

Decadent
PUBLISHING



AZURA ICE

Book One of The Crimson Bane Battles

ABSINTHE FOREVER

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement (including infringement without monetary gain) is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Absinthe Forever

Copyright © 2011 by Azura Ice

ISBN: 978-1-936394-94-4

Cover art by Fiona Jayde

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Decadent Publishing Company, LLC

Look for us online at:

<http://www.decadentpublishing.com>

Absinthe Forever

by

Azura Ice

Book One of the Crimson Bane Battles

Ian walked along Broadway, enjoying the crisp autumn air. Steam oozed from sewer drains and through manhole covers. Viewers of the latest hit play exited the theater. Every few yards, a taxi rolled curbside to await passengers. People tugged their jackets closer to their bodies or cuddled their children, who murmured about bedtime snacks. Ian dodged couples ambling toward late-night coffee shops, but as he did so, he caught a whiff of hazelnut and cinnamon mixed with perfume and popcorn. Taking in all the sights and sounds, he enjoyed being alive on such a beautiful night.

He'd indulged in a meal of lean veal, absinthe, and spicy noodles, all without chemicals or preservatives. Such meals cost him more, but purity of food and health was important to Ian—as it had been for Skorpe, too—and, although Ian loved absinthe, he limited his intake of it. He sighed, wishing he could go to The Castle with

Skorpe. He missed the Goth scene and their quality absinthe with its licorice-like aroma, but most of all, he missed Skorpe.

Even his ex-love's name sent a pang of misery and longing through Ian. He patted his latest movie rental resting in his inner coat pocket. *Well, I have something else to occupy my time tonight.* Tomorrow was Saturday, and Ian planned to watch a good flick before crashing and sleeping in. It had been a long workweek at the shipping yard.

As he looked across the street, a tall, willowy figure caught his attention. The man glanced his way and then turned the corner, the cowl falling from his head revealing long, dark hair. His purple-black velvet robe glistened with moisture as it fanned out behind him.

Skorpe? Hope blossomed in Ian's chest, but he quickly frowned and dashed the feeling. *No, it's not possible. Any person who rips you off and then disappears with the money doesn't intend on ever coming back.*

He crossed the thoroughfare, but as he did so, a pale red haze belched from the manhole in the

crosswalk. Puzzled, he stopped. His attention moved from the ominous steam to the lights lining the street.

Maybe the red color is created by a neon sign. There were a few red signs and lights, but from what Ian could tell, none of them caused the odd effect. Unease slithered through him like a venomous snake. *This is really weird. I wonder if there was a chemical spill somewhere, and it leaked into the sewer system.*

“Hey,” a male voice said behind him. “Look at the red steam coming from the sewers.”

Turning toward the guy, Ian discovered a man about his age, his arm around the waist of a svelte lady wearing a crimson velvet gown.

“I don’t like this,” the woman stated. “It’s creepy.”

“It doesn’t seem to be a trick of the light,” Ian offered. At least he wasn’t the only one who believed the mist was somehow unnatural. Looking up and down the street, he added in a soothing tone, “The red fog is coming from all the drains and manholes, so maybe a truck overturned

somewhere, and its contents spilled into the drains.”

“Maybe,” she said, her eyes wide open and full of worry. “But if that’s the case, it’s probably harmful to breathe, don’t you think?”

At her words, fear clawed through Ian.

Traffic had slowed to a crawl as the drivers and occupants stared in awe at the brilliant mist accumulating on Broadway. Pedestrians huddled around sewer drains. Some pointed; others shook their heads and shrugged.

“Let’s go home.” The woman pulled on the man’s arm. “I don’t think this stuff is healthy. We need to get indoors.”

“Okay.” The man escorting her nodded to Ian. “Later, dude.”

Watching them go, Ian felt another pang of loneliness, one much stronger than the last. It would be nice to go home with someone. Skorpe had left him weeks ago, taking nine thousand dollars in cash from out of Ian's safe. He'd written Ian a note, stating Ian would understand in time and begging Ian to not hate him. Ian figured Skorpe

took the money to help his Goth friends build a special club in Upstate New York, but Ian loved Skorpe so much he didn't have the heart to report his Goth love to the police, thinking maybe Skorpe would come back to him.

Screw that shit. I'll stay single and rent some gay porn. He gulped and hugged his movie rental inside his coat. *At least if I'm single, I don't have to share the bed, and I'm not yelled at if I eat the last bowl of Lucky Charms.*

But it didn't matter. Ian knew he was just lying to himself. He missed Skorpe, thought about him all the time, fantasized about him coming home, about how he'd felt—all warm and hard planes—lying next to Ian at night. Even though Skorpe wouldn't allow Ian to make love to him, Ian accepted that maybe Skorpe wasn't ready to commit to him physically, but that was all right. Sure, his Goth baby had his quirks, such as never removing his black lipstick or nail polish, but everyone had eccentricities...right?

