



Demon Daddy's Heir

Author: *Celeste King*

Category: Fantasy

Description: She summoned me like I was hers to command.

Little witch didn't realize she was calling her future.

Not a demon. A Daddy.

I'm ancient. Bound in blood and fire.

I've shattered realms, conquered kings, broken entire bloodlines.

But none of that prepared me for her.

Mouthy. Reckless. Human.

She smells like chaos and talks back like she's not seconds from being claimed on my throne.

She doesn't know what she is yet.

But I do.

She's mine.

My heir-bearer. My little mistake.

My favorite obsession.

But in this realm, bloodlines are power—and now that she carries mine, every creature in hell wants her dead.

Let them come. I'll paint the gates in their blood.

And then go back to changing my son's diaper while she naps.

Read on for surprise baby, forced proximity, hellish devotion, and a demon daddy who'll kill for his family—then make breakfast. HEA Guaranteed!

Total Pages (Source): 30

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:04 am

ESALYN

SIX YEARS EARLIER

The healer's cool fingers press against my wrist, her touch too gentle to match the harshness of her words.

"Your pulse is still weak. The bleeding hasn't stopped entirely.

" She's a water nymph, I can tell from the faint shimmer that traces her skin when she moves, like sunlight dancing across a stream.

Her eyes, deep as ocean trenches, flick to the bundle nestled beside me on the bed.

"The child thrives while you wither. Interesting how demon blood works, isn't it? "

I say nothing. In Lord Vorrak's household, surviving means knowing when to disappear into silence.

"Two weeks," she continues, packing her herbs and tinctures with practiced efficiency, "and you're barely able to stand. Most would still be bedridden. You have surprising endurance for a human."

Not endurance. Fear. Fear makes the impossible manageable.

Erisen stirs beside me, tiny fingers flexing. In the dim candlelight, his skin appears almost normal—the faint copper tint could pass for a human tan. Only when he opens

his eyes do I see the truth of his heritage: those golden irises that gleam too bright, too aware.

"I'll need to report to Lord Vorrak. He's been... patient." The healer's mouth twists as if the word tastes strange. "He wants to know when you'll be able to resume your... duties."

My insides turn to ice. Two weeks. Two weeks of respite while my torn body struggled to knit itself back together after bringing his son into the world.

"Tomorrow, perhaps," she adds, not looking at me. "Or the day after. I'll suggest a few more days of recovery."

But we both know Vorrak won't wait. Not now that he knows his heir survived the birth.

The door closes behind her, and I count her footsteps as they fade down the corridor. I have minutes, perhaps less. My fingers tremble as I reach for Erisen, cradling him to my chest as if I might absorb him back into my body, protecting him from what's coming.

"We can't stay," I whisper against the soft down of his head. "Not one more night."

Moving hurts. Every shift sends daggers of pain through my abdomen, but I force myself up, ignoring the rush of dizziness. The small bag was prepared days ago—hidden beneath the loose floorboard under my bed. Just essentials: a change of clothes, a few stolen coins, dried food that won't spoil.

I wrap Erisen tightly against my chest with a long strip of cloth, crossing it over my shoulders and back, tying it securely at my waist. His weight—so slight, so precious—presses against the raw places inside me, but I welcome the pain. Pain

means we're still alive. Pain means we have a chance.

The cloak comes next, heavy enough to shield us from the perpetual chill of Velzaroth's ash-laden air. I pull the hood forward so it shadows my face, then check that Erisen can still breathe comfortably within its folds.

"We're going to be free," I promise him, though my voice shakes. "Far from here. Somewhere he'll never find us."

I ease the door open a crack. The corridor stretches empty, lit only by the occasional sulfur lamp casting yellow pools against the obsidian walls.

Vorrak's estate is built like a fortress—all sharp angles and shadows, designed to trap rather than welcome.

But I've had five years to learn its secrets, to map every servant's passage and forgotten doorway.

Moving silently becomes a meditation. Step, breathe, listen. Step, breathe, listen. The pain fades to background noise as I focus on keeping Erisen quiet, on avoiding the spots where the floor creaks, on timing my movements to coincide with the distant sounds of household activity.

Down the servants' staircase, through the kitchens where the cooks are too busy preparing the evening meal to notice a cloaked figure slipping past, into the storage rooms that connect to the delivery entrance.

Each successful step feels like stealing something precious from Vorrak. Each moment undetected is a victory.

When I finally reach the small side door that opens onto the service yard, I pause.

Outside waits either freedom or capture. There's no middle ground.

"Please," I whisper—not to any god or goddess, for they've never answered before—but to whatever force might care for desperate mothers and innocent children.

I pull the door open and step out into the night. The air burns my lungs with its familiar mixture of sulfur and sea salt. Ash falls like snow, dusting my cloak with gray flecks. And there, as promised—a carriage waits, its lamps unlit, the zarryn in harness standing unnaturally still.

"Quickly now."

The healer materializes from the shadows beside the carriage, her form almost liquid in the darkness. Her ocean eyes meet mine, and I see something unexpected—compassion, perhaps. Or solidarity.

"He's in consultation with his trade partners. I told him you need uninterrupted rest tonight." She opens the carriage door. "This buys you hours, not days. Make them count."

The carriage wheels crunch over ash-packed streets, each jolt awakening fresh pain in my body.

Erisen sleeps against me, his face hidden within the folds of my cloak, his steady breathing the only tether keeping me from dissolving into panic.

We wind through Velzarothe's outer district, where the buildings crowd together like rotting teeth, their obsidian facades streaked with sulfur stains and soot.

"This is where we part," the nymph healer says as the carriage slows. Her voice

carries no emotion, but her fingers twist together in her lap. "The market district. Busy enough to lose yourself, close enough to the docks for whatever comes next."

I nod, unable to form proper gratitude. Words seem inadequate for what she's risking.

"He'll kill you for this," I manage finally.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a bitter half-smile. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I'll be far from here before he discovers what I've done." She presses something into my palm—a small pouch that clinks with coins. "I've taken my payment from his coffers. Consider this yours as well."

The carriage stops in a narrow side street, and she helps me down, her touch careful around my still-healing body. For a moment, we stand facing each other—two women whose lives intersected briefly in the darkness of Vorrak's household.

"Go," she whispers. "And don't look back."

I clutch Erisen tighter and slip away into the shadows between buildings.

The market district teems with life despite the late hour. The wretched city never truly sleeps—the perpetual red glow from the calderas makes day and night indistinguishable, and desperation keeps commerce flowing. I move with my head down, just another shadow among many, searching for a way out.

An alley offers temporary shelter. I press my back against the cold stone, trying to calm my racing heart while scanning the street beyond.

Merchants hawk wares beneath stained canopies.

Dock workers trudge past with shoulders hunched against the constant drizzle of ash.

Two city watchmen stand at the corner, their eyes tracking anyone who might be carrying something worth taking.

The wind shifts, bringing a rush of sulfuric fumes that burn my throat. Erisen stirs against me, his tiny face scrunching in discomfort. A small whimper escapes his lips.

"Shh," I plead, rocking him instinctively. "Please, little one." My voice cracks with desperation.

His eyes flutter—those golden eyes that mark him as different, as dangerous to us both—and his mouth opens in preparation for a cry that will draw every eye in the market.

I slip my finger into his mouth, letting him suckle for comfort while I scan the street with increasing urgency. We can't stay here. Each second brings us closer to discovery, to Vorrak's men finding us, to being dragged back to that obsidian fortress.

That's when I see it—a merchant wagon loaded with crates and equipment, covered with torn tarps that flap like wounded birds in the acrid breeze.

The driver, a burly man with skin like tanned leather, is engaged in a heated negotiation with a butcher.

Their voices rise above the market's din as they haggle over the price of what looks like tuskram flanks.

"Highway robbery!" the wagon driver shouts, slamming his fist on the butcher's counter. "You think I crawled out of the calderas yesterday?"

The butcher responds with equal fervor, drawing the attention of nearby merchants and patrons.

This is our chance.

I wait until their argument reaches a crescendo, then slip from the alley. My body protests each step, pain flaring through my abdomen like hot pokers. The torn stitches from Erisen's birth pull and sting beneath my clothes, but I force myself forward, one shuffling step after another.

The back of the wagon sits unattended, its contents secured with fraying rope. I reach it just as Erisen begins to fuss again, his tiny hands curling into fists against my chest.

"Just a moment more," I whisper, kissing his forehead through the cloth.

With strength I didn't know I possessed, I grasp the wagon's edge and pull myself up, biting my lip until I taste blood to keep from crying out.

My raw hands burn against the rough wood, but I manage to roll myself and Erisen into the narrow space between two crates.

I pull a torn tarp over us, breathing through the musty smell of whatever this merchant transports.

Moments later, the wagon rocks as the driver climbs onto his seat, still muttering curses about the butcher's parentage. A whip cracks, and the zarryn pulling the wagon snort their displeasure before lurching forward.

I curl around Erisen, shielding his small body from the jostling ride. Each bump sends daggers of pain through my healing wounds, but I welcome it. Pain means we're still moving. Pain means we're getting further from Vorrak with every turn of the wheels.

"We're going to be okay," I whisper to my son, though I have no right to make such promises. I stroke his cheek, marveling at the softness of his skin. "We're going to

find somewhere safe."

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DOMNO

PRESENT

The Bleeding Heart tavern smells like stale wine and old secrets, its tables cluttered with mercenaries nursing grudges alongside their drinks. Every shadow holds a weapon, every laugh conceals a threat. The kind of place where violence is just another item on the menu.

I sit alone in the darkest corner, hood drawn low over my eyes, scanning the room through the rim of my chipped clay mug. The amerinth burns a path down my throat, its purple liquid glinting in the sputtering lamplight. Too sweet for my taste, but it does the job when sleep won't come.

My fingers absently trace the hilt of my blade—an old habit from years of watching my back. The familiar weight of it against my hip is more comforting than any drink.

The door creaks open, letting in a blast of cold night air that makes the flames dance. A courier steps inside, all wide eyes and nervous energy. He's dressed too clean for this place, his shoes barely scuffed. A messenger pigeon among batlaz.

The tavern goes quiet for three heartbeats before returning to its steady hum of threats and bargains. I know what's coming before the barkeeper points in my direction.

"You Vrash'Sarrin?" The courier approaches my table like he's walking toward his own execution, scroll clutched white-knuckled in his hand.

I don't answer. Just stare at him, unblinking. Gold eyes have a way of making humans uncomfortable.

"I was told to deliver this directly to you." He swallows, Adam's apple bobbing beneath his collar. "From Lord Vorrak. Payment upon completion."

Another bounty. Of course. The world never runs out of people who need finding.

"Just got back," I say, voice rough from disuse.

Three weeks of tracking a smuggler through the back alleys of Vesnios as a favor for Vaelrix.

I'm still not sure why he wanted me to take the bounty, but it cleaned my slate with him.

Despite having to go to gorgon territory.

I still have sand from their desert in my boots and a fresh scar across my shoulder where the criminal's poison blade caught me.

Old debts. Vaelrix saved my life once, back when I still thought mine was worth saving. Lord Kaz'Turoth got his precious artifacts back, I split the reward with Vaelrix, and I got to cross a name off my mental ledger.

"It's urgent." The courier's voice cracks. "A... human woman. She's taken something valuable."

My interest stirs despite myself. Humans aren't uncommon on Aerasak, but they don't have a lot of freedom, especially outside New Solas. Most can't survive the journey between planets, much less life on this one.

"Alive," he adds, as if I might misunderstand. "Lord Thren'Surath wants her returned unharmed."

I take another sip of amerinth, letting the silence stretch until sweat beads on the courier's forehead.

"The payment is substantial. Five hundred novas," he blurts out.

Enough to disappear for a while. Enough to drink until I can't see my brother's face when I close my eyes.

Something cold slides down my spine. A memory I can't afford to revisit—Zevan's face, his eyes wide with fear as I failed him one final time.

I hold out my hand, and he places the scroll in my palm, relief washing over his features. The weight of it feels heavier than it should, like all the scrolls that came before it. Just another hunt. Just another distraction.

"Thank you, sir." The courier bows slightly, backing away from my table. "Lord Thren'Surath awaits your response."

I don't open the scroll yet. Just tuck it into my belt and drain the last of my drink.

The tavern continues its dance of deception around me, but I'm already somewhere else—thinking about the hunt ahead.

A human woman, running from something powerful enough to offer five hundred novas for their return.

Not my concern why she ran. Not my business what happens after I bring her back. Just another job.

Just another way to keep moving forward when standing still means facing what I've lost.

After the courier leaves, I don't reach for the scroll right away.

My fingers rest on it, feeling the weight of the parchment, but my eyes drift across the tavern to where two miners are locked in a clumsy brawl by the hearth.

One throws a punch that lands with a dull thud against his opponent's jaw.

The other responds by hurling a mug that shatters against the wall, spraying purple amerinth like arterial blood across the stone.

The barkeeper doesn't even look up. In Velzaroth, violence is just background noise—like the distant rumble of the volcanic vents or the constant creak of the chains that suspend the city's walkways over the molten rock below.

I take another drink, letting the amerinth's sweetness coat my tongue before the burn follows. Sweet, then pain. Always in that order. Like life.

Like Zevan.

The memory comes unbidden—my brother's face, pale against the blood-soaked ground, eyes fixed on mine as the light behind them dimmed. His lips moving in words I couldn't hear over the roar of my own heartbeat in my ears. The weight of his hand in mine growing heavier as his grip weakened.

I'd promised to protect him. Another oath broken.

My knuckles whiten around my mug. Five years, and the wound still feels fresh. Still bleeds when I pick at it. Which is why I don't stop drinking until the memories blur at

the edges. Why I take every bounty that crosses my path—to keep moving, to stay ahead of what follows at my heels.

The miners' brawl escalates, drawing in a third fighter who swings a chair that connects with satisfying force. I watch with hollow interest, recognizing the desperate fury in their eyes. Men fighting because it's easier than feeling. I understand that better than most.

A dark tendril of my hair slips free from its tie, falling across my face. I tuck it back with scarred fingers, my gold eyes reflecting like twin flames in the bottom of my empty mug. The horns that curve from my temples cast shadows across the table—a reminder of what I am. What I've always been.

Demon. Hunter. Survivor.

The scroll feels heavy in my belt. Another job. Another chase. Another chance to lose myself in something other than memory and amethyst. The payment is substantial enough to buy months of peace—or whatever passes for it in my life.

I stand, ignoring the slight sway in my stance. The amethyst hits full-blooded demons harder than most, and I've had enough to dull the sharper edges of my thoughts. Just enough to function, not enough to forget. Never enough for that.

Dropping coins on the table, I move toward the door, my steps deliberate.

My blade shifts against my hip with each movement, the weight of it as familiar to me as breathing.

The miners pause in their brawl as I pass, instinctively tracking the predator in their midst. Smart enough to fear me, drunk enough to consider something stupid.

I meet their gaze with unblinking gold eyes, and they find urgent business elsewhere.

Outside, Velzaroth's perpetual ashy wind greets me like an old enemy.

It cuts through my coat, biting down to bone with cold teeth.

The sky above glows red from the distant volcanic peaks, casting the obsidian buildings in bloody light.

Sulfur and sea salt sting my nostrils as I navigate the narrow, winding street that hugs the cliffside.

The scroll stays tucked in my coat, pressed against my heart like a cold promise. Another hunt. Another distraction from the hollow space where purpose used to live.

I let the wind push me forward, each step taking me further from the tavern and closer to whatever lies ahead. Not hope—I abandoned that when I buried Zevan. Just movement. Just survival.

Just enough reason to see another dawn.

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DOMNO

V elzaroth rises like a black scar against the coast, its jagged streets etched into volcanic cliffs that overlook a roiling, wine-dark sea.

I arrive on foot, my purse lighter after paying for a ride to the city's gates.

My boots are caked in soot from the last border outpost, my cloak damp with sea mist and smoke.

Always the same—this city of outcasts and predators, where every shadow hides a knife and every corner offers either salvation or damnation, depending on how much coin you're carrying.

The main thoroughfare winds upward like a serpent, twisting through layers of crumbling obsidian architecture.

Steam hisses from vents in the stone, creating pockets of fog that cling to my skin and clothes.

Merchants hawk contraband beneath sulfur lamps that cast everyone in sickly yellow light—making demons look more demonic, humans more ghostly.

A fitting place for the in-between creatures of the world.

I shoulder past a group of sailors, their arms laden with exotic cargo fresh from the docks. One bumps against me, eyes widening when he catches sight of my horns, the

gold of my eyes. He murmurs an apology I don't acknowledge. Fear has always been the only currency that never depreciates.

The city breathes like something alive. Chains creak as they sway between buildings, suspending walkways over drops that plummet straight into molten rock.

The air tastes of salt and sulfur, coating my tongue with each breath.

At the crossroads, a street performer spits fire, her audience tossing lummi at her feet.

The flames briefly illuminate the tattoos covering her body—protection symbols, warding glyphs.

Smart woman. The only way to survive Velzaroth is to acknowledge its appetite.

I find lodging in a cramped rooftop room above a gambling den called The Lucky Bastard. Five novas for a week, paid in advance to a toothless old woman who doesn't blink at the weapons strapped to my back and hip. She hands me a rusted key, her fingers lingering on mine longer than necessary.

"Extra for clean sheets," she rasps, her breath smelling of nimond bean brew and decay.

I drop another nova on her palm, not bothering to argue. The thought of laying my head on whatever filth coats the mattress is enough to part me from my coin.

The stairs creak beneath my weight, announcing my presence to anyone listening. Four flights up, each narrower than the last, until I'm at the roof level where my room waits—dark and airless, its single window offering a jagged slice of ocean and the occasional scream of gulls. It matches my mood.

Inside, the space is barely large enough for the bed and a cracked washbasin.

The ceiling slopes sharply, forcing me to duck my head near the walls.

A worn desk sits beneath the window, its surface carved with symbols and threats and pleas from previous occupants.

I run my fingers over one—an intricate ward against nightmares. Didn't work for whoever left it.

I drop my pack on the threadbare rug, dust billowing up from the impact.

My weapons come next, arranged within easy reach of the bed—old habits that have kept me alive this long.

The noise from the gambling den below seeps through the floorboards—curses, laughter, the clatter of dice against wood.

A fight breaks out, followed by breaking glass, then the dull thud of a body hitting the floor. Just another night in Velzaroth.

The scroll from Thren'Surath sits inside my coat, still unopened. Five hundred novas for a human woman. A fortune by any standard, especially for what sounds like a simple retrieval. Which means it's not simple at all.

I finally pull it free, breaking the wax seal and unrolling it on the desk.

The parchment crackles beneath my fingers, revealing a sketch of a woman with sharp eyes and stubborn mouth, dark hair pulled back from her face.

Beside it, details of her last known location—a small settlement in central Ikoth.

My gaze lingers on the sketch longer than necessary. Something about her face—the set of her jaw, the slight furrow between her brows—speaks of determination. Of someone who doesn't run without good reason.

Not my concern, I remind myself. Not my business why she ran or what will happen when I bring her back. Just the job.

Just the hunt.

Just another reason to keep moving forward when standing still feels too much like waiting for death.

I roll the scroll back up and tuck it away, ignoring the hollow feeling in my chest. Tomorrow, I'll gather supplies and information. Tonight, I'll drink until sleep finds me.

For three days, I map Velzaroth like a general planning for war.

Each morning, I rise before the sulfurous sun breaks through the smoke-choked sky, stepping into streets still quiet from the previous night's debauchery.

The air hangs thick with ash and secrets, both equally likely to suffocate the unwary.

I begin with the undercity, descending crumbling staircases carved into the volcanic rock.

The pathways here twist like dying snakes, intersecting in ways that defy logic.

Perfect for an ambush—or an escape. I mark each intersection in my mind, committing to memory which alleys lead to dead ends and which offer sanctuary for those desperate enough to need it.

"Watching our routes, demon?" A smuggler with one milky eye nods at me from his post, smoke curling from his pipe. His skin bears the tattoos of three different prison wardens.

I don't answer. Just brush my hand over the hilt of my blade, a reminder that curiosity has shortened many lives in this city.

The undercity reeks of desperation—the fermented sweat of those one meal away from starvation, the acrid tang of fear that never quite washes from stone.

But even in this pit of misery, there's order.

I watch as children dart between market stalls, stealing what they can and reporting back to whoever owns them this week.

Watch as the guards accept their bribes at precise intervals, turning blind eyes to shipments they're paid to ignore.

By midday, I'm at the docks, where massive black chains anchor ships to stone piers.

The guards rotate every four hours—too frequent to be convenient for smugglers, too predictable for it to be anything but intentional.

The pattern is clear to any with eyes to see: the hour after rotation is when contraband flows freely.

"Fine day to be watching the water," a dock worker comments, not looking at me as she secures a mooring line. "Finer if you've got a reason for being here."

I toss her a lummi. "Just learning the lay of the land."

She pockets the coin without checking its worth. "Land's for the desperate. Water's for those with something to lose."

Another piece to file away. The water routes are watched more closely than the land. Useful.

I spend the evenings in taverns with names that sound like curses—The Bleeding Eye, The Salted Wound, The Lucky Bastard—where information flows as freely as the watered-down spirits.

I drink just enough to blend in, never enough to dull my senses.

Gold eyes make me memorable enough; I don't need drunkenness to mark me further.

Word of humans is scarce but exists. They're here, living in the margins of a city that would consume them if given half a chance. Servants in the high houses, laborers in the sulfur mines, bodies for sale in the steam district.

"A human woman came through last month," a barkeep with a facial tattoo that crawls up his neck like ivy tells me.

"Desperate for work. Pretty thing." He eyes me as he wipes a grimy glass with an equally grimy cloth.

"Why's a demon looking for human stock anyway?"

Thought your kind preferred sport over service. "

I slide a nova across the counter, watching his eyes widen at its value. "I'm a collector, not a sportsman."

On the third day, patterns emerge from the chaos.

The high houses on the eastern ridge employ human servants, prizing their shorter lifespans and lack of magical defenses.

In the western quarter, where heat vents make the streets permanently fogged, humans perform quick marriages for those needing documentation.

And in the sprawling market underneath the great chain bridges, I hear whispers of a human healer who treats those the city would rather forget.

It should be simple. Find her, secure her, deliver her to Thren'Surath. Collect my payment. Return to drinking myself into oblivion, one step closer to joining my brother in whatever lies beyond this life.

Simple.

But as I stand at my window overlooking the smoke-shrouded city, watching a black pitter bird dart between rooftops with unlikely grace, I feel a strange reluctance settling into my bones.

Another bounty, another soul dragged back to whatever cage they tried to escape.

How many times can I play this game before I become nothing but the weapon I carry?

I drain the last of my amethyst, embracing the burn as it tears its way down my throat. Not my concern. Not my business. Just the job. Just the hunt.

Just another reason to keep moving when standing still feels too much like dying.

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ESALYN

I wake before the ash-fall begins, that brief moment when Velzaroth pretends it isn't choking on its own decay.

My body complains as I rise, a map of stiffness and old aches—reminders of a past I can't outrun.

The mattress beneath me sags in the middle, permanently damp from the steam that seeps through the cracked floorboards.

Our one window is covered with a scrap of fabric I stole from a merchant's cart three cities ago, now grimy with soot but still keeping out the worst of the cold.

Cold water awaits in our chipped basin. I splash it over my face, hissing at the shock, but welcoming the clarity it brings.

Every morning the same ritual—washing away nightmares before they can settle too deeply into my bones.

My fingers trace the scar at my collarbone, a parting gift from Vorrak—not his cruelest, but the one I see each day.

A permanent signature on skin that should have been only mine to mark.

I tie my hair back with a length of twine, tucking the dark strands beneath a scarf. Hair like mine would fetch a good price from wig-makers, but I'd rather starve than

have strange hands that close to my scalp again.

Erisen still sleeps, his small body curled tight beneath the frayed blanket we share. Only his hair is visible, black as spilled ink against the dingy fabric. I watch the rise and fall of his breathing, counting each one silently. One, two, three... The most precious sound in this forsaken city.

"Eri," I whisper, hating to wake him but knowing I must. We survive by routine, by vigilance, by never breaking pattern. "Time to wake, little one."

He stirs, golden eyes blinking open—Vorrak's eyes, or so I'd thought. Now, I've seen enough demons in Velzaroath to know many share that trait. It brings me little comfort. His tiny hands reach up, finding my face in the dim light.

"Hungry," he says, the word barely audible. He's learned to be silent even in his needs.

Our breakfast is meager—a heel of bread I've saved, darkened with age and stale enough that I have to break it against our small table. I give him the larger piece, watching as he nibbles slowly, making it last. No child should know how to ration hunger.

"Remember today's rules?" I ask, smoothing his hair over the tiny buds of horns that grow at his temples.

"Stay close. Stay quiet." His voice is solemn, his eyes understanding too much for his six years. "Hide from the gold eyes."

My throat tightens. "Just until sundown. Then we'll come home and I'll tell you a story."

His smile, rare and precious, lights something in me that refuses to die no matter how hard this world tries to extinguish it. Hope. Love. Defiance.

We leave our shelter as the sky bruises with dawn, picking our way through Velzaroth's twisted arteries.

The building we live in should have collapsed years ago, held together by spite and the roots of stubborn plants that crack through stone.

The alley outside is narrow enough that I can touch both walls if I extend my arms, slick with condensation and something darker that might be blood.

Erisen's hand in mine is warm, his steps matching my pace with the precision of much practice. We wind through the lower city, keeping to the shadows. I've mapped every route, every hiding spot, every escape. Knowledge is survival here.

The market district comes alive with the sunrise, merchants setting up stalls beneath sulfur lamps that cast a sickly glow over their wares.

The butcher's shop sits at the corner where three alleys meet, its back pens filled with tuskrams awaiting slaughter.

The smell is overwhelming—blood and offal, the creatures' fear tang.

But it pays three lummi a day, and the butcher asks no questions about my past.

"Ah, the quiet one," the butcher grunts when I appear at the back door. His name is Krull, and his arms are perpetually stained to the elbows. "Pens need cleaning. Got three new beasts for processing today."

I nod, not wasting words. Erisen slips behind me, almost invisible in his stillness.

"Boy can have the scraps if he helps sort entrails," Krull adds, nodding at Erisen. An act of kindness in his way, though the thought of my son handling the bloody remains of slaughtered animals makes my stomach turn.

"Thank you," I say, because refusal isn't a luxury I can afford.

The day unfolds in blood and filth. I muck out the pens while tuskrans squeal and thrash, their bulbous bodies ramming against the wooden slats.

Their terror is palpable, a stink that clings to everything.

I work mechanically, shoveling waste and hosing down concrete.

My hands are cracked, bleeding in places where the harsh lye soap has eaten away at my skin.

Erisen stays near the back wall, sorting through buckets of organs—livers, kidneys, hearts—separating what can be sold from what will become scrap. His little hands are stained crimson, but his face remains impassive. He's learned to wear a mask better than children triple his age.

Midmorning brings a group of demons striding through the alley, their horns catching the sulfur light. The sight of them freezes the blood in my veins—gold eyes, arrogant postures, power crackling at their fingertips. Vorrak's kin, if not in blood then in nature.

"Eri—" I hiss, but he's already moving, slipping behind stacked crates with the silence of a shadow.

I bow my head, becoming invisible in my servitude. Just another human laborer, not worth a second glance. My heart hammers against my ribs as they pass, laughing at

some private joke. One pauses, glancing toward the crates where Erisen hides.

"Smell that?" he asks, nostrils flaring. "There's something..."

"It's a slaughterhouse," another replies, shoving him forward. "Everything smells like death and shit."

They move on, their attention caught by a vendor selling contraband spices. I exhale slowly, counting to ten before looking toward Erisen's hiding spot. He emerges like a ghost, his eyes wide but calm. Always calm, my strange, solemn child.

"Too good for this world," I whisper when he returns to his task. "Too good."

Finally, the day ends. The walk home clings to routine—we take different routes each day, weaving through Velzaroth's tangled streets like prey animals avoiding the scent lines of predators.

Today we pass the dye-works where women with blue-black hands hang strips of fabric from iron hooks.

Their fingers will never come clean; I understand that kind of permanent stain.

Erisen's face brightens when we reach our alley, exhaustion giving way to the small pleasure of recognizing home. Our shelter isn't much—a forgotten space barely held together. But it's ours.

I usher Erisen inside, my eyes sweeping the narrow alleyway one final time before following. My fingers find the three bolts automatically—slide, click, secure. One would be enough, but three buys precious seconds if someone comes. Three might mean the difference between escape and capture.

"Hands," I say, and Erisen holds his out for inspection. Blood has dried beneath his fingernails, embedded in the tiny creases of his knuckles. I pour water from our clay pitcher into the basin and add a drop of precious soap—bartered from a blind woman who makes it with lye and tuskram fat.

"Scrub hard," I tell him, working the soap into his small hands. "Under the nails too."

He obeys silently, methodical in his movements. Everything about him is careful, deliberate. A child shouldn't move with such practiced caution.

While he washes, I light our small brazier with trembling hands.

The flint sparks three times before catching the kindling.

Warmth blooms slowly, pushing back against the perpetual chill of our hideaway.

From our stores—a crate beneath the floorboards—I retrieve a handful of dried nimond beans and the bone we've been using for broth all week. Not much, but it will fill our bellies.

"Can I help?" Erisen asks, his clean hands now fidgeting at his sides.

"You can set the table." I nod toward our "table"—a flat stone balanced atop smaller rocks, with two upturned crates for chairs. He places our two wooden bowls and single spoon with careful precision, adjusting them until they align perfectly.

The broth bubbles thin and watery, the beans softening gradually. I stir with a stick whittled smooth, watching Erisen from the corner of my eye. His movements are fluid, economical. He wastes nothing—not energy, not emotion, not sound. Like me, he's learned that survival demands efficiency.

"Tomorrow we'll have fresh bread," I promise. "Krull's wife said she'd swap for the kidney packets you sorted."

He nods, not quite smiling but his eyes lightening in a way that warms me more than any fire could. When the food is ready, I serve him first, giving him the larger portion as always. My own hunger can wait; his cannot.

We eat in comfortable silence, the spoon passing between us. His fingers are delicate as he accepts it, careful not to touch my skin—another habit born of necessity. For years I'd flinched at contact, and he'd learned not to initiate it.

When the bowls are empty and washed, I bring out our most cherished possession: broken ceramic tiles I found discarded behind a scriptorium, and bits of charcoal from our brazier.

