

The Price

ANNE BISHOP

“Well, shit, sugar. Someone had a party and didn’t invite me.” And it was the kind of party I used to like. Nasty.

And yet, as I stood in the doorway, looking at what had been a nicely decorated sitting room, I felt edgy, uneasy. There’s no law against murder among the Blood, and if I’d come upon a room like this when I lived in the Realm of Terreille, I wouldn’t have thought twice about it. But in the Realm of Kaeleer, the Blood still live by the Old Ways, and the whole dance of Protocol and power usually works to keep confrontations from becoming fatal.

So what happened last night that ended with three men being hacked to pieces, resulting in a room now redecorated in a blood-and-gore motif?

And why did I think *hacked*? Using Craft and the power that makes the Blood who and what we are, a person could do just as much damage to a human body. But something in the room whispered to me that this was . . . not personal, exactly, but definitely a hands-on killing. There was a lingering sense of fury and hatred here.

I know those feelings well, and my past contained rooms just as messy. But there was something else here that I almost recognized but couldn’t quite name.

Of course, that could have been nothing more than annoyance with myself for being at the scene. If I’d stayed home this morning, I would have been tucking into breakfast right now. But I’d gone for a walk and ended up at this establishment because they serve a fine breakfast—and because this place was the closest thing to a Red Moon house in Kaeleer. So I’d come here to take a look at my past, which had contributed to my recently failed romance.

The Blood have a saying: Everything has a price. The price for my first attempt at a physical relationship with a man where money didn’t change hands was a bruised heart. Funny how the heart gets bruised when someone tells you you’re not what he wants—even when you already know he’s not what you want either.

But there’s nothing like a bit of slaughter to take a person’s mind off her own problems.

Using Craft, I stepped up on air so that I was standing a handspan above the carpet. I walked into the room. Three male bodies were splattered over the carpet, the walls, the furniture, and the painted screen that turned one corner of the room into a private area. I assumed there were only three because I found three left hands—and I found other body parts in triplicate.

“Lady Surreal?”

As I turned toward the doorway, I lowered my right hand and called in my favorite stiletto, using Craft to keep it sight shielded so it wouldn't be obvious I had a weapon ready. A moment later, when I recognized the man in the doorway, I vanished the stiletto.

“Prince Rainier.”

Rainier was an Opal-Jeweled Warlord Prince from Dharo, another Territory in Kaeleer. I'd seen him a few weeks ago at a party here in Amdarh and, more recently, enjoyed dancing with him at a family wedding. I'd also noticed him in the dining room this morning, reading a book while he ate breakfast. A fine-looking man with a dancer's build, fair skin, dreamy green eyes, and a mane of brown hair, he stood out in Dhemplan's capital city, where the residents had the common coloring of light-brown skin, black hair, and gold eyes. Which was, actually, the common coloring of all three of the long-lived races.

Being half-Hayllian, I had the black hair and light-brown skin, but my eyes were gold-green and my ears came to delicate points—the legacy of my mother's people. I was also a Gray-Jeweled witch, so my power was darker and deeper than his. That didn't mean I could afford to be careless. Warlord Princes were natural predators and also very protective. That should have been a contradiction, but it wasn't; it just made them extremely lethal.

“Why did they ask you to see this?” Rainier said as he looked behind the painted screen. He paled, and I didn't imagine his breakfast was sitting well, but when he moved away from the screen, he studied the room with a hunter's eyes.

“Maybe because I wear the Gray,” I replied, shrugging. Or maybe because the owners of this place had heard a few things about me and wanted my professional opinion. “And you?”

Grief tightened his face. “I had an appointment here after breakfast.”

Here. Not just in this establishment, but *here*. “You knew them.”

“If these are the same young men who reserved this room, then, yes, I knew them.”

“What were they doing?”

“A weekly lesson. I was hired as a secondary instructor.”

It was better not to ask about that while I was still in this room.

“They didn't deserve this,” Rainier said quietly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.” His voice sharpened. Everything about him sharpened.

I nodded and looked around again. He knew these men; I didn't. “So. Three men

were killed for no apparent reason. If there wasn't a reason, there wasn't a payment. Which means no one hired a professional to get rid of them."

"A professional? You mean an assassin? How do you know it wasn't?"

"Because I am a professional. Was a professional." I shrugged. "There's not much call for assassins in Kaeleer."

