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A WALK  
BETWEEN

*Worlds*

ANASTASIA RABIYAH

A Walk Between Worlds  
*by Anastasia Rabiya*

**Amira Press**

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*by Anastasia Rabiya*

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## **Dedication**

To the fallen who choose to rise above what they have always  
been and reach for the light.

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## **Prologue**

Treila sat alone in the corner of the room she had shared all her life with her twin sister. She hugged her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth, tears trailing down her cheeks. Minai was gone, and she didn't understand why. She was the one who did not belong, the one with the secret. Not Minai. Treila had prayed for such an event to befall herself, a horrible kidnapping so that her family would be rid of her, an untimely death so that she would not have to hide what she was.

Three days had passed, and no word had come. The weight of the crown felt heavy upon her, for her parents had never intended she inherit it. Of all the things she was, the most was unprepared. She had no training to lead her people, but there was no one else in her family's line left. She needed answers. She needed time. She needed her sister back. Minai, with her quiet determination, her ability to solve problems, and her benevolent magical charms, would have known what to do next.

Not long after her sister was taken, Treila received word from the Nor king that he would not take no for an answer. He would arrive to wed her and unite their lands by full moon. If she refused, he would kill her and claim the Telen city by force. Either way, the war between their cities would come to an end ... soon.

She reached out with her mind, a trick of someone with empath talents in her blood, and sought the familiar touch of

her sister's thoughts. Treila concentrated and whispered a prayer over and over that Minai was safe from harm, that she would find the comfort of their lifelong mental connection.

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## **Chapter One: Courage**

Kolar raised his face to his master. "You cannot make me do it. I refuse to kill the woman." He glared into the demon king Olemoth's almond-shaped, red eyes. They narrowed further to slits of anger. His master's brown claws clicked atop the handles of his bone throne. Firelight flickered across his recently polished horns. Kolar kept his feathered wings folded at his back and ran three fingers across the hilt of one of his swords. "She is innocent. Spilling her blood will not change the outcome of this war."

Olemoth sucked in a tight breath, his dark lips quivering. "How dare you disobey me? Me? The one who pulled you from the flames as a babe. A master who taught you how to fight, how to serve. You shame yourself defying me in this." His master's knuckles cracked as he grasped the edge of the handles of his throne tight and pulled himself into a stand. The ermine-edged cloak Olemoth favored swept past Kolar, brushing his forearm, infusing the air with the scent of sage.

Remaining on his knees, he waited to see what his master would do next.

Olemoth's hooves thumped across the red and gold carpeting, the sound of his passing fading away from the throne room. Not long after, metal armor clinked in time with soldiers' boots. Kolar heard Minai's cry of fear. He turned to see what would happen to her—the woman he had stolen from the Telen city.



Her ebony skin all bare in the places her fine dress revealed made his mouth water. He alone had captured her upon his master's command. Kolar had carried her through the air, across the great desert called Galaffa, and here to the demon sky palace, just as he had been ordered to do. But now, he did not want to see her die, and the two demon soldiers at either side looked ready to slit her throat at any moment.

"You should use her to bargain with," Kolar suggested, an unfamiliar panic starting in his chest. He stared at her large, round eyes—eyes full of fear and naivety. "Trade her to the Nors in exchange for an alliance."

Olemoth's reptilian tail swished behind him, a sign of annoyance. "Who do you think you are to suggest what *I* should do with this hostage?" His upper lip curled.

"I am but your humble servant, as always, my master." A shiver of foreboding ran along Kolar's spine. Rarely did he argue with Olemoth, but the woman's tender embrace, the way her hand rested against his cheek each night they had camped on their journey, her kind affections had awakened hunger in him—longing for more than his rank as an assassin for the demon king. He saw the world around him in a new light now. He questioned the truth of Olemoth's teachings, and even the story that the demon had found him as a baby in the castoff fires. Minai had told him different stories, tales about more of his kind that flocked in the western skies and kept themselves in the crags two days from the Telen palace. He didn't believe her at first, but she had no reason to lie to him.

"Humble." Olemoth snorted. He reached for the dagger at his belt, drew it, and examined the blade. "You seem to have lost that trait." His fiery gaze flickered to the woman.

Minai stared into Kolar, her brown eyes pleading for aid. She needed a champion, someone to stand up and fight for her, not a fallen angel who lived among demons—who might very well be half demon himself.

The demon king strode across the carpet to face the Telen princess. "What do you think, dark child? Should I bargain you to your enemies? Would you warm the bed of the Nor king for the rest of your days and keep peace among us all?"

Minai's breathing increased. She stared at Olemoth and then at Kolar. Her full lips parted. "I would choose to live if it is my choice at all. Kolar is right. There's nothing to gain in murdering me. The wars will go on." She bit her bottom lip for an instant. "I would warm *your* bed to stay alive."

Kolar held his breath, realizing what horror he had done by bringing her here. She no more deserved to be a concubine to any king than he deserved to be called a knight.

Olemoth sighed. "As pleasing as your offer is, I only want my kind in my bed. Life is a fleeting thing." His blade sliced through the air.

"No!" Kolar screamed and drew his swords as he jumped to his feet to charge. Time slowed. He sprinted toward the demon king in what he knew would be his first and last act of defiance. Olemoth's blade slashed. Blood spurted across Minai's cream-colored dress, staining her corset and splattering outward.

Wind whispered when Kolar's swords arced toward his master.

*Too late. I am too late.* He didn't watch where he struck, his gaze fixed on Minai as she slumped forward, her life draining away.

The guards released her and sprang forth to protect their king.

Kolar's metal blades crashed against Olemoth's shoulder guards.

Her body hardly made a sound when she crumpled to the carpet. She landed sideways, her innocent expression facing him, her eyes losing their luster. Minai had opened his mind to the light for a brief time, and now he felt darkness closing in all around him. The guards drew their axes and made ready to cleave off whatever part of Kolar they could reach.

Olemoth hissed.

Kolar knew he could not beat them. He turned, and for the first time in his life, he fled. There was nowhere for him to go, no place safe that he could hide from the demon king. He made it out of the throne room, down the candle-lined hall, and raced through the concubine quarters, empty now, for the king's women were out in the bathing pools.

The guards gained, crashing through the silks and linens piled by the archway. Vases fell to the marble floor, shattering.

An open window beckoned to Kolar. Cool morning air brought with it the scents of the wilds. At either side of the target, gauze curtains puffed and billowed. *My only hope.* He ran faster, leaping over pillows and beds in his effort to gain

freedom. At his back, his wings spread in preparation. The perfume of flowering copperwood trees far below the palace lured him into hoping for what could not be.

A shot of pain cracked against the back of his head. In that instant, as his heartbeat pounded in his temples, he knew all was lost. His eyes slipped shut. He saw Minai's face over and over at the moment the demon lord had slit her throat and heard his voice echoing. *"No!"*

Unfortunately, he did not fall unconscious. Steps away from the window, the guards hauled him up, one at each arm, and dragged him back the way he'd come. His fallen swords rested atop an unmade bed. He wished he had them with him, but even so, he knew there would be no way to escape his master now.

Blood ran down the back of his neck, hot and slick. It made its way along his spine and soaked into his pants. He held still, knowing no way out.

When the guards placed him before Olemoth, Kolar did not bow. He stood as straight as he could, his body swaying, his vision blurred. He faced his punishment with a courage he had lacked all his life—a courage he should have possessed moments before when Minai needed him. He had failed her—the only person to ever show him tenderness—the only one who had showed him what love might be like.

"Death is too kind an atonement for you, betrayer." Olemoth paced, his hooves making a steady cadence. "You do not deserve to live either." He rubbed his bearded chin, eyes wandering over the carpet. "I must make an example of you."

The demon king halted. The stubs of his wings, long ago cut away in battle by the Nor king, twitched above his shoulders. "I will have you thrown into the void. There you will know true loneliness. You will come to understand that what I offered you, a home, duty, life ... those things were precious. You've thrown it all away with your disloyalty to me. And for what?"

Kolar could hardly stand. His head pounded, and he felt faint. He wanted to shout out that he gave it all away for the soft touch of a woman's hand against his cheek and for the truth of stories from another land that rang with hope and love. But he knew Olemoth could not understand these things. They did not matter in the sky palace. Such aspirations were the fairy tales of the Telens and the Nors. Demons believed in power and strength, taking instead of giving. Until Minai had sidled beside Kolar in the icy cold night when they camped in the Galaffa Desert and whispered three small words, he had not known what light was. *"Please, protect me."*

"For that little Telen whore of a princess. I'm sure she seduced you. That's what they do best. It's her I blame for this act of treason. But you..." He faced Kolar and lifted his chin with a fisted hand. "I thought you were stronger. I should have left you to die in the flames like the trash you are. Spawn of a demon and an angel. You have no place. You belong in the void."

Kolar's eyes slipped shut.

Sounds rushed past his ears. The scrape of metal against metal, the crack of whips preparing to bite at his bare skin.

He cringed when they bound his wrists. When each slap of lash against flesh hit him, he bit his lip, determined not to cry out or show his pain. He was ashamed. Not for betraying Olemoth. He was sorry he had not promised to protect Minai, regretful that he had not been able to stop her death.

The beating went on for three days. When the guards unhitched Kolar's bonds, he fell face-first against the bloodstained floor of the torture chamber. Lying there, he waited for whatever punishment his master might mete out next. Water dripped from the rafters, pattering every so often near his face. He was thirsty and tired. His stomach grumbled. His back throbbed with pain.

Hooves clacked across the stone floor.

Kolar opened his eyes and saw Olemoth's furry legs a few steps away. "Place him in the void. If I don't forget him, I may give him a second chance." The demon king snapped his fingers, setting guards into motion. "This war is trying and requires my attention."

Kolar lifted his head to see his master's face.

"I doubt I will remember you after this day." Olemoth turned and sauntered away.

The guards took up Kolar's wrists and removed him from the chamber. They passed through several arched halls, descending into the bowels of the sky palace to the void. It was not exactly a place, not a room or a dungeon, but the magical span of energy that held the palace aloft in midair. The door to the void awaited, open and ready to swallow him up.

Kolar closed his eyes and prayed for the courage to survive it. For if he did, he swore he would change. He would make his way toward the light Minai had spoken of. He would find his people and learn the truth of his origins. He promised he would never serve Olemoth again.

They shoved him forward, and Kolar fell through an endless sky of black. No stars marred the darkness. He spun head over heels until his black wings caught air and slowed his descent. Time became a mystery to him. His stomach no longer begged for food, and his thirst was quenched. The void stopped all life but did not destroy. The void was limbo, a state of being and yet not being. There he waited, alone and broken, for the day Olemoth might remember him.

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## Chapter Two: Justice

Treila held her hand to her throat and cringed from the echoed pain there. *My twin has died.* She stood in the window of the high tower, watching the sky for some sign of the dark angel who had stolen her sister, some sign that what she felt had happened was not true. When the gods offered none, she covered her mouth with her hand and stifled her cry of pain. The bond they had shared since birth was broken forever now, and she knew the full weight of being alone. "Minai." She closed her eyes and let pent-up tears fall down her cheeks.

The war between the Telens and the Nors had taken a turn for the worse. The demons in their sky palace had seized the opportunity to gain power. Killing off the nobles of both cities seemed to be their plan. They had taken her father and mother in a bloody siege three months before. With her sister now gone, Treila knew she would be the demon king's next target. She made a plan to escape, to slip away in the night before the Nor king could arrive to claim or kill her.

She thought back on the night Minai had been taken. "Why would an angel steal my sister?" She had seen the black wings of the one who thieved her twin. She knew he was different than the fair-winged angels living near Telen in the cliffs of Plemae. Her sister's death meant that either the winged clans had turned against Treila's people, or the demon king had found a way to turn one of the angels to his cause. She doubted the latter. Angels were watchers. They never



took part in the wars or in times of peace for that matter. They went about their lives in the cliffs, more of a mystery than anything else.

She cried long into the night and prayed for justice. "My sister's death will not be in vain," she said, resolving to do something other than weep. "I will find out the answer to this tragedy. I will kill whoever is behind it." She crept out of her room and down the hall to a guard's stow room. Inside she rifled through one of their closets for clothing close enough in size to fit her. Creeping in silence along the shadows in the hall, she returned to her room to dress. She used a sharpened dagger to slice off the thick length of her black hair. Carefully, she tossed the mass into the hearth by her bed and watched it catch fire, burning to nothing but a memory. Next, she bound her breasts to hide what she was. She donned the drab gray of men's clothing, set the dagger in her belt, and took up a bow and quiver upon her back. She ran a wet cloth over her face before painting her skin with the green dyes guards wore. Glancing at herself in the looking glass, she frowned. *No one will know me now.*

The princess planned to blend in with the regiment leaving at dawn. She wanted to ride out to the Helmish Hills and then, hopefully, break away to scout the cliffs of Plemae, where the angels lived. Answers awaited her there, and maybe salvation. She fluffed the pillows on her bed and placed the coverlet over them. The maids knew she liked to sleep up until midday, and the illusion of her body beneath the covers would ward off suspicion until she could be far enough away not to be discovered.

She waited another hour before she stole through the servant halls to the barracks and slipped into an empty cot for the short remainder of the night. She lay awake, staring at the ceiling and plotting her revenge. Sleep was a luxury she doubted she would enjoy after this night.

Morning came soon enough, and she shuffled along with the men out to the mess hall. She gulped down her meager ration of hot grain cereal and dried meat. The men took no notice of her. Most bore a melancholy expression. She understood why. Every venture into the outer lands offered an opportunity to die either by the hands of the Nors or the claws of the demon king's hoards.

She followed in line to deposit her bowl and spoon in the cook's bin, and then out to the stables where each was fitted with armor before he took up a mount. The squires did the same to her, wordlessly fastening a breastplate across her front and strapping it tight over her backside. The helm came next, its visor open so she could see on her way out of the keep. She waited for a horse to be offered to her. When the majority of guards had rode out toward the city gates, Treila spoke in the lowest voice she could muster. "A horse, I need a horse."

"This way," a young man said. She stared at his round face, so innocent, so young. No sign of a beard marred his skin. *He can't be more than sixteen winters.* He smiled and turned to lead her to the back lines.

The young man pulled a helmet on. He waved at the few horses that remained. "These ones are unclaimed. Their riders were lost in the last siege. If this is your first ride out,

stay close to the center. Stay safe. The seasoned riders take the outer edges of the band. You'll do well to stay by me."

She nodded, afraid to speak and slip up, revealing that she was a woman and not a warrior.

He handed her the reins of a massive warhorse, fitted with full armor. Treila had ridden sidesaddle many times, but never like a man. She grimaced and set her foot in the stirrup. Pulling her body over the animal's wide girth, she frowned. *Riding like this will be easier, though. I can let the horse have his head and race past the troops until I'm far enough away that they'll take no notice of me.*

The soldier nodded and waved a hand at her before he went to find his own mount. His armor clinked together as he walked.

She thought of Minai, standing on their shared balcony the day the dark angel stole her. Treila knew the shape of the male's face, had memorized the color of his lustrous blue-black hair, and looked forward to the day she could slit his throat. She wanted his eyes to be open when she killed him. She wanted to hear him beg for mercy.

Hooves plowed holes in the fields they crossed after parting from the city wall. The riders held a loose circular shape, and Treila disregarded the young man's warning to stay in the center. She guided the warhorse to the outer edge of the troops, eyeing the cliffs beyond the Helmish Hills. She wondered if anyone would notice if she led the horse straightaway to where she wanted to go.

"Stay in the center," a voice called. "Like I told you."

She caught sight of the young man who had helped her earlier. She opened her mouth to shout back at him, but the hoarse cry of a demon weaver screeched through the air, cutting her off. The circle of warriors broke in half and then into quarters. Her horse followed on instinct, keeping pace with those around her. Treila yanked the animal's reins, urging it toward the hills. There she could vanish from the guards and take up her quest to find out exactly who had stolen and murdered her sister.

The horse relented, galloping across the burned field toward Plemae. Treila didn't look back. She knew the army would battle the demon weaver, and many of them would be killed. *There is nothing I can do about it.* The warhorse kept pace through the valley and up along the first hill that she needed to cross. Behind her, the shriek of the weaver rang across the lands and sent chills up her spine. Such creations were abominations, a bad mix of dark magic and evil. The Nors made evils like the weavers as well. Only her people adhered to the old ways of light magic. But in many ways she was not like her people.

