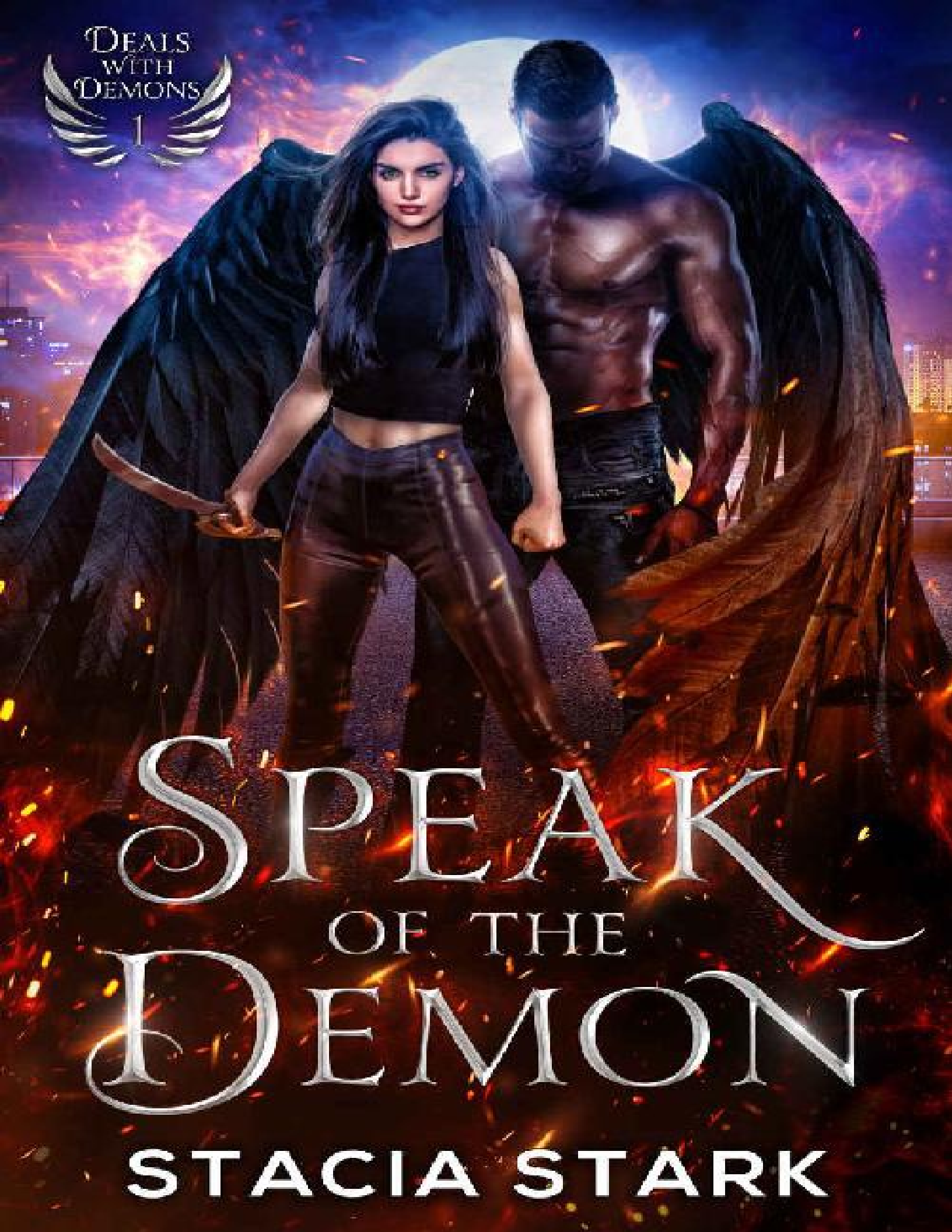


DEALS
WITH
DEMONS
1



SPEAK
OF THE
DEMON

STACIA STARK

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The Deals with Demons Series

Speak of the Demon

Dance with the Demon

Inner Demons

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SPEAK
OF THE
DEMON

DEALS WITH DEMONS

STACIA STARK

“And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.”

— ROALD DAHL



“*I* didn’t do it, I swear!”

The lesser demon’s voice turned into a high-pitched whine. He inched his black, clawed hand toward the long knife I’d dropped on the ground.

I slammed my foot down on his hand. Hard. “Uh-huh. Must’ve been some other demon who looked just like you, right?”

His feet dug into the ground in an effort to escape, the muscles of his legs straining. But he wasn’t going anywhere.

I’d found him with his claws sunk deep into a goblin’s neck, ten minutes after he’d attacked a group of humans. He’d obviously been summoned, and if he was free of his bonds, he’d managed to kill his human summoner.