"I'd heard—" He fumbled, belatedly remembering that I was related to the most powerful Warlord Princes in the Realm of Kaeleer.

"That I was a whore? I was that, too. You could say one career led to the other."

Wariness in his eyes now.

"I didn't kill them," I said. "If I had, I would have done a better job of it. Let's go. There's nothing more to do here."

He was under no obligation to go with me, but he followed me out of the room, stayed with me while I talked to the owners, and made suggestions about who they should talk to in the Queen of Amdarh's court to report this incident.

When I left the building, he went with me, walking on my left—a signal to everyone who saw us that I was the dominant party. As a Warlord Prince, he belonged to a higher caste than I, a mere witch, did. But my Gray Jewels outranked his Opal. In the knife-edged game of power the Blood play on a daily basis, which of us held the high card in terms of authority could change in the blink of an eye.

I turned a corner, heading away from the theater district with its playhouses and music halls. Those streets would be quiet at this time of day. I wanted the bustle of people and the distraction of shops.

Even this early in the morning, there were plenty of people in the shop district, plenty of faces . . .

"We didn't find their heads."

"They were behind the screen," Rainier replied grimly.

"Damn. It might have helped to see what they'd looked like." Might have given me a clue about why the murder had happened. Of course, I could have used a clue about why I was still chewing over this. I'd made a good living killing men. I should have been able to shrug these deaths off. I couldn't—because something just wasn't right about the kills.

"It wouldn't have helped," Rainier said. "Their faces were burned past recognition." He paused, then added, "Witchfire."

Knowing how fiercely witchfire can burn, I swallowed hard, glad I hadn't managed to get breakfast. Did make me reassess my companion's nerves, though. He'd

looked at those faces and had kept *his* breakfast down.

“So, what kind of lessons were they getting?” Maybe knowing why the men had been in that room would help me figure out why they died.

“Sex,” Rainier replied.

I stopped walking. People flowed around us. “How many women?” I could feel my blood chilling, feel the old rage rising.

He looked puzzled. “One.”

Some of those messy rooms in my past had occurred when the males had thought the odds were in their favor for rough sex without the female’s consent. They learned how deep and pure female rage can be. Of course, they died learning it, so the lesson didn’t do them much good.

Rainier shook his head. “It’s instruction, Surreal. Frank discussion about what a woman wants from a lover. Some demonstration.”

“Demonstration.” Maybe the little bastards had gotten exactly what they deserved.

Rainier took my left hand in his right and lifted it, his eyes never leaving mine. His lips, warm and soft, surrounded one knuckle. The tip of his tongue stroked my skin.

A sweet, unexpected feeling flowed through me, banishing anger.

He released my hand, and said quietly, “Demonstration.”

Hell’s fire, Mother Night, and may the Darkness be merciful. He must have been a dedicated student when he’d been learning those lessons. I had to clear my throat in order to get my voice back. “So.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

His smile was pure male as he took my arm and started walking again.

“Understanding what pleases is just as important in a man’s personal life as it is if he serves in a court,” Rainier said.

Hard to argue, since that little demonstration made me feel deliciously female and desirable. But it also plucked at the edgy, uneasy feeling I’d had in the room, so I looked for something else to talk about—and stopped walking half a block from a corner.

“What’s he doing?” The boy was shepherding females from one side of the street to the other. That was obvious. Why he was doing it wasn’t.

“Who?” Rainier looked around, then grinned. “Oh. He’s training. Since there are two boys about the same age at the other corners, their instructor is probably sitting in that coffee shop across the street, keeping an eye on them.”

Things were different in Kaeleer, but . . . “You *train* males to be a pain in the ass?”

“We train them to serve.”

“That’s what I said.” My comment annoyed him. I didn’t care. If he spent one day on the receiving end of that kind of stubborn attention, he’d have a totally different opinion about a male’s right to serve.

Then my stomach growled.

Rainier studied me. “Would you like to go to the coffee shop? They don’t serve meals there, but they do have baked goods.”

“Fine.” I stepped away from him. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Surreal.”

I heard the warning in his voice, but I ignored it and walked to the corner. I’d noticed the boy stepped aside if a woman already had a male escort, and I was curious.

