



Wanted by the Adepts of Te'Mea, protectors of humankind.
Condemned by the demonlords, rulers of the world.
Je'Rol is a cursed man in search of a dream—peace in his life.

On a world where most halfbloods are executed at birth, Je'Rol has survived. The son of a demonlord and a human, Je'Rol bears the stigma of the blood rage, a killing instinct unleashed when he loses control of his emotions, and each time carries him closer to the edge of losing his humanity forever. Only one object can free him of the killer inside; but it is an object only of legend and one said to reign over all demons. Because of its power, he is not the only one who seeks it.

With his life cut shorter by each blood rage, time is quickly running out for Je'Rol, but his search for freedom could mean the end of the world.

Tiger Born

**By
Melanie Nilles**

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Chapter 1

Je'Rol groaned, leaning against a tree trunk for support while waiting for the pain to fade, and scanned the gory mess around him. Among the blood-splattered trees and brush, bodies and their dismembered limbs were strewn. From the darkness, glimpses of his memory flashed back. Now, he would never know who or why. Who were they? Why had the men attacked him?

In self-defense, the monster within him had awakened and lashed out, the blood rage only satisfied by their deaths. Or had it been? Had something else pulled him from the savagery of his demon side?

Someone had called to him. They had tamed the beast, allowing him to regain control, but that control slipped away each time. Soon, he would never return, lost forever within the darkness until the demon side took him into death.

But he was back from the nightmare again, sore and tired, although his eyes seemed to fool him. Through the trees, he saw the edge of the forest, where the cliff fell off into a deep river chasm. There, a cloaked figure stepped to the cliff where he had rested prior to the attack. As a child, he might have thought it impossible or a dream for the stranger to cross the air over several hundred feet to a crushing death on the rocks far below, but in the years since he had left the place he last called home, he'd seen stranger things.

The shoulders on the figure were narrow for a man, and the dark, bare feet beneath the cloak too small. A woman then; and the act of walking on air meant magic. Only two groups possessed such knowledge—the immortal demonlords and sorcerers.

He stood upright, the scent of the men's blood overwhelming him. It covered Je'Rol, unforgiving in its barrage on his senses and masking the scent of the stranger.

"You are mine." The feminine voice came from the shadows of the hood hiding the stranger's face.

His chest burned like fire. A faint glow reached him from beneath his eyes, and he looked down at the strange stone shining green from his chest amid the scratches the beast must have inflicted to remove it. It hadn't been there before. The men who had sacrificed their lives had put something on him, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't touch it.

Sudden heat from the stone seared him but it didn't. No smoke. No blackened flesh. Yet it burned as if scorching him in flame. He collapsed to his hands and knees, sweating and panting.

The woman lifted an arm from beneath her cloak, revealing black tattoos writhing over the dark skin of her hand and wrist. "Rest now, Je'Rol."

Her voice coaxed his eyelids shut as the sounds of feet trampled through the grass and brush around him.

He slumped to the ground at her feet, and the burning on his chest faded with his surroundings.

* * *

Memories flitted through his head, carrying him up and down with the currents. The lows dipped into dark territory, moments of vaguely familiar shadows, events he never wanted to see. The highs stung worse than the shadowy dips, reminding him of the rare peace and joy that would never come again.

Je'Rol rode through the dreams, sinking into tragedies he sought to forget in the depths of the blood rage and lifting with the few bright points.

An innocent memory faded away, replaced by one of the terrible memories, when the beast

overshadowed him and left him watching as if through a fog. Its roar drowned out all other sounds, except the screams of his victims, who died quickly.

Memories arose of the first time he lost control. In his thirteenth year, when he'd started changing into a man, he'd known he wasn't like the other boys. Only pieces of that first time floated from the recesses of his mind; between standing up to a group of bullies and feeling the rage and desire to retaliate rise with the relinquished control of his emotions until he woke up beneath an old tree, he remembered nothing. His clothes were torn and bloody. He returned home to his mother weeping. She took him in her arms and made him clean and change quickly. They left before the accusers arrived and, from a distance, he and his mother watched their home burn.

All his life, even before the first blood rage, they had wandered from village to village, his mother warning him to leave the other children alone. She had colored his hair to hide the unnatural silvery base with the black "V" segments that, with his icy blue eyes, betrayed his tiger demonlord lineage; his father had been of the Je'Gri clan.

In those times he lost control, all sense of who he was disappeared and instinct took over, but it wasn't survival. Rather, he had inherited an instinct to kill but none of the control.

No matter how gentle or noble the demonlord parent, the human side of the halfblood offspring could never contain the demon side. He had been cursed from the moment he'd been born, but he sought a way out of that curse. The obelisk of Mai'Kari would give him control of his demon half. He could have peace, if he could find the obelisk.

But he couldn't close his eyes to the suffering. He had killed them, each life who dared to cross him when he lost control.

The memories stung him with guilt.

It burned through him, consuming him in fire.

"Wake up, Je'Rol." A woman's sultry voice.

The scent of wood smoke surrounded him, riding a blend of spices and cooked meat. His side ached where he lay on the hard floor with his arms behind his back.

The burning faded with the dreams. Je'Rol opened his eyes to shadows dancing around the light on the farthest wall. Soft furs lay between him and a hard stone floor and, at the opposite side of the room, covered two chairs near a crackling fire.

A lithe form occupied one of those chairs. Delicate hands at the ends of tattooed arms held a green gemstone set in gray metal. The light side of the woman's profile revealed dark hair tied out of a face with a small nose and full lips, her tawny skin taut with youth.

She turned partially in the firelight, her cheek curving with her smile.

A smile taunting him to break free from the binding on his wrists behind his back. He wouldn't be there for long. No one could hold him, at least no mortal who had tried.

For what seemed an eternity, she stared at him, the smile slowly melting from her face. "You're so quiet. Surely you desire answers." She spoke the words with the seduction of a lover, stirring up painful memories from the sea of turmoil in his past. "Not even a growl?"

She pouted, but only for a second. A wry grin curved up her shadowed face, and she rose smoothly from her chair and walked to him, her dark leggings hugging her body and revealing her nimble movements.

She was the one—the tattoos on her exposed areas of skin confirmed it—a sorceress, as dangerous as any demon hunter. He'd seen it as he returned from the fog of the beast's control. She had walked across the chasm as if solid ground lay under her feet. It had been magic.

His heart sank at the prospect before him; sorcerers and demon hunters were two sides of the

same coin—the Adepts of Te'Mea, those born with the ability to *dispirit* demons, a power only full demonlords were immune to. She had the power to hold him without ropes.

The woman knelt next to him on the fur rug. "You cannot escape," she whispered.

His chest burned with the glow of whatever she used on him. From his throat, a growl rumbled.