High demons could feed off a number of things— lust, greed, lies, and— it was rumored— fear. But most lesser demons preferred pain. Unfortunately for them, there were rules involving a little thing called consent.

That was where I came in.

“The Mage Council will be pleased to finally have you in their hands, Asparas.”

The demon shrieked, screaming denials, even as his claws dripped goblin blood on the pavement. That pavement— and everything else in Durham— was covered in a layer of yellow pollen. Spring had reached North Carolina and my allergy spell was barely holding strong this year. Another few days of this and I’d need to buy yet another charm.

“Okay,” I said. “Onto our next order of business. I’m going to ask you a question, and I’ll know if you lie.”

Six months of this. Six months with the dagger I now clutched in my fist and I was still no closer to learning the truth.

Asparas froze, his eyes widening as I rolled him over with my foot. He bared his fangs at me as his tail whipped out, aiming for my leg. I sidestepped and gave him a disappointed shake of my head as I reached into the pocket of my jeans for the picture I carried everywhere.

“Have you ever seen this woman before?”

“No.”

The Mistilteinn Dagger began to glow a dull red, and I gaped at it. The demon was lying. For a moment, I stood frozen as I attempted to come to terms with it. After two and a half years of searching, Asparas was the first creature I’d ever interrogated who had recognized the picture of my mother.

“Who killed her?”

“I don’t know.”

Truth. “But you know *something*. When did you see her?”

Little known fact about lesser demons: They have photographic memories. It helps them break out of contracts when they’re summoned by idiots who want a demon on a leash but have no idea how to phrase their orders in a way that the demon can’t escape.

“December 18th, 72AP.” Asparas’s voice was sulky and he beat his wings again. Unfortunately for him, one of my throwing knives had cut through the membrane of his wing when I found him crouched over the goblin.

It took me a moment to connect the date. December 18th, 72 AP was the day my mother died. Seventy-two years after the first portals were opened on earth, my mother was murdered—likely by one of the creatures who’d originally streamed through, making this world their home.

“Who did you see with her? Who killed her?” I knew better than to ask multiple questions at once, but I was officially flustered.

“She was already dead,” the demon snarled. “Just another witch corpse, and no way for me to feed. Why would I care?”

I took a step closer to the demon and tilted my head. He froze. I kept my voice very quiet, and he began to tremble.

My voice was very quiet. “Was there anyone else near her?”

Asparas stayed stubbornly silent and I crouched next to him, keeping one eye on his sharp teeth. “Answer me and I’ll put in a good word with the Mage

Council.”

The dagger glowed red and I sighed. Unfortunately, it was an equal-opportunity artifact, and it reacted to my lies as well. “I’ll tell the Council you cooperated,” I amended, and the red disappeared.

The demon cursed in a language I didn’t recognize, but his eyes darted as he weighed the pros and cons. Finally, he snarled at me.

“There was a high demon examining her body,” he said sulkily, glowering at the picture in my hand.

My pulse beat faster and I fought to keep my voice steady as I stood straighter.

“Who?”

“Ver—”

The demon suddenly gaped, blood pouring from his throat and I froze, staring down at him for a shocked moment.

I whirled and crouched, dropping my shields long enough to send out a tendril of power in an attempt to track the owner of the arrow.

Nothing. They were gone.

I glanced back down at the demon. Dead. An arrow stuck out from his throat, and I twisted until it came free, careful not to make contact with the tip, in case it was poisoned. The arrow was matte black, which explained why I hadn’t seen it coming— it hadn’t caught the light. Even the feathers were black, and I stared at them consideringly. I knew the types of bolts most of the bounty hunters in the Triangle used, and I’d never seen one like this before.

Someone hadn’t wanted me to hear what the demon had to say. The only lead I’d ever gotten, and he was dead.

But I now had half a name. I could use that.

I dragged the demon the twenty feet to my Toyota, hauling his body into the trunk. The Mage Council wouldn’t be happy— they’d wanted him alive — but I’d still get half the bounty. The sooner I wrapped this job up, the sooner I could figure out who ‘Ver’ was. I grunted as I shoved the demon’s limbs into the trunk. I kept an old tarp handy for moments like these, and I adjusted it to prevent the blood from soaking my trunk. With a last glance around the vicinity, I slammed the lid and headed for the Mage Council’s local offices.

The lives of humans on Earth all changed within a single moment just over seventy years ago— the moment the portals opened and paranormals

streamed through in droves.

The ten years following the opening of the portals were known as the Decade of Despair. While the name still made me roll my eyes, there were few other ways to describe the years where close to a billion people had died. The Mage Council had fought the good fight, and it still focused on recruiting the kind of humans who wanted to make a difference... and those who longed for power of their own. I didn't fit either category.

