

A Great and Beautiful Evil

“This world seems nice enough,” Max said with a slightly puzzled frown as we rode toward the large city across the plain. “Despite the fact that my magic doesn’t seem to work here.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I agreed, looking at the flowers growing alongside the road. “The darkness here is not visible at a glance. You have to look beneath the surface. Then you’ll see it. And it will change you and the way you see your fellow humans forever more.”

“It’s that bad?”

“No sweetie. It’s much worse than that.” Max didn’t reply and we rode in silence taking in the lovely scenery. Eventually, we arrived at the gates to the city. It was a beautiful place with high, white walls and gleaming towers and spires. Unlike many cities I’d been to with a lower technology level, this one didn’t stink. Most of the smells coming from it were of spices and baking breads. As two guards walked out to meet us, we brought the horse’s slow walk to a stop.

“It’s so graceful,” she breathed. “Gorgeous.”

“To the eye it certainly is,” I agreed.

“Good day ladies,” the older of the two guards greeted us pleasantly enough. “I need to ask your names and the purpose for your visit to Righteous.”

“Greetings, good man,” I replied. “My name is Emma Revelare and this is my sister Lucille. We’re here on a pilgrimage to the temples of the archangels.”

“A most worthy pilgrimage,” another man declared, walking to stand before our horses. “Where do you hail from?” Dressed all in white, he looked like he could be someone’s grandfather.

“Urleska,” I answered with a smile. “A world not far from here. We hail from the city of Hinton.”

“Ah,” the fellow nodded. “Yes, interesting city, Hinton. Tell me, Lucille,” he said, turning to Max. “Does Hinton still have the great fountain at the heart of the city?”

I gave my little finger a flip to the side which I hoped Max could see. It was a trick question.

“I don’t recall every seeing such a fountain,” Max replied, apparently confused.

“Ah, my pardon,” he declared, slapping his hand to the side of his head. “I had Hinton confused with Dobson Downs. How foolish of me.”

“No harm done,” Max told him with a smile.

“You are most generous with such a foolish old man,” he said with a similar smile. “Now, I have to ask you, do either of you have any books with you? No? Though I’m sure neither of you are witches, you should both be aware that casting anything other than approved healing spells is illegal within Righteous? Very well, do you have any items of magic? Anything above a grade two magic is prohibited within Righteous.”

“No, good sir,” I answered. “We have nothing of magic upon us except our communications mirrors.”

“Leave it all at home did you?” he asked conversationally.

“I’m afraid ours is a house poor in monies but rich in virtue. We cannot afford powerful magic. However, stretching our resources a bit, we can afford a pilgrimage.”

“Well spoken lady Emma,” he stated with a nod. “Indeed. Can one truly afford *not* to go on a pilgrimage once in one’s life?” He nodded to the guards. “Have yourselves a good visit to Righteous. I highly recommend the Shepard of the Lord. It’s a good inn with fair rates.” He took

a few moments to describe how to get there. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must bid you a good day.” And with a little bow he stepped away and returned to a group of guardsmen standing nearby.

“Welcome to Righteous ladies. You may pass,” the older guard told us, waving us in.

“I don’t see any beggars,” my companion told me as she tried to look everywhere at once.

“No. There are no beggars in Righteous. Everyone here eats regularly, even if they are very poor. At night there is always shelter even for those who cannot afford an inn. For the sick, treatment is always available.”

“Wow. That’s impressive. It sounds... ideal.”

“It does, doesn’t it. Sounds a little too good. Makes you wonder why there are no lazy people here. Maybe makes you question where the money for the shelters and the food come from.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Where does the money come from?” she asked, still looking around. “Oh, that building is so pretty.”

“Yes, it’s very nice,” I agreed. “The money comes from taxes. Very high taxes. There are no lazy people because all the lazy residents were long ago thrown into debtors prisons. If you cannot pay the taxes and you are not part of the clergy, you get tossed in jail. Same for the tithes to the church. The prisons here are labor camps. There they work or they get stripes from a whip.”

“But... that shouldn’t be necessary.”

“No, it shouldn’t be,” I agreed. “But that’s part of what lies behind the lovely buildings and clean-swept streets. Most residents have to work all day, every day just to pay their taxes and the tithes the church requires.” We rode in silence for a while.

