

BOOK ONE OF REDEMPTION

A DEMON WAITING TO DIE...

KEIR

A WOMAN DETERMINED TO SAVE HIM.

PIPPA JAY

A demon waiting to die...

An outcast reviled for his discolored skin and rumors of black magic, Keirlan de Corizi sees no hope for redemption. Imprisoned beneath the palace that was once his home, the legendary 'Blue Demon of Adalucien' waits for death to finally free him of his curse. But salvation comes in an unexpected guise.

A woman determined to save him.

Able to cross space and time with a wave of her hand, Tarquin Secker has spent eternity on a hopeless quest. Drawn by a compulsion she can't explain, she risks her apparent immortality to save Keir, and offers him sanctuary on her home-world, Lyagnius. But Quin has secrets of her own.

When Keir mistakenly unleashes the dormant alien powers within him and earns exile from Lyagnius, Quin chooses to stand by him. Can he master his newfound abilities in time to save Quin from the darkness that seeks to possess her?

Keir

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By Pippa Jay

Keir

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Dedication

In memory of those I have loved and lost.

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Chapter 1

In the darkness and the silence, Keir sat with teeth gritted from the pain racking his body. He tried to shut out the pulsing ache in his head where his hair lay matted with blood. Each shallow breath he dared to take burned his raw throat and sent fresh agony spearing into his chest from ribs bruised if not broken. The cell's damp had seeped through his rags and into his skin until he throbbed with the cold. He clenched his fists against the tremors shaking him and wished he could force them still. Wished for his suffering to end.

Wordlessly, he raged against the injustice of it all, as though the anger could keep his life burning, when all it really did was waste his energy, hastening the end. Sudden tears stung the cuts on his face. He would have roared his fury and terror if he had had the strength, but it would have been a futile protest.

The iron door of the cell clanged open, shattering the silence. A sickening jolt of fear punched into his stomach. What fresh punishment did they have in mind for him now?

“Get your hands off me!”

The voice, unmistakably female and strangely accented, carried clearly through the small space. Keir started. It was the first voice he had heard in uncounted nights, and not one he would have expected. The urge to move out of his shadowed niche for a clearer view of the door warred with his instinct to stay hidden. Loath to betray his presence, he willed himself to utter stillness and let his ears do what his eyes could not.

Loud scuffling indicated that the woman was not taking her imprisonment lightly. A dull thump was followed by a man's pained grunt.

“Damn witch!” a guard wheezed. “Get her in there.”

Another thump then the door slammed closed, leaving nothing behind but a draft of smoky air from the torches in the outside corridor and the muted footfalls of the guards. Keir held his breath and listened. After a moment, faint rustlings and light footsteps crossing the flagstones told him the newcomer was on the move.

“Damn it! This wasn't the plan.”

Keir puzzled over it. The woman sounded amused—and educated, despite the coarseness of the exclamation. But no lady of rank would have been thrown into his cell or used such language.

Sudden light scorched his vision, blinding after the long hours of darkness. He closed his eyes, but it continued to glow blood red through his eyelids. Pain spiked into his head. He

raised an arm to shield himself from the glare, hoping he was still safe from sight in his niche. Had this woman been sent merely to add to his torment?

Once his eyes adjusted, he squinted into the light and saw a moving figure draped in heavy robes, styled—like his own—to be all-concealing, though they were not as threadbare or tattered. The dark, luxuriant material shrouded her in shades of green from head to toe without managing to disguise the slightness of her figure. Her hands explored the walls, and as she reached up, the hood fell back, revealing thick reddish hair unlike anything he had ever seen. It gleamed a fiery orange in the torchlight, like a halo of flame.

Curiosity overrode his pain-fogged senses, and he leaned forward. She turned toward him, her gaze skipping across his hiding place as she lifted her lamp higher—the strange light a wand of white fire clutched in one hand. She had a slim, elfin face with steel-gray eyes, a small nose wrinkled by a slight frown of irritation, and translucent skin dusted with freckles. Pretty in an unusual way, perhaps, but not beautiful. He doubted most men would give her a second look, though the color of her hair alone marked her as an oddity, and something to be noted. Was that the reason the Corizi had taken her prisoner? The rarity of her coloring could be reason enough in Adalucien. Otherwise, she seemed too frail a thing to justify sharing his punishment.

