



# BRIMSTONE ANGELS

NEVERWINTER™

ERIN M. EVANS



# PROLOGUE

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## *THE VILLAGE OF ARUSH VAYEM, THE TYMANTHERAN FRONTIER*

*21 NIGHTAL, THE YEAR OF THE PURLOINED STATUE (1477 DR)*

**F**ARIDEH MET THE DEVIL IN THE DEAD OF WINTER, SEVENTEEN YEARS after she'd been left at the gates of a village on no one's map. It was the winter after she'd drunk too much whiskey for the first time, and four winters after she'd had her first heartbreak, infatuated with the dairyman's much older son. Seven winters had passed since she'd first managed to swing a sword without dropping it.

And ten winters had blown through the village of Arush Vayem since she'd first realized that all of these things were bound to be heavy with other implications—all because she was a tiefling.

Farideh hugged the book she carried to her chest to make an extra layer against the frigid breeze that blew through her cloak and her clothes beneath. Her tail was nearly numb with the chill as she made long tiptoed steps to keep the drifting snow from crumbling into her boots, her eyes on the ground to keep her balance.

As she passed the well, she looked up from her feet, and her chest squeezed tight.

Not ten steps before her another tiefling, Criella, the village midwife and a priestess of the earth goddess, trudged up the same path. Bundled against the cold, Criella's sawn-off horns were hidden and her brick red skin ruddier than usual. Suddenly conscious of her own unaltered horns, curling back from her face and uncovered, Farideh smiled nervously.

"Well met, Mistress Criella," Farideh said, "and good morning."

“Well met,” Criella said. Her smile hovered at the corners of her mouth, but her eyes were hard. She stopped in the middle of the path. “Where are you heading?”

“Home,” Farideh answered.

“Hm. Where did you get that book?”

Farideh made herself keep smiling, as if she couldn’t hear Criella’s implication that she ought not to have the book in the first place. “From Garago,” she said, naming the wizard whose book it was. “He lends books to Havilar and me sometimes.”

“Havilar and I, dear.” Farideh bit her tongue as Criella continued. “And where is your sister?”

“Inside, probably,” Farideh said. Criella pursed her lips, and the younger tiefling quickly added, “I haven’t seen her in some hours. She’s likely with Mehen.”

“Does Mehen know you’re borrowing magic books?” Criella asked.

Farideh turned it over and opened it to show the frontispiece. “It’s just a history book.”

“*The Legacy of the Skyfire Emirates in the Calim?*” Criella said. “What has you so interested in *there* of all places?”

Far, far to the west, other tieflings sometimes joined the fiery efreet in the Calim Desert in their perpetual war against their enemies, the djinns of the air. Criella didn’t have to say another word—Farideh knew what she was implying: Why was Farideh reading a book about rogue tieflings who aided monsters and known slavers? Didn’t Farideh understand that she—just like everyone else descended from devils and fiends—had to know her place, to stay safe somewhere like Arush Vayem, to be quiet and unnoticeable?

Or did Farideh *want* to be the sort of tiefling who made life hard for the rest of them?

“Mehen was talking about the wars there.” Mehen, a dragonborn and a soldier in his life before Arush Vayem, had been the guardian of Farideh and her twin sister, Havilar, since they were abandoned at the village gates. More than a few of Havilar and Farideh’s childhood bedtime stories had been sweeping, gory tales of battle. If he hadn’t talked about the Calim, it was the merest coincidence.

“Was he?” Criella said.

"He mentioned them," Farideh amended. "It seems like such a silly thing, don't you think? For so many hostilities to range around something as unchangeable as one's nature?"

Criella's smile vanished altogether. "Ah. Is that something else Mehen has taught you?"

Farideh flushed. "That . . . the djinn shall always be djinn?" she said as innocently as she could, but her pulse raced. It had been too near to admitting there was something like fear lurking in herself. That the lines of descent that linked her to some long ago and faraway fiend were more powerful than anything she could affect. "I believe that's why they're called elemental," Farideh added.

"Of course," Criella said, but already she was studying Farideh as if there might be some sign of her true nature unfolding. Farideh blushed harder. Any of the human villagers would find Criella's scrutiny too subtle to notice. But Farideh's eyes were like Criella's—she knew the shifts and flickers of a tiefling's eyes. Criella wasn't trying to hide her disquiet.

Farideh longed to tell Criella that she knew. That she hated it. That it was worse coming from someone like Criella, who was a tiefling too. Who had gotten the same scrutiny from someone else when she was Farideh's age. Who had cut off her horns and clubbed her tail because of those looks and run away to Arush Vayem, a community of tieflings, dragonborn, and anyone else who wanted to disappear.

A prison and a refuge, Farideh thought. The wall around the village—the wall that kept out the monsters of the mountains, raiders and scouts, the hordes of people who hated Criella and the others enough to drive them to a place like Arush Vayem—might as well have been a circle of armed warriors, half their weapons pointed inward.

