

*Heretic
Behaviour Copy*

THE SECRETS OF DEMONS

E.C. GLYNN



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*This book is dedicated to all those who feared to examine their religion
too deeply – but did anyway.*

To honour the bravest parts of myself.

And to my mum.

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Prologue

*I*t takes no special talent to kill a human, the High Priest Abbott mused as he watched the woman thrashing before him. *No special training or ceremony required. Any hard object swung fast enough will often do the trick...*

He stared with disgust at the struggling woman's thin black horns that were beginning to protrude from her long mass of blonde hair.

Yes, he thought. Death is a simple thing to accomplish where humans are concerned. Demons on the other hand...

"To die with such pageantry," he told her solemnly, "is proof your death really means something. Consider it an honour many are not afforded."

Anger and hate flashed across her pale face as she looked up at him and opened her mouth. For a moment, Abbott thought she might speak, but instead, she screamed.

He'd heard many screams in his time. Screams for mercy, screams of pain, of fear...but this scream, the High Priest Abbott instantly knew, was different.

It nearly blew out his ear drums.

The force of it opened the heavy wooden doors of the Grand Cathedral and rattled the stained-glass windows in their sockets. His spies later reported that it had defied the laws of sound completely and had spilled out onto the winter streets of Jeralusah, travelling right over the outer walls of the small Holy City.

Good. Let them all know.

Despite the unnatural power of her cry, and the pain it caused him, Abbott refused to lower the censer to block his ears, and he was pleased to see that none of the elite warrior priests who held her, his jesu, flinched either. Instead, two of them pulled the noisy demon to her feet and began to haul her forward into the main hall of the Grand Cathedral. They braced for her resistance and were not disappointed. As soon as she stood, she stopped screaming and began to thrash violently in their arms, fighting against their grip and the choking clouds of sedative incense that Abbott determinedly swirled. Despite her efforts, the jesu bore up well and continued to drag her forward.

They were professionals, and this was not their first time.

The demon's blue eyes flashed up at Abbott in helpless fury again. He noted that her horns were starting to retract into her head, and she did not scream again.

Perhaps she cannot. Perhaps her abominable power was all used up in that single moment of desperation. How pathetic.

Despite the cool winter air, her naked torso glistened as streams of sweat poured down her lithe body, and her long blonde hair clung in thick, knotted clumps to the back of her neck.

Beautiful.

The word rose unbidden in the High Priest's mind as he drew his eyes away from her and surveyed the entire sacred ceremony, the Sacrament of Contrition.

Nearly two hundred priests and acolytes who served the Church of Midas stood at attention in lines that spanned down either side of the Grand Cathedral. They hummed a low, hypnotic droll, with their heads bowed and palms pressed firmly together in reverence.

The stained-glass murals on the towering windows above them caught the winter morning sun on its entry into the hall and turned its cool light into sharp rainbow streams. The glass depicted images of Midas emerging triumphantly from the depths of the ocean and presenting himself as the One True God to the cowering folk of Artor, a pivotal moment in the Church's fresh history.

Beautiful, it was all so beautiful.

Abbott watched as his jesu pulled the demon closer to her death. The sedative smoke was finally starting to take effect, and she stumbled now, looking disorientated. He shifted his gaze from her to the God-King, who was greedily eyeing the scene, like a stalking crocodile, from upon his throne of glass and sand.

Midas seemed to sense the High Priest's gaze and glanced over at Abbott, who swiftly forced his focus back on the ceremony at hand, maintaining the rhythmic swinging of his censer and preparing for the ritual lines he would soon deliver. It was always considered improper to stare too directly at the Divine, but today, of all days, it seemed particularly voyeuristic.

"With this smoke and herb," he intoned, "I cleanse thee, demon, so that thou may be a fitting offering for our Almighty God-King. We earnestly pray that he may forgive this sinful and blasphemous world. That his wrath and anger may be appeased, and that he will look upon us for yet another season, with his Divine mercy."

The jesu had dragged the demon close enough to Midas for him to touch her now.

She had been forced to her knees again and now knelt with a face frozen in fearful intensity. The expression somehow made her simultaneously beautiful and ugly to the High Priest, and he considered it thoughtfully. The fear was very good, he conceded, but he saw considerably more fear in the eyes of the jesu who held her.

That, he mused silently, is even better.

The demon was one of ten sacrifices being provided by the nation of Artor to the God-King for the winter season. It was a requirement of his rule that kept even the most devout fearful and wary of a misstep.

Abbot moved behind the demon. He signalled for the humming in the Grand Cathedral to stop. Two hundred priests obeyed instantly, as if he had pinched the sound from their throats. The low droll was replaced by an eerie, heavy silence that fell over the ceremony like a smothering hand. It was a strained absence of sound, more akin to the silence of a drowning man than the peaceful silence of a sleeping baby, the kind of silence that could only be made in the moment when two hundred priests paused, waiting for their God to perform a miracle.

Midas removed his gloves and extended his palm towards the demon. His eyes unfocused the moment that he pressed a thick thumb into the centre of her forehead and his power struck the woman.

Abbott marvelled for the millionth time how incredible it was to watch someone's body transform, and how beautiful the Golden Sand looked as it glinted in the highlights of the sun on its journey to the ground.

The Heretical Behaviours

Selling One's Soul to Obtain Demon Powers.

The God-King alone holds the rights to supernatural powers and abilities. It is forbidden to accept the Devil's contract and sell one's soul to Viah in exchange for powers.

Dancing, Revelry, Festivals or Celebrations.

The nation remains in an age of contrition. This must be observed by all citizens at all times until the Divine Mercy and Forgiveness of the God-King is decreed.

Using the God-King's Name in Vain.

His name is sacred and powerful. Flippant or ill-considered use is forbidden.

Misuse of the God-King's Golden Sand.

All that is created by the God-King's holy power remains an extension of his divinity. Any use of his Golden Sand must be approved by the God-King himself. It is expressly forbidden to use it in any form of trade or financial transaction.

Idolatry.

All gods worshipped before the arrival of the Almighty God-King were false gods. Worship of any but the One True God-King is forbidden.

Disrespecting the Church.

The Church is the Arm of the God-King. It implements his will. Its authority and personnel must be respected at all times.

Harbouring a Heretic.

Any person found to be harbouring one who is known to have committed a Heretical Behaviour will be considered to be colluding in that transgression and punished.

Misconstruing Dark Age History.

It is forbidden to fondly reminisce or misconstrue the Dark Ages, especially if committed with intent to cause disruption to the rightful ascension of the God-King and his Church.

No Clemency

Three Months Later.

While Mila held her breath, she prayed that the other prisoners were all letting the smoke fill their lungs.

An acolyte was walking slowly down the line, fumigating each of the chained ikarei with the incense emitting from the large handful of herbs he held upon a brass pewter plate. Mila knew the distinctive peppery aroma of mintlock, a sedative used to dull the mind and senses. She wondered if any of the other sacrifices also knew this. She hoped they did not and were all breathing deeply.

Sedation wasn't a particularly kind thing to wish upon her fellow prisoners, but the situation was dire, and if she was going to survive this, she needed them all to stop feeling their fear so damn loudly.

Please, she silently begged them. I need to be able to think.

For days now, the other ikarei had been unintentionally broadcasting their emotions so intensely that Mila's power had been overwhelmed. She had been able to focus on little else, and it didn't help that she was also suffering intense withdrawal headaches from lack

of access to an entirely different plant, rubane. She'd grown too used to smoking the weed and living for years in the peaceful silence of its dulling properties. Without access to it over the past four days, it felt as though her power was now spewing out from her body in an enormous, unruly wave, catching and dragging in every energetic signal in its vicinity...every plant's cry for water, every insect's determined march, every thought and reaction of any human within a hundred-foot radius. That included the deep well of hysteria and fear that her fellow prisoners had been energetically digging in their captivity.

With the mintlock incense now thick in the air, the pulsing, horrific emotions in the room were finally quelling. Mila kept her breaths small and shallow, her face turned away from the cloud of incense. Slowly, the fog in her mind began to lift. She could finally think for herself again, could finally comprehend her situation with clarity.

It was not good.

In the next few minutes, she and the other ikarei would be led out into the Grand Cathedral to kneel before the God-King, and soon after that, she'd experience exactly what it felt like to transform from her mortal body into a glowing pile of Golden Sand.

If she was going to escape this fate, she had to do something now.

She analysed the golden metal bindings that held her wrists to the collar of the man who stood before her in line. They were solid, and her arms were numb after having been clipped to the back of his neck for days. She knew she was now awkwardly dragging his head backwards, but she no longer had the strength left to try to hold them out at an angle that didn't pull at him, let alone muster the strength to somehow break the solid gold chains themselves. The one small blessing of her situation was that she was last in the row of prisoners, so there was no one behind her similarly dragging her own neck back.

After determining that physical force wasn't an option for escape, she mentally gathered the ragged edges of her scattered and disobedient power and forced it to focus on conducting a sweep of the energies within the stiflingly hot room. Like a snake flicking its tongue to taste the air, Mila let her smooth, black horns grow slightly outwards from her scalp. She didn't technically *need* them extended to use her power, but doing so helped greatly in achieving specificity, and right now, as she hunted for any nuance in sentiment or attitude that might be useful to her, specificity might be the thing that could save her.

She tried not to let it touch the other prisoners. She already knew too well exactly how they felt, and they were equally as helpless as she was. Their despair did nothing but suck at her like a delicious black mire, beckoning her to join them, to dive in and lose herself again.

No. She wrenched her power away and continued to scan for all other life in the room. There were six guards and four warrior priests, *jesu* they were called, escorting the chained line of sacrificial *ikarei*, and two guards outside the door. She ran her power over each of them, looking for anything in their energy that might help: a drop of mercy, of impatience with their work, of pride...anything at all that she could maybe, somehow, exploit to escape.

Nothing.

The dark, pulsing energy of the holy *jesu* who guarded them pressed gratefully against her mind, and if the guards weren't utter zealots themselves, then they were simply too full of fear to be useful. Fearful guards were as useless to her as the hot fear radiating out from the group of imprisoned *ikarei* she stood amongst. The intermingled energies of the room reminded her nauseatingly of the dynamic she'd once sensed between the workers and animals waiting in line at an abattoir.

She retracted the small horns back into her head and whimpered quietly when the headache returned with full force. The situation was hopeless. Perhaps she was better off sniffing the mintlock. At least then maybe she wouldn't be in pain before her death.

The heavy wooden door behind her suddenly banged open, and two more robed jesu entered the dark room. They moved towards her, inspecting her face, and Mila fought to ensure that her gaze appeared unfocused and hazy, as though she'd taken a full hit of the mintlock. It would do no harm for them to think she was dazed and docile.

There was more movement from behind her, and she started a little when the High Priest himself passed by. His shadow crossed her as he moved towards the front of the line.

"The moment has come," he intoned calmly, reciting the official damnation by heart as he walked. "By committing the First Heretical Behaviour, you have sinned in the eyes of the Church and the eyes of our Great God-King Midas."

As he spoke, the jesu unclipped her hands from the neck of the man in front. Mila gasped in pain as they dropped heavily in front of her, and blood began to rush back into the sorry limbs. Her hands remained bound, but at least they were finally pointing back towards the ground.

"Such a sin demands punishment, and our Divine Lord demands the seasonal sacrifice of ten heretics quarterly to appease his wrath. Thus, with your demonic nature revealed, your punishment has been determined by the Church, and I pronounce it now."

The two jesu were working their way up the line, unshackling the other ikarei one by one.

"You are to be immediately sacrificed at the hand of our God-King, to ensure both that justice is served and to enable our humble nation

to demonstrate our enduring contrition and obedience for yet another season.”

The hold of the mintlock was strong, and no one in the line moved at his proclamation, but still, a collective moan of fear and despair flowed through the group, and Mila could not help but be affected by it. She tried desperately to retain her sense of self, to remain energetically sovereign, but resisting the strength of the emotion around her was like trying to hold onto a handful of salt amidst a torrent of water.

The jesu had now reached the front of the line. They swiftly unshackled the young man who stood there. In unison, they took him by the shoulders and led him out of the small wing and out of sight, through the mosaic archway to where Mila assumed the main hall of the Grand Cathedral awaited. He stumbled along with them obediently.

She knew the moment the man reached his destination, because a deep rumbling noise suddenly filtered down the hallway and into the wing where she and the others waited. True terror contaminated her when it dawned on her that the sound was not a distant horn, but the slow, deep, tolling chant of hundreds of priests and acolytes as they observed the Sacrament. The baritone hum of their voices echoed throughout the entire cathedral, a deep and expressionless drone that merged somehow with the smoke and the dark and the overwhelming stench of despair.

“Please.”

She heard the young man’s sharp voice suddenly cut through the dull hum, begging.

“Please!”

Mila knew there would be no clemency.

A fresh wave of fear washed through the waiting prisoners as his pleas quickly turned into wordless scream after scream. They echoed

into each other, unrelenting, ceaseless, until the moment that his voice was abruptly, sickeningly, cut off.

Mila desperately tried to retain her sense of calm amidst the tide of panic swiftly rising around her. Despite the fact she'd avoided the full force of the initial dose, the residual essence of the mintlock still hung in the air and was making the sensitivity of her power worse, dampening any ability she still retained to block out the anguish of her fellow prisoners.

She had to do something.

She desperately flung her power out again and this time, as it rounded the outskirts of the room, she found something new.

Previously, she'd felt the energies of two guards positioned outside the door but...no longer. There was a noticeable lack of human energy in the spaces those two bodies had once occupied. They were gone.

She did not think, did not breathe, did not pause to question her next move. The other guards and jesu in the room were momentarily facing towards the archway, their attention drawn in the opposite direction by the young man's screams. This opportunity might never come again.

Mila took three steps backwards, slid the door open a crack with her fingertips, slipped through it and ran.

Run.

The tunnel was beautiful but Mila barely acknowledged the green and blue stained-glass that spidered out across the curved roof in all directions. She turned to the left and ran, not knowing where she was going but praying she'd stumble across an empty room, or even just a dark corner to hide in. She was weakened from days of imprisonment and knew that, despite the athleticism she'd cultivated by living in the rainforest, right now she wouldn't outlast a chase. Her only hope was

to hide and perhaps slink to safety when the focus of the search went elsewhere.

Her feet pounded along the dark grey stones, and she held her bound wrists to her chest awkwardly as she ran. The sunlight glimmering in from the stained-glass above her created blotted streams of aquamarine that pooled down from the roof onto the floor, and she stumbled swiftly through this haze of colour, a tiny brown leaf tumbling in whirling floodwaters of light. She extended her horns as she ran, throwing her power out before her in the hope of giving herself even one second of warning before she barrelled into anyone.

Unbelievably, it seemed that there was no soul in front of her. Behind her, however, angry shouts suddenly rang out, and she heard a heavy door slam, followed by the sounds of running feet.

They were after her.

