."

"And me?" Zahra rolled to a seated position. She rose to her feet and pulled on her pants. She bent over and slipped her feet back into socks and boots then grabbed her vest and zipped it closed. Dressed, she returned to her chair. Straddling it, she stared at him. "What will I do?"

Stay safe. “Be on call.” Dashtu swallowed hard. He crossed the space between them, snagging his jeans as he went. He pulled them on, leaving them zipped but not buttoned, and stopped in front of her. He knelt and covered her hands with his own. “I’ll call you if I need you. Until then, stay safe. Keep the humans out of the way.”

“What do you hope to accomplish? If we take out the Necro, another one will take his place. And if one doesn’t step up then one of his lieutenants will rise to the power. We can’t just snap our fingers and make them go away. I’m tired of chewing them away little by little. I want humans safe.” She yanked her hands out from beneath his and balled them into fists.

“So do I.”

Zahra hurled herself from the chair. She paced next to the wall. Her angry strides echoed, the sated woman gone as the tactical soldier took her place. Her energy flared, the sparks of power intoxicating with their strength. She whirled to face him. “I don’t think you understand. I’ve been fighting these bastards for a while. I was promised you’d help me. You’d help take them down.”

“You act like I can drop a nuclear bomb on them or something,” Dashtu snarled. He refused to give into her anger.

“Can’t you?” She whirled to face him. “I was told you’re special. You have powers beyond compare. God, I want you so much and you make me so damn angry. Can’t you just take them out?” Her body vibrated.

“Not without taking out the humans too.” Dashtu closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He mentally begged his angelic father whom he never knew to try and lend him some of that fabled divine patience. “Don’t you think I want to do that? But there are children in that building, Zahra. Children! They can’t be forced to pay for the Necros’ actions.” He kept his voice down, uncertain who could hear through the thin walls. This wasn’t the place to be talking plans, yet it was the only place they had. “*We should talk mind to mind.*”

Zahra flinched. “*The children can’t be made to pay. I’m not asking them to pay. I’m not happy I lost my parents to a zombie attack, but I won’t stand around and wait for more kids to be orphaned.*”

There, now she dug at the root of the pain. Like picking at a days old scab, fresh pain oozed to the surface. “*I’m sorry you lost your parents.*”

“*Don’t be sorry. Just kill the bastards who did it.*” Her mental voice snapped across his.

He went to her and curled his hands on her shoulders. “*Zahra, think about what you’re doing. We can’t go into this without a plan.*”

“*Why the hell not?*” she raged at him. Pounding her fists on his chest, she unleashed her anger on him.

Dashtu stood there, absorbing the blows. “*Because if we do a lot more innocents will get killed.*”

"So what do you think? I think you're stalling. I don't think you have any answers."

He let her exhaust her frustration. He held her, more to be sure she didn't hurt herself than him. After all, he could heal. Even now, as her fists pounded against his flesh, he directed energy to his muscles. *"I don't have all the answers, but I have some. We can't just take out the Necros. We have to replace him with something better, something that will help the humans."*

"And what do you suggest?"

A smile curved the corner of Dashtu's mouth. Though Zahra had been the one to seek him, he knew what he had to do. He'd planned to do it with Ulanda, but her death had changed everything. *"I suggest that you take over."*

Zahra stilled. Even her breathing halted for a moment. Not a breeze stirred. The near incessant sounds of sex coming through the walls silenced. *"Me?"*

"I can't think of anyone better suited to taking care of the humans and fighting off the Necros. Can you?" Dashtu stifled his widening grin. If he'd just come out and told Zahra his plan, she probably would have thought he was crazy. Heck, she probably thought that now. Still, feeling her mind circle the idea, the ever broadening hope surrounding her, he knew he'd made the right plan.

"You've got a point. So do you have a plan? Tell me more." Zahra's anger faded.

Dashtu wasn't surprised that telling her that he would put her in charge had her simmering down to a low boil. He hadn't known a woman yet who would object to being made the boss. *"We need something that will unequivocally bring down the Necros and set you up as the new force in town. Most of the lieutenants operate on a force principle. If you can kick their asses, you can rule them. So that's what we do."*

"How?" she whispered.

"Don't know yet." He pressed his lips to hers in a quick hard kiss. *"That's how far Ulanda and I got before"...*

Zahra finished his trailing sentence. *"Before she died."*

Dashtu deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue along her plump, lower lip. He pulled away before she could open her mouth and allow him entrance. *"There's something you need to know. I'm pretty sure Ulanda is a zombie."*

She stiffened in his arms. *"A Blade has become a zombie?"*

"Yeah." His gruff admission probably told her all that she needed to know. He hadn't had a chance yet to challenge Ulanda to see if she had retained her abilities. Probably something he should know before he charged into battle.

"That won't happen to me, you know," she whispered against his lips. Reaching up, she twined her fingers in his hair and pressed her body against his. *"I promise you that."*

"How can you?" Grief tore the words from his throat. *"You can't guarantee that."*

"Yes, I can." She brushed her mouth across his, the action full of promise. Stepping away, she danced across the floor.

"How can you?" If she thought she could stop herself from dying, from being turned into a zombie, she had more balls than he did. No one had any control over that, not even him. Except, well, he couldn't die, and he doubted the radiation and gene therapy that created zombies would work on him either. A grin twisted his lips.

"Because I'm not like her. I'm not weak. I've fought them, and I've won."

"So had Ulanda." Damn it, why didn't Zahra see? Ulanda'd had both strength and skill. She'd had them in spades. She'd still died and had become a zombie. One small slip, one deviation from her usual flawlessly executed attacks and she'd succumbed.

"I think you underestimate me." She paused by the door, arms crossed over her chest. Cocking her head, she stared at him. "Now come on. I think you know what you need to do."

"Yeah, I do." He didn't like this, not one bit, but he also knew he wouldn't be able to talk her out of it.

She stepped up to him and cupped his cheek. "Good. Because I'm going to do what I have to do and so will you. We'll take the Necro out, and we'll put me in charge. I like your plan. I think we can win." Her solid affirmations wrapped around him with the strength of a bear hug. Then, with a whisper of a kiss across his lips, she pulled away and darted out the door.

Dashtu waited. His heart pounded in his chest. Straining, he listened to the sounds of her footsteps disappearing down the hall. They pattered on the stairs and then were swallowed by the bustling sounds of Barg's. Even after the raucous laughter of drunken humans and the screaming sounds of women bored from faking their orgasms faded, he still listened for her. He longed to reach out with his mind and brush against hers. He didn't.

He had to trust her. She told him she wouldn't turn into a zombie. Though his experience told him otherwise, to follow after her like a nervous mother wouldn't do either of them any good. If he wanted to keep her, he had to let her go.

Damn, dealing with Blades always made things far more difficult than they had to be. Most humans rolled over when faced with his half-angel status. Then again, most humans didn't turn him on the way Zahra did either. He expelled a harsh breath, and uncertain how long she had rented the room for he hurried downstairs.

He met the crush of humanity in Barg's establishment with little more than a sense of duty. Down here, the humans drank and partied as if nothing else mattered. The age old mating dance carried on between the pounding music and the press of sweaty bodies. Didn't these people know what had happened? Didn't they care? Perhaps they did and the liquid encouragement was all that kept them going.

Dashtu shrugged his shoulders. He nodded to Barg, behind the bar as usual, on his way out the door. He stepped into the night, feeling the blast of dark, dank air slap him in the

face. The wailing of zombies floated on the wind. His body might be sated from his and Zahra's lovemaking, but his mind was sharp. Returning to the Necromancer's compound carried risks he was well equipped to take. Now, to return and set things in motion. Then maybe he could help Zahra become the Blade and the leader she was meant to be.

Chapter Ten

A few blocks away from Barg's the air suddenly changed. Dashtu stopped and flattened himself against a crumbling brick wall. Though no zombie wails filled the night, he sensed them, a few blocks over and hungry for blood. He waited, his only thought for the safety of the woman he loved. When the patrol turned away from Barg's, Dashtu relaxed and threaded his way down the alleys.

He had meant what he said. Zahra would be a leader. His lips quirked into a smile as he thought of the way she'd hunted him, thinking *he* would be the savior of humanity in the Neukacee area. Instead, he was merely a catalyst, a spark to tinder, setting things in motion so she would become the people's liberator.

In order to do that, he needed to know what kind of reception she'd get once she breached the Necromancer's compound's defenses. With a renewed sense of purpose he hurried back to the former hospital he now called home.

Stony stood at the gates, a scowl on his face. He held a rifle in his hands. Additional ammunition was strapped across his chest, and at his hip a pistol rested in its holster. Anger radiated from the young man, a deep well of it that seethed with hatred and violence.

"Where the hell have you been?" Stony snarled.

"Out." Dashtu stepped forward.

Stony sidestepped, blocking his access. "I have orders to bring you in."

Dashtu shrugged, hands held loose at his sides. "Okay. Let's go."

Stony blinked at him, caught off guard by Dashtu's nonchalance. He glanced warily around and Dashtu wondered if the soldier thought that a guard flanked him. A full frontal assault wasn't his speed, but of course, this human soldier didn't know that. No, Dashtu liked to work from inside the organization like an insidious bit of doubt that kept a person

stumbling around, never quite sure he was doing the right thing. He wanted the Necromancers off-balance like that.

“Well, we don’t want to keep him waiting,” Dashtu said. “Unless you just want me to head in on my own.” He kept his tone light, his words nonconfrontational.

“No. No. I have orders to bring you.” Stony spun on his heel and stormed through the gates.

Dashtu followed. That the Necromancer wanted to see him didn’t surprise him in the least. If he had a mole at Barg’s then they could have easily heard the conversation between him and Zahra. Somehow, the prospect didn’t bother him as much as it should. Maybe because he knew there were people like Shera who would relish the fall of their current employer.

The yard was surprisingly empty as he followed Stony through it. No bands of zombies practiced. No soldiers trained. He glanced overhead at the moon. Wispy clouds filled the night sky, stars twinkling through their translucent bands. It would be a perfect night for hunting with plenty of moonlight for zombie and soldier alike to see by. But even on nights like these, he’d watched them practice in the yard. So why not tonight?

The unguarded revolving door sent the hairs on the back of Dashtu’s neck rising. Inside, the main desk sat empty. A lump sat in his chest, a knot of fear for the children he knew lived down one of the corridors. With Stony marching before him, Dashtu couldn’t veer off and check in on them. He only hoped Kira kept them safe.