A cute puppy, all bright-eyed and eager. A little Yellow-Jeweled Warlord. A miniature man. His eyes widened when he saw my Gray Jewel, but he took a deep breath and smiled.

“May I be of service, Lady?” he asked.

Protocol. Specific phrases that had specific answers. Protocol balanced power, giving the weaker among the Blood a safe way to deal with the stronger.

“I’m going to the coffee shop across the street,” I replied.

“Then I will escort you, if it pleases you.”

I held out my left hand. He slipped his right hand beneath it, checked the street to make sure no horse-drawn carriages or Craft-driven coaches were approaching the crossing, then led me across the street.

“Thank you, Warlord,” I said when I had been safely delivered to the door of the coffee shop.

“It was my pleasure, Lady.”

And it was. I could see it in his eyes. There would be bitches who would bruise his ego, dim the pleasure in those eyes. There would be many, many more witches who would gently reinforce his training, confirming his place in the world as a man worthy of courtesy and consideration, a man valued for who and what he was.

While I waited for Rainier to join me, I watched the boy escort two young witches across the side street. He continued up the street with them past three shops before one of the women murmured something—obviously a reminder that his duty was completed, since he stopped and turned back. As he passed the alley between two

of the buildings, he hesitated, took a step closer toward that shadowy place that would put him out of sight.

Edgy. Uneasy.

He was almost at the mouth of the alley.

Something wrong.

Using Craft to enhance my voice, I bellowed, “Warlord! Here! *Now!*”

As I ran across the street, I began to appreciate the value of training. The boy didn’t hesitate. He spun at the sound of my voice and ran away from the alley just as *something* reached out to grab him. Something sight shielded. I couldn’t *see* it, and yet I *could* see it, like an afterimage that remains on your eyelids after you close your eyes. A robed arm. A gloved hand. Reaching for the boy.

As he ran past me, I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and swung him behind me, throwing a Gray shield around both of us at the same time I called in a hunting knife—a big knife with a wickedly honed blade. I probed the alley with my psychic senses. No one there anymore, but I picked up a hint of the same fury and hatred that I’d sensed in that room.

“Stay here.” I released the boy but kept a Gray shield around him as I moved toward the alley. Into the alley.

Female. I was certain of that now. Definitely a witch skilled in her Craft.

“Everything has a price, bitch,” I said softly, even though I knew she was gone. “Maybe you had a reason to go after the men—or thought you did. But not the boy. Not a child. Everything has a price—and when I catch up to you, and I will, I’ll show you how to paint the walls in blood.”

“Surreal?”

A light psychic touch, full of strength and temper. Rainier at the mouth of the alley, guarding my back.

I backed out of the alley, staying alert in case the bitch was skilled enough to hide her presence. I didn’t turn away until Rainier’s fingers brushed my shoulder. As I turned to face the street, I got my next lesson in how well Blood males are trained in Kaeleer.

There were hard-eyed, grim-faced men everywhere. A female had yelled on a public street. It didn’t matter that it had been a command and not a cry of fear or distress. A female had yelled—and they’d responded. They’d poured out of the shops, out of the carriages and coaches. Whatever had upset the female was going to be fixed. *Now.*

Which explained why assassins weren’t needed in Kaeleer.

Protocol was the only tool I had—especially since the Warlord Prince standing beside me had risen to the killing edge to become a living weapon.

Using Craft again to enhance my voice, I said, “Thank you for your attention, gentlemen. There is nothing more to be done here.” I raised the hunting knife, so the men who could see me couldn’t fail to notice it. Then I vanished it and lowered my hand.

I waited, hardly daring to breathe until I saw the men in front of me relax. Communication on psychic threads rippled over the street. Men returned to their carriages and coaches, to the shops or interrupted meals.

I heard Rainier release a slow breath as he worked to step back from the killing edge.

When the boy’s instructor joined us, I released the Gray shield I had put around the little Warlord. The puppy couldn’t tell us more than a lady had called to him, asking for help. He’d hesitated because he couldn’t see her, and she’d sounded . . . strange.

She hadn’t been able to mask her hatred. It must have bled into her voice. And it was going to piss her off that her prey had escaped. Which meant another man was going to die.

After the instructor bundled his students into a carriage and drove away, Rainier wrapped a hand around my arm.

“You need something to eat,” he growled.