Her adrenaline surged and she pushed on until she came to the first deviation in the hallway, a narrow, winding staircase that was built into the left-hand wall. It went both up and down.

In the split second she had to make the decision, she chose down. She hurtled down the stairs, not worrying about falling and breaking her neck. A broken neck would be a blessing compared to the fate that awaited her if they caught her. She left the light of the beautiful tunnel behind her and descended into the darkness below.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust when she hit the stone floor. She blinked rapidly as she stumbled forward, throwing her bound hands out blindly and praying there was nothing in her way that she could run into.

Up ahead, she saw a tiny sliver of light. She stumbled towards it. Perhaps it was a window or door in the distance? But as she drew closer, she realised it was a simple oil lantern that had been left atop a large cement block.

Not a cement block, she realised in horror. A grave.

She was in a crypt.

A chill gripped her spine and she made to return to the stairs but had barely taken a single step when she bumped directly into the chest of the owner of the lamp. The unexpected collision threw her off balance and with her hands still bound, she was unable to steady herself. As she began to topple over, strong hands reached out to grab her and helped her regain her balance.

The owner of the lamp was a striking man with blond curls, a broad jaw and a powerful energy that barrelled into her without hesitation. She briefly wondered how she hadn't sensed his presence when she entered this place. While his face was taut and stern, his grip on her arms was gentle, and despite the fact his green eyes were rimmed red, as though he'd been crying, she could still feel the strong energy of his intrigue washing over her.

"You're not a priest," he accused softly, his voice smooth as a river stone, his eyes scanning over her bound hands with interest, "Or a jesu. Who are you?"

She did not reply and tried to pull away from him, but he did not let her go. He opened his mouth to speak again but was interrupted by sounds of her pursuers coming down the staircase and into the crypt.

Moving on instinct more than thought, Mila tried once more to pull away from the man, and this time he let her go. She ducked down and hid behind the gravestone, her heart thudding so loudly that she thought her chest may well rip at the seams.

"Who goes there? What's going on?" the blond man with the lantern called out in the direction of the stairwell, his tone now far more authoritative.

The footsteps abruptly halted.

“We’re hunting a demon who has escaped the Sacrament,” a Jesu voice called out from the gloom. “A female. We mean no disrespect, but have you seen –”

Without warning the blond-haired man exploded with rage. “Disrespect? Do you even know the *meaning* of the word? This is a private family crypt. It is forbidden, on pain of death, for any not of the bloodline to enter.” His words echoed throughout the cold, hard space. “And yet you storm in here, during my time of mourning, and all but accuse me of harbouring a demon? Of heretic behaviour? Get out!” He spat the words at them.

Crouched behind the grave and feeling as though she were made of stone herself, Mila heard the pursuers leave. She dared not rise, even when she felt sure they’d left. Eventually, she heard the lone footsteps of the blond man approaching her. His shadow crossed her face, and she shivered with fear as she met his eyes. They were no longer rimmed red. They gleamed.

“A demon,” he said with a small tilt of his head. “Well, well, well.”

Mila shivered under his scrutiny, waiting for the blow to fall. The man’s concentration broke and his head suddenly snapped up as the echo of more voices in the hallway tumbled down into the crypt.

“You’d better get moving,” he said. “Someone of a higher rank will surely come down here and won’t be so easily deterred from conducting a more thorough search.”

Mila blinked. “You’re letting me go?” she asked, confused.

“I’m not.” He said sternly, holding up a finger to correct her then slowly lowering it. “I’m just...not detaining you either. Not yet anyway.” As he spoke, a slow drawl of a grin began to spread across his face, as if he’d just realised that today he’d been gifted the good fortune of observing a very entertaining hunt.

And she, the hare.

“Besides,” he said. “They don’t need my help to detain you, if the commotion above is anything to go by.”

She agreed, nodding fervently and backing away from him, not quite daring to turn away from the unusual man until she was well out of arm’s reach. “Thank you.”

He raised his brows and grinned at her in the candlelight. “Good luck,” he said in a soft, sing-song tone.

When Mila reached the staircase, she tried to calm her racing heart and took a moment to consider her next move.

The sounds of tens of jesu running around in the tunnel, barking orders and clanging their armour was nearly deafening.

There were so many of them. She’d never be able to outrun them. Her only option was to try outsmart them.

So, when she detected a brief break of movement in the tunnel above her, she made her move. She ascended the stairs, passing by the ground floor completely, hoping the jesu would stay in the tunnel and assume she was searching for a way out. It was not much of a bluff, but her options were limited. If she could find somewhere further up to hide until nightfall, that could save her.

She leapt up the steps three at a time, but when she reached the top landing, she realised with dread that the decision had been a poor one. The stairway did not lead to another level. It led only to a single, beautifully carved wooden door. And beyond that door, Mila’s powers informed her, there was only one small room...and it was already occupied.

Occupied by a being whose energy dominated the space like a thunderclap.

The sheer volume of it stopped Mila dead in her tracks. Cruelty, impatience, a desire to be seen. She’d never come across someone who projected so much and so loudly. There was something childlike in

the concoction, like the energies you'd expect from a toddler about to torment a frog.

Entering the room was not a good option. Descending the stairs again and trying the tunnel was a certain death sentence. She could hear the jesus swarming below her like angry ants of a disrupted nest. Mila prayed she could just hide here on the landing and never have to open that door, never have to be the frog, but when she heard voices at the bottom of the stairwell she realised that her attempt at a ruse had been foiled by the sheer numbers of those after her. They had enough to split ranks and send someone up the stairs, as well as press ahead into the tunnel. They were coming, and in about two seconds, Mila would be discovered.

A yell from below told her they'd seen her.

There was no other option.

She pushed open the door, burst into the room, and blinked heavily in the blinding gold light that accosted her eyes. When she registered where she was, she blanched in horror.

It was a viewing platform, an ornate suite with a balcony that looked down over the Grand Cathedral and onto the Sacrament in progress below. The echoing chants of the priests and acolytes rose up around her in a deafening mist, filling her ears and dominating the air. Her stomach plummeted in dismay.

She was right back where she started.

Cruelty and Chaos

The escape attempt had been for naught.

The pursuing jesu were moments away from reaching the room. Would they toss her over the balcony when they caught her? If so, she'd land on the immaculately tiled floor below, probably right before the God-King. Would he still accept a sacrifice with a broken neck?

One of the jesu finally reached the doorway. He was panting, but he didn't immediately reach for Mila. Instead, he looked over her shoulder and spoke with deep concern etched into his face.

"Princess, forgive me."

Mila turned and registered the other occupants in the room for the first time.

The powerfully loud energy came from a striking woman, who sat atop a high-backed, golden chair.

Mila had never seen anything or anyone like her before.

She was tall and dark. Her dominating frame emphasised by the sleek black fabric that wrapped tightly around her body. It whirled

in thick swaths around her long arms and legs, reaching all the way down to her wrists and ankles. Sewn into the fabric were the skins of hundreds of golden snakes, and she toyed with a tiny live one between her long, manicured fingers. Her black hair hung in thick, tight curls down around her neck, and delicate, gold feathers had been woven through small braids that hung from her temples. Her skin was as immaculate and sheer as a dark mirror, and Mila judged that she couldn't have seen more than twenty-five summers or so. Her lips were painted with a strong, metallic blue, and two streaks of golden paint adorned her sharp cheekbones.

This must be the God-King's daughter – Princess Jezebel – but she didn't look like a princess. She looked like a goddess.

“Well,” Jezebel said, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow and looking Mila up and down slowly, dark eyes lingering on the thin, black horns that were still protruding a few inches above Mila's scalp. “This afternoon is already panning out to be far more entertaining than I expected. Someone...explain.” She flittered her fingers in the air commandingly.

Beside her a tall, muscular man with cropped hair and a bare chest stood poised to attack. He did not look remotely amused. Instead, his sword was drawn and his deep brown eyes narrowed as he surveyed the scene and the intruder. To the other side of the princess was a serving woman, who might as well have been invisible beside the physical and energetic pull of her mistress.

“Someone explain,” the princess said again in a low, deadly tone, as though unaccustomed to repeating herself.

Despite the heat of the room, Mila shivered.

“I...she's a...” The unfortunate jesu behind Mila spluttered on his words, unable to believe that, of all the people in this building responsible for the demon's escape, he somehow had the poor fortune

of being the one to report it to Jezebel. “She’s a d-demon. Meant to be below with the others. My sincere, sincere apologies for the disturbance. I’ll take her with me now.”

“Wait!” The order was sharp, and the princess rose from her chair, gliding towards Mila like a panther moving through shadows.

Mila felt her body automatically freeze as the woman approached. Her nose was assaulted by the wave of perfume, dark spice with notes of vanilla on top. It was gorgeous and sultry and overwhelming but was nothing compared to the actual wearer. Even if Mila had wanted to look away from her, she couldn’t. She was too beautiful, and her energy was too dominating.

Eventually, she stood right before Mila and inspected her, her deep brown eyes scanning from bottom to top. Her lip twitched with disgust as she surveyed the dirty, olive, cotton shorts that covered Mila’s slim legs, and the cream crocheted top that hung over her small breasts. They lingered on the many golden piercings in Mila’s nose and ears but lit up when they reached her horns again. She even reached out to touch one, and when her graceful hand stroked it, Mila’s legs nearly bucked from the sharp, electric sensation that ran through her. Jezebel’s smile truly brightened at that response and her eyes gleamed. Finally, she fixated on Mila’s long, straight brown hair, and when she noted the length, her eyebrows raised again with interest.

Nothing about Mila’s appearance was unusual for a Highlander, except the length of her hair. Due to the constant humidity, Highlander women usually cut theirs short to allow any precious breeze to access their necks, but Mila hadn’t moved there until she was fourteen. She’d spent her childhood amongst the devout and hardworking plains people of Prious, and in Prious, the women wore their hair long.

Despite the pain the memories of her past life caused her, Mila had never been able to bring herself to sever that connection to her

childhood. Keeping her hair long and healthy in the forest had been a mammoth effort, but the knowledge she'd cultivated of rainforest fruits and their nourishing properties had helped. Usually, she wore it tied up and out of the way, but her grass hair tie had broken on the journey here, so now it hung loose, draping down to her ankles. It had never been cut before and was shiny, healthy and rich.

"Your hair," Jezebel said, and before Mila could open her mouth to reply, she snapped her fingers, and the guard approached. "I want it," Jezebel said simply, cocking her head slightly to the side.

Without hesitation, the guard seized Mila's hair, and in one swift movement of his dagger, he sliced it clean away from her head.

The immediate disappearance of the weight that had been silently present for all her life was as shocking as a bucket of ice water being thrown over her. She gasped for air, her bound hands instinctively reaching for her head.

No one in the room acknowledged her response. Instead, the maidservant hurriedly stepped forward and held a mirror up for the princess, who held Mila's hair up in a bunch to her scalp.

The princess tucked her braid to the side, studying her reflection for a moment before shrugging. "Upon further consideration...I don't think it's quite the right shade for me."

In three quick steps, she strode to the small gold brazier that quietly burned in the corner and abruptly tossed the heavy cut-off hair into it.

It was consumed by the flames in all of two seconds, the balcony swiftly filling with the acrid scent of burning hair.

Mila stared dumbly at the brazier, and then at the woman, in disbelief, trying to fight down her outrage and make sense of what had just occurred.

Princess Jezebel stared back with barely masked delight, waiting for the response, the reaction, a flinch...anything she could latch onto in order to extend this fun game she'd just begun. The malicious energy pulsed from her with renewed intensity, and Mila suddenly recognised the danger the princess truly presented. Despite the fact she was probably minutes away from being sacrificed, the immediate threat to her life was suddenly this woman who stood directly in front of her.

And yet.

She could not bring herself to drag her eyes to the ground in submission. If Jezebel was going to kill her here and now, she wouldn't cower. She was suddenly overwhelmed with fury and frustration that she'd spent her entire life hiding and cowering. If this was to be her last stand, she might as well stand strong.

So, she stared back at Jezebel, unyielding in her gaze, and felt the woman's excited energy rise in response, as though she were relishing in the novelty of coming across someone who was not yet quite broken.

Those perfect lips curled into a cool smile. "You *are* interesting. What's your power?"

The question took Mila by surprise. She wasn't expecting this silent battle of wills to turn into a conversation. She'd been expecting death.

"I can sense energy," she said tersely.

"What do you mean energy?" Jezebel demanded.

"Emotions, intentions, state of being... Whatever is the driving force of living things in my vicinity."

"Is that so? And what is *my* energy?" she said with a leer.

In that moment, Jezebel reminded Mila of a bored rainforest monkey she'd once seen. One that had pushed a rival's vulnerable babe off a branch for the sake of its own entertainment.

Mila considered her answer for a second and then answered truthfully.

“Cruelty and chaos.”

Jezebel said nothing for a long few minutes, taken aback by the candid answer and the courage of the giver. Mila continued to hold her gaze, still unable to look away, although she became dimly aware of the sound of footsteps and more people coming up the stairs. Another guard, two jesu, and even the High Priest Abbott now appeared in the doorway.

“Seize her,” the High Priest ordered, his tone panicked.

The jesu moved towards Mila.

“Stop!” Jezebel ordered curtly, and when the jesu did not immediately halt, she whirled on them in fury, stomping her foot like a petulant child. “Did you not hear my command?” she bellowed.

The movement towards Mila stopped, but Mila sensed an air of uncertainty to their obedience. Who was truly in charge here?

“Princess?” The High Priest looked faintly annoyed, but he was not about to disobey the daughter of his God-King on the very afternoon they were holding a sacrament to appease his wrath.

“Unbind her hands.” The princess pointed to Mila. “This one is now mine. I will take her as my new pet.”

Mila baulked silently at her words.

The High Priest was less restrained. “Highness...” He struggled for a moment to try to articulate his complaint whilst remaining respectful. “She is an intended sacrifice, a demon. If you take her, we’ll be one short for this season.”

Jezebel seemed to consider this, then she turned towards Mila. “What do you think, demon? Should you be sacrificed today? Or do you think you and your power can sufficiently entertain me for a few months until the next Sacrament?”

Mila did not know how to respond, but Jezebel seemed to be expecting her to speak. Eventually, she simply said, "I wish to live."

"Excellent." Jezebel clapped her hands delightedly, a childlike energy seizing her. "Abbott, tell my father that I've taken one for myself. He can't have this one yet. I've got plans for her, and I intend to extract every last sliver of entertainment from her this spring." She suddenly giggled. "How quaint. A spring pet".

"Princess Jezebel... Forgive me, but... I - "

Mila was amazed that he seemed still prepared to argue with her. So did the princess.

"Am I not half Divine?" She interrupted him with a stony, warning glare, her energy shifting from childish excitement to murderous intensity in an instant. "Do you not worship my family line? Obey me."

