



ERIN M. EVANS

THE ADVERSARY

FORGOTTEN REALMS™



Book
III



THE ADVERSARY

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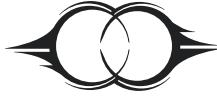
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PROLOGUE

FROST CRUSTED THE LEAF CURLED A HANDSPAN FROM FARIDEH'S FACE. BUT it shouldn't have.

She shut her eyes, a thousand half-formed thoughts buzzing in her skull. But only one took hold: it had been hot enough the day before that there was no way frost—

The *hyah, hyah, hyah* of a crow scattered her thoughts. She winced and turned her face to the ground. Hot the day before . . . or maybe it was the same day, or maybe it was a lifetime ago. She couldn't be sure of anything but the cold air, the hard ground, and the bare forest around her, vanishing into thick patches of fog.

Farideh pushed herself up. She brushed away bits of leaf and dirt, and hissed as the motion sent a tremor through her arm. Every muscle felt stiff and overdrawn. And her head—the tiefling blinked heavily as the throb behind her eyes surged to a state that couldn't be ignored. She pressed one hand to her eye, cupping the curve of her horn ridge as she did, trying to remember what had happened. Maybe she'd fallen ill. Maybe she'd drunk too much whiskey. Maybe Havilar . . .

Farideh looked around the clearing for her twin. The light through the tree branches was bleached as white as old bone and just as lifeless. She eyed the ragged edge of fog creeping over the clearing, a season's worth of dead leaves, the bare sentinels of trees staring down at her. Their low creak of protest broke the silence as a sagging earthmote settled into the trees to her left.

Farideh jumped to her feet and scuttled back, away from the leaning trees. The floating island of earth was caught by the trunks like a rock clutched in

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a giant hand. It hung so low that she could make out the strange blue flowers flocking the meadows beneath its rocky spires. And it was slowly sinking lower.

Earthmotes don't do that, she thought, her panicked breath a cloud of vapor on the cold air. A taproot snapped and a tree crashed to the ground.

The faint and unmistakable smell of brimstone drifted on the air.

Hyah, the crow screamed. *Hyah*.

Farideh wet her mouth, not daring to look away from the earthmote. There was a nauseous feeling building in her stomach and the small of her back. Her tail started to lash the deadfall. Brimstone meant Hells-magic. Portals. Hands shaking, she checked her sleeve for the rod she carried, the rod that helped her channel the same dangerous, boiling magic. It was gone. Worse, the shirt was not hers.

Her heart squeezed. Something's wrong, she thought, looking for the devils between the trees. Something worse than Havi's whiskey . . .

Havilar. The cold sunk down to the core of her. Oh gods—where was her sister?

"Havilar!" she cried, though her voice was hoarse, as stiff and unwilling as her muscles. "Havi! Havi!" The fog smothered her shouts. "Havilar!"

Someone groaned behind Farideh, and her heart tripped over itself. She ran at the noise, stumbling as if her legs were relearning how to move. She crashed into the patch of ferns her twin sister rose weaving out of.

"Fari?" she said, in a voice just as broken as Farideh's. "What . . . ?" Farideh threw her arms around her sister and held her tight, watching the grove over her shoulder. The smell of brimstone pricked at her nose again.

"What happened?" Havilar said. She pushed Farideh back far enough to look around. "Where are we?" She frowned. "What happened to your face?"

Farideh shook her head, as the same question died on her lips. For all her young life, Havilar's face had been a mirror of her own—same horns, same cheekbones, same softly curved nose. The only difference was Farideh's silver left eye against Havilar's gold ones. If that was still so, then the same subtle but undeniable changes had been wrought on Farideh's own features.

Thinner, she thought studying Havilar. Maybe harder. The chin was firmer and the cheekbones sharper. Hollows under the eyes that hadn't been there before. Paler.

"Your hair," Farideh said. Havilar reached for her braid, grabbing instead a hank of purplish-black hair, smooth as silk.

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Havilar looked around at the deadfall. “Where’s my glaive?” she asked muzzily. She pressed a hand to her head and winced.

The earthmote crept nearer to earth, and another tree moaned and cracked. Havilar jumped. “*Karsboj.*” She looked around the clearing. “What happened? It’s all . . . different. Isn’t it?”

It’s different—Lorcan’s words echoed in her memory. *You’re different. I chose you over her back there. I was ready to let her attack me so you could get away. Doesn’t that mean anything?*

Lorcan.

Farideh’s pulse sped. It stirred up her pact magic and sent a surge of shadowy smoke wafting off her skin, through the strange shirt: Lorcan, the cambion she drew her powers through, should have been there.

But *all* of their things were missing, and so were their traveling companions. And while the half-devil might have vanished without saying a word if he found the means—

In the same moment, Havilar’s thoughts seemed to clear. “Brin.” She lurched out of Farideh’s arms and out of the ferns, shouting for the young man she fancied who would never have left her behind. “Brin! *Brin!*”

No one answered but the crow, hopping from tree to tree like a loose shadow, flapping noisily.

“We must have . . .,” Farideh started, but she had no answer. “He must be . . .” No weapons, no gear, no armor, no Brin. No Lorcan. Brimstone on the air. Cold. She wet her mouth again. Something was wrong. She had to remember what. The crow stopped, bobbing on the branch directly ahead of her.

Here, the crow was shouting. Here, here, here.

Only it wasn’t a crow. A tiny devil with black wings and a cruel, clever face hopped down to a lower branch, and grinned at the twins with red, jagged teeth. Farideh heard Havilar gasp.

Rod or not, Farideh drew on the Hellish powers her warlock pact granted her, pulling Havilar behind her as they poured into her veins. The devil bobbed and smirked at her. “Bad idea,” it said. “Very bad. Here, here, here!”

“Oh do shut up,” a new voice called. “I heard you the first *hundred* times.” Farideh spun, flames surging into her hands. Opposite the earthmote, a woman—a half-devil, a cambion—strode toward them. Small-boned and red-skinned, Lorcan’s sister, Sairché, rustled through the dead leaves in no apparent hurry, her wings held back like those of a hawk about to take flight.

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Her armor gleamed as silver as the needle-sharp eyelashes framing her gold eyes and the tattoos tracing her clean-shaven scalp.

“Wretched imp,” Sairché spat.

“*Adaestuo*,” Farideh said. The ball of burning energy collected between her fingers, swirled together and streaked across the distance, aimed straight at Sairché’s face.

It shattered an arm’s reach from the cambion, broken on a magical shield that flashed red and disappeared. Sairché clucked her tongue.

“Now, now,” she said. “That wasn’t part of our agreement.”

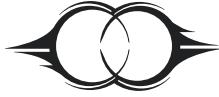
“What does she mean?” Havilar asked. “What agreement?”

Farideh didn’t answer, all her swirling half thoughts colliding, landing together in a swarm. *What other choice do you have?* Sairché had said.

Cold horror poured down Farideh’s core.

“Fari?” Havilar demanded. “What does she mean? Fari, what have you done?”

CHAPTER ONE



27 Eleasias, the Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)
Proskur

Farideh had been prepared for many things when Havilar asked to speak to her alone, just after they'd arrived in Proskur: Another appeal they take on a bounty on their own, without their absent foster father. An admission Havilar had been the one to start the tavern brawl that had chased them from the last waystation. Devils in the nighttime, urging Havilar to make a pact. Zhentarim. Cultists of the king of the Hells, out for revenge. There were so many possibilities, so many dangers to keep track of, that Farideh had stopped guessing by the time they sat down at the inn. She was ready for Havilar to say almost anything.

But not for Havilar to ask to switch bedrooms.

"You see Brin all day," Farideh said, aware even as she did that she sounded childish.