I did, but I heard “I’m going to fuss over you” in that growl, and I really didn’t want to be fussed over. “Don’t worry about it, sugar. I can—”

His fingers tightened. “Lady, let me serve or point me toward something I can kill.”

Shit shit shit. Warlord Princes rose to the killing edge in a heartbeat, but they couldn’t always come back from it on their own. You either pointed them to a killing field or gave them something else to focus on—which usually meant a female they could fuss over and look after for a while.

“I could use a meal.” I shook off his hand, saw the temper in his eyes chill, and immediately linked my arm through his to give him the contact he needed. We walked for several minutes before he chose a dining house that had a small courtyard in the back for guests who wanted to eat outdoors.

I don’t know what passed between Rainier and the Warlord waiting on the tables in the courtyard. We weren’t asked what we wanted to eat—I wasn’t, anyway—but I’d barely settled in my chair when coffee, glasses of red wine, and a basket of bread appeared on the table. That was swiftly followed by bowls of greens that were delicately dressed, thick steaks, vegetables, and some kind of casserole made of potatoes, onions, and sausage. The meal lasted long enough for the wild look to fade

in Rainier's eyes—and for me to reach a few conclusions.

I leaned back in my chair. “There's a killer out there.” Which pretty much described anyone who was Blood, but I was making a distinction between the potential in all of us and someone using that potential.

Temper flared in Rainier's eyes. “There was no reason to go for that boy.”

“Sugar, I don't think reason has much to do with this.”

He frowned. “You think this killer is a witch who has slipped into the Twisted Kingdom?”

I didn't think she was insane in the way he meant, but hate can be its own kind of madness.

He sighed. “Then we have to find her and give her what help we can.”

“No, we have to find her and kill her.”

“But—”

“No.” I studied him. “You didn't sense anything in that room or in the alley, did you?”

He shook his head.

“I did. Maybe it's because I'm . . . familiar . . . with what I felt that I was able to sense it at all.”

Rainier swirled the wine left in his glass. “What kind of men did you kill, Surreal?”

“The ones who broke witches, killed witches, tortured witches, shattered their lives.” I drained my glass. “The ones who preyed on children.”

“You became an assassin to pay them back for . . . ?”

“My mother. And for me.” I set my glass on the table. “Are you coming with me, Rainier?”

“Where are you going?”

“Hunting.”

He studied me for a long moment before he nodded. “I'm with you.”

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I collapsed on a bench in one of the little parks that were sprinkled throughout Amdarh. Even in the city's busy shop district, you couldn't go more than two blocks without finding a plot of green that provided shade or a dazzle of color from flowers or the soothing trickle of a fountain.

“The bitch is good, I’ll give her that,” I said, when Rainier joined me on the bench. We’d been hunting for two days—and two more men had died. One was an old man tending a shop for a friend who was ill. The other was a young Warlord who had shielded himself long enough to send a warning on a psychic thread. Despite men converging on the spot from all directions, the witch had still managed to slip past them.

“Here.” Rainier gave me a glass bowl and a spoon he’d gotten from a food stand nestled in one corner of the park.

“What is it?” I poked the spoon into the shaved ice in my bowl.

“Flavored ice,” he said as he dug into his own bowl.

I tried some. The ice, flavored with berry juice, was just the refreshment I needed after hours of prowling the streets. Halfway through, I started poking at the treat, my pleasure in it gone. Edgy. Uneasy. Worried about something I didn’t want to put into words.

I sighed. “We’ve been hunting for two days, and we don’t know any more than we did when this started.”

“You know more than you think,” said a deep voice—heavy silk with a husky undertone of sex.

Rainier tensed, instantly wary. I looked over at the black-haired, golden-eyed man standing near the bench. I hadn’t seen him approach, hadn’t heard him, hadn’t sensed his presence until he wanted it felt.

If you wanted to look at a prime example of a beautiful predator, Daemon Sadi was it. If you wanted to survive the encounter, looking was all you did.

Daemon settled on the bench with the feline grace that, combined with that body and face, made a woman’s pulse spike—even when the woman knew what could happen to her if the Sadist became annoyed. He was a Black-Jeweled Warlord Prince, the most powerful male in Kaeleer. He was also, may the Darkness help me, family.

“You’re supposed to be on your honeymoon,” I said.

