

The Warlord's Secret

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CHAPTER ONE

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
First Warlord of Tiyan

We found the demon when we took this land near the great cliffs. The local barbarians told us of its power, how it can heal a man from death and stop a storm from destroying a village. After so many years at war, I knew the demon alone could stop the wars that drove us from our home of Karyan across the sea to this barren strip of land along the cliffs.

I went after the creature, captured it, and forced it into many hosts. It killed them all - or we did when they went mad. This morn, when we'd given up, the demon told us of the perfect host. Mayhap it was tired from our trials, or mayhap it was trying to deceive us. Its words, however, were true.

The demon is too strong for a boy under the age of five summers. Those of age to become pages were too old, for the beast twisted their impure hearts and made them attack us. It is evil and would destroy us if it could, but in a host who is pure, it can do no harm. Girls were too weak to hold the demon at all. Even the purest and strongest of them, to include my brother's daughter, went mad and were killed.

After several seasons and seventeen children, we discovered the right age for a host. This boy is between six and ten summers, when his body is strong enough to contain the beast and yet still pure. The boy we chose last season survived and can wield the demon's powers. We'll kill him when my heir, the second Tiyan ruler of my bloodline, reaches six summers in age. He will become the demon's host, and will use the demon's power to defeat our enemies. The demon will be passed to each heir of Tiyan.

As long as a male from my bloodline is the warlord of Tiyan, the kingdom will never fall to its enemies, and we will use the demon's magic for the good of all people. The demon says a female heir cannot hold it. If a female heir is ever born, she will fall to the demon's evil nature, and it will use her weakness to destroy my kingdom. The gods have long favored my line with male heirs - -we have never had this female warlord as an heir. To be sure of it, all females born into my line will be killed. I entrust this duty to none other than my brother, whose sons will forever guide the Warlords of Tiyan.

Tiyan, above all else.

"This is where the scouts were seen yesterday," Rissa, tenth Warlord of Tiyan, murmured as she calculated the distance between the city and her destination.

The village on the border of Tiyan and the neighboring kingdom was marked by a small black circle on the rough parchment map. The Western Cliffs - -which formed one of Tiyan's natural defenses - -were marked in yellow, and the violent ocean edging the cliffs in blue.

"No, it's not."

The clipped note in her chief advisor's voice reminded her of how little he approved of her recent decision to involve herself in war planning.

"Sirian, I'm certain this is where - -"

"No, Rissa. If I believed this route dangerous, I wouldn't send you this way," he replied.

Yes, he would.

She ignored the voice of the creature coiled restlessly within her.

"My last two journeys from Tiyan ended in bloodshed, Sirian," she said even more quietly. "I lost twelve men on my last visit to the villages."

"And I've told you more than once that you need not travel, but you insist," Sirian said. "You return safely. This is all that concerns me."

"Their deaths concern *me*."

Sirian edged closer, his wise gaze and silvering hair the only signs of aging on his otherwise lean frame.

"Rissa, this was your decision. Before the last full moon, you never desired to visit the villages, or even to venture outside our walls. If you left the war to me, as your father did, we - -"

"I must keep our alliances strong by delivering the water from the Springs! You know this!" she snapped.

"If you insist on traveling, you must accept the risk of bloodshed. I've chosen the safest route there is, but you're in danger no matter what route you choose. We're nearly at war!" he reminded her with a chilling smile that didn't reach his dark eyes. "If you *insist* on going, this is the route you must take."

She bit her lip, not wanting to make yet another scene in front of the waiting warriors.

"My dear, you've not been yourself lately," he added, softening. "Let me go in your place. I will take the magic waters to them and send word that the Warlord of Tiyan is confident in our triumph over the enemy."

His words sent a tremor of fear through her. The last time she entrusted the Springs to Sirian, they ended up in the hands of her enemies.

"It's my duty," she said. "I'm well."

We are well, the beast seconded.

She stared at the map for a long moment as the awakening demon shifted within her. Tendrils of coldness stretched from its home within her chest, testing her strength before subsiding into stillness once more. Rissa shuddered and released her breath.

"I'm well," she repeated.

But for how long?

"Then go!"

Traitor, the beast said.

Sirian's sharpness and ingenuity in battle had kept Tiyan safe for years. He'd never been affectionate, but he had never failed to support her father when he needed his most trusted advisor. And yet she long knew the demon to be right: Sirian was no ally of hers.

The demon's triumph sickened her. Her father ruled a full thirty summers before the demon spoke to him and drove him mad. At five years into her rule and mere days from war, was she already toppling down the path of madness?

She stepped into the cool night ahead of an occupied Sirian and threw her head back to see the half-moon.

"My queen, I ask again to accompany you," said a gruff, seasoned warrior, stepping away from the dark shapes of her awaiting men. "For once, I agree with that ass. You take too many chances."

"Hilden," she chided with genuine affection. "You've looked over me since I was too small to walk. You know how strong I am."

"I have no children of my own, my queen, but if I did, I'd hope to see them outlive me. I wish the same for you."

"I'll come back, Hilden, I promise."

He'd say no more - he never did. Her most trusted friend and servant bowed and returned to the dark forms.

Her eyes fell to the awaiting guards, most of whom wouldn't survive the night.

"It'll get easier," Sirian said, pausing beside her. "Soon, you won't even remember them."

"You're so cold, Sirian."

"Only because I know the Spring water you carry is worth a hundred lives."

"How can anything be worth even one life?"

"If you thought it were not, you would not go."

"My queen, your horse is ready," Hilden called.

She strode to her horse, hands trembling as she took the reins. She rode away quickly, as angry at herself as she was at her closest advisor.

Despite the danger outside the walls, tension released her shoulders when she'd gone far enough to lose sight of the city's walls. The ocean air was fragrant and heavy, and moonlight pierced the forest canopy in patches. They traveled through the forest to the rocky cliffs, following a well-worn trail to the border of Tiyan and Nilian, her nearest ally.

She breathed a sigh as they entered Nilian territory, assured of her safety. This night's journey was simpler than the past few journeys, as no enemy territory stood between her kingdom and her ally.

The trail entered another dark thicket of forest, and she arrived soon at the agreed upon meeting place, a meadow marked with a single obelisk. A man in a hood awaited them.

One of her riders urged his horse into a canter and approached, while she halted her horse, disguised among the men. She rarely revealed her face outside the kingdom, as was decreed by the first ruler of Tiyan so long ago.

Too quickly, her rider barreled back and halted beside her.

"My lady, we must go!" he whispered.

"Not 'til we deliver the Spring waters."

"My queen, please! The ruler of Nilian didn't come. He sent a messenger with a warning: the king of Landis seized his family and half his kingdom and swears to destroy it all if Nilian sides with you!"

Her stomach sank. With her own people under threat, she knew the choice Nilian's ruler faced. That left her with two allies, neither of which was within half a day's ride.

"He said Landis planned to attack you this eve, and he sent his messenger ahead to warn you."

"Let's go," she said.

The messenger across the meadow waved and wheeled his horse. He was swallowed by the dark forest before she could return the wave. Her men turned back, newfound urgency in their movement as they pushed their horses into quick paces. Her own breath was loud in her ears, the sound of her horse's hooves drowning out everything else.

They reached the cliff before the first arrows fell. One of the men ahead of her went down with a cry, his horse squealing. He bounded to his feet as another paused beside him. She slowed her horse, fumbling for the magic waters at her hip.

"Go, my queen, go!" a guard shouted.

A bellow sounded in the forest behind them, and moonlight gleamed off of the tips of falling arrows and the raised swords of the men that followed them.

"Take this!" she said, and shoved the bladder at the downed man. "It'll heal you!"

"We're all dead men, my queen! Now, *run!*"

He shoved the bladder away and slapped the rump of her horse. Her horse bolted, and she ran.

Taran of Landis inched his way down the ancient tree, oblivious to the rough bark nipping at his moist skin. Nights near the ocean were humid and heavy despite the constant sea breeze, and he sucked in another deep breath, determined not to take even the heavy nights by the ocean for granted.

How did he survive fifteen years enslaved in the catacombs by a madman? He shivered at the taste of night-blooming flowers and the salty ocean on the cool breeze. The nights made him think fondly of his old friend, an ancient blind man who saved him from madness in the catacombs.

The sound of someone creeping through the brush made him pause in his descent to listen. His sight was poor enough that the moonlight hurt his eyes, but his other senses were strong after growing up beneath the ground.

"I know you're there, lying in a tree like one of the great cats you track."

He relaxed at the familiar voice and spotted the speaker.

"You're as quiet as a mad bear, Vara," he replied just as quietly.

"Peace, friend, I came to see if you're alive."

"I am," he said, and dropped the rest of the distance to the ground. "You always come after me."

Vara, the only man he might count as a friend if he dared count any, whirled, and moonlight caught his pale green eyes. The son of the ruler of the kingdom of Landis had men enough yet came himself to visit whenever Taran was away more than a few days.

"I probably always will," Vara replied. "Are you well?"

"Your father wishes me inside the walls. I've waited a sennight without finding a way to obey."

"My father ordered you into Tiyan?"

"He wants the water from the Springs, which he claims is magic."

Taran straightened the satchels strapped across his chest, his gaze returning to the walls of Tiyan. Every night, Tiyan warriors lit channels of fire around the field east of the walls using oil pans propped up by wooden stilts. The light did nothing to illuminate the

traps and holes in the field, another of Tiyan's defenses against its enemies. No man could cross the meadow alive without knowing where the traps lay.

He'd never been as frustrated - or interested - in anywhere before. He'd never seen a kingdom with walls so strong a god must have built them.

Tiyan was a worthy enemy, perhaps the only one that could withstand Landis's armies. Was the tiny kingdom strong enough to help him seek his revenge against those who had imprisoned him beneath ground and killed his family?

"I'd heard of them as well," Vara said, following his gaze. "Is this all my father sends his best scout to do?"

"I do as I'm ordered, Vara."

Taran glanced at him, wishing him gone. Vara felt a kinship with him after freeing him from the catacombs. But Taran wanted no favors from any man, even one who may have been a good man, had he been the son of any other.

"Someday, I rule Landis," Vara said. "And you will be my most trusted warrior. Then you will take an oath to me."

"I take an oath to no man, Vara. All you've done for me won't change that."

Vara shifted, irritated with his words. The princeling knew as much, and Taran never hesitated to remind him: his loyalty lay to a dead family and a foreign land across the sea, from whence he'd come to this barbaric land.

"I'll leave you to puzzle over the walls," Vara said in a tight tone.

Taran watched him fade into the forest with a warrior's stealth. He'd felt a need to apologize the last two times he spoke to Vara, but never would.

Of everyone he'd known since coming to this land, Vara had been the only kind one, aside from the ancient warrior in the catacombs. Vara freed him, paid for his weapons. He shook his head.

There were no good men in Landis's barbaric armies, not even Vara!

The noises of the forest stilled suddenly, and he cocked his head to the side. The sound of men crashing through the forest grew near fast. He sought refuge in his tree on a branch overhanging the main trail.

The first form darted through trees and brush, shoving branches out of his path and stumbling. Moonlight glinted off pursuers' weapons as they crashed through the forest. The first reached the nearby stream and stumbled, falling to his knees in the center of its shallow waters.

Rather, *she* stumbled. The scent of pure woman sent a thrill through him, and he leaned forward. Yes, it was a woman's shape, her body clad in dark breeches and boots, her sleeveless tunic held in place beneath a leather belt. A long, dark braid swung wildly with her movement. Her breathing was labored, her rise from the fall characterized by clumsiness borne of fatigue.

He dropped to a limb closer to the ground.

Images of what Landis's men did to the women of an enemy flashed through his mind. He was a man of war and battle, but he had never been a man to prey on those unable to defend themselves. Caring for the ancient warrior in the catacombs, Jame, all those years taught him compassion otherwise denied him among the dead in those underground passageways.

She passed below him. He swung down, clenched her body between his thighs, and pulled her into the protection of the tree.

The woman fought him, and Taran struggled to stabilize himself, finally wrapping his arm around her neck and forcing her head against him. Her breathing was ragged and uneven, her trembling body slick with sweat. Her scent was distinctly female: rich, musky honey. Her legs dangled helplessly in the air, and he saw the glint of tears on her face.

She ceased squirming when her pursuers passed below them. No sooner had they gone than a hot, stinging sensation slid down one of his legs.

Startled, he loosened his grip as he tried to snatch her arm and nearly dropped her. The woman clenched his arm and slid towards the ground until she held only his wrist.

She looked, and her teal eyes seared into him. He felt the uncanny sensation that she understood his tormented existence. She let go, dropping into a heap on the ground then vaulting to her feet and running.

He hesitated before vaulting to the ground, unable to explain the quickening of his heart or the sense that the woman's teal gaze - the color of the eyes of Karyan nobility - reminded him of the home he hadn't thought of in years. The shouts of her pursuers prodded him, and he gave chase.

He heard their whereabouts just before she gave a strangled cry and collided with one of them. He tore into the center of the group, hacking down two men before the other six reacted. By the time he engaged the third, the woman was running once more. She eluded one man and slashed at another with a dagger before sprinting toward the field.

He fought hard and fast, disturbed by an image of the woman with the piercing eyes being snapped up by a trap in the field. He buried a dagger in the gullet of the remaining man and darted forward.

The glow of fire made him squint as they neared the field.

Ahead of him, the woman seemed to know the safe path through the hidden traps he'd discovered during his observation of the city walls. He pumped his arms hard, ignoring the cries of three men as they fell into pits or were snapped up by traps with iron teeth. Two more closed in on her, but she danced away, luring one into a trap and throwing the second off guard long enough to escape his outstretched grasp.

The guards on the fortress walls had bunched together to watch and draw poison-tipped arrows. Taran reached the lagging man and hacked him down, leapt over the body and one of the snapping traps, and continued.

"Heron!" the woman cried.

The men on the wall lowered their weapons at her shout, and the remaining pursuer tackled her. Taran saw the two struggling figures teeter dangerously close to the edge of a pit. Mustering his strength, he leapt, tearing the woman out of the attacker's grip and rolling several feet with her.

The attacker fell into the pit with an abruptly short scream.

Breathing hard, Taran eased off her. He ignored the senses warning him of the guards drawing near and instead smoothed dark hair from her face and listened for her breathing. She was alive but unconscious. The scent of blood drew his gaze to her forearm, where a long gash was visible in the moonlight.

A ribbon of black laced the thick rivulet of her blood.

"Step back!"

The first guard to reach them prodded him with a sword. He rose and displayed his empty hands.

"Don't touch her," Taran growled.

"Be calm, boy. She's one of ours."

The aging but burly and large man sheathed his weapons and knelt over the still form. He carefully hefted her limp body and held her against him like a child.

Another guard took each of his arms and cuffed him in rusty iron fetters. One of the guards studied a barbed dagger before placing all his weapons in a small sack. Battle lust made Taran eager for another fight, but he forced himself to calm, realizing he now had an entry into the heart of Tiyan.

They walked through a small door into the walls of Tiyan. The world beyond was nothing like his home, the inner city of Landis. In front of him, whitewashed dwellings lined wide cobbled streets and reflected brightly in the moonlight. The quiet city smelled of the ocean and the forest.

The guards escorted him to a large hold at the center of the city. Its front doors were propped open by large logs. They climbed a set of wide, sweeping stone stairs that led up to the building, past towering columns, and into an airy chamber without a ceiling. He took in the gilded sconces and carved statues until his sensitive eyes watered, and he closed his eyes to the torch light.

"Careful, Hilden," someone said as the man carrying the woman lowered her to the ground.

He sensed by scent and sound several more men in the shadows of the room. The murmuring of guards stopped, and he opened his eyes enough to peer through his eyelashes.

A man in his prime with silvered hair emerged from the darkness. His gait was confident, his stature commanding, his face hard and cold. He lifted his chin to the men holding Taran in place, and they released him. His clothes were made for his body, the kind of clothing only the wealthiest could afford.

"This is the creature that attacked one of ours?" The man's voice was low and cold.

He circled Taran in consideration. The hair on the back of Taran's neck rose in warning. What he did not see, he sensed. This man possessed the same dangerous edge as the warrior-king of Landis.

"I saved your woman," Taran said.

"What clan do you claim?"

"I am claimed by the Landis," Taran responded.

The man's air cooled even further, and the men in the chamber tensed.

"You're far from home. Scouting for your master's raid?"

"I'm but a wanderer seeking refuge," he said.

"I saw you attack her," Silver-hair said. "You may stay as long as you wish in our prison. It's several feet beneath the ground - far enough for us to forget you quickly."

Taran shifted at the threat of the underground.

"Ask her," he said. "She will tell you I saved her."

"It is *my* decision," Silver-hair said, and motioned to the guards.

Taran tensed, the movement enough to snap one of the rusted fetters. He launched himself at the man, only to have four guards tackle him. They dragged him out of the chamber, down the stairs, and into the streets. They dropped him into a black hole, and

he hit the hard ground with a grunt. He broke through his bonds and gave a roar of fury. The heavy, musty scent of earth was contained within a four-by-four-foot cell, not even large enough for him to lie down. Three walls were solid dirt and one was cool iron.

Taran roared again and beat on the walls. His bruised body shook, his frantic thoughts fed by his reeling senses. There were no sounds, no sights underground, no sensations aside from the scent of his own fear and the feeling of earth closing in around him.

He paced, shouted, and pounded the walls until his body was depleted of energy. He dug into the hard earth with his fingertips and sagged against one wall, panting.

He closed his eyes to the darkness, struggling against his crippling terror.

Jame, my friend, I need your strength!

Taran sought to remember the wise words of his friend. It had been too long since he recited them; five summers had passed since he was freed from the underground.

The moon is a fickle lover, like a beautiful woman...she gives her whole heart but once a month and leaves you before dawn...why fear you the night? No darkness lasts the ages, Taran...I do not care to remember the sound of a bird's cry, but I wish I remembered the taste of spiced ale.

He recalled too little of Jame's wisdom, but the disjointed words of his mentor soothed him nonetheless.

"No darkness lasts the ages."

He imagined Jame's creaky voice chanting it with him. Already he felt as if an age had passed since he was flung into the darkness.

Taran braced himself and opened his eyes. He concentrated hard on wiping the blood from the wound *she* caused before binding it with a strip of linen from his tunic. Grimly he wondered if the king of Tiyan intended for him to die slowly in the hole without food and water, a fate worthy of Memon, the warrior-king of Landis.

Memon viewed Tiyan as his next easy conquest, a meek kingdom that would fall without a fight. The poor and sickly viewed Tiyan as a kingdom of refuge, where magical waters prevented sickness and death to any who drank from them. The kind ruler of Tiyan welcomed those without food and shelter. Taran had heard of Tiyan's magic whispered by more than the people of Landis.

Both were wrong! Was there *no* truth to the widespread beliefs?

The grating iron door made him jump. Beyond the iron wall sliding away was a small portcullis, which stood between him and a small stone chamber with ensconced torches. *She* was there alone.

The scraping ceased, and her quickened breathing reached his ears. He lowered his hand and stared at her.

He had thought her fair in the moonlight, but in full light, he found her beautiful. Her large eyes were arresting, her delicate features feminine and flawless. His gaze drifted to her shaking arm, where blood dripped down her fingers to the floor. She followed his look and drew the injured arm behind her back. His eyes lingered on the small pool of blood on the white stone. The rich maroon hue was mixed with a ribbon of black.

"You come from Landis."

He met her gaze again but said nothing.

"Your king wishes to destroy Tiyan."

When he did not respond, she approached.

"I *know* you," she murmured. "How?"

He studied her. Her conviction was on her face, and he couldn't help feeling the same. His arm snaked through the gate. He gripped her throat.

"Release me," he growled, pulling her against the cage.

"You did not save me only to kill me now."

"Foolish woman! I will kill any who seeks to cage me beneath the earth! Release me. *Now.*"

"If I...if I release you, you must swear not to tell your master of my city," she gasped.

"You are not in a position to barter."

"I cannot free you from here. You must release *me* in order to be free yourself!"

"I take no oath to you. Release me."

If she were a man, he would not hesitate to choke her breath from her until she agreed or died. Yet there was something in her haunted look and beautiful features that forbade him to harm her. He was reminded of the uncanny connection he felt upon their meeting in the forest.

He released her. The woman stepped back, one hand fluttering to her throat. She made no move toward the lever controlling the iron portcullis that would either free or condemn him.

"Does your sword have a price?"

"You seek to hire me now?" he asked.

Her nod was hesitant.

"I take an oath to none."

"I do not seek your oath, only your sword, for which you will be paid in gold."

"What would you have me do?"

"I need a guardian," she said. "And you fight with the courage of ten men."

"You have many men here. I have counted them all."

"But you will answer only to me, and only to *my* gold. I will not need you long."

Her words were ominous. He sensed a fear as deep as his fear of the underground, only he doubted a woman accustomed to the pure inner city of Tiyan ever experienced such fear or pain.

"Rissa?"

The familiar voice behind her jarred her. She paled and hurried to the lever.

The portcullis grated open. He squeezed through the opening and shielded his eyes, face-to-face with Rissa.

"If you try to escape, a dozen guards will cut you down before you reach the city wall. If you stay as my guardian, I will pay you what gold you ask for," she said in a hushed voice. "Quickly! Do you accept what I offer?"

He drew closer to her. She stepped away until the wall was at her back. Taran breathed deeply of the sweet honey musk that made heat skitter across his blood.

"Rissa!"

She pushed him away at the nearing voice. He twisted to face the man he took to be the king of Tiyan, closing his eyes against the torchlight.

"Rissa, what - -come, Rissa! Guards!"

"No!" she cried. "No, Sirian! He does not harm us!"

"Rissa, step away! He is a scout of Landis! If he escapes - -"

At the sound of steel on leather, Taran lowered himself into a crouch.

"Sirian, cease!" she ordered. "He's not a threat but a wanderer! What threat is a blind man to *you*?"

The tension was heavy enough to make Taran lower his stance further.

"Sirian, I'm not well," Rissa continued. "You distress me. This man stays."

"Rissa - -"

"I have decided."

Sirian sheathed his sword.

The woman ordered quietly, "Wanderer, come with us."

Taran trailed the two from the room, ignoring the hushed exchange of words. His anger subsided as he left the underground and entered the night. Sirian and Rissa led him back to the impressive hold at the center of the city and up a set of stairs to the second level and down a wide hallway. A quiet breeze traveled between massive wooden doors opened on both sides of the great hall. The round chamber was much like the streets: peaceful and clean.

Sirian opened one of the few closed doors, escorting Rissa. Taran stepped into a cavernous bedchamber lit by low burning hearths and scented by the white flowers sitting in each window. Rissa's quarters, he assumed as he shut the door.

More hushed fighting drew his attention. The woman's features were flushed, the man gesturing in Taran's general direction. Sensing her growing distress, Taran crossed to the door leading from the bedchamber into the hallway and opened it.

"Sirian."

The silver-haired man turned at Taran's low command. His look was one of frigid anger as he stormed out. Taran closed and barred the door, facing the woman in time to see her enter the bathing chamber and close the door. He heard the bar slide into place and strode toward it to beat on the door.

"Leave me be!" she ordered in a tired voice.

"Open the door!"

She tore it open, glaring up at him.

"I asked for a guardian, not a master! Leave me be!"

The air of the bathing chamber was rendered moist and heavy by the awaiting bath. A small window overlooking the city was too small to squeeze through, and he saw no weapons.

"Keep the door open. I cannot guard you if you hide from me."

She whirled away and paused in front of the bathing basin, a sigh robbing her frame of tension. He watched as she stripped off the tunic to reveal a muscular, firm back. The delicate shape of her slender neck and shoulders drew his eye.

"Please leave me alone," she said in a drained tone.

He pushed himself away from the door and took up a position near the bed, where he was able to see all entrances.

She remained in the bathing chamber until the hearth was nothing but embers. He made a comfortable nest on the floor, propped against several borrowed pillows. The woman finally emerged, pale and drawn but scrubbed clean. Long, dark hair hung loose and dripping around her shoulders. She wore a shift sheer enough for him to see the shading of her curves. He felt the familiar stirring of desire despite his exhaustion.

"You can sleep in the spare chamber," she told him. "There's a bed."

"I stay where I can see you."

"I told you, I don't need a master, only a guardian," she said as she dropped into bed.

"You have an odd way of thanking the man who saved your life," he stated in a low growl. "What if I am the threat Sirian believes me to be?"

"You would be doing me a favor if you were to act against me."

He rose and grabbed his dagger, tossing it in the air before lazily pushing the flat of the dagger to her neck.

"You were not so eager to die earlier," he said in a hard tone.

"They had much worse intentions than killing me," she countered.

"And I am different?"

"Yes, you are. You have had two chances to end my life and didn't."

She held his gaze in silent challenge a moment longer before dropping back and stretching out once more. She rolled until her back was to him.

Taran lowered his arm, twitching in irritation. Few men would turn their back to him, and normally, when there was a woman in bed, he was not on the floor.

He forced his blood to calm and tossed his dagger on the unappealing blanket before the hearth. He checked the door again and retreated to the bathing chamber. The scented bathing waters were still warm. He stripped out of his clothing and lowered himself in, relaxing.

He rarely experienced a warm bath in Landis. They were reserved for the most influential of the clan. He closed his eyes. The image accompanying him into a light doze was that of the beautiful woman sleeping in the bed nearby.

He roused himself, leery of becoming too comfortable in the home of his enemies. He dressed and explored the bedchamber, digging through her wardrobes and trunks. He replaced a stack of breeches into the trunk he pulled them from, only for a small book to fall out. He knelt and retrieved it.

The woman not only had a book - it was in the tongue of the land where he was born! The wood covers were unusually cool to his touch, and a shiver went up his arm.

The Book of the Damned.

He began to read, stumbling over the words after years without reading his native tongue. The language was from his homeland of Karyan, a place he left when he was a child. His instincts warned him that something about the book and the women was...wrong. Darkness clung to the brittle pages, resisting even direct firelight.

He placed the unsettling book on a table and crossed the chamber, watching the book as if it might decide to walk away on its own.

CHAPTER TWO

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Second Warlord of Tiyan

The demon's power enabled me to save a life today. I never felt such gratitude as I did in the moment the little girl's eyes opened! If I'd known how to use this magic last

summer, I might have saved my dear queen and our daughter after they were attacked in the forest.

Father never warned me the demon would speak to me, but it does. It's been my only companion since my father died many years ago. He insisted I stay within the walls, never take a life, remain faithful first to my people, second to my family. How I miss him! My uncle - -his most trusted advisor - -is now mine, a man I trust but do not like. The demon does not care for him, either, and tells me stories too frightening to be true. It says my uncle killed my mate and daughter, not the bandits.

And yet, the creature is generous and lets me take as much of his magic as I need, enough to build our walls in a season's time and make them stronger than the walls of my enemies. Its words are poison but its magic protects my city. We defeated the last of our enemies - -tonight is a feast in my honor, only none save my uncle and I know it was the beast who saved us all!

My son nears the age where my uncle says the demon must claim him as a host. I remember my own host day. If I could spare my son the pain...but it must be so. The demon protects us, heals us. I will teach my son the demon's power and warn him about its lies. It yearns to be free again to destroy.

In the mind of a weaker man, it would drive him to madness. My uncle tells me this is why I must wait until my dear son is six or seven summers. He tells my heir the same words my father told me: do not leave the walls, never take a life, remain faithful to your people and family. To this, I remind my heir of my father's creed: Tiyan above all else.

When a strip of yellow lit the edge of the night sky, Taran returned to his perch in a large window facing the sunrise. He tied a piece of black cloth around his eyes as the sun's rays peeked over the neighboring buildings.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself to be one of the great cats he tracked in the forest. They were magnificent, powerful creatures in varying hues of gold and brown. He admired the graceful predators and often tracked them when he wanted to escape Landis.

The woman rose, her honey musk teasing his senses as she moved around the chamber. She approached him finally, and he snatched the small hand reaching toward him. She gasped and pulled away, but not before his thumb grazed her calloused palm.

"Your hands are rough," he said

"I work beside my men," she said. "What ails your eyes?"

"Light."

He moved into the shadows of the chamber and pushed up his eye-band to see her.

Rissa was dressed in clean men's clothing, her hair braided once more. Two daggers perched at her rounded hips, and her brilliant eyes glowed in the sunlight. He looked her over.

"Your arm is healed," he said.

Rissa looked down self-consciously and clasped her arms behind her back.

"You will remain here for twelve nights," she said. "But if I ask you to leave, you will do so without questioning me."

She was small to make such demands, but he had learned from years of watching his mistresses plot that even a small woman was capable of great manipulation, deceit, and *power*.

"You would deny me refuge if I seek it?"

Her jaw clenched. "You must serve me as I ask, and then go. I would be foolish to let you free within my walls."

"I don't think you're foolish, but I'll leave when I wish and no sooner."

"If it is refuge you seek, you will only be granted it by swearing allegiance to us."

"That I will not do," he said with a shake of his head. "I swore no allegiance to Landis. I swear none to you."

"You're not a servant of Landis?"

"I am a slave of Landis, nothing more. One day I will take my freedom."

A knock at the door prevented her response. She searched his face before relenting and crossing to the door. He listened to the hushed conversation that devolved into a hushed fight.

Rissa slung the door closed and moved toward a small table where her sword waited. She froze as her hands reached for her book rather than the sword.

The air of the chamber stilled and grew heavy, as if it meant to suffocate him. The hair on the back of his neck and forearms rose. He moved closer to her in case the unseen threat attacked, hands on the hilts of his daggers.

"You can read."

The inhuman monotony of her tone made him realize *she* was the threat.