Havilar pursed her lips a moment, her golden eyes locked on the heavily waxed surface of the table between them. "There's things," she said delicately, "you can't do walking in the market or at a campsite with your sister."

Farideh drew a breath, trying to slow the flush of blood creeping up her neck. "Right. I mean, I understand, how . . . why you're asking. I just . . . Is it the best idea?"

Havilar wrinkled her nose. "Well, I think so. Obviously." She scratched at the wax. "You're making this sound like I'm asking if I can fight a pile of owlbears with my bare hands. It's not a big deal. I'm not asking your permission, anyway." She looked up at Farideh. "I don't *need* permission."

"Right," Farideh replied, because she had no idea what to say. For the last two months, Havilar had been encouraging Brin, a young man they'd crossed paths with while they pursued a bounty to the city of Neverwinter.

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A young man, as it turned out, with a lot more to him than first appearances suggested.

“You know this isn’t going to last,” Farideh blurted.

“Of course I do,” Havilar said huffily.

“Because you seem like you’re getting awfully attached, and once we get to Suzail and rescue Mehen—”

“We can be attached, in the meantime. And when it’s over . . .” She scraped more at the thick wax coating the table. “Anyway, it might not go all dire and pointed. You don’t know.”

“Brin’s in line to be the king of Cormyr,” Farideh said dropping her voice. “It doesn’t matter how much you love him, no one is going to let a tiefling be queen.”

“Too bad,” Havilar said with a grin. “I bet I’d look fantastic with a crown.”

“I’m serious. If we get to Cormyr and he sees everything he’s giving up—”

“He doesn’t want to be king,” Havilar said. “Or almost-king, or almost-almost-king . . . or however you call it. So stop worrying about it until he does. Anyway, *you’re* one to talk. What am I always telling you but to get away from Lorcan before he corrupts you or snatches your soul or gets you hurt? And what do you say?” She shifted her voice, a mockery of her sister, “‘It’s fine. Nothing like that’s happened.’ And Brin isn’t remotely interested in my soul.”

Farideh pointedly did not glance across the room to where Lorcan—looking like nothing but a striking human man—lounged at another table. Watching. Waiting for Farideh to finish. The lines of the protective spell linking the two of them tugged on the nerves along her right side—the half-devil had made a point of sitting at the very edge of its range. At the point where she couldn’t quite ignore him.

“We are not talking about Lorcan,” Farideh said. “But it brings up a good point—where’s he supposed to sleep?”

“You can take him.”

A blush forced itself up Farideh’s neck, into her cheeks. “*No.*”

“Fine,” Havilar said. “Tell him to come down and sit in the taproom. You’ve made the spell stretch far enough, right? It’s not important where Lorcan stays.” She bit her lip. “It *is* important that you . . . Look, I don’t care what you think about me and Brin.” She focused on the table again. “It’s just . . .” She bit her lip again and added a little softer, “We’ve never slept apart, you and I, and I don’t want you to be angry about it.”

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Farideh tried to imagine falling asleep, alone, without the sound of Havilar's soft wheezing, without the weight of her sister beside her. One way or another, that night would come.

Better than having it happen because she tried to fight a pile of owlbeats, Farideh thought. Or because some devil snatched her.

"It's all right," she said finally.

"Promise?"

"Yes. But you promise you'll be careful. And *promise* you're not going to tell me about it."

Havilar looked crestfallen. "Not even a little?"

"I want to be able to look Brin in the face. So a *very* little."

"All right," Havilar sighed. "You have to promise not to tell Mehen, though. He'd probably get his lightning breath going for this."

Farideh doubted she'd have to tell their adoptive father a thing—Havi and Brin were so *obvious* it was hard to be in the same space as them. And then Mehen would blame Farideh for not stopping Havilar from being infatuated with Brin in the first place. "As far as I'm concerned you and I were never once apart."

Havilar grinned. "Perfect."

Lorcan tipped his chair back, and the spell's lines yanked again, hard enough Farideh drew a sharp breath. She glared across the room at him, and he scowled back. *Stop it*, she mouthed. Lorcan stood and started toward them.

Havilar was looking past her, up at the stairs, the way Brin had gone when they'd returned from their errands. "Is it harder to be good at, do you think, than, say, killing orcs and things?"

Farideh's blood rose in her cheeks. "I suspect it's different."

"The first time I killed someone I threw up," Havilar admitted. She looked back at her sister. "*Four* times."

"I don't think you'll throw up."

"If I do, I'm going to tell you whether you want to hear it or not," Havilar cautioned, as she stood. "You deserve the warning."

Havilar glared at Lorcan as he came to stand beside the table. He smiled back at her, pleasant as could be, but in those black, black eyes was something sharp as razors.

"Well met," he said. "What have you two been talking about?"

Havilar gave Farideh a look that said Farideh ought to be just as careful—if not more so—turned on her heel, and headed up the stairs. Lorcan chuckled watching her go. He looked down at Farideh.

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“Well,” he said, appraising her face and no doubt the high color of her cheeks. “I have to assume it was something . . . interesting. What did she want?”

Farideh hesitated. “Your half of Brin’s room.”

Lorcan gave a low throaty laugh. “Well that *is* interesting. What is she going to trade me?”

She looked past him at the tavernkeeper, who was eyeing them both. Or maybe, Farideh thought, she was just watching Lorcan. Out walking through Faerûn, Lorcan took precautions and made his appearance shift, taking on the skin of a human man. Gone were the horns, the red skin, the wings that would have stretched halfway across the taproom. His eyes were still black as nightmares, but they were ringed in white. His dark curls lightened several shades, and his skin was a shade brighter than Farideh’s. But he was still hard not to look at.

Farideh took a deep breath. “I presume she’ll pay you back your half of the room fee. What did you pay for it again?”

Lorcan smirked. “Where am I to sleep?”

“You don’t sleep.”

“I sleep a little. This plane is *wearisome*. And why not, if I have nothing else to do?” His eyes didn’t leave her face, but still Farideh had the sense he was appraising every inch of her in his head.

What would you do if he asked to sleep with you? she wondered to herself. If he didn’t try to make you say it first? She quashed that thought as well—it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter because Lorcan wouldn’t ask, Lorcan had no interest in sharing a bed with her and every interest in keeping her off-balance. After a month, the sureness of it had been hammered down into her bones. All she had to do was keep herself focused and sensible and not get pulled into Lorcan’s manipulations.

“But,” he went on, “more importantly, I need a chance to let this disguise drop. You don’t want me to tire of holding it up.”

Farideh let out a breath. She’d forgotten about his spell’s limits. “Well, Havilar will have to think of something.” She stood. “Shouldn’t we go?” Without waiting for him, she crossed the taproom—pointedly *not* looking at the staring tavernkeeper—and out the door. The protection spell that had hidden Farideh from the Hells now hid Lorcan as well, and meant he had to follow wherever she went.

That didn’t help matters between them either.

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The sun was setting as they made their way through the winding streets of Proskur. Lorcan threaded his arm through hers. As they passed graying clapboard houses and windowless shops, he held her close and it was strange how right and normal *that* had begun to seem. Even though too many people were watching her walk past—even though they were headed to meet another of Lorcan’s warlocks—she relaxed and held him too. Just a little.

A tiefling wasn’t an everyday occurrence, and most people were circumspect about the descendants of humans and fiends—even if that past transgression was too many generations back to count. Despite the heat of the day, Farideh wished she’d worn her cloak and hood.

Lorcan hung on her arm, distracting them. A real fiend, Farideh thought bitterly. A wolf in sheep’s clothing.

It had been eight months since she’d accepted the infernal pact of a warlock, since she first learned to channel the dark and blistering energies of the Nine Hells. Eight months since she’d been banished from the mountain village she’d grown up in, eight months of hunting bounties for coin—all the way east to the Sword Coast, and far north as Neverwinter, down into the heart of the Nether Mountains, and everywhere in between. Eight months of little comfort, little sense of the future. Eight months of Lorcan, for better or worse.

