

The Tietling

Angel Kissed, Devil Touched

By
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CHAPTER SAMPLE

Branan

Scotland, 1053

I did not choose to be a monster—a shell of a man—half-human, half-fiend.

I was once a man, not a great man, not a saintly man, but a good man, and a man nonetheless.

My father, who was the Earl of Glaxton, became so by his father who had earned land and title by deeds done for Malcolm I, the then King of Scots. My father was a man of means. I, Branan Lachlan, was his first-born son, ready to inherit my birthright when the nightmare began.

Our lands were large and plentiful. They covered Loch Lochy, Loch Garry, and Loch Oich as well as Glen Lope to the east. The family home was located near the village of Ardoch, near Loch Garry. It was an easy ride to the villages of Maimlaty, Achalocher, and Monegrghe from our manor.

We had always had to defend our land, our freedom, and our way of life from marauders, invaders, brigands, and the like. But we were true to the Scots and to our current King, Macbeth. My father fought alongside the king, when he won the right of the crown from Duncan, in the battle near Elgin in 1040. The Lachlans were tough and prepared for all manner of foray.

But no one was ready for the invasion that came the summer I turned twenty-one.

At that time, Iona Drummond and I were engaged to be merrit. She was already with child (I confided I was not a saintly man), and we wanted the wedding sooner than later for obvious reasons.

The evening before the nightmare began, my two brothers, Earc, a year my junior, Baodan, three years my junior, and my brother-to-be Artagan Drummond, four years my senior, decided to hunt the next day. Iona's family had arrived for a fortnight with intent to leave the day after the wedding to return to their large farm several miles north of our estate.

My father, Donnach Lachlan, along with my soon-to-be father-in-law, Fearghas Drummond, had drunk too much of the fine beer Fearghas had brewed himself. I preferred mead and had consumed enough as well.

I looked over at the two fathers, lying nearly across each other at the table as they sang bawdy tavern songs. I laughed. Boys never grew up, or at least men became boys again under the fuzzy loveliness of drink.

In front of them sat the remains of our supper. Hannah had made a *cockatrice*. Only the bones of half the chicken and those of half of a roast suckling pig were left. I burped loudly in remembrance of the sacrifice made by the two animals.

My father snickered at my tribute, beer dribbling down his full red beard and onto the front of his deep blue velvet tunic. Donnach was the epitome of the Scotsman with his flowing ginger hair and beard the color of the red deer that ran through our forests. His blue eyes looked blurred as he tried to focus on his new best friend. He had Viking written all over him.

Fearghas was a mountain of a man, wide in girth and tall in stature. He had huge hands which looked as if they could pound a man into the ground. I was sure if I hadn't promised to marry my beloved Iona, her father would have killed me in under a minute. His beard grew longer than my father's, well down the chest of his plain brown woolen tunic. His wide leather belt would have wrapped around my waist at least twice and at least six times around my neck.

I was tall, but not as tall as Fearghas. I looked over at my brother, Earc. He was about an inch shorter than I and looked similar to my father—ruddy, red haired, and robust. I more so resembled my mother's likeness.

I considered myself a handsome fellow with green eyes the color of moss in the sunlight, flecked in gold, and a full head of blond hair. My body was lean but well-muscled from daily labor. I looked down at my own light blue tunic and brown leggings, as I idly picked remnants of dinner from them. I noted the cat lay across one of my leather boots. I hadn't even felt the weight of it on my foot. I lightly tossed it away. It touched the tip of my scabbard moving my sword uncomfortably. The sword had been a strange gift from an unnamed warrior traveling through Glaxton when I was very small. The blade was etched in Christian iconography, full of stylized crosses and other Biblical symbols. This was my prized possession and was rarely far from me.

Moving my scabbard and sword back to a comfortable position I glanced at my younger brother. Baodan sat on the other side of my father, with his head already on the table and his longish brown hair splayed out around it. His eighteen-year-old body could not yet handle the beer. I smirked, remembering my own first stupor. It was a rite of passage in this Scottish land of legend, magic, and glory. We would leave him the night in his drool.

Artagan sat next to his father. He was not yet as big as Fearghas, but I knew he would someday mature to that caliber. His beard only grew down to the middle of his throat, still as dark as his hair. He too, was dressed in the simple tunic of a peasant. We were the only aristocracy in the area so we chose our spouses from the good people of our lands.