Before the Decade of Despair, the Mage Council's Durham facility was the Durham County Human Services building. I'd seen pictures of the original building in a book somewhere, and it had been designed with plenty of windows in an attempt to make it more welcoming.

The Human Services had been mostly rubble after the Decade of Despair, and the Mage Council had snapped it up. The new facility was designed to withstand anything paranormals threw at it— the walls were made of colossal stone slabs, and the lower floors had bars on the windows. Most of the glass was long gone since the mages considered it a security risk, and it was now an unimaginative gray block of a building with some of the strictest security measures in the city.

The facility spanned a city block and towered over the smaller apartment buildings in the area. Along with floors of offices, a library, and the mysterious, ultra-secure upper floors, the facility had been expanded to include a judicial floor, a basement prison, and an execution chamber.

Ben was leaning against the side of the building when I arrived, and I silently cursed. He looked like one of those guys who'd peaked in high school, and was reliving his glory days over and over. His hair was thinning, but he'd occasionally spring for a glamor-charm, giving him a luscious head of hair for a few weeks before the spell faded. Most of his muscle was slowly turning to flab, and he spent the majority of his time off attempting to get laid.

Ben's smile widened and he wandered after me as I dragged the body around to the back entrance so it could be checked in. He watched me silently and I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging his presence.

The mage working behind the check-in counter gave me a dark look as he processed the body. I shrugged and stared mournfully at the cash he'd slid under the glass screen. I'd counted on twice the bounty. This week was going to be tight.

I ground my teeth as I shoved the cash into my pocket and took the

paperwork from the mage. Whoever thought they could get away with killing my mark in front of me would have another thing coming, oh yes they would.

I had half a name, and it wouldn't take me long to research exactly who that name belonged to. For the first time, I had a solid lead— someone who'd been seen near my mother's body. That was cause for celebration.

“So, how exactly did you fuck that up so bad?”

Ben hadn't taken the hint. Maybe if I pretended he was invisible, he'd leave me alone. The mage still hadn't forgiven me for plying him with drinks six months ago and making him spill everything he knew about the dagger currently sheathed on my belt. He'd been snooping around the restricted section of the Mage Council's library, and if the council found out, he was in *big* trouble.

The Mistilteinn Dagger was also known as the Dagger of Truth. The moment I'd heard of it, I was determined to make it mine. With the dagger in my hand, I'd be able to interrogate suspects without needing a truth spell.

Of course, if the council discovered exactly where I'd found my dagger, I'd be in much deeper shit than Ben. The Mage Council had to cooperate with the high demons, because if it came down to a war, the demons would wipe them all out without blinking. Stealing ancient artifacts from the demons wasn't conducive to a good working relationship.

Both Ben and I had kept our mouths shut, but that didn't mean we were buddies. He thought the dagger should've been his, even though he hadn't had the ovaries to go after it. Me? I'd never forget the first time I worked with him after joining the Mage Council and he double-crossed me, stealing the mark and leaving me stranded, deep in red cap territory after dark. Turns out, vicious, murderous goblins don't listen to reason. I still had a scar on my thigh as a reminder of that night.

He was still staring at me. I scowled. “Mind your business,” I advised him, and he lifted his lip at me before turning and stalking away.

I headed back around the front of the building, scanned in at the desk in the lobby, and took one of the elevators up to Cara's office. The apprentice mage specialized in weapons and, if I slipped her a fifty, she'd likely examine the arrow for me. The fact that someone had killed Asparas before he could tell me who was seen near my mom's body could be coincidence, sure. He could've pissed off any number of people during his rampage across Durham.

But I'd been doing this job for long enough that I didn't believe in coincidences.

I knocked on her open door, my eyes scanning her office. A collection of swords leaned against the wall in one corner, a tiny window offered a small glimpse of the city below, and her floor, desk, and guest chair were littered with books and weapons.

“Shit.” I’d been hoping she’d be here, but she must be out in the field. While I really needed to get the arrow analyzed, I didn’t have time to wait around. I made a mental note to text Cara later and took the elevator back down to my car where I Googled, enjoying the breeze coming through the open windows. Within a few weeks the North Carolinian heat would be brutal.

The page loaded and I scanned the results. The search term demon + Ver gave me a few options. There was Verrier, known as the demon of disobedience, or Verrin, the demon of impatience. I scrolled, occasionally lifting my head to keep an eye on my surroundings. Few people would start shit this close to the Mage Council’s facility, but it paid to be careful.

Neither of those demons had been seen on Earth during the past fifty years. That didn’t mean they weren’t going by different names. Maybe they’d just been careful not to draw attention to themselves. I blew out a breath, running my thumb down the list.