"I can."

Her hand rested on the book. She lifted the wooden cover before dropping her hand as if the book were hot enough to scald her.

"How is your leg?"

"I heal quickly, though not as quickly as you."

"Can you read these symbols? I cannot," she said, flinging a hand toward the desk.

"I can."

His response made her turn, and he stared. Black pupils swallowed the color of her eyes. The darkness peering out of her eyes was ancient and evil. Coldness slithered through him. Her face stilled until she looked as cold and lifeless as a statue.

He didn't know what magic she possessed, but it was unlike anything he'd ever seen.

She knew this man. He had come to her in the dream in which he killed her. His face had been blurry, his dress different. Before the moment when she saw the book, she hadn't wanted to connect the spectral figure of her mind with the very real man before her.

The hibernating creature within her shook itself awake and began crawling through her blood. It was cold, so cold it seared. It had not been awake for five years, since...since she had killed her father.

The monster stirred when she was threatened, but had never awoken completely before. This time, the demon would not fall again into its deep slumber. The demon had chosen her successor, as her father said it would.

The man before her was poised like an animal on a hunt, his penetrating, dark eyes pinned on her.

She'd never seen a man quite like he who stood before her. He was built like any warrior, but it was the sharpness of his gaze that made her uneasy. His eyes were observant and restless, his eyebrows thick and low, and his features hard. Scars were visible on one cheek, on the back of his neck, and on the wide upper body that was exposed the previous day.

He was the perfect host for the demon: strong, confident, intelligent.

She blinked and released her breath. Her muscles were tense enough to ache. She turned away, seeking to suppress the beast, and grabbed her sword.

"Come, slave," she said, and started for the door.

She felt sick.

The disturbing sensation of being in a room with an otherworldly creature faded as he followed her into the hallway. He lowered his eye-band once more, engaging his other senses. He sensed her tension slide away, and with it, the darkness.

He soon felt the heat of morning as they stepped from the immense building out of a side door and into the fresh day. Sirian waited, his dark eyes going from Rissa to Taran, where they settled.

This danger Taran understood. He felt the warning in Sirian's intense glare. It made his blood hum with impending battle fever, but he ignored the silent challenge. He was not there for the woman, not there to take Sirian's position.

Several burly guards bowed to Sirian and Rissa and trailed them into the street. He followed at a distance, keeping to the shadows in order to lift his eye-band and peer at the world around him. Rissa's sharp glance found him twice, as if to ensure he continued to follow them.

The sun pushed aside the shadows as it emerged from the depths of the distant sea until it sat on the horizon, casting long shadows and brilliant bars of light into the walled city. Dwellers of the many buildings around him stirred with the rising sun.

He took in the different manners of dress, the different features and colors, and the variety of accents and languages he heard as he walked. There were three women to every one man he passed. The women were of all ages while the men were either young or elderly, their numbers gutted by war. Even Landis, which was constantly at war, did not have such a void of able-bodied men within the city.

There were a great many children whose cheerful voices and tiny forms darted by him several times. In Landis, the children were closeted away for fear of being snatched and sold into slavery.

Why did they not seem inflicted by the harshness his people knew? There were no signs of famine or diseases that oft struck Landis, no fights in the streets for a higher position in the warlord-king's court or among his chosen men, no brawls over who would mate with a woman of age. The oddities of Tiyan made him recall the wives' tales told about the city's magical powers.

"Taran! Keep up!"

Rissa's voice drew him from his thoughts. She waited for him to catch up then ducked through a door leading from the inner city beyond the walls, and he followed.

His shoulders hunched instinctively as he felt the eyes of the guards atop the walls on him. No swarm of arrows pierced his back as he walked away from the walls.

It was as he exited the walls that he saw where the men of the city were. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of white tents were neatly aligned outside the wall. He squinted to survey Tiyan's western defenses. The kingdom perched on a cliff overlooking an ocean of velvet blue. Lines of tents were tucked between the outer wall of the city and the edge of the cliff.

The heavy scent of fragrant sea swept over him, the chill of the ocean kept out of the city by its thick walls.

Dozens of men sparred in small groups along the cliff. His blood quickened at the idea of joining them. He loved war, the all consuming sensations of battle from the metallic scent of weapons and blood to the burn of his muscles as he fought beyond his normal capabilities. There was nothing like battle to make a man feel alive!

Rissa, Sirian, and the guards headed toward the sparring men. He held out as long as possible before his watering eyes forced him to lower his eye-band. His senses painted a scene in the darkness behind his eyelids.

Sirian partnered with Rissa while the guards fanned out around them, one alert while the other four paired up to spar. None of them made any move to invite him to their practice, so he moved away, toward the closest group of five.

He watched quietly until one of the men eyeing him approached. He raised his eye-band to meet the gaze of the warrior, a man with dark eyes and hair and cocoa skin.

"I'm Kellin," the warrior said, raising his chin in greeting.

"Taran."

"We saw you fight last night," Kellin said, and drew his sword. "Can you fight without your eyes?"

"I can," Taran confirmed.

"How?"

"I learned to fight in the dark," was all he said, not wanting to invite more questions by mentioning his time in the catacombs.

"Never heard of anyone fighting in the dark," Kellin said with a small smile. "You are either a liar or very good!"

"Very good," he said without hesitation.

"Join me!"

Taran nodded and stripped off his tunic and excess weapons before dropping into a fighting stance opposite his challenger.

Kellin struck first. The Tiyan warrior fought with efficiency, skill, and determination. Better yet, he was eager and passionate about battle, a rare trait among the warriors of Landis, who were forced to fight or starve!

Taran settled into a comfortable morning with the good-natured warriors of Tiyan. His skill, agility, and strength went unmatched and quickly won him solid admiration among the men. He bowed out after several rounds to watch a heated match between two warriors casting loud taunts at each other as they battled.

Unlike Landis warriors, who were suspicious others meant to take their places, the Tiyan warriors accepted him quickly.

Make me proud, Jame would have said.

He smiled to himself as he thought of the ancient man. Jame would have been happy at Tiyan. If the elderly man had only waited a few more years to die, he might have left the underground hell and lived to see this wonderful world. Taran doubted the people of Tiyan would spit on an elder like Jame as the people of Landis did.

Taran's attention swept to the walls behind him, and he felt a pang of yearning and regret. What was it like to have a home worth fighting for? With the thought came an image of Jame, who told yearning tales of such a place he recalled from his youth.

He looked in time to see Sirian fling Rissa over his shoulder. She landed hard on her back. Sirian stood over her and planted his hands on his hips, frowning. The guards around the two glanced at the older man with visible unease.

Taran resisted the urge to protect her as he might Jame from Landis warriors, reminding himself of what he felt in her presence earlier.

Sirian and Rissa glared at each other with animosity that bespoke a brittle relationship. Sirian snatched his tunic and stalked away. Taran waited only a moment longer before approaching. The woman tossed her head back and breathed deeply.

"Spar?"

Dark circles smudged the delicate skin beneath her clear eyes. Her face was flushed from exertion and anger. Her eyes skimmed over him. After a small hesitation, she nodded. He settled into a fighting stance, unusually satisfied at the prospect of engaging her at any level.

She struck first fearlessly. Taran met her blows and then attacked without his brute force, instead assessing her ability to react. She was unafraid and sure-footed, agile, and well-disciplined. He grudgingly admitted that Sirian had trained her well. She fought hard and with her heart, a combination that thrilled him.

He identified several major flaws in her defense, struck them multiple times to confirm, and caught her wrist to stop her. Her attention went from his body to his face, and she stepped away.

"You need more of an angle when you deflect," he told her. He raised her sword arm and angled her sword while explaining. "If you angle your sword, the blow glances off. Otherwise, your head will be cleaved in two."

Rissa looked at him hard. Her breathing was regulated but heavy, her scent and heated nearness aiding battle fever in agitating his blood.

"Try," he ordered, and stepped back.

He thought her ready to refuse, but when he struck, she made an effort to block as he said. He adjusted her arm again and stepped back, hammering at her until she reacted the way he wanted. He corrected one other movement and slowed their pace until it resembled that of the youths being trained a short distance away. He watched her form as she struck and defended.

"Rissa." Sirian's cool voice broke into his quiet focus.

Rissa bristled but straightened.

"You've done enough. It would not be wise to tire yourself," Sirian informed her.

His eyes were on Taran.

"I'm actually learning from him, Sirian," was Rissa's arch response.

Sirian's gaze returned to hers, and the two exchanged a look that made the hair on the back of Taran's neck rise once more. Sirian caved first.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "We are riding into the forest today. Since you choose to deliver the magic waters yourself, we can't risk losing Oceanan's support as you did Nilian last night. Their messenger won't wait long."

Rissa's frame relaxed. She sheathed the sword.

"It would behoove us to leave before midday's heat hinders you."

Taran stayed the sudden urge to challenge Sirian to a round. His tone was beyond insulting. When Rissa merely nodded, accepting the insult, he felt the urge to shake sense into the oblivious woman.

"Get your things," she ordered him. "You will come with us."

Taran obeyed before Sirian contradicted her.

"Taran!" Kellin called, trotting to join him as he pulled on his tunic. "Heed yourself. The old man has his eye on you."

Taran felt Sirian's hard gaze again. He nodded once before following the woman. Sirian gave him a cold look as he passed. Ignoring him, he took his place at the rear of the procession and adjusted his weapons.

Aside from the dark moods of Rissa and Sirian, Taran sensed nervousness in the guards. The air was hot and heavy and promised to become unbearable quickly. They left the protected area behind the kingdom and started into the woods on a two-man trail. The shaded forest was cool and quiet, as if all the animals and trees watched and waited.

His skin crawled. Danger hedged the kingdom. It was not within the walls, the encampment on the cliff, or within the passionate people themselves. He couldn't pinpoint what made his instincts restless, but he also saw apprehension in the tense frames and roving eyes of those riding before him. Rissa was braced in the saddle as if expecting attackers at any moment.

The cool forest shade was soon defeated by the lack of air movement. The hot horse between his legs made him want to walk rather than ride. He loosened what clothing he could and rolled his sleeves. Those ahead of him grew more restless with the passing time, eerie quiet, and stifling heat.

He heard a distant sound and cocked his head to listen. It did not come again; it would not. Stationary scouts shifted only when necessary. He gauged the watcher to be a good distance away, close enough to see their movement and numbers but far enough not to see their armament. Another rustling followed, this one much closer and to the left of their trail.

One scout meant observation; the second, danger.

Taran nudged his horse forward into a slow trot. He maneuvered past the two trailing guards and slowed his horse behind Sirian.

"We're being watched." He spoke loudly enough for Rissa to hear.

"This is a safe route," Sirian returned, unconcerned.

"There's more than one scout," Taran said, eyes on Rissa's back. "We must retreat or risk falling into an ambush. The forest does not lie about these dangers."

Rissa turned to look at him, then Sirian.

"Sirian?" she queried.

"The route is safe, Rissa," Sirian said firmly. "I would not have brought us this way if not."

They continued. Irritated at the rebuke, Taran prepared himself.

He sensed the ambush long before it came. He heard the distant movement as attackers neared, the adjustment of the men's emplacement, even the loading of arrows and stretching of bows. He inched closer to Sirian's horse but said nothing. Rather than warn them again, he tied his reins to his horse's mane, freeing up his hands to draw his knives. He guided the horse with his legs, testing its sluggish responsiveness as the attackers prepared to pounce.

He amused himself briefly with the thought of eliminating Sirian himself once the battle began. His gaze fell to the woman's back. For her sake, he hoped they were being stalked by inept bandits and not by bloodthirsty warriors like those from Landis.

CHAPTER THREE

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Third Warlord of Tiyan

No one must know of it. I found a way to heal without revealing the demon. I add a bladder of my blood to the Springs in the center of the city each season. My people never fall ill, and those who are injured, heal.

Except for my own wounds. The demon won't heal me or allow the magic of the Springs to heal me. My great-uncle said I must only use the demon's power for others or risk the demon's curse. Before his death, he admitted he didn't know what the curse was, only that none in our line must draw the curse.

But when I asked the demon, it said there was no curse, that all I needed to do was tell it I wanted to heal. This seems too simple, and I cannot yet dismiss the caution my great-uncle - -and his son, my cousin - -took when discussing the creature.

My father believed the demon should only be used to do good. Maybe there is no harm in asking it to heal me as it does everyone else. After all, how can asking for the same treatment it gives all others be bad?

Does not the Warlord of Tiyan deserve to walk as the rest of his people do? It's been too long since I was last able to use my legs. I was but a child. The demon says it can heal me. My father warned me about its lies, but I know this is not one of them. I see its magic with my own eyes. Can this one boon be as bad as my cousin believes?

Tiyan, above all else.

The first arrow planted itself firmly in the rump of Sirian's spirited grey. The horse whinnied and bolted. It shoved Rissa's horse off the trail in its haste, where a branch knocked her to the ground. Her guards watched in surprise as Sirian and his horse disappeared around the bend. She scrambled to her feet, drawing her sword.

White and black feathered arrows suddenly poured from the surrounding forest.

Taran met the first attacker head on with his sword and sought to turn his horse with his legs. The panicked animal fought him for its head instead, refusing to obey him. He caught a glimpse of Rissa through the melee and wrestled the horse for control. He struck down another attacker.

Three guards surrounded Rissa, whose writhing, squealing horse was as much of a menace to her as the attackers flooding from the forest. She struggled to mount behind one of the guards shielding her, when an attacker's blow landed solidly against his horse's flank. It bolted, leaving the woman exposed.

Taran shoved his way through the attackers, hacking as he went, determined to reach Rissa. Finally, he landed a sharp blow to his horse's rump and made the beast dart in the direction he wanted.

He reached Rissa and threw himself from his horse, keeping a hold of the reins as he smashed blows into one of the three facing her. Rissa blocked the blow of the second and dropped, rolling as an axe split the ground near her head. She darted to her feet and threw one of her daggers.

Her blue eyes went to him once, and he saw the look of infuriated accusation within them. Rather than draw nearer for him to protect her as they had agreed, she maneuvered the man she fought between them.

Taran glared back and dispatched his attackers before hacking down the man between them. Rissa arced a blow toward *him*. He deflected and grabbed her. She resisted and ran. He snatched her belt and slung her across his horse's withers before mounting. For the first time, the horse responded when he urged it out of the battle.

He knew without looking the remaining guards were doomed or dead. He ducked over the horse's neck again as the arrows followed them and slapped the horse's rump with his sword.

Finally, they were clear of bodies. The beast bolted. Taran cursed the animal again under his breath and blocked two strikes before they broke free of the footmen. Arrows continued to fall, and he kicked the horse on in determination, focusing hard on the road ahead of them. It branched suddenly, so he pulled the horse's head hard to the left.

He rode hard until the horse's breathing grew labored and then he slowed, senses alert. There were no sounds of pursuit, no sounds of arrows being drawn or fired.

Relieved, he pulled the blowing horse to a halt and grabbed Rissa by the scruff of her tunic, unceremoniously hauling her up and dumping her on the ground. She landed on her backside and stared at him, a familiar fury within the teal depths of her eyes. She hopped to her feet and darted back the way they came.

Irritated with her spirit, Taran leapt from the horse and pursued, his long strides quickly cutting the distance between them. He grabbed her arm, and she twisted, punching him hard in the jaw before tearing away.

He snatched her again by her belt, then grabbed both flailing wrists and swept her feet from beneath her, falling with her. Rissa grunted at the impact of his weight and squirmed.

"Be still!" he ordered as she strained.

Her breathing was hard, her wild look one of pure anger and fear.

"Let me go!"

"Be still!"

"Damn you! *You* did this! Those were *Landis* men - -"

"Rissa!"

His tone quieted her, and she stared up at him, breathing heavily. Her body was warm beneath his, a sensual combination of firm muscle beneath soft, feminine curves. The flare in her eyes drew him, promised of passionate depths. Their faces were inches

apart, and he could not help but recall he had not been atop a woman in far longer than he pleased.

"Those were Landis men," she said again.

He said nothing but shifted to hold both her hands in one of his. He met her gaze and held her eyes, forcing her to focus on him. She strained and squirmed again.

"Be still. You're not going anywhere, Rissa," he told her firmly. "Unless I let you."

His gaze was steady and commanding as he sought to connect with her panicked mind.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Let me go."

"Are you hurt?"

Rissa searched his gaze, calming. He saw the raw emotion on her face: anger, confusion, fear. The emotions subsided as she understood her danger to be over. When she focused on his eyes again, he felt the soul-deep connection between them as he had the first night they met. He nearly shuddered at the intense sensation. He listened to her breathing, could almost taste her skin from their position. He could not recall the last time a scent had so ensnared him.

"I'm not hurt," she whispered.

The husky edge to her voice nearly undid him. Taran's intensity did not waver as he held her gaze. She calmed further, another emotion soon crossing her gaze.

Desire.

Taran understood the look intimately. Rissa said nothing, waiting. He wanted to taste those full lips, plunder her honeyed mouth. In that moment, he knew she would not refuse him.

No.

The reminder of their danger, of his purpose in Tiyan, roused him. He grudgingly released her and pushed himself back, straddling her thighs. Rissa closed her eyes and sighed.

Taran grimaced. Becoming involved with this woman would jeopardize any chance he ever had at vengeance against Landis.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

A wary, tired edge was in her soft voice. She pushed herself onto her elbows, drawing her legs to her chest. He gazed at her, imagining what he would *like* to do to her.

"Take you where you were going," he growled at last.

"They're your men," she repeated

She withdrew the broken shaft of an arrow from a pocket and handed it to him.

It held the stamped insignia of Landis, a swooping hawk.

"I do not claim Landis," he said, and tossed it.

"But you spy for them," she accused. "I know you do!"

"You know nothing about me, Rissa."

She flushed and rose, visibly frustrated once more.

"Have you a name?" she demanded.

"Taran."

"Taran, I know who and what you are, even if you choose to deceive me!"

Rissa drew herself up to her full height and looked around. Taran watched her, admiring but leery.

"Sirian was quick to leave you," he said as he rose.

She shot him a look.

"We need to go east," she said.

"How is it I've rescued you two days in a row? Are you that foolish to travel when you shouldn't?" he goaded.

He crossed to the quiet horse as he walked, issuing it a warning look as well. He wanted no further trouble from either female.

"I have duties," was the short reply.

"How often do your duties place you in danger?"

He gripped the horse's reins and mounted. Rissa looked up at him, face flushed. She was calm and in control once more.

"I've been attacked one of every two days I leave," she answered.

Taran whistled and offered a hand.

"Start sending Sirian," he suggested.

She hesitated before accepting his hand.

Determined to keep her off guard or at least satisfy part of his screaming blood, he pulled her before him. Rissa tensed, but his arms closed around her to prevent her from jumping off. She swung one leg over the horse's neck and settled against him.

He tightened his grip until their bodies were pressed together, determined to feel her soft curves.

"Sirian is my much trusted advisor," she grated finally.

"Sirian?" Taran echoed. "You're not his daughter and he the king?"

"In Tiyan, I am called a Warlord, not a queen. Surprised to find a female Tiyan Warlord?" she asked archly.

"Yes."

"We're not like other clans," she explained. "We do not fight amongst ourselves like *your* kind does. We're not barbarians."

He ignored her pointed tone. She was tense again, her air troubled. Not wishing to see the dark Rissa from the morning return, he did not pursue. He concentrated on encouraging the stubborn horse to head back the way they came.

"My father had no other children. I inherited the royal blood, with the magic to heal," she said.

He sensed there was much, much more in her carefully chosen words.

"Heal?" he repeated. "Like you did your arm?"

"Yes." She tensed again. "How is your leg?" A dark edge was in her voice, one that made him uneasy.

"It's healing. Your cut was shallow."

She sighed and relaxed, her head falling back against his shoulder. Surprised, Taran resisted the urge to rest his chin atop her head, or nuzzle her cheek, or smell her hair. Instead, he forced his head straight ahead.

"I can heal it for you."

"No," he said.

They rode for a short distance before she spoke again.

"Taran, if you'll not take an oath to Landis or Tiyan, will you take an oath to me?"

He did not like the tone of her voice, at once considering and deceptive.

"No."

"It's not loyalty," she pressed. "I want to ask you to agree to protect me."

"As I've done the past two days?"

"Yes, but...from other threats, not necessarily Landis."

He rolled her words around his head.

"From Sirian."

She said nothing.

"I take no oath," he told her firmly. "But while I am with you, you need only fear me."

Rissa was quiet. He sensed it was not the answer she sought.

"How long do you intend to stay?"

"As long as I desire."

"What would I have to pay you for you to stay as long as I'd like?"

The answer he wanted to give lingered at the forefront of his tongue.

"You seemed ready to kill me but an hour ago," he reminded her.

"I haven't decided whose side you're on," she admitted. "But if you can be swayed by gold..."

"I cannot."

He sensed her unease. It was too easy for the beautiful woman to distract him.

"You can read."

The disturbed note in her hushed voice made his instincts clamor.

"Yes," he said.

"How did you know of the ambush?" she asked in the same tone.

"My senses are more refined than yours."

"But your eyes are weak."

"I spent fifteen years underground. My eyes are weak, but my hearing and my other senses are not," he answered.

"How is it a barbarian from Landis knows anything about honor?"

"I told you - I'm a slave. My father brought me from across the sea. When we arrived, Memon lured us to his kingdom and killed everyone but me. He sentenced me to the catacombs."

"Strange he didn't kill you."

"You sound too eager for my death!" he grumbled.

"Memon has no mercy for anyone!"

"No, he doesn't," he said. "But his son, Vara, does."

"I've heard Vara's name. His mother was killed by Memon, and her family took refuge within my walls."

"You gave them refuge and refuse me?"

"You have a great deal of freedom for a mere *slave*."

"You treat me like a spurned lover."

"I suppose I do," she said, amused. "I dreamt about you. We were lovers, and you killed me."

"I can assure you, I'd never kill you once we were lovers."

"Sometimes what we want and what we must do are not the same."

"What exactly are we talking about?" he asked. "If you believe a *mere dream* determines your fate, you're a fool. But if you want to be a fool, then I'm glad we're destined to be lovers!"

"We're not destined to be lovers!"

"And I'm not destined to kill you."

"I'm a fool either way."

"You're a beautiful one, who I will enjoy bedding."

She gave a harsh laugh and relaxed once more, her head falling back again. Instinctively, he touched his cheek to her temple before he realized what he did.

"How did you learn to fight if you spent your life underground?" she asked.

"I wasn't alone," he replied. "There was another man down there, an old warrior named Jame."

"Jame," she repeated. "Was he named after the great warrior from the far east?"

"Maybe. Was he a great man?"

"The legends about him say he killed his mate, who was the daughter of a god, and he was cursed for all time."

"This man was too noble to kill any but a warrior."

"Like you."

"I try to be as honorable as he taught me," he replied. "Even to spurned lovers."

She fell silent, irritated with him.

They rode in silence through the forest. He heard nothing to indicate danger, but the heat grew steadily with their bodies pressed together. Both were sweating by the time he saw their destination: a stone fortress nestled inside the forest. Guards drew arrows back at their approach, and Rissa roused herself.

"Birch!" she called.

The guards lowered their weapons. A small door in the stone structure opened. Taran released Rissa, and she hopped down, awaiting him. Her look was intense. He dismounted and met her gaze, sensing she assessed him. Rather than submit to her unspoken challenge, he took the horse's reins and led the exhausted beast inside the fortress. The woman trailed.

Sirian appeared, clean and newly clothed. Taran glanced warily toward him as he led the horse toward stables nestled along one wall of the stone fortress.

"Rissa, I am grateful you are well!" Sirian managed a relieved note in his tone.

"And you, Sirian," she responded less warmly. "You didn't send a party for me."

A moment of tense silence fell. Taran strained to hear his response.

"You're exhausted," Sirian said. "You need a cool bath and a meal."

Taran handed off the horse to a stable hand and turned to watch as Sirian took Rissa's arm, leading her into a squat stone building at the center of the fortress. He suspected there was much more to Tiyan and its enticing warlord that he had yet to discover. He trailed them into the dark fortress but kept his distance, eyeing his surroundings with distaste. The stones were dark, the air musty, the ceiling low. It reminded him of being underground.

Sirian and Rissa wound through the fortress before disappearing into a door guarded by two men. Taran remained in the hall and paced as he studied the guards.

"If I may ask, are you all that remain of the guard?" one voiced.

Taran glanced at him, taking in familiar cocoa features.

"You are Kellin's kin?" he asked.

"He's my brother."

"I met your brother this morning. We sparred. He's quite a warrior," he said.

"He was not with the guard this morning?" the guard pressed.

"No. He stayed behind," Taran replied.

The man before him relaxed visibly.

"I'm Taran."

"Allin. I began to fear my brother would be next assigned to the Warlord's guard."

Allin glanced at the man beside him, whose frown seemed permanent.

"I can't imagine Rissa's guards last long," Taran said.

Voices rose from behind the door, their words too muffled by the wood to distinguish. Taran's gaze lingered on the door before returning to Allin. Allin exchanged a knowing glance with the guard beside him.

"Is Sirian her father? Brother?" Taran asked. "Mate?"

Allin shook his head.

"He is nothing!" The guard beside Allin nearly spat the words. "He cares for nothing but himself. Our guards die, and he does nothing!"

"We serve Sirian at Rissa's command, though there are some in the kingdom who do not think the Warlord should be a woman," Allin clarified with a faint smile. "Lean's family was brought in last summer. The Warlord cured his wife and daughter of illness when Sirian refused them entry."

"There is not a family in our walls the Warlord has not helped," Lean added, calming. "Tiyen was built by those with no home for those with no home; Sirian forgets that too often."

"Still your tongue, Lean," Allin warned. "Our new friend may be an ally to Sirian."

Both looked at him.

"I assure you I'm not," Taran replied.

The voices rose again. He sought a distraction to keep him from wrenching open the door and hauling the small queen away from her second.

"Where must she go daily that she risks herself?"

"To our allies to the north and south, to the villages," Allin replied.

"She saves people before bringing them here," Lean supplied. "She trades a bladder of the Springs to the northern clans to assure their allegiance."

"The Springs are real?" he asked.

"It's how she heals people," Lean explained at his puzzled look. "The Warlords of Tiyen have magic in their bloodline. As long as one from her clan is the Warlord, the Springs will continue to heal. There are some who say a female Warlord will bring a curse upon us, but we don't believe this," he added. "Those who follow Sirian want him as Warlord. I hate the man."

Allin issued him a warning look. Lean mumbled to himself and fell silent.

Taran dwelled on their words and hers. If the lowly guards knew a member of her clan must be on the throne for the Springs to heal, who else did? Would that make *any* well magical?

Taran leaned against the wall opposite the closed door, pensive. What did Memon know? Through the mistresses Memon kept and shared with his men, Taran had learned of nothing but a desire for gold and magic waters.

Sirian knew something others did not if he were willing to risk the Warlord's death to take over the kingdom. Her advisor did not believe what the guards believed, that only a member of her clan could make the Springs heal people. There was a reason Sirian remained the embittered but somewhat faithful servant. Whatever it was he knew, he needed her around a little longer. He was too much like Memon not to act against someone he no longer needed.

By their edgy exchanges, he could tell Rissa knew her advisor posed some danger.

The door smashed open. Sirian stalked out, ignoring them. His normally cool features were red, his black eyes flashing. Taran watched him until he disappeared around a corner.

The door remained opened. Allin and Lean made no move to stop him, and he entered.

The brightly lit chamber was filled with tables and chairs. Rissa leaned both hands on the table before her. Her frame was rigid, the table empty. Taran nudged the door closed but rested his palm on the hilt of a dagger.

She pushed herself up and faced him. Taran's jaw tightened as he took in the right side of her face, which blazed red as if struck. His eyes lingered on her before he moved toward the largest of the maps on the wall before him.

It was a detailed map, with the sea painted blue and the land border meticulously drawn. Dotted lines separated the boundaries of each of the kingdoms. Though they weren't labeled, he recognized Tiyan and, farther to the east, Landis. There were two smaller kingdoms whose territories overlapped in between. Landis was much larger in land mass than Tiyan. Tiyan's lands were shallow but extended for great distances along the coast.

"Landis, Corcoran, Magen, Browis, Leescran, Palmis, Nilian. Tiyan's enemies."

The kingdoms formed a ring around most of Tiyan with the exception of a strip of land running north along the coast and bordering two other unnamed territories.

"Dierdirien, Oceanan," she continued, and pointed to the two territories. "Tiyan's allies."

He no longer questioned the need for such a trained, disciplined army, or the absence of able-bodied men within the city's walls. Tiyan was a trapped animal with its back to the ocean.

"What is it they want with Tiyan?" he asked.

There was little fertile land among the cliff-dominated territory, little at all he could see as being a reason to traverse the small territory let alone labor to build an alliance against it. Tiyan's strongholds were marked in black around all major routes into and out of the territory as well as two located closer to the walled city. One stronghold was in the north, in which they stood, and one in the south near the entrance to the desert.

"We control the only bay north of the desert accessible by ship, should the countries across the sea choose to trade with us," she said. "And, Tiyan's waters are said to hold the gift of life."

His eyes fell to a crescent-shaped bay at the southern reaches of Tiyan.

"You plan the battles?"

"Sirian does," she said, an edge in her voice. "He's the reason Tiyan has not fallen in thirty years. He trains the warriors and fights the wars."

The praise was spoken grudgingly with a note bordering despair.

"Yet you don't trust him," he said.

"I don't know how to do what he does."

He glanced at her, comprehending the reason for her distress. Her gaze was distant, haunted, as she studied the map. She withdrew from her thoughts and addressed him.