Learning his letters is dangerous—educated slaves fetch higher prices—but knowledge might someday save him where I cannot.

"Show me what you remember," I say, arranging the tiles on our stone table.

His small fingers grasp the charcoal, leaving faint smudges as he forms each letter.

His concentration is absolute, brow furrowed, the tip of his tongue visible between his lips.

The sight strikes me with unexpected tenderness.

In these moments, he's just a child learning to write, not a fugitive's son with demon blood.

"Good," I whisper as he completes the alphabet. "So good, Eri."

Night falls quickly in Velzaroth, the red sky deepening to black. I tuck Erisen into our shared pallet, pulling the blanket up to his chin. He yawns, fighting sleep as children do, though his reasons are darker than most. Sleep means vulnerability, means nightmares.

"Rest," I murmur, stroking his hair. "I'll keep watch."

When his breathing slows, I allow myself to study his face—the curve of his cheek still soft with childhood, dark lashes resting against skin several shades lighter than mine.

My fingers hover above his hairline, where I know the small bumps of horns hide beneath his black hair.

They've grown, no longer easily mistaken for unusual birthmarks.

Soon, no amount of careful brushing will conceal them.

I trace the air above his features, not quite touching.

Somewhere in this face is mine—the shape of his nose, perhaps the set of his mouth when he concentrates.

But those eyes when open, golden and bright, remind me of what cannot be outrun.

Vorrak's blood runs in his veins, no matter how far we flee.

How far does Vorrak's influence reach? The question torments my nights. Demons live for centuries, their grudges outlasting human generations. His pride alone would demand retribution—I stole from him twice: my body and his son.

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DOMNO

I 've tracked worse quarry through better terrain.

Velzaroith is a shit-stained maze of broken stone and seeping shadows, but the city's chaos works in my favor.

No one notices another demon passing through, not when we all walk with the same dangerous purpose.

Four days of methodical hunting, working outward from the docks where she was last spotted.

The woman's careful—I'll give her that. Leaves almost no trail. Almost.

The butcher's shop sits at a three-way junction of alleys, a strategic location with multiple escape routes.

Smart choice for someone who needs to disappear quickly.

I position myself across the market square, back against a crumbling wall where sulfur lamps cast just enough shadow to conceal my presence.

The hood of my cloak obscures my horns, though I don't bother hiding my eyes.

Gold irises are common enough in this cesspit of a city.

Movement at the back of the butcher's catches my attention—a slender figure in threadbare clothes emerges, head down, shoulders hunched inward.

Even at this distance, her body language speaks volumes: prey animal, always alert, always ready to bolt.

Esalyn Tyre. The human woman worth five hundred novas to someone powerful enough to hire me.

I go still, the way predators do before the killing lunge. But there's something unexpected. A small shape moves at her side, fingers curled in the fabric of her skirt. A child. A fucking child.

My jaw clenches. The dossier mentioned nothing about a son.

They move through the market with practiced efficiency.

Nothing wasted—not steps, not glances, not breath.

The kind of economy that comes from living on the edge of survival for too long.

I follow at a distance, weaving between vendors and laborers with measured steps.

Not too fast, not too eager. Hunting isn't about the rush; it's about patience.

The boy is small, maybe five or six. His movements mirror his mother's—head low, body angled slightly behind hers. But there's something in his careful steps, the way he scans their surroundings, that sparks recognition. He moves like a hunted thing. Like me, after Zevan died.

I watch as Esalyn purchases a small loaf of bread, counting out copper lummi with

fingers that hesitate over each coin.

Her nails are cracked, stained dark at the edges.

Working hands. She breaks off a piece of bread and passes it to the boy, who tucks it away rather than eating it immediately.

Saving it. A child who knows hunger intimately.

When she turns slightly, I catch a better glimpse of her face.

High cheekbones, skin the color of rich earth, eyes constantly moving.

Beautiful in the way dangerous things often are—all sharp edges and watchfulness.

But it's the exhaustion etched into the lines around her mouth that snags something in my chest. A bone-deep weariness I recognize from my own reflection.

The boy looks up suddenly, and his eyes lock with mine across the market. Gold. Demon gold. Not full-blood, but unmistakable. The pieces click together with sickening clarity. She's running from the boy's father. A demon who wants his half-blood son back.

Something cold settles in my gut. Five hundred novas suddenly feels like blood money.

The boy tugs at his mother's skirt, whispers something.

Her head snaps up, gaze sweeping the crowd until she spots me.

For a heartbeat, our eyes meet. I see the moment fear floods her system—pupils

dilating, shoulders tensing, hand tightening on her son's shoulder.

She doesn't run. Smart. Instead, she calmly changes direction, leading the boy down a side alley without obvious panic.

"Fuck," I mutter, pushing off the wall.

This job just got complicated. I told myself after Zevan that I'd never hunt children. Never be the monster that took my brother's life. But if I walk away, someone else will come. Someone who won't hesitate. Someone who won't see a mother and child fighting to survive—just novas on the hoof.

I follow at a distance, tracking them through Velzaroth's underbelly.

Their home, if you could call it that, is little more than a glorified crack in the city's bones—a space between a tannery and the cliff face, sealed with tar and desperation.

I watch from the shadows as she ushers the boy inside, checking the alley three times before following.

The door closes. One bolt slides into place. Then another. Then a third.

The boots on her feet are worn nearly through at the heels. The cloak wrapped around her shoulders has been mended so many times it's more patch than original fabric. Everything about her screams of someone using every ounce of strength just to stay one step ahead of whatever nightmare chases her.

I've seen enough. The bounty can go fuck itself. But walking away isn't an option—not when whoever posted it will simply hire someone else, someone who won't give a shit about hunting a mother and her half-demon son.

I need a new plan. One that keeps them alive without putting my own neck on the chopping block. One that accounts for the complication of demon blood in the boy's veins—blood that likely belongs to someone powerful enough to offer five hundred novas for their return.

My hand finds the hilt of my blade, a familiar anchor. Zevan's face flashes in my mind—young, scared, betrayed in his final moments. I won't be the cause of another child's terror. Not for all the novas in Aerasak.

I trail them for three days without approaching.

Keeping enough distance that she won't bolt, close enough to intervene if needed.

It becomes a strange ritual—each day I find a new shadow to occupy, a different vantage point to observe from.

My presence in Velzaroth's underbelly raises no eyebrows; demons pass through the city's edges often enough, and I've mastered the art of becoming invisible through stillness.

On the second day, I watch her arrive at the fish market before dawn.

She works twelve straight hours gutting catch alongside five other humans, her fingers moving with precise, mechanical efficiency.

The fishmonger—a surly old bastard with skin like cured leather—pays her half what he pays the others.

She doesn't argue, just pockets the lummi with that same careful hesitation, like each coin represents another day of breathing.

"You short her again," I mutter from my hidden corner, fingers tightening around my blade. "Stingy fuck." But I stay put. Drawing attention serves neither of us.

The boy waits nearby, tucked into an alcove with a frayed bit of rope that he knots and unknots with nimble fingers.

He doesn't wander, doesn't whine, doesn't demand.

Just watches, those gold eyes missing nothing.

Something in me tightens every time he looks up to check that his mother is still there.

On the third day, rain turns Velzarothe's walkways to slick obsidian, steam rising where droplets hit the heated stone beneath.

The boy slips in the market, skinning his knee.

He doesn't cry out—just bites his lip and rights himself before anyone notices.

But I see the way Esalyn's hand trembles when she kneels to check the wound.

She's running on fumes, dark circles under her eyes like bruises.

They follow the same careful path home each night, a winding route that doubles back twice and passes through a crowded tavern yard where pickpockets and merchants create the perfect cover. Smart.

By the fourth day, I've mapped their entire routine, calculated the moment she's most vulnerable, pinpointed exactly where I could intercept them without witnesses.

But I don't move. Something holds me back—something beyond the boy's demon eyes and careful movements.

On the fifth day, I find a better perch atop a crumbling guard tower overlooking the eastern market.

From here, I can see the full sweep of Esalyn's day unfold like a tattered scroll.

The way her shoulders straighten before she enters any public space, the practiced smile she offers vendors, the vigilant glances she casts over her shoulder.

Each movement tells a story of someone who's learned survival through relentless discipline.

She stops at the fishmonger's stall last, trading what looks like mended fishing nets for a small package wrapped in oilcloth.

The old man's face softens a fraction when the boy peers over the counter—the only kindness I've witnessed directed at them.

He slips an extra dried fish into the bundle when she isn't looking.

The boy catches my eye across the market and quickly looks away, tugging at his mother's sleeve.

My fist clenches against the stone ledge.

I expected to find a thief, a liar, a woman who'd conned her way into someone's pockets or bed before disappearing.

Someone who deserved the bounty on her head.

What I see instead makes acid rise in my throat—a woman stripped down to pure survival instinct, protecting her child with ferocious endurance.

As darkness falls, they make their way down that same narrow side street, disappearing into their meager shelter.

For the first time in years, I find myself plagued by indecision.

Simple math says to collect the bounty. Five hundred novas buys a lot of oblivion, enough amerinth to drown in until even Zevan's face blurs into blessed nothing.

But that gold-eyed boy keeps slipping into my thoughts. The careful way he watches for danger, the hunger that haunts his small frame. His mother's exhausted vigilance.

I should walk away. Let some other hunter claim this bounty and carry the weight of whatever happens next. But I know better—whoever posted that reward won't stop with one failed attempt. And the next hunter might not hesitate when they see the boy.

I could turn her in, make sure the boy finds somewhere safe. Split the difference between my conscience and my survival. But even as I consider it, something long dormant stirs in me—a feeling alien enough that it takes me a moment to recognize it as something other than anger or emptiness.

It's recognition. The bone-deep understanding of what it means to protect something when the whole world wants to tear it away.

Dusk settles over Velzaroth like a funeral shroud, and I remain perched above the city, caught in the unfamiliar territory between duty and something that might be mercy.

For the first time since burying my brother, I can't fall back on cold calculation.

Something about this woman and her son has cracked open a door I thought permanently sealed—and I'm not certain I want to see what lies on the other side.

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DOMNO

I 've positioned myself between a spice merchant and a weapon seller, their competing scents of cardamom and steel oil providing perfect cover.

From here, I can watch Esalyn work without being obvious.

She guts fish with mechanical precision, her knife flashing silver in the weak sunlight filtering through Velzarothe's perpetual haze.

The boy sits cross-legged nearby, playing with those same frayed bits of rope, fashioning them into intricate knots that his small fingers somehow manage without effort.

Six days of watching them has taught me their patterns. Six days of planning how to approach without sending them running. Six days of telling myself this is just another job while something in my chest argues otherwise.

The market pulses around us, a living organism of transaction and survival.

Velzarothe's underbelly always smells the same—sulfur and desperation, with notes of rot beneath.

I've breathed worse. The boy—still nameless in my mind—glances up occasionally, those gold eyes scanning the crowd with unnerving awareness.

Twice already he's nearly spotted me, his gaze sliding past my shadow before darting

away.

"Fresh catch!" the fishmonger bellows, drawing more customers. "Straight from the bloodwaters!"

Esalyn doesn't look up, doesn't pause. Her hands are red-raw from the brine and fish guts, but they never falter. The muscles in her forearms flex with each precise cut. Survivor's hands. Fighter's focus.

A commotion erupts at the far end of the market square—shouting, the crash of wood, angry voices rising above the market's normal din.

I straighten, instantly alert. A merchant's cart has toppled, sending barrels rolling across the uneven cobblestones.

People scatter, some cursing, others laughing at the vendor's misfortune.

Then comes the growling.

"Shit," I mutter, spotting the source. A pack of tethered drakehounds—nasty beasts with scaled hides and too many teeth—strain against their bindings, agitated by the sudden chaos.

Their handler, a heavy-set human with scarred arms, struggles to control them as the animals snap and lunge at passersby.

My attention snaps back to Esalyn. She's already moving, head up, hand extended toward where the boy was sitting. But he's not there.

The crowd surges as demons and humans alike push to avoid the rolling barrels and snarling drakehounds.

I scan the churning mass of bodies, searching for that small figure.

There—a flash of dark hair, a small form caught in the current of the panicking crowd.

The boy stumbles as someone shoves past him, sending him directly into the path of a particularly vicious-looking drakehound that's nearly worked its jaw free of its muzzle.

I move before my brain registers the decision, slipping through gaps in the crowd with practiced ease.

No conscious thought, just pure instinct driving me forward.

My hand closes around the back of the boy's cloak, fingers gripping the worn fabric as I yank him backward with enough force to lift him off his feet.

His small body collides with my legs as I pivot, shoving him behind me and into the shelter of an abandoned vegetable stall.

"Stay," I growl, the word rough in my throat. The drakehound lunges, meeting empty air where the child stood moments before.

The boy looks up at me, eyes wide but remarkably free of tears. Not afraid—alert. Calculating. Those gold eyes so like mine assess me with an intelligence that catches me off guard.

"Erisen!" A woman's desperate voice cuts through the chaos.

Esalyn appears through a gap in the crowd, face flushed, breath coming in short gasps.

Her dark hair has escaped whatever binding held it, framing her face in wild tendrils.

When she spots her son, relief floods her features for just an instant before wariness replaces it.

Her gaze lifts to me, and the temperature between us drops ten degrees.

"Mama," the boy—Erisen—whispers, and her arm shoots out, dragging him to her side with protective ferocity.

Her other hand never strays from the crude blade sheathed at her hip, fingers curled around the handle in warning.

Up close, she's even more striking—high cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass, full mouth pressed into a hard line, those hazel eyes flecked with gold regarding me with undisguised suspicion.

"Thank you," she says, the words stiff and forced, clearly weighing whether gratitude or immediate retreat serves her better.

I nod once, mouth dry. Up close, her scent hits me—salt water and something warm beneath it, like sun-dried cotton. Her boy—Erisen—watches me with those unnerving eyes, half-hidden behind his mother's leg but not cowering. Just observing.

A muscle in Esalyn's jaw twitches as she takes my measure. Her gaze travels from my horns to my boots and back, lingering on the scars visible at my throat, the weapons strapped across my body. Her fingers tighten on the boy's shoulder, pulling him fractionally closer.

"We should go," she murmurs to the child, but her eyes don't leave mine.

I step back, creating distance between us.

The market chaos is settling now, the drakehounds subdued, but the crowd still swirls around us.

She nods a wary thanks, lips pressed tight, and studies me like she's memorizing my face in case I'm another demon to be wary of.

The calculation in her eyes is unmistakable—sizing up potential threat, escape routes, whether thanks or flight serves her better.

I shrug it off and say nothing, my expression unreadable. No point in words. No point in prolonging this moment that's already stretched too thin between us. Better to disappear now, before she can ask questions I won't answer.

With a final glance at the boy, I turn and walk away, steps measured and unhurried.

The crowd parts around me—most humans in Velzaroth know better than to brush against a demon in passing.

I don't look back, but I feel her eyes on me as I disappear into the narrow alley that cuts between the fishmonger's stall and a boarded-up storefront.

The sensation of being watched lingers long after I've left the market square behind, tracking my way through Velzaroth's twisted streets and back to the sad excuse for a room I've rented.

The space is bare except for a pallet on the floor and my pack in the corner—nothing worth stealing, nothing worth keeping.

I strip off my weapons one by one, setting them within arm's reach, and stretch out on

the thin mattress.

Outside, the sky darkens from blood-red to something deeper, and the city's night sounds rise—drunken shouts, stray animals snarling, the distant rhythm of drums from the tavern two streets over.

Sleep comes eventually, dragging me under despite my resistance.

And then the smoke finds me.

It always begins the same way: air thickening, turning gray around the edges. The dream-version of myself knows what's coming but can never change course. I'm running through narrow passages that twist and change, the walls bleeding shadow. Somewhere ahead, someone is screaming.

"Zevan!" My brother's name tears from my throat, raw and desperate. "Zevan!"

The passages open into a chamber I know too well, where fire crawls along the walls and ceiling. My brother kneels in the center, blood streaming from wounds I can't see clearly through the smoke. His gold eyes—the same shade as mine, as our father's—find me across the distance.

"Dom," he mouths, reaching out a hand streaked with ash and blood.

I lunge forward, fingers stretching toward his, but the distance between us grows with each step I take. The smoke thickens, coiling around my brother's form, obscuring him from view. His scream pierces through it all—high and terrified and abruptly cut short.

"No!" The word shreds my throat as I bolt upright, sheets tangled around my legs, sweat cooling on my skin.

My heart hammers against my ribs as reality seeps back in. The cramped room. Velzaro. The job. The woman and her boy. I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, willing the images away, but they cling like cobwebs.

Morning light filters weakly through the narrow window, revealing my clenched fists, knuckles white with strain. My head throbs with a dull, insistent pain that wraps from temple to temple.

Every night, the same dream. Every morning, the same hollow ache. Some part of me remains in that smoke-filled chamber, forever reaching for a hand I'll never grasp again.

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ESALYN

I press Erisen to my side as we navigate the market, my fingers wrapped around his small shoulder with more force than necessary. He doesn't complain, though I catch him glancing up at me with those knowing eyes—too old for his six years, too aware of the danger that dogs our heels.

"Stay close," I murmur, scanning the crowd with practiced wariness.

Three days since the market incident. Three days of jumping at shadows, sleeping with my knife clutched in my fist, and checking our tiny room for signs of intrusion.

That demon—the one who pulled my son from danger—his face haunts me at odd moments.

Those gold eyes, sharp as blades but somehow not cruel.

The careful way he stepped back after returning Erisen to me, as if understanding my fear without taking offense.

It makes no sense. Demons don't help humans without reason, especially not in a place like Velzaroth where kindness is just another currency to be bartered.

"Mama, you're squishing me," Erisen whispers, squirming under my grip.

I loosen my hold slightly, offering him an apologetic smile that feels tight around the edges. "Sorry, love. Just stay where I can see you, alright?"

The marketplace is busier than usual today.

A merchant caravan arrived before dawn—we heard the commotion from our window—bringing goods from the western mountains.

Fresh vegetables, untainted by the ash that settles over everything in Velzaroith.

Spices that don't reek of sulfur. Clean water that doesn't need to be boiled twice before drinking.

We weave between the stalls, heading toward the fishmonger's where I still have work for another three hours.

Not my favorite job—the brine eats at my skin, leaving my hands raw and cracked—but it pays just enough to keep a roof over our heads and food in Erisen's belly.

The fishmonger doesn't ask questions, doesn't notice when I slip an occasional small fish into the deep pocket of my apron.

Something catches my attention at the edge of the square—a flash of movement, a familiar silhouette that makes my heart stutter.

The demon from the market stands beside a loaded wagon, his broad shoulders flexing as he lifts a crate that would take two human men to carry.

Even from this distance, he's unmistakable—taller than most, with those curved horns rising from his temples like a crown of darkness.

His long black hair is pulled back, revealing a face that seems carved from stone rather than flesh.

I pull Erisen closer, changing our course to avoid passing near him.

"Mama, look—it's him!" Erisen tugs against my hold, his voice bright with recognition.

"Hush," I warn, but it's too late.

The demon glances up at the sound, his gold eyes finding us unerringly in the crowd.

Something flickers across his face—not a smile, nothing so simple—before he gives me a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Just acknowledgement, nothing more, as he sets down the crate and turns to take another from the merchant's cart.

With a start, I recognize the merchant—a round-faced, bearded human called Thedrin whose wagon I stowed away in two towns back, when Erisen had a fever and we needed to get out quickly.

He'd discovered us halfway through the journey and, instead of throwing us out, had given Erisen a blanket and a cup of hot broth.

Before I can process this connection, a small pebble drops from Erisen's pocket—one of the smooth stones he collects and carries everywhere. It bounces once on the uneven cobblestones before rolling toward the wagon.

"My lucky one!" Erisen cries, and before I can stop him, he's wriggled free from my grasp and darted into the open space between stalls.

"Erisen!" I hiss, lunging after him, but he's already halfway to the wagon, his small legs carrying him with surprising speed.

The demon stiffens when he sees my son approaching. I expect him to ignore the child, to turn away as most of his kind do when faced with humans they don't intend to frighten or feed from. Instead, he sets down the crate he's holding and crouches as Erisen reaches him.

My heart lodges in my throat as I close the distance, ready to snatch my son away at the first sign of danger. But what I see freezes me in place.

The demon has retrieved Erisen's stone from where it rolled against his boot. He holds it out on his palm—a massive hand that could easily crush the smooth pebble—as my son approaches. Erisen stops just short of touching him, suddenly shy in a way he rarely is.

"This yours?" the demon asks, his voice like gravel over velvet, low enough that I barely catch the words.

Erisen nods solemnly. "It's my good luck. Found it by the water."

The demon considers this with surprising seriousness, then extends his hand farther, offering the stone. "Better keep it close, then."

My son reaches out, his tiny fingers brushing against the demon's calloused palm as he retrieves his treasure. "Thank you," he says, with that disarming politeness he sometimes displays. "Are you staying in the city long?"

I finally regain my momentum, closing the last few steps between us. "Erisen," I say, my voice sharper than intended. "Come here."

But the demon's eyes have lifted to mine, and something in that golden gaze makes the words die in my throat. Not threat, not even interest—just a quiet assessment, as if he's reading something written on my skin that I can't see.

The demon's eyes linger on mine, gold as molten metal. I step between him and Erisen, resisting the primal urge to run. Demons can smell fear—everyone knows that. Predators recognize prey instinct, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

"We need to go," I say to Erisen, keeping my voice steady despite the rapid drumming of my heart. "Thank you for returning his stone."

The demon rises to his full height, and I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact.

He's massive—even for his kind—with shoulders that block the red-tinged sunlight filtering through Velzaroth's perpetual haze.

His gray skin bears the faint silvery tracings of scars, telling silent stories of battles survived.

"It was no trouble," he says, and there's something in his tone—a careful neutrality—that doesn't match what I know about demons. They're vicious, prideful creatures who view humans as little more than amusing vermin. This one speaks to me like I'm a person.

Erisen peers around my leg, clutching his recovered stone. "You helped me before. In the market."

My spine stiffens. I'd hoped he wouldn't remember that.

"I did," the demon acknowledges, his expression unchanging. He doesn't soften his features or stoop to appear less threatening as some might when addressing a child. He simply regards my son with the same steady attention he pays to everything—watchful, assessing.

"What's your name?" Erisen asks, and I nearly choke.

Gods above, this child. I've spent years teaching him to be invisible, to never draw attention, and here he is chatting up the most dangerous creature in the marketplace like they're neighbors meeting at a well.

The demon glances at me, as if checking whether I'll allow this conversation to continue. When I say nothing—frozen in indecision—he looks back at Erisen.

"Domno," he answers simply.

A real name, not the half-growled threats most demons offer when forced to identify themselves. It sits oddly in the air between us, this small piece of truth.

"I'm Erisen," my son replies, and I feel cold wash through my veins. Names have power. Names can be tracked.

I grab Erisen's shoulder. "That's enough. We're late."

Erisen's brow furrows in that stubborn way that means he's about to argue, but Domno speaks first.

"Your mother's right." His voice remains that same neutral rumble, but I catch something else there—not command, not quite, but certainty. "Markets aren't safe places to linger."

"Is that why you pulled me away from that fight?" Erisen asks, undeterred.

The corner of Domno's mouth twitches—not a smile, but something adjacent to it. "Sharp memory, little one."

"Thank you for that," I hear myself say, the words escaping before I can catch them.
"For helping him then."

Domno nods once, a gesture that seems deliberate, measured. "Children shouldn't pay for the chaos of others."

From another demon, I'd assume these words masked some darker intent—that he was playing with us before revealing his true purpose. But there's no artifice in his expression, no hungry gleam in his eyes. Just that steady, watchful gaze that seems to see more than I want exposed.

"You're not from Velzaroth," I say, another observation that slips out unbidden.

"No." He doesn't elaborate, doesn't ask how I know. Perhaps it's obvious—his accent carries the harsh consonants of central Ikoth. Where I ran from.

Erisen picks this moment to step fully from behind me, clutching his stone. "Are you staying?"

"Erisen," I warn, finally finding my footing in this bizarre exchange. "We need to go. Now."

Domno shifts his weight, his massive frame suddenly more angled away from us—giving space rather than taking it. "Listen to your mother," he tells my son, then looks at me. "Safe travels."

With that, he turns back to the merchant wagon, lifting another crate as if our conversation never happened.

I pull Erisen away, moving through the market with renewed urgency, my mind churning. That brief exchange has left me feeling exposed, like someone peeled back

my skin to examine what lies beneath. There was none of the casual cruelty I've come to expect from demons. No threats. No intimidation.

Just those eyes, seeing too much.

"He's nice," Erisen whispers as we turn down the alley leading to the fishmonger's stall.

"No," I correct him sharply. "He's not nice. He's dangerous. All demons are dangerous, Erisen. You know that."

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But even as I say it, I find myself glancing back toward where we left him, a sensation like fingertips trailing down my spine. There was something in Domno's presence—a controlled power, a careful restraint—that doesn't fit with everything I've been taught to fear.

And that makes him more dangerous than most.

Two days later, I'm unloading a crate of brine-soaked krazee fish when I feel it—that distinct prickle along my spine that warns of eyes on me. I place the slippery catch on the fishmonger's counter, wiping my raw hands against my apron before glancing over my shoulder.

Domno stands at the edge of the square, a dark silhouette against the ashen sky.

Unlike before, he makes no pretense of other business.

He simply watches, those gold eyes tracking movement around him while somehow remaining fixed on where Erisen sits on an upturned barrel, sorting through a pile of fish bones for ones thin enough to use as needles in the small repair kit I keep tucked in my boot.

My muscles tense automatically. Predator in sight. Grab the child. Run.

But Erisen spots him first, his small face lighting with a surprised delight that makes my heart twist. Before I can call out, my son has slipped from his perch and scampered halfway across the open space.

"Mama, look who's here!"

The old fishmonger, a grizzled woman with skin like tanned leather, flicks her eyes toward me. "Your boy's got peculiar taste in friends," she mutters before returning to her gutting knife.

I wipe my hands again and hurry after Erisen, trying to shake the tremor that's settled in my fingertips. Domno hasn't moved, hasn't tried to approach my son. He stands like he's been carved from the volcanic stone that forms Velzaroth's bones, waiting for us to decide the distance.

As I reach them, I see he's holding something cupped in one large hand.

"Show Mama," Erisen is saying, balanced on his tiptoes trying to peer into Domno's palm. "They're magic stones."

Domno's eyes flick to mine, unreadable as ever. "Not magic," he corrects, voice pitched low. "Just not from around here."

He uncurls his fingers, revealing a handful of smooth, polished stones that glimmer with colors I've never seen in Velzaroth's dull, ash-coated landscape—blues like a clear sky, greens deeper than forest shadows, one that seems to shift between purple and gold depending on how the light catches it.

Erisen gasps, reaching out but stopping just short of touching them. "Where did they come from?"

"The southern shores of Ikoth," Domno answers, as if sharing geography lessons with a six-year-old human child is perfectly normal behavior for a demon. "The water there is clear enough to see through to the bottom."

I study his face, searching for the hidden motive behind this small kindness.

His features remain impassive, dark brows drawn slightly together in what might be concentration or wariness.

The sharp angles of his jawline and cheekbones catch the dull light of Velzaro's crimson sun, highlighting old scars that whisper of violence.

"You can have them," he says to Erisen, tilting his hand so the stones slide closer to the edge of his palm. "If your mother agrees."

It surprises me—this deference, this acknowledgment of my authority over what my son receives. Most demons would simply do as they pleased, especially with something so trivial.

"Please, Mama?" Erisen looks up at me, eyes wide and hopeful in a way I see too rarely these days.

I hesitate, searching Domno's face again. "Why?"

He doesn't pretend to misunderstand my question. "They're just stones," he says simply. "The boy likes them. I have no use for them."

It's so practical, so straightforward, that I find myself nodding before I can think better of it.

Erisen cups his hands beneath Domno's, and the demon tips the small treasures into my son's waiting palms. The soft clink of stone against stone sounds impossibly loud in the space between us, and Erisen's face glows with wonder.

"Thank you," he breathes, already sorting through them, examining each one with

careful fingers.

Domno straightens, nods once in my direction, and turns to leave—just like that. No demands, no lingering, no attempts to ingratiate himself further.

"Wait," I call, fumbling in the small pouch tied at my waist where I keep the few lummi we have to spare. "Let me?—"

"No." The word is firm but not harsh. He doesn't even turn fully back to me, just angles his head so I can see the sharp profile of his face. "They cost me nothing."

And then he strides away, moving through the crowd with that predator's grace that parts the flow of bodies without seeming to try. His dark hair swings against his back, tied with a strip of leather at the nape of his neck.

Erisen doesn't even notice his departure, too absorbed in his new treasures. I watch the demon's retreating form until he disappears around a corner, my thoughts a tangle I don't care to unravel.

Over the next week, Domno appears in the marketplace like a recurring dream—sometimes expected, sometimes a surprise that steals my breath.

I spot him helping Thedrin unload sacks of grain that the merchant's aging back couldn't manage alone.

Another day, he directs a lost traveler through a shortcut in the winding alleys that even I didn't know existed.

Each time, he acknowledges me with that same subtle nod, never approaching unless Erisen spots him first and rushes over with his peculiar lack of self-preservation.

He asks nothing of me—not my name, though he must know it from Erisen's chatter, not my story, not my body.

He simply exists in our periphery, a shadow that doesn't threaten to swallow us whole.

I tell myself not to trust it. Demons are patient hunters. Whatever game he's playing, I won't be the prize.

But then comes the wooden bird.

The wooden bird sits in the palm of Erisen's hand like something alive, almost warm against his skin.

It's small enough to fit in his pocket but carved with such intricate detail that I can make out individual feathers along its wings—a Black Pitter, unmistakable with its sleek silhouette poised for flight.

"It'll bring you luck," Domno explains, his low voice oddly gentle as he crouches to Erisen's level. Sunlight catches on his horns, casting twin shadows across his face. "Better than stones. Birds always find their way home."

My son's fingers close around the gift with reverent care. "Did you make it?"

Domno nods, a single dip of his chin that seems to cost him something. There's no pride in the gesture, just acknowledgment.

I stand a few paces away, arms crossed over my chest, fingers digging into my biceps.

Something sweet and ugly curls through my ribcage—a feeling I can't name.

It's not quite jealousy, not quite fear, but a tangled knot of both.