Then she moved toward him, and his old suspicions flooded back.

“Another step,” he growled, “and I will kill you.”

The girl stopped and squinted into the shadows. After a moment, she raised the light over her head. “That isn’t very friendly.” Her tone was calm and even, but the way she held herself told him she stood braced for any sudden movement, the lamp a weapon should she need one.

“I am not friendly. I am dangerous.”

Even as he made the threat, he knew his chances of proving it were remote. In his fragile condition, she had a fair chance of fending him off, or possibly even killing him, and it seemed she knew it. Perhaps his voice had given away his pain and exhaustion. Perhaps she found his seated position less than intimidating, but in truth he could not bring himself to stand. Her posture relaxed a fraction, and she took another step forward, her light invading his niche.

Wincing, he turned his cloth-covered face away.

“You don’t look very dangerous.” She held her torch like a sword as she drew closer. “You look sick.”

He kept his arm raised as if to ward her off, though he shook with the effort of it.

“My name’s Tarquin Secker,” she offered. “But my friends call me Quin. Who are you?”

The words escaped him before he could call them back. “I am Keir.”

As if she had somehow mistaken their exchange of names for permission, she crouched before him and held up her free hand, palm outward.

Keir shied back as she reached out to him. Fear and anger lent him a temporary burst of energy, and he shoved her backward. “Do not touch me!”

The blow was not as heavy as he could have normally managed, but Quin landed on her back with enough force to knock the breath from her with a pained grunt, though she kept her grip on the light-stick. She rose and approached him a second time, slowly and with evident caution, but Keir’s strength had failed him at last, and he sagged against the nearby wall.

“Are you wounded?” She knelt down and reached for him again. He shrank from her touch, and she stopped just shy of his arm. “I don’t want to hurt you, Keir. I might be able to help.”

He said nothing, could not bring himself to unbend, and after a moment, she sat back on her haunches with a sigh. “All right, so you don’t want my help. Why are you in here anyway?”

“What does that matter?”

Quin shrugged. “I’m curious, and there’s not much else to do.” She tilted her head. “Did you hurt someone? Kill someone, maybe?”

Despite how mildly she had phrased the question, the inference stung. “No. They caught me stealing food.”

The tension left her face. “Just a thief, then.”

The accusation, however true, stirred his resentment. “What choice is there when you are starving and have no money?”

“Fair enough, but you did just threaten to kill me, so I wondered...” Quin fiddled with the light-wand in her hand. When she spoke again, her tone seemed musing, as if she spoke more to herself. “And yet you didn’t. So I’m guessing you either can’t or wouldn’t.”

Only a fool would make that assumption. Keir held his tongue, tired of the discussion. What did it matter now?

“Look, I shouldn’t be here. I just want to get out. Maybe that’s an idea I can interest you in?”

For a long moment, Keir could think of nothing to say. Escape was inconceivable.

Then he muttered, “There is no way out.”

“I can always find a way.” She gifted him with a grin so full of mischief that it sparked a flicker of life in him. How could someone be so certain of accomplishing the impossible? Was the woman mad?

She rose then moved farther down the passageway, which was lined on either side with archways similar to the one in which he hid. Again, a fragment of curiosity nudged him forward to watch as she assessed their surroundings. The chamber’s original purpose was storage—though the door could be locked and barred, it had never been intended as a dungeon. A gutter ran down the center of the passage, trickling dirty water from elsewhere in the fortress through hidden pipes. At the far end, a drain ran beneath a heavy iron grid that sealed off a smaller archway. Behind the barrier, the gutter widened into a deeper channel for waste. Slow-moving, foul-smelling liquid filled the trench, with no indication of how deep it was or how far it extended. Quin’s light-wand only cast shadows across it and revealed the unpleasant, oily green color.