Ian shook his thoughts away. Skorpe was a part of his past now, but regret burned hot in his gut. *I*

was wrong for not telling him how much I loved him.

As Ian placed his foot on the curb, he suddenly couldn't breathe. Within seconds, his lungs strained for air, but nothing entered through his nose or mouth. He wanted to gasp, but his entire body ceased functioning.

Panicking, he attempted to sit on the curb. Instead, he fell flat on his face just inches from a drain belching thicker, redder mist. He couldn't move, couldn't blink. He wanted to scream, but no sound would emerge from his mouth. Terror sliced through him.

The frightening ailment continued, and his heart thrashed as if it would burst free of his ribcage. Unable to even turn his head, Ian lay on the cold, damp asphalt, his mind racing, heart flailing harder and harder, the sound thunderous in his ears.

God help me! Someone, anyone!

He watched as those in his line of vision clutched at their throats and collapsed. Some hung out of taxis or lay headfirst in the backseats, their feet sticking out from the open doors. People

sprawled on the sidewalk, limbs akimbo. A few slumped against light poles and the sides of buildings. Many fell through doors, jamming the exits like fleshy corks. Children lay next to their parents. The people close enough for Ian to see wore terrified expressions, their eyes bulging, mouths agape. An older woman, a man about her age, a teenage boy, and a priest lay in the crosswalk a few yards away.

Ian's hearing and eyesight seemed like the only senses left to him. Engines approached, the sound growing louder by the second. Soon, two cars, a taxi and a white Sportage traveled into his line of vision, steadily bearing down on him and the people prone in the street. Although Ian couldn't blink, he could move his eyeballs, albeit slowly. Without a doubt, he knew he was in danger of being smashed. The Sportage rolled closer. Whatever had assailed everyone on the street had also infiltrated the confines of all vehicles and rendered their occupants powerless.

With no way to move or any control to even squeeze his eyes shut, Ian was certain the vehicle

would crush his skull. As the car began to swerve, Ian watched in terror, his last thoughts of Skorpe. The car lurched to the right, and the wind off the Sportage blew over his face, ruffling his hair across his forehead. The crunch of metal and the shatter of glass followed. Somewhere behind him, the vehicle's motor continued running.

However, the man who had been accompanying the older woman wasn't as lucky. The taxi passed over him, the sickening crunch of bone like the popping of light bulbs. Bouncing, the taxi veered to the right. It struck a parked car, its engine gunning, the roar deafening in the sudden quiet.

Disgusted by the noise and the gory scene, Ian wanted to vomit, but again, his body wouldn't function.

Dear Lord, what happened? Terrorism? Germ warfare?

Distant noises filtered into Broadway. The screech of metal on metal, glass shattering, crashes and explosions permeated the city, but not one scream or cry pierced the night. As time passed, the sounds stopped, but the lack of one particular

noise only increased Ian's fear and confusion. He no longer heard the wild beating of his heart.

If I can see and hear, am I really...dead?

What about the others? Were they trapped in their bodies, staring at him, at one another? Were some fixated on the filthy pavement or the sticky floorboard of a cab? Did this malady go beyond New York City? Was Skorpe safe?

Slowly and with a huge amount of effort, Ian finally managed to train his gaze on the people sprawled in the crosswalk. Every last one stared into space.

After what felt like hours, the car behind Ian finally sputtered and ran out of gas. He must have dozed off. At least, he thought he'd been sleeping. He couldn't shut his eyelids, but suddenly his vision popped on, and he realized he'd been unaware of anything for a while.

For a moment, Ian regarded the man crushed by the car. Sickened by the sight, he focused on the

woman and the other two males in the crosswalk killed by the misty, red poison. He couldn't breathe, no aromas entered his nose, nor could he feel the pavement against his face. At least he wasn't in any pain, but it was a fleeting comfort. *Am I truly dead, or is this just how it feels to be dead?* The last thought disturbed him almost as much as his fear for Skorpe's well-being. *If this is what death really is, I don't think I can handle an eternity of staring into space like this with only my disturbing thoughts to keep me company.*

Dawn crept into the city, gradually brightening Ian's surroundings, but no cars traveled the street, no people walked about. Ian heard the click of the traffic light, the buzz of electricity through signs and the faint roar of the automated subway routes. The coos of pigeons drifted to him, and faintly, he caught the cry of seagulls. If animals were alive, then maybe some people had survived, too.

Skorpe, I hope you're safe.

Ian let his mind wander to one of his most precious memories of his time with his Gothic love. He'd taken off work early, purchased prime

absinthe from The Castle and whipped up a meal of stir-fry—whole grain noodles with spices and olive oil. And, for dessert, he'd sliced up an organic cantaloupe he'd purchased from the health food store on the corner from his apartment.

