

(Once Upon #5)
Once Upon A Kiss
- A World Apart

Nora Roberts

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Chapter 1

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In the sweltering jungle, under the blood-red sun, Kadra hunted. Her steps were silent, her eyes—green as the trio of stones that encrusted the hilt of her sword—were alert, watchful, merciless.

For four days and four nights she had tracked her prey, over the Stone Mountains, beyond the Singing River, and into the verdant heat of the Land of Tulle.

What she stalked rarely ventured to these borders, and she herself had never traveled so far in the south of A'Dair.

There were villages here, small enclaves of lesser hunters, settlements of farmers and weavers with their young and their animals. The young were as much food to what she hunted as the cattle and mounts were.

She trod on the mad red flowers that were strewn on the path, ignored the sly silver slide of a snake down the trunk of a tree. She saw, sensed, scented both, but they were of no interest to her.

The Bok demons were her only interest now, and destroying them her only goal.

It was what she had been born for.

Other scents came to her—the beasts, large and small, that inhabited the jungle, and the thick, wet fragrance of vine and blossom. The blood—no longer fresh—of one that had been caught and consumed by what she hunted.

She passed a great fall of water that raged over the cliffs to pound its drumbeat into the river below. Though she had never walked upon this ground, this she knew by its light and music as a sacred place. One that no demon could enter. So she stopped to drink of its purifying waters, to fill her water bag for the journey yet to come.

And poured drops from her hand to the ground in thanks to the powers of life.

Beyond the falls, the busier scents of people—sweat, flesh, cooking, springwater from a village well—reached her keen senses.

It was her duty to protect them, and her fate that none among them could ever be her companion, her friend, her lifemate. These were truths she had never questioned.

At last she caught the overripe stench that was Bok.

The sword streaked out of its sheath, a bright battle sound as she pivoted on the heels of her soft leather boots. The dagger, its point a diamond in the sun, flipped from its wrist mount to her hand.

The dark blue claws of the Bok that had leaped from a branch overhead whizzed past her face, missing their mark. She set into a fighting stance and waited for his next charge.

It looked oddly normal. Other than those lethal retractable claws, the scent, the needle-sharp fangs that snapped out when the lips were peeled back for battle, the Bok looked no different from the people they devoured at every opportunity.

This one was small for his species, no more than six feet, which put him on a level with her. He was naked but for the thin skin of his traveling armor. Except for claws and teeth, he was unarmed. The vicious gouges across his chest and arms were stained from his pale green blood. And told her he had run afoul of his companions and had been forced out of the pack.

A distraction for her, she imagined, and didn't intend to spend much time dispatching him.

"They sacrificed you," she said as she circled. "What was your crime?"

He only hissed, flicking his long tongue through those sharp teeth. She taunted him with a happy grin, muscles ready. Above all else, she lived for combat.

When he leaped, she spun her sword up, down, and severed his head with one smooth stroke. Though the ease of the job was a bit of a disappointment, she grunted in satisfaction as the green blood sizzled and smoked. And the body of the Bok melted away to nothing but an ugly smear on the ground.

"Not much of a challenge," she muttered and sheathed her sword. "Still, the day is young, so there is hope for better."

Her hand was still on the hilt when she heard the scream.

She ran, her dark hair flying behind her, the band of her rank that encircled her head glinting like vengeance. When she burst into the small clearing with its tidy line of huts, she saw that the single Bok had been but a brief distraction, delaying her just long enough.

Bodies, of animals and a few men who had tried to defend their homes lay torn and bleeding on the ground. Others were running in panic, some holding their young clutched to them as they scattered. And she knew they would be hunted down and rent to pieces if a single demon escaped her duty.

Sorrow for the dead and the thrill of upcoming battle warred inside her.

Three of the Bok were crouched in the dirt, still feeding. Their eyes glowed red, their vicious teeth snapped as she charged. They sprang, mad enough with blood to choose fight over flight.

She cleaved the arm from one, leaped into a flying kick to knock another out of her way as she plunged her ready dagger into the heart of the third.

"I am Kadra," she shouted, "Slayer of Demons. Guardian of the red sun."

"You are too late," the remaining Bok hissed at her.

"You are outnumbered. Our king will tear out your heart, and we will share in the feast."

"Today you go hungry."

He was faster than the others, and fueled by his grisly meal. This, she knew, would be an opponent more worthy of her skill.

He chose not his claws but the long hooked blade he drew from the sheath at his side.

Steel rang to steel as the screams and the stench rose around her. She knew there were at least three others and she knew now that the demon king, the one called Sorak, was among them.

His death was her life's work.

The Bok fought well with his sickle sword, and swiped out with those blue claws. She felt the pain, an absent annoyance, as they dug furrows over her bare shoulder. Instead of retreating, she pushed into the attack, into the flashing blue and silver to run him through with a fierce thrust.

"I am Kadra," she murmured as the Bok smoked to the ground. "I am your death."

She wheeled to aim her weapon and her gaze on the demon king and the three warriors that flanked him outside the open doorway of a hut.

At last, she thought. Praise the powers of life, at last.

"I am your death, Sorak," she said. "As I was death for Clud, your father. On this day, in this hour, I will rid my world of you."

"Keep your world." The king of demons, regal in his red tunic and bands of gold, lifted a small, clear globe. "I go to another. There I will conquer and feed. There I will rule."

His handsome face was sheened with sweat and blood. His dark hair coiled, sleek and twisted, like snakes over his elegant shoulders. Then he bared his teeth, and the illusion of rough beauty vanished into horror.

"Where I go, the food is plentiful. There, I will be a god. Keep your world, Kadra, Demon Slayer. Or come with me." He beckoned with a voice seductive as a caress. "I will give you the Demon Kiss. I will make you my queen and plant my young inside you. We will rule this new world together."

"You want to kiss me? To join with me?"

"You have shed the blood of my sire. I have drunk the blood of a slayer. We are well matched. Together we will have power beyond all imagining."

His three warriors were armed. And a demon king's strength knew no equal among his kind. Four against one, Kadra thought with a leap of her heart. It would be her greatest battle.

"Come, then." She all but purred it. "Come embrace me."

She pursed her own lips, then charged.

To her shock, the demon swirled his cloak, and with his warriors, vanished in a sudden flash of light.

"Where... how?" She spun in a circle, sword raised, dagger ready, and her blood still singing a war song. She could smell them, a lingering stench. It was all that was left of them.

Women were weeping. Children wailing. And she had failed. Three Bok, and their hellborn king, had escaped her. Their eyes had met, and yet Sorak had defeated her without landing a blow.

"You have not lost them yet."

Kadra looked toward the hut where a woman stood in the doorway. She was pale and beautiful, her hair a midnight rain, her face like something carved from delicate glass. But her eyes, green as Kadra's own, were ancient, and in them it seemed worlds could live.

In them, Kadra saw pain.

"Lady," she said respectfully as she stepped toward her. "You are injured."

"I will heal. I know my fate, and it is not time for me to pass."

"Call the healer," Kadra told her. "I must hunt."

"Yes, you must hunt. Come inside, I will show you how."

Now Kadra's eyebrows raised. The woman was beautiful, true, and there was an air of magic about her. But she was still only a female.

"I'm a demon slayer. Hunting is what I know."

"In this world," the woman agreed. "But not in the one where you must go. The demon king has stolen one of the keys. But there are others."

She swayed, and Kadra leaped forward, cursing, to catch her. Frail bones, she thought. Such delicate bones would shatter easily.

"Why did they let you live?" Kadra demanded as she helped the woman inside.

"It is not in their power to destroy me. To harm, but not to vanquish. I did not know they were coming." She shook her head as she lowered herself into a chair by a hearth left cold in the heat of day. "My own complacency blinded me to them. But not to you." She smiled then, and those eyes were brilliant. "Not to you, Kadra, Slayer of Demons. I've waited for you."

"Why?"

"You call me lady, and once I was. Once I was a young girl of rank who took a brave warrior into her heart, and gave him her body in love. He was killed in the Battle of the Singing River.

"It was a great battle against the Bok and the demon tribes who joined them." Impressed, Kadra tilted her head. She had been weaned on battle stories, and this was the greatest of all. "Many were destroyed on all sides. Many brave warriors perished, as did three slayers. The numbers of Bok were halved, but still Clud escaped and since increased those numbers again to plague our world.

"I watched the battle in my fire, and in the moment my love was struck down, in that moment of grief, I bore a girl child. She who was born to take up a sword as her father had done. She who would be more than those who

made her. You are she. You are my blood and flesh and bone. I am she who bore you. I am your mother."

Kadra retreated one step. Where there had been pity was now anger. "I have no mother."

"You know I speak true. You have vision enough to see."

She felt the truth like a burn in the heart, but wanted only to deny it. "Humans who are not slayers keep their young. They tend and guard and protect them even at the risk of death."

"So it should be." The woman's voice thickened with regret. "I could not keep you with me. My duty was here, holding the keys, and yours was your training. I could not give you a mother's comfort, a mother's care, or a father's pride. Parting with you was another death for me."

"I need no mother," Kadra said flatly. "Nor father. I am a slayer."

"Yes. This is your fate, and even I could not turn your life's wheel away from it. As I cannot turn it now from where you must go, from what you must do."

"I must hunt."

"And you will. Our world and another are at stake. I could not keep you then," she stated. "I cannot keep you now. Though I have never let you go."

Kadra shook her head. She was accustomed to physical pain, but not to this hurt inside the heart. "The one who bore me was a warrior, as I am. She died at demon claws when I was but a child."

"Your foster mother. A good and brave warrior. At her side you learned what you needed to learn. When she was taken from you, you learned more. Now, you will learn the rest. I am Rhee."

"Rhee." Kadra, fearless in battle, went pale. "Rhee is a legend, a sorceress of unspeakable power. She is closed in a crystal mountain, of her own

making, and will free herself when the world has need."

"Stories and tales, with only some truths." For the first time, Rhee's lips curved in a smile lovely in humor. "The green of Tulle is my home. No mountain of glass. You have my magic in you, and it is you who must free herself. There is great need. In this world, and the other."

"What other?" Kadra snapped. "This *is* the world. The only world."

"There are more, countless others. The world from which the demons sprang. Worlds of fire, worlds of ice. And a world not so different from this—yet so different. Sorak has gone to this world, through the portal opened by the glass key. He has gone to plunder and kill, to gather power until he is immortal. He wants your blood, wants your death to avenge his father. More, even more, he wants the power he believes he will gain by making you his mate."

"He will not have me, in this world or any. He would have slain his own father in time if I had not destroyed Clud before him."

"You see the truth. This is vision."

"This is sense."

"Whatever you choose to name it," Rhee said with a wave of her hand. "But a king cannot rule without vanquishing his most feared foe. Or changing her. He will not rest until you are destroyed by death or by his kiss. He goes through the portal to begin his own hunt. With every death from demon hands in that place, another here will die. This is the balance. This is the price."

"You speak in riddles. I will fetch the healer before I hunt."

"If you turn away," Rhee said as Kadra got to her feet, "if you choose the wrong path, all is lost. The world you know, the one you need to know. There is more than one key." Rhee breathed raggedly as her pain grew, took another clear globe from the folds of her skirt. "And more than one mirror."

She waved a hand toward the empty hearth. Fire, bright as gold, leaped into the cold shadow.

In it, Kadra saw another jungle. One of silver and black. Mountains... No, structures of great height—surely they could not be huts—rivers of black and white that had no current. Over them great armies of people marched. Over them battalions of animals on four round legs raced.

"What is this place?"

"A great village. They call it a city. A place where people live and work, where they eat and sleep. Where they live and die. This is called New York, and it is there you'll find them. The demons you must stop, and the man who will help you."

Though fascinated, and just a bit frightened of the images in the flames, Kadra smirked. "I need no man in battle."

"So you have been taught," Rhee said with a smile. "Perhaps you needed to believe you needed no one, no man, to become what you have become. Now you will become more. To do so, you will need this man. He is called Doyle, Harper Doyle."

"What good is a harper to a warrior?" Kadra demanded. "A fine warrior he'll make with his song and story as sword and shield."

"He is what you need. You will fail without him. Even with him there is great risk."

"Why should I believe any of this? Any witch might conjure pictures in a fire. Any woman might spin a tale as easily as thread."

"The stone in your crown of rank, those in your sword, I gave to you. For strength, for clear vision, for valor, and last, for love. They were my tears when I gave you to your fate. In my eyes you see your own. In your heart, you see the truth. Now we must prepare."

Kadra set her hand on the hilt of her sword. "I am prepared."

With a heavy sigh, Rhee got to her feet. She walked to a wooden cupboard, took out a metal box. "Take this." She offered a bag of stones. "Where you go," she explained, "they have great value."

Kadra looked into the bag of shining stones. "Then where I go is a very foolish place."

"In some ways. In others, fantastic." Rhee's expression was soft. "You have much to see. I will give you what knowledge I can, but there are limits. Even for me." She held out her hands, gripped Kadra's before Kadra could draw back.

"The rest," she said, and glinting tears scored down her cheeks, "is up to you, and the man called Doyle."

A great roar, like rushing water over cliffs, filled Kadra's head. In it were words, a hundred thousand words, spoken in countless tongues. A pressure, as a boulder laid on her heart, filled her chest.

The light was blinding.

"Valor and strength you have, my child. Use them on this journey wild. But open yourself to vision, to love, before it's too late. Gather them close and face your fate. Would I could keep you safe with me," she murmured, and her lips brushed a kiss over Kadra's. "But once again I set you free."

The world whirled and spun. The air sucked her in, tumbled her, then spat her rudely out.

Chapter 2

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Sprawled in bed, plagued by the mother of all hangovers, the man called Doyle let out a surprised and pained grunt when a half-naked woman

dropped on top of him.

He saw eyes of intense and burning green. Eyes, he thought wearily, that he'd been dreaming of moments before he'd awakened with a head the size of Nebraska.

There was an instant of recognition, a strange and intimate knowledge, and with it a bone-deep longing. Then there was nothing but shock.

He had time to blink, a split second to admire what he was certain was a very creative hallucination, before the very sharp and very real point of a dagger pressed against his carotid artery.

"I am Kadra," the mostly naked and well-armed hallucination stated in a throaty voice as oddly familiar as her eyes. "Slayer of Demons."

"Okay, that's really interesting." If he'd been drunk and stupid enough the night before to bring a crazy woman back to his apartment, and couldn't even remember heating up the sheets with her, he deserved to get his throat cut.

But it really wasn't the way he wanted to start the day.

"Would you mind getting that pig-sticker away from my jugular? You're spoiling a perfectly good hangover."

Frowning, she sniffed at him, then used her free hand to pull up his top lip and study his teeth. Satisfied, she drew back the dagger, slid it handily into its wrist sheath.

"You are not a demon. You may live."

"Appreciate it." Going with instinct rather than sanity, Harper shoved her, snatched at the dagger. The next thing he knew, she'd executed a neat back flip off the bed, landed on her feet beside it. With a very big sword raised over her head.

"You win." He tossed the dagger aside, held up both hands.

"You yield?"

"Damn right. Why don't you put that thing down before somebody—especially me—gets hurt? Then we can go call the nice people at the asylum. They'll come pick you up and take you for a little ride."

Disgusted that she'd landed on a coward, she shook her head. But she lowered the sword. "Are you the harper called Doyle?"

"I'm Harper Doyle."

"We have to hunt."

"Sure, no problem." Smiling at her, he eased toward the far side of the bed. Whatever that feeling had been when he'd first looked into her eyes, he was sure now he hadn't been drunk enough, hadn't been stupid enough to bring her home with him. "Just let me get my hunting gear and we'll be off."

Using his body to block her view, he slid open the drawer in the nightstand and drew out his Glock. "Now, put that goddamn sword down, Xena."

"I am Kadra," she corrected and studied the object in his hand. "This is a gun." The name, the purpose of it were floating in her head, in the maze of knowledge Rhee had given her. The fascination for it, this new weapon, made her yearn. "I would like to have one."

She looked at him, studying his face for the first time, and found herself shocked that it brought her another kind of yearning.

"I was sent to you," she told him.

"Fine, we'll get to that. But right now, put the sword down," he repeated. "I'd really hate to spoil my record and shoot a woman."

It was more comfortable to study the gun, and her feelings for an interesting weapon. "The missile goes through flesh and bone. It can be very efficient." She nodded, sent her sword home. "Perhaps you are a warrior. We will talk."

"Oh, yeah," Harper agreed. "We're going to have a very nice chat."