"You've had time to assess our defenses and capabilities and now, learn the placement of our strongholds. Sirian is convinced you're a Landis spy."

He faced her as she spoke. She stiffened, once again the leader, and gazed up at him.

"Memon will appreciate the information," she said. "He's tried for years to sneak someone inside our walls. I wanted Sirian to be wrong, but the attack today...I can't take that chance, Taran. I cannot track two traitors within my walls."

Anger simmered beneath her controlled façade.

"I want you to leave, Taran," she told him. "You have what you came for, now go."

"You ask me for protection one moment and send me away the next?" he responded. "Nay, lady, I will leave when I desire."

"You will leave when I tell you!"

"I do not answer to you," he said.

She paused at the door to face him, cold yet angry.

"You will answer to me, Taran."

The blatant challenge warmed the fire in his blood, and he approached. The woman before him did not back down.

"Or you will spend your last days in the darkest, deepest hole I can find," she added, and turned to leave.

Taran snatched the back of her neck and dragged her back. He forced her head back until he could see her eyes, and she could see the unholy light in his. He would *never* return underground!

"You forget in whose hands your life lies," he warned.

Her breathing faltered, but she remained defiant.

"You will not kill me here, Taran, but I will kill you if you do not go," she whispered tightly. "I know you fear nothing but the underground, and I will send you there for all of eternity if you refuse my command!"

Her words struck his core, and for a moment he was blinded by the incensed need to destroy any such threat. Her gaze remained steady, daring him to do as he imagined.

"You're wrong, Rissa," he managed. "If any man is to kill you, that man will be me."

He released her and stepped away. She remained facing the door, shoulders hunched.

"You *must* go, Taran," she whispered. "Sirian will kill you if you do not. You saved me in the forest, and I'm trying to save you now."

"I do not fear him as you do, Rissa," he snapped.

She ripped the door open and stalked out. Taran suppressed a roar of fury and frustration. He had never met a woman who could swiftly stir his blood in so many opposing ways!

It was only when his anger calmed that he realized what the warlord of Tiyan was trying to do. He turned to face the map again.

Memon, King of Landis, would never have cared enough to warn him away.

Rissa waited until she was out of sight of the two guards before breaking into a trot. She grimaced. She had enraged two powerful men this day, and all within a span of an hour! Even worse - she'd lost the bribe she brought for the Oceanan messenger. The bladder of water from the Springs was lost in the fight with Memon's men.

Reaching her room, she pushed the door open and locked it from the inside, sagging against it. This room was smaller than her quarters within the city's walls, but she was glad to have a private place to be alone for a few moments. She was exhausted and drained. Sirian's suggestion of a cool bath and meal was inviting, but she knew she did not have the time. The return journey must be undertaken soon, despite the heat and danger lurking in the forest.

How many men had died in the past month alone defending her? She gazed at the floor, counting. She forced herself to recall each of their faces, each of their names, each of their stricken families. She forced herself to remember why they died, what their deaths bought - -a chance for her to live.

As much despair as she felt for each of the forty-three deaths, there would be nothing but doom, disease, and death for her people if she did not stay alive. She had to save Tiyan from a man like Memon before she went mad and destroyed the demon.

How much time did she have?

Soon, the demon answered.

She patted her cheek, where Sirian's blow had fallen. He grew more controlling as the days progressed, more possessive and erratic. His attention - -traditionally reserved for the army and its battles - -had shifted to her until he monitored everything she did. She knew the rumors that spoke of the Warlord being cursed. The people must never have to choose whom to follow; Tiyan must never be splintered.

Her death, then, would have to come before her madness, before Tiyan was torn in two.

Sirian's betrayal first came to her in a dream created by the demon as a warning before it was strong enough to speak to her. The dreams of his betrayal were followed by the dreams of Tiyan's walls toppling and of her impending death at the hands of a man she knew was Taran.

Taran. He found *The Book of the Damned* and fought with immortal ability and speed. He stirred her blood in a way no mortal man ever had. He was as her dream predicted, the man meant to steal her heart and take her life. She pushed herself away from the door and crossed to a small pitcher of water and basin in the corner.

Maybe the beast awoke to help her fight Sirian before it, too, betrayed her. Taran's masculine, virile scent lingered in her clothes, on her skin. His eyes, so light in color they were more golden than brown, penetrated her thoughts with every look. No man had ever touched her, and she had never wanted one until *him*. Her body ached for him, but to yield to him would be her death.

Just as her dream revealed.

Fate, the demon agreed.

Her hands shook as she drank water.

Desperate to maintain her position as her people's protector and outlive those threats hedging closer, she washed her face and changed clothing to prepare for her return journey. A tap at her door drew her from her black thoughts.

"Yes?"

"My queen."

Hilden's voice was always welcome to her. As the man who raised her while her father ruled Tiyan, he alone was spared the poisonous wrath of the demon.

"Come in, Hilden," she murmured.

He entered with a bow and stood aside, waiting as she barred the door again. Rissa felt his eyes on her and perched on the edge of a trunk. He frowned, concern on his face.

"Will you not reconsider traveling tonight?" he asked.

"I must return. I fear being away from Tiyan for too long," she replied. "I lost Oceanan's bladder of magic Spring waters when we were attacked. Sirian can stall their messenger, but if I don't bring another soon, they'll go the way of Nilian and align with Memon against us."

"Rissa, will you go to Dierdirien? Their king sends word again. They are in the mountains, in a land hard for your enemies to cross."

She smiled, touched.

"You know I cannot leave my Tiyan when it needs me most."

He nodded as if expecting the response and seated himself at a small table near the fire. She watched him, wondering when he had aged so much. She recalled the strong, thick man who watched over her as she grew. She did not remember when the lines at his eyes and forehead became deep creases or when his red-blond hair went grey.

"I'm so afraid, Hilden," she whispered. "And I'm ashamed I did not act before now, when it may be too late to counter Sirian."

"You are an innocent in a battle begun long before your father's passing," he said. "I curse him daily for leaving you in such a position and ne'er warning you."

"You believe Sirian betrayed my father?"

"I know he did."

Rissa said nothing, unable to tell him her father was driven too mad by the demon his last ten years to know his daughter. She suspected Hilden knew, which was why he stepped up during those years and taught her to fight and survive long before Sirian did.

"The man Taran," Hilden began.

Rissa turned away.

"I do not wish to speak of him, Hilden."

"My queen, I feel I must advise you. I know Sirian hates him, and I know you trust no one," he continued. "You know my sister mated with Memon long ago. She was his first mate, and from her womb came my nephew Vara."

"Memon's son can be nothing but twisted, like the father!"

"No, my queen. Vara wishes to return Landis to the way it was ages ago, when there was peace. He wants to free his people of the madman who is his father."

"What of him, Hilden?" she asked, impatient.

"He speaks highly of Taran, says he is an honorable man. You yourself have seen this. He's saved you from Memon's men."

"Maybe he wants me to trust him so he can betray me, too."

Hilden's look was one of understanding and concern. She breathed deeply.

"Forgive me, Hilden. I know you alone are my ally."

"Taran will be. Vara trusts no one, much as you do, but he trusts Taran."

She considered his words. If Hilden pressed an issue, she would listen. What she knew - -that Taran was meant to kill her - -she could never tell him without revealing the demon. How she ached to trust someone wholly!

At her nod, he bowed and left.

CHAPTER FOUR

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Fourth Warlord of Tiyan

I found my advisor with his sword drawn standing over my daughter's body. I don't know what happened next, but when I awoke, I was covered in blood. The demon told me I'd gone mad when I saw what my cousin did.

I always obeyed the First Warlord's decree: I never left the walls, and I've been true to Tiyan and my family. But I took a life, even if it was deserved. My father said I am cursed already. After the demon healed his legs, he threw himself from the Western Cliffs. My cousin and I thought the madness died with him.

The madness took me, and I killed a man who was like a brother to me.

Today, there was only the demon to help me. I threw my cousin's body from the Cliffs into the ocean, and I told my mate a bandit killed our daughter. The demon said I would lose my ability to heal my people, since I broke the First Warlord's decree.

I begged it to forgive me, to continue healing my people. I would give two bladders of blood, if it means my people are well! It agreed, but only if I do something that makes me sick.

My cousin's son will take his place as my advisor. He doesn't know what I have done, what I must do for the demon.

Tiyan, above all else.

He was too angry to watch the procession leave. He joined Lean and Allin as they dined, listening with forced indifference as they told him that Rissa had left alone with her guard at dusk.

She was a fool, he reflected darkly. He pushed flavored lamb around his plate with a hunk of bread. Sirian sat at the head of the long table, graciously accepting the warlord's normal seat while the warlord risked her life to return to her people. Taran did not understand the need for her to return so soon, but the woman was beyond any man's control.

He glanced at the warriors around him, wondering if the people's loyalties were as divided as Allin and Lean seemed to think they were. He could not imagine any siding with a man like Sirian, but he knew men well enough to know there were those like Sirian and Memon who cared only for power and gold.

As he gazed around, he realized the people fought for Tiyan, fought for *her*, not out of duty or fear but out of respect and gratitude. They would fight for her until their deaths, each of them as brave as the members of her guard.

He knew nothing aside from Memon's heavy-fisted ways and those of the surrounding clans, but he felt far more comfortable sitting in a hall full of what should be the enemy than he ever had at Memon's court. Tiyan resembled the life he would choose if he could. He had always wanted there to be more than Memon's reality.

He wondered how to use Tiyan, how to direct it to serve his means. Tiyan's armies fought tenaciously and successfully in defense of the small kingdom; what would they do if channeled into the offensive? How far could he push the boundaries of Tiyan? How long would it take him to decimate Memon and every last member of Landis?

A quick movement caught his attention as a guard darted from the entrance to Sirian. Sirian bent his head to listen. His features paled and he bounded to his feet while the guard still spoke and motioned to two men at his right.

Taran knew instinctively what could cause such a reaction from Sirian, and it involved the foolish woman. He trotted through the halls, finally arriving at an open door leading into a darkened night.

Sirian spoke to a flustered man near one wall. There were unmistakable signs of hastened activity: guards lined up to draw horses from the stables while several more hurried from their posts atop a wall to the area near Sirian. Weapons were retrieved from a small barrel pushed through the loose ranks by a youth. Taran snagged the arm of a guard jogging by.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"The Warlord has been captured!"

Taran released him and turned to stare hard at Sirian, whose calm features hid any emotion he might feel. Was he part of this plot?

Rissa would be better served dead than falling into any other clan's hands. The woman infuriated him, inflamed him, but no woman deserved what awaited her at the hands of kingdoms like Landis!

Taran turned on his heel, retreating into the squat building once more. He quickly dressed in clean clothing in the chamber assigned him. Then he gathered his weapons, intent on leaving before Sirian's men muddled up any tracks left behind by Rissa's captors.

A stench tickled her nose, drawing her from a heavy slumber. The first unpleasant sensation was followed by a second: a throbbing headache. Rissa grimaced. The quiet jingle of metal fetters and distant voices greeted her ears.

She was not bleeding, for which she was grateful, but her body ached as if it had been flung around a stone room for hours.

She forced her bruised, heavy limbs to respond, testing them. None were broken. Her hands were bound by rigid metal fetters connected by a chain to a leather belt around her waist. A roughly sewn piece of fabric was tied around her eyes. She scrunched her head down until her fingertips brushed the rough material across her eyes.

"My queen, wake up!"

The shock of the shake accompanying the shout flung her deadened senses awake. The distant clamor of voices became a nearby roar, and the stench of rot foul made her

gag. She was hauled into a sitting position by two beefy hands that then tore off her blindfold.

"Listen!"

Disoriented, she blinked to clear webbing from her gaze. Two disheveled members of her guard were with her in a dark, blurry cage. The entrance was propped open and guarded by three men. Beyond them was a crude wooden floored arena hedged by rows of shouting people.

"Rissa!"

The man before her gripped her shoulders again and shook her, and the fuzzy faces of the men from her guard came into focus. They were disheveled and bloodied, with the man before her suffering a broken nose. Ledden, the oldest member of her guard, stood by the door. He glanced between her and the enemy's men outside.

"Samin?" she asked, and shook her head to clear it. "What happened?"

He released her and leaned forward to hear her over the bellowing crowd. "Are you well? Are you hurt?" he demanded.

"No, no, I'm fine."

Her gaze fell to the fetters at her wrists and ankles. She did not remember being attacked, let alone imprisoned! She recalled falling asleep atop her horse as she rode down the quiet, darkened path toward home. Was she that fatigued?

Was her madness already starting? Her father had suffered from blackouts. Unsettled at her unusual weakness, she watched Sami's squat form fold with difficulty as he crouched beside her.

"Take this," he ordered, and pushed a dagger into her hand. "They don't know who you are. If you must, end your life before they touch you."

She gazed around, realizing that she and the two members of her guard occupied a cage filled with the bloated corpses of a half dozen other men, what was left of her guard.

Coldness shot through her.

"You don't know what they do to women," Sami continued grimly.

He took a second dagger and jammed it into the lock of her fetters, twisting with a meaty hand. The fetters broke open. The blade of the dagger snapped in two. Sami pulled her hands free and tossed both dagger and bonds, doing the same with the bonds around her ankles.

He looked at her expectantly, as if awaiting encouragement from his leader that all would end well. Her mouth was too dry to respond. The dim light of hope in his eyes faded into grim acceptance. He rose and drew her up with him. He unfastened the belt around her waist and flung it into the darkness.

"You remember what Sirian taught you? How to kill a man?" he asked. "Throat, if not throat, stomach. If not there, his eyes, his groin. Understand?"

She nodded.

"If..." He gazed down at her and placed a dagger against his chest. "If you must take your life, place your dagger as such and fall upon it. It will strike your heart. There will be no pain."

Panic stirred within her at his words. The beast stirred as well. Its coldness stretched outward from her chest, testing her resolve to keep it contained. She grabbed his arm as he turned.

"Sami, I don't understand what's happening!"

"We were caught."

One of the guards at the mouth of the cage strode in with a torch, illuminating the dead bodies surrounding her. She looked down once but snapped her head up, unwilling to lose control. With his sword, the guard motioned for Sami to proceed.

Sami held her gaze with a long look, and she knew he was bidding her farewell. He turned and exited the cage, toward the torch-lit area beyond the wooden rows packed with people on either side of the arena. She followed as far as she dared, until she drew the wary looks of the remaining guards. She hid the dagger in a pocket and watched.

Sami was led into the center of the tiny arena, and the guards moved away. He stretched his neck and upper body and then drew his remaining dagger. The first three arrows streaked across the arena and implanted themselves in his back.

She gasped in dismay. Sami grimaced, as if annoyed rather than in pain, but otherwise ignored the arrows jutting from his back. He lowered himself into a fighting stance. Five hefty men, each well-armed and carrying weapons ranging from swords to maces, surrounded Sami. The crowd began to cheer.

Her heart slowed, the realization she may not live through the night settling into her with cold clarity.

She winced as another bevy of arrows pierced Sami's back. He stumbled forward at the impact but showed no other sign of faltering. She watched as the twisted battle began and progressed, unable to turn away despite her horror. The five barbarians toyed with Sami and inflicted him with wounds meant to disable and bleed him, to prolong the match without killing him. Her eyes were riveted to the scene. Her chest clenched until it was difficult to breathe. She braced herself against the door of the cage. Ribbons of Sami's blood soon slicked the wooden floor of the crude arena. His moves slowed, faltered, and failed.

"My queen." Her remaining guard took her arms and turned her away from the scene.

Her breathing was ragged, tears on her face. She swiped at them and focused on him. It was her remaining guard, Ledden, whose watchful gaze had rarely left the enemy's men outside the door.

"Sami does this for Tiyan. A warrior wants to die in battle for his Warlord and kin. Hear me?"

She sought to steady her breathing. Panic and fear made her hands shake once more. The crowd roared. She knew without looking the death blow had been dealt. Ledden's gaze drifted over her head. He expressed no emotion, simply dropped his eyes to hers once more.

"Do as Sami said," he told her. "These people were mine once long ago, before I sought refuge in Tiyan. Your father showed me mercy and you showed me kindness. I don't believe what they say of the curse - -Tiyan is stronger with you as a Warlord. But I know what these people will do to you. It's better you end it before it begins!"

Rissa drew a deep breath with difficulty and forced her mind to focus. She faced death on a daily basis. She would fight, and she would die by her own hand if it came to it, as bravely as any member of her guard died for her.

Yet, no dream ever hinted that this was her end. She saw her death at the hands of Taran, not in the hands of the barbarians!

We do not die here.

The beast itself told her thus. For once, its words soothed her.

"Tell my mate and child I died with bravery."

Ledden patted her arm and moved past her. She could not bear to look as he took his place in the center of the ring. She squeezed her eyes closed, forcing herself to recall the name and face of the men of her guard. She drew strength from their courage and sacrifice, recognizing they fought for the same reason she did: to protect Tiyan.

Samin, mate of Lela, father of twins Allin and Kellin.

Leonan, widower.

Henryn, mate of Maryn, father of Patin and Ellabe, grandfather of Ton.

Connorn, newly mated to Sierra.

Ledden, mate of Dorsa, father of Kelly.

Panic spun through her again, but she suppressed it with the same determination she suppressed the beast. Even on the verge of her death, she would not let loose the creature within her. It knew only death and pain, while she lived - -and would die! - -for hope and life! In this, she would be different than her father and predecessor. In this, she would *always* remain a better person than the twisted, abusive man who had controlled her so absolutely before she killed him.

With my help, the beast reminded her.

The twisted, abusive man who had fallen prey to the same curse in his blood that she carried in hers.

Maybe it was better she died today, before she became like him!

We do not die here, the demon repeated.

She breathed deeply despite the scent of death. The crowd's sudden roar made her flinch. Whatever happened, she could not, would not, die this day. Her dreams, however mad, were never wrong. Taran would kill her, and Taran was not present.

Resolved, she noticed her hands still shook as a guard grabbed her and pulled her toward the entrance of the cage. She did not fight but focused on the night sky far above. It would be dawn soon. They had not traveled far. Desperation spun through her. Maybe Sirian would send a party to save her. He was too wise to risk losing her before he learned her secrets. He would do anything to protect her until that time, for only armed with that knowledge could he hope to rule.

Her hand closed around the hilt of a dagger as she reached the center of the arena. The wood stage beneath her was slick with dark blood, the scent of which made her nauseous. Rissa forced herself to breathe steadily.

She was unable to identify which clan it was that captured her. The people were as bedraggled as any of the barbaric clans around Tiyan. There were several hundred men and women in the makeshift arena, with the king's party of advisors and servants sitting within the ring against one wall. There was one exit at the far end of the arena opposite the warlord's party marked by torches, with no guards she could see.

She didn't recognize any of the men in the small group. She had met once with her immediate neighbor, the king of Palmis, but this clan that had snatched her plainly did not know who she was, or they would not seek to kill a queen in such a way. Nay, her death at their hands would be worse if they knew her identity!

Her shoulders hunched as she awaited the flurry of arrows that struck Sami. None came. Instead, the five attackers closed in, weapons sheathed. The crowd jeered more loudly at their approach. They leered, and one made an obscene gesture.

Abruptly she understood the warning from Sami and Ledden. She had heard stories whispered of what barbarians did to women, but she never put much faith in the outrageous tales. What kind of men did such to a woman of any clan, even an enemy clan?

She was left for last, not to be killed, though she knew that would be the ultimate outcome. She had been left for the men to brutalize, to tear apart from the inside out! Her mouth went dry and her heart skipped several beats. Adrenaline made her shake harder, and she prepared herself to fight, understanding the warnings of her dead guards.

The first man grabbed her from behind. She tore away, lashing out with the dagger. She missed but succeeded in scaring him back a step. She sensed the others creeping forward and ducked, escaping a second hand. Awareness filled and overwhelmed her senses, blinding her to all but instinct and the sound of her breathing.

Let me fight them!

The words were familiar, the same she'd heard the night she killed her father.

She stopped fighting the demon and felt its power flood through her, taking control. Colors, shapes, and sounds blurred around her as she allowed the demon to command her body. She spent an eternity in her mind, watching four of the men fall dead to the wooden floor at the hands of the demon. The world appeared in slow motion around her, the demon's magic making her move with speed she never imagined possible.

At long last, she saw her chance: the men had withdrawn and the path to the arena's entrance was clear. With effort that almost drove her to her knees, she reined in the demon, alarmed how much harder it was this time than when she'd killed the madman who was her father.

She ran as she had so many times before. She heard the remaining men give chase, sensed the outstretched arms groping for her. She darted and danced away, focused on nothing but the two torches marking her chance at freedom. She didn't see the guard until it was too late.

She smashed into him and fell back. Her senses caught up with her, jarring her out of her mind. The crowd was screaming, the torches blinding. Her breathing was labored, her chest burning and muscles shaking from the demon's abuse of her body. Her eyes flew up to the guard as she sought to orient herself once again.

Taran towered over her.

She froze, horror replacing exhaustion. The attackers reached her as she sat in stunned stillness at Taran's feet. The first blow from her attackers made her head ring and eyes blur. A second knocked the wind from her. She gasped, pain ripping through her as a kick landed in her stomach. She squeezed her eyes closed, bracing herself.

No other blow fell. Angry voices wove in and out of the crowd's jeering and the ringing of her ears. She was hauled off the ground and slung over someone's shoulder. She sought to right her reeling senses, registering Taran's scent.

The beast inside her was subdued, waiting. By the time they crossed the arena, her numbed mind began to accept the possibility of death at his hands. If he killed her

quickly, she would not fight. She had enough strength to control the demon; maybe she could prevent it from escaping to a new host.

We don't want to die, the demon said.

Her eyes watered, and she knew she'd never accept her death without fighting to live, even at his hands! Tormented, exhausted, she concentrated on reining in her emotions.

Taran dumped her before the king's party, and she pushed herself up. The only man seated before her wore chains of gold and carried a sword with a ruby in its hilt. His advisors and mates dressed in well-made clothing edged with silver, denoting their rank among the shouting crowd in rags. She glanced toward the lingering attackers hovering like vultures. Shuddering, she looked toward Taran, the sense of betrayal raw.

The warrior stood above her, his powerful body poised. His rugged features were unshaven, giving him the same barbaric appearance as those around him. She barely recognized the feral look on his face, and despair slid through her.

He was among his own kind. She had forgotten he was a barbarian like the others after all he'd done to save her.

"Memon will be pleased with you," Taran was saying. "There are many more women in Tiyan, enough to appease all your men twice over."

The king he addressed appeared less than convinced. The men in his party were restless, considering. The women were hungry, and she saw them watch Taran with a familiar light in their eyes.

"You choose to honor a member of his guard," Taran added.

She wisely chose not to meet the challenging gaze of a restlessly shifting man among the king's company but focused on Taran's leg. She listened to his words with cold comprehension.

"My men are bored. Show them what they miss, or let them play with her before you take her to your warlord," the warlord stated.

She felt the uneasy truce between the two parties in the ensuing silence, understood their hospitality toward Taran was dangerously tepid. He knew enough of what she was that he would never turn her over to any but his own. He would betray her, and he would kill her, but she suspected even he was not brave enough to cross the king of Landis, whose cruelty was known far and wide. No, he would hand her over to Memon, not these barbarians!

If she ever escaped, she would seal him in the blackest hole she could find!

She forced her face to remain emotionless, her form still enough not to draw attention, like a wounded animal trying not to distract the hungry predators fighting over it.

"If it will keep you out of my mates' beds, keep her," a new voice said.

She raised her head enough to look past Taran's leg. The man speaking wore the signs of wealth: gold chains, silk sashes, and well-made weapons. His gaze was a familiar bright green, his hair curly and black. Her breath caught.

Taran bowed his head in deference to his master.

"This is the first favor my best scout has ever asked of me. I will grant it," Memon responded with a bow of his own. "And so will you, Ingr."

The seated king eyed Taran as Memon approached Rissa. Taran stepped aside, and Rissa tensed further as the man squatted before her. He took her chin and looked

at her square in the face. She recognized the inky blackness swimming in his green eyes and felt her gut twist.

Her father had looked similar in his last days, when the demon within him finally wrenched away control of his body.

How could there be two demons? How had Memon come upon the creature?

"Tonight she's yours, slave. Tomorrow, she's mine," Memon ordered, and rose.

She resisted the urge to scrub his cold touch from her chin.

"Yes, master," Taran responded.

"Finish it with my blessing."

Taran grabbed her wrist and dragged her a short distance away from the party. She stumbled, fury and fear bubbling within her. She refused to look at him when he stopped. The flash of metal drew her attention, and she raised her eyes as he trailed the dagger down his forearm. An angry line of blood bubbled in the blade's wake.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Saving you. I told them you were my mate. They captured you by mistake," he snapped. He gripped her wrist, twisting it to expose the soft flesh of her forearm.

His intention - to complete the mating ceremony - exploded into her thoughts. She snatched his wrist.

"Taran, no!"

He shook her off without meeting her gaze, his hard face cold and calm. She pulled at her captured wrist, and his eyes flashed with anger. He grabbed her roughly and shook her, his fingers digging into her arms.

"I have one chance to save you, Rissa. Do *not* - -"

"You cannot mix my blood!" she whispered frantically, struggling to pull away.

"Listen!" He forced her close, lips brushing her ear and making her shiver. "I know the warlord of Tiyan wants nothing to do with a *slave*, but it will not take them long to learn who you are. You'll be dead if you refuse me. As my mate, you are at least guaranteed to see dawn, and we'll escape together!"

He released her and clenched her wrist once more, pushing back her sleeve. Rissa strained to control her wild desperation. His words spun through her head, but the thought of what would happen if her blood joined with his made her sick.

Do it! the demon roared.

"Taran, if my blood is joined, my people will die! It must remain pure, it must - -" She spoke fast but faltered as he raised the dagger to her forearm. "I swear to you, Taran, I will do anything! Spare me this, and I swear, whatever it is you ask, I will grant you! I swear by my blood!"

He paused, his jaw clenching and his grip on her wrist tight enough to hurt. Her chest heaved, and her eyes stung with gathering tears.

"By your blood," he repeated, meeting her gaze. His golden eyes were more intense than the midday sun. She nodded, throat too tight to speak.

He forced her closer and drew her arm between them, so none but the two of them could see. Rather than cut her, he bound their arms with a long strip of leather as was tradition.

Rissa met his gaze, sucking in a deep breath. He finished and reached forward to wipe the tears from beneath her eyes.

"Master, it is done," he announced as he turned to display their bound forearms.

"Go, then." Memon did not spare him a glance but continued his conversation with the seated king. "My slaves occupy an inn marked with the symbol of a rearing horse. Take a room there."

They were booed and jeered as he led her quickly out of the arena. Relieved, horrified, she focused on subduing the demon, whose angry pacing in her chest made her want to double over in pain.

She'd survived another time, but she couldn't count on fate favoring her much longer, not when madness had begun to take its hold of her. Her eyes went to Taran, and she couldn't help but feel both grateful and surprised.

The slave had honor.

He always believed there to be nothing more frightening than being sealed underground, until he saw the small woman battling for her life. He had never felt such a blinding combination of fury and terror as he did in those few moments before she ran. Her claim of her blood's purity repeated through his thoughts. He doubted it to be true - a queen intent on mating with her equal would say what she needed to in order to convince a slave not to wed her.

And yet, the wild look on her face made him want to believe her.

He all but dragged her through the quiet, stinking roads of Corcoran, seething, oblivious to the wooden huts lining the muddied street on each side of them. She made no sound, did not attempt to resist him, but she would. She always did. The woman was uncontrollable, and this thought infuriated him further. Anyone with sense would not venture out after dark following such an attack!

By my blood.

It was beyond his imagination that she would grant him that which he wanted! He held the ruler of the greatest kingdom at his mercy! The thought should make him frenzied to plot Memon's downfall. He should be roaring in joy. Twenty years, and the answer was bound to his forearm!

There was pleasure in the feel of his warmed blood. His skin was heated, his blood coursing. Taran led her down a street lined with small inns before spotting the one marked as Memon said. He tugged her inside and ducked into one of the dimly lit single-room rooms, closing the door behind him. He drew a dagger and slashed their arms free.

As if sensing the charge around him, she withdrew. Her movement drew his attention, and he caught and held her gaze, the fire within his blood stirring for a different reason.

Rissa was beautiful, even with her eyes rimmed in red. Her hands shook, though her gaze was steady. Her breathing was unsteady, the scent of her honey musk and sweat thick in his nostrils.

"What do you choose for fulfillment of my oath?" she demanded.

"You will grant me anything."

"I swore so."

And Taran gave a predatory smile. He stepped toward her. Rissa held her ground until he neared enough to touch her. Only then did she retreat. He backed her into the

side of the hut, holding her gaze. Her pupils dilated as he neared, her breath quickening.

"What does every man want?" He kept his voice low, lethal, and stopped just short of their bodies touching. The tension was thick, their heat filling the empty space between them. Taran breathed deeply, allowing his senses to fill with the woman gazing up at him.

Rissa bridged the space between them, moving her hands to brace against his chest. Taran captured them and pinned them above her head. She made no move to pull free despite his loose hold. Satisfied, he leaned forward until their faces nearly touched. Her breathing quickened even further, uncertainty in her gaze.

"Power," she murmured.

"Perhaps," he purred, eyes falling to her plump lips.

"You cannot rule, but any other position is yours," she breathed.

"Sirian's position?"

"If you desire." A glint of triumph lit her gaze, and she added with arrogance, "But you can never command *me*."