He'd left a note on the refrigerator for Skorpe to meet him on the rooftop. When Skorpe arrived later, showered and wearing fresh clothes, he discovered an air mattress, a scrumptious meal, a crystal decanter of absinthe, and lit candles waiting. Ian remembered how Skorpe's melodious laughter had carried on the breeze that souged across the roof as they'd stared up at the night sky. Although the stars battled against the brightness of the city lights, Ian and Skorpe were still able to pick out a few constellations and pondered whether or not intelligent life existed beyond their world.

The whipped cream on the delicious rooftop evening had been a kiss so sweet, so poignant that it led to more kisses, some deep and demanding. Skorpe had caressed Ian and whispered how much he desired him. For a moment, Ian had thought

Skorpe might throw caution to the wind and make love to him. However, at the last minute, Skorpe had pulled away, panting and begging Ian to give him more time. Although disappointed, Ian respected Skorpe's feelings, and as the days passed, he continued to wait for that special moment together.

But now...now things were different. The world was no more. *Maybe I'll meet you in another world, my love.*

An explosion jolted Ian out of his half-sleep. The disruption stemmed from a few blocks away, and had he been standing nearby, it would have knocked him off his feet. Without a doubt, he knew what had happened.

Minutes later, another explosion followed. Ian couldn't judge time, but he guessed half an hour had passed when another jet roared by overhead. The resulting boom, the vibration in the street, and the sounds of falling debris reached him. Soon, smoke and dust wafted along the pavement and swirled around the bodies.

Planes running out of fuel and crashing!

Everyone in the world must be dead if no one was monitoring the air traffic. If Ian could cry out his fear and agony, he would. Hopelessness and terror consumed him. *Oh, Skorpe...where are you, baby? I pray nothing has happened to you.*

Surprisingly, a single, hot tear trickled from Ian's eye closest to the asphalt. Regardless of his situation, he feared for Skorpe more than he did for himself. Ian couldn't bear the thought his soulmate was dead. Ian was aware of his surroundings, so that was something, right? He couldn't be dead if he was aware...could he? Maybe, just maybe, there were others like him, too. Perhaps Skorpe was one of them, and perhaps there was a small shred of hope after all?

But what good does it do me or anyone else to still be alive and yet unable to move or breathe? If there are others like me, we're all prisoners within our decaying bodies.

The more Ian thought about it, the more tears leaked from his eyes.

After a fitful night of sleep, Ian awoke the next morning. As he became aware of his surroundings, he caught movement to his left. He managed to pinpoint what had caught his attention. At first, Ian thought it was just another puff of smoke from a downed jet, but as he focused on it, the glowing outline of a person grew more distinct.

What the hell?

The form looked like a red neon sign bent into the shape of a human being. Only a solid, radiant outline was visible. It moved like a real person, walking from one corpse to another, stepping over them, pausing to investigate the lifeless occupants of the vehicles before moving on to the next.

Within moments, more crimson shapes appeared on the street. The forms strode from out of buildings, exited coffee shops, and stepped from taxis. What were these things, and why were they only bright outlines, as if drawn by an artist who had forgotten to paint in the rest of the person?

One glowing figure paused and knelt amongst the dead in the crosswalk. It turned toward Ian, its

eyes like two flaming pieces of coal. It stared unblinkingly, its orbs growing hotter and brighter by the second, the thing's attention riveted on Ian.

A new kind of terror visited Ian, one that made his "death" on Broadway and the fear that had accompanied it seem like fun and games. Worse, he knew this thing was dangerous. Ian didn't know how he knew such information, but something deep within him howled in horror.

I'm already dead, so what could those creatures possibly do to me? Ian sensed the form's gaze wandering along his anatomy, as if it was questioning something. An unnatural chill swept through the inside of Ian's body.

Holy hell, that thing's delving into me, looking inside me! Ian scrambled around in his brain, trying to shut all thoughts and emotions down before the being detected his thoughts and feelings. Regardless, he couldn't quell the fear jumping around, screaming in his brain. *Please don't come over here, please don't come over here, please don't—*

The sound of a big engine interrupted the quiet.

Startled, Ian guessed the sound stemmed from a very large truck or bus headed down Broadway. Acting like they were of one mind, the figures turned toward the sound, and the thing's sinister poking about in Ian's mind retreated. Ian heaved a mental sigh of relief.

The strange crimson outlines vanished just as quickly as they'd appeared.

Ian struggled to move his eyeballs to see if all the frightening beings had left. *Did I imagine them?*

A white, unmarked panel truck stopped in the middle of the street directly across from Ian. People emerged from it dressed in orange suits, boots, gloves, and helmets fitted with air-filtration masks. Eight persons stood surveying the scene. Some carried hand-held gadgets, whereas others moved to other locations where they set down large cases and opened them to pull out more technical implements.

Relieved that there were survivors, Ian surveyed what he could while the investigation crew worked. They selected a few bodies,

performed tasks on others, and then left. An enormous dump truck arrived, and another crew began loading corpses into it. He laid watching and wondering how long it would take before someone gathered him up and tossed him into the back of the truck like he was a discarded toy. But the workers didn't reach him, and as evening descended on the city, the laborers gathered their tools and left Ian to the quiet of the street.