"You are mine. Obey me, Je'Rol."

The fire burned through his resistance. The beast snarled but made no attempts to escape.

A soft caress on his cheek calmed him.

"Listen to me..." Her words blew warm against his ear. He wanted to listen.

With her sliding over his side, the scent of her body closed in around him as more than blood and sweat. It erased the troubles of his mind, welcoming him into humanity with the identity of a person rather than a being of flesh.

No. She was a sorceress, not a true human. She had fouled her soul for power no demon possessed. Not a threat to the demonlords, the sorcerers were allowed their ways, considered useful by some rumors he'd heard. What did she want with him?

Je'Rol tried to pull his arm free from behind him, but something in his mind stopped him.

"Your will is mine, Je'Rol. You will obey every word I say. The demon will stay dormant until I ask its release. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

A mocking smile curved up her lips. "Very good, but I expected you to learn fast. Someone who can hide for this long from the demonlords and the Adepts must have some intelligence. You gave me a lot to consider in your capture, but tracking you was the hardest part, until I learned you were sighted entering these lands. Then I had only to wait."

The fire faded from his chest, leaving his head clear with the realization that she had hunted him. Why him? Or was he just one more halfblood? "What do you want?"

"Your cooperation."

"Why?"

"Tell me you're mine." Her breath blew warm and inviting across his neck.

The beast resisted, but it could not deny the seduction of her request. He had one other choice—he didn't have to answer her.

Her face lowered to stare at him, her dark eyes piercing in the reflection of the firelight. "Tell me, Je'Rol. You obey me."

His chest burned again, and he could see only one solution. "I..." The fire seared through him, quelling the beast. He couldn't resist. "I will do what you want."

"What do *you* want?"

Je'Rol blinked and tried to focus, but the fire in his chest consumed him in one thought. "I want... I want the pain gone."

Gentle fingers traced along his hairline and jaw, down his neck to the source of the fire on his chest. "Quiet your mind," she whispered. "Soothe the beast. Give yourself to me."

Something in him resisted, fueling the fire. After a few seconds, the resistance faded, along with the burning.

In relief, he took a deep breath and lay quiet on the fur rug. What did she want from him?

"That's better." The gentle tone of her voice soothed the last of the agony from his chest.

"Liandra," a deep voice grumbled from the shadows opposite the fire.

The woman rose from his side and walked away.

"How much longer will this take?"

Je'Rol twisted on his side for a glimpse of the man who spoke.

"You can't rush the conditioning, even with a halfblood like him. The demonlord side is strong."

"Can you make him do it?" The man sounded urgent, and more than a little upset.

"He will."

"I can't afford to waste my time on trials. You succeed, or we're all dead."

"I said he will." Now she sounded upset. "Give me one day. He's already coming around. He'll complete your task when I'm done with him."

A pause filled the room, broken only by the crackling of the warm fire. Je'Rol let out a heavy sigh.

"One day," the man said.

"One day. This time tomorrow he will be yours to command... Lord Bannon."

In the flickering light, Je'Rol made out a small section of face around the eyes and nose of a man surrounded by shadows. Not shadows. A black beard and hair. Those cold eyes caught Je'Rol's for a second before Lord Bannon marched out the door, which thudded closed behind him.

They must have brought him to one of the fortresses of the human leaders. In a twist of irony, the humans had taken the title "Lord" for their rulers, mimicking part of the reference to the powerful domain rulers, the demonlords. Je'Rol could only guess the humans who sought to rule over other humans wished to copy the true domain rulers, thereby taking at least in rank a part of the highest class of beings on the world of Derandria, since they could never hope to possess the same power. A mind game over the humans they ruled. The human lords were no better than their demonlord masters.

What did they want with him? What good was he to ordinary humans?

Liandra stared after Lord Bannon a few seconds before returning to him. The brief movement of air carried the scent of leather and sweat and a touch of spice. It faded with the woman's closeness and her scent surrounding him once more in a clinging imitation of humanity.

"You must be hungry." Her quiet voice stirred the rumble in his stomach. How long had it been since he'd eaten a decent meal? Always traveling. Always scavenging or hunting. The thought of food made his mouth water.

"You cannot escape, Je'Rol." She leaned over him, her tattooed midriff exposed while she unwrapped his wrists behind his back. He could have broken free. She must have known that he had killed the men she sent to attack him. Who else had sent them? They had planted something on his chest to control him, or for her to control him, although it was too late for the men by the time she stopped his demon half.

"How do you know my name?"

The strap loosened and she sat back on her legs. "Your name is whispered among all Adepts, one of only a few halfbloods to evade the demon hunters."

"I could be someone else." He sat up and rubbed the ache from his wrists and arms.

Liandra backed away in a crouch to her fire, her every movement reminding him of a cat and her dark eyes never wavering from him. "You restrain the demon within you. Surviving this long is a rare feat."

Out of habit, he pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, despite the warmth of the room. It allowed him to feel hidden in a way nothing else could, cut off from the rest of the world in a physical way, like his outcast status cut him off from society.

"Yet when provoked—" The statement cut off with a growl.

"Yes. I had to be sure."

His claws grew out from ordinary hands and sliced through the leather strap binding his ankles. "Sure?"

A wry grin curved up her face a moment before she turned to the fire and stuck a poker through the flames to the back of the hearth. She pulled out a small cauldron and set it on the stone before the fire with a clatter of the thin handle, then caught the poker on the lid ring and lifted it.

The scent of spices and meat burst from the cauldron with a plume of steam, luring him forward.

"You must be hungry. Eat. Satisfy yourself." She handed him a bowl and ladle.

He sat next to the hot fire and dipped the bowl into the bubbling stew. Not the scalding heat of the broth nor the burning cauldron gave him hesitation when his fingers touched them. Hunger drove him to the food. Cooked food; better than that, meat.

She handed him a small, hard loaf of bread, which he used to soak up the steaming broth. Too long it had been since he last ate a seasoned, fully cooked meal. The emptiness of his stomach drove him to hurriedly finish off two bowls to her one before he slowed with a third. Then he noticed the flavors in his mouth, a rich blend of spices he'd never experienced, almost overwhelming his palate, which normally savored barely cooked, unseasoned game and whatever fruits and berries he found on his travels.

It was food. That's all that mattered. He finished off the last in the small cauldron in satisfaction and sat back in the second chair near the fire, sated for once in a very long time.

"Are you content, Je'Rol?"

He licked the last drop from his fingers and set the clay bowl next to the cauldron, suspicious of what she really wanted. Only one answer came to him: "How could I be content as a slave?" A tinge of anger growled in his words.

Again the smile, but she held the amulet in her left hand.

His chest burned.