"I do not need to." He met her gaze again. "You will yield to me. I need command nothing."

"Then it is me you choose."

"Tonight, I make no choice."

She once more closed the distance between them, leaning forward to kiss him.

"Maybe we are fated to become lovers," he whispered.

Fire and need tore through Taran. He sought to control it, not yet trusting the woman in his arms. He responded to her kiss, savoring the sweet taste and softness of her warm lips. It was when her searing body touched his that his control began to slip.

He deepened the kiss, thrilled when she responded by becoming more demanding, more passionate. She responded with none of the reservation she normally displayed, opening to him. He growled and wrapped his arms around her, hefting her onto his hips. She wrapped her legs around him and gasped into his mouth, her own desire matching his.

He struggled for some slip of discipline, but there was something about this woman that drove him mad. He moved to the bed and lowered her onto her back, pressing her soft shape flat with the full length of his body. The scent of her desire ensnared him, dragged him closer to the edge of his control. He moved against her, and she responded, parting her knees and raising her hips in an ancient sign of invitation. Their petting grew more frenzied, more instinctive, and far from the languid, sensuous control he had intended to use with her.

Beating at the door registered distantly in his thoughts. Taran ignored it, his hand traveling down her body.

"Memon commands it!"

The words pierced his haze, and he pulled his head away, breathing hard.

"Taran," she whispered, and touched his face. He shuddered at the need and caress in her voice.

"Memon commands it!"

Taran pushed himself up with a curse, determined to tear the messenger apart for the disturbance. He wrenched open the door.

"Memon commands your presence," a burly man he recognized from Memon's guard told him. "It is of dire importance."

"Can it not wait?"

"Memon commands it."

He frowned and rubbed his face, at once aware that his hands smelled of her. He nodded curtly at the guard and closed the door, not hearing her approach.

"Rissa - -"

Pain smashed through his head. He struggled against the darkness, trying to rally his fury to keep from falling completely unconscious after her blow. He surrendered after a long moment, thrown into a familiar dream.

"Is that it, Father?" he exclaimed, leaning over the railing of the ship.

"Yes, son. The land of the barbarians," his father boomed from across the ship's hull.

"Barbarians!" he breathed with a child's fascination.

He watched the massive white cliffs grow closer, awed by their size. The ship sloshed through dark teal waters toward a crescent-shaped bay with white sands that glistened in the midday light. A dark green forest hedged the bay, hiding the inhabitants from sight.

The ship's captain belted orders to his sun burnt crew, and Taran turned, his dark hair tossed in the sea breeze. His father joined him and handed him his wooden practice sword. He strapped it on eagerly.

"Remember, son, your uncle, our king, wants us to return with a token of the barbarians' agreement. This is a very important day."

"I know, Father. I'm ready."

"We must respect their traditions, no matter how offensive they are."

He nodded, half listening, as he leaned over the side of the ship again. They'd traveled over a fortnight on the king's largest ship, bearing silks, game, and swords to offer as gifts with the barbarians. The finest of his merchant father's wares - -from delicate silver to well-bred horses to marble statues - -were packed in the hold alongside rare fruits and animals. A season before, his father was called in by his brother, the king, to personally travel to the barbarian lands after a tribe of barbarians invited them to trade with them.

"We'll anchor soon. Go to the boats," his father directed.

Taran ran.

The ship anchored near the shore, where barbarians in ill-fitting clothing made of animal skins awaited them. Taran looked down at his own richly spun wool and linen clothing, pitying the men on the beach. One of them wore a sash of red and black, a youth his age hiding behind him.

All the men save a small crew rowed to the beach of sugary sands.

The barbarians spoke a guttural language as ugly as their clothing, which one of his father's men translated. Taran felt someone watching him and peered between two of his father's men to see the youth his age with glowing green eyes.

The youth glared at him for a long moment, then unfolded his arms, curiosity winning over. The youth beckoned to him.

With a quick glance to make sure none of his father's men paid him any heed, Taran stole away to the far side of the beach, trailing the barbarian youth. He stopped, and Taran slowed.

The youth spoke a few commanding words. Taran shrugged, and the boy approached, reaching out to rub his clothing between his hands. The boy murmured in wonder at the soft cloth.

Taran smiled and pulled off his mantle, handing it to the boy. The youth flinched at his movement, then stared at him suspiciously.

Pity for the boy increased as Taran studied the bruises on the youth's arms and face. His eyes were as green as the trees hedging the beach.

He pulled off one of the gem-studded medallions marking him a cousin to the king. He handed it to the youth, who tried hard not to smile in pleasure. The green-eyed barbarian accepted both of the treasures, eyes glowing.

"I'm Taran," he said, pointing to himself.

The youth hesitated, then pointed to himself.

"Vara."

Vara tugged off his own necklace, a simple strip of leather with a circular stone. Taran accepted it and put it on, drawing a proud smile from the youth.

Suddenly, the boy's gaze sharpened, and he pushed past him, stopping after a few steps.

"What is it?" Taran asked, turning.

The men down the beach were shouting. His father's men hurried to prepare their boats to travel while the barbarians reached for their weapons. He watched, startled at the developments.

Vara was still for only a moment before he whirled and grabbed Taran, pulling him toward the forest.

"Wait, Vara!" he objected.

Vara gave a flurry of urgent words in the foreign tongue, succeeding in dragging him to the edge of the forest before Taran yanked free. Alarmed, Taran turned in time to see the man with eyes the color of Vara's strike his father down.

"Father!"

His shout drew the gaze of several of the barbarians, who started toward the forest. A battle broke out on the beach as dozens of barbarians poured from the forest and attacked his people.

Vara grabbed his arm. Stunned, he resisted until he saw the barbarians charging toward them. He darted after Vara, unable to shake the image of his father falling beneath a barbarian's sword.

The youth was smaller and nimble, accustomed to navigating the forest. Taran struggled to keep up, acutely aware of the sounds of men crashing through the forest behind him. They reached a small group of horses, and the boy vaulted atop one, offering his hand.

The horse took off. Taran held onto the boy, numb and terrified, as they rode long and hard, away from the beach, away from his slain father. Tears welled, but he refused to cry, understanding he had one ally in the barbarians' lands.

The city they entered was dirty and rank, the people poorer than any he'd ever seen. Vara slowed their horse, halting on the other side of the city, where wooden dwellings gave way to stone hovels.

Taran dismounted, hands shaking. Vara took his hand and led him into the stables, hiding with him in a small tack room. The youth was scared, which only terrified Taran

more. He broke down and cried quietly for his father and their men, wondering how he could make it across the ocean alone.

Vara shushed them as the sound of several voices drifted into the tack room. Both held their breaths. The door was yanked open, and hands grabbed them both. Vara was flung to the floor of the stables.

"Vara!" Taran called, scared, as the men dragged him outside.

They flung him on the ground. He heard Vara shouting and looked around wildly. The man from the beach who struck down his father strode from the stables, accompanied by another man hauling Vara by one arm. .. Hate and sorrow spun through him as he gazed up at his father's killer.

The barbarian ignored Taran and snatched Vara by the scruff, only to backhand him hard. Taran watched him drop, growing even angrier. The youth scrambled up as if accustomed to the treatment, yelling again at his father.

The barbarian muttered and grabbed Taran. The boy kicked and punched, unable to shake the man's grip. Two guards pushed a large boulder near the rear of the stables to reveal a black hole in the ground. Vara's voice grew pleading.

The barbarian flung Taran into the darkness.

He hit hard, rolling in time to see the sky disappear. Little did he know he wouldn't see it again for fifteen years.

Panicked in the darkness, he bounded to his feet, tripped, and landed hard on his face. He clawed at the ground and began to weep.

"Hello?"

The old voice surprised him.

"Who's there?" he demanded in a half sob.

"A friend. Are you hurt?"

"No." He pushed himself up, unable to see. "Am I dead?" he whispered.

The warm voice chuckled. "No, boy. You're alive, and I'll help you stay that way."

"Can you help me escape?"

"There's nothing but evil outside of here."

"I know. I have to kill it. He killed my father," he replied.

"What's your name?"

"Taran."

"Hello, Taran. Call me Jame."

Fear drove her beyond the limits of her own exhausted body. She knew *he* followed. The thought of what almost happened drove her mad with despair.

If she fell victim to her desire for him, it would be the beginning of the end. Even knowing so, she had been willing to yield to him. Her own death stared at her through golden eyes, and she had cared for nothing but feeling his hot skin against hers, sating the ache of the sacred hollow between her thighs, and cooling the lightning burning in her blood! How weak had she become to lose complete control?

Her madness was closer than she thought!

A sob escaped her, and she fell, oblivious to the bramble scraping her arms and neck. She sat for a moment until her wobbly legs were strong enough before forcing herself to her feet.

The trickle of a familiar stream heightened her dulled senses, and she forced herself onward, through the brush and to the stream. It was here she first met *him*, the betrayer who would eventually kill her.

Unable to shake the feel of his hands branding her, she forced her gaze beyond the stream, where the walls of Tiyan were visible through brush. She made her way through the forest until she reached the trap-riddled meadow.

The kingdom appeared peaceful from a distance. The numbers atop the walls had been doubled, a sign of impending battle. One of the guards shouted when he saw her, and she saw the small door abutting the closed gates open. She made her way deliberately across the field littered with traps and pits until she reached the small entrance and the waiting guards. She sagged against the doorframe. One of the guards draped his cloak around her.

"My queen!" A guard's exclamation drew her fatigued gaze from its place resting on the ground. "Sirian is scouring the forest for you!"

He held out a hand to her, and she accepted it, barely forewarned by the buzzing in her ears before she fainted.

CHAPTER FIVE

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Fifth Warlord of Tiyan

My cousin tells me I've lost my way in the lessons of my forefathers. I never knew these lessons. My father died soon after my birth. There were no lessons to be learned, except what the creature taught me.

It showed me the world outside of Tiyan.

It's dirty and angry and cruel. No wonder so many seek refuge in Tiyan. The neighboring kingdoms rape and kill even their own!

The creature was right. I cannot allow such a world to exist, because it threatens Tiyan. We have the thickest walls, and the creature promised to help me build the strongest armies with the strongest warriors. It promised me I'd have the power to seize all the kingdoms around Tiyan and bring them to heel, to purge them of evil and rescue their people.

It gives me all its power and strength, to use to crush the barbarians and throw them all from the cliffs. Its power is great - it makes me giddy! I want more...

"If she is your mate, the kingdom is rightfully yours," Memon said. "We are near-equals."

The king of Landis offered him a cup of rare wine. Taran accepted, never believing anything could make him ally with the devil he meant to kill. All it took was a pair of teal eyes.

Memon wanted Tiyan on its knees, and the warlord of Tiyan owed him one oath, the gift of his choice. If he could fool Memon into believing him loyal, and the warlord of Tiyan into giving him her armies, he would have his revenge.

"Her people will not recognize such a claim," he said.

Part of him reeled at the turn of events that found him sitting with a man who had never before acknowledged him. They and Memon's son, Vara, were alone in a small room together. Taran knew dozens of ways to kill a man. He could not help but consider several of them as he took in Memon's inky black eyes and relaxed frame.

He forced himself to be patient, to ignore the blood pulsing through his veins at the thought of leaving Memon's lifeless body on the dirt floor and walking away. Killing Memon here would not win him armies or Rissa.

"You would be surprised what support this claim will win you," Memon said. "My first mate was the queen of Landis."

"Then you killed my mother and took the kingdom," Vara muttered with a dark look at his father. The prince shifted in his seat, his large frame tense. The lanky youth had grown into a muscular man with icy green eyes, curly black hair, and chiseled features as cold as his father's. Taran sensed the tension between the two men.

"But he speaks the truth, Taran," Vara added. "It's not normal for a woman to rule. The people know this."

He was not the same untried princeling who had saved him from the catacombs several years before. Taran had heard the quiet rumors about Vara's growing independence and couldn't help but wonder if Vara would help him plot against his own father. Many warriors believed the wound that caused the scar running down the side of Vara's face occurred when he fought off his father's assassin.

Memon's son had always sheltered Taran from Memon's wrath. Taran had never wanted to give the princeling any credit for doing good. Seated before the two of them, he saw how clearly the two were no way like each other.

Memon paid his son no heed, focused completely on Taran.

"You have not seen them fight and die for her. There is something about her that affects them," Taran said. "I do not know if they will accept me. If so, what would you have me do?"

"They will recognize your claim, which is enough. They will grant you safe passage."

"There is no guarantee."

He pondered his bandaged forearm, where he cut himself when he intended to take her as his mate. If her people asked for proof that they mated, they would see his arm but nothing on hers. Would they believe him if he said she healed herself?

"They will. I have a...friend who will make certain they accept you," Memon said, unconcerned. "I have seen the walls and watched her armies fight. I am accustomed to a different enemy, one not nearly as strong. To destroy her, I need to attack from without and within Tiyan. I have found no ally yet who will stand by my armies and attack Tiyan's city directly for fear of some curse. Tiyan's warlords once ruled all these lands. My allies will block their roads and take the fortresses at the borders, among other actions."

"Cowards," Taran muttered.

"We must discover a better way of taking Tiyan, from the inside. We must remove the queen."

Taran looked at Memon hard. Vara shifted again. He rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable with the conversation.

"Kill the queen, so she cannot reappear to claim her title. Your claim on the kingdom would be less challenged by the people than another's claim. You've proven to be among my most trusted men."

"Killing her would be a mistake, Father." Vara spoke again. "I've seen what Taran describes. The people will accept him only if she accepts him."

Memon did not acknowledge his son or his words.

Taran glanced at Vara. He had no intention of killing Rissa despite what she had done to him. He needed a plan, one that would serve his intentions against both of them. Memon did not yet have the men for an onslaught on Tiyan, but he might succeed in swaying their allies if the warlord was dead.

"What would you have me do after killing her?"

"You would rule under my favor. Even our spy does not know the source of magic that makes the Springs flow pure with life. You would discover it while I raise an army able to push northward and southward with Tiyan as the base. Tiyan will become the throne of an empire."

Unless Sirian finds the secret first.

He suspected Sirian was Memon's spy and couldn't help but wonder if Memon understood how deep ambition ran in a man like Sirian. He didn't know how the warlord survived as long as she had. Whatever her secret, she hid it well if her own trusted advisor still sought it!

His gaze lingered on Vara, and he wondered if the rumors of the widening chasm between him and his father were true. He'd never felt a need to trust anyone in Landis. Suddenly, he realized he needed his own ally.

Vara looked away, a frown on his face.

Rissa gazed at the maps before her, half listening to Hilden explaining their situation to her. She could not afford to sleep long after her misadventure in Corcoran so she let herself doze for a short time before seeking out Hilden with questions she should have asked long ago.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked, motioning to the map of the forest before her.

She gazed at it, noting the different colors and shapes that marked the men of Memon and surrounding enemies. Memon's numbers were not what she expected, but they were enough to sever most of the main roads from the interior to the coast and Tiyan. The northern territories had been all but cut off, but the southern routes - where most of her army was ineffectively positioned - were open. Unfortunately, the southern routes ran into the desert, and the armies were too far to return in enough time to stave off any attack Memon planned in the next fortnight.

Sirian would know what to do, only she was unable to trust him. She leaned forward restlessly, seeking to recall what little he had taught her of strategy and why it looked very much like her kingdom was already doomed.

"We need routes into the kingdom open," she said slowly.

"The northern is our most likely avenue, more so because we have an ally in the mountains," Hilden replied.

"It's also covered by the majority of Memon's army."

"We have allies here and here who will support us." He pointed on the map.

She rubbed her bandaged arm thoughtfully. She'd spent the time after her doze bleeding herself. The allies would not assist without the promise of more healing waters, which meant she needed more bladders of blood and another journey into the enemy-riddled forest under Sirian's watch.

"Are we completely outnumbered?"

"Not yet. Memon is keeping his distance. He might be awaiting the other kingdoms to align with him. Even so, the concentration he has here will be troublesome for us."

She nodded as Hilden indicated the armies to the south, where Memon was positioned to sever the route to her armies.

"He's been taking out our men a few at a time for the past season," she said with a frown. "Our numbers have plummeted the past year, and I don't understand the placement of our army. It seems...wrong."

"It *is* wrong. We can defend ourselves at length. If Memon succeeds in raising an army of his allies, he will be able to trap us here on the cliffs, against the ocean here."

"Sirian saw this and did not act," she murmured. "Or did he create this? I don't know what to do, Hilden."

"We can begin storing as much food as possible and bring in the people of the villages to protect them," he suggested. "The army is well trained. We might wipe out the threat to the north and maintain that route, but it would take away from defenses elsewhere. We would need to recall the armies from the south to bolster our numbers."

"Certainly not." Sirian's voice preceded his quick step into the quarters.

Rissa twisted, leery of her second. His eyes took in the map.

"The numbers to the north are misstated," he said. "Memon has at least twice that."

Hilden frowned. "Our scouts - -" he started.

Sirian bristled, staring the warrior down. "I come from that direction!"

Hilden looked away without responding. Sirian's dark gaze turned to her and softened.

"I am happy to see you well again," he said. "Why don't you rest yourself."

"I'm interested in this," she said, and tossed her hand toward the wall.

"But you don't understand it," he insisted. "And I need some time alone with the map to plan."

"Sirian, I want to be more involved," she said firmly.

He moved forward and took her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"I know you went through much at the hands of those barbarians." He settled his hands on her shoulders. "Go and rest, and I'll explain everything to you this eve. Please."

His dark eyes were warm and open. Once again, he was the Sirian she remembered, the man she worshipped as a child as he belted orders to the army. There was a much better time when she did not know he planned to usurp her, and the memory comforted her. She hesitated. Sirian tossed his head to Hilden in dismissal.

"Rissa, go and take care of yourself."

He stepped away from her toward the map.

She watched him, uneasy. The demon was quiet. She wondered why it was no longer triumphant when confronted with her betrayer.

"Thank you, Sirian," she said.

"I'll fetch you for our evening meal," he promised.

She exited into a wide hall, glancing at Hilden as she closed the door behind her.

"My queen," he said, and shifted for her to join him walking. "Our scouts have not found more than what was on the map."

Dread stirred at the pit of her stomach.

"How recent is their information?" she questioned.

"As of last night," he said.

"You do not think it could have changed in the past half a day?"

"Memon has called in no more of his army. We watch them as well. They remain at the boundary of his kingdom and Corcoran."

"Perhaps he shifted men?"

"Not likely. They are evenly spread, though heavier in the north. We can still break through those in the north provided we alert our allies and pull in the southern armies," Hilden explained.

"When is the next report expected?" she questioned after a pause.

"This eve, at dusk. There are four. He has the afternoon reporting already."

"Does it come to you directly?"

"Normally. I then take it to Sirian or Bastion."

"Bring it to me first," she instructed in a low tone. "Tell no one."

"My queen, what do you intend to do?"

"If what I believe is true, I will find a way to deal with Sirian."

He bobbed his head and awaited more information. When she gave none, he proceeded down a separate hall.

Her gaze lingered on him before she strode to her apartments. The demon was silent but shifting within her chest. She shuddered. She needed more blood and more time to buy off her allies. Even so, she didn't know how to pull the armies from the south without drawing Sirian's or Memon's attention.

Barring her door, she then crossed to the spare bedchamber. She opened the single wardrobe, pushing the doors open enough for light to illuminate the contents. She knelt and pushed clothes and trunks out of the way to reveal a dagger wrapped in linen, several bladders, and a barrel the height of her knee. She retrieved the dagger and one of the bladders and settled on the floor of the wardrobe.

Gritting her teeth, she ran the dagger down the scar already present at the inside of her forearm, grunting at the hot pain. Blood oozed and began to drip.

She angled herself toward the light, until she could see the black ribbon of demon essence entwined with the brilliant red stream of her blood. She positioned the bladder on the floor below her wrist and sighed.

It would take hours to fill a single bladder to trade to the northerners for their support. Hilden desired a closer alliance with his people from the kingdom of Dierdirien, but enemy kingdoms divided Tiyan from the mountain kingdom. The surrounding kingdoms were hesitant to challenge a man like Memon and had abandoned Tiyan at the first hint of Memon's ill-will. Whether Dierdirien came to her aid or she resorted to bribing mercenaries and Memon's smaller allies, she needed more blood and time.

Of the half dozen bladders in the secret cupboard, three were filled. The barrel was a third full. Despite her oath to prevent the demon's passage from her body to its next

host, she did not wish her people to suffer the afflictions of so many other kingdoms. When she died, the barrel was her last gift to her people and their new king.

As she watched her life source drizzle into the bladder, she felt a familiar sense of loss. She rested her head against the side of the wardrobe and closed her eyes. The image of Taran's face flashed before her closed eyes, and with it a sense of frustration, fear, anger, and, most damning of all, desire. She opened her eyes and clenched her jaw, intent on forgetting him.

The beast was less forgiving. It awoke more fiercely than before, straining against her resolution. She shifted uncomfortably at the internal turmoil. The demon relented after a brief struggle, but something about its unusually quick surrender bothered her. She released a tense breath as the demon within her subsided and settled.

Something was different. She did not feel ice at her core or the coldness in her veins. It had been many years - before she inherited the demon - since she was free of the cold block within her.

She chewed her lip, pondering the change. Her eyes settled on the black laced blood oozing from her arm into the bladder. She leaned her head against the wardrobe once more. Within moments, she was dozing, accompanied to sleep by dreams of men attacking her in an arena filled with blood.

A soft knock awoke her, and she blinked groggily. Moonlight filtered in through the open window. She leaned forward, squinting to see her arm in the dark. The bladder was full. Fatigued, she carefully sealed it and returned all but the bladder to the hiding spot behind the trunks. She wrapped her arm and hurried to the door.

Hilden paced in the hallway. She beckoned him to enter. His gaze fell and lingered on her wrapped forearm.

"What do you have to tell me?" she asked, closing the door behind him.

He unfolded a piece of parchment.

"Memon has shifted another handful of men to the north, but nothing to equal what we were told," he said, reading with a frown. "The numbers in all other directions are the same as yesterday."

"We can still break through to the north?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Will a messenger make it to our allies?"

"We can try. It would be difficult, but my brother Henri knows -"

"Rissa?" The cool voice surprised them both.

"A moment, please!" she called, then whispered to Hilden, "Wait here."

Rissa hurried back to the second bedchamber and withdrew an empty bladder from a crate. She poured a small amount of blood into it with unsteady hands before returning to her chamber. Hilden watched her as she strode to a pitcher of wine perched on the hearth. She filled the bladder with wine, sealed it, and shook it to mix the contents. She shoved the bladder into his hands.

"Take this. Send a message beseeching Dierdirien for help and promise them three more for their assistance. I do not how you do it, but ensure this reaches them without Sirian's knowledge," she whispered. "Arrange for me to accompany the scouts on the morn. I will speak to the man you wish me to."

"My queen -" Hilden interrupted, hope and doubt in his gaze.

"It is as I command it!" she snapped.

He said nothing, but she sensed his troubled air.

"Wait here and leave when we're gone," she said, starting toward the door.

Sirian appeared refreshed and relaxed, the opposite of how she felt. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, but she needed to confirm what her instincts told her before she acted.

"I thought we might eat in the war chamber," he said with a smile.

"I'm a bit tired," she admitted, closing her door behind her. "I probably won't stay long."

"You are pale today," he stated, studying her features. "I know your experience must have tried you. I won't keep you long."

"Yes," she agreed, and sighed. "Five more men dead. They were so sweet to me before..." Her throat tightened, and she trailed off.

"Do not think of them," he said. "It is their duty, and a price that must be paid."

"I need to tell their families," she murmured. "I should have done so upon arriving."

"I've sent messages," he informed her.

"Messages?" she echoed, astonished. "Have you no compassion, Sirian!"

"We have other matters to attend to," he said, brushing off her concern. "I've reviewed the afternoon scouting reports."

Rissa stared at him, unnerved by his complete lack of empathy. Had she always been so blind to his cruelty?

"What do they say?" she forced herself to say.

"As I expected, Memon has doubled his presence to the north and is hedging in from all other directions. He's moved his army from the border with Corcoran and is sending it directly to our east. I'm afraid..."

How long have you lied to me? she yearned to ask.

His voice faded in and out as she studied him. Sirian's coldness had never struck her as anything but rigid discipline and cool thinking. She felt very alone as she realized his plotting was not the result of a few months of planning but the maneuvers of a calculating, patient man. Perhaps he waited a year into her rule before beginning to plot against her, or perhaps he waited two years. Perhaps, as Hilden believed, he began plotting long before her father's death. The idea sickened her as much as his callous dismissal of the deaths of men who were a part of their Tiyan family. Sirian was determined to tear Tiyan apart, and she did not know enough of war planning to know how to stop him.

Taran will save me, the demon said.

The feeling of failure settled into her bleak thoughts. She forced her hurt deep inside and drew a strengthening breath.

They entered the war chambers. She was irritated to see Sirian's trencher empty. Her dinner lay warm but not hot on the table. The cider he had made nightly for her since she was a child sat next to the meal.

The map had been altered. The numbers to the north were doubled, if not tripled, from earlier, and the armies surrounding Tiyan appeared both much larger and much closer. The strength of her armies to the south was diminished, as if there were too few to trouble with recalling.

The sight made her feel cold. Sirian began to explain the positions thoroughly as she forced herself to nibble on her food. Rissa paid heed to his explanation of tactics, uncertain if they were truthful, but noting his assessments.

Hilden entered at one point and presented the evening scouting report. Rissa watched Sirian read it, nod in satisfaction, and proclaim it was as he had said. Hilden frowned.

She watched Sirian speak for a long time after. He lived for war and battle - it was evident in his brightened gaze and face. She wondered what had swayed him to turn against Tiyan and how far he had already gone. The idea that he might have started his treason when her father still ruled infuriated her.

She reached for the cider. Sirian followed her movement with his gaze and smiled, an unnatural glow in his eyes. He turned to modify the army placement on the map.

She stared into the cup, alerted by his look. She sniffed at the cider but found it smelled no differently than she expected. She swirled it, considering when she had last drunk some of the sweet, tart cider. It had been the night she left the forest fortress, the night she was captured.

The night she fell asleep atop her horse for the first time in her life.

Sirian's voice droned on. Stealthily, she moved the cup over the edge and spilled it on the floor beneath the table. When she looked again into its depths, she saw the clumps of herbs at the bottom.

She set the cup on the table. Her heart thudded in her ears.

"Sirian, I think I'm going to lie down. I'm feeling really tired," she said.

"Of course. I'll handle everything. You rest."

The phrase was hauntingly familiar, for he had used it every night for the past few years.

Without another word, she crossed to the door and fled. How did she assess the extent of betrayal already committed by a man she trusted as an uncle? Her eyes watered while a sense of doom settled in her gut.

Neither Memon nor Sirian would take her kingdom! In the morning, she would act, and Sirian would never again see the light of day!

Taran waited uneasily on the sweeping stairs of the ancient hold in the center of Tiyan. Guards hung back in a loose perimeter around him, but they had thus far not challenged him. The night air was crisp and cool and laden by the scents of the ocean. The sky was clear and stars bright.

Hilden reappeared. His step was quick, his eyes darting around. He paused beside one of the guards. Taran tensed, expecting an order to have him seized and thrown underground. The guard nodded at Hilden's brief address and trotted away.

Hilden waved Taran forward. The bright chamber blinded him. He squinted, senses heightening. He heard Hilden pause a short distance ahead and stopped, sensing only two men in the massive chamber. At Hilden's silence, Taran opened his eyes, irritated by the brightness.

"This is Bastion. He will confirm for Sirian," Hilden said in his gruff voice.

Taran complied and rolled up his sleeve to display his bandaged forearm. He took an immediate dislike to Bastion; the man was short and thick with close-set blue eyes as cold as a winter's morning.

"And you saw her arm bound?" Bastion demanded of Hilden.

"I did," Hilden confirmed, also frowning.

Taran said nothing.

"So be it."

Bastion gave Taran a distasteful look before swiftly moving away. Hilden waited until he was gone before moving closer to Taran.

"The warlord is gone. Sirian as well," he said. "I didn't know until we went to search for them upon your arrival."

"Did they leave together?" Taran asked.

Hilden shook his head. He motioned for Taran to follow and led him up the stairs into Rissa's expansive chambers.

"We can talk here," Hilden said. He sat in one of the chairs, visibly relaxing.

Taran paced as he waited. The room was lit by a hearth and one oil pan, but it smelled completely of *her*. His blood tingled, and he was annoyed by the reminder of her affect on him.

"Where is she?"

"She will return," Hilden answered. "It is Sirian you need to worry about. Bastion alone knew of his departure."

"And Rissa?" he pressed.

"Safe. She went to meet an ally."

"She *what*?"

"No one knows."

"Foolish, foolish woman!" Taran growled.

"I know this ally and arranged for her travel without Sirian's knowledge. She is safe," Hilden said. "And brave."

With neither of Tiyan's estranged leaders present, Taran's mind shifted to how he might exploit the situation. His gaze lingered on Hilden.

"You will announce our mating at dawn to the people of Tiyan," he stated firmly.

"All but Sirian will be pleased," Hilden replied. "Though I heard you were one of Memon's."

"I serve no one," Taran said as he crossed to the window overlooking the city. It was beautiful, far too pure and good for a man like Memon. He thought of Rissa, of how he would wrest control from her, or better, control *of* her and of Tiyan. Hilden might defer to him in her absence, but Taran knew where the loyalty of most of the men lay.

"If you are who I think you are, you will protect her and us well," Hilden added. "I hope it is so."

Taran glanced at him, noticing how haggard the older man suddenly appeared.

