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#1 New York Times bestseller Kresley Cole introduces **The Dacians**, a new paranormal romance collection following the royal bloodline of Dacia, a vampire kingdom hidden within the Lore of the Immortals After Dark.

Shadow's Claim features Prince Trehan, a ruthless master assassin who will do anything to possess Bettina, his beautiful Sorceress mate, even compete for her hand in a blood-sport tournament—to the death.

HE WON'T BE DENIED

Trehan Daciano, known as the Prince of Shadow, has spent his life serving his people, striking in the night, quietly executing any threat to their realm. The coldly disciplined swordsman has never desired anything for himself—until he beholds Bettina, the sheltered ward of two of the Lore's most fearsome villains.

SHE'S BOUND TO ANOTHER

Desperate to earn her guardians' approval after a life-shattering mistake, young Bettina has no choice but to marry whichever suitor prevails—even though she's lost her heart to another. Yet one lethal competitor, a mysterious cloaked swordsman, invades her dreams, tempting her with forbidden pleasure.

A BATTLE FOR HER BODY AND SOUL

Even if Trehan can survive the punishing contests to claim her as his wife, the true battle for Bettina's heart is yet to come. And unleashing a millennium's worth of savage need will either frighten his Bride away—or stoke Bettina's own desires to a fever-pitch....

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS FROM THE LIVING BOOK OF LORE...

The Lore

"... and those sentient creatures that are not human shall be united in one stratum, coexisting with—yet secret from—man's."

- Most are immortal, can regenerate from injuries, and can only be killed by mystical fire or beheading.
- Their eyes change to a breed-specific color with intense emotion.

The Vampires

"In the first chaos of the Lore, a brotherhood of vampires dominated by relying on their worship of logic and absence of mercy. They sprang from the harsh steppes of Dacia and migrated to Russia, though some say a secret enclave, the Daci, live in Dacia still."

- Each adult male vampire seeks his *Bride*, his eternal wife, and walks as the living dead until he finds her.
- A Bride will render his body fully alive, giving him breath and making his heart beat, a process known as *blooding*.
- Tracing is teleporting. A vampire can only trace to destinations he's previously been or to those he can see.
- Three vampire factions exist: the Forbearer Army (turned humans), the Horde (flesh-takers), and the Dacians . . .

The Dacians

"Whispered to have vast intellects and stony hearts, the vampires of mist and legend observe the Lore with dispassionate eyes. Cursed with unending strife until the House of Old rises. . . ."

- Dacia's closed kingdom, the Realm of Blood and Mist, is said to be hidden within a hollowed-out mountain range.
- Do not drink blood from the flesh.
- The Daciano royal family consisted of five arms, each with a sacred duty to the realm.
- Upon the old king's death, and the rightful heir's disappearance, the family fractured into warring houses.

The Sept of Sorceri

"The Sept forever seek and covet others' powers, challenging and dueling to seize more—or, more darkly, stealing another's sorcery. . . . "

- Born with one innate power, their root power.
- One of the physically weaker species in the Lore, they used elaborate armors to protect their bodies. Eventually they held metals—and especially gold—sacred.

The Demonarchies

"The demons are as varied as the bands of man. . . . "

- A collection of demon dynasties.
- Most demon breeds can teleport to places they've previously been.
- A male demon must have intercourse with a potential mate to ascertain if she's truly his—a process known as *attempting*.

The Death Demons

"Violent, warlike, and ruthless, they constantly hunger for their next kill—and the strength it brings. . . ."

- A demonarchy located in the plane of Abaddon, once famed for its blood sport tournaments.
- Harvest power with each kill they make.

The Vrekeners

"Death descends on swift wings. The righteous reckoning of the Lore, they strike like a plague from the heavens, their wings blocking out the light of the sun, casting the land in shadow."

- Mortal enemies of the Sept of Sorceri, who they consider wicked and unclean.
- They live in the air territories. Their royal seat is Skye Hall.

The Accession

"And a time shall come to pass when all immortal beings in the Lore, from the Valkyrie, vampire, Lykae, and demon factions to the phantoms, shifters, fey, and sirens... must fight and destroy each other."

- A kind of mystical checks-and-balances system for an ever-growing population of immortals.
- Two major alliances: the Pravus Rule and the Vertas League.
- Occurs every five hundred years. Or right now . . .

"Wrong an assassin's woman—and he will make you pay."

—TREHAN CRISTIAN DACIANO,
PRINCE OF DACIA,
LAST SCION OF THE HOUSE OF SHADOW

"I thought gold was the most precious and beautiful thing on earth. Until I met him."

—PRINCESS BETTINA OF ABADDON,
KINGDOM OF THE DEATHLY ONES



A savage kick to Princess Bettina of Abaddon's back severed her spinal cord.

A blessing.

The searing pain that had been clawing through her entire being faded below her waist to pinpoints of pressure, then tingles, then . . .

Nothing.

Blessing. She'd long since stopped begging for her life, knew she'd never leave this field of poppies alive.

The four winged monsters who'd dragged her here had plans for her: as much agony as possible before her death.

Just as their kind had delivered to her sorceress mother twenty years before.

Though half demon, Bettina was weak in body, hopeless at fighting. She'd depended on her Sorceri power for protection—the one that these Vrekeners

had siphoned from her as easily as they'd snatched the clothes from her body.

No longer could she open her swollen eyes. Her last sight? The leader standing over her, brandishing a scythe, his eyes frenzied. His claw-tipped wings had blocked the light of a low yellow moon. The scythe's blade wasn't fashioned out of metal, but of black flame. . . .

Yet Bettina could still hear, was still aware. In the distance, a new age band played in an outdoor arena. Young mortals danced and sang—

The force of one kick jostled her over onto her belly. Her mauled face shoved against crushed poppies. The leader played with her as a hawk would a mouse, ravaging the meat from its bones. His followers jeered and doused her with bottles of spirits.

Menacing yells, steel-toed boots, the blistering sting of alcohol.

Ah, gods, she was *too* aware. She tried desperately to lose herself in memories of a boy with smiling blue eyes and sun-kissed hair.

He doesn't know how much I love him. So many things I wish I'd done—

Her upper body exploded with even more pain, as if to compensate for the numbness in her fractured legs. She could perceive her broken ribs jutting from her skin. Her mangled arms draped limply across the ground where they'd fallen when she'd last tried to protect her head. . . . Anguish multiplied.

Or perhaps the Vrekeners' blows rained down more swiftly. The kill was near.

All she'd wanted was to go to a party with her mortal college friends. She'd been excited, happy to fit in

with them, or to appear to—as a halfling, she'd never *fit in* before. Little did she know that she'd already drawn her enemy's notice with her sorcery. She'd never intentionally used it—

Over all other pain, she perceived the heat of that burning scythe descending ever closer to her. Hotter, hotter, *scorching*.

Alcohol on her skin, the black flame . . .

Bettina choked on a sob. They planned to burn her? Suddenly she felt weightless. *This is what dying feels like?*

No, she was traveling. *Summoned?* Dear gods, yes, the demon in her had been summoned across realms. Naked, powerless, sightless, she slipped from that field in the mortal world to her home plane of Abaddon.

In a flash, the poppies were replaced by cold marble, a balm on what was left of her skin. That awareness returned. I'm lying on the floor of my castle's court, broken, wearing only my blood and the Vrekeners' rank liquor. The courtiers still gossip and laugh. Can't they see me?

She tried to scream for help; blood bubbled up over her lips. *Can't scream, can't move.* She could only listen. A conversation between her godfather Raum—the Grand Duke of the Deathly Ones—and another was already under way.

"Now you've done it, Raum." It was Caspion the Tracker. The demon she secretly loved. "Tina hates being summoned with that medallion." *Not at present!* "She considers it a leash."

Her guardians had insisted on it, a condition of her leaving Abaddon.

"Ha! It probably makes her feel more like a demon," Raum said in a gruff tone, knowing that wasn't true. They'd had words over his use of the mystical medallion. "Besides, she told me she was coming home from college by month's end."

"You know time moves differently in the mortal realm," Caspion said, amusement lacing his words. "And more, she said she was very busy but would *try* to visit—"

Bettina heard a courtier gasp. *They've seen me.* Murmurs rose to a furor.

From the front of the court, Caspion demanded, "What is it?" Closer by, he asked, "Who *is* this pitiful creature? No, no, this isn't *Tina*. It can't be!" A touch on her forehead . . . a sucked in breath of recognition . . . a roar of grief. "*Bettina!*"

Raum bellowed, "What has happened?"

"Tina, wake up!" Caspion commanded her. "Ah, gods, stay with me. *Stay*."

For him, she managed to slit open one eye. His curling blond hair hung over his harried face. His own eyes had gone from midnight blue to black, signaling his emotion. They even started watering as he gazed over her injuries.

She saw a shining hero of old. Her beloved Cas.

He yanked off his warm coat, covering her. "A physic!" he yelled into the crowd. "Now!"

Others gathered around her. She heard Raum stomping closer. "Who's done this to my little Tina?" Something broke directly. No doubt from his fist. "Damn you, tell me! Who's hurt her?"

She tried to answer, parting her lips. . . . Her jaw must be broken.

Another anguished roar. Oh, Cas.

Visibly making an effort to control himself, he said, "You hang on and *stay* with me."

There's nowhere else I'd rather be than with you.

"I'll get you through this, Tina. I swear it. You're going to be all right," he said, his voice thick. "Don't leave me."

Bettina felt the tiniest sliver of hope, something to fight for. Surely Cas returned her feelings, saw her as more than a little sister.

"Will she live?" Raum bit out. "She's not hardy like a demoness, not strong like we are."

She hadn't been a true demon before. Now she was no longer a true sorceress. *They took my root power. My soul.*

A male she didn't recognize asked, "Has she frozen into her immortality?" The physic?

Cas answered, "She was on the cusp. Maybe by now..."

"We need a Sorceri healer. If we act quickly, the princess could recover," the physic said, but hastily qualified his statement: "Her *body* could recover from this."

What did that mean?

Raum ordered, "Find Tina's godmother! Don't return from the Sorceri plane without Morgana!" Coming into Bettina's line of vision, Raum yelled to Cas, "I should never have let her go! I was too lenient! Things will change in Abaddon!" His eyes were glinting, his voice choked up. The crusty old warrior was at a loss. He began ramming his horns against a stone wall, roaring to everyone, "Heed my words! We return to olden ways!"