This demon with his scarred hands and golden eyes, crafting something delicate for my child.

This predator, taking time to whittle wood into the shape of freedom.

It doesn't fit the stories. It doesn't match the warnings whispered in dark corners about what demons do to humans who trust too easily.

"Look, Mama!" Erisen rushes to me, bird balanced on his palm like an offering. "It's just like the ones that nest above the market!"

I touch it carefully, running my fingertip along the smooth curve of its back. The craftsmanship is exquisite—not roughly hewn as I might expect from those massive hands, but refined, patient. Hours of work in each tiny detail.

"It's beautiful," I admit, the words rough around the edges.

Domno rises to his full height, towering over both of us. His expression remains inscrutable, but something flickers in those golden eyes when they meet mine—a question, perhaps, or recognition.

"Thank you," I add, the gratitude catching in my throat.

He shrugs one broad shoulder, the movement rippling across muscles honed by violence. "He said he likes birds."

So simple. As if it explains everything.

Erisen clutches the carving to his chest, beaming up at Domno with unguarded

affection that makes my heart lurch. "I'm going to name him Whisper," he decides. "Because he's quiet like you."

A shadow of something that might be amusement crosses Domno's face, softening the hard angles for just a moment. "Good name."

Later that night, as I tuck Erisen into our narrow bed, the carved bird rests on the windowsill where he can see it from his pillow. He's been holding it all day, showing it to the baker's apprentice, the old woman who sells ribbons, anyone who would stop to admire it.

"Domno says birds carry messages between demons," he tells me, eyes heavy with approaching sleep. "They're important."

I smooth back his dark hair, carefully avoiding the small horns that grow at his temples—a stark reminder of his heritage, of why we run, of what waits if we're caught. "Is that so?"

Erisen nods against the pillow. "He doesn't smile much, but he's nice, Mama. I can tell."

I want to correct him, to remind him that "nice" is a dangerous assumption when it comes to demons. But the words won't come. Instead, I find myself thinking of those golden eyes, watching us with something that isn't hunger or cruelty or any of the things I've learned to expect.

"Sleep now," I whisper, pressing my lips to his forehead.

When his breathing deepens into slumber, I pick up the wooden bird, turning it over in my hands. The craftsmanship is even more impressive in the soft lamplight—each feather distinct, the curve of the beak perfect, the eyes somehow capturing alertness

despite being simple indentations in the wood.

What kind of demon takes the time to create something this delicate? What kind of predator offers gifts with no apparent strings attached?

The next morning, I make a decision I know I might regret.

When Erisen asks if we can visit the south market where Domno sometimes helps the spice merchant unload his wares, I don't refuse.

When my son's face lights up at the sight of gray skin and curved horns among the crowd, I don't pull him back to my side.

I watch them—the massive demon with battle scars etched across his skin and my small son with his collection of treasured pebbles and carved bird.

Erisen chatters away, fearless in a way that makes my throat tighten, and Domno listens with that same grave attention he gives everything, occasionally offering a word or two in response.

They're an impossible pair, these two. The demon who should terrify us and the child who refuses to be afraid.

And I, against every instinct honed by years on the run, find myself allowing this strange connection to grow.

Not out of trust—never that—but because something in the careful way Domno keeps his distance, in the gentle handling of that wooden bird, in the solemn attention he pays to my son's rambling stories, doesn't match the monsters I've fled all these years.

I tell myself it's for Erisen's sake, this small freedom I permit. The flicker of joy in his

eyes is worth the risk.

But later, when Domno's gaze shifts to mine over my son's head and something unspoken passes between us—recognition, perhaps, or understanding—I feel a tremor run through me that has nothing to do with fear.

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DOMNO

The hours stretch like shadows beneath a setting sun now, each moment lingering a beat too long on my skin.

I'm still here, fifteen days after finding them.

Fifteen days of excuses I make to myself while watching Esalyn work her raw hands through piles of fish, fifteen days of catching the quiet smiles she reserves only for her son.

Fifteen days of failing to do the one thing I came to Velzaroth for.

I roll a small stone between my fingers—one of Erisen's castoffs, a dull gray pebble he deemed "too normal" compared to the colored ones I brought him.

It's smooth against the calluses of my palms, warmed by constant contact.

I should have left by now. Should have either taken the woman and collected my payment, or walked away from the contract entirely.

Instead, I find myself calculating the fishmonger's schedule, knowing Esalyn finishes her shift as the red sun hits the crooked tower in the western quarter.

I drift through back alleys and shadow-paths, timing my arrival to match her tired steps.

Not hunting her—not anymore—but orbiting her life like some tethered thing.

Today, I lean against the wall across from the fish stall, watching ash drift like snow across the square. Merchants pack their wares as the day fades. The scent of sulfur mingles with rotted fish, but somehow I've grown used to it.

Erisen spots me first, as always. His eyes light up, golden as a demon's but set in that soft human face. He waves with one small hand still stained with fish scales.

"Domno!" He breaks away from his mother's side, racing toward me with that peculiar fearlessness that tightens something in my chest.

I straighten from the wall, no longer bothering to pretend I'm here for any other reason. The boy reaches me, bouncing on his toes, excitement practically vibrating through his small frame.

"I found another one," he declares, fishing in his pocket. "Look."

He produces yet another pebble, this one with a vein of quartz running through its center—nothing special by any measure, but he holds it like treasure. I take it with care, examining it as seriously as I would examine a battle plan.

"Good eye," I tell him, passing it back. "Strong stone."

His smile widens, revealing the gap where he lost a tooth three days ago. He tucked it beneath his pillow after I told him an old demon superstition about teeth holding memories. I've never had children, never wanted them—but something about his trust burns through my defenses like acid.

Esalyn approaches more slowly, wiping her hands on her apron.

The constant work in brine has chapped her skin, leaving redness across her knuckles.

Her dark hair is tied back today, a few strands escaping to frame her face.

There's exhaustion in the shadows beneath her eyes, but wariness too—never completely faded, even after these weeks of cautious interaction.

"You're making a habit of this," she says, but there's no edge to her words. Just observation, perhaps a hint of amusement.

"Slow day," I reply with a shrug that dismisses the hours I spent helping unload timber at the eastern gate, just so I'd have reason to pass through this part of the market.

She doesn't believe me—I can see it in the slight narrowing of her eyes—but she doesn't challenge the lie either. Instead, she adjusts the worn sack slung over her shoulder, grimacing slightly. The seam has split, threatening to spill her meager purchases.

Without thinking, I reach for it. "Let me carry that."

She hesitates, that flicker of instinctive distrust crossing her features. Then, to my surprise, she hands it over.

"Still think I'll devour you both the moment you turn your backs?" I ask, keeping my tone neutral despite the unfamiliar weight of her trust in my hands.

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "No, but old habits die hard."

Erisen tugs at my free hand, fingers barely wrapping around two of mine. "Can we show him, Mama?"

Esalyn's expression softens when she looks at her son, though tension remains in the line of her shoulders. "Show him what?"

"The drawing I did. Of Whisper flying."

She hesitates, then nods. "I suppose—if Domno doesn't have somewhere else to be."

They both look at me, waiting. The woman with her guarded eyes and the boy with his open face. I could tell them I have business elsewhere. Should tell them that. Instead, I adjust the sack on my shoulder.

"Lead the way."

They live in a house—if it can be called that—that I'm shocked is still standing.

It looks like the wind might blow it over and I have to duck deeply to get inside, careful not to hit my head on the low ceilings.

The space is small but meticulously clean— a single bed pushed against one wall, a stone slab made into a table, a curtain partitioning off what must be their washing area, and a small worn rug in the center.

The wooden bird I carved sits on the windowsill beside a row of colored stones and dried flowers.

Erisen immediately digs through a box beneath the bed, producing a scrap of paper covered in charcoal marks. The drawing is childish but recognizable—a bird with outstretched wings soaring above what might be mountains or might be waves.

"Whisper's going on an adventure," he explains, holding it up. "To find his family."

I crouch to examine it properly, aware of Esalyn watching us both. "Good wingspan," I comment, pointing to the extended wings. "He'll fly far with those."

Erisen beams, then scrambles to show me other drawings—stick figures that he identifies as himself, his mother, the fishmonger, and a surprisingly recognizable rendering of me, horns and all, standing taller than the rest.

"Quite the artist," I tell him, and mean it. The boy has an eye for detail beyond his years.

"He gets it from his father," Esalyn says quietly.

It's the first time she's mentioned the boy's demon parent, and something in her tone raises the hair on my neck. There's history there, buried beneath her careful words. History I don't have the right to ask about.

But Erisen has no such restraint. "Did you know my father?" he asks me, eyes wide with sudden interest.

Esalyn stiffens beside me. I keep my expression neutral, shaking my head. "No," I answer honestly. "I don't know many other demons."

"But you're both from Reinmirth," he persists.

"It's a big place," I tell him. "Like saying all humans come from the same village."

He considers this with a seriousness that seems too heavy for his small shoulders. "Oh. Well, Mama says he was very powerful."

Esalyn's hand settles on his shoulder, a gentle but unmistakable warning. "That's enough questions, love. Why don't you put away your drawings while I make us

some tea?"

The mention of tea surprises me. It's an invitation to stay, to linger in this small, clean space that smells of herbs and soap rather than the ever-present sulfur of Velzaroth's streets.

I should refuse. Should walk away before this strange orbit I've found myself in pulls me any closer to their lives. But when Esalyn glances at me, a silent question in her dark eyes, I find myself nodding.

"Tea would be good."

I return the next day, and the next, and the one after that. Seventeen days now. Eighteen. Nineteen. Each morning, I wake with the same thought: today is when I finish this. Today is when I either collect my bounty or walk away for good.

But I find myself at their door anyway, bearing small gifts that I tell myself mean nothing. A leather cord for Erisen to string his stones. A jar of salve for Esalyn's chapped hands, purchased from a traveling herbalist at twice its worth.

We sit at their small table tonight, where she has dragged in another crate for me, the lamplight casting long shadows against the walls.

Steam rises from cups of meadowmint tea, curling in the space between us like question marks.

Erisen chatters about his day, about the lunox he saw in the marketplace—"White as snow with a blue face, Domno!

And a tail this big!"—while his hands stretch wide to demonstrate.

In return, I offer little of myself, but I listen like it matters. My silence isn't cold anymore—it's careful, considerate. I watch him with a focus that once served me well in tracking targets but now feels like something else entirely.

"And then she let me pet it!" Erisen continues, practically bouncing in his chair. "Its fur was so soft, like the blanket Mama made, but warmer."

Esalyn laughs at his enthusiasm, a sound like water over stones—clear and unexpected in this ash-choked city.

The corners of her eyes crease, and for a moment, the weariness that typically clings to her features falls away.

I find myself watching her like the sound unsettles me, as though I forgot what joy sounded like.

Something shifts in me, an uncomfortable tightness that has no place there. I've spent years perfecting the art of remaining unmoved, untouched. Yet here I am, affected by a human woman's laugh.

"You'd like Reinmirth," I say to Erisen, the words escaping before I can catch them. "There are creatures there with fur softer than any lunox."

His golden eyes widen. "Really? Like what?"

I hesitate, suddenly aware of Esalyn's attention fixing on me. It's rare that I offer anything of my homeland, anything of myself beyond what's necessary for this strange arrangement we've found ourselves in.

"Kilmar," I answer finally. "Like great cats but with scales mixed in their fur. And thalivern—insects with wings like colored glass."

"Do you miss it?" Esalyn asks quietly. "Your home?"

The question catches me off guard. No one has asked me that in years—not since Zevan. My fingers tighten around the chipped mug, feeling the heat seep into my palms.

"Parts of it," I admit. "The thick forests. The black sand beaches. Not much else."

She studies me with those dark eyes that see too much. "What made you leave?"

I should deflect the question. Should steer the conversation back to safer waters. Instead, I find myself answering with a truth I rarely acknowledge.

"Nothing there worth staying for."

It's not the whole story—not even close—but it's more than I've given anyone in a long time. Esalyn seems to recognize this, nodding slightly before returning her attention to her tea.

Erisen, oblivious to the weight of the moment, tugs at my sleeve. "Would I like it? Since I'm part demon?"

The question hangs in the air, innocent yet loaded. Esalyn tenses, her fingers whitening around her mug. I keep my expression neutral despite the rage that flares at the implication of the boy's heritage—at what his mother must have endured.

"You might," I tell him carefully. "But it's not always kind to half-bloods." I glance at Esalyn, silently acknowledging what she already knows. "Or to humans."

She looks away, but not before I catch the shadow that crosses her face. There's history etched into her every movement, into the protective way she shifts toward her

son.

I tell myself this is just a detour—just a pause before finishing the job—but the days keep passing, and I keep showing up.

Keep finding reasons to linger in this small room with its mismatched furniture and carefully mended curtains.

Keep allowing myself to be drawn into their orbit, against every instinct that has kept me alive all these years.

The bounty waits. Five hundred novas—enough to spend the rest of my life in comfortable numbness. But comfort has never been what I sought, and the numbness I've lived in for years seems to be falling away, replaced by something sharper, more dangerous.

Something like feeling.

DOMNO

I feel oddly uneasy when I leave Esalyn and Erisen hours later. But I don't go to my room. I go to where information is spread and can give me a better idea of what is waiting for us. Of how much time I have.

Heavy smoke hangs in the air of The Broken Horn, a tavern where the walls sweat as much as the patrons.

It's well past midnight, and I find myself perched on a stool worn smooth by years of similarly disreputable asses.

The place reeks of stale amerinth, sweat, and the particular tang of desperate decisions being made.

Perfect for my needs.

I nurse a drink I have no intention of finishing—a murky concoction that probably contains more ash than alcohol.

My fingers curl around the chipped glass, seemingly relaxed, though my body remains coiled tight beneath my casual posture.

Nothing about me says "I'm listening" except that I am, every sense tuned to the conversations bleeding together around me.

A pair of smugglers argue about cargo routes to my left. Behind me, a woman with

scales freckling her cheeks haggles with a man missing three fingers. Information flows like sewage in places like this—abundant, filthy, but valuable if you know how to filter it.

The bartender—a hulking creature with tusks filed to sharp points—slides another drink in front of me without asking. I haven't finished the first, but that's not the point. The cost of occupying space here is continuous patronage.

"Haven't seen you in a while," he grunts, voice like gravel shifting underfoot. I did spend the first week here in Velzaroth drinking myself underneath his bar.

I shrug. "Been busy."

His yellow eyes assess me with the particular wariness of someone who's broken up too many lethal fights. "Must be. All the hunters have been scrabbling for work lately. Except you."

There's a question beneath his observation. I ignore it, sliding a few lummis across the scarred wood instead. The coins disappear beneath his massive hand.

"Heard anything interesting?" I ask, the practiced casualness of someone making conversation rather than gathering intelligence.

He snorts, a sound like metal scraping against stone. "Depends what you find interesting. Had four brawls this week. Found a severed hand in the privy." He leans forward, dropping his voice. "And there's rumors a kal'galan finally made it to the city."

That catches my attention. Kal'galan are rare—demons who practice blood magic, outlawed even in the lawless corners of Ikoth. If one's in Velzaroth, things will get bloody fast.

But it's not what I came for.

I'm about to press further when a burst of laughter erupts from a table in the corner. Three mercenaries—two human, one with the telltale ridged skin of a half-gorgon—sprawl around a table littered with empty glasses.

"—wasting his time," the half-gorgon says, voice carrying through the smoky air. "Five hundred novas just sitting there unclaimed."

My fingers tighten imperceptibly around my glass. The mercenary beside him—a woman with a scar bisecting her face—leans forward.

"You sure it hasn't been collected? Seems like easy money, tracking down one human woman."

Something cold settles in my stomach. I don't move, don't react, though my pulse quickens beneath my skin.

"Positive," the half-gorgon replies, tapping ash from a rolled herb onto the table. "Spoke to Thren's courier myself yesterday. Said they're getting impatient, might double the bounty soon."

The name slams into me like a physical blow. Thren. Vorrak Thren'Surath. Other hunters are talking to him? Asking about the bounty?

And I've been playing house with his quarry.

"You going after it?" the third mercenary asks, a burly human with fingers stained black with what might be poison.

The half-gorgon laughs. "Nah. Got better things to do than chase some noble's

runaway pet."

Heat flares behind my eyes at his words, a familiar precursor to violence. I imagine the satisfying crunch his windpipe would make beneath my hand, how easily his spine would snap if I decided to make an example of him.

Instead, I remain still, processing the implications of what I've just heard. Vorrak Thren'Surath is still pushing to get Esalyn. To get Erisen. And he's growing impatient enough to raise the bounty.

Which means others will come—hunters less conflicted than I've become. Hunters who won't hesitate to drag them back to whatever fate awaits in Reinmirth.

I drain my untouched drink in one swallow, letting the harsh liquor burn away the tightness in my throat. The tavern suddenly feels too close, too stifling, filled with potential threats rather than just the usual collection of violent opportunists.

Five hundred novas. Soon to be more. For a woman with work-rough hands and a boy who collects colored stones.

And somewhere in one of Reinmirth's black spires, a demon noble waits for their return.

I've barely set the empty glass down when a voice cuts through the tavern's din, low and controlled but unmistakably directed at me.

"Domno Vraith'Sarrin."

Not a question. A summons.

I turn slowly, keeping my movements casual even as every instinct screams to reach

for the blade at my hip. The speaker stands three paces away—close enough that he's slipped past my awareness, which means he's better than most.

He's built like a whip, all lean muscle beneath expensive clothes too fine for this part of Velzaroth.

Human, or close enough to pass, with skin so pale it's nearly translucent.

Blue veins map tributaries beneath that sickly canvas.

But it's his eyes that mark him as something other—colorless, like water with all the life leached out of it.

My gaze drops to his throat, where I find what I'm looking for: a brand burned into the flesh, still raw at the edges. The mark of House Thren'Surath—Vorrak's personal insignia, a stylized demon horn wrapped in thorny vines.

One of Vorrak's couriers then. Blood-bound servants who exist only to deliver messages and die if they fail.

"Been a while since anyone's used my full name," I say, leaning back against the bar as if this interruption is merely a mild nuisance. "You're far from Reinmirth."

The courier's mouth twitches, not quite a smile. "Lord Thren'Surath sends his regards. And his... concern. He expected results by now."

Of course he did. Nobles like Vorrak measure time differently than the rest of us—expectation and fulfillment should be separated by nothing more than the span of a thought.

Around us, conversations dim as patrons sense the delicate weight of violence

hanging in the air. Not outright fear—this is The Broken Horn, after all—but the instinctive wariness of scavengers detecting larger predators in their midst.

"Your lord's timeline wasn't part of our arrangement," I say, keeping my voice flat. "Tracking takes time."

The courier's empty eyes assess me, searching for deception. "Twenty days seems excessive for a human woman with limited resources. Especially for a hunter of your... reputation."

There's a barb in those words, a delicate questioning of my abilities that would once have ended with his body cooling on the floor. Now it just makes my jaw clench, the flare of gold in my eyes the only external sign of my irritation.

"She's proven more elusive than expected," I lie smoothly, the words falling from my tongue with practiced ease. "Moves constantly. Has help." I deliberately omit any mention of Erisen. Let Vorrak's pet believe I'm still unaware of the child—it might buy them time if things go sideways.

The courier's head tilts, a movement too precise to be natural. "And yet you remain in Velzaroht."

"She was here. Trail goes cold at the eastern gates. I'm picking up threads." Another lie, offered with the confidence of truth. "Your lord's property will be returned. I don't fail."

"Property," the courier repeats, something like amusement touching his bloodless lips. "Yes, Lord Thren'Surath is most eager to reclaim what's his. He offers an additional three hundred novas if delivery is made within the week."

Eight hundred total. Enough wealth to disappear forever, to drink myself into

oblivion on some nameless planet where no one knows what I've done or who I've failed.

All it would cost is Esalyn's freedom. Erisen's future.

I know what they would face in Vorrak's keeping. I've heard the whispers about his particular tastes, the servants who disappear, the screams that echo through his compound. The thought of Esalyn in his hands—of Erisen growing up in those shadows—twists something raw and painful beneath my ribs.

"Tell your lord I'll collect when the job is done." I meet his pale gaze steadily. "No timelines. No guarantees beyond completion."

For a moment, I think he'll press further, but something in my expression must convince him it's unwise. He inclines his head in a mockery of respect.

"Lord Thren'Surath awaits your success." The words carry the weight of a blade against my throat. "Do not disappoint him."

He turns without waiting for a response, slipping through the crowd like smoke. I watch until he disappears through the tavern's warped doorway, only then allowing myself to exhale slowly through clenched teeth.

The bartender sets another drink before me without comment. This time, I don't hesitate. I drain it in one burning swallow, but the fire of cheap amerinth does nothing to drown the disgust twisting in my gut.

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ESALYN

I 'm cutting zynthra when I first notice it—the distinct pause in Erisen's humming from the doorway.

Just a moment's hesitation before he abandons the tune altogether.

When I glance over my shoulder, he's already halfway out the door, clutching his drawing to his chest like it might blow away in the perpetual ashen breeze.

"Stay where I can see you," I call after him, the words so familiar they might as well be carved into my tongue.

Erisen doesn't answer, but he doesn't go far.

Just to the edge of the alley where our broken-down shack meets the wider street, his small frame silhouetted against the rusty light of Velzaroth's eternal dusk.

His head pivots left, then right, scanning the crowds with an intensity that makes my chest tighten.

I know exactly who he's looking for.

The knife in my hand stills against the cutting board.

I should call him back inside, continue our routine as if the demon hasn't carved himself a space in our lives.

As if Erisen doesn't light up when he appears, as if my own pulse doesn't quicken at the sight of broad shoulders and calculating gold eyes.

Instead, I watch my son wait, hope making him stand straighter than any six-year-old should know how to stand.

"He's just a demon passing through," I'd told myself the first time Domno appeared, materializing like a shadow come to life in the market.

"Just curious about a half-blood child," I'd reasoned the second time, when he'd pulled Erisen to safety that day we first met.

"Just being kind," I'd thought the third time, when he presented my son with a carved wooden bird so delicate it seemed impossible it came from those scarred, battle-worn hands.

Now it's been three weeks, and I've run out of excuses.

Erisen bounces on his toes, impatience vibrating through his small body.

The paper in his hands crinkles as he adjusts his grip, careful not to smudge the chalk illustration he spent all morning crafting.

From here, I can make out splashes of red and green—another of his fantastical creatures born from a mind too gentle for this ash-choked city.

I should be terrified that my son waits so eagerly for a demon. After what Vorrak did to me—what he would do to Erisen if he found us—I should forbid any contact with Domno's kind.

But Domno isn't like Vorrak. That became clear the moment he knelt to meet my

son's eyes as an equal, rather than looking down at him as a curiosity or possession.

The knife resumes its rhythm against the cutting board, the steady thunk-thunk-thunk matching my heartbeat.

Outside, Erisen's posture changes, his spine straightening like a bowstring pulled taut.

My gaze follows his, landing on the tall, dark figure appearing from the direction of the eastern quarter.

Domno moves like smoke through water—fluid yet substantial, each step deliberate despite his casual pace.

His long black hair is tied back today, emphasizing the sharp planes of his face and the regal curve of his horns.

Even dressed simply in a worn leather tunic and dark pants, he carries himself with a predator's confidence.

But it's not fear that flutters beneath my ribs as I watch him approach.

"DOMNO!" Erisen's voice rings out, high and clear against Velzaroth's constant background rumble of steam vents and distant machinery. He waves his drawing overhead like a flag, nearly bouncing in place.

I move to the doorway, drying my hands on my apron. Close enough to intervene if needed, but giving them space—this strange ritual that has somehow become part of our lives.

Domno's stern expression breaks at the sight of my son. It's subtle—just a softening around the eyes, a slight quirk of his mouth—but the transformation is startling. The

dangerous hunter vanishes, replaced by something I don't have a name for.

"What's this?" he asks, his deep voice carrying to where I stand. He kneels in one fluid motion, bringing himself to Erisen's height—a gesture that makes my throat tighten inexplicably. Demons don't kneel. Not to anyone, certainly not to half-blood children.

Erisen thrusts the paper forward, words tumbling out in his excitement.

"I drew monsters! But they're good monsters, not scary ones.

This one"—he points to a spiky green blob—"is made of grass and sticks and protects the forest. And this one"—his finger moves to a swirl of red and orange—"is made of fire but he doesn't burn anything unless it's bad people. "

Domno studies the drawing with the same intensity I've seen him assess potential threats in the market. His brow furrows slightly as he takes in every detail, treating my son's imagination with the seriousness of a battle plan.

"Strong creatures," he says after a moment, his rough voice gentler than I've ever heard it. "Good defenders. You gave the fire one clever eyes."

Erisen beams at the praise, his face lit with a joy so pure it makes my chest ache. "They're friends," he explains earnestly. "Like us."

Something flickers across Domno's face—too quick to read, but enough to make me wonder what ghosts he carries. Then he nods, a solemn agreement between equals.

"Like us," he affirms, and though the words are simple, they carry a weight I can feel even from where I stand.

I should interrupt. Should call Erisen inside, thank the demon for his time and establish boundaries that have already been trampled beyond recognition.

Instead, I lean against the doorframe and watch as my son launches into another story about his imaginary guardians, hands gesturing wildly in the air.

Domno listens with unwavering attention, nodding at appropriate moments, occasionally asking questions that set Erisen off on new tangents. There's an ease between them that defies explanation—as if they've known each other for years instead of weeks.

And as the story unfolds, I find myself watching Domno's face more than my son's. The subtle shifts in his expression as he responds to Erisen—amusement, interest, something almost like tenderness—reveal glimpses of a man beneath the demon's carefully constructed armor.

When he smiles—really smiles, not the calculated expressions he offers in the marketplace—it transforms his entire face.

The hard angles soften, the ever-present vigilance in his eyes gives way to something warmer, and for a moment, I glimpse someone who might have existed before whatever battles carved those scars into his skin.

That smile creates an ache deep in my chest, a yearning I don't dare name.

A breeze stirs, carrying the metallic tang that always hangs in Velzaroth's air.

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, watching as Erisen's small hand traces invisible patterns across Domno's leather glove.

The demon doesn't pull away. Doesn't tense.

Doesn't snap that a half-blood child shouldn't touch him.

"This river goes all the way to the ocean," Erisen explains, his finger drawing a winding path across Domno's palm. "And the treasure is here, under the big tree that talks."

"Clever hiding place," Domno replies, the rumble of his voice carrying across the small space between us. "Talking trees make good guards."

My son grins up at him, gold flecks in his dark eyes catching light just like Domno's—a demon trait that sends fear through me every time a stranger looks too closely. But Domno's gaze holds no disgust, no calculation, only a patient attentiveness that makes my chest tight.

I should end this now. Thank him for his kindness and send him on his way. Kindness from a demon always has a price—this lesson is etched into my skin, into six years of running, into nights I still wake gasping from memories of Vorrak's "generosity."

Yet something in Domno's demeanor makes the warning stick in my throat.

The careful way he positions himself, always making sure I can see his hands.

The space he maintains between us, never crowding or using his height to intimidate.

The respect—actual respect—with which he addresses me, as though I'm more than a human woman with nothing to offer.

He looks up, catching me watching them. For a heartbeat, those gold eyes meet mine, something unspoken passing between us before I look away.

"We don't owe him anything," I remind myself, gripping the doorframe harder.

His occasional protection in the market, the wooden bird that now sits on our windowsill, the small pouch of healing herbs he'd silently left last week when Erisen had a cough—none of it creates a debt. I won't allow it to.

"Mom, Domno knows about the northern mountains!" Erisen's voice breaks through my thoughts. "He's been there!"

I focus on them again. My son has somehow migrated into the circle of Domno's crossed legs, looking up at him with undisguised admiration. The demon sits perfectly still, as if afraid any movement might startle the child now leaning trustingly against his knee.

"The Ridge," Domno corrects gently. "Treacherous for those who don't know its paths."

"Have you climbed the highest peak?" Erisen asks, eyes wide.

Something passes over Domno's face—a shadow of memory, perhaps pain—before he shakes his head. "Not the highest. I hunted through the middle passes."

The word "hunted" sends a chill up my spine, a stark reminder of what he is. A demon bounty hunter. A killer for hire. The stories they whisper about him in the market—they can't all be lies.

Yet here he sits, cross-legged in the dirt outside our broken-down shelter, letting my six-year-old son map imaginary rivers across his battle-scarred hands.

"You'll come tomorrow too?" Erisen asks suddenly, looking up with such naked hope that I have to press my lips together to keep from intervening.

Domno's eyes flick to mine, questioning. Asking permission in a way Vorrak never

did, in a way I'd never expected from a demon.

I should say no. Should establish boundaries that have been blurring since the first day he appeared. Instead, I find myself giving a small nod, something foreign and warm unfurling in my chest when the tension in his shoulders eases.

"If your mother has no objection," he tells Erisen, his deep voice careful.

My son turns to me, eyebrows raised in silent pleading. For a moment, I see his future stretching before him—a life of hiding, of never having friends, of learning too young that trust is a luxury we can't afford.

"You can come," I say, the words feeling like both surrender and defiance.

The smile that breaks across Erisen's face is worth whatever risk I've just taken. Even Domno looks momentarily surprised, a flash of something almost vulnerable crossing his features before his composure returns.

This is fine, I tell myself. We can be friendly. Just that. Nothing more. Nothing closer. I've learned the cost of getting too close, especially to demons.

But as Erisen curls closer to Domno's side, continuing his story about treasure and talking trees, and as Domno listens with that steady, unwavering attention, I can't deny the quiet voice inside me wondering if perhaps this demon is different.

I've been wrong before. Catastrophically wrong. But watching them together—my son's animated gestures and Domno's gentle responses—makes me contemplate what it might mean to be right this time.

Just friendly, I repeat to myself. Nothing more.

The lie tastes bitter on my tongue.

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ESALYN

It starts as a whisper. Then a ritual. Then something I can't name.

"Will Domno come today?" Erisen asks every morning, hope bright in his golden eyes. The question always hangs in the space between us while I brush his hair carefully over the tiny horns emerging at his temples.

"Perhaps," I answer, though I already know.

Domno appears like clockwork—sometimes with trinkets for Erisen, sometimes with herbs or vegetables I couldn't otherwise afford, and always with that guarded vigilance that both unnerves and comforts me.

He never announces these gifts, simply sets them down without ceremony, as if embarrassed by his own generosity.