Jezebel's personal guard also chose that moment to step forward, his presence shadowing Jezebel's back and reinforcing her command. The High Priest glanced at him and then took a deep breath to steady himself in what was clearly a humbling and difficult effort. Finally, he seemed able to remember his place. He sucked his lips tightly into his mouth as if to stop them opening of their own accord, then nodded to one of the jesu, who strode forward and roughly unlocked the cuffs on Mila's wrists.

Jezebel did not spare anyone else on the balcony a second glance. She seized Mila's arm and dug her long nails into it, pulling her along as they left the room and descended the stairs.

"This is going to be fun," she said with confidence as they strode swiftly out of the cathedral, followed closely by the huge guard and the handmaid.

Mila was far less certain.

The Princess Jezebel

Princess Jezebel strode with the speed and determination of a woman possessed. She all but dragged Mila behind her into a carriage that carried them a little distance away from the Grand Cathedral to a far smaller, but still ornate, tall, white building. Mila soon realised this must be the princess's own personal apartments.

Together, they marched up the winding, white-tiled staircase and did not stop until they reached the very top and entered an opulent bedchamber.

Thick, towering, sandstone walls rose to meet the roof that, like the tunnel in the cathedral, was a stained-glass mosaic. This one was a rainbow of colours, interrupted only by five dark, exposed wooden beams that spanned the width of the room. Huge windows had been carved into the stone walls, each a various-sized crescent, except for the one in the middle, which was perfectly circular. Mila stared at the design for a moment before realising she was looking at carvings that depicted the waxing and waning phases of the moon.

The centre window was large enough to fit two plush, red seats inside it, and Mila could see a tiny, black-wire fence balcony jutting out on the other side. Each of the other windows were lit from beneath with small, elaborately twisted jars that expelled a soft golden glow. On closer inspection, Mila realised with horror that the jars were filled with Midas's sand. She swiftly averted her attention away from them, praying she would not feel the death energy that she knew they held.

The western side of the room was dominated by an intricately painted wooden wardrobe that spanned the entire length of the wall. It was accompanied by a number of freestanding mirrors and dressing curtains that were made up of all manner of materials, such as feathers and woven reeds and giraffe skins.

On the eastern wall lay an enormous, black, four-poster bed. It was adorned with spider-web thin fabric that draped from the supporting beams of the ceiling and trailed down, across the mound of pillows that lay on and around it. Each was a different colour and stitched with an assortment of tessellating patterns, desert flowers and hypnotic swirls. The entire room was an explosion of colours, textures and shapes. It was gorgeous and awful at the same time.

Mila finally stopped gawking and turned back to Jezebel, who had dismissed all attendants save the one guard. Now alone, she drew Mila towards the bed and then proceeded to undress in front of both Mila and the guard without ceremony.

Mila's instinct to breathe completely abandoned her at the sight of Jezebel's perfect naked body.

"Men have been so... *unsatisfying* recently," the princess said as she peeled off the last of the gorgeous black fabric from her skin and discarded it in a pile on the floor. "And I'm getting quite sick of having them killed for finding their moment of pleasure before I find mine."

She sighed and tilted her head gently, exposing her neck in a display that, for the briefest of moments, was the perfect portrayal of heartfelt consideration.

Then she suddenly snapped back to a more exacting stance. "It's a selfishness I cannot abide. I'm the daughter of the God-King. If I can't even have good sex, then I shudder to think what the other women of Artor endure." She tittered a little at her own joke and then looked over Mila's shoulder and spoke directly to the guard.

"And as always, Jahan, you're free to watch, but do not interrupt," she said in a voice that had abruptly changed again, this time from the whinging girlish tone to one that was deep and sultry and mocking.

"Highness," was all the guard replied, his face impassive. His energy matched his words, stoic and professional.

"Unfortunately –" she turned back to Mila and sighed theatrically, "– he's handsome, but he's also boring. If I wasn't so certain he'd be equally as boring in bed, I'd have tried him on years ago."

Mila could tell that she enjoyed talking about the guard as though he were simply an object that she could choose to use on a whim. Perhaps, to her, he was. Perhaps now Mila was too.

That realisation unsettled her even more.

Jezebel's dark eyes were hard, shiny beetles as they studied her, and Mila's stomach plummeted at her next words.

"I've been with women before too. However, against my better judgement and much to my own misfortune, I always seem to be drawn back to men. Have you been with women before?"

Mila answered honestly, although it drew bile to her mouth to do so. "Yes." A brief flash of memory threatened to interrupt but Mila pushed the images away. Now would be a dangerous time to indulge in nostalgia and she wanted the taint of this situation nowhere near

those memories. She needed to focus on the moment if she wanted to survive this encounter.

“Excellent.” Jezebel’s eyes flashed with glee. “Perhaps you’ll be skilled enough to keep my attention for longer than a single tumble. And if you truly can feel my energy with your power, then I expect you to use it and read my desires. I don’t want to have to tell you what I want. I just want you to do it.” She clapped her hands in delight, thrilled by the cleverness of her idea and her certainty that she’d determined exactly how Mila’s powers worked. “This has potential to be extremely entertaining. Let’s begin.”

With the confidence of a woman who had never been rejected or denied a thing in her life, she reached for Mila’s hand and forced it upon her left breast. “Here, tell me what you feel.”

Mila closed her eyes and tried to block out the pounding of her own heart, the near overwhelming adrenaline and panic, the feel of Jezebel’s cold skin and sharp nails on her hand. Her power whirled around the room uselessly and aimlessly. It wasn’t going to work as Jezebel thought it would. Mila couldn’t read minds with her power. She had no idea how she would do this thing the princess expected her to do.

Certain that she was going to be sent back to Abbott within the hour, she felt utterly helpless and overpowered, a tiny bird in a cyclone.

Stop, she told herself. Stay calm. Breathe. Think. Focus.

She pushed the constant pangs of her searing rubane headache away and took a deep breath in and out. She forced herself to extend her thin, black horns the full few inches that they could grow and urged them to enable the full sensitivity of her power.

You can do this. Just like you used to help those other women.

Years ago, before the effort of chasing rubane’s blocking effect had taken over her life, she’d been an accomplished midwife. She’d helped

women in the village to deliver by secretly sensing their baby's energy beneath their skin as she'd worked with them, her horns hidden beneath a hat.

Surely, she could use her power in a similar way now? She just had to try to remain calm.

She focused her full attention and power on the woman before her and breathed deeply again. She urged her power to go in.

There.

She could see Jezebel's energy more clearly now that she was calmer, and it truly was chaotic: purple and black, swirling like an angry tempest within her. Mila probed further in, looking for more, looking for the answer that would save her.

There. The key to surviving the night.

Boredom.

Above all things, Jezebel was too powerful for her own good and so bored with it all. She was a woman who had spent a lifetime getting exactly what she wanted without any effort or risk on her part. No one denied her. No one chastised or surprised her. Jezebel might not even know it herself, but Mila's power sensed that she craved the unexpected, the game, the risk.

Mila considered this new information carefully and then trusted her life to the skill of her power, risking it all with her next words.

"I am a demon," she hissed into Jezebel's ear. "Spawn of Mud and worms. I am soulless, evil. I have no morals or qualms. From this distance, I could *easily* kill you, and there's nothing you or your guard could do to stop me." She drew a short breath before delivering the final blow. "But I'd be satisfied tonight with hearing you scream."

She was rewarded instantly by the deep, primal pulse of energy that emanated from within Jezebel's core. When Mila opened her eyes, she

noted the slightly feral excitement peeking out from behind Jezebel's brown eyes.

Emboldened, Mila straightened her shoulders and did exactly what Jezebel's silent energy was begging her to do.

She did not break eye contact when she stepped forward and invaded Jezebel's space. She reached up and grabbed a fistful of the woman's thick hair, roughly forcing her head up, as she moved in lockstep with her, back towards the bed.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mila saw the guard move to protect his princess, but he was stayed by a small flick of Jezebel's hand.

She understood what Mila was doing and was allowing it to happen. For the first time in Jezebel's life, someone was wresting control from her, demanding space and forcing her to yield it, and from the yearning look on her face, Mila knew that, at least for tonight, this was exactly what the princess had been craving.

Hours later, Mila lay listening to the soft, slow breaths that barely punctuated the night. She looked over at Jezebel, who now lay fast asleep beside her atop the terracotta silk sheets, limbs flung out in abandon. Her dark skin caught and held the first silver ripples of the rising moon in a way that made her seem almost more painting than human. She was beautiful, made more so now to Mila by the easy contentment and peace radiating from her.

In fact, Mila registered with sudden surprise, other than the horrible death pulse that emanated from the small jars of Midas's sand, the energy of every being inside the room was peaceful, and this had not been the case for a single moment in the days since Mila had first arrived in Jeralusah. The absence of human stress or fear was as welcome to her as cold water is to a burn.

Unfortunately, her head still throbbed and she was beginning to feel a nauseating ache in her stomach from the continual lack of rubane. She fought to ignore it and, instead, considered her new situation.

She had transitioned from a condemned religious sacrifice to the nearly bald plaything of the God-King's daughter within an extraordinarily short amount of time. She wondered what this would mean for her tomorrow.

Was the evening's submission simply an itch the princess had desperately needed scratched? Would Mila be sent back to Midas when the sun rose? She had no way of knowing but had done her best tonight to use her power in a way she'd never done before and ensure the value of her life in the princess's eyes.

She'd discovered that, with skin contact, her power was far less likely to dilute itself throughout the room, and she could more easily read the princess's energy accurately, tailoring her touch to meet the internal, silent demands of the other woman.

It had worked. And now, for the first time since her capture, Mila felt a glimmer of hope – knowing that her powers could intimately provide Jezebel with an experience that just might be unique and satisfying enough to save her own life.

In a sudden flash of inspiration, Mila let her horns grow again and reached her hand out to gently touch the princess's extended index finger. She sent her power running through that physical bond into the woman, curious to know if she could glean anything else that might be of use. Something that might only be apparent now in this moment of vulnerability, something that was usually hidden within the ever-whirling tempest of Jezebel's conscious mind.

Sleeping Jezebel's main energetic projection was that of peace and contentedness, but Mila pushed her power beneath the surface layer

of Jezebel's psyche and searched through the sea of energies she found there in a way she'd never done before, a way she hadn't quite known was possible.

What was causing the peace? Surely, there was more here than the mere happiness of a pleasurable physical release?

She was surrounded by the colours and textures of Jezebel's inner self, and carefully, not wanting to rouse the woman, she mentally sifted through them until she found one she could put a name to.

Seen. Jezebel had finally felt seen.

Like wriggling backwards out of a foxhole, Mila slowly extracted her power and drew it back into herself, feeling her horns slide back beneath her skin like a sword into a sheath.

How curious that Princess Jezebel could have all the power, control and wealth of the world, and yet the thing that brought her true peace was the experience of someone actually truly seeing her, even if it was only for a glimmer of a moment.

A bubble of hope began to form in Mila as she considered that seeing Jezebel's authentic energy was exactly what her power made her capable of doing. Overuse of rubane may have weakened the control she'd once had over it, but skin-to-skin contact still seemed to be an effective way to hone it. Mila had faith that the control would return if she stayed alive long enough. And if she could just keep Jezebel in a perpetual state of peace and happiness, then perhaps this new situation might be survivable.

Or at the very least, it might allow her to survive long enough to find some way to escape before the season turned.

Overwhelmed by the small wave of relief that accompanied this realisation, Mila allowed herself a long exhale, and then turned her attention towards the guard, who still stood watch. She allowed her horns to grow slightly longer as she sent her power out towards him,

practising her control and certain he wouldn't be able to see them from where he stood.

He had not moved from his post since the halting flick of Jezebel's wrist. As Mila studied him, she wondered what he'd thought of the whole affair. Mila's unruly power flittered from him and began to scan aimlessly around the room, catching the calm of the many plants that hung from the boudoir and the sleeping waves of the birds on the windowsill before it finally found the guard again and settled on him. She felt nothing hostile emanating from him. By all accounts, the guard was currently contributing to the feeling of peace inside the room. The glimpses she could see of his energy were characterised only by professionalism and a small ounce of fatigue. It had evidently been a long day for him too, and he seemed happy it was nearly over.

As if he recognised that her thoughts had now turned to him, or perhaps because he had, indeed, somehow seen her horns grow and suspected himself to be the subject of her analysis, he broke from his position and approached the bed.

"Come," he said quietly when he was close, not wanting to wake Jezebel. "I'll have the maids clothe and feed you and show you to a nearby room you can claim. I suspect the princess will want to have you close by in the morning."

"Thank you," she replied, grateful for the small kindness on a day that had been filled with nothing else but fear and abuse.

She slipped from the bed and tried to follow him but stumbled. The guard's arm found her and wrapped around her middle before she could hit the floor. She gripped him gratefully as she found her feet again.

"Thank you," she murmured, but was too exhausted to read him more deeply. Too exhausted in that moment to contemplate seeking

an opportunity to escape. Too exhausted even to be ashamed of her nakedness in his arms.

Just then, the idea of sleep, in a bed away from this room and this turbulent woman, was as irresistible to her as the shoreline is to a wave. When she saw the plain white sheets of a bed in a spare servant's room before her, she crashed headlong into them without hesitation.

Trial by Cat

On the day Mila had been betrayed, she'd been surprised and hurt, but never seriously concerned that the mob would actually expose her as a demon.

Despite the plethora of theories that abounded, there was only one true test that could correctly identify a demon, and it was unlikely that the villagers who came for her knew it. Some of the false tests were unpleasant, but none of them were dangerous. Most had been invented and spread by ikarei themselves, such as making a small cut to the arm to prove that one's blood ran red, rather than blue. Or plucking a hair from one's head and proving that it was mundane and would not turn into a hell-worm when it hit the ground.

On the day they came for her, she'd been more fearful of the mob's fervour than anything they might subject her to by way of a test. She tried to diffuse their energy with her demure stance and lack of theatrics. She'd learned long ago that, with this particular sect of society, there was no real way to win against them, and the occasional chance to score was only achieved by startling them with unexpected dignity.

“Look at ’er,” she had heard one man jeer, “olding herself like she were some kinda princess. I swear I’ve seen ’er ’orns before. She lies with the worms!”

“Now, now,” a calmer male voice interceded. “All we have is rumours, Brennan. Wait until the test is conducted before tainting her with such a brush.”

Mila detected the reluctant ‘*brrumph*’ behind her and tried to suppress a small smile. She did actually quite like the gentle and industrious worms that determinedly worked magic in her garden beds, but she knew that those were not the worms of the afterlife that the speaker had been referring to. The worms of the Rot.

An icy blade of true fear struck her when she caught a glimpse of the priest waiting for her at the testing area. This wasn’t the first time in her life that she’d been approached by a group of humans demanding proof of her humanity, but this was the first time that group had included a priest, and that was very bad news.

Fully ordained priests were an unusual sight in the rainforest Highlands. Usually, the unrelenting humidity, the difficult terrain, and the isolation of the small villages deterred all but the most determined of acolytes to venture out to mission and spread the Church of Midas.