"You tire yourself. Go and rest," he said, not unkindly.

"Rissa does not rest. I do not rest. I must await word of the messengers."

"What messengers?"

"Those she sent north to our ally, Dierdirien. If they fail, I will hear before morning."

Taran faced him. Hilden rested his head on the back of the chair, eyes closed.

"She bleeds herself for them," Hilden added. "I know that's why her arm was cut, that she wouldn't mate with you."

"She said her blood was too pure for me." Taran all but spat the words. "I know a warlord will never mate with a slave of Landis."

Hilden studied him then rose and crossed to the bed. He tugged the *Book of the Damned* from beneath a pillow.

"I've watched over her for many years now, and I know Tiyan's strength comes from her blood. I don't understand it, but the secret is in here," he said, presenting the book. "You must read it."

Taran accepted it, once again unsettled by the darkness clinging to the book.

"I hope you can help her," Hilden said.

"And if I have other intentions?" he challenged. "If I am another Memon or Sirian trying to take her kingdom?"

"The queen has killed before the Corcoran attackers."

His words surprised him. The woman professing to shield and heal her people had blood on her hands?

"She'll be back early tomorrow," Hilden said. "I'll make the announcement at dawn. You may stay here."

Taran said nothing. He remained in place for a long moment after Hilden left. Nothing but the crackle and soft light of the hearth disturbed the room, aside from the cold book in his hands. Uneasy, he placed it across the chamber on the table once more.

Her scent drove him mad! He wiped his face restlessly before stripping off his clothing. He placed his weapons on a pillow and tossed himself into the bed, at once sinking into the soft comfort. The entire bed smelled of nothing but her. He sighed and rolled onto his side, clutching a Rissa-scented pillow in his arms. Too restless to sleep, he tossed the pillow across the bed and snatched another, his gaze settling on the book.

He crossed the chamber and flipped the book over carefully. It was old and heavy, its covers made of wood smoothed by years of wear. It smelled of musty parchment pages that were cut in different sizes and poorly bound.

He opened it, once again curious as to why it was written in a language he had never heard spoken in any of the kingdoms. The book was filled with disturbing sketched drawings of men and demons locked in combat.

He studied the pictures and began puzzling through the words, determined to discover why a woman who could not read books chose to keep this one in her chamber.

CHAPTER SIX

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Sixth Warlord of Tiyan

I've never known anything but war, from the time I was old enough to ride a horse, until now, when I rule as the oldest of all Tiyan rulers. I've outlived two advisors and three mates...I purged the kingdoms to the east of their evil ways.

As old and frail as I am, I still wish to fight the barbarians, but my advisor warns me I'll soon follow the path of my mad father. The creature tells me otherwise and cheers me on whenever I take the head of another cursed barbarian. Their women and children fall beneath my sword...the joy we feel...

"Vara."

The muscular man turned at his name, staring hard into the brush where she hid. He appeared to be alone, and she took a deep breath to still her hammering heart before emerging into the small clearing lit by the moon. The resemblance between father and son was enough to make her stop two steps into the clearing. Shadows made his appearance sinister. One of his hands rested on the hilt of his sword.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Rissa hesitated, fear skating through her. Hilden, the only man she trusted, trusted this man as well. She wiped sweaty palms on the men's breeches she wore.

"Speak, boy! If I have not cleaved your head, 'tis because I took an oath to kin to spare you. Do not try my patience!"

Anger crossed through eyes as green as spring buds. She pushed back the hood on her cloak to meet the man's gaze. Vara's jaw clenched hard enough for muscles on either side to tick. He searched her face silently.

"I learned of your desire for your father's kingdom," she started.

Surprise registered across his chiseled features, and he took a step forward.

"We are not allies, though we are both enemies of the same man!" he snapped.

"What a *foolish* creature you are! My father would gift me his kingdom if I brought you to him."

The creature stirred within her, sensing the threat.

"You won't," she replied.

Vara's hand dropped from his sword hilt, and he stared hard at her.

"I am not your ally," he repeated.

"I have no allies," she said in a hollow tone. "But I have something your father wants, and I have something *you* need if you are earnest about saving your people."

"I need nothing from you I cannot take when my father defeats your kingdom," he assured her. Vara turned to leave.

"Your father's madness is near its end," she whispered. "Have you never wondered why your lands are barren and your people plagued? Do you wonder if the madness will take *you*?"

He paused.

"Hilden told you of my father's madness?"

"I saw it in his eyes. It's the same madness that runs in my blood."

Vara turned. Rissa removed a dirk and slit open her palm, displaying it to him. He hesitated before stepping toward her to see the black laced blood dripping to the earth.

"My father's blood runs black," he said.

"And yours?"

He shook his head.

"The creature in your father will need to take a new host soon," she said. "You must avoid mixing your blood with his and kill any whose does, or the creature will continue to destroy your people."

She wrapped her hand and lowered it. She withdrew a bladder and handed it to him. He made no move to take it.

"Tis not water but blood. My blood. It is what keeps Tiyan's lands bountiful and my people from disease. If you doubt me and my intent, you cannot doubt what mere drops of my blood will do to protect your people."

"Why do you think I will help you?"

Rissa met his gaze with a wan smile. He took the bladder with a frown.

"My fate is sealed," she replied. "I do not ask your help for me, but for the people of Tiyan and Landis. If your father falls completely to the madness, your people will suffer more than they do now. I was told you are a man with a heart meant to lead his people away from their pain."

"Perhaps we are both fools," he countered.

"Perhaps," she allowed. "I would ask my fellow fool for a boon."

His jaw ticked again, and she held her breath, waiting. His face remained emotionless, but she sensed the struggle within his breast. At last his eyes fell to the bladder in his hands.

"If this does as you say, I will grant you your boon. If it does not, I will lead the attack into your kingdom," he warned.

She gave a curt nod. "I will ask my boon when next we meet," she responded. "I must go."

She turned away. He caught her arm.

"I will take you the safe route. Hilden asked this of me," he said quietly.

She returned safely for the first time in a fortnight. When she trekked through the lit halls of her home it was well past midnight - -even Sirian would be sleeping. Hilden had greeted her at the walls and escorted her to the center of the city lest she be challenged by patrolling guards. He left her at the entrance to the city's hold, and she continued to her chambers unimpeded.

She wiped her face as she walked and tugged off the hood she wore to cover her hair. She wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a good night's rest before facing Sirian the next morning. She sighed, too tired to consider her next step. She had not the training for tactics or strategies. Sirian, however, could not be permitted to continue his treasonous actions.

The beast within had been restless the past two days, prowling the thawing area of her chest. She rubbed the area beneath her collarbone with a frown, unable to understand the demon's movement. It had stirred before, but not with the warm tingle melting its icy cage. This time, it wouldn't go back into hibernation.

She pushed open the door to her chambers. The thought of a hot bath made her muscles quake with anticipation. The fire provided the only light in the large, airy chamber, its glow and shadows flickering across the room. The scent of jasmine floated from the bathing chamber. She reached its entrance before she heard the low voice.

"You take too many risks."

She froze.

"Leave your city unprotected?"

She turned. Taran's large frame blocked her path to the door.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Taran made no move toward her. She could not see his face in the shadows but felt his anger.

"Where's your master?" she prodded at his silence.

"I have no master," he said in a soft voice.

"What do you want?" she asked.

She shifted until there was a table between them, feeling very much like a cornered rabbit. Her heart had quickened for two reasons, one of which she did not want to admit.

"You have no right to be here!" she whispered. "You've betrayed me once al - -"

"I saved your life," he snapped in a whip-like voice that made her jerk. "And if I remember correctly, you swore an oath to me."

"I swear, Taran, if your presence here hurts my people, I will do what I must to rid them of you," she promised.

"Your people believe us to be mated. I showed them this."

He raised his arm

She blinked and stepped away as he began to circle the table. His face was still hidden in shadows, but there was little mistaking the tension in his frame.

"Hilden and Bastion announced it this morning while you and Sirian were absent," he told her.

"My blood cannot...they will..."

The beast pressed against its boundaries, and one hand fluttered to her chest.

"In addition to an oath, I possess one of your secrets. It's your blood that keeps Tiyan strong."

She glared at him.

"What is that worth to you, Rissa?"

Fury flooded her at the taunt. She slapped him hard and shoved him back.

"It's worth your life in a black hole!" she snarled. "I would rather die than see you hand all I love to your sick master!"

"No," he warned as she raised her hand again.

Taran snatched her wrists and trapped her against him, forcing her arms crossed behind her. She strained, mad with anger and fear. His body was hot and solid against hers. She felt her blood quicken and her skin flush with awareness and heat. A strained silence stretched between them.

"One of us will die, Taran," she said in a hushed tone. "Tiyan will not survive otherwise."

His breathing was steady, his grip on her tight.

"Tiyan will survive," he said just as quietly. "I will claim Tiyan."

"You cannot be a true warlord of Tiyan," she said and strained again. "I cannot grant you that."

"Then you will grant me my boon when I choose it," he said in a hard tone. "But I will claim Tiyan."

Yes, Taran would claim Tiyan, for Taran would kill her to get it. The demon struggled, and she felt her body begin to give.

"What is it worth to you?" she challenged in a thin voice. "Is it worth destroying Tiyan to win?"

"I have no intentions of doing so."

"You will, Taran. It is the only way Tiyan can be taken. You will make the walls fall and the Springs dry if you take Tiyan from me!" she swore.

"And if I tell Sirian it's your blood that keeps Tiyan strong? Is this not what he's been trying to find out?" he asked, squeezing her against him.

"You and Sirian will share a similar fate soon," she responded. "I care not what you tell him."

"And Memon?"

"I know you've already betrayed me, Taran. I don't care to whom you've betrayed me. You will never have Tiyan."

"Foolish woman!" he snapped, and pushed her away. "If Tiyan falls, it will fall because of your foolish will!"

"It will be greed that destroys Tiyan. Sirian's greed, Memon's greed, *your* greed! I will fight to stop every one of you. You are no better than they are, Taran!"

Her strength was quickly ebbing, her madness near.

"What if I could save your people?"

"Why? To live a worse fate under Memon's rule?"

"Under *my* rule!" Taran countered. "I would destroy Memon, something *you* cannot do for them!"

His reminder of her failure left a bitter taste to her mouth.

"Rissa - -"

"What would you do, swear to me to protect them and swear to Memon to exploit them?" She flung the words at him. "Or have you already sworn an oath to Memon?"

"I swear to no man."

"So he sent you here to assume a position my people would respect while sweeping the way clear for Memon to enter and destroy all?" she continued.

He was silent, and she considered his closed features.

"He sent you here to kill me and assume *my* position."

"Yes," Taran replied. "Only I must know the source of your power first."

You are no better than Sirian." She spat the words. "You are far worse! It doesn't matter. As I said, you will never take Tiyan from me!"

"I choose you."

"To fulfill my oath?" she questioned tersely.

"Yes. You."

She was quiet, thinking quickly.

"You cannot refuse," he reminded her. "You swore on your blood."

"I don't understand. Me as your personal slave?" she hedged.

"Body, soul, spirit, everything. You."

Her heart quickened once again.

"I have no choice but to agree."

"We are agreed?"

"We are agreed that I am the fulfillment of the oath," she confirmed.

"Very well."

She released her breath. Another long moment of silence draped over them. Rissa started toward the bathing chamber once again, rattled and exhausted.

"I did not give you permission to leave," Taran said.

"Sirian did teach me how to bargain, and you negotiated poorly, Taran!" she said, ignoring him. "You chose what you wanted but not when you wanted it. I will honor my end of the bargain at my convenience, not yours!"

She slammed the door to the bathing chamber, flinching at the sounds of a loud curse and the clatter of a table smashing into the stone wall. She locked the door and stepped back, waiting for him to barge into the bathing chamber. He did not, and she sagged, fatigued.

I choose you.

It was too late to undo what he had done. He had not meant to speak the words. He had intended to demand her armies, her loyalty, her oath of non-interference in his plans. Instead he had...nothing.

The moment he made the decision to demand *her* as payment, all had become overwhelmingly clear, as if he had chosen at last to take control of a dream that had imprisoned him for so long.

Taran opened his eyes beneath the eye-band, the heat of a hot morning sun on his face. He had not slept since storming out of her room. His anger burned too hot for him to face her, too hot for him to do anything but drive his wired body into the ground with activity.

As dawn had crested, he felt wearied yet energized. The sensations made him more restless. By the first touch of sunlight, he was at the sparring grounds awaiting anyone to show for practice. Even several hours into the morning, he could not shake the fire speeding his blood.

As he sucked in deep breaths, his senses went mad when they detected her approach. Her scent permeated his very skin to agitate his already heated blood. He remained facing the ocean, resolved to deal with her on his terms.

He sensed something else about her that made his thoughts heavy. Fear. Not the kind of fear one experienced when falling from a horse, but a soul-deep fear that wrapped around her core.

She stopped a safe distance away. His frame tensed once again, and he breathed in her scent, savoring the way its musky sweetness filled his lungs.

"Taran."

Her voice, so soft it skimmed his skin, threatened to ensnare him. Regaining control of himself, Taran turned to face her without removing his eye-band. She had arrived with eight uneasy, restless men. When she spoke, her voice was cold.

"These men will escort you to your chambers. I ask you not to fight them. I will grant them permission to kill you if needed."

The restless men with her were plainly unsettled by the situation.

"Do you understand me?"

He approached, stopping when he sensed the guards bunching closer.

"When I originally entered Tiyan, we bargained the terms of my stay. If I recall, I swore an oath to you and you one to me," he responded in a low voice.

"And I asked you to leave when I wished it," she answered evenly. "You have a choice: this or the underground."

"There is not a man here who will keep a man out of his mate's chambers," he growled for her ears only.

"There is not a man here who is not loyal to me," she responded coldly. "I give you no other choice."

"You forget, Rissa. I have one more boon to claim from you," he whispered. "You may buy my silence about your blood secret this morn or..."

Her breathing quickened. Interested in the strong reaction, Taran pushed his eye-band up to see her.

The warlord was pale, her eyes faded and lined with dark circles. She looked close to being ill but met his gaze squarely. Despite his anger, he felt the urge to touch her, to cradle her in his arms until her distress subsided. She did not look angry this morning, only worn and like a man sentenced to death.

He clenched his fists, reminding himself that the seemingly vulnerable woman had handled him well enough the previous night despite his upper hand.

"It's your secret, Rissa."

"Stay in the chambers. We'll talk later." Her voice was barely audible. She turned to address the guards.

"Take him away."

He lowered his eye-band and moved around her. The guards hung in a loose perimeter around him, and he felt their tension ease as they walked. He wanted to condemn the unreasonable woman, but it was difficult when he thought of her pale features. Something had happened to affect her between their discussion the previous night and this morning. He had heard nothing of or from Sirian, and the guards on the walls revealed nothing of any threat.

He retreated obediently to Rissa's quarters and crossed to close the opened windows. When the invasive sun was shuttered, he tossed the eye-band on the table. The quarters smelled of jasmine, Rissa, and spiced ale. His gaze settled on his morning meal of bread, cheese, and cider.

He ate and sipped the cider, its warmth making his muscles relax. Within moments after finishing the drink, he grew too drowsy to stay awake and retreated to the bed.

She smells like home, he mused darkly. His arms circled the pillow smelling most like her, and he melted into the bed, swiftly falling into slumber.

A pounding at the door made him snap awake. He leapt to his feet before he was fully aware of his surroundings. He ripped open the door, blinded by the torch light in the halls. Hilden stood before him, sweating and breathing hard. His face was grim, his frame tense. Men darted through the hall in a flurry of activity that alarmed him.

He closed the door after Hilden entered, surprised to realize he had slept through the day and well into the night. His gaze returned to the empty mug of cider and his uncontrollable urge to sleep. Anger crept through him.

He crossed to the windows and opened them, assessing it to be only a few hours before dawn. He silently cursed the warlord of Tiyan for drugging him and couldn't help but feel surprised she hadn't straight out killed him.

Even before hearing Hilden's words of what danger was upon them, he began to dress himself in clean clothes.

"Speak, Hilden," he ordered.

"He's started his attack on the southern wall."

"The walls have held?"

"Thus far. We've tripled the guards atop them and gathered the people into the center of the city."

"Who is it?"

"You don't know?" Hilden snapped.

Taran glanced toward the darkened figure near the door.

"Who is it, Hilden?"

"Not who we expected. Our ally to the north."

Taran straightened with a frown.

"Dierdirien and Oceanan?"

"Oceanan," Hilden said. "And Memon."

Taran said nothing, angered that Memon was capable of as many secrets as Rissa.

"I believe there to be no immediate danger to our people," Hilden continued. "The walls will hold, and as Rissa knows, Memon's forces are not yet large enough to threaten us. With Oceanan, they may have a chance."

"What are you not telling me?" he asked as he emplaced his weapons around his body.

"There is a war outside the walls and one inside," Hilden said grimly.

"Rissa and Sirian," he assessed. "How bad is it?"

"Bad."

At the direct admission, Taran paused in his movement. Rissa had not come to him, had not sent for him. In fact, she'd made sure he was out of the way when she acted against Sirian. Her foolish distrust made his blood boil.

"Rissa has Sirian imprisoned, but his loyal followers have overtaken the northern entrance and threaten to allow our enemies in if he is not released," Hilden said. "They number a third of the men within the walls. Most of the army has been in the south and are beyond our ability to recall in time."

Taran saw Sirian's shrewd manipulations in the convenient location of the army.

"Rissa refuses to free him."

"Yes."

"Why did you come to me, Hilden?" he asked abruptly.

"Rissa needs help."

"I am the last man she would accept help from, and for good reason."

"I have watched over her since she was a child," Hilden responded. "I know more of her soul than her father. I realized too late I should have prepared her more for this day, when she would need the knowledge Sirian has denied her all these years. Even so, I didn't. She is as weak at battle planning as Sirian is strong."

"Your guilt has no affect on me, Hilden," Taran said.

"You are not immune to her, Taran. You have done more to protect her than any man here. She told me what you did in Corcoran. She believes you to be interested only in assuming her position. But as a man, I understand it would have been easier for you

to assume her position if her body and mind were broken by the men you saved her from."

Taran flinched at the vision the words created.

"She would not tell me what you took from her in fulfilling her oath to you, but you did not choose anything a man like Sirian would have chosen. You did not choose her title, her armies, her gold, her influence, her banishment, her death."

"But I would have," Taran warned. "I'm not here to protect her, Hilden. I want what Sirian wants, what every warlord outside of this kingdom wants but cannot have. The difference between me and them is that I'm willing to take Tiyan without its magic. Do *not* convince yourself or any other that I am here as her - -or Tiyan's - -guardian!"

"You cannot let another destroy Tiyan if you want any part of it to survive for your purposes." Hilden's voice cooled. "There will be nothing for you to take if you do not help Rissa."

"Why do you think I know anything about battle planning?"

"You know Memon's methods of battle planning and how to counter them."

It was not as he had planned. Taran never expected Rissa to act against Sirian, or Tiyan to be divided by a civil war. Tiyan, and the struggle between its leaders, was not his concern. He should not care if the two destroyed each other. He should view their actions as clearing the way for him. Taran gripped and un-gripped the dagger in his hand, unable to convince himself.

I choose you.

Hilden was right about many things, among them the walls of Tiyan needed to remain if Taran hoped to claim the kingdom one day. As for Rissa...

"I will fight on the walls like every other man," he said. "This is all I offer."

Hilden jerked open the door and strode into the hallway. Taran followed at a distance. The main chamber had been transformed into a centralized location for rallying warriors, supplies, and war planning. His eyes found her as he descended the marble stairs.

She was paler than she had been in the morning. She leaned over the single table at one end of the main chamber, several larger warriors around her. Kellin lifted his head in greeting before returning to the table. Hilden moved through the crowd directly to the table and took up a protective position behind Rissa, watching without interfering.

Taran's gaze lingered on her as he reached the foot of the stairwell. He *felt* her frustration, sorrow, and fear. The sensations unsettled him, but he forced himself to turn away. Hilden was right - -Rissa needed help. Taran resisted the draw with effort and stepped into the buzzing night.

In the distance, over the walls, he saw the flaming arrows streaking in both directions. No attack would reach the city's hold, but the sight confirmed Memon was not baiting the kingdom. He would not waste men and arrows if his intent were not serious.

Itching for the feel of battle, Taran broke into a jog toward the battle. He reached the guard-packed wall and ducked beside a building as a flurry of arrows broke loose into the kingdom. At a pause, he darted to a small enclave hugging the walls, where a dozen warriors were gathered. He pressed as far into the ranks as he could and caught the last order issued by the wall commander before the group separated.

"What's happened?" he asked, stopping one of the warriors.

"Memon's men are attempting to come over the southern wall," was the grim response.

"Come, brother!"

At the familiar voice, Taran released him and turned. Allin and a red-faced Lean waved him over.

"We thought you'd gone!" Allin called almost cheerfully. "We go to the southern wall!"

They joined a larger group shifting from the eastern to the southern wall. The men ahead of him lurched ahead as the first few of Memon's men leapt atop the walls. Battle lust surged into his blood, and Taran darted forward with them. He took the narrow stairs two at a time and reached the top, hacking down a man with his face painted in Memon's colors of black and red.

Memon had deceived him into believing he didn't have the men to attack! The thought of taking down Memon's men thrilled him more than it should. Taran threw himself into the fight eagerly and was pleased when Allin joined him at his side. He released his pent-up rage and frustration and gave a bellowing war cry, trying hard to forget the warlord of Tiyan.

"How did you sway Oceanan?" she demanded, all too aware of the battle waging on the southern wall.

Sirian paced a small underground cell beside the one Taran had occupied his first night in the city. Her hand fell from the lever that opened the heavy iron door.

"Let me out, Rissa. This is foolish!"

"How did you sway Oceanan?" she asked again.

"You know you can't win a battle without me. I alone know the locations of all our armies. I alone know how to recall them. Let me out, Rissa."

She grated her teeth, sensing the truth in his words. None of her men, not even Hilden, knew the locations of all their warriors. There was no trail indicating the extent of Sirian's betrayal, no one to reveal his plans but him and the small army holed up near the northern wall.

"I intend to keep you in your cage," she said slowly, "and deny you food and water. I imagine you would not last the week."

"Tiyan will fall in a week," he responded. "You see that now. Your southern wall is under siege by Oceanan and Memon. At some point in two days' time, I have given the order to those loyal to me to open the southeastern gate to your enemies, thus slamming you from two sides. There's much more, Rissa."

She turned away. Tears of fury threatened to spill, but she could not, *would* not let Sirian see her weakness! A lengthy silence followed, and she bitterly considered how well he had betrayed her. Disarrayed her armies? Severed the routes into and out of the kingdom? Bartered an alliance with one enemy and one previous ally?

He was right - -she was a fool! How could she have been so oblivious to it all? How was the simple assurance that he would not kill her assurance enough that he would not destroy everything else to get to her?

"Let me out, and I'll fix everything," Sirian said softly. "No one else will suffer. No one else will die. It's that simple, Rissa."

The words were reasonable to her tired mind. How many times had she docilely allowed him to do just that?

"Don't let your pride interfere with your ability to save your people, Rissa. The only one who will die will be you. A small sacrifice for saving your people."

His words soothed her, and she wanted badly to believe him!

He lies.

The demon's intense warning jarred her.

Before she fell again for Sirian's lies, she pushed the lever to seal his cell and walked away, rage and confusion making her head spin. She breathed deeply of the night air, embarrassed to feel the tears on her face. Sirian had always known what to do, had always guided her decisions. All the while, he plotted to destroy all she loved.

She leaned against a building, struggling for control of herself. She had not slept in at least two days and had been bleeding herself when she had time. Her fatigued body ached while her tired mind struggled to keep her thoughts clear of emotion.

The eastern gate would open in two days, and Tiyan would fall. Her gaze went to the sky. Dawn had not yet begun to spread, but it would not be long. Driven by the urgency to fight in any way she could, she pushed herself away from the wall and walked in search of Hilden.

She needed time to counter Sirian's well-planned treachery.

She wiped her face as she went, and she dwelled angrily on the second traitor within her walls, Taran. Taran, whose golden eyes made her blood heat and whose touch brought a warm tingle of anticipation to her body...it was ironic that the two men she loved in her life would betray her.

She had always loved Sirian as an uncle, a man who helped raise her. He was the first man to stand behind her ten years earlier when the title of Tiyan's warlord fell to her, when several elders in the kingdom objected to the title falling to a woman. He had stood behind her every decision since and enforced them all. He was the first to oppose the rules of Tiyan dictating that women would not train to fight. He taught her himself.

Yes, she admitted sadly, she had always trusted and loved Sirian.

But Taran...was it possible to love a man she did not know, a man who would kill her?

"My queen?" Hilden's gruff voice broke into her thoughts as he trotted out of the hold into the street.

"Hilden, we must determine how to take the northern gate immediately," she said.

"Sirian has given - -"

"Whoa, child." He gripped her upper arms, his concerned gaze taking in her face.

"Rissa, you need to rest."

"I can't," she replied. "Not yet. Sirian - -"

To her dismay, the traitor's name came out a half sob. Hilden took her arm quickly and led her a short distance away into a darkened alley. Her defenses crumbled, and she began to cry.

"My poor girl," Hilden murmured.

Rissa sobbed into her hands, pain, fear, exhaustion, and frustration bubbling uncontrollably. Hilden waited, distraught. She did not cry long, only until she released enough of her emotions to control the rest.

"This is madness, Rissa," Hilden said.

"I don't know what to do, Hilden," she admitted in a tight voice.

"You're doing the right thing," he assured her. "I know you hurt."

"Yes," she whispered. "In so many ways. Sirian..." Her voice trailed off.

"Taran is here," Hilden stated.

"He is Memon's."

"I think he is not."

"He is a traitor, Hilden," she said firmly.

"He's on the wall fighting Memon's men."

She wiped her face once more. "I'm scared, Hilden," she said, and sighed. "We must repair the damage to the southern gate and make sure the eastern gate doesn't fall into the hands of Sirian's followers. For all I know, he was lying and will take the northern gate!"

"We can pull men off the northern walls. The eastern wall is buffered by the meadow. We'll see them coming before they arrive, but the forest hides the armies south and north of the city too well."

"Do we have enough men to hold the southern wall?" she asked.

"I don't know, Rissa."

She felt panic bubble and tears sting her eyes once again. She forced her breathing to deepen.

"I believe that to be a no," she said. "What do we do, Hilden?"

They were both pensive.

"What would Sirian do?" she muttered. "Find a way to undermine the opponent." She rubbed her face. On a night like this, she could think of little else she wanted but a cup of Sirian's cider and a hot bath followed by a good night of sleep.

"Taran can defeat him." Hilden's words were soft, hesitant.

She said nothing.

"Forgive me, my queen, but I lack the wisdom you seek. If you go to him, maybe - -"

"He's made his intentions here clear to me." She cut him off with effort.

Her own thoughts had strayed to the man who spent enough time in Memon's armies to know the madman's strategies. If ever there was a born leader, it was the man meant to replace her.

"Forgive me. You love your people more than any other here. You will do what you must. Please, my queen, you look unwell. Why don't you rest?"

"I want to see the southern wall," she said.

"It's too dangerous."

"With Sirian gone, I must be the leader to the armies," she said, straightening. "And I'm going to the southern wall. I want to see for myself what is happening in my kingdom."

"Please reconsider - -"

"No, Hilden. I'll ride over on horseback to enable a quick escape if needed," she insisted. "Please, I need to do this. I feel as though my unwillingness to confront Sirian has hurt all of Tiyan."

"Take two guards with you," he relented at last.

"I will," she promised. "Thank you, Hilden."

The burly man grunted in response. She breathed deeply and trailed him through the alley to the main street.

Their ways parted at the hold. Accompanied by two guards, she mounted her favorite bay horse and pounded through familiar roads and intersections to the southern wall. , The chill of the ocean crept into its walls.

She halted her horse three roads from the walls, gazing at the swarm of men. A cold chill of fear swept through her. Torches lit the area, but it was impossible to tell her men from Memon's horde. The sounds and scents of battle were thick in the air, from clanging of metal to cries of the injured to the smell of heated bodies. Her eyes sought the wall commander without finding him.

"Go to Hilden. Tell him the southern wall needs more men!" she ordered the guard to her left before shouting at the man on her right, "Find the wall's warlord!"

"Hilden said not - -"

"Go!"

He hesitated a moment longer before urging his horse forward at a quick canter. She nudged her horse, taking in the scene with growing anger and fear. Two roads from the wall, she saw where the wounded and dead were being kept. Her eyes skimmed over both, and she hardened herself to the cries of the hurt as she continued forward. She would come again when the battle settled to heal her people.

With piercing war cries, two forms broke from the horde before her. Swords flashing, they sprinted towards her and the center of the city only to be brought down by a flurry of arrows a dozen feet before her.

Rissa drew her sword but guided her horse forward, eyes searching the mass of struggling bodies for the warlord. Battles raged atop the walls, on the narrow stairways, at the base of the walls. If not for Sirian's treachery, if not for her complete ignorance...

The second guard on horseback appeared from a street to her right. He waved her forward, and she turned her horse, trotting quickly to him.

"He's here," he said, pointing. "He sends me with a message for Hilden!"

"By all means, go!" she urged.

His horse pounded away. She moved forward once again down an alley leading directly to the open area before the wall. The majority of the fighting covered two streets to her right. The line of warriors appeared to be holding. The wall warlord had set up a small table in the mouth of an alley between two buildings and was surrounded by several men. Messengers darted between his group and the warriors at the wall.

