



Hunters (Spirit Blade Part 1)

Part 1 of 5

Nadia wants no part of the shevoru, the dark blade that has gained power by possessing the souls of raging half-bloods and monsters she has killed. Since learning the secret of the dagger and the spell that the sorcerers taught her to use, she has freed herself from its influence. She is finally ready to make the journey to rid the world of its evil by using the power of an ancient device.

The Adept leaders desire the power of the dagger to serve their purposes, but the messenger they sent to retrieve it from Nadia is the last person she wants to see...

SPIRIT BLADE
Novel Serial
Part 1 – Hunters

By

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More to come!

PART 1 – HUNTERS

"It is my hope that one day those adept at dispiriting the beasts may serve to fulfill a higher purpose, that generation after generation, their gifts prove bountiful as their race. In this new capability to overpower the harshest natter, they will open a gate to the survival of their kind and potentially remove the mistakes of those too ignorant to see the dangers of their ambitious experiments. It is with a full heart that I will do all I can to guide them to use this developed power as a means to an ends to restore the bounty that was once Derandria..."

– Lady Te'Mea's translated address to the conclave *Durani thar Orokan*

Prologue

The symbols glowed beneath her finger on the rim of the bowl. Del'Aru watched in wide-eyed fascination at the magic awakening on the ancient object, one of many magic-infused artifacts left after the disappearance of the Old Ones, the ancient race that once dominated Derandria. There, in the ruins of one of the old, hidden studies, she had revived the Vessel of Ukalov.

"Treak!" she called. The goblin would want to see the results of her efforts to reveal the magic of the large bowl. She was near, her scent strong yet amid the musty shelves of the old study.

From around a desk came the rapid patter of goblin feet. The bald green head bobbed in the faint light over the level of the desk top, with fanlike ears that pointed up along the dome of the head. Treak stood no taller than Del'Aru's hip but reached her side in a blink.

In her simple long shirt belted at the waist with a vest keeping it snug around her scrawny body, the goblin climbed onto the table on which the vessel sat. Large dark eyes widened in fascination.

Del'Aru removed her finger from the brim of the silver bowl and the symbols faded. The bowl returned to its normal, tarnished state. "Incredible."

The goblin nodded agreement, a smile revealing pointed teeth in her mouth.

"I can't believe it was hiding in plain sight." Del'Aru turned her eyes to the book on the table next to the bowl and flipped the page to drawings of the vessel and its many symbols in the language she was just beginning to understand.

"It would seem the Old Ones knew how to hide their most precious knowledge." She looked about at the dusty study with its walls of books, the tables of artifacts with the sediment of time coating them, and, in the center, a statue of three exquisite women holding rings slanted on tangents to each other around a wide center.

A tug on her brown sleeve—her scales transformed into clothes to protect and warm her human form—pulled Del'Aru's eyes back to the goblin. The quick run of gestures had her nodding in agreement. Although goblins couldn't speak in the presence of demonlords, Treak and she had worked out a system over their years of friendship.

"Yes, they didn't want it falling into the wrong hands. But they can't keep their secrets forever. I am immortal, and if it takes an eternity to solve the mysteries of the Old Ones, then that's what it'll be. I won't give up, Treak. I need to know what my dreams mean."

Another series of gestures left her puzzled while the goblin hopped from the desk and ran across the dusty floor to one of the shelves. Treak scurried up the ladder to pull out several scrolls of parchment. With them tucked under her arm, she pressed her bare feet on the side of the ladder and slid down with a squeak of skin on metal.

Del'Aru had left the goblin to the lighter items, although Treak could move the larger books with magic. But it didn't feel right to leave the goblin to such tasks to strain her when Del'Aru was more than capable.

Del'Aru joined Treak at the second of the two desks, where the goblin unrolled the old parchments slowly. The first appeared to be a list of names, demonlord names of various clans, including her own Del'Rayk, but one that hadn't been heard from in hundreds of years and was

probably dead; demonlords might be immortal, but they could be killed by other demonlords. The clans had warred and fought for territory for over two thousand years off and on. The text above the names indicated an agreement of guardianship of the First Ones, whatever that meant.

"First of what?" she questioned aloud. Some of the names rang familiar, even chillingly familiar, like Te'Mea, the demonlord who organized the first Adepts, humans with the power to dispirit lesser demons but not demonlords. Her blood ran cold at the realization that she had heard recent rumors of some of the demonlords on that list since leaving her clan's self-imposed isolation from the world—some were still alive. What were they the first of?

"Why didn't you show me this sooner?"

Treak blinked and pointed at the vessel.

"You can interrupt me."

Treak folded her arms in an impatient look.

"All right. So, I don't like to be disturbed, but this is important." Far more important than the vessel.

The goblin opened her arms and waved as if to include the entire study.

Del'Aru huffed. "So, it's all important. I understand. But do you know what this means?" She lifted the paper, studying the names, memorizing them. "If these are the first demonlords, they might have known the Old Ones, know what all this means, what happened and why I'm having nightmares about it. And maybe why they are called the 'First Ones' and how they got here. This is the key to unlocking the secrets, Treak. This is what I've been searching for, and I know where the closest one might be."

Treak smiled and gave a nod.

"Ready to fly?"

The goblin paled and her ears drooped. *Now?* She signed the word.

"I can't risk waiting. I promise not to play this time."

Treak rolled her eyes and headed for the door of the study. With a hint of magic, Del'Aru sent the parchment back to its place with the other scrolls, where it would remain hidden like the study. Her research of the Old Ones, the first sentient race considered to have inhabited their world and disappeared, would go more quickly if she could find one of these First Ones, these Guardians, to advise her. Seeing monsters drawn in their books that she had dreamed about had been only the beginning of the end. She was much closer now to learning what it meant.

Excitement coursed through her. She wanted to play in flight, but she had promised Treak.

Chapter 1

Nadia dared not blink. The half-blood was good, maintaining control in a fight instead of losing control in the blood rage. Rather, Je'Surana was sharp and focused, even in the use of her claws and teeth. Few half-bloods could fight without the killing instinct taking over. Nadia had only known one other, but he didn't have the advantage that Je'Surana did.

As regrets crept into her heart threatening to distract her, she shook them away.

None too soon. Je'Surana struck, whirling with the speed and agility of her demonlord half.

But Nadia was no ordinary human. An Adept by birth with the demon-controlling *dispirit* power and a full-fledged demon hunter by training, she easily flipped the half-blood over her head.

Je'Surana sprang back to her feet, white and black strands of hair falling loose from the tight tail of hair on her head. Pale blue eyes scalded Nadia and a feral snarl issued from the girl, exposing the growing points of teeth.

This was what Nadia expected. This was the fight she craved to harden her heart from the grief still haunting her five months later.

She would likely lose if the girl succumbed to the blood rage, but she might not. It would test her theory after what happened with Je'Rol at the battle of the Nik'Terek Gate. But that wasn't what she had been asked to do.

Nadia glanced aside to the steward in the shadows of the chamber, the man in the white and black blouse and pants formed from his tiger hide by the power of magic and imagination. He tipped his head.

Exactly what she had expected. He wanted her to challenge the girl, and that's what would happen.

Nadia sprang for the girl, ducked a swipe of Je'Surana's claws, and yanked the dagger from her belt in one motion. She whirled, but the girl leapt over her with the power and grace of her demonlord half.

A quick calculation passed through her head based on the arc of the girl's jump. Nadia whirled and drove the blade into Je'Surana's side.

Pain creased the poor girl's face as blood stained her shirt around the dagger's crossbar. "Nadia..." She stumbled backwards into a pillar at the edge of the fighting floor.

Nadia stood over her, catching her breath and trying not to feel. The training had started out as it had every day for the last four months, slowly building in intensity as the girl displayed ever-improving fighting intuition.

It wasn't fair to her, however, as the man who had requested it refused to allow Je'Surana to use her full power against Nadia. Always winning did little to help Nadia hone her fighting skills. There was no challenge in defeating a young, inexperienced half-blood holding back the blood rage, a remarkable feat to be sure but one which left her vulnerable in some ways.

That had improved when Lord Je'Kaoron ordered Nadia to push Je'Surana to test the limits of her control. As the daughter of a demonlord and an Adept, Je'Surana was the only half-blood with the power to *dispirit* the demon half of her blood. The blood rage could only be sated by the taking of lives as an instinct of the predatorial demonlord side to hunt and kill. Unfortunately, the human side was not strong enough to control the blood rage, which could take over in any

situation of intense emotions. Je'Surana had proven that not all half-bloods were a threat to humans.

"Nadia, please," Je'Surana begged. Teeth and fingers had returned to normal. Pale blue eyes like the royal Je'Gri who fathered her turned aside. "My lord."

Nadia waited, struggling against her desire to pull the dagger from the girl. It should never have happened. Damn him for allowing this! And to his own child!

Lord Je'Kaoron's soft steps stopped at the girl's side, but he made no effort to help her. "Get up."

Nadia blinked, uncertain she had heard right. Didn't he care?

Yes, he did. The flash of a swallow and the twitch of his eye gave it away, yet he maintained his cool composure. "This is but a minor injury for one such as yourself. You're stronger than this. Get up."

Je'Surana's face creased into confusion for only an instant before smoothing into determination in accepting his order. Amid twitches of pain and using the column for support, the girl climbed to her feet. The stain in her shirt grew, spreading down to her waist.

Lord Je'Kaoron made no move to help but stood like a statue watching.

Her back against the pillar, Je'Surana gripped in both hands the dagger handle now dripping blood. Grunting of pain and gasping for breath, she pulled it from her side. Her trembling hands dropped the blade. It clinked an echoing note on the floor, and she pressed her empty hands to the wound. In her weakness, she sank against the pillar.

Nadia clamped her jaw and forced her feet to stay in place against her desire to carry her to the girl's side. While full demonlords could not be injured by any mortal weapons, half-bloods healed quickly from far more severe wounds than what the girl bore.

But Je'Surana had never endured such pain, living a life surrounded by demonlords who accepted her and never having to struggle to survive.

Nadia pushed away the sympathy invading her mind.

"Now, watch and learn." Lord Je'Kaoron turned those cool eyes on Nadia.

A chill raced down her spine as she realized what he intended. The inherited *dispirit* power of Adepts didn't work on demonlords. There was a reason they were the lords and ladies of Derandria; no one was more powerful than the shapeshifting rulers of the world. And now, Nadia had no weapons to defend herself, if it would do any good.

Her heart pounding, she stepped back at his approach into the center of the fighting ring. Light cast down on them from windows high above along one side. Like many of the structures of Acropa Je'Gri, most of it had been carved from the mountainside, and this had only one side facing the sun.

"I'm sorry about Je'Surana," she said.

Lord Je'Kaoron's eyes narrowed slightly, but he said nothing.

Nadia shifted aside, and he followed with a menacing casualness that made the hair at the back of her neck stand up. If he was upset at her stabbing Je'Surana, Nadia would be lucky to survive this encounter if he was truly upset with what she had done to the girl.

Now, she wished she held the dagger of souls. Its darkness had kept her from touching it since returning to Acropa Je'Gri after it took the life but not the spirit of Je'Rol—she hadn't used the spell on him but she hadn't intended to kill him in the end. His death had been an accident for which she had grieved. The dagger had proven successful in inflicting suffering on a demonlord, the only weapon she had ever known to have that ability. In this fight, it might have been her

only chance to win, and she didn't even have that.

Lord Je'Kaoron stalked her around the fighting ring, the soft tap of his steps like the ticking of a clock counting down to her death.

She had never fought demonlords. Rather, she had always shown respect to appease them, hiding her disgust...until she met Lord Je'Kaoron. He wasn't like others, but she had seen him in action and feared even an accident.

His first strike came as a combination of a kick she avoided and a punch that caught her shoulder and sent her stumbling around in time to avoid his next attack.

In a small opening, she hammered her fist into a pressure point on his side. He grunted from the sudden exhalation and took a moment to catch his breath.