His head felt as if someone had spent the night attempting a lobotomy with a dull, rusty blade. He could accept that. In a bemused celebration of his thirtieth birthday—how could he be thirty when he'd been eighteen two minutes ago—he'd consumed a tanker truck of alcohol. He'd been entitled to get plastered with a couple of pals. He was entitled to the hangover.

Having a woman—a gorgeous green-eyed Amazon who filled out her black leather bikini in a way that gratified every young boy's comic book fantasies—leap on him out of nowhere was a really nice plus. Just the sort of happy birthday surprise a man who'd reached the point of no return on the path to adulthood could appreciate.

But having that erotic armful hold a knife to his throat wasn't part of the acceptable package.

And where the hell *had* she come from? he wondered as she stood there eyeing his gun. There was nothing but simple curiosity and avid interest on that sharp-boned siren's face.

Had he been so drunk he'd forgotten to lock his door? It was a possibility—a remote one, but a possibility. But she'd called him by name. No way she was from the neighborhood. He was a trained observer, and even if he'd been a myopic accountant rather than a private investigator he would have noticed a six-foot brunette with legs that went to eternity.

"Jake." The solution trickled through his suffering brain. Though he relaxed a little, he held the gun steady. "Jake put you up to this, didn't he? Some weird-ass birthday surprise. Jake's who sent you."

"I am sent by Rhee, the sorceress. How is it that a harper has such a weapon? Have you killed many demons?"

"Look, it's too early in the morning for Dungeons and Dragons. Show's over, sister."

"I am not your sister," she began as he eased out of bed. Then her eyebrows shot up. He was naked, but that neither surprised nor shocked her. Her instant and elemental attraction did.

He was taller than she by nearly a full hand, broader in the chest and shoulders, with fine, sleek muscles.

Reevaluating, she pursed her lips. His hair was the deep brown of oak bark, and though unkempt by sleep, it created a good frame for a strong face. His eyes were the bold blue of the marsh bells, his nose slightly crooked, which told her it had weathered a break. His mouth was firm, as was his jaw. Though his skin was pale, like a scholar's who closeted himself with scrolls, she began to see possibilities.

"You have a fine build for a harper," she told him.

"Yeah?" Amused now, though still cautious, he reached for the jeans he'd peeled off the night before. "How much did Jake pay you for the gig?"

"I know no Jake. I do not take payment for slaying. It is my destiny. Do you require payment?"

"Depends." How the hell was he going to get into his jeans and hold the gun at the same time?

"The knowledge was given me that these have value in your world." She tugged the bag of stones from her belt, tossed them on the bed. "Take what you need, then dress. We must begin the hunt."

"Look, I appreciate a joke as much as the next guy. But I'm naked and hungover, and it irritates me to wake up with a knife to my throat. I want coffee, a barrel of aspirin, and a shower."

"Very well. If you will not hunt, show me how to use your weapon."

"You're a piece of work." He gestured toward the bedroom door with the Glock. "Out. Back to Central Casting, or Amazons R Us, or wherever the hell—"

She moved so fast that all he saw was a blur of limbs and leather and flying hair. She leaped, executed a handspring off the bed, and some part of her—boot, elbow, fist—connected with his jaw.

An entire galaxy of stars exploded in his head. By the time they novaed and died, he was flat on his back, with her standing astride him turning the Glock over in her hands.

"It has good weight," she said conversationally. "How is the missile..." She trailed off when with a twitch of her finger she fired. Her eyes widened with something like lust when through the open bathroom door, she saw the corner of his vanity sheared off.

"It is faster than an arrow," she commented, very pleased.

Not Jake, he corrected. Jake might have a weird sense of the ridiculous, but his old college friend wouldn't have sent him a lunatic who liked to play with guns. "Who the hell are you?"

"I am Kadra." She nearly sighed with the repetition—perhaps the harper was loose in the brains. With some sympathy she offered a hand to help him up. "Slayer of Demons. I have come to hunt, to fulfill my destiny. Though it does not please either of us, you are obliged to assist."

"Give me the gun, Kadra."

"It is a good weapon."

"Yeah, it's a good weapon. It belongs to me."

Her lips moved into a pout, then her face brightened again. "I will fight you for it."

"I'm at a disadvantage at the moment." He got to his feet, very slowly, kept his voice mild and easy. "You know, naked, hungover."

"Hung over what?"

"Maybe we could fight later, after we clear up a few points."

"Very well. I will give you the weapon, and you will give me your word that you will help me hunt the Bok."

"Helping people's what I do." Maybe she was in trouble, he thought. Not that he intended to get involved, but he could at least listen before he called the guys in the white coats. "Is that why you're here?" Gently, he nudged her gun hand aside so he wouldn't end up with a bullet in the belly. "You need help?"

"I am a stranger here, and require a guide." She reached out, squeezed his biceps. "You are strong. But slow." With no little regret, she returned the Glock. "Can you make more of the gun?"

"Maybe." She'd threatened him with a knife, with a sword. She'd knocked him on his ass and disarmed him.

Damn if he didn't respect her for it.

In any case, she'd made his first morning as a thirty-year-old man interesting. He hadn't become a PI because he liked the boring.

Added to that, there was something... something about her that pulled at him. Her looks were enough to knock a man flat. But it wasn't that—or not only that. You couldn't find the answers, he reminded himself, unless you asked the questions.

"I'm going to put my pants on," he told her. "I want you to step back and keep your hands away from that sword."

She stepped back. "I have no wish to harm you, or any of your people. You have my word as a slayer."

"Good to know." When she was at a safe distance, he tugged on his jeans, then snugged the gun in the waistband. "Now, I'm going to make coffee, and we'll talk about all this."

"Coffee. This is a stimulant consumed in liquid form."

"There you go. In the kitchen," he added, gesturing toward the door.

She strode out ahead of him. Whatever shape he might have been in, Harper thought, however baffled he might be, a man who didn't admire and appreciate that view was a sorry specimen.

Still, he glanced at the front door of his apartment as he passed. It was locked, bolted, chained.

So she'd locked up after she'd come in, he decided. He looked back to see her stop and gape out the living room window. Like a kid might, he mused, at her first eyeful of Disneyland.

So high, she thought in wonder. She had never been in a hut where the ground was so far below and so many people swarmed beneath. Their costumes were strange to her, strange and fascinating. But fascination turned to awe when she watched a cab zip to the curb, saw the woman leap out.

"She rose out of the belly of the yellow beast! How is this done?"

"You pay the fare, they let you out. Where the hell are you from?"

"I am from A'Dair. In my world, we have no beasts with round legs. I don't—wait." She closed her eyes, searched through the knowledge Rhee had given her. "Cars!" Those brilliant eyes opened again, smiled into his. "They are machines called cars and are for transportation. That is wonderful."

"Try to find one in the rain. Honey—"

"Yes, I would like honey, and bread. I am hungry."

"Right." He shook his head. "Coffee. Coffee first, then all questions can be faced. Come with me. I want you where I can see you."

She followed him into his tiny galley kitchen. While he measured coffee, she ran her fingers over the surface of the counter, over the refrigerator and stove. "So much magic," she said softly. "You must have great wealth."

"Yeah, rolling in it." He made a reasonable living, Harper thought. But he was what you could call between active cases at the moment. Maybe he could hold off on the guys in the white coats, see if she needed an investigator, and had enough to pay his retainer. "Jake didn't send you, did he?"

"I do not know this Jake." She peered at the side of the toaster, delighted with her own odd reflection. "I know no one in this world, save you."

"How did you get here, to my place?"

"Through the portal. It is..." She straightened, trying to decipher the knowledge, then to express it. "There are many dimensions. Yours and mine are two. The Bok stole a key and have entered yours. I have another." She drew the clear globe out of her pouch. "So I have followed. To hunt, to kill so that our worlds will be safe. You are to help me in this quest."

Poor kid, he thought. She was definitely a few fries short of a Happy Meal. "You can't just kill people in this world. They lock you up for that."

"You have no slayers to fight against evil here?"

He dragged a hand through his hair, then rooted out some Extra-Strength Excedrin. Isn't that what his father had done? And what he himself had wanted to do as long as he could remember? To go after the bad guys, on his own terms?

"Yeah, I guess we do."

The woman was definitely in some sort of jam, even if it came out of her own oddball imagination. He would just keep her calm, ask some questions, see if he could dig out the problem. When he'd done what he could, he

would make a few calls and have her taken someplace where she could get some help.

It would be the first good deed of his new decade.

"So, you come from another dimension, and you're here to hunt down some demons."

"The king of demons and three of his warriors have entered your world. They will need to feed. First, they will hunt for animals, the easy kill, to gather strength. Where are your farms?"

"We're a little short on farms on Second Avenue. So what do you do back in—where was it?"

"A'Dair."

He could run a search on the name on his computer, see if he could pinpoint where she'd come from. She didn't have a discernible accent, but the cadence, the rhythm of her speech sure as hell didn't say New York.

"What do you do back in A'Dair besides slay demons?"

"This is my purpose. I was born a slayer, trained, educated. It is what I do."

"Friends, family?"

"I have no family. She who raised me was killed by a tribe of Bok."

Mother killed, he thought. Trauma, role playing. "I'm sorry."

"She was a fine warrior. Clud, sire of Sorak, took her life, and I have taken his. So there is balance. I have learned that she who bore me was another. Rhee, the sorceress. Her blood is in me. I think I am here, able to be here, because of that blood." She sniffed the air. "This is coffee?"

"That's right."

"It has a good scent."

He poured two mugs, offered one. She sniffed again, sipped, then frowned. "Bitter, but good."

To his surprise, she downed the entire mug in one swallow, then swiped a hand over her mouth. "I like this coffee. Dress now, Harper Doyle."

"How do you know my name?"

"It was told to me. We will hunt the Bok together."

"Sure. We'll get to that in a little while."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't believe. You think I'm loose in the brain. You waste my time with too many questions when we should act."

"Part of what I do in my little world is ask questions. Nobody's calling you a liar here. Why shouldn't I believe you're a demon slayer from an alternate universe? I'm always getting clients from other dimensions."

She paced up and down the narrow room to work out the logic. He was mocking her, and this was not proper. Lesser warriors were not permitted to show a slayer disrespect.

Yet, she admired him for it even as she found his demeanor frustrating.

This was his world, Kadra reminded herself, one of wonders far beyond her ken. So her world would be beyond his. If she were in his place, she would not believe without proof.

"You must be shown. I cannot blame you for doubt. You would be weak and foolish if you didn't question, and the weak and foolish would be of no use to me."

"Darling, keep up that sweet talk and you'll turn my head."

She didn't have to understand the words to recognize the sarcasm dripping from them. A little impatient, a little intrigued, she held one hand up, and the other, with the globe in its palm, out.

"My blood is of the sorceress and the warrior. My blood is the blood of the slayer. I hold the power of the key."

She drew her mind down to the globe, drew the power of the globe into her mind.

Harper's kitchen wall dissolved as though it were a painting left out in the rain. Through it, he saw not the apartment next door but a thick, green jungle, a curving white ribbon, and a sky the color of pale blood under a fierce red sun.

"Holy shit," he managed before he was sucked into it.

Chapter 3

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The heat was enormous, a drenching, dripping wall of steaming water. It was a shock, even after the jolt of pain, the blast of blinding light. Even so, his bones felt frozen under his skin as he stared out at the tangle of towering green.

New York was gone, it seemed. And so was he.

Not a hangover, he thought, but some sort of psychotic event brought on, no doubt, by too much liquor and too many loose women.

As he watched, dumbfounded, a snake with a body as thick as his thigh slithered off into the high, damp grass.

"We can stay only a short time," Kadra told him, and her voice was dim, tinny, light-years away. "This is the west jungle of A'Dair, near the coast of the Great Sea. This is my world, which exists beyond yours. And the knowledge says, in balance with it."

"I've been drugged."

"This is not so." Annoyed now, she clamped her hands over his arms. "You can see, you can hear and feel. My world is as real as yours, and as much in peril."

"Alternate universe." The words felt foolish on his tongue. "That's pure science fiction."

"Is your world so perfect, so important, that you believe it stands alone in the vastness of time and space? Harper Doyle, can you have lived and still believe you are alone? My heart." She pressed his hand to her breast. "It beats as yours. I am, as you are."

How could he dismiss what he saw with his own eyes. What he felt, touched—and somehow knew. Just, he thought, as he had somehow known her the instant their eyes had met. "Why?"

She nearly smiled. "Why not?"

"I recognized you," he managed. "I pushed that aside, clicked back into what made sense so I could deny it. But I recognized you, somehow, the minute I saw you."

"Yes." She kept her hand on his a moment longer. It felt right there, like a link. "It was the same for me. This is not something I understand, but only feel. I do not know the meaning."

And in some secret chamber of her warrior's heart, she feared the meaning.

"I'm standing here sweating in a jungle in some Twilight Zone, and it doesn't feel half as strange as it should. It doesn't feel half as strange as what's going on inside me, about you."

"You begin to believe."

"I'm beginning to something. I'm going to need a little time to process all the—"

She whirled, the sword streaking into her hand like a lightning bolt. A creature, no more than three feet high, with snapping teeth in both its mouths, shot out of the brush and leaped for Harper's throat.

Despite the shock of it, his instincts were quick. His hand whipped down for his gun. It hadn't cleared the waistband of his jeans before Kadra's sword sliced through both heads with one massive stroke. There was a fountaining gush of vile green liquid that stank like sulfur.

Heads and body thumped, a grisly trio, onto the ground, then began to smoke.

"Loki demon," Kadra said as the three pieces melted away. "Small pests that usually travel in packs of three." She lifted her head, sniffed. "To your left. You will need your weapon," she added, and pivoted to her right as another of the creatures jumped through a curtain of vine.

Instinct had his finger on the trigger, and if that finger trembled a bit, he wasn't ashamed. He heard the slice of her sword through air just as the last—please, God—of the miniature monsters charged him.

He shot it between the eyes—all four of them.

"Christ. Jesus. Christ."

"This is good aim." Giving Harper a congratulatory slap on the back, she nodded over the smoking heads. "This is a fine weapon," she added, sending his Glock an avaricious glance. "When we go back to your world, you will provide me with one. It lacks the beauty of the sword, but it makes an enjoyable noise."

"Their blood's green," Harper said in a careful voice. "They have two heads and green blood. And now, how about that, they're just melting away like the Wicked Witch of the West."

"All demons bleed green, though only the Loki and the mutant strain of the Ploon are two-headed. On death, the blood smokes and the body... melts is

not inaccurate," she decided. "You have witches in the west of your world who die like demons?"

When he only stared at her, she shrugged. "We have witches as well, and most of them the powers of life have instilled with good. My home is east," she continued. "Beyond the Stone Mountains, in the Shadowed Valley. It is beautiful, and the fields are rich. There is no time to show you."

"This is real." He took one long, deep breath and swallowed it all at once.

"Our time here is short. There is a clearing, and a village in it. Rhee lives there. We will go."

Since she set off in a punishing jog, he had no choice but to follow. "Slow it down, Wonder Woman. I'm barefoot here."

She tossed a scowl over her shoulder, but modified her pace. "You drank excessive spirits last night. I can smell them on you. Now you are sluggish."

"Alert enough to kill a two-headed demon."

She let out a snort. "A child with a training bow could do the same. Lokis are stupid."

As they ran down the narrow, beaten path, a flock of birds flushed out of the trees and into that odd red sky. He staggered to a halt. Each was its own rainbow—a bleeding, blending meld of pinks and blues and golds. And the song they sent up was like the trill of flutes.

"Dregos," she told him. "Their gift is their song, as they are poor eating. Stringy." She slowed to a trot as they came to the clearing.

He saw houses, small and tidy, most with colorful gardens in the front. People dressed in long, thin robes harvested out of them what looked to be massive blue carrots, tomatoes the size of melons, and long, yellow beans spotted with green flecks.

There were men, women, children, and each stopped work or play and bowed as Kadra came into view.

"Greetings, Demon Slayer," some called out.

She acknowledged this with what Harper supposed was a kind of salute by laying her fist on her heart as she walked.

Those long legs ate up the ground toward a small house with a lush garden and an open front door. She had to duck her head to enter.

Inside, a young girl stood by what he assumed was a cookstove. She stirred an iron pot and looked up at them with quiet blue eyes.

"Hail to Kadra, Slayer of Demons."

"We come to speak with Rhee."

"She sleeps," the girl said and continued to stir. "She suffered a demon bite during the attack."

"She did not say." Kadra moved quickly, shoving open a door. Within, Rhee lay pale and still on a bed. The emotions that churned in her were mixed and confusing, and through them came one clear thought.

Mother. Will I lose yet another mother before my own end? "Is it the sleep of change?"