Acolytes were dangerous to ikarei in the way that an errant spark is dangerous to a fireplace, capable of causing problems, but usually containable. They led weekly Church sermons and tried to enforce the observance of the Heretical Behaviours within their small, allotted villages. They usually travelled too frequently to truly identify someone who did not quite fit into their community.

Priests, on the other hand, were as dangerous as a wildfire in a dry field. Priests did not conduct paltry sermons in backwater towns. They arrived only when requested by an acolyte, and they had the authority to test and condemn demons.

If a priest had come all the way here from Jeralusah for Mila, then she had no doubt that whoever had betrayed her had raised a very compelling case.

Probably Oberon.

She pushed the name away. Speculation wouldn't help her survive what was coming next.

The priest eyed her coolly as she was brought forward, but he said nothing. His firm, handsome face was neutral and calm, and he was dressed well. His grey travel robes had evidently only recently been donned, as they were clean and dry – a rarity for clothes in these parts. A thick, brown leather belt was cinched neatly around his flat stomach, and from this hung his instruments of prayer, along with a tiny, waterproofed leather book that contained the Holy Text of the Heretical Behaviours.

Once Mila had been deposited by the mob into the centre of the rocky circle, the priest turned his back to her and walked to his cart, returning with a black wooden cage swinging gently from his hand. Mila's heart sank as she caught a glimpse of white fur poking out between the wooden slats and she knew at that moment that her time had come.

It was happening. The true test. Trial by Cat.

The priest placed the cage down outside of the circle and went back to his cart again, this time returning with three large, thin, white crystal circles. He entered the circle where Mila stood and laid all three out on the ground, leaving some distance between each of them.

Once he was satisfied with the placement of the circles, he looked at Mila and said, "Choose one to stand upon. Once you have made your decision, do not move. If you fail the test, you will be arrested as a demon, and you will be sacrificed at the upcoming Sacrament of Contrition as a heretic. If you move at all or attempt to disrupt or

injure the cat, then the test will be halted, your guilt as a demon will be assumed, and you will be flogged for committing the Sixth Behaviour prior to your sacrifice. Do you understand?”

Mila’s mind sifted through her recollection of the behaviours and remembered the Sixth, *Disrespecting the Church of Midas*.

She nodded.

“I need to verbally hear you confirm.”

“I under –” she choked on the words with her dry throat and coughed a little to clear it.

The crowd jeered.

“I understand.”

“If you are innocent, I implore you, stand still and this will be over momentarily.”

As he spoke, he relayed no compassion. Mila didn’t waste any energy trying to wring sympathy from him somehow. Instead, she inspected each crystal circle and then chose the second one to stand on, nodding to the priest to indicate that she had chosen and that she would not move.

Once the priest was satisfied with her positioning, he bent forward and lifted the lid to the box. A haughty white feline leapt out joyfully, winding its fluffy tail around the bottom hem of the priest’s robe before moving to the open space where the crystal circles lay.

Just like that, the test had begun.

The priest spoke to the now silent crowd as the cat moved towards the crystal circle on Mila’s left.

“Trial by Cat is simple in its design,” he explained. “Testing Cats are specifically bred for their affectionate nature and are trained to stand upon each of the three white circles. If this woman is not a demon, the cat will wind itself around her legs, meowing and pawing at her for treats or pats. But if she is a demon, it will not even know she is there –

for these cats are pure, selected by the Divine himself, and cannot see those without a soul.”

Mila watched with her heart in her mouth as the animal strode boldly up to the first circle on her left. It sniffed at the edge, hopeful to find a treat. When it found none, it stepped up onto the crystal, turned, sat, and looked back expectantly at the priest, who leaned forward and rewarded him with a small portion of dried jerky.

The crowd politely clapped, and the cat chewed deliberately before proceeding with purpose towards the next white crystal circle – the one Mila was standing on.

Despite the warning she'd been given, she couldn't help but try to shuffle her feet as the cat approached her, to try make any kind of noise to alert the cat to her presence. But it was clear that the Testing Cats were also specifically selected for their deafness, as its tiny ears yielded not the smallest flicker of movement.

However, her actions had not escaped the attention of the priest, who, for the first time since she'd been seized by the villagers, allowed an inch of emotion to cross his young face. It was the look a snake gives a mouse in the moment it decides to eat it.

To her surprise, though, he said nothing. In hindsight, she realised that he'd known in that moment that she was about to be exposed by the cat as a demon, and he had determined that this would be a far richer and more satisfying outcome for both himself and the crowd than simply stopping the test because she'd shuffled her feet.

He was a showman, this priest, and a clever one.

The beautiful, white cat unfaltering sniffed at the edge of Mila's circle for treats, and when it found none again, it attempted to step onto the crystal, making absolutely no effort to avoid walking directly into Mila's left shin.

At the sudden, unexpected contact, the cat shrieked and hissed in fear, its back arching towards the sky, soft tail now angular and tense. It scarpereed back to the priest and leapt into his arms, fearful and unnerved by the invisible brick wall it had struck.

The crowd cheered, the priest's eyes gleamed, and Mila's heart sank. The test's objective had been met.

The Unpleasantness

Jezebel's screech of rage pierced through the otherwise calm morning, and Mila heard the echo, audible despite the thick walls of her suite. A moment later, a burly, buzz-haired guard burst into her room and roughly seized her, dragging her from her bed before she'd even had time to dress. Even if she hadn't still been suffering horrendous pangs from the rubane withdrawals, the manner of her entry back into Jezebel's room would have been painful. The brute all but dragged her up the stairs and tossed her roughly onto the floor, where she landed firmly at the feet of a small crowd of serving staff. They stood huddled together like scared chickens, waiting for a fox's judgement. Mila felt waves of streaming tension flowing from the group, but after she blinked for a moment and orientated herself, she swiftly realised that the tension was not for her.

The guard who had been kind to Mila the previous evening now knelt in the centre of the circle of people. His shirt was ripped, and his bare chest was half visible through the torn linen. His face was downturned, but Mila could still see him bleeding from three long lines

across his cheek. Scratches, she realised, from Jezebel's strike. Despite the hubbub, he seemed calm, and his body remained motionless, but when Mila gently let her horns extend a little, she could feel his fear pulsing out quickly in time with his heartbeat.

"You took it upon yourself?" Jezebel's tone was stiff and cold. "To remove something I own from my possession, without my knowledge?"

Her face was red with rage, but Mila also sensed glee emanating from her. She was clearly relishing this, a welcome opportunity to reinforce her power and ensure that even those closest and most loyal to her knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that they would be punished if they put a foot wrong.

"I believe that's defined as theft, Jahan!" Her voice now became hysterical. "Have you been stealing from me all these years? Removing anything else you saw fit to part from me?"

"No, Highness, never," Jahan replied instantly, contritely.

"Never?" Jezebel lambasted. "Well, you did last night! How am I to believe anything you have to say about the matter? How am I to ever trust you again?"

Jahan had no reply to this, or perhaps realised that a reply was futile. Mila realised with shock that Jezebel was equating his gesture of simple human kindness – a bed and room to herself – as the equivalent of robbery. As though Jahan had removed jewels from the room without asking Jezebel's permission.

Mila felt what little hope had bubbled in her chest the night before dissolve. This woman was truly mad.

"Nothing to say?" Jezebel crowed. "Well, then..." Her tone returned to its earlier calm with chilling swiftness, "The punishment for thievery is usually the loss of a hand." She let that statement linger in the warm morning air for a moment before continuing on. "However,

you've been loyal enough for many years. We've known each other since we were children. That bond does not mean nothing to me. Would you like to keep your hand?"

"Highness..." Jahan's reply was barely audible.

"Louder!" Jezebel demanded.

"Yes, Highness."

"Beg me, Jahan. Beg me for your hand."

Jahan did not hesitate, as though he'd seen enough of Jezebel's punishments over the years to know that she only responded to utter subservience, and for him to hold onto any sense of pride was futile.

"I beg of you, Princess, daughter of the Almighty God-King Midas, powerful, beautiful and magnificent." His voice was low and quiet. Mila heard true contrition laced in every word. "Please, forgive your servant for his transgression. It shall never be repeated. The lessons learned today shall be applied henceforth through every step of any future service I am graced to bestow upon your person. I remain your most devoted servant. Please, allow me to keep my hand."

Jezebel let the silence fester for a long moment, then spoke. "I will be gracious this time." She paused and considered her next words. "You may keep your hand, and you may even remain in my retinue as one of my guards, although you will no longer be permitted to be my Guard of the Body."

His shoulders did not relax an inch at the sentence, as though he knew this outcome was too good to be true and was waiting for the true blow to fall.

He was not wrong.

Jezebel luxuriated in the tension before continuing in a somewhat lecturing tone. "I suspect this transgression was influenced, not through a sincere desire to steal for me, but by what you took to be a situation where a pretty, young woman needed care. You are wrong.

You forgot for a moment, I suspect, that she is a demon. She has committed the First Heretical Behaviour. A reminder to all,” she raised her voice and cast her gaze about the audience, “this means she *sold her soul to obtain demonic powers*. She is a heretic. She is a living evil, and treating her as anything other than that sets a dangerous precedent on how to treat her while she remains in my service.” She turned her attention directly back to Jahan. “Her unsuspecting appearance and meek demeanour fooled you into believing she is one of us. She is not.”

Jezebel let that statement simmer, marinating in the attention of her captive audience. “Now that I’ve schooled you on one of the behaviours, it’s your turn. Remind me, Jahan, what is the Sixth Heretical Behaviour?”

Jahan did not hesitate, as though he’d been born reciting the Holy Text. “The Sixth Heretical Behaviour is any display of disrespect towards the Church of Midas.”

“And would you concede that your lapse of judgement about the demon straddles that line of heresy? Flirts with it, perhaps?”

Jahan remained silent. Everyone in the room knew what Jezebel was doing. The Sixth Heretical Behaviour was a famous catch-all for any sin. Anything could be considered an act of disrespect towards the Church in the right context.

“Let your eyes never deceive you again,” Jezebel announced finally. “And you will lose one of them for this transgression.”

The shock of this judgement landed on Mila like a blow to the face. She imagined that a braver, more fearless version of herself would have stepped forward to argue against the monstrous punishment. To defend the man’s actions. To roar in Jezebel’s face that, demon or not, she was a living being and that the guard had been the only example of human decency she’d experienced since she’d arrived at the Holy City.

But she did not. To her great shame, she found that she could do nothing but watch.

Jezebel narrowed her eyes at Jahan in disdain, and two other guards stepped forward to escort the proud, trembling man away to receive his punishment.

Later, Mila tried to tell herself that she'd done nothing because she could sense the futility of any rebellion in that moment, but the darker and more cowardly truth was that she had simply been too frightened. Scared bone deep.

Whatever understanding she had hoped to foster between herself and Jezebel was shattered. The woman viewed Mila as property, nothing more, and had ordered the blinding of a kind man who, by all accounts, was a childhood companion, simply because he'd dared to treat Mila otherwise. It was the most evil act she'd ever beheld.

When Jahan disappeared from the doorway, Jezebel turned to Mila with a sickly, sweet smile, and the fear cemented deeper.

"And now that this unpleasantness has been dealt with, I'm ready for a repeat performance of last night's efforts. Come." She clicked her fingers, and Mila somehow found the strength to take a step forward, knowing that if she had any chance of surviving another few minutes here, there could be no shadow of doubt that she was anything but an obedient slave.

And, she told herself, she would keep up this pretence for however long it took for her to figure out a way to escape.

The Dress and the Collar

It was only a little later that morning when Jezebel and two guards escorted Mila into a carriage outside. Once in, they left the high, black walls of the palace and went into the whitewashed city of Jerusalem. The city was remarkably clean, but felt uncomfortably so, in the way a child's room is clean after they hurriedly sweep their toys under the bed. The streets were pristine, with evidence of the daily morning rinsing now rising from the cobblestones in a glistening mist, but many windows remained shuttered, and for a city in the peak of its midmorning bustle, it seemed awfully quiet.

The few people moving about on the streets were striding with purpose, not dallying to mingle in the new sweet, spring sunshine. They bowed respectfully when Jezebel's carriage passed, but averted their eyes, and collectively, their energy seemed to exude frustration with the interruption, rather than excitement at seeing their princess.

Mila surmised that Jezebel must venture out often, and her presence was probably more of an inconvenience for the city folk than a novelty.

When they stopped out in front of a seamstress's shop, Jezebel gestured to the guards to haul Mila out of the carriage, saying nothing by way of explanation until they met the demure, young seamstress. The plump woman would not look directly at Jezebel, and visibly shrank back from Mila when she saw her horns.

Jezebel delighted in her reaction. "Yes. Now capture whatever it is you are feeling in a dress, Lorelai. I want all who see her to revile, desire, pity and fear her, in a single moment. And, most of all, I want them to know that I own her."

"Of course," the trembling woman said quickly, but Mila also felt her energy rise at the idea of the interesting challenge. There must be a reason that this seamstress was Jezebel's one of choice.

* * *

It was late into the afternoon when the outfit was finally finished. Lorelai had long overcome her fear and aversion of Mila. She now looked over the new attire she'd created with pride.

Mila was exhausted. She hadn't eaten in nearly three days, and the symptoms from the rubane withdrawals were now hitting her like a flu, causing her to tremble and ache as she'd stood for hours under Lorelai's administrations. Jezebel either hadn't noticed or didn't care.

"It's perfect!" She clapped as Lorelai stepped back for the final time. The princess had supervised the entire project from a deep green ottoman in the corner, barking out suggestions and corrections as Lorelai worked.

"And her hair?" the seamstress asked, inspecting Mila with a critical eye. "Are you happy with how it is, or do you wish it styled somehow?"

"Leave it," Jezebel replied. "It's not important to me that she's pretty. It's important that she makes an impact."

The outfit achieved exactly that.

In the mirror, Mila could see that the floor-length, sweeping black dress was designed to appear unfinished in parts, making it difficult to tell if she was wearing something magnificent or tattered rags. For the bodice, she'd been stuffed into a corset that laced up the front rather than the back. The crisscrossed lace tie had been deliberately left loose enough so that Mila's skin was exposed all the way from the top of her breastbone to the top of her pubic bone. If she'd had more of a bust, it would have been utterly scandalous. From her hips downward, the fabric of the dress was a mix of black layers and green velvet strands that had been clipped and hung in awkward places to look like strands of algae and riverweed. This, together with her short, brutally cut hair stabbing out awkwardly from her head made her unrecognisable. She truly looked like a creature that had crawled out of a swamp, a demon of the Muds.

Terrifying and seductive all at once.

Thankfully, she'd been permitted to keep the small gold hoops in her ears and nose. She stared hungrily at these in her reflection, trying to use the familiarity of them to find her old self.