Whatever the Necro wanted with him, it couldn’t be good, and a part of him feared his plan had failed even before it had begun.

* * * * *

Zahra had waited in shadows until Dashtu emerged from Barg’s looking a bit too self-satisfied. Her tender pussy reminded her of their lovemaking, but Dashtu’s expression went beyond the joy of good sex. It looked almost as if he had some grand master plan that proceeded without any problems. He’d said she would rise to lead these people, and listening to the unwashed masses inside Barg’s drink their lives away, a part of her wondered if he knew what he was talking about.

Still, the idea intrigued her. Spika had told her she was destined for great things and Zahra thought it was simply being a fighter, though there was nothing simple about it. She ducked into the shadows, watching as a young soldier challenged Dashtu at the gate.

She overheard snippets of conversation. The Necro wanted to see Dashtu. Zahra frowned. Unless that was in the plans. Since he hadn’t bothered to share them with her, she didn’t know. Zahra closed her eyes. Mentally, she started to reach out to connect with him. Something pulled her back. As far as he knew she had gone back to her sanctuary, maybe

even had engaged another round of zombies. She didn't want him to know she'd followed him.

She waited long enough for the soldier and Dashtu to disappear into a revolving door at the side of the hospital. Taking the unmanned gate for a sign, she ducked inside. She darted across the open yard then kept to the shadows surrounding the building. The front, with its large overhang and wide, circular drive appeared as abandoned as the entrance she'd used. From the back near a parking garage, wails of zombies rose and fell like a musical symphony Spika had made her listen to once. Using the sounds as a guide, she circled the large building.

Ducking beneath a window, she waited between the skeletal remains of once-manicured bushes and a sliding glass door. The door no longer moved. A stick had been jammed in the track to keep it open, and through it went a veritable parade of soldiers and zombies.

Sometimes singularly, other times in pairs or trios, the soldier led zombies into the large field. The creatures milled, glowing eyes looking all around as if they couldn't figure out how they'd gotten there or what had happened to them. Clothes looked torn, wounds had scabs or new red scars. Zahra squeaked with surprise.

These were new recruits. A child looking no more than twelve came out, a wicked looking pistol held in its hands.

Zahra bit her knuckles. She thought back to her own childhood on the streets after zombies killed her parents. The creatures had been brutal, clawing her mother until huge tears crossed her chest and blood pooled beneath her. Zahra's father had fought, trying to protect his wife, and when she fell, trying to protect his only daughter. When the fight ended he lay on the floor of their simple home, his neck bent at an awkward angle and slashes on his thigh and abdomen spilling blood and entrails across the living room floor. Zahra had hid in the cupboard. Crouched in the darkness, she'd listened to her parents fight and die. She dashed away a tear.

For that child and for all the others locked somewhere in the Necromancer's compound, she'd fight. She'd destroy them, and then she'd keep the humans safe.

A wave of approval washed over her mind.

Zahra shut the connection down, afraid Dashtu would find out she'd followed him back to the compound. Careful to keep her thoughts neutral, she waited until several soldiers came out of the building. They herded the zombies into a loose formation and marched them to the parking garage.

She watched them leave, cursing the lack of cover. Between this door and the garage lay smooth expanses of pavement, occasionally broken up by a raised meridian designed to help keep traffic flow smooth. The raised beds with dried plants and overgrown bushes offered very little cover. She prayed they'd offer enough.

In her unrelieved black outfit she'd stand out as a human who didn't belong. Without glowing eyes she certainly couldn't pass as a zombie, and frankly, the idea of doing so had

her stomach churning. The soldiers wore military surplus, most of it olive green or camouflage. If she were caught... She refused to think along those lines.

Keeping low, she hurried to the next meridian, sliding onto her stomach beneath low-hanging bushes. The overgrown branches provided enough shielding to hide her, yet she peered between the leaves to watch the spooky procession of men and zombies. They reached the parking garage.

Soldiers, all of them holding guns of some kind, surrounded the building in even intervals. Orange plastic mesh covered every available opening, except the large entrance and exits, making the parking garage a kind of diabolical cage. The wails coming from the garage made her hair stand on end. There had to be hundreds of zombies being held like cattle in there. And that wasn't the only parking ramp.

The more she watched the zombies, the more Zahra's determination to destroy them cemented. No more tiny raids where she took out a patrol or two. That only served to anger the Necromancers like a pinprick to a finger. The heavy weight of the katana on her back sang to her a song of blood lust and death. She reached up and curled her fingers around the black hilt.

Zahra waited. No sooner had the group of zombies entered then another one came out. She stilled, trying not to even breathe as the creatures formed up and ran across the parking lot right at her. She stiffened. Leaves rustled in the bushes around her.

She stared at the oncoming zombies certain she'd taken things one step too far. As they neared, their eyes glowed green. Inhuman wails surrounded them, blending with those from the parking garage. The sounds drove shivers down her spine.

She prepared to bolt to her feet, determined to fight for her life. Coming inside the compound hadn't been the smartest thing she'd ever done. Tentatively, she reached toward Dashtu with her mind.

The zombies ran right around her.

Zahra remained still, her mental probe halted by the prospect that she wouldn't need his assistance. She watched as wave after wave of legs raced by her. Some human, some zombie, all of them willing to kill her if they found her. She waited until they ended, counting at least fifty in various squads. Behind her, the groups funneled off, some out the gate, some around front probably for training of some sort.

When she deemed it safe, she rolled out of her hiding place and raced toward the building. Not stopping, she darted out the gate. Once in more familiar territory, she hurried back to her new home. She raced through streets and alleys, ignoring the sounds of minor scuffles. A man shouted. A woman screamed. Zombie wails filled the air. *Get home*. The words pounded a mantra in her mind. If she had connected with Dashtu he would have told her to return. He probably would have yelled at her for even breaching the compound's defenses. But she had. And now she knew, the zombies, the Necromancers, the soldiers, all of them had to go.

* * * * *

Following Stony like some subservient puppy didn't rank highly on Dashtu's list of things he liked to do. Outside the guards rotated another batch of new zombies -- Dashtu didn't know from where they had come -- into one of the parking garages that housed them. Another unit went out on maneuvers.

The hospital sounded as still and empty as a tomb. Normally soldiers ran errands; other people, like Shera, also ferried documents or messages between the Necromancers and their lieutenants. Not tonight. It was almost as if the hospital waited with bated breath for something to happen.

Stony led him to a room similar to the one where he'd been chastised just a few days ago. The door opened, revealing the Necromancer.

"I've brought him to you," Stony said. He saluted sharply then turned on his heel and left.

Dashtu entered the room.

The door closed behind him with a click as the lock turned. Dashtu tried not to flinch. He stared at the chair next to the table and declined to sit. Behind the table stood the Necromancer, and right now he had to look up to meet Dashtu's eyes. The half-angel preferred it that way.

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall in a casual pose. "You wanted to see me?" he asked as if his life might not hang in the balance. He thought he'd sensed Zahra close by and hoped he was wrong. She didn't deserve to be caught in the crossfire of whatever was about to happen here.

"Sit." The Necromancer spoke the word like an order.

Dashtu stared at the chair. "I'd prefer to stand, thanks," he replied. Pissing off his boss who just happened to be a new-breed Necro probably wasn't the smartest thing Dashtu had ever done. He figured if he were going to go down fighting he'd rather do it on his feet.

The Necromancer didn't even blink. For a Necro he looked rather young, his hair still jet black and slicked away from his face. His skin held relatively few lines, though his dark brown eyes looked as if they were far too old for him. Dressed in a lab coat over a shirt and jeans he could have been a young doctor, maybe even an intern during the days when the hospital actually treated the sick. A gold band flashed on his left hand and the antiquated symbol of marriage startled Dashtu. He glanced from the jewelry to the Necro's face then back again. What kind of woman would marry a man who could make zombies?

"You weren't on patrol earlier. My lieutenants said they saw you at Barg's. Is that true?"

Dashtu nodded. "Needed to blow off some steam. Is that a problem?"

“Not if you weren’t keeping company with a female fighter.” The Necro curled his lip. “Because that’s what I heard.”

“A fighter?” Dashtu forced a chuckle past his suddenly tight throat. “Why would you think that? I prefer my women more pliable, if you know what I mean.” Just saying the words put a bad taste in his mouth. When it came to women he liked them feisty, strong, willing to stand up for what they believed in. Exactly like Zahra.

“Stop fucking with me!” The Necro slammed his hands on the table. Anger flushed his face red. Lips curled back in a snarl, he glared at Dashtu.

Deep inside, Dashtu’s power went cold and still. He could end it right here, right now. Reaching for that core of strength, he raised his energy. “You don’t want me fucking with you.” Dashtu bolted to his feet. He held out his hand, a tendril of his energy unfurling within his palm. The wicked red energy wrapped around the Necro’s neck and squeezed.

The man gave a strangled gasp, hands flying to his throat to try and remove the choking band. Gurgles rose in his throat. Staring at him, Dashtu poured everything he had into choking off the man’s life. He’d hurt far too many to get away and trapped in this room with him afforded an excellent opportunity to end things.

The Necro slumped against the wall, his face beet red. Eyes bulging, he struggled to bring air into his aching lungs. His hands flailed. His knees crumpled and he fell to the floor.

Still, Dashtu tightened the band of energy.

A red ligature line blossomed on the man’s neck. The Necro’s eyes closed.

Take that, you son of a bitch! Dashtu’s vision turned red. Outside the room he heard shouting voices, the pounding of booted feet. What kind of emergency device had the Necro activated? It didn’t matter. Not now. Just a few more moments and the Necro would be dead. What happened after that didn’t matter. *I’m sorry, Zahra.* If the Necro’s death meant his own, Dashtu accepted it. Standing tall, hand outstretched as he poured energy into the faltering man’s body, he willed him to die.

A key rattled in the lock. On the floor, the Necro still gasped for air.

Die. Die. Die. Dashtu willed the command at the Necro. For all the lives the twisted scientist had taken, he deserved to die like this. Horribly. Painfully. Dashtu’s shoulder blades burned. Inside his boots, the soles of his feet tingled. His scalp prickled, the short hairs nearly standing on end. Never before had he drawn energy like this. His breath caught in his throat. Heart pounding, he listened to the scraping of the key inside the lock, the creak of the handle as it turned.

A breath of cool air shot into the room.

“Hold!” Booted feet burst into the room. Two soldiers reached for him, each man grabbing an arm. They wrenched his hands behind his back. Two more men dropped to their knees beside the Necro.