"No. She was not kissed, only bitten beneath the shoulder as she tried to guard the keys. Nor was it a mortal bite, though she had pain and there was sickness. More than necessary, as she did not see to the wound quickly."

"She... spent too much time with me."

"Not too much, only what was needed."

"Your mother?" Harper looked through the doorway at the woman on the bed, and laid a hand on Kadra's shoulder. "Can we get her to a doctor?"

"I am Mav the healer," the young girl told him. "I tend to her. I have drained the poison, given her the cure. She must sleep until her body regains strength. She said you would come, Kadra, with the one from the other world. You are to eat."

Mav ladled out some of the thick broth from the pot. "And to wash in the falls. In this way, you will take some of this place with you into the next. You must be gone within the hour."

"Do you want to sit with her awhile," Harper began. "Take some time with her?"

His hand caressed her shoulder, a gesture of comfort she had known rarely in her life. "There is no time." Kadra turned away from the doorway.

"She's your mother."

"She bore me. She set me on this path. Now I can only follow it."

She sat down at the table where Mav had put the bowls and a round loaf of golden bread. There was a squat pitcher of honey and another of water as white and sparkling as snow.

Because he was tired, hungry, and confused, Harper sat. This is real, he thought again as he sampled the first taste of the rich, spiced broth. It wasn't a dream, a hallucination. He hadn't just lost his mind.

Kadra tore off a hunk of bread, poured honey over it, and ate with a concentrated focus that told Harper she wasn't concerned with taste, only with fuel.

"Do you have family?" she asked Mav between bites.

"I have two brothers, younger. My mother who weaves.

My father was a healer as well. Sorak, king of demons, killed him this morning."

"I was not quick enough." Grief thickened Kadra's voice. "And your mother is a widow."

"He would have killed us all, but you came. He fears you."

"He has cause. I regret that death touched you."

"He came for Rhee, for the key. Her powers are not as strong as they were, and he made demons from wizards so he might track her. She explained to me while I tended her so I might tell you."

Mav folded her hands and spoke as if reciting a story learned by heart. "The other, the world beyond with yellow sun and blue sky, is full of so much life, and most who live there have closed themselves off from the magic. They will not understand, they will not believe, and so the Bok will slaughter them. Flesh, passion. Innocence and evil. Sorak craves this, and the power he will gain from it. The power to destroy you."

"He will die there." Kadra drank the tankard of spring-water quickly. "This is my vow, on your father's blood." She pulled out her dagger, sliced a shallow gash across her palm, and let her blood drip onto the table. "And on mine."

"It will comfort my mother to know it. But there should be no more bloodshed here." Mav reached in her pocket, took out a white cloth, and deftly wrapped it around Kadra's hand. "You must wash in the falls, for cleansing, then go."

When Kadra got to her feet, Harper sighed and got to his. "Thanks for the food."

Mav blushed, cast down her gaze. "It is little to give the Slayer and the savior. Blessings on you both."

Harper took one last glance at her. Kid couldn't be more than ten, he thought, then ducked out the doorway.

He had to double his pace to catch up with Kadra. "Look, just slow down a minute. I'm trying to keep up here, in more ways than one. I don't usually spend my mornings visiting alternate dimensions and killing loco demons."

"Loki."

"Whatever. So far you've jumped me, held a knife to my throat, threatened me with a sword, punched me in the face, and sucked me through some... wormhole in my kitchen. And all this on one lousy cup of coffee. This isn't your average first date."

"You do not have the knowledge, so you require explanations." She moved through the jungle at a brisk pace, eyes tracking, ears pricked. "I understand this."

"Beautiful. Then give them to me."

"We will cleanse in the falls, return to your world, hunt down the Bok and kill them."

He considered himself a reasonable guy, a man with an open mind, an active sense of adventure and curiosity. But enough was enough. He grabbed her arm, yanked her around to face him. "That's what you call an explanation? Listen, sister, if that's the best you can do, this is where we part ways. Send me back where I come from and we'll just put this all down to too much beer and fried food."

"I am not your sister."

He stared at her, at the faint irritation that clouded her glorious face. Helpless, he began to laugh. It rolled out of him, pumping up from the belly so that he had to bend over, brace his hands on his thighs as she cocked her head and studied him with a mixture of amusement, puzzlement, and impatience.

"I'm losing it," he managed. "Losing what's left of my mind." Even as he sucked in a breath, a spider the size of a Chihuahua pranced between his

feet on stiltlike legs and gibbered at him. Harper yelped, whipping out his gun as he stumbled back.

But Kadra merely booted the enormous insect off the path. "That species is not poisonous," she informed him.

"Good, great, fine! It just swallows a man whole."

Kadra shook her head, then loped down the path. Keeping his gun handy, Harper followed.

Red sun, he mused as he looked up at the sky. Like, well, Krypton. If he followed comic book logic, didn't that mean that he, from a planet with a yellow sun, had superpowers here.

Concentrating, he took a little jump, then another. On the third, Kadra looked back at him, her face a study in baffled frustration. "This is not the time for dancing."

"I wasn't dancing I was just..." Seeing if I could fly, he thought, amazed at himself. "Nothing. Nothing at all." He heard the roar like a highballing train. It grew, swelled, pounded on his eardrums as he jogged after her. She swung around a curve on the path, and he looked up. In front of them, white water plunged from a height of two hundred feet or more. It screamed over the cliff, dived in a thundering wall, then pounded into the surface of a white river.

Flowers, some unrecognizable, some as simple as daisies, teemed along its banks. There, with the wild grass and wildflowers, with the sunlight spilling in rosy streaks through the canopy of trees, a unicorn lazily grazed.

"My God." The hand still holding the gun fell to his side. The mythical beast raised its regal white head and stared at Harper out of eyes so blue and clear they might have been glass. Then it went back to cropping the grass.

The beauty of it, the sheer wonder, wiped his temper away. Now I've seen it all, he thought. Nothing will ever surprise me again.

He realized the fallacy of that a second later when he glanced back at Kadra.

She'd stripped. The black leather lay piled on the bank, her sword, her dagger crossed over it. She'd pulled off her boots, her wrist sheaths, and was even now reaching up to lift the circlet from her hair.

She was, Harper thought, more mythical, more wondrous than the white-horned creature. Her body was curved and sleek, the color of the fresh honey she had poured over the breakfast bread. Her dark hair, arrow straight, rained over her shoulders, down her back, lay tauntingly over one magnificent breast.

His body tightened, his mouth went dry. For one blissful moment, he lost the power of speech.

"This is a sacred place," she began as she laid her circlet on her crossed blades. "No demon can cross its borders. Take off your clothing, put down your weapon. You may take no cloth or metal into the falls."

So saying, she dived.

It was a picture he knew would remain etched in his mind forever.

"Things are looking up," he decided, and peeling off his jeans, he jumped in after her.

The water was cool, sluicing the sweat from his body in one glorious swipe. When he surfaced, he felt the last nasty dregs of the morning's hangover sink to the bottom of the river. In fact, he realized as he struck out after Kadra and the falls, he didn't just feel clearheaded, didn't just feel good. He felt charged, energized.

She waited for him at the foot of the falls, treading the churning water lazily. Her eyes were impossibly green, impossibly brilliant.

"What's in this water?" he shouted.

"Cleansing properties. It washes away negative energies."

"I'll say."

She laughed, did a quick surface dive that gave him a brief and wonderful flash of her butt. Then she rose again, a vision of black and gold, under the pounding spill of the water. She climbed nimbly onto a plateau of rock, stretched her arms wide to the sides, and let the water beat over her.

He lost his breath, and despite the cool relief of the water, his blood ran hot. He hoisted himself up in front of her, laid his hands on her hips. Her eyes opened again, and her eyebrow quirked.

"You're the most magnificent thing I've ever seen. In any dimension."

"I have a good build," she said easily. "It's made for fighting." She bent her right arm, flexed her biceps.

"I bet it holds its own in other sports."

Though she couldn't ignore the trip of her own heart, or the quick click of response in her belly, she only smiled. "I enjoy sporting, when there's time for such things. You're very handsome, Harper Doyle, and I have a yearning for you that is stronger than any I have known before."

"Do you think you could pick one of my two names and stick with it?" Since she didn't seem to object, he slid his hands around her thighs, then over her silky butt.

"Harper is your title."

"No, it's my name. My first name." He really had to get a taste of that lush, frowning mouth. But as he dipped his head, she laid a restraining hand on his chest.

"I do not understand. Are you the harper called Doyle?"

"I'm Harper Doyle, and before this turns into a comedy routine, Doyle is my family name. Harper is the name my parents gave me when I was born. That's how it works in my world. I'm not *a* harper," he added as the light began to dawn. "I'm not, what, like a minstrel? Jesus. I'm a PI."

"A pee-eye? What is this?"

"Investigator. Private investigator. I... solve puzzles," he decided.

"Ah! You are a seeker. This is better. A seeker is more useful on a hunt than a harper."

"Now that we've worked that out, why don't we go back to me being handsome." He drew her closer so that her breasts—cool, wet, firm—brushed his chest. His mouth was an inch from hers when he went flying.

He landed clumsily, swallowing water on his own curse. She was still on the rocks when he came up and swiped the hair out of his eyes. She was grinning. "You made a good splash. It is time to go."

She dived, struck out for the bank. Oh, he was handsome, she thought as she hoisted herself out. Very handsome, and with a clever look in his eyes that made her want to join her body to his.

Something about him was making pricks on her heart, as if trying to find the weakness, the point of entry.

He would be a strong lover, she knew. And it had been a long time since she had desired one. If time and fate allowed, they would have each other. But first, there was the hunt.

By the time he pulled himself onto the bank put on his jeans, she was strapping on her sword. He didn't bother to think, just went with the moment. And tackled her.

She let out a surprised little grunt and studied his face with some approval. "I misjudged. You do have speed."

"Yeah, right, it'll help on the hunt. But right now..." He lowered his head, all but tasting that beautiful mouth. And once more he went flying. But this time it was through the portal. The blast of light, and sharp, shocking pain.

He landed hard, with Kadra once more on top, on his kitchen floor. "Damn it!" He banged his head sharply on the base cabinet, felt the unmistakable shape of his gun dig into his bare back. "Give me some warning next time. A damn signal or something."

"You have your mind too much on sporting." She gave his shoulder a pat, then levered off him. Sniffed the air. "We will have more coffee, and plan the hunt."

"Okay, Sheena, let's reevaluate," he said as he got up.

"I am Kadra—"

"Shut up." He slapped the gun down on the kitchen counter while her mouth dropped open.

"You would speak so to a slayer?"

"Yeah, I'd speak so to anybody who busts uninvited into my house and keeps giving me orders. You want my help, you want my cooperation? Then you can just stop telling me what to do and start asking."

She was silent for a moment. She had a ready temper, something even her intense training hadn't completely tamed. To lose it now, she told herself, would be gratifying, but a sinful waste of time. Instead, she measured Harper, then nodded with sudden understanding. "Ah. You're talking with your man-thing. This is a common ailment in my world as well."

"This isn't my dick talking." Or at least, he'd be damned if he'd admit it. "I want answers. The way I see it, you're looking to hire me. That's fine. You want me to help you track down these... things. That's what I do. I find things, solve problems. That's my job. I work my way. Let's get that part straight."

"You are a seeker, and you require payment. Very well." Though she thought less of him for it, she wouldn't begrudge him his fee. "Come with me." She started out, turned when she saw him standing firm. "If you will," she added.

"Better," he muttered, and followed her into the bedroom, where she scooped up the leather pouch she'd tossed on the bed earlier.

"Is this enough?"

He caught the bag when she flipped it to him. Curious, he opened it. And poured a storm of gems onto the bed. "Holy Mother of God!"

"I am told these have value here. Is this so?" Intrigued, she stepped over to poke a finger into the pool of diamonds, rubies, emeralds. "They are common stones in my world. Pretty," she admitted. "Attractive for adornments. Will they satisfy your needs?"

"Satisfy my needs," he grumbled. "Yeah, they're pretty satisfactory."

He could retire. Move to Tahiti and live like a king. Hell, he could *buy* Tahiti and live like a god. For one outrageous moment, he saw himself living in a white palace by the crystal blue water, surrounded by gorgeous, scantily clad women eager to do his bidding. Drinking champagne by the gallons. Frolicking on white sand beaches with those same women—not clad at all now.

Master of all he surveyed.

Then his conscience kicked in, a small annoyance he'd never been able to shake. On the heels of conscience nipped the lowering admission that the fantasy he'd just outlined would bore him brainless in a week.

He picked a single diamond, comforting himself that it was worth more than he would earn in a decade.

"This'll cover it."

"That is all you require?"

"Put the rest away, before I change my mind." For lack of a better option, he stuffed the stone into his pocket. "Now, we're going to sit down. You're going to explain this whole demon deal to me, and I'll figure out our first move."

"They are out in your world. We have to hunt."

"My world," Harper agreed. "My turf. I don't go after anything until I know the score." He walked to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a T-shirt. "Normally I don't meet clients at home," he said as he pulled the shirt on. "But we'll make an exception. Living room." He headed out, took a legal pad from a desk drawer, then plopped down on the sofa.

However fantastic the client, however strange the case, he was going to approach it as he would any other. He made a few notes, then jerked his chin at a chair when she continued to stand. "Sit down. Bok demon, right? Is that B-O-K? Never mind. How many?"

"They were four. Sorak, demon king, and three warriors."

"Description?"

She sprawled in a chair, all legs and attitude. He looked more scholar than warrior now, working with his odd scroll and quill. Though she had never found scholar appealing before, this aspect of him was attractive to her as well.

He has brains as well as muscle, she thought. Intellect as well as brawn.

"Description," Harper repeated. "What do they look like?"

"They are deceptively human in appearance, and so often walk among people without detection. They are handsome, as you are. Though you have eyes blue as the marsh bell, and your hair is cropped short. Those who are foolish enough to be influenced by such things as beauty are easy victims."

"We've established that you're nobody's victim, baby. Be more specific."

She huffed. "They have good height, like you, but their build is less. It is more... slender. Hair and eyes are dark, black as a dead moon except in feeding or in attack, where they glow red."

"Glowing red eyes," he noted. "I'd say that's a fairly distinguishing mark."

"Sorak's hair curls." She demonstrated by waving a finger. "And is well groomed. He is vain."

"They outfitted like you?"

It took her a moment, then she glanced down at her hunting clothes. "No. They wear a kind of armor, black again, close to the body, and over this Sorak wears the tunic and cloak of his rank."

"Even in New York, body armor and tunics should stand out. Maybe there's something on the news." He picked up the remote and flipped on the television.

Kadra leaped up as if he'd set her chair on fire. Even before her feet were planted, her sword was out, raised high above her head in preparation for a downward thrust.

"Hold it, hold it, hold it!" He jumped and, as he might have done to save a beloved child, threw himself between the blade and his TV. "I don't give a rat's ass about what you did to the bathroom sink, but put one scratch on my TV and you're going down."

Her heart pounded in her chest, and her muscles quivered. "What is this sorcery?"

"It's not magic, it's ESPN." He hissed out a breath, then moved in to clamp his hands over hers on the hilt of the sword. She tipped her head back so their eyes, their mouths, lined up.

"It's television, which is arguably the national religion of my country. An entertainment device," he said more calmly. "A kind of communication. We have programs—ah, like plays, I guess, that tell us what's happening in the world, even when it's happening far away."

She drew a breath, slowly lowered the sword while she stared at the picture box where the machines called cars ran swiftly around a circle. "How is this done?"

"Something about airwaves, transmissions, cameras, stuff. Hell, I don't know. You turn the thing on, pick a channel. This is a race. You get that?"

"Yes, a contest of speed. I have won many races."

"With those legs, baby, I'll just bet you have. Okay, I'm turning on the news now so we can see if there are any reports on your demons. So relax."

"How can you use a thing when you have no knowledge of its workings?"

"Same way I can use a computer. And don't ask. I thought you said you knew about this world."

"I was given knowledge, but I cannot learn it all at once." It embarrassed her not to know, so she went back to sprawling in the chair, giving the television quick, suspicious glances.

"All right, we'll take it in stages. Just don't attack any more of my household appliances." He sat again, flipped the channel to the all-news station, then picked up his pad.

"Back to your demons. Distinguishing marks? You know, like two heads, for instance?"

Feeling foolish, she sulked. He had nearly slain a spider with the weapon known as gun, but she had not made *him* feel loose in the brain. "They are Bok, not Loki."

"What makes them stand out? How do you recognize them?" Even as she threw up her hands, he tapped his pencil. "And don't say they are Bok. Draw me a picture."