“What’s she like,” Farideh asked, “this warlock?”

Lorcan’s hold on her arm eased. “You won’t like her. But then, you don’t need to talk to her.”

“Is she wicked?”

“She won’t do anything to you.”

They walked a little farther down a narrow, dirty street. Lorcan’s grip on her loosened as he searched the doors on either side.

“But she can get you back home?” Farideh knew it was the reason for this errand. Lorcan had only escaped his sister’s clutches a month or so prior. Bound under the same protection spell as Farideh, Sairché couldn’t scry him, but Lorcan couldn’t return to the Hells either. Farideh wasn’t sure he should. “Is she a very powerful warlock?”

“Powerful enough to call someone who can answer some questions for me.” He eyed a man passing them by, all bundled up and hidden. “Find out if it’s safe. Temerity’s clever that way.”

Temerity. He hadn’t said her name before.

Farideh had always known Lorcan had pacts with other warlocks, other descendants of the Toril Thirteen. She’d been certain most of them were

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more talented than her, better suited to the pact. But hearing it—Farideh’s stomach twisted. She pressed the feeling down. He moved ahead of her, letting her go completely. She folded her hands together instead of trying to catch his.

“Who was her ancestor?” she asked.

Lorcan frowned at her over his shoulder. “What?”

“Like Bryseis Kakistos,” she explained. “What was the name of the warlock Temerity descends from?”

“Why do you care?”

“It’s only a name,” Farideh said, falling into step beside him.

Lorcan turned back to scanning the shops they passed. “You of all people should know better than to be indiscriminately curious. Ah,” he said, eyes falling on a dark green door. A sign with a picture of a mortar and pestle hung over the entrance. As they drew nearer, the thick scent of spices and perfumes curled around them, beckoning them in. Lorcan considered the door for a moment. The street had widened, edging back into something bordering on respectable.

“Wait out here,” he said finally. “I won’t be long.” With that, he swept into the shop without so much as a glance at Farideh.

She sighed. There was a bench in front of the shop beside Temerity’s and she settled herself there to wait, trying not to wonder too hard about Temerity and the warlocks of the Toril Thirteen.

Almost a hundred years ago, thirteen tiefling warlocks had come together to work magic that helped the king of the Hells, Asmodeus, rise up and claim the mantle of a god—transforming all the tieflings on the plane of Toril into the descendants of Asmodeus, cursed to wear that blood plain on their skin, no matter what they seemed before. At the coven’s head had been Bryseis Kakistos, the Brimstone Angel. Farideh and Havilar’s ancestor. By those lines of descent, devils like Lorcan sought out sets of warlocks to reflect the Toril Thirteen.

So like Farideh, Temerity had been chosen for some long ago ancestor’s sin. Perhaps she’d been pursued by many devils—some of the heirs, she had come to understand, were rare, though none so rare as those of the Brimstone Angel.

Perhaps Temerity had known her blood’s story from the cradle and sought the devils out. Perhaps she, too, had merely been in the right place at the right time for Lorcan to say all the right words and snare her in a pact that changed everything.

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Farideh picked at the fraying edge of her sleeve and thought of Lorcan standing in the little stone house she'd grown up in, summoned accidentally by her sister. She thought of his hot breath on her cheek still cold from the snowy wind outside. She thought of him whispering, "Say you're mine."

A shiver ran up Farideh's spine. She might not be able to return to a normal life, but she could surely find her way out of the tangle of emotion Lorcan had trapped her in and into something simpler. More sensible.

A woman stood in the doorway opposite the bench, watching Farideh with a wary eye, no subtlety in her distaste. Farideh shifted uncomfortably.

"You waiting for someone?" the woman said after an interminable time.

"My friend," Farideh said. "He won't be long."

"Buying spices from another devilborn." She sniffed. "Your kind do like to stick together."

Farideh's tail flicked nervously. She pulled it closer to lie along her thigh. "My friend's human, many thanks."

"Is he now?" Farideh met the woman's skeptical gaze. Without the ring of white humans were used to, Farideh's eyes were unreadable. Emotionless. Inhuman. The shopkeeper could stare as long as she liked and Farideh knew she wouldn't see anything there, not without practice.

"Do you want me to have him show you?" Farideh said. "Or do you want to say what it is you're getting at?"

Farideh knew perfectly well what the shopkeeper was getting at: she didn't belong here. Whatever clientele the shopkeeper was used to dealing with, a seventeen-year-old tiefling trying to rein in the tendrils of shadow that curled and coiled around the edges of her frame was not a part of it. The woman's eyes moved from the swell of the horns along Farideh's brow, to the flat color of her eyes, to the sharp points of her eyeteeth when she spoke, as if hunting for a sign of what, exactly, she was up to.

"You a friend of the Dragon Lords'?" the woman demanded.

"Do I look like someone your lord would employ?"

The woman's eyes lingered a little longer on Farideh's heavy horns. "Of course not," she said. "But then, that's the sort they'd like to have, innit? Skims beneath your notice, and catches you all unawares when the wrong someone happens by your shop. All 'cause you thought sure the Lords on high wouldn't give a ragged tiefling two coppers together." She smiled nastily. "No offense."

The powers of the Hells surged up in her veins, forcing their way down into her hands, throbbing behind the beds of her nails as if they were trying

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to force their way out in a torrent of fire that would show the shopkeeper just how careful she ought to be about offending the heir of the Brimstone Angel.

“None taken,” Farideh lied.

“But if you’re not with the Lords,” the woman went on, “then I’m thinking I ought to report you to the city watch. Ought to be conscientious. Since there’s such a fear of criminals.” Farideh could almost hear the old saying about tieflings, running through the woman’s thoughts: *one’s a curiosity, two’s a conspiracy, three’s a curse.*

Farideh drew a slow breath, trying to calm her pulse and push the powers back down. “He’ll only be a moment,” she said.

“So will the watch,” the woman said.

They couldn’t afford to bribe the watch, Farideh knew, nor pay a trumped-up fine. They couldn’t afford to wait for some jailor to let her out of a cell or some magistrate to say she’d done nothing wrong. Farideh stood, glanced up and down the street.

“That’s what I thought,” the woman muttered.

But Farideh couldn’t leave, not with the spell still tethering Lorcan, and if she went the twenty steps the spell would stretch, she’d still be well in the woman’s sight. The engines of Malbolge churned more slick magic into her and she seemed to pulse from the soles of her feet up to her ears. Her veins were darkening with the unspent power. She had to go. She could not go. The woman narrowed her eyes.

There was nowhere to flee but Temerity’s shop.



An army of scents assaulted Lorcan once he crossed the threshold—arispég, bitter marka, myrrh, and juniper—crawling so deep into his nose, they lay across his tongue. Long ropes of drying garlic hung from the rafters like garlands, and bins of seeds and blossoms and teas lined the walls, making the space feel much closer and narrower than it was.

Lorcan never understood why Temerity had such a banal cover for her powers—perhaps the smell covered the stronger components of her rituals, perhaps she liked being the one who came by such rare and precious commodities, perhaps she just enjoyed having a supplier for her personal perfumes—but the little shop seemed to satisfy her, which was good enough for him. He had everything he needed from Temerity.

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Almost, he amended, crossing the shop. Which step triggered the magical tinkling of a bell, he couldn't have said, but Lorcan was ready when an auburn-haired tiefling woman with the angry tips of a pact-brand reaching up from under her low, wide collar came around the shelves behind the counting table. He leaned against the table with the sort of smile that usually made her forget he was such a bad person to trust. "Temerity," he said. "Well met."