Low-growing vines slowed her horse's progress. Blood-colored stems and red-orange leaves netted round the animal's hooves and broke off with crunching sounds. The acrid smell of the plants made Treila gag. Years ago, the Nors had seeded them to keep the Telen people bound to their city. To the west, the demon king had caused the Darkwood Forest to infringe on the grazing lands of her people's flocks. Like all Telens, Treila persevered. She kicked the horse into a faster gait.

The hills gave way to the rocky grounds before the Plemae cliffs. Dizzy and light-headed from the foul odor of the broken vines, she pulled her mount's reins, halting the animal. Treila tried to catch her breath in the fresher air.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She looked over her shoulder and saw a plume of black smoke rising from the battlefield. The demon weaver no longer screeched, but she couldn't hear the sounds of her army either. Something was watching her. She felt its eyes and the exposure to it where she was, out in the open and alone.

Before her, the Plemae cliffs beckoned. She hoped the angels would accept her into their city and be able to answer her questions. Maybe the feeling of Minai's death was all some part of her grim visions and foresights. Maybe it had yet to happen, and her sister was safe in those cliffs with that dark angel. She doubted her hopes, though. Treila urged the warhorse forward, but the eerie sensation of being spied on didn't abate.

Her horse's hooves clacked across hard stone. Her horse snorted. The silence in this part of the valley before the cliffs bothered her. No birds called. No plant grew across the barren setting. Not even a stray lizard darted in her path. Treila looked back over her shoulder again.

Enormous black wings spread across the horizon, shadowing the blue of the sky. She opened her mouth to scream, but the demon weaver's great clawed hands scooped her up and wrenched her from the saddle. The monster twisted in midair, and she was trapped between its scaly fingers, crying out for someone to help her.

It circled and swooped. Her horse neighed and flailed. She closed her eyes, unable to watch as the demon weaver swallowed up the animal, armor and all.

*I'm dead. I'm dead now.* Treila thought back on her plan and realized how foolish she had been. Now the demon king had her in the palm of his minion's hand. There would be no escape from him, and demons showed no mercy.

She peered through the opening in the weaver's fingers and saw the field where her regiment had died. All of the men lay splayed across the grounds, their bodies burning, their horses dead too. The demon weaver dipped low over the carnage it had caused, and she saw the round face of the young man who had helped her, blood trailing over his cheek and his leg missing. His helmet lay crushed an arm's length from his body.

The reptilian fingers drew together, closing off her view of the outside world. Treila hated the dark. She hated this newfound feeling of being alone and disconnected from the world. She missed her twin and the connection they had shared.

*"I take you to Olemoth, Telen princess."* Its whispery voice slithered through her mind, making her shudder with fear and foreboding. Her garments and cut hair had not hidden her from the beast. It knew her. It had probably come to the scene to hunt her. She tried to breathe, to stay focused, but her heart beat so fast it felt like it would explode. There was no escape for her now. She knew it, and prayed to her gods that justice would be served for her sister's death ... and her own.

For days, the demon weaver carried her. It didn't stop to rest. It didn't speak to her in her mind again. They passed through cool air and then heat. She smelled the scent of cinnamon all around her when the monster finally began its descent. She was tired and hungry, exhausted from being trapped in the monster's steely grip.

Raucous cries and curses greeted her when the demon weaver dropped Treila on a stone balcony. Weak and worn, she got to her knees and looked up at the gathering of demon warriors that had come to collect her. The hulking males with leathery wings and cruel horns at each temple jeered and pointed. She was entertainment for them, a thing to be gawked at and prodded.

One came forward, more scarred and dangerous looking than the rest. He bent and gripped her upper arm to pull her to stand. "Olemoth will have your blood now," he grumbled. "Come, last one of the Telen line."

She whimpered and followed him away from the others. They left the balcony, his steps on hooved feet loud and long. It was difficult to keep up with him. Treila knew she needed to escape. There had to be a way to trick him or at least divert his attention until she thought of a way out. "I have never lain with a man," she blurted.

The demon guard snorted and kept walking, seemingly nonplussed by what she implied.

Treila forced herself to look at his face. Thick eyebrows overshadowed his deep-set red eyes. His sharp nose looked as if it had been broken several times, and his full lips curved in a malicious sneer. His pupils darted her way and then back

to the hall ahead—a small sign that he was waiting for her to say more.

She couldn't imagine kissing him or getting any closer than she was already, but she could think of no other way to arrange a possible escape.

"You lie, Telen whore." He squeezed her wrist hard.

Fighting back a cry of pain, she trailed her fingers over the fist that gripped her so tightly. "Please. I'm so scared. I only want to know what it feels like."

The demon's steps slowed, but didn't stop. "He'll kill you like he did your sister. Slit your throat, and watch your life's blood drain out."

She noticed his pointed teeth when he spoke, sharp as a wild dog's. Treila halted, and the demon dragged her a few more steps before he stopped and breathed out a deep sigh. He snarled and tugged at her arm. "Come."

"Please." She reached up to touch the skin revealed on his broad chest just above his furred tunic. "Claim me before I die."

He sucked in a startled breath, blinked, and looked down the hall to see if anyone else was near enough to hear them. Slowly, his attention returned to her, his gaze raking up and down her body.

Treila took a step closer and breathed in the scent of his musky skin. He didn't smell as foul as she imagined he would. She closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see his face, and leaned her head against his chest as if he might protect and comfort her.

The demon grunted. His heartbeat pounded near her ear.



"Come," he whispered and thrust his hips against her body, backing her away from where they stood. "No one will hear us in this place. I will give you what you ask for. You can take the memory of our coupling to the afterlife with you and dream of the day I'll join you there to repeat it again and again."

A door opened. He pulled her into darkness, and the door shut softly behind them. His clawed fingers combed through her short hair and ran down her back until he cupped her buttocks and squeezed. Nearby, she heard cries of pain and the echoing crack of a lash. She opened her eyes and stared up at the demon, whose expression had softened. "What is this place?"

"Torture rooms." He licked his lower lip and then sucked it into his mouth. "You can scream if I please you. No one will interrupt us. They will think you are just another of the prisoners." He guided her farther into the darkness. Blood and ash mingled with other rank scents in the hall. The demon lowered his mouth to hers and nipped at her lips.

She wanted to back away, to slip from his hold, but she fought her instinct of revulsion and kissed him back, tentative and clumsy, for she had never been intimate with anyone before now. He pulled back and frowned. "You don't kiss with any passion."

She didn't know what excuse to offer him.

The demon took her hand in his and pulled her from the dark hall to a small room lit by a flickering flame in its hearth. Inside there was only a bare table and two chairs. He shut the wooden door and slipped off his furred tunic, dropping it to

the floor. When he faced her, Treila's eyes widened. His chest was scarred with thick lines.

He glanced down and then back at her. "From battles." He shrugged his shoulders as if his markings meant nothing, and lumbered toward her. She backed to the table, forced to stop at its edge. There was no escape, no way to overpower him, so she reached to touch his chest and explore the scars. This had been a bad idea after all.

"You are not as pretty as your sister was."

Treila's hands fell away to brace herself from being forced onto her back. "So, it was the demon king who stole her, not the angels."

Her captor grunted and nodded. "Angels do nothing. They watch. They wait. They are not smart enough to seize opportunities. Demons do that." He dipped his face to kiss her. His warm lips touched her cheek before his tongue licked away her falling tear. He whispered beside her ear. "Olemoth would never foul himself by claiming a Telen, much less a Nor." He kissed her earlobe and worked a line of moist caresses down her neck. "But I see no reason ... not to take you. A shame to do so before you must die." His fingers pushed between her legs and stroked her center with experience. "I would keep you for my concubine in the lower reaches of the palace. I would teach you how to kiss ... if I were king."

Her breath caught in her throat. His touch felt good despite her aversion to him. It was obvious that he had explored a woman's body many times before and knew how to work each pleasure point. He unfastened the armor at her back and

pushed the metal away. "Kiss me again, like your life depends on it, Telen, or I will take you to Olemoth without stealing your virginity."

His middle finger rubbed circles between her legs. She couldn't concentrate, couldn't breathe properly for fear and the fiery sensation he sent through her body. Treila lifted her chin and closed her eyes. His lips dragged over her mouth, his hot breath tasting of sweet wine, his tongue strong and large as it entered her mouth. He groaned and pressed his finger faster. For a moment she was lost in the forbidden closeness. No one had dared touch her, much less kiss her before, but she knew this meant nothing. It was a way out, a chance, however small, at regaining her freedom—her very life. Her fingers snaked across the table until she found the edge of the discarded breastplate. Treila tightened her fist on it and swung.

The metal collided with the side of his head, letting out a loud clang. His mouth pulled free. His finger left her cleft as he staggered backward, startled.

A wave of cold swept through her. She had no idea what she would do next. He was standing between her and the door, rubbing at the side of his head, his expression curling into rage.

Treila glanced around the room. The fire in the hearth popped. A rat scurried across the floor, drawing her eye. The mangy rodent scabbled over a wooden door on the floor. She wondered if it could be a basement, or perhaps a way out.

"I can tie your hands if that's what you want, woman." His hoof stomped once.

She dove for the wooden door. Her fingers closed over the latch on it and trembled as she turned and pulled back the simple lock.

Another clomp. Another.

She threw back the door and stared down into an abyss of pure black.

"I can make it hurt," she heard the demon warn just before his clawed fingers grasped a hold of her shoulders and pulled her away from the darkness she was about to fall into. There was something unnatural about the place beyond the door she had opened, something that called to the side of herself she had been forced to hide.

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### Chapter Three: Mercy

Kolar remembered the feel of Minai's arms holding on to him. She had shown him affection when all she should have done was hate him. He didn't understand why. He regretted bringing her to the demon king. He regretted who he was and all the vile things he'd done. The void shifted with shades of blue and gray. He watched the colors mingle and meld, wishing he had never taken her from the balcony. She had been standing there with her arms upraised, singing to the dawn. Even the moment he saw her he had felt a dreadful foreboding. A predator, he had swooped in and stolen Minai. Because of him, she was dead.

He shook his head and questioned his existence, something he had never done before. Life had been simple enough. He was a warrior for his master, and he did whatever his master desired. No questions. No hesitation. He was nothing more than a slave. He had never realized that truth. Instead he had believed himself a knight of the demon lord, a forceful entity to be reckoned with. But all he really was, all he had ever been, was a weak servant with no conscience.

*If only I could have a second chance...*

Light spilled down from above. A woman screamed. He looked up. Someone had opened the trapdoor to the void. Kolar's heart pounded in his chest. *Maybe my master has forgiven me.* He spread his wings and forced himself into flight. Passing up through the void was like swimming upstream. He struggled. He fought. He made his way toward

the light. He refused to forget his last thought, his prayer for another try at life.

*I will be a true knight. I will protect those who cannot protect themselves. I will end this war and the tyranny of my master.*

He spilled forth into the dank dungeon amidst the distant outcries of suffering prisoners. His wings, widespread as they were, slapped against stone walls. Before him a woman lay facedown on the filthy stone floor. Ready to force himself upon her, one of Olemoth's demons was growling from his stance next to her prone form.

"You!" the demon shouted. "Get your useless hide back into the void before Olemoth sees you've escaped."

Kolar needed his blades. He was not accustomed to fighting without the matched weapons. But he was not helpless. He lunged at the demon, catching his victim off guard. They both grappled with one another, circling the hole that led to the void, sidestepping the fallen woman. The demon snarled. Drool seeped from the side of his mouth. Kolar leaned forward to throw his adversary off balance. It worked.

Stumbling, the demon spit out a slew of curses.

Kolar toppled the creature and shoved him into the void.

With both hands he heaved the door shut on his former prison. Out of breath from the adrenaline in his veins, he knelt beside the woman and tenderly brushed her cheek. "Are you ... all right?" She didn't respond. He ran his fingers over her body to check for injuries. Satisfied she was unharmed in any noticeable way, he turned her on her side.

Even in the dim light, he knew her face, the curve of her cheek, the pout of her full lips. Her eyes flickered and opened, fixating on him. "Minai," he whispered, incredulous. "How can this be? I saw him kill you." He traced her throat to be sure. No line or scar marred her perfect dark skin. But her long hair had been chopped short. He lifted her hand and placed her palm to his cheek, hoping to feel the light inside her wash over him.

"I know you." Her voice was low and pained. "I *know* you." She blinked and tried to sit up, pulling her hand away. "Bastard!" She slapped at him. "Get away from me, you monster!"

He stood and stepped away, watching as she got to her feet. The clothes she wore were not the finery of the Telen princess he had stolen. Streaks of war paint and dried tears stained her cheeks. Her full lips were drawn in a dangerous snarl.

"I'll kill you for what you've done!" She charged at him, her fists curled tight, her eyes narrowed.

He remained still, standing in place to take each blow she pounded against his chest. The strikes were nothing compared to the pain he sensed in her. She had suffered because of him. He suffered, too. Their pain and loss were the same, but he doubted she would see that.

The woman beat on him until she grew weary. Her breaths choked with sobs, she finally stopped and stood there, eyeing him with hatred.

"I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I didn't want Minai to die. I had hoped ... when I saw you here ... that she ... that

you..." It was no use. She was not the woman he had stolen. Minai was lost, dead, forever a reminder of something beautiful and good that he passed into his master's hands.

"Why did you take her from me?" She sobbed and raised a fist again, holding it in midair.

"Because my master told me to take her." He bowed his head. Her hand slapped his cheek, knocking his face sideways. He deserved much worse.

Outside the room, the sounds of hooves clopped across the stone floor. Someone was coming, perhaps just a guard checking in on those prisoners in the torture rooms. Perhaps someone worse. Kolar raised his face. "Let me take you from this place."

"I don't trust you." She glared at him.

"You must. There is no one else, and someone is coming."

The door to the room began to open. Grim, gray light spilled into the darkness. She turned her head to see who was about to step in. In that small instant of her drawn attention, he bridged the distance between them, slipped his hand over her mouth to silence her, and enfolded the woman and himself within his black wings. It was an old trick of the demons, a charm of invisibility that he had mastered as a youth. The darkness of his feathers blended in with shadows all too well.

She stiffened in his hold, but didn't struggle. The scent of her hair and skin was familiar. He clutched her and waited. She smelled like Minai. She smelled like hope and freedom. He wished she would cling to him and take away the horrible pain and emptiness he felt inside.



The intruder was a lowly guard, a lesser demon who plodded into the room, glanced around once, and then left with a slam of the door. Kolar listened as the guard's steps echoed farther away. The woman's body felt good next to his, warm, hot even. He didn't want to let go of her. "Who are you?" he whispered by her ear.

"Treila. I am the last princess of the Telen people, thanks to *you*."

He set his chin on her shoulder. Sadness lingered in his voice when he spoke. "I give you my life, for all time. I owe you so much more for having taken your sister from you."

"You killed her." Her voice caught in her throat.

"No. I would never have hurt her." But he did feel responsible for her death. He didn't have to bring Minai to the demon king. They could have fled, flown to the south on the high winds and hidden in Darkwood Forest. Anyone who ventured there was never seen again.

"I don't believe you." She shoved away from him and burst free of his grip. Her escape parted his feathers, and one ripped free with a painful pinch. The long black plume fluttered in lazy circles until it hit the floor. He watched the woman stomp toward the door. She was afraid, but she was brave—a dangerous mix.

"Wait." He started after her.

She ignored him and opened the door. Treila looked out into the hall beyond. "I'll avenge her death."

He sighed. "How?" Kolar set a hand on her shoulder, readying to pull her backward in case anyone approached. "You are only one, and you have no weapons. Do you expect

to march into the demon king's throne room and choke the life out of him with your bare hands?"

"If I have to." She slapped at him, but he tightened his grip and did pull her back then. Treila stumbled into him. He shut the door and set her up straight.

"How did the door to the void open? Was it you?" He nodded toward the trapdoor he had dispatched the demon into.

"Yes. I thought it might be a way out. I was trying to get away while he..."