“He’s not breathing,” one of the men said.

"Good!" Dashtu snarled. Even bound by the men he still channeled energy to suffocate the Necro. The scientist's legs twitched once then stilled.

"What did you do?" the soldier asked, reaching for the red mark around his neck. He lightly feathered his fingers over it. "Let him go now."

"No. He's killed hundreds, thousands of people. He deserves to die."

"It doesn't matter. Another one will take his place," the soldier said. There, behind his eyes, Dashtu saw a spark of humanity. "You don't want his successor."

Dashtu eased his powers. No one spoke about the revolving door that the Necros must face on a daily basis. Those who wielded the ultimate power were always a threat to those who didn't. Coups and the threat of deposition hovered over their heads. "Who is it?"

"Someone far crueler than he."

On the floor the Necromancer coughed.

Dashtu stared at this soldier and knew the truth in his words. He might kill this Necro, but the one who came after might be worse. But if his action damned countless others, he couldn't live with himself. No, when he took them out he had to do so in a broad sweep. Take everyone out. The Necromancer, his successor...everyone. Once Neukacee was clear then they could work on expanding.

"Kill him," the Necromancer croaked.

"Yes, sir," the soldier next to him said. He nodded to the two men holding Dashtu's arms back. "Take him outside." The icy tone of the man's voice chilled Dashtu to the bone.

Dashtu allowed the two soldiers to lead him out of the small room. They didn't stop at his cubicle, didn't allow him to dress in battle gear. Instead, they took him out the door, halting in front of the largest zombie army Dashtu had seen outside of the ill-fated attack on Zahra in the market. At the thought of her name, his chest tightened. What had he done? What had he brought down upon the humans?

His shoulders burned. Not from the two men holding his arms, though they weren't gentle, but from something else. It felt like something was trying to break through the skin just beneath the shoulder blades. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he stared at the glowing eyes of the army he faced. He prayed Zahra wouldn't try to play the hero.

The soldiers released his arms and stepped away. Behind Dashtu, one of the men raised his hands and made a signal. The zombie wails stopped.

Silence descended on the courtyard.

Dashtu stood there, facing over a hundred zombies, all quiet. He glanced behind him. The soldiers had gone. Where or how, Dashtu wasn't sure, but he stood alone, facing the zombies. As one, the creatures stepped forward. One more step. Then another, until the ones in front stumbled into a run.

Kill him. The order reverberated through Dashtu's body. This was how he was going to die, torn apart by the zombies.

“No!” Dashtu yelled. The children inside the compound needed him to live. The humans needed him to live. Zahra needed him to live.

Something tore open deep inside him. Love flooded his senses. A bright light surrounded him, making him squint to see the zombies.

They fell back, hands over their eyes.

His back burned as if a red-hot iron were laid against his skin. He clawed at his vest, tearing it from his body. The torn denim fell to the cement. Wrapping his arms around himself, Dashtu dropped to his knees. Head bowed, he released a primal scream from his throat.

Flesh tore. Blood trickled down his back. The zombies didn’t even have to touch him. Whatever worked through his body would do the job and the abominations wouldn’t even have to lift a finger. He sucked in air through his burning lungs. One, final stab of pain ripped him apart, and then with a whoosh the agony ended.

Light still surrounded him, muted now. A heavy weight hung from his shoulder blades, the slender tickle of feathers against his skin startling.

Feathers.

He had feathers growing out of his back.

Dashtu reached behind him and caressed the downy soft wings that now sprouted from his muscled back. His gentle touch sent shivers of pleasure through him. Oh God of angels, he had wings.

His eyes stung, and he blinked them, realizing that he had tears rolling down his cheeks. After years, decades, of thinking he wasn’t good enough, that his angelic father had left him, long-living and full of power, but never quite worthy of wings, he had them. Wings.

“Your mother never told you what you were. Or what I said the day I left”...

The male voice reverberated through his mind. Looking up, in the light surrounding him, was a man. An angel. He hovered in the air, white wings illuminated by hints of sunset’s orange and red light. His wings flapped slowly, his body as perfect as only an angel’s could be. *“Yes, Dashtu. I am your father. And I am an angel of vengeance. As are you and what I said was that I had told you all I could. One day you would earn your wings. Today, my son, you have earned them.”*

“Father,” Dashtu breathed. He bowed his head, certainly not fit to be in the company of such a heavenly being.

“You’ve come into your powers, son. Use them well.”

In a blink, the angel left. Dashtu knelt, the unfamiliar weight of wings on his back making him uncertain.

"How touching." Stony's voice dripped with derision. He strode forward, a pistol held in his hands. "If my boss didn't want the zombies to rend you limb from limb I'd shoot you now." He motioned to the massed zombies. "Kill the freak!"

The zombies' wails rose again, the volume doubled as if the creatures wished to make up for lost time.

Dashtu stood. He faced them, no longer afraid of his powers, of killing, of dying. He had earned his wings and his father had never hated him. He vowed to use his powers well.

"Come and get me," he growled. If it would be the last thing he'd do, he'd be sure that the zombies and the Necro wouldn't harm Zahra ever again.

* * * * *

Zahra shivered as a chill washed over her. Somewhere something was happening. Her stomach clenched, her fingers curled into a fist with the need to hit something. Someone. She shook her head, dislodging the sensation and hurried back to her old sanctuary. Inside, she sensed Eko practicing maneuvers. She knocked.

Eko answered the door, her naked body wrapped in a robe. "What is it?" She stepped back to let Zahra inside then closed the door behind her. She turned her back to him, then dropped the robe and reached for her clothing lying on the bed.

"Something big is happening. I believe there's going to be a major attack on the Necro's compound. If it goes wrong..." Zahra drew a deep breath. "I want you to gather up the humans and flee. Keep them safe, Eko. I'm not sure if I'll make it out of this, and I want someone watching over the innocents."

"I figured as much. I've felt power building most of the day. I've never been much of a babysitter."

"Neither have I, but we have to do what we have to do."

"Yeah, we do." Fully dressed, Eko stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Zahra. "Be safe, sister."

"You too." An unexpected wash of emotion filled her. She backed out of the embrace, not wanting Eko to know how much her words of solidarity touched her. For so long Zahra had been alone. She sensed in Dashtu, and in this battle, she was alone no longer.

"Good hunting," Eko said. "Kick some zombie ass."

"Don't worry. I will." She nodded once more then hurried out. No sooner had she stepped into the darkened street than she placed a mental call to Dashtu.

She saw him in the Necromancer's compound. Just like in the market, hundreds of zombies surrounded him. He fought, fists flying. Whips of power snaked out from his fingers and hands to fell the zombies. And she saw something else. A white feather floating on the wind.

Chapter Eleven

The image of white feathers haunted Zahra. Dashtu hadn't had them, the raw pain in his voice palpable as he'd told her that he should have had wings. He made it sound like a birth defect, a disfigurement his parents had never forgiven him for. So what had caused him to have them now? Perhaps the image was her own fevered imagination conjuring what wasn't there. She didn't know, but the closer she came to the Necromancer's compound, the sooner she'd find out.

Maybe the wings meant he was already dead. She stumbled. Pain nearly drove her to her knees. "No," she whispered. "No." Gritting her teeth, she picked up the pace.

"Dashtu! Can you hear me?" She flung her mental cry to the winds, needing to know he was still alive.

He didn't reply, not verbally. Instead images filled her mind, of Dashtu, those white wings big and beautiful sprouting from his back. He fought. Fisticuffs for the zombies that were close enough to him, angelic power for those who weren't. In her mind, she watched as swarms of the creatures surrounded him. Reaching behind her, she curled her fingers around the hilt of her katana, ready to leap into battle for him.

On the outskirts, soldiers watched.

A tall zombie, her skin the color of warm chocolate, stood near the soldiers. Though her eyes glowed green and she wailed with the rest of her kind, something made her stand apart. A strength, a hint of grace that could be as deadly as it was beautiful. She had to be the Blade that Dashtu had lost -- Ulanda.

The zombie turned, almost as if she felt Zahra's searching gaze. A feral smile curved her lips. She lifted her hand, to wave or to make a gesture, Zahra didn't know. She terminated the connection, her steps faltering. Ulanda the Blade had become Ulanda the zombie.

Zahra's blood ran cold. Sure, Dashtu had spoken of it, but she'd dismissed his fears as those of a man not wanting to lose what he had. To know that a Blade had become a zombie...the pain must have been unimaginable. She tried to find some semblance of the Blade powers she knew intimately. They were there, weaker now that the woman had become a zombie, but still there. "*Oh, Dashtu,*" she mentally wailed. "*I'm so sorry.*"

If he heard her cry he didn't respond. The long claw of a zombie caught his cheek, ripping open the skin. Blood welled in the cut. Whatever happened, however this ended, she had to be there. For the humans. For the man she loved.

A familiar form stood at the end of the street, hand outstretched to stop her. "Holt," Zahra yelled as she halted. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping! I've stayed on the sidelines for far too long. Go to Dashtu. Lend him your strength. I'll go to the Blade and help her with the humans should the need arise."

They were going to die. Nothing short of that could bring Holt out of his self-imposed exile. The man held secrets, deep ones, and now wasn't the time for Zahra to try to pry them out of him. All she knew was that if he stood here, offering his help to the Blades, something bad was about to happen.

"All right. Thank you." She reached for him and he clasped her hand in his.

"Oh hell," he muttered and hauled her into his arms. Holt embraced her and in that too-human gesture of support she felt his caring and his concern.

"I'll be all right," she replied, uncertain of what else to say. The words sounded trite. They had to be true. "I'll come back and see your ugly mug again."

Holt laughed. The booming notes echoed from abandoned buildings. "I think if you have it in your power, you will." He released her and stepped aside. "Good hunting, Blade. Go find your angel."

"I will. Thank you." Zahra nodded to him then took off at a dead run. The man had always been her source of information, a loner who stayed apart from the humans and their struggle. Not for the first time, she wondered about him. Who was he? Where had he come from? A part of her wanted to linger and watch him offer his help to Eko. The Blade acted as if she needed no one. Zahra knew how that went.

She dodged the few zombie patrols she saw. All of them were headed in the same direction as she. The zombies were coming home to hunt.

"*Hang in there, Dashtu. I'm coming.*" She willed him to hear her. The back of her mind buzzed. Flashes of images pulled her forward. Blood splatters on concrete. Feathers, torn and mutilated lying amongst dried grasses. Zombie eyes, ever glowing. Their wails haunted her mind. And in the middle of it all the man she loved battled for his life.