Free of the attack, Bettina's body started trying to regenerate, nerves sparking to life once more. Pain erupted all over her, blistering waves of it.

Even in the midst of her escalating agony and lingering horror, the words *olden ways* struck fear in her heart.

Prince Trehan Daciano shot awake in the middle of the day, bolting upright from his pallet of furs.

He gazed around in confusion, seeing his usual surroundings—shelves of books, weapons, his sideboard with carafes of mead-laced blood.

Though he'd experienced no nightmare, sleep had been snatched from him, replaced by a marked unease. With each moment, he grew even more on edge, a feeling like . . . like *emptiness* settling in his chest.

Like dread. So different from his usual numbness.

Brows drawn, he rose, tracing across the spacious room to one of the curtained balconies.

These grand apartments had once been the royal library. Centuries ago, he'd moved in and never moved out, haunting this place until no other member of the family would enter.

Time and history seeped from these familiar stones. He knew every crag and groove as well as he knew his own grim reflection. *Like these stones, I quietly endure the ages.*

Drawing back the thick curtain, he gazed outside. From this height, Trehan could survey far into the Realm of Blood and Mist, the secreted lands of the mighty Dacians.

The royal city below was still at this hour. Only the sound of Dacia's bubbling blood fountains could be heard.

Across from his residence stood the majestic black stone castle, the heart of the realm—abandoned without a king. How many of his kinsmen had perished trying to seize that keep? How much deceit and murder surrounded it?

The warring houses of the royal family had once boasted hundreds of members each—now dwindled down to a handful.

For an immortal family, they knew death so well.

Trehan was the last born to the House of Shadow, the assassin arm of the family. Though he was a potential contender for the crown—along with four of his lethal cousins—he had no real aspiration to seize it. A quiet loner by nature, he loathed spectacle and attention, was content to blend into the shadows.

He only wanted to perform his duty. For nearly a millennium, he'd been the enforcer of law, a merciless assassin.

As his long-dead father had oft told him, "You are the *sword of the kingdom*, Trehan. Dacia will be your family, your friend, your mistress, the grand love of your life. That is your lot, Son. Want for nothing else. And you will never be disappointed."

Trehan had once foolishly entertained secret hopes, but he'd eventually embraced his father's teachings. As was logical.

I want for nothing. This *was* his lot, to await down here in the earth until Mother Dacia needed his sword. To strike, execute, then return.

So why this unaccountable restlessness? This sudden . . . frustration?

It was similar to that niggling feeling of some task forgotten. Except this feeling had teeth, gnawing at his chest.

And why should Trehan have a sense of something left undone? He *always* did everything that was expected of him. Ever cold, ever rational Trehan couldn't explain this.

What have I left undone? Rubbing a palm over his chest, Trehan crossed to one of countless bookshelves. He selected a recently acquired explorer's narrative, adjourning to his favorite seat before the fire, planning to lose himself in tales of life outside this mountain, of emotions he never felt, and interactions he never experienced.

Not on this day.

After rereading the same page a dozen times, he closed the tome, staring into the flames as he struggled to identify the hollow ache in his dormant heart.

His fingers tightened on the book, sinking into the cover. *Gods damn it, what have I left undone?*

Yet the dread only mounted. Then came one word, a whisper in his mind. . . .

Protect.



The Plane of Abaddon, Demonarchy of the Deathly Ones THREE MONTHS LATER

B ettina, you don't understand," Caspion muttered as he gazed out into the night. He clutched the balcony rail with one hand and a silver mug of demon brew with the other. "I've done something that I can't undo, something that even *I* can't talk my way out of."

Bettina stood beside him at the rail, drink in hand as well. "Oh, for gold's sake, what could possibly be so bad?"

Bad was recovering for months from a savage beating, then returning to "olden ways."

Bad was being offered up as a tournament prize by one's godparents.

"Can you not relax, Cas? Enjoy the night and tell me what worries you." Though her apartments in one of Castle Rune's great spires were now a sort of jail, the view couldn't be beaten.

Her balcony circled the entire spire and was ele-

vated above the fog that swathed the medieval town of Rune below. From here, she and Caspion could see the tops of the giant moonraker trees that stretched from the marsh five hundred feet into the air. Bats jagged in front of the waxing moon.

The setting was as romantic as she could have hoped. Sidling closer to Cas, she basked in the warmth emanating from his big warrior's body. But he exhaled wearily, taking a drink from his mug, his troubled gaze fixed below him.

As an adult death demon, Cas could see in the dark, could even penetrate Rune's infamous fog bank. What was he watching for? Why was he nervous?

She hated seeing her soon-to-be lover in this condition. His eyes were bloodshot, his golden hair disheveled. Fatigue was etched into his normally flawless face.

"Surely my predicament must be worse than yours." She was about to be married off to whichever "suitor" prevailed in the upcoming tournament for her hand. *Unless I seduce Cas tonight* . . . "Did you get caught bedding another nobleman's daughter?" she asked, biting back her jealousy. Caspion was legendary for his conquests.

"If only that was all." He downed his brew.

So Bettina drained her mug as well, coughing as she finished. She'd never had more than a few sips of this potent concoction before tonight, preferring lighter Sorceri wines. But she was on a mission, would do anything to achieve it.

"Easy, girl," Cas said with a ghost of his usual heartbreaking grin. "That drink gains on you with each drop."

Eyes watering, she forced a smile. "It tastes so . . . different." *Like fermented ghoul urine, I imagine.*

Bettina knew that this brew left one relatively sober

up to a tipping point, beyond which sudden drunkenness ensued. Then one became *tore up from the floor up*, as her snarky new servant would say.

Hey, as long as Cas was drunk with her. "I'd love some more, darling. Let's go back inside." *Back to my softly lit apartments and cozy settee.*

"A final cup, then," he muttered, turning toward her sitting area.

Inside her spire, all twelve rooms were filled with imported silks and antiques, adorned with flame chandeliers of the finest crystal. Everything was luxurious, polished splendor.

Well, everything except the small, dented copper bell on her coffee table. . . .

After pouring them another round, Cas sank down on the settee, raking his fingers through his curling hair.

She joined him there, gazing at his handsome visage and muscled frame with a sigh of appreciation.

Standing more than six and a half feet tall, he towered over her five-and-a-half-foot height. His eyes were a hypnotic blue, turning stormy black with strong emotions. His proud horns were the ideal size, curving back along his fair head like a Grecian wreath. He kept them polished; they glinted like amber in the candle-light of her room.

He had sublime features—a strong chin, broad cheekbones, and full, kissable lips. She could only *imagine* how incredible those lips would feel against her own. They'd never kissed, had never touched beyond a hug.

She'd fallen for Caspion from the moment she'd first seen him ten years ago, when she'd been only twelve. Her beloved sire, King Mathar, had just died,

and she and Raum had been presiding over Abaddon's royal court. Or at least Raum had been presiding, reluctantly.

Just three years older than Bettina, Cas had come striding into the chamber, dashing in his armor. All conversation had stopped, the crowd parting as he'd offered a bound bounty—one of her realm's most feared foes.

He didn't present it to Raum. But to her.

She'd still been in the depths of grief, feeling all alone, like a hornless Sorceri imposter who would never belong among the martial Abaddonae. But then a ray of sun had caught Caspion, highlighting those blond locks, setting his eyes aglow. Like a sign.

And she'd known that her life would never be the same.

Besides the fact that they were both orphans, they'd had little in common. She'd been a wealthy royal, treated like a fragile porcelain doll; he'd been found in an alley as a downy-horned toddler and had grown up begging in the streets. She'd been filled with self-doubt, wondering how a peculiar halfling like her could ever be queen; he'd been bold and brash, determined to make his mark, to earn the respect of the Abaddonae.

And yet the unlikeliest of friendships had blossomed. After that first day, she'd followed Caspion everywhere.

In the years to come, he'd routinely sneaked her offplane, teleporting her to the world of mortals so they could discover those new lands together. He'd eventually taken her on his less dangerous bounty hunts, while she'd marveled at his talent in tracking his prey.

They'd shared each other's secrets: his continual sexual dalliances; her modern ideals and fears about assuming the crown once she came of age and was wed.

Yet after all they'd been through together, Cas still considered her his best friend and nothing more. Perhaps this was because her looks weren't on par with his—or demonic in the least. Her features were most often described as "elfin." One problem: she wasn't an elf.

Maybe her breasts were just too small. She glanced down, briefly glaring at them.

Didn't matter. For all her physical shortcomings, tonight she would attempt to change her friendship with Cas, to *elevate* it.

In preparation, she'd extinguished the chandeliers and lit a few candles throughout the rooms. She'd procured several jugs of demon brew, then dismissed the guards stationed outside her door.

And she'd dressed for the occasion.

"Won't you tell me what's going on, my darling?" she asked, edging closer. "You always trust me with your secrets. You know I'll keep them forever."

"My problem doesn't concern you," he said, absently rubbing his throat. "It mustn't."

"Hmm. Very well." She'd try another tack. "You haven't complimented me on my outfit." Bettina had grown accustomed to the jeans, sandals, and T-shirts she'd worn during her two-semester stint at college, but in Abaddon, she'd returned to dressing as her foremothers had.

In other words, she'd clad herself in provocative clothes, plaited her dark hair into wild, disordered braids, and donned as much gold jewelry as her body could carry.

As was the Sorceri way, she also wore a mask. The scarlet silk was a thin band around her eyes, making their color stand out—champagne-brown irises circled with a ring of black. According to her godmother, Morgana, her wide eyes were her best feature.

But now Cas barely spared a glance at her red laceup bodice or her skimpy black skirt with slits up to her hips. The thigh-high boots encasing her legs in soft leather evoked no reaction. He said nothing about the gold armlets winding up each arm, the matching collar around her neck, or the diadem perched upon her head.

A master goldsmith, Bettina had created each of the pieces in her workshop—adding a surprise *design modification*. She was secretly proud of her skill.

"Very pretty," he said in a distracted tone, glancing in her direction. "You grow prettier with each year."

She'd read in a women's magazine that a male who liked you wanted to watch you all the time. You'd catch his eyes on you constantly.

Sometimes Cas didn't look at her at all. When he did, sometimes he didn't seem to *see* her.

No, I must snare his attention! One of two fates awaited her, depending on the outcome of her mission tonight.

If she succeeded in seducing Cas, she would wed her heart's desire and be forever protected by the only male she'd ever loved. They would become king and queen of the Deathly Ones and live out their eternal lives together.