I raised my glass to my love's older brother. Artagan gave me a wry smile as if he had a secret to tell, his brown eyes sparkling under too long hair that covered his eyebrows and eyelashes. *Time will tell what secrets he has*, I thought, drinking among the merry echoes of my family's laughter against the solid stone walls.

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The morning dawned too bright but we gallantly sat on our mounts and headed into the forests, squinting into the harsh daylight. We took a couple hours nap out of the eyes of the womenfolk before continuing our quest.

Later that day, we made our way home from the hunt on which we had felled a glorious stag. As we dragged our dead prize behind our palfreys on a litter, we laughed, telling and retelling the hunt's tale, embellishing it at every turn. Young Baodan's arrow was the one that had killed the animal, but to hear the story, we had each landed the deadly blow at the exact moment.

Earc had filched a flask from our father's private solar room, and we were enjoying the warming feeling the drink provided as it covered our brains in delicious wooziness. It helped with the headache from the night before, and it also made the story all the funnier.

The evening neared, the sun became but a glint of light and the forest darkened, when we heard the howling. A wolf for sure but not a wolf that could liken to any we had heard before. We sobered immediately, our storytelling done.

The horses all shied away as if they sensed the Devil himself were close. It took all my brothers' strength and much cajoling to keep their mounts under their seats.

I calmed down my horse, Socrates, with barely contained panic within my own breast. I patted his neck and gave him soothing sounds. As always, he responded to my touch, having known me since we were both very young.

The wolf burst from the woods, with a swiftness not known to the mortal world. Before we could react, the creature was upon Baodan, clawing him off his saddle, his throat ripped open before he hit the ground.

Artagan's palfrey reared and went completely over backwards, crushing him beneath the horse's weight.

Despite Earc's best efforts to reign in his horse, he was thrown.

"*Deevil's peats, I trow!*" he yelled in anger and surprise but recovered quickly.

I dismounted and allowed my own horse, pulling the dead stag on the litter, to bolt away in the darkness.

Earc and I, broadswords drawn, approached the beast ready to strike when it shifted away from Baodan and was upon us. As its weight hit us, we saw that it did not stay a wolf. Mouth dripping with blood and screeching an ungodly cry, it altered into some form of man with green-yellow eyes that glowed in the dark with bared fangs still prevalent.

The creature spoke in a guttural voice that was so sickeningly devoid of humanity, I could only imagine it was that of the Devil himself.

"I have come for ye."

A cold, jarring pain rattled my heart as its eyes penetrated my own gaze. I was mesmerized.

Earc, being closer to the creature, lunged his broadsword with all his might into the chest of the beast. For a moment, it stood laughing. Then, putting its hands over Earc's, it helped my brother push the sword all the way through its heart and out the other side. A mortal would have fallen instantly at the first thrust, but this demon simply pushed Earc away then pulled the sword back out! Its flesh seemed to heal almost instantly.

"Ye *canna* kill me, fool. I am the one who kills."

I returned from my trance and lifted my sword. Fashioned after a Viking sword, its simple blade was made of iron and of heavy construction with a central groove down the center of the blade. I grasped the wooden handle with its curved iron hilt, supported by bronze fittings. It was strong and useful on the hunt. My fancy blade, better for combat, rested in my room back at the house.

I fought like a madman, all reason having escaped my thoughts. I struck the thing at every turn, seemingly slaying this beast-man again and again, but to no avail. I watched my blade slash its arm and leave a gash which instantly healed. I watched my blade drive into its thigh yet nothing happened. I sliced at its chest and watched the skin reclose through the rip of its tunic.

I could not best it. It could not die.

The fiend then grabbed me, and I felt the sting of its claw-like fingernails digging into my weary upper arms. The smell of death that oozed from its flesh was almost worse than the pain. It was as if the creature had been buried for a score and then had risen from the dead. It embraced me as if to comfort a child.

Yet, instead of comfort, I suddenly felt a desperate, searing pain in my neck. I heard the pounding of my own heart; I heard my own blood moving through my veins and into the beast that sucked it out, as it sank its fangs deeper into my throat. I was lost. Paralyzed, I was dying.

Earc grabbed his fallen sword and moved to the back of the demon, impaling it again, once more to no avail. But in the least, it caused it to pause in its efforts, its face now dripping with my blood mixed in with Baodan's. Its embrace was still solid around me, binding my arms to my side. Though weak, I struggled against it, pushing with all my might.

