

Sneak Peek of The Demon's Due

The Brink tasted like ozone and fear, but I swallowed both as Alastair's fingers dug into my arm. While I might be done hiding my shedim side, I wasn't done being hunted.

I picked my way over patches of ice that bloomed into carpets of tiny flowers with sharp crystalline petals, a lifetime of running over uneven terrain saving me a twisted ankle on the slick ground. Crunching a lopsided carnation—Mother Nature's gas station flower—under my boot, I wondered whether Alastair's head would make that same satisfying noise when I killed him for good.

Operative Fleischer, champion of justice, had vanished the second the bloodsucking parasite blackmailed me into leaving—

I dropped my gaze from the mud-brown sky to the fortress looming ahead of us. The weathered gray stone walls were lined with crenellations and guard towers, while bushes with oversized thorns grew wild in the dry moat. Their barbs coiled like hungry serpents, waiting for unwary flesh to pierce.

Annoyingly, my eyes stung from the stench of pine cleaner that had followed us for the past half hour. The reek made as much sense as the floating reefs of bone-white coral resembling teeth we'd navigated in eerie silence.

Usually, trips to the Brink were anything but quick. Count on Alastair to have some dumb artifact that could whisk us from the rift through the Brink to the fortress like an overeager puppy with a full bladder bounding to its favorite tree.

Though even one second spent in his charming presence was an eternity too long. He'd forsaken any pretense of civility, exposing a man-shaped reservoir of spite and brutishness.

The handcuffs bit painfully into my wrists as he hauled me forward by the chain, his casual flick sending me lurching behind him. My stomach churned with revulsion at being reduced to a prisoner, a possession, while the weight of his control over me made me want to scream with rage, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

Alastair didn't know it, but the restraints were overkill, given that the very sentence he was frog-marching me toward had already stripped me of my Eishet Kodesh abilities and left my connection to Cherry Bomb on the fritz.

Yes, I'd forfeited my blue flame magic for an hour, but I'd expected the pay up to happen either when I first wagered it days ago or at some random innocuous time. Not that some asshole magic guardian would stalk me and find the exact worst moment to snatch my abilities away.

My captor pounded on the fortress's metal-reinforced wooden gate with an expression of savage triumph, and that old adage about not counting chickens flitted through my head.

I still had a shot. One requiring extraordinary luck, insanely perfect timing, and possibly a minor miracle, but technically, still a shot.

But with my shedim side fading in and out, my Eishet Kodosh magic in absentia, and the nulling cuffs squashing the hope that I'd be able to do anything even if I got my powers back, I was swimming in a catastrophe cocktail. My brain had locked up completely, like a computer with too many fatal errors. No reboot and no strategic thinking.

Sensing my distress, the Brimstone Baroness tore through the staticky barrier separating us. Our link clicked into place like a dislocated joint popping back to where it belonged.

Cherry itched to tear that British bastard limb from limb for orchestrating horrors from his comfortable shadows. I forced the sudden toxic green of my eyes back to their regular light brown and ordered her to shove her hate down, because my jaw still throbbed from Alastair's backhanded blow when I'd attempted to bond over deadbeat supernatural parents.

Who could have guessed that while Calista had hidden her dhampir son, she'd also protected him, visiting as often as she could to not only train him with valuable survival skills, but simply spend time with him.

Alastair had stoked his hatred for the parties he believed responsible for his mother's death like precious glowing coals. To be fair, he had plenty of that emotion to go around, along with a list of every vampire who'd ever dissed or underestimated him.

"They'll get theirs when I have the power of a Prime and they don't," he'd said darkly.

Alastair's hand now flitted to a green camo canteen worn on a canvas shoulder strap, the uncharacteristic accessory first revealed when he lost his wool coat back in the bone reefs. BYOB? Supplies for a tailgate party? Picky about his food? In any case, he hadn't touched it yet, so perchance it was a boutique hemoglobin to be savored in celebration.

So long as he didn't try snacking on me.