“There seem to be a lot of guards,” she muttered, looking a bit less impressed the with lovely-seeming city.

“Indeed. The people are not allowed weapons. Therefore, they needs must have many guards. Supposedly to protect the people against the lawbreakers.”

“Supposedly?”

“What happens when you forbid people to defend themselves?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I suppose they rely on others to defend them. I guess that allows them the freedom to pursue their varied crafts and professions. Evidently something of a necessity here if they want to pay their taxes.” I didn’t say anything. “Well? What does happen when you say your people can’t defend themselves?”

“They certainly don’t feel safe,” I replied with a sigh. “And with no weapons they have no true say in the matter anyway. They feel how they are told to feel. Or else. Basically, freedom dies.”

We rode further into the lovely city.

“I’ve been thinking.... That seemed... a bit odd,” Max told me with a hint of a frown. “I mean back at the gate. The whole thing about no books.”

“Yes. No books other than religious texts are allowed in Righteous. And few of those.”

“They’ve banned religious texts? But isn’t their society based on the writings of the angels?” A man we rode past closed his eyes, shook his head, and turned away.

“Indeed. However, their scholars have determined that since the message of the Creator came through the angels, the message could have been miscommunicated by said angels. Therefore, they took it upon themselves to go through and edit the Book of Angels. Their version isn’t greatly different in wording. Just a little change here and there. Remove a passage here and add another

there. But the meaning became very different.”

“How incredibly arrogant!” Max declared. “To think that they know more about the will of the Creator than the angels of the Creator! It’s beyond imagination.”

“Oh, it’s all that and more,” I agreed. “And I suppose I should warn you. Speaking ill of the establishment is a good way to be visited in the night by the Hand of the Righteous. Before you ask, I’ll go ahead and explain about them. On paper the Hand is an order of monks who share the wisdom of the angels and the Creator with members of society. Sounds noble, right? In reality, they are more of a secret police. They encourage people to spy on their neighbors. And worse.

“You notice how practically every building has sculptures of various angels and saints as well as shrines and statues of the aforementioned angels and saints? It makes for a resplendent scene. But it’s been done because no one here dare appear to be less pious than their neighbors. The entire city is immaculately clean because cleanliness is an angelic virtue that was not edited out by their ‘learned’ scholars. Trash outside one’s house would certainly indicate that the family living inside were impious. No few people would immediately turn their names over to the Hand in order to curry favor.”

“But what if.. what if they were sick or working multiple jobs to pay the bills?” Max asked.

“One must make time for the will of the Creator,” I quoted. “A fine would be the very least a person might expect for such infractions. No small number of homes and businesses have been confiscated by the Hand. And then there are the disappearances.”

“Disappearances?”

“Yes. People who’s names have been given to the Hand have a strange way of simply disappearing. Some of them turn up again... days, weeks, or months later. They are initially in poor health and have had their spirit broken. Many spout of passages from the Righteous version of the Book of Angels with no rhyme or reason. And some never return.”

“Are you saying the people who return have been brainwashed?” Max demanded, apparently outraged.

“Oh, no,” I contradicted a touch sadly. “Brainwashing is much too advanced. These people have been tortured.”

“For not cleaning up their yards or houses?” It was plain that she was having a hard time believing this.

“That’s one possible reason,” I agreed. “There are many, many more. Speaking out against the revised teachings of the church is a really good way to find out what’s below the Hand’s monastery. Saying anything less than complimentary of one of the clergy would also be a prime example. Questioning why things are they way they are would likely get you a trip to the torture chambers for fomenting discontent within the realm. Not publicly praying enough is another good way to find yourself under the torturer’s care. Perhaps most frightening of all is receiving a blessing from the angels that the priests do not have. After all, they are ‘holy’ men. How could some common person receive a blessing they do not themselves possess?”

“But torture’s...”

“Evil?” I prompted gently.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Indeed it is. Yet they use it a lot here. In truth, this society is not based upon the writings of the angels or the words of the Creator as they tell anyone who will listen. No, this society is based upon fear. Fear and facade of holiness.” Shaking my head sadly, I told her, “There is probably a tier in hell very similar to this place.”