"Nay," it rasped, "Not yet, me son. I'm no done."

Then it kissed me—not as a man would kiss a lover, not with tenderness or even passion. This was a kiss that stole the soul of men. Revulsion at this creature's kiss was instantly replaced by the warmth stealing through my veins, as if my missing blood were being replenished and contrived to heal me. I craved to keep kissing the beast. My entire being awakened to that kiss feeding me ecstasy, feeding me life.

The kiss was broken too soon, and I felt bereft as if I missed something wonderful, but my brother had interrupted our coupling with another strike into the body of the beast.

The troll released me and I fell to the ground, my body moving through its metamorphosis from life to death. I did not know what was happening to me. I could smell blood. I could vividly distinguish animals rustling through leaves, scratching tree bark, and gnawing at their food in the woods. I could even hear Earc's heart beating. I felt a coldness running through me as if the wind could cut through my skin and touch my internal organs. I felt my muscles expanding, stretching my clothing to its limits, power seeping into me.

As I knelt on hands and knees, with the onset of primal demon awareness taking hold, the creature's head rolled under me and came to rest with its green-yellow eyes staring back at me. Earc's last sword strike had been true and complete.

I screamed a strange bark and recoiled into a crouching position.

Earc came to me and held me up, still pointing his bloody sword at the now headless body of the beast.

"Run, Earc."

"I will not leave you, brother. You are hurt."

I heard his heart pounding very loudly, calling me to it. I would kill him if I let him stay here. I would do to him what the beast had just done to me.

"I tell you to run and find help, *now!*" I thrust him away from me.

He paused, blankly regarding my state, but finally did as I bid.

I needed to feed. I had to have flesh—meaty, bloody flesh—in that very instant, and it needed to be human flesh. It became an obsession as I had never felt before. The pounding in my head became unbearable, the desire in my belly excruciating.

I heard a heartbeat. I knew Baodan was dead, ripped apart by the beast, so as I turned, I knew I would find Artagan broken but still alive.

Then I fed on his dying last breath.

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My father, along with Fearghas Drummond and a load of peasants who worked for us, returned to the carnage in a wagon and on several *rounceys* to find two dead sons, a dead horse, and—I presumed—a dead monster. They also found me, a live monster, comatose. I had fed the life out of Artagan, leaving his body ripped to shreds in a grotesque mirror of Baodan’s corpse. I vaguely remember being gently picked up and carried back to the house where Iona tended to my nonexistent wounds, my neck bite having healed immediately after I fed on Artagan.

Everyone was at a loss to explain the events of the evening and the healing of a grievous wound Earc had witnessed me receiving. I knew the truth. That truth meant I could not live there without putting my family and friends in grave danger. I decided to stay long enough to marry Iona and make our child a Lachlan instead of a bastard.

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On the first day after being Devil-touched, I arose and did what I did every morning. I ambled to the window to look out and see what God had given us for the day.

It nearly killed me.

When my hand clutched the drapery, the sun burned my exposed fingers as badly as if I had stuck them into a fire. My singed fingers reeked of smoke, as though they were made of kindling. I pulled back immediately and watched my hand smolder for a moment then miraculously heal, just as my bite wound had the night before. I had not yet recovered from that shock when I noticed not five fingers healing, but six! I had an extra digit on each hand so my fingers numbered twelve. The new one added to my hand in a natural order on the outside next to the little finger and looked as though it had always been there. I could not hide that odd fact for very long.

I stuck a toe in the sliver, with the same burning result, and I noted the same extra digit on each foot, smaller than the pinky toe and curling in pain.

I fell to my knees “*Eternal light, shine in my heart . . .*” And I recited the first prayer that came to my mind.

“*Eternal hope, lift up my eyes . . .*” It was a sweet little prayer by the Alcuin of York that I remembered from my childhood. “*Eternal pow’r, be my support; eternal wisdom, make me wise. Eternal life, raise me from death; eternal brightness, help me see; eternal spirit, give me breath; eternal Savior—*”

I stopped, as my lips burned at the word *savior*, and stared at the curtains. I realized with a broken heart that I would never again see the sun unless I wished to be no more. Thwarting the sun’s rays in my family’s company became my first real challenge as I had to avoid windows, outdoor chores, and most of the rooms in the house.