"I didn't want to hurt her," Nadia said in the hopes that she could appeal to his sense of decency. Never before had he attacked like this. Rather, he had provided solace after the death of Je'Rol, lying as a tiger all night frequently to watch over her and accompanying her in the gardens. He had stopped her from taking her own life, always there in either form with the weight of his presence.

And he had been the voice of reason to Je'Rekun's plans, carrying secrets and sharing only what Je'Dron wanted his brother to know and setting up Je'Rekun's defeat and Je'Dron's return to power. He opposed the killing of humans, a belief promoted by High Lord Je'Dron through the domain.

But the lethal temper of demonlords was well-realized. Although he now stood in human form, Lord Je'Kaoron was no human. The pale skin and white and black hair tied back from his face were reminder enough of his tiger form. Like High Lord Je'Dron, he was royal Je'Gri, his primary coloring being an almost silvery white with black stripes in his natural tiger form. Like other demonlords, when he transformed into a human, his hide became his clothes in whatever style he chose. Tall and elegant in their human forms, the demonlords had at one time camouflaged themselves to hunt humans as prey.

But they were far superior in many ways.

He attacked with claws that raked her armor.

She spun away and bluffed to catch him again, but where she expected him to be, he was not.

In the instant it took her to realize the truth, she was yanked back against him. An arm clamped around her torso while sharp claws pinched into her throat.

Panic held her frozen and unable to catch her breath.

"My lord—" Her whisper cracked the silence of the hall.

The faint sound of a swallow reached her ears.

"Father, please..."

Slowly, the claws retracted, but the arm around her remained.

In her ear, a barely audible voice said so close that his warm breath blew across her cheek, "We are being watched." His arm loosened around her. Curious to confirm what she suspected, she turned to face him. He stared down at her, but not with the haughty expression of most demonlords when regarding their human subjects. Rather, his face softened to its usual gentle but perplexing expression. She should have trusted that he would not hurt her.

"Thank you, Huntress." He tipped his head and slid past her to return to Je'Surana, whom he scooped up in his arms. She winced and emitted small grunts and gasps from holding her breath in pain.

Uncertain what to say or do—sorry that she had hurt Je'Surana but not daring to interfere

with Je'Kaoron's lesson—Nadia watched him carry the girl away in silence.

From the shadows came the soft ruffle of fabric. Fighting instincts sharpened from the calm descending, and she whirled to search the direction from which the sound had come. "Who's there?"

Shadows shifted beneath an arch between pillars and reached out for the dagger still on the floor.

"You should have struck a hand higher," a man said, his voice familiar. "Punctured lungs, kidneys or liver. It would have been far more effective."

The hooded figure that stepped from the shadows with the dagger held between black-gloved hands stopped at the edge of the fighting floor. The demon-head with the arrows through it on his bracers matched her own, the arrowheads shimmering green from the inlaid *imera* stones. Another demon hunter, and she was pretty certain who it was but wanted to be sure before she knocked him to his back.

"She's half-blood, Huntress." He sneered the title in derision.

He might as well have declared war.

Fury and confidence boiled over to smother her fear. "Kill a half-blood and face the judgment of a demonlord who cares for her? I would think a fellow hunter would realize the death sentence of such an act."

"It is our sworn duty." He approached and held out the dagger to her. "A job hazard we should gladly risk."

"To give the demonlords one more reason to hate us?" She snatched the dagger from between his hands.

He snorted and lifted his face to let the light under his hood. A fuzz of black hair covered his jaw and encircled his lips, masking his face from confirming his identity.

"No, thank you. I would rather not fall in High Lord Je'Dron's disfavor," she said.

"And you are not in disfavor after killing his son Je'Rol, Nadia TuFalan?" His taunting burned like acid through her, exposing old wounds and the hatred stuck to them.

He should never have re-entered her life.

Pretending not to care, she hurried to the bench where she had left a long cloth to wipe away her sweat after the workout. Except instead of herself, she used it to wipe the blood from the dagger, the blood of the naive and loving Je'Surana, whose father could be tempered while being harsh in his lessons.

"You did not return to the temple."

So, they had noticed her absence from the gathering. She was but one of hundreds of Adepts. But she was the only woman who had completed the demon hunter training. Other women turned to the sorcery side of Adept training, a more intellectual pursuit than the physical nature of demon hunting, or they remained as teachers and scholars. As she was the only known woman demon hunter, her absence would stand out.

"I was occupied with the Je'Gri."

"Yes, I see."

The teasing in his voice burned through her. She whirled on him, the dagger at his throat while he made no move to stop her. Rather, he wore a grin that matched the gleam in his eyes beneath the hood. She should slit his throat, but something in his eyes stopped her, as it had long ago, when she had feelings for him, before he betrayed her.

"You see nothing!" she hissed.

He put his palms up in a conciliatory gesture.

Slowly, she lowered the dagger, disliking that he hadn't conceded, which meant that she hadn't yet convinced him that nothing more took place between her and Lord Je'Kaoron. That was what he accused her of, and what she fought within herself.

"Why are you here?" she snapped and returned her attention to the dagger.

"The *Kodre du Noctir Te'Mea* sent me."

Her heart stopped. The council of elders that oversaw both sects had sent someone for her. Not only *someone* but *him*.

"Why?" she asked cautiously.

"They want something, a dagger in your possession."

She stared at the dagger in her hands, but it wasn't the one to which he referred. *Sect du Maistri Te'Mea* had gifted her with a particular dagger and a spell. She hadn't understood its purpose until Lord Je'Kaoron had explained that it stole the souls of its victims, including half-bloods, upon the drawing of blood when the spell was used. She had been told the spell would end the life of anyone once the dagger drew blood, a half-truth. She hadn't noticed the blade growing in power with each half-blood soul and becoming more dangerous. She hadn't known to be aware of it, but since Je'Rol's death, she had noticed the darkness and the relief of not wielding it.

"It's not ready." An excuse only. It had nearly incapacitated a demonlord, something none of their weapons had ever achieved.

"They don't care. They want it."

Nadia sheathed the cleaned dagger at her waist. "I'm not finished with it."

She lied. She wanted nothing to do with it, but if the elders wanted the spirit blade that badly, they must have had a reason, and that reason couldn't be good. For too long, the Adepts of Te'Mea had talked of dethroning the demonlord clans ruling their world. In her training to harness her *dispirit* abilities, she had heard rumors hinting of talismans that might overpower the demonlords. Then, she had been all for it.

Now, after realizing that not all demonlords sought to use humans but, rather, desired to co-exist as beings deserving of the opportunities life afforded, she wasn't sure. She had seen a different side to demonlords and half-bloods in the last few months, flipping everything she had believed on its head. Even Te'Mea, the founder of Adept training, had been a demonlord. Granted, her objective had been to teach humans to protect themselves from swarms of natters, but that couldn't have been her only purpose in training the first sorcerers to use what they could of demonlord magic.

"Can it destroy a demonlord?" he asked.

Nadia hesitated, keeping her back to him to avoid revealing her face and the dread of revealing the truth. She looked about but saw no hint of any of the tigers or humans. "Not yet."

Steps tapped close behind her, and he came around her side to block the light. "Then I will finish the task."

She bristled and straightened, her eyes level with the top of his broad shoulders. Too often, she had to prove herself. Despite her achievements, they never quit questioning her capabilities. "It is mine to command."

A smile curved up his lips, his face shadowed under the hood with the light behind him. Anger boiled up inside her to see that smug expression. How dare he of all people question her! How dare he return after all those years.

"It was your assignment. By order of the *Kodre*—"

"No! It is my *right*. It was a gift of the sorcerers. *Serae* Emon bestowed it upon me as a weapon to defeat all demons. Who are you to take it away?"

He tipped his head, the shadows deepening beneath his hood, which he threw back.

"Kaelen Dormivou..." Hatred burned through her and she did all she could to keep from thrusting the dagger in her hands through his heart. It might not have been the spirit blade, but it would do the job on a human; besides, he had proven he didn't have a soul after what he did to her.

His lips twitched into an almost smile, but those dark eyes revealed a hint of something sad or regretful, as well he should be.

"I have nothing to say to you." Emotions tangled inside her into a confusion of how to react. Rather than give him the satisfaction of seeing it, she turned to leave. The Je'Gri should never have allowed him within the city.

A hand on her arm stopped her not a step away, but a spark of anger gave her the strength to yank it from his grasp. "Do not touch me," she growled and spun away.

He grabbed her again and pulled her near. "Listen to me, Nadia," he said in a low voice. In an ancient tongue taught only to Adepts from the book of Kirian, he said, {"Forget us. The *Kodre* seemed...anxious to get that blade. Several others were presented at the gathering but none satisfied them. Yours is the last not examined."}

She pulled her arm away, afraid of the implications of his words. {"It will remain that way until I feel it's ready."}

{"How will you know?"}

{"The demonlords will know."}

He sucked in a breath. {"They are the last who should know."}

{"They are the ones who revealed the truth. That blade possesses the souls of many half-bloods. It didn't only end their lives when it drew blood. It stole their spirits. That blade is dark magic. It is cursed."}

{"It is strong."}

{"No."} She stepped back, shaking her head. He didn't understand. He hadn't felt the darkness whispering through him when wielding the dagger. He obviously had never wielded such a blade. {"It is evil."}

Before he could stop her again, she hurried away. The dagger was hidden, but that didn't mean it couldn't be found and stolen. It had nearly taken the life of a demonlord, even if he had already been weakened. It wouldn't take much more to make it capable. That could never happen.

In the quiet of sleepless nights of grieving, she had realized the full implications of that dagger and understood; it had fed her hatred of Je'Rol, blackening her heart against the truth that he had left to protect her from himself twelve years ago. In the battle with Je'Rekun's forces five months ago, Lord Je'Dron could have let it slowly steal her spirit; instead, he had helped her see that she could reach Je'Rol even in the blood rage. In the days after, Lord Je'Dron's compassion and Lord Je'Kaoron's support in her grief had shown her how wrong she had been about demonlords, as Je'Rol and Je'Surana had shown her that half-bloods deserved a chance at life. The dagger would destroy all of them.

Je'Surana.

Nadia's heart sank, pushing aside thoughts of the dagger hidden in her room. Her only

consolation of the girl's wound was that it had not been caused by the vile weapon but by an ordinary dagger.

Past others in corridors lined by columns carved from the cliffside and along walkways and staircases looking out over the valley, she rushed to reach Je'Surana's quarters.

Chapter 2

In an inner corridor, Nadia spied Lord Je'Kaoron ahead of her, Je'Surana in his arms. Given the strength of demonlords, she wasn't surprised he had reached the room so quickly. Carrying the girl must have been nothing to him, made lighter by his parental affection for her. Nadia used to believe demonlord males only seduced human girls to satisfy their sexual needs, but even before meeting Je'Surana, she had seen that wasn't true. They weren't uncaring, nor only attracted to the young and innocent. They were more similar to humans than most individuals of either race were willing to admit.

"Lord Je'Kaoron." She caught up and opened the door for him.

Je'Surana lifted her head, her face pale as she was carried into the room. The red stain at her side had spread to her hand through the cloth she pressed over it.

"I'm..." At a raised eyebrow on the calm visage of the demonlord, the words stuck in Nadia's throat.

"I know," Je'Surana said in a weak voice as Lord Je'Kaoron continued to the large bed. "I should have been quicker."

He laid her carefully on the bed as an elegant woman in white and black breezed past Nadia and hurried to the bedside.

Nadia's guilt strangled her voice as the two demonlords spoke in their Lexic too low for Nadia to understand. As an Adept of Te'Mea, she had been taught the forbidden language of the masters but was sworn to never reveal her knowledge.

Lord Je'Kaoron finished with a brief swipe of hair from Je'Surana's face and stepped away to let the tigress work. He joined Nadia and took her arm to lead her out. "Leave her. She will heal."

Nadia turned to the neutral expression on his face. "But the injury—"

His eyes hardened, halting her objections.