If she failed with her demon, a tournament would begin for her hand—and for the crown of Abaddon. Bettina had seen the caliber of contestants beginning to file into Rune.

Swilling demon lords who already had dozens of brutalized wives.

Snakelike Cerunnos who would expect her to feed their spawn—with her flesh.

A troll that wasn't an anatomical match for her.

She knew none of them desired her; they only wanted the throne. Reminded of her prospects, she laid her hand on Cas's thigh, saying in a breathy murmur, "It's been so *lonely* without you here these past few weeks." She edged even closer. "You still won't confess where in the Lore you went off to?"

"Doesn't concern you," he said, but she'd known him long enough to know she was wearing him down.

"Please talk to me, Cas." She twirled the ends of her bodice laces, trying to draw his attention to her diminutive—but expertly displayed—breasts. "Take my mind off my fate."

"And that is another worry I contend with." He clenched his mug until the handle bent. "How could your godparents do this to you?"

Though Raum and Morgana, the Queen of Sorceri, were lifelong foes of each other, they agreed on one thing: Bettina's need for a husband/protector/king. But since they couldn't agree on a particular male—or even a particular species—they'd decided to host this tournament.

Searching only for the strongest champion in the Lore, they'd opened it to *all* creatures.

Olden ways. Abaddon had once been known for blood sport within its notorious Iron Ring—and for virgins offered up as prizes.

Bettina knew her two guardians loved her; they *meant* well. She also knew how fortunate she was to have them in her life. Halflings born of two hostile species were often shunned by both.

"I agreed to all their terms, Cas." She remembered that fateful conversation. She'd been sobbing, telling them, "Yes, yes, I'll do *anything*. Just get me my power back!" Sinister and destructive as it might be.

Cas scoffed. "Agreed? You mean they manipulated you."

If Bettina ever got famous enough in the Lore to earn a trailing name—like Maksimillia the Butcher or Lothaire the Enemy of Old—it would probably be Bettina the Pushover. Maybe Bettina the Easy Mark.

"Always, they get their way with you!"

Not *always*. Last year, she'd stunned everyone—including herself—and defied her guardians in order to attend a mortal design college. Ever since she was young, she'd been obsessed with fashion and jewelry creation, the Sorceri love of gold and garb running deep in her. She'd consumed every book on the subject and had been hungry to learn more and hone her craft.

Far from the prying eyes of Castle Rune, Bettina had been a carefree Lorean, blending with humans, enjoying freedom, new friends, and even her own flat with electricity and modern amenities! No longer had she been a halfling freak among hardy demons—she'd been a design geek, immersed in a tribe of them.

One night had changed her entire life. She swallowed, tamping down that memory. "I wasn't exactly in a position to resist my guardians again."

The first—and last—time she'd defied them, she'd

been punished to within an inch of her life.

It'd taken her two months to convalesce; being part Sorceri and on the cusp of immortality meant she had healed fully—but *slowly*. The only thing that had gotten her through it?

Caspion.

Each day, he'd sat at her bedside, entertaining her with tales of his debauched companions, a randy pack of young demon males.

And each night he'd hunted her attackers relentlessly. Sixty days of hardly eating or sleeping.

But a month ago, Raum had ordered an exhausted Cas off the trail, promising that a cadre of soldiers would take over. Bitterly disappointed, Cas had vanished, returning only last night.

Now he took another drink. "Why in the gods' names didn't you wait for me to come back before you agreed to something like this tournament?"

Because my godparents pushed so hard. Because I feel unwhole without my power. Because they withheld the worst details of this medieval fiasco.

"I had little recourse." And even less now. In fact, Bettina had only one move available to her: seduce Caspion. Only a virgin could be offered up for the tournament. "And besides, I had no idea when you would return since you left me no word." Over the years, he'd disappeared from time to time, going on his more perilous hunts—or benders or attending orgies or whatever else he and his wild friends did.

"What's done is done, Cas. The fact remains that unless I come up with a way out of this tournament before the start tomorrow night, I'm going to be married off to a stranger by the end of next week."

His voice barely above a whisper, he said, "I'm going to be dead by the end of the night."

Chills raced over her. "You can't say something like that, then not explain. Aren't we friends?"

"So many things I've wanted to do," Cas said, his eyes distant. "So many things I've never even begun."

She'd felt the exact same way in that field of poppies.

He finally faced her. "Remember when we were going to travel the rest of the worlds? See every single demonic plane in the Lore?"

"We can still do that."

"No, Tina." He ran a palm down the leg of his black pants. "I've broken one of their laws. They will send *him*. Straight from the Realm of Blood and Mist."

"Who?" Bettina demanded. She'd never heard of this realm. "Who do you think will hurt you?"

Who *could*? Caspion was an adult demon male, now fully immortal. He was also a talented swordsman. She'd watched him train for countless hours. Even now his ever-present sword glinted proudly from the sheath at his side.

So why was his expression one of obvious dread? She'd never seen the stalwart Cas like this.

He suddenly looked his age: a young twenty-five. "They have a secret kingdom, hidden from the Lore. . . ."

Oh, yes, he was on the verge of telling all. "Go on, darling."

"Their people rarely leave—and then only in a cloaking mist that makes them invisible. Though most 'otherlanders' are forbidden within, I had a powerful friend, a sponsor of sorts, so I was allowed inside." He paused for a long drink. "But once an otherlander enters, he can't ever leave—except upon pain of death. Yet I did. I couldn't stay in that place any longer, one just as primitive as Abaddon. Here, at least I'm free to roam where I will! And my sponsor . . . he changed. Drastically. So I escaped, never thinking their killer could find me on our plane, but I sense him. Already I sense him in Abaddon."

"Tell me who is looking for you!"

Staring past her, he muttered, "The Prince of Shadow. The most soulless bastard I've ever met. He comes in the mist, an assassin without equal. To be targeted by him is to be as good as dead."

"No! We'll fight this male. I'll sic the entire army on him, place a bounty on his head! What type of Lorean is he?"

"The kind our army can't fight. Ah, Tina, I shouldn't have left here, should never have gone there to begin with! I was just so godsdamned frustrated, after failing over and over. . . . Now the last thing I'll see is a crescent moon."

"My darling, you're not making any sense," she said, desperate to stop this assassin. She would gut any foe of his with her new blade—the secret one she'd designed to slip into her gold collar. "Let me repay all your kindness to me, Cas. I can help you now."

"Without your power?"

How matter-of-factly he spoke about that, while she suffered chills. "Then Salem can help." Salem, her new "servant."

Once a phantom warrior, able to solidify his body at will, he'd been cursed to be a sylph—an invisible spirit, an air elemental. He could possess just about anything—a raven, a pillow, a clock. She would order him to keep an eye out for this mysterious assassin.

Instead of always spying on me. Did Morgana and Raum actually expect her to believe that Salem was a mere domestic? She'd barely shooed the sylph out of her rooms before Cas had arrived tonight. "Salem's telekinesis is surprisingly powerful—"

"No one can help me." Cas stood unsteadily, unfolding his tall form. "I must go, meet with some friends. Settle my accounts. Tell no one of this, Tina, or you betray my trust."

Shooting to her feet, she cried, "*Please* don't leave." He could be going to his death!

"My cards have been dealt. At least no one can say I didn't pay what I owed." He gave a bitter laugh, as if at an inside joke.

She grabbed his brawny arm. "Then return here tonight."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"No, not *maybe*." Recalling his many conquests and his love of females, she glanced up at him from under her lashes, licking her lips. "Come back to me, and I'll welcome you with open arms, Caspion."

He groaned. "You're still a virgin, and the future queen of Abaddon. I'd have to wed you to bed you."

"Okay! You'd make an incredible king."

"Really? The Abaddonae welcoming the guttersnipe orphan as ruler?"

Some of the old guard Deathly Ones held him in low esteem because he'd been a foundling with no land or family name, but . . . "You've been making such strides, Cas."

She alone knew how much he yearned for acceptance. Though he reveled hard—he worked harder, accumulating wealth with each bounty.

He gave her a sad smile. "You know I can't have you."

For half a decade, she'd assured herself that he hesitated because of the difference in their stations. All she had to do was help him see his own worth.

Or maybe he simply needed to sow his wild oats before settling down.

After all, who could possibly adore him more than she did? Though he must have guessed her feelings long before now, she finally confessed to his face, "But I . . . I love you, Cas."

He chucked her under her chin. "I love you too."

"Don't be obtuse." She laid one hand on his muscular chest. "I am *in* love with you. I want you above all others." She'd tried to forget him—her stint offplane hadn't been only for school—but Caspion remained firmly in her heart.

"You only feel this way because of what awaits you tomorrow," he said. "You're desperate for an escape. I understand why you're doing this, but you aren't my mate."

"You can't know that for certain, not until you 'attempt' me. *In the throes, you know*; isn't that what you demon males say?"

He gripped her hand, pulling it off his chest. "You shouldn't be musing about such things, Bettina!"

Sometimes Cas could be as medieval in his thinking as the rest of the denizens of this plane. He might admit his conquests to her—but he withheld all details. "I'm not a child. I know simple biology."

A male death demon—like the males of many demon species—couldn't produce semen unless he was with his mate. He could enjoy sex up until then, could attempt a bevy of females and take release in a way, but the pleasure paled in comparison to what could be found with his fated one.

"Take me, Cas, and let's find out once and for all."

"If you're not mine, I'd still be honor-bound to wed you. Would you deprive me of my future mate? I'd grow to hate you." He pinched his forehead. "Ah, none of this matters anyway! I am done. I brought their killer down on my head."

"Whose killer? If you tell me, we can figure out a way to defeat him, or hide you. Just talk to me. Please."

Cas faced her, cupping her cheek with a callused palm. "Good-bye, Tina."

"Wait!"

He'd already traced away, teleporting from her apartments. But she couldn't follow, or search for him. Even if she were demon enough to trace, Bettina was unable to leave this cursed spire alone.

Her . . . *condition* made it impossible. Sure enough, her body had healed.

But not the rest of me.

She rushed to her circular balcony. During the day she could see the central market, but at night that fog rolled in. She squinted, straining to spy Cas; no use. She had the sight of the Sorceri, nearly as bad as a human's!

Can't go to him, can't watch over him.

Hastening inside, she called out, "Salem! Come here!" Nothing.

