

Pain.

It burned through every fiber of my being in an icy rush of fiery flames that left me freezing even as it charred me. I'd known pain in its myriad forms many times over the long years of my life. This particular pain had first become familiar to me at the age of fourteen when my enraged mother used silver to punish me. I had experienced it several more times during the battles in the Hells. This time felt different. In the darkness that shrouded my mind, I couldn't fathom why it should be, only that it was. I burned in a river of ice for a reason that ran far deeper than the outcome of any war. What that reason was fluttered at the edges of my thoughts, always just beyond my reach.

Focusing on the reason allowed me to push the pain into the background where it belonged. Letting my body deal with it while my mind kept busy had been a lesson hard learned but worth it. I reached for the fluttering. It slipped between my mental fingers leaving only traces of a familiar softness. But not a softness that was easy to access. It was surrounded by walls and the prickly briars of sarcasm. It was...

My thoughts stuttered to halt as the shock of blood coated my tongue and slid down my throat in a trickle of sweet heat. Immortal blood. I could taste it in the energy it contained. Except, it wasn't just one flavor. Intrigued, my mind shifted to sorting out the new mystery, letting the pain fall further away. Or perhaps the trickle of blood was helping? That flavor...

There were notes of angel and demon and even the faintest hint of mortal in there. What was the other? It was by far the most dominant flavor. Beyond delicious and nothing I had ever tasted in all of my years.

As the pain continued to lessen, strength seeped slowly into me, but not the full consciousness I needed and wanted. The dark was a place of weakness, of vulnerability. From within its borders, I was helpless to protect myself, my siblings...the prickly softness...

Driven by the need to gain back what I'd lost combined with a deep desire to taste more of the strange blood, my teeth lengthened and tore through the skin of the donor. As it gushed hot and sweet beyond measure into my mouth, I wished I could make it easier on whoever it was that had stepped in to lend aid. Unfortunately, I didn't have the strength, though it was coming quickly now. Unwilling to allow the donor to back away before I was awake and strong again, I reached up and held their arm to my mouth.

The blood restored me faster than any I'd ever used before and the pain receded to nothing at the same time I felt the last of my wounds heal. And then I registered Jo's scent flowing around me and the feel of her soft skin against my lips as the memory of the chamber crashed into my mind.

The silver spears, me throwing Jo out of the way, being pinned by the spears, blood pouring down the front of me. So much lost blood. Panic—an emotion I hadn't felt in so long I'd almost forgotten what it was—flashed through me as my eyes snapped open as I yanked her wrist away from my mouth.

She'd given me her blood. She'd saved my life but at what cost? Fear for her and fury at the danger she'd put herself in whipped through me. "What did you do?"

"What I had to do." She held her arm tight against her body. Except I needed her to give it back to me. I needed to seal the wound with my saliva before she lost any more blood.

When she winced and then gasped, holding her arm tighter, I started to reach for her but she shook her head and panted through gritted teeth, "Over...in...a...sec..."

I sat up, concern replacing the anger over her actions. Without being blocked, giving blood to a demonborn was a painful experience but once I'd stopped taking her blood it should have lessened, not get worse like it seemed to be.

Only a few seconds passed before she held out her completely healed arm. I took it carefully in my hand and examined it, understanding where her flash of pain had come from. I lifted my gaze to search hers.

"How?"

"I don't know. It happened after the spikes hit you, only it moved faster and hurt more then. I think—" Her gaze was suddenly unfocused and she swayed where she sat, her expression confused when she said, "Caius?"

I started to reach for her, but the world spun, tipped to the side, and dumped me back into darkness. This wasn't the same as what I'd just emerged from. It was more complete and rather than floating within in it, I flew through it at speeds I could only guess at.

A pinprick of light appeared in the distance. My speed increased. As the light grew closer, it swirled through a range of colors before settling into a soft green. A sense of cool built around me. Like swimming through a refreshing stream after standing in the hot sun or walking barefoot through soft, thick, green grass in the deep shade beneath trees on a summer day.

And then I fell straight into the light.

Confused, I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

I sat on a stool in a bathroom and stared into eyes a familiar shade of green, though the face that went with them wasn't what I was expecting. The eyes belonged to a woman who looked far too youthful for the wisdom in her gaze as she dabbed at a bloody cut near my upper lip.

Standing close to me was a young girl with crystal blue eyes and a halo of long, blond hair.

I wasn't in control of the head I was in so I was grateful when it turned to glance at the large bathroom mirror. Shocked, I looked through the eyes of another girl, this one younger than the first. Unlike the blonde, this girl's hair was jet black and though I'd never seen her as a child, I knew, without a doubt, I was somehow in Jo's head. A much younger Jo. Which made the other girl Victoria and the woman must be Miranda.

"You didn't have to do that, Jo," Victoria said, her tone sounding like she had said this phrase before. "I'm sure he would have left me alone."

Jo scoffed in an immature version of what I would later come to know and said, "You always think people will be nice to you if you are just nice enough to them. He knocked your books to the ground."