"You are not a slave," she whispered. "You are a tool. Tools are extensions of their masters."

She toyed with him, but he couldn't deny her. The magic overpowered him with the fire on his chest. Je'Rol growled in pain and clutched his chest, but he couldn't touch whatever the men had implanted. Claws grew and shrank with the battle inside him.

"You must do as I say, Je'Rol, or all is lost." Her voice took on a whimpering quality, as if she were about to cry. Let her. He felt nothing for the sorcerers and their dark powers.

"Tomorrow we leave for Dev Nadir with Lord Bannon. I will be with you." Her voice lowered to almost a whisper. The soft rustle of fabric announced her movements. "I'll stay by your side, restraining the demon. Would you like that? Would that please you, Je'Rol?"

The fire faded from his chest, leaving him to catch his breath.

She climbed over him and pushed off his hood. Probing hands slid down his neck, but she knelt over his lap without sitting.

"You have a death wish," he snarled. No one would push him to that limit of losing control, least of all a sorceress. Or maybe it would serve her right to test him and satisfy himself with her at the same time.

She smirked and continued her game, leaning close to his ear. "Maybe. Tell me your deepest desires," she whispered. Although acting as if she wanted him, she never pressed close.

He had no intention of playing her games and grabbed her wrists to remove her hands from their mock caress. If she thought appealing to his sexual desires would make him cooperate, she

was wrong. The temptation hardened into a desperate need, but violent memories suppressed that with the need to forget.

"Show me, Je'Rol."

He would show her one desire—how he could fight his way free. Claws extended, pinching her wrists so she winced. Human flesh was weak. Not even a sorceress could survive a demon attack if she couldn't control the demon. He could free himself, if he could fight her control.

His chest burned again.

He didn't want to kill. He hated killing. He hated the monster within him, bred into him by a demonlord father.

The rumble of frustration broke from his throat. He shoved the sorceress away and replaced his hood. "Leave me."

She landed hard on her chair but crossed her legs as if nothing had happened. A few seconds later, the sly smile returned. "I underestimated you. Your desires are not what I expected." She licked the beads of blood along her wrists, her eyes never leaving him.

The fire faded once again, leaving him to think clearly. What would she try now that her first scheme hadn't worked? How would he free himself of this?

For a long while, he watched her treat her wounds and studied her for weakness. The tattoos twined around her arms like snakes, dancing in the flickering firelight. He recognized animal shapes and made out strange symbols among them, likely the language of the sorcerers. They ran across her chest and shoulders and up her neck and around her forehead beneath the short locks of black hair hanging there.

Rumors said they used the tattoos as a source of their dark magic, like the talisman binding his will to hers. Even thinking of escape or disobeying her burned him into submission, a far worse fate than the simple *dispirit* power possessed by all Adepts. Whether trained in magic as a sorcerer or used in combination with the fighting skills as a demon hunter, *dispirit* was control over the demon by the Adept's will. At the most intense, his thoughts weren't his own, or exaggerated his own into a strong conviction. He would have to plan carefully how to escape.

Perhaps he should worry more about what she and this Lord Bannon wanted from him. Dev Nadir was the largest human city in the bear demonlords' domain, a shipping and trade harbor. What business could Lord Bannon have there that required a halfblood? For that matter, why would the demonlords allow a human to control a halfblood rather than killing him outright?

Sooner or later, Liandra's tongue would slip, and he'd be waiting.

She opened the lid of a small bowl and dug her fingertips inside. From it, she pulled out a small pale-green salve that hinted of mint and dabbed some onto the tiny points of blood on her wrists. "You're as beautiful as them."

Je'Rol curled his lip back in a snarl. She wasn't the first to tell him he resembled the beauty of the demonlords in their human form. He'd heard it from others, men who thought him too frail to put up a fight to them, who didn't know halfbloods were far stronger and faster than any human. And women...

Je'Rol shook away the painful memories conjured by the suggestion. With his arms crossed, he closed his eyes and shut out the room and the sorceress.

Memories could remain buried.

"That is why you hide your face," she whispered. "Demonlords are more beautiful than any human, as are many of the halfbloods."

But demonlords used that to give their prey a false sense of security. Some still spoke of "culling their herds" of weak or old individuals, and they didn't always speak of four-legged

livestock.

"What do you want from me?" The words ground in anger.

"You'll learn when we arrive in Dev Nadir, not before. That is for Lord Bannon."

Je'Rol grunted and slouched back, listening and waiting. If he wasn't getting anywhere, he might as well rest.

Scratching sounds from outside set his nerves on edge. Natters, the smallest, nocturnal predators, mindlessly attacked anything worth eating. He extended his claws in anticipation, but the lowest demons likely wouldn't attack with the sorceress able to control them. They couldn't enter anyway; the room was made of stone, and likely sealed, as in a fortress. Lord Bannon was probably one of the humans who afforded the expense of building a structure to keep all natters out, if he could afford the services of a sorceress.

Liandra tipped her head as if listening. "They won't bother us." The leather covering of her chair squeaked with her movements. "You'll go nowhere tonight. Why don't you rest...Go to sleep, Je'Rol."

Weighed down by the burden of a full stomach and the safety of the fortress after a long day of travel, his eyelids closed against his will.

"You're tired," her voice coaxed. "Close your eyes and rest, Je'Rol."

Chapter 2

Je'Rol awoke to find himself stretched on the fur covering the floor of the room, his cloak off and the stench of his travels gone. Sometime while he'd slept, someone had bathed him and dressed him in a fresh tunic, and they had removed the blood stains from long ago and wiped the leather breeches with oil.

The sorceress, Liandra. A low growl rumbled from his throat. She had done this to him, not that he wasn't grateful to remove the stench of blood, but much of it had been the fresh blood of those sent by her to restrain him in the first place. It had all been her fault.

She was gone, having left him to wake on his own. The soft glow of morning through the clouded glass of the single narrow window illuminated the empty room. Besides the two chairs next to the cold hearth, only a small table bearing a pitcher and a small basin near the door for washing occupied it with him. The room was small, perhaps a sleeping room, but one without a bed. He had slept on the skins of animals.

This had been the sorceress's room for keeping him, where she had taunted him the night before, but she was gone now. Where had she gone and when would she return? What of the spell she had put in place to control him?

He still had his mind, his will, and she wasn't there to dull it with her control.

There was her error.

Je'Rol sat up and loose hair fell around his shoulders. The scent of herbs reached his nose. Why bother with all the trouble, and how had he slept through it all? He woke at the slightest sound whenever he rested in the wild.

Her spell had been more powerful than he had expected, unless she had drugged him.

A low growl emanated from his throat. What had she done to him?

The burning in his chest; it had started with her.