"Blood is a powerful thing," Criella said, her eyes burning into Farideh, "though it is always within our power to circumvent it. If we are vigilant."

"Criella." The gruff voice behind Farideh made her jump. Criella looked up, and her surprise at seeing Mehen standing there was as plain as her contempt for his foster daughter. He might have weighed as much as a small ox, but Mehen could move with a silence not even Farideh could predict. She shifted out of his way.

Mehen stood a full foot taller than the already tall and gangly tiefling girl, his scales a dull ocher over hard muscle, and the frill along his jaw full of holes where he once wore the jade plugs that had marked his clan. Those rested now in a small enameled box Mehen kept in his room. He did not discuss them with Farideh or Havilar.

"Well met," Criella said. "Farideh was just telling me about her interest in the Skyfire Emirates."

"Is that right," he said. He looked down his snout at Farideh. The way Mehen looked at Farideh made her suspect he never quite knew what to do with her. She was not like Havilar, who would have polled her own horns like Criella had it meant she could be a warrior of Mehen's skill.

But even if she was not his favorite, Mehen would surely not take Criella's side.

"It's a *history* book," Farideh said again. She knew Mehen's expressions too—well enough to spot the shift of a scaly ridge that registered his annoyance at Criella.

"Good," he said. "The genasi's tactics are blunt, but it's good to know your enemy." He smiled at Criella, and she drew back at the row of sharp, yellowed teeth. "Run along," he said to Farideh, "and get inside. You'll freeze to death in this weather."

"Yes," Criella added. "I was about to say the same."

Farideh bobbed her head meekly over the edge of the book.

She wanted to tell Criella, "I know you're thinking I'd be lucky to freeze. I know you're thinking my blood runs hot as the Ninth Layer of the Hells and we'll all find that out soon enough. I know you're thinking that with twins, one of us is bound to turn out rotten, and your coin's been set on me."

"Good morning, then, Mistress Criella," was what she did say.

She had no more than rounded the corner before Mehen and Criella started talking again. "You had best set them to a profession," Criella said. "They're too old to be running wild."

"They're young enough," Mehen said. "And I'm training them fine. We need defenders."

"That girl is going to be no one's defender and you know it," Criella said. "Everyone knows it. Better to put up scarecrows than to send her on patrol."

"No one was hurt." But Farideh heard the embarrassed tone in Mehen's voice. Havi could be sent on patrol, but not Farideh. Not so long as she jumped at martens and couldn't keep hold of her sword.

"She's a bright girl," Criella said, "but she has a smart mouth and she's too clever by half. Give her to me. I need an apprentice, and a few years of devotion to Chauntea should wear her . . ."

Farideh hurried down the lane, her face hot despite the cold wind. She didn't need to hear the rest of Criella's offer—the priestess had hinted at it often enough to Farideh—and she couldn't bear to hear Mehen's reply. Determined as Mehen was to keep her home and training, Farideh wasn't sure which fate was worse.

But she would have to choose. There wasn't much else open to her within the village's walls, and Farideh knew better than to dream of a future she couldn't have.

Farideh picked her way up to the ancient stone barn that had been converted, long before she'd been born, into a house for the dragonborn veteran and, later, his foundling daughters. By the time she stomped the snow off of her boots, she had forgiven Mehen, as she always did, but Criella knew just how to get under her skin.

She wasn't the kind of tiefling Criella thought she was. She started to unwind the scarf from her neck and looked up into the room. Maybe Criella was right. Maybe she ought to keep her head down and stay here, so that people didn't think . . .

The flutter of her thoughts ceased.

Her twin sister, Havilar, sat on the floor, her long legs stretched out in front of her, resting back on her arms. She was looking up at something standing in front of her.

No. Not something, *Someone*.

The devil was standing—waiting—in a circle of chalk runes that Havilar had drawn on the ancient oak planks of the floor. If Farideh looked at the runes, she would have known their names, but she could only look at *him*.

Someone else might have said he looked like an archdevil out of one of Garago's books. He did—red-skinned, cinder-haired and black-eyed, handsome as a young lord, with shapely horns and a pair of veiny wings that nearly scraped the ceiling of the loft he stood below. He was slim and well-muscled and clothed in snug leather,

with rings on every finger and charms pinned wherever they could find a place.

But to Farideh, he looked like sin. He looked like want. He looked like all the thoughts she couldn't let herself have, bundled up in a skin and watching her drip snowmelt on the floor.

Handsome was a paltry word for him. Tiefling, human, or anything else—boys didn't look like this. Boys didn't make her feel as if someone were pulling seams loose inside her. He smiled, and his teeth were so like hers—even but for the sharp points of his canines that were too large by human standards, and pitiable by dragonborn. She had never thought so looking at her own teeth, but the devil's looked like a wolf's. Like something ready to take a bite of her.