The eerie red figures didn't return that evening. Ian passed the time pondering what had caused the disaster. How many survivors were there? Was New York City the only place affected by the strange mist?

There were too many questions and absolutely no answers. However, one question kept piercing Ian's mind: *Is Skorpe dead?*

No matter how badly Skorpe had broken his heart, Ian prayed his Gothic love was all right.

As another nighttime slipped into the city and

cloaked the street where Ian laid, cherry-red outlines wandered from body to body, business to business, and car to car. What were they looking for? Were these beings caused by the freaky scarlet haze, or had they created the fog to kill all of humankind?

Once again, the sound of approaching trucks scattered the red figures to any escape route they could find. The engines stopped nearby, and soon footsteps closing in on Ian shook his composure. He heard whispering, but could only discern a few words and phrases.

“He was last seen....”

“Are you...?”

“Yes...no idea...in this...vicinity....”

“We must hurry...the Banes will be back....”

“There, next to the curb. That looks like him.”

Someone tossed a sheet over him. Ian sensed being lifted and conveyed somewhere. The people’s clipped discussion offered him little information.

“Wait. Headquarters has ordered us to move to a scene three streets over.”

“We need to get him in the truck now!” a familiar voice shouted.

“We can’t,” said a woman. “Survivors have been detected, and we’re ordered to save several instead of just one.”

“Unload the bike. I’ll use it and meet you over on Forty-Second.”

“Are you sure?” a man asked. “You’ll be unprotected.”

“I’m only going to load him on the back of the bike and ride directly over.” An eerie silence followed, then, “I promise I’ll be right behind you.”

Ian sensed being moved from a group of people to a lone person.

“Now, hurry before the street is flooded with Banes,” the familiar voice stated. “I made a promise to you all, and I intend to keep it. You’ll see me in a few minutes.”

Could that be Skorpe? It sounded like him, but he’d never spoken with such authority. Ian shrugged the thought away. *It’s not possible.*

The noises of people running and talking filled

Ian's ears.

The rattle of a sliding door, like a van's or a panel truck's, sounded loud in the stillness. Somehow he knew he'd been lifted and sat on an object. He could almost feel something beneath his ass, and then a wide expanse pressed against his front.

Did he dare have hope? Ian wished he could see through the sheet wrapped around him. *It feels like I'm leaning against someone. Am I starting to feel again, or am I just imagining it?*

Something jerked in front of Ian, then jerked a time or two again. He knew this only because the sensation of falling assailed him, but whoever was bracing Ian sat him upright again. Finally, he realized his hands had been grasped and pulled out in front of his body beneath the sheet and secured.

I'll be damned! Inwardly, he allowed himself to experience a bit of elation. *Someone is taking me away from the street after all.*

The jerky motion happened again, and a motorcycle started up, the ear-numbing sound of it momentarily frightening Ian. He sensed movement,

but with the cover wrapped around his body, he couldn't see anything. Leaning against the semi-hard surface in front of him, Ian imagined the streets they traversed, the scenes hidden from his eyes, the corpses rotting in the avenues, and he suddenly thanked God for permitting him temporary blindness.

What if this person I'm with intends to hurt me? I have no idea what the people are doing with some of the bodies they've collected. A tendril of fear poked at his brain, and panic settled in. He had no way to fight, no method of defending himself.

Finally, the motorcycle's gears downshifted, and the machine slowed.

"It didn't take you long to catch up," a male voice called.

"Are you kidding?" another man joked darkly. "He's not going to get caught out on the street with any of the Banes roaming around out there."

"You guys load the bike into that truck," the first voice commanded. Shuffling followed, and a loud creak rent the air. "Bring the body and ride in this

one with it. You'll have your tools at your disposal and privacy.”

Ian sensed being carried somewhere. The bike revved, and the sound became hollow and echoed dully, a sure sign of it entering a paneled truck or a semi-trailer. It grew darker, a door clanged shut, and then another engine roared to life. Light flared on the other side of the sheet wrapped about Ian.

“It’s okay, Ian,” the familiar male voice said.

Someone tugged the cover off Ian’s head. Stunned, he stared up into Skorpe’s dark, worried eyes. Delight, relief, and a host of questions bounced around in Ian’s mind and heart. *I can’t believe this is really happening. Where the hell’s he been all this time?* Frustrated with his lack of speech, Ian tried to convey his thoughts through his eyes.

Skorpe placed his hands on either side of Ian’s face and looked him directly in the eyes. “You’re safe now.”

Holy shit! He knows I’m aware of everything! Thank God!

“I’m going to do something that will shock you.”

A smile tweaked Skorpe's full, black-painted lips, but the concern in his eyes intensified. "It's essential I do this to free you." Skorpe pulled the sheet off Ian's body, unfastened Ian's pants, and then yanked on them several times. "There's a reason I never let you make love to me, Ian. We're both pure."