Victoria looked distressed. "Yes, but then he knocked you to the ground."

"You have quite a cut here," Miranda said, her expression concerned as she continued to gently clean the burning wound on Jo's lip.

Having a mother figure act in such a fashion was as baffling as it was comforting. In sharing the young Jo's head, I was also feeling her emotions and I wasn't sure exactly what to do with that. The love she felt for her mother was absolutely alien to me. I'd seen such a thing from a distance, but to actually experience it left me out of my element. Miranda was as opposite Eisheth as a mother could be. It was good Jo had grown up with a mother that could inspire such love, even if I didn't understand it myself.

"And you are sure he didn't hit you, Jo?" Miranda asked, gentle but firm. Eisheth would have demanded I bring back the head of whoever "he" was for issuing such an insult. Miranda was only concerned with her daughter's wellbeing though, not with vengeance or ensuring her daughter was tough enough and capable of killing.

"No, I just hit the ground when he shoved me. Then Mrs. Dawling saw it and came to help. But Tony is always going to be a bully. You can't make him nice, Victoria."

"Maybe if more people would try, he wouldn't be a bully."

An image of the dark-haired boy in question floated through the mind I shared and I found myself wondering what this Tony kid was up to now and where I might find him...

The scene faded and blended with the next. I rode along in Jo's head as she grew into a young woman. I had no choice but to sit passively within her head, watching through her eyes as most everyone except her mother and sister ignored her. Sit there and do nothing when bullies

occasionally noticed her and proceeded to make her life miserable until she quit reacting on the outside. I could do nothing while time and again life taught her to bury her pain so the bullies couldn't prey on it, so her mother and sister didn't have to worry about her. Watched as she perfected the mask of "fine" that I'd come to know so well.

I watched with sadness as she withdrew from her sister. Not because Victoria was overly critical but because Victoria cared too much and worried too often. Jo wanted her sister to be happy, so she turned her "fine" mask on Victoria, quit letting her sister in, and quit confiding in her.

Lived with her through the pain and fear of watching her mother fight through cancer the first time. Witnessed the construction of her façade until even her own mother and sister couldn't tell that it was nothing more than a shell she hid behind. Struggled with her while she taught herself to bury her tears and not let them fall until she perfected the ability to hide everything except the carefully curated emotions she allowed the world to see. Watched how, in a world full of bullies, neglect by her peers and her teachers, and the horror of parental cancer, the ability to bury unpleasant things and keep her emotions under wraps became a treasured ability because it was the only thing she felt she had control over. Seeing and feeling the transformation as she built up her walls caused an ache in my non-existent chest.

I despaired watching her many moments alone, her lack of friends, connection, and basic contact. With all that I had faced in my lifetime, this lack was something I'd never faced before. Even in my first fourteen years under Eisheth's thumb, I'd had friends and for the first five years, a demon nursemaid who, while not exactly loving and caring, was more motherly than Eisheth.

When the news of her mother's limited time came when the cancer came back, she confronted the turmoil of fear and sadness alone. I wished I was more than a rider in her head. Unfortunately, I remained trapped, living with her as she buckled down to finish school, pay bills, and take on the mantle of adulthood before others her age were having to think of it because her mother wasn't capable anymore. Lied to other adults to keep them from worrying about her home life.

Felt the mix of terrible grief and absolute confusion the night her mother died. Fought a battle against tears for the first time in years and won. Went through the motions of funeral planning despite complete mental and emotional exhaustion. Stared wistfully at Victoria's door with Jo as she wished she knew how to express her emotions like her sister could...that she had someone to express them to like her sister had.

I stood with her under the blue canopy in the cemetery and felt the stubborn willfulness that let her glare at a demonborn. Experienced the fear that coursed through her when that same

demonborn followed her down the street in the dark because he had agreed to watch over her when she foolishly ventured out for fast food and put herself in danger.

Went through the confusing kaleidoscope of emotions that flowed through her during the attack at her house. Shocked that she'd ever thought she could actually fight me and win. And totally unsurprised at her determination to save her sister.

I was with her as she learned of her new world and new life, as she struggled to learn to use her powers, and when she finally started reaping. With her when she was confronted by the son of an archdemon and admired again her backbone despite the fear coursing through her.

A passenger always, I watched through her eyes as our journey unfolded, surprised that she had felt we were at least friends as soon as she had. It was something I hadn't picked up on until later, though I had cared for her long before that.

When Zane confronted her at Lilly's safe house, I felt the stinging lash of his words and the total shame she felt when she lost the battle against the tears that insisted on flowing. And in that moment, I wanted to strangle my brother. That she felt his words were somehow the truth to the point she'd cried for the first time in years over it infuriated me. That she felt ashamed of those tears just stoked my anger. Until I somehow ended up on this strange trip through her past, I hadn't even realized she'd been in tears when she left the house. When I'd found her, she'd been furious. If I had known Zane made her cry, he would have felt far more of my wrath than he had.