In the morning, my beautiful Iona brought me breakfast in my darkened bedchamber. The servants could have done this but her love for me shone through in this little gesture. I took the offered tray gratefully, staring into the bright blue eyes of my raven-haired lover. Her gentle smile encouraged me, even though I saw sadness around her full lips. She had lost her brother the past day, and I my own brother. Still in shock, I had not been able to take it all in.

“They are talking,” she said simply.

“About what,” I asked innocently, afraid of the answer. I glanced at my tray. Piled on the plate were my favorites of eggs and bacon. I grabbed my knife and eagerly sliced a hardy slab of meat. But, surprisingly, though the juices trickled down my chin, it tasted *bauch* and dry.

“That you should be dead. That you could not have possibly lived through the bite and the kiss of the beast that attacked you.”

“They are right,” I said carefully. “But I was granted a miracle and I am glad for it.” I did not want to face the truth. I did not want to think about the alternative.

I stared at my food for a moment, unsure of my next move. Hunger pangs led me to my knife again. I tried the Scottish bannock, that wonderful bread only our cook, Hannah, could make. Dripping with honey, it always melted in one’s mouth. Yet, when the morsel touched my tongue, it tasted like dust. I set down my knife, discouraged, only wanting live flesh and blood. Iona’s pounded in my ears. It took every ounce of strength I had not to take what I really craved.

Trying to force down the bite of bannock, I commented, “I am very sorry for Artagan,” meaning that I was very sorry I fed on him. Iona construed it the way I had hoped she would.

She sniffled. “My parents are inconsolable. His body...” She stopped. I knew what his body looked like, ripped to shreds as if by a wild animal.

I reached out to comfort her, holding her hand in mine. I felt her warm blood coursing through her veins. I had always wanted Iona and our babe grew inside her to prove I had taken already what was mine. However, now I wanted her flesh in a completely unthinkable way. I fought the desire rising within me as one would fight rising bile before expulsing bad food.

She picked up my left hand, staring at my new finger. Her shocked eyes lifted to mine as she backed away and left the room.

I did not call after her as my head reeled with this knowledge that I did not need human food. The food I desired was the flesh of my own family.

The next night, after avoiding sunlight all day long (mostly by feigning the need for sleep), I knew I had to break away. I left the house into the soothing darkness and walked to the stables. I was amazed at how well I saw in the dark. It almost looked like daylight to my new demon eyes.

As soon as I entered the stables, all the horses began to whinny in fear, while stomping their feet and thrashing against their doors as if to escape. I approached Socrates’ stall and peered over the gate. His familiar brown eyes grew large and wild, and his hooves flailed defensively then pummeled against the hay and dirt, desperate to bolt away from me. Me! The one who had raised him from a colt, and now he reacted to me as he did to the creature that attacked me the night before. ‘Twas then I knew I could never ride my mount, Socrates, again. I felt his loss deeply. I could do nothing more than leave the stables.

I spent most the night wondering what other evil was in store for me. I cried for the first time in years and quickly discovered the next sign of my mutation as I wiped away tears of blackened blood.

My need to feed on living flesh and blood would drive me into the woods night after night so I would not draw my family into my hell any more than I already had. The sound of their blood pounding in my ears was like a cacophony of rain on the roof in a bad storm. I heard it as clearly as I heard them speaking or sneezing. If I hadn’t satiated myself with the beasts of the forest, I would have become the beast and devoured my family in an instant.

As the hunger gnawed in my belly like a dog gnawing on a bone, I learned something else that first night. I spotted a doe in the woods and ran toward her, feeling foolish but desperate, knowing I would never catch her. Humans were simply not fast enough to outrun a red deer.

However, as I ran, I noticed the trees pass me by faster and faster as I chased her down. My body seemed to lower as I ran, hugging the ground. I was amazed when I caught up to her and was able to jump upon her large nimble body and bite into her neck.

After I brought her down, I looked at her dead form, my hands on her side. But they were not my hands, even with the sixth finger on each hand; they were paws. Huge paws, the paws of the Devil's spawn, the wolf. I sat there, in wolf's form, thinking the thoughts of a man in sheer terror of what I had become.

But as I changed back into a man, nay, a human-like devilish creature, the fearsome need in my belly burned harder than any fire I could imagine, and I fed on the doe. I thought I had become a vampire, but it would turn out to be even worse than that.