While following the light pull on her arm, Nadia looked back at the girl.

"I'll be all right," Je'Surana said.

"The tigresses will attend to her," Lord Je'Kaoron said.

But she was responsible for the wound. She had thought the girl would be swifter.

They reached the door, but as another woman in white and black robes hurried past, she looked back again. Two tigresses; that couldn't be good.

Je'Kaoron closed the door behind them, cutting off her view but not the guilt clutching her heart.

"She must learn to accept the pain. In the protection of Mount Serako, she was not faced with the challenges you have presented. It could be far worse, but she did well." A hint of pride touched his face. "Come, my lady."

He wasn't angry, or if he was, he didn't show it behind that demonlord beauty and cool demeanor. And, as usual, he addressed her as an equal, as a lady.

"She's—" Nadia caught herself and lowered her voice. "She's your daughter."

"Yes. She is."

He said that far too casually.

"She understands the burden of what she is." The flash of reproof in his gaze silenced further

objections. Nadia had no place to tell him how to raise his child. She was the last person to have that right after what she had done in her hatred of Kaelen eight years ago. "You did as I requested, and I bear no ill in that. Any fault rests on me."

On him. Then he took the blame willingly for any harm to Je'Surana.

"It was not the *shevoru* that pierced her, and in that, I am grateful."

So was she. Whether she would have used the spell that drew out the soul or not, the blade diminished the power of half-bloods to heal.

In silence, they walked a ways through the corridors, passing tigers, humans, and other demonlords in human and natural forms of all colors. Particularly distinctive were the wolflike Cas'Lu in their natural forms with their enormous size and aura of power and the more delicate but colorful Siv'Lors resplendent in human form. Where Je'Rekun had banished other clans from the Je'Gri domain, Je'Dron's allies walked the corridors freely, once again welcome to share their domain.

Lord Je'Kaoron acknowledged others with a tip of his head but said nothing, which fed her trepidations. She recognized the route they took and where it led.

When they arrived at her room, he followed her inside and closed the door. Despite all the times he had visited her as a friend, this time was different. His presence cast a shadow of fear over her mood, not for her physical self but a fear of disappointing the one person whose companionship meant something to her.

Eager to part with the weapon that had pierced the sweet-natured Je'Surana, Nadia unstrapped the dagger sheath from her belt.

"You've met the hunter?"

She paused with the weapon in her hands and turned as realization hit her. He'd been waiting for a private moment to speak. "You knew?"

"His scent was distinctive."

Of course it was, to him. The senses of demonlords and half-bloods were far more acute than any mere human's.

"As was his presence. Adepts have a certain...aura." A hint of something glinted in those eyes. "Natters sense it, as do we."

"I thank you for the warning, my lord." She set the dagger sheath on the low dresser near the head of her bed with more force than she intended. "I wish I had known he was here."

"Is he important?"

Nadia hesitated and gazed out at the fading light shining through the glass doors of her balcony. Memories flitted into her mind of a younger version of herself determined to be the first woman to complete demon hunter training and of an older mentor who had used her and abandoned her to the cruelty of others and the expected fate of other women.

"No. Only a memory." She pulled at the lacings of one of her bracers harder than necessary. Damn the elders for sending Kaelen of all people. Had it been anyone but him, she wouldn't feel so insulted. Apparently, those in charge hadn't learned their lesson about her determination to continue. He wouldn't convince her to play nice. He was the last person to whom she would concede.

"Then I ask your forgiveness, my lady." That soft voice Lord Je'Kaoron used when he seemed uncertain stole her frustration, as did his title of equality rather than her position. "I was only told another demon hunter had arrived to speak with you."

He was far too perceptive.

And respectful, something Kaelen had never been. She should have realized by now that she had nothing to fear from him.

Lord Je'Kaoron stepped up next to her and took over unlacing her bracer. "Is his business complete?"

Embarrassed that he would feel the need to step in and help her, she kept her eyes on his dextrous fingers making swift work of loosening the strap to allow her to slip her hand free.

Lord Je'Kaoron had been the one to alert her to the purpose of the blade and he was the kindest demonlord she had ever met. He was more of a friend than anyone she had known, but never had she stayed anywhere long enough to form any relationships, not since her induction after satisfactorily completing her demon hunter training.

"No." With one bracer still secured, she retreated to the cold fireplace. There, she knelt and removed the grate to sweep away the ashes from the stones. Her fingers dug along the edges of a stone square to grasp it and pull it up, revealing the dagger she despised.

The soft ruffle of fabric accompanied his presence next to her. "I see." As if it was no more than an ordinary weapon, he reached for the leather-wrapped handle and lifted it.

Upon being pulled from the leather sheath, the blade shimmered in the evening light through the closed balcony doors. Not a scratch marred the perfect smoothness of the metal but for the etched symbols along its short length. Delicate and no more than the length of her forearm, the dagger resonated with power, power which she had harnessed by the incantation spoken each time she had used it. It had killed so efficiently because the spell had captured the spirits of the half-bloods the moment the blade drew blood, and it now possessed many of them.

After not bearing it for so long, the power resonating from the souls captured within it darkened her mind.

"*Shevoru*," Lord Je'Kaoron said. "The spirit blade." His pale blue eyes met hers. "A foul magic that defiles the soul of the bearer."

Nadia shuddered and stepped back to stare out at the cool fall afternoon and away from the cloud of malice around the dagger. The balcony of her sleeping chambers overlooked the magnificent stretch of valley below the cliffside city and palace of the Je'Gri clan rulers.

Away from the dagger, Nadia's mind was lighter. She breathed easier and gazed out at the plethora of colors beyond her balcony. The long, twisting branches of the *borshal* trees that decorated the cliffside structures had lost their blossoms, but changing leaves swayed in the breeze to highlight the ornate structures of the different levels of *Acropa Je'Gri* like the grass and leaves in the valley below, where orange tigers or guards of bronze and black armor of the warrior caste of Je'Gri wandered with clan allies among the fall foliage.

"This one, however, is in constant struggle. The infant half-bloods were pure souls and counteract the darkness of those in the blood rage. You are strong, my lady, to bear such a weapon without falling to its dark influence, or losing your mind." The gentle voice sent a shiver up her spine to explode into doubts in her mind. "I have always seen that."

"You are too kind, my lord." Nadia brushed aside a loose thread of hair tickling her face, the rest of her brown locks hanging in a braid behind her. "This is why Kaelen is here. The elders seek its power."

"Of course, they do."

He stepped close behind her, bearing the hated tinge of evil borne in the dagger. The scent of the demonlord, unlike any human, was something fresh and appealing, not the stench of sweat and filth. It circled her in the sleeping chamber and she inhaled deeply, welcoming the contrast

to the sickening aura of the blade.

A faint swallow cracked the quiet of the room behind her.

"I need to destroy it. I will not hand it to *him*," she said, more to give herself strength than for Lord Je'Kaoron to know. "The dagger is only the beginning of a way to defeat the demonlords."

He blew out a heavy sigh. "The other clans fear the power sought by the Adepts and are organizing to oppose them."

She had suspected that, but to hear him say it sent a chill down her spine.

"What of Je'Dron's allies?"

"*High Lord* Je'Dron," he gently admonished her lack of title. All demonlords expected to be addressed with appropriate titles, a show of respect from their subjects since they dominated the world of Derandria, although she'd heard them talking about one or another without titles.

"What about High Lord Je'Dron's allies?"

"They are hardly strong enough to oppose the majority of demonlords."

"Then the weapon must be destroyed before the others learn of it and decide to do something, like take it for themselves." It might not alleviate the problem, but it would rid the world of one vile abomination. In the wrong hands, it would be a terrible weapon.

"How would you do that?"

Nadia blinked and turned, surprised by the question. "I don't know. Can you not?"

"Our power may be strong, but such magic is beyond us." He studied the blade held between his hands. "Only those who created it might have the knowledge and the power to destroy it, but would they?"

There was the question, and the answer weighed upon her. "No." The sorcerers had done this for a reason. She was perhaps the only Adept to see the harm they were causing.

After a pause, he said, "You could return to the Nik'Terek Gate."

The Nik'Terek Gate. Anything that passed through vanished. The blade would be gone from that world.

She stared at the weapon in his hands as realization coalesced. "I should have tossed it through that day."

"You weren't ready. All things happen in their own time. The time wasn't then, but you're ready now." He lowered the dagger and stared out the balcony doors in silence for several seconds before saying, "I must return there also. It will be dangerous—many of Je'Rekun's supporters survived. I've been delaying as long as I could, until I was certain Je'Surana was safe here. Thanks to you, I feel confident of that."

"But her wound—"

"Nothing for a half-blood, and she will have to rest for a day or two, long enough for me to leave without her begging to join me."

Nadia stared at him, studying the softening lines of his face when he spoke of the young girl. Never had she witnessed such love from a demonlord for a half-blood child. The last human girl whose newborn half-blood Nadia had taken with the dagger had said the demonlord father had visited to console her. They weren't monsters. When they were human, they were human in heart and form, or more human than human men.

She pushed aside the painful memories arising from the ashes since Kaelen's return to her life to focus on the man before her. "She is a blessed girl."

His smile warmed through her, radiating from her core to her limbs. "You honor me and my kin, my lady."

She tried to smile, but the tangle of feelings rising inside forced her to look away. "Why must you return?"

"I have...unfinished business. When I was recovering from injuries sustained in the battle, High Lord Je'Dron ordered the return to *Acropa Je'Gri*. I healed but could not abandon others. I should not wait longer."

Under the intensity of his gaze, Nadia could not escape. She was one of those "others". Because she had killed Je'Rol when she had finally realized it wasn't what she wanted, the grief had torn her apart. Without Lord Je'Kaoron, she would have killed herself to end the suffering. He had encouraged her to eat, made her feel valued, shown her that she could feel without feeling weak, and he had assured her that Je'Rol's death was the only way he would have found the peace he sought and that she hadn't taken his soul. Grief had replaced the anger that had hardened her all those years. And Je'Kaoron had respected her as a demon hunter and as a woman, drying her tears when they flowed while never judging her and never asking anything of her. He simply cared about others as if everyone mattered.

"Winter comes soon. We can make the journey and return before the coldest days."

Uncertain what to say, Nadia nodded. She needed to be done with the dagger and the sooner, the better. His company would make the journey easier.

"You will feel lighter without this burden," he said with a hint of admiration in his quiet voice and held the dagger to her.

She shook her head and turned to the fireplace. "Not until I'm ready to leave."

"If that is your choice." He returned to the fireplace and set the dagger into its hole, slid the stone over it, and slid the ashes and grate back into place as if nothing were amiss. He then passed his hand before it and a blaze roared to life upon the logs, warming the chill from the room.

"It must be done, before this world descends into chaos." She stopped at his side, staring into the fire. After a lengthy silence, she looked up to a hint of pain on his face.

A few seconds later, he stirred from whatever thoughts haunted him. "The young bear the hopes of the old. You see possibilities that the others dismiss. That is a quality this world needs."

He was far more flattering than she deserved, but she appreciated his encouragement. This would destroy her dagger, but not the others that had been presented at the gathering and rejected. What would happen when those others were ready? Another thought burst from her lips: "I hope Je'Surana heals quickly."

"She will...Sleep well, Nadia. I will see you tomorrow." He turned to the double doors, his white and black robe sweeping out behind him.

She shivered from the cold lingering in the room and turned back to the view of the autumn evening. Once the dagger was gone, she would feel better. That was a first step in the changes the world needed, a world in need of healing as much as she had been.

Chapter 3

She was a fool. No demonlord could be trusted, especially those who feigned to treat humans as equals. She *knew* that. Kaelen hadn't wanted to believe Nadia would be sleeping with them, but seduction was the only way to explain what had happened to her. She had been one of the best in training and her anger had pushed her to succeed better than he had hoped. He was good, but she had been the best, the fiercest. Something had changed that, and he would bet it was the demonlord.

It didn't help that she despised him for what he'd done, and maybe she was right to hate him, but it had made her a better demon hunter.