He unlaced the tunic around his neck. In the light of day, he saw it—a green stone sunk into his chest, but he couldn't touch it. An invisible barrier stopped his fingers from any attempt to dig it out of his flesh.

Interesting, since she didn't need special marks or talismans to control him.

Unless the small stone had another purpose. Could she still control him? How could he remove it?

He could worry about that later. First to escape.

Je'Rol found his cloak hanging over one of the chairs. A little damp, but it was clean; the blood had been scrubbed out, although a faint hint of the odor lingered in the fabric. Someone wanted him presentable, but for what reason? Lord Bannon? He had wanted Je'Rol ready for something.

It wouldn't matter if he escaped; he had no interest in the humans' affairs.

After securing the cloak around his neck, he found the leather strap with which he had tied his hair and wrapped it in a tail once more. Satisfied with his hair out of his way and hidden by the hood, he tried the door, expecting it to be locked. At his tug, it whipped open and slammed into the wall beside him.

This was too easy.

Or maybe not.

Guards stood on either side in their light armor bearing the black and gold crest of their human lord master, which included a bear motif in the center. It didn't surprise him, considering the territory in which they lived. Honoring the bear clan with their likeness should appease them

into allowing this Lord Bannon to rise in rank among the humans.

They crossed spears before him.

"You're to wait for *Serae* Liandra. Lord Bannon's orders." The one on his right spoke in a coarse voice, his face lined with age to match his confidence.

The other was young and nervous, by the flash of his throat when he swallowed and the rapid pounding of his heart in the silence of the empty corridor.

Beneath his cloak, Je'Rol extended claws in preparation. They were no threat to him.

Faster than they could blink, he grabbed the spears and splintered the shafts against the door frame. A second later, the old soldier pressed a sword to Je'Rol's throat, while the young man stood in place yet.

"Back into the room, halfblood," the man snarled.

The human was quicker than Je'Rol had anticipated but not near strong enough to subdue him. The scent of blood overpowered the stench of sweat. Wetness tickled down Je'Rol's throat, cooling his skin.

The beast inside him growled in threat, but the man never flinched.

Je'Rol debated his chances against the swordsman. He was unusually swift in his reaction for a human guard, more like the elite Li'Ador, the warriors who trained the Adepts seeking to become demon hunters. That one was confident in his skills, too, a dangerous combination. Although not dressed in the black and silver armor, he had the skills of the demon fighters. How much had Lord Bannon paid him to give up his allegiance?

A wrong move and Je'Rol would be skewered. It wouldn't kill him, but it would disable him for most of the day. The soldier was only one man. Je'Rol could take him, if he did this right.

Je'Rol backed into the room, the soldier following every step. Once inside, Je'Rol waited for him to retreat from the room. The point of the sword lowered from his throat, the tip shimmering with a red line of blood. The man backed away, his sword held in preparation to strike any second.

Another move—

Je'Rol whirled and slashed the space where the soldier should have been. A flash of silver swung at him, and he dodged left, swinging his arm to catch the young man and throw him against the wall. The boy was no threat, and killing would only fuel the desire for blood from the beast within him.

No. His conflict was with the old soldier. Hatred had flared in the old soldier's eyes while he had held the sword at Je'Rol's throat, seeking a reason to kill.

Je'Rol wouldn't kill, but he could disable.

Fire flared in Je'Rol's chest in that moment of hesitation, distracting him from the soldiers.

In a blink, metal glinted before him.

"Stop!" The woman's voice echoed through the corridor.

Je'Rol staggered away from the point pressing into his chest and blinked. A lithe form broke from the shadow of the dark alcove and stepped into a dusty slant of sunlight from the window to his right.

Her shoes barely made a sound on the floor in her rush to join them.

She pressed the old soldier's hand down. "Do not hurt him."

"He attacked us." Menace snarled in the man's voice.

"He's needed *alive* by Lord Bannon. Would you reject your lord's orders?"

He glared at her for several seconds, and lifted the sword to her face. "I was defending my life."

Liandra whispered in a strange language and touched the bloody edge. It sizzled and bubbled, the blood caking and flaking off in seconds. "Put it away, Captain. He's not to be harmed."

"He tried to leave. Our orders were to keep him here until you returned."

Her glare lightened into a coy smile. "And where am I?"

The old soldier's sharp eyes darted to Je'Rol and back to Liandra, and he bowed his head in defeat. A moment later, he straightened and slammed the sword into the scabbard belted to his waist, a scowl darkening on Je'Rol.

"Good. Stand watch and see that we are *not* disturbed."

He said nothing but reclaimed his position next to the door, opposite the young man, who pulled himself to his feet and took his position.

The sorceress stopped before Je'Rol, her dark eyes staring into him. "Sit in the chair, Je'Rol."

Her knuckles tightened around something in her hand, but the fire didn't yet ignite.

Seeing little choice, he backed away to one of the two chairs.

The door thumped closed and she crossed the room to sit down opposite him. Liandra leaned back into a casual position and crossed her calves by sliding one slender leg over the other. She did nothing without a teasing, sexual appeal.

Her hand opened so only she saw what was inside. By the tint of green on her face, he could guess what held her gaze. The stone was important to her.

"Clearly I underestimated you," she murmured, her voice clear but low in the silence of the room. "You awoke sooner than I expected."

He didn't like the sound of that, but waited. Humans hated silence. It made them nervous.

Liandra stared at the stone. The hint of green on her smooth face vanished.

After a few minutes of silence gelling between them, her eyes lifted. "The journey to Dev Nadir will take several days and hundreds of servants and guards. You won't be so lucky if you try to escape, not with a dozen Li'Ador."

They could just as well have called the demon hunters. A dozen Li'Ador could easily keep him disabled, if not kill him. The warriors had earned the respect of normal humans by protecting them from demons and adhered to a rigid code meant to protect the public. They had no special powers, but their martial skills were unmatched. The Adepts of Te'Mea went to them to learn to become demon hunters.

Je'Rol had once fought and killed several Li'Ador who had dared to attack him when he'd wandered into the gardens of a human leader. He'd fled to avoid the inevitable, but they'd chased him into an ambush with two others. The fight had been gruesome and difficult. On the brink of death by the unnatural speed and skill of the warriors who caught him, the beast had arisen. He remembered waking next to a dead horse and two bloody bodies shredded by claws, a horrible wound in his side.

He didn't want to think what a dozen Li'Ador might do to him. Death was a good possibility. Their speed nearly matched his, and their strength was extraordinary for mere humans. He'd heard rumors of the Li'Ador killing halfbloods, but not until his fight had he thought it possible. Several Li'Ador combined were as effective as the power of an individual demon hunter.

If Lord Bannon had employed a dozen of the warriors, he might have others protecting his fortress.