Confusion drifted through Ian. *What is he going on about? We're finally reunited, and he's talking about purity?*

"Neither you or I use any man-made products or cosmetics," Skorpe continued, his tone even. "We both utilize alternative medicines to heal ourselves instead of synthetic drugs, and everything we eat is chemical and preservative free, and most of our beauty products are natural, right down to using baking soda to brush our teeth. We only drink bottled spring water, and we both use distilled water to bathe in most of the time. The only liquor we drink is absinthe, and it's pure, too." Skorpe smiled down at him and ran one hand over Ian's chest, a chest that hadn't moved up and down with life for nearly three days. "I've missed our

evenings talking over a bit of absinthe so very much.”

Ian stared up at his love, both elated and confused to see him. *What the hell does eating right or using organic substances have to do with any of this?*

Laughing sympathetically, Skorpe answered Ian's unspoken question. “I imagine you're wondering what I'm going on about when you'd rather know why I left you and what's going on with you right now.” He stripped off his boots, trousers, and briefs, then hiked his purple, velvet robe up around his waist. He grasped Ian's flaccid cock and began kissing and licking it. “Bear with me, Ian. All will become clear to you very shortly.”

Surprised, Ian relished the warmth spreading through his body. The heat slipped into his abdomen, permeated his limbs, and coursed up into his skull. Slowly, sensation began to return, and a steady thump penetrated his ears. *My heart's beating again!*

“I'm going to consummate our union.” Skorpe

raised his head and looked up at Ian. "I'm from Parallel Earth. Whatever happens to one Earth will happen to the other, only with slightly different circumstances. In our world, we're only permitted one mate. If we have sex, it means we're joined by our souls until one of us dies. And on Parallel Earth, sex has healing properties." He indicated his face and lips and then wiggled his fingers at Ian. "Parallelans look like Goths, but our black lips and nails and our pale skin isn't from makeup. It's all natural." Skorpe straddled Ian's abdomen, and to Ian's surprise, desire roared through him.

Ian couldn't speak and still couldn't move, but he began to sense the implications of what Skorpe was telling him. As crazy as Skorpe's story seemed, Ian still believed him. After all, he never would have thought a red haze could've inflicted this malady upon him nor would he have considered that crimson figures existed if he hadn't experienced it all for himself.

"I didn't steal your money out of greed, Ian," his love said. "I took it to set up a place where we'd be safe. The Goth club in Upstate New York I told

you about is actually a haven for Parallellans. We must fight the Crimson Bane so it doesn't also leak into Parallel Earth. If both worlds are overrun by these things, then all is lost."

Ian looked down his body, his gaze traveling to Skorpe's naked ass poised over his now-hard cock. Whatever he'd done to Ian's body raced through him, warming every cell, infusing his body with life and sensation.

"I love you, Ian."

He met Skorpe's gaze, where tears glimmered in their dark depths.

"I never meant to hurt you. Everything I did was to protect you because we knew the Crimson Bane was coming." Reaching for a tube lying in the top of a nearby medical box, Skorpe grasped it and squeezed clear ointment onto his fingers, followed by slathering Ian's eager prick with the gel. "Those red outlines you saw wandering the street are demons created by humanity's carelessness, greed, and vanity. I know it sounds insane, but they're called Banes, and they were spawned by the harmful contents spewed into sewers and dumped

in waste facilities.” Skorpe tossed the tube aside and pressed Ian’s cock into his firm, hot ass.

Ian gasped, sucking air into his lungs for the first time in almost seventy-two hours. Desire roiled in him, and the need to touch Skorpe proved overwhelming. As sensation returned to Ian, it felt like hundreds of tiny needles jabbing his entire body.

Skorpe smiled, and the worry vanished from his eyes. “Ah, you’re healing faster than I thought you would. Do you know why you didn’t die from the red haze, Ian?”

Ian barely managed to shake his head.

“Since you weren’t contaminated by chemicals and other toxins and artificial ingredients, your body went into protection mode when it detected the Crimson Bane and put you into suspended animation. You were breathing, but without sensation, you weren’t aware of it, and your heart rate slowed to hibernation mode—a beat that has been just enough to keep you alive. A regular doctor would have pronounced you dead. Luckily, there are others like you, many of whom live

outside the cities.” His expression sobered. “That’s what my crew does—we detect and find the survivors trapped in their bodies, unable to do anything other than see and hear.” He traced one finger down Ian’s cheek. “I can only imagine the pure terror you’ve experienced the last three days, but it’s over now.”

Skorpe pushed down over Ian’s erection. A slight frown marred Skorpe’s smooth features as Ian felt the ridge of his love’s tight anus muscle surround the head of his cock. The barrier gave way, and Skorpe’s body accepted the rest of Ian’s prick. Ian thought he’d go mad from the lust raging through his body. Unable to move or make hardly any sounds, Ian reveled in the beautiful torture cascading through him. He focused on not coming, struggled with the sensation building at the base of his cock that sent corkscrews of fire into his balls and down to the tip of his rod.

