



Mage's Bane

Excerpt

If Riaz was going to do some of his healing mumbo-jumbo, I didn't need any street walker promenading by and witnessing a man pulsing black flames from his hands to my bare stomach and back. So, spending the last of my forty bucks, I gave in and rented a cheap room. The motel caretaker almost didn't rent me a room, probably because I looked like drunken road kill or something close to the walking dead. He wasn't satisfied until I showed him the blood on my shirt was my own and assured him we weren't fugitives. Then I had to explain a dog attacked me in the alleyway because I startled

it. The lies were coming along thick, but I couldn't afford for a mortal man to know a demon had been the cause of my deep wounds. Or that the Djinni behind me was impatient and two seconds away from blasting his caretaking ass into the netherworld.

We had to walk back outside to get to our room. I smelled deliciousness wafting from the burger joint across the street. Dinner was out of the question with only two pennies in my pocket. It wouldn't be the first time or probably even the last, I felt sure. On the bright side, at least I wouldn't have to cram in my car's backseat for a good night's sleep. And I had my mother's photo. After the cat-demon excitement died down—as much as it could anyway, considering it wasn't everyday a cat went ballistic on me—the most exciting moment of the night had been watching the anger radiate off Riaz, as in the end, he'd been the one to jump into the Dumpster for the photo.

I stumbled into the musty room, trying to see through the hazy shimmer. I kept attempting to blink it away with no success. A cold sweat gave me clammy skin, and I was sure it was because of the venom being pumped faster by my erratic heartbeat. I was slightly nervous by the Djinn healing to come. The demon venom threatened to kill me at any moment, but I was actually more worried about Riaz's hands on me, touching me in my most intimate spots. Even though I'd known him a quarter of my life, I couldn't rid myself of this childish discomfort...or was it anticipation? This isn't a big deal at all, so stop acting like it is.

It wasn't like it was the first time. Riaz had healed me once before when I was a teenage girl. I'd tried to be a smart ass and show off to the big, bad Djinni my new driver's license—as if he cared about mortal

things—and I got showy-flashy with my driving. I plunged us off the highway and down a steep embankment, hitting damn near every tree on the way down. The rescue crews and newspapers called me a lucky girl for over a year. Had it not been for Riaz's healing touch, I'm pretty sure internal bleeding would've taken me out at the tender age of eighteen. I'd been pretty out of it, but I remember Riaz had been fast-acting on keeping me alive. I know I hit my head pretty hard because after all his insults calling me a foolish girl, I thought I saw compassion in his eyes. I even thought I heard him telling me not to die and leave him. Well, I figure he said that out of fear he'd waste away on earth as nothing more than a specter.

He saved me to save himself then. But this particular night, I expected him to demand I send him back while I rotted away from demon venom. Just to prove he didn't care I needed him, I thought he might make me beg for my life. But he did none of that as he silently trailed behind me. I turned—a bit unsteadily—to see him close and lock the door with a tight-lipped expression.

The fast motion sent me into a dizzy state, causing my stomach to churn. I covered my mouth until the wave of nausea passed. Good lord, I'll be mortified if Riaz sees me puking or hears me spilling my guts in the bathroom like some college frat party. It was bad enough he'd probably never let me live any of this down. After a few deep breaths, I was finally okay enough to remove my hand and place it against my stomach.

"Take your shirt off and lay across the bed." Riaz's authoritative voice caused my pulse to jump a notch. Hesitantly, I lifted my grubby shirt over my head and let it fall to the floor. I glanced at him to see what emotion—if any—Riaz felt and sighed. All I saw was indifference—and me half-naked before him.

In fact, he didn't even try to catch an eyeful of skin as any normal male would. Granted, Riaz was no normal male, but most males, human or not, would soak up the exposed skin of a female. I wondered how he could look at me with irrelevance when I stood before him in only a bra. I couldn't keep my eyes off him at any given moment.

It was unfair he had a willpower I didn't possess. I mean, I wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, but I assumed—hell, I don't know what I assumed. Riaz was ancient. He'd had at least fifteen Akasha Mage handlers before me over the eras, so me parading around fully naked would only get a raised eyebrow and him asking if I'd fallen off the deep end again. I hated that the attraction was one-sided in our relationship.

It was immoral for an Akasha to become sexually involved with her Djinni. It would never end well for either party, and according to my former mentor, Yasmin, it was forbidden. But I couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever gotten intimate with any of his past mages. Someone must have slipped up to realize that bonking a Djinni wasn't the best tactic in any given situation.

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