She stopped dead. "Well met," she said, a smile of her own creeping across her lovely features. "Didn't expect to see you coming in by the door."

"All these years, I can still surprise you—I like that," he said. That sounded right. He was out of practice with her—with any of them, really, aside from Farideh. "I was in the city, and how could I pass through without checking on you?"

She held his gaze, eyes like silver pieces. Eyes empty of the sort of warmth and interest Temerity usually had for him. Lorcan tensed. Reconsidered.

"How long *has* it been?" she asked, coming right up to the edge of the counting table. "Do you remember?"

He didn't, which was sloppy and he knew it. He'd been distracted by other things—the plots of his mother and sister, the complicated machinations of the Lords of the Nine. Farideh.

"Too long," he settled on, with a tone of regret.

Temerity's smile didn't waver. "Indeed," she said. "Ten months. And another two before that."

"And you didn't call," Lorcan said. He took her hand in his. "I assumed you didn't need me. I hate to be a nuisance. I do hope," he added, lower, drawing a small circle on the skin of her wrist, "that I'm not being a nuisance."

A little warmth stirred in Temerity's features. She was simple—much simpler than some other warlocks he could name. Make her feel special. Make her feel wise. Make her think that she's making the best possible decisions, even when she isn't. Make her think there's something there, under the surface, between them.

"Too long," she agreed, brushing her curls away from the side of her face. Then, "Long enough your rivals have come calling."

"Oh?" Lorcan said, as if it didn't concern him. "I'm glad I can still count you mine."

"For now," she said, but she relaxed.

"Well," he said smoothly, still toying with her hand, "you'll at least give me the chance to make a counteroffer. I'd hate to lose you because other people's

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mistakes kept me away.” He brought her hand to his lips and she exhaled unevenly. What sort of idiots were those other collectors if they couldn’t sway Temerity? “Haven’t I given you everything you want?”

“Not everything,” she said.

“Well we’ll have to see about remedying that, won’t we?” he murmured, even though he knew what she was asking for and he wouldn’t dare try to get it. It didn’t matter—not now. She was listening, and that was enough. “But in order to do that I do need a small favor. A little ritual—no,” he cut himself off and leaned a little nearer, close enough to kiss her just below the ear. “We can get to that later, of course, darling.” Temerity raised an eyebrow and smiled. He drew another slow circle across her wrist.

The bells chimed again, and Lorcan glanced back over his shoulder, careful to hold tight to Temerity as he did. Things weren’t nearly far enough along that he could risk her getting distracted by some customer.

But it wasn’t some customer. Farideh stared back at him, frozen.

No, not at him. At Temerity’s hand in his.

Lords of the shitting Nine, he thought.

“Well met,” Temerity said, the picture of a sweet-tempered shopkeeper. But Lorcan knew better and heard the sudden venom in her voice. She yanked her hand free and moved around the table. “Can I help you?”

“I . . . um . . . ,” Farideh trailed off and she looked away at a chain of seedpods hanging down from one of the heavy shelves. Shit and ashes, Lorcan thought, already sorting through all the things he was going to have to say to soothe her. Every option would turn into something far more complicated than he wanted to handle. Why couldn’t she be like Temerity, wanting to be soothed?

If she were like Temerity, Lorcan thought, you’d have a much bigger problem on your hands. For now, he needed space and quickly, before anybody got any more ideas.

“You’re interrupting,” he said.

When Farideh looked up at him, her expression was guarded—nothing for Temerity to see there. There at least was that. “Clearly.” She looked to Temerity and held out a hand. “You must be Temerity.”

Shut up, he thought. Shut up, shut up. There were too many things still hanging hidden in this conversation. Too many risks. And as much as he wanted to intervene, that might make things worse.

Temerity glanced at him, then crossed to take Farideh’s hand. “I should have guessed. Were you just going to leave her out there in the dark?” she asked Lorcan.

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“She can handle herself.”

“But can she handle Proskur?” Temerity considered Farideh. Looking for all the world as if she and the younger tiefling were about to be dear friends. Lorcan edged nearer.

Temerity turned Farideh’s arm up, revealing the fading streaks of dark magic tinting her veins. “A warlock,” she said, rubbing a hand over her forearm. “And so young.”

“Not that young,” Lorcan pointed out. “No younger than you were.” But the jab didn’t shift her attention, her growing ire back to him.

“Well,” Temerity said to Farideh, “then you still have time to grow wiser.” Still holding Farideh’s arm, Temerity looked over at Lorcan. “Whose heir is she?”

Shit. *Shit*. Lorcan sighed dramatically. “Can’t you guess? I feel as if every time I replace my Greybeard heir, they can hardly don their own clothes without instruction.” Lorcan shook his head, as if exasperated—not a lie, but the careful placement of truth by truth, and he prided himself on the difference. It was, after all, the sort of thing that separated devils from the cacophony of fiends howling throughout the planes. “What part of ‘sit outside and wait’ did you misunderstand?” he asked Farideh.

Farideh kept her blank expression, but her cheeks reddened and she wouldn’t look at him. Good enough, he thought. Fix it later. You’ll think of something.

Temerity held his gaze for a long time, as if she were trying to decide whether there was something to tease out of his comment.

“Don’t you have a little side room or something she could wait in?” he asked. “I seem to recall you do.”

Temerity rolled Farideh’s sleeve down over her wrist, any trace of her previous tractability gone. “Ten months is a long time,” she said. “I’ve had offers. Several. I won’t tell you it’s not tempting. But none of them said they could get me what I really want, so what was the point?”

“It’s hard to reclaim that sort of thing,” Lorcan admitted. This was going all the wrong ways. Four steps to Farideh. Twelve steps to the door.

“But not impossible,” Temerity said. “It sounds to me like there are plenty in the Hells who’ll consider a trade,” she said. “A soul for a soul.”

“Not many gods look kindly on that sort of trade,” Lorcan reminded her, shifting closer to Farideh, who was still watching Temerity cautiously. Good, he thought—she knew something bad was happening here. “You send another

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to the Hells, you might well end up unclaimed when your time comes. End up in the Hells anyway.”

“Better odds than I have now.” She stared at Farideh again. “Whose heir are you?”

Farideh glanced at Lorcan. “The Greybeard. Didn’t he say that?”

“It’s *Titus* Greybeard, dear. You’d know that if you descended from him.” Temerity shook her head. “You’re the Brimstone Angel, aren’t you? The heir of Bryseis Kakistos.”

“Would I walk the streets with such a valuable heir?” Lorcan scoffed. He slipped between the two women, pushing Farideh away from Temerity. Prod her, he thought, provoke her. Get her mad at *him*. “You knew I had more than one warlock. Just because she’s younger and—”

Temerity shoved him into Farideh. “Don’t play me. You don’t walk the streets with any of your warlocks. Not like this.”

“Necessity makes us all change paths eventually,” Lorcan said. He reached back to push Farideh toward the door, taking careful stock of Temerity’s expression. She’d likely try to scratch his eyes out—she’d tried it before. “You’re wiser than this. Or you *were*. Temerity, tell me you—”

Temerity pulled the rod from her apron so quickly he couldn’t react. But in the same moment as he spied the spell surging up the implement, Farideh kicked his knees in so that he fell under the bolt. He felt the magic sizzle across the edge of the spell that disguised him.

Before he could stand, Farideh grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back, with a soft gasp of Infernal, through a vent in the world. One moment he was looking up at Temerity, at the rod pointed at his throat, the next there was a fold of darkness and brimstone closing over him, and when it passed, they were at the door. Farideh stepped in front of him, her own rod out and aimed at Temerity. Lorcan scrambled to his feet.

“If you don’t believe I’m no one,” Farideh said quietly, the faintest tremor in her voice, “then I think you know this isn’t a fight you want a part of.”