He'd called her a leader. He'd told her she'd take the Necro's place in charge of the humans. He'd told her that she'd save them.

Who would save him?

She burst into the Necromancer's compound with that thought on her mind. Just inside the gate she skidded to a stop. She grabbed her katana and charged into the fray.

"I'm here. I'll save you, my love."

"Zahra," he whispered into her mind then suddenly, she was there. The dark-skinned zombie she'd seen in her vision. Ulanda.

"You can't save him. No one can." The zombie's voice crackled with disuse.

"You're wrong, bitch. Because I can." Her katana swung through the air and the battle was on.

* * * * *

Dashtu heard Zahra's defiant words. *Go*. He wanted to turn and yell the order at her. He didn't. She wouldn't listen. She'd stay. And she'd die.

Zahra shone like a beacon of light against a dark sky. Moonlight glinted from the katana she swung with deadly accuracy. The beheaded bodies of zombies lay around her. Ulanda watched the massacre like a dark-skinned goddess, a macabre conductor for a deadly symphony.

Zahra moved into the opening. She swung her katana at Ulanda, the tip catching the zombie across the shoulder. Fabric ripped. Skin tore and blood welled to the surface. Iridescent green drops lingered on her skin like emeralds on black velvet. Ulanda looked at the injury and smiled.

She didn't need any weapons. As a Blade her body had been honed into an instrument of destruction. She lunged at Zahra, catching her on her wrist. A quick twist and the black hilted katana clattered to the asphalt. Zahra cried out.

It didn't look like much of a contest. Caught up in his own battle, he couldn't help.

Dashtu battled fatigue right along with the zombies. His shoulders ached. Minor wounds burned through his wings. A shower of white feathers tumbled down from them whenever a zombie managed to land a blow. He had wings. He'd earned his angel power. A fresh rush of strength filled him, and Dashtu redoubled his efforts. His hands blurred, palms cupping a zombie's head to snap the spinal cord. Like dominos they tumbled to the ground, falling in broken heaps.

Step by painful step he battled his way toward Zahra. He counted his progress not in the dead that lay on the ground but in the landmarks he passed. Standing on the top of a small rise, dry leaves crunching beneath his feet, he held the high ground. A knife slashed a lucky blow to his arm.

His biceps burned. The wound hissed, blood oozing to the surface to capture the tiny mutated genes that made one a zombie. He cried out.

Stumbling, he whipped his wing into a dead bush. Twigs tore at the skin, leaving a smear of blood and downy feathers in its wake.

"*Zahra*." He flung energy at her with his mind. If he were going to go down, he wanted her standing and alive.

Another ring of swords announced a blocked blow. Reaching out, he curled his fingers around a metal lamp post. The cool metal brought him back to himself. He wobbled, but remained standing.

Zahra slipped. Gore covered her boot. A white pin feather clung to the heel and he realized with a sickening jolt that she'd stumbled on his feathers. His blood? Hers? She fell on one knee.

Ulanda raised her blade.

"Zahra! No!" Dashtu yelled.

Moonlight winked on Ulanda's katana. She brought the blade down in a wide-sweeping arc. The sick sound of flesh slicing echoed in Dashtu's ears then he heard Zahra's scream. It cut through him like her blade that lay on the ground not far from her.

Ulanda's triumphant laugh cut him to the bone.

"No!" Dashtu railed.

Strong arms grabbed him, pulling him away from his precarious perch.

"Zahra!" he bellowed as someone dragged Zahra's body away.

A sea of zombies closed around her, their wails excited now. They closed around Ulanda. A soldier kicked her katana out of the way and it spun into the crowd.

"*Father!*" Dashtu yelled, hoping, praying that his angelic sire would come back to save them. He called himself an angel of vengeance. Surely vengeance was needed now. He'd killed Zahra. As surely as if he'd struck the fatal blow, he'd killed her. "*Help me!*"

No one and nothing answered his mental cry.

Ulanda surged toward him. He saw her, the katana gleaming dully with drying blood, her green eyes burning with an inhuman passion. His powers, always strong, raged through him, burning circuits inside his body to bring him to new heights of strength.

From where the energy came, Dashtu didn't know. He blamed it on his newly awakened angelic heritage. The wings flapped strong at his back, a crack of bone and feathers taking out those who tried to come up from behind. The appendages moved almost as if they had their own sentience, their only goal to remain.

He just wanted all the zombies to die.

Raw power surged through him. Flinging his hands to the sides, he released a loud roar. His feet, shoulder-width apart, braced him against the rush of bodies. He flung the energy from him. It hit, creating a circular barrier around him. With a thunderclap, the power sizzled and zombies screamed.

Dashtu opened his eyes and saw the charred corpses. He stood in the middle of a perfect circle with at least a ten foot radius. Within that circle, smoldering zombies lay.

Dashtu rushed from the circle. Where zombies had once tried to fight him, now they hung back. Only soldiers stationed along the high fence kept the creatures from fleeing. "Take that," he yelled. Grabbing a zombie, he shook it like a rag doll. "You want some more of that?" Power flickered in a show of red sparks from the end of his fingers. By God, he couldn't bring Zahra back. He would take out everyone who had ever wanted to hurt her.

Humans forgotten, Dashtu focused on the glowing green eyes.

His foot kicked a fallen blade. Dashtu bent down, his hand closing around a slender, black grip. Gold bamboo shoots were engraved on it, and he recognized the blade as Zahra's.

A strangled cry ripped from his throat. No, she couldn't be dead. Oh, he knew. He'd seen her fall. Holding her blade tore open the raw emotional wounds, and he swung it in a deadly arc. A bit light for him, the blade killed nonetheless. He severed another zombie's head from its shoulders. Quite a bit more effective than his fists. Deadlier too. He could call his angel blades, but it seemed right to use Zahra's.

"I am an angel of vengeance," he yelled, claiming whole-heartedly the title given to him by his father.

Ulanda swung to face him. Gore dripped from her katana, the body at her feet indiscernible as either human or zombie. The green flecked ichor coated the ground. It glittered on the black asphalt, dripped from the blade, and ran in rivulets down his body. One soldier stood to the side, retching.

"Kill him!" The order blared across a public address system, the voice clearly identifiable as that of the Necromancer.

"You can try." Spinning on his heels, he darted through an opening toward the building.

The blood lust ebbed. Numerous aches and pains made their presence known. The urge to lie down for a week made his muscles heavy. Dashtu shook it off. Until the Necromancer and every zombie were dead, he wouldn't rest. Someone had to avenge Zahra.

Dashtu vaulted over a fallen body toward the revolving door. Somewhere in that monstrous building, the Necromancer waited. He rammed his shoulder into the door and spun into the building.

He blinked, his eyes struggling to adjust to the electric lighting from the darkness outside. The wails of zombies rolled through the door, filtering through glass and brick to echo inside. Dashtu raced down the corridor.

Shera's desk sat empty.

The children. He'd promised Zahra he'd get them out. Ignoring the sounds of scuffles behind him, he ran down the hallway. He took the twists and turns by memory, eventually finding his way to the large emergency room area that housed the children. Kira had the children herded into one corner. Several older boys with make-shift weapons guarded them.

"Get out!" Dashtu yelled.

"Where?" Kira crossed her arms over her chest. She glared at him, her bearing one of someone not used to taking orders. "The zombies are looking for you and now you brought them to us."

Wails echoed down the hall.

Shit! She was right. He thought only of finding the children and getting them out of the way before he destroyed the Necromancer and everything surrounding him. "I don't care but you have to get out. The Blade is dead."

Kira flinched at his words. She turned and gestured to the boys. "I know somewhere where we can go."

"Then I suggest you get there." Brandishing Zahra's katana, he turned toward the hallway.

Ulanda stood in the entryway. She held out her hand, staving off the zombies filing down the hall behind her. A few soldiers mingled in with them, mostly keeping the zombies in formation and obeying whatever Ulanda ordered.

"How touching." Ulanda strode forward.

Dashtu stared at her, trying to find in her chocolate skin, her muscled form, some semblance of the Blade he'd loved. Her green eyes glowed with a maniacal light. Scars crossed her arms, and she held the katana with an easy familiarity.

"Your Blade is dead." She halted in the opening.

Dashtu glanced over his shoulder to see the children had fled. He wished them Godspeed, though God never factored into the equation. Not anymore. "Then so am I."

"You look very much alive." She strode forward, her hips swaying. Blood covered the katana and her hands. It smeared her face, some of it glittering with green from her fellow zombies. She licked her lips and grinned, her teeth white against her dark lips. "Never thought you'd see me again, did you?"

Dashtu held out the katana, point first. His worst fears stood directly in front of him. He didn't want Zahra to end up like this woman. "Stay back!" The tip of the sword pointed directly at Ulanda's heart.

"You wouldn't kill me," she purred. "We used to fight so well together."

Her words implied they did so much else too, and he wouldn't deny it. Memories of Ulanda the way she had been, his own private warrior goddess, flooded his mind. He remembered her riding him, the adrenaline of battle turning them to the pleasures of the flesh. His cock slid into her wet heat, her cunt milking his seed from his body. Like all Blades he'd known, something had rendered her infertile. Like Zahra, Ulanda had never wanted him to heal it.

He was eternally grateful. Zahra's death he could deal with. So long as she didn't end up a zombie like Ulanda, he'd face it. Somehow, he doubted he would make it out of here alive. And if he did, it'd be decades before he could even think about loving again, if ever.

"No!" he screamed at her.

"Oh yes." She laughed, that husky, rich, wine laugh that always had wrapped around his balls and squeezed.

It did so again.

"Go to hell," Dashtu snarled. "Are you going to talk or are you going to fight?" He steeled himself against the vision of his hands sinking the blade into her flesh. This wasn't the Ulanda he'd loved. She had died just like Zahra had died. This creature might look like Ulanda, might talk like her, might even fight like her, but she was not the Blade he'd loved.

"I thought you'd never ask." Her blade sprang to the ready. "Funny, isn't it. You caused the death of two Blades. I would have thought you would have learned your lesson after one."

It had to be her strength that gave her the ability to talk. Most zombies simply wailed their inhuman cries into the night. Ulanda was the first one he'd encountered who had retained her full speech abilities and it made her all the harder to kill.