And that was why the sorcerers had entrusted her with one of the four blades. Although he didn't trust *sect du Maistri Te'Mea*, if they had succeeded in creating weapons that could kill demonlords, he was all for the chance to end the tyranny of the immortal creatures that ruled their world.

Although Nadia had hurried from the chamber where she had been training the young half-blood and had sworn to keep the dagger, there were ways of making her cooperate.

Trailing far behind to avoid the demonlord's acute senses from detecting him, Kaelen watched the two enter a room in a quiet corridor.

Disgusting. She had been enchanted.

Unless Nadia was the one using Je'Kaoron for her own means. Perhaps Kaelen owed her greater credit. She wasn't a naive young girl who fell for the seduction of a demonlord's lusts but a trained warrior and an Adept. And she was a woman. While female demonlords were cold and aloof to the flattery of any man, perhaps the males were more susceptible to the teasings of a human woman. There was one advantage Nadia had, and in consideration, she would be one to use the full range of weapons available to her.

Only time would tell where her loyalties lay. She had, after all, sunk the dagger into the half-blood.

And Lord Je'Kaoron hadn't batted an eye.

Kaelen had to wonder if the demonlords had any feelings. They truly weren't human to say they cared and then to allow harm to those they supposedly cared about.

Upon the stirrings of old regrets like sediment from a river bottom, he adjusted his posture and let them be carried away by the current of the present situation.

Demonlords knew how to keep Adepts guessing about their motives, and that included the secret meetings of demonlords that many of the sorcerers and hunters had reported at their gathering.

Nadia hadn't given him the chance to explain, but she would.

He waited inside an empty room two doors from the one where the two had entered, his door open a crack to listen and watch for one or both to emerge while hopefully containing his scent from the sensitive nose of the demonlord.

He would wait all night if he had to, but sooner than he expected, Je'Kaoron stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Kaelen froze, not daring to breathe. The demonlord paused and turned his head as if aware of something, but after a couple seconds, he strode away. He must have noticed Kaelen's presence.

Now was Kaelen's chance to speak to Nadia, but he also wished to speak to Lord Je'Kaoron, specifically to learn Nadia's role in the defeat of Je'Rekun, whose allies might seek her head or those of any other Adept if they suspected them of taking sides in a dispute. It had reached the *Kodre noct du Te'Mea* that she had been present at the battle of the Nik'Terek Gate, where Je'Rekun had disappeared and many of his supporters were killed. It was also known that Je'Kaoron had deceived Je'Rekun and that a half-blood girl had possessed an ancient object meant to control demonlords.

He could find Nadia again, but locating a particular demonlord could be difficult among so many who could hide in their natural predator forms, and Nadia didn't want to talk to him.

Confronting Lord Je'Kaoron would be another matter. That required a certain sense of submissiveness, something that went against Kaelen's defiance to their authority.

Before the demonlord put too much distance between them, Kaelen stepped out quietly and followed past Nadia's door. A simple spell from the elder sorcerers in the *Kodre noct du Te'Mea* whispered from his lips. Sorcerers didn't like to share their spells, but they had been known to help demon hunters, only because they were also Adepts. In his case, the elders had felt it useful for him to possess that knowledge. If it worked as they had taught him, it would obscure his presence to blend with his surroundings, his black cloak being ideal for hiding in shadows. If he moved quietly, the demonlord wouldn't even realize that Kaelen followed him.

Lord Je'Kaoron led him through corridors and down a set of stairs to a wider level, where a boardwalk lined a garden to the cliff. Je'Kaoron halted behind a white and black figure sitting at the far edge of the garden.

Kaelen ducked behind a tree and waited. His interrogation of the demonlord would have to wait. Luckily, shadows were long with the sun behind the mountain, and night approached in the east like a predator stalking its prey.

["I thought I might find you here,"] Je'Kaoron said in the demonlord Lexic.

["It clears my head. You might try it."] The man twisted and, in the mix of light, revealed the face of High Lord Je'Dron. ["Sit, old friend."]

Je'Kaoron took a place next to the High Lord of the Je'Gri. Although they sat with their backs to Kaelen, the breeze blew from their direction, carrying their voices to him and his scent away.

After a period of quiet filled by the few remaining leaves rustling in the tree where Kaelen hid, Je'Kaoron said, ["The time has come."]

["You're ready to investigate rumors of a *sakul m'rath*?"]

["I am."]

Je'Dron turned, black and white hair partially hiding his face. ["Je'Surana is ready?"]

["She is. Nadia has prepared her sufficiently."] In a low voice, Je'Kaoron said, ["She can protect herself."]

Je'Dron's brows lifted in question.

["Winter will come soon. We cannot afford further delay,"] Je'Kaoron finished.

["No. We can't."] Je'Dron turned forward again, facing the valley with its webs of roads connecting human communities and fields stretched out below and making his words harder to understand with his back to Kaelen. ["But I wonder if you are truly ready."]

["If what I have seen is a warning, then my suspicions are correct. It must be stopped."]

["I may be far younger, old man, but even I have learned the difficulties of separating emotion from duty...and paid the price."]

Je'Kaoron nodded and fell still for a while. The soft chirrup of insects sang in the gap, while

the last light of the day slowly faded from the stars twinkling in the darkening sky.

When Kaelen thought they might not speak again, Je'Kaaron said, ["I can do no more for Je'Surana. She must live her life, with or without me."]

["I wasn't speaking of her. You may fool others, but I've known you too many centuries not to see what ails you."]

Je'Kaaron paused for several long seconds. ["I will do what must be done. One old man's temporary joy is not worth sacrificing this world."]

["And what of the huntress?"]

Kaelen's heart threatened to leap from his chest. He strained to make out every word of what followed that question.

Je'Kaaron partially turned, and Kaelen dreaded the demonlord spotting him. However, Je'Kaaron bowed his head and dropped his shoulders. ["She will do it."]

Do what? What did they have planned for Nadia?

Rage flared inside him, but he restrained the urge to demand an answer from these two. It would only end up with his life forfeited. Instead, he took a deep breath to calm himself.

["Then it shall be."] Je'Dron sounded almost dismayed. ["I would not wish on anyone the burden you bear. Knowing your secret is enough for me."]

["Then it is better that so few of us remain."]

So few of who? What secret? If they had something planned for Nadia, Kaelen needed to know.

["Perhaps...Or we might not be in this situation if the others had such guidance."]

["The young never listen to their elders,"] Je'Kaaron said with a hint of admonishment in his voice.

["Some of us learn, and we will try to pass on the wisdom."]

["Not all are open to learning."]

At that, Je'Dron tipped his head. ["That is their loss."]

["It would be the loss of all."]

The two fell still for a while again as the stars lit in the sky and the moon rose among them.

After some time, Je'Dron stood. ["I must retire, but I expect you have much to ponder."]

["I need only notify the party of our departure tomorrow."]

["Then I will send word to them."]

["Thank you."]

["Thank *you*,"] Je'Dron said with a bow of his head. ["For all you have done for me and this world."]

Kaelen frowned, confused by the show of respect from the highest ranking Je'Gri to a lesser. Je'Dron wasn't the high lord he had encountered upon first arriving in the city palace. At the time, he had the impression that Je'Dron yielded to no one, but apparently that wasn't the case.

The high lord blurred and changed. The tiger that replaced the man ran towards Kaelen.

In the second he would have had to prepare for an attack, the tiger ran past.

Kaelen caught his breath from the moment he thought he would be a snack for eavesdropping on the ruler of the Je'Gri domain. He should have been. Demonlord hearing was supposedly so acute they could detect a rodent's heartbeat, and their sense of smell was capable of tracking any prey. High Lord Je'Dron should have detected him.

It didn't make sense, unless the spell cloaked everything.

The white tiger disappeared as if he wasn't there.

Kaelen relaxed and watched the man remaining at the ledge like a ghostly statue. *What are you about?* The cryptic conversation played through his head with possibilities that led to the same destination—Lord Je'Kaoron was up to something and using Nadia for that purpose. Kaelen couldn't allow it, and not only because of the dagger. Nadia deserved more respect.

Reality hit like a punch to his gut. Not even their commanders of the Li'Ador training had granted her that much, using him to try to fail her from her goal of becoming a demon hunter. He had hated himself for what he'd done, but he'd been proud to learn it had only made her stronger. Nadia deserved the recognition and respect she had earned, and he wasn't going to let a demonlord take that away.

Kaelen stepped from the shadows.

Je'Kaoron turned his head aside. "Are you now a sorcerer?"

Kaelen froze a step from the tree and waited.

The demonlord rose and turned to face him. "Hidden from sight but not from other senses, Hunter," he said with a hint of annoyance. "You followed me for a reason."

Kaelen stood his ground.

"No doubt you question my motives with the huntress." Lord Je'Kaoron stepped towards him. "Or you would not have followed me from her quarters."

Kaelen choked on the demonlord's revelation for a second before organizing his thoughts. Apparently the spell hadn't hidden more than his image. High Lord Je'Dron had chosen to ignore him. "After reports of your deception of Lord Je'Rekun, I must."

A huff of mild amusement accompanied Je'Kaoron's momentary smile. "Rumor travels fast. You must not believe all you hear. An open mind is far more powerful than blind loyalty."

Kaelen let out a soft snort. "Is that how you justify it?"

"I'm certain your compatriots have formed their own opinions which have influenced you. What good would it be to share my view if you will not believe it?" Je'Kaoron clasped his hands before him, an act of confidence; but demonlords could afford to relax. He was right that Kaelen would not believe him. The man was far too perceptive to be trusted. "Would you prefer to be hunted or to serve to protect humanity?"

"This isn't about me."

"But it is, Hunter. You've only a small view of a much larger world, and yet, as with your gathering of Adepts, many drops can fill a bucket with poison."

"The poison stands before me," Kaelen growled.

Je'Kaoron breathed deeply. "You hear but do not listen. If I tell you of events from my view, you will only see what you wish to see in my words to support your argument, because your mind is closed."

Kaelen clamped his teeth on the arguments burning his tongue. His fingers curled into fists at his side. Damn the demonlord and his twisted words. Kaelen had no patience for it. "What happened to Nadia? What did you do?"

One white eyebrow lifted. "It was not I or any demonlord, but the magic of your sorcerers that haunts her. It was her choice to seek refuge."

"Impossible." What did he mean by refuge? From whom or what?

"Is it? You asked about the dagger? You know of its dark properties? A weapon, certainly, to be used to kill demonlords."

Kaelen swallowed at the revelation of that knowledge. Nadia never would have shared its purpose. Would she?

"It was not difficult to ascertain. The weapon exudes the darkness of the souls it has captured. It enhances the darkness of the minds of those in close proximity. Once realized, she has been strengthening her mind from its influence. But it is a weapon that could take control over its bearer in the rage of those it possesses, effectively sending a human into something like the blood rage of the many half-blood souls captured."

A chill ran through him, but not from the cool autumn breeze. He believed Je'Kaoron, yet the demonlord could be lying to frighten him from completing his mission.

Worse was the demonlord's knowledge of the dagger's purpose and his casual way of speaking of it.

"The Adepts walk a fine line," Je'Kaoron said in a low voice that cut through the night. "For some time, we have been aware of the machinations of the sects and their plans to overthrow us. You do well to remember that it was a demonlord who trained the first Adepts and a demonlord who organized the first protectors. Even in the beginning, the demonlords were split. That rift has grown since Te'Mea proposed her plan. Some, like High Lord Je'Dron, believe humans deserve to govern themselves. Others say humans have gained too much freedom and use that to amass too much power. Like you, they close their minds without considerations of the merits of all concerned."

"And what of you?"

Je'Kaoron stepped forward to halt at arm's reach from him, putting Kaelen on alert for an attack.

It didn't come. Instead, the tall, beautiful man so deceptive in his grace and poise to be mistaken as weak had he been human looked down on Kaelen with a smile like that of a parent to a child. "I was the one who convinced High Lord Je'Dron of the merits of humans as potential equals and to open Tikeros to other clans. Until Je'Rekun's subversion, Tikeros thrived. Whatever you think of me, I am not who you believe me to be."