With great reluctance, she grabbed that copper bell—one that would summon Salem to her. *A medallion controls me*; *a bell controls him*.

She was well aware of how demeaning this could be, but seeing no other choice, she rang it.

A moment later, the grandfather clock spoke in a deep baritone voice: "You booted me out, and now you're ringing me back in? Somebody needs to make up her bloody mind!"

"Salem, I want you to guard Caspion tonight."

"What's doing wiv the demon?" he asked with his thick accent—exactly how a grown-up Oliver Twist would sound, Bettina often thought.

"Will you just follow my order for once?"

"Let me guess," Salem began in a surly tone, "he's hacked off the wrong sort yet again. Went cherry-picking wiv a lord's daughter? Played slip the pickle wiy a warrior's wife?"

"Aren't you supposed to follow my every command?" Salem's services had been a get-well-soon gift from Raum after the incident. Clearly, Raum had no idea that Salem was a rogue whose hobbies included spying on her bathing.

"Fiiine," Salem said begrudgingly. "Caspion'll be at

his usual haunts?"

"Yes. Meeting with friends."

"Then by all means, I go to the closest cat-house forthwith," he said, the last word sounding like *forfwif*. The air around the clock seemed to ripple, and then Salem was gone.

Alone, she paced. If anything happened to Caspion . . . No, no, Salem would watch over him. Not that Caspion even *needed* watching over, she reminded herself.

And what foreign assassin would dare target a Deathly One in Abaddon?

Thirty minutes passed.

An hour.

She gnawed her fingernails, but they kept growing back, her immortal regeneration finally at its peak. The grandfather clock ticked ominously.

Oh, why wouldn't Cas return? To remind him that she awaited, she hung a lantern in her window. No, she couldn't see the town, but Cas could see her spire. A lingering light might beckon him.

Suddenly, a wave of vertigo hit Bettina. Her vision blurred.

Realization dawned. "Oh, no," she whispered, her tongue heavy in her mouth.

The demon brew had just caught up with her.

She shook her head against its effects, needing to

think. I've been so despairing about Cas's safety . . . that I forgot my mission to seduce him failed.

One of two outcomes. *Tomorrow*, *I am doomed*.

She rocked on her feet as more dizziness followed. Light-headed, she blundered into her bedroom, crawling past the curtains of her canopy bed. Falling back atop the silken sheets, she closed her eyes as the room spun.

Perhaps Cas might come back this night. If she could just get one more shot at him, she wouldn't let him out of her clutches so easily. Bettina wasn't exactly known as a fiery fighter. *But desperate times*...

She would strike fast and hard.

Her last thought before she passed out: *Please come back to me, Caspion.*



So this is where the demon hides. . . .

Sword at his hip, cloaked in a mist of his own making, Trehan surveyed an imposing castle and surrounding town. Both had been built on a plateau inundated with fog. On three sides lay swampy jungle with small rivers forking out. Gargantuan trees twenty feet in diameter soared from murky waters.

Though Trehan had never seen such a jungle, he turned without interest, crossing an ancient-looking drawbridge into the town. A weathered sign read: Welcome to Rune, Royal Seat of Abaddon. Might Maketh Right. The words had been carved between two dragon heads.

Abaddon. He vaguely remembered hearing of it, knew it to be a demonic, backwater plane, closed off from most of the Lore. Yet Rune was bustling this eve. Merchants hawked their wares along winding cobble-

stone streets. Banners hung in shop windows. Many in the crowd peered around with the open curiosity of tourists.

As Trehan moved unseen through the throngs, he heard snippets of conversations, gleaning that a tournament was beginning tomorrow night for the hand of this demonarchy's orphaned princess. The throne of this plane was up for grabs as well.

Already competitors of various species were encamping near a large iron combat ring.

A change in regime? Despite his interest in politics, Trehan ignored his spark of curiosity, concentrating on the task at hand.

The Prince of Shadow had a sanctioned kill to make. Just moments ago, he'd used his scry talisman—a priceless crystal passed down through his house for generations—to locate his target here.

He normally wore it on a leather tie around his neck, but now held it aloft; the four-faceted crystal emitted a red light, casting a flare to indicate the location of this night's prey: Caspion the Tracker.

That demon had broken the laws of Dacia and was now marked for death.

The crystal's flare appeared directly above what sounded like a brothel, filled with boisterous laughter and tinny music. Not surprising—Caspion was a wastrel with a penchant for drinking and whoring. He'd done plenty of that in Dacia.

A public place was not a favorable hunting ground for Trehan. He had to remain unseen, as was the Dacian way.

Deciding to lie in wait in the alley alongside the tavern, he retied the crystal's leather around his neck. *Knowing Caspion's predilections, I fear I'm in for a long delay.*

There'd be no reading before the fire in his lonely rooms this eve. No polishing the weapons in his meticulous collection. Resigned, he started toward the alley.

He scanned his surroundings, not to admire or explore—but to be prepared for any threat. Dacians were a breed of observers, watchers from the mist. *Forever to observe, never to engage.*

Though Trehan had traced to hundreds of different Lorean planes, each with its own attractions and won-

ders, he'd never enjoyed them.

Trehan rarely enjoyed *anything*. He drank blood, but didn't taste it. If he slept, he woke unrefreshed. He performed his duties for Dacia, but the satisfaction he'd once derived from his job had . . . ebbed.

One of Trehan's cousins, Viktor, had recently told him, "You must've been punished by the gods to live the most stupefyingly boring existence imaginable with the added curse that you can't even recognize how onerous and aimless it is."

"I live a life of service," Trehan had corrected him. "And I have pastimes I enjoy. I read by the fire—"

"Because your only alternative is to stare mindlessly at the flames."

I do that as well. Trehan had heard the whispers about him. Some Dacians likened him to a ghost, calling him a shade—a play on his Shadow title—because his life consisted of nothing but silent, grinding toil, devoid of goals or plans. They conjectured that he had no desires—secret or otherwise.

He'd been taught early *not* to desire, and certainly not to aspire to more than service to his kingdom.

Yet three months ago, an old longing had resurfaced, one he'd thought he'd been rid of after all this time—

Trehan halted, his senses on alert. He peered around through the mist. He spied no threat, yet his inexplicable tension did not ease.

Then his gaze was drawn up far above him to one of the half dozen spires in the castle, the highest one, well beyond the fog's reach. In a swampy region like this, an elevated floor probably contained royal apartments.

One window in particular held his attention. A lone lantern glimmered inside, like a beacon. For some reason, he felt nigh *compelled* to investigate it. Which didn't make sense. No rational Dacian would court unnecessary exposure.

Focus on the mission. A target roamed free; Dacia was at risk so long as Caspion lived. Because the demon knew the way back to Trehan's kingdom.

Though the Dacians had mystically hidden their realm, no cloaking was foolproof forever. As an added security measure, they'd outlawed anyone from leaving without a special exemption. Disobey—and *die*.

That was where Trehan came in. As Dacia's master assassin, he stalked these lawbreakers across the ends of the Lore, locating them with the scry crystal and striking them down before they could lead anyone back.

That was his sacred duty—and he would complete it this eye.

With a determined shake of his head, he dragged his sights toward the talisman's flare over the tavern.

Yet just as quickly, his traitorous gaze slid back to the lantern. Why leave one lit in the window? What would Trehan find inside those apartments? What story was even now playing out within those walls?

Is my life truly stupefying?

Glancing from the flare . . . to the lantern . . . back to the flare . . .

Damn it, he was the last Dacian who should risk expulsion. No one loved his home more than Trehan.

When the lantern guttered out, he hissed a curse. *And* still *I go to investigate?*

Although such a move was completely unwarranted—and unprecedented—he teleported to the balcony outside the apartments. A warding spell was in place to bar his entry, a security measure that he easily circumvented.

Over the years, how many had surrounded themselves with spells to keep Trehan's sword from their neck? Breaching such magics was a particular talent of his.

He made himself into mist, ghosting past the glass doors into a spacious sitting room. The chamber was now pitch black, but he could see perfectly, noting the lavish—and feminine—decorations.

Instead of furs, woven rugs covered the stone floors. Precious silks in myriad shades of purple streamed over the windows and draped a settee.

Purple meant royal. So what demoness resided here? He wasn't familiar with the line of this demonarchy. Was she the princess about to be wed?

Shelves of well-worn books lined a gallery, tomes on design, fashion, ancient art, weapon history, and . . . goldsmithing? All had pages flagged.

Trehan was someone who revered weapons—and books; the specific focus of this collection intrigued him.

But before he could explore the shelves, he found himself following the scent of a light perfume down a corridor.

Sketches lined the walls, the subjects as unusual as the books. A talented hand had rendered the inner

workings of an antique clock. The mechanisms of various spring traps. A three-dimensional diagram of a bolt-action crossbow. They were all signed simply *B.A.*

The level of detail and the unique style were fascinating. To Trehan, this was unparalleled art. He wanted to possess these pieces, to closet himself with them in his solitary quarters; they wouldn't be the first he'd "liberated" back to Dacia.

Only the sound of soft, even breaths coming from an adjoining bedroom could pry Trehan from his discovery. Inside, he stalked closer to a sizable canopy bed, easing back the curtain . . . to find a small female sleeping.

Shining braids of dark brown hair fanned out around the top of her head, while the rest of her mane lay loose about her slim shoulders. She looked as if she'd fallen back on the bed and hadn't moved since.

He canted his head, taking in her delicate appearance. This was no demoness—she had neither claws nor horns.

She was trim, with a tiny waist. Young-looking.

Most Loreans were frozen into their immortality when they were physically strongest, never aging past that point. She couldn't have been more than twenty when she'd transitioned. He'd turned at age thirty-one. As with all male vampires, his heart had gradually stopped beating and his lungs had ceased taking air. His sexual drive—and sexual ability—had vanished.

That had been nearly a millennium ago. . . .

Over that endless span, Trehan had made a study of the various species of the Lore, and he recognized this one's clothing. She was dressed as a sorceress of old in a scanty outfit designed to reveal as much skin as possible, several pieces of gold jewelry, and a red mask.

One of the Sorceri. Here in Abaddon?

She was a long, long way from home. Perhaps she was a companion of the demon princess soon to be given away.

He wondered what her power was. He'd heard of Sorceri who could move mountains and boil oceans.

Her mask was slim enough that he could see most of her pixieish features: high, defined cheekbones, an elegant jawline, and a gracefully pointed chin.