He chewed his cheek, knowing well enough what the demon had tried to do to her. She had her sister's eyes, her sister's mouth. Her lips turned into a snarl as if she could sense the direction of his thoughts. He found her alluring, dirty though she was from having been stolen. He could see the beauty of her waiting to shine through. His body stirred, quickening at her closeness. His heart thrummed harder in his chest. He licked his lips and tried to stop thinking about what it would be like to pull her into his arms again—maybe kiss her cheek, or trace those full lips with two fingers, back and forth, until he memorized their softness. "Treila, let me take you away from here. Let me take you to safety, to Darkwood." His voice had grown husky from the desire flickering inside his chest.

"I would never go there! Darkwood Forest is cursed. It's a place for keeping secrets, and I have no secret to keep!" She managed to back away from him a second time. After forcing open the door, she trudged out into the hall beyond.

He chased after her, vowing that he would not let this woman die like he had Minai. If anyone threatened her, he would kill them or die trying.

She glanced at him before she ran, turning along the corridor and halls as if she knew the way. Maybe she did. Maybe this was all an illusion and he still floated in the void, hallucinating. He blinked, fearful that he really was in the void, and she was gone from his sight when his vision cleared. Kolar ground his teeth together. The dungeon was no place for a woman. If another demon found her, she might not be so lucky at escaping a second time.

He emerged in the alcove by the kitchens. The scents of meat and spices made his stomach grumble. He had not eaten much when he brought Minai on the journey to the sky castle, and he had not eaten at all after they arrived. The void had hidden any bodily needs, but they raged now, doubled by having been neglected.

"Treila?" he called in a soft tone, hopeful she would answer. Kolar edged along the curtained wall, ready to hide behind the fabric should a higher guard approach. He abhorred the feeling. He was never one to conceal himself. He used to be brave, but not now.

Hooves clacked on stone.

Kolar dipped behind the thick brocade and held his breath, remembering how Olemoth's pride in him had stirred his courage. He was nothing now, an outcast, sure to be murdered if he was caught. *I am in as much danger as she is.*

Dishes clattered and smashed. Demons trotted past Kolar's hiding place. She had been found out. As if in answer to his

supposition, she screamed. Metal clanged. Voices shouted and grumbled about the mess. Kolar crept along the curtain, the stained glass window overlooking the lake below at his back. Every so often he looked over his shoulder at the vast, empty sky. It was night. Stars twinkled at him. A full silvery moon was tipping up over the horizon.

Treila's second scream sounded less like panic, and more like anger. "Let go of me!"

She'd been captured. He knew it would happen. A wave of hopelessness swept through Kolar. His heart skipped faster. Doubt swayed him, begged him to stay where he was and try to escape from the sky castle after the commotion abated. It would be easy. He knew the castle like the back of his hand. He could simply wait until the cooks were asleep and then slip out through the door to the balcony. He could fly away—free.

"Help!" Her plea cut through to his dwindling courage. Not again, he couldn't let this happen again.

He stepped out of hiding. Ahead of him, two demon guards dragged the Telen princess away, toward the corridor that would lead them to Olemoth. She thrashed and fought, but they only lifted her higher so that her feet didn't touch the ground, and carried on.

"Help me!" she shrieked. "Damn you! You said you gave your life to me!" She looked back, and their eyes locked.

He set his jaw, fisted his hands, and ran after her. He had to save her from them and from the fate he knew she would suffer. Olemoth would kill her as mercilessly as he had her sister. They were the last of their line. Their father and mother had already been disposed of. With the royal family

disposed of, the demon king could claim their land and then move on to the Nors.

The sound of his feathers whispered behind him. His eyes narrowed on the first guard. Kolar charged into his adversary and knocked him to the ground. The force of their contact sent pain through him, but he ignored it. Pain was nothing. Olemoth taught him as much.

"Traitor!" shouted the other guard, but he could say nothing more. Treila sank her teeth into his arm. He released her with a startled cry, and she darted away, her cropped hair bouncing. Kolar fanned his wings and followed. They needed to escape the castle, to get away from this danger.

He caught up to her and took her hand in his. "This way!"

Behind them, the guards gave chase.

Through the archway, down the marble steps, Kolar led the princess. She kept pace with him and hardly suffered a harried breath. Treila was strong—ever so much more than her sister. Nevertheless, when they reached the garbage chute that the kitchens used to toss trash into the lake below, he swept her up in his arms, arced his wings, and leapt into the air.

Her weight was nothing to him. Years of training and exercise had conditioned his body to bear any burden his master placed on him. She clung to him, her arms latched around his shoulders, her face filled with awe and fear.

"They're following us."

"Yes." He knew they would. Swooping low, he flew over the lake's surface. His reflection showed in the moonlight, and far below he saw the sparkling scales of the beast that kept

watch. She would not harm him, though. He had long ago bribed her with food. The serpent was a simple beast, loyal to any who sated her with edible gifts. He whistled to the beast, and it turned. One shimmering fin broke the water's surface.

Treila sucked in a shocked breath, her eyes wide.

"She'll help us," he explained.

The serpent's great horned head burst out of the water. Its eyes glowed in the moonlight, causing Treila to whimper. Kolar circled in midair, turning to face his pursuers. The two motley demons parted to attack from both sides. But the serpent shot up from the water, jaws wide, and snapped up the one closest to it. Her victim bellowed a disturbing roar of pain that was soon silenced when the beast pulled its prey beneath the surface to swallow.

The woman tucked her face against Kolar's neck, unwilling to witness more.

"Olemoth will hunt you down, Kolar Darkwing. He'll send you back to the burning fields where he found you as a babe!"

"He should have left me there!" He arched his wings to stay steady. "I do not fear his wrath ... or death."

The demon stole a sideways glance at the lake, his dark eyes searching for any sign of the beast. "Death will find you soon enough." His great batlike wings thrashed and carried him higher until he flicked his wrist at Kolar, a gesture of dismissal. The guard started back toward the sky castle, and Kolar knew his time was now limited to how fast he could make himself and the Telen princess a memory.

"It's all right," he said against the side of her face as he caught the air and made his way to the thin clouds. "He left us, but more will come."

She said nothing, her face still pressed to his skin, her arms tight about him. In a way it was good that she had no words for him. Kolar did not know what to say to her and dreaded the moment she would ask him about Minai. The time would come, and he knew he would see only hatred in her eyes when he told her what had happened.

He flew through the night and into the pink sky of morning, heading south to Darkwood. There they would be safe from the wars, from Olemoth, but they would have to face other challenges. Darkwood held its secrets well, and he intended to become one of them. Kolar had ventured there once, quite by accident. He didn't like to think on that night, but there they would be safe. The demons never entered the cursed woods.

"Forgive me," he whispered to Treila. "If you can find it in your heart, all that I ask, all that I can hope for, is that you will one day have mercy and forgive me for what I am."

She sniffled and clung to him.

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## **Chapter Four: Generosity**

Treila heard Kolar's words, but she couldn't bring herself to forgive him. He was a monster, an abomination who had stolen her sister away from her in the night—and now her sister was dead. Maybe he hadn't been the one to slit Minai's throat, but that didn't matter. She had seen the angels that lived past the cliffs. They didn't look like the creature carrying her. The winged folk in Plemae had white feathers, and their eyes were blue as the sea, not blood red like a demon's. How could she forgive him? She wasn't even sure exactly what he was at all. He smelled like leather and saddle oil. His feathers had their own warm scent, pleasant even. His skin was spicy, reminding her of her father. But he was not a Telen, nor was he wholly an angel. There was a darkness in him that was familiar to her.

Treila sucked in a wet breath. This was no time for tears. He was taking her away from the demon sky palace, and she supposed that was a good turn of events. She had only wanted to visit the cliffs and find out who it was that had stolen her sister. Now she had him, but he was not what she had expected he would be.

They landed at the edge of a thick wood. Boundary stones stood every ten paces as a warning. "I won't go in there," she told him when he released her, for she knew where it was they stood. "I told you I won't hide in that forest."



"Olemoth will hunt us down. He'll kill us both." He held out his hand as if she might take it and follow him blindly into the accursed place.

Treila crossed her arms over her chest and glared. "You think me a fool! I am not like my sister. I don't trust you."

He bowed his head, his wings sagging. "Your sister was not a fool, and I failed her. She asked for my protection, and I failed."

She huffed and walked away, turning her back on him. Grass and fallen leaves crunched beneath his feet as he followed. "She was too trusting. That's all I meant."

He sighed, keeping a few steps between them.

She led him along the edge of the woods, all the while looking for a place to rest. She wanted somewhere secluded that would offer cover from the sky. Treila wouldn't admit it to him, but she was exhausted, and her surroundings were beginning to blur together.

She found what she wanted, a stand of thick shrubs and high grass near a boundary stone. After uncrossing her arms, she pushed into the heavy foliage and promptly slumped onto the ground. When she looked back the way she'd come, she saw that he hadn't followed her into her nest-like hiding place. "Well? Are you coming in here, Kalak, Karo, whatever your name is?"

"I'll watch over you." His silhouette showed against the bright morning light. Leaves moved in the breeze. The scent of him came to her. Treila drew in a deep breath and recognized something she had not detected before. It was the same taste of the demon who had tried to have his way with

her in the dungeons. "You're one of them." She curled up and gathered leaves around her to keep in her body's warmth.

"You're a demon, that's what you are."

"Not wholly," he said back. "Your sister told me there are others like me—angels who live past the Telen city."

"You're not one of those angels," she spat. Treila closed her eyes and let the swift mist of sleep overtake her. She wandered in her dreams, seeking the soul of her sister and finding naught. She had always been able to see the future in her dreams, although it was not often clear. After walking the mists and seeking, she settled in a dark place within the recesses of her mind. Visions danced in the aether—scenes of what was to come and what might be. She watched them pass, noting the continuation of the war, an attack upon the Nors by the demon army, a counter attack by the Nors. The three peoples never could come to terms, and the war and differences between them would forever keep the hatred strong. Parents taught it to their children, and so the cycle continued. The whole of it made her sad, and a feeling of being helpless to stop it all swept over her soul.

The darkness twisted and turned until it became the Nor king's face. She had seen him before on three occasions, a young man with more battle scars than she cared to count. He had deep-set brown eyes in a pale face, and his golden hair blew about his visage like a wild lion's mane. The scene at his back unfolded—a line of warriors waiting to attack. Behind him the sun was setting in a reddened sky. He urged his horse into a gallop. Raising his spear, he charged, a battle cry renting the vision.

Treila awoke, feeling restless. The sun was at its peak. She brushed the leaves from her legs and squinted to see if the winged man still stood where she had left him.

"Are you hungry?"

She crawled out of her hiding place and stood up, eyeing him. He did not look tired. No darkness rimmed the places beneath his sorrow-filled eyes. His mouth was set in a firm frown, his cheek twitching from clenching his teeth. "Yes," she answered.

"Come into the forest with me. We can find food there."

"The Nors will set upon my homeland in three days' time. I need to go home."

He snorted. "How can you know such a thing?"

"I see visions of what will come to pass."

He rubbed his chin, his frown deepening. "Really?" His wings twitched. "What will happen to me in this future you see?"

She glared at him. "I have no control over what is shown to me. I see, and I try my best to change what is to come if it's bad. That's all."

His head turned to one side while he contemplated this information. As he stood there staring at her, Treila's body flushed with an unusual heat. She tried to convince herself that it was anger. Searching him with her eyes for any sign of a weapon only proved disappointing. He had nothing of use, no sword, no simple eating dagger with which to slit his throat, or hunt with.

"Tell me your name again."

"Kolar Darkwing."

Treila walked a circle about him, surveying his body, the heavy build of muscles across his bare chest. He wore loose pants that could use mending. There were fresh cuts across his back. "What are those marks, Kolar?"

"Olemoth had me whipped after I betrayed him."

"Betrayed? What did you do?" She reached out to touch one of his wings, curious. The feathers were coarse and thick, the barbs soft across her fingers.

He flinched, drawing back. When his eyes met hers, she saw tears well in them. His lips quivered. He stepped away. "I tried to save her. Minai was the only thing in my life that ever made sense, the only one who ever—touched me in a kind way."

Fury raged in Treila's chest. "Touched you!" She raised her fist and punched him in the chest. "Touched you! How dare you! What kind of sick creature forces himself on an innocent?"

Each blow she landed on his body crashed down and thumped hard. He didn't move to escape her beating, but took it as if he earned it, as if he needed to suffer. "My sister deserved none of what happened to her—and your touch befouled her, destroyed her!" With both hands she shoved him. Kolar fell backward, his body crushing the plants when he hit the ground. His dark wings spread to cushion his fall. Yet he waited for what more she would do.

"If I had a knife, I would cut your throat."

He nodded. "You would be justified for taking out such retribution." He stared off into the woods. "Minai was the only light I have ever seen. I let that light burn out. If I had a

knife..." He raised his face and looked at her. "I would give it you so that you could kill me. My life is yours, as I said. I am your servant. Dispose of me as you will." He set his hands on the ground and crawled towards her. When he reached her feet, he lowered himself in supplication.

Treila's attention fixed on the red lines across his back. There were no old scars. He had not been beaten until recently. Out of breath, her anger released for the time being, she felt sick at her stomach—empty as it was. "I've never seen anyone like you. What are you, exactly?"

He looked up, his red pupils mesmerizing in their own sinister way. "I don't know anymore. Ever since your sister set her palm against my face and told me I did not belong to the demon king, that I was a being of light, that there were others like me, I have lived in a constant state of flux. Was she right, Treila? Am I more than Olemoth's pawn?"

She imagined what it must have been like for him to be near her sister. Minai was more of an empath than Treila could ever hope to be. There were no visions of the future for her, only the immediate here and now. She had been a healer of sorts, able to see into the minds and hearts of anyone around her, and right the wrongs within them. "I don't know what you are. My sister wasn't like other Telens. She probably thought she could help you. She thought..." Treila waved a hand at him and stomped away.

"She thought what?"

"She thought she could make things right. No matter what." She raked a hand through her hair and sighed. "She

always saw the good in everyone—obviously she thought she saw some in you."

"And you? What do you see when you look at me?"

Treila didn't want to answer that. She saw him as the evil creature who had stolen away *her* light, her hope and her solace. Being a Telen princess was one thing, with the pressures of royalty and place, but being a twin and a seer was entirely something else where she came from. What Kolar said was true. Minai had the ability to make a person believe that all things were possible, that he or she could be something more. But Treila was not like that. They had both inherited magic. Hers was dark and her sister's of light.

"What do you see?" he pressed.

She faced him and studied Kolar as he rose to stand. Inky black hair framed his grim face. Her attention traveled down to his bare chest. His muscles were well defined. "I see the one who stole away my light."

He snarled and held out his hands to her. "Come now. Quickly."

She took a backward step, frightened by his vicious facial expression.

"Now! They've found us."

She looked over her shoulder and caught sight of five of the demon king's guards as they dipped from the clouds. Panic gripped her, tightening her chest. They had been discovered.

"Treila, come!"

She knew she ought to run, but into the hands of the man who had stolen her sister? Where would he take her? Into

Darkwood? She didn't want to go there, not into that cursed forest, not past the boundary stones. She didn't know what manner of horrors resided in that ill-fated place, and she didn't want to find out. So, Treila ran in the opposite direction, racing along the edge of the woods toward a stand of high bushes. If she made it there, she thought she might be able to hide.

"No!" she heard Kolar shout.

She pushed herself to go faster. Her feet crashed into the ground. She kept her eyes on the place she intended to take cover. No looking back ... or up.

Leathery wings beat in the air. A wind picked up. She clenched her teeth. Only ten paces from the first bushes, clawed hands dug into her shoulders. Her body was wrenched up into the air, her legs flailing. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Her eyes sought out Kolar and found him, embattled midair. His black feathered wings slapped against a demon's leathery ones as the two grappled for dominance. Shrieks and excited whoops echoed down from the sky. There were more guards. Treila dared to look. So many demons had come she couldn't count them all.

She knew then that she should have gone into the Darkwood Forest with Kolar. At least they would have had a chance—even the smallest of hopes was worth keeping alive. Now it was too late.

A horrible thud brought her attention back to Kolar. His face was blank, eyes wide, and blood dribbled down one of his cheeks. One of his wings curled in on itself as the demon he

had been fighting grabbed hold of Kolar's right arm and dragged him higher into the sky.