The book slid out of Farideh's hands.

Havilar nearly jumped out of her skin when it hit the floor. When she turned and saw Farideh, she clasped a hand to her chest and let out a sigh. "*Karshoj*, you scared me."

"Oh Havi," Farideh breathed. "What have you done?"

A grin split Havilar's face—a face that was in almost every respect identical to Farideh's, save two: First, where Havilar's eyes were both golden, Farideh's right was silver and always had been. Second, Havilar was much more likely to be grinning. People called her "the cheerful one," and sometimes "the wild one."

The one I am always chasing after, Farideh thought.

"Isn't he marvelous?" Havilar said, though by the tone of her voice, Farideh could tell that the devil with his black, black eyes didn't have the same effect on Havilar at all. "The spell was supposed to call an imp," she said, "but I must have gotten lucky. He's a cambion. Half-devil," she added. "And people say you're the smart one."

"No one says that," Farideh said, forcing herself to look away, to look at her sister. But still she could *feel* the cambion looking at her. "Listen to me: This isn't lucky. This is very bad. You have to send him back—right now."

"You're such a worrywart. He's safe. He can't harm anyone as long as he's in the circle and look—" She turned and made a series of rude gestures at the cambion. He regarded her with the same mild smile. "He's locked right in. He can't do any harm."

He can, Farideh thought. He is. She felt as if her mind were slowing down, as if her tongue were turning to clay. "Send him back. If anyone finds out you've summoned a devil—"

"I'm not sending him anywhere until Mehen has seen him. Maybe you won't be the smart one forever. This is a hundred times better than that dire rat he had me trap." She pulled off Farideh's scarf the rest of the way and wrapped it around her own neck. "Here, you watch him for a minute."

"What? I can't! You can't leave me—"

Havilar took up Farideh's cloak as well. "Yes, you can. Just don't mar the circle. That's important. Probably."

"Wait!" Farideh said, but Havilar was already out the door and into the snow.

Leaving Farideh alone with a devil who looked like walking sin.

He stood there—quiet, still, watching her intently. The silence felt so fragile, as if the slightest breath would shatter it. She thought of Criella's concern, of the fiendish blood undeniably coursing through her veins, ready to make her do something foolish. Or dangerous. For a long time she didn't dare move.

But then, neither did the devil. The circle—despite the fact that Havilar shouldn't have been able to do anything of the sort—was holding. He was only standing there.

She told herself to relax—she wasn't going to talk to him, she knew better than that, Criella was wrong—and bent down to pick up the book.

"You're not like that one," the cambion said.

Farideh lost her grip on the book and dropped it again. She stared up at the devil, but he was still standing there, still trapped in the circle. "What?"

"You are not like her," he said. His voice slithered into her ears and Farideh shivered. She scooped up the book and held it to her like a shield.

"I . . . I thought you weren't supposed to talk," she said.

"I'm not able to do any *harm*," he said, "and what harm is talking?" He smiled again, as if he knew what Farideh had been thinking before. "You're not like her," he repeated. "Like night and day. Like sweet and sour. Like the ocean and the desert." He tilted his head. "It's astonishing."



Farideh flushed. "I don't know what you mean by that. We're twins. We're alike tip to toe."

The cambion tapped a finger below his right eye, the same eye as Farideh's silver one. Farideh's flush burned hotter.

"It's only an eye."

More than an eye though. Even the dragonborn who refused to see fate or the hands of the gods in anything, touched the hafts of their weapons when they spied her odd eyes. Bad enough to be a tiefling, the descendent of humans and fiends; worse still to be marked like that. If she'd come by it honestly—she knew they thought—by a blinding stroke, it would be one thing . . . but nothing normal was born with two-colored eyes.

"It's a very *clever* eye," the cambion said. "Both of them are. They see things your sister's don't."

Farideh scowled at him. "It's just an eye. It can't see invisible doors. No spell-hidden creatures. No silver pieces in your ear—"

"Of course not," he said, and like that, the wheedling tone was gone. "But you do see the way people look at you, devil's child."

Those black eyes, cold as a winter storm, were staring right into her heart and the sudden seriousness in his voice jolted her.

"What is it they say?" he asked. "One's a curiosity, two's a conspiracy—"

"Three's a curse," she finished. "You think I haven't heard that rubbish before?"

"I *know* you have." When she glared at him, he added, "It's not as if I'm plumbing the depths of your mind, dear girl. That is the burden of every tiefling. Some break under it, some make it the millstone around their neck, some revel in it." He tilted his head again, scrutinizing her, with that wicked glint in his eyes. "You fight it, don't you? Like a little wildcat, I wager. Every little jab and comment just sharpens your claws."