She dismounted and led her horse toward the small group, edgy and leery of the battle going on around her. Arrows rained over her, one striking her horse. It reared, tearing the reins from her hands as it threw her. She hopped to her feet and started to chase but scrambled out of the way.

A hand clamped around her arm and dragged her back into the alley. Taran shot her an angry look and pushed her past him, pinning her still against the wall with one arm. He stayed near the mouth of the alley, pressed against the wall but dark eyes scouring the area around. At a second flurry of arrows, he withdrew from the mouth. She remained where she was, his simple touch enough to revive her fatigued body.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

She said nothing.

Arrows penetrated the darkness of the alley. Taran drew her closer, pressing her body between his and the alley. His shoulders hunched protectively. His large, warm hands planted on her hips.

She shivered at the erotic touch of their bodies. His was solid, his dark masculine scent and strength wrapping around her. She could not remember anything as comforting as his protective strength and heat. She wanted to melt against him, to let him help her shoulder the weight on her shoulders.

Taran was a man as a man should be: capable of both commanding men at battle and rescuing a woman he had no reason to save. For a long moment she savored the feel of him against her and wondered what it would be like to be this man's lover instead of his enemy. In a different life, a different time...

She sighed at the futile thoughts. If only he were not a spy of Memon's! If only he did not intend to steal Tiyan from her! If only he were not meant to kill her!

But even with those bleak thoughts swirling in her head, she felt herself slide under his spell once again. She yearned for *this* man's touch, though she barely knew it!

He touched her cheek with a roughened palm. His hand smelled of weapons, leather, and sweat.

"You're a fool, Rissa," he said again but without heat. "What are you doing out here?" His features were shrouded in darkness.

"I want to see what I could have prevented," she whispered, embarrassed at the raw note in her voice.

"You haven't slept."

"I will rest when my people are safe."

"You have a plan."

"That doesn't concern you."

"Stubborn woman," he muttered.

"Memon doesn't mind you killing his men?" she challenged, seeking to keep from falling entirely beneath his spell.

"I told you, I serve no man," Taran responded. "Much like you."

"I serve a greater purpose. You must as well," she countered.

"I serve my own purpose."

"How do I fall into it?"

He was silent.

"You must have a plan, or you would not have demanded me in fulfillment of my oath," she reasoned.

His hand dropped from her face.

"That doesn't concern you." He echoed her words.

"You don't have a plan," she mused.

"You're mine, like any of my possessions. I don't need a plan," he said.

"A possession," she repeated, bristling.

By his uneven tone, he was as much at a loss of his choice as she was. He gripped her upper arms and pressed her to the wall, bending until his golden eyes were at her level. His face was hard, his rugged features striking.

"You have never understood the danger in challenging me," he stated. "You drive me mad, Rissa, and I honestly don't know if I'll leave you or bed you when this is over."

His words made her blood quicken. "You'll kill me, Taran," she whispered. "You'll have no choice. And when I die, Tiyan will be yours."

"I've already made my choice," he said with difficulty. "I chose you over Tiyan."

"It doesn't matter. You've set in motion a course which cannot be altered."

"What are you talking about?"

She shook her head, her throat tight. When she refused to meet his gaze or speak, Taran drew her again to his body and wrapped his arms around her.

She yielded to the warm, strong hug, her frame molding against his. Taran said nothing, simply tightened his grip around her. He tenderly pressed his lips to her temple. She closed her eyes, savoring the sensations, his scent and heated touch imprinted upon her mind. She breathed deeply of his spicy, virile smell, comforted by it.

Yes, she could understand why she would walk gladly into death's arms. To surrender even one night to this man, one night of his tender touch, heated kisses, and hard body...

On her father's death, she swore to die without cursing another with the demon. She was careful with her blood, but she had not counted on the demon's next host appearing so soon. She would refuse to gift him the demon; however, she could not help but despair at the idea that she was not yet ready to die herself.

Torn, she agonized over how much longer she would live before she, too, fell into madness. Her father's dip into insanity had almost destroyed Tiyan. If she did not follow her destiny soon, she, too, would endanger all she loved.

"You must return to safety."

"Yes," she agreed.

His body was taut. She felt the thick, long proof of his arousal hard against her belly, but his effort to provide comfort rather than tend his own pleasure made her feel even safer in her killer's arms. He was the most honorable man she'd ever known. He had always been the enemy with the most capability to harm her, yet did the most to help her. She drew another deep breath, gathering strength from him.

"I'm very sorry we're enemies, Taran," she said in a hollow tone.

"We don't have to be."

Yes, *you do*, the beast responded.

"You said once we were fated to be lovers."

"I was wrong," she whispered.

She withdrew from his embrace, withdrawing from the warmth and comfort of his body.

His features were dark. She wiped tears from her face again. She turned away and walked slowly down the dark alley, mind and body heavy.

Yes, it was possible to love a man she barely knew. She pondered the idea numbly until it was replaced with the vision from her dream, the one where Taran killed her. She was unable to accept her fate - her death and Taran's destiny as Tiyan's leader - without the peace of knowing Tiyan was safe with Taran.

Did he know he was destined to rule Tiyan? With the demon's restlessness and the progressing war, she doubted she had much time to help him see it. How did she ensure Tiyan was safe?

Grim, she quickened her step as she debated how to manipulate her killer before the final blow fell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Seventh Warlord of Tiyan

My father was a misguided man. Maybe his will was too weak, and the demon took advantage of him. It has taken my whole life to stop the senseless wars. I give water from the Springs to every king my father wronged.

There are many of them. Tiyan's penance is to heal what we destroyed. All but the king of Landis have forgiven us. He refuses the waters, even knowing his people still suffer.

I found the histories written by the first warlord of Tiyan and his brother. Every warlord has kept the kingdom's histories. The demon tried to trick me into burning them, but I refuse its will as much as I can. Some days, this is not much, as the weakness of my forefathers has made it powerful enough to choose its next host and seize control of my body.

I saw the folly of my forefathers in the histories. Maybe once the demon was a gift to Tiyan, but now, it is Tiyan's curse. Today, it lets me write these words. Tomorrow, it may make me burn them. I've written the history of my time many times, and each time I've destroyed it, unable to resist the demon's will.

I, too, will fall victim to the madness caused by the demon. I pray to the gods it does not force me to destroy the histories, so that someday, someone will have the strength I lack.

Maybe a female warlord will end the curse? Maybe it was the demon's first lie. Tomorrow, I shall give an order to counter the First Warlord's order. No longer will the female heir of Tiyan die at the hands of her own blood.

If I live to see tomorrow.

Taran spent the night on the wall, fighting with the men who had treated him like a brother for a kingdom he wanted but would never have.

By dawn, the intruders were driven beyond the breached wall, and stonecutters and woodworkers summoned to begin repairing the wall behind the ongoing battle. He watched their work with appreciation, astonished by Sirian's ingenuity. As slippery and twisted the man was, he knew how to train men to win a battle.

A messenger sought him out the moment he sat with a hunk of bread and ale, ordering him back to the hold with no explanation. He went grudgingly, not wanting to deal with what awaited him.

The main chamber of the hold was as disorganized as the battle was organized. Messengers perched near the door in one huddle while various warriors, Rissa's counselors, and strangers occupied the floor area. Talk was loud enough to hurt his ears, ranging between orders shouted across the chamber to the man Bastion bellowing at the messengers from the northern wall.

Hilden noticed his entrance and motioned him to the front. He wove through the crowd, peering between his eyelashes before he reached the main table where Hilden stood.

"The queen summons you."

Taran suppressed a grimace. He made his way to the stairs and jogged up, taking them two at a time. His step quickened down the hall, but he was unable to tell if he were eager or dreading the sight of the woman again. Their tender embrace the previous night had affected him more than it should have, and yet she had walked away.

He stopped outside her chambers, heart pounding. Taran drew a deep breath and steeled himself against what confrontation was certain to await him.

She was not in her chamber. Taran lowered his eye-band at the bright light streaming through her windows. He listened for her and heard her stir in the secondary chamber to his right. He drew a dagger, never certain what to expect from the queen of Tiyan, and pushed open the door to the second bedchamber.

"I'm here," she called from the small bedchamber. "It's dark. You don't need to cover your eyes."

He pushed up his eye-band, testing the chamber's darkness through squinted eyes before opening them. The chamber's drapes were drawn, extinguishing all but enough light to see.

Rissa stood near a large wardrobe, as pale and distraught as she had appeared the night before. He smelled the tang of blood in the air and looked down at where she held linen over a forearm dripping blood.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

She ignored his question and turned away, moving to a small basin of water.

"Taran, you know that your choice of...me as fulfillment of my oath obligates you to the same position as my mate, do you not?" she asked with deceptive casualness.

Taran moved closer to her, watching her clean and bandage her forearm with practiced efficiency.

"Our people believe you to be my mate. In their eyes, you are already the king of Tiyan."

He met her challenging gaze. She raised an eyebrow and leaned against the wall.

"You asked for me, all of me. To have me, all of me, you must be the king."

He crossed his arms, exposing roped forearms.

"And *you* told me I could never command you," he reminded her.

"You cannot command my...magic, Tiyan's magic. It is a part of me."

She started forward and faltered, nearly dropping to her knees. Taran caught her. Her body trembled, and her skin was paler than he first thought. He searched her face while carrying her to a nearby trunk. She was as pliant as she had been in his arms the night before, her lush frame nestled against his.

"You can command Tiyan, just not the magic."

Taran sank into a squat beside her, studying her as she spoke. The scent of blood was heavy in the chamber, the strain of war and unknown hardship on her face.

"I cannot command an army, Taran. I don't know how," she whispered, sagging. "My father, the ninth ruler of Tiyan of our bloodline, was a cruel man. He saved his people but beat his daughter. He did not intend for me to take his place upon his death. I was imprisoned within my chamber most of my life. Sirian cared for me more than my father. My father went mad and almost destroyed Tiyan. Then he had to die.

"I was left a kingdom with no idea how to lead. Sirian taught me much, but even he refused to teach me many things. I realize now he intended to keep me as ignorant as

my father had in order to prevent me from ruling my kingdom as I should. I let him do as he wanted, let myself believe he was a loyal advisor. Sirian did everything. Today, I was asked by the steward how many men fought on the eastern wall, and I could not tell him."

She paused, lost in thought. Taran listened, disturbed by her story.

"I love Tiyan," she murmured. "I love its people. I've saved every man and woman I could, opened my gates to take in those with no home and no hope. I can heal them but not defend them, and if Tiyan falls, it is because of me. Even if I knew how, it may be too late to save them. Sirian moved all our armies too far south to recall them in time to save the city. He has ordered those loyal to him to open the eastern gates and let Memon's armies through, but I don't know when. He turned one of my allies, Oceanan, against me, and I do not know the strengths of his followers within my own walls."

She looked at him, her eyes dull. "I've failed, Taran."

The lifeless, hopeless look in her gaze was too genuine for even a woman as powerful as she was to manipulate. It was a despair he'd felt in the catacombs, when he'd seen nothing but death as his fate. He felt the urge to run and the urge to take her into his arms and kiss her worries away collide within him. His sight cleared again, long enough for him to feel as he did when he chose her as the fulfillment of his oath. His path was once more clear.

"You will accept me as your king?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

"You will give me Tiyan?"

"I have no choice."

Her ominous tone did not register with him. He reached out to her, pained by her beaten appearance. Taran touched her face before dropping his hand to hers. He took her calloused hands in his, his gaze falling to her arm again.

It was what he thought he wanted: the mighty kingdom of Tiyan, his to use for retribution against those who had taken his family and relegated him to the life of a slave. After summers of waiting and years of agony underground, he had his tool to use against Memon.

For the first time in his life, he felt a deep sense of peace at his core.

But it was not just Tiyan that brought the feeling. He was comforted by the presence of the tortured woman beside him. He wanted Tiyan, but only if the beautiful woman came with it. Studying her, he was unable to help the tender feeling growing stronger in his breast. He had never imagined anything but vengeance would ever stir his blood like the sweet, brave woman before him did!

"You will fight for Tiyan?" she whispered, raising her eyes to his. Her teal gaze was filled with sorrow rather than hope, but her vulnerability hooked him nonetheless.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Would you take an oath to Tiyan?"

"I swear, on my soul, I serve Tiyan."

Her eyes closed. She gave a deep sigh and leaned toward him. Taran dropped his knees to the floor. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her limp frame against him. He spoke her name once. She did not respond. He rose and carried her into her bedchamber, resting her on her bed. It took all his restraint to keep from climbing into the bed with her.

She slept. Her breathing was deep, her face relaxed. Though his eyes were closed against the light, Taran traced his fingers over her firm features, down her neck, shoulder, and to the bandaged arm. He frowned, aware he had not pursued the reason the other bedchamber smelled of blood.

His promise pried his attention from her. Taran leaned forward to give the woman a chaste kiss on her forehead before turning away. He had a war to win and a woman to claim. As he left her chambers, he was unable to dispel the whispered warning that the queen of Tiyan had managed to force him into uttering an oath he swore never to give.

She waited until certain he was gone before rising. She was as weak as he thought her, but she couldn't rest, not when she needed to act. She didn't doubt Taran's ability to defend her kingdom - if he ever got the chance. What he needed was that window.

With shaking hands, she dressed in the simple garb of a page and pulled her hood to cover her face. She left the hold and stole away to the north gate. The dwellings were alight and inns packed with refugees fleeing the eastern and southern portions of the city before they, too, died in the war.

Hilden awaited her, frowning. She took the reins to her horse and mounted, stopping only when he caught her arm.

"No, Hilden. The fate of my people depends on this," she said before he could speak.

"There's another way! There must be!"

She pulled away and took his hand, squeezing it.

"My father's line dies with me, Hilden. Take care of my people. And..." She hesitated. "Take care of Taran. The kingdom is his."

"Remember what I told you," he said hoarsely. "Find Vara and speak to no one else. He will be in one of the three places I told you."

She nodded. She wanted to thank him for all his years of caring for her, for being the father hers was not. Her throat tightened, and she began to wonder if there were another way.

There *couldn't* be an alternative, if the demon was to die!

She whirled her horse and trotted into the forest. The horse knew the familiar path; it was the same she traveled to Oceanan. When she reached the border of their kingdoms, she broke east on a dirt road.

When dawn lit up the sky in front of her, she cried.

Soon, the demon promised. It moved freely through her body, stealing her strength for its final act against her.

"I don't want this!"

Fate.

She urged her horse onward until she reached the short obelisk marking the road leading into Landis. She shivered in the cold morning breeze and wiped her eyes. Pulling the hood up again, she draped her cloak over the Tiyan seal on her horse's saddle and urged it forward.

Landis's guards were many, but no one challenged a lowly page on his master's horse. She kept her head low as she walked her horse past scouts perched on boulders and hidden within trees. The road wound through meadows broken up by thatches of

forest with tiny villages huddled in the distance. Landis was many times the size of her kingdom, and she had just begun to panic she'd be too late when she saw the city at its center.

Resolve steadied her despite the impatient demon crawling within her.

Landis was dirty, filled with the scent of waste and death. She gagged as a cool morning breeze carried the scents to her. She rode through the city that bustled with ill-clad warriors and few others, unable to help feeling both disgust and pity for them. Wood dwellings sagged, and refuse was stacked high between them. The roads were muddy, and the first of several wells she saw teemed with dirty water.

The city changed as she wandered the zigzag roads toward its center until she came upon an inner wall - now open - leading to stone structures gleaming with gold and silver artwork. The warriors were just as dirty, but the wealthy members of the clan wore silks and jewels like gaudy flowers.

She sought out the markers Hilden mentioned, following the lazy loop through the wealthy roads of Landis. Stables, golden well, dwellings. The king of Landis lived with his harem in a low, sprawling dwelling whose walls gleamed with polished stones set in silver and gold. The warriors guarding the dwelling eyed her. She remained on the road until she reached the private stables.

The wealthiest of the warriors gathered outside the stables, armed with well-made weapons that would pay for enough clothing for all the poor in Landis.

She dismounted and tossed the cloak over the horse's saddle, looking for the face she sought. They ignored her as she joined the rest of the pages moving in and out of the stables, bringing horses and armament to the warriors.

The stables were dark inside, the scent of horse, leather, and hay overwhelming the scents of decay from the rest of Landis. She wove through the activity until she saw Vara. Releasing the horse, she approached and stopped a safe distance from the two men he addressed.

He looked up and froze. The men turned and looked at her dismissively, but he pushed past them, snatching her arm. He yanked her away hard enough to knock the breath from her and shoved her into a small tack room.

He was too surprised to speak, just stared at her through piercing green eyes.

"You owe me a boon," she said.

"You're mad!"

He ran his hand through his curly hair and closed the door to the tack room.

"My father will kill you!" he added, pacing. "And if you think I can prevent him, you're -"

"I know you're in no position to oppose your father *openly*," she replied.

His eyes narrowed, and one palm moved on the hilt of his sword.

"I need you to call off the raid this evening," she continued.

"My father isn't a fool, warlord, and he'll suspect me of worse than he does now. I won't risk my kingdom for yours. You've seen Landis. You must understand I have too much to do here to help you."

"Your father will listen to you. I'll make it so."

"How?"

"Turn me over to him. You'll earn his favor, even if only for an evening."

"Turn you over to him," he repeated. "I didn't think you the fool, either."

"You'll do it, and you'll get what you want," she said with some impatience. "I kept my word, didn't I?"

"Yes," he said, hand dropping from hilt. "The waters healed as you said they would."

She pulled free another bladder, this one full of her blood. He took it.

"There's enough there to heal all your people. Place it in the wells."

"And I repay you by...giving you to my father?"

"You repay me by making sure the raid planned for tonight never happens," she replied.

"If it were any other night...I have...plans for the raid. My father's supposed to raid with us, which he's never done."

She heard the unspoken words and waited. Vara's eyes lingered on the bladder.

"The illness your father suffers from is the same I suffer from," she said. "Whatever you plan for him, plan for me before it's too late for your people or mine."

"You're Taran's mate."

"My people need him. If you don't kill me, what I have will infect him, and he'll follow your father's fate."

Vara's jaw clenched. He wiped his mouth and then the back of his neck.

"Taran needs tonight to repair our defenses. When it's over, you can throw both your father and me off the Western Cliffs. I don't care, Vara, but you must do these two things!"

"You leave me no choice, my queen!" he snapped. "I freed Taran from the catacombs. I knew he was meant for greatness, but I expected him to serve me when I'd rid the kingdom of my father. I haven't protected him to let my...*our* enemy turn him into my father!"

Despite his words, she saw the conflicting emotions on his face. At last, he sighed and strapped the bladder to his sword belt.

"I can't protect you," he said. "I won't even try."

"I do not seek your protection. Do as I say, and you'll save Landis from your father."

"Did he take an oath to you?" he asked suddenly, eyes narrowing.

"He took an oath to Tiyan."

"Taran wouldn't take an oath to me, even after all I'd done for him."

"I can be very convincing," she said with a small smile.

He studied her for a long moment, and she saw his resistance give before he spoke.

"Very well. I'll do as you ask."

"What do you mean she went to Vara?" Taran demanded.

Hilden glanced around the round chamber, which had fallen quiet after his words. Taran felt anger bubble within him. He waved a hand for everyone to leave and forced himself to wait until they were gone.

Midmorning light filtered into the circular chamber, the sounds of fighting distant.

"My king - -"

"Don't call me that!" he grated. "Whatever her plan is, she'll probably toss me in the hole you've got Sirian in when she returns!"

"I don't think she planned on returning," was the slow response. "She knew you needed time. The attack on the eastern wall is this evening; we can't hold the city."

"Because my armies are down south and my queen ran away."

"She didn't *run* away!"

Taran stilled his response as the older man bristled. Instead, he stared at the map on the table between them. He'd left her sleeping and assumed she'd given up whatever game she played. He'd hoped she had and left her alone, after posting her favorite guard - Hilden - at her door.

He didn't expect Hilden to *help* her put her life in danger!

And yet, he had to find a way to defend her... *their* kingdom before he could deal with its runaway queen. He knew Vara well enough to know the man was nothing like his father. He looked up, struck by a thought.

"Why Vara?" he demanded.

"I don't know her plan, my king. It's not my place to ask."

"So it's your place to watch her die because you did not feel you should object to her madness?"

Hilden's jaw clenched. He bowed and walked away.

Taran sighed and threw himself into a chair at one end of the table. He didn't need the distraction of worrying about the queen while trying to prevent them from losing the war! The southern wall was overwhelmed, and a secondary barrier had been constructed overnight to halt Landis's progress. Memon had strengthened his attacks after the Tiyan warriors drove him back and had broken into the city again. With most of the men securing the southern wall, they couldn't hold the eastern wall, too.

He stared at the map and calculated he'd need a week to bring the armies in the south back to Tiyan. Landis and his allies stood between the armies and the city.

Landis.

He straightened, his eyes going to the healed scar along his forearm.

"Hilden!" he called.

The gruff warrior appeared in the doorway.

"I need to send a message to Landis," he said. "Quickly. Bring me someone you trust."

"Message, my king?" Hilden asked, eyes narrowing.

"Yes, Hilden. We're going to surrender."

Hilden went rigid. Taran slapped him on the shoulder.

"While we plan a banquet for Landis, you'll be bringing the armies in from the south."

Hilden said nothing. Taran didn't expect the guard to understand, especially since he hadn't thought everything through yet.

"Send someone up to my chambers," he said, and trotted away.

He took the stairs three at a time and strode into the chambers, barring the door behind him. The second bedchamber smelled of blood, the bathing chamber of jasmine. He breathed deeply, more interested in detecting the faint smell of the warlord.

She'd left the small book on her pillow. He didn't have time to read, yet he felt drawn to it the same way he was drawn to her.

The Book of the Damned.

He sat on the edge of the bed and lifted ancient pages clenched between heavy wooden covers. The words were from his homeland across the sea.

I compiled this for my dear Rissa, but I fear the demon will prevent me from giving it to her. Even if I did, she could never read it. I chose not to teach her the tongue of our forefathers, for I intended her to start our line anew, without the taint of the creature.

For you, my daughter, The Book of the Damned, the history of our kingdom in the words of the madmen who invited a demon into the heart of Tiyan.

He hesitated, then turned the page.

We found the demon when we took this land near the great cliffs. The local barbarians told us of its power, how it can heal a man from death and stop a storm from destroying a village. After so many years at war, I knew the demon alone could stop the wars that drove us across the sea to this barren strip of land along the cliffs.

The more he read, the harder it was to stop. He hunched over the book, rereading every passage, holding his breath as he turned each page. The book's ancient pages were so brittle, he feared they would crumble before he finished.

The demon, the blood, the curse. The words of Tiyan's warlords yearned to be read, their lesson clear: the creature was no ally of man.

Knocking jarred him as he read, and he hid the book beneath a pillow before allowing Hilden's chosen messenger to enter.

"My brother's son, the cousin of Vara," Hilden said, motioning to a gangly youth with Vara's green eyes.

"You will go to Memon in Landis and remind him of the agreement we made. Tell him I am the ruler of Tiyan, and he is invited to a feast in his honor in three days' time," Taran instructed.

Hilden frowned.

"Go!"

The boy went. Taran closed the door, intent on returning to the book. Hilden jammed his foot between door and jamb.

"Leave me, Hilden."

"My king, I have something I must tell you."

Taran waved the grizzled man in and retreated to the bed, pulling the book free.

"My queen sent an urgent message to Dierdirien a few days ago. They have responded."

"And?"

"And they are sending their armies south but may not arrive before several days."

"These are true allies, unlike the others?"

"Yes, my king."

Taran considered the old warrior, itching to return to the book.

"How are the walls?" he asked.

"They're holding. The warlord's magic keeps them stronger than our enemies expected."

"If Memon ceases his attack, we will have time to repair them."

"Dierdirien will arrive in a few days, and Memon in half that time," Hilden said. "He'll kill her, and you'll have no armies and no magic."

"Your warlord would tell you that Tiyan's survival outweighs everything."

Even as he spoke the words, he knew he couldn't sacrifice her for the kingdom. Hilden said nothing, his gaze dropping to the book.

"You are only now reading it," the warrior said. "My father was the mad warlord's most trusted advisor, the descendent of the first warlord's brother. He swore me to protect this book with my life, to give it only to whoever could save Tiyan from its warlords' mistakes. I should've been at her side instead of Sirian."

"Did you read it?"

"It was forbidden. Only the ruler of Tiyan can know its secrets."

He wanted to push the warrior into more, but he was too much like his devoted predecessors.

"Thank you, Hilden," he said. "When Landis answers my message, please come back."

Hilden bowed and left. Taran watched the door close and then opened the book where he left off, determined to find a way to help Tiyan's warlord.

She recognized the messenger boy the moment he was led into the chamber. Memon sat, entranced, as her blood dripped down her arm and hand to the floor.

"The legends spoke only of one creature," he said.

"My king, a message from Tiyan," the guard announced.

Memon ignored him and closed the distance between him and Rissa, snatching her. He dragged her to a window and the bright midday sun. He held her arm up to the direct light. The leaders of his armies, his harem with their bruised faces and arms, and his guards stared at her with increasing intensity.

The beast within Memon was strong enough to crawl beneath his skin. The ripple of his flesh made her feel ill. His eyes were blacker than night and gleamed while his touch was cold, as if his body were already dead.

Was this *her* fate as well?

"The power of one demon has brought every kingdom to its knees before me," he murmured. The gleam in his gaze grew brighter. He released her and spun.

"What is Tiyan's message?" he asked as he drew his sword.

She inched away, doubtful he'd kill her outright.

"My king," the boy said with a hasty bow. "The warlord Taran invites you into Tiyan's walls in three days' time for a feast. He said to remind you of your agreement."

Memon gave a triumphant laugh, his gaze going to the bruised women who made up his harem. They all shrank away as he approached. He grabbed one by the hair and yanked her toward him.

"Tell Taran, I will see him in two days' time."

As he spoke, he slid the sword through the woman's gullet and released her. Rissa alone gasped as the dying woman gagged and squirmed on the floor.

No one objected; most chose not to look.

"Tell him, he will honor me by meeting me first outside his walls and kneeling as any good slave should."

He snatched another woman as he spoke and stabbed her. The third bolted toward the door. Rissa saw him reach for the dagger at the base of his back and closed her eyes, sickened by the gurgling sound as the dagger pierced the woman's throat.

"Tell him of the death of my three mates," Memon said.

He approached her. She backpedaled until the wall stopped her. Memon stopped close enough for her to smell the rot on his breath.

"And that I've chosen another. We will celebrate for two reasons. Go."

The messenger bowed again and fled. She stared at the twisted man before her.

"We've never had a mate," the demon said through his voice. "We didn't know another existed."

He twisted a lock of her hair between his fingers. She didn't move, didn't speak. The creature within her was strangely still, as if it, too, were caught off guard.

"Imagine the power we will wield. One of us has done all this. Two of us..." He trailed off, his gaze turning to the sky peeking through the window. "Combined in one body..."

She couldn't help wondering what two of the creatures would do. They needed their hosts to live, wouldn't survive without their mortal bodies.

No!

The demon made its decision with a thrash that drove her to her knees. She clenched her abdomen, gasping as the creature writhed with enough power to ripple her skin as Memon's did. Pure will kept her conscious as she struggled to keep it from shredding her. Its tantrum subsided when it saw she wouldn't give, and it paced furiously within her.

Not our fate! it objected again.

Memon appeared lost in his thoughts, oblivious to her huddled on the floor. She sensed he communicated with the creature.

"My king?" one of his advisors ventured.

The possessed king snapped out of his thoughts and looked around.

"Take her to the catacombs. Ready the army to accompany me to Tiyan, in case Taran seeks to betray me. Send Vara to me."

She looked up at his command. He strode out of the chamber. In the silence that followed, her eyes went again to the dead women.

Whatever he planned for her would be far worse than their quick deaths.

No!

She gritted her teeth. The guards hauled her to her feet and through the hold.

"If you don't want to die here, you better find us a way to escape!" she hissed at the demon, rubbing her chest.

It said nothing, but its agitation told her she'd have to plan for the both of them. As she struggled to focus and keep her tears away, another thought came to her.

Above all, the demon wanted to live. It feared what Memon planned - -one host for both of them.

Could she kill it, if her blood mixed with Memon's?

Kill us both.

"I can live with that!"

It thrashed again, and she doubled over, wondering if she could remain strong enough to kill the demon, or if it'd wrestle her strength from her before she could act against it.

The decision she thought she'd made - -to sacrifice herself and let Memon kill her - -was as much of a danger to her people as Memon at Tiyan's walls.

Part of her hoped she might find a way to survive apart from the demon.

No.

The guards led her into the streets and behind the hold. They stopped in front of a wooden door in the earth. One hauled it open, and she peered into the impenetrable depths.

The other shoved her in. She fell farther than she expected. Light exploded into her mind as she hit the bottom, followed by darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Eighth Warlord of Tiyan

It tried to kill me today. I feel my body weakening - it refuses to heal me this time, now that it's chosen its successor, as my father said it would! If only I'd been older, wiser, more willing to listen to him.

If I had the strength to warn my son! If I could share with him what madness the monster brings! It won't let me, and I lie here, unable to speak, my voice taken by my own hand.

My trusted advisor reminds me I am a servant of Tiyan. What is one man's life to save so many, he asks?

I cannot speak, but I would tell him the evil I've done for the beast, and then ask him if he thought the curse was worth a wall we might have built ourselves!

Taran closed the book. It was past nightfall, and shadows and light from the hearth danced around him. He set the book down, picked it up, then replaced it. The fire mesmerized him as he thought.