Today, he walks us back from the market, keeping pace beside me while Erisen darts ahead, chasing shadows with the stick Domno carved for him.

I catch myself watching the demon's profile for the third time in as many minutes—the sharp line of his jaw, the way the fading light catches on his horns, the careful sweep of his gold eyes as they constantly scan our surroundings.

"Something wrong?" he asks without looking at me, voice low.

Heat creeps up my neck. "No."

But there is something wrong. I'm noticing things I shouldn't: the breadth of his shoulders beneath his worn leather jacket, the graceful economy of his movements, the way his rough voice softens when he speaks to Erisen.

Signs of danger, all of them—evidence that my hard-won walls are developing cracks.

Erisen squeals ahead of us, having discovered a thalivern fluttering near a steam vent. The creature's four iridescent wings catch the ruddy light, momentarily transfixing my son.

"Look! Domno, Mama, look!"

When I glance up at the demon beside me, I find him already watching my son, alert to potential threats yet allowing this small moment of wonder. His hand rests casually near the blade at his hip—a position I've realized is as natural to him as breathing. Not threatening but ready.

The familiar tangle of fear and something warmer twists in my chest.

"He's remarkably observant," Domno comments as we resume walking. "Most children overlook thaliverns—too small, too common."

"He notices everything," I say, unable to keep the pride from my voice. "Sometimes I think he sees more than I do."

Domno's mouth quirks in what might be a smile. "He certainly saw something in me."

The words hang between us, loaded with meaning I'm not ready to unpack. Instead, I focus on Erisen, now carefully tracing patterns in the ash that perpetually dusts Velzarothe's streets.

"Thank you," I say abruptly. "For the herbs. The fever tea helped."

Domno doesn't look at me, but I see tension ease from his shoulders. "Chest congestion can turn dangerous quickly here."

His words are clinical, but I hear the concern beneath them. It's this dichotomy that confuses me most—the brutal efficiency in his movements contradicted by the gentleness he shows my son. The legendary bounty hunter who kneels to examine a child's drawings.

We reach our shack just as the wind picks up, carrying the metallic taste that warns of a fire-storm brewing in the volcanic peaks. Domno glances skyward, nostrils flaring.

"Bad one coming," he says, voice tight.

"Domno, stay for dinner!" Erisen calls, tugging at the demon's hand. "Please? Mom makes dreelk stew when the fire-winds come."

I should say no. Should maintain the distances I've carefully cultivated. But the darkening sky and the way Erisen's small fingers curl around Domno's massive hand stops the refusal in my throat.

Domno looks to me, waiting. Always waiting for my permission, never assuming, never pushing.

"We have enough," I find myself saying. Because Domno has been helping supply us.

His expression remains neutral, but something flickers in his eyes—surprise, perhaps gratitude. "I'll bring meat," he says simply, and disappears into the deepening gloom only to return twenty minutes later with fresh tuskram cuts that must have cost more nodals than I see in a month.

Inside our tiny home, the three of us navigate a small space never meant for someone of Domno's size.

He moves carefully, ducking beneath the low ceiling beams, conscious of his bulk in a way that speaks of long practice.

When his arm brushes mine as I stir the pot, my skin tingles with awareness I have no right to feel.

As we eat, the wind rises, howling around the ramshackle walls.

Erisen sits closer to Domno than necessary, sneaking glances at the demon as if to assure himself he's still there.

For his part, Domno seems content, more relaxed than I've ever seen him, those predator's eyes softening whenever they land on my son.

The first tremor rattles the dishes. A second, stronger, shakes dust from the ceiling.

"Fire-winds shifting the old fault lines," Domno explains, noticing my tense posture. "The tremors rarely last."

But this time they do. The storm builds, unusually fierce, with wind screaming through the cracks in our walls and ash raining down like snow. I've just put Erisen to bed when a particularly violent gust rattles our home's very foundations.

His cry pierces the storm's howl. Before I can move, Domno is already at his bedside, his tall frame a shadow against the ember-lit window.

"Erisen," he murmurs, voice steady against the storm's chaos. "You're safe."

My son's face is tear-streaked, his small body trembling. He reaches for Domno instinctively, and the demon—one who should be feared—doesn't hesitate. He settles beside the bed, allowing Erisen to lean against him as the sky outside burns crimson and gold.

"Will the storm take our house?" Erisen whispers, his voice small beneath the howling wind.

"No," Domno answers with absolute certainty. "These walls have weathered worse."

He doesn't offer empty reassurances or distract with stories. He simply exists—solid, unshaken, an anchor in the storm's fury. My son's trembling gradually subsides as he curls against Domno's side, those small fingers clutching the demon's sleeve.

I stand frozen across the room, witnessing something I never imagined possible—my son finding comfort in a demon's presence. Not just any demon. This one. With his battle scars and gold eyes that see too much.

The ember-glow casts half of Domno's face in shadow, highlighting the sharp angles of his features, the proud curve of his horns. Yet there's nothing threatening in his posture as he sits perfectly still, allowing my son to draw whatever comfort he needs.

My heart constricts with emotions I can't name—or perhaps fear to name. Because this feels dangerous in ways running never did.

When another tremor rattles through our meager dwelling, I instinctively reach for the knife I keep beneath the table.

My fingers close around empty air—I've moved it to the shelf after catching Erisen eyeing it with dangerous curiosity.

The momentary panic that flashes through me dissolves when I look across the room to find Domno hasn't moved, his steady presence anchoring my son against the storm's fury.

"The mountain is just stretching," he tells Erisen, his deep voice a counterpoint to the wind's shriek. "Like you do when you wake up."

My son's small face turns up to him, skepticism battling fear in those golden eyes so like Domno's own. "Mountains don't stretch."

"They do," Domno answers with complete seriousness. "I've been alive much longer than you. Seen it happen."

The corner of my mouth lifts without permission as Erisen considers this with all the gravity a six-year-old can muster.

Domno doesn't speak to him with that falsely bright voice adults often use with children.

He addresses him directly, honestly, respecting his intelligence even while simplifying complex concepts.

I pull my shawl tighter and settle onto the floor by the hearth. Though I should insist Erisen sleep, these storms have terrified him since infancy. And in truth, this one is worse than most—a convulsion of Velzaroth's volcanic heart that sends tremors up through the stone beneath us.

Erisen's small fingers trace one of the scars on Domno's forearm—a pale line against gray skin. "Did that hurt?"

"Yes," Domno answers simply. No embellishment, no warrior's boasting.

"My mama has scars too," Erisen confides, his voice drowsy despite the storm. "On her back. She says they're stories she doesn't want to read."

Something flickers in Domno's eyes—a flash of heat quickly controlled.

His gaze lifts to mine across the dim room, and I feel exposed in ways that have nothing to do with my clothed body.

The marks Vorrak left on me are hidden beneath fabric, yet Domno sees them anyway—or rather, sees what they represent.

The vulnerability in his gaze unnerves me more than any storm.

I look away first.

"Some stories we keep to ourselves," Domno tells Erisen, his voice impossibly gentle for a creature built from battle and blood. "It doesn't mean they didn't happen."

The kindness in those words scrapes against something raw inside me. When did this demon learn to speak to wounds without touching them? To acknowledge pain without demanding its exposure?

Erisen's eyes grow heavier as Domno's steady presence works its magic. My son fought sleep like this for months after we fled—jerking awake at every sound, crying silently against my shoulder. Now, he slumps against Domno's side, his breathing gradually deepening despite the continuing tremors.

I don't know when I began relying on that—this strange peace Domno brings with him.

I don't want to need anyone, and yet I've caught myself listening for his footsteps in

the ash-thick streets.

I've caught myself smiling when I see him, my body easing before I even realize it.

The constant vigilance that has been my companion since escape loosens its grip when he's near.

I tell myself it's temporary—just safety in a dangerous place—but my heart is slower to lie.

Trust is building in the quiet moments, not because I offer it, but because he earns it without trying.

In the way he stands between Erisen and the market crowds.

In how he enters our home with a careful respect that suggests he knows exactly how precious the space is to us.

In the fact that he has never once asked about the horns my son tries so desperately to hide.

Domno shifts slightly as Erisen finally surrenders to sleep, easing my son down onto the thin mattress with a gentleness that belies his warrior's hands.

Those hands that I've seen wrap around the hilt of his blade with deadly precision now tuck a threadbare blanket around my child's shoulders.

He moves with exquisite care, as if Erisen is made of something infinitely precious and fragile.

The sight burns a hole straight through the armor I've spent six years building around

my heart.

DOMNO

I ease away from Erisen once his breathing deepens into sleep.

Even in slumber, his small features hold an echo of tension—a child too accustomed to vigilance.

He looks fragile against the threadbare blanket, those tiny fingers still clutching the wooden bird I carved him.

Something pulls tight in my chest, an unfamiliar ache I have no right to feel.

When I look up, Esalyn's watching me. The ember-light catches in her dark hair, illuminating the tired lines around her eyes that somehow don't diminish her beauty.

She's all careful strength and wary grace, a woman who's learned to make herself smaller to survive.

Yet beneath that practiced invisibility burns something fierce—I've seen it flare when market merchants shortchange her, when strangers stand too close to her son.

The storm's fury has abated, leaving behind only the occasional grumble of distant thunder. Ash settles on the windowsill like gray snow.

Esalyn rises silently from her chair, moving with that deliberate quietness I've come to recognize as second nature to her. She reaches above the hearth and pulls down a small amber bottle, holding it up with a questioning tilt of her head.

"Outside?" she mouths, gesturing toward the door.

I nod, surprised. We've never been alone together—truly alone, without Erisen's presence creating a buffer between us. The thought sends an unexpected spike of something that isn't quite nervousness through my blood.

She checks on Erisen once more before we step into the night.

The air smells of ash and iron, the afterbirth of Velzaroth's volcanic tantrums. The small covered porch outside her door barely deserves the name—just a few rotting boards held together by stubborn nails—but it offers shelter from the drifting cinders still floating down from the crimson sky.

Esalyn settles on the single step, her shoulders pressed against the doorframe. She uncorks the bottle and takes a swig before offering it to me, her movements revealing a momentary tension. This gesture feels significant—trusting me enough to turn her back, to share her meager luxuries.

I accept the bottle, careful not to let our fingers touch. The mead is sweet but burns pleasantly, nothing like the potent amerinth I usually drink to drown memories. For a while, we sit in silence, passing the bottle back and forth while watching embers dance on the horizon.

"Erisen has never taken to someone like he does with you," she finally says, her voice low. Not accusatory, but wondering.

I roll the mead across my tongue before answering, buying time against the surge of emotion her words trigger. "I don't know why."

"I do." She takes the bottle back, studying it rather than me. "Children see what adults miss. Whatever you're running from, whatever you've done... he sees past it."

Her perceptiveness unnerves me. For six years I've existed as a shadow among shadows, barely speaking more than necessary to complete jobs. Now this human woman with exhausted eyes cuts straight through my carefully constructed emptiness.

"He's a very special boy," I say, the inadequacy of the statement burning my tongue. What I mean is: he reminds me of Zevan. He makes me want to be the man I failed to be.

Esalyn sighs, leaning her head back against the weathered wood. "He is." The bottle dangles loosely from her fingers, catching the crimson light. "I've done everything for him. Everything."

The raw honesty in her voice scrapes something loose inside me. She's never spoken like this before—has maintained careful distances, shared only what was necessary. Now, something has shifted between us, some invisible barrier thinning.

"I belonged to Vorrak Thren'Surath." She speaks the name like a curse, her voice steady despite the way her hands tremble around the bottle. "Not as a wife. As property. A human servant in a demon noble's household."

My blood runs cold at the name. Vorrak's reputation extends even to mercenaries like me—a collector of rare things, living and otherwise, with connections throughout Aerasak's underground. The bottle suddenly feels fragile in my grip.

"Erisen is his son," she continues, words tumbling out now as if she's held them back too long.

"Not by choice. Never by choice. For three years, I was his favorite plaything.

" Her voice doesn't break, but something in her eyes fractures.

"When I discovered I was pregnant, I knew what would happen to a half-demon child in that house.

Especially one born to a human servant."

The implications hang in the ash-laden air between us. My throat tightens with rage so intense it temporarily blinds me. I've seen what powerful demons do to those they consider beneath them. Have spent my life distancing myself from my own kind because of it.

"I escaped when Erisen was two weeks old," she says.

"A healer in the household—she took pity on us.

Helped us slip away when I was supposed to be recovering.

" Her hand unconsciously goes to her back, where scars I've never seen but can easily imagine must mark her skin. "We've been running ever since."

The bottle is empty now, but she still clutches it, fingers white against the amber glass. Her face remains composed, but the trembling in her hands betrays the cost of these confessions.

I don't reach for her, though something in me wants to.

Comfort has never been my language. The rage thrumming through my veins—familiar and clean—is easier to recognize than this other feeling spreading beneath my ribcage.

Instead, I stare out at Velzaro's glowing horizon, where magma pulses beneath the city's blackened foundations.

"I think I took to Erisen because he reminds me of someone. I had a brother," I say, the words scraping my throat raw. "Zevan."

Esalyn goes still beside me, her fingers ceasing their restless movement against the empty bottle. She doesn't look at me, doesn't press—just waits in that patient way of hers, giving the silence room to breathe.

"He was younger. Softer." I roll the taste of his name around my mouth, unfamiliar after years of forced silence. "That's rare among demons. To be gentle."

The wind shifts, bringing with it the sulfurous scent of the city below. Ash drifts between us, settling on our shoulders like gray snow. My horns ache suddenly, a phantom pain that always accompanies thoughts of Zevan.

"I was supposed to protect him. That's what older brothers do." The bitterness in my voice surprises me. "But I failed."

Esalyn sets the bottle down, her movements deliberate and quiet. Her profile in the dim light shows no judgment, just attentiveness that somehow loosens something long-knotted inside me.

"We were working together, nothing too dangerous. Or so I thought." I avoid telling her we were tracking a bounty as I stare at my scarred hands, seeing instead Zevan's slender fingers, better suited to holding books than weapons. "It was a trap."

The wind picks up, rattling loose boards beneath us.

Memory floods back—the copper smell of blood, Zevan's gold eyes wide with shock.

He was much too young to be out with me like that, and sometimes in my memories, I don't picture him on the cusp of adulthood as he was.

I see him as the child I should have protected.

"Seven against two. We fought back to back.

He was... magnificent." Pride and pain twist together in my chest. "Until a blade caught him from behind.

Just below the ribs." My finger taps unconsciously against my own side, marking the spot.

"I was fighting and it wasn't until it was much too late that I realized he had collapsed in a room that was on fire. I couldn't reach him in time."

I don't tell her how I watched him die as my skin blistered, as I tried to rip through the burning walls as they collapsed, or how Zevan watched me, blood bubbling between lips that kept trying to reassure me . How his last act was to tell me it wasn't my fault. The cruelest mercy.

"I buried him in the red sands of Ikoth's northern shore," I say instead. "Where we used to swim as children. Then I hunted down everyone involved. One by one."

I feel Esalyn's gaze but don't meet it. Fear of what I might see—disgust, perhaps, at the cold violence in my voice. Or worse, pity.

"After that..." I shrug, a gesture meant to dismiss the weight still pressing against my chest. "I forgot how to live. I worked to survive, mostly to drink until I could forget. And every day doesn't feel right without him."

The confession hangs between us, stark and unadorned. I've offered no justifications, no softening of truths. She knows what I am now—a killer hollowed out by grief, a demon who couldn't save the one person who mattered.

She surprises me by shifting closer, not touching, but near enough that I can feel the warmth of her—a living counterpoint to the cold emptiness I've carried for years.

"Thank you," she says simply.

I finally look at her, confused by the sincerity in those two words. "For what?"

"For not saying it gets better." Her eyes, hazel flecked with gold, hold mine without flinching. "For not trying to fix me with pretty words."

Something shifts between us—understanding taking root in barren soil. We sit side by side, her scars invisible beneath worn clothing, mine etched into gray skin for anyone to see. Two broken things that recognize each other's jagged edges.

"Does Erisen know?" I ask finally. "About his father?"

She shakes her head. "He knows we're running. That his father is a demon but we don't trust demons. That people might want to hurt us. But not why." Her voice drops lower. "How do you tell a child something like that?"

I have no answer. The silence stretches between us, but it's different now—not filled with wariness but with something like recognition.

Neither of us tries to mend the other's wounds or offer hollow reassurances.

We simply exist together in this moment, two survivors carrying their respective ghosts.

DOMNO

Over the next few days, a strange peace settles over us.

It's fragile as spun glass, but I find myself clinging to it with a desperation that should alarm me.

Each morning, I wait at the edge of the marketplace where Esalyn works, pretending not to watch as she stacks fruit at her employer's stall, her deft hands arranging them with practiced care.

Her movements are economical—never wasted, never drawing attention—and I recognize the instincts of prey that's been hunted too long.

Erisen is always with her, his small face brightening when he spots me in the shadows.

I've learned to carry oddities in my pockets for him—smooth stones with unusual markings, a discarded gear from a clockmaker's shop that catches the light, bits of colored glass tumbled soft by the sea.

His wonder at these worthless treasures stirs something long dormant in my chest.

"Look what Domno found today!" he'll announce to his mother, gold eyes wide with excitement. She smiles then—a real smile that reaches her eyes—and for a moment, the weight she carries seems lighter.

I find myself falling into uncharacteristic habits: helping elderly vendors move their heavy crates, fixing a loose stall door that's threatened to collapse for months, scaring off the bolder thieves with nothing more than a glare.

The locals have begun to nod at me instead of scurrying away.

My reputation remains intact—no one dares approach directly—but there's a subtle shift in how they regard the demon in their midst. I started for money—since I'm not earning any as a hunter—then to be close to Esalyn and now... it's just who I am to these people.

Evenings find us in Esalyn's cramped dwelling, eating simple meals that somehow taste better than anything I've consumed in years.

The table wobbles unless I brace it with my knee.

The roof leaks when it rains. Yet sitting across from Esalyn while Erisen chatters between us feels more like home than anywhere I've ever been.

Tonight, the air hangs heavy with approaching rain. The three of us sit cross-legged on the worn rug as Erisen demonstrates his impressive collection of treasures. His small hands carefully sort stones, buttons, and bits of colored thread with the seriousness of a scholar organizing ancient texts.

"This one," he declares, holding up a pebble with a natural pattern resembling a spiral, "is the most special. It helps me sleep."

"Does it?" I ask, voice gruffer than intended. The vulnerability of his confession catches me off-guard.

He nods solemnly. "I put it under my pillow when the bad dreams come."

Esalyn's hand automatically reaches for her son's shoulder, her fingers gentle as they stroke his hair.

The protectiveness in her gesture is familiar now—I've witnessed countless variations of it over these past days.

She might appear delicate, but there's steel in her spine when it comes to Erisen.

"And what's this one for?" I ask, pointing to the wooden creature I carved him days ago—a stylized batlaz with exaggerated features that sits prominently among his collection.

"He watches over everything," Erisen explains, patting the rough-hewn figure with reverence. "He's the guardian."

Something lodges in my throat at the simple trust in his voice.

This child who's known nothing but flight and fear still finds room for belief in guardians and protection.

His eyes—so similar to mine in color yet unmarked by violence—begin to droop as he arranges his treasures in intricate patterns.

I don't notice when he falls asleep, his body gradually leaning against my side until his weight settles fully against me.

His head rests near my knee, one small hand still curled possessively around the wooden batlaz.

The trust in this unconscious gesture staggers me.

Children have always given me a wide berth, instinctively sensing the violence that clings to my skin like a second shadow.

But not this one. Not Erisen.

Looking down at his peaceful face, another boy's features overlay his—dark hair, gold eyes, gentle spirit.

Zevan used to fall asleep the same way, head dropping mid-conversation when he was small.

The memory doesn't bring the usual knife-twist of pain.

Instead, it settles like a warm weight beside the present moment.

With careful movements, I gather Erisen into my arms. He weighs almost nothing, this half-demon child with his mother's resilience and none of his father's cruelty.

His head lolls against my shoulder, trusting even in sleep.

I carry him to the narrow bed pushed against the wall, easing him onto the thin mattress before pulling the patched blankets up to his chin.

His fingers refuse to release the wooden batlax, so I tuck it under the covers with him. Standing there, watching his chest rise and fall with each breath, I'm struck by how easily someone could take all this away. How fragile this peace truly is. How temporary.

When I turn, Esalyn is watching us from across the room.

Her face is partially shadowed, making her expression unreadable, but there's tension

in the line of her shoulders.

She holds my gaze for a long moment before tilting her head toward the door, a silent invitation to step outside as we usually do now.

I follow, careful to keep my footfalls quiet around Erisen's sleeping form. Whatever waits in her silence, I know this moment of peace has reached its breaking point.

The night air wraps around us, thick with the scent of pending rain. Esalyn pulls the door closed behind her with practiced quiet—the same careful movement I've watched her perfect for days, always alert, always protective. The soft click might as well be thunder in the silence between us.

I open my mouth to speak, but the words die in my throat as she crosses the short distance between us. There's determination in her step, fear in her eyes, and something else—something hungry that mirrors what I've been fighting in myself since I first laid eyes on her.

Her fingers brush my jaw, feather-light and tentative. Then her lips find mine.

The kiss is soft, almost hesitant. A question more than a claim.

Her mouth tastes faintly sweet, like the meadowmint tea we'd shared earlier.

Heat blooms in my chest, spreading outward until my skin feels too tight to contain it.

Time stretches, suspended in this unexpected moment of connection, before she pulls away.

Fear flashes across her face—the instinctive recoil of someone who's learned that reaching for what she wants invites punishment. Her body tenses, ready to retreat, to

apologize, to reclaim the careful distance we've maintained all these days.

I don't let her run.

My hand lifts to cup her face, calloused thumb brushing the curve of her cheek. Her skin is softer than I'd imagined in those moments when I'd allowed myself to wonder. I hold her steady, anchoring her in place while her eyes search mine for rejection that won't come.

"Esalyn," I say, her name a rough whisper in the darkness.

The tension doesn't leave her, but something shifts in her gaze. Resolution replaces fear. She doesn't look away, doesn't apologize for wanting. This is the same steel I've glimpsed beneath her careful facade—the unwavering core that's kept her and her son alive against impossible odds.

When I lean in to reclaim her mouth, hunger overtakes restraint.

My lips find hers with none of her earlier hesitation.

My free hand curves around her waist, drawing her closer until I feel the heat of her body through the thin fabric of her dress.

She makes a small sound against my mouth—surprise melting into something deeper—and her hands come up to grip my shoulders.

I kiss her like I've wanted to since I first saw her in the marketplace, hair hidden beneath a scarf, eyes downcast but ever-watchful. I kiss her like I've needed to since watching her brush Erisen's hair from his forehead with such tenderness it made my chest ache.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging just enough to send electricity down my spine. I back her against the wall beside the door, careful not to trap her, but needing to feel her body aligned with mine. Her breath catches, and I pull back just enough to read her expression.

No fear there now. Only heat and a fierce want that matches the inferno building in my veins.

"I shouldn't—" she begins, but her hands contradict her words, sliding down to press against my chest, not pushing away but exploring the contours beneath my shirt.

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask, voice rough with restraint.

Her teeth catch her bottom lip, and the sight nearly undoes all my control. "No," she whispers. "But I don't understand?—"

I silence her with another kiss, deeper this time.

Her mouth opens beneath mine, and I trace the seam of her lips with my tongue, drinking in her responsive shiver.

She tastes like longing and possibility, dangerous and sweet.

Something primal in me wants to claim, to mark, to make clear to anyone who might come looking that she belongs to someone now.

The thought jolts me back to reality.

Someone is coming looking. Someone has already tasked me with bringing her back.

I break the kiss, pressing my forehead against hers while we both catch our breath.

The night air suddenly feels cold against my heated skin. Her hands still rest against my chest, and I wonder if she can feel the chaotic pounding of my heart beneath her palms.

"Domno?" Uncertainty colors her voice, and I hate myself for putting it there.

I slide the pad of my thumb along her jaw. "I do not want to stop," I say roughly, and it seems to settle the hurt blooming in her eyes. "But I don't think we should keep going." Then I quickly add, "At least tonight."

And I am wrong for that. For giving us both hope. But I can't stop myself when I say it.

She nods. "You're right."

I breathe a sigh of relief.

Tilting her head up, I press a slow, soft kiss to her lips before I force myself to step back. I am already too close to her and Erisen. I can't risk hurting her before I decide what I am going to do.

"Goodnight, Esalyn," I whisper.

She stares up at me with a look so mixed with longing and uncertainty it nearly cracks me in half. "Goodnight, Domno."

And it takes every ounce of my strength to walk away.

ESALYN

I don't sleep. Not really. The night stretches endlessly as I lie beside Erisen, his small body curled against mine, innocent and unaware of how his mother's world has just tilted on its axis.

Every time I close my eyes, I feel the ghost of Domno's hands on my waist, the pressure of his mouth against mine, the rough texture of his jaw beneath my fingertips.

What was I thinking?

The ceiling above me offers no answers, only shadows that shift and dance with each flicker of the dying lamp.

Outside, rain begins to fall, pattering against our thin roof in a rhythm that matches my restless heartbeat.

I trace my lips with trembling fingers, still feeling the imprint of his kiss like a brand.

It's been so long since anyone touched me with desire instead of ownership. So long since I've wanted to be touched. Six years of running, of keeping my gaze lowered, of flinching when men move too quickly near me—all of it dissolved the moment I pressed my mouth to his.

The memory of Vorrak rises unbidden—his cruel hands, his mocking laughter when I cried, the possessive gleam in his eyes that signaled another night of pain.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the memories away, but they cling like smoke.

How many times had he reminded me that I was nothing but a plaything, worthless except for what my body could provide?

Yet when Domno looked at me tonight, I saw none of that. His golden eyes held heat, yes, but also something else—something that made me feel seen. Not as property. Not as prey. But as a woman who might be worth wanting.

It terrifies me more than anything else has in years.

Beside me, Erisen shifts in his sleep, one small hand still clutching the wooden batlaz Domno carved.

The sight twists something painful in my chest. My son, who trusts so rarely, has given his complete faith to a demon we've known for mere days.

A demon whose intentions I still cannot fully discern, despite the way my body betrayed me tonight.

When dawn finally breaks, painting thin strips of light through the cracks in our shutters, I rise with eyes that feel like sand.

I move through our morning routine by rote—heating water for washing, preparing a simple breakfast of porridge flavored with the last of our dried zynthra, braiding Erisen's dark hair to cover the tiny horns at his temples.

His golden eyes, so like Domno's in color yet infinitely more innocent, watch me with unusual concern.

"Are you sick, Mama?" he asks, reaching up to touch my cheek.

I force a smile, smoothing back a stray lock of his hair. "Just tired, love. I didn't sleep well."

"Bad dreams?" His voice drops to a whisper, serious and concerned. He knows about bad dreams. Has his own that wake him crying in the night.

"No, love. Just thinking too much." I kiss his forehead, breathing in his clean, familiar scent. "Ready for the market?"

At the old woman's fruit stall, I arrange wares mechanically, my mind elsewhere as my fingers sort through the produce.

Twice I miscount a customer's change. Three times I jump at shadows, expecting to see Domno's tall figure among the morning crowd.

My lips still tingle with the memory of his mouth on mine, and heat blooms in my cheeks every time I recall how easily he'd lifted me against him, how perfectly our bodies had aligned.

"That man is looking for you," the old woman says suddenly, her gnarled fingers gripping my arm.

My heart stutters painfully until I follow her gaze and see it's only the baker who has some work for me. Not Domno. Not Vorrak. Just the ordinary dangers of an ordinary day.

By midday, I've convinced myself Domno won't return. Why would he? I've seen the restlessness in him, the shadow of old wounds that drive him to keep moving. Whatever drew him to us, it can't possibly outweigh the complications we represent.

"When's Domno coming?" Erisen asks immediately, his eyes scanning the

marketplace. The disappointment on his face when he doesn't spot the demon makes my chest ache.

"I don't know if he will today, Eri."

His small face falls, but he quickly brightens.

"I made him something!" He tugs a folded square of paper from his pocket, carefully opening it to reveal a childish drawing—three figures holding hands beneath a red sky.

"It's us! See?" His finger points to each figure in turn.

"That's me, and you, and Domno. Can I give it to him when he comes? "

"Erisen..." I begin, not knowing how to explain that some people don't stay, that attachments are dangerous, that we can't afford to trust so easily.

But the words die in my throat as a familiar shadow falls across us.

I look up to find Domno standing there, his massive frame blocking the sun.

Today, he looks less like the predator I first encountered and more like a man who hasn't slept any better than I have.

There's a tension in his shoulders that wasn't present yesterday, a wariness in his golden eyes as they meet mine.

"Domno!" Erisen launches himself forward, small arms wrapping around the demon's legs without hesitation. "Look what I made you!"

Domno's face softens as he crouches down to examine the drawing, those lethal hands unbelievably gentle as they handle the creased paper. "This is very good," he says, voice rough with what might be emotion. "Is this us?"

Erisen nods enthusiastically. "Can we go looking for more special rocks today? Please?"

Domno's eyes lift to mine, seeking permission. "I thought the boy might like to walk to the eastern shore. The tide brings in unusual stones after a rain."

My heart stutters. He's asking to take Erisen alone. Away from the market. Away from me.

I've never allowed anyone to be alone with my son. Not the man who got us here on his wagon, not anyone in the market who employs me, not even the neighbors who've shown us nothing but generosity. Six years of vigilance screams against the very idea.

Yet something in Domno's steady gaze makes me hesitate.

I remember how he carried Erisen to bed last night, his movements careful despite hands that could crush bone without effort.

I recall the protective stance he took in the marketplace days ago, placing himself between my son and danger without thought for himself.

Still, trust comes slowly when you've lived as I have.

"I—" My voice catches. I clear my throat, aware of Erisen's hopeful expression and Domno's patient wait. "I don't think?—"

"Nothing will happen to him, Esalyn." Domno's voice is strong and steady and sure.

His eyes hold mine. "You know I won't let any harm come near him."

"I'll come with you both," I say, watching Erisen's face fall slightly.

And I try not to let it bother me. I want him to trust others, and it's good if he doesn't always need me.

"But I can stay back a little. Give you two some space.

"The compromise feels monumental, like stepping onto a frozen lake not knowing if the ice will hold.

Domno's expression shifts subtly. Something like respect softens his sharp features. "The shoreline just past the eastern market stalls. We won't go beyond the black rocks."