Kaelen glared at the man before him, a man who was part of the threat to humans all over the world but especially to Nadia; and he hated Lord Je'Kaoron more for giving him pause for consideration. He spoke of machinations within the Adepts but what of those of demonlords? What game did this one play?

"Demonlord lies," Kaelen ground between clenched teeth, ready to defend himself and to die if the man took offense. He had seen the demonlord's capabilities against Nadia.

Lord Je'Kaoron shook his head, his shoulders sinking. "Your mind is closed. That will be your undoing...Nadia has acted with honor to High Lord Je'Dron, to the Je'Gri clan, to Adepts, and to this world, but it was not without a price. That was what happened to her," he said in a quiet voice. "I suggest that if you wish to know more, you speak to her."

He would, if she would let him.

"What did *you* do to her?"

Lord Je'Kaoron tipped his head, his brows pressed together in a wrinkle of confusion. "I have done no harm. I can assure you."

Harm, nothing. The demonlords were nothing but a scourge on their world.

"As I said, your judgment is colored by your perspective. I will not speak for Nadia. That is her place." A shadow fell over the man's features as he took a small step closer, his posture setting off an instinct for Kaelen to defend himself. "Nadia is not yours to control."

"But she's yours?"

Je'Kaoron's face hardened in a threatening glare. "She is no one's to control."

Before Kaelen could argue, the demonlord blurred in the magic and transformed into a white tiger, which bared its sharp teeth in warning and ran off through the garden, putting an end to the confrontation.

Kaelen watched him disappear back into the corridors, certain that the demonlord was hiding something. Kaelen wasn't leaving until he had that dagger and Nadia away from their influence, especially from that one.

Chapter 4

Nadia tightened the strap of her second bracer bearing the demon head with sharp teeth. Arrow tips formed of green *imera* stones pierced that fearsome head, the same design as her belt buckle on the black uniform. With those secure, she adjusted the dagger sheath and hesitated at the darkness creeping into her mind. Lord Je'Kaoron's warning returned and she did what she could to push the effects of the dagger's magic aside.

Nadia slammed her fist against the wall, the turmoil inside questioning why the sorcerers ever created such vile weapon. Their search for ways to control or destroy the demonlords would only lead to bloodshed. They had cursed her and the world.

The weapon did this to her. The twisted cruelty of its power whispered of conspiracies and rumors. She hated it, but she couldn't let anyone else bear it.

It had to be destroyed.

How many other devices or talismans had the sects discovered or created?

The thought shook her to her core, not only in what it could lead to but also that only five months ago she had believed in their leadership and wholeheartedly supported the downfall of the demonlords.

Had she changed so much?

Nadia blinked and looked around at the room that had been hers for more than six months. While traveling across Tikeros, she had been summoned by then High Lord Je'Rekun to clean up that region of half-bloods.

Now, she pitied them, admired them even. Je'Rol had changed her. And Je'Surana had changed her. Together, they had each demonstrated the humanity within. Half-bloods could live in peace if given a chance.

And Lord Je'Kaoron had changed her. He had shown that demonlords could care about humans and half-bloods. They weren't all cold killers.

They had all changed her.

Letting go of her hatred for Je'Rol and time away from the influence of the dagger had cleared her head. She saw how twisted the sects had become. Someone had to stop them, and she would but only after destroying the dagger. The only way to be sure no one else could use it was to destroy it. Then she could return to the temple and try to talk sense into their leaders.

Nadia secured her cloak around her neck and wrapped her blanket for the chilly nights. She handed it to a young man in a brown leather vest over his blouse, one of many servants.

Under Je'Rekun's reign of terror over humans, the servants had cowed and quivered, even in serving her, but under Je'Dron as High Lord, they stood taller, more confident that a simple error wouldn't be their last. Je'Rekun had ruled as most demonlords had for more than two thousand years, believing that humans were nothing more than livestock. Je'Dron, however, treated humans as equals, resulting in humans asking to serve to gain better lives than most peasants.

Unfortunately, the progressive views of Je'Dron weren't held by all demonlords.

That was why the Adepts sought ways to overpower them.

She was tired of being used by their leaders. The elders needed to realize that some demonlords were allies, but she doubted they would listen, especially to her, a woman.

Only the demonlords had any respect for women. Even Je'Rekun had respected her skills

without judgment of anything but her being an Adept.

She would make them respect her as she had made the Li'Ador respect her.

With the servant carrying her travel pack, she exited the room. He stayed beside her, easily matching her strides as she hurried through the corridor to an outdoor walkway and staircase of the cliffside city. A warm breeze lifted from the valley, sweeping away the chill of the late morning. She inhaled the fresh air, letting it invigorate her with the freedom it promised and cleansing her soul of the shadow from the dagger.

"Nadia!"

Her heart turned to ice at the voice shouting from above. She motioned the servant forward. "Step faster."

Kaelen must have been watching for her. The cliffside city was ideal for seeing everything that happened in the valley and along the outdoor stairways. Kaelen didn't have to work, only to watch and wait. She should have known he would be waiting.

She refused to listen to him and his lies. As much as she would like to have a lord or lady to convince him to leave her alone, it would only add fuel to the fire started by the leaders of the sects. She didn't need him spreading lies about her like his implications last night. She had to face him herself, but she could avoid him as long as possible if she hurried a little faster.

Only a near tumble that left her grasping the banister to keep from falling slowed her. How she hated those stairs!

"Huntress."

At the concern on the young man's face, she flashed a smile. Movement behind him fouled her mood.

"Leave me!" She directed her words at Kaelen, who descended towards them in a hurry.

The servant turned as Kaelen caught up to them.

"We need to talk." Kaelen took the blanket roll from the servant and frowned. "Are you leaving?"

Refusing to answer, she snatched away the roll and continued down the stairs at a more cautious pace.

"Huntress?"

Stupid servant. She didn't need him. A kind gesture, to be sure, but he only slowed her.

"You're excused," she snapped without looking back. The tromp of another set of steps followed.

"Get away from me, Kaelen."

"I can't do that...unless you give up the dagger."

Nadia turned on the landing to continue on the zig-zagging course of stairs. Perhaps she should have taken one of the inner staircases, but this was the easiest way to see the stables in the valley. Now, it was too late to change her mind. He would only harass her worse in the privacy of the inner corridors.

"Where are you going?"

"Away from you." She continued her course, her boots clapping noisily on the last few levels of the outer stairs. He easily kept pace close behind, saying nothing.

Until they reached the valley floor.

Ahead rose the impressive structure of the stables, its tiled roof curving at the end to direct rain water into large troughs and away from the long arcade between the indoor training arena and the stabling area. In the circular area outside that passage with its doors open for morning

activity, a crowd of tigers had gathered, most of them the orange of the warriors. Several of the stable hands held saddled and ready horses while other figures in orange and black armor waited astride their mounts.

"You're traveling with them?"

Nadia hurried forward, her boots crunching over the grass and her heart anxious to reach the demonlords and escape Kaelen.

A hand clamped on her arm halted her and pulled her around to face him. In the sunlight, the lines of his face looked deeper than she remembered from eight years ago. He had aged, but he hadn't changed.

"What are you doing with them?"

"It's not your concern." She yanked her arm, but his fingers tightened and he loomed closer, his face inches from hers set in a hard line.

"It is my business, Nadia. You're a demon hunter, an Adept. You serve humans, not demonlords. What happened to you?"

The instant his fingers loosened, she pulled away. "You did." Free of him and not wanting to argue, she jogged several steps before resuming her fast march to the stables.

He would never understand. He hadn't understood eight years ago, and seeing him last night had only served to bring back memories she had tried to forget, the secret she had buried to save herself from emotional pain that would rip her apart if she let it.

And she had finally found some peace after resolving her issues with Je'Rol.

She didn't want anything to do with Kaelen, just like he hadn't wanted anything with her until it served his purposes.

"Nadia. Nadia."

He followed, but she continued to a sorrel mare offered by one of the stable boys and lifted her belongings to the back of the saddle.

A quick glance across her shoulder as she tied her belongings behind the high cantle made her pause. In white riding pants with a white and black coat belted at his waist, Lord Je'Kaoron passed Kaelen from behind, stopping the man in his tracks at the outer edge of the resting tigers, several of whom stirred. The demonlord's poise and fair appearance made Kaelen look churlish and stocky by comparison.

Black stripes raced along the white hair tied out of the cleanly-defined features to blend together loosely over the demonlord's shoulders. Upon catching her eyes, he smiled.

"Nadia," Lord Je'Kaoron greeted her and took the reins of the sleek gray from the stable boy who also held her mount. While his horse chewed on the bit, he led it near to her and said in a low voice, "What do you wish of him?"

She looked up to where Kaelen still stood at the edge of the stirring tigers. "Nothing." She yanked one of the straps around her blanket roll with more force than intended.

One white eyebrow lifted on Lord Je'Kaoron's face. He said nothing and led his mount away to where he could step up without the horses biting at each other.

"This is wrong, Nadia," Kaelen said. "Surrounding yourself with demonlords will not please the others."

Nadia huffed and finished tying her belongings onto the saddle, yanking the leather straps hard. He was lucky Je'Dron and his clan supporters tolerated such disrespect. "I don't care what the Kodre, Li'Ador, or any others think. I'll be safer with the Je'Gri where we're going," she said over her shoulder to Kaelen.

"Where's that?"

She clamped her jaw and, with one foot already in the nearest stirrup, swung her other leg over the saddle. "It doesn't concern you." Leather creaked under her weight as she took up her reins from the stable boy.

Kaelen made his way to the horse's head amid tigers that acted as if he didn't matter. "Then hand me the dagger."

"No." She looked about and caught Lord Je'Kaoron's questioning expression. How many of the others knew about the dagger? She would bet he had told High Lord Je'Dron, especially in regards to her destroying it since it had killed the high lord's half-blood son.

She tried to turn the mare, but the reins were nearly pulled from her fingers. "Let go."

Kaelen stood firm, his mouth in a hard line within the black stubble along his jaw. "Hand it to me and...I won't bother you again."

To say the offer didn't tempt her would be a lie. However, she couldn't allow anyone to take advantage of its power. It had to be destroyed, even if that meant being harassed by him.

And he wouldn't give up. He'd follow her everywhere until he had what he wanted. The thought sent a shudder of irritation through her.

"Join us, Hunter."

Nadia looked up in surprise as Lord Je'Kaoron rode up on her right, a glimmer in those blue eyes that made her wonder what he planned. She bit her tongue and waited.

"Join us. Once we have completed our task, you may claim the dagger."

She couldn't have heard that correctly.

"In doing so," he added in a darker tone, "I will hold you to your promise, and Nadia will be free from you forever." Lord Je'Kaoron couldn't mean what he said.

No, he didn't. Lord Je'Kaoron was a man of riddles. He wouldn't betray her—or his own kind—by letting Kaelen simply have the spirit blade. Once they completed the task, the dagger would be gone, but Kaelen didn't know that. But what did he mean by being free of her forever?

From the ashen color of Kaelen's face, he wasn't sure he liked the sound of the offer.

"What assurances may I have that you'll not decide to...hunt me?"

"We do not hunt humans."

"No," Kaelen muttered while looking from Lord Je'Kaoron to her with his lip curling in distaste. "I suppose not."

Rage flared in Nadia at the insinuation in his look, but she fumed in silence while waiting for him to mount one of the extra horses held ready.

The tigers gathered closer together, while Lord Je'Kaoron motioned her to join him.

Nadia rode forward through an aisle of tigers standing aside for her to pass. They closed up behind her, blocking Kaelen. She would thank the demonlords later. Lord Je'Kaoron said nothing but gave her a quick glance a moment before riding forward.

They set out from the valley and around the mountain home of Acropa Je'Gri, leaving the familiar comforts behind. The tigers spread out to surround her and Lord Je'Kaoron in the lead with Kaelen and several mounted orange and black armored guards strung out behind them.