Like the rest of this city, the Shepard of the Lord looked like a nice enough place at first glance. I was able to get us a single room with two beds. A luxury I really hadn't expected. Searching over the room, I found out why. Aside from the one-way mirror behind the wash basin, there were also no less than three peep holes into the room.

With a frown I draped my cloak over the mirror and then set about plugging the three missing knotholes with handkerchiefs. Max watched me with a frown but said nothing. Shaking her head, she draped her cloak over the room's single window. It had been a nice view but the window had neither shutters nor curtains.

"Can we talk?" she mouthed to me.

"Sure, why not?" I answered with a grin.

"Okay, let's go back to the other night. I'm starting to understand about some places being worse than others. But some actions are hard to justify no matter where you are or who you're dealing with. You killed someone that night you bled all over the house. Didn't you?"

"You have so many dark lessons ahead of you," I replied with a touch of sorrow. "I don't envy you what you've yet to learn about the worlds in that regard. But to answer your question, yes. I killed a man. I don't know if he raped young boys or tortured people. I do know that a lot fewer people will die because of his death."

"If he wasn't evil, then how can you justify his death?" she asked.

"I don't know that he wasn't evil. Chances are that he was. And I don't justify anything. The man needed killing. And now he's dead."

"And how do you know that you haven't damned yourself?" she asked, looking worried. "What if that man had previously been destined to save mankind? Now he'll never get the opportunity to fulfill that destiny."

Taking a deep breath, I looked down at my hands. Despite my resolve, that was indeed a question that bothered me from time to time. "I admit, there have been a few... a very few... of those people about whom I've wondered that very thing. So I went back and did some research. One was a secret rapist. Every serving girl in his entire household... and it was a large household... had been repeatedly raped by him. In another case, a woman had a farm outside of town. There she performed pagan rituals and slit the throats of children in order to slake the unholy thirst of the godling she fostered. When I found that out, I killed the godling as well. Of all the jobs I've done, I have yet to find one that was not warranted on more than one level. Not a single one. And yes, I am worried that one might slip by somehow. That's why I keep checking occasionally, both before and after. I continue to have no doubts that our worlds are better for what I have done."

She sat there blinking at me for a moment. "You killed a godling?"

With quiet laugh, I answered, "Yes. But it was a small one and not very powerful."

At which point someone kicked in our door and armored men came pouring in.

Max had finally stopped trying to explain why we shouldn't be dragged down into the torture chambers under the Hand's monastery. We were both shackled hand and foot. In addition, Max had a purpling bruise across her face. The same blow had split her upper lip. That blow seemed to be the primary reason she'd given up on trying to explain.

“Ah,” the old man in white, whom we’d met at the gate, nodded as we were dragged into the room in which he sat. The two of us were forced to our knees in front of his desk. “Your story was simply too perfect. Perfect people make me suspicious since no one is perfect. Only the Creator holds perfection.” Yet another misquote from the book of angels.

Max tried to explain again why we shouldn’t be there and fell silent when the guard again raised his hand.

“Are you suggesting that you did not say our greatest scholars were ‘arrogant’ when they corrected the passages the angels mistranslated? Oh yes, we had people listening all along your path. And how about that conversation you had in the Shepard of the Lord. My, oh my. Your friend here admitted to killing a man. And you admitted to knowing about it. Oh yes. You both belong down here. In fact, you belong further down.”

“How many men have you killed?” I asked him. I got punched in the side of the head by one of the guards for my efforts.

“Let’s not be uncivilized Rodrick,” The fellow gently told the guard who’d hit me. “I’ll be happy to answer your question. Fifteen men and women have died at my hand. Six were executed and nine died while we were trying to save their souls. Sadly, those were my younger days and I was inexpert with the tools we use.”

“And what were their crimes?” I wondered aloud, despite the pain in my head.

“Various crimes,” he replied with an amused smile. “Everything from heresy to fomenting rebellion to using demonic magics. Despite those deaths, I have been able to save the souls of hundreds of sinners. Helped them to reject their dark and evil ways. Now those people walk with the love of the Creator once more. When they die, they will ascend into the heavens and join the angelic hosts.” Yet more corruptions of the Book of Angels.