I nod, throat tight. "I need to finish here first." I gesture to the remaining fruit that needs sorting.

"We'll wait." The simplicity of his statement soothes something in me—no argument, no attempt to rush or persuade.

Erisen bounces on his toes, impatient but trying so hard to be good, clutching his drawing like a talisman.

His dark hair falls over his forehead, nearly hiding those eyes that mark him as something other than human.

In moments like these, with excitement flushing his cheeks, he looks so young, so unburdened by our circumstances.

I want to preserve that lightness for him, even as every protective instinct screams at me to never let him out of arm's reach.

I finish my work in record time, nodding goodbye to the old woman whose knowing eyes follow me with too much understanding. She's seen too much of life not to recognize what's happening, even if I refuse to name it myself.

We walk to the shore together, Erisen between us, his small hand slipping naturally into Domno's massive one.

The demon's fingers close around my son's with a gentleness that seems impossible for someone his size.

Every so often, Domno glances down at Erisen with an expression I can't fully decipher—something between wonder and uncertainty, as though he can't quite believe this child trusts him so completely.

At the shoreline, I hang back as promised, finding a sun-warmed rock to sit on while they move ahead.

The tide has indeed left treasures scattered across the volcanic black sand—gleaming shells, tumbled stones, fragments of sea glass worn smooth by time and water.

Erisen crouches to examine each potential treasure, his small body vibrating with excitement.

But it's Domno who captures and holds my attention.

The fearsome demon hunter moves with surprising patience, crouching beside my son without complaint, listening intently to Erisen's chatter as though every word matters.

His massive frame dwarfs Erisen's, yet there's nothing threatening in his posture.

He points to something in the sand, and Erisen's delighted laugh carries back to me on the salt-laden breeze.

I press my palm against my chest, trying to identify the strange ache building there.

It's jealousy, yes, but not the bitter, angry kind.

It's a wistful longing for something I'd convinced myself I'd never have—someone who looks at my child and sees not a burden or a weapon or a half-breed, but simply a boy worthy of kindness and attention.

And perhaps, buried deeper, a longing for someone who might look at me and see more than just Erisen's mother, more than just a woman on the run. Someone who might see the parts of me I'd locked away years ago when Vorrak's cruelty taught me that desire was dangerous, that wanting invited pain.

Last night's kiss rises in my memory again, making my skin flush hot despite the cool ocean breeze.

The way Domno had held me—firm but never restraining, passionate but never demanding—had awakened something I thought long dead.

Even now, watching his broad back as he bends to help Erisen dig something from the sand, I can feel the ghost of his hands on my waist, the heat of his mouth on mine.

Erisen's excited cry pulls me from these dangerous thoughts. He's racing toward me, something clutched in his small fist, Domno following at a more measured pace.

"Mama! Look what we found!" He skids to a stop before me, opening his palm to

reveal a perfectly formed spiral shell, iridescent in the sunlight. "Domno says it's very rare. Can I keep it?"

"Of course," I smile, touching the smooth surface. "It's beautiful."

Domno stands nearby, hands loose at his sides, watchful but giving us space. When our eyes meet over Erisen's head, something electric passes between us—the shared memory of last night, the uncertain promise of what might come next.

How strange that watching him with my son has undone me more thoroughly than his kiss—though that wrecked me, too. That seeing this lethal demon treat Erisen with such gentle care makes me want things I've denied myself for years.

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DOMNO

I've started counting days. Three since she let Erisen start to spend more time alone with me.

Four since I first tasted her. Six since I told her something that I never share with anyone.

The numbers tick upward in my mind like a countdown moving in reverse—each one bringing me closer to something I can't allow myself to name.

Today, I wait outside their small home as the sun crests the eastern hills, casting Velzaroth in that peculiar crimson light that makes every shadow look like spilled blood.

The heat's already rising from the stone streets, promising another scorching day.

I've brought a small basket of fresh zynthra and quillnash from the morning market—the bright vegetables an excuse for my presence that grows flimsier by the day.

I don't need excuses anymore. But old habits die harder than most men I've hunted.

The door creaks open, and Erisen bolts out like he's been waiting with his ear pressed to the wood. Maybe he has. His small face lights up when he sees me, golden eyes—so like mine—gleaming with an innocent joy I'd forgotten existed in this ash-choked world.

"Domno!" He launches himself at me, and I catch him without thinking, letting him scramble onto my shoulders where he's taken to perching. His weight is nothing, but the trust in the gesture still staggers me. "Are we still going to the tide pools?"

"If your mother says it's alright." My voice comes out gruffer than intended. Even after these days together, gentleness doesn't slide off my tongue easily.

Esalyn appears in the doorway, wiping her hands on a worn cloth. The morning light catches in her dark hair, picking out threads of gold I've only noticed in these quiet moments. There's caution in her posture—there always is—but something else too. A soft awareness that wasn't there before.

"The tide pools?" She raises an eyebrow. "That's quite a walk for little legs."

"I can walk far!" Erisen protests from his perch. "I'm strong like Domno."

The corner of her mouth twitches upward, and the sight sends a rush of heat through my chest that has nothing to do with the climbing temperature. "Is that so?"

"He won't have to walk much," I say, settling the basket on her rickety table. "I can carry him when he tires."

Her eyes meet mine, holding for a moment longer than necessary. In that silent exchange is a world of unspoken things—trust tentatively offered, boundaries carefully respected, the memory of her mouth under mine when darkness gives us courage.

"Alright," she concedes. "But be back before sundown. The streets aren't safe after dark."

"Neither am I," I remind her, the words escaping before I can stop them.

Something flashes in her eyes—not fear, but awareness. "That's rather the point."

She packs a small bundle for Erisen—extra water, a piece of cloth in case he gets wet.

Her movements are efficient, practiced from years of preparing for quick departures.

I've seen how she keeps their few possessions organized, ready to grab at a moment's notice.

How the boy knows to stay quiet when strangers approach.

The vigilance of prey that's been hunted too long.

It's familiar. I recognize it from my own life.

"Come back for dinner," she says as we prepare to leave. An invitation, not a demand. Another small step across the chasm between us.

The tide pools lie on the far western shore where volcanic rock has created natural basins that fill and empty with the rhythms of the crimson sea.

Erisen chatters the entire journey, asking questions about everything from the batlaz that stalk the night markets to whether demons can fly.

I answer each one truthfully, something shifting in my chest when he accepts my words without the suspicion most would show.

"Why are your scars different colors?" he asks suddenly, small finger pointing to the marks visible above my collar.

I consider lying, or deflecting. But deception feels wrong with him. "The silver ones

are from demon blades. The darker ones from other weapons."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore."

He contemplates this with surprising gravity for a child his age. "Mama says the same thing about her scars."

My jaw tightens. I've seen glimpses of those marks when her sleeve slips, thin white lines that speak of systematic cruelty. Thinking of Vorrak's hands on her makes violence rise in me with frightening ease.

"Some scars heal better than others," I tell him. "But they all tell stories of survival."

When we reach the tide pools, Erisen's delight is immediate and infectious.

He kneels at the edge of each basin, marveling at the miniature worlds contained within.

Small, colorful creatures dart between crevices.

Tiny silver fish flash like liquid metal.

His childish wonder at these simple things loosens something knotted inside me.

I sit on a sun-warmed rock, watching him explore. My eyes scan the horizon reflexively, tracking movement, assessing threats, planning escape routes. The habits of a lifetime don't fade in two weeks.

"Look!" Erisen holds up a spiraling shell, its surface pearlescent in the sunlight. "It's

even prettier than the last one!"

"A good find," I agree, accepting it when he places it solemnly in my palm. "Your collection grows impressive."

"It's our collection," he corrects, absolute certainty in his voice. "Yours and mine and Mama's."

The simple inclusion scrapes against my heart like a blade. Our collection. As though I've always been part of their small unit, as though I belong there. As though I'm not hunting them still, according to every contract I've signed.

The nights have become both salvation and torment.

After Erisen sleeps, Esalyn and I sit outside beneath stars partly obscured by Velzaro's perpetual haze.

We talk in low voices about nothing important—the day's events, Erisen's latest discoveries, safe topics that skirt the edge of deeper waters.

Sometimes silence stretches between us, comfortable in a way I'd forgotten silence could be.

And sometimes I kiss her. Or she kisses me. The boundaries blur more each night.

Last night, her head rested against my shoulder as we watched the twin moons rise above the jagged skyline.

The weight of her, warm and trusting against me, had been almost unbearable in its simplicity.

When she tilted her face up, questioning, I'd answered with my mouth on hers, gentle at first, then hungry with a need I've denied for too long.

Her fingers had traced the scars at my neck, learning them without revulsion. My hands had spanned her waist, marveling at how perfectly she fit against me. We hadn't spoken of what it meant. Speaking would make it real, and reality brings consequences neither of us seems ready to face.

I let Erisen explore every pool, patient as he discovers each minute wonder of this tiny corner of Aerasak.

His concentration is absolute, brow furrowed beneath the dark hair that's growing just long enough to cover the nubs of his horns.

I watch his small fingers, so careful with each creature he finds, placing them back exactly where they came from.

No cruelty in him, despite his bloodline. Despite his father.

"Can we come back tomorrow?" he asks, squinting up at me against the crimson sky.

"Perhaps." I help him gather his collection of shells, smooth stones, and a curiously shaped piece of driftwood that resembles a batlazz with its ears perked. "Your mother might have other plans."

He considers this with a solemnity that seems too heavy for his small shoulders. "She doesn't like to plan too much. Says plans get broken."

The observation cuts with unexpected precision.

I know the logic—planning creates attachment, attachment creates vulnerability.

Better to expect nothing, to be ready to run at any moment.

I lived that way after Zevan died, bounty to bounty, town to town, no roots to tear out when the time came to move on.

"Sometimes," I say carefully, "breaking a plan isn't always bad."

We walk back slower than we came, Erisen's energy finally flagging after hours of exploration. When he stumbles over a loose stone, I lift him without comment, settling him on my shoulders. His small hands grip my horns for balance, more gently than necessary.

"Does it hurt when I touch them?" he asks, voice drowsy with approaching sleep.

"No," I tell him truthfully. "They're the strongest part of me."

His fingers trace the ridges, curious but careful. "Mine are small. Will they get big like yours?"

The question constricts something in my chest. He deserves honesty, but I measure my words carefully. "They'll grow as you do. Each demon's horns are different."

"Even my father's?"

My stride falters slightly. "Yes. Even his."

"I don't remember him," Erisen says after a pause, his voice smaller. "Is that bad?"

I adjust his weight on my shoulders, buying time to master the rage that pulses at the mention of Vorrak. "No. Some things aren't worth remembering."

When we reach their small home, the dying sun casts long shadows across the packed dirt. I set Erisen down, and he immediately scampers to the pile of driftwood I've collected over the past few days to add his treasures. His energy has returned, his resilience remarkable. Like his mother's.

"Can you show me the knife again?" he asks, eyes bright with excitement. He caught me carving his latest wooden creature a few days ago and wanted to learn all about my weapons.

I glance toward the door, checking for Esalyn's approval. She stands framed in the doorway, arms crossed, but her expression holds no objection—just the watchful caution she never fully discards. She gives an almost imperceptible nod.

"Not for using," I clarify, removing the smallest throwing knife from my belt. "For understanding."

I kneel beside him in the dirt, holding the blade flat across my palm. "A knife is like any tool. Respectful hands make it useful. Careless hands make it dangerous."

Erisen listens with rapt attention, his golden eyes fixed on the metal gleaming in the fading light. I show him how to hold it properly, his small fingers mimicking my grip with surprising precision.

"Balance is key," I tell him, guiding his arm through the motion without releasing the blade. "Feel how it wants to move."

When I'm satisfied he understands the basic principle, I set up a piece of driftwood against a rock and stand behind him, my hand over his, controlling the throw. The knife strikes with a satisfying thunk, and his face lights up with triumph.

"Again!"

Esalyn watches from the doorway, her expression softening in increments. The tension in her shoulders eases slightly as she leans against the frame, dark hair falling loose from her usual tight knot. Each time Erisen's aim improves, she allows herself a small smile.

We continue until his small arm trembles with exertion, the determination in his face so fierce it almost masks his fatigue. Almost.

"Enough for today," I say, retrieving the knife one final time.

"One more," he insists, stifling a yawn that contradicts his demand.

"Tomorrow," I counter, sliding the blade back into its sheath. "A tired arm makes poor decisions."

He doesn't argue further, his eyelids already drooping. When he sways slightly on his feet, I lift him without thinking, his small body fitting naturally against my chest. His head drops to my shoulder immediately, tiny fingers curling into the collar of my shirt with instinctive trust.

The weight of him—so slight yet somehow monumental—anchors me to this moment in a way I can't articulate. His breath warm against my neck, his heartbeat a rapid flutter compared to my slower rhythm. I approach the door where Esalyn waits, her eyes tracking us with an emotion I'm afraid to name.

I don't speak. Words would only complicate what's happening between us. Instead, I meet her gaze and give a single nod—asking permission, offering reassurance.

She steps aside to let me enter, the gesture so simple yet loaded with meaning. As if allowing me to carry her sleeping son across her threshold is the most natural thing in the world.

As if letting me in always has been.

ESALYN

With Erisen safely tucked beneath our threadbare blanket, I open the door and slip outside.

The night air carries the metallic tang of cooled volcanic rock, the heat of the day finally surrendering to darkness.

Domno follows, his movements nearly silent despite his size—a predator's grace that should frighten me but somehow doesn't anymore.

This has become our ritual. These quiet moments after Erisen sleeps, when the walls between us thin like smoke. I try to ignore how it makes me feel, that he has special time for both of us.

"He's exhausted," I say, settling on the rough-hewn bench Domno dragged here three days ago. Another small conquest of permanence I haven't allowed myself in years. "You're good with him."

Domno leans against the wall beside me, arms crossed over his broad chest. The night casts shadows across the planes of his face, softening the battle scars but highlighting the sharp gold of his eyes. Eyes that miss nothing.

"He's easy to be good with."

I trace a finger over a splinter in the bench, wondering when exactly I stopped planning our escape routes whenever Domno appears. When his presence became

something I anticipate rather than endure.

"I've never seen him take to anyone like this," I admit, the words feeling like pebbles in my mouth—small, hard truths I'm not used to offering. "Not just Erisen. Me too."

Domno shifts, his attention sharpening. I can feel the weight of his gaze without looking up.

"I've never..." The words stick, and I force them past the tightness in my throat. "We've never had someone like you. Someone who stays." It comes out almost like an apology, this confession of our isolation. "Someone who shields without caging."

I finally look up, needing him to understand.

It wasn't just Vorrak who taught me to keep the world at arm's length.

It was everyone. The servants who looked away.

The guards who followed orders. The travelers who never questioned why a woman and child always slept with their backs to the wall and bags packed.

"It's not just what happened with Vorrak," I say, voice barely above a whisper. "It's everything since. Everyone since. I've never let anyone in."

Domno doesn't respond with words. Instead, he pushes off from the wall and crosses to me in two silent strides. His hands find my shoulders, strong and sure as he pulls me up and against him. The contact sends warmth cascading through me, despite the night's chill.

He rests his chin atop my head, his breath stirring my hair. "You should both know how to protect yourselves."

The rumble of his voice vibrates through his chest against my cheek. I close my eyes, allowing myself to absorb the solid heat of him, the security of arms that could crush but choose to shelter.

"The boy has good instincts," he continues. "But instinct only goes so far."

I pull back just enough to look up at him. "And me?"

Something dark and hungry flashes across his face. "Your instincts..." His thumb traces a path along my jawline. "Are better than you give them credit for."

He releases me and steps back, reaching for the blade at his hip—the same one he'd shown Erisen earlier. The metal gleams in the moonlight as he offers it to me, handle first.

"The first lesson is in how you hold it," he says, voice dropping to that low register that seems to reverberate directly through my bones.

I take it, surprised by the weight. His fingers brush mine as he adjusts my grip, positioning my thumb along the flat of the blade.

"Balance is everything," he murmurs, moving to stand behind me. His chest presses against my back as his arms come around to guide mine. "Feel how it wants to move with you, not against you."

His proximity wreaks havoc on my concentration. I'm acutely aware of everywhere we touch—his breath warm against my neck, the solid wall of his chest against my shoulders, his hands enveloping mine. Heat pools low in my belly, a sensation I'd forgotten my body was capable of.

"Like this?" My voice emerges breathier than intended.

His fingers tighten slightly over mine. "Almost." He shifts my stance, his boot nudging my feet farther apart. The movement brings his hips flush against me from behind. "Power comes from stability. From knowing exactly where you stand."

My breath hitches at the contact, and I feel him go still, recognizing the change in my response. No longer just a student learning a lesson.

"Esalyn." My name in his mouth sounds like something dangerous, something sacred.

I turn my head just enough to see his face, finding his golden eyes heavy-lidded, fixed on me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle with awareness. The knife suddenly seems irrelevant in my hand.

"I think," I whisper, "I'm losing my balance."

His free hand slides to my waist, hot even through the fabric of my shirt. "Then I'll have to hold you steady."

The knife trembles slightly in my grasp as his other hand leaves my wrist to brush my hair aside, exposing the sensitive skin of my neck. I feel him hesitate, giving me time to pull away.

I don't.

But his lips never meet my skin like I expect. Instead, he recaptures my hand, still gripping my waist so that his arms are around me. The leather wrapping of the knife feels cool against my heated skin as he guides my arm through a careful arc.

"Feel the weight," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble against my ear. "Let it become an extension of your arm."

I try to focus on the weapon, on the deadly grace of it, but all I can concentrate on is the heat of him pressed against my back, the way his chest expands with each breath. My control starts to unravel as his thumb traces small circles on my inner wrist.

"You're not focusing," he observes, and there's something like amusement in his voice. "Maybe you need a more direct approach."

His hand leaves mine, taking the blade with it.

I nearly protest the loss until I feel cold metal sliding down the center of my body.

My breath catches as the flat of the blade trails between my breasts, over my stomach, coming to rest between my legs.

The hilt bumps against me, creating the barest hint of friction exactly where I need it most.

My hips move of their own accord, grinding slightly against the pressure. Heat floods my cheeks at my own brazenness, but when I glance back at Domno, his golden eyes have darkened to molten amber.

"I'd love to take care of you too," he says, his words careful but edged with hunger. "If you want."

The question in his tone pulls at something in my chest. Choice. He's always giving me a choice.

I nod, unable to find my voice.

He releases my hip, moving the blade from one hand to the other.

And then his dominant hand works between my skirts, fingers finding the bare skin of my thigh with unerring precision.

Then, he moves higher until he can feel how soaked I am.

His fingers stroke me through the fabric of my underwear and my head tips back against his shoulder as I whimper, my hips jerking.

He takes that as a sign and pulls the fabric out of his way.

I gasp as he touches me, his calloused fingertips tracing patterns that make my knees weak. He stretches me with one finger, then two, his movements measured and deliberate as he learns what makes me shiver.

Then he withdraws, leaving me cold and wanting.

I'm about to protest when he steps away from me, only to come before me.

He grips my chin, kissing me deeply, but he breaks it all too quickly.

With fluid grace, he kneels and drives the knife into the ground before me, the metal gleaming in the moonlight.

"Get on your knees," he commands, voice rough. "Show me how much you want this."

Heat floods through me at his words, at the naked want in his expression.

He wants to watch me ride the handle, and excitement shoots through me.

I should be offended, should bristle at the demand, but there's something intoxicating

in his certainty, in the trust cracking open between us.

The blade stands like an offering, like a test.

I sink to my knees before him, my eyes never leaving his as I straddle the weapon and lower myself. The smooth hilt presses against me through the thin fabric of my underwear, solid and unyielding.

"That's it," Domno encourages, his massive frame towering over me. "Take what you need."

I begin to move, sliding against the hilt, the friction sending sparks of pleasure through my core. His hands find my waist, steadying me as I rock against the blade. The danger of it, the wrongness tangled with rightness, makes everything sharper, more intense.

Domno's lips find my throat, trailing hot kisses along my pulse point as I ride the weapon. His teeth graze my earlobe, sending shivers cascading down my spine.

"So beautiful," he whispers, his breath hot against my skin. "Now let me see how well you take being stretched."

His hand slides under my skirt, pulling aside my underwear. I'm so wet that it doesn't take much effort at all to soak the handle, and then he's dragging me over it, encouraging me to sink down. I moan as it fills me, his eyes watching every little emotion that leaks out as I do.

My hands find purchase on his shoulders, fingers digging into the hard muscle there as pressure builds low in my belly.

He touches me everywhere, reverent and unhurried—a palm cupping my breast

through my shirt, fingers tracing the curve of my hip, lips mapping the constellation of freckles across my collarbone.

"Let me see you," he urges, his voice a rough caress. "I want to see you lost in pleasure, Esalyn."

The intensity builds as I move faster, desperate for release. My thighs begin to shake with exertion, with want. Domno's hand slides between us, his thumb finding the exact spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids as I slam my body down harder on the hilt.

"That's it," he encourages, his golden eyes blazing. "Let go for me."

When I finish, it's with his name on my lips and buried against his shoulder, a half-sob that tears from my throat before I can stop it. The release crashes through me in waves, and I clutch at him like he's the only solid thing in a world turned liquid.

The moment after, when my breath still comes in gasps and my limbs feel boneless, I fold into him completely. His arms encircle me, holding me like something sacred, precious. He presses his face into my hair, and I feel rather than hear the shaky exhale that passes through him.

He helps pull me off the handle, cradling me in his arms, whispering affectionate words of praise in my ear.

I can feel how much he wants me, and yet, he makes no effort to have me straddle him next.

And it hits me that he was thoughtful in helping me find my pleasure without using me for his.

Instead, he strokes my hair and back and holds me.

This quiet moment feels even more intimate than what came before—this silent acknowledgment that whatever stands between us has transformed into something neither of us were searching for but somehow found anyway.

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DOMNO

The morning air tastes different. Lighter somehow, as if the ash and grit that constantly coat Velzaroth have momentarily lifted.

I'm leaning against the outer wall of Esalyn's home, watching as she braids Erisen's dark hair with nimble fingers.

The boy's eyes keep drifting to the wooden bird I carved him, now clutched in his small hands like it might take flight if he loosens his grip.

"Hold still," Esalyn murmurs, her lips quirking when he squirms impatiently. "Almost done."

I find myself mapping the curve of her smile, committing to memory the way sunlight catches in her hair.

Last night plays through my mind in a constant loop—the weight of her against me, the trust in her eyes when she surrendered to pleasure.

The memory warms my blood even as it unsettles something deep in my chest.

This isn't what I came for. Not even close.

"Can we go to the eastern market today?" Erisen asks, turning those golden eyes—so like mine it sometimes unnerves me—up toward his mother. "Domno said there might be new stones there."

"After I work." Esalyn secures the end of the braid, then presses a kiss to the crown of his head. "And only if you finish your reading."

The boy nods solemnly, then slips from her grasp and races to me, bird still clutched in his hand. "Will you come with us?"

I reach down without thought, ruffling his hair and destroying a portion of Esalyn's careful work. "Of course."

The ease of the answer startles me. No calculation. No weighing of risks and benefits. Just... yes. Because I want to be where they are.

When have I ever allowed myself what I simply want?

Erisen beams up at me, then darts back inside to gather his books. I watch him go, this child who carries demon blood but none of our scars. Not yet.

"You're staring," Esalyn says, moving toward me. Her steps are lighter today, something guarded having fallen away between us.

I don't deny it. "Hard not to."

A flush creeps up her neck at my words, and I find myself fascinated by the path it takes. Without thinking, I reach out to trace it with my fingertips. She leans into the touch like a flower seeking sun.

"Thank you," she whispers. "For last night."

I want to tell her there's nothing to thank me for. That the privilege was mine. That I've killed men and collected bounties and survived a brother's death, but nothing has ever felt as momentous as watching her come apart in my arms.

Instead, I just nod, words failing me as they often do. My hand slides to the nape of her neck, feeling the warmth of her skin, the delicate bones beneath.

"Go help him with his books," I say, withdrawing reluctantly. "I'll help him read today if you'd like."

She nods and leaves, and I linger in the doorway, surveying the narrow street.

It's habit, this automatic cataloging of potential threats, escape routes, vantage points.

Except today, the assessment feels perfunctory.

A gesture so familiar my body performs it while my mind wanders elsewhere—back to the way Esalyn's breath caught when I touched her, forward to the moment we'll return from the market and put Erisen to bed.

I'm getting soft. Distracted.

And some buried part of me, the part that's been hollowed out since Zevan's death, doesn't mind it.

I straighten, shifting the weight of my blades against my ribs, and turn to follow them inside. That's when I notice it—the absence of song from the Black Pitter birds that usually perch on the rusted gutter across the street. Silence where there should be morning calls.

Something's wrong.

My body goes still, senses expanding outward. I catalog everything—the faint breeze carrying market smells, the distant clatter of a cart over stone, the weight of my knives and the distance to Esalyn and Erisen inside. Threat assessment becomes

instinct, immediate and sharp.

There. A shift in light. The barest disturbance of ash on a rooftop diagonally across from us.

Too deliberate. Too controlled.

I catch the glint of metal—not a random flash but the calculated angle of a blade positioned to reflect nothing. Only years of tracking prey allowed me to spot it at all.

And then I see him, a silhouette melding with the shadows of a chimney stack.

A dark form poised with the unnatural stillness that comes only with supreme confidence or supreme patience.

I know that posture—the head tilted slightly, the weight balanced perfectly on the balls of the feet, ready to spring or strike.

My blood goes cold, colder than it's been since I first caught sight of Esalyn and tracked her through Velzaroth's winding streets.

Kareth.

He hasn't changed—still that same lean, predatory grace that made him feared even among other hunters.

His charcoal-black skin absorbs the shadows around him, making him nearly invisible except for the amber glow of his eyes and the crimson undertones that shimmer across his form when he finally shifts.

Four years since our paths crossed on that blood-soaked hunt in Ikoth's outer reaches.

Four years since he swore to repay me for taking his prize. The bounty that made my reputation and shattered his.

Those stag-like horns rising from his head cast splintered shadows across the rooftop as he straightens, knowing he's been spotted. Not hiding anymore. Making a point.

He's found us.

Vorrak didn't just raise the bounty. He brought in the one demon hunter who would pursue this job as more than business—as personal vendetta.

Kareth's mouth splits into that familiar, too-wide smile—all sharp teeth and no warmth. Even from this distance, I can feel the cold calculation in his gaze, assessing me as I assess him.

I've lowered my guard. Stopped watching the shadows. Stopped measuring threats.

The worst mistake a hunter can make.

In that moment of recognition, understanding crashes through me like a physical blow. This isn't just about a bounty anymore. This is about everything I've built with Esalyn and Erisen. Everything I almost let myself believe I could keep.

I lunge through the doorway where they are both about to emerge, gripping Esalyn's shoulder with more force than intended. Her skin flinches beneath my fingers, but I can't soften my touch—not now.

"Get Erisen and stay inside," I hiss, already moving back toward the door. "Away from windows. Now."

She reads the danger in my eyes instantly, mother's instinct sharpening her

movements as she rushes toward her son. I don't wait to see them secure—can't afford to. Kareth won't give them that time.

My boots scrape against stone as I launch myself upward, grabbing the edge of a sagging gutter to haul myself onto the neighboring roof. My muscles burn with the force of the climb, but fear drives me faster than pain. Each breath feels scorched in my lungs, every heartbeat a countdown.

Across the broken skyline, Kareth has already disappeared, melting into the labyrinthine gaps between buildings. He knows exactly where I've been staying. Exactly who I've been with. Which means he's been watching—for how long?

The thought sends ice through my veins as I leap between structures, using chimneys and uneven walls as leverage. Below, morning market-goers scatter as my shadow passes overhead, but I barely register them. All I see is the path to cut Kareth off before he reaches them.

But demons don't move like humans. We flow like something liquid and lethal, and Kareth is one of the best. By the time I spot him again, he's already ahead of me, those stag-like horns silhouetted against the reddish morning sky as he vaults between two crumbling towers.

He's not running from me. He's circling back.

"Fuck," I snarl, changing direction so abruptly my boots skid on loose tiles. I miscalculated. He's not making a direct path—he's looping around to approach from the blind side of Esalyn's home.

I drop from the rooftop into a narrow alley, landing hard enough that the impact shock travels up my spine. No time for caution. No time for anything but raw speed as I charge through the maze of streets, shoving past anyone too slow to move.

The tiny house comes into view just as Kareth's sleek form disappears through the door I left ajar in my haste.

The door I left open for him.

My vision narrows to a tunnel of red-tinged fury as I burst through the entrance, knives already drawn. But I'm too late.

The scene unfolds like something from a nightmare. Kareth stands in the center of the single room, his amber eyes gleaming with undisguised triumph. One clawed hand rests casually on the hilt of his blade as he leans against the rickety table.

Opposite him, Esalyn stands with her back pressed against the far wall, Erisen clutched against her side, half-hidden behind her skirts. Her face is a mask of terror, but her stance is pure protection—a mother ready to die before letting anything touch her child.

"There he is," Kareth drawls, his voice smooth as spilled oil. "Our mutual friend."

The air in the room shifts as I step fully inside, tension crackling like gathering storm energy. Kareth turns his gaze to me, those stag horns casting twisted shadows across the wall behind him. His smile widens, showing each of his unnaturally sharp teeth.

"I was just explaining to this lovely woman why we're both here. Catching her up on the situation, you might say."

"Shut your mouth," I growl, positioning myself between them, though it's clear the damage is already done.

"Oh, but I've barely started, Domno." Kareth's voice is almost playful, savoring each syllable. "I was telling her about the five hundred novas Lord Vorrak is offering for

her return. A tidy sum, wouldn't you say? More than enough for a broken hunter to drink himself to death with."

The words land exactly as he intended—like poison darts finding every vulnerable spot. I can feel Esalyn's eyes on me, can almost hear the rapid beat of her heart.

"Is it true?" Her voice barely rises above a whisper, but it cuts through the room like a blade. "You were sent to find me? For him?" The words break as she asks, "You knew?"

I knew when she told me what she was running from? I knew why she looked so scared? I knew what she was protecting Erisen from and forced my way into their lives still?

Yes. I knew. But I refuse to tell her that, to handle any of this until Kareth is gone. I'll make her understand, once she's safe.