She was a prisoner again. This time she doubted she could wheedle her way free. Her captor carried her across the plains. For long hours they flew until she saw the lake and the sky castle, floating as it did in the grips of demon magic above the water's surface. This demon did not seem to care to hold her close. She searched his face for any sort of compassion but found none. His eyes were dark, devoid of emotion, his mouth curved in a permanent frown. Someone had cut off part of his nose and left a curving scar across the demon's face.

"Stop staring," he warned with a snarl.

And she did as she was told.

This time she and Kolar were brought to a wide room within the castle where a throne and fine silk curtains centered the chamber. She stared at the wall beside the throne. Weapons hung there on bracers—so many blades from so many nations. She had no illusions. These were the demon king's trophies—evidence of his conquests and the defeats of his enemies.

Kolar lay unconscious on the rug where his opponent had tossed him. Blood dribbled from a gash on his head, staining the carpet a deeper shade of sanguine. From the looks of the old stains, this was not the first time victims had been brought to this place. Treila stared at his chest and counted each slow breath he took in.

Hooves clacked across tile. She tore her attention away from the fallen winged man and found herself staring up at



the largest demon she had ever seen. He was mottled in colors that ranged from green to an earthy brown. Long brown claws clicked together on his fingers. A curving, snakelike tail twisted back and forth behind him.

"King Olemoth," she said, and nodded at him.

His blood-colored eyes narrowed. "You have more courage than your sister."

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"What shall I do with you?" He walked around her, his gaze taking in her shape. She noticed that he paid no attention to Kolar.

"You ask this of me? I would think you already have a plan to slit my throat as you did my sister's. And then you can capture the Nor king and do the same to him. Your reign will go unchallenged. You will be ruler over the three lands."

"A good plan it is." He smirked, revealing pointed yellow teeth. But you underestimate me, like so many of your kind." He reached forth and touched her face, cupping her cheek with his leathery palm. "Kolar didn't understand why I killed your sister. He had taken the wrong princess. It is you I wanted, woman. You are the darkness of your race, the culmination of shadow magic that the Telen people have tried to breed out and hide when it continues to be born in their offspring. You live because your father didn't have the courage to smother you as a babe." He ran the pad of his thumb over her mouth in a gentle caress that defied his words. "My guess is that you don't even know what you are, or what power you have. If your parents were smart, they have kept that knowledge from you."

His words made her shiver. Minai was the special one—not her. Treila had known that all her life. Minai saw the light, brought the light out in others. It was her sister who had been chosen to rule, with good reason.

The urge to search Olemoth's soul compelled Treila. She raised her hand and set her palm against his gnarled cheek despite having been told time and again that such an action was forbidden to her. Like the demon who had captured her, the demon king's face was marred by war. His red eyes glittered and darkened. She saw into him, past the rough countenance and cruelty, to the heart of who and what he was. His dark soul was twisted with anger, selfishness, and evil. He wanted to destroy, to cause chaos, and he had never known the light of love.

Treila wished that she bore her sister's magic. If she did, she could have planted the seed of change in Olemoth's soul. In time that small seed could grow and push out the ugliness inside him. But Treila was not her sister. Her magic matched Olemoth's no matter how she didn't want it to be so. It was a vile power that she had kept hidden all her life.

"Oh, I will let you live, Telen princess," the demon whispered. "And every night you will thank me for my generosity."

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## **Chapter Five: Faith**

Kolar raised his head, pain throbbing at the temple where the demon had struck him with the hilt of a dagger. He saw the exchange between Treila and Olemoth, the darkness that passed from Telen to demon and back again. It was a blue-black wisp of shadow, a shade quite the opposite of the magic Minai had shared with him. His heart quickened. The demon king would control her, use her to do his bidding, if Kolar didn't stop this now. But what could he do?

Her head lowered, and her eyes searched him for any sign. At that moment, he felt what Minai had planted in his soul, a warmth, a hope, as it spread through his body, heating his limbs all the way to his fingertips. Kolar raised one shaking hand, and in a voice so low he doubted she could hear him he said, "No."

Treila frowned, but some of the fire of her spirit showed in her face. She was with him this time. Together they would escape, and together they would find freedom from the demon king. "I wonder, King Olemoth," she began, turning her attention back to Kolar's master. "What would you have me do with this shadow-magic that resides in me? Would you have me unleash it onto your enemies?"

The demon king laughed low in his throat. "Telen, you know nothing." He reached for her throat.

Treila jumped back in a single, fluid movement, out of reach of his grasp.

Olemoth growled and started for her, but she backed farther, until she was in front of Kolar. Treila lowered herself to her knees at his side and set her hand in his. "What can I do?" she asked, fear plain in her quavering voice.

"Do what has been forbidden you all your life. Fight him." He struggled to his knees, his body shaking with pain, his vision alternating between spotted with flecks of black and total blurriness. "He sought you out for what you keep inside. Let it out."

Her fingers tightened on his.

Kolar forced one wing to spread and curl itself around her in a weak form of protection.

"What's this?" Olemoth asked. "You have some feelings for my slave? Ridiculous Telen. The halfling is nothing but the offspring of a raped angel. Sired by a demon, he was, and his mother left him to die in the burning fields. I should have left him too. Kolar is nothing more than trash!" The demon king lunged then, fingers splayed and ready to snatch up his prize.

Kolar lunged too, pulling Treila into a clumsy embrace. His other wing closed around them both, and he willed his trick of invisibility to take hold. They winked out of view, and with her help, he got to his feet and dodged in time to avoid the demon king's attack.

"My swords," he whispered by her ear.

She turned in his arms, her face bewildered, but Treila nodded.

In five steps they were at the wall of weapons. Kolar let her go and took hold of his matched blades. They clinked

together above his head, matched slices of silver steel. Treila took her place behind Kolar.

He squinted at the demons who approached. With a wave of his hand, Olemoth commanded their demise—or his at the least. The guards advanced, drawing daggers and maces, and one, a battle-worn axe. He knew there was no way to defeat them alone, not in the condition he was in. "Use your magic, Treila," he urged. "Don't be afraid."

"I don't know how." Her voice sounded so small and frightened, much like Minai's had when he first stole her away.

"Magic is simple. Tell it what you want done—and it will be so!"

The top-heavy demon with the axe came first, his mouth in a dangerous snarl, his eyebrows cinched in the middle. The axe rose up.

Kolar braced.

The axe swung down, aimed at Kolar's head. In a swift sidestep, he avoided that attack. His wings caught air when he thrust first one sword and then the second, both sinking into flesh, dragging, and slipping free. Sanguine stained the metal and spilled onto the rug. The demon howled a furious cry before he fell at Kolar's feet.

"I will cut you down, each and every one. This Telen is under my protection. No demon will have her!"

"And you think you will have her?" the next one asked, his dagger flashing to and fro. "You? A castoff? Someone's garbage? She would no more let you than she would let any of us."

A wave of black blinded Kolar for a moment. He blinked and wiped at his eyes with the back of his arm. It came away wet with blood that had dripped down from his head. "Treila. I need you now."

Her fingers traced his lower back for a heart's beat. Cold, shaking fingers. *Fear. Darkness. Shadow. Death.* Those emotions and thoughts swirled through his mind. Kolar hissed. He needed to escape her touch. There was something so *wrong* about it.

"Be my champion," she said.

His eyebrows furrowed. A surge of strength infused him with newfound energy. The hope Minai had placed inside him burgeoned into an animalistic drive to destroy all who stood in his path. He knew what had happened even as he leapt forward to meet the next demon. Minai and Treila had passed some part of themselves into him, and together the two opposing magics had changed and melded into a third sort—something dangerous and deadly.

He felled three of Olemoth's guards before the demon king approached, his mouth a curling expression of rage. The demon king had no weapon, had nothing save his clawed hands. In a flash of memory, Kolar remembered those hands setting the sword he now held into his own palms as a youngling. He remembered the way Olemoth looked on with pride during his classes. The demon king was the only father he had ever known. That thought burned through his mind as he faked with his left sword and cleaved off his master's head with the other.

Treila screamed. The remaining demons gasped and retreated. Without a leader there would be chaos in the sky castle. With a king there would be no order, for order was a lacking thing among them as it was.

Kolar heaved in breath after breath, both horrified and pleased over what he had done. Treila touched his lower back again, this time without the slithery cold of her magic. She spoke to him, three small words that made him calm.

"Take me away."

She closed her arms about his waist. He waited until the other demons left them. Then Kolar turned and embraced the Telen princess, feathering three kisses on her cheek before he sighed and hid them both in the black feathers of his wings. "You are safe now. I will always protect you. I'll never leave your side."

"Don't make me use that magic again." She heaved a wet sob and clung to him tighter.

He had no answer for her command. Her magic had only just surfaced for the first time. He didn't want to imagine what she might be able to do if she learned to control it, to shape it and unleash it on her enemies. It had worked through him, and he hadn't liked the feel of it beneath his skin, like some second soul, the cruel aura of a beast controlling him. Its power lingered. He heaved up her lithe body and carried her away from Olemoth's dead body, intent on the window in the concubine's room and the freedom that escape promised.

Olemoth's women screamed when he passed through their sanctuary. He paid them no heed, not in the least tempted by

their ripe, alluring figures. Kolar was tired. He climbed on unsteady legs atop the sill, spread his great black wings, and dived into the open air.

They camped in the shadow of the lorian trees, far from the edge of Darkwood Forest and farther still from the sky palace. Kolar built a fire to keep the princess warm. He offered her a handful of berries he had found nearby and promptly lay down beside the fire to rest while she ate. For a long while she sat across from him, staring with her large eyes. He didn't feel like talking. Neither did she it seemed. Treila looked over her shoulder at the shadows made by the trees' branches. She closed her eyes, muttered a small blessing, and crawled across the mulch-strewn earth toward him. The loose men's clothing she wore hung open, exposing the tops of her round breasts. His eyes stayed there until she reached him.

"Can I sleep by you?" she asked, sounding innocent. "It's cold."

He nodded and closed his eyes while she curled her body against his. Her fingers tested the tender places where he'd been injured. He winced, and she drew her hand away. Treila looked up at his face, her expression devoid of any emotion he could discern. She stared at him for a time before turning her back to him and resting her head across his upper arm. "Tomorrow I'll tend to that wound on your head."

He had been with concubines before, but even they shunned his advances. He was not one of Olemoth's demons, and the novelty of being different was not attractive to them. The only kindness they showed was something as simple as



what Treila offered—closeness for practicality and no other reason. He breathed in the scent of her hair and slipped his other arm over her waist, expecting her to push away. She stiffened but stayed where she was.

At that moment, Kolar realized how alone he had been all his life. Even in the demon king's highest favor, there had never been a companion for him. He had slept in an ornate empty bed before Olemoth had banished him to the void. It had not bothered him until now. With Treila so close to him, he knew the solace of having another to hold. He felt the peace of companionship, however unstable their bond might be. He reached for her hand. Their fingers knotted together in a gentle hold. *Maybe she feels as I do*, he thought. *Alone. Apart from her family.* He listened to her breathing, and it lulled him to sleep for a time.

Wolves howled not far from where they lay. Kolar opened his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Treila had turned in her sleep to face him, her eyes still shut and her mouth slightly open. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her full lips, to taste her, to have her kiss him back. But such a thing wasn't possible. He couldn't force himself upon her, and he knew she wouldn't want him, not like that, not at all. They were of different races and only a couple of days ago had been enemies. He didn't doubt that she thought him her enemy still.

He curled his arms around her shoulders as carefully as he could and held her to his body. The night was cold, and the fire had burned low. She was warmth in the emptiness. Kolar kissed her cheek and closed his eyes to sleep a little longer.

His mind turned over and over, planning and plotting what they ought to do next. She would want to go home, and he thought he should make sure she made it there safely. Her curves melded to his body, her rounded breasts soft, her pelvis pressed to his crotch, lighting a burning heat in his cock. He wanted her, but the desire was nothing new. He had wanted many women of many races.

"Are you asleep?" she asked, causing him to open his eyes.

"No."

"I had a dream the other night that the Nor king took Telen."

"Will it come to pass?" He cared not for wars at the moment, not even the vision she spoke of. All that mattered to Kolar was the fullness of Treila's lips and the way her eyes stole into his soul.

"Most terrible things I see come to pass."

He frowned. "But if you know what is to come, then you have the opportunity to change it."

"Maybe."

He lowered his mouth to hers, so close that his intent was clear in case she wanted what he desired. His lips brushed hers when he spoke. "Maybe your magic is not a curse as you see it. Maybe it is a gift with which to change the future you see. The gods show you your visions for a reason."

She leaned forward.

He held his breath while Treila kissed him. Her lips parted, and his tongue met with hers. The play between their mouths was unhurried and tentative as if she did not want to press

him too far. He savored each flick of her tongue against his, each parting of her mouth when she paused to take a deep breath, each joining when she began the kiss again. Treila lifted one leg up over his hip and urged him closer still to her body. Had they been naked, he could have felt the heat of her center against his straining length. They could have mated sideways in an unhurried rhythm until his release spilled inside her and they became one.

She broke the kiss and snuggled her face into his chest. "I'm sorry. That was wrong of me to do. I'm just so..."

*Lonely*, he thought. *I feel it too.*

Kolar combed his fingers through her short hair and savored this rare occurrence. In his mind he replayed the feel of her kiss and wished she would kiss him every night again for the rest of his life. He would give anything to have her be his, to not have to fight or kill again.

He stared at the orange embers of their campfire and prayed. He asked for change and hope, for light and peace. Faith had never been his strong point, but he tried to believe that what he wanted was not impossible.

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## **Chapter Six: Nobility**

Morning came and warmed their entangled bodies. Treila pushed away from Kolar to stumble into the cover of the trees. He heard her rustling around, probably hunting for more berries to eat. He buried their campfire even though no flames remained. The less of a trail they left behind, the better. Flight was not an option. He knew the demons would try to find him, at least when they finished the battle for who would lead. Olemoth had no offspring, and he had long ago killed off his relatives. Never before had it seemed strange, but at that moment, with the sun glimmering on a distant horizon lined with hazy purple mountains, Kolar thought it an atrocity. Maybe because he had no family and never knew the love of kin, he had not given Olemoth's ways much thought.

"There's a river," Treila said, walking up behind him. He looked back at her. She had rinsed herself in the water, and her hair was damp. Droplets of water glistened on her skin like gems. He wanted to lick each one off, and the idea of doing so sent heat through his body.

"It leads to Telen, if you want to travel back to your home." He averted his eyes, his skin flushing over what he wanted to do to her. "I can fashion us a raft. It would be the fastest way to travel, other than through the sky. If I carry you past the clouds, the demons will only find us again."

"I'll help you, if you tell me what needs to be done." She stepped closer to him, her footfalls light. He trembled when her fingers ran along his sore wing. She explored the muscle

beneath his feathers. Daring to turn, he spied the expression of intrigue she bore. "You were injured here." Her fingers brushed over the place where a demon had wounded him. "And I still need to clean this." She waved her hand at his temple. The gash had scabbed over, but still throbbed to the beat of his pulse.

"There will be time for that on the river." He traced her lips, but pulled away when her mouth turned down. "Have you ever ... seen another like me? Not the ones with the white wings like your sister spoke of, but one that would match me."

Her hand fell back to her side. She bit at her lower lip and shook her head no. "But that doesn't mean there are none like you."

He raised his hand and set his palm against her cheek. "Minai touched me like this." His thumb smoothed over her mouth again, back and forth, daring her to do more. "I know it is a Telen magic, a way to see inside the one who is being touched. She changed me, Treila. I feel like ... there is a part of her inside me."

Tears welled in her eyes. "There probably is. That was part of her magic. If I passed part of my soul into you, it would not fill you with the same energy." She ran her forearm across her eyes to hide her emotions. She was ashamed of what she was, afraid even.

"Touch me as your sister did," he said and snatched her hand. He placed her palm on his cheek and held it in place. "Show me what you mean."

The same energy coursed through him that he had experienced in the sky castle—heat, power, a burning need to fight, to mate, to thrive. Kolar breathed in and tasted the sweet scent of her skin in the air. His arousal quickened. He wanted her worse now for the strange contact passing between them. "Mmm." He closed his eyes and used his free hand to pull her body to his. "I feel the magic twisting inside you, but you're wrong. It is not dark."