“We are. Jaenelle and I came back to Amdarh for a day to visit the bookshops and pick up a few supplies before going to the cottage in Ebon Rih.” He paused, and his eyes got that sleepy look that always scared the shit out of me. “That was the intention anyway.” He looked at Rainier. “Surreal and I have a few things to discuss. Why don’t you take a walk?”

“Lady Surreal and I are working together,” Rainier replied.

I could have smacked Rainier for the subtle challenge in his voice. He knew better than that.

“Fine,” Daemon said—and he smiled.

Rainier paled. He excused himself and retreated. Not far. That Warlord Prince temperament wouldn't let him back down all the way. So he settled on another bench where he could keep me in sight.

“Are you going to share that?” Daemon asked.

I handed over the bowl and spoon. “I thought you liked Rainier.”

“I do. What does that have to do with anything?” Daemon took a spoonful of flavored ice before handing it back to me. “Mm. That is good.”

“We *are* working together.”

“Whatever you tell him is your business.” He studied the park and waited.

“All right,” I finally said. “What do we know? There's no reason for the killings.”

“Just because you don't know what it is doesn't mean there isn't one,” Daemon said, his tone a mild scold. “Consider the predator instead of the prey. She's an opportunistic killer. She's not hunting for a particular man or a particular kind of man. She strikes when she can, where she can. She attacks males who wear lighter Jewels, so the odds are she wears at least the Opal Jewel.”

“But not a Jewel that's close in strength to the Gray,” I murmured. “Her sight shield couldn't hide her from me completely the one time I spotted her.”

Daemon nodded. “So you know you can take her without getting hurt unless you're careless. She also chooses males who aren't prepared to defend themselves, which indicates she wants the thrill of spilling blood without the risk of their fighting back.”

I huffed in frustration. “You arrived in Amdarh today. How did you figure all this out so fast?”

He laughed softly. “I've been playing this game a lot longer than you have. Besides, Lady Zhara and I had a chat this morning before I came looking for you, and she gave me all the information she had about the killings.”

A few weeks ago, the witches in Amdarh got their first taste of what it's like to dance with the Sadist. After that unfortunate incident, I bet Zhara, the Queen of Amdarh, was thrilled to have a chat with Daemon.

Then he looked at me. “Are you worried that you'll find a mirror when you find her?”

Damn him. He knew.

“She's not a mirror, Surreal. You never made a kill that wasn't deserved. You took pleasure from the killing, but you never killed for pleasure. There's a difference.”

“You don’t know all the kills were deserved.”

He just looked at me.

We’ve known each other for centuries. I was a child when I met him, when he helped my mother and me. I’ll never know how closely he kept track of me after I began my career with a knife, but now I had no doubt, none at all, that if I’d become a killer in the same way the witch we hunted was, I wouldn’t be sitting here. He would have destroyed me long ago. I shouldn’t have felt relieved knowing that, but I did.

“How do we find this bitch, Sadi?”

“If you can’t find the predator, give the predator a reason to find you. Provide irresistible bait.” His smile was gentle and vicious. “The prey that seems the sweetest is always the one that got away.”

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I crouched in front of the little Yellow-Jeweled Warlord. The miniature man. My irresistible bait. “You know what to do?”

“Yes, Lady,” he said, his voice so subdued I could barely hear him.

“I’ll be close by.”

He nodded. “If she cuts me, will it hurt?”

I looked toward the table tucked in the back corner of the coffee shop. Jaenelle Angelline looked back at me, her sapphire eyes full of something feral and dark.

“Yes,” Jaenelle said gently, “it will hurt.” She pointed to the wooden frame that held the web of illusions she’d created to play out this game. “By itself, the illusion I’ve made of you will fool the eye, but in order to fool the hand when someone touches it, it has to be linked to you. While nothing will actually happen to *you*, you will feel whatever happens to it.”

The little Warlord looked into those sapphire eyes. Whatever he found there gave him what he needed. “I will serve to the best of my ability.”

Jaenelle smiled. “I know.”

I gave the little Warlord one last, long look. He had a loose button on his jacket. It hadn’t been loose yesterday evening when the boy and his instructor came to the family town house so that Jaenelle could build the web of illusions.

Some of the tension inside me eased. It was such a little detail, but I’d be able to use it to tell when the switch was made and the illusion took the boy’s place out on the street.