“You seldom go out on Friday nights unless it’s for a fresh veal dinner,” Skorpe gasped, closing his eyes. He settled across Ian’s pelvis, receiving Ian’s cock deep inside his body as he relaxed. “So

when I went to your apartment, I knew where you were. You saw me on the corner, but the red mist was already filling the street. I had to go somewhere safe until it was over. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to return and reach you in time."

With effort, Ian raised shaky arms and enfolded Skorpe in his embrace. To have his Gothic love in his arms again felt as invigorating as their joined bodies did. *I can't believe he's here and in my arms. I'll never let Skorpe go again—never!*

The truck lurched to the right. Ian rolled to the side with Skorpe, the motion propelling them against one wall. Ian landed on top of Skorpe, their bodies separated. Desire still raged within Ian. He drew Skorpe closer, urging him into his body again. Skorpe whimpered in pleasure.

"You," Skorpe gasped, "feel so amazing. I've wanted this for so long."

"I..." Ian croaked for the first time. He swallowed and tried again, his voice a scratchy hint of what it used to be. "I thought I'd never see you again." The fire building in his cock nearly rendered him incapable of speech again, but Ian

quelled it for a moment and added, "All I could think about was you. I wondered if you were alive, and if so, where you were. And if you were okay. I thought I'd lost you, Skorpe."

"Never." Skorpe grinned up at him. "We're mates now."

"I love you," Ian said.

Wiggling his hips, Skorpe replied, "We have plenty of time before we arrive at the Safety Zone, which is The Castle I told you so much about."

"You'll forgive me if I move slowly." Ian chuckled softly, his voice finally beginning to function properly. Skorpe's laughter melded with Ian's.

Ian thrust into him, each movement gentle. He wanted to ravish his Gothic baby, but until his body returned to normal, he'd have to take it slowly. *Oh, but there's sweet rapture in going slowly!*

Skorpe met his motions, his body honed yet pliant beneath Ian. Within moments, Skorpe stiffened, his inner muscles contracting around Ian's cock, the sensation inflaming Ian's need to

have his lover as his and his alone. Ian dredged up more strength and pumped a little harder, the silkiness within his lover was Ian's undoing. He stiffened, filling Skorpe with his seed. With a soft cry, Skorpe arched his body and pressed his cock tighter against Ian's abdomen as it pulsed. Hot liquid slicked their bellies.

"It's official," Skorpe gasped as he relaxed and allowed little tremors of his orgasm to cascade through him and into Ian. "We're one person now."

"You're forever mine. I'm never letting you go."

"Yes, our love is like absinthe." Skorpe kissed Ian, his tongue delving into Ian's mouth, tasting him, urging a response that would keep Ian coming back for more.

Oh, how I love this man! Ian kissed Skorpe back with vigor, with total abandonment. They truly belonged to one another now.

Finally, Skorpe released Ian's lips and whispered, "Our love is forever strong."

Ian smiled. "Forever enduring," he whispered back.

Skorpe awakened slowly. As his brain cleaned away the cobwebs and his vision cleared, he remembered where he was and who he was with.

Ian! He shifted the warm, lax weight against his chest and repositioned his half-numb arms around Ian's sleeping form. Memories of his search for Ian bombarded his mind. When the red mist had souged up from the sewers beneath the New York City streets, he had feared the worst. The mist had occurred sooner than the Parallelans had expected. Thank the Parallel God that Ian's body was virtually free of contaminates. It was the only thing that had saved him from death and, then later, the Crimson Bane.

Skorpe had a lot to explain to Ian, but there was plenty of time for that later. *Things will be tough, but as long as we're together, everything will be fine.*

A thunderous boom reverberated through the air. Skorpe frowned. Another boom followed.

What the...? Skorpe stiffened and looked

around the dimly-lit panel truck. Basic tools such as hammers and pry bars jingled against the confines of brackets, hooks, and straps. Metal boxes with various other tools and scientific equipment vibrated against the floor and the walls. Contamination suits swayed on their pegs.

Another thunderous noise rattled the truck, and just as Skorpe identified the sound, a small window opened in the front panel.

“Skorpe?” a male voice said. “You awake back there?”

“Yeah, Nolan, what’s up?”

“We’re being shelled, so you better hang on to something back there.”

It was one thing to identify the noise, but to have his suspicions confirmed shook Skorpe to the very core of his being. “Who the hell is shelling us?”

“We don’t know,” Nolan replied, “but whoever it is isn’t trying to hit us. We’ve sighted Bane in the area.”

Ian stirred in his arms and sat up.

“So what the fuck’s going on?” asked Skorpe as dread filled his heart.

“It looks like we’re driving through a war zone,” a female voice answered from the cab. “Survivors are fighting the Bane. Nolan spotted a few people running along the edge of some woods.”