"I . . ." Farideh realized she was doing exactly what she had sworn not to do, and took hold of the book, crossing over to the shelves on the opposite side of the barn. So he was right—as he said, it wasn't hard to guess. She slid the tome onto the shelf.

"Who could blame you?" the cambion went on. "Who wants to be held responsible for something they can't control? Turned away

because of something their foremothers and forefathers did to gain a little power?"

She was trying, but gods, he was prodding her in sore spots. "What do you know about my foremothers and forefathers?" she said. She kept her eyes on the spines of the books. "Maybe it *was* power that made them cross with devils, or maybe they didn't have much choice. Maybe it was for some . . . greater good. *Maybe* it was love. The cambion broke into raucous laughter, and she felt herself flush.

"Ah! Is that what they tell you?"

"They . . . It just might have been that way, that's all." She looked back over her shoulder. "You weren't there."

A smile twisted the cambion's lips, and Farideh blushed again. She'd been staring at his mouth. "Of course. All those mortal women swooning over gallant pit fiends. All those golden-hearted succubi blushing as men kiss their burning hands. My darling, let me tell you a secret: devils don't love."

Farideh looked at the door. Havilar would be back any minute, and with her, Mehen. Mehen would tell Havilar what a stupid thing it was to call a devil and make her send him back. Or maybe he'd just pull out his falchion and slice the cambion in half.

When she looked back, the devil had taken a few steps closer to her, still toeing the edge of the circle of runes. She was still a good eight feet away, but there was nothing between them, and she was very aware of those eight empty feet.

"You're a half-devil," she said. "So if it's all about power, who wanted it there?"

His smile twitched, and for a moment she wondered if he had sore spots of his own. "Nobody. Least of all my father."

"Is he the devil?"

"No, that would be my mother," he said. "Invadiah, the fiercest erinyes of the Lady of Malbolge." There was a sour note to the way he said it.

Farideh didn't know what an erinyes was, but she suspected Criella would tell Mehen to keep a tighter rein on her if she did. Malbolge was the name of one of the Nine Hells. Her sense of dread deepened, though she pushed it aside. He was a devil—of course he came out of the Hells. He was still trapped in a circle Havilar made.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Farideh," she said.

The cambion clucked his tongue. "Anyone ever tell you, Farideh, that there's power in names?"

"You told me your mother's name pretty easily," she replied.

"True enough," he said. "And I'll even tell you mine, since I know you want to hear it. It's Lorcan."

"Well met," she said, and instantly felt foolish.

"Better than you think," he said. "We're even now. You can see I'm not like the others."

"What others?"

"Why, the ones who judge you," he said, with a wide gesture at the world beyond. "The ones who wait for you to fail."

"There's no one like that here," she said, even though that wasn't true. Criella. The dairyman, the blacksmith's apprentice, the tinkers, and others. They thought they were hiding it, but they watched her when they thought she wouldn't notice, gauging her, waiting for her true nature to burst forth like a bud coming to poisonous bloom.

"So is that what this is?" Farideh said, hotly. "You're going to try and convince me to . . . to . . . what? Kill my neighbors? Corrupt them? I'm not going to—"

"Heavens to Hells, you're an excitable one," Lorcan said. "How old are you? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen."

"All but grown," he said. "Regardless, you're smart enough to know better than to do something just because I said it, I'd wager. I would have had an easier time snatching up your sister if I were *that* sort of fiend. I'm only here to help."

"I thought you were here because Havilar called you."

"And I *came*," he said, "because I wanted to help."

"You can't help me."

"Oh? It doesn't take a seer to work out how your life will go."

Farideh shook her head again, as if she could stop listening to him. Leave, she told herself, leave now. She started toward the door.

"You'll live in this village for all of your life," Lorcan said, keeping pace with her along the border of the circle. "You'll spend every day trying your hardest to be what they want, and you'll never meet their

expectations, because you were not made for this. You will always be their burden, the creature that turned up at the gates in swaddling.”

Farideh stopped. “How do you know that?”

He smiled. “Your sister told me. They love *her*, don’t they? But only so long as you keep after her, cleaning her messes and making sure no one realizes that she’s causing so much trouble.”

“Havi’s not trouble.”

“No,” Lorcan said, with a chuckle. “She’d *never* do something foolish like summoning a devil because she thought it would be fun.” Farideh bit her lip. “If you’re lucky you’ll succeed and she’ll be safe. If you aren’t—and darling, no one’s *that* lucky—one day you’ll slip, you’ll miss, and she’ll undo everything you’ve worked your entire life to protect. They’ll throw you out of this village and into the real world. She’ll never see it coming because Havilar believes that people are *good* and they’ll always love her and there’s nothing wrong with playing along the lines of their expectations. Whoever finds her first will take her head if she’s lucky. At least that way’s quick.”