We took our positions. Daemon stayed in the coffee shop with Jaenelle. The boy's instructor took his usual place at a window table. Rainier and I sight shielded before leaving the shop. He crossed the main street to tuck into a doorway near that corner. I crossed the side street, settling into a doorway just beyond the alley. The boy went to the corner to perform escort duties, leading ladies across the street.

We watched, waited. So far, all the killings had taken place in this part of the city, but there was no guarantee the bitch wouldn't start hunting somewhere else, no guarantee she'd come close enough to spot the bait.

An hour passed. We watched. Waited. I tensed every time a lone female approached the corner, every time the boy offered his hand as an escort—and breathed a sigh of relief every time he stepped into the coffee shop to receive advice from his instructor. But every time the small figure left the coffee shop, it was still wearing a jacket with a loose button.

I gritted my teeth. I trusted Jaenelle, and I could understand her delaying as long as possible before making the switch in case someone *could* recognize the illusion for what it was. But, Hell's fire, why was she waiting so long?

We were coming up on the two-hour mark, which would end the training session, when something drifted toward me on the air. Something that made me edgy, uneasy. I scanned the people going about their business, cursing when I lost sight of the boy as a carriage passed by. Then I saw him again. And I saw her. She came from Dhemlan, so there was nothing about her looks that would attract attention, but I knew it was she.

They crossed the side street on the opposite side from me. I held my breath and hoped Jaenelle could still make the switch from boy to illusion before the rest of this game was played out.

The witch said something to him that made him smile, brought out that bright-eyed puppy eagerness to please.

They crossed the main street. He stayed at the corner. She continued up the street, toward the alley. Toward me.

She glanced at the alley, then stopped and cried out, "He's hurt! Mother Night, he's hurt!" She looked around frantically. "Help me, Warlord. Help me. He's hurt!" She darted into the alley.

The boy stayed true to his training. A female had cried for help. He ran into the alley after her.

And I saw the loose button on his jacket.

I heard his panicked cry as I rushed into the alley.

"Let him go, bitch," I snarled, calling in the hunting knife.

She whirled to face me, the boy held against her, a knife as mean as mine pressed against his neck.

Her eyes danced with the glee of the kill. The smile she gave me was malignant.

“Let him go,” I said again. I saw terror in the boy’s gold eyes, but I had to play out the game—and hope.

“There’s no law against murder.” She pressed the blade against the boy’s neck hard enough to cut the skin. Blood trickled from the wound.

“True. But it’s also not condoned when there’s no reason.”

“He’s male. That’s reason enough.” She pouted. “You’re female. You should be on my side.”

When the sun shines in Hell, bitch. “Let him go.”

“All right.”

She ripped the knife across the boy’s neck and throat. Blood sprayed the alley walls. Sprayed her. Sprayed me.

I just stood there, frozen by the feel of warm blood on my face. *We failed.*

“Why?” Before I finished with her, I was going to get an answer. “Tell me why you killed those men, killed this boy.”

The alley was suddenly filled with hatred, with fury . . . and bitter hurt. *That* was the other thing I’d sensed in that first room but couldn’t quite recognize.

I knew that feeling, too. Didn’t matter. Not with that boy’s blood on me. “What happened, sugar? Did your lover walk away after taking all he could stomach from you?”

Her fury drowned out the bitter hurt. “He didn’t walk far.” She pouted. “But the males in the village were so angry about him dying like that, my aunt commanded that I stay in Amdarh for a while. They exiled me, a Queen’s niece, from my own village because of that bastard.”

“That doesn’t explain killing the men here.” Something wasn’t right. Broken heart or not, something wasn’t right.

“They’re all the same!” she shouted. “They make you feel special until the contract ends, then they walk away.”

“The man you killed was a consort under contract?” No wonder the men in the village were pissed off. If he’d fulfilled his contract, a consort had the right to walk away without repercussions.

“He was better than the other ones I’ve had, and I wanted to renew the contract. But

he refused. The bastard started packing his things the minute after the contract ended.”

“Guess he just didn’t want to spend another year in bed with a snotty little bitch.” I studied her. She wasn’t nursing a bruised heart. A bruised ego, maybe, but not a bruised heart.

That malicious gleam filled her eyes again. At that moment, I hated her with everything in me.

“I can do anything I want with a male,” she said. “No male is going to make me feel special, then walk away. Never again. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong.” I smiled. “As you pointed out, there’s no law against murder.”