There.

Vercan. His social media listed his home as Raleigh, and once I searched his name directly, it was evident that he’d been here when my mother died. Turns out, he was a proponent of ‘demon’s rights,’ and he’d been one of the first demons to champion cross-species relationships several decades ago.

I raised an eyebrow at that. Even fifty years ago, those kinds of relationships could get you killed. Now things were changing, and there was even a dating app devoted to paranormals.

I did a little more online stalking, my anticipation making it difficult to focus. Vercan was my best lead, so I’d start with him and check out the other demons if he proved to be a bust. I went still as I found a Facebook post he’d been tagged in. He was on the guest list for one of Samael’s parties tonight. One of his *private* parties. My mouth went dry at the memory of the last party I’d attended.

Samael was the biggest, baddest demon on the East Coast— and likely the country. Nothing happened in his territory without his express permission, and he played nice with the Mage Council because he chose to— not because he had to.

It was his obsidian tower that loomed over Durham, sticking out like a sore thumb. And while the mages liked to pretend they were in charge, everyone knew they bowed to the high demons.

Samael's masquerade parties were legendary. Humans, mages, witches, fae, even— I'd heard— the occasional werewolf would attend, although the latter never stayed long— their alpha didn't approve. The parties allowed the demons present to feed off the attendees' lust, lies, and greed, while the attendees got to brag about partying with the demons. A win-win for assholes.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if tonight was one of Samael's exclusive, invite-only kind of parties. I scanned the tower's website and grimaced. Samael had just held a masquerade party for the public a few nights ago, which meant the next one could be weeks away. And Vercan was due to fly to Europe in a few days.

This was my best chance.

I chewed on my lower lip. When my sister and I were growing up, my mom had one rule. One instruction that she repeated ad nauseum: stay away from the demons.

But what if the demons could help me find out who killed her?

I started my car and pulled away from the curb. As long as I could get into the party, I could stay out of Samael's way and have a quick chat with Vercan. Unfortunately, my dagger would have to stay behind.

Since high demons can smell— and feed off— lies, I'd figured it wouldn't do any harm if I "borrowed" the Mistilteinn Dagger. Even learning it was *Samael's* dagger, and that it was guarded by a *dragon* hadn't been enough to deter me.

The scariest part hadn't been the dragon. The scariest part of my shenanigans had been dancing with Samael so I could get close enough to steal a single hair from him, allowing me to break his wards without him noticing. The thought of revisiting the demon's tower made me tremble.

If he recognized me as the woman responsible for stealing his dagger, I was worse than dead. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. As long as I didn't rouse suspicion, I'd be okay. And I wasn't losing this lead.

Decision made. I was going to the party, and I knew just who could help me get in. I turned the car around. My day-drinking friend wouldn't be hard to find.

The sun was already beginning to set as I parked my car on Main Street.

Meredith's Bar was a squat, brick building that had seen better days. It had an outdoor seating area in the back, but most people chose to stay inside, where they could keep an eye on everyone who walked through the front door.

Steve was slumped on his usual stool at the bar, staring into his drink.

There weren't many places in the city where paranormals could let their guard down and have a drink without watching their backs. Steve was a human, but working for paranormals didn't usually make humans popular amongst their own kind. I'd made sure to keep an eye on his schedule, and today was Steve's day off.

Steve always looked slightly disheveled, as if he'd just gotten out of bed, and today was no different. He needed a shave, his glasses were smudged, and there was a yellow stain on his shirt. Behind his glasses, his grey eyes were slightly blurry— but they sharpened on my face as I sat down next to him.

“What do you want?”

“Can't I just want the pleasure of your company?”

Steve's brow furrowed, and he pushed his dirty blond hair out of his eyes. “The fact that you're using that tone with your ‘I need something’ smile tells me everything I need to know.”

I dropped the smile and replaced it with a scowl. “I was trying to be charming.”

“Try harder.”

“Fine. I need a favor.”

He slid me a suspicious look. “What kind of favor?”

“I need to get into Samael's party tonight.”

“You're not on the list.”

“That's kind of the point of this conversation.” I waved a hand between us and he instantly shook his head.

“Uh-uh. No way. You're dreaming.”

I tilted my head, staring Steve down. “I need this. I'll pay for it.”

“It's too dangerous. For both of us.”

“Come on Steve, you know how it goes. I help you out, you help me out, everyone wins.”

“No.” He lifted his hand for another drink and I ran my finger along one of the deep scratches in the wooden bar while we waited. Mere was busy pouring whiskey for a group of werewolves, and one of them was watching her intently, his yellow eyes almost glowing. From the twitch of her lips,

Mere was well aware of him checking her out.