She returned her torch to a thin cable around her neck. The wand threw broken light down the length of her dark green robes, casting random flickers of brightness across the dirt-encrusted floor as she rolled one sleeve of her robe up to the shoulder. She wrinkled her nose and braced herself as she knelt to plunge her hand into the channel.

The murky liquid reached the edge of the fabric as she groped around in the mire, seeking something below the surface, before she withdrew her arm with a sound of deep distaste. Muttering imprecations under her breath, she rose and shook off as much of the sludge as she could then rubbed herself dry with one corner of her robes.

“Is this a sewer, do you know?”

“Can you not tell?”

“I’m not an expert,” Quin said. “For all I know, the water here always reeks like things have died in it.” She pushed her light-wand through a gap in the grid, reaching as far as she could. It showed little more than greenish-tinged brickwork and deeper shadows beyond.

“Do you know where it leads?”

“No.”

“Hmm, helpful.”

A twitch of anger spurred him into responding despite his lethargy. “A river runs under the city from west to east, and then out to sea. I think all the sewers feed into it.”

“Ah.” Quin seemed to consider his words. “Well, trekking through the bowels of the city isn’t really my idea of fun, but then, neither is being a guest of the Corizi, so…”

She reached inside her belt and removed a small package, handling it as if it were made of something infinitely more fragile than glass.

“There’s going to be a lot of noise and light in a minute,” she called to Keir, “and there might be plenty of stone and metal flying around, so stay where you are.”

With delicate fingers, she peeled the wrappings off her package, to reveal two flattened slivers of something like colored clay, then kneaded the sections together. After a few moments, she tore the mixed clays into several small pieces. After pressing them into the joints between the metalwork and masonry with nervous haste, she scuttled back into the niche opposite Keir. A long and empty silence followed.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked.

“A door.”

Keir snorted, coughing when the effort hurt his throat. “I do not think your key works.”

Quin frowned at him then tilted her head as if she expected to hear a different opinion elsewhere. Nothing but the odd drip of water and the faint raggedness of Keir’s breathing filled the damp silence of the dungeon.

With sudden decisiveness, Quin stepped out of the protection of the archway and returned to the grid. A sizzling noise greeted her, followed by a rapid shower of brilliant purple and red sparks that struck her full in the face. As she cried out and backed away with her hands clutched to her eyes, Keir struggled to his feet, heart thumping as the hissing became a roar. Instinct sent him leaping at Quin, bearing them both into the opposite archway as a huge explosion shattered the grid and surrounding stonework. A cascade of red-hot metal and stone shards tore at the walls and filled their niche with burning dust and debris, spattering them both. Ominous creaks and groans followed the blast, with fine grit and chunks of mortar tumbling from the ceiling as great cracks raced across the chamber.

Stunned and winded, Keir could do no more than roll aside with a groan as Quin scrambled out from under him. Agony raged through his body, more immediate and overwhelming than the sensation of the foundations ripping beneath him, more terrifying than the crash of falling stone. He had no will to move. He lay and waited for the fatal crush to come.

Instead, Quin tugged at him, urging him to his feet with insistent hands he had no strength to refuse. He submitted to her aid without protest as she wedged herself under one arm to support him. Sudden warmth, like a draft of strong spirits, flushed through him and stole his breath as she held him. It gave him strength, set him moving even as he wished to

simply fall and die. Stumbling and swaying, they made their escape through the plummeting debris and destroyed archway into the waterlogged darkness beyond, as the chamber collapsed behind them.

* * * *

Quin fought to keep Keir upright as a swelling tide of filthy water chased them deeper into the cavernous passageway. He hung on her, a dead weight dragging her down. Her wet robes clung to her ankles while the surging water tugged at her legs, threatening to trip her. Behind them, walls and ceilings were still collapsing, forcing the water higher and faster until the archway fell in on itself, sending a towering wave of putrid water sweeping over them. Quin struggled as their world became one of choking water and blackness. Hands knotted in Keir's clothing, she fought to stop him being swept away until her head broke the surface and she hauled him up with her. Swimming was out of the question. Swamped by the dark water, without light or knowledge for guidance, she spent her strength merely keeping them both afloat in the mire.