Taking him literally, she reared up, snatched the pencil and pad. In fast, surprisingly deft strokes, she sketched a figure of a man with long, curled hair, a strong, rawboned face and large, dark eyes.

"That's good. But it's going to be tough to pick him out of the millions of other tall, slim, dark-haired guys in New York. Doesn't shout out demon to me. How do you recognize them—as a species, let's say."

"A slayer is born for this. But others might do so by their stench. They have a scent." She struggled for a moment in her attempt to describe it. "Between the ripe and the rot. You would not mistake it."

"Okay, they stink. Now we're getting somewhere. Anything else?"

"Teeth. Two rows, long, thin, sharp. Claws, which they show or conceal at will. Thick, blue, curved like talons. And when they are wounded, their blood is green. Now we hunt."

"Just settle down," he said mildly. He listened to the news reports with half an ear. The usual mayhem and gossip, but no frantic bulletins about man-eating demons on the loose in New York.

"Why are they here?" he asked her. "Why leave one world for another?"

"Sorak is greedy, and his hunger is great. For flesh, but also for power. There are more of you in this place than on our world. And you are unaware. They can move among you without fear of the slayer. They will feed, gluttonously. First on animals, for quick strength, then on humans. Those that he and his warriors do not consume, he will change so he can build a vast army. They will overtake the world you know and make it theirs."

"Whoa, back up. Change? What do you mean by change?"

"He will turn selected humans into demons, into slaves and warriors and concubines."

"You're telling me he can make people into things? Like, what, vampires?"

"I do not know this word. Explain."

"Never mind." Harper pushed himself to his feet to pace. For reasons he couldn't explain, the idea of having human beings turned into monsters was more disturbing than having them served up as demon meals. "How do they do it? How are people changed?"

"The Demon Kiss. Mouth against mouth. Tongue, teeth, lips. A bite, to draw blood, to mix it. Then the demon draws in the human essence, breathes his own into his prey. They are changed, and are compelled to hunt, to feed. They remember nothing of their humanity. This is worse than death."

"Yeah." The thought sickened him. "Yeah, it's worse. No way this son of a bitch is going to turn my town into his personal breeding ground." When he faced her, his face was set, and the warrior gleam in his eye gave Kadra her first real hope. "Animals, you said. Cats, dogs, what?"

"These are pets." She closed her eyes and searched the knowledge. "Such small prey would not please them. This would do only if the hunger was impossible. They prefer the flesh of the unicorn above all."

"Unicorns don't spend a lot of time grazing in New York. Horses?"

"Yes, horses, cows, goats. But there are no farms, you said. In the wild, they feed often on the lion or the ape."

"Lions, tigers, and bears? The zoo. We'll start there. As soon as we figure out how to outfit you so you blend in a little better with the general population."

Frowning, she looked down at herself. "I don't resemble the other females in your world?"

He scanned the breasts barely constrained by black leather, the long, lean torso, the swatch of leather over curvy hips. And those endless legs encased in boots. Not to mention a two-and-a-half-foot sword.

"I couldn't begin to tell you. Let's see what I can put together."

When she came out of his bedroom fifteen minutes later, he decided she did more to sell a pair of Levi's than a million-dollar ad campaign. And the old denim shirt had never looked better.

"Baby, you are a picture."

She studied herself in his mirror, and agreed. "It is tolerable hunting gear." Testing it, she executed several quick deep-knee bends that had Harper's blood pressure rising. "It will do." So saying, she picked up her sword.

"You can't walk around outside with that thing."

She glanced up, smirked. "So, do I slay demons with bad thoughts?"

"Aha, sarcasm. I like it. I've got something. Hold on." He went to the closet, shoved through it and came out with a long black coat. "A little warm for May, but we can't be picky."

"Why do people in your world cover up so much flesh?"

"I ask myself that question every day." He took another long look at her. Maybe, just maybe, if he'd been able to design his own ideal woman, he'd have come close to the reality of her. "You going to wear the little crown?"

Her hand went to the gold on top of her head. "This is the circle of my rank."

"You want to blend in?" He lifted the circlet off, set it aside. "Put on the coat and let's see."

Scowling, she dragged the coat on, turned to him. "You're still going to turn heads and star in a lot of male fantasies tonight, but you'll do."

Satisfied, he pulled on a battered bomber jacket, hitched it over his gun.

"I want one."

He noted her look at his Glock. "Yeah, I know. But I don't have one to spare." He slid on sunglasses, grabbed his keys. "Let's go."

"Why do you cover your eyes?"

"Styling, baby. I've got a pair for you in my car." He stopped at the elevator, pushed the Down button. "Try not to talk to anybody. If we have to have a conversation, let me handle it."

She started to object, but the wall opened. "A portal? Where does it lead?"

"It's an elevator. It goes up, it goes down. A kind of transportation."

"A box," she nodded as she stepped in with him. "That moves." Her grin spread when she felt the shift. "This is clever. Your world is very interesting."

The doors opened on three, and a woman and small boy got on.

"The elevator," Kadra said politely. "Goes up and goes down." The woman slid an arm around the boy and drew him close to her side.

"Didn't I tell you to keep quiet?" Harper hissed when they reached the lobby and the woman hustled her son away.

"I spoke with good manners, and made no threat to her or her young."

"Just stick close," he ordered, and took her hand firmly in his.

When they stepped outside, he thought it was a good thing he had a grip on her. She froze in place, her head swiveling right and left. "What a world this is," she breathed. "Blue sky, great huts, so many people. So many scents. There." She pointed to a sidewalk vendor. "This is food."

"Later." He pulled her along the sidewalk. "My car's in a garage a couple blocks over."

"The ground is made of stone."

He had to jerk her up when she bent over to tap a fist on the sidewalk.

"Concrete. Men make it and pour it over the ground."

"Why? Is the ground poisonous?"

"No. It's just easier."

"How can it be easier? The ground was already there." She stopped again, mouth agape as an ambulance whizzed by, sirens screaming, lights flashing.

"Is it a war?"

"No, it's transportation. For the sick or the wounded."

She digested this and other wonders on the two-block hike. The shops with their goods locked behind glass, the crowds of people in a hurry, the clatter and din of the machines that ran on the wide stone road.

"This is a noisy world," she commented. "I like it. What are these trees?" she asked, knocking a fist on a telephone pole.

"I'll explain later. Just say nothing."

Harper strolled into the garage with a death grip on Kadra's hand. He flipped a salute to the attendant, who was passing the time with a magazine. But one look at Kadra had the attendant gaping.

"Oooh, baby! That *is fine*."

"Why am I called baby here?" she demanded as he whipped into the stairway. "I am not new young."

"It's an expression. Endearment or insult, depending on your point of view." On the second level, he crossed the lines of cars and stopped at his beloved

'68 Mustang. He unlocked it, opened the passenger door. "Climb in."

She sniffed first, caught the scent of leather and approved. She was already fiddling with dials and jiggling the gearshift when he got behind the wheel. "Don't touch." He slapped her hand away. She kicked her elbow under his jaw. "Cut it out." Shoving her arm down, he reached for her seat belt. "You need to strap in. It's the law of the land."

When he bent to buckle her up, he saw that she was still miffed. "You sure push my buttons," he muttered.

"This is an expression?"

"Yeah. It means—"

"I do not need an explanation. You are aroused by me."

"And then some." He trailed his fingers over her cheek. Then he opened the glove compartment and tossed a pair of wraparound shades in her lap. "I guess we have to go kick some demon butt before we deal with our buttons."

Chapter 4

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She had a great deal to think about.

She was primarily a physical creature. When she was hungry, she ate. When she was tired, she slept. And all of her life, her purpose, above all others, had been to hunt.

It was a sacred trust, a sacred gift. She could laugh and weep, desire and dislike, dream and act. But over it all, through every cell in her body was the purpose.

She had been born, raised and trained for it.

But no slayer lived long if she didn't use her brain as well as her might.

Even with the wonder of her first car ride, the thrill of seeing the structures and the people, hearing the blasts of horns, of music, of voices, her mind still chipped away at the puzzle.

She had been sent to this place, and to this man. So their destinies were joined. She would protect him and his people with her life.

He was a seeker, and deserved respect. But as a slayer she ranked highest, save for the sorcerer. And if Rhee had spoken true, she had that in her blood as well.

The man had no right to usurp her authority. He would have to be put in his place for it.

But he was correct. This was his world, and his knowledge of it exceeded hers. If he was to be her guide, then she must follow. However much it rankled.

She desired him, which both pleased and irritated her. Pleased because he was strong and handsome, amusing and intelligent—and he desired her in turn. Irritated because she was unused to experiencing a desire this keen without the time and means to act upon it.

And she was not prepared for what was tangled in and woven through that desire. Lust was appetite, which could be easily sated. But this longing fluttering inside her, like a wild bird fighting to be free, was stronger, stranger than any need of the flesh.

It distracted her, and she could not afford to be distracted. If the Bok escaped her, this world, and her world, were doomed.

"So, how'd you get into the slayer business?"

She turned her head, and even with the dark glasses, Harper felt the heat of her gaze. "It was a gift, given me at my creation. It is woven in my blood, in my bone."

"Let's put it this way. You didn't pop out of the womb with a broadsword in your hand and a little dagger clenched in your teeth."

"I was trained." She liked watching the lights turn colors. She'd processed their purpose herself because she was tired of asking questions. "To track, to hunt, in weaponry. To fight, to build my body, my mind, my spirit."

"How about your parents?"

"I know no father. It is the way of slayers."

"All slayers are women?"

"We are female, birthed by females, raised, trained, and tested."

"What do the guys do? The men."

"Males hunt, farm, become warriors, scholars, seekers like yourself." She shrugged. "Whatever path is open to them. Some, in protecting their land, their families, in battle or in defense of self, kill demons. But they are not slayers."

"Are there more like you back home?"

"There were ten, now there are nine. Four weeks past, Sorak killed one of us. A trap. He drank the blood of a slayer. That is how he had the power, the strength, to elude me, to get this far. She was Laris. She was my friend."

"I'm sorry." Harper closed a hand over hers. "He'll pay for it."

The gesture, the simple warmth and connection, moved her. "There is no payment rich enough. His death will have to do." She looked over quickly when he lifted her hand to his mouth, brushed his lips over her knuckles.

"A custom," he said, reading her shock. "Like an expression. Comfort, affection, seduction. Whatever fits."

Her lips curved. "In my world you would be thrashed for taking such a liberty with a slayer."

"We're in my world now, baby."

"And here the sky is different, and the ground. The customs. I enjoy many of the new things in this place. The drink called coffee, the elevator, and the car. I have not decided if I like the box called television or all your expressions, but I enjoy the sensation of your mouth on my skin."

He parked the car, turned off the ignition. "You got a man back home? A lover?"

"No."

"You're going to have one here." He climbed out, skirted the hood, and opened her door. "We'll walk for a while," he told her and took her hand again. "Stay close."

She let him lead. It gave her the opportunity to observe and absorb, to identify scents. Food came to her again—sweet, spiced, tart. Her stomach tightened in hunger. Perhaps traveling through the portal sharpened the appetites, she thought. If that were true for the Bok, they would already have fed at least once.

She caught the scent of animal among the human. Great cats, reptile, fowl, and more she couldn't identify. And then she saw them, exotic beasts, prowling or dozing in enclosures while people strolled past or stopped to stare.

It gave her a pang at the most elemental level. "It is not right to lock them up. They are not born for this."

"Maybe it's not," he agreed. He hadn't come to the zoo since childhood because it invariably made him sad. "I can't say I care for it either."

"This is a cruel thing you do here. This is a sorry place, this zoo. Is this what you teach your young?" she demanded, gesturing to a little girl being wheeled in a stroller by her parents. "That one species can be locked away for the amusement of another?"

"I don't know how to explain it to you. Civilization has encroached. There isn't as much room as there once was. In captivity, they're safe, I guess, and tended. They can't be hunted or taken as trophies."

"They are not free," was all she said, and turned away.

"Okay, maybe this was a bad idea. It's depressing, and the place is jammed. I wasn't thinking about it being Sunday. It doesn't seem like the time and place for a demon snack. Maybe we should try the animal shelter—dogs and cats. Or hit the stables."

She held up a hand, bared her teeth. "Bok," was all she said.

She was on the scent and ran like the wind. People scrambled out of her way, and those who caught a glimpse of the sword under her coat scrambled faster and farther.

It was a challenge to keep up with her under normal circumstances, but with the obstacle course of people, children, benches, and trash receptacles in the zoo, Harper's lungs were burning by the time he caught up.

"Slow down," he snapped. "You mow down innocent bystanders, we'll get arrested before we get where you want to go. And I can't begin to tell you how much fun the cops will have with your demon story."

"There!" She pointed to a building, seconds before a stream of people rushed out. Screaming.

She drew her sword as she raced through the doorway.

Whatever Harper had expected, it hadn't been this, this stench of blood and death, of fear and rot. In the cages, monkeys were wild. Screeching, screaming, leaping desperately from branch to branch.

He saw the blood and gore on the floor, tracked it with his eyes, and found—to his horror—a man, no, a demon, feeding savagely on a body. A human body.

When the demon lifted his head, his teeth, his eyes glistened red.

It all happened in seconds. The shock, the disgust, the fury. All of those vicious sensations burst through him as Harper drew his gun. And something hideous pounced on his back.

Claws dug into his shoulders, gouged as the thing that attacked him let out a predatory howl. He spun, ramming back into the wall. His gun flew out of his hand and slid across the floor. Cursing, he battered the thing against the wall as his own blood spilled hot down his back. He felt the rough edge of a tongue slide through it, slurp hideously.

Revolted, he flew back with his elbow, aiming high for the throat, hammered down with his heel on the instep of a booted foot hard enough to hear bone snap.

There was a shriek, inhuman. Harper jabbed behind him with his fingers where he hoped to find eyes.

Now it screamed, and the claws released.

He saw what it was now, as he spun around. The face of a man, the eyes of a monster. It came for him, and Harper sprang into the fight.

It was limping from the bones he'd crushed, but it was still fast. Lightning fast. Harper whirled, and the thing hurtled past him. When it turned to charge again, he met its face with a flying kick.

Kadra fought her own demons, swinging her sword to block the slice of a curved blade, evading the swipe of claws as she carefully retreated. She gauged Harper's position by sound. She couldn't risk even a glance behind her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sorak, behind the bars, grinning, grinning as he feasted and watched the battle.

Kadra flipped her dagger out of its sheath, managed to turn enough to judge Harper's distance and position. She feinted, thrust, then leaped to cleave the demon's sword arm from his body.

"Harper Doyle!" She shouted, then heaved him her sword as she snatched the sickle blade from the air to battle the next demon.

They fought back-to-back now, Harper wielding the sword, she slicing with the dagger and blade. Green blood mixed with red.

Still, she saw, Sorak watched.

"I will have you," he called out. "I will have your blood. I will have your body. I will have your mind."

"I am Kadra!" she almost sang it as she thrust through slicing claws and pinned the point of the dagger in the demon warrior's throat. "I am your death." She spun, prepared to leap into the other battle. And watched Harper's sword cleave his opponent's belly.

Through the smoke curling from the demon dead, she scooped the Glock up on the fly as she rushed to where Sorak fed and gloated. She saw only the quick flash of his teeth, the taunting swirl of his cloak as he bolted toward an open door on the side of the cage.

She fired, the explosions of sound roaring through the building. Even so, she could hear the demon's laughter. She vaulted over the safety rail, closed her hands on the bars of the cage where beasts lay slaughtered, and battered at the steel.

"Come on." Riding on adrenaline and pain, Harper wrenched her around. He shot the sword back into her sheath, snatched his gun and holstered it. "Put this away. Now," he snapped, handing her the dagger. "We're getting out, fast. There's no possible explanation for what just happened here, so we're not going to make one. Move!"

She ran with him, through the building, out the rear. He tugged the coat over her sword, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and tried to look as normal as a couple could who had just battled a pack of demons.

"Keep it slow. Cops are already heading in." He heard the sirens, the shouts. They turned away from the noise and kept walking. How long had they been inside? he wondered. It had seemed like hours. But now he realized it had been only minutes.

"Can you track it?" Harper asked her.

Alone, on her world, the answer would have been yes. But here, with the crowds of people, the scents and sights so unfamiliar to her senses, she was unsure.

"He will go to ground now. He knew. He knew I would come here. Sorak has more knowledge than I thought. Now he has fed, he has amused himself. He will rest and wait. He will not feed again in the daylight."

"Just as well. The place is going to be crawling with cops. Since we're covered with blood, and armed, we wouldn't get very far."