Above the bar hung a sign that had once read “Tom’s Bar.” Sometime between now and when I’d been here last, the “Tom’s” had been crossed out and replaced by “Meredith’s”.

Tom disappeared a few years ago. And he hadn’t been missed. The old curmudgeon had been a bigot, ensuring paranormals felt so unwelcome that they chose to drink almost anywhere else.

Never mind the fact that his daughter was a witch.

Meredith had run the bar for months after he disappeared, finally throwing up her hands and advertising drink specials to lure in both humans and paranormals. Mere didn’t care who her clientele was, as long as they drank enough to pay her bills.

Meredith’s was now neutral territory— one of the few bars in Durham where paranormals could rub shoulders, mages could make deals, and witches could scheme without drawing attention. It was an unwritten rule, but starting a fight in Meredith’s would have every creature in the bar on your ass within moments.

Mere wore her long, black hair in a thick braid, hazel eyes dancing as she grinned at a gnome who stood up on a bar stool and slid a few bucks into her tip jar. She wiped her hands on her apron and nodded at him, glancing at the young fae bartender she’d recently hired. He waved his hand and the cap flew off a bottle of beer, which lifted into the air and poured a thimble-sized glass of beer for a pixie who was fluttering drunkenly across the bar.

The bartender said something to Mere and she moved toward us.

“Danica,” she greeted me, leaning against the bar. “What hell are you raising now?”

I couldn’t help the smile that curled my lips. Meredith was good people.

“The bad kind,” Steve said sourly as she slid another whiskey his way. “The demon kind.”

I sighed as Mere raised her eyebrow at me. “Why am I not surprised,” she said. Her gaze dropped to the dagger on my hip, obviously remembering the night I’d plied Ben with alcohol.

“It’ll be an easy in-and-out,” I promised Steve. “You get me in, I’ll talk to the guy, and then I’ll disappear. No one will even know I wasn’t on the list.”

Steve sighed, but I could tell I almost had him. “Why is it so important you talk to this demon?”

I told him about the lesser demon and the arrow. Steve raised a brow as

he sipped at his whiskey. Behind us, a group of goblins burst into laughter, and Steve hunched his shoulders, shooting a look toward the crowd. He may work in the tower, but that didn't mean Steve was fond of paranormals.

I followed his gaze. The goblins were leaning toward each other, their red eyes intent as they talked in hushed voices. One of them glanced our way and bared his pointed teeth, the malevolent expression on his green face warning us to mind our own business.

Steve shook his head morosely and twisted in his seat toward me. "So you think this guy knows something about who killed your mom?"

I nodded. "This is my best chance to question him before he flies to Europe."

According to my research, Vercan had a security team who'd been working with him for decades. But he'd have to leave them at the door to get into Samael's party.

Steve sighed. "In and out?"

"In and out," I promised, and he closed his eyes briefly.

"Fine."

I grinned at him. "You're amazing."

"You'll owe me."

"You know I'm good for it."

"I don't want your money. I want a favor. To use when I need it."

"Done. You know, you could really use a haircut."

He raised one eyebrow. "Don't make me regret helping you out."

I glanced outside. The sun would be setting soon and I needed to get ready for the party. With a final 'thank you' to Steve, I waved at Mere and she nodded at me from across the bar.

Sneak into the party, talk to a demon, and get out again. How hard could it be?



I smoothed my hands down the little black dress I was wearing. The dress had strategic cut outs, which should hopefully draw attention away from the thicker material and the drape of the fabric in other, much *more* strategic places.

I slid my Benchmade Nimravus Cub II into the knife sheath around my neck. The Nim Cub was one of my favorite knives— lightweight, tough, and with a three-and-a-half-inch blade that made it easy to hide. My knife sheath was attached to a sparkly lanyard, which would look like a necklace caught beneath my dress, and I could reach the knife even if my stupid heels made it difficult to balance.

Samael had no rules about guests being armed at his parties. But, like Meredith's, his tower was neutral territory. You could carry, but if you used those weapons, you were in deep shit.

I placed the Mistilteinn Dagger on the nightstand beside my bed. There was no way I could risk taking it into Samael's territory, which sucked, since it meant I'd have to rely on good, old-fashioned intuition to tell if Vercan was lying.

Nothing I could do about that.

Outside, the sun was setting, the light streaming in through the huge windows. I'd fallen in love with the apartment for many reasons. It was in Southeast Durham, in a neighborhood that was still mostly human. It was once a renovated textile mill, and it had escaped the decade of despair mostly

unscathed, apart from a few cosmetic issues which had been fixed long before I moved in.