I turn to face her, and the betrayal etched into her features hits me harder than any physical blow. Erisen peers from behind her, his golden eyes wide with confusion and fear, still clutching the wooden bird I carved for him.

"Esalyn—" I start, but Kareth cuts me off.

"Oh, he's been looking for you for weeks. Tracking you. Following you." He gestures expansively. "Lord Vorrak was quite specific about wanting his property returned intact. His property and his... offspring."

Esalyn's face drains of color, her knuckles white where they grip Erisen's shoulders.

"You knew," she whispers, answering her earlier question, and the light in her eyes—the warmth I'd seen just minutes ago—flickers and dies. "All this time, you

knew who we were. What he wanted." She shakes her head. "I never should have trusted a demon ."

And the way she says it is like a damn blade to my chest.

DOMNO

Kareth looks between us with a smirk, but his body is tensing. "Well, now that that's over..."

"Esalyn, get back!" I snarl, my body already moving before conscious thought forms.

Kareth lunges toward them, a flash of charcoal skin and amber eyes.

I intercept him, slamming my shoulder into his chest with enough force to crack ribs.

The impact rattles through me, but I barely register the pain.

We crash into the table, the stone crumbling as we hit the floor in a tangle of limbs and blades.

"Run!" I shout to Esalyn, catching Kareth's wrist as he tries to drive a dagger toward my throat. His skin burns hot beneath my grip, those crimson undertones swirling across his flesh like lava beneath obsidian.

Esalyn grabs Erisen and bolts for the door, the boy's wide golden eyes locked on me as they flee. Something in his gaze—trust, fear, confusion—twists in my chest like a blade.

Kareth's teeth snap near my face, too close. "You've gone soft," he hisses, his breath sulfurous and hot. "For what? A human whore and her half-breed whelp?"

Rage explodes through me like wildfire. I smash my forehead into his face, feeling cartilage crunch beneath the impact. Kareth howls, amber eyes flaring brighter as black blood spurts from his broken nose.

"Not. Another. Word." Each syllable punctuates another strike as I drive my knee into his sternum, using the momentum to throw him off me.

He recovers with unnatural grace, those stag-like horns catching the light as he rolls to his feet. Blood drips down his chin, staining his teeth as he grins at me.

"You know what Vorrak does to human women," he taunts, circling me like a predator. "What he'll do to her when I bring her back. Maybe he'll let me watch this time."

I don't answer with words. My blade whistles through the air, barely missing his throat as he dances backward through the doorway, drawing me out into the street. Exactly what he wants—space to maneuver, to use his speed.

We spill into the narrow alley, blades catching the morning light. Around us, onlookers scatter, pressing into doorways or fleeing entirely. No one interferes when demons fight. They know better.

Kareth moves like smoke, each strike flowing into the next. His double daggers blur as he slices toward my ribs, my throat, my eyes—testing, taunting, looking for weakness. I block and parry, my larger frame making each impact heavier but slower.

"I followed you for days," he says, voice casual despite the violence of his movements. "Watching you play house with them. Pretending you're something other than what we are."

His blade nicks my shoulder, drawing a line of hot blood. I barely feel it through the

rage pounding in my veins.

"When Vorrak sent me, I couldn't believe it." Kareth's laughter is cold as winter. "The great Domno Vraith'Sarrin, reduced to petting a human child and fucking its mother."

I roar, abandoning defense for a brutal offensive strike. My blade catches his upper arm, opening a deep gash that spills black blood down his skin. The satisfaction is short-lived as he uses my momentum against me, spinning inside my guard to slam his elbow into my ribs.

Pain flares, sharp and bright. A cracked rib, maybe two.

"I'm going to enjoy this." Kareth's eyes gleam with something darker than ambition. "When I'm done with you, I'll find them. Bring them back to Vorrak in pieces if I have to."

Something fundamental shifts inside me at his words—not just anger but clarity, crystalline and absolute. This isn't about me anymore. Not about my failures or my past.

This is about Esalyn's smile in the morning light. About Erisen's small hand trustingly held in mine. About the life I never thought I deserved but suddenly, desperately want.

"You won't touch them." The words emerge as a promise, cold and certain.

Kareth's mouth twists. "You can't stop me. You couldn't even save your own brother."

The blow lands harder than any blade. For a heartbeat, Zevan's face flashes before me—young, trusting, dead because I failed him. The memory nearly costs me my

head as Kareth's dagger whistles past my ear.

I recover, barely, catching his wrist and twisting brutally until something snaps. He doesn't scream—demons like us were trained to swallow pain—but his eyes flare with hatred.

"They're not yours to protect," he snarls, striking with his off-hand in a move that slices across my chest. "They belong to Lord Vorrak."

"They belong to themselves." I drive my knee into his stomach, following with an uppercut that snaps his head back. "And I belong with them."

The truth of it reverberates through me as we crash against a stone wall, cracking the mortar with the force. Blood slicks the cobblestones beneath our boots—his and mine—as blade meets blade in a dance we've both known since childhood.

I drive my blade deep into Kareth's throat, twisting to ensure the wound is fatal. His amber eyes widen in shock, then narrow in fury as black blood cascades over my knuckles. His mouth opens, forming words I'll never hear as he slides down the stone wall, leaving a dark smear in his wake.

"Find peace in the dark, old friend," I mutter, though we were never friends. His body slumps forward, those antler-like horns scraping against the cobblestones as he falls.

The sudden silence rings in my ears. Battle-heat drains from my limbs, leaving me hollow and aching as I stalk down the alley?—

And find nothing but empty air everywhere I look. No sign of Esalyn and Erisen.

My heart stutters in my chest. I scan the alleyway, the doorways, the shadows between buildings. Nothing. They're gone.

I did tell her to run, but I didn't think she'd get too far. Away from the house, yes, but to hide. To come out when I was ready.

But I don't see them anywhere as I slip through the alleys, toward the market. I don't know where they've gone.

"Esalyn?" My voice echoes against stone walls, unanswered. "Erisen?"

The boy's name catches in my throat. I remember his small hand in mine, the way his golden eyes—so like my own—had widened with wonder when I showed him how to carve wood. The trust in his gaze whenever I lifted him to see farther, higher.

She fled. Of course she fled.

She must have grabbed Erisen and disappeared into the labyrinth of Velzaroth's winding streets while Kareth and I were locked in combat. Smart. Practical. Exactly what she should've done.

But knowing this doesn't stop the gnawing emptiness that spreads through my chest like poison.

I stagger back toward their home—what's left of it. The place looks even more pitiful now, the door hanging crooked on its hinges, the table I carved for them splintered beyond repair. My blood and Kareth's stain the floor like an accusation.

They're gone. Both of them. And with them, the only light I've known in years.

"Dammit!" I slam my fist against the wall, sending a tremor through the rickety structure. Pain lances up my arm, but it's nothing compared to the hollowness consuming me from within.

I hadn't realized until this moment how much they'd become a part of me. How Esalyn's wary smile when I brought food had become the benchmark of my day. How Erisen's quiet excitement when I appeared was like sunlight after an eternity of darkness.

And how could she know any different? All she saw was another demon—another betrayal—another hunter coming to collect.

In her place, I'd have done the same. Run. Hide. Trust no one. Especially not the bounty hunter who'd been pretending to care.

Except I wasn't pretending.

Stalking back to their home, I sink to my knees in the wrecked room that made up their entire space, my fingers brushing over one of Erisen's colored stones, abandoned in their flight.

The smooth surface is cool against my blood-warmed skin.

Next to it lies the batlaz I carved for him, but the bird is missing. He must have taken it with him.

The sight of it all splits something open inside me—a wound deeper than anything Kareth's blade could inflict.

"I wasn't pretending," I whisper to the empty room.

For the first time since Zevan died, I had found something worth living for. Something that made the endless years stretching before me seem like more than just an exercise in survival. And now they're gone, thinking me another monster sent to drag them back to Vorrak's cruelty.

The thought of Esalyn and Erisen alone, hunted, afraid—perhaps thinking I'd led Kareth to their door—claws at me with talons sharper than grief.

Blood drips from my wounds, pattering onto the floor in a rhythm that matches the throbbing in my chest. My failures pile up like corpses: Zevan, who trusted me to keep him safe. And now Esalyn and Erisen, who never knew they could.

I can't lose them too. Not like this.

I push myself to my feet, ignoring the protest of torn muscles and cracked ribs. The hunt that brought me to them ends here, with Kareth's cooling corpse in the alley and my heart torn open on this splintered floor.

But a new hunt begins—one not for bounty or salvation, but for the chance to prove what I couldn't say when it mattered: that I choose them. That they are mine to protect, not capture. That whatever future I have left belongs with them, if they'll have me.

ESALYN

I run like the hunted animal I am.

Erisen's small body bounces against my chest with each frantic step, his face buried against my neck. My lungs burn. My legs scream. But I don't slow down. Can't slow down. The revelation of Domno's betrayal drives me forward like a blade between my shoulder blades.

"Mama, wait!" Erisen's voice is muffled against my skin, his breath hot with confusion and fear. "Where's Domno? Why did we leave him?"

His question slices deeper than any knife could reach. I tighten my grip on him, ducking beneath a low archway where sulfur-crusted pipes hiss with escaping steam. The heat sticks to my skin like guilt.

"Quiet now," I whisper, choking back the bitter taste of my own stupidity. "We need to be quiet."

How could I have been so blind? So foolish?

A demon with battle scars who appears from nowhere, taking interest in a human woman and her half-demon child.

I should have known. Should have sensed the wrongness of it.

Instead, I'd been seduced by his careful kindness, by the way Erisen's eyes lit up

whenever Domno appeared.

I dodge around a corner, past the skeletal remains of what was once a bathhouse, its stone pools now filled with murky rainwater and worse things. The air reeks of rot and sulfur, but it's safer here in Velzaroth's forgotten places. No one comes here willingly—except those with nowhere else to go.

Like us.

"But—" Erisen squirms against me, trying to look back the way we came. "He was fighting the bad demon. Domno was protecting us!"

His words strike me like a physical blow. I stumble, nearly losing my footing on the slick stones. The memory of Domno's body slamming into the other demon's flashes through my mind—the violence of it, the desperation. For a heartbeat, doubt creeps in.

Then I remember the other demon's words.

Bounty hunter .

My throat closes up. Six years of vigilance, of paranoia, of looking over my shoulder—and I'd invited the very danger I feared right into our home. Let him touch me. Let him near my son.

"He lied to us," I say, the words scraping my throat raw. "He was hunting us, Erisen. For money."

I duck through a half-collapsed tunnel, the ancient stones groaning overhead as if sharing my pain. The darkness swallows us, and I navigate by memory and desperation, one hand pressed against the damp wall to guide us through.

"No." Erisen's voice is small but stubborn. "No, Mama. Domno wouldn't."

The simple faith in his words breaks something inside me. For a moment, I hate Domno more than I've ever hated anyone—more than Vorrak, even. Because Vorrak never pretended to be anything but what he was: a monster. But Domno made us believe in him. Made me believe.

We emerge into a forgotten plaza, its cracked fountain long dry, the stone eyes of forgotten gods watching from weathered statues.

I pause, lungs heaving, trying to get my bearings.

The shadows are growing longer. Night will be upon us soon, bringing new dangers. I need to find shelter. Need to think.

"He carved me a bird," Erisen whispers, and I realize he's crying—silent tears tracking down his dusty cheeks. "He showed me how to skip stones."

Each word is another fracture in my already shattered heart. I set Erisen down, kneeling before him on the cracked stones. His golden eyes—Vorrak's eyes, but so different in their gentleness—swim with tears. I brush them away with trembling fingers.

"I know, love. I know." My voice catches, memories of Domno's careful hands on my skin, his mouth against mine, crowding my thoughts. "But sometimes... sometimes people lie. They pretend to care when they don't."

The words taste like ash on my tongue. Because the most terrifying part is that it hadn't felt like pretending. The way he'd looked at me in those quiet moments, the gentleness with which he touched Erisen's small horns when the boy was self-conscious about them—none of it had felt false.

But neither had Vorrak's initial kindness, all those years ago.

"He came to take us back to my father, didn't he?" Erisen asks, his perceptiveness striking me like a physical blow. He's always understood too much, my boy with ancient eyes.

I pull him close, burying my face in his hair to hide my own tears. "Yes," I whisper. "For money."

And that's what cuts deepest. Not just that Domno betrayed us, but that we were nothing more than a transaction to him. A way to earn coin. All those moments—the carved bird, the careful way he repaired our table, the heat in his eyes when he touched me—just means to an end.

"We have to go, love." I stand, lifting Erisen again. He feels heavier now, a weight of sorrow dragging at both of us. "We can't stay in one place too long."

We move deeper into Velzaroth's forgotten underbelly, through narrow passages where the stone itself weeps with condensation. Past huddled figures who don't even look up as we pass—the city's discarded souls, too broken to care about two more fugitives.

With each step, I feel the tenuous roots we'd begun to put down being torn away. The tiny life we'd built, precarious as it was, had started to feel like home—especially with Domno's solid presence filling the empty spaces.

Now we have nothing again. Just fear and flight and the crushing knowledge that I'd been wrong to hope for more.

Over the next few days, we become ghosts in a city that doesn't care if we live or die.

We spend our first night in an abandoned bathhouse at the very edge of Velzaroth's western quarter, where mineral-crusted pipes twist like petrified snakes across crumbling walls.

The air is thick with sulfur and decay, but it's dry and hidden from prying eyes.

I spread my cloak on a section of floor where greenish moss hasn't yet claimed the stone, and Erisen curls against me, his small body radiating heat.

"Will we find a new home soon?" he whispers, his golden eyes reflecting what little light filters through the collapsed ceiling.

"Yes," I promise, brushing his dark hair away from the small horns at his temples. "A better one."

He nods, believing me because he has no choice. I watch as exhaustion claims him, his long lashes fluttering closed against tear-stained cheeks. Only then do I allow my smile to crumble.

The next night, we hide in an empty stable where the smell of long-gone zarryn lingers in rotted hay.

Erisen sits cross-legged in the corner, turning his wooden birth over and over in his small hands—one of the stones Domno gave him.

It's smooth and black, shot through with threads of silver that catch the fading light.

"Why did he give me things if he didn't like us?" he asks, voice hollow in a way that no child's should ever be. He never lets go of the wooden carving, and he stares down at it like he doesn't know what to think.

I pause in my task of weaving straw into a makeshift bed. "I don't know, love," I say, the words sticking in my throat. What can I tell him? That men are cruel? That kindness can be a weapon? He already knows too much about the world's darkness.

Erisen tucks the pebble into his pocket without another word, but I see how his fingers keep returning to it throughout the evening, seeking comfort in the one tangible reminder of Domno's presence. It breaks something inside me to watch.

On the third day, we find shelter in the bones of what must have once been a temple, its dome now a jagged half-circle against the red sky.

Statues of forgotten gods line the walls, their faces worn smooth by time and the constant ash that falls like snow in this part of the city.

I recognize none of them—they are not the Seven worshipped in Ikoth, nor any deity I've encountered in my years of running.

"Are they sleeping?" Erisen asks, pointing to a faceless figure whose stone arms reach upward in supplication.

"Perhaps," I say, unwrapping our meager portion of food—a half-loaf of sour bread I'd traded my hair ribbon for in the market. "Or maybe they're just waiting."

"For what?"

I break the bread in two, giving him the larger piece. "For someone to remember them."

Erisen nods solemnly, then sits beneath the statue as he eats, leaning against its pedestal as if finding comfort in the silent stone presence. I watch him, this boy who once chattered endlessly about everything he saw, now conserving words like they're

as scarce as food.

Each day, he grows quieter. Each night, more withdrawn.

The child who had finally begun to bloom under Domno's attention is wilting again, curling inward like a plant deprived of light.

The bright curiosity that once sparked questions about everything from why the sky turns red at sunset to how stone bridges stay up without falling is dimming, replaced by a watchful silence that reminds me too much of our earliest days on the run.

I keep smiling for him. During daylight hours, I am stronger than stone, more reliable than the ground beneath our feet.

I point out curious-looking thalivern with their iridescent wings when they flit through broken windows.

I make up stories about the clouds that manage to peek through Velzaroth's smoky haze.

I braid his hair with nimble fingers that don't betray my fear, tucking the strands carefully over his small horns.

"Remember when we saw those black pitter birds nesting on the cliffs?" I ask him as we huddle together on the fourth night. "How fast they flew? Someday we'll fly just as fast, far away from here."

Erisen nods against my shoulder, but says nothing. He doesn't believe me anymore. Perhaps he never did.

It's only after his breathing deepens with sleep that I allow myself to break. I ease

away from his warmth, moving just far enough that my silent sobs won't wake him. Tears carve hot paths down my cheeks, tasting of salt and defeat when they reach my lips.

I press my fist against my mouth to muffle the sounds that want to escape. My body shakes with grief—not just for what we've lost, but for what I allowed myself to believe we could have. A home. Safety. The solid presence of someone who looked at us and saw more than just prey.

"Please," I whisper to the faceless gods surrounding us, my voice raw and desperate. "Please help us."

But the stone figures stand silent, unmoved by my tears, and I know better than to expect answers. Hope unravels inside me, thread by precious thread, leaving nothing but a hollow ache where my heart used to be.

DOMNO

I haven't slept in three days.

I prowl Velzaroth's underbelly like the predator I am, following trails that grow colder with each passing hour. The familiar weight of purpose settles into my bones, sharper now than it's been in years. Not since Zevan died have I hunted with such ferocity.

The difference is that then, I hunted to kill. Now, I hunt to save.

"You saw a woman," I growl, lifting the tavern keeper by his throat until his feet dangle. His eyes bulge, face purpling as he claws uselessly at my grip. "Human. Small. Dark hair. With a boy."

Around us, the other patrons of this piss-stained establishment fade back into shadows. Nobody wants to get involved when a demon loses his temper. Especially one with horns as large as mine—a sign of power they all recognize.

"Three nights ago," he chokes out, spittle running down his chin. "Heading west. Wouldn't... wouldn't say where."

I drop him, watching dispassionately as he crumples to the floor, gasping. "Next time," I say quietly, "you tell me immediately. Or I come back and take more than just your breath."

His frantic nod follows me as I stalk out, shouldering through the doorway that's too

small for my frame. The heat from the sulfur vents hits me like a wall, but I barely notice. The burn in my lungs is nothing compared to the fire in my chest.

West. It's not much, but it's something.

Dawn breaks red and angry over Velzaroth's jagged skyline as I make my way through the western quarter.

Windows are boarded here, doors barricaded against the desperate.

The air reeks of decay and ash, coating my tongue with each inhale.

It's the kind of place people disappear. The kind of place Esalyn would choose.

Smart woman. Always thinking three steps ahead.

I reach into my pocket, fingers brushing one of the stones there. One that I gave Erisen. I collected all his treasures in my pack, refusing to leave them behind. But this one I keep it close like a talisman.

A group of street children huddle near a steaming grate, their hollow eyes following my movement with practiced wariness. I approach slowly, hands visible. Among the human and half-breed faces, I spot a gaunt half-demon boy, his tiny horns barely visible beneath matted hair.

"Food for information," I say, setting down a package wrapped in cloth. The scent of fresh bread wafts from it—more than these children have seen in weeks.

Their leader, a girl missing half her ear, steps forward. "Whatcha want, demon?"

"A woman and boy. Human mother, half-demon son. They're running."

The children exchange glances. Information is currency in Velzaroth, and they know its worth. The half-demon boy whispers something to the girl, who nods.

"We saw them two days ago," she says. "Near the sewers beneath Old Temple District. Woman looked scared. Boy wouldn't stop crying."

My chest tightens. Erisen crying. The image slices through me like a blade. Was he afraid? Hungry? Missing his collection he left behind?

Missing me?

I toss another package toward them. "That's for the truth," I say, turning away before they can see how their words have affected me.

The Old Temple District looms before me, its crumbling spires reaching toward the crimson sky like grasping fingers. Once, pilgrims flocked here to worship gods whose names are now forgotten. Now it houses only ghosts and those desperate enough to live among them.

A good place to disappear. An even better place to die unnoticed.

I navigate the maze of fallen columns and headless statues, mapping the possible entrances to the sewer system beneath. Five, maybe six access points. All hidden. All dangerous.

Just like the woman I seek.

Night falls, and still I search, moving with a predator's patience through places no sane being would enter willingly.

I kick down rotting doors, scale crumbling walls, drop into black pits that reek of

sulfur and death.

My body remembers old skills, muscles recalling the efficiency of movement I'd cultivated as Ikoth's most feared bounty hunter.

The hunt awakens something in me I thought long dead. Not just the ruthlessness or the singular focus—though those flood back like old friends—but the clarity. The purpose.

For years after Zevan died, I drifted through life half-dead, taking contracts to fill my purse so I could empty it again at taverns across Aerasak. I became a ghost haunting my own existence, a blade without direction, cutting whatever was placed before me.

Until Esalyn.

Until Erisen.

Until I found myself carving wooden birds in the predawn hours, thinking of a small boy's smile. Until I discovered myself lingering at market stalls, wondering if she would like the scent of this oil or the color of that fabric. Until I realized I was planning for tomorrows again.

Three more informants. Two broken arms. One nearly crushed windpipe.

The information trickles in, pieces of a puzzle I assemble with meticulous care.

A sighting near the western aqueduct. A woman trading a hair ribbon for bread.

A child with golden eyes hiding beneath a merchant's cart during a guard patrol.

I'm getting closer. I can feel it.

On the fifth day, as crimson rain begins to fall—acid-laced droplets that sizzle against stone—I corner a smuggler who specializes in moving people out of Velzaro. His eyes widen when he sees me, fear scenting the air between us.

"The woman and child," I say, voice deadly calm as I press the edge of my blade against his throat. "You've arranged passage for them."

He swallows, the movement pushing his skin against the sharpened metal. A bead of blood forms, dark against his pale flesh.

"They're gone," he whispers. "Left on this morning's caravan."

The world stops. The breath freezes in my lungs.

"Where?" I demand, pressing harder.

"Northeast passage. Through the Ridge."

I release him, already calculating. The Ridge—the treacherous mountain path connecting Velzaro to the outer territories. A desperate route. A dangerous one.

The bounty doesn't matter. It never did, not really—not after I saw her with Erisen that first day in the market. Not after I understood what I was being paid to destroy. But now, even the pretense of it is gone. The job is a ghost, an excuse I used to stay near them while I figured out what to do.

Now I know. I need to find them. Protect them. Be the shield between them and a world that wants to use them both.

I need to tell her that she was never the job. She became the reason I would never do another. Because I had nothing left to hunt.

I push myself beyond exhaustion, beyond reason, as I track the northeastern mountain path. My boots slip on loose shale, catching myself before I tumble into the ravine below. Six days without proper rest has dulled my reflexes, but I refuse to stop. Not when I'm this close.

The Ridge isn't meant for travelers—it's a death trap of narrow passages and sudden drops, where sulfur vents belch toxic fumes without warning. Only the desperate or the hunted use these routes. Esalyn fits both categories.

At a crossroads marked by a lightning-struck tree, I crouch to examine the ground. The recent acid rain has washed away most traces, but there—a small footprint pressed into mud, too small for an adult. Erisen. My chest tightens at the sight.

I follow the trail until dusk, when a grizzled nomad tending a hidden campfire grunts information my way after I offer him a flask of amerinth.

"Human woman?" He gestures vaguely toward the cliffs that rise like broken teeth against the crimson sky.

"Saw her two days past. Pretty thing, scared eyes.

Had a half-blood boy. Keeping to the shadows, they were.

" He takes another swig. "Heading for the old shrine—the Temple of Forgotten Names, they call it. Nobody goes there. Bad omens."

Perfect for hiding. Perfect for ambush.

I leave him with the rest of the flask and set out immediately, pushing my body harder. The temple sits carved into the very edge of the cliffs, half-swallowed by ancient lava flows now hardened to black basalt. It's barely visible against the

darkening sky, its spires crumbled like broken fingers.

From my vantage point in the twisted scrub brush, I watch the temple for hours. Nothing moves, yet I sense life within. I know Esalyn's patterns—she'll wait until full dark before risking movement, when the red moon casts enough light to see by but shadows are deep enough to hide in.

And there—a small figure emerges first, cautious as a wild thing. Erisen. His slight frame is tense, golden eyes scanning the perimeter before he signals behind him. Esalyn follows, a knife—my knife that I gave to her—gripped tightly in her hand.

The sight of them steals my breath. They're alive. But gods, they look wrong. Broken somehow.

Erisen's cheeks have hollowed in the short time since I last saw him, more sadness than weight. He's dirty, somehow looking smaller, and even from this distance, I can see the way he hunches his shoulders—a protective stance I know too well. It's like he's completely withdrawn into himself.

And Esalyn... She moves like a wounded predator, each step calculated despite her obvious exhaustion.

Her dark hair is pulled back severely, emphasizing the sharpness of her expression.

Shadows pool beneath her eyes, and her hand trembles slightly as she guides Erisen toward a patch of dreelk growing between the rocks.

They gather the bitter greens quickly, stuffing them into a ragged sack. Survival food. My jaw clenches. They should be eating warm meals at a table, not scavenging like animals.

I wait until they've returned inside before circling the temple, identifying entry points.

The main entrance is blocked by rubble—intentional, I suspect—but a narrow window near the back sits partially open.

Inside, the faint glow of votives casts weak light.

The sulfur candles are common enough in Velzaroth not to draw attention, but provide just enough illumination to see by.

Night deepens. I move silently toward the window, listening for any sound from within. Their voices drift out—Esalyn's low murmur as she coaxes Erisen to eat, his small, tired replies. The domesticity of it slices through me. This is what I almost destroyed. What I still might lose.

I wait for silence—for Erisen's breathing to deepen with sleep—before approaching the window. I need to talk to Esalyn and I know she won't just let me in. And I don't want to further upset Erisen.

Hopefully she'll forgive me for breaking in. It's the least of my transgressions.

The frame groans softly as I ease my larger body through, dropping noiselessly to the stone floor inside.

The knife is at my throat before I can fully straighten, its edge pressing cold against my skin.

"I taught you well," I murmur, remaining perfectly still.

Esalyn stands before me, her body taut as a bowstring. The votives cast her face in harsh relief—high cheekbones, hollow cheeks, eyes like open wounds. We stand in a

hall and at the very end, the door is cracked. Where Erisen must be.

Her gaze is pure wildfire, burning with equal parts fury and fear. My knife—the one I gave her for protection, the one I taught her to use with my hands guiding hers—doesn't waver at my throat.

"Esalyn," I say her name like a prayer, low and steady. I make no move to defend myself, no attempt to disarm her. I could—we both know it—but I won't. This choice must be hers.

I meet her gaze directly, letting her see everything I've hidden before: the regret, the need, the truth.

And I wait.

DOMNO

"What are you doing here?" Esalyn hisses, her voice barely above a whisper so as not to wake Erisen.

The knife doesn't waver at my throat, her knuckles white around the handle.

Instead, she backs me down the hall until we are out of sight of the room that Erisen must be in—probably so he won't accidentally see this if he wakes.

She looks like a goddess of vengeance, standing there in the dim light. Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders now, wild and untamed. There's a smudge of ash across one cheekbone, and a small cut along her jaw that wasn't there before. My chest aches at the sight.

I could disarm her in seconds. We both know it. But I remain still, giving her this power over me. She's earned it.

"I came for you," I say simply.

"To finish the job?" Her eyes narrow, rage emanating from her in waves so potent I can almost taste it. "To collect your nodals?"

The bitterness in her voice cuts deeper than the blade at my throat. I deserve it. I deserve worse.

"No." I keep my voice steady, my gaze locked with hers. "To tell you the truth."

"I already heard the truth from Kareth before you killed him." She adjusts her grip on the knife, pressing just hard enough to draw blood. A warm trickle runs down my neck. "He told me everything."

"He told you what he knew," I correct quietly. "Let me tell you what he didn't."

There's so much distrust in her eyes, but I can see it—that slight waver. She wants to believe something different than what Kareth told her. She just doesn't feel like she can.

"Talk," she demands. "And if you lie to me again, I will cut your throat."

I believe her. The fierce woman who escaped a demon lord wouldn't hesitate to kill another demon who betrayed her. It's part of why I...why I can't stay away.

"The bounty came in through the usual channels," I begin, keeping my voice low. "Five hundred novas for one human woman. Just another job." I hold her gaze, unflinching. "I didn't know about Erisen. I didn't know why you were running."

Her jaw clenches. "Would it have mattered?"

"Yes." The certainty in my voice surprises even me. "But I didn't know that then either."

The votives flicker, casting shifting shadows across her face.

In the dim light, I can see the exhaustion etched into every line of her body, the way she's holding herself together through sheer force of will.

Yet she's still beautiful—not despite her rage and fear, but because of it. Because she refuses to break.

"I found you in four days," I continue. "I watched you in the market with Erisen. Saw how you counted your lummi three times before buying him a sweetbread. Noticed how you always kept your back to the wall, your eyes on the exits."

Her expression doesn't change, but something flickers in her eyes.

"I was going to walk away," I admit. "Leave you be. But then Erisen almost got trampled in the market, and I—" I swallow hard. "I couldn't just watch. And after that, I couldn't stay away."

"So instead you lied," she says, voice sharp as the blade she holds. "You pretended to be someone Erisen could trust. Someone I could—" She cuts herself off.

"I didn't mean to stay," I tell her, the truth raw in my throat. "It was supposed to be just once. Check that you were safe. But then once became twice. Twice became every day." I exhale slowly. "I didn't know how to walk away once something good found me again."

The confession hangs between us, naked and vulnerable. I've never spoken so honestly to another living soul, not since Zevan died.

"I let you into my home," she says, voice trembling with rage. "I let you near my son. I trusted you with the only thing that matters to me."

"I know." The weight of her words crushes me. "I should have told you sooner."

"You should never have come at all." The knife presses harder.

"But I would have never found you," I whisper, the realization hitting me like a physical blow. "And for the first time since my brother died, I remembered what it felt like to be alive."

Esalyn's knife doesn't waver, despite the tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. They glitter in the dim light but don't fall—she's too strong for that. Too practiced at holding herself together when everything threatens to shatter.

"Do you know what he did to me?" she asks, her voice so quiet I have to strain to hear it. "Vorrak?"

I don't move. Don't dare to breathe.

"He kept me in a room with golden chains.

Said they suited my skin." Her free hand unconsciously moves to her ankle where I've noticed the faint circular scars before—marks I never asked about.

