

*An excerpt from Wind Catcher, Book 4 of*

*Demon in Exile:*

*The Mad Black*

“How did you know?” I asked, and her answer made all the difference.

Our trip back to the Checkered Flag Manor had been long and uncomfortable. My crack company rode along in cheerful silence, the recognition by the King being everything that we’d hoped. Vigil Enricata Moon, the youngest vigil ever, had been formally recognized by the King, hopefully dissuading any further detractors from a political standpoint. We’d also decreed our intention to respond against any p that might threaten the Vigil or the Realm. It had all gone off without any visible hitch.

As for me, well, I’d surprised the Royal Quarter with my continued existence, a miracle in the eyes of many, and was now eager to get back into my pajamas. That desire, in and of itself, bothered me to no end.

Hart called it ‘the Mad Black,’ a mind-bending soul sickness that I’d experienced in the Dungarr Basin during the spring campaign. I called it a curse as it staggered me in front of the King and his court. The disease was chronic and debilitating, drowning my thoughts in shame and isolation while my personal connections and survival instincts fled. Luckily, I was stronger now and had a loyal set of companions to guide me home, almost intact. *Almost.*

In my long absence from Maidenhall, the succubus witch, Vigaila Grace, had returned and infiltrated the court of King Falbrenn, taking on the appearance of an alluring blonde courtesan. The creature’s hunger, inadvertently unlocked by yours truly the previous year, was endless, and its ability to devour the energy of others had consumed an entire village before it had moved on to the court of the King of Colivar. Fortunately, Vigaila Grace had failed to heed her own advice, and that had led to her final act.

The ancient succubus had made a fatal mistake, declaring war on an enemy that she didn’t fully comprehend. She’d assumed that I was now weakened and alone, powerless to stop her, but as Vigil Ara Storm, I was more than just one man. As she was called out and cornered in the Grand Hall, the witch had taken her best shot, her invisible tendrils tearing through my defenses and my soul in hopes of crippling me in front of everyone that mattered.

Her vicious attack might have worked, but instead of two monsters facing off in the King’s Court, there had been four. My half-elf beauty with a *Kjaira* soul

wrapped around her heart and another *Kjaira* soul imbued within my fang-dagger. The dark souls of the two death-demons had moved to defend me, striking at the head and the heart of the ancient succubus before anyone else could react.

Standing among the witch's smoldering carcass, I'd fought to survive the Mad Black, an illness of mind and soul that assaulted my being whenever my inner balance was shattered. In that moment of Royal resurrection as Vigil Storm, I was a victor, blind and broken. Guided from the Grand Hall of the King under the care of Company Storm, I'd been escorted back home and went straight to bed.

My company should have been out celebrating at the Scarred Man Pub, just across the street from our manor house and stables, but for some reason, nobody wanted to leave, not until I was ready to join them. They knew that I wanted to run so that my soul could heal away from their worried, sympathetic eyes. They'd seen it all before and were having none of it. I respected their decision.

Now, upstairs in my bedroom, I waited for an answer from Raven. She had reacted in a blur, her *Kjaira* soul had taken over in the instant that I was attacked, and she had beheaded the succubus with her black blade, *Talon*. My Beloved had somehow recognized the hidden peril and saved my life, but it still puzzled me how.

"Hart says that she's surprised you were still standing when the black cloud finally cleared," Raven replied. "You weren't healthy to start, and that witch

had taken more than her share.”

Hart Storm, my adopted sister, was also my company inquisitor, a young woman blind to all but the supernatural forces that flew within and around her vigil.

“You don’t have Hart’s eyes,” I gently pressed, propped up on my bed with my better half at my side.

Normally, my older sister Laila would be on hand to talk me through the schism and the pain of an episode of the Black. I assumed that she was on her way, but until then, I could be brave.

“Cat has declared that the company will be sorting out additional security precautions with Ben Heck and Laila when they get here. You don’t threaten the Powers and Peers of the Realm without recourse,” Rae explained.

*It had been a warning, not a threat, I thought.*

“I plan on making another statement that should set them back for good when they make their move,” I said.

“You barely have the strength to walk. How do you expect to do that?”

“I have a backup plan. Do you want to hear about it before Laila arrives and kicks you out of here?”

“Of course.”

“Then tell me how you knew.”

Raven sat up and stared into my tired face. I was exhausted, drained, but more tired of harboring the guilt and shame of an untold story before my Beloved.

“Why did that woman, that thing, smell like you?” she finally asked. “She didn’t even try to hide it. Why

was that?”

“Camouflage,” I replied. “How could I detect her disguised as she was?”

“But you did.”

“In the end, I saw her mind boiling over with thoughts of hunger and domination. She displayed the same passion for my destruction in the Dungarr Drip.”

I didn’t have the stomach to explain any of this to Raven before, but my heart needed to share it and get it out in the open.

“*Passion* for destruction?” she echoed. “Her last words make more sense to me now.”

And there it was. The truth had been realized, and I was free to run.

“Where are you going?” Rae asked, reaching out for my hand.

Her touch caught me at the edge and helped push the Mad Black down, a spider back into its burrow. Raven, still dressed in her finery for court, wrapped herself around me in a protective embrace.

“You really are a brave, stupid man,” she offered.

“You finally noticed? I thought that I was quite clear on that point from the first time we met.”

After a moment’s thought, she kissed me, whispering, “Yes, yes, you were, and I’m alive today because of it.”