Her breasts pushed into his chest, her nipples erect. "What is it, then, if not darkness?"

He smiled, looking at her again. "It's passion, Treila. The passion that resides in all living things—the need to survive. Had you not touched me in Olemoth's throne room, we would be dead now. Your passion reached past my exhaustion, past the pain. It ignited my will to survive, and so I did."

A single tear ran down the side of her face. He turned his head and kissed it away. "You are not what you've been told you are. You are not darkness, not the opposite of your sister's light. Your parents had no reason to keep what you are a secret. Maybe they thought they did, but Olemoth was wrong."

She let out a wet sob and drew her hand off of his face, only to circle his neck with her forearms the better to hold him close. "No," she muttered over and over. "It can't be true what you say. I am nothing, a bad seed, a child that should not have been allowed to live. The mark was upon me as a babe, and my mother told me how she disguised it by burning my skin with hot tallow wax from a candle in the birthing

room. She hid what I was. She told me never to tell and never to use my magic."

"She was wrong." He nuzzled her cheek, working his way down to her neck. There he placed hungry kisses, one after another, across her skin. Every part of his body was awakened and in need of her closeness.

But she pushed away from him. Waving one hand in dismissal, she said, "The raft. We must go. This is no time to talk about what I am or am not. The Nors will come to take Telen City, and..." She looked away, as if seeking the unfinished words in the trunk of a nearby tree.

"And you must try to stop them," he finished. "I'll help you if you let me."

She sighed, and when her eyes met his, he believed he saw hope there—the same hope her sister had carried so freely, but an emotion she looked ill at ease to experience.

She turned her back on him, and Kolar supposed she was right. They needed to get farther away from the sky palace and the danger that would eventually come for them. Treila had a responsibility to her people to protect them.

They gathered fallen logs for the remainder of the morning. Treila made a braided rope while Kolar set the trunks side by side at the bank of the river. He was hungry and figured she probably was too, but there would be time to fish or forage after the work was done. Together, they lashed the raft together and pushed the awkward vessel into the water. Treila climbed up clumsily, but managed to get herself in the center. Kolar sat at her back, but didn't move to touch

her. He was sweaty and weary, his body still aching from the battles of the day before.

A cool breeze blew across the water to cool him. He watched the side of the raft for any sign of fish. He hadn't followed this particular river much farther than where they were, and it was good to be on the move to someplace new, not to someplace where he needed to take a life. He stared at Treila's profile, pondering the sadness in her.

"When we reach Telen, you can stay in the palace if you like," she said, catching him off guard. "I am queen now, whether the people want me or not. They will do as I say."

"I have no place in the Telen palace, but I thank you for your noble offer. I do not deserve your kindness."

She sighed and nodded.

Kolar fanned his wings to cool them both off. "Besides, when you have no need of me, I would like to go to Plemae and see if there are other like me there. I need to find a place where I belong, and it has never been in the sky palace, nor will it be among your people."

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "And what if you do not belong with the angels in Plemae? What then?"

He shrugged. "What does it matter? I can always go into Darkwood."

"Aren't you afraid of that place?" She picked at the braided rope sticking up from the poles beside her.

"Afraid? No. It is a place where dreams are kept, where Olemoth and his kind placed creatures they did not want in our world, but were too afraid to kill. I welcome the mystery of the forest and what secrets might yet hide within its



shadows." He smiled at her, amused by her pursing lips.  
"Perhaps I belong in Darkwood after all."

"Perhaps." She faced the way ahead, silent again.

He wanted to scoot closer to her, but there was a melancholy in the air that he feared touching. Already he had overstepped his bounds with her earlier. Kolar relaxed and watched the bank roll by. Long grass and bulrushes edged the river. Every so often he spied some sign of life, a buck sipping at the water's edge, a turtle peering out from the water, or a frog leaping after a dragonfly. Life teemed all about them, the wilds going on in their own way whether men and demons waged war or not. He liked it on the raft, traveling at the will of an element. He felt at peace with the world and himself for a time and let his mind be clear of troubles.

It was Treila who pushed back to join him. She leaned into his chest, and he drew his arms about her to hold her steady.

"Have you ever had a woman?" she asked without meeting his gaze.

"Never." He set his chin atop her head. "Have you?"

She laughed at him. "No, no, and not a man either. I thought I would lose myself to that demon in the dungeon. It was my own fault to be there. I tempted him. I hoped to escape."

*You're tempting me now.* He said nothing of his thoughts, though, lest she think him the same sort. "You did what you had to in order to stay alive."

"Thank you for saving me." She reached for his hand and held it in her lap.

"You saved us. Your magic."

"But in the dungeon, if you hadn't come..." The nape of her neck beckoned to his lips. He wondered if she would sleep beside him this night and how long it would take to reach the Telen city. How many nights could he resist her body? How many nights did he have left to hold her in his arms and hide from the ever-increasing void he felt growing within?

"Tell me a story, Kolar."

"A story? I am no weaver of words. I'm an assassin and a thief. Better of you ask me to kill someone for you, or steal a great prize protected by an army."

"I'm sure you have stories, a thousand or more for all that you've done in your life. Even I have stories, and I have been in the palace since birth, only coming out on the dais when the Nor king's army stands in offense at our borders, or to walk in the courtyard and gardens. There were a few times when the war was idle that my mother allowed me to go about the city in a carriage. I watched the people living their lives on those occasions and wondered what it would have been like to be born into their class." She squeezed his fingers before she went on. "I almost reached Plemae before the demon weaver found me and brought me to the sky palace." She stole a glance at him, but then closed her eyes. "The plants there try to stop intruders. I can only imagine what I would have found when I reached the cliffs. Plemae was meant for those with wings."

"I want to go there."

"I'm sure you will."

"Will you come with me?" He nudged her neck with his mouth, nipping her once in a playful way. "Come to the cliffs and be there with me."

"Be with you." Treila shook her head. "What would I do there?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Stay with me at night. Teach me to tell stories ... Teach me to do anything but destroy." He trailed three kisses up the side of her neck to her cheek. "Teach me to be something other than what I am. Teach me to live and love."

"Love?" She shuddered but stayed in place. "I am no expert in the ways of love."

His mouth paused at her earlobe. There he whispered, "We could learn of it together. Make lovers of enemies." Goose bumps prickled her skin. Her breathing became shallow, and she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, her teeth biting down.

She pulled his hand to the apex of her legs and snuggled into his back. The gesture was an invitation he had never had before.

"What do you want from me, Treila? Name it, and it will be yours."

Her hand guided his up and down the coarse pants she wore, to trace her womanly center. He did so as gently as he could, although instinct made him want to do more. Each bump of the raft over rough water made his fingers press her. Each motion he made and did right was echoed by her small, sweet moan. Finally, her legs shaking, she pulled his hand away and said, "I want you to stay with me."

He exhaled. "If that is your wish, then I am yours."

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## **Chapter Seven: Hope**

She couldn't believe what she had asked of him, or how brazenly she had shown him how to touch her. His closeness gave her courage and the strength she could never find before. They rode their raft until the sun began to settle low in the sky. Kolar took the long pole they had and pushed them to the bank. She found it difficult to walk after sitting still so long, but she managed to get onto the bank. There, Treila stretched her arms high and twisted to crack her back.

"I'll get us some food," he said. "You find what we need to build a fire."

She nodded and walked away from him into the high grasses that grew by the river. Every so often she found a dried piece of cane or dry driftwood. She gathered it all in her arms and carried it to a flat place where she set rocks in a circle. She had watched how he set up the wood in a pyramid, but she couldn't start the fire as he had, with a spark stick he carried in his pocket. Treila looked around, hoping for berries or something else to sate her growling stomach until Kolar returned.

It was a while before he broke through the grass with a large fish dangling from one hand and a fistful of green leaves in the other. The fish was gutted and ought to be enough to fill both their stomachs. He set it atop a rock while he lit the fire. "I need to bathe," he said. "Will you watch this while it cooks to be sure it doesn't burn?"

She nodded.

He stuffed the leaves into the fish before fastening it to a long stick. Afterward, he braced their meal over two other sticks at either side of the small firepit in a makeshift spit. "You'll know by the smell when it's done. I won't be long."

He stood and started away, heading for the river again.

She sat there watching the shiny scales on the fish catch the firelight, and imagined what Kolar looked like without his pants on. She had seen a guard naked once, an older man with silver hair on his head and chest. She had been hiding in the closets as a game with her sister when he came into his room and tore off his clothes so that he could dress for bed. A man's body was different than a woman's, having a long part with which to make babies. The man's had hung lax between his legs from a nest of equally silver pubic hairs. She had stared through the slant of light behind the partially closed door at the man's phallus, and wondered what made it work, or how it could fit inside a woman's body.

Treila pushed herself up from the ground and walked carefully down to the riverbank. A step behind the thick, high grasses, she crouched to spy on Kolar. He had pulled off his clothing and waded into the water, his scarred backside to her. His butt was as firm and muscled as the rest of his body. He dipped into the water, all the way up to his shoulders. His wings spread out, one not as much as the other, and in a rush of motion, he dived down beneath the surface and vanished. She squinted in the growing darkness, wondering where he would rise.

A cool breeze blew across the water's surface. The hushed whispery sounds of water churning past made her feel a

sense of calm. This place was peaceful. No one wanted to kill her here. There was only the soft touch of the plants next to her skin, the moist scent of the fertile earth beneath her feet.

Kolar's head and shoulders broke from the surface, his wings soon after. As he stood and wrung the water from his long hair, she imagined what it would be like to return to Telen City with him at her side. The High Guards and Council would not approve. He wiped the water from his face, turned, and started toward the bank, water dripping down his sculpted body. There were no silver hairs on him, but black patches curled amidst his chest and led to a thin line that trailed past his navel to a curly patch of hair. She dared to study his nakedness. His phallus was dormant, as had been the only other one she'd seen. Each step he made in the river caused a small splash of water to sound at his ankles. He glistened in the last of the sunlight.

At the bank, he stopped and closed his eyes before shaking out his hair. The black tendrils clung to his cheeks and neck. His wings shook as well, water flying free from the shiny feathers. They looked like a swan's wings, sleek, and nearly dry despite his submersion. She imagined that they must be like a bird's, with oils to keep them from becoming waterlogged.

When he started toward the grass, she backed away, turned, and hurried back to the fire. She settled into the spot she had been in before he left. Treila bent to turn their fish at the moment Kolar stepped through the grasses.

She stole a furtive glimpse up at him, but hurriedly looked back to the task at hand when she saw that he was still naked.

"The water's cold," he said, seating himself next to her. "I washed my pants and hung them to dry until dawn. We'll have to sleep close to the fire tonight."

"I, um, can make a covering with dry grasses." She peeked over at him and saw that he was staring into the fire. "If I start now, I may be able to have something large enough for us to share."

"That's a fine idea." He faced her, his blood-red eyes fixing on her face. "I'll gather some up for you."

She nodded, and blatantly stared when he stood to go. His eyebrows formed a V. "Is something wrong?"

Her mouth hung open for a moment. "It's just that ... Well, you're naked."

He looked down at himself as if there might be something unusual on his body that caused her to scrutinize him as she did. "My pants are still wet," he explained again. He shrugged and walked away.

Treila gaped at his butt until he disappeared into the foliage. She heard him humming a low tune while he salvaged up dry grass for her to weave. *If he keeps going about like that ...* She tried not to giggle and poked at the fire again for something to keep her mind off of the way his body roused hers. Tonight she would sleep in his arms again, and kiss him, for his mouth made her lose focus on the world around her and the worries of what she would have to face when she returned home. She liked to forget that she was someone of



importance, and she liked even more the thought she was the focus of his attention.

He returned, his arms laden with dry grasses, and set them at her side. Kolar settled down and tended the fire and the fish. "I'm not good at weaving," he said. "But I can sew if need be."

She cleared her throat and busied herself looping knot after knot of pliable grass leaves together. Her mother had taught her to weave, to sew, and many other practical things a woman of nobility was expected to know. She had enjoyed those long hours of tutelage and closeness. Her sister had not and often spent that time undoing the incorrect stitches she had made. Not that it lowered the high esteem their mother held Minai in. In fact, it served to amuse them both.

"You're thinking about her," Kolar said. He scooted closer to her until their shoulders touched. He watched her fingers work, his face tight in concentration.

"How can you tell?" She paused, and he handed her a new leaf.

"Your face changes, and I feel different, like a part of me is missing."

Treila swallowed hard. "A part of you is missing," she repeated. "That can't be right."

"Why not? I feel it." He touched his chest. "Here. It aches. Like something has been torn away that I need to replace."

She nodded and wove faster, knotting and looping and trying not to face what it was his statement suggested. She finished three long rows of weavework before she said, "That is how I feel. It's the same connection I had to Minai. The two

of us could sense when one was in pain, or joyful. Mother explained that Telen empaths are tied to each other when there is a multiple birth. It was another reason to spare me as a baby. What would life be like for my twin if my parents had adhered to the law to destroy their child?"

"It would be like your life now."

She accepted yet another blade of long grass and meshed it with the rest. "It would be. I feel empty, out of place, not that those emotions are anything new to me. But the worst part is that I feel like a part of me has been cut away. My sister was like a third arm to me, and I to her. Without each other, we could not be whole."

He placed his arm over her shoulder. "I understand."

Treila sighed and decided it best not to look at him. She wanted the feeling of his mouth pressed to hers, the heated touch of his body tight against her shape. She needed him to fill in the emptiness she spoke of. And she didn't doubt that he would if she had the courage to ask.

They ate after the meal cooled, and Kolar wandered off again, this time in the darkness. He said something about trying to find dessert. She had laughed at his comment, but shivered when he left her. In the sky, the moon was nearing its full peak. The Nor king would come to Telen City, and whether she intended to marry him or defy his will, she needed to be home to face him. *I suppose I could marry him*, she thought. *It would end the war between our people and leave the demons as a shared enemy.* She spread the grass blanket over her body and lay down, resting her head on a

hastily tied bundle of more grass for a pillow. The stars twinkled high above.

Treila looked for the constellations she knew. Wisps of clouds eddied over the sky, hiding some from her sight and revealing others. Kolar's steps made soft sounds when he returned. "Found them," he announced and climbed under the grass blanket beside her. "Here, try one."

His fingers pushed a round bean past her lips. "What is it?" She chewed and tasted a sweet but sour flavor she didn't recognize.

"The demons call it Illusion." He pushed another to her lips, and then another. By the sixth bean, her body tingled, and a strange euphoria clouded her vision. Kolar laughed and ate whatever remaining ones were in his palm. "Do you like it?"

She blinked, staring at the moon. There she saw a face looking down at her. The stars swirled and danced rather than stay in place. When his hand reached for hers, a sizzle shot up her arm. "What's happening?"

"It makes you see things differently. Makes you feel. Illusion opens your mind to what you desire."

Treila laughed at him. "Were you planning on seducing me?" She rolled onto her side and faced him in the dark. Silvery moonlight illuminated one side of his face. She touched his temple beneath where the demon had hurt him. "Is that your plan?"

He placed his hand over hers, pressing her palm to his cheek. She found she couldn't hold back the magic she was so used to keeping hidden. It pushed into him, and she knew

his thoughts and heart. He wanted her, but he hadn't given her the beans to seduce her. He only hoped they would help her let go of the sadness. "As the demon king said, you have good plans, Treila."

She smiled and ran her lips over his chin. He kissed back, his mouth touching her upper lip until they both moved into position to taste each other. He kissed her gently, his lips parting every so often so that the tips of their tongues could touch. Her euphoria grew into a rush of ecstasy when he removed his hand from hers and slipped it beneath her tunic. His fingers explored her abdomen, one rimming her belly button before he moved higher to discover her breasts. Her nipples became taut. He circled one and then the other, the sensation hundredfold what it should be.

Her eyelids slipped shut, and a starburst glittered in the back of her mind. Every tentative stroke he gifted her body made the colors spin and change in her thoughts. She wanted him to push his hand into her pants and touch her as he had on the raft.

Instead, he took hold of her hand and guided her fingers down his body to the long, hard length of his phallus. She moaned when he held her hand in place and showed her what to do. Slowly, he pulled her hand up, his skin soft and sliding beneath her hold. Then down he pushed her, until she reached the base of him. He let go, and she continued without his direction, their kisses deepening.