I was with her as we traveled through the Between, as we became far more than friends. The depths of her feelings for me surprised me, even after everything we'd been through. But it was her lack of knowledge about what sex would do to our relationship that shocked me. How had no one ever told her that entering a physical relationship with someone you have strong feelings for creates a permanent emotional bond? She had friends in such relationships, how had they failed to inform her in that area? Did they think there wasn't a need?

When I'd stopped her advances to make sure she was absolutely certain, it wasn't just her consent to the physical act I was asking for, it was her consent to be irrevocably bound to me as a mate I wanted as well. Had I known she was unaware of that, I would never have taken that step until she understood every consequence of a physical relationship between us. Although her conversation with Rowen later revealed that she was content with the permanence of our relationship, it still bothered me that she'd had to enter it unknowingly.

I chaffed at my inability to do anything or change anything as I watched our journey through the Between unfold.

Trapped as a silent rider, I seethed under the constraints of whatever this was because I could do nothing as Bryson's attack unfolded. I could only wait until the me in the vision arrived to put an end to it. And there was nothing I could do to stop her pain or the emotional unsteadiness that followed.

I experienced the fury at her father, the wonder of having somewhat of a relationship with him, her terror in the canyon, and the absolute shock at the fairy's words. I was in her head only able to watch as she needlessly feared telling me. Felt the sharp shards of betrayal when her father tried to take the baby from her. It was one thing to hear her say she wanted the baby; it was something else altogether to actually feel the fierce protectiveness she already had for it.

Frustration ate at me that I was once again relegated to watcher as her father's betrayal unfolded. When I watched through her eyes as he struck her, and then later when he held her down and helped force the tea down...I had never wanted to kill someone as much I wanted to then. I'd known of her injuries, I'd known what Elijah tried to do with the tea, but to be in Jo's mind, feeling what she felt in those moments brought a new level of understanding.

It killed me that I hadn't found her sooner. That I hadn't picked up on his deception. He was Jo's father and she seemed to want a relationship once she got past her initial anger. And he worked hard to gain her trust. My trust. When he seemed to show genuine concern for Jo's well-being at the fairies while she was still in healing, I thought perhaps he would turn out to be a permanent and supportive addition to Jo's life. I never should have let my guard down.

And through it all—even after Bryson unraveled her emotions—that I was the only one she felt truly safe with, that I was the only one she felt comfortable enough to truly break down in front of, humbled me. She'd guarded herself so carefully, never letting anyone see her weak or broken and yet she could be all of that with me. That she could let me in during those times meant more than I would ever be able to properly express.

The last scenes flashed faster and faster until the cool rush of air returned and then I was flying through the darkness again. The energy inside swelled until I felt I would explode and I knew it was her. The energy that was her, all refreshing water and cool earth, soaked into me until it permeated the entirety of my being.

And then I was thrown into the light again. I caught a brief flash of the two of us lying on the floor before I was dumped back into my own head and body. For a moment, I could sense both of our hearts beating in unison as the bond formed fully, its creation as soft as a breath of air and as

powerful as a tidal wave. Everyone would feel that much power coming together, everyone would know.

The word "*Consort*" whispered through the air and faded.

And then it was just us, lying on the floor of the chamber staring at the ceiling. I turned to look at her. The woman who had been through so much in her short life. Who loved me deeply and completely. What I felt for her went deeper than anything I'd ever experienced. I would do whatever it took to keep her safe and happy but I would never walk away from her, even if it destroyed the worlds.

She had likely taken the same trip through my life. I had no secrets from her and that was fine with me. When she turned to look at me with those soft green eyes, they were so full of the love I knew she carried inside, despite the fact she'd seen all the blood I've shed, all of the terrible things I've done in the wars I've fought. I could sense that none of that mattered to her. And now, we were bound by more than just mating. A full blood bond meant our very lives were tied together. If one died, the other went with them. And yet, she didn't seem bothered by that either.

Unable to find words for what I felt, I slid my hand around the nape of her neck and pulled her to me, my mouth closing over hers as I let the kiss, the physical contact express what I couldn't.

And then her emotions slammed into me and suddenly I could feel her passion as if it were my own. When she returned the kiss with the same ravenous hunger that filled me, I covered her body with mine while she wrapped her legs around me and I rocked against her, needing our clothes out of the way with a desperation I hadn't realized I could feel.

Wait...our clothes were soaked with my blood. How could I want this while lying in a puddle of congealing ichor and trapped in an underground chamber? I would have never considered something like this before the bond. And then I realized it wasn't just my hunger, it was hers. Our emotions and desires were rebounding between us, feeding on each other, and growing.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against hers, my breathing ragged as I said, "That's going to be a problem."

She chuckled breathlessly. "I'll say."

"Probably not the best time or place for it though." I gave her a rueful grin.

Her eyes widened as if she'd just remembered what we laid in. "Ew."

It took every shred of self-control that I'd mastered to push away from her, get to my feet, and help pull her up. A part of me was perfectly willing to engage in carnal acts in a lake of blood if need

be. But the more rational side was far stronger. There would be plenty of time for that once we were out of the chamber and someplace more comfortable than a stone floor.