As he spoke, Farideh saw the village, angry and afraid. A garrote, a chopping block, or an angry mob. Soldiers from somewhere else. Warrior-priests on horseback. Gods, it could come a thousand different ways. She’d *heard* it a thousand different ways from the villagers. Her blood would melt the snow . . .

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” she said. Tears choked her voice.

“Doesn’t matter,” Lorcan said. “It’s an unhallowed grave, unmourned and alone for the both of you. There’s no escaping that, no matter how perfect you are.”

There isn’t, Farideh thought—she’d always known that, hadn’t she? Hard as she tried to be good, no one trusted her.

“I can help you, you know,” Lorcan’s crooning voice slid through her worries. “Simple as it comes. No one will ever hurt you. No one will ever hurt her either.”

“No,” Farideh said, though her thoughts felt slippery and loose. She covered her eyes and ducked her head. “No. Go away.” Stay, she thought. Tell me.

“It’s a simple thing,” he said again. Lorcan set his hand, hot as an iron, on the bare spot between her shoulder blades, his fingers sliding

just under the edge of her collar. "Not like what they tell you. Just say you're mine. That's all it takes."

"No." She couldn't. It would be everything she wasn't supposed to . . .

"You'll have the power to do as you please. You'll have the power to stop *them*. 'I'll give you everything and all you have to do is take it. Take the power. Say you're mine.'"

"No," she said, though her voice was growing fainter and her head was spinning. Why would she say no? She would be safe.

"No one touches a burning coal—and that's what you'll be, my darling, something so hot and bright and dangerous they dare not lay a hand on you. Someone tries to harm Havilar and you will stop them. Someone tries to deny you what you truly deserve, you will show them their folly. Anyone comes to this village, looking for anyone who doesn't want to be found . . ." He trailed off.

She could not open her eyes now. "Yes?"

"You will be their savior," he whispered in her ear. "Tell me you don't want that?"

"I . . ." Farideh faltered. "I do."

"Free. Free to do as you please. Free to find whatever life you want." He pulled her close, very close. "Free to stop those who would hurt the innocent. Hurt your friends. Hurt Havilar." His breath burned against her skin. "You want that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You want me to give you that power?"

"Yes."

"You want to be mine?"

"Yes," she said, and with that her thoughts seemed to clear: *He's out of the circle.*

Farideh looked up in horror at the cambion, whose arms held her like an iron band. "No!" she cried.

"Too late, darling." He whispered in her ear, "It wouldn't have held the imp either."

Then everything caught fire.



Farideh woke to someone calling her name. There was a smell of burned wood and a chill breeze blowing over her skin. She opened her eyes to a heavy black snow swirling through the sky.

Not snow, she thought. Ashes. Fat black ashes. Like burnt paper.

She started to sit up and someone grabbed her arm. Havilar. She looked up at her sister, whose cheeks were streaked and spotted with a slurry of tears and clinging cinders. Beyond, the village—the whole village of Arush Vayem—stood, watching from a distance of a good twenty feet. Between the twins and the villagers, the ground was a flat stretch, cleared and charred as if something had exploded, burning away the grass and snow and . . . what else had been there? Mehen stood in the middle, his falchion out and ready. But he was facing the villagers.

They're angry, Farideh thought muzzily. Something . . .

She remembered the stone barn and the cambion. Her breath sped up. Her nerves rattled with fear and pain and she realized her shoulder was screaming, and her dress had been torn open on that side.

From her collar to her elbow her golden skin had been branded with an elaborate design. She stared at it a moment and the lines seemed to form a flail. A flail and a smattering of lines that looked like a whirlwind. She touched it gingerly—it burned like a fever.

"Oh Fari," Havilar whispered. "What have you done?"



The time between waking in the wreckage of her home and finding herself sitting in the dark beside a campfire, somewhere in the foothills of the Smoking Mountains passed in a blur. She remembered shoving half-burnt things into a haversack. She remembered Mehen cursing the villagers in a string of Common and Draconic, blowing out a fork of lightning breath when the blacksmith's apprentice got too near. Criella shouting. Everyone shouting. Farideh had to leave. If Farideh was leaving then so was Havilar, if Havilar and Farideh were leaving, then so was Mehen, and damn them all and *karshoji Tiamat*

come down on them. She remembered Havilar clinging to her arm with one hand and her glaive with the other, as if the two were all that could anchor her in the world. Mehen leading them up a mountain trail, muttering to himself in Draconic—they could not go to Tymanther, but where else could they go? The Black Ash Plain lay to the south, riddled with giants and their kin. The great Underchasm split Faerûn to the west. To the north lay Chessenta . . . and if Farideh's burn meant what he thought . . .

The lines that laced her shoulder were red and oozing. They ached. They itched. Worse, they *pulled*, as if the burn were a tether and something was holding the other end.

Mehen settled a blanket over her shoulders. "You should go to sleep," he said gently. Havilar was already fast asleep, sprawled face-down with her horns curling back from the ground.