As swiftly as it had begun, the tidal wave subsided into sludgy waves. Soon, Quin could touch the bottom again, and she stood, legs shaking. She collapsed against the side wall, finding a ledge to rest on as she pulled Keir out of the water. He lay against her, limp as a thing dead, but she felt the shallow heaving of his chest before he fell forward, retching.

Quin forced down her urge to gag in sympathy. The stench was overwhelming, and her skin itched at the thought of what might be covering it. It was enough to make anyone want to throw up, though Keir should've been more used to the stink and filth of this civilization than she. After a few moments, he stopped, spitting the foul taste from his mouth. With a shake of his head, he tried to rise. Quin made to grab his robes and help him, but he swatted her hand away and levered himself up next to her. For a while, neither said a word as they sat gasping in the fetid atmosphere.

Funny, just a few minutes ago he was threatening to kill me...

Quin stared at her companion. However ironic, it seemed her first instinct about Keir had proven correct. Whatever else he might be, he had just saved her life.

One heroic act doesn't make someone a hero. She couldn't remember who had told her that, though she could remember her response. Yeah, but one good deed deserves another.

"Thanks," Quin managed at last, her breath rasping in her throat.

Keir said nothing, but his cloth-covered head turned toward her as if acknowledging her gratitude. In silent agreement, they rose and followed the sluggish water as it flowed along the sewer.

* * * *

Time lost all meaning as they trudged through the water, chilled and exhausted. Quin's head throbbed with pain as she stumbled onward, too numb with cold to care where the tunnel might lead other than out of the cell. Keir seemed oblivious, laboring through the sludge without a word, as if powered by clockwork.

Ugh. The stench had left the inside of her nose and mouth burning. *Give me some clean water, a puddle even...*

A pale light ahead etched out the contours of the sewer and reflected off the oily water. Quin hurried forward.

Please be a way out.

A sharp turn in the passageway revealed the sewer's outlet as its contents cascaded from the end of the slime-coated tunnel and splashed into the mire below. Hazy sunlight and a blast of cold wind greeted her as open sea and sky filled her view. The surface beneath her feet became treacherous where time and effluent had worn it away, leaving it dangerously slick, and the water pushed at her relentlessly. Once she'd reassured herself it was only a short drop down, she took a gamble and jumped, jarring her legs on landing. Keir seemed hesitant to follow and lost his grip as he tried to lower himself.

Water!

Despite the cold and the strong sea winds blowing inland, Quin stripped down to her underwear. The reek made her want to gag. Hades knew what harm prolonged contact might cause, and since she was already wet, a little more made no difference. Choosing a stretch of sea well away from the waste outlet and the swamp it had created, she plunged in and washed herself down as thoroughly as possible, shuddering at the iciness of the water. The chill of it stole the remaining sensation from her extremities, rendering her numb and breathless, but she forced her head under the waves to soak the filth from her hair. Anything to be clean.

She surfaced in a cascade of droplets and a series of painful gasps as the cold burned deep into her chest. As she rose and turned back to the beach, Keir's motionless figure caught her eye. She stared at him as she twisted her hair into a rough knot to squeeze the water from it, mystified by his lack of movement. Were his injuries more serious than she'd imagined? Was he ill? Whatever the reason, perhaps he needed her help.

With the worst of the stench rinsed from her skin, she trudged back to her abandoned clothing and took her tunic from the pile. After a quick sluice in the sea, she wrung it out and tugged it over her head. It was scant improvement, but better than nothing.

Oh, for a hot bath. She almost groaned with longing.

She approached Keir, arms wrapped around herself as shivers racked her body. “We have to get you out of those wet clothes and cleaned off,” she told him through chattering teeth. When he didn’t respond, she stepped closer, intending to help, and he shoved her back.