“Daphne, people can’t fight the Bane that way!” Skorpe protested.

“No shit, Sherlock!” Daphne replied. “Like Nolan said, they’re shelling us, so hang tight back there.”

“How long until we reach The Castle?”

“Half an hour.” She shut the little window with a firm click.

Darkness bathed the truck’s cargo hold again. The only light seeped in around the edges of the double doors. Fighting panic, Skorpe swallowed a lump of fear.

“What’s going on?” Ian asked and then yawned.

“We’re going through a war zone,” Skorpe answered, keeping his voice calm, “But don’t worry. We should be out of the area within minutes.”

“I take it survivors are doing the shelling?”

Skorpe made out the vague outline of his partner. “Yes, but we’re not equipped to help them,” he stated. “Command will send a team back later to check for anyone who might escape the Bane.”

“Can they kill those demons that way?”

“No,” Skorpe sighed, “but the people fighting them will learn that soon enough...if they endure this latest skirmish.”

“Then how do we kill those things?”

“We’re working on that.”

“What? Working on it? You mean no one knows how to kill the Bane?”

The distress in Ian’s voice flowed over Skorpe in waves. “There are things we can do to deter the Bane, but no, we haven’t found a way to kill or banish them.”

Another explosion occurred, this time so close that Skorpe jumped. Damn, that was just too close.

“Well,” said Ian, “come over here with me. At least if the worst happens, we’ll be together.”

Skorpe settled next to Ian again. He felt Ian’s touch on his thigh, and then Ian’s fingers interlaced

with his.

“We’ll get through this.” Skorpe remained silent. Too many what-ifs careened through his brain.

Another explosion, one much closer this time, rocked the panel truck. The vehicle lurched, tires squealed, and Skorpe pulled Ian tightly against him. The truck steadied, but Skorpe sensed its speed increasing.

“It feels like the truck’s speeding up,” Ian whispered.

Skorpe said nothing. *Nolan is desperate to get out of this area. The bombs are one thing, but traveling too fast on slick roads isn’t a good idea either.*

Two distant detonations reached them, but another explosion erupted so loudly Ian cried out and Skorpe yelled in surprise. The panel truck lurched again, but this time it tilted severely to the left.

The cargo hold became a dryer tumbling its contents. Tools fell off their hooks and brackets. The floor beneath Skorpe’s ass and feet abruptly

turned into the right-hand wall, and the left-hand wall became the floor beneath their backs. A couple of first-aid kits, flashlights, bundles of flares, and other equipment rained down on him and Ian, followed by plastic suits whapping Skorpe in the face.

“Shit!” Ian hissed. “I bet we have bruises show up all over us.”

Metal screeched, and their transport shimmied and vibrated so hard Skorpe wondered if the entire vehicle was disintegrating.

Daphne screamed from the cab. “Skorpe!”

“I’m here,” he said.

Something hard and heavy collided with Skorpe’s cheekbone; pain assailed his face.

The truck’s droning motor suddenly died, and the only sound that remained was Daphne’s cries for help on the radio, and the bombs and grenades going off around them.

“Are you all right, Ian?” asked Skorpe as he struggled to sit up.

“I...I think so. Something struck my shoulder, but it doesn’t hurt too badly.” Ian’s voice sounded

frightened, but at least he didn't seem injured. "Should we climb out of the truck?"

"No, we stay put unless Daphne tells us otherwise."

Silence reigned.

Moments later, Ian said, "Skorpe, what if...one of those things opens the back of the truck?"

"Then we fight." How did he tell the love of his life that if those back doors opened, and it wasn't a human greeting them that they were both as good as dead?

"Fight with what?" Ian pressed.

"With everything we've got."

Daphne continued to babble through the front wall. "Castle this is Truck Nine, come in!"

"This is Castle," a voice responded. "What's your position?"

"We're about twenty-five minutes outside of the perimeter on Old Blackmire Road." The fear in Daphne's voice was unmistakable. "A blast has incapacitated us, and we need rescue now!"

"Dispatching a rescue unit now, Truck Nine. Good luck."

“Good luck?” Ian echoed.

“Shh.” Skorpe couldn’t do anything except hold Ian. “All we can do is sit here and wait.”

“Great.”

After what felt like hours, a roar seemed to gradually approach the truck.

Ian sat up, soreness lacing his body. He sat for a moment, straining his ears for more noise.

“What’s wrong?” Skorpe whispered.

“Did you hear that?”

“I heard something, but it happened the same time that last explosion went off, so I’m not sure.”

“I thought I heard a rumble like thunder or maybe even an engine.” Ian frowned, trying to filter noises.

Daphne’s scream sliced through the din of chaos. Ian jumped. Even Skorpe’s touch did nothing to soothe him.

She screamed again. “No! Please, no!”

“That’s Daphne, isn’t it?” Ian said.