The dark powers of Malbolge crept up Temerity’s brand, clawing at her throat. “Little girl,” she said coolly, “don’t defend him. He’ll bring you to ruin in the end.”

“So will you, by the sound of it, and a lot quicker,” Farideh said, not lowering the rod. “Lorcan seems to have some fond feelings for you, but I don’t know you. I don’t like you. And your neighbors already seem to think I’m a criminal, so don’t think there is a *thing* stopping me. If I see you set

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one foot out into the street after us . . .” She hesitated, no doubt sorting through suitable threats. “I’ll show you what it means to be the heir of Bryseis Kakistos,” she said.

Perfect, he thought.

Temerity didn’t falter, but neither did she come after them as they backed from the shop. The neighbors Farideh had mentioned were watching, and Farideh needed no prodding to hurry away from the shop, Temerity, and any rival Temerity might call down out of the Hells.

I should have cut her loose ages ago, Lorcan thought, glancing back at Temerity’s shop. She’d been easy to catch, young and disaffected and *wanting* so badly to rise above her grubby upbringing—and pretty enough to make it a pleasure to help her do so. And when the pact hadn’t done that to her liking, it had been a simple thing to trade her soul for a constant trickle of gold and the sorts of spells that kept the watch out of her hair. She’d thought him more a faerie story prince there to rescue her than a devil with his own desires. Age had made her wiser, but not enough to recognize that in her wanting, she was the author of her own fall. Lorcan was only the tool she’d used to make it happen.

And now she was looking for more powerful tools.

The streets were dark and poorly lit as they wound back through Proskur. From the shadows, cold, appraising eyes watched them pass. He kept Farideh pulled close. Try it, he thought at the sharpjaws lingering there. Oh, give me an excuse.

As they walked, Farideh didn’t say a word, and the longer she didn’t talk, the more Lorcan worried. The longer she was silent, the more she was deciding things for herself, not letting Lorcan explain and nudge her conclusions somewhere more palatable.

“You sounded ridiculous, back there,” he said. “Thundering around like some chapbook Chosen. Where did you get that nonsense?”

“One of us had to do something,” she said tightly.

“Darling, that wasn’t what it looked like.”

“Yes it was,” she said, still not looking at him. “I’m not an idiot. That’s how you talk to us. How you keep us in check.” She’d gotten much better at not wearing all her feelings on her sleeve, but not enough to hide the quiet shame and anger from the likes of Lorcan.

“That’s how I talk to *Temerity*. It’s different.” She said nothing. “*You’re* different,” he started.

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She stopped in her tracks and pulled free of him. “Don’t. You owe me better than that.”

“I’ve *given* you better,” he said sharply. “I chose you over her back there. I was ready to let her attack me so you could get away. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

She looked away, at the lights of the streetlamps flickering in the gloom. “Not really. You *have* to choose me. I have the protection spell. Besides, which of us is the rarer heir?” Now she looked at him like she was making herself face all the ugly, sharp edges of their pact. Like she was daring him—or maybe daring herself—to tear away the veils of artifice and careful words.

I would choose you anyway, he thought and hated himself for it. There was no one else on any plane Lorcan would have counted on the way he did Farideh. Allies were dangerous, more ways for the hierarchy of the Hells to manipulate your actions and force your hand. This alliance . . . he didn’t have any sense of how to manage it anymore. But he knew down in the core of himself that he’d take Farideh over every other warlock in his retinue.

And that he would never, never tell her that.

“Margarites,” he said.

Farideh blinked at him. “What?”

“You asked for the name of the warlock Temerity is descended from,” he said. “She was called Margarites.”

“Oh.” Farideh was quiet a moment, as if she were turning that bit of information over in her head. “Was she like Temerity?” she asked finally, though what she was thinking of, Lorcan couldn’t imagine.

“She was reluctant,” he settled on. “They say Margarites was one of the warlocks Bryseis Kakistos coerced. You ought to watch out for those heirs,” he added, as they approached the inn. “Some of them aren’t too happy with their lot.”

“How did she know who I was?”

Lorcan didn’t answer. He could hope it was an accident—a rumor gone ’round the ranks of his sister’s erinyes, the assumption of a rival that Lorcan would stick close to his most valuable heir, a simple guess born of Temerity’s envy and rage.

But there was one person in the Hells who knew for certain Lorcan was traveling with Farideh, and Sairché was not someone it paid to stand around wondering about.

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Temerity stood watching the door to her shop, the air clotted with spices and brimstone and unspent magic. The sound of her breath, angry and flustered, was a roar in the room's quiet.

Sairché stood in the doorway to the rear of the shop, several paces ahead of the portal's opening, and flanked by two monstrous erinyes, female devils all armor and teeth atop shining hooves. She watched Temerity for several moments, noticing the rage shimmering through the tiefling. Lorcan had surely been here, just as surely as he'd gone.

When the erinyes began to fidget, Sairché sighed. Temerity startled and turned, rod high.

"Well met," Sairché said. "I gather that didn't go as we'd discussed. It's quite all right," she added when Temerity scowled. "I know he distracts you."

"He didn't distract me," Temerity snapped. "*She* was with him. She tried to kill me—you didn't mention that."

"I didn't think I had to."

"She wasn't just a girl," Temerity said, as if Sairché hadn't spoken. "You made it sound as if she were a novice, a nothing, and she tried to kill me."

"I can all but guarantee whatever she threatened you with was a bluff. Every word." Behind her, Sairché could hear her half sisters shifting, their hooves dragging on the floorboards as they restlessly reconsidered their stances. Not time to draw things out, she thought.

"Nevertheless," Sairché said, "you've done far better than any of his other warlocks. We can consider our deal complete."

Sairché pulled a scroll from out of a pocket and handed it over to Temerity. "Your agreement. You're released from the Pact Certain."

Temerity unrolled the parchment. "It's real?"

Sairché smiled. "Of course. I keep my word."

The tiefling regarded her warily. "*He* doesn't. Why should I trust you?"

The erinyes' building annoyance was palpable now—annoyance at Lorcan, at Temerity, at their little sister playing dress-up with their once exalted mother's mantle. Sairché was well used to skirting the edges of the hierarchy of the Hells, to plucking secrets and turning them into treasures. Excellent practice for parts of her new status, terrible for others—she had gained some measure of respect from her warrior half sisters, but these sorts

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of meetings, mortals who didn't know their places, concessions that seemed out of proportion . . . the erinyes talked.

Sairché gave Temerity a thin smile. "That isn't my problem."

"It *will* be your problem if you're lying."

"Well, it hardly matters. You're going to give it up again."

"I will not lose it," Temerity snapped.

"Please. You'll shift your pact now—you must if you want to keep your powers. You'll find a new devil, a new patron, a new set of sweet words and promises—don't deny it. We all have a type. What exactly do you think will go differently?" Sairché moved closer to Temerity and ran a friendly hand down her arm, feeling the tension of her biceps. "Accept it. Only this way, Lorcan doesn't get the credit, so we can all be pleased by that."

High spots of color marred Temerity's creamy cheeks. "You cannot speak to me that way."

"Have I upset you?" Sairché said, all too aware of the watching erinyes. "Here, let me make it up to you. I'll give you a safeguard. A way to be sure no devil tricks you out of your soul. All right?"

The muscle of Temerity's arm softened and her silver glare became wary. "How will you do that?"

Sairché drew the long stiletto blade from her belt and held it up, showing Temerity the gem-studded hilt, the delicate chasing. The tiefling bent a little nearer to see. "It's a simple thing," Sairché said. "Hardly takes a moment."

In one smooth motion, she flipped the blade into a stabbing grip and plunged it between the tiefling's ribs, forcing it past muscle and organ and deep into her heart. Temerity's eyes widened, her mouth wide in shock as Sairché twisted the blade, locking it against the bone. Temerity clutched at the gushing wound, gaping up at the cambion.