Yet her carnally red lips seemed out of place on her finely-boned face, more suited to a siren.

He couldn't tell if she'd be an incomparable beauty, not until she opened her eyes and removed her mask. No matter. For a male who enjoyed little, he was liking this inspection *very* well.

His gaze dipped to the delectable swell of her breasts in that revealing top, and lingered. He noticed his hands were opening and closing of their own accord, as if he was imagining fondling those little mounds.

Touching her? A frown creased his brow. He shouldn't be reacting like this. He was unblooded, the walking dead—until he encountered his fated Bride.

At that time, his body would wake for her.

For centuries, Trehan had awaited a daughter of Dacia for himself. As his father had told him: "If it's meant to be, Mother Dacia will give you a Bride. Within our stone borders, you will find her. Until then, want for nothing and embrace the shadows."

Trehan had done that. *I extinguished any foolish hopes*. He'd all but put a Bride out of his mind.

So why was his gaze rapt on this otherlander's breasts . . . ?

I must leave this place, complete my kill. Trehan had never missed a target. Besides, if she woke and saw

him, he couldn't return home—unless he dispatched her. He had permission to leave and return, but only if he was unseen *by any he left living*.

There was one exception to the rule, but it was so ridiculous that it didn't warrant consideration.

Even as he mused these things, he inched closer to the bed. Before, he'd thought the beacon in the window had drawn him; now he wondered if this female had somehow been the draw.

Remember the mission! He finally pried his gaze away, only to realize he'd been so spellbound by her that he'd allowed his mist to fade. The carelessness! With a flare of unease, he turned back—

Her eyes flashed open, met his.

I am . . . seen. But *zeii mea*, my gods, what eyes she possessed! The irises were the lightest brown, ringed with stark black. He could stare into them for lifetimes.

Where had a thought like that come from?

She blinked thick black lashes up at him. "Oh! You scared me," she murmured in English.

Seen. Why hadn't he disappeared before she'd awakened? Why hadn't he remained invisible to her? Now he would be forced to kill her, or else never return home.

"You've come at last." Her lips curled into a grin that would've stolen his breath. If he still breathed. She raised her arms over her head, stretching sensually.

At last? Who did she think he was? She gazed up at him as if they knew each other. She gazed at him . . . with desire.

All at once, he understood why he hadn't disappeared, why he'd let his mist fade.

Because deep down, he'd *wanted* this creature to see him.

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As she rose to a sitting position, her exotic braids and lustrous, wavy hair cascaded over her shoulders. Her locks were chestnut brown, threaded with strands of black, the colors complementing her distinctive eyes.

She reached for him, boldly laying her hands on his torso. When he perceived the warmth from her palms, he shuddered like a young vampire, unschooled with women—

Boom! . . . Boom! . . . Boom!

The floor seemed to quake beneath his feet, the walls to shake with deafening tremors.

Yet Trehan knew what was actually happening. The sound was his heart awakening for her, a drum beginning to thunder in his chest.

Beating again and again, faster, harder.

This ethereal creature had roused his body! Soon his lungs would fill with breath, his shaft with blood.

An otherlander belongs to me? A sorceress? He'd heard of worse pairings. Considering where he'd found her, she could have been a demoness.

Then he remembered a critical fact. To return home, Trehan had to eliminate all who witnessed him—*except* for his Bride. The far-fetched loophole that was too ridiculous to consider had happened tonight!

Thoughts of witnesses and ancient laws faded, replaced by an instinctive protectiveness.

Could she feel the same pull toward him? She was born of a different species. From the tales he'd heard of otherlander Brides, he knew she wouldn't automatically want him with the same ferocity with which he desired her.

"So happy you've come to me," she whispered in a slurred tone, eyeing him with such a proprietary glance

that he was taken aback. "To my bed." She was looking him dead in the face, but acting as if they'd met before.

Then comprehension struck. She was of the Sorceri; it was likely that she—or one of her kind—had foreseen her mate. Of course!

"Been waiting for you, darling."

At her words, excitement soared inside him. A shade with a stupefyingly boring existence? No longer.

He merely needed to complete this blooding, then take his new Bride back to his underworld realm. His target could wait until she was safely ensconced in Dacia.

Then this delicate sorceress would grace his home—and his bed—for all eternity.

He knew of other males who'd felt panic at this realization; Trehan experienced only satisfaction. Secret longings resurfaced, at last to be appeased.

I am ready for her.

At that moment, his lungs started to expand. He inhaled deeply, until they felt too big for his chest. Blood rushed to his shaft, hardening it. He groaned as it distended against the confining fabric of his pants.

His gaze raked from her pert breasts to her waist, dropping to the titillating skirt that bared most of her gently flaring hips and her long, shapely legs.

Her Sorceri adornments—the collar around her neck and the gold climbing her pale arms—now struck him as unbearably erotic.

A sexy, delicate sorceress. Apparently I've been waiting for you as well.

Long-dormant drives came roaring back to life—to mate, to claim, to *bite*? After eons, he *hungered*.

No, *not* hunger! Dacians didn't pierce the flesh of others. He wanted only to possess and master her.

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But first, he had questions. What is the name of my pretty Bride? Why are you so drunk? What is your connection to this demon realm?

He'd gone the better part of a millennium without bedding a female. Will you forgive how out of practice I am with all this?

She gazed up at him from under her lashes. "I won't disappoint you, I swear it."

Disappoint him? "I am—"

She raised her fingertips to cover his lips. "Shh. Don't say a word. *Please*. You're in my bedroom for a reason. Let me show you how right you were to come here." She began unlacing her bodice, shimmying from the material. With a shy grin, she tossed it aside to bare the most exquisite little breasts he'd ever seen.

At the sight of her rosy nipples tightening before his eyes, Trehan's powerful, rational mind went blank, his questions forgotten.



Bettina had awakened to a darkened room.

All her candles had burned out, but she'd sensed a male's presence, an awareness that made her skin tingle. She'd barely been able to discern the outline of his towering form.

Cas! He'd returned. How to get him to stay? she'd thought in a drunken panic. How to get him into my bed?

So she'd taken off her top. His response: a sharp intake of breath. Which told her he either liked the view—or was merely surprised by her daring.

Talk to him; don't let him get away! "I'm going to make you so glad you've come to me, darling," she said, but she could hear herself slurring. You've got one shot at this, one shot at a future worth having!

Strike fast and hard? She would seduce him yet. When she piled her hair atop her head and arched her back in invitation, he gave a not-so-subtle growl. A growl of appreciation? Or frustration that he couldn't have what he wanted?

She fretted her bottom lip, letting down her hair. But as soon as the locks concealed her breasts, she felt two wisps of air as he swiftly swept her hair back over her shoulders.

When she could *feel* him staring once more, Bettina couldn't suppress a buzzed sense of accomplishment.

This was actually happening. Caspion. Here in her bedroom. Admiring her breasts. He was finally *looking* at her—because he wanted her!

Cas was going to be hers tonight, and then he'd understand what she'd always known. She was *his* as well. Their fates would intertwine. There'd be no tournament for the "unchaste" Bettina.

She was giddy—and drunk, but mainly giddy. She imagined walking hand in hand with Caspion the Tracker, announcing their betrothal to all.

Yet he still hadn't caressed her or kissed her. With another spike of alarm, she rose, swaying until his callused hands gripped her shoulders to steady her. Ah, contact!

A lifetime of swordplay had roughened his palms. Because my Cas is a warrior, none finer, none braver. . . .

She laid her hands on his chest, lids growing heavy at the feel of his mighty body. But this was just a tease; she needed to trace his skin, to explore him.

She reached for his coat, working it over his bulging shoulder muscles. He shrugged from it, and she heard it land over the foot of the bed.

For years, she'd been beset with curiosity about sex, about the masculine form. Yet she'd never touched a male before. Would nights of fantasizing at last come to fruition?

When she attempted the top button on his shirt, her normally agile fingers were clumsy. She made a sound of frustration. "I'm impatient to touch you—"

The material of his shirt disappeared with a single

rip, joining his coat.

"Thank you. I-I just need to feel you for the first time." Bettina worked with metal every day, engraving, forging, casting. To check for the slightest imperfections, she would often close her eyes and trace her sensitive fingertips over her work, as if seeing with them.

Now she smoothed the pads of her fingers over

Cas's naked torso, holding her breath . . .

The reality was so much better than fantasy! "My

gods, I love your body."

Her words made him groan. Light grazes over the hard planes of his pec muscles made them tense for her, made his heart thud louder. And oh, how his flat nipples hardened. When she dragged her forefingers across them, he hissed between his teeth.

She dipped her hands, savoring each rise and fall of his rigid stomach muscles as they contracted. His body was honed like unyielding iron, his skin flawless.

Initially he'd felt cool, but now he ran hot as a forge.

Any shyness she might have felt disappeared. Every caress deepened her desire, until even her breasts felt heavy. His scent washed over her—normally pleasing, it had now grown *intoxicating*.

Inside, she felt like molten gold . . . smoldering, awaiting a chance to be made whole.

Her nipples stiffened so much they ached, and he must have noticed; his hands tightened on her shoulders, as if he didn't trust himself to touch any other part of her body.

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He was such a ruthless demon warrior, and yet he was being patient with her, letting her explore him.

Was he *too* patient? He should've thrown her to the bed by now! Why wasn't he kissing her?

Maybe he was reconsidering this. *Take him over the finish line, Bettina!*

Dazed bewilderment.

Trehan could only stare, riveted by his Bride's pert breasts and taut nipples, savoring her every stroke upon his skin. How long he'd gone without a single touch!

This creature belongs to me, he told himself again. To me alone—

The sorceress grasped his hands, pulling them down to her soft breasts.

The contact roused him from his enthrallment. With a strangled groan, he covered her flesh with his palms, molding it.

Why did other vampires always warn of obstacles inherent in mating with an otherlander? Trehan's mate was demanding that he stroke her breasts, the ones she'd been eager for him to see.

When he gave them a reverent squeeze, she moaned low. Her reaction made him shudder, a sensual haze clouding his mind once more.

And then she swept her hands down his torso, lower . . . lower toward that aching, engorged part of him. As she grazed her nails along his waist just above his sword belt, his throbbing shaft strained for her touch.

Finally, he found his voice. "You are so lovely." She briefly stilled at his words, tilting her head.

His lust-addled brain determined two things: she truly didn't want him to talk; *nothing* could interrupt this blooding.