One of Skorpe's warm hands clamped down over Ian's mouth. "Be quiet," Skorpe whispered into his ear. "If they hear us, we're next."

Frightened silly, Ian sat so still his spine ached, but he couldn't control his breathing. What if those things out there heard him? Could they detect the pounding of his heart, too?

Two motors roared to life and tore off to their left.

Something rattled the doors to the panel truck.

With his heart thrashing so hard Ian felt dizzy, he clamped down on Skorpe's other hand, squeezing it in terror. *Heaven help us! We're dead!*

Skorpe pulled Ian into his arms and held him tightly. The sudden quiet thundered in Ian's ears.

The rattle happened again. Something metal squealed, followed by the clang of a tool. One door flopped open to crash noisily against the pavement. Ian blinked against the abrupt brightness, his eyes protesting the blinding light. Finally, his eyes adjusted enough he made out normal human feet shod in combat boots. The owner of the feet knelt and peered through the

door.

“Skorpe?” the man called. “You in there?”

“I’m here,” he answered. “And my partner is with me.”

“Thank God you’re okay.” The man sighed. “Wish I could say the same for Nolan and Daphne.”

The other door was lifted, and more light poured into the compartment.

“Come on,” the man urged. “Some of the men used four-wheelers and led the Bane away. They’ll meet us at The Castle.”

Motioning for Ian to follow him, Skorpe crawled out on his hands and knees. Ian scrambled over tools and equipment behind him. Once out in the fresh air, Ian stood up, his cramped muscles protesting, and blinked against the cold autumn rain. As he gazed around at his new environment, he drew in a lungful of cool, moist air. Aflame with more color than the lower half of New York State’s foliage had been, the trees dripped with moisture, their leaves so bright the water droplets on them glistened like jewels. Thick, silver mist

rolled across the landscape obscuring patches of scenery each time a fog cloud tumbled through.

“What about the people driving our truck?” Ian asked Skorpe.

Skorpe shook his head. His velvet cowl fell back and pooled around his shoulders to reveal a sheaf of dark, shiny hair. “Once a Bane drains you, there’s nothing left to save.” He gathered his hair out of the hood and pulled it all to one side to hang down his chest. “Sometimes we find the occasional person who hasn’t been sucked dry, but it’s more or less pointless to save them. Regardless, we can’t leave someone like that behind, so we provide a sanctuary for all.”

Ian grimaced. Sympathy for their deceased drivers and loathing for the Bane warred within him. He took two steps in the direction of the truck’s cab. “Maybe we should double check on them to be sure—”

“Leave them,” Skorpe insisted. “There’s nothing we can do for them now, and you’ve already seen enough death to last a lifetime. We have to get moving before the Bane return to collect their

bodies.”

“What about the truck and its supplies?” asked Ian.

“We leave it here for survivors to scavenge,” the man said, motioning for them to get in a tank. He smiled, his lips as black as Skorpe’s. “Let’s go. The tank is cramped, but it’s safe.”

“Works for me.” Ian jumped up on the tracks and climbed to the top of the metal beast.

Behind him, the man laughed, and so did Skorpe.

“Your partner learns fast, eh?”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” Skorpe answered.

Ian turned and looked down at them. “I don’t want to be here if those things come back.”

Another Parallelan gazed up at him from the open hatch. He motioned for Ian to climb inside.

“I just want to get settled someplace where I can relax for a while,” Ian said to Skorpe. “My nerves are shot, I’m starved, and some good absinthe sounds like Heaven right now.” He raised a fist in the air. “Remember—absinthe forever!”

The others chuckled.

“I hear you on that,” the big Parallelan agreed, laughing.

Ian held his hand out, and, with a wry smile, Skorpe gripped it and climbed up after him. Climbing down the ladder into the tank, Ian looked forward to reaching The Castle. It was time to start his life with Skorpe, and with any luck, their two worlds would discover a way to defeat the Crimson Bane.

* * *

~**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**~

Azura Ice writes several subgenres of romance, which includes but is not limited to het, ménage, m/m and can be set in contemporary times or even in a far away world or another dimension. Azura's muse leads her by the hand, and her fingers do the light-speed typing.

Who is Azura Ice? She's a full-time author who is owned by two crazy felines of tabby descent (although they swear they're of Egyptian lineage). Azura writes in an attic study that overlooks a beautiful valley, and enjoys her husband's company when he's permitted to enter her domain. However, if he brings offerings of coffee and an occasional chocolaty treat, she's inclined to let him in her office more often.

Azura takes her writing seriously, so she doesn't hang out on group loops (she tries to avoid shiny object syndrome), but if you'd like to contact her, interview her, etc., you can reach her at Azura.Ice@live.com and visit her website at <http://ablueice.wordpress.com> and you can chat with her through Twitter www.Twitter.com/Azura_Ice and Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/azura.ice>



*Immerse Yourself in Fantasy
with
Decadent Publishing*

<http://www.decadentpublishing.com>

Table of Contents

[Title page](#)