“How did you help those people?” Despite the question, I already knew. The question and its answer were both for Max’s benefit.

“Through pain,” he told us accompanied with a look a father might give to an unruly child.

“You mean torture?!” Max half asked, half demanded.

“Young Lucille, you have it exactly,” he agreed with a quiet smile. “Myself and my people are going to cause you pain. A soul searing suffering which will cleanse away the darkness that lay within you. In some it takes only days. For others it’s weeks or months. Some few last longer for the hold the darkness has on them is most deeply rooted.” She suddenly seemed to understand what was happening here and looked frightened for the first time. “Yes,” he nodded. “I can see you finally realize what is at hand. Repent and repent truly and you will leave here after only a short stay. But until then, I will sear away your false confessions for I have an ear for truth. I will cleanse away everything but what is good within your soul.”

“Emma? What are we going to do?” Max desperately asked. We were now chained to the wall of a large, smelly dungeon room and had been here for some time. Three bronze braziers burned low giving off an unpleasant heat. Instruments and devices of torture sat all about... some of them heating in the braziers. Eight other people were chained to the walls in this room. All women. Most of them wore only a thin shift or less. The grimmest of the women here wore nothing at all. She looked more malnourished and bruised than the others... and they looked none too well fed or free of bruising.

“Quiet girl,” one of the other women pleaded. “Talking will bring the guards.” Max looked scared and confused but stopped talking.

The heavy door suddenly slammed open and the man in white strode in followed by a pair of burly young guards. Well, one burly and one simply fat. Several of the women made frightened sounds before the room fell silent.

“Good day ladies!” the older man called enthusiastically. “We have another round of soul cleansing redemption in store for you. Today I have something different for everyone. You are all going to scream like there’s no tomorrow. And there might not be! Today might be the day that Gabriel sounds his horn signaling the end of days. Therefore, I am going to work most diligently to save your souls now.” He was so sincere. He’d completely bought into the belief that by torturing people he was actually helping them. In my experience, the ones who truly believed their own fantasy were the most dangerous for everyone else to be around.

“Lady Emma,” he smiled at me. “We’ll start with you and end with your sister. You seem to be in good physical condition. I have found that beating down the material body is a good place to start for redeeming the spirit and soul.” Pulling a knife, he walked over and began cutting off my dress.

“Please don’t!” Max called. “She’s a good person. She doesn’t deserve this!” It was certainly gratifying to hear that. I’d begun to wonder in recent days if maybe my friend had changed her mind about my character.

“Don’t worry my dear,” the fellow told her with a fatherly smile. “This will lead to her being a *truly* good person. Not simply the shallow facade you want to see.”

“No, you can’t,” she cried as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“We’ll get to you in good time. Now, gag her,” he absently told one of the guards who did so quickly while the man in white finished cutting off my dress. “I truly hate these synthetic materials,” he frowned before cutting away my bra as well. “The sooner they are declared unclean, the better.” He took a moment to throw it into one of the braziers where it smoked a second before bursting into flame. With a nod, he turned back to me, “It would seem I was correct about your physical condition.” While there was absolutely nothing sexual in the way he looked at me, the same could not be said of the two guards. Both stared and leered at my breasts and panties. The torturer walked up to me, smiled, and punched me hard in the solar plexus. My breath exited in a whoosh and he immediately commenced to beating me. Face, chest, belly, and even a few stray shots to my arms and legs. It was a thorough beating which left me hanging limply in my chains and Max sobbing and choking on her gag beside me.

He walked to one of the guards who handed him a piece of white cloth with which he wiped the sweat off his brow. When his breathing evened out again, he walked over to a wall and picked up box with numerous press screws built into it.

“Agnes,” he greeted the next woman. Simply holding the box, he commanded her to put her hand in the box. And trembling, she did so. He then tightened down the screws until she began crying. With a nod he motioned one of the guards over to hold the box and he immediately did so. The man in white then walked over and picked up a pliers-like tool. Moving to the open end of the box, he reached in with the tool and pulled off two of the older woman’s fingernails eliciting a number of screams from her. This was very hard to watch and I feared it would only become more so as he made his way around the room.

“Do not worry yourself with the flesh, Agnes,” he told the sobbing woman. “These things will grow back,” he said, flipping her fingernails into the nearest brazier. “Your soul is much, much

more important. How long have you been with me down here?”