“Do not touch me,” he breathed, his voice fainter than ever.

Quin’s fragile patience shattered, the rush of anger providing a faint flush of warmth. “Fine, do it yourself,” she snapped, “but if you don’t, the cold or the sewage may kill you, and I’ll be leaving your corpse here!”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Keir stood trembling like a beaten animal, head and shoulders bowed. If she felt weak after their ordeal, how much more had he suffered?

Despite her guilt, her harsh words seemed to have had the right effect. Without further protest, he stripped off the outer layers of his robes—no more than scraps of fabric tied over each other to hide the gaps in other places—before staggering into the sea and allowing the waves to wash him clean.

Quin glanced at the pile of abandoned tatters then back at Keir with a mind full of questions. Even without the threadbare cloak, he remained covered from top to toe, not the smallest patch of skin visible, shrouding himself from the world. He even wore a flap of cloth across his mouth, muffling his voice. She had no idea what he looked like, or how old he was, but nothing could disguise his skeletal condition.

Poor devil.

She stooped to gather up her ruined robes and Keir’s discarded clothing, rinsing them as best she could in the seawater before laying them out on the sand.

Not much hope of them drying like that.

Quin sighed. The tunic, though still damp, at least covered her to the knees and kept off the worst of the chill. How Keir would fare without even the rags he’d shed to wash himself, she couldn’t imagine. He’d crawled from the waves to kneel shivering in the shelter of the rock face that divided beach from land. Quin crouched some distance away, giving him the space his previous aggression demanded but fretting that his health would take a turn for the worse. She had no supplies with her, having hidden them in the city where she’d expected to be safe—a naïve assumption that had cost her dearly.

Bereft of even the most meager of useful things, she’d have to find her bearings before they made a move, especially if Keir were unfit to travel far. She had no intention of leaving him behind, despite his first threat to kill her. In the end, he had saved her life by pushing her out of the way when the prison ceiling collapsed, and she owed him that debt if

nothing else.

Intent on salvaging what she could of their filthy clothing, she nonetheless sensed his gaze on her and glanced across. From somewhere within the shadow of his hood, unseen eyes were staring back, and it spiked her curiosity. Why had he chosen to conceal himself, to refuse help when he so desperately needed it?

With their outer garments laid out to dry, she rose. Her arms still clutched around her in an attempt to ward off the chilling winds, she made her slow way toward him. The movement of his head matched her progress across the beach, a sure sign of his suspicion. Far enough away not to be a threat, she knelt gingerly on the sand, grateful for the warming touch of sunlight on her back.

“Why are you still here?” he asked, his tone weary and bewildered, as if her companionship were beyond understanding.

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“You are free of the city, of the Corizi. Why not leave?”

She chose to ignore the question, getting to her feet instead. “Are you ready to go?”

Keir sagged forward, one hand touching the sand for balance as his head sank lower. “Go where?” he said, his voice so faint Quin had to lean in to catch the words before the breeze swept them away.

“Away from here.” Quin shuffled closer, her concern deepening.

Keir sank lower toward the sand, as though no longer able to keep himself upright.

“Keir, what’s wrong?”

“What do you want of me?” he demanded. “Can I not even die in peace?”

“I don’t want you to die,” she said, the words catching in her throat. *No, I’ve already seen too many die, too many wasted lives...*

Keir’s head lifted, as if drawn by her wish. “There is not a soul in this world who would not wish me dead.”

“Why? All you did was steal some food.” Unease squirmed in her stomach. She could’ve been wrong, but somehow she doubted a murderer would’ve cared enough to save her life. “Or did you do something more to earn that kind of hatred?”

“Do? Nothing. I merely exist.” Keir drew in a ragged breath that sounded almost like his last. “I am a curse to the city and a blight on the Corizi. The Blue Demon of Adalucien. Who would choose to save my life?”

The Blue Demon! Shock blazed hot through her veins. *Oh, Hades, I never thought it would be human!*

“I might,” she murmured, and then darted forward with her hands outstretched as Keir crumpled to the sand with a sigh. Pain lanced through her at the contact, and she gasped as his mind bled into hers.