Home, they reminded her, and for a moment she was enveloped by a crushing wave of sadness and despair. *Would she ever see it again? Did Cari know what had happened to her? Was it Cari who had betrayed her?*

Summoning her inner strength, she shoved the thought away. Letting that pain in would not help keep her alive today. She needed to focus. The small brown eyes that stared back from her reflection were hollow and pinched with stress and fatigue but remained determined.

There came a knock on the seamstress's door and another guard entered. He walked straight to Jezebel and presented her with some-

thing Mila could not see, but she clearly felt the princess's second-hand delight.

Jezebel turned to Mila and held out the item. It was a golden collar and matching lead.

Mila shrank back from them in horror as Jezebel approached. The guard was anticipating this and moved to block the exit.

Mila could do nothing but clench her eyes shut in misery as Jezebel leaned forward and clasped the golden collar tight around Mila's neck, clipping it together and locking it securely.

"Made from the melted gold of all those who've failed me," Jezebel whispered in Mila's ear.

As she drew back, Mila shuddered in horror but filled with morbid curiosity, she turned back towards the mirror. Unwilling to look, but unable not to.

The golden collar stood out brightly against her tanned skin and her dark new apparel. The long lead held in Jezebel's tight grip seemed to twinkle in the candlelight. The energy of the thing was like a perpetual death knell. Sheer sadness and pain made into an object that was now latched permanently to Mila's throat. Her knees trembled under its force.

"How do you like it?" Jezebel asked.

"I'm in agony," Mila croaked back, tears in her eyes.

"Good."

When they left the seamstress's townhouse, Jezebel surveyed Mila's new attire and expression of anguish with pleasure. She clutched the lead tightly, as though feeling even more possessive now that her new pet looked so fine. It occurred to Mila then that, with this lead now around her neck, the likelihood of her slipping away in the night and escaping had all but vanished. This thought made her chest ache, and she was nearly overcome by the impulse to burst into sobs and throw

herself into the path of one of the many oncoming carriages rumbling up and down the busy street.

Her soul couldn't bear this.

As if she knew her thoughts, Jezebel smiled as she stepped into the carriage, yanking on the lead as she did which caused Mila to stumble up the steps behind her.

When they were seated, Jezebel let out a sigh of pleasure and knocked on the roof of the cabin to signal to the driver that they were ready to return.

"What a fabulous day," she said out loud to herself. "I don't know why I didn't think of doing this earlier. I'm having so much fun. Oh! And we'll definitely be taking a trip to Lady Picory's house soon," she said. "Show that arrogant woman that she's not half as interesting as she thinks she is."

While the thought of being paraded around in this attire by Jezebel made Mila feel even more physically ill, knowing that she would be out of the palace again tomorrow shook her a little out of her depressed stupor.

It's just a lead, she silently reminded herself. It's not a cage. All Jezebel has to do is put it down and leave me unattended in a room for one minute. Perhaps even within reach of a dinner knife. That's all I would need.

That tiny adjustment of perspective provided just enough hope. Mila felt the cloud of despair recede slightly, and it became a little easier to breathe again.

The sun was starting to set as the carriage returned them to the palace. As they entered the thick, black cast-iron gates, Mila made an effort to stare out the window and learn as much about her surroundings as possible. It was hard not to be distracted by the sheer beauty of it all. As the carriage trundled past the many grand buildings that

lay within the palace estate, Mila took in the sight of hundreds of gold lanterns that paired beautifully with the deep orange glow of the dusk sky. Together, they lit the road up brilliantly and heralded the way to the Grand Cathedral, which now lay immediately before the carriage. Its four, tall sandstone spires and enormous stained-glass windows made it impossible to miss. It had powerful lights shining at its base, which illuminated it right up to the top of its tips of gold. Mila found herself thinking that, if she didn't hate the structure so much, it would have taken her breath away.

Around it, Mila could see a few smaller, but equally breathtaking buildings. She wished she knew what each one was used for or who lived in them, but Jezebel did not offer an explanation, nor did she seem inclined to even acknowledge Mila's curious stares. The only noise Mila heard in the carriage now was the omnipresent cicada symphony from outside that had commenced the moment the sun dipped below the high black walls.

The carriage continued to rumble quickly along the cobbled road, moving away from the buildings and now through a small forest of fruit trees, decorative gardens, and occasionally passing a beautiful sculpture or fountain. Once, it passed over a bridge made entirely of stone and glass. The water in the hand-cut stream below was illuminated by glowing stones, and the blue light shining back up through the glass bridge floor was one of the most spectacular things Mila had ever seen. She wondered how many commoners had ever been allowed to see any of this.

The palace was separated from the rest of the city of Jeralusah by a round, slick, towering wall of obsidian. Guard posts manned by jesu were dotted along the wall at even intervals. The palace was simultaneously a place of worship, a home to the elite, and a fortress.

Finally, just as true night fell, they arrived at Jezebel's private apartments, which sat on the western boundary of the property.

Dinner was waiting for the princess when they arrived, and she did not hesitate, descending on the plate with a hearty appetite after issuing a brisk order to Mila to sit on a cushion by her feet.

Despite the large table, Jezebel ate alone. Mila assumed that Midas must have a similar living arrangement on the other side of the property. She wondered for the first time what their relationship was like. Did Midas ever join his daughter for meals? Did Jezebel ever invite him?

She also wondered, with increasing urgency, if she would be fed at all.

Jezebel also seemed to be considering this exact question, eyeing Mila at her feet with great pleasure as she sucked the rich skin off a chicken bone.

"It's been a big day for you today. You must be hungry."

Mila hadn't risked saying much all day, but at this point, silence seemed the wrong choice.

"Yes, mistress," she said softly, bowing her head in the picture of submission. Internally, she frantically scanned the princess with her power for any inclination of what she might expect next.

It didn't help. Now, satiated with food, the energy radiating from Jezebel was a thick, toxic mix of callous boredom and arousal.

"Well, if you're hungry –" the princess spread her legs, leaned back and raised an eyebrow.

Mila complied.

Meeting Midas

With all the controversy, curiosity must have got the better of the God-King. Word soon arrived at Jezebel's apartments that Midas was demanding an inspection of the demon who had been plucked from his Sacrament of Contrition in a manner so outraging to his High Priest.

Mila had been expecting this, and she tried to mentally prepare herself to be calm and poised for the presentation, but when the day came, even Jezebel had woken differently. Mila had sensed a heightened level of stress emanating from the woman, which could not be assuaged with sex. Even the princess was afraid of her father, and that morning, she was nursing a sliver of doubt about what he would make of her reckless decision to keep Mila as her pet.

When they entered the main hall of the God-King's Grand Cathedral, Mila's breath was swept from her body by the sight of it and its accompanying rush of death energy.

The vast expanse of space was lined with glass columns on either side that formed a wide aisle. Each of them was at least ten metres

high, about a metre in diameter, and filled to the brim with the heavy sand made of pure gold particles. Particles that had once been living creatures.

Mila's mind struggled to grasp the enormity of the graveyard she was walking through. She knew that when Midas had first appeared from the sea and announced himself to the nation of Artor, he'd been challenged by humans and demons alike, and eventually, there had been a war. She'd also been taught that Midas had stood as one man, one God, alone against an entire Artorian battalion. In an enormous display of his strength and power, he'd proceeded to individually disintegrate every single arrow, net, horse, stone, sword and eventually soldier, as they'd come at him, turning them all into an insignificant pile of Golden Sand. She'd always assumed that the tale had been exaggerated. Now that she saw the amount of sand that made up the wide, glass columns that lined the Grand Cathedral, she wasn't so sure.

Regardless of whether the story was a parable or not, it remained undeniable that none could walk in this hall without being reminded of Midas's enormous power, and his unquenchable demand for Artor's subjugation. In fact, the very order was inscribed into the northern-facing wall of the cathedral as an eternal reminder.

“Provide ten sacrifices to me, by the end of the season, every season, as demonstration of your contrition. Or I will destroy you and all you hold dear.”

It was a mammoth effort to retain her impassive mask as she shadowed the princess through the hall. The High Priest Abbott was also present, his heeled boots echoing in the hall as he walked one step behind Mila, her noisy, scowling shadow.

It was a relief when they finally arrived at the far end of the hall and she was permitted to kneel and drop her head to the floor. A blessing

that she no longer had to look at the pillars of death or feel Abbott's gaze upon her back.

"Well, daughter?" The God-King's voice was deep and rich, reverberating through Mila despite her distance from the high-backed throne.

Filled with both fear and curiosity, she risked a tiny peek up at him. He'd been anticipating it and, to her horror, met her gaze with his own, one full of white fire.

She ducked her head again swiftly, inwardly cursing her reckless gesture. It had, however, given her a tiny snippet of context for what was about to befall her.

Midas was enormous, taller than the largest man Mila had ever seen. He was not especially handsome or youthful, and his face was dominated by huge, hawkish, dark eyebrows that were narrowed in a perpetual sneer. His nose was crooked and angular, as though it had been broken in his youth – but were gods ever really young, and who would have ever struck one?

The questions sprung unwillingly into Mila's mind, but she had no time to dwell on them. Midas awaited her.

His tanned skin ran deep, with lines that sat entrenched through the middle hollow of his cheeks, nearly down to his chin. Despite his weathered face, his body was in impeccable condition. He sat shirtless, save for a gold shoulder panel, which hugged his thick neck and shallowly covered both shoulders. Aside from this and a belted warrior skirt, he was naked. His huge, corded arms and wide expanse of chest were on display for all to see, meticulously presented as if sculpted from stone. Except for his hands, of course, she corrected her assessment. Today, as always, he wore his protective, sacred, red gloves. The only items in the world that did not disintegrate at his touch.

“I hear you robbed me of a sacrifice this season.” He continued to address Jezebel. “Abbott is most distressed.”

He himself didn’t sound too distressed. Curious, perhaps. Maybe even slightly amused at his daughter’s antics and his High Priest’s response, but he was also clearly expecting an explanation.

“Father.” Jezebel performed a deep bow. “It is merely a small delay. She will be sacrificed at the next Sacrament. I am merely indulging myself...temporarily.”

“I see.”

There was a long pause, and when Jezebel realised that neither his approval nor disapproval was incoming, she pressed on. “Mila’s unique demon power, combined with her desire to avoid death, is keeping me entertained, and you know how much I have struggled with boredom, Father.”

“Oh?” the God-King rumbled, his interest piqued. “And what is her power?”

“She can sense the energy of living things.”

There was another long pause, then, “Bring her to me.”

Mila heard Jezebel huff in surprise. This demand was apparently completely unexpected, and Jezebel was hesitating, fearing that Midas would use the moment to destroy Mila before Jezebel was finished with her.

Mila felt the petulant energy flow from Jezebel as she considered disobeying for half a second, before she finally submitted and pulled Mila forward by the neck, placing the lead in the God-King’s gloved hand.

Now that she was this close to him, Mila began to tremble in earnest. She’d been around demons with strong powers before, but Midas was a god and he could kill with an effortless touch.

No demon had powers like that. As a rule, demon powers, whilst all different, couldn't transform the world around them, and certainly couldn't kill. They were as harmless to others as the whispers of ants were to a sleeping lion.

Mila was so close to him that she could smell him. A scented oil covered his skin and accentuated the harsh lines of his muscles. Its smoky, plum smell made her feel nauseous. Three white, fluffy cats wound around his feet, oblivious to Mila's closeness. She felt a pressure beneath her chin as Midas gripped her with his red-gloved hand and forced her face up, so that her eyes looked directly into his.

"Well, demon?" Menace and the promise of death laced through every word. "What is my energy?" he growled.

Mila was frozen. She tried to read him, but her powers seemed numbed and muted. Despite her pride, she began to cry with fear. She was so frightened, terrified that he would whip off his glove and disintegrate her within the next second.

"I do not know," she choked out. "I cannot sense you."

And it was the truth. She felt nothing at his touch, as though he were invisible to her power.

He considered her answer for half a second and then spoke. "That is because I am not a living thing," he said softly, releasing her face so abruptly that she fell back a step. "*I am immortal!*" he roared to no one and everyone, but most especially himself.

"Praise be," Jezebel intoned, fully cowed now, showing no ounce of defiance.

"Praise be," the High Priest Abbott repeated dutifully.

"I am not entirely opposed to the idea of demon pets entertaining my aristocracy before their sacrifice," Midas said, appearing mollified by their subjugation. "Especially if it amuses you, daughter."

Jezebel blinked. It was clear she hadn't been expecting the conversation to take this turn, and Mila knew she certainly had no plans to share the outrage and attention she was receiving with others in her circle.

"Your Eminence," the High Priest Abbott spoke for the first time. His voice was flat with barely masked outrage.

Of all the priests who served Midas, Abbott was the one known by name throughout Artor. Even Mila knew of his reputation, despite the self-imposed isolation of her previous life. She'd heard a number of disturbing stories about his devotion. How, in his youth, he'd once reportedly lit his own feet on fire to demonstrate the strength of his conviction. These stories were not only good for bards to regale to sweaty listeners in the airy drinking gardens of the Highlands, but they were extremely effective when it came to exporting and enforcing the rule of the Church across the vast nation in rapid form. Despite the fact Abbott was now an old, thin man who lived off self-flagellation and gratuitous displays of routine starvation, the reputation stalked him like a shadow.

"I warn," Abbott continued, "that to allow the perpetration of such an anomaly within the very walls of your palace may lead to your subjects being tempted into sacrilegious...attachments to these creatures." He turned to Jezebel and his gnarled voice turned sermon-esque. "Never forget, Highness, that while they may present to us like humans, it is not their true form. They are fallen. They are humans who have sold their souls to obtain the slightest whiff of power. I wonder if you'd enjoy the close proximity of such a creature if you could see its true form – a black and shapeless form of energy. A being who has deep capacity and unrelenting desire for deception and destruction. A demon's earthly power may have some uses and bring small pleasures and conveniences, but they are to be viewed as nothing

more than a sinful temptation. They are, at their core, rotten beings –
”

Jezebel was nodding in fervent agreement with him, but to Mila’s surprise, Midas chose to interrupt, seemingly annoyed that the priest had chosen this moment to rant and dampen a rare moment of his daughter’s enjoyment.

“I remind you, High Priest, that there is no hierarchy among the behaviours. The First is equally as toxic and corrosive as the Eight, no more, no less. It would do well for the humans in Artor to remember that. Especially as the demon population begins to dwindle but my need for the Sacrament of Contrition remains ever present.”

“Your Eminence,” Abbott conceded immediately, scraping his forehead to the floor. Mila resisted the urge to read his energy, trying to keep her focus purely on Jezebel. But she was very curious to know what he truly felt about the rebuke, even as he said, “It shall be the subject of this week’s sermon. A timely reminder.”

Jezebel looked jubilant, and Mila felt from her the flow of great satisfaction, reassured that her actions straddled the border of theologically acceptable.