And he had a bad feeling that a lot of the blood was his own. He wouldn't be any good to Kadra in the next round if he was light-headed and shocky. First things first, he thought as he concentrated on staying upright. Get bandaged up, get steady. Then think.

"We'll hunt the bastard down and kill him with his belly full."

It was difficult to turn away from the hunt. But she had seen the demon attack him from the rear and knew he was wounded. She would not leave him behind.

"He has disguised his scent with the animals, and the humans. He will take time for me to find his lair." She steadied him when he swayed against her, and the hand she pressed to his shoulder came away smeared with his blood.

"How bad is your wound?"

"I don't know. Bad enough. Fucking claws. Went right through the leather. I've only had this jacket five, six years."

She turned her head to look at the gouges and was relieved to see the demon had torn more cloth than flesh. "It is not so bad. It was a good battle," she said with sudden cheer. "You fight well."

"Three out of four. It's just the one now."

"He will make more."

The horror of that seized Harper's belly. "We have to stop him."

"We will do what must be done. Now we go back to your hut. Your wounds must be tended. We will rest, eat, think. We will be ready for the night."

Her unerring sense of direction took them back to his car. "Can I sit on the side with the wheel now?"

"No, you can't sit on the side with the wheel now. Or ever." Hurting, exhausted, he jabbed the key into the lock, wrenched open the door.

"Are all so selfish with their possessions here?"

"A man's car is his castle," Harper stated, and limped around to take the wheel. "Are you hurt?" he remembered to ask.

"No, I am unharmed." Realizing he might take this as a criticism of his skill, she took his hand as he had taken hers. "But I am a slayer."

"Kiss ass."

She cocked her head. The battle had lifted her mood. "This is another expression?"

He had to laugh, had to hiss in pain. On a combination of both, he started the car. "Yeah, baby, but it's one I wouldn't mind you taking literally."

Chapter 5

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Though sheer will kept Harper conscious, he was in considerable pain and woozy from the loss of blood by the time he pulled back into his slot at the garage. Kadra's idea of how to deal with the problem was to carry him.

He had just enough strength left to stop her from slinging him over her shoulder. And just enough wit to realize she could have pulled it off.

"No." Since his limbs had gone watery on him, he warded her off with a scowl. "I'm not being carried across the Lower East Side by a woman."

"This is foolish. You're injured. I am not."

"Yeah, yeah, keep rubbing it in. Just give me a hand." When she frowned and held one out, he shook his head. "You're a literal creature." He slid an arm around her waist, let her take some of his weight. "Walk and talk," he told her. "Tell me more about this change."

"After the kiss of change, the victim falls into a trance—a sleep that is not a sleep, for one day. During the sleep, the demon blood mixes with the human's. The human becomes what has poisoned him, with the demon's instincts, his habits. His appetites."

Since Harper's breathing was ragged, she tightened her grip and shortened her stride. "When the human wakes he is demon, though some wake before the change is complete and are demi-demons. In either stage, the one who has changed is bound to the one who changed him."

"Is there a cure?"

"Death," she said flatly, and shifted her grip on him as they stepped outside. He was pale, she noted. And his breath was only more labored. It would

have been easier to carry him.

But she understood a warrior's pride.

"Your hut is only a short journey. We will go at your pace."

"Just keep talking." His shoulder was going numb, and that worried him. "I need to focus."

"Why did you become a seeker?"

"I like to find things out. Without a PI license, it's called nosiness. With one, it's called a profession. Insurance fraud, missing persons, some skip tracing. I try to stay out of the marital arena. It's just humiliating for all parties to stand outside a motel room with a camera."

She didn't know what he was talking about, but she liked his voice. Despite his wounds, or perhaps because of them, there was grit in it. "Are you a successful seeker?"

"I get by." He looked around but couldn't quite pinpoint where they were. The sounds of traffic, the busy music of the city, sounded dim. She was the only thing clear to him now—the supporting strength of her arm, the firm curves of her body, the scent of the sacred waterfall that lingered in her hair.

It was as if both their worlds had receded and they themselves were all that was left.

"What must you get by?"

"Hmm?" He turned his head. He'd been right, he thought, there really was nothing but her. "I mean I do all right. I do regular legwork for a lawyer. Jake, the one I thought had hired you. He's got a sick sense of humor. That's why I love him."

He staggered at the curb, tried to orient himself when she steadied him. "It is this way." She turned the corner, glanced up and down the street. "Where is the well? You require water."

"Doesn't work that way here." But she was right about one thing. His thirst was vicious. He nodded toward a sidewalk vendor. "There."

With her arm banded around his waist, Kadra watched Harper exchange several small disks for a bottle. He fought the top off, drank deep.

"You must pay for water? Does it have magical properties?" She took it, drank. "Nothing but water," she said with some amazement. "The merchant is a robber. I will go back and speak to him."

"No. No." Despite the dizziness, Harper laughed. "It's just one of the acceptable lunacies of our little world. When water comes out of the tap, it's free. Sort of. When it comes out of a bottle, you pay on the spot."

She pondered this as they came to the intersection. She'd watched the way the people, the cars, the lights worked together. When the metal tree ordered the waiting group to walk, everyone hurried, often sliding and swooping between cars that jammed together and faced other metal trees with lights of amber, emerald, and ruby.

Everyone in the village played along.

She felt Harper sag, and pinched his waist ruthlessly to snap him back. "We have only..." She flipped back to his earlier term for the section of road. "One more block."

"Okay, okay." He could feel sweat running a clammy line down his back. His vision was going in and out. "Let's talk about me. I'm thirty. As of yesterday. Unmarried. Came close a couple years ago, but I came to my senses."

"Had the woman bewitched you?"

"No." He had to smile at the term. "You could say that was the problem: she *didn't* bewitch me. This is a huge disappointment to my parents, who want grandchildren. As I'm an only child, I'm their one shot at it."

"Is it not possible in this place to make young without a lifemate? Can you not select a breeding partner for this purpose?"

"Yeah, you could, and a lot of people do. I guess I'm more of a traditionalist in that one area. If I have kids, I want them to have the package. You like kids?"

"I am fond of young. They have innocence and potential, and a special kind of beauty. In time I will select a breeding partner so that I may make life. It is a great honor to make life."

"I'm with you on that." Nearly there, he told himself. Please, God, we're nearly there. "Anyway, my parents live in New Jersey. Another world."

"Was Old Jersey destroyed?"

"Ah... no." His head was spinning now. Concentrate, he ordered himself. Just put one foot in front of the other. "Geography and world history lessons later. Let's stick with personal revelations. I didn't want to tie on my dad's cop's shoes, so I veered off into private investigation. I apprenticed with a big, slick firm uptown, but I didn't like the suit and tie brigade. Went out on my own about five years ago. I'm good at what I do."

"It's wasteful to be bad at what you do."

"You know, my dad would lap you right up. He'd like you," Harper explained, breathlessly now. "He was a good cop. Retired three years ago. He'd go for your sense of order."

He fumbled out his keys as they approached his building's entrance. She wanted to ask him why everything had to be locked, like a treasure box, but his face was dead white now.

She dragged him to the elevator, puzzled out the buttons. They had come down, so now they would go up. It pleased her enormously when the doors opened.

"Four," he managed. "Push four. If we have to call 911, I'm going to leave it to you to explain that I've been clawed by a Bok demon."

Ignoring him, and regretting that she couldn't fully appreciate the ride this time, she dragged him out when the doors opened again. She took the keys from him, selected the proper one, and unlocked his door.

"You don't miss a trick, do you? You'd make a damn good PI."

She merely booted the door closed behind them, then bending, lifted him onto her shoulder.

"Honey." His voice slurred. "This is so sudden."

She laid him facedown on the bed, peeled off his ruined jacket, then tore away what was left of his shirt.

His breath hissed through his teeth at the bright burn of pain. "Can you be a little more rough, Nurse Ratched? I live for pain."

"Quiet now." The wounds were deeper than she'd thought. Four ugly grooves and one jagged puncture. The blood that had started to clot flowed freely again. "This must first be cleansed. How do I fetch water?"

"Tap. Bathroom tap. The sink. Damn it. The white bowl—ah, the taller one," he added as he got an image of her scooping water out of his toilet. "Turn the handle."

She found the bathing room, and the sink. And was delighted when water gushed out. She soaked a towel and carried it sopping wet into the bedroom. She felt his body shudder when she laid it over his back.

He fought well, she thought again as she cleaned the wounds. And was stalwart in his pain. He had more than the strength of a warrior; he had the heart of one too. She remembered how his hand had whipped up and closed around the hilt of the sword she'd tossed him.

A good team, she decided. She'd never found a partner she could admire, respect, and desire.

She retrieved her supply bag, reached in for the vial of healing powder that all warriors carried. Her fingers brushed over the cloth Mav had wrapped around her hand.

Lips pursed, Kadra studied her own unmarked palm. Perhaps some of the healer's powers were still in the cloth. Quickly, she made a paste from powder and water.

"This will sting," she told him. "I'm sorry for it."

"Sting" was a mild word for the blaze that erupted under his skin when she spread the medication over his wounds. His hands fisted in the spread, his body jerked in protest.

"Only a moment," she murmured, wrenched by his pain. "It eats any infection."

"Does it chew through flesh while it's at it?" He spit the words out through gritted teeth.

"No, but it feels that way. It is no shame to scream."

"I'll keep that in mind." But he swore instead, softly, steadily, viciously, and earned more of the slayer's respect.

When the paste began to turn from sickly yellow to white, she breathed a sigh of relief. The infection was dying. Over the smeared wounds, she lay the thin healing cloth.

"If there is any magic in my blood," she whispered, "let it help him. Sleep now, Harper the valiant." She brushed her fingers through his hair. "Sleep and heal."

He dreamed, strange, colorful dreams. Battles and blood. Storms and swords. Kadra, with her war cry echoing through dark, dank tunnels. The

king of demons feasting on flesh in the shadows.

And he himself delivering the killing blow that sent green blood gushing.

In dreams he knew her body, the feel of those luscious curves under his hand, the taste of her skin, the sound of her moan. He saw her rising over him, warrior, goddess, woman.

He felt, real as life, the warm press of her lips on his.

And woke aching for her.

He sat up, instinctively reaching for the back of his shoulder. He found nothing, no wound, no break in the skin, no scar.

Had it all been a dream after all? One wild booze-induced dream starring the most magnificent woman ever created?

The idea that she was only in his mind depressed him brutally. What were a few Bok demons between friends, he thought as he pushed himself out of bed, when you had a Kadra in your life?

Was the only woman who'd ever stirred him on every level just a product of his imagination? Of wishful thinking? If he could only fall in love in dreams, why the hell did he have to wake up?

Back to reality, Doyle, he told himself, then took a step toward the bedroom door and nearly tripped over his leather jacket.

He scooped it up, fingers rushing over the battered material. Nothing, nothing in his life had ever delighted him more than seeing those bloodstained rips.

He tossed it aside and bolted for the door.

She'd changed back into her own clothes. And was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her nose all but pressed to the television screen, where the Yankees were taking on the Tigers.

"I like this battle," she said without turning around. "The warriors in the white are beating the warriors in the gray by three runs. They are better with the clubs."

"Girl of my dreams," Harper said aloud. "She likes baseball."

"There were other images in the box." And each had startled and fascinated. "But this is my favorite."

"Okay, that does it. We have to get married."

She turned then, smiled at him. His color was back, and that relieved her. His eyes were clear, and held more than recovered health. The lust in them aroused her. "You healed well."

"I healed just dandy."

"I hunted among your stores," she told him. "You have little, but I like this food and drink." She gestured toward the bag of sour-cream-and-onion potato chips and the bottle of Coors.

"You're perfect. It's just a little scary."

"We must eat. Fighting requires fuel."

"Yeah, we'll eat. We'll order some pizza."

He looked hungry as well, she noted. But not for food. She rose smoothly. Her blood was already warm for him. "I'm pleased you are well."

"Yeah. I'm feeling real healthy just now. You can tell me how you managed that later."

"You do not wish to talk at this time." She nodded, stepped toward him. Then she circled around him to check his shoulder—and to admire his form. When she stopped face-to-face again, her eyes were level with his. "Do you wish to join your body to mine?"

He blinked once, slow as an owl. "Is that a trick question?"

"You have desire for me."

Charmed, perplexed, he dipped his hands in his pockets. "Is that all it takes?"

"No." She was never as sure of herself as a female as she was as a slayer. But this time, with him, she felt sure. "But I have desire for you as well. It is a heat in my belly, a burn in my blood. I want to join with you."

"I wanted you before I even met you," he told her.

"This is like a poem." And softened her under the skin. "You are well named. I cannot speak as cleverly, so I will say we have time for this and for food before we hunt again. And that our minds and bodies will be stronger for appeasing both appetites."

On those long, tantalizing legs, she walked past him into the bedroom.

Worlds, he thought as he followed her, were about to collide.

"Whoa. Wait. Hold on." She'd already stripped off her top, and was pulling off her boots. "What's the rush?"

She looked up, a crease between her brows. "Are you ready to sport?"

"Yeah. But we could take a minute to..." He stared at her, golden skin, naked breasts. "What am I saying?" He scooped her off her feet and made her laugh by tossing her on the bed.

She rolled, came up on her haunches. Saliva pooled in his mouth as she grinned at him. "You have energy. Good. Strip," she ordered. "We will wrestle first."

"You wanna wrestle?" He unbuttoned his jeans.

"It is stimulating," she began, then lowered her gaze. "You seem to be very stimulated already. I admire your body, baby." It pleased her to use one of his terms of affection. "I want to touch it."

"Are you sure you're not a dream, brought on by one too many bourbons and bumps?"

"I am real." Watching him, she stroked her hands over her breasts, cupped them. "Touch me."

When he came forward, reached, she rolled away laughing. And crooked her finger at him.

He dived.

She obviously took her wrestling seriously—he was pinned in under five seconds. "Two out of three," he said and put himself in the game.

They tumbled over the bed, hands gripping, sliding, legs scissoring. Bodies straining. He wasn't sure if he pinned her by skill or because she'd allowed it. He didn't give a damn. Not when she was sprawled under him, her hair spread out, her eyes hot and green.

"Let's call it a draw," he suggested, lowering his head.

Her hand shot out, wedged between them. "There can be no mouth on mouth. This is not permitted."

"Kisses are illegal in your world?"

"A kiss is a gift." Now it was she who was breathless, from the press of his body, from the knowledge that his lips were nearly upon hers. "One given in promise between those who mate."

"I had mating in mind."

"No, joining. Joining is... sport. Mating is for life."

He wanted that mouth, as much as he wanted to breathe. And he wanted her to give it to him. "In this world a kiss is a sign of trust, affection, love, friendship. All manner of things. When a man and a woman join here, a kiss is a part of the union. A pleasurable part. You've never kissed a man?"

"I've made no promise to a man with my lips."

Make one to me, he thought. "Let me show you the way it's done in my world." He brushed his lips over her cheek. "Let me have your mouth, Kadra."

The hand separating them began to tremble. "I can take no lifemate." She felt his breath on her lips, warm, seductive. "It is not permitted for a slayer in my world."

"This is here. This is now." He closed his hand over the one she still held to his heart. "Let me be the first. Let me be the only."

She could have resisted. She had the strength, and though she could feel it melting, she still had the will. But his lips were so lovely, so soft against her skin. The glide of them was like all the promises that could never be given.

And her own lips yearned.

His world, she thought as she yielded. She was in his world now.

Their lips met, silkily. And her breath rushed out in shock at the sensation. The intimacy, the sweet flavor, the smooth slide of tongue against tongue were more potent than any brew she had ever sipped.

With one drink, she was drunk on him.

"Again," she demanded, and dragged him down by the hair until mouth ravaged mouth.

He had thought a kiss a simple thing, just another part of the mating dance. But with her he was whirled into the glory of it. He sank deep into her, and deeper still, until the taste of her was a craving in his belly.

I've waited for you, she thought, bowing her body to his—a body that ached for his hands. How could I have waited for you when I didn't know you existed? How could I have needed you when you were never there?

But when his hands moved over her, she knew it was true. All the passion that was in her blood, all the passion newly discovered, she gave to him.

She was a fantasy come to life. All curves and sleek skin. Urgent hands and avid mouth. She raged beneath him, demanding more even as he gave. She was a feast who commanded him to feed.

Now when they wrestled, their breath was ragged and their skin damp. The mouth that had conquered hers rushed everywhere, tasted all of her.

When she crested, it was like a wave rising up inside her, spilling out on a throaty cry and pouring into him.