On the third night after my turning, the village priest came to our house and merrit Iona and me in my father's walled garden. The harsh climate of my homeland and the hunger of the deer, rabbits, and other animals led him to protect our kitchen crops with walls and locked gates. His father had built the walls six feet tall, but the deer still bounded over them. Donnach had added three more feet in his lifetime, and he capped the stone wall with lime.

It was a lovely respite and could be entered by humans through three wrought iron gates. There was no gate on the far side at the top of the hill.

The garden was not a flower garden, replete with the beauty of color and blooms. It was designed with the aim of providing food to our supper table and curatives for our sick.

It was curved to follow the hill rising above our house. The top tier held some wild flowers, such as furze, and the bee hives. We used the furze as winter feed for cows, ponies, and other livestock, grinding it to a palatable consistency. We also used it as a fuel.

In our garden grew hawthorn bushes, gooseberry bushes, redcurrant bushes, and a few rose bushes for rose tea.

Along the middle of the garden ran trees of apple, plum, cherry, and almond. Around the edges lay plane, birch, ash, and hawthorn.

I smelled the sage in the air, adding to the immense oppression I felt in my breast. I concentrated on the garden itself, rather than the people collecting within it, to calm my raging beast developing inside. I looked at the raised beds of peat and recognized rue, southernwood, wormwood, horehound, and fennel. I saw in the next tier the boxes full of iris, lovage, chervil, clary, and mint. We had a whole section just for the full bodied poppy, what used to be a favorite seed of mine. The gourds and melons were still tiny and green. I saw the neat rows of radish, coleworts, leafbeet, parsnips, neeps, and skirrets. Furthest away were the most fragrant crops of garlic, chives, bulb onion, green leaved onion, and leeks. And not one of these things made me salivate.

Only the families attended. My father had told the people of the village that my scars from the attack of the beast were hideous to look upon. He asked them to pray for me, since I had not yet healed, and to stay away from the manor.

I wore a hooded cape and gloves. Though my new demon's flesh seemed immune to heat and cold, the heavy black wool was a clearly odd choice for the warm summer night, but it completely covered the strange knobs forming on my upper forehead. My sixth finger was as uncomfortably shoved into my gloves into the space for my pinky, just as my extra toe was jammed into my boots. My father had already ordered two more pairs of boots, slightly wider than my current ones, at my request. He raised his eyebrows but did as I wished without question. He was afraid to ask.

I stood next to the woman I loved. She wore a white ankle-length silk tunic over a white lacy kirtle. My mother, Ceana, and my sister, Muireall, had spent many hours embroidering in gold and

white thread the outlines of roses on Iona's tunic. She was very beautiful, with her dark hair falling soft and straight nearly to her waist.

She held white flowers in her left hand and touched her slightly bulging belly in the other. Her smile was wide and lovely but false as her eyes told me of fear, not joy.

I glanced at mother and Muireall. They, too, were decked out in their finest. Muireall looked just like my mother and me—blonde with green eyes and slim of build. The silver velvet tunic made her look older than her fifteen years.

My mother's graying hair was pulled back in a tight bun. Her deep red dress and white kirtle couldn't hide her nervousness. She wrung her hands in worry, rubbing the fancy silver looped belt around her waist. I saw the anxiety in the lines around her eyes. They had become more pronounced just within the last three days since the death of her youngest son, and perhaps because of the knowing, in her deepest thoughts, of her oldest son's descent into Hell.

While the priest said the holy words from the Bible, my ears burned as if he had taken a lit fire log and wedged it into each eardrum. My brain ached, and I felt certain that my head would soon explode. The priest quickly had us say our vows and sign the registry before leaving in haste. He must have somehow felt the evil, being a man of God. I forced myself to stand there and croak out my vows to my lovely bride and smother my urge to rip her and the priest to shreds.

I never went to the wedding bed that night, rushing into to the woods instead to satiate my hunger for blood and flesh on anything other than my bride and my family.

Iona awoke as I entered our bedchamber at dawn. I sat in a chair in the darkest corner.

"You left me," she accused, as she sat up in what was to be the bed I shared with her until death did we part. Her raven hair fell over her shoulders, messy yet enticing. I turned to look at the empty fireplace.

"I had no choice," I whispered, "for I am afraid if I touch you, I will make you as I am."