Sairché turned to her guards, pleased at the faint look of approval they both wore. "When she's done bleeding," she said crisply, "do something about the body and get back to the Hells." She turned back to the door and cast a simple spell to remove the spatter of blood marring her armor, before drawing her wings down and pulling her cloak over them. "I have to attend to our brother."



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If Farideh *had* asked for details, Havilar thought, lying tangled in the rough sheets and Brin's arms, she didn't know what she could possibly say to give it any justice.

Much like kissing, it wasn't how Havilar had expected—it was stranger and worse and also far, far better. She sighed and settled her head on Brin's shoulder, careful to avoid butting his jaw with her horns.

"I feel," she said, "like I passed through another plane. But no one told me."

Brin chuckled and kissed her forehead. "I like that."

"And tired," she added. "I don't know if I've ever been this tired. I don't even want to move."

"I'm going to pretend that's a compliment."

And, she thought to herself, I didn't throw up. I have a lover, and I didn't throw up. A faint breeze stirred the dirty curtains over the open window, cool on their sticky skin. She wondered if anyone outside heard them, knew what they'd done. She sighed again, content.

"Don't laugh, all right?" she said. "I thought it would take longer. All night maybe."

He didn't chuckle that time; he ran his fingers up and down her shoulder. "But . . . it was all right?" he asked. "I mean, it would go better with practice—"

"Shush. It was perfect. The best."

It hadn't been like in chapbooks. At least not quite for her. Maybe for Brin—it seemed more like chapbooks for him. But Havilar figured that the fact he'd known a *little* of what to do after, when it became clear she hadn't had the same experience—even if there was plenty of fumbling and giggling and not much serious romantic gazing—meant that their first efforts could be considered very good overall. She'd rather, she thought, laugh than be serious about something so messy and ungainly and *personal* anyway.

Brin rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, his skin so pale next to hers. "Was it how you imagined?" he asked. "Am I . . . how you imagined?"

She pushed up on one elbow so she could look at him. "I really don't know. It's been so long, it feels like, since I wasn't thinking about you anyway. I forget."

"Two months," he said, holding up his fingers.

"I *can* count," she said and pinched him. He pinched her back, and this time she grabbed his hand and pulled it close. "It's not as if I'm what you imagined."

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“No,” he agreed. He traced the edge of her horn over her forehead. “Not outside anyway. Inside . . .” Brin smiled and shook his head. “No, you’re better. Inside and out.”

Havilar snorted, but didn’t tease him about the accidental wordplay. It was too nice a compliment to spoil. He could have a princess, she thought, and he likes you better.

Brin glanced past her at the open window. “Ye gods, it’s still hot as blazes.” But he didn’t push away from her.

Havilar smiled. “Is it this hot where you’re from?”

“In Suzail, it’s not so bad,” he said. “The water keeps the city cooler. As long as you don’t go too far inland, it stays pretty pleasant.” He brushed a strand of hair over her shoulder. “The Citadel’s cooler still, but it’s up in the mountains, so it would be.”

“Does it snow?”

“Lots. I used to have to shovel it off the courtyards. It was supposed to build character.” He chuckled to himself. “Aunt Helindra would have dueled the holy champions herself and won by sheer temper if she’d known. It’s unprincipally, shoveling. Anyway, it would always just snow another load the next day. So all winter, I was in the courtyard. Shush,” he said, before she could tease him like usual. “I can shovel snow.”

Havilar smiled—she wouldn’t have teased him, not anymore. Not when she’d seen for herself he was stronger than he looked. “It snows in Arush Vayem, too,” she said. “Right up to your knees. And then the winds come and blow it all around. No one tries to move it—you just stomp it down again and again until spring finally comes.”

“Well I suppose there are other ways to build character,” he said cheekily. He looked her in the eyes for a long moment. “After this, we can go up into the Stormhorns,” he offered. “I could show you the Citadel. Where I grew up. We could even stay the winter, if you like.”

“Will they let me stay? Let *us* stay?” she amended.

Brin nodded. “I’ll convince them and you convince Mehen. Then in the spring we can go to Tymanther and you can show me your mountains.” He hesitated. “I mean, you and me. I know Farideh can’t.”

“No,” Havilar said with a sigh. “I wouldn’t be welcome either. I’m the one who called Lorcan after all.”

“Summoned,” Brin corrected, but he was still playing with her hair, so Havilar didn’t pinch him for that. “Do they even know that, though? And anyway, you led him away. Surely they’ll forgive you.”

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“That’s not how Arush Vayem is. The rules we broke, they’re the kind of rules too big to forget. We can’t go back home.”

He stopped. “That’s so sad.”

It was—the kind of sad Havilar spent a lot of effort not thinking about. She’d always thought of the future as a vast, uncertain mess, so why worry about it too hard? But Brin made her think ahead, think about the paths that were open to her and those she could never go back to again. It was strange to think of how much she’d planned without planning—she wouldn’t grow old in the little stone house; wouldn’t return from some adventure through the big, spiked gates; wouldn’t see if any of the handful of boys near to her age turned out to be interesting.

Havilar sighed, as if she could exhale all those feelings right out in a vapor. “Yes,” she agreed. “But maybe someday that will change. Or maybe our mountains aren’t that different.”

“And if you’d stayed,” he said, “we wouldn’t have met. So there’s that?”

She grinned at that, but a second thought made the smile soften. “I always would have left,” she told him. “I’ll always choose Farideh.”

“Don’t worry. I know.” And if there were anything she loved best about Brin it was probably that: he knew what she meant, even when she wasn’t saying it right. She smiled at him, pleased at the realization. “I love you.”

Brin went still as a rabbit, as if he were thinking she wouldn’t see him if he didn’t move. Even though Havilar couldn’t remember imagining this moment, she was sure this wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

“This is a court thing,” Havilar said. “Isn’t it?”

“No,” he insisted, and Havilar knew he was lying, even if he didn’t. “It’s just . . . it’s kind of sudden is all.”

“When was I supposed to say it?” He didn’t answer, so she added, trying for impudence, “Do you have a writ for this too in Cormyr?”

Brin didn’t laugh. “No, I don’t mean you weren’t supposed to.”

Havilar sat up. She hated this. She hated when he got snarled in old rules and expectations, and there was nothing for her to do but wait until he picked his way out. It happened now and again, and much as she didn’t understand it, she was prepared. Still, she thought, pulling the covers up and trying to decide where she ought to look, she wished in this case *she* might win out over all the odd rules of Cormyr’s court and Torm’s citadel tumbling around in Brin’s head.

He sat up too and reached for her arm. “Wait. This . . . It’s not what I meant. Please come back.”

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“It’s fine,” she said, because she wanted it to be. “I just thought it, so I said it. You don’t have to think any way about it.”

He gave her a look, as if he knew exactly how much of that was a lie. “Havi, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to ruin things. Really, you just surprised—”

Farideh and Lorcan’s muffled voices filtered through the wall, sharp and angry, and Havilar shushed Brin. “Do you think they heard us?”

“Heard us what?” he whispered. “Talking? They haven’t been back that long.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. The door shut earlier when we were lying about.”

“Are you *sure*?” Havilar asked. “She doesn’t want to know details. I promised.”

“I’m sure,” Brin said. He took her hand. “Look, can we just start over—”

Farideh’s cry sliced through the wall as if it were tissue, followed by a strange pulse, as if a spell had been cast. Havilar leaped off the bed and yanked on her leathers. “Something’s wrong.”

“Havi, they’re just arguing.”

“Then I won’t be long,” she said, pulling on her blouse.

“No.” Brin threw back the covers and groped at the floor for his own clothes. “If you’re going, I’m going. And we’re talking about this.”