Outcast...hunted...beaten.

She gathered him to her. “And I will.”

* * * *

In a room atop the North Tower, the Matriarch sat in a high-backed, elaborately carved chair, keeping her back straight despite the bone-deep ache that had grown over the years to plague her. Her room gave her little distraction from the discomfort, being all too familiar. The walls of the apartment were iridescent white plaster and divided into sections, each panel decorated with pastel scenes of colorful landscapes and elegant figures—children at play and courtiers poised in formal dance. A large marble fireplace dominated one wall, unlit during daylight hours and surmounted by a wide family portrait framed in gold. Thick, burgundy drapes shrouded the huge four-poster bed and bordered the three arched windows that trickled sunlight into the room and revealed views across the city.

She sat motionless in her dark-blue robes, the complicated silver knot of Corizi on the front of her bodice embellished with silver beads and tiny white pearls. The high collar outlined a masculine jawline and an oval face that was wrinkled and haughty. Her long hands lay folded in her lap, and she took slow, deep breaths, listening to her city speak. Hearing something beyond the distant babble of voices, rumble of carts, and cries of street vendors. It could only mean trouble. As if to confirm her suspicion, the sound of irregular footsteps and a pounding at the door took her from her musing. Her eyes snapped open.

“Enter,” she commanded.

A gray-haired soldier limped into the room and slammed the door. As he stood before her, sketching a perfunctory bow, she acknowledged him with the merest inclination of her head.

“Mother,” he greeted her, his tone just shy of insolent.

“Well?” she snapped. “Is my palace about to fall?”

“They are making repairs as we speak.”

“How long will this take?”

“Two days.”

The Matriarch grunted, unimpressed. “And the cause?”

“An explosion in the lower levels, causing the sewer beneath the palace to collapse.”

“Yes, I heard the explosion,” she retorted. “I should imagine the whole city heard it.”

She leaned forward, watching intently for any sign that might betray him and put the lie to his words. “No such weapons or devices are stored beneath the North Tower, Rialto. What had you hidden down there? The truth, my son.”

For the first time, something other than anger flickered across his face. “Prisoners,” he admitted, not meeting her gaze.

The Matriarch clasped the arms of her chair until her nails dug into the wood, resisting the urge to push up from her seat. He was far past the age where she could slap him for his foolishness. “Since when are prisoners kept below the tower?” she demanded. “Why were they not in the holding area?”

“I did not want these two to be seen.”

Suspicion coiled into a hard knot in her chest. *Oh, please, do not have done this, my son...* “Why? Who were they?”

His silence allowed the distant commotion of the bustling city and the nearby rebuilding to divert her. The everyday sounds of civilization filled the empty air, marking the passing seconds in irregular beats. Rialto swallowed hard, his long face twisted as if in pain. “The Blue Demon.”

The Matriarch made herself sit back, though anger left her shaking. “Why?”

“He has been allowed the freedom of our city too long!” the commander spat, his look slightly wild. “I would rid us of him, once and for all.”

“But why? Have you not tormented him enough for the sin of his birth, without resorting to murder?”

He shook his head, waving aside her words with one hand as if they had no value.

“The removal of such a creature is not murder. It is a cleansing.”

“Rialto.” The Matriarch forced herself to calm. “You cannot do this. The law does not permit execution without proven cause.”

“His existence is cause enough.”

“He has committed no crime!”

Rialto thrust his face to within inches of her own. She held herself steady and matched his gaze though her heart quivered. How far would his insanity goad him? “He has blighted my life, as well you know, Mother,” he growled. “A curse on me and on Adalucien. I will have it ended!”

After a moment’s pause, the Matriarch reached out to touch his cheek. “I believe there is a curse on you, my son,” she said with a hint of sadness, gazing into a face she no longer recognized. “I think it has driven you mad.”