Liandra's smile taunted him from escape considerations. His thoughts might be his own, or they might not. Her power over him only led him to believe he was free to choose. How could he trust his own thoughts as long as she held that power?

"Do you like bleeding?" She closed her hand around the green stone with the gray ring

around it, hiding it from his sight.

He had almost forgotten the guard's sword. Je'Rol swiped the coolness on his neck and studied the shine of blood on his fingertips. A small wound, it would heal before midday. He wiped his fingers on his cloak and crossed his arms, unconcerned by the small scrape.

Here they were again, back to the game she played last night, but her body perfumed like a garden. "What do you want?"

She leaned forward, her free hand reaching for his knee while the one with the amulet balanced across her bent legs. That wasn't the hand he wanted. He'd let her have her fun, until the amulet came into reach.

"What do you think I want?" she asked.

"My cooperation in a scheme plotted by Lord Bannon," he grumbled.

She stroked his knee. "You know so little."

"Then tell me."

"You'll learn when the time comes." Her hand slid up his thigh. It brought her body with it and the hand he sought.

Je'Rol snatched her hand with the green stone and pulled it close. She made no attempt to fight.

"What is it, Je'Rol?" Her voice was silky smooth, a touch of seductiveness haunting her tone. "What's in my hand?"

She was too calm. Or was this part of her game?

He pried open her fingers and dug out the gem, a deep emerald set into a narrow medallion of metal bearing symbols like those tattooed on her body. Was it the answer—the source of her control over him?

The smirk on her face said she wasn't worried about him having it. If it wasn't the source of her power, what was it?

He held it up between thumb and forefinger, his other hand still clamped around her wrist. "What is it?"

"If it were important, do you think I would risk you taking it?"

"What is it?" He tightened his fingers around her wrist, letting the claws extend to pinch her. No more games!

She winced but it didn't dull her smile or cause her to struggle. He caught a new smell, the subtle change of her scent hinting of something he knew well—fear.

Fire ignited in his chest. He tightened his grip, ready to crush her bones.

"You cannot hurt me, Je'Rol."

Heat flared through him from his chest so each breath choked as if inhaling the blaze. He gasped for air and scratched at the glow.

She backed away and the fire subsided.

He no longer held her or the green stone, but leaned on hands and knees, wheezing for clear air.

A soft touch ran down his head. "My poor boy. It seems you've learned nothing from our time together, but you will."

She knelt before him, a finger on his chin lifting his face to her. He growled but restrained himself from tearing her apart. Air filled his lungs, cool and a bit dank but welcome after the fire. He jerked his head away in defiance.

"You will obey." Liandra stood, the fingers of her left hand clenched once more around the stone held inches from him. "Come now, Je'Rol."

His body obeyed and rose from the floor, and his feet carried him to the door without question. She knocked and the young guard opened the door for her, a blotch of discoloration forming on his cheek.

"He's ready now," Liandra said.

The older guard gave Je'Rol a dark glare but said nothing.

Je'Rol pulled his hood over his head and followed the sorceress. The stone wasn't important. Hurting her did nothing but cause him more pain. Killing her was the last option, but he would if it meant his freedom.

No. That was her control on him. She didn't have to say anything. With her near, he couldn't trust his own thoughts; but she couldn't control him if she was unconscious. Or was that the reason for the stone?

She used him, and he wanted to know what Lord Bannon planned in Dev Nadir. Curiosity restrained him, not her.

The tromping of boots on stone echoed through the corridor. Liandra led him to the alcove, which made a sharp angle into another corridor lined by narrow windows.

As they passed, he looked out to his right on a rocky decline of land down to a village around which a protective wall rose up. Each glimpse through the glass gave him a piece of the picture he put together. Through the windows on his left lay a courtyard surrounded by the stone walls of the fortress, a pond in the middle with a tree hanging over it. A group of men in formal attire and ladies in fancy dresses mingled about, many sitting on stone benches lining the open area. Small etchings of bears climbed the corner columns.

Beyond the covered but open walkway on the other side of the courtyard rose the smooth stone wall of several floors of fortress topped by a tiled roof.

"This way, Je'Rol." Liandra motioned with her finger to follow her through a doorway.

He hesitated, until the old guard stepped close behind him. The scrape of his movements and the faint ring of metal hinted of his eagerness to skewer Je'Rol with that sword.

A low growl rose from Je'Rol's throat, but he followed the sorceress through a doorway and a short corridor on their right to a full hall. Liandra paused in the doorway, giving him a moment to take in the dark columns throughout the hall, which blended with the armed guards in their strict rows facing the center, where the rows of black and silver Li'Ador armor formed a clear aisle. The eyes of the elite burned him in the fire of their hatred.

Je'Rol tensed, his claws extending in preparation to fight. The beast rose inside him but didn't try to escape. He would never win against that many Li'Ador.

Liandra whispered to him, "Follow me. Walk quietly and they won't move."

He glared down at her dark hair. Now was not the best time to attack her for his freedom. That time would come when they were away from the threat.

"Dev Nadir awaits." Liandra strode into the hall.

The beast waited on a breath for a reason to take over, while Je'Rol followed the sorceress's gliding steps and tried not to think about the danger surrounding him.

Ahead, a double door with brass vines circling an inlaid brass and iron scene of bears in a forest stood open to a stone-lined yard filled by mounted soldiers around three carriages.

Once through the hall of soldiers, he stepped out into sunlight and pulled his hood low to shade his eyes. The soldiers sat quietly atop their horses, but their hatred penetrated the air around him with a menace that taunted the beast to rise.

Not yet. When the time came, he might not have a choice but to unleash the demon side. If he could avoid it, he would, and so far, the threat on his life was minimal. Patience would be his

best ally.

On the cool breeze from the mountains towering over them, the scent of horses rose with the sweat of men. A path of road cut among the boulders and trees curved down among the natural barriers and the stone buildings of the village built on the same hillside.

Je'Rol took in the numbers of soldiers, particularly the black and silver armor with the black traveling cloaks. Lord Bannon must have had money to pay for all this. The bear clan was generous to allow him to rise to such power. A small part of Je'Rol was curious why, but the matters of the humans were no more his than those of the demonlords. He wished to avoid them all.

Liandra motioned him to follow her to one of the carriages. In the open outdoors, he hesitated and twisted back to view the palace, for that was what it was, more than a fortress to keep out the natters, the lowest, stupidest of demons. A quick jump would launch him over the heads and spears of the soldiers to the roof. In a couple more, he could be down the rocky hillside or up the mountain.

He'd never make it.

Je'Rol blinked away the doubts tearing through his desire for freedom and turned with a growl to the woman at the carriage.