When he groaned and pulled his face away, she thought she had hurt him, until she felt the heat of his release on her

clothes. He halted the efforts of her hand and held her tight to his body, crushing the wind from her lungs.

"Illusion makes me see white lights," he whispered by her ear. "But with you in my arms, I see so much more. Every color imaginable. I see possibilities and a future I had never imagined could be mine."

Treila kissed him once more after he loosened his tight embrace. "I wish this night could go on forever."

"So do I. There is no hatred between us here. No wars. No one to stop us from doing what we want. I wish you didn't have to go back to Telen." He touched his nose to hers and nuzzled her face. "I wish there was a place we belonged together."

She wanted to tell him that they should stay where they were, but she knew it was wrong. She had to go back and face her fate. She would take this night from him and revel in all he offered. Treila knew either death or servitude to a man she didn't care for awaited her soon enough. *So for now, she thought, I will be with a man I do want. I will make this a night to remember until the end of my days.*

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## Chapter Eight: Lust

"Seduce me," she said in a husky voice. "I want you."

Kolar hesitated. Was it what she wanted, or was what she asked a result of the Illusion? He shook his head and frowned. "I wouldn't want to hurt you, Treila."

She arched her back, tempting him with her body. He was spent, but even so, his cock stirred to life, thickening at the prospect of a warm, wet sheath for the first time. "I want to feel what it is like to be claimed. I want it to be you. Be my first."

He swallowed back his instinctual reply to do exactly what she wanted and tried to make her laugh instead. "How many more do you plan to conquer after me?"

She hissed at him. "That's not what I meant."

"Where would it leave us if we did such a thing? A relationship between us can't last. Everything will change when you return to your people. I'm sure there are others anxious to take your hand, to love you and worship you. I will be nothing in your eyes then." His words were harsh, but didn't faze her. Treila ran her hand over his ass, tugging him at her body.

It was not easy to resist.

"What you say might be true, but I still want you. I don't care what will happen when we get to the city. I want this moment, this time with you, and I want to feel you inside me." She rubbed her palm up the side of his body to his shoulder. Her fingers stopped where skin met feathers.

He ached for her, to take her, to claim her as his mate not once this night, but as many times as he could before the sun rose up to stop them from coupling.

"Please," she begged. "We may not have such a chance again."

The Illusion made his mind whirl, drawing on the erotic thoughts already playing out. He imagined himself sinking his cock deep into her wet folds, his lips enveloping her nipple, his tongue twirling about the firm nub of flesh, their bodies tangled together, straining, working, struggling toward a new height of release. He felt like his cock was on fire, and his balls shrank up toward his body, urging him to give in.

"I feel that you want me." Her hand left his shoulder to push its way between their bodies. "You can't hide your need. I don't want you to hide it from me." Her delicate fingers circled the crown of his sex, tickling and soothing all in one lurid motion. She closed her fingers around his length and gave one long, tortuous tug.

He couldn't help the lusty moan that rolled up from his gut. "I want you," he confessed. "But I can't do what you ask. It's not right."

He dragged himself away despite her efforts to keep him close. Kolar stood beside the fire and looked down at her. He curled his fingers into fists while she stared up at him, her eyes taking in his body. She rolled onto her back, a look of disappointment on her face. Treila plucked open the laces on her tunic and shimmied it over her head. The wrap she had used to bind her breasts had come free when he explored her earlier. She pulled it away too. Her brown skin and dark

nipples made his mouth water. He wanted to plunder each perfect mound with his tongue.

Her eyes implored him to give in.

When her fingers moved to the tie on her pants, and she pushed away the last vestige of clothing that kept him from taking her, he knew he would give in. She tossed the fabric aside and pulled her knees up. Her eyelids lowered in bliss. Her mouth formed a delicious pout he longed to kiss away. Slowly, her hand moved across her belly to the curly patch of hair between her legs. She dipped a finger into her folds and sighed.

How could he resist such an invitation? Kolar looked up at the sky and the strange patchwork of light the stars made. The Illusion made the world more beautiful to him, true, but it would be a lie to say Treila's guess about why he had gone to find the beans was wrong. He had wanted this.

Wordless, he sank to his knees before her.

She parted her legs farther so that he could see her finger toying with her clit. His mouth watered. The musky scent of her body drew him in. Kolar crawled between her thighs and buried his face in that sweet, hot place. Her fingers combed into his hair, driving him to continue.

He obliged, licking at her center, sucking in the tender lump that made her writhe. He tasted her, inhaling her flavor and savoring every involuntary shiver that made her thighs quake. She came in a rush of wetness. He licked it away and kissed her inner thigh to give her reprieve.

His seed dribbled from the tip of his cock. He was so hard that it hurt. Kolar didn't want to resist. Why had he thought



he should? She was right. They might not have such a chance ever again. And if he had learned anything in his life as the demon king's ward, it was that he must take what he wanted lest someone else take it from him.

He sat back, kneeled, and took hold of her hips. She sucked in a startled intake of breath when he roughly pulled her body up his forelegs to meet hers. His cock stood at her entry, ready to push inside, to be buried and held by her tightness. He stared as he forced himself inside. She whimpered, but he couldn't stop. He never wanted to stop. Deep inside her body he felt something give. Her sheath clinched, and he pulled back until he was nearly free of her. That sensation was even better than entering. Again and again he did this until he couldn't catch his breath.

She lifted her hands up over her head as if she had given in. Her breasts bounced. Their skin slapped together in a torrid rhythm. He closed his eyes, his world a burst of ever-changing colors, his body numb and yet so sensitive to the closeness he felt. His balls tightened a final time before he came inside her body. He clenched his teeth together to keep from screaming.

Then it was over. He remained there, not wanting it to be so. His cock was softening, and he finally understood why so many of the demons kept concubines to sate themselves after battles. This was the most wondrous feeling he had ever experienced. He wanted to feel it again, as many times as he could, and he wanted each time to be with her.

He lay atop her body and tried to move to the side, but his sex came free of her, and she curled into him, cuddling close.

Reaching back, he found the grass blanket and covered their nakedness. After a while he heard her snuffle. Kolar brought a hand to her face and felt the unmistakable wet trails of tears. He had hurt her. She would never forgive him. He didn't know what he should do. "I'm sorry." He kissed the top of her head.

She sniffled again and kissed his chest with a feather-soft brush of her lips. "Why are you sorry?"

"You're crying. I've hurt you."

Treila laughed under her breath. "Hurt me again."

Relief swallowed his regret, and he laughed at her forward ways. "I'll need to sleep a little while before I can perform for your pleasure again. I hope that's acceptable."

"Mmm, I guess I can wait." She lifted her chin, her eyes glassy. He didn't understand why she had cried, but he kissed her forehead and decided not to press her for answers.

Morning came warm and bright in the long grass. Kolar lay beside Treila, watching her sleep. Her eyes moved behind closed lids as she dreamed. *What visions do you see?* He wished he could stay beside her like this every morning. He wished for so many things. He had been given a chance at redemption, and he would not fail.

"Wake up, Princess." He ran his hand along her cheek, stroking her warm skin until she awoke. "We should be moving on. I think we'll be to your city before night falls if the river flows as she did yesterday."

She blinked her big brown eyes. "Yes," she said in a sleep-laced voice. "We should."

"Did you dream?"

She nodded.

"What was it you saw?" He waited, hopeful that her visions would be of a future together.

Treila pushed up from the ground. "The same dream as before. I saw the Nor king at my city's boundary, preparing for battle, readying to charge his army at my city and destroy it. When I wake, his war cry resounds in my mind, and I feel guilty for lingering here."

Disappointed, he got up and buried the remains of their fire. Kolar rolled up the woven blanket and his swords. "We can talk more on the river if you like."

She reached for her clothes, looking bewildered. Treila dressed and soon caught up to him when he started down to the bank. He looked back at the place they had spent the night and swore he would not forget what had happened between them. His pants were dry, still hanging from the bramble where he'd left them. He stepped into each leg and fastened his belt in place. Carefully, he strapped his swords to his belt.

"Are you ready?"

Treila looked down at the ground. "No, but it must be done." She reached for his hand so that he could lead her to the raft and steady her while she climbed aboard. Kolar joined her, and they settled as they had sat the day before with Treila sitting between his legs, her back against his chest. Kolar pushed the raft from the bank with the pole and sent them rushing into the river's heart.

The water was rushing this day, white eddies frothing at either side of their raft. He saw less of the creatures of the wild and more signs that they neared a city. By midday, they

passed small huts, some of which had people within. A gathering of three children waved to them. Treila cringed and sank further against him, but Kolar lifted his hand and waved back.

The hours passed too quickly, and before he knew it, Kolar spied the great white Telen palace on the horizon. Their river would carry them close to the city, enough so a small walk would lead his princess home. "If we are parted," he said, "I want you to know how much you have meant to me and how much our time together has changed me."

Treila turned and hugged him. "We can't be parted. I feel you inside me even now, a connection as strong as I had with my sister. No matter what happens, if you think of me, I will know that you are still out there. If you are happy, I will feel your bliss."

"And if you are sad," he told her, "I will find you again and make you happy."

They passed beneath a rope bridge, and he recognized the terrain near where they traveled. He had flown over this same place the night he stole Minai. Somewhere in the far distance, voices sang in unison, their music placid and barely audible. Kolar took up the pole and guided their raft to the bank. It caught speed and slid up over the muddy edge, successfully beaching them.

They both stretched their limbs, and Kolar smiled down at her. "Let me fly you the rest of the way."

She looked uncomfortable with the idea. "Your wing isn't right. I've seen the way you favor it."

"I have flown under worse circumstances. It's nothing. Tonight you can sleep safe in your own bed and eat food far better than a river fish roasted over a fire."

Treila set her hand at her forehead to shield her sight from the sun. She stared to the horizon and the palace. "All right. We fly."

He swooped her up in his arms, settling her to goggle again. His wings stretched wide, to their full reach, albeit she was right about the one. He ran toward the palace, cattails whipping against his legs until a gust of wind caught in his feathers and they were lifted into the air.

She stared at his face the whole time he carried her over the dales and farmland far below. Her weight was slight compared to other things he had carried for his master. The people of Telen saw him, and some waved or called out. Others scurried to hide, unsure of what manner of thing he might be. He noticed the ravages of the war and the recent attacks the city had suffered. Fresh graves dotted a wide field near the city's boundary, and many fields bore stretches of black scars from recent fires. A wall of spears was being erected to the east, no doubt to ward off the Nors.

Kolar circled the palace. He carried his princess to the very balcony he had taken Minai from so many days ago. After setting her there, he looked out over Telen and saw the cliffs far beyond the hills where he knew the angels lived. The draw to go there weighed on him.

Treila pushed open the doors to the bedchamber and stepped in. He hesitated for a time before he followed after her. Inside there were two ornate beds, with red curtains

drawn, and women's finery in every corner. Treila tugged away her clothes to replace them with a simple shift of white. She took off her soldier's boots and pushed her feet into soft leather slippers with bells at the ends. She went to a desk with a looking glass over it and stared into her reflection. Her frown deepened while she combed out her hair.

"Someone's coming," Kolar said. "I can hear them racing up the stairs."

"It will be the guards. It's obvious we were seen." She pulled her short hair back into a tight bun and fastened a golden veil over her head. "It will be all right."

The double doors burst open, and a group of angry-looking men entered the room. They had bows set with arrows and aimed them on Kolar.

"Be at ease," Treila told them. "He is my guardian. No harm is to come to him."

"But Princess," one began, "he looks like the same creature that carried your sister away."

She waved a hand at them in dismissal. "He is my guardian, I tell you. My word is not to be questioned. We must prepare for the arrival of the Nor king. How many more days until full moon?"

"Two, Princess. He has sent you another missive, but we could not locate you in the castle, so the Council had it opened and read it. There was fear that you too had been stolen away."

"Go to Hansden, and tell him to call a meeting. I will see this message the Nor king has sent and decide what must be done." She started for the door, her back straight, her chin

held high. Kolar felt forgotten as the men lowered their weapons and followed after her.

When she passed through the doorway, Treila turned to acknowledge him. "Kolar Darkwing, you have borne me on a long and tiresome journey. I would be honored if you would care to take ease here in this room. In fact, I would feel safe with you here. Should you need any comforts, you have only to ask of my servants in the chamber next to this, and you can be sure they will attend to your needs."

He nodded, but in truth had no desire to remain where he was. He needed to be at her side, but perhaps that would cause too many questions for her to answer too soon. She left him standing next to the wall, and two guards stole long, curious stares at him before they shut the doors on the hall. He glanced around her room, taking in the paintings of flowers and the silken dresses that hung in an open closet chest. The palace of Telen was much finer than the demon sky castle. Kolar paced, unsure of how this would all work out. Finally, unable to think of anything useful to do, he stepped out onto the balcony and lay down across a padded bench to wait.

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## Chapter Nine: Cowardice

Hansden waited beside the seat next to Treila's in the Council's chamber. He picked at his red tunic and breathed a sigh of relief when she came to sit beside him. "Child, I thought you were dead! Where have you been?"

"I left to find out what happened to my sister. It was not the angels of Plemae that stole her. It was King Olemoth."

"Olemoth!" Hansden squeaked. "How can you know such a thing? And how dare you leave us at such a time? If your parents were still alive..."

"I was captured by a demon weaver." At that moment, the three other Council members came in, each of them wide-eyed in disbelief at her return. Treila waited for them to take their seats.

Hansden cleared his throat. "I call this meeting to order. Our princess has returned to us safely and has asked to see the Nor king's latest demands."

The others waited while Hansden unfurled the parchment and weighted it across the table. Treila read in silence, her worries crashing down once more.

*Princess of Telen,*

*You have not answered my demands. I remind you a second time that you have until full moon to choose. Wed me and unite our cities, or forfeit your life. I look forward to our union and the peace between our cities. I have heard of your recent misfortune in the loss of your father, mother, and*



*sister. You are the last of your line, and I would hope you do not see fit to join your relatives in death.*

*Azazel Nor*

"It is much the same demand as the first letter." Hansden set his hands on the table and knitted his fingers together. "What will you do, Treila?"

"A marriage would stop the wars," Dalekkan suggested from the opposite side of the table, his one good eye narrowed. "Marriage and peace is a better fate than death, if I may be so bold as to suggest that choice to you."

She sat back in her chair, an old, embroidered throne that her father used to dominate. "Life is always better than death." She tapped her forefinger on her chin. "And his army is too strong for ours. We cannot defeat him if he tries to lay siege."

"It would be the perfect opportunity for the demon king to strike against both peoples—when no one expects him to do so." It was Vladimir who spoke then, one of her father's most trusted advisors and the leader of the Telen army. He wore his uniform, and his face was still stained with war paint.

"King Olemoth is dead," Treila announced. "Beheaded by the guardian who returned me to Telen."

"Guardian? What guardian?" Hansden asked, his face pinched with confusion.

"A dark-winged angel. He waits in my bedchamber as we speak. He protected me from the demon king and killed Olemoth before we escaped."

"Nonsense," Vladimir countered. "The angels never get involved. They stay in the safety of their high cliffs and look

down on our lives without emotion." He raised one hand, his finger pointing at the ceiling to make his point. "And there are no *dark* angels. You have been deceived. Angels are creatures of the light—like your sister was." He stood and pushed away from the table. "I will have this imposter taken to my dungeon for interrogation."

"You will not!" Treila stood up and pounded one fist against the table to halt him. "He is my guardian, and you will do well to leave him be."

Vladimir's face turned a deep shade of crimson. "There are no dark ones, Treila. I have known you since you were a babe in your mother's overprotective arms. Don't let your naiveté destroy this city. Submit to the Nors and wed. You will spare us all."

"You do not know me. None of you have ever known me." She headed for the door. "I will meet with the Nor king and give him *my* demands." She stomped past the leader of her army, her skirt billowing. Past the door and out into the arched hall, she hastened. She needed to be back in Kolar's arms, for without him at her side, she felt uneasy. These men of the Council thought her a foolish girl. But she was nothing of the sort. She had been set behind her sister all her life while Minai was trained to rule, but Treila had paid attention to the things that mattered—war and negotiations. She knew the demons would come again. Vladimir was right about that. She knew the Nors would take this moment of weakness to seize more power. But she also knew there were dishonorable ways of ending wars.