"A Blade knows the stakes. You told me that." He flashed a grin. "So are you talking because you've forgotten how to fight? When you became a zombie you lost your humanity. I wonder what else you've lost." He didn't give her a chance to answer. Instead, he charged.

Behind her, he saw the soldiers watching, keeping the zombie armies at bay. He swung his katana in a high and fast arc.

Ulanda brought up her blade to block.

Steel rang against steel and then her arms shook. The blade slipped and nicked her hand.

First blood.

He hungered for the second. Using his superior strength against her, drawing on his angelic powers, he made her fight for everything. Every swing, every breath -- hell, every moment of her life, he made her struggle. Though she moved with the same fluid grace, he refused to acknowledge her as the Blade he'd loved. She'd killed Zahra. For that, she would die.

The blade sliced across her upper arm. She growled and countered with another strike. The blade slipped, slicing across his thigh. Zahra's blood mingled with his as the cut opened and bled.

He reached out with his mind, using her lifeblood to amplify his signal. If there were a chance, he'd feel her. Icy cold enveloped him. Nothing, not even a spark of Zahra existed. She was gone.

A sob rose in his throat. Dropping to his knees, he lifted the blade to block another attack. The woman he loved was dead. What happened next didn't matter at all.

Chapter Twelve

The children were free and the woman he loved was dead. What did he care if he brought the building crumbling down on top of him? At least then the Necromancer would be dead. Someone else would have to fill the void of power, perhaps the other Blade Zahra had mentioned. Perhaps Holt.

Dashtu surged to his feet.

No matter how this ended he was not going to go down without a fight. He would not lay there like a wounded puppy waiting to be kicked.

A sinister smile curved Ulanda's lips. She stared at him with hungry eyes. A couple of feints with her katana put him on the defensive. Emboldened by her restraint, he struck again.

Dashtu lost himself in the clang of colliding blades. His muscles burned with the unaccustomed exertion, yet he didn't falter. Instead, he sought out her weaknesses, used his knowledge of the woman he'd once loved to get behind her guard. And when he did, he struck.

The blade sliced across her skin, splitting open forearm and chest to release a gush of green-flecked blood. She screamed, her wounded cry ripping through the air. Soldiers and zombies alike fell back.

Still, Dashtu pressed her. Like a man possessed, he made her fight for it, made her work, and step by step he pushed her back. Before he brought the building down around them, he would see Ulanda dead.

A soldier stepped forward.

Dashtu barely spared him a look. "Get back," he yelled. "This fight is between us."

The young man stopped, eyes wide. He scurried back to the lines where other men and zombies waited.

Dashtu nodded. Once he killed Ulanda he'd have to work fast. She pressed him, their blades crossing. He pushed against her, his strength overpowering hers. Looking into her green eyes, he realized he felt nothing for her. Aside from being the *thing* that had killed Zahra, no other trace of emotion filled him. Not regret. Not love. Nothing. He searched the hollow pit of his soul and liked the emptiness. It would make his job so much easier.

Ulanda stumbled. She pitched to her knees, the blade slamming against the tile floor hard enough to kick up chunks of linoleum.

Dashtu reared over her. He swung Zahra's katana, thinking it fitting that her blade be the one that beheaded her killer. It whistled in a clean arc toward Ulanda's neck.

The zombie ducked.

The blade whooshed overhead. Dashtu snarled, too late to correct the course. Pulling back, he swung again.

Ulanda stabbed into the opening. Her katana found space between two of Dashtu's ribs, pushing through flesh and muscle into the tender tissues beneath. The wound burned along his veins. Pain speared his lungs, making it impossible to draw breath. He stumbled back.

The blade pulled out with a clean swipe, no longer covered in a mixture of zombie and human blood. Now just his ran red down the blade and deep inside the wound, he felt the burning of zombie blood mingling with his own. He transferred the katana to his left hand, clamping his right over the wound.

The zombie charged again. With the blade in his left hand, he had to work twice as hard at parrying her blows. Fighting with two blades was one thing, trying to use a weapon in only his off-hand was another. Each blow reverberated up his left arm, jarring the injury to his ribs. The agony of breathing nearly dropped him to his knees, yet he refused to give up.

Love, pure and powerful, filled his mind. Zahra's love. How could he be feeling this if she were dead? The emotion emanated from outside his mind, as brilliant as a beacon in a dark, moonless night. He staggered, righting himself with a renewed burst of strength.

Ulanda fell back.

Dashtu pressed her to the ground. He straddled her on his knees, the katana held high. Removing his right hand from the wound, he moved it to her shoulder and pinned her to the ground. For long moments, he stared at her. She wriggled, trying to free herself. Dashtu dropped to his knees.

He sat on her, staring at the creature that she had become. The past, the present, none of it mattered. In that moment, he knew she'd been the weaker Blade.

Ulanda opened her mouth then closed it again. With her eyes, she pleaded with him. To kill her? To free her from the hell of being a zombie? No; he refused to allow himself any such mercy. Killing her would simply be payback for her killing Zahra. He swung the katana.

It fell in a clean arc, severing her head from her shoulders. The force of the blow sent her skull rolling a few feet away from the body.

Dashtu stood. The body twitched once, twice, almost as if it couldn't quite believe it was over. He bent over and wiped Zahra's katana on the zombie's clothing. Then he turned and faced the scattering group of soldiers and zombies. He stepped forward.

Once more, the wave of love assaulted him. He halted, trying to probe his mind to find the source. Certainly not paternal love, not with the image of Zahra rising over his body. Moonlight created a halo around her pale flesh. Her breasts leaned tantalizingly close to his mouth, the hard nipples too succulent to ignore. He saw himself swiping his tongue over the tight beads and listening to Zahra's moan of pleasure. His cock hardened.

"She's dead," he whispered. Scuffling made him turn to catch sight of a group of young soldiers. Whatever they saw in his eyes made them hurry down the hall and out of the way. He swung around, searching entryways for signs of intruders. Everyone had fled.

Hope kindled in his chest. He curled his hand into a fist, his wound aching. Drawing power, he sent healing energy to it, using bold strokes to knit flesh together and purge the zombie infection from his blood. He screamed, a raw, primal sound of pain that made even the Necromancer's most hardened men run in terror. Healing, he jogged down the hall.

"Dashtu, love, I'm here." Zahra's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"No, you're dead," he countered. *"Don't play tricks on me."* He tried the first door he came to and opened it. Ducking inside, he shut it behind him. He had to get himself under control.

Dashtu flattened his palm against the door. His left hand hung by his side, still clenching her katana. Leaning forward, head lowered, he drew long, shuddering breaths. An image of Zahra falling beneath the zombies drove everything from his mind. He squeezed his fingers around the hilt of her blade. A fighter didn't just drop her blade. She usually wore several knives. She wasn't wholly without protection. He had seen her fall. He held her blade. Those two undeniable facts circled in his mind.

Closing his eyes, he worked to calm his mind. There, in a still, quiet part of him, he reached for Zahra. Her face wavered before his closed eyelids, his love searching for her, trying to find her among all the other souls inhabiting this compound. He felt...nothing.

Outside the door, someone shouted. Footfalls echoed. Dashtu turned the lock on the door.

He tried again, the distraction of the soldier searching for him fading from his awareness. The love he'd felt had to have come from her. *"Zahra. Where are you?"* He called and called, his mental voice echoing as if it rattled down a vast canyon. No one replied.

Dashtu sagged against the door. Tears burned his eyes.

"Dashtu?" A whisper of sound, barely loud enough to be heard over his grief touched him.

Zahra? “Don’t torment me like this,” he whispered. His wings folded themselves against his back, the feathers warm on his bare skin. He pulled them tighter, their touch not nearly as comforting as Zahra’s.

Other realms beckoned to him.

Hesitantly, he reached for them, thinking that they might be a figment of his imagination. True angels, he knew, held the ability to search for souls on all planes of existence. Not just the earthly one or the ones humans called “heaven” and “hell.” He had finally remembered the lullaby his father used to sing to him, the words coming to him like his wings, “Heaven is not what it is said to be. Hell is not what it is said to be. The saved are not forever happy. The damned are not forever lost.”

“*Zahra!*” he screamed into the ether. If she were on any of the hundreds of different planes of existence, she’d hear him and answer. He hoped. “*Zahra! Love! Answer me!*”

He waited, not even breathing for fear the slightest noise would keep him from hearing.

Silence.

Her body. He had to see her corpse. Maybe then, his mind wouldn’t play these cruel tricks on him. He unlocked the door and opened it. Peering into the empty hall, he waited until he was certain no one waited then hurried out of the supply room. He kept his wings tucked close to his body as he raced down the familiar corridor. Past Shera’s still-empty desk, through the revolving door and out into the empty courtyard.

Nothing, not even a stray bit of trash filled the space that once had teemed with zombies and soldiers. He reached out and felt them, mostly on the upper levels of the hospital, a few in the parking garage. Either way, as soon as he found Zahra’s corpse, he’d level the place and bring it down around their ears.

He ran for the spot where he’d watched her fall.

A breeze toyed with a few errant downy feathers. The white bits of fluff skipped across the asphalt as if it were a sunny spring day. A smear of blood caught his attention.

He stopped, noticing that the crimson gore lacked the green flecks that marked it as zombie blood. Plenty of that littered the ground, the faded yellow paint where parking places and curbs had once been. No, this was human. He knelt down and touched it. Zahra’s.

His wings unfurled with a snap of sinew and feathers. They beat once, twice, until he rose above the ground. From his vantage point, he watched the smear lead back into the building, stopping when it reached the doors. Someone had carried her corpse inside.

To be converted. His gut wrenched, his wing beats faltering. He dipped toward the pavement.

A flash of awareness touched his mind.

Power surged through him. Dashtu pulled it from the ground, from the air, from within himself, anywhere he found a source he yanked the energy to him. Strong flaps of his

wings carried him higher, past the first floor, to the second then the third. Drawn by the hint of Zahra's life force embedded in her blood, he made it to the fifth floor. There, he hovered outside a large window. Bringing his legs up, he kicked the window.

Glass shattered.

Two more kicks broke the window large enough for him to slip through. He did, a jagged edge catching his wing. Wincing, Dashtu pulled himself through. He stood in the middle of a waiting room, chairs and couches covered by dust. A television sat mute in the corner, brittle magazines covering an end table. Down the hall, he felt her.

Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. One way or the other he'd have his answer. The signs on the wall marked the floor as a surgery ward, the large theaters perfect for attending audiences to watch. His gut led him to surgery room number three, and he tore open the double doors and raced into the room. Low, emergency lighting illuminated the area just enough for him to see a stainless steel surgical table and blood. Lots and lots of blood.