A crash. Another shout. Another voice, that wasn’t Farideh, wasn’t Lorcan. Havilar snatched her glaive from where she’d set it against the wall, blood thrumming. Here was something she could solve, she thought.

“Gods damn it,” Brin cursed. “Where are my breeches?”



Farideh turned at the door to her room and held up a hand to stop Lorcan from following her. “Go down to the taproom,” she said, wishing she didn’t have to, wishing he’d known well enough that she couldn’t be around him right now. “Just come up when your spell’s running out. We can trade.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lorcan said, brushing past her and into the room. “Surely you can control yourself for a few hours.”

Farideh stood, hand on the doorknob, remembering Temerity’s hand in Lorcan’s, him leaning close enough to kiss her. *We can get to that later of course, darling.* Her stomach was in knots. “Go down to the taproom. Please.”

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He looked at her as if she were making a terrible joke, and if possible, it made everything worse. “So I cool my heels and wait to see if Temerity’s new friends come calling? I suppose the protection spell will let you know if I’ve been torn back to the Hells? Think it through, darling.”

“Don’t call me that,” Farideh snapped. *Of course, darling.* She shut her eyes, embarrassed at how deeply that had wounded her. Lorcan was silent. She heard him cross the room, felt him reach past her to slip her hand off the knob, and for a moment was relieved.

“If you’re going to shout,” Lorcan said, “close the door.”

Farideh looked away. “Do you call all of us ‘darling?’”

For a moment, Farideh felt sure he was going to change the subject, twist their argument into something she’d done wrong. He stared at her for so long with those dark eyes that weren’t really his. “No,” he said finally. “It doesn’t suit all of you.”

“How many does it suit?”

“Four, now,” he said. “Two of my warlocks are dead, two have thrown me over. Four of the remaining have no interest in me calling them any sort of endearment, and one thinks of herself as old enough to be my grandmother, so I’m the one she calls pet names. You, Temerity, my actual Greybeard heir, and the heir of Zeal Harper seem to enjoy it just fine.” Stubbornly she held his gaze, and it was like pressing on a bruise.

It seemed to agitate Lorcan too, and he burst out, “And that is one of the many reasons I don’t care for my warlocks to introduce themselves to each other. You build up these little versions of the pact that don’t exist and get angry when you find that they’re not real. Did you think it would make you *happy* to know?”

“No,” she said quietly. “But I’d rather know the truth.”

You are a piece in a collection, she thought. A little idiot he amuses himself with by keeping dancing.

Farideh drew a long slow breath and bit down on her tongue to shock the thoughts from her head. Don’t wallow. Don’t be a fool. You knew this was how it was. You knew there were others and you were only one of a set. You knew he was a devil. You were doing so well . . .

“Please go,” she said, tears crowding her throat. She wasn’t about to cry in front of him, not now.

Lorcan stayed where he was. A surge of magic rolled over him from the center of his chest outward and the illusion dissolved, leaving behind his

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natural form. Horns curled back from his brow, his skin turned red as live coals, and batlike wings erupted from his back, spreading wide enough to block Farideh from the door before curling closer.

“No,” he said. “You don’t get to chase me off because you refuse to have a little sense, darling.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“You need to decide,” he went on, “what you want from this pact. You push and you pull, you struggle like you’re fighting every step of it but then you refuse any chance to get free of it. You turn around and make rules and get angry I haven’t broken them for you. I’m not your lover. I’m not your champion. I’m the devil you made a deal with, and I’ve done more than enough for that. We don’t have any other sort of agreement.”

“I know that,” she said, but the words came out soft and damaged.

“You haven’t asked for any other sort of agreement,” he said coming closer. Close enough to touch. She didn’t want to be angry at him, didn’t want him to go—

And then he added, nastily, “It certainly didn’t occur to you before, when you were swanning around with that paladin.”

She blew out a breath. Why did she think she could master this? “First, if we don’t have an agreement, then you have no right to throw an acquaintance in my face. Dahl is not your business. And second”—she curled her nails into her palms—“No. I’m done. I’ll go and sit downstairs. Come find me when you can disguise yourself again.” She moved to slip around him, but he caught her by the arm.

“I meant what I said—Temerity learned about you from somewhere, and the gods only know who she contacted once we left her shop.” He leaned nearer. “If you leave me, then we’re both in danger.”

“If I stay . . .” She looked up at him, her anger tangled in embarrassment, her embarrassment in lust. “Lorcan, I am two breaths from breaking this pact,” she said, her throat a knot. She swallowed hard. “Let me go, or I—”

“Or what?” he said, holding all the tighter to her arm. “You’ll throw me to Sairché because of other warlocks that you have *always* known about?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Because that’s what happens if you break the protection spell,” he went on. “She finds me, and I’m done for.”

Her pulse sped—he was getting angry. “I don’t want that—”

“You clearly want to punish me for some indiscretion that wasn’t even—”

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Farideh felt her cheeks warm. “This isn’t about punishing you.”

“Really? So it’s about poor Temerity?”

“It’s about *us!*” Farideh shouted. “It’s about the fact that there is *nothing* under the sun that is ever going to make you stop being a devil. And I know that, and I’ve always known that, but this . . . This makes it abundantly clear how much I haven’t believed it. You’re right,” she said softer. “I’m no one special. You’re no one special. I don’t know what I want from this and I should. So give me some gods-be-damned space to figure it out, because if you make me choose right here, right now, I choose to be done.”

Lorcan was as quiet as a hunting cat watching her. “Because of Temerity?”

Farideh shook her head. “Because I know myself. And I know you a little better now.”

“Whatever you think you know,” Lorcan said, every word packed with rage, “whatever I call or do not call Temerity is a trifle only a stupid girl would fixate on when Sairché is extremely capable of tracking us right now.”

Farideh’s heart was still pounding, her head still light enough to float away. There was no changing Lorcan, and apparently, there was no changing herself. “Then break the pact,” she said. “Sairché doesn’t want you, she wants me.”

“And that’s better than accepting you don’t get to tell me what to do? Do you think my sister would have done half the things I’ve done for you?”

“I think your sister would know to give me a little space,” Farideh said, “instead of insulting me until I want to run from her.”

Lorcan started to retort when the door opened. He had no more than turned, reaching for the sword he wore on his belt but a burst of magic splashed over him, freezing him in place. Farideh leaped out of the way, back to the wall, and pulled her rod from its place in her sleeve.

Sairché stepped around her brother, a wand in her hand, and with a quick spell closed the door behind her.

“Well met,” she said. “I do hope I’m not—”

Farideh pointed the rod at the cambion. “*Adaestuo!*” Sairché threw herself behind Lorcan’s still form as a bolt of energy streaked past and obliterated a wooden chair pushed up against the wall, narrowly missing the curve of her batlike wing. Farideh ducked around Lorcan, another burst of Hellish magic ready, but Sairché had rolled to her feet, and as Farideh marked her position, the cambion took hold of a charm that made her shimmer and vanish.

Farideh kept the rod out, searching the empty room for some sign of where Lorcan’s treacherous sister stood. “What have you done to him?”

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“Nothing permanent,” Sairché said from somewhere behind her. Farideh spun, but when Sairché spoke again, it was from off to the left. “Not yet. I wanted to talk to you, and let’s face it, Lorcan’s a terrible distraction.”

Farideh cast another bolt but it smashed against the wall. How long before someone came to see what all the noise was about? How long before someone caught her casting magic with a frozen devil in the middle of her room?

“Put away the rod,” Sairché’s voice said. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

“How did you find me?” Farideh asked, moving into the curve of Lorcan’s wing. If she was going to hit Sairché, she’d have to be careful. Keep her talking—that was the only way to find her.