She rose above him, as she had in dreams. Woman, warrior, lover. She took him into her, closed around him, and throwing her head back, rode.

Joined, he thought dimly as his blood pounded. Everything inside him was joined with her.

He reared up, banding his arms around her, fusing his mouth to hers as they took each other over the brink.

Chapter 6

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No joining had ever been so intense or so pleasurable. None had caused her to feel this mysterious sensation that was beyond the physical. Nor to find herself both conquered and victorious.

Bards spoke of such unions, but she had never believed the words were more than romantic delusion.

And they were joined still, she realized. Wrapped tight, fused like two links in one chain. This was more than sport, she thought. She didn't wish it to end.

She rubbed her lips together, experimenting. His taste was still there—his flesh, yes—but it was more. His mouth, the intimacy of the kiss that had been like... feeding each other. She hadn't known such matters could have such heat, and yet be tender.

She had never known tenderness, nor had she believed she required it.

Small wonder that in the world she knew, a mouth kiss was reserved for lifemates and was part of the sacred vows that stretched for all time.

If he lived in her world, or she in his, could there have been a lifetime between them?

Thinking it brought such a pang, such a wrench of longing. She was a slayer, she reminded herself, and he a seeker. They could walk the same path only until their battle was won. Then they, like their worlds, would stand apart.

But until their time was ended, she could have what she could take.

"I like the kissing," she said, sliding her hands into his hair as she eased back to see his face. "I would like to do more if there's an opportunity to join again."

"Kissing isn't just for joining." Still lost in her, still steeped in the first heady brew of love, he brushed his lips across hers.

"What else? Teach me."

At the idea of tutoring her, his pulse kicked again. "At times like this, after making love—"

"Making love." Following his lead, she leaned in to rub her lips over his. "I like this expression."

"Sometimes, after, while a couple is still tuned to each other, they kiss to show how much pleasure they were given. It might be long and lazy, like this."

He drew her in again on a slow, gentle glide that brought a purr of approval to her throat. Soft, so soft, deep without demand. Sweet as a maiden's dream.

"Yes," she sighed. "Again."

"Wait. Sometimes, when passions have been roused and people are still caught in that last edge of the storm of them, the tone of the kiss reflects that. Like this."

He caught her to him, close and hard, and his mouth was like a fever on hers. Now she groaned and wrapped around him like rope. He felt the thrill of her on his skin, in his blood, down to the pit of his stomach.

"You make me want." Her voice was thick now, and her heart galloped as if she'd raced to the pinnacle of the Stone Mountains. "In ways I have never wanted."

"You make me need." He held her now, just held her. "In ways I've never needed. What are we going to do about this, Kadra?"

She shook her head. "What must be done is all that can be done."

"Things have changed. Things are different now."

If only they could be, she thought. With him, a joy she hadn't known was locked inside her could be free. "What I feel for you fills me, and empties me. I've never known this with another." Still, she made herself draw back from him. "The fate of two worlds is in our hands. We can't take each other and lose them."

"We'll save them. And then—"

"Don't talk of 'and then'." She touched her fingers to his lips. "Whatever fate holds for us, we have now. It's a gift to be treasured, not to be questioned."

"I want a life with you."

She smiled, but there was sorrow in her eyes. "Some lifetimes have to be lived in a day."

He wasn't going to accept that. He was good at solving puzzles, Harper thought. He'd find a way to solve this one. He also knew when he was banging against a head as hard as his own. There were times for force, and times for strategy.

"Having a warrior goddess drop on me out of another dimension, visiting an alternate reality, fighting demons, making love. It's been a pretty full day so far." He tangled his fingers in her hair. "What's next on the schedule?"

Strength, Kadra thought, wasn't only a matter of muscle. It was a matter of courage. They would both be valiant enough to accept destiny. "We must hunt Sorak, but we will need food and planning time. He's the mightiest of his kind, and the most sly."

"Okay, we'll order that pizza and fuel up while we figure out our plan of attack."

Nodding, and grateful he hadn't pressed where she was now vulnerable, she rolled off the bed. "What is this pizza?"

No pizza on A'Dair, he thought. Score one for Earth. "It's, ah, a kind of pie. Round, usually," he said as he allowed himself the pleasure of watching her slip on the brief bottom half of her hunting costume.

"You're magnificent, Kadra. 'Beautiful' is too ordinary, too simple a word," he added when she stared at him. "Do men on A'Dair tell you that you take their breath away, that looking at you is like being struck blind by a force of beauty so strong it's painful?"

His words made her weak, as if she'd slain a thousand demons in one day. "Men do not speak so to slayers."

He rose. "I do."

"You are different." So wonderfully different. "When I hear the words from you, they make me feel proud. And shy. I have never been shy," she added, baffled. "It pleases me that you find me attractive to look at."

"Do you think that's all I meant? You are very attractive. You're right off the charts in that area. But then you add the courage, the brains, the compassion I saw in you when Mav told you of her father's death, the active curiosity, the sense of fun, the heart of a warrior. You're unique to any world, and I'm dazzled by you."

"No one has ever..." Her throat burned. "I need time to find the words to give back to you that are as fine and rich."

He took her hands, lifted them to his lips. "They were free. They don't require any trade or payment."

"Like a gift?"

"Exactly."

"Thank you."

He dressed, switched the TV to the news in case there were any updates. He started to call in the pizza order. Then he remembered it wasn't just his taste that had to be satisfied this time. "Okay, pizza can come with a variety of options. Meat, vegetables—stuff like onions, mushrooms, peppers, sausage, pepperoni. It's an endless parade. I usually get it pretty loaded. Is there anything you don't eat?"

"I don't care for the meat of the grubhog."

He let out a quick, huffing laugh. "Check. Hold the grub-hog."

He called in the order—explained to her what a phone was—then went into the kitchen for a couple of beers. "It'll take about twenty minutes. Let's figure out what step we take next over a beer."

"I like the beer," she told him.

"Just one more reason we're perfect for each other." He tapped his bottle to hers. "So." He dropped down on the couch, stretched out. "You said Sorak would have a lair. What sort of digs would he look for? What's his habit in living arrangements?"

"Demons live belowground." She crossed her feet at the ankles, then lowered herself in one smooth move to the floor. "They like the dark after feeding. They will burrow, dig tunnels so they may travel under the ground."

She picked up the portable phone he'd set down and began to play with it.

"In the east, Laris and I once tracked a demon pack to a great lair, with many tunnels through the rock and dirt, with many chambers for stores and sleep and treasures. We slew the pack and destroyed the lair with fire. It was Clud's palace, and there I destroyed the king of demons. But Sorak, then prince, was not there. When he heard of this, he vowed to kill the slayers who had killed his sire, and to build a great new kingdom in a place where no slayer could defeat him. I have this."

She flipped back her hair to show him a thin hooked scar at the base of her neck. "Only a demon king can leave his mark on a slayer. This is Clud's. The last swipe of his claws before my sword took his heart."

"Impressive." Harper pulled down his shirt to expose the line of puckered skin on his shoulder. "Skip trace, with a bad attitude and a switchblade."

She nodded. "How did you kill him?"

"It doesn't work that way here—ideally. I kicked his ass, then turned him over to the cops and collected my fee. The authorities," he explained. "We

put bad guys—our demons—in jail. In cages, like at the zoo today."

"Ah." She considered that, and found it just. Captivity was a living death. "Is the demon who broke your nose also in his cage?"

"Sucker punch," Harper told her, running his hand down the uneven line of his nose. "Yeah, he's doing a stretch. Pissant grifter going around snuggling up to rich women, then ripping them off, copping their jewelry, draining their bank accounts. Prick."

Kadra angled her head. "I like the way you speak. I find it arousing to listen to your stories."

"Oh, yeah?" He slid down onto the floor beside her, walked his fingers up her boot to her thigh. "I've got a million of them."

"Sporting must wait."

"I like your face. I find it arousing to look at your face." He touched it, just a skim of fingertips over her cheek. "When I was sleeping, I dreamed of making love with you. Then it happened, just the way I'd dreamed it."

"This is vision."

"Maybe." He thought of the blood and the battle, of the dark and the smoke. "One thing, before we get back on track. I've always liked working alone; that's why I went out on my own. I've liked living alone, which is why I've screwed up any potentially serious relationship with a woman. I never wanted a partner, until you."

She lifted a hand to his cheek in turn. A kind of joining, she realized, with only a touch. "I have been alone. It is the way of slayers. I never wished it otherwise, until you. They will write songs about you in my world. The great warrior from beyond A'Dair."

And when she listened to them by the fire, she thought, she would be alone again.

She let her hand drop away, then took a deep drink of her beer. "I tracked Sorak across my world and killed many of his warriors. He has sired no young, and with his death, the power of the Bok will be diminished. I thought he meant to build a lair in some far-off place, a fortress of great defense. But in my world. I did not know he meant to come to this place, to build his kingdom in yours."

"We won't give him the chance. You said he would burrow underground."

"Yes. The Bok require the cool dark when they rest."

"I've got an idea where he might've gone. The subway. We have a system of tunnels under the city, for transportation. The sewers are another option," Harper considered, "but I don't know why anyone, even a demon, would want to set up housekeeping in the sewers if he had any other choices. The trick will be pinpointing the right sector."

"What creatures of your world travel this subway, this underground route?"

"The variety is endless. Just people, of all walks. It's a crowded city. It's another reasonably efficient and inexpensive way to get around it."

He spent the next few minutes explaining the idea and basic workings of the subway system.

"This is clever. You have an innovative and interesting culture. I would like to have more time to study it."

"Stick around, take all the time you want." He rose when his buzzer sounded. He went to the intercom by the front door, verified the pizza delivery, and buzzed the entrance door open.

"You keep a servant in that small box?"

"No." Amused when she came over to peer at it, he explained its function, then opened his door to the delivery boy's knock, paid him, and sent him on his way.

"Was that your servant?"

"No. I gave my servants this century off. He works for the place that makes the food. It's his job to bring it to people when they call on the phone. Hungry?"

"Yes." She sniffed. "It smells very good."

He set the pizza box on the coffee table. "I'll get some napkins—we'll need them—then you can see if it tastes as good as it smells."

When he came back she was sitting on the floor, the lid of the box open, poking a finger at the crust. "It is very colorful. Is this a staple of your people's diet?"

"It's a staple of mine." He lifted a slice, flicked strings of cheese with his finger. "You just pick it up with your hands and go for it." He demonstrated with an enthusiastic bite.

Following suit, Kadra brought a slice to her lips. She bit through pepperoni, through pepper, through onion into cheese and spicy sauce, down to the thin, yeasty crust.

The sound she made, Harper thought, was very like one she'd made during sex.

"I like this pie called pizza," she stated, and bit in again. "It is good food," she added, her mouth full.

"Baby, this is the perfect food."

"It goes well with the beer. It's like a celebration to have kissing and joining, then pizza and beer."

He knew it was ridiculous, but his heart simply melted. "I'm crazy about you, Kadra. I'm a goddamn mental patient."

"This is an expression?"

"It means I'm in love with you. I go thirty years without a scratch, and in less than a day I'm fatally wounded."

"Don't speak of death, even as an expression. Not before battle." She reached out, closed her hand tight over his. "It is bad luck. When it is done... When it is done, Harper, we will talk more of feelings."

"All right, we'll table it—if I have your word that when it's done you let me make my pitch."

Baffled, she frowned at him over what was left of her first slice. "Like in the battle of baseball?"

"Not exactly. That you'll let me tell you the way it could be for us."

"When it is done, you will make your pitch. Now tell me more of the subway."

"Hold on." He switched his attention to the televised news bulletin.

The reporter spoke of the attack at the zoo, the murder of the guard and the mutilation of several animals. Witness reports were confused and conflicting, ranging from the claim of an attack by a dozen armed men to one by a pack of wild animals.

"They don't know what they're up against," Harper said quietly as the newscaster reported that the police were investigating the incident and that the zoo would remain closed until further notice. "They don't have a clue. I call them with the truth, I'm just another loony."

"It is for us," Kadra told him. "Rhee has said that we would fight this battle together. He must be destroyed here or driven back where he belongs. There must be balance again."

"Here." Harper rolled his shoulder where a demon had dug its claws. "We finish it here. New York style."

Kadra pondered the images on the television, the moving paintings of the zoo. "This subway. Does it go near the place where they keep the animals? Where we battled today?"

"There are possibilities."

"Sorak would like a lair near prey. It will be dark soon," she said with a long look at the sky through the window. "Then we hunt."

Chapter 7

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She balked at changing her hunting gear for jeans a second time, claiming they restricted her. He let it pass, figuring the long coat would cloak most of her... attributes.

The thing about New York, Harper thought, as they passed a guy with shoulder-length white hair, two nose rings, and a black leather jumpsuit, was there was always someone dressed weirder than you were.

He wore his ripped jacket, for sentimental reasons. And for the practical one that if he was going up against a demon again, there was no point to sacrificing another garment to the long blue claws.

He had his Glock in a shoulder holster, a backup .38 in an ankle holster, a combat knife sheathed at his back, and a switchblade in his left boot.

He'd have preferred an Uzi, but what he had on hand would have to do.

"I like my work," he told Kadra. "And I like to think it makes a difference to some of the people who come to me with problems." He paused to take a good look at his neighborhood—his city—his world. "But this heading out to save the planet stuff brings on a real high."

"You were born for it." When he glanced over at her, she shrugged. "This is what I believe. We are born for a purpose. How we live, how we treat others who live with us forms our spirit and determines if we will fulfill that purpose or fail. We were meant to face this night together. Meant for it from the moment we were created."

"I like that. And I'll take it one step further. We were meant for each other, too."

Meant to love each other, she thought, and to live alone in two different worlds. Her life had been filled with sacrifices, but none would bring the sorrow of the one she had yet to make.

Harper led Kadra down into the station for the train heading uptown. She would have vaulted over the turnstile if he hadn't blocked her.

"You have to use a token, then you walk through."

"These are very flimsy barricades," she pointed out as she bumped through. "Even a child could get over them."

"Yeah, well, it's... tradition."

"Like a ritual," she decided, satisfied. She heard the roar, felt the floor vibrate. "The earth trembles." She was prepared to drag him to safety when he grabbed her hand.

"It's just a train coming in." Still holding her hand, he pulled her onto the platform, where she studied the other waiting passengers.

It was a huge cave, strongly lit. She had never seen so much life, so much motion and magic in one place. "Your people have so many colors of skin. It's beautiful. You are blessed to have such richness of person, such variety." When she glanced back at him, she saw he was smiling at her in an odd way. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He leaned toward her, and to her utter shock, kissed her mouth.

"We cannot join here," she said in a hissing whisper. "It is a private activity."

"It wasn't that kind of a kiss. Remember, there are all kinds."

"I thought you were pretending."

"Is that a polite word for lying? On this side of the portal, people kiss all the time. Lovers, friends, relatives. Complete strangers."

She snorted. "Now I will say you are lying."

"Locking lips is practically a global pastime. And this one'll get you: people pay a fee to sit in a big, darkened room as a group and watch other people's images on a screen—a larger version of the TV, where you saw baseball. One of the things those images often do is kiss."

"I think you are a harper after all, because you tell fantastic tales with great ease and skill."

"Nothing in those knowledge banks about movies?"

She frowned, but tipped her head and searched through. When her eyes widened, lit with delight, he knew she'd hit on it.

"Movies." She tested the word. "I would like to see one."

"It's a date." He heard the rumble of the approaching uptown train. They had another date to keep first.

She liked the train that flew under the earth. She liked the way people crowded inside, bumping together as they clung to metal straps. There were colorful drawings to study and read. Some spoke of magical liquid that gifted the user with shiny, sexy hair. Another advised her to practice safe sex. There was a wall map provided for lost travelers, and yet another picture that boasted its elixir could transform the skin to make it sexually attractive to others.

Kadra leaned close to Harper's ear. "Is sex the religion of your world?"

"Ah... you could say a lot of people worship it. Why are you whispering?"

"No one is speaking. Is conversation permitted?"

"Sure. It's just that most of these people don't know each other. They're strangers, so they don't have anything to say."

Kadra considered it, and finding it reasonable, she tapped the shoulder of the woman standing beside her. "I am Kadra, Slayer of Demons. My companion in this dimension is Harper Doyle. Together we hunt Sorak."

The sound Harper made was somewhere between a laugh and a moan.

"Rehearsing," he said with what he hoped was a nonthreatening smile.

"New play. Way, *way* off Broadway. Honey," Harper said to Kadra as the woman edged as far away as the press of bodies would allow, "maybe you should just talk to me."

"Making introductions is courteous."

"Yeah, well, you start chatting about demons, it tends to weird people out."