So he resolved to say no more, determined to do whatever it took to come inside her. At the thought of pinning down her writhing body to spend deep within it, need surged within him, as if a dam had been breached.

He clasped her upper arms, tracing them into her bed. She gasped as he positioned himself over her, but then she whispered, "Yes, *yes*."

Her hair spread out behind her, a backdrop of shining waves. Her scent was drugging. She arched her back, drawing all his attention back to her breasts, to those jutting nipples. Did they throb as badly as his shaft? Were those stiffened peaks driving her mad?

He rubbed his thumbs over them, gave each a light pinch as he watched her reaction.

"Oh, gods." She licked her lips, staring up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. As her irises began to glitter from her passion, she whispered, "Kiss me. Please kiss me."

Anything! He lowered his head, slanting his mouth over hers, relishing her cry. Her red lips were smooth, unimaginably giving. He slipped his tongue between them, and she met him.

As she softly lapped, Trehan's head swam. Her mouth tasted like spiced honey mead.

He kissed her with all the pent-up passion denied him over lifetimes. With each sweep of his tongue, he grazed his straightened forefingers over her nipples, until she was undulating beneath him.

When he tore his mouth away to run his lips along the slim column of her neck, she breathed, "I've

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needed this. Needed you." She sounded delighted—and relieved?

He craved relief as well. For now the pressure in his cock was turning into pain. He rose up on his knees, unbuckling his sword belt, tossing it to the floor.

"You know you can do anything to me," she murmured. "I'm yours—I always will be."

He groaned. Want for nothing? No more. His wanting for this female was primal, undeniable, bordering on . . . savage. He dropped his head to her chest, kissing all around one nipple, tasting her luscious skin.

"Yes!" She sank her nails into his back. "More. Please! P-put your mouth on it."

With a growl, he complied. When he closed his lips over one peak and it puckered to the tip of his tongue, she gasped. When he flicked it, she moaned, "That feels so *good*."

His new Bride was so responsive, he knew he could make her come just from this. Another night, he would, tormenting her until she begged him for release.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him in place as he began to suck.

Her taste was bliss—her cries, the scent of her dark hair, the way she moaned with each swirl of his tongue.

What a gift he'd been given with this sorceress!

Impulses warred. He wanted to suckle her for hours, to lick her sex and taste the orgasms he'd wrung from her. He wanted her pale hands gripping his cock, her red lips sealing around it as he thrust.

To feed his length inside her . . . inch by throbbing inch.

Haze. Losing control. He snarled against her breast,

increasing his suction as he drew his head away. Then to her other nipple. What would it be like to pierce that taut peak with a fang? Blood from the sweetest little font.

Where had that disturbing thought come from? His kind considered biting another to be a savage taboo. Were his fangs beginning to ache? *Ignore them.*

As he sucked, he palmed her breasts with greedy hands, possessively clutching her. When her arms fell limp over her head—*letting me do as I will*—his worry faded. He drew back and gazed at his woman, pride firing inside him.

Panting breaths between plump, red lips. Hips rolling with need. Nipples wet and swollen from my tongue. His heart thundered for her. Forever for her.

She's stunning.

All she needed was his bite, emblazoned on her skin. *No, ignore these forbidden thoughts! Think only of mating her.* He could scent her desire. *She* needs *to be mated.*

With that idea in mind, he snatched off her skirt, leaving her in only her mask, her jewels, and those leather boots.

"Oh! P-please go easy." She swallowed audibly. "This is about as far as I've ever been before."

A virgin! Misgivings arose. How young was she?

Yet she didn't attempt to cover herself. Any lingering doubts dwindled when she gave a needy whimper, spurring him on.

Must prepare her body. A virgin would need extra care. He supposed. Never been with one. He couldn't remember bed play before her, seemed to have forgotten anything he'd learned in his youth.

He dipped one hand, glancing his palm up her supple thigh.

"Yes," she sighed, "oh, yes. You've made me ache

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here." Her knees fell wide open for him, spreading her slick, blushing folds, and one thought arose: *She is* o comoara, *a treasure*. My *treasure*.

Soon he'd be buried to the hilt inside that lush heat. His cock pulsed in readiness. Pre-semen beaded the crown, dampening the front of his pants.

Again her fingers skimmed across his waist, back and forth before sliding lower behind the material. Just as he reached between her legs, she worked her hand into his pants.

Her soft palm gripped him; he cupped her hot sex. He gave a curt, shocked yell, almost coming spontaneously; she moaned with abandon.

Even as he reveled in her wetness, her touch jolted him—nimble fingers clutching at his shaft, gently tugging. The foreign sensation drove his hips forward for

more.

He could feel her swollen little clitoris budding beneath the heel of his palm; her dizzying scent made him *crazed* to taste her there.

Then her hand started to move on him. "It feels so . . . *amazing*," she said in a tone filled with wonder.

She'd never even touched a cock before? Amid all the turmoil he felt, tenderness arose for his sweetly innocent mate.

But then she squeezed it, murmuring, "My darling, I need this inside me ever so badly."

Too much! Seed climbed until the pressure grew agonizing. He was about to come, would never last as he sank his length inside her virgin sheath and took her maidenhead.

"Stroke me," he commanded her. He would get this out of the way, then see to her pleasure all night. Claiming her repeatedly.

She hesitated, then tentatively rubbed his shaft from hilt to tip, and again. As he petted her quivering flesh, he grew mindless, unable to stop himself from fucking her hand with short pumps of his hips.

His testicles tightened. His cockhead swelled. He knew he had only a second before he ejaculated for the first time in centuries. Two choices. Rip down his pants—or raise his wetted fingers from her sex to his lips.

The latter won. As he sucked her cream from his fingers, he groaned around them, beginning to spill into her hand.



B ettina had been lost in this experience, awash in every unfamiliar sensation and sound.

Cas's increasingly desperate groans. The heat of his skin as it slickened with sweat. His measured thrusts giving way to frenzy, until he was grinding against her fist.

Then something spurted over her hand. Hot. Liquid. Her eyes flashed open.

Semen?

Cas gave a deep bellow, his mighty body jerking as jet after jet of his seed erupted. How was this *possible*?

Could I have wrung this from him? Her brief flare of happiness was doused by confusion. No, he couldn't produce it, not until he'd had sex with his mate. Certainly not *outside* of her.

Had he already found his female and broken that seal, only to be untrue to his fated one? Had he lied to Bettina?

Once he'd emptied himself, once the violent shudders had subsided, he collapsed atop her with a satisfied grunt, nuzzling her neck. When she tugged her moist hand from his pants, he reached for his ripped shirt, using the tail to wipe away his come before tossing the garment away.

Which she supposed was considerate?

Then his fingers returned between her legs. She gasped when his thumb circled her clitoris, his other fingers teasing her opening. When she felt his erection already growing against her hip, that smoldering desire mounted even stronger than before, momentarily erasing all misgivings.

She'd gone her entire life without this kind of pleasure; why did it feel so critical to her now? Her body relaxed, her legs helplessly spreading for more of his

caresses.

"Ah, my wanton little sorceress"—his heated words fanned over her ear, making her nipples pucker against his damp chest—"you are a treasure." Still lazily petting her, he began to kiss down her body, grazing his lips over her collarbone, then between her breasts. "Now let me attend to you."

Even as she trembled with delight, she wondered why Cas's voice sounded so raspy. Just from his arousal? And was he talking about licking her down there? The idea excited Bettina—but why wouldn't he claim her? "Don't you want to make love to me now?"

Finish line . . . so *close*.

"Soon. But I've had a sample of your taste, *dragă mea*, maddening me. First I feast. . . ."

That did not sound like Cas—

But his warm breaths over her navel felt so good, made her shake with eagerness. "C-Cas?"

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The male tensed, cursing in a language she'd never heard. "What did you say?" He rose up above her and pinched her chin hard.

She began to sober up as panic raced through her. "You're not Caspion!" she cried, shoving at his chest.

Red flags had arisen before, but she'd been a slave to her senses, to the pleasure radiating outward from his every kiss, his every stroke. She'd assured herself that his voice was desire-roughened or that she was simply drunk.

"Caspion?" he grated. "So that is the way of it? You believed I was another when you gave yourself so

freely!" He captured her wrists in one fist.

"Release me!" she ordered as she fought to get free. "Who *are* you?" She couldn't see, but she could *feel* tension rolling off him, could hear the rage in his voice. Violence would follow.

Just like before.

Confusion rocked her, that familiar terror arising. She'd learned all too well how vulnerable her body was to attack!

Why does this keep happening to me? Tears welled. She whispered, "N-not again." But he wasn't listening.

Between gritted teeth, he said, "I am Prince Trehan Cristian Daciano. And you are my woman." Pinning her arms above her head, he vowed, "After tonight, little Bride, you will *never* mistake me for another again. . . ."

Raw instinct burned inside Trehan, aggression overwhelming him. The need to mark his mate grew irresistible, not necessarily for blood but for *dominion*.

For possession. She's mine.

Biting simply wasn't done—but his control faltered. Goaded over the edge by jealousy, he knew he would answer the call.

She wants another. My female craves another male in her bed.

"Bride? *V-vampire*?" she cried, fighting his hold on her wrists. "Wait, wait!"

He spied her pulse fluttering in her neck. His fangs sharpened to tap that spot—never had they been beyond his control, never had they *throbbed* to pierce flesh. No vampire could resist this temptation.

But a Dacian would be expected to.

Compared to his hunger, that thought was too dim to be heeded. He leaned down, parting his lips to lick her neck, instinctively preparing her for his bite. Just below her collar, soft, pink skin beckoned him. "I feel your pulse against my tongue. Ah, your flesh . . . it tastes so *sweet*."

If her skin tasted like this, her blood would be like heaven. Hot, rich, heaven sliding down his throat.

Over. His restraint gone—

"Don't bite me!" she pleaded. "Don't hurt me!"

Hurt her? "I don't want to hurt you . . . I can't stop this."

"P-please don't."

You're going to fucking bite her? Like some savage vampire? You're a godsdamned Dacian! "If you've any defenses, sorceress . . . use them . . . against me now! Stop me."

He heard a sob, felt moisture on her face. Tears? She was *crying*?

Her small body trembled against him as she whispered, "I-I *can't* s-stop you."

The idea of her in such distress cut through his frenzy. Somehow he forced himself to draw back, to *not* plunge his dripping fangs into her.

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Behind her mask, her glinting eyes darted. Darted blindly? He waved his hand in front of her face. Nothing.