In the body of the good, the demon's magic was used for good. In the body of one such as Memon...

He flipped the book open again.

Even in the body of a good person, the demon tried hard to corrupt. The more the warlords used the magic for themselves, the worse their fates and the faster their madness came.

Taran closed the book again, disturbed.

He understood the depth of her fear. She knew she was damned and wasn't willing to condemn anyone else with the creature in her blood. Rissa was destined to be the last warlord of Tiyan. Her father had seen to this.

Tiyan, above all else.

He rose and tossed the book away, wanting to distance his thoughts from the monsters that had condemned generation after generation of warlords with the beast. They'd truly thought their sacrifices would help their people, that they could control the darkness of the demon. And yet, Tiyan would not only fall into war, it would lose the bloodline and demon the warlords fought so hard to preserve!

Tiyan's fate was sealed the day its warlords welcomed a demon into its midst!

"Fools!" he muttered. He retrieved the book and flung it away from him. The wooden covers broke against the wall. The pages fluttered to the floor, like leaves in autumn. He resisted the urge to burn them, in case the brittle papers held more secrets he needed.

She had to die with the demon in her.

He paced again and rubbed the back of his neck, unable to determine another fate possible. The demon needed to be destroyed. She would die with it.

It was her intent all along, he realized. Without knowing what her ancestors had done, she was the only one strong and brave enough to try to rid Tiyan of its curse.

"You read it."

He didn't notice Hilden's quiet entrance. The warrior closed the door behind him, his gaze on the broken book.

"Can its secrets save her?"

"Nothing can save her!" Taran snapped.

"Nothing?"

"Death."

Hilden suddenly appeared haggard, ancient, and worn. Taran threw himself onto his back in front of the fire, exhausted.

"My father said the book held the secret to saving her," Hilden said. "He didn't want to kill her. He knew she was special."

"You knew your father was decreed to kill her?"

"He told me the day before he was killed. He knew his fate. He knew the warlords of Tiyan would die with her, whether by his hand or another's," Hilden said.

"Fools, utter fools!"

"Maybe. Or maybe the first warlord and his brother didn't want their people to suffer as they did overseas."

"Walls can be built with time and peace can be bought. To invite a creature like that into the heart of Tiyan...there is no evil that cannot corrupt!"

"I know, even without knowing what it is," Hilden said, sitting near him. "I watched her father go mad. She's shown the signs far earlier than any warlord."

"Your forefathers killed female heirs because the demon told them they were too weak. And yet, the only female heir there's been has challenged the demon and wants to kill it. I think this was the demon's first lie."

"But there's nothing in the book about what will save her?"

"No. The demon takes over their bodies until a new host is chosen. The original host goes mad. No host has ever survived."

"What of the magic?"

"It's the demon's."

"No, the magic in the Springs."

"What of it?"

"It can bring men back from the dead," Hilden said. "I've seen it done."

Taran was quiet, pensive once again. An urgent knock at the door jarred him from his thoughts. Hilden opened it and exchanged quick words with someone. At the frown on his face, Taran's stomach sank further.

"The messenger returned. He says Memon agrees to your banquet, but in two days. He also intends to take a mate."

"Rissa."

Hilden frowned. Taran sat up, his mind working quickly.

"The demon," he murmured. "There are two, one in Memon, and one in Rissa."

"You think he means to unite them?"

"The fool will do anything."

"What happens to Rissa?"

"He's not attacking. We need to repair the walls," Taran said. He crossed to the second bedchamber and flung open the door to the wardrobe that smelled of blood. A large barrel was tucked in one corner and several small bladders stacked near the front.

"Will two days give Dierdirien time to get here?" he asked as he hefted one full bladder.

"If he's quick, yes."

"And Vara?"

"What of Vara?" Hilden asked, voice growing quiet.

"Can he be swayed in our favor?"

"He hates his father, but he wants Landis. He won't ally with anyone who wants to destroy Landis."

"You know him well, Hilden."

"His mother was my sister. Memon killed her. Neither her son nor her brother will stand by him."

Taran handed him the bladder.

"Take this to Vara. Give him my...Tiyan's oath that we will not fight Landis if he will ally with us against his father for one battle." Taran's gaze returned to the barrel. The answer to his turmoil was clear: his revenge wasn't worth her life. She'd given her blood for her people and her life to rid Tiyan of the demon, once and for all.

For the first time in his life, he knew his fate. It wasn't in Landis, in the foreign land of his birth, in the catacombs.

He was destined to rule Tiyan, just as Rissa was destined to die for Tiyan.

"My king?" Hilden asked at his silence.

"Go, Hilden. We have two days to prepare ourselves."

"For what?"

"For one last battle with Memon."

"You will stay and fight for Tiyan?"

"Tiyan is mine, Hilden."

The warrior offered a low bow before hurrying away. Taran wrestled the barrel out and pried its top open. It was filled with maroon blood swirled with black. He gritted his teeth, not wanting to think of how long she'd cut herself to gather so much.

He resealed it and strode to the door. One of the warriors stood in the hall next to a sleepy servant. They both snapped to attention at his order.

"There's a barrel in the bedchamber. Take it to the Springs. *Carefully*. Post a guard near it."

Both bowed, and he stepped aside as they entered the bedchamber. He started down the hall then returned to the massive chamber, gathering the scattered pages of *The Book of the Damned* and placing them again in the wooden covers of the book. His gaze lingered on the fire. The book's fate was to burn until not even ashes remained!

But not yet.

He held it against his arm and trotted through the hold, down stairwells until the familiar must of the underground slowed his step. He stopped outside the door to the underground dungeon, his skin crawling at the scent of earth all around him. Clenching the book, he stepped into the familiar dungeon with its two small cells.

The iron wall was open in front of Sirian's cell. The warlord's former advisor leaned against the wall as if expecting him. His dark gaze was direct, his hair and clothing neat. His eyes fell to the book.

"The barbarian can read," he assessed.

"You read it," Taran said. He seated himself on a table across the room from the imprisoned man.

"Who do you think found the second demon?" Sirian replied in his clipped tone. "Memon was more than willing to become its host."

"You didn't tell him what would happen."

"I needed him to clear a path for me."

"By destroying Rissa."

"You read her father's words: her fate was decided before her birth. I'm helping her rid Tiyan of the demon."

Taran bit back his response.

"There's a place for you in all this, Taran. You're brave and strong. You would serve me well."

"You offer more than I have now?"

"You have nothing now," Sirian scoffed. "The walls will collapse around you when the demon and Rissa die. The walls are made of the demon's magic, and Rissa's armies are too far south to hold the city. Memon will roll through here like fog off the sea."

"You did all this," Taran said in a low voice.

"Her father was mad before he reached twenty summers. I kept the kingdom together and will rescue it once she's dead. Tiyan will be mine."

"Memon won't give you Tiyan, even if she's dead."

"He won't live long after she's dead. Two demons cannot live in one host."

"You know this?"

"I know much about the creatures. I know how to save her."

Taran was quiet. Sirian waited for him to speak, and Taran glared at the older man, unwilling to break the silent battle. Sirian smiled.

"When you're ready to negotiate, come back. I'll save her, for a price."

Taran rose and drew a deep breath. "Unlike the warlords of Tiyan, my kingdom isn't going to host evil. I've been a slave to Memon for too long. Neither I nor Tiyan will be enslaved by such evil. If I lose the kingdom and the warlord, it won't be to men like you or Memon. Farewell, Sirian."

He turned and walked away, waiting until he was beyond sight to take the stairs three at a time. He paused when he reached the main level, satisfied with the information Sirian gave him. And all the more furious at anyone who would betray Tiyan and its queen.

Memon didn't know inviting another demon into his body would kill him. As long as Sirian was kept in the dungeon, Memon wouldn't know until it was too late.

Maybe, just maybe, Taran could drive the demon out of Rissa into Memon.

His thoughts went to the Springs and the precious barrel.

He wouldn't believe there wasn't a way to save her. As long as the demon didn't drive her mad, and a part of her remained, he'd find a way to save her.

She thought her eyes still closed and blinked again. No, it was darker than sleep. The demon rushed to heal the gouging wound in her leg from the sharp stone she'd landed on. She touched the ground around her, trying to measure the size of her prison. The packed dirt was rocky beneath her fingers. The darkness smelled damp; the air was still and silent.

How would she survive in a place where she couldn't see?

She stood and reached overhead to feel for a ceiling. Nothing but air greeted her outstretched hands. Holding them out in front of her, she stepped forward until a boulder the size of her foot tripped her. She stepped over it, slipped on pebbles, and dropped with a gasp as pain slammed through her knees.

Must leave!

The demon's pacing was frantic, both distracting her and sapping her strength.

"Stop!" she hissed. "I can't get us out of here with you doing that!"

It slowed without stopping. She rose and stumbled forward again, cursed as she ran into a larger boulder, then lost her balance and rolled down a sudden dip.

Tears rose, and she cursed again.

"You'll adjust."

She froze at the faint voice, unable to determine if it was the demon who spoke. Pushing herself up, she listened. There were no sounds aside from her movement in the still underworld.

"What's your name?"

"Are you really there?" she asked.

"I think so. Are you?" came a warm voice and soft chuckle.

"Where are you?"

"Right over here on the rock that tripped you."

"What are you?"

"A lost soul," he said with a heavy sigh. "Trapped here as you are."

The demon had stilled, once again considering. She turned in the direction of the creaky voice, unable to shake her unease. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and a subtle charge filled the air around her.

He wasn't human. The demon sensed it, even as she struggled to figure out where he was. He was quiet, and she held her breath, listening for him.

"Are you well? You fell hard."

The voice was closer, from a different direction.

"Yes," she managed. "How long have you been here?"

"Years. What are *you*?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm a woman."

"Nothing more?"

"Like you, I suppose," she said.

"You have a trace of darkness about you."

"Darkness!" she said with a harsh laugh.

"What's your name, dark lady?"

"Rissa, last warlord of Tiyan."

"Must be a new kingdom. Never heard of it."

"You've been here more than a few years," she said. "Who are you?"

"I had a name once. Jame."

She gasped.

"You know of me?"

"I do," she said. "A...friend told me about you."

"I've had one friend in the past age," he said with another warm chuckle.

"He thinks you died."

"We will keep it so, dark lady. He wanted to rescue me, but none can."

"Why not?"

"My penance must be served down here, where there is no light."

She shivered, afraid to ask more. The demon moved at last, though it hadn't yet decided what to think of the visitor.

"How is my friend?"

"He's well," she whispered. "Better than you or I are. He's safe."

"He's found his place?"

"Not by choice, but yes."

"Good. He was lost for too long."

"Is there any way out of here?"

"No."

She waited for more, her heart falling when he didn't expand on the simple answer. She sank to the ground again.

"Where is this Tiyan?"

"Along the Western Cliffs."

"Tis cursed then."

"How do you know that?" she demanded, twisting in the newest direction of his voice.

"It's always been that way."

"You know of...of them?"

"The demons? Aye. There were many in my time, but most were killed. Is this the darkness about you?"

"My forefathers harnessed - -"

He laughed. She frowned and turned toward his voice again.

"There's no harnessing a demon!" he assured her.

"We did! We use its powers to help our people."

"If so, the demon is a child. The full-grown creature is too strong for a man's body. Will tear through even a warrior, unless it chooses not to."

"A child?" she echoed.

"They take ages to grow. Would grow harder for the human hosts to contain it as it aged."

The demon was still, interested. She took in Jame's words, surprised to feel relieved. If what he said were true, she wasn't weaker than her father; the demon was growing stronger.

"How do you kill it?" she asked.

"It must die with its host. I've never heard otherwise, but I've been here for a long time."

She sighed, no longer able to sustain her hope. She rubbed her face and looked around.

Taran had spent half his life in this place with nothing but darkness and Jame, his friend. She couldn't help the sense of horror she felt at such a fate. She understood his hatred for Memon, the man who had robbed him of more than his sight.

"I'll go mad here," she whispered.

"Memon casts many down here. Few I care to help," Jame admitted. "Most are no better than he is, but Taran was an innocent child when he came to me. I couldn't let him suffer the fate of the others."

"And me?"

"I was curious, dark lady. I sensed two creatures and found one."

"I don't know how he survived without going mad," she said.

"The pure can resist evil, dark lady. In my age or yours, this is true."

"No, Jame, I don't believe this."

"You've resisted the demon."

"It rules me as much as I do."

"Taran fought madness because he feared I wouldn't survive without him. He wanted revenge against Memon for his family's death, but revenge isn't enough down here. He fought to live for a helpless old man. What do you fight for, dark lady?"

She listened, glancing in the newest direction of his voice. He made no other sounds in the silent darkness. Her own breathing was loud in the pause, and she tried to focus on his voice and not the dark thoughts in her mind.

"My people," she said at last. "Tiyen."

"Taran?"

He was quiet, letting her think again. She admired Taran's strength, yet she resented him, for he wasn't damned as she was. She wished he'd never appeared. And yet, she couldn't imagine a better life than ruling Tiyen with him at her side. The man meant to rule Tiyen - and her own heart - was someone she had to escape, lest the demon destroy him as it would her!

"My fate is decided. I won't let him suffer as I have, as my forefathers have. The demon dies with me."

It thrashed in objection, doubling her over again.

"It disagrees," Jame said with another warm chuckle. "May the gods give you strength, dark lady."

"They do," she gasped.

She felt a light touch on her arm. Suddenly, she smelled a feast of meat and bread. The unseen creature placed a plate of food beside her. Her stomach roared to life, and even the demon paused at her body's reaction to the food.

As much as she ate, she didn't seem to dent the plate of food. It refilled itself as if by magic. When she sat back with a belly stretched to its limit, the scent and food disappeared.

"I'll watch over you as you sleep, dark lady." Jame's voice was the closest yet.

His words saddened her.

"I have no need of sleep. I'll be dead too soon. I'd rather stay awake my last two days," she replied.

"I cannot see what comes, but I know what kind of a man Taran is. He will find a way to save you."

"There is no way. You said so yourself."

"I raised him, dark lady. His fate is not that of a common man."

She wanted to believe him, but his faith *hurt!* She'd given up her own, and to invite hope when she needed to focus on stopping the demon for good...her resolve was too brittle to consider any other fate. She must destroy the demon. The only way was to destroy herself.

Tiyan, above all else. Her death would save both her people and Taran, the man fated to rule Tiyan.

There could be no other way.

"Leave me be, Jame," she whispered. "Let me spend my last days as I choose."

"As you wish, dark lady. I am always here, should you need me."

"Thank you."

He left her to her dark thoughts. The demon was calmer, its movement no longer urgent or panicked. The belly full of food made her drowsy. She lay down on the pebble-strewn dirt, wondering if death was anything like living in the catacombs.

The image of Taran crossed her mind, and she admired him more for his ability to survive such a place. Her breath caught as she recalled his searing touch and gaze, his passionate kisses, his confidence that nothing in this world would stop him from getting what he wanted.

Once, he'd wanted her as much as he did vengeance. A man that strong wouldn't fold to her wishes if some part of him didn't want her. She'd manipulated and betrayed him in the name of Tiyan, and yet he not only remained, he'd accepted his place as Tiyan's warlord. His desire to destroy Memon was strong. Tiyan was a match for the demon-possessed warrior-king of Landis.

In the silent darkness, she wondered what he'd choose: vengeance or Tiyan. She wasn't likely to stay alive long enough to see with her own eyes.

"I hope you're right, Jame."

"I am, dark lady."

She closed her eyes, a sense of calm at her core. In the end, her life and heart were a small sacrifice for Tiyan's survival.

As she drifted into sleep, she was both comforted and tormented by memories of Taran's touch.

"You ask much of me, Taran."

He swatted the horse on its rump. It leapt toward the dark forest. Vara stood alone on the cliff's edge at the boundary of Oceanan and Tiyan, clad in a crimson-lined cloak. Moonlight glinted off the swords at his hip, and a cold ocean breeze swept up the Western Cliffs, rolled over them, and rustled the branches of the nearby forest.

"If I'd ever had a brother, you'd have been him," he responded, approaching.

Vara's green eyes almost glowed in the moonlight. He was wary but not on guard, his stance relaxed and eyes narrowed.

"A poor brother I'd have made," Vara said with a dry chuckle. "Still, I did all I knew to do to protect you."

"I've never forgotten."

Taran's gaze went to where the dark ocean met the sky in the distance. The night usually reminded him of Jame. Lately, he'd been thinking of nothing but Rissa. Even the frantic efforts to repair the walls couldn't keep his thoughts occupied for long.

"There's something different about you tonight, Taran," Vara said. He tilted his head, his gaze intense.

"I feel different," he admitted. "You might say I understand better why you feel as you do about Landis."

"Landis is nearly dead. My father's killed it."

"That's why you'll help me."

"You ask too much," Vara said again. "You know I turned in your queen to my father?"

"You did?"

"She gave me little choice. She said you needed time to fix the walls. What could I do?"

"Fools, all of the Tiyan warlords!" Taran said with no heat.

"Your anger is not at me," Vara said, amused. "Father threw her in the catacombs."

Taran shivered at the mention, not wanting to imagine the strong warlord of Tiyan broken by the catacombs. She'd suffered enough at the will of her forefathers.

"When I first saw Tiyan's walls, I knew how powerful the kingdom was. You know this, too, Vara. With you leading Landis and me leading Tiyan, there will be peace at last."

Vara looked out at sea. "Landis has been Tiyan's enemy for an age," he said after a pause. "I want my father's kingdom. Beyond this..."

"Your people will never heal without peace."

"I don't understand peace, Taran! I've known war my whole life!"

"You remember what you said when you pulled me from the catacombs the first time?" Taran asked. "You promised to return in a day's time, and I begged you not to send me back to the catacombs. But you did, and you told me..."

Vara met his gaze. "...Trust me, son of Landis," he finished softly.

"I did then," Taran said. "And I do now. We alone can bring peace to this world and heal what the demons have done. But only if we do it together."

"You who claimed no loyalty to any kingdom have sworn yourself to Tiyan in a sennight's time," Vara said, bitter. "And never to me, as much as I've done for you."

"We are both sons of Landis," Taran said with some difficulty. "It hasn't been easy for me to accept the people who killed my family."

"The *people* did nothing! My father killed my family as well, Taran, and you've never extended the hand to me that I did to you!" Vara snapped.

"I have only just learned there is more than my selfish anger that matters. I didn't know you needed me as a brother."

"I did. I do."

"Then take the hand I extend now. Bring peace to both of our kingdoms."

Taran watched the tormented emotions crossing Vara's eyes. He kept his own features impassive, but Vara's words pierced him to the core. The Landis prince struggled to control his raw emotion, his own soul as tormented as Taran's.

Taran had never known how selfish his own anger was. Vara, Rissa...they'd suffered as much as he did, and he'd refused to believe anyone else was suffering. They'd both risked their lives to save him, and he'd pursued his vengeance without a second thought about either.

Vara, the man who'd freed him from the underground and defied his father to place the foreign-born slave in an honored scout position, who'd bought his weapons, fed and clothed him when he was too poor to do so for himself.

He'd seen the Landis prince as a means to an end, never a brother. No, he blamed all of Landis for the wrongs of its leader. All the while, Vara treated him with as much kindness as the abused son of a madman could. Of all the warriors, Vara wanted *him* at his side when he triumphed in his own revenge.

That he'd wronged his only friend all these years made him feel ill.

"Forgive me, brother," Taran whispered.

Vara turned away, hands on his hips and face toward the sky.

"I have few men I trust," Vara said. "Not enough to defeat my father and his allies."

"His allies will recognize you as the leader of Landis when your father is gone. Whoever you have will be enough for my plan. Dierdirien will arrive soon and can help us remove any king unwilling to accept peace."

"You have little time to await them, brother. My father comes tomorrow with your mate and his armies."

"Then I will act tomorrow night."

"You've never stood alone, brother," Vara said without turning.

"I'll need you tomorrow." He waited, wishing he knew what to say to repair the years of pain he'd caused his friend. He sensed Vara's inner turmoil.

"What's your plan?" Vara asked, facing him.

Taran took a deep breath, relieved. He spoke, his voice quieting until Vara had to draw nearer. When he'd finished, Vara stared at him, then said,

"Madness!"

"Madness if it fails. It won't," he said. "Your part is key, brother."

"I'll do as you ask. I must warn you that I promised your queen that I'd take her life as I do my father's."

"If I fail, you must promise me the same," Taran said. "The demons will die tomorrow."

"Aye, brother, they will." Pride sparked in Vara's gaze. "We'll make a man of you yet," he said.

"I'm your brother, Vara, from today onward."

"Give my regards to my uncle."

Vara clapped him on the arm and retreated toward the forest. Taran looked at the ocean once more. There was no one he trusted more than the Landis prince.

His brother.

"We must go, my king," Hilden said, emerging from the forest.

"Is everything set as I requested?" he asked, trotting to his horse.

"Dierdirien sent his best warriors ahead. The meadow is ready."

"Let's go," Taran said as they wheeled their horses in the direction of the trail along the cliffs.

They set a fast pace toward the hold, where they separated. Taran tossed his reins to the page that darted from the stables before jogging the narrow stairwell leading to the top of the walls.

The guards and their weapons were doubled.

He looked out over the forests to the north, the destruction of the south, and the meadow to the east. The next day would either be Tiyan's last or a new beginning for all the kingdoms.

Landis's warriors - those who had brought down the southern wall - were present in larger numbers than before. Camp fires from Landis's men and allies made the forest canopy glow in patches as far as he could see. The enemies' warriors were in place. In the morning, Landis would move its men into the meadow.

The guards were grim this night, their faces creased with worry. He stopped to talk to several, checked a few weapons with nods of approval, and patted the younger ones on the back. Their responses were quick smiles. As worried as they were, they were resolved to defending their kingdom, no matter what the price.

The moon reached its peak before he'd finished inspecting the walls and greeting its guards. He stepped into the shade of the wall, proud and confident. Tiyan wouldn't fall. He felt it. His gaze traveled the length of the glowing forest to the walls and settled in the direction of the magic Springs. He trotted his way through the city to its center.

True to his word, Hilden had posted two guards around the Springs and the barrel. The fountain's cheerful waterfalls eased him, and he perched on its edge. He traced his fingers along the barrel's rough surface before dipping his hand into the water.

The waters looked like any other. Transparent and cool, the Springs were the chosen means of deception by Tiyan's warlords to hide their magic while helping their people. Rissa hid her secret as well as her predecessors.

He stalked away from the Springs.

The book was where he left it in Rissa's chambers. He picked it up again, resisting the urge to throw it into the blazing hearth.

"Tomorrow," he promised it quietly, "I'll avenge my family and yours."

He tossed it onto the bed and looked around.

Her scent haunted the chamber. He retrieved one of her pillows, hugged it, and breathed her in.

Tomorrow.

The square patch of light woke her. She blinked, blinded by the brightness of the morning sun streaming into the catacombs.

She scampered up the small hill toward the light. The beam was swallowed by the catacombs, and it was still too dark around her to see how large the underground world was. The end of a rope was tossed down and landed at her feet. She paused beneath the entrance to look around.

"Jame?" she whispered.

"I'm here, dark lady."

"You won't come with me?"

"Nay, dark lady." Despite the nearness of his voice, he wasn't visible.

"Thank you, Jame."

"Take care of my friend."

She said nothing, unconvinced she'd live to the end of the day. One of the warriors above pulled at the rope, and she snatched it, unwilling to remain in the darkness. Jame said nothing else, and she was hauled up into broad daylight.

A day beneath ground made her eyes ache in the full light of day. She shielded them, unable to see through her blurred vision as the warrior pulled her. He all but flung her onto a horse, and she righted herself, joining a long caravan of well-armed men.

Vara lifted his chin in greeting as she passed him, and she wiped her eyes, meeting his green gaze. His features were stoic, his face hard. The warrior led her to a wooden wagon, enclosed on all sides except for a small window. He held the reins and opened the door, motioning her in.

She obeyed and lowered herself to the floor a moment before the wagon jarred into motion. Despite feeling better rested than she could remember, she was unable to shake the sense of unease from the catacombs, as if Jame's magic lingered. The demon was calm.

Whatever the creature in the catacombs had done to her, she felt stronger than she ever had.

They traveled until the wagon grew hot. She sprawled on its floor, listening to the sound of crunching shale. At long last, it jerked to a halt. The door was opened, and she was hauled out once more.

Her heart slowed as she took in the majestic walls of her home. Had it been only a day or two since she left? It felt like a lifetime, as if she were looking up on the walls for the first time in an age! Her beloved walls stood strong and beautiful, the white stone streaked with peach.

They'd stopped in the center of the meadow, the safe path through the traps marked by wooden stakes. A small tent was erected a short distance from them. Three men stood near it.

As they approached she saw that it was Memon who awaited her with one of his advisors at one side and Vara on his left. The warrior hauled her to him and released her with a hasty bow. She feared what she'd see in Memon's eyes and stared instead at his chest plate. Her demon stirred in lazy agitation, as if still under the spell of Jame.

The demon-possessed ruler of Landis turned away, and Vara took her arm. They walked to the tent, and her gaze settled on Taran, who awaited them in the shade of the tent with two of her advisors. His steady gaze remained on Memon. She took him in, surprised at the change.

The man before them wasn't the lost scout who refused to be tied to any kingdom or cause above his own. No, the man before them stood regal and unafraid, his confidence as solid as the walls. She saw none of the hesitation that had marked his acceptance of Tiyan as his master.

No, he looked every bit the ruler of Tiyan. He would lead Tiyan better than her possessed forefathers.

Tiyan didn't need her or the demon, and neither would Taran.

Taran bowed to Memon, whose dark chuckle was anything but assuring.

"The most beautiful of the kingdoms, mine at last!"

Taran said nothing, and she held her tongue.

"Tiyan and my mate are both yours, my king," Taran said. "It would be my honor to show you what you've gained."

"You're more of a son to me than my own!" Memon responded. "Take me inside, show me Tiyan!"

"A boon, my king?"

"Name it, my son!"

"A last moment alone with my mate."

Memon's smile faded, and he studied Taran. She held her breath, wondering what he'd want from her.

"Right here, my king. I keep nothing from you. Hilden will take you into the city, and your archers may watch me to ensure I do not venture closer to her than I am now."

There was a pause, and Memon's gaze settled on the open gate to Tiyan.

"Very well," he agreed. "Vara, stay here. My guard will attend me into the city."

They bowed, and he strode toward the gate, trailed by his men.

She waited. Vara stepped away, and Taran met her gaze at last. An awkward silence fell. He searched her face, and she studied him, wondering why she'd never noticed the strength of his features. He was clean and well-dressed for the first time, his tailored clothing enhancing his muscular, lean build. She ached to close the distance between them for one last kiss, a farewell to the man who'd sealed her fate!

"Rissa, I don't know what will happen tonight," he said. "I wanted to tell you I'll protect Tiyan with my life, not because I swore an oath to you, but because I understand now what it is to have a home to fight for."

She hadn't expected the words. His gaze was piercing, as if he tried to see the demon inside of her. She admired his newfound air of command but couldn't help resenting him for having a second chance she'd never get. She cleared her throat.

"I'm pleased you'll care for my people."

"I love Tiyan, Rissa," he continued. "I love you. I won't take one without the other."

"Spoken like a fool!" she managed, startled. "Tiyan, above - -"

He held up his hand. She stared at him.

"That's no way to talk to the warlord of Tiyan, lady," he said, strangely calm. "Come morning, a new age will begin for Tiyan."

"I know this! My line dies with me tonight!"

"You will see dawn, my queen, I promise you this. When you do, you'll know you and Tiyan belong to me."

His self-assurance floored her. Whatever decisions he'd made, he wouldn't be shaken by anything she said.

I love you.

Speechless, she gazed up at him, unable to shake the heat racing through her blood. He smiled in bitter triumph and then turned.

She watched him go, heart racing.

I love you.

Vara motioned her out from under the tent and led her toward the caravan. He paused in front of her and turned to face the walls.

"Look at them," he spoke quietly. "Your last day as the ruler of Tiyan."

She turned to follow his gaze, saddened by what might be the last look at her kingdom. Guards lined the walls, the symbol of Tiyan's Springs prominent on their shields even from the distance.

With a deep breath, she turned her back on the kingdom, ready for the dark fate Memon intended for her. She took a step toward the wooden wagon.

Fire exploded in her gullet as an arrow pierced her from behind. She gasped and dropped, crying out when the second arrow tore into her. The demon within her thrashed and darted to the first wound, then the second, trying to heal both.

A third arrow drove her unconscious, and she slumped, unaware of Vara catching her.

CHAPTER NINE

Excerpt from *The Book of the Damned*,
Ninth Warlord of Tiyan

The demon must die with me. I have decided this. I killed my cousin when he tried to act against my daughter so long ago and replaced him with a man I trust with all I have. He will guide her when I am gone. I forbade her from learning to read, so she never learned of the demon.

I feel my madness coming. The demon has its eye on my Rissa. I know if I am too weak to destroy it, it will kill them both when it tries to take her, for no female is meant to be the Warlord of Tiyan.

*In the end, Tiyan will survive, even if my line dies with my daughter.
Tiyan, above all else.*

"Forgive me," he whispered as she fell.

Taran lowered the bow, ignoring the stunned look on the faces of the wall guards on either side of him. He felt each arrow as if it punctured his body instead of hers. Each shot made him doubt more what he did, until his hands shook as the last arrow flew.

She would die before the moon rose. If he was wrong, he'd killed her. If he was right, he'd saved her. In either case, he'd just caused her pain he'd never want to feel.

He was madder than she was to think killing someone would save them!