The dark eyes of the sorceress held him, a touch of knowing in her taunting smile. "Come," she said.

He stepped up to the dark carriage interior before her. She followed and took the seat across from him.

The guards that had followed them out shut the door. No one had attacked or stopped him. Either they had been given explicit orders or... "They don't know."

"They know *what* but not *who*." At the jingle of bits and fittings, she gazed out the window. "It was necessary to secure the Li'Ador."

He'd bet it was, and it would be a fair bet to win that Lord Bannon paid heavily for them to leave Je'Rol alive rather than kill him. Why was he wanted alive when they knew he was a threat?

How could he escape? For that he'd have to wait for the right opportunity.

With a call from somewhere in the waiting group, the clatter of hooves on stone surrounded them. The carriage lurched and rolled forward.

Je'Rol stretched his legs to the bottom of the seat on which the sorceress sat, bracing himself in a slouch with his arms across his chest. The carriage angled down the winding path, and the ring of hooves on stone muffled when they reached the hard-packed soil of the road.

"How long to Dev Nadir?" Rarely had traveled the roads. Although he had arrived on the Karaligo continent a couple years ago in his search for the obelisk, he always traveled and avoided the demonlords where he could. Hiding who he was on a world that feared or despised him from either side meant never staying anywhere long enough to reveal himself.

"Three days." Her eyes fixed on the land passing outside the window to her left.

Three days by carriage would have been a little more than a day alone for him, or a rider on a fresh horse; but the carriage horses required rest and food and weren't built for fast travel. Three days meant plenty of opportunity to escape, if he could break the control she had on him.

Chapter 3

Throughout the first day, Je'Rol held his tongue, watching the sorceress and observing her. The bouncing of the carriage made it impossible to rest while they traveled, but he tried. He would need to stay alert come nightfall.

His plans to escape at night proved futile—a dozen Li'Ador surrounded him and the sorceress used her power of commanding him to sleep where they camped in the open. He couldn't resist her power and woke to her standing over him the next morning. A low growl rumbled in his throat in irritation, but with the Li'Ador alert around him, he dared not retaliate and quickly ate the meal offered to him.

Afterwards, they prodded him to enter the carriage. Je'Rol growled and extended his claws for the next man who dared crowd too close. Amid the soldiers half a head shorter, he caught a glimpse of the black-bearded Lord Cair Bannon in his finery among a group of armored soldiers.

A woman with long golden hair stood back from them, her amber gown fitting her tall, slim figure with an elegance not possessed of any human he had ever seen. She said nothing but glanced at Je'Rol, her face pinched in a dark scowl.

He froze at the steps of the carriage, struggling against the beast demanding release to defend itself, but not from the Li'Ador. The golden lady set off a warning within him by her presence. Instinct said she was more than a normal woman.

She watched him, a hint of menace on her face.

"Inside," one of the guards ordered.

Je'Rol snarled and all voices quieted. The woman approached, a motion to the guards all she needed for them to move aside in deference.

His heart raced with each step she took. The dignity and poise with which she carried herself multiplied the imminent threat of her presence, but he refused to back down. No human would hold him prisoner for long, not even one as terrible and beautiful as her.

"Do as you're told, halfblood." Her voice snapped the order as if trained in the art of command, something he fully expected from a lady of nobility.

He served no one and let her know in a growl.

Her eyes narrowed. Silence hung over the land as if no one dared breathe. From his position among the soldiers, Lord Bannon watched, the exposed areas of his face paling in sharp contrast to his black hair and beard.

"Be grateful for the mercy shown you," the golden lady said in a threatening voice.

Words betrayed him to argue with her. Or was it more? Something about her forbade him from arguing, but it wasn't for lack of words. The way she carried herself commanded respect, and fear. Only a fully trained sorceress might show such confidence, but the golden lady wore no tattoos like Liandra.

He didn't care who she was, or he tried to tell himself.

"Why should I care?" Je'Rol growled and held up one clawed hand in threat. Sunlight glinted off the nails extended into sharp claws ready to tear through flesh.

Her lip twitched, but she stayed her ground. Either very brave or very stupid, it didn't matter. When he made his move, anyone who stood between him and freedom would be slashed.

Lord Bannon came up behind her. "My lady, your carriage is ready." He made no move to touch her but stepped back out of her way.

For several seconds, she glared at Je'Rol. Then, without a word, she turned, her chin held high, and followed Lord Bannon to a second carriage. Lord Bannon bowed and offered her a

hand to step up, before closing the door and leaving the carriage.

Interesting. Who was really in charge?

And who was this woman who could inspire a chill in *him*, Je'Rol, halfblood tiger demonlord? Her scent was carried away by the wind blowing from him, or he might have had a base to identify her.

"Inside, halfblood."

Je'Rol whirled on the guard with a snarl. Over a dozen Li'Ador closed around him, armed with spears and swords, some with bows taut with arrows and full quivers upon their backs.

"Come, Je'Rol," Liandra invited from within the dark carriage.

Unless he wanted to be slashed into a thousand pieces, he had only one choice. The damned sorceress had him, and she knew it. Next time.

Growling, he climbed in and sat down.

Liandra gazed at him, the corners of her mouth lifted slightly.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You'll see in two more days."

"Tell me, sorceress." He lunged for her, claws ready.

Fire seared through his chest as he grasped her shoulders and pinched. It filled his body, consuming him in pain.

Not again. He refused to give in.

Through clenched teeth, he growled at her. "Tell...me."

Her face inches from his revealed a moment of fear beneath the calm façade, but it could have been a mistake. She smiled in spite of the rapid pulse within his grasp.

The burning increased in his chest with the glow from the stone. It both enraged and subdued the beast he wished to unleash upon her.

"You cannot hurt me."

The pain blotted out his surroundings, intensifying each second he held her. Claws retracted and he stumbled back, gasping for breath.

Sweat plastered his hair to his cheeks and neck, but the heat decreased each second he sat away from her. His clothes stuck to him. Although he'd lost to her power, Je'Rol had seen the truth. She feared him. But why rely on the stone and not her own power? Or was she weak?

"Sit, Je'Rol, and enjoy the ride." Amusement touched her quiet voice.

The beast vanished deep inside, but it could not escape in her presence. For a few seconds, she'd allowed him to think for himself.

"I hoped I could trust you, but I see that I'm mistaken." Her voice flowed in a silken serenity to match the lift of her full lips. She crossed her legs and, beneath her cloak, crossed her bare, tattooed arms, which peaked out through the part of fabric.

He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to *kill* her for what she had done to him. The beast agreed, but now that he desired its cold compassion in bloodshed, it could not break the invisible cage of restraint she had built around it.

"What have you done to me?"