He retreated from her, regaining a semblance of composure. “I will rid the city of its madness,” he said coolly, assuming his soldier’s stance once more. “I will be free of him.”

The Matriarch shook her head. “There must be a fair trial. The law must be observed, Rialto.”

“Then I shall bring him to you for trial, Mother. Him and his companion.”

“Companion?”

“My men arrested a woman, one asking questions about the Demon. No doubt seeking some unholy alliance. Together, they caused the explosion.”

“Then no doubt they lie buried beneath our feet, Rialto.” The Matriarch sighed. A shame and a waste, but it would spare the poor souls further torment, at least. “You said the chamber was destroyed. Surely they have not survived?”

Sudden doubt etched his haggard face. “I shall have it searched.” He saluted and turned, clearly distracted as he left.

The Matriarch watched him go, still clutching the chair arms as if the solidity of the wood could grant her a measure of reassurance.

“May the Gods have pity on them,” she muttered. “And on you too, my son.”

* * * *

When Keir came back to the world, he was warm and sheltered. Heat flowed from the cheering crimson flicker of a campfire. A deep-blue sky full of evening stars hung overhead, and the twin moons set beyond a row of trees. He lay on something soft and fresh with the scent of resin and greenery, draped in heavy robes that smelled faintly stagnant. For the first time in more years than he could remember, he seemed safe and cared for, though neither his pain nor weakness had lessened.

He eased himself up, taking time to observe his surroundings. An outcrop of rock lay behind him, three or four larger boulders making up a circle of stones. A patch of scrubby woodland masked the horizon, dark, wavering shadows sheltering them from the sea breezes that stirred their branches. The crackling of the fire sounded over the rush and fall of the sea somewhere nearby, while drifting smoke carried the aroma of something cooking. Quin had wrapped her dry robes around him and laid him on a pile of leafy branches. Not a single rag had been removed—even those he had stripped off had been neatly rebound around his arms and legs, cloaking his true self from sight. Had she uncovered his face? He touched his cheek, but the dressings were undisturbed. No doubt she had been too afraid to unmask him and see the horror beneath the fabric. Few would dare, no matter how curious.

Footsteps heralded Quin’s return as she strode into the circle of firelight, starting

when she noted Keir awake.

“How do you feel?” She crouched down, warming her hands on the fire with an air of urgency. With her robes sacrificed for his sake, her basic outfit seemed scant protection from the chilly evening.

“Grateful,” he managed, and then coughed, his mouth dry.

She immediately stepped around the fire, proffering a small flask she must have summoned up by magic. Keir drank in deep gulps, the cool water soothing his throat. As he passed it back, Quin handed him a fist-sized fruit. Recognizing it, he moved the covering away from his mouth and ate. It was tart and somewhat under-ripe, but he relished each bite.

“I couldn’t find much,” she apologized, as he finished. “I didn’t want to go too far with you unconscious. My supplies are back in the city, and it took me most of the day just to get you here. I wasn’t sure if you were fit to move or even if it was the right thing to do, but I couldn’t leave you on the beach.”

“You could have.” Keir lay back and stared into the flames, his strength spent. “No one else would have concerned themselves.”

“Why?” Quin sounded genuinely bewildered. “Is there something wrong with you?”

He suppressed a laugh then regretted it as stabbing pains lanced across his ribs. “Do you not know what I am?” he demanded. “Are you not afraid?”

“Afraid of what? You saved my life.”

“I would not have done so if I had stopped to think of what I was doing.”

“Really?” Quin frowned, taking a long sip from the container as if she had no fear of contamination from sharing his drink. “Well, you did it all the same.” She capped the flask. “Listen, if it’s some kind of disease, I’m immune to most things. If not, I have some friends who can treat almost anything. They could help you.”

“A cure?” This time, Keir did laugh, and could not make himself stop until tears wet the rags concealing his face and his chest burned. “Are they magicians? There is no cure for a curse!”

“What kind of curse?”

“The dark kind.” Keir closed his eyes and covered his face with one hand, shutting the firelight out. Shutting *her* out.