“I... I... I don't know!” she managed in between sobs.

“Three weeks Agnes. Three long weeks. “You publicly doubted the piety of Father Avare. Why? Because he decorates his church with gold to better show the glory of the angels and the Creator. Clearly there is something evil within you not to recognize how very holy a man Father Avare truly is. I think we are now very close to rooting that evil out of you Agnes. Very close indeed.” And with that he gave her a fatherly pat on the cheek and motioned for the guard to remove the box from her hand. She whimpered and shook as the man in white moved on to the next woman. And I was right. Each was progressively harder for me to watch as these evil men went about their work.

The last woman before Max was the completely naked one. By the time the man in white had worked his way around to her, she'd somehow found the strength to stand.

“Eve,” he greeted her fondly yet with sadness. “You may yet end up being my seventh failure. But I am going to give it my most sincere effort to prevent that from happening. I see you haven't been using the bathing water we've put in your cell for you,” he said shaking his head. With a sudden frown he pulled on a pair of gloves and then reached between her legs and stared at his fingertips. “And now I see that you have somehow managed to lure yet another man to you.” He removed the gloves and tossed them into the brazier. “Perhaps it's because you are a woman that you continue to do this evil. First you seduce good Father Luxure and then you turn around and accuse him of raping you. How many times have we pierced your tongue now for telling lies? How much hot wax has been dripped on your womanhood trying to rid you of your unnatural appetites? And now I find that you've gone and seduced another man here in my own monastery. What am I to do with you Eve?”

“I was raped yet again you pig!” she shouted just a moment before being punched in the gut by the fat guard.

“Everyone here is either a priest or a sinner. You are guarded by monks of the first tier and the male prisoners are no more allowed to wander freely than you are. Therefore, the only ones you could have lured into your cell are priests,” the man in white told her sounding ever so reasonable. “And you had to lure them in because priests do not commit rape. Especially not troubled young women such as yourself whose soul's are in such great peril. Oh Eve, you are so close to an eternity in hell. I am most fearful for you.”

“I'd rather spend eternity in hell than live here with you,” she gasped. The guard hit her in the face this time.

“I'm so sorry to hear that Eve.” There followed a moment of silence. “Perhaps the problem is both physical and spiritual with you Eve. Perhaps the problem is that you are a woman,” he mused aloud. “Yes. I think you would not be seducing pious priests if you were no longer a woman.” With blood dripping from her chin, she looked worried, puzzled, and rebellious. “Bring her down,” he commanded to the guards. Lifting her chains off the hook in the wall, they dragged her out to the center of the room.

“Chain her spread out on the table,” he commanded. The guards quickly did so despite her struggles and curses. Both seemed to cop a number of feels while the man in white looked over various instruments of torture on the other side of the room.

A few minutes later he walked around to the head of the table she was chained to bearing very large pincers. “Eve. I must admit, this is going to be something of an experiment. I've long suspected that a woman's clitoris was a direct path to evil. I'm going to remove yours and see if the

evil goes with it.” Eve began cursing the man again and was quickly gagged by the two guards who seemed all but jubilant now that they were actually going to maim someone. “Yes,” he continued. “Perhaps that will help. I’d remove your breasts as well but that would almost certainly kill you. Therefore, I’m only going to remove your nipples. Perhaps these losses will finally drive the evil from you.” Eve seemed to be screaming behind her gag.

“Now do you understand, Lucille?” I asked. “Do you truly understand now why I do what I do?” One of the frowning guards started walking towards me.

Still gagged, Max nodded most definitively.

“Do you agree with me that these men need to be dealt with? That there is no hope for rehabilitation with them?” The fellow drew back a fist to strike me. However, Max nodded again. My hands slipped from the shackles with almost no effort. Blocking his attack was easy. Almost as easy as punching him in the throat. While he was busy staggering back and dropping to his knees, I stepped out of manacles that bound my ankles.

With my split lips I smiled at the fat guard and the man in white.