Interesting, Mila observed, *this dynamic between Jezebel and the High Priest*. But even more interesting was another little tidbit Mila had learned during the exchange. She’d never known that the God-King viewed all Eight Heretical Behaviours as equally unforgivable. How curious to learn that the Second, ‘public displays of joy or group celebrations’, was as worthy of the same punishment as the First, ‘selling one’s soul to obtain demon powers’.

Mila studied the hard face of the High Priest Abbott carefully and realised then that the nation-wide persecution of ikarei was almost entirely a construct of the Church alone.

Midas might demand sacrifices, but Abbott was the one, through his sermons and lessons and preaching, who had caused the Church to turn the people of Artor so specifically against them.

Why? she wondered, and tentatively reached her power out to read him, but all it took was a yank from Jezebel's hand upon the lead to bring her power back where it was most required. No time to pull the thread on that mystery, at least, not while she had this abominable Princess to entertain.

She dutifully followed the princess as they left the priest and the God-King behind them in the Grand Cathedral.

As they departed, Mila observed with interest that Jezebel could not keep the smirk from her face, and her energy was still exuberant, as if scoring such a victory over the High Priest was something she'd long desired.

Lady Picory's Party

Navigating Jezebel's ever fluctuating emotional state to earn herself food became Mila's sole purpose as the days passed. In the evenings, she would lie awake long after Jezebel had fallen asleep, and try distract herself from the pain of her stomach eating itself by pondering the mystery of Abbott's deliberate persecution of her kind.

Was he simply scared of ikarei? Or was something more sinister at play?

There were no answers readily available, and Mila's opportunities to read the High Priest were limited. Jezebel hated him and avoided him whenever she could, choosing instead to socialise outside the palace wherever possible.

One such morning, Jezebel announced with glee that they would be visiting Picory Manor. Mila could barely rouse herself to be curious about the destination. She could not tell if it was the horrid leash's aura, the starvation, or the rubane withdrawals causing her to feel lightheaded. Probably a combination of all three.

Breakfast had not been offered.

Conversely, Jezebel's mood could not have been more bright. Mila sensed great excitement and anticipation radiating from her as they drew closer to the manor, and she wondered what exactly the princess had in store for her that day and who they'd be meeting.

"Eliza Picory," Jezebel said, as though answering Mila's unspoken question. "She and Meredith, who you'll also meet at some point, are part of the new nobility." She saw Mila's questioning gaze and rolled her eyes. "God, you are truly a heathen, aren't you? The new nobility is what we call the wives whose husbands were among the first to lay down their weapons and swear obedience to my father. They were richly rewarded for their loyalty and now all own titles and manors in the land that lies within a day's carriage ride around Jeralusah. You'll need to understand all of this if you're to be of proper use to me, demon."

"Yes, mistress," Mila agreed with a fervent nod and silently noted the manor they approached with awe. If this was the type of reward available for recognising Midas's ascension as God-King, then it was little surprise that the war had been short-lived.

Especially when the opposing option had been death.

The carriage came to a halt at the large wooden doors of the manor, and Jezebel accepted a footman's hand as she descended. She pulled Mila behind her and did not pause even for a moment to allow her to gain her footing on the small step. Only her agility from a lifetime living amongst trees saved Mila from a painful fall onto the sharp gravelled courtyard.

The doors to the manor opened slowly, and Mila followed Jezebel inside to the greeting room, where they were made to wait a surprisingly long time before their host appeared. Finally, the door pushed open, and a tall woman with curly brown hair and a dancer's gait

waltzed in. Mila's power was drawn to her involuntarily and she wrestled with it, trying to draw it back onto Jezebel.

"Princess! Welcome. I wasn't expecting you to grace us with your presence today."

Lady Eliza Picory's welcome seemed so sincere and warm that Mila was surprised to feel the undertone of resentment and dislike directed towards the princess. The look of horror she cast in Mila's direction, however, was entirely undisguised, and Jezebel laughed loudly when she saw it.

"I had to show you my newest pet, Eliza. A *demon*. I know," she said gleefully to the shocked silence. "Now come, let us go to the sitting room, and I'll show you how she can entertain you too."

For a horrifying moment, Mila wondered if Jezebel really intended to share her around for the sexual gratification of her social circle, but that thought was interrupted when she felt Lady Picory's own sharp waves of energetic discomfort at the idea.

The woman was a master actor, and without Mila's powers, she wouldn't have noticed the flood of concern that suddenly enveloped Lady Picory at Jezebel's suggestion. But she continued to smile broadly as she said, "Fabulous. Now I'll just warn you that there are already a few of the girls upstairs. I do hope it's alright to show her off to a few others as well?"

"Of course!" Jezebel was delighted by the idea of a larger audience.

However, once they ascended the grand golden staircase and pushed open the double barrel doors to the sitting room, the abrupt silence that met them on their arrival made it quickly apparent that Lady Picory had understated the social event she was hosting. She had, in fact, been throwing quite the party, one that had almost certainly included dancing, joy and celebration. A truly heretical, secret gathering of elites.

And it was clear that Jezebel had absolutely *not* been invited.

Mila wasn't sure if the absence of the invitation had been because Jezebel was the daughter of the God-King, or simply because she wasn't liked, but either way, the snub was obvious. She could feel Jezebel's outrage and humiliation sizzling from her as the princess found herself standing in the centre of a silent room, filled with people who didn't want her there.

Mila paused behind Jezebel, using the woman as a shield against the size of the crowd, but their energies came barrelling towards her anyway. She shrank her horns reflexively to minimise the impact, but the action just drew attention to them and made things worse. A number of distressed gasps emitted from those who had witnessed it.

Fear, horror, curiosity.

She was unsure which of those energies were directed at her and which at Jezebel, but either way, it didn't matter. They hit her all at once, bombarding and overwhelming her senses, forcing her to physically gasp for air to steady herself. She fought for control of her power, and finally, with great effort, she managed to draw it mostly back into herself, blocking out the frenzied energies of the fifty or so people in the room and leaving just a small beam that linked her to Jezebel alone.

Jezebel's energy was mixed. Her humiliation and outrage had dulled as she comprehended what she'd interrupted and was steadily being replaced by anger and pride. She was determined not to let the occupants of the room know that she was upset. Showing indifference was the only way she could save face in this situation, something Lady Picory understood perfectly. She tried to help, breaking the uncomfortable silence with a carefully worded explanation.

"Apologies, Princess. I believed you to be quite busy with our Holy God-King following the Sacrament of Contrition and expected that

you wouldn't want to be bothered by such a small gathering. It's really been nothing more than just an...embarrassing demonstration of gross opulence."

There was a titter of nervous laughter from the other women and men in the room.

Jezebel gave a close-lipped smile in response. "Yes, you're right. I have been busy. In fact, I barely have time to grace you all with my presence today. But I was passing through and thought I might pop by and show you all my new conquest. My demon pet."

She stepped aside, fully exposing Mila in her new, horrifying garb, for all the party to gawk at.

"A *demon*?!"

"I *knew* I saw horns."

"How has this been permitted?"

It seemed an age passed before the room had their fill of staring, and Jezebel was more than happy to stand in silence and stare them all down until they did. Finally, the tension lifted, and general chatter slowly resumed.

Jezebel accepted a drink from Lady Picory and allowed herself to be escorted to a magnificent chair next to one of the far windows. There sat eight or so women. Jezebel's friends, Mila assumed, or at least, women she expected to indulge her.

Once Jezebel was seated amongst them, she ordered a server to bring over a bowl and some bread. She was swiftly obeyed.

When the items arrived, the princess placed them on the floor at Mila's feet and gestured to them. "Eat."

Hungry but wary, Mila knelt slowly and leaned towards the bowl.

When the tips of her fingers touched the rim, Jezebel rapped out a sharp, "No! No hands. From the floor will suit you just fine."

It was humiliating, but Mila was starving, and in this situation, pride was a dead currency. Food was food.

So, she knelt and ate the bread with her mouth alone, like a puppy by its master's feet.

"Her power," Jezebel's voice sounded from above her, "is the ability to sense your energy."

"That's the power she chose?" The woman who spoke had a lilt of a laugh to her voice. "Ahh. I'm sorry, Princess. I can't help but laugh when I hear of the powers demons accept in exchange for their souls. They could not be more useless, more ridiculous."

"Well, that's half the evil of Viah on display there, isn't it? Entrapping children in their dreams with the promise of great powers," someone else said.

"Entrapping the weak," Jezebel corrected. "Remember, we're all subjected to Viah's temptation in our sleep as children. We –" she gestured to the group around her, "– were among those devout enough to resist."

Mila felt an air of superiority settling over the group.

The woman who'd mocked Mila's power sat with a white cat nestled sleepily in her lap. She reminded Mila vaguely of a peacock: tall, and slim enough that her clavicle was all but poking free of her skin. She was older than all the other women by at least two decades, and wore a shimmering, ocean-green dress, her gold hair piled high in an updo, which pulled the skin on her forehead taut.

"She certainly has an...earthy quality to her," she said.

The observation was a barbed critique, especially considering how much effort Jezebel had put into dressing Mila in a manner that could be described as anything but "earthy".

Jezebel let the comment roll off her as she reclined further into the chair and gestured to a maid holding an enormous, feathered fan to commence cooling her.

“Judge her all you like, Meredith.” She turned to the wider group. “You’ll all come to hate her soon enough.” She could barely conceal her delight. “My demon can sense your energy,” she repeated. “And for those of you too thick to figure out what that means yet, it means that anything you once thought to hold secret from me will be secret no longer.”

Mila didn’t know who tried to hide their horror more, her or the ladies of the room. Jezebel ploughed on, totally aware and completely delighted by the reaction to this information.

“Demon,” she ordered, “read Eliza’s energy.”

She evidently had not forgiven the host for not inviting her to the party.

Obediently, Mila turned to face Lady Picory and reached her hand out towards her, to help direct her unpredictable power. The wall of hostile energy radiating from the woman hit Mila like a charging horse.

“She would kill me if she had the chance,” Mila responded honestly, trying to appear bland and disinterested in this news. Jezebel was dangerous, but she also did not want a woman like Eliza Picory as an enemy.

“Don’t appreciate my little reader, Eliza?” Jezebel laughed again. “I wonder what you think you have to hide from me.”

“I hide nothing, Princess,” the woman harrumphed. “She is a demon. I merely believe she should have been sacrificed with the rest for both her sin and for our nation’s repentance. The world would be a safer place without her kind.”

“As would we all from your ambitions.” Jezebel sneered, and Lady Picory pursed her lips.

Mila tried to draw her power away from Lady Picory and return her attention to the bread that still lay before her. Her power did not obey. It flew from her weak mental grasp and scattered throughout the room again, reading everything in the vicinity, overwhelming and meaningless to her in its sheer volume: *lust, anger, hunger, delight, human, human, mouse in the wall, plants hanging from the ceiling, thirsty, anxious, human, human, ikarei, human, human –*

Mila sat bolt upright.

Ikarei energy? There was another ikarei in here somewhere?

Forgetting the bread entirely, Mila wrestled for control of her power, trying to scan the room more deliberately, wishing that she could hone it more accurately and with less effort.

It was useless.

There was another ikarei in here somewhere. She knew it, but maddeningly, she simply wasn't powerful enough to identify who it was. Not without touching each and every person in the room, and that was never going to happen.

It was beyond frustrating.

With resignation, she allowed herself to be distracted from this startling discovery by the new topic being discussed by the ladies.

"There must be something done about them. Their voices grow stronger in Traders Bay every week, and soon it will spread, as these things always seem to do."

"It's straight up blasphemy, it is. Who do they think they are to know better than the Church?"

"I know better than the Church," Jezebel chimed in haughtily.

That caused a slight hiccup in the flow of conversation, but the woman named Meredith smoothed it over swiftly. "Of course you do, Highness. You're half Divine. But these dissidents... Where do they even come from? Who are *they*? It's sheer arrogance."

“It’s a phase,” another woman huffed dismissively, wanting to return to gossip rather than politics.

“It’s a threat,” Meredith corrected. “I’m telling you, Cedrik gets multiple reports these days of small crowds gathering to hear them speak.”

“Speak about what, exactly?”

“I dare not repeat specifics here,” Meredith wisely said. “Safe to say, it’s critical of the Church. Especially the High Priest.”

Mila was surprised to see Jezebel snort at that. “Is that it? Well, take it from me, the High Priest could do with a little critiquing now and again. Hardly worth troubling our afternoon over, Meredith. Now, who is next for my demon’s scrutiny?”

As the conversation around her continued, it quickly became evident that, while the princess was enjoying the scandal she’d created by bringing a demon into the room, there were more people than just Lady Eliza Picory who could not reconcile her actions with their beliefs. Mila’s presence caused an undercurrent of tension to Jezebel’s social circle in a way that the princess had not expected, nor did she understand.

Mila, however, understood it perfectly.

When Mila had been a human child, she’d been counted amongst the most devout. Living in a hardworking town in the region of Prious, she’d dutifully gone to Church with her family, and she’d obeyed Church law with fervour and excitement. She loved being recognised and praised by her community as “such a good girl”. It had all been so easy to do, and the alternative was so frightening that she couldn’t imagine living or being any other way.

Even though she’d been young, she still remembered the way the priest had described, in excruciating detail, the Rotting Muds of the afterlife that awaited all nonbelievers and heretics. Fear of that fate had

been paralysing, and the mental image of a place where Viah, the great Worm of Death, stewed in the filth of the Rot, devouring the souls of the fallen, frequently gave her nightmares.

That fear had been reinforced weekly, through a variety of mechanisms. She remembered for years of her youth, she'd been separated from her parents every Worship Day. While the adults had attended lessons run by the priest, the children played with toys in a back room under supervision of an acolyte. The toys available to her were figurines of Midas, the jesu, and a warped, horrendous-looking creature that Mila was told was a demon. The only acceptable game to play was the one where the demons were vanquished.

She also remembered story time, where one of the attending acolytes read fables to the gathered children. Fables that centred around the story of Viah, the devil who dwelt on his throne of grot and bile, and plotted ways to tempt young humans while they slept, to convince them to sell him their souls.

The message was always clear: *be prepared, strengthen your mind and resolve against this threat now, for when he comes for you in your sleep, the strong will prevail and the weak will fall.*

As she'd grown a little older, she'd been permitted to attend the sermons with the adults, and she'd witnessed firsthand the way these teachings had crippled meaningful connections outside of close-knit family groups. Her parents were forever mistrustful and wary of those who seemingly had reason to be happy, always whispering that the neighbour who'd recently given birth, or become betrothed, must be secretly dancing and feasting in their homes. They were also unable to show hospitality or compassion for any outside their tiny, exclusive selection of trusted friends. Mila distinctly remembered her father turning away an old travelling woman during a truly ferocious storm,

out of fear that he may unknowingly harbour a heretic inside his house.

This was the key issue that Jezebel's circle had with her decision.