"When I was carrying Erisen, he would tell me what he planned to do with our child.

How he would make him stronger than any half-blood had a right to be. "

The hatred in her eyes burns bright enough to scorch the air between us. I've seen that look before—in my own reflection.

"I don't want your pity," she spits, misreading my expression. "I want you to understand why I can't ever go back. Why I will kill anyone who tries to take us there."

"I understand," I say, and I do. The weight of her words settles on my shoulders, familiar and heavy. "But I won't take you back, Esalyn. I know what it's like to try to outrun your past. I know what it's like to never know a moment of peace."

The temple air grows thick with our shared history, with the weight of survival hanging between us. Outside, the wind howls against the abandoned stone walls, a

lonely sound that matches the emptiness I've carried for so long.

"So you became the hunter instead," she says, understanding dawning in her eyes.

I nod once. "Until I found you." She's starting to look so uncertain, so I add, "That's why I couldn't stop myself when it came to both of you.

You...gave me that. The peace and a reason to live that I didn't have before.

I wouldn't give you up, not for the money or a bounty. Not for the right or wrong reasons."

She shakes her head. "You know, Erisen has never gotten close to anyone. But he asks about you," she admits, the words clearly costing her. "Wanted to know where his Domno went."

The possessive— his Domno—slices through me like a blade far sharper than the one at my throat.

"I told him we had to leave," she continues, voice hardening again. "That it wasn't safe anymore."

"It isn't," I agree. "Not now that others know. Kareth was just the first. There will be more."

Her jaw tightens, the tendons in her neck standing out. "I've been running from Vorrak for six years. I know how to disappear."

"Not from hunters like us." The truth is cruel, but necessary. "Not anymore."

The knife presses harder, drawing another trickle of blood. Her eyes flash with

renewed anger. "So what then? You tracked us here to warn us that we can't run from you? That's not making your case any better, demon."

There it is—that fierce protectiveness that first drew me to her. The way she stands like a warrior twice her size, defending what's hers with every piece of herself.

"I tracked you to protect you," I say simply.

She laughs, a sharp, brittle sound. "Protect me? By finding me for Vorrak?"

"By standing between you and anyone who comes for you," I correct, my voice dropping lower. "It's what I've been doing since I first saw you."

Something dangerous flickers in her eyes—not trust, but possibility. It's a look I recognize from cornered prey that suddenly realizes it has options beyond fleeing.

"Why would you do that?" she asks, suspicion lacing every word. "What's in it for you?"

I could lie. Could claim honor or duty or some noble purpose. But I've lied enough.

"Because when I'm with you and Erisen, I remember who I was before the darkness took everything," I admit, the truth raw and exposed. "And I want to be that man again."

ESALYN

His words hit something raw inside me—a place I've kept guarded since the day I ran from Vorrak's estate with a newborn clutched to my chest.

"Because when I'm with you and Erisen, I remember who I was before the darkness took everything. And I want to be that man again."

My hand trembles against his throat, the knife suddenly heavy. Blood beads around the blade's edge—his blood—dark against his gray skin. The sight of it makes my stomach twist. I've never been the one to draw blood, only to have it drawn from me. The power feels strange in my hand.

"Lower the weapon, Esalyn." His voice is gentle but firm, like he's speaking to a wounded animal. Those golden eyes that have watched me across market stalls and my tiny kitchen table hold steady. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Aren't you?" My voice cracks. "What do you call this, then? This betrayal?"

"A mistake," he says, not flinching from my blade. "The worst I've made since Zevan died."

And what's awful is I want to believe him. I want to lower my weapon, to let him in. I have missed him as much as Erisen has, even if I don't want to.

My son's attachment to this demon tears at me in ways I can't articulate. For six years, we've been each other's entire world. Then Domno walked in with his quiet strength

and careful attention, and Erisen blossomed like a flower turning toward sunlight.

"You made my son love you," I accuse, voice breaking on the words. "You made me—" I can't finish. Won't give him that truth. Not now.

His jaw tightens. "I never meant for any of this."

"That doesn't make it better." The knife wavers, my conviction weakening despite myself. "You were being paid to hunt us. While you sat at our table. While you touched me."

Heat crawls up my neck at the memory of his hands on my skin, how I'd surrendered to his touch so easily after years of never letting anyone close. What a fool I'd been to think I was special—that I was anything more than a bounty to collect.

"Look at me, Esalyn." His voice drops lower. "Really look."

I force myself to meet his gaze, and what I see there makes my breath catch. There's no calculation in those golden eyes, no hunter assessing his prey. Only raw, unshielded pain—and something dangerously close to devotion.

Slowly, I lower the knife. Not because I trust him, but because killing him won't undo what's already been done.

"You don't get to fix this with confessions," I say, stepping back to put distance between us, my spine still rigid with hurt. "Protection means nothing if it's built on secrets."

He reaches for me, then stops himself, hand hovering in the space between us. "I know."

"No, you don't." My fingers curl into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms. "You don't know what it's like to have the ground ripped out from under you again and again.

To never know who you can trust." My voice shakes, but I refuse to break.

Not again. Not for him. "I've spent six years building walls to keep Erisen safe, and you—you just walked through them like they were nothing. "

His face remains impassive, but I see how my words land in the tightening of his shoulders, the subtle clench of his jaw.

"I need space," I continue, forcing each word past the lump in my throat. "I need the chase to end."

The temple around us creaks, ancient stone settling as the wind howls outside. The single candle I lit flickers, throwing his face into sharp relief—the proud curve of his horns, the planes of his face that I've memorized without meaning to.

"Don't track me again," I tell him, wrapping my arms around myself. "I have to figure out what's left of my own strength without your shadow following my every step."

Something flickers across his expression—pain, resignation, respect. He steps back, his massive frame somehow smaller in the dim light.

"Where will you go?" he asks, voice rough.

I glance at Erisen, still clutched in the arms of sleep, unaware that his world has shifted again. My beautiful boy who deserves so much more than this life of running.

"That's not yours to know anymore," I whisper, the finality of it like a stone settling

in my chest.

He wavers, his eyes flicking over me. I can tell he doesn't want to force me but he doesn't want to let go either. Instead he just says, "I will always want to protect you, Esalyn. Both of you. I hope you will eventually see that."

I don't move until Domno's shadow disappears completely from the temple as he slips back out the window. The sound of his footfalls outside fades into silence, and I'm left standing with a knife in one hand and the tatters of whatever we'd been building in the other.

He didn't argue. Didn't try to convince me. Just accepted my words with that single, sharp nod and walked away.

It's what I asked for. What I demanded.

So why does it feel like someone has hollowed out my chest with a dull blade?

The candle flickers as a draft sweeps through the abandoned temple, sending shadows dancing across cracked stone walls. I sink to the ground, still tucked out of view, so he doesn't hear me. My legs suddenly feel too weak to hold me.

"I did the right thing," I whisper to myself, but it doesn't feel right. "You'll understand someday."

But the words ring hollow in the temple's vastness. The silence that falls afterward is too complete, too final—a punishment for daring to want something beyond survival.

I've been alone with Erisen since the night we fled Vorrak's estate. Years of keeping my head down, of teaching my son to be quiet, to be invisible, to trust no one but me. I'd built our life on caution and fear, and it had kept us alive.

Then Domno appeared like some dark guardian from the shadows, and something inside me that had been locked away for so long stirred to life. Not just desire—though gods know that burned bright enough—but something more dangerous: hope.

I press the heels of my palms against my eyes, willing back the hot threat of tears. My throat constricts painfully as I swallow them down. I won't cry over him. I've shed too many tears already in this life; I won't waste more on a demon who'd seen me as nothing but prey.

Except... had he?

I think of how he looked at Erisen—not with calculation or disgust, but with something like wonder.

How his massive hands, scarred from countless battles, would become impossibly gentle when showing my son a new pebble for his collection.

How he'd sit at our rickety table, his broad frame making our shabby dwelling seem smaller, yet somehow safer.

"Damn you," I hiss into the darkness, the words catching like thorns in my throat.

The emptiness of the temple mocks me. Six years of running, of keeping everyone at arm's length, and now I've pushed away the one person who made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't have to run forever.

My arms feel too empty. My skin remembers his touch—calloused fingers tracing paths of fire along my collarbone, my shoulders, down the curve of my spine. The heat of his mouth against mine, drinking me in like I was something precious. Not possession, not ownership, but reverence.

Was it all a lie? A hunter's trick to make his quarry compliant?

I wrap my arms around my knees, making myself small as the vastness of what I've just done crashes over me.

I've spent so long running from Vorrak that I forgot what it was like to run toward something instead.

And now I'll never know if what sparked between Domno and me could have become something worth the risk.

"Maybe I just lost the one person who would've stayed," I whisper, my voice breaking on the final word.

Especially as I remember everything we've been through.

How he saved Erisen and helped him read.

How he made him little wooden carvings. Domno spent hours on it, whittling away in patient silence while Erisen watched with fascination.

It wasn't the gift of someone playing a role.

It was something real in a world that had given us so little to believe in.

But I can't trust that feeling. I've been wrong before, trusted and paid dearly. The scars Vorrak left run deeper than skin.

So I square my shoulders and harden my heart against the ache. Tomorrow we'll pack what little we have and find somewhere new. Somewhere Erisen can grow up without fearing shadows. Somewhere I can forget the weight of golden eyes that saw through

every wall I'd built.

ESALYN

I pull myself together, wiping angry tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand. Dwelling in misery won't change anything. We still need to leave at first light. I've done this before—packed our meager belongings and disappeared without a trace. This time will be no different.

Except it is. Because this time, I'm not just running from a monster. I'm running from someone who made me feel things I'd forgotten were possible.

I push those thoughts away and rise to my feet, my knees protesting after too long on cold stone.

The abandoned temple groans around me, ancient wood and stone shifting in the night wind.

I need to check on Erisen, make sure he's still sleeping peacefully.

We have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow.

The flickering candlelight casts long shadows as I make my way back to where I left him sleeping. My body feels heavy, like I'm wading through deep water, each step requiring more effort than it should. Exhaustion or heartbreak—I'm not sure which weighs more.

But as I approach his sleeping space, a growing sense of unease prickles along my spine. It's too quiet. The small bundle I expect to see rising and falling with his breath

is oddly misshapen. Something isn't right.

"Erisen?" I call softly, quickening my pace as I push open the door to the room.

The blanket is twisted and empty, bunched up where his small body should be. The wooden bird Domno carved for him lies on the floor, its delicate wings catching the dim light. But my son is nowhere to be seen.

My stomach drops, a cold void opening inside me. My heart stutters, then races.

"Erisen?" I call again, louder this time, panic threading through my voice as I spin in place, checking every corner of the small chamber. "Erisen!"

The echo of my voice bounces off ancient stone walls, mocking me with its emptiness. The temple suddenly feels vast and threatening, full of hidden corners and crumbling passages where a small boy could be lost—or taken.

My mind jumps immediately to the worst possibility: Vorrak found us. He's taken our son while I was distracted with my broken heart over a demon who betrayed us. Or maybe it was Domno himself—perhaps his words were just another deception, and he's completed his bounty by taking what matters most.

Something inside me snaps. Six years of vigilance, of never sleeping deeply, of watching every shadow—all undone in a moment of weakness. I collapse to the floor, my legs giving way beneath me.

"No, no, no," I sob, my fists beating against the unyielding stone. "Erisen! ERISEN!"

The pain in my hands feels distant, inconsequential compared to the agony tearing through my chest. My worst fear has come true—I let someone in, and now my son is gone.

I clutch Domno's carved bird to my chest, its edges digging into my palm. My tears fall onto its wooden wings, darkening the grain. I trusted. I wavered. I let my guard down for one moment, and the price is everything.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, rocking back and forth on my knees. "I'm so sorry, Erisen."

My cries echo in the empty temple, a mother's grief bouncing off ancient walls that have seen countless sorrows over centuries.

The sound is primal, wounded—a noise I didn't know I could make until this moment.

Six years of careful planning, of teaching him to hide, of protecting him with everything I have. All for nothing.

I've faced horrors. I've endured Vorrak's cruelty. I've given birth alone, fled with a newborn, built a life from nothing. But this—the emptiness where my son should be—this, I cannot bear.

A sudden sound wrenches me from my grief—the scuff of a boot against stone. I whirl around, knife already in my hand, the wooden bird clutched to my chest like a talisman. The candle flickers wildly with my movement, sending shadows dancing across the walls.

And then Domno is there, ducking through the low archway, his massive frame filling the space where moments before there was only emptiness.

His golden eyes scan the room, sharp and alert until they land on me—crumpled on the floor, bloody-knuckled and tear-streaked.

Something shifts in his expression, a crack in that carefully constructed mask he

always wears.

"Esalyn—" he starts, taking a step toward me.

"You!" The word tears from my throat, sharp as a blade. "Where is he? Where's my son?"

Confusion flashes across his face, followed swiftly by understanding, then something darker. His shoulders tense as he looks at the empty blankets.

"Where is Erisen?" His voice drops to a dangerous register I've never heard before.

I launch myself at him, a wild, feral thing, my knife cutting the air between us. "Don't you dare say his name! This is your fault! You brought them to us!"

He catches my wrist before the blade can find its target, but makes no move to disarm me. There's no effort in his grip, just enough pressure to keep the steel from his throat.

"Esalyn, I swear I didn't?—"

"You were hunting us!" I'm screaming now, the pain in my voice echoing off ancient stones. "You were going to deliver us to Vorrak! And now—now my son is gone!"

Something inside me shatters completely. I asked for space, but I could already feel my walls weakening once he left. How foolish I was.

My free hand pounds against his chest, each blow punctuating my words. "I trusted you! I let you near him! He loved you!"

Domno doesn't flinch, doesn't defend himself. He takes each blow like he deserves it,

his face stripped of everything but raw anguish.

"You made me believe—" My voice breaks, emotions flooding through the cracks. "You made me think we were finally safe. That someone in this gods-forsaken world would protect us instead of hunting us."

My legs give out beneath me, and I sink to my knees, the knife clattering uselessly to the ground. The fight drains from me as quickly as it came, leaving only hollowness.

"He called you his friend," I whisper, the words like ash in my mouth. "He waited for you every day by that window."

Domno kneels before me, his movements careful, deliberate. In the candlelight, I can see every scar that marks his gray skin, every line etched by battles I know nothing about.

"Esalyn, focus." His eyes are sharp, his body tense. "Where is Erisen? What do you mean he's gone?"

My panic starts to ebb and I realize that he doesn't have a clue what I'm talking about. "I came in here after you left, and he was gone." I narrow my eyes in suspicion. "And now you're back."

"Because I heard you screaming." His eyes sweep over the room again, anger blooming across his face. "You were screaming because Erisen is gone."

"Yes," I hiss. "He's gone." I shake my head, trying to push to my feet. The panic and fear overwhelmed me, wasted precious minutes I needed. How stupid of me. How could I have wasted any of that time? "I have to go find him."

"Let me."

I freeze, stopping in my climb to my feet. "What?"

"I am one of the best hunters on this continent. I will find him."

I know that I wouldn't stand a chance at tracking a demon, but with everything that has happened, I am reluctant to let Domno do this. "How can I trust you?"

His eyes never leave mine, unflinching as steel meets skin. "I swear to you, Esalyn—by whatever gods you believe in, by my brother's memory—I will bring Erisen back to you, or I won't return at all."

The conviction in his voice reaches something deep inside me, past the rage and grief. This isn't the smooth talk of a hunter or the calculated words of a liar. This is a vow carved from the same raw place that my own desperation comes from.

"If anything happens to him..." I can't finish the thought. The possibility is too vast, too terrible to give voice to.

"It won't," Domno promises, and somehow, despite everything, I want to believe him one last time.

DOMNO

" I 'm coming with you." Esalyn rises to her feet, tears still streaking her face but determination hardening her jaw.

"No." The word leaves me with finality. I soften slightly at the fury that flashes in her eyes. "You'll slow me down."

"He's my son?—"

"And I move faster alone." I cut her off, scanning the temple floor for signs of Erisen's passage. "I've tracked prey across wastelands that would kill most demons. I can find him."

Her hands ball into fists at her sides, knuckles still bloody from beating the stone floor. "If this is some trick?—"

"It's not." My voice drops lower, an edge of danger I haven't allowed her to hear before. "I will bring him back to you. Wait here."

Before she can argue further, I'm gone, slipping through the temple entrance like a shadow detaching from deeper darkness.

The night air hits my face, carrying the ever-present scent of ash and sulfur that clings to Velzaroth.

But beneath it—there—the faintest trace of Erisen.

Not his physical scent, but something else.

The lingering trace of magic that clings to half-demon children, invisible to most but unmistakable to someone who's spent years hunting.

I drop to a crouch, examining the soft earth outside the temple. Small footprints, too light to be an adult's. A larger set alongside—boots, expensive ones. The pattern is familiar in a way that crawls cold down my spine.

Something primal shifts inside me, awakening from long dormancy. The predator I spent years becoming before Zevan's death. The hunter that earned both fear and coin throughout Aerasak's darkest corners. The demon I thought died with my brother.

But it didn't die. It was just waiting for something worth fighting for.

I follow the tracks down the craggy path, my movements fluid and soundless despite my size. Each print tells a story—Erisen walking willingly at first, then being carried. No signs of struggle. He trusted whoever took him.

Dawn bleeds across the eastern sky as I reach the edge of Velzaro's blighted coast. The tracks end at a narrow dock, long abandoned by honest traders.

Someone took a boat. I memorize every detail—the boat's weight, the distinctive chip in the pier post where it was moored, the faint traces of magic lingering like oil on water.

Without hesitation, I cut east along the coast, pushing my body to speeds I haven't attempted in years.

My muscles burn with effort, but the pain feels distant, unimportant.

Time becomes meaningless. Four hours pass before I reach the next settlement, a collection of ramshackle buildings clinging to the cliffside like barnacles, too pathetic to even have a name.

I don't bother with pleasantries. I kick open the door of the only tavern, sending it crashing against the inner wall.

Conversations die mid-sentence. The patrons—smugglers, vagabonds, and worse—turn to stare.

Their eyes widen at the sight of me, a full-blooded demon with murder written across his face.

"I'm tracking a mark," I say, my voice a low rumble that promises violence. "A half demon child. With a hunter. Have you seen them?"

Silence meets me, broken only by the sound of a glass being set down too carefully. I scan the room, marking each face, each potential threat. My hand rests casually on the hilt of my blade.

"I won't ask again."

An old man in the corner shifts slightly, weathered face betraying nothing but eyes that know too much. I'm beside him before he can blink, my hand closing around his throat.

"Tell me."

"South," he wheezes, hands fluttering uselessly against my grip. "Heard they were going to Vorrak's estate."

The name hits like a physical blow. I should have known. The bounty was never about Esalyn. It was about the boy. They left her to take him.

"Give me a map," I growl out, and he quickly draws me a rough location. It'll do until I'm closer.

I release the old man and turn away, my mind already racing ahead. Vorrak's estate is three days' hard travel, less if I don't stop. I throw a gold coin on the table—payment for information that just might save Erisen's life.

Every second Erisen is gone, panic burrows deeper under my skin like a parasite. But it's not just fear for Esalyn's grief that drives me—it's my own. Somewhere between carved wooden birds and skipped stones along the shore, that quiet boy with golden eyes became mine.

I see Zevan in his curious glances, in the way his small face lights up at new discoveries. I feel my brother's presence in Erisen's careful drawings, in his soft questions about the world.

But it's more than that. He's not just a replacement for my brother. I've come to learn and enjoy all the little things that make Erisen so special.

I love him. Like my own son.

The realization doesn't shock me as it should.

It settles into place like the final piece of a puzzle I didn't know I was solving.

For six years after Zevan died, I was a dead man walking, taking bounties to fund a slow suicide of alcohol and recklessness.

I thought nothing could awaken what died that day.

Then a small hand placed pebbles in my palm, treasures freely given. Golden eyes—so much like my own—looked up with trust I'd done nothing to earn. It might not be my blood in his veins, but he looks like me, he chose me, and he owns my heart.

He's mine .

I push myself harder, legs eating up the coastline as I track southwest. Vorrak won't expect anyone to follow so quickly. He won't expect me at all.

And this time, I'm not hunting for coin or oblivion.

I'm hunting for family.

The path ahead twists through salt-crustured rocks that gleam like bone under the bloodred sky.

I navigate the treacherous terrain without slowing, my boots finding purchase where others would stumble.

Each breath sears my lungs with the volcanic heat that pulses through these canyons, but I push forward.

Pain is irrelevant. Exhaustion is a weakness I can't afford.

I see glimpses of him in my mind—those solemn golden eyes, the careful way he arranges his collection of stones, how his small hand felt when it slipped trustingly into mine. The images cut deeper than any blade.

Three figures emerge from behind a jagged outcropping ahead, their silhouettes stark against the ash-stained sky. Slavers, judging by the brands on their exposed forearms and the cruel curve of the hooks at their belts. They've spotted me—a lone demon worth good coin in the right market.

"Lost, horn-head?" The largest one grins, revealing filed teeth. "Pretty far from Reinmirth."

I don't waste breath on words. My blade slides free in one fluid motion, the metal singing through the sulfur-heavy air.

The first slaver is dead before his companions register my movement.

Blood sprays across volcanic rock as I pivot, driving my knife through the second man's throat while my sword separates the third's head from his shoulders.

Three bodies hit the ground in the span of four heartbeats. I clean my blade on one of their shirts and continue without breaking stride. They weren't part of Vorrak's crew—just opportunists in my path. They don't matter. Nothing matters except the boy.

The canyon narrows, funneling me into a ravine where heat rises in visible waves from cracks in the earth.

A predator's instinct saves me—I drop and roll as something massive lunges from an overhead ridge.

A scaled beast with sulfur-yellow eyes crashes where I stood, jaws snapping on empty air.

A firemaw—native to these volcanic borderlands, drawn to heat and movement.

I've killed them before. I'll kill this one faster.

The creature rears back, its armored throat expanding to spit molten venom.

I'm already moving, ducking beneath its guard and driving my blade up through the soft spot beneath its jaw.

My arms burn as acidic blood splatters across my skin, eating through the surface layer.

I ignore the pain, twisting the sword deeper until the firemaw shudders and collapses.

I spare one glance at my forearms—the wounds will heal—and press on. Pain is a distraction. Time is bleeding away from me with every step.

My thoughts turn to Esalyn as I scale a particularly treacherous ridge.

Her face when Kareth revealed my betrayal—the shock shattering into something worse than rage.

It was the look of someone who expected to be hurt and hated herself for forgetting that truth.

The same expression she wore when she spoke of Vorrak and what he'd done to her.

I'd become just another demon who proved her right.

The memory twists in my gut like a living thing.

I'd spent a lifetime building walls between myself and everything soft, everything vulnerable.

Then she and Erisen had somehow slipped past my defenses, made themselves at home in places I thought long dead.

And I'd repaid that miracle with deception.

Night falls as I reach a nameless settlement clinging to the edge of a lava flow. Lights flicker behind shuttered windows. I smell fear as I approach—the residents here know trouble when they see it. Three mercenaries block my path at the edge of town, weapons drawn, confidence born of numbers.

"Toll to pass," one says, motioning to a leather pouch at his hip. "Pay or turn back."

I don't have time for this. My sword is in my hand before he finishes speaking, the blade catching starlight as it arcs through the air.

The first mercenary's eyes widen in the instant before steel meets flesh.

The second manages to raise his weapon before I drive my knife between his ribs. The third turns to run.

He doesn't make it three steps.

I clean my blades methodically, the movements automatic after years of practice. These men worked for someone—likely the local crime lord. Their deaths will draw attention I don't need, but speed matters more than stealth now.

The trail leads to central Ikoth, toward increasingly difficult terrain. Vorrak is counting on the journey itself being a deterrent. He doesn't know what drives me. He can't understand that this isn't about gold or reputation. This is about not failing a second time.

Zevan's face flashes in my memory—not as he was at the end, broken and bleeding in my arms, but smiling. Young. Trusting me to protect him as I'd always promised. I'd failed him once. I would die before failing Erisen the same way.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:04 am

DOMNO

R einmirth's air feels different from Velzaroth's—heavier with humidity that clings like a second skin, carrying scents of unfamiliar vegetation and decay. The red sky hangs lower here, a permanent blood-stain above me as I survey Vorrak's stronghold from the treeline.

It didn't take long once I was in the city to force an exact location out of someone. And the gaudy estate was horribly easy to spot.

Black stone rises from the jungle clearing, towers crowned with spiked obsidian that glitters wickedly in the dull light. The architecture itself seems to sneer—excessive, ornate cruelty carved into every battlement and archway. The stronghold doesn't just house Vorrak; it embodies him.

I flex my fingers around my sword hilt, the familiar weight grounding me.

Four days of relentless travel have left my body hollow, running on rage and determination instead of food or rest. My gray skin is streaked with dirt and dried blood—some mine, most not.

The wounds from the firekaw have healed to angry red welts across my forearms.

Inside those walls, Erisen waits. Scared. Alone. The thought sends fresh heat coursing through my veins.

I don't bother with stealth or subterfuge. That's not who I am, not what I was made

for. Six guards patrol the main gate, alert but unprepared for direct assault. No one would be foolish enough to attack Vorrak's stronghold alone.

No one except a demon with nothing left to lose and everything to save.

I emerge from the trees like a storm front, my blade already singing through the air.

The first guard barely registers my presence before his head separates from his shoulders.

The second manages to raise his weapon—too late.

My sword punches through his chest armor, finding the heart beneath with practiced precision.

"Sound the alarm!" The third guard's shout ends in a wet gurgle as my knife finds his throat.

The remaining three converge on me at once, their coordinated movements marking them as professionals, not conscripts.

I drop into a defensive stance, letting instinct take over.

My body remembers what my mind doesn't need to articulate—the subtle shift of weight that telegraphs an overhead strike, the tightening around the eyes before a lunge.

A blade grazes my shoulder as I pivot between two attackers, using their momentum against them.

One crashes into the other, throwing both off balance.

I exploit the opening, driving my sword through one guard's spine and using the momentum to rip upward through his comrade's abdomen in the same movement.

The last guard backs away, fear sharpening his features. "Demons don't fight like this," he hisses, circling warily. "What are you?"

"A father." The word surprises me as much as him, but it feels true in my bones.

His moment of confusion costs him his life. My blade finds the gap in his armor at the neck, severing his spine before he can process my answer.

Alarm bells begin to ring as I approach the gate, their clangor a battle hymn spurring me forward.

Two more guards rush from a side entrance, crossbows raised.

I don't slow my stride. The first bolt whistles past my ear; the second grazes my thigh, a minor inconvenience.

Before they can reload, I'm upon them, my movements economical and lethal. No wasted motion, no hesitation.

The courtyard beyond the gate reveals more obstacles—a dozen soldiers forming ranks, and archers taking position on the upper walkways. A frontal assault would be suicide.

I scan the stronghold, my hunter's eyes finding the weaknesses others would miss. A drainage channel to the left, partially obscured by decorative stonework. A service entrance near the kitchens, likely guarded but less heavily than the main approaches.

Six years of hunting the most dangerous prey across Aerasak taught me patience and

strategy. Brute force has its place, but lives longest when tempered with cunning.

I feint toward the soldiers, drawing their attention and the first volley of arrows, then dive for the drainage channel, rolling beneath the iron grating before they can adjust their aim.

The passage is narrow—designed for water, not warriors—but I force my broad shoulders through, ignoring the stone that scrapes skin from my arms.

The channel opens into a storage cellar, mercifully empty.

I listen for footsteps above, mapping the stronghold's layout through sound and vibration.

Heavy boots thunder across the floor above—guards responding to the alarm.

But beneath that chaos, I detect something else: the lighter tread of servants scurrying through back passages, avoiding the commotion.

Where servants go, paths exist. Where paths exist, I can move unseen.

I emerge from the cellar into a narrow corridor, killing the lone guard stationed there before he can shout. His body provides a uniform that won't withstand close inspection but might confuse at a distance. I strip it quickly, donning the black and silver tabard over my bloodied clothes.

Moving with purpose through servant passages and storage rooms, I dispatch anyone I encounter with silent efficiency. Not out of cruelty—necessity. Each death brings me closer to Erisen, and I cannot allow mercy to cost the boy his freedom or his life.

My senses stretch outward, seeking that familiar trace of magic that clings to the

child. Faint at first, then stronger as I ascend a spiraling staircase hidden behind the kitchens. Golden eyes and small hands collecting pebbles fill my thoughts, driving me forward when my body threatens to falter.

I step through the massive onyx doors into Vorrak's throne chamber, their surfaces etched with scenes of conquest and torment.

The room stretches before me like the inside of a mausoleum—all polished black stone and crimson accents, illuminated by floating orbs of amber light that cast more shadows than they banish.

Vorrak sits upon a throne carved from a single piece of volcanic glass, its edges honed to threatening points.

His gray skin carries a bluish undertone that marks higher breeding than mine, and his horns—four of them instead of the common two—curve elegantly upward, tipped with gold. The perfect image of demon aristocracy.

And there, beside him, stands Erisen. My blood roars in my ears at the sight of that small figure, his golden eyes wide with fear, his little body rigid as Vorrak's hand grips his shoulder possessively.

The boy's clothes have been changed—rich fabrics in Vorrak's house colors replacing Esalyn's careful stitching. A visible claiming.

"Domno Vraith'Sarrin," Vorrak's voice slides through the chamber like oil on water. "I'm afraid your bounty has been closed."

I scan the room, marking the positions of four guards—two flanking the throne, two by the doors I've entered through.

All armed with the curved blades favored by Ikoth's elite warriors.

My body throbs with fatigue and fresh wounds, but I straighten to my full height, letting my stolen guard tabard fall to the floor.

"Give me the boy," I say, my voice scraping like stone against steel.

Vorrak's elegant eyebrows rise, and his fingers tighten on Erisen's shoulder until the child winces. "The boy? You mean my son? The one you were contracted to return to me?" He laughs, the sound cold and cutting. "I believe there's been a misunderstanding, bounty hunter."

"The only misunderstanding is yours, thinking you'd ever see him again." I take a step forward, ignoring the guards who immediately tense. "Remove your hand from him."

Erisen's eyes lock with mine, and I see a flicker of hope rise in them. It feeds something primal in my chest—something I thought had died with Zevan.

Vorrak rises, pulling Erisen closer. "Fascinating. You've gone native, Vraith'Sarrin. Developed sympathies for my property." His lip curls. "Did the human whore seduce you? Is that it? Or was it simple greed? Did you think to extort more novas from me?"