She leaned forward, her eyes dancing with cold malice. "You are mine, Je'Rol." Her voice bore a sinister edge that hadn't been there until now.

He'd heard rumors of the dark powers controlled by sorcerers, who seemed to thrive on the fear and mystery surrounding them. The demonlords would be right to massacre the Adepts of Te'Mea, but they had nothing to fear. Demonlords were immortal, untouchable by any magic, and they occasionally found both sects useful—sorcerers and demon hunters.

Je'Rol had never subscribed to any rumors, choosing instead to judge each individual on their actions.

Serae Liandra fit the dark descriptions of most rumors concerning the sorcerers, thriving on misleading him with wrong turns to freedom. Likely knowing none would survive, she had sent soldiers to plant something on him. Not only could she control the demon side, which she subdued with her will, but she also controlled his human side, and no Adept could do that. He needed to find a way to remove that stone, or the magic she used.

Until then, he could only sit and ponder the situation and the woman who had imprisoned him within his own body.

During the brief midday break, he was allowed outside only to eat and relieve himself with a full escort of Li'Ador watching his every move. He never saw anything of Lord Bannon or the lady with the golden hair.

By the end of the day, he yearned to stretch his legs and run the moment the guards opened the carriage door.

Over a dozen Li'Ador were ready for him.

Je'Rol clenched his fingers into tight fists. They held their weapons drawn and ready, a nasty blade at the end of each staff and arrows taut against bowstrings. At the memory of a previous battle with the Li'Ador and the pain he'd suffered after recovering control from the beast, he shuddered.

Over a dozen of those weapons aimed at him now. Despite connecting to the demonlord side, he could not release the beast. He could fight as he was, but he would be no match without the full ferocity of the tiger. Any other time he would be grateful for the restraint.

"Step down, halfblood." One of the officers said.

Je'Rol ignored him, his legs tightening in anticipation of a jump that would carry him over men and horses to the security of the boulders breaking the foliage beyond them. Once there, he could disappear into the crevices and trees of the mountains around them. Only the bear clan could stop him.

Fire flared in his chest, startling him off balance. The ground cracked against his shoulder and he rolled to his back as the sorceress stepped out, a satisfied look on her dark-complexioned face with her cowl off her head.

"You will follow orders." She spoke in that sensual, teasing voice. The soldiers backed away from her approach. "Come now."

The heat faded, leaving him cool in the crisp air. Je'Rol climbed to his feet next to the small, lithe figure. Those dark eyes gazed through him, demanding that he obey.

He let out a low growl, but it sounded like a whimper.

When she whispered in a strange tongue, a cloud of darkness blanketed everything, as if twilight had come, yet no one questioned it.

He blinked but could not clear his vision or the cold that settled inside of him. What had she done this time?

As if from far away, she whispered, "This way."

No more than a shadow shimmering with strange symbols, which glowed on sections of her skin exposed outside her cloak, the sorceress stepped away from the carriage. The guards parted before her. Je'Rol followed through the shadows of the men. The myriad scents surrounding him muted with his vision and sounds muffled.

But through the shadowy darkness, a figure of normal lighting stood out behind the crowd of men. He hesitated, hoping for a better look. The golden hair bobbed over the shadows.

"Come, Je'Rol," Liandra's voice beckoned.

His feet moved to obey the sorceress against his will. He struggled to keep an eye on the figure through the shadows, but it disappeared.

A whisper touched the pain in his chest and the darkness lifted, revealing a cavern before him in the rocky side of the mountain.

"You will sleep here tonight," Liandra stated.

He growled his annoyance with the cave and the danger of dark places as nests to natters, despite the efforts of the Adepts and the Li'Ador to cleanse the world of the pests. It was no better than imprisonment in her room while she taunted him with her magic. Even worse were no windows or fire. But with the Li'Ador standing off, the threat of impalement eased from his mind.

"Any food with that?" His stomach rumbled as if to emphasize the ache in his gut.

A patronizing smile lifted her cheeks. "Soon."

Not soon enough. Je'Rol looked back at the two hundred or more men and a few women settling around the carriages and horses.

While the Li'Ador may not have followed them to the cave, they stood at rigid attention, their bows or staves in their hands. From beneath a dozen helmets, their eyes watched him without wavering.

He snarled at them, but they never flinched.

"Wait inside, Je'Rol," the sorceress commanded softly.

Inside was out of their sight. He ducked the low overhang and entered a cavern larger than the room in the palace where she had held him. No natters and no scent of them having been there recently, but it would have negated Lord Bannon's purpose for him. He stood up under a tall ceiling, the sorceress behind him.

"Sit."

Her voice grated on his nerves, but he resisted the urge to bend his legs and collapse. The power of the request was lighter than other times. Had something weakened her, or didn't she care?

A weak sorceress might grant him a chance of escape. Claws extended beneath his cloak, ready to fight his way to freedom.

"Sit," she said more firmly.

The urge to sit rose strongly in him. Fighting her will over his made him tremble and stumble backwards.

"My will is yours. You will do as I command."

"No."

Her eyes narrowed and a faint light shone from beneath her cloak a moment before the fire flared in his chest. "You must give up, Je'Rol." Her voice whispered through his head with the seduction of relief from the pain.

He couldn't fight her, not when his chest burned, but he tried.

The fire seared through him, all consuming in its intensity. He gasped for air but it burned his lungs. The stone glowed from his chest and he clutched at it to scratch it off but could not touch it.

His knees weakened and he collapsed before the sorceress, struggling for air. Sweat stuck his hair and clothes to his skin.

She squatted down and lifted his chin with a finger. Part of him wanted to wipe the smile from her face with the swipe of a claw, but the other part of him restrained it, insisting he listen

to her.

"My dear Je'Rol." Her other hand stroked his loose hair from his face, her touch gentle, almost loving.

It was wrong. She didn't care for him, except for how she could bend his will to obey and carry out whatever plans she had for him.

"I would comfort you and give you a place to lay your head, if you'd let me."

Yes, he wanted that.

No, he didn't. Damn her. She caressed him, touched him as if she loved him; but he felt nothing, only a shadow of a memory long buried.

This had to end, before he lost himself to the confusion of his thoughts.

Claws scratched on rock, but he could not raise them against her. Tears cooled his eyes of the burning still enveloping him.

"Why do you fight it? I can control the demon. You can be free, a halfblood accepted by others because you don't lose control. Isn't that what you've wanted all your life?"

Yes.

But not from her and not like this.

Through clenched teeth, he growled, blinking to clear his vision of her. "I would rather be a slave to the beast—" The burning raged through his chest and his arms ached— "Than a slave to you."

"My poor, misguided halfblood. I can give you freedom."

His ears deceived him, or she did. What game did she play now?