"I'm not tired," she said, hardly above a whisper. Her throat ached from the effort of not crying. She couldn't—not after all she'd done.

He was silent for a moment. "We'll be all right."

Farideh nodded, though she couldn't see how.

"Farideh," Mehen said. She looked up. "Trust me. I've done this before."

"And so we can't go to Tymanther," she said dully.

Mehen snorted. "There's a lot more world than Arush Vayem and Tymanther. We'll make our way, take bounties or serve as guards. We'll find someone to help you get rid of that pact, and we can come back."

Farideh pulled the blanket close. "You know we can't." She squeezed her eyes shut. The cambion had been right. One mistake, and she was as good as dead.

Fine—if that was how the world was going to treat her, perhaps she'd just keep whatever the cambion offered, and to the Hells with them all. If they all thought her damned, better to damn herself right.

The thought frightened her, but there it was.

Mehen was watching her. "If you're not going to sleep, keep watch. Wake me when you're tired. Or if you hear anything."

Farideh doubted she would ever be tired again. Once Mehen had gone to his own bedroll and dropped off to sleep, she let herself weep quietly into her hands.

"What on all the planes are you crying for?" a voice said. "You're much better off now than you were."

She froze like a rabbit before a wolf, looking up at Lorcan silhouetted in the firelight. He was still ferociously handsome, still unspeakably fiendish, and this time there was no circle—not even a broken, haphazard one—to separate them. Havilar and Mehen slept on.

"Are you here to take my soul then?" she said quietly.

Lorcan burst into laughter. "Oh, Glasya skin me, that's adorable. No, I'm not here to harvest you. We have an agreement, and I'm here to see to that."

"Oh." She wondered what exactly it was she had bargained away in the heat of the moment and the tangle of his pretty words. "But you will? Is that what this is?"

"Dear girl," he said, "the king of the Hells' own blood runs in your veins. A soul was never a certainty for you. I'd suggest you stop worrying about it."

"So I *am* doomed," she said. "And you *are* here to take me."

"There you are again," he said, with a shake of his head, "being melodramatic. I'm merely giving you some perspective. That isn't the sort of deal we've made at all."

"You're talking in circles again," she said.

"My darling, I already told you: If all I wanted was a petty little soul, there were dozens I could have snapped up quicker and neater than yours."

She pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders. "Then what *do* you want?"

"A warlock." He stepped closer. "You, in particular, as my warlock."

She shook her head. "I don't . . . I don't know what you mean."

He gave her a dark look, as if she were being deliberately obtuse, but she could only shake her head again. Lorcan sighed. "It means you're bound to me. For the pleasure, I grant you powers. Powers you seemed to dearly want, before."

"Spells?" she asked. "What . . . what do I have to do?"

"Nothing. You'll find it's much simpler than other sorts of spell-casting. Now," he said, his eyes gleaming in the firelight, "do you want a taste of what you've purchased?"



She shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know that I do." And he wasn't telling her what she'd purchased those powers with, she couldn't help but notice. "Why me?"

He shrugged. "Call it a whimsy of my character. I have certain preferences for my warlocks."

"Warlocks?" she said, emphasizing the plural.

"You aren't exactly my first," he said with a chuckle.

Farideh started to ask him who the others were—whether they, too, were caught in the net of their own fears and wants, whether they were afraid of him, whether they were pretty—and stopped herself. She didn't want to know.

He set his hands on his hips. "Come now," he said after a moment, "what are you thinking?"

"That you don't seem dangerous," she admitted. "Which makes me suspect you are very dangerous."

"I hope that is not a logic you apply to your everyday life."

"No," Farideh said. "Just devils . . . and the like."

"I'm only half a devil."

"That's enough like a devil." Her voice hitched, and she pressed a hand to her mouth, willing herself not to cry again. But it was too much and the tears overcame her.

"Oh Hells," he said, holding out a hand, "come here."

She didn't know how he snatched her wrist away from the layers of the blanket, how he pulled her free of it and to her feet, but as soon as she realized he was moving and she should stop him, Lorcan had her tucked against him, her back pressed to his chest, his arms wrapped around her.

"You're freezing," he commented. Fortunately he was warmer than the fire.

She stiffened, and kept her eyes resolutely on Mehen's sleeping form. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Proving you haven't doomed yourself. Really, I'm a pleasant enough fellow if you give me a chance."

She was sure in her heart of hearts that Lorcan would say anything if it meant she'd stay bound to him. But that night, far from home and far from any future, she was still seventeen, still a girl, and still desperately lonesome. She stayed where she was.

“Why me?” she said. “You said . . . ‘the king of the Hells’ own blood.’ Is that why?”

“*All* tieflings have the blood of Asmodeus,” he said. “Regardless of who first dirtied the well. An effect of the ascension—it’s terribly boring. Don’t worry about it.”