The train stopped. People poured off, people poured on. Kadra scowled and planted her feet. "As you said, how can they defend against Sorak if they are unaware of him?"

"I've thought about that. Thought about going to the cops. The National Guard." Frustrated, he dragged a hand through his hair. "Nobody's going to believe us, and the time we'd waste trying to convince them we're not candidates for a padded cell would only give Sorak more of an advantage."

"You said there were demons in this world, that you put them in cages."

"There are plenty of them. But they're a different type than you're used to fighting. They're not another species, they're us. People come in a variety pack, Kadra. Most of them are good—at the core, they're good. But a lot of them aren't. So they prey on their own kind."

"To prey on your own kind is the greatest sin. You hunt these demons. Who else hunts them?"

"Ideally? The law. It just doesn't always work out. It'll take more than a subway ride for me to explain it to you. I don't always understand it myself."

"There is good and there is evil. The good must always fight the evil as the strong must always protect the weak. This is nothing that can change by walking through a portal."

He linked his hand with hers. Her vision was so clear, he thought. And her spirit so pure. "I love you," he murmured. "I love everything about you."

The warmth poured into her, flooding her belly, overflowing her heart. "You only know one day of me."

"Time doesn't mean a damn." The train jerked to a halt at the next station. "We'll be getting off soon. Whatever happens tonight, I need you to believe what I'm telling you now. I love you. My world was incomplete until you came into it."

"I believe what you say." It felt strange and right to press her lips to his. "My heart is joined to yours."

But what she didn't say, what she couldn't bear to say, was that her world would be forever incomplete when she left him.

"You're thinking that when this is over, we won't be able to be together." He put his hand on her cheek now, kept his gaze steady on hers. "That I'll have to stay in this world, and you'll have to go back to yours."

"There is only one thing that should be occupying our minds now. That is Sorak."

"When we get off this train, we'll worry about Sorak. Right now, it's you and me."

"You have a very domineering nature. I find it strangely appealing."

"Same goes. When this is over, Kadra, we'll find a way. That's what people do when they love each other. They find a way."

She thought of the globe in her pouch. The key that was hers only until the battle was done. The weight of it dragged on her heart like a stone. "And when there is no way to be found?"

"Then they make one. Whatever I have to do to make it work, I'll do. But I won't lose you."

"I can't stay in your world, Harper. I am a slayer, bound by blood, by oath, and by honor to protect my people."

"Then I'll go with you."

Stunned, she stared at him. "You would give up your world, the wonders of it, for me? For mine?"

"For us. I'll do whatever has to be done to have a life with you."

Tears swam into her eyes. She would never have shed one for pain, but one spilled down her cheek now. For love. "It is not possible. It would never be permitted."

"Who the hell's in charge? We'll have ourselves a sit-down."

She managed a wobbly smile. "It would take more than a subway ride to explain it to you. There are balances, Harper, that must be carefully held. I am here to right a wrong, and am given entrance by the power of Rhee's magic. When I have done what I've been sent here to do, I'll have no choice but to return. You will have no choice but to stay."

"We'll just see about that. Here's our stop."

"You are angry."

"No, this isn't my angry face. This is my if-I-can-fight-demons-I-can-sure-as-hell-fight-the-cosmos face." He gave her hand a squeeze. "Trust me."

She trusted no one more. If she had been permitted to take a lifemate, it would have been Harper Doyle. His strength, his honesty, his courage had stolen her heart. She would miss, for the rest of her life, his strange humor, his bravery, his skilled mouth.

When they had defeated Sorak, she would go quickly and spare them both the pain of leaving. And now she would treasure the time they had left as companions. She would relish the great deed they were fated to accomplish together.

The first order of business, Harper thought, was to get down on the tracks and into the tunnels while avoiding detection by the subway cops. He explained the problem to Kadra as they moved down the platform away from the bulk of the waiting commuters.

"Very well," she said, and solved the dilemma by jumping down onto the tracks.

"Or we could do it that way," he grumbled. He flashed his ID in the direction of a couple of gawking businessmen. "Transit inspectors."

Hoping they subscribed to the New York credo of minding their own business, he jumped. "Move fast." He took her arm. "Stay out of the light. Once we're into the tunnels our main goal is to avoid being smeared on the tracks by an oncoming train. Then there's the third-rail factor. See that?" He pointed. "Whatever you do, don't step on that, don't touch it. It'll fry you like a trout."

He pulled his penlight from his pocket as they followed the track into the tunnel. "There are some areas in the system where homeless people set up housekeeping."

"If they have a house to keep, they cannot be homeless."

"We'll save the tutorial on society's disenfranchised for later. Some of the people who manage to live down here are mentally unstable. Some are just desperate. What we're looking for, I figure, are the maintenance areas. Off the main tracks, where there's room to establish a lair."

"There is no scent of people or demon here."

"Let me know when that changes." He felt the vibration, saw the first flicker of light in the dark. "Train. Let's move."

He doubled his pace toward the recess of an access door, and pulling her up with him, he plastered himself to the door. "Think thin," he advised.

He held on as the roar of the train blasted the air, gritted his teeth as the air pummeled them. Through the train's lighted windows, faces and bodies of its passengers blurred by.

"It is more exciting to be outside the box as it flies by than to be inside it."

He looked over at Kadra as the last car whizzed past. "One of these days you'll have to tell me what you do for entertainment back in A'Dair. I have a feeling I'll be riveted."

He tried to keep a map in his head as they wound through the labyrinth. Twice more they were forced to leap for a narrow shelter as a train sped past. But it was Kadra who swung toward a side tunnel.

"Here. Sorak has been this way."

Harper caught no scent in the stale air other than the grease and metal of machines. "Can you tell how long ago?"

"Some hours past, but fresh enough to track."

She moved carefully, knowing the dangers of an underground ruled by a demon. She kept her voice low as they began to hunt. "The Bok sees as well in the dark as in the light. Perhaps better. He will fight more fiercely for his lair than he would even for food."

"In other words, that skirmish we had this morning was just a preview of coming attractions."

She thought she was beginning to understand his odd expressions, so nodded. "Tonight, it is to the death."

She whirled, coat billowing, as she laid a hand on the hilt of her sword. Though he had heard no sound, the beam of Harper's light picked out a shadow in the dark. He'd nearly drawn his gun when he recognized the uniform.

"Transit cop." He said it under his breath to Kadra. "Let me handle this. Hey, Officer. Riley and Tripp from the *Post*. We're cleared to do a feature on—"

He broke off as the figure took one shambling step toward him and his stiletto-like teeth gleamed in the narrow beam of light.

The teeth parted, row after monstrous row. The hands, tipped with bluing claws, lifted. But the eyes—the eyes were still painfully human.

"Help me. Please, God, help me." And with a sound trapped between a sob and a howl, he leaped.

Kadra's dagger shot through the air and into his throat with an ugly sound of steel piercing flesh. The blood that trickled out of the wound was a thin reddish green.

"The change was not complete with this one," Kadra stated.

"He was still human." Furious, Harper dropped to his knees and tried to find a pulse. "Goddamn it, he was still a human being. He was a fucking cop. You killed him without a thought."

"He was neither human nor demon, but trapped between. I ended his life to save yours."

"Is that all there is?" Harper's head whipped around, and his gaze burned into hers. "Life or death? He asked for help."

"I gave him the only help I could. Do you think it gives me pleasure? With his death, one of my people dies. That is the balance." She crouched, pulled his dagger free. "That is the price."

"We could have gotten him to the hospital. A blood transfusion, something."

"That is fantasy!" She shot her dagger home. "He was dead the instant Sorak kissed him." She gestured toward the body as it began to smoke. "Infected with demon blood."

There was nothing to be done for him, in your world or in mine. If Sorak has found one human to change, he has changed others."

She glanced toward the dark maw of tunnel. She would rather face it, even if her own death waited inside, than the hot accusation in his eyes. "If you are unable to do what must be done, go back now. I will go on alone."

"He asked for help. He was scared. I saw the fear." Now all Harper could see was a blackened skeleton. "And he never had a chance." Sickened, Harper got to his feet. "We'll finish it together."

"This is the way. I smell blood, some still fresh." She walked deeper into the tunnel.

Chapter 8

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They moved in the dark, guided by the thin beam of Harper's penlight and Kadra's instincts. And they moved in silence.

She had killed a man—and to Harper the charred remains they had left behind in the tunnel were still a man. She had done so with the same cold efficiency she had used to destroy the hideous little two-headed monster in A'Dair.

In the zoo he'd found her brutal focus fascinating, admirable. Even sexy. But there they had fought beasts—savage and hungry and alien despite their form.

This had been a man. How could she be so certain that his lunge forward had been an attack instead of a plea?

"You said it takes time for the transformation," Harper began.

"In my world." She snapped the words out. "I can't know—no one can know—how the change happens in yours. No demon has ever traveled from my world to yours until now. In A'Dair, the demon carries his victim off, into a lair. For twelve hours the human sleeps, a changing sleep that is like death. Only during this period is there any hope of being saved, and even that hope is small. Once the demon wakes, it is too late. The change is irreversible even if he is not complete. He is demon. And he feeds."

"If there's a different time frame here, maybe there's a different structure to the change."

"He waked. He walked. He would have fed on you if he had not been stopped. The blood was already mixed, Harper. His death was a mercy. What was still human inside knew."

She hadn't known love could be painful. She hadn't known that when your heart lay open to another it could be so easily wounded. But hers was, and the hurt ran down to the bone: he had looked at her as if she were the monster.

She didn't want to speak of it. She wished to push it aside and do only what she had come to do. But the ache in her heart was a distraction.

"Every human death is a death inside me." She spoke quietly, without looking at him. "I cannot save them all. I would give my life if that would make it otherwise."

"I know that." But they both heard the doubt in his voice.

The pain of it sliced through her, made her careless, made her vulnerable to what leaped at her out of the dark.

It was snarling, teeth snapping. Its claws swiped, scoring her neck as she whirled to block.

It was old and female. And it was mad. It skittered back, impossibly fast, like a spider, into the shadows. Kadra freed her sword and, going by scent and sound, struck out.

It cackled. That was the only way to describe the sound it made as it attacked Kadra from behind.

Harper's bullet caught it in midair. Blood gushed, that awful hue of mixed red and green, as it thudded to the ground, arms and legs drumming.

An old woman, Harper thought as he stared into the crazed and dying face. One of the pitiful who so often slipped through society's fingers and into its bowels.

She was old enough to be his grandmother.

"You did not kill her." Kadra crouched beside him. "You did not end her life, and you must not take the weight of it. Sorak killed her, and you ended her torment. You slayed the monster. The woman was already dead."

"Do you get used to it?"

She hesitated, nearly lied. But when he lifted his head and looked into her eyes, she gave him the truth. "Yes. You must, or how could you pick up your sword day after day? But there is regret, Harper. There is sorrow for what is lost. The demon has no regret, no sorrow. No joy or passion, no

love. I think when they feed on us, they hope to consume what it is that makes us human. Our heart, our soul. But they cannot. All they can take and transform is the body. The heart and soul live on in another place. And that place is locked to them."

"So Sorak's come here. Maybe he thinks he'll have better luck eating souls in this dimension."

"Perhaps."

The woman was all but ashes when Harper looked at Kadra again. "I'm sorry about before. I didn't want to believe it could happen, that we could be used this way. It was easier to blame you for stopping it than Sorak for starting it."

"There will be more."

"And we'll both stop it." He reached out, touched a fingertip to the claw marks on her neck. "You're hurt."

"Scratches, because I was careless. I won't be a second time."

"Neither will I." Not with the battle, he thought, and not with her. He took her hand as they got to their feet. "Let's find this bastard, and welcome him to New York."

Harper kept his Glock in one hand, the knife in the other. The tunnel curved, and a dim light glowed at the end of it. He heard the rumble of a train behind them, but ahead there was silence.

He could see signs of human habitation now. Broken glass, an empty pint bottle that had held cheap whiskey. Food wrappers, an old tennis shoe with the toe ripped out.

"His lair." Gesturing with her chin, Kadra slid her sword out of its sheath. "He is not alone."

"Well, why don't we join the party?" He turned the knife in his hand. "We've brought our host some nice gifts."

She stripped off the coat, flung it aside. "He will not be pleased to see us."

The tunnel widened. There was more debris from the life that had chosen to spread underground. Spoiled food, battered boxes that might have served as shelter. A headless doll. And as they drew closer to the light, a splatter of blood against the dingy wall.

The first three came out in a mad rush, all claws and teeth. Harper fired, sweeping his aim left to right. There was a stench of something not human as one threw the wounded at Harper, then came in like a missile beneath the body. Its teeth fixed in his calf as he sliced upward with the knife.

The teeth continued to grip his leg like a vice even as the thing began to smoke. He cursed, kicked, and felt both cloth and flesh tear as the demi-demon struck the tunnel wall.

He spun clear to see that Kadra had already killed the third, and a fourth that had tried to use the cover of their attack for one of his own.

She wasn't even winded.

"That was too easy," she commented.

"Yeah." He limped over, gritting his teeth against the burning pain of the bite. "That was a real breeze."

"He toys with us." Now she pulled out the healing cloth. "He insults us. Bind your wound."

He knelt, quickly tied the cloth around his bleeding leg. "And just how is sending four advance men with really nasty teeth an insult?"

"He knew we would destroy them. Four, not fully changed, are child's play."

"Yeah." Grimly he tightened the knot on the cloth. "I'm feeling real childlike at the moment."

"He wants us in there. Wants to watch the battle. The smell of blood feeds him almost as much as the taste."

"Okay." He tested his weight on the injured leg. It would have to hold. "Let's go give his majesty a real five-star meal."

She drew her dagger, checked the balance of both blades, then nodded. "For your world and for mine. To the death."

"Let's make that Sorak's death."

They charged.

Kadra caught a blur of movement above, and went into a roll that sent the demon flying over her head. She ran him through with one thrust, pulled her sword out clean before his body hit the ground. Using her hips, she reared up, shot her boots into the next attacker's face. And was on her feet, hacking and whirling.

She heard gunshots and, pivoting, saw Harper slay two demi-demons on his left and set to meet another on his right with his blade.

She spun clear, slicing with her sword, and positioned herself so they fought back-to-back.

"Sorak is close!" she shouted. "I smell him."

"Yeah." Sweat dripped into Harper's eyes and was ignored. "So do I."

He shot a bony, bald demi-demon who still wore a torn and faded New York Mets T-shirt. As the demon smoked and died at his feet, Harper scanned the tunnel.

He couldn't think about who they had been, he told himself, only what they had become.

"I don't see any more of them."

Still back-to-back, they circled. "Sorak!" Kadra shouted. "Come and meet your fate."

As if on cue, light flashed into the tunnel. Through the glare of it, three demons charged.

"He's used the portal. He's brought more through."

Harper fired, and when the Glock clicked on empty, he used it as a club. His leg screamed as he sprang off it to launch himself into a roundhouse kick. The demon barely staggered, shoving Harper so that his wounded leg buckled. He skidded over the floor, and lost his breath and the gun when the demon landed on him.

For the second time, he felt the bite of claws. Screaming in rage, he plunged the knife into the demon's throat, snarled like an animal himself when the thick green spewed onto his hands and face.

When he crawled out, covered with blood, he saw Kadra fighting both of the remaining demons.

Her blades flashed like lightning. She blocked the sickle sword that one of them swung at her, then plunged her dagger into his belly while she hacked her blade through the second demon.

"Next time," Harper said as he limped toward her, "I get the two-on-one."

Winded, she nodded. "Next time."

The smoking blood hazed the air. She peered through it, pointed her sword at Sorak. His claws and face were smeared with the blood of the body that lay at his feet.

He had fed, and fed again, she realized, and would have the strength of ten.

Still, her stance was cocky, her voice a sneer. "You should have brought an army, demon king. We would have littered this place with your dead."

"I brought better than an army." Sorak reached back and hefted a small girl by the scruff of her neck. She let out a sobbing squeal as her little legs kicked in the air, two full feet off the ground.

Leering, Sorak skimmed his teeth over her throat. "The young are so sweet to the taste. How much for her life?"

Kadra lowered her blade. Though her hand was steady, her heart stumbled in her chest. "Will you bargain your life with a human child's? Is not a king worth more?"

"I was not speaking to you, Kadra, Slayer of Demons." Sorak lifted his other hand, and the gun.

Subway cop, Harper thought on a jolt of panic. Sorak had taken the gun from the transit cop, and he had been too angry to notice the empty holster.

On an oath, Harper shoved Kadra aside as Sorak fired. As she fell, blood streaming from her temple, the sword clattered to the ground.