Most importantly, my apartment faced west— with no view of the tower that dominated the city. In fact, a few streets further west, the neighborhood was mostly made up of humans, and if I focused hard enough, I could pretend the demons didn't exist.

The apartment was well out of my price range, but the owner's daughter had a little problem with a stalker ex-husband and I'd helped her when I'd first arrived in Durham. One glance at my butterfly knives, and he'd decided he no longer needed to show up at her workplace or call her sixty times a day. Interesting how that worked.

The owner had ignored me when I said I didn't need to be paid. Finally, he'd mentioned that he had an empty apartment. It was a security risk to leave it empty these days, and *I'd* be doing *him* a favor if I moved in and paid reduced rent.

I was weak. I'd moved in a few days later.

I pushed my hair off my face and frowned. Put it up and make it more difficult for someone to grab, or put it down and use it to shield my face?

Down. Chances were beyond slim that I'd have to fight tonight. Samael didn't tolerate any disturbances.

The woman in the mirror had haunted green eyes and a pale face. She did not look like a woman who had her shit together. I turned away and blew out a deep breath. I'd been so focused on getting into the party, I hadn't given much thought to the reality of it. Getting caught sneaking into Samael's tower was suicide.

I crossed the room, my eyes dropping to the pictures on my cluttered desk. On them, my mom lay dead, her eyes blank and staring, the bracelet I'd made her still on her outstretched arm. Both the stricken expression on her face and the blood surrounding her body had made it obvious that she'd died alone and in pain.

These were the photos I'd been sent two years after my mom had died. I'd been told it was an accident, and I'd truly believed it, until someone had slid the evidence of her murder under my door in Austin.

I'd returned to Durham two days later.

My kitten weaved in and out of my feet, her purr a comforting motor. I'd rescued Lia from a flooding gutter eight months ago, and she rewarded me by jumping out at me and wrapping her paws around my ankle whenever she got

the chance.

“Can’t hang around, cat. I’ve got a demon to track down.”

I ordered a Lyft before I could back out. No need to advertise my presence near the tower by using my own car. The Lyft was only a few minutes away, so I gave my feet a break and took the elevator. I slid straight into the car and smiled at the driver.

“Danica?” the fae asked and I nodded.

He pulled away without a word and I studied the back of his elegantly pointed ear. It wasn’t often that I interacted with the fae. The high fae preferred to stay in their own realms, and it was well known that the seelie and unseelie kings couldn’t stand each other.

But the fae also adored human technology, investing in some of the biggest tech companies on earth. To them, our phones *were* magic, and many of the fae had attempted to integrate with humans— with varying levels of success.

This fae appeared almost human, with white-blond hair and unearthly pale skin. But when I dropped my shields, I could barely feel any power from him. A member of the seelie or ‘light’ court then. But not high fae. If he was high fae, he would’ve *seethed* with power. And he wouldn’t be driving a Lyft.

His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror as we pulled up to the tower.

“Stay safe,” he said, and I nodded, closing the door behind me. I tipped him and then slid my phone into my purse as I gazed up at the obsidian tower.

A healthy percentage of Durham residents had protested when Samael began building this tower several years ago. To make way for the obsidian monstrosity, he’d demolished some of the last standing reminders of life before the portals opened— the Lucky Strike water tower and neighboring smokestack.

The protests had made no difference. In a city where the tallest building had been under 400 feet, the colossal, 2000-foot tower was a huge ‘fuck you’ to anyone who had a problem with it.

It was also a warning. The Mage Council may be in charge, but they ruled only with the demons’ permission, and that could all change in an instant. Samael began construction six months after a rogue mage let a spell loose. The mage was retaliating against the council after he failed testing to move up the ranks. Four thousand people had died, and the ballpark was nothing

but a crater.

Weirdly enough, since the demons had moved downtown, things had been quiet. Funny that.

I forced my shoulders to relax, pasting a smile on my face as I handed the gold invitation to the demon on the door. He ran his scanner over it and gave it back to me with a nod. My heels clicked as I crossed the dark marble floor to the elevators. Unlike last time, I didn't need to join a line of humans and paranormals waiting for the elevator. I slid inside with a couple of demons, watching careful as they shifted around each other, hunching their shoulders awkwardly.

I couldn't see their wings, but I knew they were there. Unlike lesser demons, high demons automatically kept their wings hidden carefully away from prying eyes. I wasn't sure if it was because humans would be terrified if they could see the wings that made them so different, or if it was because their wings represented a vulnerability.

I was guessing both.

The elevator was still the most spacious I'd ever seen. From what I'd heard, Samael had a short list of people he allowed to land on his roof and balconies, and I wondered if his insistence on making sure creatures with wings ended up cramped and uncomfortable in his elevator was a strategic move. From the little I knew about him, I was guessing he'd enjoy putting visitors to his territory on the back foot.