The enforcement of the Heretical Behaviours had waged a quiet war on the centuries of culture and tradition that had existed within the many diverse regions of Artor. There were many older folk still alive to whom the 'Dark Ages' were more than a cautionary tale, but a life they remembered and enjoyed.

So, to them, their princess's apparent disregard of the punishment given to heretics was a slap in the face to the sacrifices they'd made to ensure they were following Church law.

On the other hand, Jezebel was Midas's daughter. She was guaranteed a place in Aluah, the heavenly afterlife, regardless of her actions, and as such, she would never truly experience the questioning, the betraying insecurity that almost all others felt about the fate of their immortal soul at one point or another in their life.

Mila remembered clearly the dawning horror she'd felt on that morning fourteen years ago when she'd awoken with horns poking a few inches through her hairline. She had no recollection of the dream where she'd agreed to a devilish pact with Viah, but the horns were evidence that it had happened and that she'd failed the test. Somehow, despite her years of devotion, she had been tempted and tricked, and for reasons she could not discern, her sleeping mind had agreed to become his demon. At thirteen she'd condemned herself to an afterlife of torture and misery in the Rot. She probably would have tried to end her own life that very day out of shame if she hadn't suddenly become so fearful of what would happen to her after she died.

Mila shook that memory, and the aftermath of that morning, from her mind. It would not be helpful today, or any day, to remember what had transpired next.

* * *

Ultimately, citing a busy schedule, Jezebel did not stay long at the party, and everyone, for their own reasons, was grateful. When back in the carriage and jostling along the road again, Mila waited for Jezebel to make good on her threat and demand to know about the true energy and feelings of the so-called friends within her social circle. She wondered if there was ever a pleasant way to tell someone they were universally disliked. She wondered if Jezebel would lash out at her in pain and punish Mila for their feelings towards her. She wondered if she'd be able to plausibly lie.

To her surprise, the question never came, and when she next routinely ran her power over Jezebel, she realised that the reason for the lack of intrigue was simple. Jezebel already knew, and as much as she pretended it didn't affect her, it did.

They arrived back at Jezebel's apartments and, once inside, Jezebel ordered a beautiful stained-glass bath to be drawn and a book of uncouth poems to be brought to her, ordering Mila to read aloud while she bathed.

Mila was surprised by the choice, but as she sat on the cold black tiles, with the bathtub warm against her back, she found herself trying not to laugh as she read, despite the mood of the day that had transpired.

“There once was a girl from Artor
Was a teacher, but also a whore
She did sums on the side
Whilst riding astride
She's efficient, but also she's poor.”

Jezebel did not hold back, laughing freely. With interest, Mila felt the tight clutch of humiliation and hurt that Jezebel had been wrapped in slowly loosening with her laughter.

“There once was a boy from the plains
Big breeches but lacking some brains
Any girl he would wed
Would take him to her bed
For a night, and a sheet full of stains.”

Jezebel laughed again and then, to Mila’s surprise, began to construct her own.

“There once was a girl from the west
Who had a large, singular breast
Just one, not the two
Lopsided, askew...”

“It was hard to find quite the right vest?” Mila didn’t know what boldness possessed her in that moment to say anything or where the line even came from, but it worked.

Jezebel snorted in amusement. “That’s a good one. Let’s try another.”

“There once was a girl from Artor,
Had an arse that was big as a boar...”

“Big as a boar?” Mila challenged cautiously. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“You do better then!”

Mila couldn’t believe that she was actually enjoying this exchange. She wracked her brain for a moment and then began,

“There once was a girl from Artor,
Her name was Eliza Picor
She had tiny red lumps
On her breasts and her rump
They were permanent, itchy and sore.”

Jezebel’s full-bellied laughter echoed throughout the entire apartment.

They went on like this until, eventually, Jezebel called for a servant to bring two large plates of food. The smell of sesame-roasted root vegetables served alongside small, hot balls of spiced mince and cabbage filled the air, and Mila looked agonisingly over at Jezebel who smiled and inclined her head in concession.

Mila ate properly, for the first time in days.

The Test

Two weeks later, Mila woke and sensed two very important things had changed. The first was that something was very different about Jezebel's mood. She was nervous and subdued and wouldn't respond when Mila inquired why. It worried her, and Mila knew she needed to figure out the reason quickly.

She couldn't blame it on Worship Day. That was tomorrow, and even though Jezebel resented sitting in the Grand Cathedral for hours, listening to Abbott drone on, she'd never been nervous about attending the weekly sermon.

Could it be the weather? Mila wondered. The spring was pressing on and these specific weeks in the season were known as The Build-Up, easily identifiable by the near-constant, oppressive humidity that never allowed a storm to bring relief. It was uncomfortable to do much of anything during these weeks. Perhaps that was contributing to Jezebel's mood? But no. Why should that make her nervous? If anything, the weather had created more stability and routine to Jezebel's days. An early morning walk around the palace gardens before the

crippling humidity struck, a nap in the heat of the afternoon, and then socialising during the evening after the intense wall of humidity built like clockwork just before sundown. No storm though. Stormweek would come later in the season, right before summer.

No. None of these were satisfactory reasons for Jezebel's nervous mood, and Mila's ignorance made her stressed.

The second important thing she realised, was that she'd finally awoken without the searing burn of pain behind her eyes.

Her body had finally adjusted to the lack of rubane and was no longer punishing her for its absence.

Sweet, blessed relief – finally.

In fact, over the past week, she felt as though she were being rewarded in more ways than one for her patience. She'd steadily gained more control over her power and was now able to sense Jezebel and her surroundings with far less effort. On top of this, Jezebel now seemed to have grown accustomed to Mila's dutiful, quiet, constant presence. The result was a few lapses in her security, including letting the lead fall to the ground during her most recent dinner. Mila knew that as she gained the woman's favour and trust, lapses like this would happen more and more often. All she needed to do was wait for one she could exploit.

Mila had anticipated most of these changes happening eventually, but what she could not have predicted was Jezebel's growing enjoyment of Mila's company. Since composing limericks in the bathroom, Jezebel now spoke to Mila directly and even occasionally explained things when Mila asked questions. She never asked Mila for her opinion, and regular meals were still not guaranteed, but the lack of food seemed to stem more from Jezebel's short attention span, rather than a malicious desire to starve her new pet. In fact, Mila noticed a curious instance of Jezebel glancing across at her whenever the princess was

being funny or clever, as though, now that she'd acknowledged that Mila was intelligent, she wanted to be acknowledged as such in return. Mila's small rebellion came in the way she made a point of never giving Jezebel such recognition, not unless she was ordered to do so. It was the one semblance of autonomy she still retained, and she was determined not to relinquish it easily.

* * *

The mystery of Jezebel's nervous mood prevailed as they headed out on their scheduled morning walk, and although Mila was determined to figure out the cause, she couldn't help but be distracted by the beauty of the gardens. The sudden absence of her rubane headache made her feel as though she was able to truly see and appreciate them for the first time.

The use of the word 'garden' to describe the horticultural marvel that Midas's gardeners had managed to create over a mere forty years was an insult. It was enormous, and the vast area was divided into segments that represented every single specimen of flora that could be found across the vast and diverse regions of Artor. Along the eastern side, where they walked today, Mila discovered with delight that it had been planted with the rich, tropical flora that dominated large swaths of her home in the rainforest Highlands.

Around them, stood the towering, hundred-year-old bayan trees that had been carefully uprooted from their original homes and now lined the marble pathway. Despite the heat, the thick branches and unusual roots of the huge trees managed to create a cool walkway with their shadows. The sight of them made her powerfully homesick, and for a brief moment, Mila couldn't help but reminisce about her own beautiful cottage.

It sat nestled between a sister-pair of huge bayan trees that, over time, had come to grow around, and seemingly embrace, the small,

sweet cottage. The thick roots, which grew downwards from the lowest hanging branches on the trees, acted as pillars that protected her house from the elements and also created small alcoves where she'd been able to clamber up and sit to meditate in the mornings before the cooler air submitted to the humidity.

Inside was largely bare of any furniture that she had not painstakingly created herself from the foraged wood of fallen trees. Her windowsills were overrun with small plants, which had simple energies. Mila could easily sense their needs with little drain on her body, and she'd delighted in giving them what they needed in order to grow to their full potential – be it more or less sunlight, or more or less water. Her attentiveness had been rewarded by being bathed daily in their content and pragmatic energy.

Her cottage lacked the usual human smells of babies, chewing tobacco and rubbish. Instead, it smelled primarily of smoke, herbs and sweet florals. The rubane she'd smoked daily had an earthy, nutty aroma that complemented the concoction, but the pretty weed itself grew prolifically around the outside stones, turning red, yellow and pink as the seasons changed. It was beautiful. She missed it desperately.

With a semblance of hope, she considered looking for it in these gardens. It was a Highland native plant, after all, so if it would be anywhere in the palace, it would be in this area. But it was a weed, so perhaps it hadn't made the cut.

Her visualisation was broken by Jezebel's sharp "Well? Isn't that funny?"

"It is," Mila agreed smoothly, although she had no idea what had been said. She brought her attention back to the princess. The golden lead to her collar continued to dangle loosely between Jezebel's fingers, and the new Guard of the Body followed, always a few paces behind, holding himself taut as a drawn bow, ready to intervene if his princess's

demon decided to turn on her. Mila sensed his never-ending nervousness for the tenth time that day and sighed. Attacking Jezebel in that moment was the furthest thing from her mind, and the guard's anxiety was ruining the otherwise unusually peaceful morning.

"I need to relieve myself," Jezebel abruptly announced, and Mila's stomach tightened as she watched the princess tie the end of the lead to a nearby bench before walking off in the direction of the garden lavatory.

The guard seemed as confused as Mila. He hesitated for half a second before finally deciding to follow the princess. Despite the questionable wisdom of leaving a demon alone in the garden, his duty was to protect Jezebel at all times.

Mila was alone.

Her breathing tripled in pace. This had never happened before. Was now the moment she'd been waiting for? It seemed too good to be true.

Incredulously, Mila watched the princess and the guard depart. As soon as their figures were out of sight, she turned and inspected the knot. It was loose and performative. Mila could have yanked on the loop half-heartedly and it would have come undone.

It set off alarm bells in her head. Something about this wasn't right.

Mila closed her eyes and sent her power out into the garden, pushing past the immediate energy of the dense surrounding vegetation and exploring deeper amongst it.

There.

A human...no, two humans. Courtiers spying on her, waiting to see what she'd do.

Well, at least the cause of Jezebel's mood was now revealed. This had been a test, and a timely reminder that Jezebel might be spoiled, cruel

and vain, but she was certainly not stupid, and it would be dangerous to assume that she did not suspect Mila of plotting to escape.

So, instead of tugging at the knot, Mila sighed and made a show of sitting comfortably on the bench to wait like an obedient pet, fanning herself as the surrounding din of crickets denied her even a moment of peace and quiet.

Patience had always been her strong suit, and she knew that earning Jezebel's trust now would be invaluable for her future plans. And she had time, she still had two months.

Jezebel and the guard returned. She tried to keep her face neutral, but Mila was so well tuned to her now that the princess could not disguise the energy of joy and relief that rose when she saw Mila waiting dutifully for her return.

"Good girl," Jezebel said happily, and the condescending phrase suddenly triggered in Mila an old memory.

"Mila is such a good girl." They had all said about her. Her family, her village, the acolyte... She'd loved the praise, lived for it. But none of it had mattered on the morning she'd awoken as a thirteen-year-old and found that she could suddenly grow horns and feel the energy of the household. Mila was momentarily awash with memories – the way her sister had screamed and how her mother's face had turned ashen grey. The way her father had smashed things, and for the first time in her life, Mila had been afraid of him, afraid he might convince himself that he could somehow beat the taint out of her...

Push it away.

Mila shut her mind down and forced the memories out of her head. Jezebel was looking at her expectantly, and Mila knew that she would not be able to keep the pain off her face if she allowed herself to remember that morning in more detail.

“Highness?” She forced herself to look up innocently, acting as though she was confused by Jezebel’s praise, as though an escape attempt hadn’t even crossed her mind.

Jezebel said nothing more but glowed happily at the response and turned to continue down the garden path.

Mila had passed the test.

The Artor Trading Company

The following day, Jezebel informed Mila that they would be attending a dinner in the city that evening. She also mentioned offhandedly that Jahan, the former Guard of the Body, would be joining their entourage. Mila felt a thrill of excitement at the news.

She knew she'd earned Jezebel's trust now, and this event, more than any other she'd attended with Jezebel thus far, seemed most likely to yield a potential opportunity to escape.

Knowing that Jahan was to be the guard in attendance was possibly another bonus. He'd already shown himself to be sympathetic towards her once. Perhaps he could be persuaded to help her again. Perhaps, she fantasised, he was so resentful of Jezebel that he might even join her in her escape.

With this thought in mind, Mila could hardly wait to see him and gauge his energy, and the day seemed to crawl. When the evening finally arrived and Jahan arrived at Jezebel's apartments, Mila looked

up at him with hope and pleasure, but Jahan's energy was anything but reciprocal. Her optimism swiftly came crashing down.

Jahan's energy was pure professionalism once more, despite the gaping, bloody hole in his face that was now slightly healed, but still unmissable and grotesque. Jezebel had prohibited him from covering the wound tonight, with even a cotton patch.

"This," she informed him with glee as the carriage departed the palace grounds, "is to reinforce to all gawkers the repercussions of disappointing me tonight or treating the demon too kindly."

There were a lot of gawkers around tonight.

The purpose of the dinner was to honour and welcome a new board member to the Artor Trading Company, a powerful corporation that Jezebel was heavily invested in. She explained it to Mila in the carriage, prattling excitedly about her stake in the evening.

"The Artor Trading Company deals almost exclusively in the procurement of luxuries and exotics, and they have an extensive network of contacts that span the most remote corners of the globe. They also have a private army of guards that is larger than the Church's own private Corps of Guards. And I'm the official Patron of the entire enterprise!"

Mila had heard the name before. The Artor Trading Company was infamous for many reasons. Not least of which were the lack of qualms they had about dabbling in the human slave trade. She remembered once meeting an envoy of the company in her remote home village of Brome, and he had severely frightened her.

The tall, angular man had arrived in explorer's leathers and with a sharp, manicured beard that looked heavy and awkward in contrast to the bare-faced Highlander men. He had claimed to be searching for rare mushrooms and had proposed generous employment terms if someone in the village would consent to be his collector and purveyor.

Mila had feigned ignorance of the Company's existence, but even she remembered how hard it had been to say no to the man. The money he'd offered had been good, but his demeanour, coupled with the five guards at his side, had silently implied that they hadn't travelled this far to leave empty-handed. They would ensure that they found something – or someone – to sell if the mushrooms weren't available.

Mila was not surprised to learn that Jezebel was a heavy player in such an organisation.

While the dinner tonight might have officially been in honour of a new shareholder, Jezebel made it no secret that she considered herself to be the true guest of honour, and she ensured that she timed their arrival at the dinner perfectly to command the full room's attention.