"No. Goddamn it, no!" Harper fell to his knees, gathering her up, checking quickly for a pulse.

"I was born for her death." Sorak shook the child until she began to wail. "Tell me, Harper Doyle, were you born for death?"

She was alive, he told himself. And slayers healed quickly. He would do whatever he could to give her that time, and to save an innocent child from death. Or worse.

He got to his feet, the knife gripped in his hand. "For yours. I was born for yours."

"Approach me and..." Sorak ran a blue claw teasingly down the girl's round cheek as her wails became the mewling sounds of a trapped animal. "I tear

her to pieces. How much for the child, Harper Doyle? How much are the young worth in this world?"

Her eyes were blue, Harper noted. Glassy as a doll's now, filled with shock. "How much do you want?"

"You will do. Your life for her life. I would enjoy taking what is the slayer's and making it mine. Throw down your blade, or the child dies now."

"And Kadra?"

Through the stinking smoke Harper saw the gleam of jagged teeth. "Do you think your life is worth both of theirs?" Sorak stepped forward, and Harper could see blood coming from wounds of the claws sliding down the girl's white neck. "I could kill you where you stand with this weapon. But it would be... unsporting. Make the bargain, or watch while I give her my kiss."

There was no bargaining with monsters. Even knowing that, Harper could see no choice. "Set her down, let her go. A knife isn't much good against a gun. You're smart enough to know that. In this world, using a kid as a shield is a sign of a coward. I thought you were a king."

"I am more than king here. I am god." Carelessly, he tossed the girl on the floor, then drew out the globe. The portal burst open. "Run, little human child. Run quickly, or I will take you after all."

She ran, weeping. The portal snapped shut behind her.

"And now." Grinning, Sorak streaked forward in a move so fast that Harper had no chance to evade or defend. Using the back of his hand, Sorak struck Harper in the face with a blow so vicious that it threw Harper back against the wall. The knife sputtered out of his hand like wet soap.

With the wall bracing him, Harper slid to the ground.

"You are mine now. A warrior slave in my army, in this world. I will rule here."

"Fry in hell," Harper choked out as those claws closed over his throat. In his mind, he called out to Kadra to wake, to save herself from the horror that was coming.

"Soon you will see what it is to be as I am. To lose those weaknesses that make you human." Sorak leaned close, his mouth only a fetid breath away from Harper's, his gleaming teeth bared. "I will give you the slayer when you wake, and we will feed on her together."

He knew pain, agony beyond imagining as that mouth, those teeth closed over him. The shock of it ripped through his system, tore at his sanity as those keen blue claws tore through flesh until he felt his own heart prepare to burst.

The hand that had been fighting to reach the gun in his boot convulsed, dropped limply to the ground.

He had visions of fire and smoke, of blood and brutal death. Torment and anguish. With them came a lethargy that weighed his limbs down like molten lead.

Through the smoke, through the pain, he heard Kadra scream his name.

His trembling fingers closed over the gun. His numb arm moved, slowly, slowly, in exquisite pain to bring it between their bodies. Without being fully aware of where the muzzle was pointed, he fired.

Chapter 9

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When Kadra came to, her vision was smeared with blood and pain. Her body knew a thousand stings and aches from the battle. Her ears still rang from it.

And her first thought as she pushed to her knees was: Harper.

The air was clogged with smoke and stink from the blood of a dozen demons and demi-demons. She remembered the child and her heart jerked. Burying her pain, she picked up her sword, gripped it in both hands.

The sound she heard now, slicing through the filthy air, was one of greed, one of bitter glory. Whirling, she swung the sword high over her head.

She saw, huddled by the dripping wall, Sorak, his regal cape unstained as he gifted the bleeding Harper with his evil kiss.

Fear, rage, horror gushed through her and poured out in a single urgent cry that was Harper's name.

She ran, screaming still, the point of her blade pointing toward the ceiling, where it caught the dim light and glinted like vengeance.

The gunshot was a small sound, a muffled crack like the rap of a fist on wood. Sorak's body jerked, and his head lifted with a kind of baffled shock. He pressed a hand to his belly where his blood spilled between his slender blue-tipped fingers.

"I am king of the Bok." Sorak watched in confusion as his own blood poured. "I am god here. I cannot be destroyed by human means."

"Wanna bet?" With what little strength he had left, Harper fired again. "You lose," he managed before his head slumped.

Kadra leaped between them as Sorak collapsed. She whipped her sword down, the point at its heart. "He has killed you. Harper the warrior has sent you to hell."

"And I have made him mine." His grin spread. "And you, Kadra, Slayer of Demons, must destroy what you love or be destroyed by it. I have won."

"He will never be yours. That is my vow." With all of her strength, she rammed the sword home. Leaving it buried in Sorak's body and in the stone

beneath, she dropped to her knees beside Harper.

There was blood, his own and Sorak's, on his face. The healing cloth around his wounded leg had soaked through. His eyes were already going dim.

But they met Kadra's now with something like triumph. "He's done."

"Yes." The slayer's fingers shook as she brushed Harper's hair from his face. "He is finished."

"Mission accomplished, huh? The kid." He closed his eyes on a wave of agony, a flood of impossible fatigue. "The kid got back through the portal."

"You traded your life for hers." For mine, she thought. And for mine.

"She couldn't've been more than two. I couldn't stand there and let him... Christ." He had to gather strength just to breathe. "Your head's bleeding."

"It's only—"

"A scratch. Yeah, yeah. Got a few of my own." He bore down, fought to clear his vision so he could see her better. "Baby, I'm pretty messed up here."

"I will get you to a healer."

"Kadra." He wanted to take her hand, but couldn't lift his arm. "Bastard kissed me. It works faster here, the change. We can't be sure how fast."

"You will not change. You will *not*." Tears ran down her cheeks unchecked. "I will take you back, through the portal. To Rhee, the sorceress."

"I'm going under. I can feel it." He was cold, cold to the bone. Losing, he knew, the warmth of his own humanity. "We can't take the chance. You know what you have to do."

"No." She gripped his face with desperate hands. "No."

"I dropped the gun. Get it for me, let me do it myself."

"No." She pressed his face to her breast and rocked. "No, no, no."

The smell of her flesh brought comfort, but under it, creeping under it, was an ugly, alien hunger that horrified him. "Don't let me change. If you love me, end it. Let me die human." He pressed his lips to her heart. "I love you. Let that be the last thing we both remember from this. I love you."

He went limp. Panic filled her, a wild weeping as she shook him, slapped him, called to him. But he was in the changing sleep, a kind of living death, and could not be reached.

"No. You will not take him." She leaped up, whirled to where Sorak had died. All that was left was her sword, still in the stone, and the globe the demon king had stolen. She scooped up the globe, then with a piercing battle cry, wrenched her sword free.

Tears streamed down her stony face as she dropped down beside Harper again, wrapped her arms around him.

But when the portal opened and the light burst over them, it took them to a world she had never seen.

The room was white. Through a wall of glass were trees of crimson and sapphire against a pale gold sky. Framed by it, robed in white, stood Rhee.

"Help him." Kadra laid Harper between them, stretched out her arms in pleading. "Save him."

"I cannot."

"You have power."

"So do we all. Child—"

"Do not call me child." Furious, primed for battle, Kadra leaped to her feet. "Some are saved from the changing sleep through sorcery. I have heard the tales."

"It is beyond my means to save him."

"You say we share blood, but you refuse the one thing I have ever asked of you. You sent me to him."

"Not I, but destiny."

"Destiny," Kadra spat out. "Who weaves a destiny that asks a man to fight what is not his war, to risk his life in a battle not his own? This he did. He fought with me, and for me. He destroyed the Bok king when I failed. He laid down his life for a child who was not his own. And for this courage, for this valor, he is repaid by becoming what he fought against. Who asks such a sacrifice?"

"There are no answers to the questions you ask. What did he bring to you, what was your gift to him?"

"Love."

"Then there is a way. Courage and strength," Rhee said as she stepped forward. "Vision and love. With these there is a way for you, only you, to save him."

"How? Whatever it is, I will do. A quest, a battle? Tell me, and it is done."

"A kiss."

"A kiss?"

"A gift of breath, of life and love. If your love is true, if it is pure, one to the other, the power of that kiss, of the love in it, will overcome the evil of the demon's."

"Can it be so simple?"

"Nothing ever is," Rhee said with a smile. "You must be cleansed first. I will help you, and tell you the rest."

"There is no time." Her heart lurched as she gestured to Harper. His fingernails were a pale blue. "He is already changing."

"Time stops here. That I can give you. He will remain as he is while we prepare."

"There is choice," Rhee said while Kadra bathed. "There is great risk."

"I am a warrior," Kadra replied.

"You must be woman and warrior now."

"So I bathe in scented oils, wash my hair with jasmine blossoms. I have no patience for such matters."

"Rituals." Rhee's lips curved as she held out a thick white towel. "Do you not sharpen your sword before battle? This is not so different. Not all warriors are female, daughter, but all females should be warriors. He will need all you are if he is to survive this."

"If I fail, may he stay here? Sleep, as he is sleeping now?"

Gently, Rhee touched Kadra's hair. "Would you wish that for him? An eternity of nothing?"

"I cannot let him change. It was the last thing he asked of me, to take his life so he might end it as a man."

"And will you?"

"I will not let him die a beast. I will not fail him. If I use my sword to end it, I will never lift it again."

This, Rhee thought, was what I wished for you. Beyond valor and might, beyond battle cries and quests, a love so deep it is a drowning pool.

"These are choices that only you can make. There is one more. The magic that passed from my blood to yours is strong. But more potent is the magic

you found in your own heart. Trust it."

Rhee closed her hands around her daughter's arms. Arms, she thought now, that had learned to lift a sword and to embrace a man who was her equal. "Give yourself to it without hesitation. If you waver, if you doubt and still do this thing, he may live. You may not."

Rhee offered a long white robe. "Wear this."

"Strange garb for battling life and death." Kadra put it on, belted it. "If my love isn't strong enough, I die."

Rhee folded her hands because they longed to reach out, to touch, to soothe. "Yes. I gave you to your fate once before. And my arms ached from emptiness. I watched you, in my way, as you grew, as you became. And I was proud. But my arms were empty. Now, I give you once more to your fate."

"Did you love the man who was my father?"

"With everything I am. And yet I could not save him. I could only watch while he was taken from me. He would have been proud, as I am, of the life we made together in you."

"Mother," Kadra said when Rhee turned to the arched opening. And she stepped forward, let herself be gathered close. Let herself hold.

"You found kindness," Rhee murmured. "And forgiveness. They will make you stronger." She held tight one moment more, just one moment more. "Be strong, my daughter. It is time."

She led Kadra back into the white room. Now Harper lay on a bed that was draped with thin white curtains. A garden of white flowers surrounded it. Dozens of slender, milky tapers added a quiet light.

He wore a white shirt and trousers. His face, while deathly pale, was unmarked.

Kadra parted the bed curtains. "His wounds."

"This much I could do. His flesh is healed, as yours is."

"He is beautiful. He is..." My life, she thought. "I have only known him a day, yet he has changed me forever."

"You changed each other. And that change will be stronger than the one Sorak put inside him. You must believe it."

"A sword is not enough." Kadra glanced over. "Is this my lesson?"

"You have always had more than a sword. Sorak is dead. Together you have accomplished this great feat, and both our worlds are safe. For this gift, each of you is granted passage into both worlds. As you choose."

"How can this be? The balance—"

"Love makes its own balance." Rhee walked to a table where each of the globes stood on a small pedestal. One emerald, one ruby.

"The emerald is your stone, and its key opens the portal to the world you knew. The ruby is his, and its key opens to his world. I must leave you. What you do now is between only you two. I will always be with you. Kadra, Slayer of Demons, your fate is again in your own hands."

Rhee held up her arms and vanished.

"This I must do without sword or dagger." Still, she took her circlet from the table, placed it on her scented hair. "But I am what I am. And all I am is yours, Harper Doyle."

She stepped to the bed, placed a hand on his cold cheek. The words were inside her, as if they, too, had been sleeping. "I love you with heart, with soul, with body. In all worlds, in all times. Come back to me."

And bending, she laid her lips on his.

Love and life, she thought as she breathed both into his mouth. Life and love. Strong as a stallion, pure as a dove. She drew the poison in, gave him her breath. Gift of heart and soul take now from me, and from the Demon Kiss be free.

Pain vibrated through her, but she kept her lips warm and gentle on his. *Dizzy*, she braced a hand beside his head, and gave.

I would die for you, she thought. I would live for you.

When his mouth moved under hers, when he stirred, she slid bonelessly to her knees beside the bed.

Outside, the sky deepened, gleamed gold, and the jeweled trees shimmered.

Harper dreamed of swimming, fighting through a black and churning sea that was swallowing him whole. He broke through its icy void, searching for her, battling the greedy waves that sucked him back.

Until he slid into a warm white river, floated there. And woke speaking her name.

She lifted her head, and felt no shame at the tears as she gripped his hand. "Yes. Yes, yes." She pressed his hand to her cheek, kissed it, then taking his hand, she laughed in relief at the healthy color in his skin and nails. "Baby," she said, relishing the term, "I am with you."

He saw only white, the gauzy draperies, the glow of candles through them, the richness of the flowers. Then he saw her as she rose up beside him and again laid her lips on his.

"If this is hell," he said aloud, "it's not so bad."

"You are not dead. You live. You are unchanged."

He sat up, amazed at the energy running through him, the absolute freedom from pain. "How?"

"Love was enough."

"Works for me. Where are we? What did you do?"

"We're in yet another dimension. Rhee the sorceress... my mother, brought us. She healed us."

"And what, exorcised the demon?"

"That was for me. A kiss waked you, and brought you back whole."

"Like Sleeping Beauty? You're kidding."

She leaned back. "You look displeased."

"Well, Jesus, it's embarrassing." He scooped his hair back, slid off the bed.

"You would rather die, with pride?" Though part of her understood the sentiment perfectly well, it still rankled. She who had never believed in romance had found the event desperately romantic. The kind of moment the bards write of. "You are ungrateful and stupid."

"Stupid, maybe. Ungrateful, definitely not. But if it's all the same to you, let's just keep this one portion of the experience completely to ourselves."

She jerked a shoulder, lifted her chin. And made him smile. "You saved my life, and you made me a man. Thank you."

Now she sniffed. "You are a brave warrior and did not deserve the fate Sorak intended for you."

"There you go. My ego's nearly back to normal now. And can I just say you look gorgeous. Incredible. In fact, there's an expression in my world about how you look right now. It goes something like, wow."

"Ritual foolishness," she replied, flipping a hand at the robe.

"I love the way you look. I love you, Kadra."

She sighed. "I know. If the love between us was not strong and true, you would not have waked so I could be annoyed with you." She looked away from him, deliberately, when he came to her, when he wrapped his arms tight around her.

So he kissed her cheek, kissed her temple where a bullet had grazed. "I thought I had lost you, and that was worse than thinking I'd lost myself."

Yielding, she turned her lips to his. "Harper Doyle."

"Kadra, Slayer of Demons."

She eased back, her eyes solemn despite the humor in his. "Do you wish me to be your lifemate and bear your young?"

"You bet I do."

"This is what I wish as well. This is not a traditional path for a slayer."

He lifted a hand to skim a finger over her circlet of rank. "We'll make new traditions. Stay with me, Kadra. Be with me. We'll stay here, wherever this is. It doesn't matter."

"This is not our place." She stepped back, gestured to the two globes. "The one on the emerald stand opens to my world. The ruby to yours. I believed that to keep the balance we must each go back, must each remain in the world where we came from. But, I have vision."

She looked back at him. "My mother is a sorceress, and her blood is my blood. I see what I once refused to see. I have magic inside me. I must practice with this as I once practiced with a sword. Until I am skilled."

"Slayer and sorceress. I get a two-for-one."

"There can be no balance when love is denied and refused. We are meant, so we will be."

"Choose," he told her. "I'll live in any world, as long as it's with you."

She picked up the bag that held their things, tossed it to him. She lifted her sword. And, crossing to the table, she lifted the globe that rested on a ruby stand.

"The Bok have lost their king, and the slayers who are my sisters will rout them, and continue the fight against all demons. But there are battles to be fought in your world, demons of a different kind to be vanquished. I wish to fight with you there."

"Partners, then." He took her hand, kissed it. "We make a hell of a team."

"And I like the pie called pizza, and the beer. And even more than these, the kissing."

"Baby, we were made for each other."

He swung her into his arms, crushed his lips to hers. When the portal opened, and the light washed in, they leaped into it together.

And went home.