



DEATH BRINGER

DEREK LANDY



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PROLOGUE



The closing door made the candlelight dance, waltzing and flickering over the girl strapped to the table. She turned her head to him. Her face, like every other part of her, was decorated with small, pale scars, symbols painstakingly carved into her flesh over the course of the last few months. Her name was Melancholia St Clair. She was his secret. His experiment. His last, desperate grasp for power.

“It hurts,” she said.

Vandameer Craven, Cleric First Class of the Necromancer Order, esteemed Scholar of Arcane Languages and feared opponent on the debating battlefield, nodded and patted her hand.

She had entered into this arrangement with the kind of zeal that only the truly greedy can muster, but recently her bouts of annoying self-pity were becoming more and more frequent. “I know, my dear, I know it does. But pain is nothing. Once our work is done, there will *be* no pain. You have suffered for all of us. You have suffered for all life in this world, in this *universe*.”

“Please,” she whimpered, “make it stop. I’ve changed my mind about this. Please. I don’t want it any more.”

“I understand,” he said sadly. “I do. You’re scared because you don’t think you’re strong enough. But I *know* you’re strong enough. That’s why I picked you, out of everyone. I believe in you, Melancholia. I have faith in your strength.”

“I want to go home.”

“You *are* home.”

“Please...”

“Now now, my dear girl, there’s no need for begging. The Surge is a beautiful, wondrous thing, and it should be cherished. You’ve taken your next step. You’ve become who you were always meant to be. We all go through it. Every sorcerer goes through it.”

She gritted her teeth as a spasm of pain arched her spine, and then she gasped, “But it’s not supposed to last so long. You said I’d be the most powerful sorcerer in the world. You didn’t say anything about *this*.”

Craven made the effort to look her in the eyes. He despised people who sweated, and the perspiration was rolling off her in heavy rivulets. It turned his stomach to look at her wet, dripping, scarred face. “With the power I promised you, you’ve just had to suffer a little more than the rest of us,” he explained. “But all the work we’ve been doing, preparing you, it’s going to be worth it. Trust me. The symbols I’ve etched into you are seizing the power of the Surge and they’re keeping it, they’re looping it around, letting it build, letting it grow stronger.”

“Let me out.”

“Just another day or so.”

“Let me out!” she screeched, and shadows curled round her, rising and thrashing like tentacles.

He stepped forward quickly, gave her a smile. “But of course, my dear. You’re absolutely right – the time has come.”

Her eyes widened, and the shadows retreated. He doubted she was even aware of them. Strapped and bound as she was, she shouldn’t have been able to wield any kind of power. For once, Craven’s smile was genuine. This was a good sign.

“It’s done?” she asked, her voice meek. “You’re going to let me go?”

“Let you go?” he echoed, and gave a little laugh as he undid her straps. “You make it sound like I’ve been keeping you *prisoner!* Melancholia, I am your friend. I am your guide. I am the one

person in the whole of the world that you can trust to always be honest with you.”

“I... I know that, Cleric Craven,” she said.

He took a handkerchief from his robes and used it to take hold of her wet, slippery arm in order to help her sit up. “We have to choose the right moment to tell the High Priest about you, but once we tell him what we’ve been doing down here for all this time, it’s all going to change. Word will get out that you are the Death Bringer, and there will be many people vying for your favour. Trust none of them.”

She nodded obediently.

“There will be some who won’t understand,” he continued, “even within the Necromancer Order itself. Whenever you feel unsure, or scared, or whenever you just want to talk – I’m here for you.”

“I’m scared now,” Melancholia said, her fingers closing around the skin of his wrist. It took all his self-control not to shiver with revulsion at her clammy touch.

He smiled reassuringly. “There’s nothing to fear, not while you’re with me. Rejoice, my dear. Very soon, you’re going to save the world.”