Before she even thought to run, I created a Gray shield bubble around her, trapping her.

“Everything has a price,” I said softly. “I’m calling in the debt for the men you killed here in Amdarh—and the boy.” Especially the boy. “You like splattering the walls with blood and gore, sugar? Well, now’s your chance.”

I gave her one moment to realize what was going to happen. Then I fed all of my own fury into my Gray Jewels as I unleashed their stored power and slammed it into her. Her body exploded, a storm of red mist and white bits of bone swirling in a Gray bubble. I thrust a rapier of Gray into the mind I could still sense in that mist, breaking her power, finishing the kill. There would be no ghost or demon-dead to haunt this alley.

Then it was done. Debt paid. But the price for stopping that bitch was much, much too high.

“Surreal.”

Grief tightened my throat, but I obeyed the command in that deep voice and walked to the mouth of the alley . . . where Daemon waited.

“You played the game well,” he said. “Why didn’t you splatter her over the walls? You wanted to.”

“After what she’d done, it didn’t seem fair to have men spend a couple of days scrubbing her off the bricks.”

He looked into the alley. “Leave the bubble. I’ll take care of it later.”

I nodded, feeling heartsick. “All of this because males are trained to serve, to please.”

“Hardly,” Daemon replied dryly. “That was her excuse. I’ve seen her kind too many

times over the years. She liked inflicting pain, and she liked having control over the person while she did it. She didn't kill any of those men because they were trained to serve; she killed them because they had the right to walk away from someone who wanted to hurt them."

He was right. I knew he was right, but . . . "I guess I should—" I looked down at my clothes.

No blood.

I turned and looked into the alley. No blood sprayed on the walls. No small body.

"No one can create an illusion the way Jaenelle can," Daemon said softly.

No small body in the alley. "When . . . ?"

"She made the switch the first time the boy came back into the coffee shop for instructions. She needed him on the street just long enough to hone the details in the illusion."

Jaenelle would pay attention to the details—right down to a loose button on a jacket. Which meant I'd watched an illusion for most of those two hours and never known the difference.

Relief made me dizzy, weak. Daemon put his arm around my shoulders and led me to the coffee shop. Rainier entered the shop just behind us.

The little Warlord sat on a chair at the back of the shop. He looked shaken, but he was safe. Whole. Alive.

"Hmm," Jaenelle said as she gently probed the boy's neck. "Swallow now. Does that feel sore?"

"A little," the boy replied.

Caught by those sapphire eyes, he didn't look shaken anymore. A bit dazzled, but not shaken. Jaenelle had that effect on males.

"Hmm," Jaenelle said again. "There's no damage, no injury. But I think a bit of medicinal care is still required."

The boy's eyes widened. "Medicine?"

I guess bravery only goes so far.

"Mm. A dish of flavored ice twice a day for the next three days will take care of the soreness." Jaenelle's eyes sparkled with laughter. "Can you handle that?"

The boy grinned. "Yes, Lady." He bounced off the chair and came over to stand next to Rainier and me.

“Now,” Daemon said, slipping a hand around Jaenelle’s arm to coax her to her feet. “Since everything is settled, my Lady and I will take care of our shopping and resume our honeymoon.”

“Daemon is going to teach me how to cook,” Jaenelle said, smiling at him.

“Oh, how”—*brave of Daemon*—“nice,” I replied.

Everything has a price. I wasn’t sure who was paying whom with the kiss that followed, but it was certainly a demonstration.

After watching for a few seconds, the boy tugged on Rainier’s sleeve. “Am I going to learn how to do that?”

Rainier grinned. I closed my eyes.

Daemon broke the kiss and chuckled as he led his Lady out of the coffee shop.

Within a few minutes, the boy and his instructor were gone as well.

“Well,” Rainier said. “It’s been interesting, Lady Surreal.”

“That it has, Prince Rainier.”

He hesitated. “What are you doing this evening?”

Soaking in a deep tub of hot water. Sleeping. “Why?”

“Would you like to go dancing?”

We would never be lovers. Just then, that was a point in his favor since I wasn’t ready to spend time with a man who wanted to be a lover. But maybe we could have some fun together as friends.

I smiled at him. “Yes,” I said, “I’d love to go dancing.”