He returned the bow to the nearest guard. Vara would do as he asked and saw the ends off the poison-tipped arrows, claim she'd fallen ill, and hide her body in the wagon until it was time to act. Memon's arrogance allowed him to enter the meadow without his men. He'd entered the city with the men he brought - his personal guard - and left only Vara with the queen.

Taran strode away, turmoil making his gut clench. He looked in the direction of the Springs, unable to see them but calmed to know they were there. Hilden awaited him.

"Is everyone in place for this evening?"

"Yes. You would wait to seal him in the city?" Hilden asked.

"You must trust me. Take this to Vara, now."

He handed the warrior a bladder of the woman's blood, the last one from the wardrobe. Hilden's frown deepened, but he accepted it and hurried away, sensing the urgency.

Taran wiped the sweat from his brow and blew out a breath.

He'd meant what he said. He didn't want Tiyan without her. She looked better than when he'd last seen her. He wondered if the demon had taken her as it had Memon, who looked well but whose skin was cold as death.

He didn't dare cross the divide between them, not when he'd known he was about to kill her. Even so, he couldn't help the longing he felt when he'd seen her, vulnerable, defeated, alone.

He smiled, enjoying the shocked look on her face when he'd told her he loved her. For once, the warlord of Tiyan didn't have the upper hand! The vision of her dropping beneath his arrows replaced it, and he clenched his jaw.

He struck off toward the hold at the center of the city, where Memon would be. No matter what he felt, he couldn't hesitate to execute his plan.

"It's as beautiful as the stories." Memon's voice greeted him as he entered the hold.

He lifted the eye-band, unsettled at seeing the possessed king in Tiyan's throne. Tiyan warriors looked on in quiet anger while Memon's warriors explored the chamber in fascination.

"The old ones say this chamber was built ages before man. Its walls are carved from the cliffs," Memon continued. "Sacred ground of the gods."

"The gods have long since forgotten any of us," Taran answered, glancing around the round chamber.

Memon chuckled and rose, approaching.

"You've given me the greatest honor any man ever has," he said.

Taran gazed into the inky black eyes, ignoring the urge to look as the creature slithered beneath the skin on Memon's neck. The warrior-king patted his shoulder and turned to look over the chamber again.

"What will you do with Tiyan?" Taran asked.

"Make it the seat of my kingdom."

You'll destroy it as you did Landis!

"And me? Will I have some position of honor in your armies?" he forced himself to ask.

"Whatever position you desire, my loyal Taran. You can rule Landis in my place, if it please you."

Vara froze mid-step as he entered. Taran glanced at him.

"You honor me, my king," he murmured.

"What of me, Father?" Vara demanded. "What shall I rule?"

"Taran is more of a son than you've ever been. What have you ever brought me?"

Vara flushed. Taran gave him a warning look, and the man took his place with his father's guard, silent.

"Show me my home, Taran," Memon ordered, starting up the stairs.

"As you wish, my king," he responded with another look at Vara.

He trailed Memon up the stairs and down the main corridor, watching as Memon paused to take in ancient tapestries and evaluate gilded ornaments.

"I noticed Sirian isn't here," Memon said. "Where is he?"

"In the dungeon."

"Why?"

"He has his own plans for Tiyan."

Memon faced him, and Taran met the dark gaze.

"Still, he's been loyal to me," Memon said.

"Sirian is loyal to no man, my king. Of few things I am certain, and this is one."

"Why do you say so?"

"He wants Tiyan for himself."

"And you didn't?"

"My king, I've given you the city, haven't I?"

"I want him freed. I will decide for myself where his loyalty is."

Taran bit his tongue, wanting more than anything to refuse.

"As you desire, my king," he said instead. "He'll attend you at the feast this evening."

"Vara, take my new mate to the slave's chamber and have her bathed. I want her ready for this eve," Memon ordered. "Place four guards with her, lest she or one of her people try to free her. When the moon is at its highest, see that she's brought to me in the great hall for the ceremony."

"Yes, Father," came the tight response.

"At last, Tiyan, you're mine," Memon said softly, pausing to look out a window into the wide, silent streets of the city.

Taran followed his gaze. The people of Tiyan were gathered on the north side of the city, near the forest. If his plan failed, he'd send the remaining members of the army with the people north, until they met Dierdirien's armies.

If he failed, the most they could hope for was mercy in another kingdom.

Memon inspected the hold and the city until late afternoon, when the scent of roasting meat wafted from the massive kitchens behind the hold through the city. Taran trailed him and his personal guard, answering questions dutifully.

He grew more uneasy as the afternoon progressed. Whether due to his anger or his concern for Rissa, Vara didn't return. More Landis warriors rode through the gates to explore the city. Vara didn't send word, and only pages ran between their group and the main hold or Memon's armies. Even Hilden was gone.

With the sun close to the horizon, Memon finally returned to the hold. Taran left him for the dungeon, only to find Sirian was already gone.

Cursing, he went to the wall overlooking the meadow and spotted Vara atop his horse, awaiting his signal at the edge of the forest. Relieved, he snatched a torch and waved it thrice, until Vara wheeled and disappeared into the forest.

He ached to know how Rissa was but feared even sending a page, lest Memon's men grow suspicious. Instead, he returned to the bedchamber and breathed deeply, calmed by her scent.

"My lord?"

The messenger's voice was muffled by the door. He swung it open, and the youth bowed.

"Memon requires your attendance in the great hall."

Leery of the madman's summons, he followed the page to the round chamber. Servants scurried to prepare it for the feast while Memon sat atop his throne, Sirian before him.

Taran's gait slowed as he approached, dread sinking into his stomach. Sirian appeared gaunt from his stay in the dungeon but otherwise clean and well-dressed.

"My king," he said with a bow, ignoring the silver-haired man.

"My two trusted advisors, neither of whom trusts the other," Memon said, entertained. "Both of you have proven your loyalty. Tiyan wouldn't be mine without you."

"Tis my honor, my king," Sirian said with a pretty bow.

"Tonight, I take the warlord of Tiyan as my mate. Her blood joined with mine will make the other kingdoms fall at my feet!"

"You will be great indeed, my king," Sirian agreed.

Taran said nothing. Sirian's knowledge of what happened when two demons possessed one host was not one he would dare share.

But Sirian was free, which meant whatever his plan was, he would soon have a chance to act. Hilden appeared among the servants, and Taran waved him over.

"My king, Vara sends word: the water isn't working," Hilden whispered.

Rissa was dying too fast.

"What of Dierdirien's warriors?"

"Soon, but not yet."

Taran cursed and glanced around, catching sight of Sirian.

"Keep an eye on Sirian. I don't know what he's plotting, but he's dangerous. When the time comes, strike him down," he instructed. "I must see Vara."

Hilden bowed, and Taran turned to Memon.

"My king, I must attend to the preparations."

Memon waved him away, and Sirian inched closer to the king with a small smile. Despite his foreboding, he left the chamber and sent word for Vara to meet him at the main gate.

He paced until the sun dipped below the horizon. Vara came, blood on his clothing. His green eyes flashed as he flung himself from the horse.

"Whatever it is you wait for, you cannot wait much longer!" he hissed.

"We don't have the warriors - -"

"Taran, she'll die before the last of the light fades from the sky!"

Taran was silent, struck by the words. He looked around, torn. If his plan failed...

"The southern wall is still too weak. We need more men and more time!" he said finally. "Memon's armies will know as soon as the gate lowers!"

"You forget, I command them in the absence of my father and his most trusted warriors."

"Are they with him here?"

"They're with the armies. I'll send them forward for the feast."

"Do it, and bring her to the dungeon!"

Vara nodded and vaulted atop his horse, wheeling it to face him.

"You can expect a signal soon, brother," he said. He slapped his horse on the rump and bolted.

Taran watched him and rubbed the back of his neck, squinting at the lightened sky near the sunset. Thus far, few things were going as planned!

He waited until Vara disappeared into the forest before turning.

Sirian stood behind him, trailed by Hilden.

"Have you considered my offer?" Sirian asked.

"What offer?"

"The one to save her life."

"I don't need you, Sirian. When this is done, you'll be dead!"

He stalked away with a look at Hilden, whose hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

Taran returned to the great hall. Torches blazed, and rich food began to appear on long tables. Memon presided over all before him, at times as still as the statues lining the halls and at times barking orders for more wine or shouting at servants who placed food wrong on the tables.

Avoiding the possessed king, Taran took his place directing the great hall's activities. Sirian didn't return, but Hilden rushed in soon after darkness overtook the skies. The old warrior was sweating, the glow of battle lust in his gaze.

"My king, he saw Vara bring - -"

"Did you kill him?"

"He's in the dungeon."

Taran glanced at Memon, who was frozen once again as he communicated silently with the demon.

"Stay here," he said.

Hilden nodded, his eyes darting around the chamber before settling on the throne.

Anger crossed his features.

"Soon, Hilden, I swear it," Taran said with a reassuring squeeze of the warrior's arm.

Hilden nodded brusquely.

He left through the servant's door and rushed through the hold to the dungeon. He paused in the doorway to allow a familiar shudder to pass before stepping into the brightly lit antechamber. The cell holding Sirian was closed.

"The more I think, the worse your plan," Vara grunted from the opened cell.

Taran crossed the chamber, fearful of what he'd see.

Rissa lay pale and unconscious on the earthen floor, her clothing and hair matted with blood. The demon rippled her skin, pacing frantically. The bladder of her blood lay empty beside her body. Her breathing was ragged.

His chest tightened as he looked upon her battered body. Vara carefully tied a rope beneath her arms and cinched it tight enough to wring blood from the wet clothing. Taran flinched, hands clenching and unclenching as he tried not to reach out to her, to grab her and run to the Springs.

"Are you certain this will work?" Vara asked as he straightened.

"I'm not certain of anything," Taran replied.

Except she must live.

He knelt beside her and touched her face. Her body was warm, unlike Memon's, her face contorted in pain even in sleep. The demon lunged upwards at him, and he withdrew, horrified.

Tiyan, above all else.

How the warlords ever thought this creature would save them...

"Fools!"

"Aye, we are," Vara agreed.

"Then we are in the right kingdom!" he snapped, and stood.

"We need to act soon," the green-eyed prince urged again.

"Come."

They emerged from the dungeon and returned to the banquet hall, where a messenger stood beside Memon. Taran's sharp gaze fell to Hilden, who was frowning.

No one was supposed to move in or out of the city once Memon's advisors entered. By the dusty clothing and sweating messenger, he was newly arrived.

Memon looked up, and Taran forced himself to approach.

He signaled to Hilden, who disappeared. Vara pretended not to notice the look Memon gave him and remained at the door before he, too, left.

Taran bowed. Memon waved the messenger away.

"The warlord of Tiyan is gone," Memon said, rising. "We will feast on the morrow. Tonight, we ride to the forest to find her."

Taran followed his quick pace toward the door, watching as the advisors rose from their seats at the tables to join their master.

He needed to keep Memon in the city!

"My king, maybe Sirian knows where she is."

"You think he's betrayed me?"

"He's not here, and as I warned you, he's not loyal to you."

"Where is he?"

"He knows the city better than anyone. He could hide right here then close the gates when you rode out."

Memon studied him with a frown. Taran kept his gaze steady, his heart pounding. The demon peered out at him, as if trying to judge whether or not he lied.

"At times, I doubt either of you are loyal to me."

The words made his gut twist.

"Before the end of the night, there will be a test for you to prove your loyalty."

"As you desire, my king," he said with a low bow.

"For now, we must find Sirian. Send me men who know this city as well as he does."

Taran escaped before the madman changed his mind. He motioned to several of the older servants and gave them instructions to help Memon's party search the city.

Hilden reappeared with a nod. Taran watched Memon's men depart the great hall, leaving him alone with two of his personal guard. Memon seated himself at a table and began to eat.

"Does the food please you, my king?" he asked, standing like an obedient servant beside the madman.

"It does," Memon said through a full mouth. "Sit."

Taran obeyed but didn't eat, his eyes darting around the great hall.

"I remember sending you to the catacombs."

His gaze snapped to the madman.

"You were but a child. You must have been very strong to survive all those years."

"Yes, my king," he said in a hushed tone. "I learned to survive where no one else can."

"I've thrown many a man down the catacombs, and none have ever returned. How did you eat? What did you drink?"

Taran cleared his throat before saying through gritted teeth, "There are animals and plants that dwell only in darkness, and an underwater river that almost drowned me when I found it."

"The plants were grown from the remains of my forefathers?"

"I don't know, my king. He never told me, and I never asked."

"Who?"

Taran bit his tongue, wishing he'd paid more attention to his words and less to the memories.

"An old man who'd been there for many years."

"So there was another survivor."

"Yes, my king."

"Did this old man tell you how he wronged me?"

"No, my king."

"I remember your people. I don't remember what made me take mercy on you and none of them."

"Vara," he whispered.

"Ah, yes, Vara. He was a lonely child, about your age. Old enough to defy me every chance he had. He amused me. He pulled you out of the catacombs as well."

"My king, if I may ask, why did you kill all those who came with me from across the sea?"

Memon was quiet for a moment, as if consulting the demon or his own memories. Taran waited on edge, fury and sorrow fresh within him. The man before him had taken everything from him once; he wouldn't let him do it again!

"They refused to obey me," the madman said at last. "It was wise of me to send you to the catacombs instead of kill you. Look at all you've done for me!"

Taran ducked his head to prevent demon or madman from seeing the hatred in his eyes. He had hoped there was more to Memon's reasoning, and realized bitterly there never could be with a man like this one!

"If it please you, my king, I will send messengers to your advisors for word on Sirian."

"Go."

Taran fled. He waited until he reached the street outside and let loose a roar of emotion. His body ached with repressed memories and disgust. He planted his hands on his hips and looked upward, cursing the gods in silence.

"My boy, you need to keep your thoughts straight," Hilden warned gently. "Don't be distracted by him or even your own past."

"It's not so easy, old man," he grated.

"No, it's not, but you're strong, and the lives of those you care about depend upon you."

He wiped his face, calmed by the reminder. The moon peered over the walls of the city, and he squinted toward it.

"The gates are closed, and I sent warriors after the advisors. They'll be contained or killed if they fight," Hilden said. "Now it's up to you and Vara."

"And you, my friend. I depend upon you as much as Vara."

"I'm honored, my king."

Taran smiled tightly as the grizzled warrior bowed, recalling how much had changed since he first lay eyes on the man. It felt like long ago he'd entered Tiyan at Memon's orders, never knowing where he'd end up. With a quick look around, he breathed another calming breath and then ran to the hold.

"My king!" he bellowed, bursting into the chamber. "My king, we've found Sirian with the warlord, as I warned you! We threw them in the dungeon. She's badly injured - - she'll soon be dead!"

Memon snapped into action, moving across the chamber with inhuman speed.

"Where is she?" the demon demanded through his voice.

"Come, I'll take you to her!"

Taran tore out of the great hall, followed closely by the madman, whose agitated demon swam visibly beneath his skin.

Hilden caught up to them as they reached the dungeon, where Vara was opening the iron door to the cell containing Sirian.

"Traitor!" Memon snarled.

A black flash of magic flew from him to Sirian, and the silver-haired man smashed into the back wall. He dropped and grabbed the back of his skull, where blood poured free.

"My king!" he gasped. "Don't listen to them! I've done nothing to harm you, ever!"

Memon ignored him, darting into the cell where the unconscious Rissa lay. Taran's skin crawled with the charge of magic in the confined chamber, and he watched Memon bend over Rissa.

The demon's hand pierced Memon's, and olive skin gave way to black talons.

Vara and Hilden were silent, as stricken as he was as the demon freed itself from Memon's body enough to reach for Rissa.

"My king, if you join with her, you will die!" Sirian shouted.

Taran's attention snapped to the man, and he withdrew the bow at this back. Sirian staggered to his feet, holding his head.

"Listen to me, my king! It is part of the legend!"

Memon hesitated.

The demon within Rissa was panicked, rippling her skin as it fled as far from Memon as possible.

"Traitor!" Taran shouted at Sirian. "My king, I told you of his lies! He wants Tiyan for his own!"

Vara hurried to close the iron door while Hilden rushed to the cell holding Memon.

Memon slashed Rissa's arm with his demon's talons, and the demon within her rippled her body as it moved to avoid the madman. Memon tossed his head back, roaring in the demon's inhuman voice,

"Come. To. Me!"

Taran drew the bow back and released the arrow, watching it pierce the unconscious woman's chest. Her body seized, then fell limp. According to the *Book of the Damned*, the demon would never release her while alive. If its host died, it would be forced out. The demon within her let out a screech loud enough for the three men to cover their ears while Memon roared again.

"Come. To. Me!"

Talons pierced Rissa's stomach as Memon plunged his hand into her body, withdrawing a black creature the size of its arm that pulsed and writhed. He dropped the unconscious warlord and shoved the black creature into his mouth.

"Now!" Taran shouted.

Vara pulled her body towards him until she cleared the cell then lifted her. He dropped the portcullis and shoved the lever to turn the iron gate. Memon, obsessed with the writhing creature, unhinged his jaw and swallowed it slowly, his eyes closed.

Taran snatched Rissa's bloodied body and backpedaled. Darkness swept through the chamber as Memon finished off the demon. The iron gate closed and then buckled as the furious demon beat against it.

"Get out!" Hilden shouted, shoving them toward the door.

Heart racing, Taran went. They slammed and barred the door behind them. The creature trapped within roared loud enough to shake the door.

"Taran, Vara, to the Springs!" Hilden barked, all but tearing the bow from Taran's shoulder. The warrior drew an arrow and aimed at the door while the others escaped.

Her broken body clenched in his arms, Taran staggered up the stairs and raced through the hold, shouting at people who got in his way. The world slowed around him as her blood streamed down his body.

He didn't think he'd make it. He ran, the fury of his footsteps drowned out by ragged breathing. He thought of nothing but saving her, of looking again into her teal eyes.

Gods, he would live an age with her scorn if it meant she were alive!

He stumbled, his body straining beneath her weight and his speed. The moon was too bright for his eyes, and the cold ocean breeze burned his lungs.

At last, he arrived. He climbed into the low, wide fountain. Cold water slowed his feet and sent shivers through him. Four steps in, the stone bottom dropped out from under him, and he all but dropped her into the depths of the Springs. He snatched her before she went under and dragged her back to the shallow waters, carefully maneuvering her upper body onto the small boulder Hilden had placed earlier. Her body remained submerged while her head and shoulders were free.

"Move...move it!" he shouted to the two guards, motioning to the barrel.

They were slow to respond, and he sloshed free, wrestling the barrel to the Springs. Yanking off the top, he pushed it over with a yell, until the contents turned the clear waters black in the moonlight.

Vara reached him, panting.

"Is it working?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Taran replied, buckled over.

"I brought the two men I trust most. They'll protect her, as long as it takes."

"Have them send word if anything happens," he ordered.

"We can't stay, brother! I must...make it to the armies," Vara said.

"I go to the walls."

With reluctance, Taran trotted away in the direction of the walls. He paused once to give a long look over his shoulder at the still body propped in the Springs. Fear made his insides cold. Vara snatched a horse and raced through a doorway in the eastern wall toward the glowing forest.

Taran left. He waited until he was free of the meadow before raising two torches above his head. Shadows rose from the pits littering the meadow as men spilled out of hiding into the meadow. The gates of Tiyan opened enough for some of the men to dash through the hold from the north, south, and east.

He watched as fights broke out throughout the city. Fires ignited near the south gate as his men attacked groups of Memon's advisors and the warriors that had been invited into the hold for the feast.

Memon's allies attacked from the south. Taran signaled the archers first, then watched as Tiyan's warriors melted from the meadow to the south side of the city. Battle erupted to the north, and the hidden Dierdirien warriors erupted from the forest to challenge Memon's allies.

To the east, all was quiet. Taran's gaze went as often there as it did toward the Springs, but none of Landis's men challenged Vara to join the battle.

The battles inside and outside the walls raged throughout the night, quieting only at dawn, when sunlight illuminated the destruction.

The forest to the north was afire, the dead strewn around the north and south walls. Inside the city, Tiyan's men had wiped out all followers of Memon and begun to stack the bodies near the cliff. At long last, Vara appeared from the forest, barreling toward the city.

Dismayed by the amount of fallen bodies wearing Tiyan's colors, Taran overlooked the messenger from the north the first time until he'd reached the walls.

Vara met him as he left the top of the wall.

"Dierdirien sent a messenger! They defeated the armies fleeing north," Vara said. "My army is on its way home!"

"Invite Dierdirien in, brother. I go to the Springs."

"You haven't gone?"

Taran held his gaze, and Vara nodded in deference before wheeling the horse toward the northern wall.

Afraid of what he'd find, Taran strode to the center of the city. The adrenaline from the night still hummed in his blood., Blood had turned the waters maroon.

The two guards and Rissa's body were gone.

His heart dropped to his feet, and he felt sick. He knelt beside the bloody Springs, resting his head against the cool stone. His stomach lurched, but he forced himself to calm. For a long moment, he lost track of time, instead lost in his thoughts.

He didn't want Tiyan without her.

"My king."

Hilden's gruff voice was gentle.

"I'm all right, Hilden," he managed. "Where is she?"

Hilden glanced at the bloody waters of the Springs.

"I had them take her away."

"Is she alive?" he asked quickly.

"The Springs healed her wounds, but she did not awaken from death. Vara's men took her away to protect her from the fighting," Hilden explained. "My king, you need to see this."

Taran tied the band around his eyes, as much to protect them from the sun as hide the tears in his eyes. If she lived, Hilden wouldn't look as grim as he did. He followed Hilden silently through the hold to the dungeon, drawing his sword as they neared the door.

Hilden pushed the door open.

Both cell doors had exploded off the cells and lay crumpled across the room. Memon's lifeless body was wedged between the bars of one cell.

The other was empty.

"Sirian," he breathed.

"I looked everywhere. He's gone."

Taran stood over Memon's body, his gaze taking in the blood splattered in both cells.

"The demons, too," Hilden said in a hushed tone. "Forgive me, my king. They escaped."

"But to where?" Taran asked, looking around.

"I don't know."

"Taran!"

Vara's voice jarred them both.

"The prince of Dierdirien himself has come! Quickly, brother!"

Taran looked around again.

"Hilden, I want this chamber sealed forever, its contents burned," he ordered.

"Aye, my king," Hilden agreed in a hushed tone.

His gaze dropped to his blood-soaked clothing and then lingered where her body had been. For all his careful planning, he'd killed what mattered most. Seeing the look on his face, the grizzled warrior's voice grew fatherly.

"Meet Dierdirien then go to your chamber and rest."

Silent, he trailed Hilden out of the dungeon and barred the door.

The great hall was filled with Tiyan warriors, Vara's men, and Dierdirien's warriors. Most crowded around banquet tables still laden with foods from the night.

Hilden led him across the hall to a smaller group of men. Vara spoke off to the side with a warrior-like man in plain clothing of earthy colors. His blond hair was braided down his back, his grey eyes deep set. The silver lined clothing marked him a man of rank, and he wore a round pendant with the seal of Dierdirien: two mountains and a stream. Taran quickly assessed he was the prince despite his subdued appearance.

Vara motioned him over. He forced himself to go.

"Taran, Warlord of Tiyan. Jaylon, Prince of Dierdirien," Vara said.

"An honor to support our long-time ally," Jaylon said with a bow. "I was pained to hear of Rissa's death. Be assured we have always been and will always be an ally of Tiyan."

The mention of Rissa's death disturbed him. He felt himself sink into his thoughts but forced himself to respond.

"I am honored and grateful. You saved Tiyan."

At his flat tone, the prince glanced at Vara.

"Rissa was his mate," Vara explained. "There are few warriors as strong as she was."

"This I know to be true," Jaylon agreed. "I had hoped to meet her, but I am proud to meet her mate."

Taran didn't respond. He felt the pressure of the underground again, as if the world was closing in on him. Vara studied him.

"We enter a new era of peace," Jaylon said with some satisfaction. "I will not be offended if you choose to spend the day in mourning, my friend. Vara will take care of me, I'm certain."

Though he knew he should stay and perform his role as warlord, no part of him was willing. Jaylon bowed to him again, and Vara took the Dierdirien prince's arm, leading him away.

Taran watched them for a long moment before reminding himself of his surroundings. Wearied, saddened, he retreated to his bedchamber.

Her eyelids were heavy, her body even heavier. She groaned, comfortable in her familiar bed yet aching all over. Her chamber smelled of jasmine, her scrubbed body of flower musk. Dawn drenched the chamber in soft yellow.

Fresh bread sat on the table near her bed, its scent making her stomach demand to be sated.

She didn't remember falling asleep here! She remembered...

Taran in the meadow...arrows...red and black dancing across her eyelids...drowning...Hilden pulling her from the Springs...

She snapped up in bed and ran her hands frantically over her body. She'd been dead! Violent scars marred her torso and arms. She shuddered, grateful she didn't remember what happened, or why she awoke in a bath of her own blood in the Springs.

Plagued by the ill-formed memories, she looked at the scars lining her arms before stretching for the knife beside the bread. It slipped from her grip and scratched her as it tumbled.

Maroon bubbled from her finger. The black ribbon of the demon was gone.

Her eyes blurred but she forced tears away, tossing off the blankets. Her first step drove her to her knees. Mesmerized, she stared at the blood dripping down her palm and rubbed her chest.

The demon was gone! Her chest was neither frozen nor heavy from the demon, her blood no longer tainted by black!

He will find a way to save you.

Her heart swelled with hope and happiness.

For the first time since the demon had claimed her at ten summers, she was *alive!*

Taran.

She blinked away tears and forced herself to her feet. Too weak to go far, she settled on the edge of the bed with some frustration.

Her gaze fell to the book on the mantle above the hearth. Its covers were loose, the pages within protruding at odd angles.

Fury filled her as she recalled her father gifting her the book, not long before she killed him.

You're too weak for Tiyan. So be it. This book will do what you cannot and break our curse.

And yet the curse he'd feared was broken!

She rose and staggered to the hearth, sagging to the floor again with the book clenched in her hands. In his last years, he'd cared more for the book than for her!

Opening it, she found the wooden covers rough and the symbols foreign. Darkness clung to the book, as if its pages contained traces of the demon itself.

She'd always resented it, suspecting it held the information she needed to defeat the curse. This day, it looked old and worn, like a tunic worn one summer too many.

Whatever secrets it held, they were as weak as the pages that turned to dust at the corners.

She wondered what she'd ever feared or loathed about the harmless, ill-made book. She looked from it to the fire, then tossed it. The flames swallowed it.

"I planned to do the same."

She turned at his voice, blood quickening.

The new warlord of Tiyan stood tall and strong. He closed the door and crossed to her, kneeling in front of her. Her heart hammered in her ears, her eyes watering once more.

"You saved Tiyan," she whispered.

"I cared only for you."

He reached for her with a grubby hand, looked at it, and dropped it. She cupped his face with her hands. The glow at the back of his gaze matched the feeling in her breast, and she touched her lips to his. He rested his forehead against hers, and they breathed the same air.

"You saved me, my Taran."

"Nay, my queen, you saved me," he replied hoarsely. "I had nothing, and you gave me everything."

Her emotions soared even higher at his words, until her tears overflowed. She fluttered butterfly kisses across his face, thrilled at the heat and strength of his body so near hers. Disregarding his dirty clothing and skin, he snatched her in a bear hug.

She half laughed, half sobbed in response. There was nowhere else she ever wanted to be! She breathed him in, comforted by the scent of his strength.

"I love you, Taran," she said. "But you can't have Tiyan."

He laughed.

"Tiyan is mine, and so are you, my queen!" he exclaimed. "I've learned your secrets well enough not to fall for your tricks again!"

"Very well," she said. "Tiyan is *ours*."

"Foolish woman! Today, an age of peace begins."

He squeezed her harder, and she opened her eyes, watching the forsaken book burn. Dark memories lingered like smoke after a fire.

She raised her bloodied hand.

The demon was gone from Tiyan forever.

Tiyan and Taran, above all else.

EPILOGUE

Sirian staggered through the forest, agony tearing through him as he tripped and landed hard. The demons swam within him, fighting for control of his body. They made him punch himself and smash his head against a tree. He was bloodied and bruised from their battle inside him. He sobbed as he'd never done before.

They drove him to his feet, and he ran, his body torn apart from within. He didn't see his path or notice the brambles snagging his clothing. As dawn broke across the sky, the elder demon who possessed Memon spoke to him.

I will make you great, Sirian.

"Y...yes," Sirian whispered, dropping to his knees again.

I will give you everything.

"Everything."

A different kind of fire arose within him. The agony was gone, replaced by sudden strength and energy. He stood and marveled at himself, thrilled by the power running through him. The stronger demon stretched within him to test its bonds while the other demon cowered.

"Vengeance," he said.

In time. But now, the she-demon needs a host.

Sirian straightened his clothing and looked around, towards the mountains in the north and Dierdirien's stronghold. Rage flooded him as he realized those who betrayed him - and Memon - had come as much from the north as from Tiyan. He knew well Tiyan would sway Memon's allies now that the King of Landis was dead. Taran would not be easy to defeat in battle, and Vara would help him protect Tiyan. No, he couldn't attack Tiyan. The kingdom would be expecting him.

Dierdirien wouldn't.

The she-demon will be my mate. Find her a host!

The command drove him to his knees, and he grappled with the idea of sharing power with a demon. He'd waited for years to seize control of Tiyan.

For all his sacrifice and devotion to one foolish Tiyan Warlord after another, he had nothing. But the demon would give him everything he'd ever wanted.

"Mate first," he promised. "Then Dierdirien."