Farideh pursed her lips. “I don’t like people telling me what to think.”

“Fascinating. How do you feel about people telling you what to *do*?”

He snatched up her hands in his own. Her breath caught—her double concerns twining over each other. She’d heard stories enough of people who lost their souls by not paying close enough attention to canny devils.

But at the same time no one had ever grabbed her hands like that. Lorcan’s hands were strong, and she found herself considering how much larger than hers they were.

If he held tight, she didn’t think she could break away.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

She gave a little shake of her head. She didn’t want to, and yet she did. She wanted to see what he was going to try—it wasn’t as if anyone had tried anything on her—but she wasn’t a fool and she knew he was up to no good.

“Close your eyes. Think about your burn,” he said. “And think about the world.”

“The whole world?”

“Yes. Think about Toril.”

Tempted, Farideh tried, but it was like trying to think about how to walk or how the color yellow looked—Toril was Toril. She opened her eyes.

“I don’t know how—”

“Stop talking,” he said, “and concentrate.”

Farideh closed her eyes again, and instead, thought of the ground. The way it felt to stand solid and to spread her weight between both feet in one of Mehen’s fighting stances. She thought of the cold, dry air and the wind that stirred the snow over the solidness of the mountains. She thought of the sun and Selûne looking down at her, and the color of the moon goddess’s light on the rocks and the snow. The

stillness of the cold winter night and the sound of the breath through her nostrils and the heat and pop of the fire.

And the burn—no, she thought, not burn. Brand. Lorcan could call it whatever pleased him, the lines that laced her shoulder were more than a burn. Tieflings didn't burn easily—she and Havilar had scared Mehen enough times, snatching dropped bits of bread or meat right out of the flames, quick enough that they didn't feel a thing. Only setting fire to their sleeves now and again.

But this burn, this brand, was no more a part of Toril than Lorcan was. Farideh knew that all the way to her marrow. The way it pulled at her, the way it still ached after hours and hours and Mehen's ministrations. The brand was something magical, and it tied her to Lorcan.

And something tied *him* to someplace . . . *else*. If she let her thoughts drift along the bindings, she could sense another world beyond Toril.

The Nine Hells.

Farideh swallowed hard and opened her eyes.

"You've noticed," Lorcan said.

She nodded, not wanting him to be a devil, not wanting him to be a monster. Not wanting to have said anything to him in the first place, if she could just wish for things to be true, so that she wouldn't be standing there, as unsafe as she could be.

Lorcan let go of her hand and traced the lines of the brand peeking through her hastily mended dress. "This mark is what connects you to the powers of the Hells. Well," he amended, "rather it's what lets you channel them. Through me. Easier than spellbooks."

"Does it hurt?"

"You'll be fine."

She looked back over her shoulder. "I meant you. Does it hurt you?"

He smiled—such a wicked, wicked smile. "I'll be fine too. Here's your first lesson." Lorcan took her hands up again. "Think about that connection. You were close. You felt the power."

She still could—it was like a primed pump, waiting for someone to grab hold of the handle and start it flowing. And it seemed to want her to grab hold of it, as if it were aware, as if it wanted to flow through her.

"What will it do?" she asked.

"Nothing," Lorcan said, "unless you take hold of it."

She opened her eyes. "Is this how you're going to take my soul?"

He sighed. "Lords. If I promise to leave your soul alone for the time being will you just do what I say?"

Farideh laughed bitterly. "What's your promise worth?"

"Plenty," he said, sounding affronted. "I'm not some *demon* or something. I keep my word."

"You lied about the circle."

"I didn't lie. I wasn't *forthcoming*. There's a difference. And I give you my most solemn word that you can keep whatever semblance of a soul you've managed, devil-child—unless you *want* to give it up—if you just do what I say."

"For now," Farideh added. "If I do what you say for now."

He chuckled again. "You are terribly melodramatic. For *now*."

Farideh hesitated again, sensing the power lying just out of reach. It seemed, she thought, to be only a part of something larger, a fraction of the Nine Hells, and still it was vast and roiling. She wondered if she managed to open that channel wider, like the breaking of a dam, if it would surge through her and Lorcan and kill them both.

"You know," Lorcan said, "you are bound to come up against bandits. Or monsters. Or just people who don't like the look of you. Maybe those neighbors of yours will decide you need more punishment than just banishment. This will help. For all I'm sure your dragonborn has trained you with a sword, you're not practiced enough with it."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

He rubbed his thumb over her palm in a slow circle. "Calluses. Your hands are far too smooth."

She blushed to the roots of her hair.

Later, Farideh would think if anyone ever asked her about that night, she would need to invent a story—something where she acted because she was prideful and thought she could handle what she should have known she could not; or because Lorcan was clever and she was grief-stricken and foolish; or because she was forced against her will to grasp the powers of a warlock.