Then he remembered—Sorceri senses were nearly as diminished as a mortal's.

Reason whispered, Your little Bride is terrified, can't see in the dark, has no idea who's in her bed.

Instinct screamed, Mark her! So another male can't take what's yours!

With every ounce of willpower he possessed, he released her, surrendering his prize.

She jerked upright, scrambling across the bed from him, snatching the bedspread to her chest, eyes still darting.

She hadn't been able to see Trehan whatsoever. She truly had believed that he was Caspion.

So what will she think of me when she gazes upon me for the first time? Perhaps he oughtn't to be kneeling there, bare-chested, with his spend drying in his pants, for her initial impression. He rose, yanking on his coat and slinging his sword around his hips. His tattered shirt was ruined beyond use.

"Wh-why would you do this to me?" she whispered, her mask askew. "I don't know you." She dropped her face into her hands.

It was everything he could do not to touch her, to comfort her. *But I'm the one she fears. . . .*

He'd frightened his Bride. *Because I'm not Caspion*. Yet another reason to kill him.

How excited Trehan had been to find her, how optimistic—but it'd all been an illusion, her sensual responses meant for another.

Each of the things he'd so enjoyed with her was now tainted. When she'd stroked Trehan's shaft to

come, she'd believed it was that demon's. When she'd whispered, "You know you can do anything to me. I'm yours—I always will be. . . . "

The thought sent his anger skyrocketing once more, his fangs sharpening again. Trehan wanted her to tell *him* those same charged words, whispering them in *his* ear.

With a vile curse, he reached for a candle.

The strike of the match made Bettina jump. As a candle alleviated the darkness, she saw that the vampire was turned from her, leaning with one hand against the wall. His head was down, his broad back heaving with breaths.

He dug his fingers into the stone as he clearly grappled for control. "You awaited *him* this night?" he bit out, launching his other fist against the wall, sending rock shards flying.

She gave a cry, briefly ducking under the cover.

At the sound, he tensed even more. "You fear me. You *shouldn't*. I will never hurt you," he grated. "Gods know if I haven't yet . . ."

"B-because I'm your Bride." She could scarcely wrap her mind around that.

"Yes."

"Are you a natural-born vampire?" Born vampires couldn't tell lies.

"What you really want to know is if I can speak untruths. I can't. I wouldn't anyway." His voice was deep, his words marked by an accent she didn't recognize. "Lying is counterproductive and illogical."

"Oh." She found her tears drying. The fear that so

often dominated her life had receded—and she didn't know why. Maybe because this vampire had somehow kept himself from biting her even though she'd blooded him—and *infuriated* him. His restraint reassured her somewhat.

Instead, other emotions arose. She was humiliated and still drunk, and her body felt like a stranger's.

Ah, gods, she'd just gotten with some foreigner vampire named Trehan Daciano. *Not* with her beloved.

This male had touched her as no one had before. "You wanted to bite me though? Isn't that what your kind does?"

"I've never bitten another."

That was difficult for her to believe. Every vampire she'd ever met—and there were many, since her demonarchy had allied with the Horde in the past—had eyes red from bloodlust.

When he turned, she caught a glimpse of his eyes before she averted her own. *Clear of blood?*

"Look at me, then. Know the male you belong to." She cautiously returned her gaze.

He was handsome, she supposed, in an angry, brooding way. He had chiseled cheekbones and a strong chin. His wide, masculine jaw was clean shaven. His hair was thick and black, his irises like onyx from his emotions. She wondered what color they would be normally.

Individually, his features were pleasing. Together, they appeared too severe, his expression harsh.

Body-wise, he was as tall and muscle-packed as Cas. *Mistaking them now seems a touch more plausible*, she drunkenly reasoned.

But overall, he wasn't nearly so glorious as Caspion—the standard by which she judged all males.

Though the vampire had ordered her to look, he appeared uncomfortable with her frank stare. She supposed it was rude to gawk like this, but she'd never seen a shirtless vampire before. And they *had* just been intimate.

Her gaze dropped to his muscular chest. What an odd crystal he wore—

"Tell me your name, female."

Her head snapped up. "I'm Princess Bettina."

"Bettina," he said with that unusual accent. "Bettina," he repeated in a huskier voice, as if he liked the way her name rolled from his tongue.

His supremely talented tongue. She almost shivered, recalling how he'd used it on her breasts—licking her nipples, wickedly flicking them. Beneath the sheet, they hardened once more.

"And of what kingdom are you princess?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" Then his earlier words sank in. "Belong to you? Did you actually say that? I don't even know you! Y-you took advantage of my . . . state, allowing me to believe you were another. You were silent just to keep up the ruse!"

When his expression darkened even more, anyone in their right mind would have been afraid. Yet her oh-sofamiliar fear was absent. *Because he can't hurt his Bride*. Plus, tendrils of sunlight had begun creeping into the candlelit room. Surely he'd be driven away in moments.

"I don't perpetrate ruses, sorceress."

"Then why were you quiet?"

"I followed *your* request for silence!"

Oh. She had shushed him, hadn't she? How could the night have gone so wrong?

This vampire had found his Bride—her—and had acted on instinct. Bettina was the one involved in a

ruse—seduction. "You know I said those things because I thought you were someone else."

A muscle ticked in that broad jaw of his. "And I reacted as I did because I was keen to see what pleasures you intended. Keen to know 'how right I was to come to you.' Your eyes were promising irresistible things."

She gasped.

"His loss, female; you *delivered*. It seems I savored treats meant for another."

Now she glared. "You are amazing!"

"Parts of me, at least."

Her cheeks flushed as she remembered her awed comment when she'd touched her first erection. Struggling for composure, she said, "How did you get past my barrier spell?"

"With ease."

Arrogant male! "Why are you here?" Surely he wasn't one of the competitors. "Are you the first cleareyed Horde vampire?"

Seeming to grapple with his temper, he said, "I'm not of the Horde."

"Then what? Why are you in Abaddon . . . ?" She trailed off, her gaze fixing on his sword, on the cross-guard over the grip. The forged metal was distinctly rounded—

"A crescent moon?" she cried. "Oh, gods, you're the one Cas spoke of, the Prince of Shadow! You're the assassin from the Realm of Blood and Mist come to kill him!"

The vampire didn't deny this. "He broke the laws of my people. He must pay."

Now everything Cas had told her began to make sense. An assassin without equal . . . the last thing I'll see is a crescent moon. "Please don't hurt him! He didn't realize he'd done wrong."

"Understand me, Bettina, the only thing he didn't realize was that I could find him here. I will dispatch him just as I have thousands before."

He didn't say this in a boastful manner—more like he merely stated an unavoidable truth.

Though Caspion was a powerful warrior, everything about this male convinced her that Cas had been right to fear for his life. There was a chilling lethality about the vampire, a confidence in his own cold-bloodedness.

"And what is your interest in a wastrel like him?" he demanded. "Besides what you obviously intended to give to him."

"He's no wastrel! If you hurt him, I will *never* forgive you!"

Baring his fangs, he grated, "We'll sort this out back in my home."

"What gives you the right to accost me like this, to try to abduct me?"

"I told you who I am. I've told you what you are. You've blooded me. I didn't choose for this to happen with you. Fate decided this. And now we must bow to her commands."

"You can't trace me from Rune!"

The Vampire reached for her, his gaze intent. "Can't I?"

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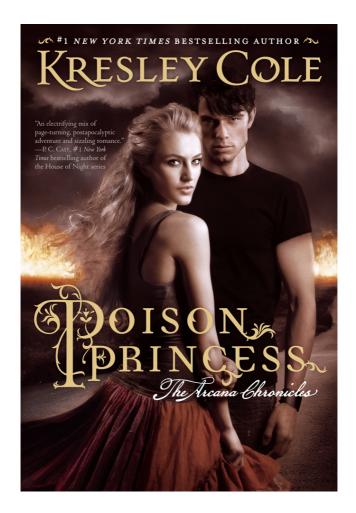


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We searched both wings upstairs and down, finding even more delights. The bedrooms had closets full of designer clothing and shoes. The garage housed camping supplies, hi-tech survival gear—and a colossal storage tank of gas.

No car, though.

In the enormous kitchen, Jackson opened one of the two refrigera-



tors, which was surprisingly well-stocked with jellies, condiments, and drinks.

He briefly closed his eyes at the feel of cold air, then said, "Come here, vou." He shoved me in front of him so I could feel it too, then stood behind me with his hand on my shoulder. "Admit it, this was worth it just to feel the icebox."

Though I was still wary about being here, I reminded myself that Jackson was the bogeyman, as long as he had that bow. So I closed my eyes too, and we just stood there for long moments.

Then I felt him reaching past me. "Jesus, chilled long-necks. Okay, that's it, I'm on the lookout for three bears." He snagged a couple of bottles, twisting off the tops. Pressing a beer into my hand, he led me into the biggest pantry I'd ever seen. "Find us something to eat, woman."

I arched a brow, but did inspect the goods, enough to last two people for months-canned and boxed foods, airtight cartons and bags, fruit juices. After hastily stuffing my backpack with PowerBars-just in case we had to flee—I perused the shelves for dinner.

A jar of maraschino cherries had my mouth watering. I snagged them, as well as a couple of cans of black olives, a carton of Pirouette cookies, and a bag of giant pretzel sticks, making a picnic on the counter.

For our main course, we enjoyed beer and pretzels. For dessert, Jackson hit the cookies, while I dug into the cherry jar. When I dropped one in my mouth, my eyes rolled with pleasure.

"You like cerises, huh?" He eased closer to me. "I've got an envie for a cherry." A craving.

Cajun innuendo, Jackson? "Here." I smiled sweetly, holding one up by the stem for him. "Enjoy the only cherry you'll get from me."

"Sounds like a challenge." With a wicked gleam in his eyes, he nipped it from my fingers with his even white teeth.

Flustered, I took a swig of my beer. But he pressed his finger to the bottom of the bottle, tipping it until I'd finished it with a gasp.



"Are you trying to get me drunk?" It was working. I'd always been a lightweight, and now one beer had me pleasantly buzzed.

"Sans doute." Without a doubt.

Okay, he was definitely flirting with me. Because I was the only game in town and he was . . . strung tight? Had to be. Still the same old Evie here.

He finished his own beer, chasing it with a shot from his flask. "Let's see what's outside." He collected his bow in one hand and my free hand in his other, then led me to a line of towering french doors.