He heard movement and knew Quin had come close. Before he could repeat his warning not to touch him, she had grabbed his arm and forced it aside so she could look him in the eye. The ferocity of her gaze froze him and silenced whatever protest he might have made.

“I don’t believe in curses, and I’m not afraid of you. I don’t judge anyone by how they look, only how they behave, and you saved my life today, whether you meant it or not.” She spoke softly and urgently, her face close to his. “If your people judge you by what they believe you are instead of by what you do, I’m sorry for them, and for you.” She paused as if considering something. “Come back with me and you’ll have a very different life, I promise. If you don’t, I think you’re going to die, Keir, and that would be a waste.”

Her words had an entrancing intensity and, for a moment, Keir saw a glimmer of what that other life might be like. Something seemed to pass between them as she held him, a sense of empathy, of kinship. Words drifted through his mind that he could not place as his own. *Outcast...alone...alone, like me.* Sorrow and bitterness bled into him.

Then he broke free from her grip and turned his face away. “You do not know what you are saying.”

Quin sat by him a moment longer then went back to her spot beside the fire. She knelt close to the flames, reaching her hands toward their heat as she shivered. “Now you’re judging me,” she said, mild reproach in her tone. “You think I’m like everyone else on this planet. Couldn’t you be wrong?”

Keir scorned giving her a reply, and they ate their inadequate meal in silence, with Quin’s gaze never leaving him. Food gave Keir some strength, but he had little appetite for it even at her insistence. Despite all she had done for him, he could not quite bring himself to trust her. Why should she be different?

Eventually, she sighed and curled herself up between two rocks with her arms wrapped around herself. After a final lingering look he could not fathom, she closed her eyes.

Keir remained vigilant even as her face softened into sleep, staring at her through the orange veil of sinking flames and refusing to surrender to his exhaustion. What Fate had sent this odd woman to him, to save him despite his desire for death? She was no beauty, no goddess he recognized. Yet something strange had passed between them as she touched him, and now he felt bound to her. Was she an angel in human guise? Or some demon sent to torment him before delivering him to his final hell?

Unable to resist any longer, Keir’s eyes slid shut as he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

* * * *

Rialto sat in his great carved chair, legs stretched out before him as he brooded over a cup of wine. His chamber was little more than an austere gray cell, one of many that made up the army barracks within the double walls of the palace. There was a plain, narrow bed against one wall, a table set with food, a long chest of his belongings, and his one luxury as

commander—a frugal fire behind a simple iron grill. His armor lay neatly stacked and polished on its ledge, though he still wore his chainmail under the Corizi tabard. The only light came from the orange glow of the fire that did little to warm him. Instead, the same bitter anger burned inside him, and no amount of wine eased it.

A sharp rap sounded on his door, and he started from his somber reverie.

“Come in,” he said, his voice slurred.

One of his personal guards entered and saluted. “Sir, they have completed a search of the chamber. No bodies have been found.”

Rialto stared into his cup thoughtfully before finishing the dregs and rolling the cup between his hands. “So, they did escape.”

“It would appear so, sir.” The young soldier stepped forward and laid a tattered piece of parchment before him on the table, gesturing with his mailed hand. “The architect was able to find an old plan of the palace sewer. It leads to the coast, east of the city. There is no other outlet before it reaches the sea.”

Rialto spun the map and stared down at it intently, brow furrowed in deep concentration. “Have a squad armed and ready to ride at dawn,” he growled. “Tell them they have orders to shoot on sight.”

“But sir, the Blue Demon...” the young man protested. His face turned a shade paler under the shadow of his visor.

Rialto sneered, contempt adding to the anger already souring his stomach. “Do not tell me you believe that superstition, boy! He will die like anyone else, and you can tell the men any curse on the man who kills him will be nothing compared to my wrath against the one who lets him escape.”

“Yes, sir!” The guard saluted, departing as quickly as protocol and a closed door would permit.

Rialto glared after him before pouring another cup of wine and raising it in a toast. “To the death.”

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