Dashtu's knees buckled. He staggered away from the table, whirling toward the door. The basement held the corpses, the bodies awaiting transformation. The process took twenty-four hours. If he got to her, he could stop it.

By killing her.

Clinging to her katana as if it were a lifeline, he hit the stairwell running. Down five flights then another as he hurried to the basement. From other runs he knew where the corpses were held, and he burst into the room. Two quick slashes killed the scientists keeping watch there. He flung out his power into every stainless steel drawer. They came back empty, except one.

Dashtu froze. He braced himself against opening the drawer to see Zahra's dead body. He took a deep breath and released it. His wings unfurled, lending him strength. He had powers. He opened the drawer.

Zahra laid there, her hands at her side. A deathly pallor covered her skin, her body chilled by the drawer. The same power that kept the lights working also kept the storage drawers cooled. Her colorless lips and flesh testified to her death.

Dashtu stroked his hand along her shoulder. No spark of life leaped to his touch. He drew energy, sent the healing blue powers into her body. His inquiry found numerous wounds and no sign of life.

She was simply dead.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. A tear slid from his cheek to pool against her skin. Pressing his lips to hers, he kissed her. "I'm sorry, but those bastards will pay." He closed the drawer, spun on his heel, and prepared to do just that.

* * * * *

A warm brush of life caressed her lips. The drawer clanged shut and footfalls left. Dashtu. He hadn't died. She'd seen them surround him, tearing into his skin, his wings, and when the zombie had challenged her, she'd done the only thing she could. She had fought back. Caught up in the battle, she lost sight of him. His rage formed a palatable wall, so strong it nearly knocked her from her feet. A lucky blow and she'd fallen. She knew then if she wanted to get out of this alive, she had to play dead. It was the one solid fact about Blades that Spika had taught her.

She let them carry her back down into the morgue, put her in this drawer. Muttered words about waiting for the Necromancer and turning her into the zombie chilled her far better than her latent powers. Spika had told her in a time of need, she could die, and come back. Just once, and only in dire circumstances. So Zahra had let herself die.

Deep inside, she cried. Her body unable to move, her psyche sobbed for her. She flung love and support at Dashtu, not wanting him to kill himself in the process. She'd come back to him.

And then he'd come. His breath caressed her skin. He'd whispered his apologies and kissed her lips. *Wake up!* Zahra had ordered her body. It disobeyed.

She screamed, her voice echoing only in her mind. *Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!* The steel drawer clanged shut with a finality that rattled her bones.

Zahra gasped. Frigid air poured into her lungs, restarting her heart. Blue flesh turned pink as blood flowed. Her fingers and toes tingled. Her skin burned. She kicked out, shrieking as abused limbs slammed against a stainless steel drawer. It budged a few inches.

Within her narrow corridor, Zahra turned. Rolling over, she scooted toward the opening, bending her knees. Drawing it to her chest, she kicked out again. The drawer slid open on well-oiled hinges.

Zahra rolled to the floor.

She landed with a thud, her body stinging at the return of warmth and life. She lay there, hands flat on the linoleum and drew breath into her lungs. Every muscle cramped. Her stomach twisted, heaved, and a few drops of bile rolled from her lips. She spat the foul taste away.

"Dashtu," she moaned, her mind wrapping around the fact that she'd been dead, trapped inside her own body. *Dashtu!* She saw him, kneeling on the floor not far away. Blue power sparked from his skin. His unfurled wings beat lazily against a non-existent current. His rage rolled from him, wave after wave of it buffeting any living creature on the floor.

Drawing her knees to her chest, Zahra pressed her palms to her ears. She rocked, her tender body held immobile by the raw strength of her lover's power.

The building rumbled.

Oh God, he was going to do it. If only she'd woken up sooner. She squeezed tears she could ill-afford from her eyes, stretching out first one limb then the other. She rolled to her knees, her stomach heaving. She swayed. The electric lights hurt her eyes.

Then the light bulbs shattered.

Zahra wrapped her arms over her head to protect against flying glass. When it settled, she rose to her feet. The room spun around her. Swallowing hard, she ignored it. She straightened, drawing strength from the fact that she had died and come back. She was a Blade. Though Spika had only told her snippets and she knew her job was to protect the humans, she realized now what a Blade truly was: the tie to humans that a half-angel needed to complete his mission on Earth. She had just enough angelic blood in her to make her special.

"Very good! I never told you this because part of being a Blade is figuring this out on your own. Go to your angel before it's too late." For a moment Zahra swore she heard Spika's voice.

"Teacher?" She looked around and saw only a single, white feather. A sudden sheen of tears, quickly blinked away, blinded her.

Too late? No! Zahra curled into herself afraid that she would be the instrument of Dashtu's destruction, not the other way around as he feared. What if his mission was to destroy these Necromancers before their big plans were completed? And if so, he'd die in the process. She bolted to her feet, determined not to let that happen. She needed Dashtu as much as he needed her. His mission couldn't end in his death, not when his plans promised so much life for this place and these people.

Feet pounded in the hallway. Out of habit, Zahra reached for her katana, only to find it missing. Her long knives on her thighs were gone too, as were the small blades she kept at the back of her waistband. She bent and grabbed the knife they'd missed at her ankle. It was short, but it was better than nothing.

Flattening herself against the wall, she waited. The first one entered. A quick strike across its throat sent it falling. The second caught its fallen comrade and shoved it in her direction.

Zahra caught it and flung it behind her. The body hit the steel lockers, rattling doors in their hinges. *Way to keep quiet*, she mentally scolded herself. Her muscles ached. Her sliding into death healed the major wounds, but all the little ones made their presence known. With her small knife, she felt, well naked. She turned and faced her attacker. Every zombie that stood between her and Dashtu was another dead zombie. She grinned and jumped into the fight.

* * * * *

The sight of Zahra's blue lips and pale countenance haunted Dashtu. He found an empty room, what once might have been storage for equipment. The large space boasted several support beams holding up the floor above. If he started here, he figured he could bring the entire hospital down in a matter of moments.

He knelt on the floor. Drawing deep breaths, he ignored the wails of zombies. The locked doors should keep them out until it was too late. Pressing his palms to the cool linoleum, he concentrated on the concrete and steel that comprised the hospital's main structure.

This is for Zahra. He inhaled deeply, reaching into himself for his power. His wings unfurled. Strength held them straight up, almost like a statue he'd seen once of a bird in flight. The perfectly folded wings hovered above the creature. A single flap would send them down, displacing air and allowing flight. He'd need that when the building started to fall.

Even as he planned his escape, he knew the futility of it. With two Blades dead because of his actions, the only thing that mattered would be to destroy the Necromancer and his operations. Flattening the building on them all would accomplish that. And if someone found his body in the rubble, maybe they'd credit him with a hero's death he didn't deserve. With Zahra gone it wouldn't matter anyway. His soul would simply return to those other realms, probably for punishment, and then the cycle of life would start all over again. He would have lost Zahra and she was the only thing that mattered to him here.

His palms burned. He gritted his teeth and forced a burst of energy down through the floor. It rattled. A low rumbling shook the building.

Dashtu smiled.

Another blast, and another, like a mystical jackhammer chipping away at the building's foundation. Cracks radiated up the wall. Distantly, he heard screams.

Savage glee poured into him as easily as the power poured out. Let them die, crushed to death by the very building that symbolized their power. Let them realize how weak they really are. "I am Dashtu, Angel of Vengeance," he roared.

Blue sparks erupted from his fingers. His wings vibrated, the humming of the feathers drowning out the creaking building and the screams of those trapped within. A white light swirled in the corner, within it, the figure of his father clearly visible.

"Go away," Dashtu snarled. He forced another spurt of power down through the ground. His cock pounded. The thrust of power took on a sexual connotation, the energy sizzling through his body. He forced his will into the building like the silken slide of his shaft into a woman. Inch by inch, bit by bit, until his fingers sank into the softening linoleum and he felt only the building, crumbling, breaking, ready to blow.

"Think about what you're doing," his father said. "There are innocents in this building."

Dashtu stared at the man who had sired him, really stared at him, though tears made his vision blurry. "What does it matter? Zahra's dead. I'm going to be dead soon enough. As long as this bastard can't hurt anyone else --"

"So you're going to hurt others to pay for the pain one man has caused you? Your actions are irreversible, my son. I cannot protect you."

"Like you protected me from my mother's wrath when you walked out of my life, our lives, leaving her to raise me alone? I have no idea why my power came in now. You say I earned it. Well, it's about damn time! I'm going to use it to live up to my name. If you wanted to save me, you should have stuck around. Maybe then I wouldn't have been a half-breed without a home." He punctuated his words with a punch of power. The building creaked. Ceiling tiles tumbled to the ground.

His father opened his mouth to say something, but Dashtu ignored it. Whatever platitudes came out of that angel's mouth wouldn't make a fucking difference. The time for "sorry" had come and gone years ago. What happened now seemed to be a gift that had come too many years too late. It'd help him finish things here, that's all. He closed his eyes to block out his father's image. Instead, he filled his mind with images of Zahra.

She rose above him, whole and healthy, and he held her in his arms. He tucked her against his chest, promised to never let anything hurt her ever again. And when her gray eyes met his pale ones, he claimed her mouth. Long steps carried them both to the bed, where he stripped her garments one by one. First the leather vest, so he could lean forward and lick her nipples. He drew one into his mouth, savoring her taste. Her fingers wove through his short hair, holding him to her. His lips blazed a trail through the valley of heaven between her breasts, and he buried his face against her skin to surround himself with her scent. As he kissed lower, finding the waistband of her leather pants and tugging them over her hips, he inhaled her musk. Her curls tickled his nose. Lower, he drew his tongue along her labia, slipping inside to taste her clitoris. She bucked her hips as he drew the swollen bud into his mouth.

Zahra. He loved her.

He lost himself in the memory, knowing if he was going to die, it would be with her name on his lips.

A column cracked. Then another. Pieces of brick fell from the wall. The building shook and Dashtu smiled.

Chapter Thirteen

“Damn it,” Zahra snarled. She jabbed the short knife into the zombie’s throat, severing its carotid artery. Not enough to kill it, but the sudden surge of blood startled the creature enough that it backed away. She darted out the door.

The building pitched.