Riding close to Lord Je'Kaoron so their horses pinned ears at each other, Nadia said in a low voice, "Thanks."

"I would rather not see you upset, as his presence seems to cause."

She pursed her lips and peered over her shoulder at the hooded figure a ways behind them. The tigers bunched closely in between, as they had during the journey from High Lord Je'Dron's

Mount Serako hidden city to the northeast on a different journey to the Nik'Terek Gate. Except this time, the demonlords blocked Kaelen from her rather than blocking her from Je'Rol.

Her heart sank in grief from the memories, but they morphed into her first sight of Je'Surana, the half-blood who had destroyed the obelisk for which Je'Rol had searched, and that led to other wanderings of her mind.

"How is Je'Surana?" she asked.

Lord Je'Kaoron reached inside his coat and pulled out a folded parchment, which he handed to her. "She asked me to give you this but I thought it best to wait since we had company. She was disappointed that you did not visit this morning."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't..."

"I understand."

Nadia took the paper and unfolded it.

Nadia,

You should not feel ashamed about hurting me. I am doing well. Lord Je'Kaoron knows this, but he forbids me from seeing you off, insisting that I rest a day more.

I wished to thank you for teaching me to protect myself, and I promise that I will practice and do better for when you return.

I always wanted to say how sorry I was about the loss of Je'Rol. He was a very inspiring man. I was jealous that he had traveled around the world, seeing magnificent sights and living free, while I was forbidden from leaving Mount Serako. But Je'Rol told me how dangerous it was.

Still, I fear more for my father than myself in his absence. He has done much to upset the other demonlords by killing Je'Rekun. He is a good man. You must know that, and I know you are a good person. I trust that you will stay with him. He doesn't think he needs protection, but he is one man with many enemies. Please look after him so he returns to me.

Thank you, Nadia, for all you have done.

Jes

Nadia stared at the note and the flowing script of the girl's handwriting. The words did little to ease the burden on her mind of what she had done.

"It was my choice," a soft voice said. "I wanted a reason to keep her behind. In that, I used you."

Nadia looked up at him riding close beside her.

"I should be asking your forgiveness."

"Why?" It would have been a part of Je'Surana's training, a teaching moment, anyway.

He huffed in an almost laugh. "You deserve more respect than I have shown."

"You're protecting her. There's nothing to forgive. You're right. She's too young and inexperienced." But if Je'Surana continued training, she would at least have a chance of surviving in the harshness of the real world, if she ever had reason to leave the security of Acropa Je'Gri. Although Nadia would like to see the day the half-blood girl could beat her, a restlessness grew in Nadia to stop the other Adepts from riling the demonlords. Finishing her training to Nadia's satisfaction might not be feasible if Nadia hoped to stop the sects from

carrying out their revolution.

Lord Je'Kaoron's face relaxed in a clear sign of relief. "Thank you, my lady. Now, forgive yourself."

So, that was it. She should have known Lord Je'Kaoron would use it as a teaching moment on her.

There was a time when he had scolded her for attacking Je'Rol. She had seen Je'Kaoron's anger, but realized later that he had only been angry that she would kill half-bloods. Since meeting Je'Surana, she understood why. It hadn't been about Je'Rol for him, but what that represented to him. She understood now, and it changed how she saw things.

"I will...in time," she said, the burden already lifting from her mind.

She folded the note and tucked it into a pocket of her leggings.

They rode on in quiet through the day, Acropa Je'Gri disappearing as they passed the mountain and the catacomb exit where Je'Rol had escaped Je'Rekun with the help of a guard that the then high lord had asked her to torture for his betrayal. In the quiet of the ride, Nadia thought back to that crucial moment with the dagger...

She felt it in the back of her mind, a shadow whispering conspiracies and seducing her with its promised power, but she had let go of her anger. She pressed the knife to the tiger's skull, the spell whispering from her lips making the blade glow with the power to take away life.

Je'Sikar, the orange tiger guard that had aided Je'Rol's escape, whimpered and mewed softly, his eyes pleading for mercy. They had shackled him with enchanted manacles in the round chamber with the high walls, weakening him to the point that her dagger could affect him. She had seen it already, as had High Lord Je'Rekun.

The tiger let out a mournful "urmf" that stayed her hand, but he dared not move. She had to finish the task. Je'Rekun observed closely. But if she killed Je'Sikar, the demonlords would learn as she would that she could kill their kind under the right circumstances. It would confirm the potential danger of the Adepts to their power.

Nadia gazed into the amber eyes of the tiger and licked her lips.

"It is in my interests. I assure you." Je'Rekun's soft voice vibrated with a purr of satisfaction. His interests in punishing Je'Sikar's betrayal, or his interests in testing her abilities?

Although Nadia wanted to know for herself how far she could push the demonlords to death, Je'Rekun was the last of them for whom she wanted to demonstrate the abilities of the Adepts.

A whispered word changed the spell the moment before she drew blood. The tiger thrashed and howled in mournful agony. Unlike her first attempt, his body didn't blur. Instead, he flopped against the chains for a few seconds and fell still, his sides again rising and falling rapidly.

Nadia sheathed the dagger at her hip and waited.

Je'Rekun strode around the panting tiger and stopped opposite her. "Prepare to depart, Huntress. You have a half-blood to kill."

Lord Je'Rekun had wanted to see if the dagger could kill. She had wanted to know too, but that had changed. Now, she hoped it couldn't and wouldn't risk another testing it on those she cared about. Destroying it would be the surest way to know that no one could use it. She had seen what happened when items or living beings passed through the arch of the Nik'Terek Gate—they didn't emerge on the other side but disappeared. It would be best for their world if that dagger disappeared.

Dangerous sounds from nearby stirred her from the memories. Over the rustle of horse legs and the accompanying tigers through tall grasses came the clicking, slurping, chittering sounds of hungry natters.

"The natters have reclaimed their preferred breeding ground," Lord Je'Kaoron said, his eyes on the barely seen opening behind a tuft of tall grasses, which moved in a way unnatural to the waving from the breeze. The single line of movement split into four lines moving towards them.

Nadia's horse stood with ears pricked at the top of a head held high.

Something hissed nearby, and several tigers broke off to take on the attacking demons.

From a distance, she could help. Using the dispirit power she was born with, she reached out to the simple minds of the approaching demons. They were focused on the smell of living flesh, their ravenous desire for fresh blood driving them from their dens with the desire to defend their nests.

A sense of fear spiked when she touched their minds, but it hadn't come from her touch. She felt the confusion already sweeping through them and looked aside. Kaelen had turned his mount to face the cavern.

Two demon hunters. She had almost forgotten about him.

The cavern soon exploded in a wave of skittering, crawling, slithering, oozing monsters that could overwhelm an untrained Adept and easily kill anyone without the dispirit power to stop them. Natters had an uncanny sense of self-preservation that drove them out in hordes when an Adept was near.

However, she wasn't the helpless girl of around the same age as Je'Surana that Je'Rol had saved long ago when a similar swarm attacked her, before she was discovered to be an Adept.

Nadia choked away the memories and the flotsam of regrets they stirred up and refocused on the horde as tigers roared and lunged at the beasts. The natters slowed, many freezing while the demonlords transformed into armored warriors to fight them off.

The battle soon ended, leaving the grasses flattened with various parts of at least a dozen different natter types strewn across a wide area and discoloring the hides of demonlords in the forms of lords and ladies and tigers.

"The caverns must be purged once more," a voice muttered next to her. She turned, but Lord Je'Kaoron watched the returning tigers with his nose wrinkled. Even she found the odor of dead natters overwhelming and couldn't imagine its assault on the sensitive noses of the demonlords. "But this has decreased their numbers. The aid of demon hunters is appreciated." His eyes slid from her.

She followed his gaze to the other black-clad rider. Kaelen approached with a scowl on his face.

"Come, Huntress." Lord Je'Kaoron turned his mount in the direction of their travel, and Nadia gladly turned her back to Kaelen. Tigers rejoined them, their coats stained with the innards of the natters. "They will be eager to reach the river."

The river. The blue water shimmered ahead, a ribbon through the green between mountain rises. Je'Rol had followed that river.

Nadia shook away the thoughts too easily resurrected while riding in quietude with the demonlords sedate around her. Five months she had grieved and healed, but this journey brought back a new grief, one of regrets for her previous life. If only she had understood then the truth that Lord Je'Kaoron had shown her, she would bear no such regrets.

They soon reached the river, where the tigers waded into deep water. The horses splashed

through a shallow crossing and paused to lower their muzzles to drink.

Once across, the party continued onwards in a line directly opposite the setting sun. More east than north, they traveled away from the valley through which she had tracked Je'Rol's escape five months ago.

Lord Je'Kaoron said nothing and wore an expression that weighed upon her with the sense that she shouldn't dare to interrupt. Kaelen remained behind, separated from them by the many tigers.

That changed near sundown. At an unseen cue, half the tigers dispersed, running ahead in pairs and trios. Hunting parties, she guessed.

The rest of them continued, until they reached a copse of trees, several with trunks thicker than her, and Lord Je'Kaoron signaled to halt.

Something rustled in the grass.

Tigers fell silent, several moving into positions around the trees.

Nadia waited.

"Come out." Lord Je'Kaoron's voice broke the quiet hush of the wind.

The rustling stopped.

Nadia reached out with the dispirit power and felt it—a demon mind but far more aware than the natters. She recognized what it was.

From the shadows broke a shape no higher than her waist, the dome of a light green head catching the last light. Fanlike ears drooped. The goblin curled its shoulders to shrink from the circle of demonlords around it.

"Have you a message for High Lord Je'Dron?"

The goblin shook its bald head.

The squeak of leather accompanied Lord Je'Kaoron's shift in the saddle as he twisted to look back to Nadia. His eyes searched past her for a moment, a frown on his face. "We will leave him to you, Huntress, and return after our hunt. I'd like to know why he's here alone."

"Yes, my lord." So would she. Goblins didn't usually travel alone but preferred the company of demonlords. She had only had such an encounter on one other occasion, and it had taken the demonlords accompanying her putting some distance between them for the curse to lift.

His frown slid past her again, but she didn't have to guess why. "You will do as she commands, Hunter."

"Yes, my lord," Kaelen grumbled from close behind her.

Lord Je'Kaoron waited, his attention on her and Kaelen until the others ran off, then took up the rear of the pack of tigers and riders.

Nadia dismounted, her eyes unwavering from the goblin except to look past at the disappearing demonlords. It would take a while before the curse lifted and the goblin could speak.

The squeak of leather came from behind, followed by the thump of Kaelen's feet hitting the ground.

"I thought goblins lived with demonlords," he said as he stepped up next to Nadia.

"Only the ones who serve."

"Don't they all?"

"No." The knowledge of the Adepts had been incomplete regarding goblins, as she had discovered.

To her relief, he fell silent, no questioning or trying to bully her. He'd learned long ago that

those tactics only aroused her defiance.

The goblin didn't run, but he had straightened upon the disappearance of the demonlords.

"One helped me find Je'Rol. He was... a scholar."

The goblin tilted his head and blinked.

"The goblin was a scholar," she corrected.

The goblin before her gave a nod. They were more intelligent than her teachers had indicated, not the servile whipping posts of the demonlords that were usually witnessed around the feet of their masters.

Kaelen said nothing but stood with a frown, brooding under that black hood. He hadn't even heard what she said about the goblins. She had mentioned Je'Rol, and that was all he'd heard. He had always hated her mentioning Je'Rol.

"I killed him, you know... Je'Rol," she said quietly, to get a reaction.

"You always said you would."