Treila marched up the steps to the tower. After sweeping past the guards' room and her servants' quarters, she reached the double doors. When her hand closed over the handle, she felt a pang of relief at her homecoming. She had thought she would never be here again when the demon weaver snatched her from her horse. Treila pushed open the carved door and stepped inside.

"Kolar?" She looked for him in the room, thinking he might be resting on one of the beds, but he wasn't in either one. She rushed through the large chamber, a terrible panic settling in her chest. *Déjà vu* settled in. This was what it felt like when her sister vanished. The irony of her feeling of loss played at her. "Kolar!"

"I'm here." His voice came from the balcony. She rushed out there to find him on the bench, his wings spread out at either side of him, feathers trailing onto the tiled floor.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought you had gone." She sighed and went to stand at the banister. She imagined the vision of her dream and saw the place where the Nor king would stand and announce the charge of his troops. It was atop a lonely hill. She had witnessed that moment so many times now that she had lost count. It felt as if it had already happened.

"I have not gone and will not do so unless you ask it of me. I belong to you, Treila. I gave my life to you." She heard him get up, the rustle of his wings a now familiar sound that she welcomed. His arms enclosed her waist. Kolar hugged her and encircled the both of them in his wings. Darkness

descended as it had in the demon dungeon when he had hidden her from a guard.

"What is this?"

"Old magic. In the darkness of my wings, you and I have become invisible. If ever you need to hide from the world, I will pull you into my arms, and we will escape whatever you fear."

She turned to face him. "The Nor king has demanded an alliance between Telen and Nor."

"Alliance?" He set his forehead against hers. "An alliance with the Nors is done by marriage, Treila."

"Yes." She stared into his eyes and waited for him to tell her no, to make her deny that she would do any such thing.

"You would be bringing peace at last."

"I don't want peace. I want *you*." She touched her hand to his cheek and delved into his soul with her mind. Deep within she searched until she came upon the small light her sister had seeded within him. She closed her eyes, concentrating on that glimmer of hope. Minai *had* placed a part of herself inside Kolar, and it felt good to see what beauty her sister had left behind. "I want nothing of alliances or the dominance of the Nors. I want you, and have since the moment you told me I was not of the darkness."

His lips hovered over her mouth when he spoke, but he sounded so very far away from her. "Tell me what to do, Treila, and I will do it for you. Anything you ask."

"Stay with me." Even as she said the words, she knew it was wrong what she wanted. In what world could the two of them be together? She was a princess, a human, and he was

the result of a demon and an angel mating—how such a possibility could have come to pass, she could only imagine.

"Always." He kissed her lips and whispered again, "Always."

She wanted to be in the shadows of someone else's light again, unnoticed, unimportant, the second heir who would not receive the throne or the crown. She could have had him then. She could have left the city forever and not truly been missed.

"I must write down my demands. But I do not trust the Council. Will you deliver my message to the Nor king?"

"Of course. Anything you ask."

She remained in his arms until he released her some time later. Kolar paced across the wide balcony, staring into the horizon. She figured he was watching Plemae for a sign from the angels. "I'll be at my desk, should you need me."

He raised one hand without turning to face her.

Treila sat down to draft her demands. She had never been one for formalities, and she thought her first attempt well enough to accomplish her goal.

*King Azakel of Nor,*

*Your demands have not been ignored, but the future of Telen is not a responsibility I take lightly. Marriage is not an option I care to entertain, nor is your choice to assassinate me. There has been enough of death and dying in our cities. If you attack us, the demons will seize the moment of chaos between our cities and destroy our people once and for all. It stands to reason that we unite against our common enemy.*

*I will meet with you the night of the full moon, as you have requested, when we shall discuss what is to become of our future.*

*Princess Treila Telen*

She rolled the parchment and slipped it inside a protective metal sleeve, thinking it was brave what she was doing, as much as it was stupid. Outside her room, Kolar had stopped pacing and stood on the balcony overlooking her city. His damaged wing slumped a little lower than the one that was unhurt.

"Have you been to Nor?" she called to him.

He ran both hands through his thick black hair before he groaned. "Many times. Would you have me go now?"

"Can you be back before night falls?"

He half smiled. "I can. Do you fear sleeping alone?"

Heat raced to her cheeks. Treila looked away. She tightened her hold on the message sleeve and brought it to him.

Kolar closed his fingers over the sleeve and slipped it into one of the leather loops on his belt. "I could kill him for you," he suggested. "You know I am capable. All you need do is ask."

His eyes flickered like a dying flame. Treila saw the side of him that should not be there, that half that had been raised by and served demons.

"If the need arises, I may ask it of you."

A sharp knock resounded at her door, startling her. "Go now. Take it to him, and be back before the sun sets."

He nodded before he pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. When he backed to the balcony, his wings tensed. Kolar spun and ran. At the open doors, he leapt into the air and passed over the railing into the sky beyond.

"What is it?" she snapped.

Vladimir's voice revealed his frustration. "I will see you now, Princess. And this guardian you speak of."

She sighed and returned to her desk. "Come in then."

The double doors opened wide, and Vladimir stood with a guard at either side of him. His eyes sought the guardian she had spoken of, but when he realized she was alone, a peculiar grin spread across his lips. "Dark angel," he muttered. "I think I am right about you. Your mother protected you well, young one, but not well enough."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Did you have something more to say to me? Another solution to the Nors? Or are you here to treat me as if I am not your princess? Because make no mistake, I rule those guards, not you."

Vladimir clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "You rule nothing, for you are the one the prophecy spoke of—the darkness. Don't think I haven't listened at closed doors all these years. Your mother knew. She should have kept it a secret from you. In Telen, all walls have ears."

A chill swept down her spine. She shouldn't have sent Kolar away, but how could she have known that Vladimir would betray her?

"Tie her. Set the cloth over her nose and mouth. I will not have her screams alarming the entire castle." He gestured at his henchmen. They sprang forth and chased her to the

balcony. One fist closed over her upper arm, and a white cloth laced with something odorous stifled her breathing.

"Your dark angel resides in your mind, Princess. The Nor king can have you, your madness, and your curse. Let him be the one to send you to your fate as your mother should have done nineteen summers ago."

She held her breath as long as she could, but dizziness threatened. Treila breathed in. The drug entered her system, numbing her body. She staggered and fell forward, but was caught up by the men.

Although his voice was growing faint, she heard Vladimir say, "If you will not go willingly and sacrifice yourself for the good of your people, then I will make the choice for you..."

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## Chapter Ten: Folly

Kolar found the Nor king perched upon a high hill, not a day's ride from Telen and only hours by wing. The man was an obvious tyrant, sure of himself and wearing the dented armor of a warrior who had fought many battles. There were a band of guards about the tawny-haired king, but they made no move to protect their leader when Kolar landed before them. Azakel raised a sword and sneered at him when he approached. "What manner of creature are you?"

"Half demon and half angel. I'm a messenger from Treila in Telen." He reached for the metal sleeve, but a sharp slap to his wrist with the flat of the Nor king's bladed halted him.

"My fiancée keeps unusual slaves to do her bidding. Why did she not send a guard?" The king narrowed his eyes, distrustful.

"I *am* her guard." Kolar sidestepped and pulled the sleeve from his belt. "She bade me give you this and return by nightfall. I can wait a moment more if you want to reply to her." He held out the message.

One of the Nor king's men stepped forward to uncap the metal. He read the words to Azakel in a flowery accent while Kolar looked on, surprised by Treila's words.

"She's brave, but I make the demands here, not her." Azakel swept a lock of unruly hair from his eyes. "I will take her back to Nor and teach her obedience. Tell her to be ready. That is the message I send with you." He flicked his wrist at Kolar. "Go, and maybe when she comes to my palace,

I'll let you keep her company when I'm at war with the demon king."

Kolar's eyes flickered over each face present. His attention fixed on the Nor king for a long while. He memorized the shape of the man's face and wished he could draw his swords to finish him. *You will not touch her*, he swore in silence. He backed away, keeping his face to them in case they decided to attack. Behind them, tents spread across the plain, peopled with an army that Kolar knew had no intention of making peace with its rival. Nor conquered and swallowed up whole cities, widening its reach across the four lands.

With a curt nod, he took to the air, worried over what the outcome to Treila's meeting with the king would be. As he flew over the treetops and the river they had traversed to get to Telen, he heard the same strange musical voices he had heard from the balcony earlier. They sounded closer to him, the words nonsensical and dancing in the air. The voices sounded familiar. He glided, concentrating on them, sure that he had heard the song a long time ago, further back than he could remember with any clarity. Kolar closed his eyes. A rush of emotion made him dizzy, and he remembered a fair woman looking down at him, her face streaked with tears. He needed that woman, but no matter how he called to her, she would not answer him. "Mother," he whispered, knowing full well that she must be gone. Why else would he have been raised in the company of demons?

He opened his eyes to look down on the farmlands below. Telen Palace beckoned to him, but so did the voices. The sky was turning golden in the early hours of evening. He decided

that he had time to go and see what it might have been like to grow up in Plemae. His wounded wing folded in, and Kolar turned his attention to the red-orange cliffs where the angels lived.

He passed over the vines he remembered Treila telling him about. The voices swirled in his mind, binding to the loneliness he had always felt, calling him home. When he reached the cliffs and looked up, he saw his people perched atop the highest point, all lined up. They sang with their arms upraised. Their wings were spread out to catch the wind, although none took flight. All of them were fair as the dawn with cream-colored wings the exact opposite of his own.

He circled.

One of the angels saw him and shrieked. More called out to warn the others. The line of angels leapt from the rock, their wings larger than his, their voices musical and lingering as they made their way toward him.

He didn't know whether to be afraid or excited. Would they shun him? Cast him out? Would they attack? Or would they take him in as one of their own? He didn't know how he felt about the latter.

A male with silver-white hair dove at Kolar, his arms open as if he would embrace him. When the angel's cold fingers met Kolar's upper arms, he found he couldn't escape. The angel's steely-eyed gaze bore into him. He was frozen in the air.

"What is your name, dark one?" he asked.

"Kolar."

Goose bumps prickled across his skin. He needed the angel to let go. The great white wings of his opponent flapped to the tune of a beating heart. Kolar's wings had halted their efforts. More hands took hold of him. More faces closed in, all with ice blue eyes and stern expressions as they stared at him.

They pulled him down from the sky, down to the cliffs where they lived. Kolar wanted to break free, but their touch made him numb and effectively paralyzed him from struggling or even trying to escape. Wingtips brushed his cheek and shoulder. Their voices entranced him further. This was the language of his people, and he knew not a word of it. But it felt right. It made him want to understand.

"Please," he began. "I have to return to Telen. I have to get back to the princess. She needs me to protect her."

They ignored his plea and carried him through the mouth of a cave. He searched their faces for some sort of emotion, kindness, empathy, mercy, but he could only discern a coldness, the likes of which rivaled the cruelty of demons.

The darkness of the cave gave way to blue lights, low flames flickering in carved-out alcoves every few steps. Paintings decorated the hewn walls, most of a bright light that Kolar took to be the sun and angels flying out from its center. Other renderings were of feathers or scenes of flowers blooming amidst a sea of gray lines.

He was taken to a circular chamber that reminded him of Olemoth's concubine room. Fine pillows in shiny fabrics lined the area, as well as downy feathers and thick blankets. A female lay amidst the bedding, her skin fair and pure, her

eyes like the others. She watched him, her gaze empty. The woman sat up, her clothing a simple woven shift that revealed the curves of her body. She looked so young, but he sensed that she was much older than him.

"Welcome, lost one. Come and tell me who you are and where you have come from, for our paths are aligned, and you are partly one of our kind."

The angels released him, and Kolar fell forward onto the soft pillows. "I'm Kolar Darkwing from the demon sky palace," he told her. "I think my mother was an angel."

The female's lips tightened before she spoke. "Your mother. She was stolen by Olemoth twenty-nine summers ago. When she escaped his palace and returned to us, she was pregnant with a cursed child. We did not expect you to return to us."

"Is my mother—"

"Amalja died birthing you." She nodded at the others, who had settled in around the room to watch. "Her last words were 'Send my baby to the fires.' We did as she wished."

"Why?"

The female looked past him, toward the chamber's entry. "We were made to watch what happens in this world, not to change it. You are not like us."

"I was a baby. You left me in the burning pits to die." He was appalled at their indifference.

"Yet you have lived. Come, Kolar, your days have been spent killing, and you are tired." She held out her hand to him, no confrontation in her voice or demeanor, no regret for what had been done to him. "Come and sit with us this night."

We will be your family. Sit and watch like we do. Stay among the cliffs and be as your mother was."

Her offer appealed to him for he had never felt like he belonged anywhere until he kissed Treila for the first time. Kolar crawled to the angel and sat beside her. She enfolded him in her arms, sending the same numbing sensation through his body that he had felt when the others touched him. Here in the cliffs of Plemae, the outside world did not matter. Wars meant nothing. The battles between demons and men were trivial passages of time in an endless slew of days that could be better spent watching the flowers bloom or the sun make its daily journey across the sky.

She stroked the side of his face with gentle fingers. Other angels joined them until they all lay together in the nest and watched the lights burn in the alcoves with wonderment. No words passed between them, only thoughts—all of their thoughts drifting through his and mingling—a collective of knowledge and observances, of truths and lies. He saw the most beautiful of sunsets, the dawning of endless days, and many examples of life and death. Kolar felt at peace for the first time, and he reveled in the simplicity of it.

"I can't stay," he told them, but the angels only held tighter to his body. Hands closed over his ankles, his wrists, his shoulders, calming and soothing his worries. The female ran her palms up and down his back, and he soon forgot that he wanted to leave them. They wanted him to stay, and the longer he remained, the more he wanted to do as they wished.

The angels began to sing. Their music lingered in the cool night air. The sound of hundreds of beautiful voices echoed in other reaches of the cave. They touched something inside him, yet another facet of who he was that he had not known existed until that very moment. He wanted to sing with them, be with them, forever.

Kolar relaxed and gave in to them. He closed his eyes, settling his body into the rhythms of theirs. He opened his mouth to join in their song. He sang along, surprised at how easy the melody came to him for it had seemed a difficult thing at first.

He tried to let go, to become what they wanted him to be, but then a voice drifted into his thoughts, halting all he was about to surrender to.

"*Help me.*" A wave of dizziness and fear swept through him—Treila's emotions and not his own. She was in danger. The connection they had made gave her entry into his mind. His body tensed. He reached for his swords and tried to pull away from those who held him.

"Please, I have to go back," he said, hoping they would let him.

"We wish you to stay here, to no longer walk between the worlds. Out there, the others will use you. Here, you are one with us." The female withdrew her hands, though, and he saw a flicker of something in her expression that she tried to hide by pursing her lips. It could have been compassion.

"I have to go back. She needs me."

"Needs are trivial to us. In this place we have one another. We need nothing else." She reached to touch his face again,

and despite the soothing ache he wanted to feel by giving in to her, he pulled farther away.

She waved her hand, signaling the others. They let go of him, allowing him more room. He stood, both hands on the handles of his swords, and looked at the group he planned to leave behind.

"Show us," the female told him. "What is it that calls you back?"

He felt the touch of their thoughts at the edge of his mind, waiting for answers. He envisioned Treila and the way he felt when she looked upon him with favor. His chest constricted. She was in danger and had used her magic to call for his help. He should have been there for her instead of here, seeking out a past that had been denied him.

"We understand, dark one. Go from this place, and come back to us when you have finished this task. You are a special creature, an angel who walks between worlds, a demon who reaches for light instead of darkness. But you will always be welcome here with us."

He breathed out a laden sigh. Kolar turned away from them and started into the caves toward the dark night beyond. He should have been in Treila's chambers with her, not here. Night had come while he was within the cliffs, and he stepped out over the lip of the cave's entrance and took to the air to see what had become of Treila.

He flew away from Plemae and crossed the farmlands toward the palace. Behind him, torches glittered far off in the distance, the first sign that the Nors were approaching. By



nightfall of the next day, Azakel would be in Telen to claim Treila as his bride.