Somewhere within the bowels of the structure a large booming noise echoed. She let her heart guide her toward Dashtu. Waves of loss and love buffeted her. Reaching out with her mind, she tried to touch his and reassure him she was all right. His mind remained blocked to her.

The building rumbled. A large chunk of ceiling tile plopped to the floor in front of her. It released a plume of dust and fiber that had her coughing. Turning away, she buried her face in the crook of her arm and tried to breathe through the debris. The walls swayed.

Dashtu. She felt him like a homing beacon in her mind. His visceral loss wrapped around her and pinched like a vise. His pain rolled through her, wave after wave in tune with the energy he pounded into the building. A crack popped the drywall next to her. It split, falling around a sprinkler fastened high on the wall. Darting away, she spun and watched as the paper covered particles collapsed, leaving a gaping hole through which she saw wiring and insulation.

The building wouldn’t last much longer. “*Dashtu! I’m coming!*” Her mental pleas fell on deaf ears. They buffeted against his mental walls. He didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want to talk to anyone. She stopped outside double doors.

Through the glass window she saw him. Covered in dust, bits of plaster and ceiling tile falling around him, cracks in the many support beams in the room, he knelt. Palms flat on the ground, he looked like a statue, so still, so determined in his purpose. She reached for the doorknob.

It didn't turn. Locked. Zahra wrenched it again. If she wanted to save him, save herself, the only way would be to get into that room. Grabbing the knob, she drew upon her Blade's strength. The latch clicked, firmly secured.

"Dashtu!" she yelled. Raising her fist, she pounded on the door. Glass rattled, a crack forming in its surface. The safety wires kept it from shattering, and she pounded harder.

Dashtu didn't even flinch.

Down the hallway, she heard zombie wails. She so didn't need this right now. Standing back, she lifted her leg and kicked the door. The force rattled her bones, made skin and muscle ache that hadn't fully recovered from her brush with death. The door held. The single knife wouldn't work to pick the lock.

The toughened glass window would be her only way into the room. Grabbing her knife, she pressed the point against the lower left edge. She punched the blade into the glass as hard and as fast as she could. The knife point hit. Glass broke.

It didn't shatter and she hit it again and again. Tiny, pebble-sized pieces of glass seemed to radiate out from where she'd hit the window. Her fist hurt. The hilt of the knife pressed against her skin. Sheathing the blade, she curled her hand into a fist and punched.

The window gave. With a crash, tiny pieces fell to the ground, leaving an opening barely big enough for her hand. She repeatedly hit the window. The zombie wails grew louder. Tiny cuts covered her hand, the sticky blood making it difficult for her to get an accurate hit in. At last, she reached in and flipped the lock. Pulling her hand back, she opened the door.

Four zombies raced down the corridor.

Zahra slipped through the door and slammed it shut. She locked it again, though she suspected the zombies would see the broken window and know how to gain entrance. Still, it might buy her a few more minutes.

"Dashtu!" she yelled. She hurried over to him and set her hands on his shoulders. "Dashtu, I'm here! Stop!"

A human arm reached through the window.

Zahra saw her katana on the ground beside him. She picked it up, stationing herself between Dashtu and the door. If they were to survive, she'd have to pull him out of this. She'd do it the only way she knew how -- by fighting.

The building rattled. Four zombies and a soldier raced through the door. Beyond them, she heard more, other booted feet, more zombies. She held her katana at the ready.

The unarmed zombies didn't worry her. She'd fought far more and survived. No, the soldier, with his heavy pistol held in his grip promised to be the biggest threat. He stood flanked by two zombies, two more in front of him, just far enough apart for him to get a good shot. If she left Dashtu's side, the soldier could shoot him, and she had no doubts he'd do just

that. If she stayed there, he'd shoot her. She felt the presence of the man she loved at her back and felt him spiraling out of control.

The building shook. The quaking beams and falling bits of construction material made her decision for her. If she died then all was lost.

Zahra darted to the left, pushing the zombie out of the way. It stumbled, recovering. A quick strike with her blade wounded a second zombie, and she smacked the soldier's wrist with the flat of her blade. He dropped the gun.

The zombies surrounded her. Zahra didn't have time to think about that, for the man brought a wicked looking knife from a sheath at his hip. He slashed at her. Nimbly, she backed away, jabbing her elbow into the zombie coming up behind her.

"Hold her," the soldier yelled.

Zahra yanked her right arm from the zombie's grip, whirling to slash at him with her katana. The blade struck him in the shoulder, cutting down across his pectorals. The blade sliced material and skin, bringing the creature's green-flecked blood to the surface. The second zombie grabbed her free arm.

She twisted, using her body weight to pull the monster forward so she could slip free. Another slash decapitated the first wounded zombie, leaving her with three and the soldier.

He reached for his gun.

"Any time now, Dashtu," Zahra growled.

Behind her, a zombie grabbed her about the waist. Zahra bent forward, using the man's momentum to swing him into his comrades. He didn't let go, and she tilted back, bringing her blade up. She marked the soldier.

His fatigues gave way, the blood he shed very crimson. The hands around her waist tightened. She spun, hoping to see Dashtu coming around. He remained bent over, channeling his power into the building. She kicked the zombie, her foot connecting with his hip. He didn't even grunt.

The zombie's claws reached for her throat. His comrade reached in. She struggled in his arms.

Strong fingers closed around her wrist. The soldier, trying to take the blade from her, and she flailed her arm, yanking it free. The blade sliced across his face. He fell back, blinded by his own blood. She kicked, using every trick she learned to extricate herself from the zombie's grip. Finally, in desperation, she plunged her short blade into his hand.

He released her.

She fell to her knees, rising again as the soldier loomed over her with his gun.

She plunged her katana into his chest.

He staggered back, the weapon sliding from his body. A plume of blood erupted from his heart. He looked down, crumpling to the floor, and the zombies wavered, uncertain how to act without their leader.

Zahra seized the moment. A quick slash decapitated the zombie next to the soldier. Another blow took care of the zombie who had tried to reach for her. Spinning, she faced the one who had held her.

Outside the room, the sounds of an approaching army grew louder. She battled for her life, channeling every ounce of self-preservation into killing the creature before her. Behind her, the soldier gurgled and went still. Another human casualty in the fight against the Necros. Zahra hated it, even as she understood its necessity.

The zombie, hampered by its wounded hand, struggled to fight. She managed a lucky blow, decapitating it. Wiping her blade on its clothing, she sheathed it once more. The blade slid home with a snick, and Zahra felt whole. She dropped to her knees beside Dashtu.

She reached for him, not wanting to interfere with his wings, yet longing to touch them. She did, stroking the sensitive feathers. Her gory hands left a trail of blood across them and immediately she regretted her action. She reached for his face instead and cupped his cheek.

"Dashtu," she yelled. "Dashtu, come back to me. I'm alive."

"Zahra," he breathed her name on a wail of anguish.

"I'm alive." She slapped him, not knowing what else would pull him out of this funk. "I'm alive."

Dashtu blinked as if coming out of a fog. His wings stilled. "Zahra?" He turned his head.

"It's me." She pressed her lips to his, mindful of the men coming down the hall. Still, to taste him once more, to let him know she had lived, that was worth a few seconds interruption in their defense.

Dashtu groaned. He reached up and cupped the back of her head, his fingers twining through her short, dark hair. His lips moved over hers, searching, tasting, drinking from her as if he thought she'd fade away at any moment. Anxious to let him know she was alive, she stroked her tongue along his lower lip. He opened his mouth, and she plunged inside.

The first tentative stroke of tongues unleashed a wildfire inside her. With him on his knees, she burrowed against his chest, her hands roaming his shoulders, his back. Whenever they encountered his wings, he shuddered. His hand flattened against her back, molding her to him, and when he reached her ass, he squeezed.

A support beam crumpled.

The impact jarred her back to her senses. "Dashtu, the building!"

He looked around, almost as if for the first time he saw the destruction he'd caused. Bolting to his feet, he went to a shaking pillar. He pressed his hands against it. Blue lights surrounded him, and the pillar healed.

"We don't have much time."

"Can you brace the building enough for us to get out of here?" Zahra stepped toward the door, releasing her katana from its scabbard.

"I think so." He dropped to his knees again, his position identical to the one in which she'd found him. This time, instead of the brutal pounding of energy against the building, she felt a slow ebbing, a healing. The building creaked.

A single man dressed in a long lab coat stepped into the room. Zahra stared at him. He looked far too young to be the Necromancer, yet she couldn't dismiss the air of power that surrounded him. He strode forward, the leashed wails of the zombies in the hall following him.

"So nice of you to put my building back together," he drawled, looking at her.

"Only so we can get out alive," Zahra replied. She started to step forward.

The Necromancer held out a hand. "I'll deal with you later, human. It's the half-angel I want."

"You'll deal with me now!" Zahra leaped for him.

He flung a wave of power at her. The energy picked her up, sending her hurtling backward through the air. She hit a column, shaking both of them. She crumpled to the floor. Bits of ceiling tile trickled around her.

She started to rise.

"Zahra, don't. This is my fight." Dashtu rose to his feet. He closed his eyes and a moment later his twin angel blades appeared in his hands. He advanced on the Necromancer.

Deep in her heart Zahra knew the truth in his words. She scurried around them, going to the door. This might be Dashtu's fight, but she had his back.

* * * * *

Dashtu knew the truth. Zahra was his Blade, and Ulanda had been a pale imitation of the real thing. The building would hold. For how long, he wasn't sure, but hopefully long enough to fight the Necromancer and get out of there. Distantly, he registered Zahra going to the door, looking out for him as always. He flashed back to the first time he'd seen her, long before she had come to him in Barg's. He'd watched her fight, blade flashing, her lithe body staying out of the way of danger. She'd reminded him so much of Ulanda he'd nearly come out of his hiding place. Now, aside from their both being Blades, that was where the similarities ended.

Ulanda had never loved him. She'd been a Blade, but a weak one. He'd known it, just hadn't wanted to believe it. She'd kept things from him, like how a Blade could come back from death, and why she couldn't. It was too late to ask her now, and frankly, he didn't think he wanted to know. Ulanda hadn't been strong enough to help him fulfill his mission. Zahra was. He knew that now.

He spun his twin blades in deadly arcs. The Necromancer wielded power similar to his, but not the same. Somehow, their genetic tinkering had activated the humans' latent abilities to wield magic. It had been a dangerous game, one Dashtu vowed to fix just as soon as Zahra stepped into her place as leader of Neukacee.