We exited one onto a huge screened lanai that was like a wonderland, with gazebos and an outdoor kitchen. The moon was full overhead, lighting the area gently, until it looked untouched by the apocalypse.

Escorting me farther outside, he declared, "We are home, Evie Greene-"

He fell silent at the sight of a pool, sparkling in the moonlight. A filled pool.

Water. A death trap.

"Christ," he muttered, darting his head around. "Moon or no, why ain't we swarming with Bagmen?"

I pulled on his hand. "Jackson, we've got to go!"

"Stay here." He strode to the side of the pool, crouching down to dip a finger. After tasting the water, he rose with a thrilled expression. "It's saltwater, bébé."

Salt? "Then they'd be repelled, right?"

He nodded. "And the water's warm."

"Where'd it all come from?"

Propping his bow against a lounge chair, he said, "Private well. Just like you had at Haven."

But we hadn't wasted it to swim. "Jackson, please. The owner could return at any minute!"

"Why would someone be out this late if he's coming back?" Jackson kicked off his boots. "Finders keepers."

"You're not going in!"



In answer, he pulled his shirt over his head, revealing rigid planes of muscles. Yes, I'd caught glimpses of him shirtless before-but this was the first time I'd utterly lost my breath looking at him.

His face and his broad chest were still tanned, his eyes seeming to glow in the moonlight. That onyx rosary around his neck glinted with his movements.

He was stripping before my eyes, yet I couldn't look away. I bit my bottom lip. Any minute I would turn my back. Any minute . . .

As he began to unbuckle his belt, his stomach muscles rippled.

I grew weak in the knees. Any minute.

When he reached his zipper, he cocked his head and met my gaze.

I was frozen, could do nothing but stare. He raised his eyebrows at me in challenge, his fingers inching his zipper down.

A second after I'd finally found the presence of mind to turn my back, I heard his belt buckle ping on the tile floor, the rustle of his dropped pants. Eyes wide, I snapped, "This is foolish, Jackson-"

In the space of a heartbeat, he'd snagged my pack off my back, looped an arm around my waist—and hauled us both into the pool.

I broke the surface, sputtering, shoving water out of my face. "Have you lost your mind? Ugh! I am not skinny-dipping with you."

In a scandalized tone, Jackson said, "Skinny-dipping? Evangeline and her dirty mind." He glanced down. I could see he'd left on a pair of dark boxer briefs.

"Oh." Had I sounded disappointed? "Still, I'm not all right with this. We should be-what do you call it?-watching our six."

"So you do listen to me on occasion? Who'd-a thought . . . Look, I'm not goan to let anything happen to you. I'll hear anyone coming in plenty of time."

When I remained unconvinced, he said, "I told you, no one can get the drop on me. Doan you trust me?"

I didn't have much of a choice. "You couldn't have let me remove my boots?" I dragged them and my socks off, flinging them near his bow.



"You're right. I should've let you strip." Then he splashed me in the face.

I sputtered again, but he was grinning. Not a smirk—a real smile. As I gazed at his lips, I found my own curling in response.

I pointed behind him. "Oh, look!" Then I splashed the back of his head.

He faced me with his eyes wide. "Now you've done it! You mess with the bull . . ." He chased me around the shallow end until I was squealing with laughter.

It felt incredible to act like normal kids again. To flirt and play.

The voices were blessedly quiet.

Just before he caught me, I dunked under, swam around him and yanked back on his ankles. He couldn't have known that in another lifetime, I'd been a terror in the pool.

He acted like I'd tripped him, sinking like a stone. Once he broke the surface, he looked surprised-and delighted-that I was messing around with him.

I'd never seen this playful, grinning side of Jackson before, had never seen him without his customary restlessness. I recognized then that I'd never witnessed him *happy* until now.

And, damn, it was a good look on him. "You're smiling."

"I should be." His wet hair whipped over his cheeks. "Best day I've had in a long, long time." He began edging me toward the side of the pool, and I let him. Streams of water slid down his broad chest and rock-hard torso.

I want to follow those streams with my lips. . . . Okay, so maybe Jackson wasn't the only one strung tight. "Um, best day?" When my back met stone, he kept easing closer until I could feel the heat coming off his body. I had to crane my head up to meet his gaze.

His grin turned smug as he said, "Got me a new bike, a jolie girl who's sweet on me, and a mansion for us to live in."

Then I realized that I had a very real problem—add it to my tab. Jackson Deveaux was nearly irresistible like this. "Sweet on you? Please."

"I can tell."

"How?"

"You smell like honeysuckles when you're liking ole Jack."

Oh my God. Just as I'd been told, I *did* smell like flowers. No wonder everyone had kept complimenting me.

"When you're mad," he added, "you smell like roses. Excited? Sweet olive. I'm still figuring out the rest."

Even as he continued to stun me with his insight, I muttered, "Th-that's ridiculous." How was I going to hide my secrets all the way to North Carolina?

"Is it?" He inched even closer.

"In any case, it's not like you are sweet on me."

"C'est vrai." That's true. "But I do know that it's slim pickings out there."

I glared, unable to tell if he was teasing. "Melt my heart, Cajun."

He reached forward, clasping the edge of the pool on both sides of me, boxing me in.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready to kiss you for the first time."

Heart stop. *Form words, Evie.* "Y-you told me something like that at my party, but I didn't fare so well that night."

"Me neither. God, I'd wanted me a taste of you." His smoldering gray gaze was locked on my lips.

I wetted them, just as I had then.

"Do you know how many nights I've thought about almost kissing you? I remember every detail about you. I couldn't tell if your eyes were blue or green. Your lips were so red—it was sexy, but I couldn't decide if I liked it. 'Cause it wasn't you, not really."

That almost-kiss hadn't been just a trick! He'd felt the same excitement and attraction that I had.

"Evangeline, you're like . . . like a peekôn dans ma patte."

A thorn in my paw. How appropriate. I guess that's my nature, Jackson.



"And I can't quite shake it, no." His eyes were completely mesmerizing.

For the first time in months I wanted to draw-just to capture that look forever.

"Let's take this off, cher." When he reached for the hem of my soaked hoodie, I found myself raising my arms so he could pull it free, leaving me in my white cami.

Which was now see-through. I might as well have been wearing nothing.

When his gaze dipped, his lids went heavy and his Adam's apple bobbed. In a hoarse voice, he said, "Mercy me."

I'd never been looked at like this, had never been utterly certain that a boy was gazing at my body—while imagining how he wanted to touch it. My face and chest flushed with embarrassment.

Just when I was about to duck under, he said, "Non, you let me look." His accent was getting thicker. "Waited a long time to see you like this."

"But we've only been together a couple weeks."

He grazed the backs of his fingers along my cheekbones, as if my face was made of delicate porcelain. "Uh-huh," he murmured as he leaned down to gently press his lips to mine. His were so firm and warm. I could just taste the bite of whiskey.

He felt perfect . . . the kiss, right.

He parted his lips, coaxing me to do the same. Once I did, he leisurely stroked his tongue against mine . . . and again. Relaxed, wicked flicks.

Energy filled me, pleasure radiating. This was addictive—nothing meh about it.

Our tongues tangled, over and over, until I couldn't stop a moan. I wanted more of him. I wanted this never to end. I needed more.

I was losing control; why wasn't he? His kiss was sensual, but deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world.

As if he has something to prove?

Just when that thought arose in my foggy brain, he drew back with



a cocky smirk. "There. Now that's what I'm talking about." He rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip. "You're not laughing now, are you—"

"More." I reached up, tunneling my fingers through his dark hair, clutching, dragging him back to me.

He rasped, "Evie?" just before our lips met again, our tongues . . .

I ran my hands down his back, over his flexing muscles. I couldn't stop touching him, couldn't keep my body from moving against his. With each sweep of my palms, he deepened the kiss. So I did it again. And again.

Soon I was gasping and he was groaning. His hands cupped my waist, descending to my wriggling hips. He squeezed them, then reached for my ass, gripping me with splayed fingers, wrenching my body even closer to him. Was he shuddering against me?

No more control for either of us.

I loved his abandoned groans, loved that I could *feel* them because we were pressed so tight together. Just as he'd promised, we were breathing for each other—and still I couldn't get enough.

For me, this was the game changer, a line in the sand. Life before our kiss; life after.

He wrapped his strong arms around me, hauling me up, crushing me against his solid chest. I dimly realized my feet weren't touching the bottom of the pool any longer.

He broke away to kiss my neck, saying against my skin, "Tu me fais tourner la tête! Ton parfum sucré, tes secrets." You drive me mad! Your sweet scent, your secrets. Heated licks followed. "Ah, Evie, you taste as good as you smell."

I breathed, "Jackson . . . "

He pulled back, letting me slip back down to stand on my own. His voice was raw as he said, "If you want me to kiss you again, you call me Jack."

I couldn't think. I made some sound of agreement.

"Say it."

My head tilted back, and I whispered, "Jack."

He cupped my face with his callused palms, so that I stared directly into his eyes. There was something possessive in his expression, something masculine and . . . older that I had absolutely no idea how to decipher-all I knew was that the intent look on his face made my heart race. "You said you wanted more?"

Of his kiss? "God, ves."

He exhaled a pent-up breath. "Bien." Then he lifted me again, cradling me in his arms. As he climbed the pool steps, he grazed his lips along my neck, keeping me in a haze of bliss. At my ear, he rasped, "T'chauffes mon sang comme personne d'autre." You heat my blood like no other.

I quivered with delight, only vaguely wondering where he was taking me. And maybe why he'd swooped down to collect his jeans along with his ever-present bow.

My back met cushions. Gazebo? Reclining lounge chair for two?

Ah, more kisses! He licked my earlobe, making me cry out, my back arching. Was that my zipper?

I felt weightless for a moment, then cool air breezed over my damp legs, up to my panties.

He hissed in a breath. "Ma belle fille." My beautiful girl. He followed me down, lying half on me, half on the chair.

When he fiddled with something in his jeans pocket, I murmured, "Iack?"

He raised himself over me with one straightened arm, flashing me that wolfish grin, so sexy he robbed me of thought. "I'm goan to take care of you, bébé." He produced a condom in a wrapper, holding it between his white teeth as he rubbed one hot palm up my torso, rolling my cami higher.

He looked roguish and wicked and oh-dear-God-did-he-havea-condom?

For me?

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from POISON PRINCESS!

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