The guard drew his sword while I stepped to the side and picked up a hot poker out of the brazier. This was what the torturer had used to burn patterns in the soles of Edna’s feet earlier. I felt sure I could make better use of it. As the fat man cautiously approached, I reached out with the poker and stuck the red-hot tip into the gasping guard’s hair. It caught with a little whoosh. This caused his companion to charge me. Using the poker, I clashed weapons with him and then bound the two together in a quick test of strength. He was fairly strong for a human. However, he completely missed the point. With my off hand I struck him in the elbow holding the sword. He dropped it, I caught it with my left hand and promptly jabbed the poker in his eye. Screaming, he fell to the ground clutching his face.

Meanwhile his buddy had put out the fire that had been his hair. On my way over to the man in white, I stuck about a hand’s worth of the sword blade into his belly. His gasping screams joined those of the one-eyed man. Finally realizing that his guards weren’t going to stop me, the torturer dropped his pinchers and dashed for Max. He pulled a knife and pressed the blade to her throat.

“Don’t move or I’ll kill her!” he told me, sounding rattled.

“Kill her, and I’ll make everything you’ve ever done here look like a spring social event. I’ll keep you alive for dozens if not hundreds of years and I’ll make you scream every day of it,” I told him with a feral smile. “But not these little screams. No, you’ll be screaming like you were about to have Eve screaming. That I promise you.”

Beginning to look a bit wild about the eyes, he declared, “I am in control here. This is a house of the Creator and I am His servant. Put down the weapon.”

“You’ve turned this place to the service of hell,” I countered. “However, if you want the sword come and get it.” Holding the bloody tip of the blade, I held out the pommel to him. Several of the women still hanging from the wall called for me not to do it. Stepping away from Max, he looked around at them, plainly memorizing who had spoken against him. Then, with a quick step, he reached out and grabbed the hilt. Lunging forward, I lashed out with a fist and broke his nose. His wild swing at me didn’t even come close.

As the man in white’s eyes watered uncontrollably, I walked over to the first guard, kicked him hard between the legs (eliciting another scream), and took his sword. When the torturer’s eyes cleared enough for him to once again be a threat, I was there to meet him with a sword. Before he seemed to really understand what had happened, I’d disarmed him. I then pushed him across to the wall where I’d hung. Speaking a quick spell of unbinding caused the manacles to pop open.

Punching him in the solar plexus to help keep him calm, I bound him to the wall where he'd chained me.

Frisking him, I found a ring of keys. It didn't take long to free everyone. As Max pulled the gag from her mouth, she looked at me and then burst into tears. "You could have escaped at any time!" she cried. "You let him beat you and torture all these women. Why?!" The women I'd just freed seemed to feel this was a good question as well. All eyes turned to me.

"Because I needed you to understand that some people are evil. And some people need to die so that others may live. You just barely understood the theory. Now you know not only the theory but also have a deep-seated understanding of just how true this can be."

"But you let yourself get beaten and these women tortured!"

"Yes," I agreed. "And I was prepared to suffer much worse in order for you to truly understand this."

"Why did you let him do that to us?" Agnes asked, holding the hand that was missing a pair of fingernails.

"As I said, I needed her to understand. And I think a better question for you to ask is why no one else has come to free you. While I did so on my own schedule, I did set you free. No one else on this or any of the other worlds has so much as raised a hand to help you."

"Yes," Agnes whispered. Eve picked the knife up, walked over to the fat guard, and began cutting his pants off.

"You ladies amuse yourselves in here for a little while. I'm going to go get us some decent clothes and then we're getting out of here." This was punctuated by a high pitched scream from the guard Eve was working on. I couldn't see exactly what she was doing but judging by the way Max suddenly threw up, I guessed she had a pretty good view.

"Take me with you," the man in white begged from his position on the wall as a number of angry women bearing their favorite instruments of torture slowly closed in on him. "I'll get you all pardons. You'll be free to go. Please, I'm a man of peace. A servant of the Creator!"

"You speak as though you truly believe that," I told him, as I paused in the doorway. "As you are a torturer, it is plain that there is an evil in you. If you are very lucky, these ladies will be able to drive the evil from you using pain. I'm afraid your soul is already damned to hell though. However, I'm willing to give them a chance to save you." And with that I stepped out into the hallway closing the door on the screams.