He feinted, drawing the Necromancer in closer. He thrust at the man's side. The Necro slid away at the last moment, not even his shirt catching the blade. He thrust out his hand and sent a ball of energy at Dashtu.

He deflected it with a flick of his wrist. The red bolt shot off to one of the support beams, hitting it. It dissipated into the building. How kind of the Necro not to destroy his home.

Dashtu ducked in beneath the Necro's defenses. One blade caught the man on the shoulder, the other low on his side. Material tore and a thin line of blood oozed from the wounds.

The Necromancer snarled. He flung power, big, red bolts of energy at Dashtu. In rapid-fire succession he shot him.

Dashtu dodged them all. Sweat glistened on his skin. It dripped into his eyes, stinging, though he couldn't take the time to wipe it away. He held his wings up and out of the way, folded so as not to catch any of the angry red bolts of power. Behind the Necro, he watched Zahra. She stared out the door, unmoving. The wails of zombies sounded as if they remained in place. Behind a force field perhaps, though he wondered if the Necro had achieved enough mastery of his power to create such a thing.

Dashtu was tired of these games. Tired of fighting, tired of trying to save people only to have more die. Dashtu rushed the Necromancer. Quick slices of the blade caught the man in his neck and torso. He crumpled to the ground.

Standing over the fallen man, Dashtu followed him down. He used his blades to pin the Necro to the floor. No mere killing would do. With a blade in his shoulder and one perforating his abdomen, Dashtu poured his power into the man. All his anger, all his hatred, he released it into the pitiful creature lying beneath him.

The Necromancer wailed.

Dashtu smiled. "This is for Zahra," he snarled as he directed another bolt into the Necromancer.

Smoke rolled from his skin.

Zahra turned to him, her eyes wide. "Finish it," she mouthed.

For her, he did. A quick slash of his sword cut the man's throat. He bled out in a matter of moments. Dashtu wiped his blades clean and stepped away. The building rumbled ominously.

"Go!" He started for the door, concerned the structure wouldn't hold for them to get out.

"There are zombies." Grabbing his hand, she dragged him into the hallway. With the Necromancer dead, his force field had given away, and what looked like an entire platoon of zombies faced them down the hall.

Dashtu pulled her to him. In the face of danger, she never wavered. "I love you," he said and slanted his lips across hers. He kissed her hot and hard, almost sure it would be the last time and not wanting her to die -- again -- without knowing how he felt for her. He hauled her against his body, letting his erect cock press against her stomach. If it weren't for the zombies, he would've taken her right here and damn the falling building.

He released her. "Let's go," he said.

Zahra closed her mouth.

He pulled her down the hallway, back toward the morgue. There had been a smaller side door here, he remembered. Above them, the sound of collapsing floors shook the building.

The children. He prayed Kira had gotten them to safety. Too late to worry now, for the first plumes of dust rolled from the foundation of the building. He skittered around the corner. Dust choked the air. Zahra held her arm over her mouth. They reached the door.

Zahra turned the knob and pushed. The door wouldn't budge. She rammed her shoulder into it, and although the metal shook, the falling building had wedged it into place. A large cloud of debris rolled down the corridor. The wailing zombies couldn't be heard over the falling building.

"Shit," she snarled.

"Let me." He moved in front of her, hoping his greater strength would help. One shove, two, and the door wouldn't move.

He stared down the hallway. They wouldn't die like this, trapped like rats in a cage he'd made. He unfurled his wings with a snap. Tucking Zahra into the corner, he slammed the door with his energy. It creaked, but didn't open.

He flattened his palms against it. Large chunks fell from the ceiling. Walls began to cave in. Within a matter of moments, they'd be dead. He poured everything he had, every ounce of strength, every bit of his love into one, final push.

The door flew open.

Dashtu grabbed Zahra and propelled them through the opening. He raced across the parking lot, beyond the falling building. He whirled around and pulled Zahra behind him to watch the hospital fall.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and peered around him.

The building crumbled. The pile of rubble rumbled once and went still.

Silence settled over the parking lot as dust floated in the air. Spinning, he pulled Zahra into his arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and he took the two steps necessary to press her back against the chain link fence. It rattled.

He pumped his hips, pressing his cock against her softness. Even the leather and denim between them couldn't disguise her heat, her need. She slid her fingers through his hair, pulling his mouth to hers. Her lips moved across his, devouring him with a hunger he matched. The settling dust served to remind them that they were alive. They'd made it through.

She whimpered against his mouth. Arching her back, she rubbed her breasts against his chest. His denim vest long gone, the smooth leather slid against his chest. He reached between them and lowered the zipper.

"Yes," she breathed before sealing her lips to his once more.

He closed his big hand around her breast. The taut bead of the nipple pressed into his palm, so hard and perfect he wanted to taste it. Instead, he rotated his hand, evoking those tiny whimpers and moans he knew so well.

Things weren't over yet, not by a long shot. Dashtu didn't care. He'd survived Zahra's death and return to life. She'd come back to him. They were alive!

Her fingers slid over his shoulders and caressed his wings. A shudder rolled through the length of him. His balls tightened. God bless, that felt good. She stroked his feathers again, her gentle touch making his hips buck against her. "God, yes," he growled against the skin of her throat.

He released her breast to slide his hand over her abdomen. At the waistband of her pants, he paused then undid the button and zipper before shoving them down. Reminiscent of another time when they'd had a hasty fuck up against something, he grinned. The raid had started and ended this way. He dipped his fingers into her heat and moaned at the slick wetness that coated his fingers. He pulled away long enough to unfasten his jeans and shove them down his hips.

"Yes," she breathed, cupping his head to drive his lips toward her breast. "Take me."

Her words were a command he had to obey. Angling his hips, he brushed against her wet labia with the head of his cock. He intended to tease, to find the swollen bud of her clit and torment it with his shaft. She tilted her hips and impaled herself on his cock. He slid home with a groan.

So hot, so tight, it was all he could do ease into her slow enough so he wouldn't hurt her. It felt like coming home. Buried to the hilt, he held her. He loved this woman. He'd fly to the top of the tallest building and shout it from the rooftops. He loved her.

"I love you," he said as he captured her nipple with his mouth.

She moaned, "Love you."

He began to move.

* * * * *

Zahra didn't believe in God or Satan, but with Dashtu moving inside her, she believed in love. Looking over his shoulder she blushed at Eko's thumbs up. Dashtu might not realize that they had an audience, but she did and it made her hotter. The Blade laughed and punched Holt in the arm. He scowled.

She clung to the half-angel she loved, his deep, hard thrusts driving her to the peak. The chain link fence pressed against her back, her leather vest somewhat dampening the blows. It rattled in tune to their lovemaking, and the hot mouth around her nipple drove all thoughts from her mind.

Dashtu drove her higher and higher. Each thrust punctuated the fact that they both were alive. She whimpered as her channel rippled along his length. "Dashtu, please," she begged.

He reached between their bodies and stroked her clit.

She screamed, her orgasm hitting her hard and fast. With a groan, Dashtu quickened his pace. He thrust through her release, each stroke igniting something new inside her. She cried out, her voice wordless sounds of pleasure. So raw. So new. Pinning her to the fence, Dashtu stiffened. He groaned once and emptied himself into her.

Zahra clung to him. His release triggered an avalanche deep inside her. Her body convulsed, her pussy milking every last drop of his seed. Their panting breaths mingled with the fading chime of the fence. She rested her forehead against his shoulder. "I think we're about to have company."

His stifled chuckle vibrated his chest. "I was afraid of that, but I had to have you." His gruff voice washed over her as intimate as a caress. He moved just enough to slide his cock from her. "Can you stand?"

She nodded against him and he eased her down to the ground. Her knees were wobbly, but she managed to have her pants pulled up and her vest zipped by the time Eko and Holt walked over.

"I see you didn't need my help after all," Eko said with a scowl toward Holt.

Irritation flashed through Zahra at the smug sounding words. "I thought I told you to keep the humans safe."

"I did, don't worry. He wouldn't let me leave until everyone was accounted for." Once again Eko punched Holt in the arm.

"I wish you'd stop doing that." He glared at her. "Glad to see you're safe, brother." Holt grabbed Dashtu's arm and pulled him into an embrace.

Brother? Certainly not fraternal brothers, for Holt was as dark as Dashtu was light. Holt had always seemed...different. Zahra grinned and glanced at Eko. She suspected the fighter would have a surprise coming before long.

"Glad to be safe. Did you secure the hotel?" Dashtu asked.

Holt nodded. "It's ready for you, and I have humans there who are the relative leaders of their areas. I believe we can say that Neukacee is the first Necromancer-free area." He grinned and turned to Zahra. "Thank you. Without your work, this wouldn't have been possible."

"Mine?" Zahra struggled not to gape. "Dashtu killed the Necromancer. I just..." Watched? That didn't sound right. She'd killed her fair share, gone out on patrols even before coaxing Dashtu to join her cause.

"You reminded Dashtu of his duty to humanity. You brought him into his powers since I now see he sprouted wings. You reminded him how to love." Holt brushed his thumb across her cheek. "There's no greater gift than that. It is said that every angel has his Blade, that which completes him and enables him to do battle. You, my dear, are Dashtu's Blade."

Zahra shivered at her friend's words. It sounded awfully formal. The next thing she knew Dashtu would be asking her to marry him. She glanced at him and saw him looking down at her with possessive love in his gaze. *That wouldn't be so bad*, she thought. "Thank you. You mentioned something about a hotel?"

"Our new headquarters, since I destroyed the current one."

"The children are waiting there as well. There's a school nearby that I think will serve our purposes nicely," Holt offered.

"Then there's nothing left to do here," Zahra said. She glanced at Holt and grinned. "Dashtu said something about putting me in charge. I say let's go."

"You're not in charge all the time," Dashtu growled in her ear. His hand roamed over her back and down to her buttocks.

"Only when it counts." And there, in front of soldiers, friends, and the ruins of the past, she kissed him. After all, Blades do more than save the world, they also get their men. A familiar tingling buzzed in her mind and Holt chuckled. She deepened the kiss with a smile. She figured her informant would find out all about Blades soon enough.



Mary Winter

Mary commutes between her dream home near the Mark Twain national forest in Missouri, and her current residence in Iowa. She lives with a menagerie of animals including an opinionated horse and a cat who was a dog in past life. When not writing spicy tales of erotic romance, she enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, spending time with her horse, and enjoying the outdoors. Lucky for her, her partner (hero) shares these same passions, and usually both of them can be found in their respective dens writing.