"What are you, Branan? What has happened to you? To us?" I heard the fear in her voice.

How could I put into words what I felt? How do you tell your wife of twelve hours and mother of your unborn child you are a demon?

"The beast transformed me into his kind, whatever he was."

I looked up to see tears rolling down her cheeks.

"We must face the truth, Iona. I am not Branan Lachlan. I am a monster."

She shook her head. "I cannot believe that. You are my husband."

I stood and took off my tunic. "Look at me, Iona. Look at me. My skin is blue." I developed unusual spots along my shoulders and the sides of my neck like giant freckles. My skin had turned an odd shade of blue as if I had a permanent body of bruises. The touch of the Devil was as noticeable as my extra fingers and toes.

"I have more muscles than I did a few days ago." I pulled back my lips for a moment then said, "I have pointed teeth."

I walked over to the bed and put my head down so she could also see clearly the strange knobs forming on my upper forehead. I grabbed her hand and made her feel one.

She cried uncontrollably. I sat back in my chair and curled up into a tight ball. I had finally spoken of my curse out loud. It was now real.

I heard her snuffle and turned her way again. I knew what I must do.

"I must leave you before I hurt you."

"Leave me?" she cried in panic, which drowned out her fear.

I nodded. "I must leave this house or I will be tempted to harm everyone in it."

Iona stared at me for a long time. “You are going to leave me a widow before I have a chance to become a bride.”

She made me sound like such a cad. But she had no idea what I could do to her and the family. If I did not leave, either they would all be dead within the week, or the entire Lachlan clan would be running with me in the woods, terrorizing Glaxton.

I had made up my mind but I wanted to try one last thing.

The next night, I learned that, without severe consequences, I could no longer enter and worship in a church, a beloved activity I had done all my life in a place from which I had always drawn great comfort. I grew up a Christian, and now I was banned from it by God himself.

The turning had taken place on a Wednesday evening, my marriage on Saturday night. The Sunday following, late at night after all others were in bed, I walked to the village of Ardoch to go to the little church that served the middle Glaxton community. I could not go to mass in the daylight with my family, but I could certainly go pray after dark. I had always enjoyed the beautiful stone structure that was built with love by the folks of Glaxton one stone at a time over a period of many years. It suited our small community well. Our family had its own pews right in front.

As I approached the door, apprehension filled me. The closer I moved, the harder it became for me to continue walking, the pain in my heart was so intense. I put my hand on the door to open it and I felt my heart screaming as if it were terrified of the holy edifice.

Out of sheer defiance of my curse, I tried another prayer, this one from Clement of Alexandria. “*Good shepherd of your sheep, your own defending, in love your children keep to life unending. You are yourself the Way: lead me then day by day, in your own steps, I pray, O Lord most holy.*”

My lips, again, burned at the words.

I stood for a moment unsure of what to do, my demon telling me to run, my human side—or what was left of it—telling me to push forward. This would be the first battle fought within me, one side good, one side wicked. I closed my eyes and yanked open the door. Damned if I was going to let the creature win!

But the creature did win. The minute I stepped through the portal it was like walking into a torture chamber. I heard earsplitting screams and fell to my knees, my body feeling as if it were being ripped apart limb by limb. And when my eyes fell upon the altar cross, they stung so badly I could not keep them open. Tears of blood flowed abundantly. They completely blinded me. I had to retreat before my body exploded.

I remember crawling out backward and rolling away from the open door until the screaming stopped. It was then that I realized that those screams had come from my own throat. I lay there panting for several moments until the pain subsided and I could move again. I heard rustling from the priest’s house, and I kicked up blood-specked dirt and gravel as I ran away before he discovered me.

God himself had sent me away. I was truly now among the damned.

The clan seemed to understand when I told them I must leave. They noticed the other changes in me such as the night hunting, the day sleeping, and my intense stares and abrupt exits during my internal fights with the demon. I noticed them glancing at me as I left the house at night. I heard their whispers as I walked by in my hooded cloak.

They noticed my unusual eating habits, too, since I now never touched human food. They called me to sup with them but I always politely escaped through the back door with a ‘Nay, later perhaps.’

I knew they all suspected I had been turned by the beast. No one would admit it out loud, not even Iona who knew beyond a doubt.