Finding robes and weapons was very easy. I got several chances to kill jailors and did so with a smile at every opportunity. After providing clothing and weapons for myself and the ladies in our original room, I began doing the same for a number of similar rooms I found. Soon there were large bands of former prisoners roaming the subterranean halls looking for food, drink, and monks to kill.

Eventually, I returned to the room where the man in white had beaten me. Except now he was the man in red. The smell of burnt flesh was even stronger than it had been.

Eve walked over to me, knelt, and took my hand between her bloody ones. "My life is yours my lady. You have freed me from the demons and have given me vengeance. All I have or shall ever have is yours. My loyalty, everything worldly I possess, and my soul. Til the end of days, I shall serve you in any way you see fit."

"Stand sister," I told her, pulling her to her feet, touched to my core. "That is not necessary."

You being free is reward enough for me.”

“You heard what the monster was going to do to me,” she said, with a single tear leaking down her face. “You saved me from that. Gave me a life worth living. I *will* serve you until the end of days. That is my promise to you.” I closed my eyes a moment and took a deep breath.

Closing both my hands on her bloody ones, I looked her in the eyes. “Then I accept your service. For your loyalty, I promise to do my best to see you clothed, housed, and fed. Your service will go towards the betterment of all the worlds. To the best of my ability, you will truly be on the side of the angels rather than simply one who claims to be on their side.” She kissed my hand and I kissed her forehead.

“What is your chosen profession?” I asked, releasing her hands.

“By trade I am a weaver,” she began. She then picked up the bloody sword. “However, I would learn to use this and other weapons. That I might guard your rest or slay your enemies.”

“Are you certain?” I asked a bit sadly.

“Yes milady. I am.” I understood all too well. She wanted to learn to defend herself. Because she’d learned the hard way that no one else would. I could certainly understand that.

Changing the subject, I asked, “Are these three dead? And hold the sword like this.”

After adjusting her grip, she smiled, “My first lesson. I’ll remember. And yes, they’re all three dead now.”

“Good.” Turning to a very pale Max, I asked, “You ready to go Max?”

“Max? I thought he said her name was Lucille,” Eve said with a frown.

With a quick glance and a grin for the bloodied woman, I told her, “We lied to him. I’m Clarissa Dyle and this is Maxine du Sorciere.”

“Maxine du Sorciere?” Max said derisively. “I never cast a single spell. I didn’t do anything. My magic was blocked the entire time we were here. I certainly don’t deserve the name du Sorciere.”

“Of course you couldn’t cast a spell,” I told her gently. “I was blocking you from doing so.” Her jaw literally dropped.

“You can do that? I mean, *why* would you do that?”

“I didn’t want you casting any spells here. They’d have put you to death if you’d tried. Therefore, I figured if you knew your magic was blocked from the beginning, you wouldn’t even think about it. And I needed you to understand just how dark some portions of humanity truly are. For that to happen, the darkness in question had to believe you were just as helpless as they kept the rest of their society.”

“You manipulative bitch!” Max declared loudly. Eve frowned and stepped in front of Max. Grasping Eve’s shoulders, I ushered her back to the side.

“Max and I are sisters. We argue sometimes. Get used to it and don’t get in the way,” I said with a gentle smile. Turning back to Max, I nodded. “Yes, I am. Why do you think we were captured at the inn? You asked if it was clear to talk and I agreed that it was. I knew they’d be listening. And I knew once they’d heard that.... Well, with the conversation as it was, I knew they’d pick us up.”

“How could you do that?”

“I told you riding into this world that what you saw here would forever more change the way you looked at your fellow human beings. I needed you to look into the darkness. You did that. I needed you to understand that there are people that simply must be killed. Letting some people live is a travesty of life. An offense against everything that is good. And you came to understand that, as well. And lastly, I needed you to truly understand that I am a much more complicated person than

you ever dreamed. Only when you understand that can you really start getting to know me.”

Max stood there staring at me for a long time. Eventually, she said, “I’m ready to get out of here.”

“Good,” I nodded, walking out the door. “We have things to do.”

“If I may ask, milady,” Eve began, “What are we about to do?”

“I’m glad you asked, Eve,” I said with a look at Maxine, who despite her anger looked curious to know as well. “We’re going to burn this monstrosity to the ground and then start a revolution.”