While I'd never seen a high demon's wings, I'd briefly brushed my hand over Samael's when we'd danced. I'd expected them to be leathery membrane— similar to the lesser demons I hunted almost daily. But they'd been downy and soft and my hands had itched to explore more.

I shivered at the memory and one of the demons glanced at me, his eyes darkening. I forced my thoughts elsewhere. No need to provide the demons with a snack.

Last time I'd come here, the elevator had stopped at the 70th floor. I'd seen the ballroom, with its expansive white marble floors, French windows, and orchestra. That room was a farce, created for the humans and anyone else stupid enough to offer themselves up for the demons' consumption. Today, the elevator stopped on the 51st floor. This, *this* was the truth.

I followed the demons out of the elevator and my head immediately began to spin. Something magical was being pumped through the vents. It made me dizzy, and far too relaxed. I was tempted to lower my shields a little

and clear my head. But using magic here would get me noticed. And if I got noticed, I'd get dead.

Blinking a few times, I attempted to clear my vision and moved away from the elevator, leaning against one of the dark walls as I surveyed the huge club.

Music pounded, the base rattling my bones as strobe lights danced amongst the gyrating bodies. A few feet away, a werewolf laughed, eyes yellow as a witch beckoned him closer, her face carved out of lust. Here and there, I caught glimpses of dark feathers, but they were always gone the moment I turned my head. Demons danced with high fae, witches grinded on werewolves, and humans joined the debauchery with wide eyes and faces twisted with feral hunger.

The walls were a deep black which matched the gleam of the floors. But one entire side of the club was open, the huge doors pushed back, revealing an expansive balcony where people were enjoying the fresh air. To the left, a long, dark bar gleamed, and six human bartenders poured drinks.

The skin along my spine prickled in awareness. There were eyes on me, and standing here would only draw more attention. I strode forward, disappearing into the crowd, where I began searching faces. A demon grabbed for me, and I ducked away with a teasing smile. "Later," I mouthed, and he nodded, his eyes hungry as his gaze slid over my skin. I ducked around a couple of fae who were making out so heavily they'd drawn a crowd of demons who inhaled their lust, eyes flaring.

The music changed, and the crowd howled as the DJ yelled something I couldn't catch. Okay. I could do this. From the little research I'd done, I found it difficult to believe Vercan would be grinding against a stranger on the dance floor.

There. Those guys looked important. They were walking through the club with the purposefulness of traveling businessmen who needed to get to their gate before a flight. I shoved my way through the crowd after them, catching a glimpse of their wide shoulders as I squirmed between a couple of demon women.

"Watch it, witch," one of them snapped, slamming her invisible wing into me. I stumbled, cursing as I lost sight of the men. They hadn't looked like they were here to feed or dance. They'd looked like they were about to attend a business meeting.

I scowled and headed in the direction I'd seen them walking, aiming for

the wall, where I leaned a hand out to take some of the weight off my aching feet. The wall disappeared, and I stumbled as it spat me out, sliding shut behind me. I caught my balance and gaped at the huge, elegant room. This was where the real business was done. I forced myself to keep walking as if I belonged in the pristine space.

Thankfully, most of the creatures here seemed too busy to pay me much attention. The marble floor gleamed with veins of gold, reflecting the light from the ornate chandeliers. Leather sofas and armchairs were scattered across the vast space, and another bar— this one much smaller— covered one of the walls, and scantily-dressed waitresses carried drinks on trays and took orders from the paranormals gathered in groups around the room.

I drew in a deep breath and my head was immediately clearer. Whatever magic had been pumped through the vents in the main club had disappeared. For the first time, I could think properly, and I forced myself to keep moving toward the end of the room, where the bathrooms beckoned me.

There were a few more dimly lit alcoves on the way to the bathroom, some of them with their thick, blood-red curtains pushed back, and others with them closed.

In the first alcove I passed, two demons sat, their voices a low hiss as they argued. I averted my gaze and kept walking. I gaped as I made my way past the next alcove. A female demon was riding a werewolf, and he had his head thrown back, his claws digging into the table in front of him.

Do you, boo.

I picked up speed, my shoulders slumping as I made my way to the bathroom where I splashed water on my wrists and rolled my neck.

My stomach roiled. If my mother knew I was here, she'd stir in her grave. If there was one thing she'd taught me, it was that demons were the most serious threat to my safety. I didn't know why she'd taken me and run— or why she'd left my sister behind with the coven— but the fact that a demon's magical imprint had been found near her body was suspicious as hell to say the least.