“You mean the protection? I suppose Lorcan didn’t think about the fact that there are more mundane ways around such things. Temerity was most helpful. Put the rod away, and give me a chance.”

“What do you want?” Farideh asked, still holding tight to the implement.

“I’m here to offer you a deal,” Sairché said.

“I don’t want it. I told you that before.” In Neverwinter, Sairché had laid out her offer to take Farideh’s pact from Lorcan, telling Farideh she’d change her mind eventually. Or else.

Sairché clucked her tongue. “A lot of devils are looking for you, and make no mistake, they’ll find you soon enough. If I can do it, a dedicated collector can too. Lorcan *ought* to have told you that much.”

Farideh looked up at Lorcan’s frozen face. He would have said she didn’t need to know that. He would have said it was handled. But how could it be if Sairché was standing here, and he was trapped? She held the rod more tightly. “I’ll manage.”

The door swung open again, and Havilar, glaive leading, appeared. She looked from Lorcan to Farideh to Farideh’s rod . . . then froze stiff as the same magic stopped her in her tracks.

“No!” Farideh rushed to stand in front of her twin, to block Sairché’s reach.

“Ah, the infamous twin,” Sairché’s voice came. “She *is* a firecracker, isn’t she?”

Panic sank its cold claws into Farideh’s chest. “He said you didn’t know about her.”

Sairché stepped out of the air and gave Farideh a pitying look, as she sat down on the bed. “He says a lot of things, doesn’t he? Obviously he lied.”

Did he lie or did he underestimate Sairché? Did it matter? If Lorcan couldn’t protect them from the Hells, she had to do something.

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If Sairché cast another spell, Farideh thought, she might be able to keep her from harming Havilar. Or Lorcan. Not both. And still whatever spell held them in place might last for moments or might last for eons.

"This is my offer," Sairché said. "Nothing nefarious—those collectors *will* come calling, make no mistake. I'll give you protection from such harm—I have resources now my brother could only dream of. You give me your sister, a Kakistos heir of my own."

"I'll fight them off myself before I give you Havilar." Farideh pointed the rod at Sairché's chest. "*Adae*—"

"Now wait!" Sairché interrupted. "Lords, did Lorcan never let you negotiate? Never mind. Of course he didn't. My second offer: my protection—Hells, let's extend it to your sister as well—for twenty years. A decent chance at life, wouldn't you say?"

"And what do you want?"

Sairché's smile grew sharper. "Just Lorcan. Reject your pact, break the protection, and I'll do the rest."

Farideh thought of Temerity, of the way Lorcan had smiled at the other warlock. *I'm not your lover. I'm not your champion.* She thought of all the times he'd lashed out at her or prodded her off-balance. All the times he'd hurt her.

But then there were all the times he'd saved her, all the times he'd been the only ally at her side. The times he'd been kind. It did matter, a little, that he'd chosen her. And she wasn't going to let him die because she couldn't sort him out.

"No," she said.

Sairché narrowed her eyes. "I don't think you understand what it is you're up against. My brother is soft-hearted and lazy and entirely self-absorbed. His schemes do not tend to reach beyond the tips of his fingers. Even for a collector, he is peculiar. The others will not be so careful with you. Or with your sister. Refuse me," Sairché added, "and *I* will not be so careful with you."

Farideh kept the rod pointed at Sairché, but found the trigger word wouldn't speak itself. The thought of armies of devils, pouring through a portal from the Hells, eager to make Havilar their tool, eager to kill Lorcan and tangle Farideh in some worse agreement—she couldn't let that happen either. She needed time to think. She needed Sairché to back off.

She wet her mouth. "What would it take to protect us for only a little while?"

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Sairché paused and considered her brother's frozen form. Farideh wondered if he could hear what was happening, see what she was up against. She wondered if he was struggling to curse at her. She reached back with her free hand and squeezed Havilar's wrist. It was warm but still.

"A favor," Sairché said finally. "And I'll protect you and your sister from death and from devils, until you turn twenty-seven." She smiled at Farideh. "A pretty number, don't you think? And a very good deal."

Farideh hesitated. "What do you mean 'a favor'?"

"Just some little thing I can't do for myself," Sairché said. "But it won't be your soul or your sister. Or Lorcan, since you've laid those out."

"But it's anything else." Farideh pursed her lips a moment. "I won't get you another soul."

Sairché chuckled to herself. "Any soul *you* could get me was already half in the basket."

"I won't kill anyone," Farideh said.

"My, you're squeamish all of the sudden," Sairché said. "Sure you won't kill *anyone*?"

"You won't trick me like that," Farideh said. If she said yes, Sairché could easily turn her against someone good or dear or important. "The favor can't be killing someone."

"No killing," Sairché agreed. "To be honest, I wouldn't have wasted it on something like that. It's not as if I don't have erinyes for that sort of thing. Let's agree that the favor will end up harming a common enemy." She smiled at Farideh again, much like Temerity had. "You can't argue with that."

"Why would you do that?"

"Well, I'd like for us to be friends. Or at least for you to trust me a little—how else will I get anything worthwhile out of you? Even Lorcan knows better than to lead with a Pact Certain." She smiled at Farideh as if the tiefling were being impish. "Honestly."

Farideh swallowed. A common enemy—the favor would be an act against another devil, another wicked soul. Dangerous, but not, if she made the deal right, an evil act. Not something she couldn't do.

Maybe it would even be best for the world, she thought. Maybe by helping Sairché she could rid the world of something worse.

You can't trust her, Farideh thought. But did she have time not to, with collector devils at her heels and Sairché threatening Havilar and Lorcan?

"What about Lorcan?"

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“I think his own rivals will sort him out,” Sairché said. “He doesn’t even realize how worn that spell has gotten—it was never meant to protect the both of you. And he’s made an awful lot of devils angry.”

“Protect him too,” Farideh said. “That’s what I want.”

Sairché chuckled. “Oh, he won’t like that.”

Once Sairché had held her brother prisoner in the Hells. The nightmares that had plagued Farideh during that time flashed through her thoughts: Lorcan screaming, bleeding; eyeless, tongueless, pinned to the wall. If another devil wanted Lorcan out of the way, the same thing would happen. “Protect Lorcan, Havi, and me for all those years. I’ll give you the favor—but no souls and no killing. And I don’t want to hurt anyone . . . anyone who’s innocent. Even if it’s to stop someone I call an enemy.”

Sairché raised her silver eyebrows. “That’s quite a lot of caveats. I may need more for my efforts. Two favors.”

“The same *sort* of favors,” Farideh said.

Sairché seemed to weigh this. “Fine,” she said, extending a hand. “Not my first choice, but I do love a favor.”

“When does it start?” Farideh asked.

Sairché smiled and took hold of Farideh’s hand. “Right now.”

All in an instant the spells holding Lorcan and Havilar dissolved and both were shouting. Sairché spread her other hand wide, and tendrils of magic shot out, glowing red as hot steel to wrap around Lorcan and Havilar both. Brin kicked the door in, looking around wildly, and Farideh tried to shout, to tell him to get back, out of Sairché’s reach.

A wind whipped out of the still, hot air, blew up from the floorboards and swirled around Farideh, around Sairché, around Lorcan and Havilar as the magic pulled them close. It caught her warning and tossed it away. It caught Brin’s cry of protest and ground it into a wordless howl, as he grabbed Havilar and tried to pull her free of Sairché’s spell.

Sairché released Farideh’s hand. With a small, wicked smile she spread her fingers, sending out another set of glowing lines that plunged into Farideh, wrapping around her sternum, her heart, burning her from the inside out. She might have screamed. She might have tried to tell Sairché this wasn’t what she wanted. She couldn’t hear her own voice. There was only the whirlwind and the fire and the blackness that grew out of Sairché’s spread hands to swallow them all up and smother any more words she might have spoken.