My father nodded his head. "It is best for now, until you find your way again, my son. We will tell the good people in Glaxton you have been called by a vision to go on a quest to the Holy Land."

I swallowed hard as I looked at my family from the safety of my hooded cloak.

My father continued, "In fact, Branán, that may be the best place for you to go and pray for mercy and peace."

"I will that." I wanted to shout at the top of lungs that I was a demon who did not need mercy and peace but a cure for my soul. I did not. I simply walked away from them.

As I parted, I turned to see them all standing in the hall as still as statues, afraid to breathe.

"I will always love you all."

The relief in their bodies was very apparent as I departed in the dark.

I became the fiend in the woods, the one parents told stories of to frighten children into being good. For the sake of my own survival, I learned how to be this creature of the Devil. I learned how to turn into a wolf and hunt, to sleep in a cave during the day and to feed at night on the plentiful bounty in the forests of Glaxton. I kept away from humans and became sub-human.

'Lachlan' meant invader or marauder, a name carried by the Norsemen who attacked these shores in the centuries past. The Lachlan name was well known and respected but I was no longer respectable. I was now the prowler, the intruder. I was Branán Lachlan of the realm of dangerous lachlan.

I kept watch of the house from afar and observed my beautiful Iona growing bigger with our child. Iona wore my mother's old maternity tunics. I recognized them from when she had Baodan and Muireall. She filled it beautifully, filling my own desires with them. My sexual desire for her was intermingled with the awful desire to feed on both her and the babe. Nightly, I fought off the notion of returning, and I kept at a distance.

My demon eyes saw her sad face perfectly. Her words would come into my head each time I watched her: *You are going to leave me a widow before I have a chance to become a bride.*

The truth of that statement was permanently etched onto her face. As long as I was alive, she was bound to me. She could never marry again unless she knew I was dead. I had trapped her into a hell nearly as bad as my own.

Then our daughter was born.

I could no longer stay away. In the middle of the night, I crept into the nursery and looked at the newborn bairn, the product of my loins, my old blood running through her new veins. I reached out for a tiny hand, which immediately wrapped around my finger and my demon's heart.

She opened her eyes and stared back at me, not uttering a sound. I looked into her eyes, exact duplications of my own; the green iris's flecked in gold, surrounded by light but full lashes. My own eyes still looked like hers when I could control the beast. When I couldn't, my eyes turned red and glowed as if the embers of Hell shone from behind them.

Here was the one connection I could keep with the human world. The one person who would not run from me, recoiling at the horror I had become.

Night after night, I silently returned to the nursery to visit my daughter. Night after night, she would hold my finger in her wee fist, and we would stare into each other's eyes and touch each other's hearts.

Brìghde, my babe, helped me keep my sanity and prevented me from toppling over the edge into complete darkness.

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The woods and the lochs kept me alive with plenty of game, such as deer, swan, and peacock, on which to feed. Because I was careful, the villages around the forest never knew what evil lurked there. I never showed my too recognizable face, now fully grown with three-inch horns on my forehead—a telltale sign of my new status.

At dusk, I would wander freely in the villages of the nearby lands. As I saw mavers pouring out the last of the washing water for the night, drunken men wobbling to their homes from taverns, or children sneaking out past their bedtimes, running into the warm night to meet friends, I still fought against my new inclination for out and out murder. But because a part of my Christian upbringing still remained intact, I had not killed a human since Artagan, and I barely remembered doing that; my transformation into the beast was what had spurred the ugly murder. I watched these villagers with envy that they walked as humans and I, the heir to Glaxton, walked among them dead.

Truly, there was a war inside my body I fought daily, the demon against the man, fire against ice. I felt both Heaven and Hell inside me, weapons drawn, warring. It was driving me mad.

I learned to live with the dementia of the damned.

Other than the odd little horns on either side of my forehead, the bruised skin, the new fingers and toes, and the large freckle patch along my collarbone, I looked exactly like I did the day I was bitten. On the outside, I would remain twenty-one forever, young muscles tightly bound over a firm lithe frame, green eyes bright, blond hair full and long.

On the inside, I was a thousand years old. Although I looked at the end of my childhood, I felt at the beginning of my old age. I still did not have a better name for what I had become, other than demon. After the horns grew in, I no longer entertained the daft-like thought that I was a vampire. Besides, I did not suck blood to live. I needed real flesh. Everyone knew vampires only sucked blood.