Typical. He had never accepted that she could love a half-blood. Her hatred of Je'Rol had been another matter, usually one Kaelen had supported. But this was something else. Kaelen had always been jealous, saying that her vehemence to Je'Rol had hurt her because of how deeply she had loved him and that she had been naive to believe a half-blood could love and that she had mistaken her awe of Je'Rol saving her from natters as an act of love. None of it had been real, according to him, and she had believed him, which had only fed her hatred of Je'Rol for tricking her. Only upon seeing him again had she learned otherwise. Half-bloods and demonlords were indistinguishable from humans with perhaps more humanity in some cases. "At least he left to protect me, not to hurt me."

"That wasn't what you said eight years ago." He muttered the words in a neutral tone, but that he had said it confirmed that any mention of Je'Rol still bothered him. Good. Maybe he'd leave her alone if he had to hear the truth.

"I was young and stupid then. I've changed."

"But you don't want to listen to me?"

"I said I was young and stupid. And what you did is unforgivable." She had done all she could to forget.

"But you could forgive a half-blood. Hm?"

"Shut it, Kaelen! It's not the same." Nadia clenched her fists and stepped away to let her temper cool. First Je'Rol and then him returning to her life. It couldn't get any worse. "I'm not talking about this now. We have a job."

"You're the one who brought it up."

To test him, and he showed no remorse for what he had done. After all those years, he hadn't changed. There were no excuses for the way he had mistreated her.

Or perhaps he was angry that she had finished her training and he couldn't accept that she had proven herself a worthy demon hunter. That would explain why he was so adamant about claiming the dagger himself. He thought her unworthy of any of it.

Damn him. Damn them all for trying to force her to comply with their version of what they thought she should be.

The demonlords respected her. Why couldn't he?

She stopped near the goblin and knelt to his level. "Can you speak now?" She'd rather hear the piercing voice of a goblin than relive the pain of her past. Of all the other hunters the Adept leaders could have sent, they had chosen the one who had ripped apart her soul.

The goblin opened his mouth but, when nothing came out, he put a hand to his throat and shook his head.

Damn. That meant Kaelen would want to talk.

"Do you have a message?" she asked.

The goblin nodded.

Hopefully the demonlords went out of range soon. She had never determined the distance of the curse to prevent goblins speaking in the presence of demonlords. Supposedly, the first demonlords had set the curse upon all goblins and their descendants. From her experience with Skar, she could only guess that it had been to spare their ears from the shrill voices of the goblins. Or maybe it had been to make dominating them easier. Then again, the goblins seemed to serve demonlords willingly, taking abuse by the commands of some.

"I wish you could tell me who sent the message." She hated waiting, especially with Kaelen's eyes burning through her.

The goblin looked from her to him and crossed its arms.

That it waited meant the message must have been important.

Kaelen stepped away from her, drawing his sword as his eyes fixed on a rustle among the trees.

"I—"

The squeak from the goblin stole her attention from whatever Kaelen stalked.

In a blur of motion, the goblin whirled and hissed at something in the trees. A high-pitched shriek accompanied the squish of something soft.

"Natters," Kaelen confirmed. The goblin returned with only a light splattering of dark liquid glinting on his clothes.

"They smell flesh," the goblin said in a heavily-accented voice deeper than she expected but no less grating on the ears.

"You can speak." Kaelen stood aside where he could watch the trees and the goblin.

"Demonlords far enough now."

"Then tell me what you came to say, before they get too close," Nadia said.

"Wark came not for High Lord of Je'Gri. This message for Guardian from Magworsh clan leader."

"Guardian?" Nadia looked to Kaelen for an answer, but he only shrugged.

"Leader sends warriors to find Guardians, First Ones."

"First Ones? Do you mean Old Ones?" The goblin Skar had referred to what humans called the Master Race as the Old Ones. Could this goblin, Wark, have another name for them?

"First Ones guard lesser races. Old Ones no more."

That was more unclear. If the Old Ones weren't the First Ones... "Who are the First Ones?"

The goblin's shoulders rose and fell with a heavy sigh, and he shook his head. "You must pass message to demonlords to reach Guardians. We observe bad things possible and First Ones needed to stop like long ago. Goblins observe, keep promises to Old Ones and Guardians."

Kaelen stepped back and pulled his hood away from a face displaying the surprise she felt. "Old Ones?"

"The Master Race," Nadia answered and turned back to Wark. "Is that why the goblins serve the demonlords?"

"Yes," he said as relief washed over him. "Goblins are keepers of ways of Old Ones, you call Master Race. You must tell demonlords. I travel to Gung Horsh clan."

"Who are the Guardians?" Kaelen asked.

Wark looked from him to her. "Leader does not know."

Kaelen stepped closer, his eyes spitting fire on the small demon. "Tell me."

The goblin stared at him, his eyes lulling into the familiar emptiness of a demon dispirited.

"Demonlords."

"What demonlords?"

"Wark not told."

Kaelen glared at the goblin for several seconds but the goblin said nothing, until Nadia broke the spell by pushing Kaelen aside. The fool should have known better.

"He can't tell you what he doesn't know. Do you think their leaders would be stupid enough to reveal that for an Adept to discover? It's enough that he told us this much without—"

A rustle of grass drew her attention to where the goblin had stood.

Not a trace remained.

"You let him escape. We could have learned more," Kaelen growled.

"No, we couldn't," she argued, despite the guilt that she had broken the spell for the goblin to escape. She shouldn't have let him slip away like that, but at the same time, she wanted him to get away from Kaelen. If his purpose was to contact the Guardians he mentioned, maybe they were meant to stop the spiral into darkness she saw coming in the conflicts among demonlords and the Adepts who hoped to use it to their advantage. Maybe that's what the goblins also saw. It both relieved her and scared her that she might be right.

Kaelen directed his burning glare at her and returned to his horse. "Our leaders will need to know this."

"Great. Return to tell them."

"Not until..." He swung into the saddle. "...I get that dagger."

Nadia led her horse away to wait for the demonlords' return in the open, where any natters that approached would be easy to spot and destroy. "Then it looks like I'm stuck with you a while longer."

"I'm not complaining."

She was, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her upset.

"Start cutting up some wood if you're staying. We could use a fire."

He made no move, nor did the horse. Nadia waited as the song of the night played softly over the land with the gentle rustle of the wind through the grass, insects chirping, and occasional bird or ground squirrel squeaking faintly.

But she saw no indications of the demonlords returning yet.

They would return. Lord Je'Kaoron wouldn't abandon her, unlike the man left with her.

After a long silence, the creak of leather preceded the thump of feet on the ground. Steps shushed through tall grass to right behind her. A set of reins landing on her shoulder startled her and she whirled.

"Hold him for me."

Nadia took the reins as Kaelen returned to the copse while unsheathing his sword.

With both horses grazing beside her, Nadia watched Kaelen hack at the lower branches. She winced at the thought of what that would do to his weapon, but without the demonlords around, it was their best chance for getting a good fire going.

Kaelen dropped a branch from the tree when a noise arose from the direction the demonlords had gone.

It could have been something far worse, but the emergence of the large cats calmed the fears arising in her mind. The riders in the group burst from the darkness with a familiar figure cast in the moon's glow heading towards her.

"Huntress." Lord Je'Kaoron stopped his mount before her and jumped from the saddle in the same motion, a worried look on his face as his eyes searched her. "Are you all right?"

That he cared enough to worry about her teased a smile from her lips, and she nodded. "Yes."

Cats and horses tromped through the grass from the darkness, one of them taking his mount.

He leaned close and in a low voice asked, "Was there any trouble?"

"No, my lord. The goblin cooperated without any persuasion."

"I didn't mean the goblin."

Nadia followed his gaze to the trees, where Kaelen helped pick up branches broken off by the demonlords, who had taken over.

"No," she said with full understanding. "He...No." Kaelen had been strangely cooperative. He could have tried to take the dagger when they were alone, but he hadn't.

Lord Je'Kaoron nodded and straightened to his normal manner. "And what of the goblin?"

Nadia blinked away her thoughts of Kaelen, glad to have something else to discuss. "Yes. He brought a message. He said his clan observed some things that worried them and that they want to find some First Ones that are Guardians to do whatever needs to be done to stop bad things from happening."

In the darkness, the man stared at her, but in the moonlight, those pale blue eyes grew distant.

"He couldn't tell me who these Guardians are, and when I argued with Kaelen, he ran off."

In his usual pleasant manner, he tipped his head. "Thank you, Nadia."

Thank you? For what—letting the goblin go or for getting the message? "Do you know who the First Ones are? He said they were Guardians of the lesser races."

"I know of them, but they don't want to risk discovery. Those who have been revealed in the past have been tortured for their knowledge." The look on his face in the moonlight tugged at the pity inside her. Sorrow or fear, she couldn't discern, but she wanted to console him as he had provided her solace in her grief. After all he had done for her, it was the least she could offer.

As she would have done with the girls whose half-blood newborns she had taken or the families of demon victims, she reached for his hand in a simple show of sympathy. He had been there in her distress, and she wanted to give him some sign that she understood. He had obviously been close to some of these Guardians, whoever they were.

He curled his fingers in hers, his hand warm.

"Did you know any of them?" she asked hesitantly.

His eyes fell to their hands and she noted the repeated sliding of his thumb over her hand in the seconds that passed.

"Please don't ask me about that," he said in a quiet voice and broke away.

The shimmer of magic transformed him and he bounded off to blend in with the others still in tiger form around the low fire they had started.

Nadia watched him, unaware of the shadow creeping upon her.

"Not in the mood tonight?"

Emotions spiked at the accusation. She jabbed her elbow into the gap in his armor, making an adequate but less than satisfactory contact against Kaelen's ribs. "Leave me alone!"

Needing space from him, she marched away to the fire. At least Lord Je'Kaoron had a heart,

which was much less than she could say for Kaelen.

Chapter 5

The next day came too soon after a sleepless night pondering what Lord Je'Kaoron might know of the First Ones. An avoidance of a subject like that was easy enough to interpret. And then there was his avoidance of her, which concerned her with worries that she had upset him. He had remained a tiger through the night, an easy way to avoid conversation, even if he stayed near.

He was a demonlord, and she shouldn't worry. The lingering stare from Kaelen while he lay on the opposite side of the fire had said it.

In the quiet of the night, the dagger's darkness had invaded her thoughts, twisting them into hating both men, until she realized what was happening. She wanted to toss it, but that would involve admitting that Kaelen was right and that she was weak.

Rather, she tolerated its presence for the sake of proving herself to him, although she had nothing to prove. She had taken down Je'Rol, the half-blood that no Li'Ador or Adepts had survived in encountering, of those who had actually caught up to him. That counted for something.

She thought of him in the quiet of the morning, the grief gnawing at her once again, and it passed into other thoughts and memories. At least while hunting Je'Rol after he escaped from Je'Rekun, she had something to occupy her mind and give her purpose. Now, she could only wonder what would happen after she destroyed the dagger and what Lord Je'Kaoron knew of the First Ones and what that meant for their world.

As the journey resumed, she let the thoughts slide, but while traveling, the weight of the dagger grew heavier in her mind. Kaelen said nothing, but he would take what he wanted when it suited him. When that was, Nadia couldn't be certain, but as long as the demonlords stayed close, he wouldn't get anything.

On the fourth day since leaving Acropa Je'Gri, she started to think they would reach the Nik'Terek Gate without any trouble.

She was wrong.

During the midday break, the tigers stirred. One in particular moved in close to her, one whose stripes she recognized from the many times he had stretched out next to her, his fur soaking up her tears as she cried herself to sleep. After spending so much time among the Je'Gri, she had come to recognize the subtle differences in some of their markings.

In his tiger form, Lord Je'Kaoron moved close to her, his head high and nostrils and whiskers twitching.

After several seconds of sniffing, his ears went back and his tail started lashing.

The others did the same, their teeth bared while they faced outward at the brush and trees around them.

Kaelen rose from the ground and drew his sword. He'd do better with a bow and arrows against trouble—his most proficient weapon—but she supposed he'd left that behind in his haste to catch her. And demonlords didn't use external weapons, not that she had ever seen, since they couldn't effectively carry them in their natural forms. They only used what they were born with, but mortal weapons couldn't hurt them.