Quivering in agony but determined not to give in this time, he watched her for signs of truth. A faint hope lit inside him that she meant what she said in the way he wanted her to say it; but he doubted she played fair. Liandra had no reason to release him from her control, not when she could use him for her own means.

She leaned forward, her breath cool on his sweaty neck. "Trust me."

He wanted to laugh, but could barely breathe through the pain.

She backed off but, a few seconds later, set a plate of food on the ground before him. "Eat now and rest. I'll return after you've had time to consider."

Her feet padded softly away through the mouth of the cavern, taking the fire with them.

Weakened from fighting her magic, Je'Rol rested his head against the cool, dank ground and breathed deeply to calm his racing heart. He was accustomed to traveling whole days on foot without exhaustion, but this was magic, and more powerful than he'd ever expected. What did they want with him?

He turned his head and stared out the low opening of the cavern. Several Li'Ador stood watch at the entrance, three with their backs to him and four standing alert facing him. Beyond them, he saw little, but the steady drone of voices and clinks and squeaks of armor merged. It was as if he didn't exist and the world went on without him.

To most of them, he probably didn't matter. This was the way he preferred it—that no one think about him. They did, though, or the Li'Ador wouldn't be standing watch.

Cold meat waited within arm's reach, along with a hard, dry roll. It wasn't much, but the meat would replenish his strength. He'd had the chance for water in the carriage.

Je'Rol's hand shook as he reached for the plate and pulled it near, the scrape of metal on stone echoing to the high ceiling of the cavern. Fresh, raw kill would have been preferable to the day old cooked meat, but he had no choice and chewed it down with the stale bread. Afterwards, he sat with his head back against the rock and closed his eyes.

Still weak from Liandra's magic, he rested. He'd need his strength if he had the chance to escape. Getting past the Li'Ador would be a challenge requiring everything he had, *if* he could disable the sorceress.

Small chance of that, but if the opportunity presented itself, he wouldn't be sitting around.

Except the more determined he was, the stronger the magic she used against him. How far would she go towards breaking him completely?

With his eyes closed, he listened to the buzz of conversations outside.

Soldiers speculated about the purpose of their journey to Dev Nadir and the territory under Lord Sidek Chandroya, the local governor. Apparently the man had a penchant for sports, particularly the more gruesome Dao'Larashi, where trained warriors fought to the death while a whole arena of spectators cheered them on.

And Lord Bannon was taking him to the city of this blood-thirsty ruler. Humans were no better than their demonlord masters when given enough freedom.

"I hear his best came from Ragren, a giant of a man. Undefeated in eight years, supposedly. Lord Chandroya bought him a few years ago for his weight in gold."

Bought him? As Je'Rol suspected from bits of conversation he'd caught in his travels, the Dao fighters were slaves.

"Right." By the tone, the other man was anything but agreeing. "No one has that kind of money sitting around."

"Ah, but rumors say the domain of the H'Shasa clan is rich with gold and gems and they freely trade with the humans through the ports of Dev Nadir."

The H'Shasa clan. Je'Rol had met one while traveling through their domain years ago, a large island named Hathaen. In their original forms, the demonlords who ruled it were strange, almost horse-like predators whose four long legs extended from a scaly, heavily-muscled body to claws. From that body, their spike-lined necks tapered to a head that resembled something between that of a horse and that of the dragon clan with sharp teeth for tearing flesh. Unlike a horse or dragon, they could snap their long, snakelike tails like whips. As fierce and swift as their beast forms, the H'Shasa demonlords were quite the opposite in nature, though no less discriminating, than any other demonlords towards halfbloods.

The demonlord had let Je'Rol go only after he promised never to return.

Je'Rol never looked back, but neither did he forget the gentle nature of the H'Shasa clan in contrast to their frightening appearance.

"Chandroya bought this fighter for his weight in gold?" The new man's voice was like rocks grinding. "Feh. Ain't no man worth that."

"Maybe not, but Lord Chandroya must think so," the third man said.

Another man chuckled. "Let 'im."

"Yeah. It's his gold to waste."

"No. I mean that," the calm, casual voice said.

"What?"

Their voices lowered, but Je'Rol focused on the source of the sound, his ears keener than any human's.

"What do you think is in *there*?" the calm man asked.

A pause, then a gasp.

"Yes."

"He wouldn't dare. In the blood rage—" the rocky-voiced man said.

"He knows. Lord Bannon hasn't said anything, but I suspect that's the purpose of this parade

and the sorceress to keep him under control...until the right time. All the strength and agility of the demonlords but none of the control. Let a halfblood loose and—" He cut off.

So that was it.

Je'Rol let out a sigh. They wanted him to defeat the undefeated Dao fighter. What if he didn't want to fight?

Liandra would probably see to that. Maybe that's what she meant by his freedom—turning him loose on an unsuspecting human who would be no match at any skill level alone with a halfblood of Je'Rol's experience against worthy opponents. He was probably the oldest surviving halfblood; no wonder she had sought him specifically. Most died early at the hands of demon hunters or Li'Ador, or lost themselves when the blood rage grew too savage.

"So long, Lord Chandroya's Dao fighter." The man's voice muffled as if behind a mug.

"Hello, Lord Bannon as the top Dao fighter owner."

"Or all the gold Chandroya can throw at him for the halfblood."

A few mumbles of agreement followed that.

"Speculation and rumor," the rocky-voiced man scoffed.

"It makes sense."

Je'Rol growled, ready to strip Lord Bannon of his skin if he came near. Was that the reason for the sorceress and his captivity to her will? Perhaps she sought to subdue the beast to level his killing skills against the human fighter. He didn't need the demon side to kill. He was stronger, faster, and more tolerant of pain than any mere human. Coupled with a sense of smell and hearing that alerted him to the subtle reactions accompanying a human's thoughts, he often downed his opponents before they finished their attack posture.

"It's damned right speculation," another man said. "Messenger came a fortnight ago to deliver news of a Dao Larashi tournament. It opens seventh night after the rise of Karnoss."

"Five days from now."

"That's no coincidence."

The star of Karnoss only came into view for a limited time each year, though sometimes twice. It must have emerged from the western horizon during his night in Lord Bannon's palace. He was no astronomer and didn't care about the stars except for navigation across the domains.

The men hushed, but Je'Rol had heard enough. Now he understood the reason Lord Bannon desired him.

He had one more day to plan his escape, if the sorceress let her guard down.

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M. A. Nilles is the darker side of Melanie Nilles. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, cats, and her horse. Her published works under the name Melanie Nilles include the *Starfire Angels* series and the *Legend of the White Dragon* epic. *Tiger Born* is the first book as M. A. Nilles. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse. For updates, visit her website at www.melaniennes.com.

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