My hand tightens on my sword hilt. "A dead man can't claim anyone or anything."

The threat hangs in the air between us, heavy and unmistakable. Vorrak's face darkens, those aristocratic features contorting with rage.

"You dare threaten me? In my own stronghold?" His voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "Guards, remove his limbs. Slowly. I want him conscious for what comes after."

The guards move as one, drawing their weapons with practiced precision.

I don't wait for them to reach me. I lunge toward the nearest, driving my shoulder into his chest and using the momentum to swing my blade at the second guard.

The sword connects with a wet thud, and I pivot back to finish the first.

"Run, Erisen!" I shout, but Vorrak has already yanked the boy behind his throne, toward a hidden exit.

The remaining two guards converge on me, their blades a coordinated dance of death.

Under normal circumstances, I'd dispatch them efficiently, but exhaustion makes my movements sluggish.

A blade catches my side, opening a fresh gash beneath my ribs.

Blood, hot and slick, courses down my leg.

Another strike grazes my shoulder, cutting through muscle.

Pain blooms white-hot through my body, but I push through it, focusing on Vorrak's retreating back. On Erisen's fear.

"You'll have to kill me to keep him," I growl, driving my sword through one guard's throat while taking a vicious cut across my back from the other.

I whirl, catching the last guard's sword with my bare hand, feeling flesh part as I pull him forward onto my blade. His weight drives me back against a column, the impact jarring my wounds. My vision swims, black edges creeping in, but I force myself upright.

Vorrak has paused at a side door, watching with cruel amusement. "Look at you," he sneers. "You can barely stand."

He's right. My body is a collection of injuries, each clamoring for attention. The firebrand burns across my arms have reopened, weeping clear fluid down my wrists. The crossbow bolt graze on my thigh throbs with every heartbeat. Fresh cuts and a stab wound leak my lifeblood onto the polished floor.

But none of that matters. Not when Erisen's eyes meet mine again, those golden irises so like my own, filled with a desperate trust that cuts deeper than any blade.

"I don't need to stand," I say, pushing away from the column. "I just need to kill you."

DOMNO

I haul myself forward, my body a catalog of agony, each movement tearing open fresh wounds. Blood trails behind me, turning Vorrak's pristine floor slick beneath my boots. The logical part of my mind—the hunter's instinct—screams that I'm finished, that my injuries are too severe to continue.

But something deeper rises above that voice. Something primal and fierce that has nothing to do with survival and everything to do with the small, wide-eyed boy watching me.

"He's mine," I growl, the words barely audible through blood-flecked lips. "Not Yours. Mine to protect."

Vorrak yanks Erisen closer, his perfect aristocratic features twisting with contempt.

"Pathetic. Is this what the feared Domno has become?

Bleeding out for a half-breed child?" He draws a ceremonial dagger from his belt, its black blade gleaming with an unnatural sheen.

"Perhaps I'll let the boy watch you die before I teach him his proper place. "

The world narrows to a single point—Erisen's face, terror and hope warring in those golden eyes so like my own. Not by blood, but by something stronger. Something I never believed in until now.

I lunge forward, my movements no longer calculated or efficient. Just raw desperation fueled by something I've never felt before. Not rage. Not duty.

Love.

Vorrak sidesteps, slashing the dagger across my chest. The blade burns like acid, enchanted steel leaving a wound that smokes and hisses. I ignore it. Pain is temporary. Losing Erisen is unthinkable.

"You won't touch him again," I snarl, catching Vorrak's wrist as he attempts another strike. His shock at my speed despite my injuries gives me the opening I need. I slam my forehead into his face, feeling the satisfying crunch of his aristocratic nose.

He staggers back, blood streaming between his fingers. "Guards!" he screams, but there's no one left to answer.

I advance on him, relentless despite the blood pouring from my wounds, despite the black edges crowding my vision. Vorrak's eyes widen as he realizes what stands before him isn't just a wounded demon, but something he's never faced—a father who would tear apart the world for his child.

"This isn't possible," he hisses, genuine fear flickering across his features. "What are you?"

"I told you," I say, my voice steady despite the fire in my lungs. "A father."

The word gives me strength as I drive my sword through his chest, angling up beneath his ribs to find his heart. His eyes widen in disbelief as I push the blade deeper, bringing our faces close enough that only he can hear my final words to him.

"He was never yours. He belongs to her. To me. To himself."

Light fades from Vorrak's eyes as I twist the blade, making certain. His body slumps to the floor, the dagger clattering beside him. For a moment, the chamber is silent except for my ragged breathing and the steady drip of my blood onto stone.

Then a small sound breaks the stillness. I turn to find Erisen emerging from behind the throne, his golden eyes huge in his small face.

"Domno?" His voice trembles.

I drop to my knees, partly from weakness, partly to meet his gaze. "I'm here, little one. I'm here."

He throws himself into my arms with such force that pain explodes through my battered body. But I don't flinch. I hold him close, breathing in the scent of his hair, feeling his small heart hammering against my chest.

"We're going home," I whisper against his temple. "To your mother."

"You're hurt." His small fingers trace the edge of a wound on my shoulder, leaving smears of my blood on his skin.

"It doesn't matter."

And strangely, it doesn't. The pain seems distant now, secondary to the fierce protectiveness that fills my chest as I lift Erisen into my arms and carry him from the chamber of death.

The stronghold is chaos, servants flee in terror and the few remaining guards don't seem to know what to do.

I have to slash a few down, but it doesn't take long for me to make my way to the

stables, where ornate carriages stand ready for Vorrak's use.

Ironic justice in stealing one to take Erisen home.

I settle him gently on the plush seat, wrapping him in a cloak from the carriage to hide his fine clothes—the last traces of Vorrak's claim on him.

My wounds scream as I climb in and urge the elegant zarryn into motion, but I push the pain aside.

There will be time for weakness later. Not now. Not until he's safe.

The journey back to Velzaroth passes in a blur of pain and determination.

I manage to address my wounds, enough so that I don't bleed out or get an infection.

Erisen stays close beside me, his small body pressed against mine as if afraid I might disappear.

Neither of us speaks much—there are no words for what we've survived together, what we've become to each other.

As we approach the abandoned temple where I left Esalyn, I see light flickering through the trees—a campfire blazing outside the crumbling structure. My heart thunders against my ribs as I slow the carriage, muscles screaming in protest as I draw back on the reins.

The moment the carriage stops, Erisen is scrambling down, his small boots hitting the ground running. He tears across the clearing toward the fire, toward the slender figure who rises from beside it like a spirit materializing from smoke.

"Mama!" His voice breaks on the word as he throws himself into her arms.

Esalyn catches him, dropping to her knees as she clutches him to her chest. Her entire body shakes with sobs as she covers his face with desperate kisses, her fingers tracing every inch of him as if to convince herself he's real.

"He saved me, Mama," Erisen's voice carries clearly in the night air, his words tumbling out in breathless excitement. "Domno fought everyone. The bad men tried to hurt him, but he wouldn't stop. He said I was his. He said he would die for us."

I remain in the carriage, watching them cling to each other, feeling like an intruder on their reunion.

Esalyn's eyes lift to find me, tears carving clean paths down her ash-dusted cheeks.

Even in the firelight, I can see the awed disbelief in her expression as she holds Erisen close, her son's words confirming what she never dared hope—that someone would risk everything for them.

Something shifts in my chest at the sight of her tears, her fierce protectiveness mirroring my own. I've never belonged anywhere, to anyone. But watching them, I know with bone-deep certainty that I would bleed out a thousand times to keep them safe.

I step down from the carriage, my legs nearly buckling beneath me.

The wounds across my body scream in protest, but I force myself forward, one boot in front of the other.

Each step feels like walking through deep water, resistance pushing against my every movement.

The firelight catches the blood still seeping through my torn clothing, but I don't care how I look.

All that matters is the woman and child before me.

Esalyn's eyes never leave mine as I approach. Her face is a battlefield of emotions—relief warring with fear, joy with uncertainty. She holds Erisen against her chest, fingers tangled protectively in his dark hair, but she doesn't back away. Doesn't turn from me.

"You're hurt," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "Badly."

I stop a few paces away, giving her space. "It doesn't matter."

"You're covered in blood."

"Most of it isn't mine." A lie. I can feel the warmth running down my side, pooling in my boot. I guess I didn't stop all of it.

Erisen wriggles in her grip, turning to face me. Despite everything he's witnessed, his golden eyes light up. "Domno killed the bad men, Mama. All of them." He makes a slashing motion with his small hand. "They tried to hurt me, but he wouldn't let them."

Esalyn cups his face, examining every inch as though searching for injuries. "Did they hurt you? Did they touch you?"

"No." He shakes his head firmly. "Domno wouldn't let them get close enough."

Her eyes lift to mine again, something shifting in their depths. Not forgiveness—not yet—but understanding, perhaps. She knows what I risked. What I chose.

"Come," she says finally, rising to her feet with Erisen in her arms. "You need to sit before you fall."

I follow her into the temple, boots crunching on fallen leaves that have blown through the broken windows.

Inside, she's created a makeshift camp—a pallet of blankets, a small supply of food, a lamp burning low beside what looks like a nest for Erisen.

It's barely adequate shelter, but she's made it safe. Made it theirs.

Erisen stays close to her side but keeps glancing back at me, as if making sure I'm still there.

His small hands twist in the fabric of his shirt—the same one I dressed him in after rescuing him, now dirty and torn at the sleeve.

Despite that, despite the shadows under his eyes, he seems more animated than I've seen him since I found him in Vorrak's stronghold.

"Show Mama your new rock," I suggest, nodding toward his pocket where I know he stashed a piece of obsidian I'd given him during our ride back here.

His face lights up, and he digs into his pocket, producing the glossy black stone. "Look, Mama! It's from a volcano."

Esalyn takes it from his small palm, examining it with exaggerated interest. "It's beautiful. Where did you find it?"

"Domno gave it to me. He says it's the same color as his heart used to be before he met us."

Her eyes flick to mine, surprise written across her features. I don't look away. Let her see the truth of it.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:04 am

Erisen continues chattering, describing our escape in the fragmented, breathless way of children.

Esalyn helps me as he does, making sure that my wounds are taken care of and helping me clean up with water she's brought in.

I'm almost good as new, and clean thanks to some clothes that were in the carriage, by the time Erisen starts to run out of energy.

I notice his eyes growing heavy. He sways slightly where he stands, exhaustion finally catching up to his small body after the terror and excitement.

Esalyn notices too. "Time for sleep, little one."

"But I'm not—" His protest is interrupted by a massive yawn.

"You're asleep on your feet," I murmur, the corner of my mouth lifting despite the pain throbbing through my body.

Erisen blinks up at me, then turns to his mother. "Can Domno help tuck me in?"

Esalyn hesitates for just a heartbeat before nodding. "Of course."

Together, we guide him to the nest of blankets she's prepared. I kneel beside him, ignoring the fresh wave of agony from my wounds, and pull the blanket up to his chin.

"Will you stay?" he whispers, small fingers catching at my wrist.

"Yes," I promise, brushing dark hair from his forehead. "I'm not leaving."

His eyes drift closed almost immediately, the day's horrors no match for a child's exhaustion. I remain kneeling beside him, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest, until I'm certain he's deep asleep.

When I finally stand, Esalyn is waiting near the temple entrance. "Outside," she says softly, gesturing toward the fire. "We need to talk."

I follow her into the night, the cool air a shock against my fevered skin. The fire throws dancing shadows across her face as she settles beside it, and I lower myself carefully across from her, my body protesting every movement.

"Thank you," she says after a long silence, the words hanging between us like smoke. "For bringing him back."

"I didn't do it for thanks." My voice comes out rougher than intended.

"I know." She stares into the flames. "You did it because you love him."

My wounds throb beneath the bandages she applied, her touch clinical and distant as she worked. I welcomed the pain. It's familiar territory, unlike the ache spreading through my chest that has nothing to do with physical injury.

I nod, unable to find words that don't sound hollow. What does a man like me say to a woman like her after everything that's happened? After the lies, the half-truths?

"He wouldn't let go of that wooden bird you carved him," she continues, a slight tremor in her voice. "Even after everything."

My throat tightens. "Esalyn?—"

"Don't." She holds up her hand, the firelight catching on old scars across her knuckles—remnants of her life before, of survival through servitude. "I don't know what to say to you, Domno. I don't know how to make sense of any of this."

I lean forward, ignoring the protest of torn muscle and sinew. Blood seeps through one of the bandages, but I don't bother acknowledging it. "Then let me speak. Please."

She doesn't answer, but she doesn't walk away either. I take it as permission.

"I was sent to hunt you. That is true." The words scrape my throat like broken glass. "The price on your head that would've set me up for life. Five hundred novas. Enough to drink myself to death in relative comfort."

Her face doesn't change, but something flickers in her eyes—a wounded animal recognizing the shape of a trap long suspected.

"But I told you that as soon as I saw you, I knew I couldn't do it." I run a hand through my slightly wet hair. "I didn't have a plan after that. I just knew I couldn't harm either of you. Couldn't walk away either. So I stayed. Watched over you both from a distance."

"Until you didn't." Her voice is quiet.

"Until I didn't," I agree. "Until I couldn't bear to just watch anymore."

I already told her some of this, but I think she needs to hear it again. Hear it when she is really listening and not just shoving me away.

The fire pops, sending a shower of sparks into the night air.

"I've killed more people than I can count, Esalyn.

I've spent my life taking bounties, hunting targets.

Never questioning, never caring." My hands hang between my knees, stained with dried blood that will never truly wash away. "Until you. Until him."

She stares into the fire, her profile edged in dying light. "And now?"

"Now?" I laugh, the sound harsh even to my own ears. "Now I'm terrified. Not of any repercussions for killing a lord. Not of what I've done or what I would do again. I'm terrified because I've fallen in love with you. With Erisen. And I have no fucking idea what to do with that."

Her eyes snap to mine, widening with shock.

"It's the truth." I hold her gaze, refusing to look away even as vulnerability flays me open. "I don't know how to be anything other than what I am. But I know I'll spend the rest of my life choosing you. Choosing him. Every day, without question or regret, if you'll let me."

I reach for her hand, stopping just short of touching her.

"I should have told you about the bounty.

I know that. I know I've given you no reason to trust me.

" My voice drops lower, rougher. "But if there's any chance—any way you could find it in yourself to let me try to earn your forgiveness—I'm asking for it.

Because the thought of being without you both.

.. it's worse than any death I've ever faced. "

Esalyn doesn't move, doesn't speak. Firelight dances across her face, revealing nothing of what she feels.

A hollowness spreads through my chest. Maybe I've destroyed whatever fragile thing was growing between us. I wouldn't blame her. Trust is a luxury for people who haven't been betrayed as systematically as she has.

But as I look at her across the dying fire, I know with absolute certainty that I'll find a way back to her. To them. Whatever it takes.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:04 am

ESALYN

I sit across from Domno, the fire between us casting shadows that dance across his battered face. My heart thunders against my ribs like a trapped animal, his words—I've fallen in love with you. With Erisen —echoing in my mind.

The weight of everything presses down on me: Erisen's safe return, Vorrak's death, the truth of who Domno is and why he found us. A bounty hunter. The very thing I've been running from for years.

And yet, he's the one who saved my son. Who chose us over wealth, over his own safety. The one who sits before me now, bleeding and vulnerable, asking for something I've never given anyone—a second chance.

"I never meant for this to happen," I finally say, my voice barely audible above the crackling fire. "I never meant to get close to you."

His golden eyes reflect the flames, making them look molten. Despite his wounds, despite the exhaustion etched into every line of his face, he watches me with such fierce attention that I feel exposed. Seen in a way I've never allowed myself to be seen.

"When I first let you near Erisen, it was because I couldn't bear to take away something that made him happy." I twist my hands in my lap, callouses catching on each other. "I told myself that's all it was."

"And now?" His voice is a rough whisper.

I close my eyes, summoning courage I'm not sure I possess. "Now I don't know what to do. Because somehow, in the middle of all this fear and running and survival, I've fallen in love with you too."

The admission feels like jumping from a cliff—terrifying and exhilarating all at once. When I open my eyes, Domno's expression has transformed, hope and disbelief warring across his features.

"Esalyn—" He shifts forward, wincing as the movement pulls at his wounds.

"Don't." I hold up a hand. "I'm still angry. I'm still afraid. Everything I've built, every wall I've put up to protect us—you walked right through them all."

"I know." He slips from his seat to kneel before me, his large frame making the movement look graceless and desperate. "I know I've hurt you. Let me at least properly apologize."

It's like he knows what a mess my head is right now, how words won't help much when there's so much to sort through. I am still hurt. He lied to us. But he nearly died protecting us, too, and I can't overlook either.

Before I can respond, he's reaching for me, his scarred, blood-stained hands impossibly gentle as they settle on my knees. His eyes hold mine, asking silent permission as his fingers trail up my thighs.

"Domno—" My throat closes around his name.

"Please." The word is rough with emotion. "Let me show you what I can't say."

I should push him away. Should remind him of his injuries, of the sleeping child just inside the temple walls. Should guard my heart that's been broken too many times.

Instead, I part my legs.

His breath catches, golden eyes darkening as his hands slide higher, pushing up the worn fabric of my dress.

The night air is cool against my skin, raising goosebumps that his touch immediately soothes.

He leans forward, pressing a kiss to the inside of my knee, then higher—reverent, worshipful touches that make my body tremble.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he murmurs against my skin.

I've been called beautiful before, by men who only saw me as property. But Domno's eyes hold something different—not just desire, but awe. As if I'm something precious rather than something to be used.

He kisses the inside of my thigh, his lips warm and insistent, and a shudder runs through me. My hands find his hair, tangling in the dark strands, unsure if I want to pull him closer or push him away. He looks up at me, his expression so vulnerable it makes my chest ache.

"I'll spend the rest of my life proving myself worthy of you," he vows, each word a promise etched into my skin. "If you'll let me."

Then his mouth is on me, hot and demanding and perfect.

I gasp, fingers tightening in his hair as heat explodes through my body.

He rips the fabric out of his way before devouring me in a way that has every thought leaving my mind.

He groans against me, the sound vibrating through my core, his hands gripping my hips to keep me from bucking away from the intensity.

My head falls back, eyes closing as sensation overwhelms me. His tongue is relentless, tracing patterns that make coherent thought impossible. All the fear and tension I've carried for so long melts away, replaced by waves of pleasure that crash over me like a storm.

"That's it," he murmurs against my most sensitive flesh. "Let go for me, Esalyn."

I bite my lip to keep from crying out, too aware of Erisen sleeping nearby. But Domno is merciless, his mouth working me with single-minded determination until I'm trembling on the edge of something vast and terrifying.

"I can't—" The words catch in my throat.

He lifts his head just enough to meet my gaze, his eyes burning gold in the firelight. "You can. I've got you."

Then he's back, tongue circling the bundle of nerves that makes my entire body jerk, and I'm falling, shattering, coming apart under his mouth with an intensity that steals my breath. My fingers tangle in his hair as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, leaving me gasping and boneless.

When I finally come back to myself, Domno is looking up at me from between my thighs.

His expression is one of pure wonder, like a man who's found salvation after a lifetime of darkness.

Blood from his wounds stains the ground beneath him, but he seems oblivious to his

injuries, to everything except me.

"There you are," he whispers, voice rough with emotion. "There's my heart."

I reach down and pull Domno up my body, unable to bear the distance between us any longer. Maybe tomorrow I'll regret it, but right now, I need this connection. Because that has always been real between us. His weight settles against me, solid and real, as I capture his mouth with mine.

The taste of myself on his lips is sweet and lights something up inside of me as I open my mouth to him.

He groans against my mouth, one hand cradling my face with a gentleness that contradicts the desperation in his touch.

The kiss deepens, his tongue sliding against mine, and suddenly I'm drowning—in sensation, in need, in the certainty that this is what I've been running toward all along, not just away from.

"Please," I whisper against his lips, my body trembling beneath his. "I need you... need all of you."

The admission costs me nothing—I've given him everything else already. My trust. My heart. My future. This final surrender feels inevitable, like the last piece falling into place.

Domno pulls back just enough to study my face, his gold eyes searching mine. The scars across his gray skin gleam silver in the firelight, telling stories of battles I'll never know. But I can read the one battle playing out in his expression now—desire warring with concern.

"Wait," I start to protest, reaching for the gash across his ribs. I hadn't been thinking when I asked him for this. "Your wounds?—"

He silences me with another kiss, this one fiercer. "I've lived through worse." His voice is a rumble I feel in my own chest. "And if I were to die, then this would be the best possible way."

Then he's laying me back against the rough blanket spread before the fire, his movements deliberate despite the urgency I can feel thrumming through his body. The flames cast his broad-shouldered silhouette into something ancient and powerful—a creature of legend come to life in my arms.

His fingers work at the laces of his pants while his gaze never leaves mine. There's a vulnerability in his eyes that makes my throat tight, a silent question even as he positions himself between my spread thighs.

"Yes," I answer before he can ask, wrapping my legs around his waist. "I'm sure."

The first press of him against me pulls a gasp from my throat.

He's large, intimidatingly so, but my body welcomes him with a readiness that would embarrass me if I had any shame left to give.

His restraint is visible in the tension of his shoulders, the tight clench of his jaw as he works himself into me with shallow, careful thrusts.

"You feel like coming home," he murmurs, pressing his forehead against mine as he stretches me slowly, giving my body time to adjust to his intrusion. "Like everything I never thought I deserved."

I arch up, taking him deeper, and his control fractures. A groan tears from his throat

as he buries himself to the hilt, and for a moment we're both frozen—connected, complete, overwhelmed by the raw perfection of it.

"Move," I whisper, digging my heels into the small of his back. "I need?—"

He doesn't let me finish, withdrawing almost entirely before driving back in with a force that steals my breath. His rhythm builds steadily, each thrust more demanding than the last, until he's claiming me with a primal hunger that matches the storm building inside me.

Yet even as his pace grows punishing, his hands remain impossibly tender—one braced beside my head, the other cradling my hip with a reverence that makes my heart ache. He handles me like I might break, even as he takes me like he's breaking apart himself.

"You're everything," he growls against my neck, his voice rough with emotion. "Everything I never knew I was hunting for."

The double meaning isn't lost on me, but there's no sting to it now. Not when I can feel the truth of his devotion in every fierce thrust, every gentle caress, every worshipful kiss he presses to my throat.

The tension builds between us, winding tighter with each roll of his hips.

I'm climbing higher, faster than before, my body clenching around him as pleasure spirals through me.

When he reaches between us, his thumb finding the spot where I'm most sensitive, I shatter with a cry I barely remember to muffle.

Domno follows moments later, his powerful body going rigid above me as he spills

himself deep inside with a broken sound that might be my name or a prayer or both.

We collapse together, our ragged breathing the only sound besides the crackling fire. His weight should feel crushing, but instead it anchors me to this moment, to this impossible reality where I'm safe and loved and free.

Once our hearts slow, I pull him closer, uncaring of the sweat cooling between us or the various fluids marking our union. This closeness feels too precious to break.

"I forgive you," I whisper against the curve of his shoulder, tasting salt and smoke on his skin. "I love you too. I know who you are now—who you really are—and I'm not afraid anymore."

He answers with a kiss that feels soul claiming and I want to let him have it.

ESALYN

M orning brings with it a clarity I'd forgotten was possible. The light filtering through the cracked temple ceiling creates patterns across the stone floor—like secrets finally revealed after years of hiding.

Erisen sleeps soundly in the small alcove we've made into his bed, dark hair falling across his face, small hands curled protectively around the wooden bird Domno carved for him.

I watch the gentle rise and fall of his chest, allowing myself this moment to simply breathe in the miracle of his safety.

Domno emerges from outside, ducking his large frame through the temple's entrance.

His movements are measured, favoring his left side where the worst of yesterday's wounds still trouble him, though he works hard to hide it.

The morning light catches on his horns, turning them from dark obsidian to something almost iridescent.

Against his gray skin, the scars from countless battles stand out like silver tributaries—each one a story I'm only beginning to learn.

In his hand, he holds the bounty scroll that started everything. The parchment looks small and insignificant in his scarred fingers, yellowed at the edges and stained with what might be blood.

"You kept it?" I ask, my voice quiet so as not to wake Erisen.

Domno's golden eyes meet mine. "I did" His jaw tightens. "But not for why you think."

He crosses to one of the candles, carefully lighting it.

And then he holds the tip of the bounty scroll to the flame, letting it burn away on the curling ink where my name and crude likeness are rendered in heavy strokes.

Five hundred novas for a woman and her halfling child.

A price that once meant everything to him and now means nothing.

"It's over," he says, his low voice rumbling through the temple space. "Vorrak is dead, which means the hunt is over."

I watch as he holds the parchment over the flames. For a moment, he simply stares at it, as if memorizing the weight of his choices. Then he lets it fall from his fingers.

We watch together as the edges blacken and curl on the stone floor, the ink bubbling before disappearing into smoke.

My name burns away first, then my description, then the reward amount—all of it turning to ash before our eyes.

Something sacred lives in this gesture, a ritual cleansing more powerful than any words could be.

Domno crushes the flames beneath his boot once it is done.

"I'm done," Domno says, turning to face me fully. The firelight catches in his eyes,

turning them to liquid gold. "No more bounty hunting. Not now." His gaze flickers to where Erisen sleeps, tenderness softening the hard angles of his face. "Not with a family to lose."

Family . The word settles in my chest, spreading warmth through limbs that have known nothing but cold vigilance for so long. I don't speak—can't, around the emotion clogging my throat—just reach up and press my lips to his jaw, sealing the promise between us.

His hand comes up to cradle the back of my head, fingers tangling gently in my hair as if I'm something precious, something worth protecting. The strength in his touch belies its gentleness, reminding me of who he is—a predator who chooses, every moment, to be soft with those he loves.

The summer sun slants through windows that don't leak when it rains. Windows that actually open when I want air and close when the ash storms blow in from the caldera. Windows that belong to me—to us.

I run my fingers along the smooth wooden sill, still marveling at how solid everything feels.

Three months in this house, and I still expect to wake up back in that leaning shack with its perpetually damp corners and creaking floorboards that threatened to give way under even Erisen's slight weight.

But this is real. The three-room house nestled into the mid-cliffs of Velzaroth is ours, paid for with honest coin that Domno earned as hired protection for merchant caravans. No blood money. No bounties. Just the sweat on his brow and the strength in his hands.

Behind me, I hear Erisen's excited chatter as Domno helps him lace his boots.

My son's voice grows louder with each passing week, as though he's making up for all the years I taught him to whisper, to hide, to make himself invisible.

Now, his laughter echoes off stone walls that don't tremble in the wind.

"Can we look for blue ones today?" Erisen asks, his small fingers tracing the curved edge of Domno's horn in that familiar, affectionate gesture he's developed. "Blue stones like your favorite knife?"

"If that's what you want, little warrior." Domno's voice carries that gentle rumble that seems reserved only for Erisen. "The tide's gone out. Should be good hunting along the southern coves."

I turn to watch them, my chest tightening with that now-familiar ache that isn't quite pain. Domno kneels before my son, his massive frame somehow making itself smaller, less imposing. His battle-scarred hands move with surprising delicacy as they tighten the laces on Erisen's boots.

Erisen's face is tilted up, those golden eyes—so eerily similar to Domno's—wide with adoration.

His small horns have grown nearly an inch in these peaceful months, no longer something to be hidden beneath carefully arranged hair but proudly displayed, polished with oil that Domno bought from a traveling merchant.

"Ready?" I ask, pulling my cloak from its hook. The cliffside winds are wild today; I can hear them singing around the corners of our solid stone home.

Domno rises, ruffling Erisen's dark hair before crossing to me. His movements still carry that predatory grace, but there's an ease to him now that wasn't there before. As if some part of him that was always braced for attack has finally unclenched.

"Almost," he murmurs, hands coming to rest on my waist. Even after months of this—his touch, his closeness—I still feel that flutter of disbelief. That this deadly, beautiful creature chooses gentleness with me.

He leans down, pressing his lips to mine in a kiss that tastes of the blackbrew tea he drinks each morning and something else entirely his own. When he pulls back, his golden eyes hold mine, searching, as if making sure I'm still here, still real.

"Now we're ready."

The path to the cliffs winds through the outskirts of Velzaro, past vendors hawking firespun glass and the metalworkers' quarter where hammers ring against anvils in complex rhythms. The smell of sizzling tuskram meat mingles with the ever-present scent of sulfur and sea salt.

No one gives us a second look. In Velzaro, a demon walking with a human woman and their halfling child barely merits a raised eyebrow. The city forgets quickly, and in its collective amnesia, we've found our freedom.

Erisen races ahead once we clear the market, eager to reach the cliffs where the black stone meets the crimson sea. His small form weaves between the twisted, heat-resistant bushes that cling to the path, their silver leaves fluttering in the salt-thick wind.

"Not too far!" I call out of habit, though I know Domno's keen eyes never leave him. The fear that ruled me for so long is slower to fade than I would like.

Domno's hand slips into mine, his calloused palm warm against my skin. "He's alright," he says quietly. "We both are."

The wind picks up as we reach the cliff's edge, wild and untamed, whipping my hair across my face. Far below, the sea crashes against black stone, sending up plumes of

spray that catch the light like liquid fire. The horizon stretches endlessly, a meeting of red sky and darker water.

Erisen stands near the edge—close enough to see but far enough to be safe—his arms spread wide as if embracing the vastness before him. The joy in his posture, in the tilt of his head and the set of his small shoulders, nearly brings me to my knees.

Domno moves behind me, encircling my waist with strong arms as he presses a kiss to the tender spot where my neck meets my shoulder. When I turn to look at him, his expression steals my breath—wonder and disbelief and a vulnerability few have ever witnessed.

"I don't deserve this," he murmurs, so softly the wind nearly steals the words.

I reach up, tracing the sharp line of his jaw, feeling the slight rasp of stubble beneath my fingertips. His eyes flutter closed at my touch, those lethal shoulders easing beneath an invisible weight.

"Maybe not," I say with a small smile. "But you came for us anyway."

Something shifts in his expression—a tightness giving way, a darkness lifting. He pulls me closer, burying his face in my hair as if I'm the only anchor in a storm-tossed sea. When he looks up again, his eyes meet mine with a clarity I've never seen before.

For the first time, he believes he might be enough.

And for me, for us, he is.

We are enough for each other.