Anything, she would think, is better than the truth—that I reached for the powers of the Hells so I wouldn't have to think of something to say to the half-devil stirring up my blood in ways I didn't want to think about anymore.

The power poured into her, like slick, dark water filling a basin, and churned through her, stirring through every vessel, every part of her.

"Say *adaestuo*," Lorcan said.

She opened her eyes. "*Adaestuo*."

The power seemed to burst into being in the air before her mouth and, channeled by her outstretched hands, streamed across the clearing and exploded against a fir tree with a sickly violet light.

Farideh stared, agape, at the force of it. The wood had splintered and charred where the blast had struck it, and embers of purple light still scintillated at its edges. A single word and she'd blown off a piece of the tree nearly as large as her head.

She might never please Mehen with her sword work, she might never rival Havilar's skill with her glaive, but this . . . this was breathtaking.

It was also loud. At the explosion, Havilar sat bolt upright. Mehen did not wake so much as materialize on his feet, falchion in hand. His eyes went straight to the tree, with its ring of strange, purplish embers . . . and then followed the path of the blast back to Farideh, her hands in Lorcan's.

She tried to leap away, to put as much space between her and the cambion as she could, but she couldn't move. Lorcan had folded his arms around her, as if this were nothing, as if no one were watching, as if Mehen weren't advancing on him with his bare blade.

"You were made for this," he whispered, and kissed her, just under her cheekbone. He vanished, and Farideh lost her balance and fell to the ground under the astonished stares of her sister and guardian.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## *THE HIGH ROAD, TWO DAYS SOUTH OF NEVERWINTER*

*10 KYTHORN, THE YEAR OF THE DARK CIRCLE (1478 DR)  
(SIX MONTHS LATER)*

**T**HE WAGON LIMPED ALONG THE HIGH ROAD MORE SLOWLY THAN Brin could have walked, but after well over a month, he was tired of walking. To be honest, he was tired of wagons as well, and ships and horses too. He was tired of moving, and the call from the lead wagon that the caravan had reached the city of Neverwinter couldn't come soon enough.

Brin watched the road behind them, stretching on beyond another four lumbering carts of former refugees returning to rebuild the city that had fallen nearly a quarter century ago. He did not see—as he feared—the cloud of dust on the horizon that half-a-dozen knights on chargers would kick up as they pelted along the dirt road.

This didn't calm him the way it should have. In fact, the longer he didn't see any sign of his cousin, Constancia, the more he worried she was just behind the last hill, ready to grab him by the ear and haul him home. He looked up at the clouds hanging in the blue summer sky and wondered if he had made an enormous mistake.

Constancia would say so: It was irresponsible. It was foolish. It was possibly illegal. And why, she would ask, by the lions of Azoun, Neverwinter?

The call had gone out halfway across the continent that the Open Lord of Waterdeep was rebuilding Neverwinter out of its shattered ruins, and all her citizens—and their descendants—were encouraged and invited to return. Among the thousands of people filtering in through the city gates, no one would notice one more boy.

And there was the city's history—the famed clockworks and fanciful buildings, the artisans whose creations were still prized—that had caught Brin's attention. And the catastrophic death of the city by earthquake and volcano, that had held it.

But perhaps most of all, it was far enough away that no one would know who he was or what he'd done or what he might have done if things were a little different—

“Is something troubling you?”

Brin looked up at the man sitting beside him, who had also paid the cart's owner to carry him to Neverwinter.

“No,” Brin lied. “Just thinking.”

The man was a Calishite, perhaps in his forties or fifties, slim and muscular. The threads of gray in the man's hair might as well have been ornaments and the crinkles in his brown skin, paint for all he wore his age. He smiled, one corner of his mouth crooked by a small scar where something had once cut the skin deeply. Brin wondered how someone came by a scar like that, and his eyes strayed briefly to the chain the man wore wrapped around his waist like a belt.

The man gave Brin a look that Brin was accustomed to getting from adults, down his broken nose, as if the man knew very well that Brin was lying. He nodded at the flute Brin wore tucked into his own belt. It was the only thing Brin had taken that he didn't strictly need. It had been his father's.

Brin's hand tapped the holes of the flute.

“You seemed nervous,” the man said. “Do you play?”

“Oh,” Brin said. He set his hand back down on the cart bed. “Yes.”

“But you're not a musician?”

“What makes you say that?”

The man shrugged. “You haven't played it once since you joined us in Waterdeep. In my experience, someone who depends on their skills to eat doesn't give them a chance to get rusty.” He smiled again. “You'll have to forgive me. There's not much to do on this stretch of the road but observe each other. I'm called Tam.”

“Brin.” Whatever other attributes Constancia and the rest of their family had tried to impress onto Brin, they had succeeded in making him curious about other people and observant enough of the minor details that hinted at a whole. His eyes dropped to the silver pin on