Heralding her approach were six young footmen, intentionally dressed by Jezebel in striking, but ridiculous, long grey sacks that hung from their shoulders to their knees. Their faces and hands were hidden by white masks and gloves. She also ensured that she was flanked on one side by Mila in her dark swamp-creature gown with her horns out at full extension, and on her other side stood tall Jahan, with his disfigured face.

Jezebel herself had gone to excessive lengths for her evening's attire. She'd spent two hours having her entire nude body painted by artists with tiny gold dots of varying sizes and patterns, over which she'd laid a thin, spider-silk sheer dress that hid nothing.

In this risqué attire, and flanked by Mila and Jahan, her entrance could not be ignored, and she was not disappointed.

A hush fell over the dining room as the footmen parted like water to allow Jezebel to mince through and wordlessly present herself.

She stood for a long while in the doorway, allowing all inside to glimpse *all* of her, and then, with a light tug on Mila's lead, she strutted over to a seat at the head of the table. She had to fight to keep a

nonchalant expression on her face but was unable to completely hide her glee.

Mila and Jahan stood behind her, and Mila braced for impact as the energies of everyone in the room came rushing towards them. She was not disappointed.

“I pride myself on being unpredictable,” a male voice from across the table called out. “But even I have never dreamed up anything like this...What in fates are we looking at, Princess?” Mila followed the sound of the voice, and it took her a moment to place why the speaker seemed familiar. Then it struck her.

The man from the crypt. The man with the green eyes who hadn’t betrayed her. Who was he, and what was he doing here?

Outside of the crypt, she was now able to see him properly. He had a very handsomely cut face, with dark brows, a broad jaw, and the light shadow of wild stubble around his lips and chin. She hadn’t noticed back in the crypt that his blond hair was so long that most of it was pulled back and secured behind his head in a bun, with some unruly golden waves refusing to be captured in this manner and bounding forward from his forehead and down his face. They framed his lovely eyes beautifully. She noted also, with interest, that he had a tiny, gold circular earring in one lobe. Very unusual for anyone to have such a piercing outside of the Highlands, let alone a man.

Something about it endeared him to her.

He was impeccably attired. His Company dinner jacket sat draped across the back of his chair, revealing a posh, fitted, dark grey waistcoat that clung to his broad chest. The loose, white shirt billowing underneath lent some softness to the otherwise harsh lines, and a thick, dark blue Ascot tie complemented the golden complexion of skin that had clearly spent a lot of time under the sun. He was unmistakably a sea-faring man and while his attire looked so tidy and expensive

that he could easily be accepted at a glance as a ship's captain. On closer inspection of his roguish demeanour, one could be forgiven for jumping instead to the title of 'pirate'.

Mila watched the man languidly place his elbows on the white tablecloth and crack a knuckle as he leaned forward. He surveyed Mila, and as he did so, what little relief she might have felt at seeing a familiar face soon vanished. There was nothing in his expression or in the eager lean of his shoulders that revealed any recognition or sympathy for her situation. She tried to reach out with her power to read him, but frustratingly, found that she couldn't and wasn't sure why. Her ability to channel and hone her power had come so far in the past month. This should have been easy enough to do, and yet tonight, from him, she felt...nothing. Just a vague shadow energy that indicated something alive was sitting in his seat.

Thankfully, she didn't need her powers to read his body language, and what she saw she disliked. He held himself in a loose, rolling manner, as though he meant to appear jovial and nonchalant but he couldn't quite hide his intensity. She was reminded of a cobra poised to strike.

"Oh, these?" Jezebel replied, throwing a hand in the air with exaggerated flippancy. "Merely my pet demon and a server who made the mistake of treating her as though she were human." She moved on from the explanation swiftly, as though the enormous news she'd just shared was little more than an afterthought, certainly not worth more of an explanation. "Congratulations on your new appointment, Christopher," Jezebel continued, "Although I am terribly sorry to hear about what happened to Martin. And I regret your father couldn't join us tonight. Is he well?"

So, this is Christopher Culis.

Mila had now attended enough social events with Jezebel for the name to mean something to her.

Christopher Culis was the great-grand-nephew of the Artor Trading Company's original founder, and tonight, he was taking over as the company's second largest shareholder following his older brother's untimely demise, which, although tragic, had not been wholly unexpected.

For the past eight generations, the eldest sons of the Culis family had all found cruel and unusual ways to die in their thirty-fifth year of life. The family had always insisted that the phenomenon was the result of a curse obtained by a sea-faring ancestor. Many social observers, however, would state that the only true curse in the family was the gene of unbridled ambition that ran through the bloodline.

Cursed or not, this exact fate had recently fallen upon Christopher's eldest brother, Martin, who had fallen from his horse four months earlier, leaving Christopher as the second most powerful man in the company and the newly instated heir to the Culis fortune. Mila assumed this was who he'd been mourning when she found him in the crypt; however, with the way he carried himself tonight, as though his new status were a physical crown perched upon his head, it made her wonder if she'd imagined his red-rimmed eyes that day.

With effort, she pulled her gaze away from him and looked around the room at the other shareholders, who all kept their faces carefully neutral as they surveyed her. It was as though they didn't know how to react to her presence and didn't want to risk displeasing their fickle princess by revealing the wrong emotion. So, despite spotting a few fleeting shadows of fear and intrigue, Mila noted with interest that they all decided to follow Jezebel's lead and ignore Mila's presence entirely.

Christopher Culis was the exception. He stared openly and hungrily at her.

“You effortlessly show us, once again, the difference between princess and mere mortal,” he flattered Jezebel, refusing to be distracted by her questions about his family. “But going so far as to take a demon as a pet is unheard of. How has the Church permitted this to occur?”

“The real question here, Christopher, is who do you think has more authority?” Jezebel chirped back delightedly. “Your Princess or the Church?”

With that challenge left floating in the air, she took her seat and signalled to the string quartet in the corner to start playing. This seemed to be the cue for the room to resume its chatter, but Mila sensed that the private conversations didn't stray far off the topic at hand.

Until there was another entrance.

The front door opened again, and this time, it was the Lady Eliza Picory who stepped through with her young handmaid.

Lady Picory surveyed the room with a horrified look that betrayed that, whatever she'd expected from this invitation, it certainly hadn't been the sight she saw before her now. She nervously shrank when she saw the formal Artor Trading Company dinner jackets worn by the other attendees and looked downright ill when she saw Jezebel and her footmen, specifically what the latter were wearing.

Jezebel's cackle told Mila immediately that she was about to witness retribution for the hurt Lady Picory had caused the princess all those weeks ago. The woman had evidently been sent an outfit by Jezebel to wear as a gift, but here she was, dressed exactly as one of Jezebel's attendants, in a long, shapeless, grey smock and white gloves.

“Who is...is that Eliza Picory?” an older man at the table exclaimed, peering over his glasses. “Dressed as a server? What are you doing, woman?”

“I...” Lady Picory’s face was now beet-red as she realised she was standing before the most powerful men in the country, men who frequently competed with her husband for access to rare goods and services, dressed as Jezebel’s servant.

Jezebel could not wipe the smile from her face as she pointed to the door. “The kitchens are that way, Eliza. I’m sure the entrées are nearly ready to be brought up.”

To her credit, Eliza gathered what little of her pride she could, and held her head high as she turned heel and headed to the kitchen.

What else could she have done? Publicly disobey the princess? Jezebel laughed again, and the sound was joined by the laugh of Christopher Culis from across the table.

“Well now, *that* was entertaining,” he said, and the hearty words could be heard clearly from the other end of the room. Mila felt Jezebel’s energy beam in response to his solidarity.

“Jahan.” Jezebel snapped her fingers and the handsome, disfigured ex-guard stepped forward and refilled her goblet, which she quickly drained, extending it immediately out to him for more.

Mila watched this with interest. Jezebel liked to drink most nights, but not recklessly like this. Something about this dinner was different for the woman, and Mila was beginning to suspect it had something to do with the presence of Christopher Culis.

Excellent.

If Jezebel was distracted and drunk enough then escape might truly be an option tonight. Mila’s blood thrummed with adrenaline as she scanned the room’s doors and windows and identified the servers’ entry. That would be the best route out of this building. Servants would

be the least likely to prevent her if she slipped down that passage. And even if she was confronted, she could say she'd been sent on an errand for the princess. These were not the serving staff of the princess's palace apartments. No one here knew of the tight control Jezebel usually wielded over Mila. It might just work if she could hold her nerve for long enough.

She breathed deeply with excitement at the thought of this prospect, but then forced herself to turn her attention back to the conversation at hand. If she behaved at all suspiciously tonight, Jezebel would surely notice. Until the moment of her breakaway, her behaviour needed to be as routine as possible.

"I can barely restrain myself, Princess," she heard Christopher Culis call across the table again. His words came out as a laugh, but there was an edge to it. He was clearly a man accustomed to getting his way, and he wanted more answers about the demon situation than he'd received so far. "Do not hold me in suspense a moment longer. Tell me, are demon pets a new commodity?"

Jezebel considered her reply carefully. Mila knew that she hadn't liked the idea her father had briefly suggested, of enabling those in the aristocracy, such as Eliza, to have their pick of demons for entertainment. She enjoyed the notoriety and the exclusivity of having the only one. However, Mila also sensed that there was something about Culis's attention and approval that Jezebel deeply desired, and she was not ready for him to lose this intense interest in her just yet.

"I am considering it," she said eventually, haughtily. "My exposure to demons is more than most, and I have found that, despite their inherently evil and vile nature, many of them have harmless, and in some cases even useful, abilities. My demon here, for example, can read energies." Again, she decided to use the opportunity to threaten the room. "She will report to me after this dinner exactly who among you

can be trusted... and who harbours poisonous intent against me. So be warned, do not say anything at this table with a half-truth stuck in your throat.”

Mila noted with interest that, once again, the room shifted as the men tried to consciously change their energy towards the princess – without quite knowing how to do so. She felt with fascination the way they tried to reshape their fear and disdain for the woman into thoughts of appreciation for her beauty and strength.

All except one. Culis.

With burning curiosity, Mila sought answers from him again, forcibly pushing away the energetic hum of the rest of the room to try to focus just on him, and again she was thwarted. While she could sense him in the room as a living being, the specifics of his energy were blurred and unreadable, with a muffled, hazy quality to it, despite her best efforts. It was inexplicable, and infuriating.

He saw her staring, and although he misunderstood the reason for the frown on her face, he correctly assumed what she was trying to do and smiled in response, a cool challenge written in his eyes. “No need to worry about me, little demon. I’m happy to tell the princess exactly what I think of her, and she knows that.”

Beside her, Mila felt Jezebel flush with both outrage and desire, which heightened as the sleek man rose from his chair and approached hers. He knelt beside her and leaned forward with a familiarity Mila had not expected to see. There was clearly a history between these two.

“Hello again, Princess,” he said in a low voice and with a wry smile.

“What do you want, Christopher?” Jezebel said with playful wariness.

“Only to see your beauty up close.”

“Flatterer,” she accused. “And...liar.”

“Guilty,” he agreed with a laugh, then leaned even closer. “You know exactly why I’m here, because you know exactly what you’ve done to me by bringing this thing here.” He gestured in Mila’s direction. “This is how a spider reels in a fly, placing the web right over the most interesting flower in the meadow.”

“You’re saying I’m a spider, Christopher?”

“I’m saying,” he gestured to himself with flamboyant self-deprecation. “I’m a predictable, mercantile fool, who will be miserable all night – at my own dinner party, nonetheless – unless you have mercy and toss me the smallest morsel of an answer to my questions.”

Mila listened to the conversation, incredulous that he was able to take such a tone with the princess. She’d never heard anyone speak with her like this, but it seemed to be working. Jezebel sighed, as if this was all very boring, but Mila could feel her enjoyment resonating strongly.

“I’ll be brief,” Culis spoke softly, and only to Jezebel, as if they were co-conspirators. “I believed your Divine father to be the sole...consumer of these creatures. What would happen if these new pets turned out to be valuable and people were... reluctant to sacrifice them?”

Jezebel nodded slowly at his words, luxuriating in his close presence. “A valid point. I’ll admit I have not discussed the specifics with him directly. But he did mention vague support for the concept of demons as pets when I presented this one to him. I imagine that, if it could somehow be assured that each demon would be sacrificed eventually, he would be amenable to the idea. It’s the High Priest Abbott who would have a conniption.”

“I think both you and I would enjoy watching that.”

“What do you mean?” Jezebel asked.

“Well...” Culis was slightly more cautious now, pausing briefly before replying. “That question you posed to the room earlier, about

who is more powerful, you or the Church? Well, let me answer it with one of my own – why is that even a question we consider at all? You are the God-King’s daughter. Who in the Church has the gall to challenge your authority... ever?”

“Abbott,” Jezebel hissed, almost to herself, but Culis leaned into it, his lips close to hers as he whispered.

“And wouldn’t you relish the opportunity to wipe that question from Abbott’s mouth?”

And wouldn’t you love to ride on her coattails as she does? The thought came to Mila swiftly, and to her surprise, Culis looked over sharply at her, as though he’d somehow heard it.

“What’s this one’s name?” he drew back slightly from Jezebel, motioning towards Mila with his head.

“It’s...” Jezebel stopped in her tracks, realising without embarrassment that she had never thought to ask. “I have no idea,” she laughed.

Culis looked at Mila expectantly, waiting for her to share it, but unless Jezebel ordered her to, Mila resolved that she would not, and Jezebel did not seem inclined to humanise her demon an inch more than she had to. So, Mila said nothing and just stared back at him, waiting to see what would happen next.

Eventually, Culis conceded defeat on the question of her name, but continued to address Mila. “And you can sense energies. Very intriguing. Does that mean you can sense the difference between humans and demons too?”

What a good question. Smart man. Dangerous man.

“It does.”

Not even Jezebel missed the way his eyes lit up at her response. “If you’re trying to figure out a way to use my demon for your own purposes, then I’d stop,” she said with a tight laugh. “I don’t like to share.”

“I do love a challenge, Princess. You know this.”

“It’s a challenge I’m afraid you’ll lose.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever felt afraid.” He playfully raised an eyebrow. “What’s it feel like?”

Jezebel giggled, and Mila sensed the blood pounding in the princess’s body. Jezebel opened her mouth to reply, but at that exact moment, the servers arrived from the kitchen, Eliza included, bearing the entrée, a rich, wild mushroom and rustic garlic soup, and Culis was forced to return to his seat on the other side of the table.

In his absence, the discussion at Jezebel’s side turned to other matters, to new islands discovered on a recent voyage that were inhabited by a tribe that seemed to consist entirely of women. Although Jezebel was distracted by the new topic and ridiculing a red-faced Eliza whenever the opportunity presented itself, Mila could tell that something had changed. A seed, something to do with proving something to Abbott, had been planted in her mind.