Kolar landed atop the balcony, frightened to see her room so dark. No one waited for him in either bed. No note had been left behind to tell him where she had gone. A little white cloth lay discarded on the floor at his feet. He knelt to retrieve it, and even before he could bring it to his nose, he knew what it was—a potent mixture of Illusion, the berries he had offered Treila when they camped together. Someone had drugged her and stolen her away. He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, but felt nothing of her consciousness. She had been betrayed by her own people. That much he knew, for the Nors were not the kind to kidnap.

He started for the doors and the hall beyond, determined to find her within the palace if indeed that was where she still was. Kolar searched the guards' chambers near her room and found them empty. He startled two sleeping servants in their beds, but slipped away into the hall to keep hunting for Treila.

When he entered a great meeting hall with a throne at the head of the massive table centering it, he noticed a terrible scene unfolding in the window. In the heart of Telen City, he saw the army of the Nor king gathered. Was he too late? Had she given herself over to him?

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## **Chapter Eleven: Venality**

Morning light spilled across Treila's face. She had been dreaming of Kolar and the night they'd shared together beneath her blanket woven of grass. She opened her eyes just as the Nor king took her wrist and set a shackle over her skin, tightening it until it pained her. Treila fixed him with a defiant stare while he pulled her to stand. "You may try to claim me, but I will never belong to you."

He ran his fingers through the knots in his thick mane of hair, his gaze inspecting her body. "You will learn your place in time, and you will find I am not as bad as you think I am. Only the strong survive in this war. I live. You live. It is right that we should become paired and have offspring, for they, too, will be strong. My enemies will be your enemies. My victories will be yours. Now, come out of there." He tugged at the chain holding her. She was forced to stand. Someone had placed her in the royal carriage and brought her to the city's center.

Azakel Nor led her to his own ornate carriage. "Tonight we wed beneath the light of the full moon, and our people will be united."

She walked with as much courage as she could muster in an effort to look like a princess and not a prisoner. Treila glanced back and saw Vladimir standing beside her carriage, his hands clasped before him. The Council stood beside him, watching the exchange. Beyond them, the people of Telen had gathered to bear witness to her humiliation. Everyone

knew what she was, from the lowest peasant to the highest advisor looking on from the Council. Treila had been stolen. Maybe not in as brutal a manner as her sister, but the Nor king would take her away, and it was likely that no one in her city would ever lay eyes on her again. She knew this pleased the Council. If Vladimir knew what she was, then so did they.

Azakel opened the door to his carriage, and, complacent, she sat on the bench within. He climbed in and sat beside her, his fist tight on the end of her chain. Treila searched his face for some sign of humanity, but there were only the scars of war and a harshness she doubted she could penetrate.

"Are you even capable of love?"

His eyebrows drew together. Lines formed on his forehead. "Love is for the poor, for those with no position of power. It is the one luxury people of our rank must forfeit."

"I have loved," she told him. "But I will never love you."

"I do not ask for your love, Princess. You will bear my children and sit at my side. Together, Telen and Nor will defeat the demons and set peace through the four lands. Why you would desire more than that is beyond my understanding."

"Peace," she scoffed. "You have no desire for peace. You want power over the people. You are no better than the demon king, and I will see you beheaded as Olemoth was." She tugged her shackled wrist away from his hold, and the chains rattled.

His face twisted into a scowl. "What do you speak of?"

"Olemoth is dead. My guardian killed him. I will have him do the same to you if you don't let me go free."

He narrowed his eyes on her. "You speak nonsense. Be silent and obedient. That is all you need be."

She crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes, thinking of Kolar. Her anger made the dark magic within her flicker and grow. She wanted to be free, to escape him, and she wanted Kolar at her side again. *Where are you?* she wondered.

"Your messenger came to me last night." The chain tightened on her wrist. He pulled her closer to him. "Wherever did you find such a creature?"

She bit her lip and looked down at herself. Someone had dressed her for the occasion in a fine skirt and corset that matched a woven silk blouse in red. She hoped it wasn't Vladimir. If she was given the chance, she would exact her revenge for his betrayal.

"Answer me, woman. I will have more like him for our cause—a whole army that can attack from the sky and defeat the demons." He jerked the chain, and she fell across his lap. He smelled like sweat and leather. His rough fingers closed over her chin, lifting her face so that he could stare down into her eyes. "Where did you find him?"

She clenched her teeth, glaring up at him. Suddenly a thought occurred to Treila, a terrible idea, a defiance she had always been forbidden to use. She pushed up from him and reached with her free hand to his cheek. She would touch his soul and change it, slip the darkness into him so that he would know her power and her pain. Her fingertips brushed over the blond grizzle on his stern face until her palm rested flat on his cheek.

He flinched. His eyes lowered to her lips. She thought he wanted to kiss her, but Treila let loose the darkness she hid so well and felt it forcing its way into his mind. She searched his past, his present, and his plans for the future. The Nor king was not much more than he showed himself to be—a war-hungry tyrant who wanted to rid the lands of the demons. He took over each village and city under his rule without remorse or regard for the lives spent in doing so. He desired Treila, but only in as much as he desired any other city he conquered. She was naught but a means to an end to him.

She saw his childhood and the cruelty of a father bent on war. Azakel had not known his mother, a prisoner taken and wed in much the same manner she would be if she didn't escape. She had died not long after his birth. Treila saw what he needed, the seed of hope, the light of goodness, but as always, she didn't have the power to plant such a seed in his heart. She only had the power to destroy.

"What are you doing to me?" he asked, his voice hushed now, lost of its surety. His eyes changed color to a molten red. His face twisted with a maniacal grin. She had succeeded.

Before she had a chance to answer, a shriek echoed in the wind, a grating sound she knew as a demon weaver. Their shared enemy was coming. Treila let go of Azakel and scooted to the window. She forced it open. Outside, the sky bled black with the bodies of a demon army. The demon king's death had not delayed the wrath of his followers.

Behind her, she heard the Nor king gasp in shock. "Stop the carriage!" he shouted. Immediately, the wheels grated in the road. He flung open his door and looked back at her. "Stay here, Princess. War is no place for the likes of a woman. It is man's work." He tossed her chain onto the bench and slapped the door shut.

She shuddered as she watched him trudge away outside her window. She had planted the seed of darkness in him, but what it would grow into, she had no idea. He wore no helm, but his body was armored. Azakel's golden hair fluttered in the wind. He drew his sword and held it up at the creatures descending from the skies.

She knew they wanted her. She was the reason they had come to Telen, although they would revel in the death of the Nor king as well. Treila scanned the sky, hoping to see Kolar, but he was not there to save her.

The battle between the Nors and the demons began as it had in her vision. The Nor king mounted a horse and howled a war cry to his army, which had been on the march behind his carriage. Across the Helmish Hills, his men answered the cry, and they charged.

Treila kicked open the carriage door and jumped down, the chain dangling from her shackle. She ran across the thick grass, hoping Kolar would come for her and take her away from all the death and dying.

The demons swooped upon their prey, their weaver attacking and devastating whole lines of men. Soon the scent of blood rent the air. Smoke rose up from the weaver's fiery

breath as its flames charred the land. Swords clashed against each other. Arrows swooshed through the air.

"Kolar!" Treila screamed. She looked to the sky, but only cruel faces and batlike, leathery wings met her scrutiny. She hid in the long grass and waited, listening to the cries of men and the roars of the demons.

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## **Chapter Twelve: Redemption**

Kolar flew before the angels across the sky, a leader in his own right for the first time in his life. They had not wanted to follow him, but when he touched the female's cheek and felt the seed of light and the seed of darkness he had gained from both Telen daughters pass into her, he knew they would join him. Angels were needed to do more than watch over the four lands. They were needed to protect those who could not protect themselves.

They flew over the hills to where the battle raged, and one by one, angels marked the demons and set upon them with their bare hands—hands that paralyzed and halted all thought—the touch of the divine against the darkest of evils. A band of thirteen angels took hold of the massive demon weaver and subdued the mighty creature until it fell upon the earth and turned to ash.

He saw the Nor king at war with three demons at once, and even from his vantage in the sky, he knew the raged gleam in Azakel's eyes. Treila had touched him with her darkness, and he could not be stopped. He felled one demon with a well-placed swipe of his blade. He charged at the second, his horse rearing at the last moment so that he had reach enough to slash his opponent's gut.

The third demon swooped behind the Nor king and slammed a battle axe into the man's back. Azakel fell from his horse to roll across the ground. Even wounded as he was, he



rose to his knees and then his feet, that same madness and bloodlust in his eyes.

Kolar scanned the scene for Treila, but she was nowhere that he could see. The Nor king's carriage lay toppled, the horses and driver dead. He flew toward the fallen carriage thinking she must be nearby.

"Kolar!" He turned and saw her stand amidst the grass, her body clothed in a fanciful crimson dress, her short hair trailing across her face. She waved her arms to get his attention.

Behind her, the demons took notice and changed their course in the sky.

"Get down!" he screamed, horrified. His wings caught the air as he turned and flew toward her.

His new family sensed his distress and left their battles to converge upon those who would capture his lover. Angels descended upon the demons, but not before one let loose a dagger. The silver blade glimmered in the light of the waning sun.

Treila lurched forth one step, and he felt the pain of the dagger echoed in his own lower back as she stumbled and fell. All that he held dear had been smitten before his very eyes. She crashed into the ground. He let go of the swords he carried and hurried to her side. The sweet smell of the grass and her blood mingled. He breathed in, tears welling in his eyes when he touched the side of her face. Her eyes opened.

"Don't move," he told her. "Don't say anything."

"I see Minai." She blinked up at him, her mouth turned in a frown. "She says she sent you to me, that you will bring me

the light I have never known." Blood bubbled out of her mouth to dribble down her chin. "She tells me I must stay with you."

He sucked in a sob, fighting the pain losing her would cause him. She could not die, not now that he had only just found her. What would his life be like without her?" He felt the numbing touch of an angel's fingers close over his shoulder.

"You can return to the cliffs with us, Kolar. There you will find peace." Another angel alighted behind Treila and approached, his fair features glowing in the twilight. "This one will slip into death." He gestured at the blade buried in her back. "It is as the creator wills it to be. Her time has come. We should not question the cycle of such things."

Treila tried to touch his face, but her hand faltered and fell to the grass at her side. She smiled for a small time. Then her eyes closed, and a wet gurgle escaped her lips. Her body did not take in another breath. He felt the weight of death gathering around him.

"No. I will not let her go."

The hands on his shoulders squeezed once. He looked up into the female angel's eyes. She had brought him into her clan in the cliffs. She had been the only one to show any hint of emotion or humanity. "You are the walker between worlds, Kolar, a demon and an angel spawned of love, though such a union was thought impossible." She bent to look down at Treila. "If you choose to walk through this world into the next, you may be able to bring her back."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Close your eyes, and follow her soul. Yours is tied to hers in ways beyond my understanding. She reached out to you and tied your lives together. Chase after her. Find her. Bring her back to this world."

"How?"

She pushed him down until he lay beside Treila's body.

"Chase after her," the angel said and released him. She leaned over the princess and grasped the dagger's handle, plucking it free with a sickening pop. The angel pressed her hand to the wound and smiled down at Kolar. "Hasten on your way. Time is fleeting as eternity. There will be no second chances if you fail."

He reached out with his mind and felt for the connection he shared with Treila. She felt so far away even though he touched her hand with his. He curled one wing over her lifeless body, his feathers touching the angel's arm. He delved into the darkness and called out to her with his mind.

Kolar fell into a vision, a dreamlike world where silvery mist encircled his naked body. Here was between life and death, and he saw Treila standing with her back to him at the edge of a precipice, nude as he was, her body unmarred by the blade that had stolen her life.

She glanced back at him, her cheeks wet from crying, but a smile on her full lips. He longed to kiss her one last time, to hold her against his body and feel the rush of heat and passion her touch instilled in him.

"Don't leave me," he told her.

She looked out over the precipice at what lay beyond. "There are so many things to do there," she said. "And my

sister tells me of what lies beyond, of the wonders of the next world. Why should I not go?" She turned back to him, her large dark eyes pleading for him to give her an answer that would sway her.

"Because I love you. I can't live in this world without you. Come back to me, Treila." He held his arms out to her.

She looked out over the fall and nodded. "When I come to this place again, it will be with you at my side." She backed away from the edge until he felt her body touch his chest.

He closed his arms around her waist and breathed in the scent of her hair. She was his again. His wings extended in the mistral void, flapping and pulling them both skyward, away from death. He felt he was in the void beneath the sky castle a second time, flying upstream in a magic so thick it weighed him down and wanted him to fail. Nevertheless, he pressed on toward a light high above, an impossible target he needed to get to.

When he broke through the mists, he saw the pregnant full moon shining down from the star-studded sky. Treila was in his arms, her face nestled against his chest, and the angels were gone. Night had crossed over the land of Telen, hiding the death all around them. He lifted Treila in his arms and walked across the long grass field toward the Telen palace. He stepped over bodies and places slick with blood, holding his greatest treasure to his chest.

When he reached the courtyard before the palace, he took to the sky and flew her to the balcony where he had started this horrible journey. He carried Treila to her bed and crawled in beside her. Beneath the covers, he explored her back for

the wound and found the tear in her dress. But her skin was smooth beneath, changed and healed by the angel. In the distance he heard the song of his relatives, a sweet music he hoped he would hear nearby for the rest of his days.

Kolar had walked between worlds and cheated death by stealing back the woman he loved. Now, he did not know what would become of them, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that she was beside him, well and unharmed, and he had the chance to be more than what he was prior to knowing her. He settled into the bed and rested his weary body, not anxious for the dawn, but content to let the night pass slowly.

\* \* \* \*

She dreamed of her sister and a great void of darkness with but one light in its mist. Treila saw visions of the Nor king marching back to his lands a changed man. She saw the fall of the demon hoards and the sinking of the sky palace into the lake it had floated over for generations. Angels flew the skies over the four lands, and Treila wondered that such a vision could be hers when she opened her eyes, for they were good things, not the visions of more darkness to come.

"Kolar?" She looked up at him, chiseled like a statue as he slept. His mouth was stern, his black hair trailing over one side of his face. She reached to push it aside so that her hand could rest in its rightful place on his cheek. He was her dark angel, her lover, her mate. She remembered how she had wanted to step over the cliff in the darkness to be with her sister again, but Kolar had asked her to stay, had told her he

loved her. Treila lifted her chin and kissed his lips until he moaned and kissed her back.

He tugged at the laces in her corset, freeing her from the garment so that he could pull away her blouse. His warm hands closed over her breasts as their kisses deepened. She arched against him when he thumbed her nipples. His tongue pushed into her mouth, and she met his passion with her own.

Treila reached for his pants and unlaced them in preparation for what she wanted him to do to her. She pushed them away, and he did the same to her skirt and undergarments. They lay naked in her bed, the heat of their bodies comfortable and right.

"I'm sorry for what I am," he told her when he climbed atop her body.

She straddled his body with her legs. "Don't be sorry anymore. We belong now—to each other. There is no one I would rather be with than you, no place I would rather be than here." His wings extended their darkness around them. She knew he had made them invisible.

For a long while they stared into each other's eyes, content to be together again. Kolar pushed himself inside her, his length thick with need, and Treila held him in place between her legs, filled and at peace with herself. Their union was unhurried, their lovemaking sweet and rhythmic until she tensed and froze in his arms during her release. Treila felt the darkness in her changing, growing into a familiar light.

The End

A Walk Between Worlds  
*by Anastasia Rabiya*

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## **About the Author**

Anastasia Rabiya writes erotic romance, paranormal erotic romance, and dark fantasy. She often crosses genres in order to follow her muses into the darkness where they seek out destiny in all its forms. She believes in fairies, demons, angels, magic, passion, chocolate, supportive friends, e-books, and writing critique groups. Her deepest desire is to pursue her creative dreams and realize them. Every spare moment she devotes to writing for her haunting muses.

Visit her on the web at [www.RabiyaBooks.com](http://www.RabiyaBooks.com)

Other titles by Anastasia available at Amira Press:

The Noonday Demon

Blood Angel

Blood Angel Book Two: Charon

Goblin's Bride

The Woods

Bound by the Night

Demonic Obsessions: Seventh Night



A Walk Between Worlds  
*by Anastasia Rabiya*

## Demonic Obsessions

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