Mortal weapons.

Nadia reached down at her side to the dagger. It was more than a mere mortal weapon. Whatever could rile the demonlords might require something more powerful, like the spirit blade.

Lord Je'Kaoron hunched, his lips curled back from pointed teeth in a snarl.

"I wish you could talk like this," she said in a low voice. "Tell me what you sense. Is it natters or something else?"

The tiger's tail lashed and, in the midst of a growl with his ears pinned back, he shook his head as if clearing something away...or shaking his head.

The other tigers positioned themselves to attack.

Their horses stood with their heads up and bodies rigid. The guards holding them had transformed their simple clothes to armor, but they gave the horses their full attention, likely using some form of magic to keep them from fleeing.

The tension thickened around her.

With one hand, she flipped the covering from the top of the dagger and pulled it. Power pulsed through her to hold it in anticipation of battle.

The sudden roar from Je'Kaoron startled her, but she stood ready.

A second later, the clearing where they rested exploded in white and orange as tigers poured from the trees and brush.

Like the battle of the Nik'Terek Gate all over again, the melee took her back.

The tiger-form Je'Kaoron stayed by her, and Kaelen joined them. The tigers didn't seem concerned with them as much as mauling each other.

Nadia caught Kaelen's questioning glance.

"What are they doing?" he asked, his sword in his hands.

"I'd guess Je'Rekun's supporters," she said. The realization twisted her stomach. If Je'Rekun's allies were determined to undermine High Lord Je'Dron, they would want revenge on the man who had taken out their leader—Lord Je'Kaoron.

"They're after him. We have to protect him."

The tiger glanced at her, those pale blue eyes meeting hers with understanding. Already, many of the guards lay wounded, but they took down many of the other tigers with them.

However, it seemed that the others had a larger force; more emerged from hiding and joined the fight, overwhelming the numbers who had accompanied her and Kaelen.

"There are too many," Kaelen said.

"We can't let them take him."

His face hardened.

"Don't even say it!" He'd done enough insinuating of her and Lord Je'Kaoron already.

Two orange tigers made it past the falling guards and approached them warily, tails lashing and teeth bared.

Nadia swallowed her anxieties about facing the demonlords and tightened her grip on the dagger.

Je'Kaoron snarled, teeth bared and ears back as he put himself between the other tigers and her.

The bloodlust of the dagger called to her to protect the one person there she cared about, but she didn't need the dark power to realize that he couldn't defeat them and needed help. And it would test the extent of the dagger's power, which might not be as powerful as its aura projected.

The tigers circled wide to where Je'Kaoron couldn't protect her from both. They would attack

together, she was certain of it.

Nadia moved with the tiger nearest to her and noticed the tall shadow next to her. She didn't have to look to know it was Kaelen sticking next to her as if she couldn't protect herself. He said nothing, but the sword made it clear.

The tigers snarled at them and continued moving.

Something brushed along the back of her legs, Je'Kaoron's tail most likely.

A white tiger approached, its teeth bloody and bared, and joined the others circling them. None attacked, but other white and orange tigers joined, until the three of them in the center of the circle were too far outnumbered and Lord Je'Kaoron pressed into the back of her legs, nearly knocking her forward.

"They want him alive," she said aside to Kaelen.

One of the white tigers blurred and transformed, a woman of scathing beauty with a white and black tail of hair from the top of her head. She stood in white leggings and a coat belted at her slim waist with a back that hung behind like half a skirt, white with jagged horizontal stripes. "He will pay for his crimes against High Lord Je'Rekun. You are another matter." Her voice was smooth and calculated.

Behind her, Je'Kaoron transformed.

"Lady Je'Diri," he said calmly.

The snarling around them ceased as the others transformed.

"Lord Je'Kaoron. It is my pleasure to bring you to justice before Lord Je'Tiren."

Her pleasure. Nadia bristled at the brutality that "pleasure" might involve.

Kaelen adjusted his sword, and Nadia imagined him trying to behead the lady with it, and failing utterly. Those who supported Je'Rekun considered humans no better than livestock. Their lives meant nothing. They were lucky not to be dead already.

Not wishing to start a fight they couldn't win, Nadia reached over and pressed the sword down. He turned with a cold fire in his eyes. She shook her head. His hatred for the demonlords would get its chance, if he stood down this time.

After several seconds, Kaelen sheathed the sword.

"Wise choice, Hunter," Lady Je'Diri taunted in her smooth voice.

Kaelen's eyes narrowed, and he stood rigid and ready to fight.

The lady's lips curved into a malevolent smile. "Your pets may leave."

"No." The word left Nadia's lips without hesitation, the dagger hilt biting into her tightening fingers.

Je'Diri scowled. "Do not argue, Huntress." A second later, her expression changed as she looked Nadia up and down. "You are the one I heard about. Did you too betray High Lord Je'Rekun?"

"I am a demon hunter," she said with confidence. "I serve no demonlord. I only do what must be done, whether it be for Je'Rekun or Je'Dron."

The lady's lips curled in disdain. "So you say, yet you travel with this traitor."

Nadia clamped her jaw on a rebuke. Her only defense would get her killed.

"Adepts claim no alliance to any demonlord," Kaelen said with a warning glance to her.

"This is not your fight, Hunters." Lord Je'Kaoron gave her a scolding look, but she knew him better than that.

"But it is." Nadia searched her head for an excuse. "You have a promise to keep."

His face darkened. "You cannot force a promise from a dead man."

Je'Diri snickered. "None of us are indebted to any human. Leave, Hunters, before I change my mind."

"Nadia—" Kaelen reached for her.

"No." She stepped away, unafraid of her own mortality or the air of superiority of the lady, typical of most demonlords. She had almost taken her own life in her grief for taking Je'Rol's life, when Lord Je'Kaoron had lifted her from that despair. It would mean nothing if she let him suffer.

"Go, Huntress," Je'Kaoron growled. He shoved her away so hard that her feet tangled and she fell to the soft grass.

Kaelen rushed to her side. "Nadia," he murmured.

She pushed his hands from her and sat up herself while the demonlords closed in on Lord Je'Kaoron and secured his arms.

Pale blue eyes caught hers for only a second before they escorted him away. She saw the sorrow in that instant. He didn't want to go, but he couldn't fight that many and win, nor could she; but she would find a way to rescue him.

"We have no supplies. At least return our horses," Kaelen said.

The demonlords said nothing but continued away with Lord Je'Kaoron at the center as others gathered around them in tiger and in human form, many bloody and injured.

Kaelen helped her to her feet. "Let them go."

Nadia stood and shook off his hands. "They'll kill him."

"What's one less demonlord?"

An orange tiger passing them snarled but continued on its way.

Nadia grabbed the cloak at his throat and pulled him close. "One less demonlord ready for peace. Do you want a war we can't win? That's what we'll get if Je'Rekun's allies take over. Lord Je'Kaoron is working to make this world better for everyone."

His eyes studied her with the same disgust she had seen when she first admitted her feelings for Je'Rol, after she had mistakenly trusted Kaelen enough to reveal that.

If that's how he felt, he could stay there. She shoved him back and started after the demonlords through the killing fields. Bloody orange and white tigers lay strewn about the area, their bodies already attracting swarms of insects. It wouldn't take the natters long to catch the scent of fresh blood. The bodies would be gone within days. She didn't intend to be anywhere near it to be attacked as fresh meat.

"Nadia."

She ignored him, determined to stand up for Lord Je'Kaoron...somehow. Even returning to tell High Lord Je'Dron might be too late.

But that didn't mean Kaelen couldn't.

She halted and turned to see him marching through the grass to meet her. "Return to High Lord Je'Dron and inform him what's happened."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Hah! You've already proven that's not true." She turned and hurried after the retreating demonlords, as much to do something for Lord Je'Kaoron as to get away from Kaelen and the threat of succumbing to the ghosts of the past that returned with him to haunt her.

Heavy steps crunched through grass behind her.

"That wasn't my choice."

Damn liar, it wasn't. Only one man had stood by her and never once pretended to be

something he wasn't, and he was drawing further ahead of her, about to be skewered for fighting against the oppression that ruled their world. Nothing Kaelen could say would change her decision, despite her fear of what Je'Rekun's allies might do to her.

"Nadia. This isn't our fight."

"Yes, it is. Why are you still with me?" She quickened her steps to keep pace with the pack ahead. The least she could do was to learn where they were heading.

"Maybe I still care. I don't know."

She let out a huff. "You never cared. It was all about embarrassing me, making me seem weak and unfit to be a demon hunter. I was just a game." The betrayal cut through her, pushing her after the demonlords. She didn't want to be alone with Kaelen and hear his excuses.

One of the tigers looked back with a warning growl.

"They'll kill you," Kaelen said from her side.

"At least I'll die for a friend...something you might learn from."

"Nadia. Nadia, wait."

A hand clamped on her arm pulled her to a stop. She tried to pull away, and when she couldn't, she put her fighting skills to use. He was not holding her back.

Kaelen blocked and moved with her, avoiding punches. When she thought she might finally have him, he twisted and caught her around her throat with his other arm. Thick and hard, his muscles tightened around her throat while he held her wrist twisted aside.

With her free hand, Nadia clutched at his sleeve, aware that he was stronger, and calculated how to escape. Her quickness had always been her advantage, rather than size. She had slackened in her training too much in teaching Je'Surana.

But she had the dagger.

Her right hand dropped to her side. Kaelen squeezed her throat and twisted her arm, distracting her from her attempt.

"Listen to me," his voice ground in her ear. "Forget the dagger."

The demonlords drew farther from them through the trees. Loneliness crept through her at the prospects of losing the only man who had actually ever cared about her.

"I didn't leave you willingly. It wasn't my choice." Kaelen paused, his swallow loud in her ears. "Yes, I was ordered to...to show how weak you were as a woman, but I didn't object for the same reason many of the men at the training center wouldn't have objected. You were one woman, but we could have gone into Kinaan for the satisfaction of a woman. Unlike them, I saw something intriguing—vicious determination and gentleness. I was the one seduced by this young woman, but Commander Rovon saw it, saw us, and knew it wasn't a matter of me using you as he ordered. He sent me away and threatened to kill you if I said anything. It wasn't my choice, Nadia."

Anger burned through her and welled in her eyes. "You had a choice." She choked on the secret still buried but stirring to rise by the revival of memories and heartache. "If this is your apology, it's too little too late."

He let out a heavy sigh and relaxed his hold.

Taking advantage of his slack and needing to flee that part of her past, she twisted to escape his hold and raced through the trees to reach the demonlords. A storm rose inside, a storm of secrets and emotions that could not be reconciled with his supposed confession. For all she knew, he lied to try to use her again.

But he hadn't taken the dagger when he could have.

It made no difference. He had still been selfish, thinking only of himself and his career rather than what would become of her. He could have saved her instead of leaving.

She had overcome that part of her life and would not go back. They had all used her, Kaelan and Commander Rován to discredit her as a woman demon hunter and the sorcerers to add power to their damned weapon.

No more.

She was her own person. She would live for herself and prove them all wrong. She would play a part in saving that world, even if no one else believed it could be done.

Lord Je'Kaoron had believed, had risked his life many times and risked the heartache of a child who loved him to build a better world for that half-blood child's future. And in the short time Nadia had known him, he had shown her a new way of seeing their world.

And she would fulfill Je'Surana's request to protect him.

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Continued in Part 2

Release schedule (preorders available at some retailers):

Part 2 (August 10, 2014)

Part 3 (August 24, 2014)

Part 4 (September 7, 2014)

Part 5 (September 21, 2014)

Complete Novel (Parts 1-5) (October 5, 2014)

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BENEATH THE CRASHING WAVES (Adronis #2)

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About the Author

M. A. Nilles is the darker side of Melanie Nilles. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, cats, and her horse. Her published works under the name Melanie Nilles include the Starfire Angels series and Adronis series. Her works as M. A. Nilles include the Legend of the White Dragon epic and Demon Age series. More can be found at www.melaniennes.com.