I pushed that thought away. I didn't know if demons could smell fear, but it seemed likely. Either way, walking around with my heart thumping in terror would mark me as a victim to every paranormal here. I'd do a loop of the room, paying careful attention to the alcoves, and if I didn't find Vercan... maybe I could pretend to be a waitress.

I snorted, ignoring the glance a light fae woman shot me as she

approached the sinks, pulling a tube of lipstick out of her purse. She wore a dress that looked painted on, with diamonds glittering from her pointed ears. Her long, blonde hair almost touched her butt, and she gave her reflection a satisfied nod before she strode out.

I'd be satisfied too if I looked like that.

Drying my wrists, I pushed my hair back and firmed my shoulders. Time to get it done.

I pushed the bathroom door open before I could change my mind, ignoring the little voice in my head that urged me to haul-ass out of here, order a Lyft, and crawl under my favorite blanket with my cat.

I canted my head, using my hair as a shield as I swayed my hips, heading toward the area with the darkened alcoves.

Nothing.

My steps faltered as I glanced away from the alcoves, toward a table where a demon sat alone at a table on the outskirts of the room. My pulse raced as my vision narrowed until all I could see was him.

Gotcha.

Vercan was staring into his drink, his face set in a scowl. The demon was handsome, but unlike most demons, who practically radiated sin, Vercan looked like a banker.

His blonde hair was cut short, his face clean-shaven, and his mouth was pinched in what either disapproval or contempt. He pushed his drink away as he got to his feet, and I forced myself to keep moving. Leaning against the nearest wall in an effort to appear nonchalant, I watched beneath my lashes as he headed toward the bathroom.

Vercan stopped at one of the curtained alcoves and glanced at his watch. He was obviously waiting for someone, and he stared out the open, floor-to-ceiling window across from the alcove as he waited. With most of his visitors either winged or powerful enough to fly, Samael obviously wasn't concerned about health and safety.

I jolted into motion as Vercan stepped into the small space and pulled one of the curtains shut behind him. He was clearly meeting someone here, but until that person showed up, this was my chance.

I strode after him, pushed the curtain back open and waltzed inside like I owned the place. Vercan frowned at me, nonplussed, but from the disdain in his eyes, he obviously didn't see me as a threat.

Good.

I got straight to business.

“December 18^h, 72AP,” I rattled off. “Almost two and a half years ago.” I pulled the picture out of my pocket and held it up in front of his face. “You were seen near this woman. Did you kill her?”

Surprise flashed across his face, but I was focusing on his eyes. And I saw the recognition.

“You know who she is.”

“Leave, witch, or die.” His dismissal grated, and he glanced past me impatiently, obviously still waiting for whoever he was meeting.

I didn’t have time for this. I glanced around, but we were hidden from view of everyone else in the main room, so I reached for my Nim Cub. It was nestled against the demon’s throat before he could move.

Something rustled behind him. Something I was pretty certain were his wings. For the first time, he tensed.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s the problem with having a security team. You get lazy. You don’t recognize a threat when you see one.”

“You’re waving a weapon around in Samael’s territory? You’re either suicidal or insane.”

I gave him a wide smile. “Neither. I’m desperate. And since you’re rather long-lived, you’ll know that my desperation makes me dangerous to you.”

Vercan stayed silent and I pressed the knife closer to his throat. He tensed, and I drew blood. He didn’t need a weapon. According to my research, Vercan wasn’t high on the power scale, but he was still bigger than me, stronger than me, and if I couldn’t anticipate his moves, I was dead. Samael probably wouldn’t even punish the demon, since I’d threatened him first.

“Uh-uh,” I crooned. “The woman. Tell me what you know and I’ll get out of here.”

He didn’t take his eyes off me. “You’re writing your own death sentence over a witch who has been dead for this long?”

“That witch is my mother. What do you know?”

Vercan didn’t quite roll his eyes, but from the sneer on his face, it was close. I shrugged like I had all the time in the world, but my pulse pounded a dull thump in my ears.

“Since you’ve gone to all this trouble, maybe I’ll tell you.” He smiled viciously. “The witch—”

He gurgled and blood sprayed my dress. I stared at him, uncomprehending, and he slumped to the ground.

I attempted to crouch, but it was too late. Samael's wards had caught me — attuned to violence in his territory. I was trapped like a bug in amber, the ward keeping me frozen and awaiting my fate.

I couldn't move, couldn't talk, could barely breathe. That meant that I couldn't draw blood in an attempt to break the ward. It was one of the strongest I'd ever seen.

And if I stayed here, I was dead.

Panic rose, sharp and nauseating. From where I stood, I could see the arrow sticking out of the demon's throat. Vercan shouldn't have been dead—it took much more than an arrow to kill a high demon. And yet he was slowly turning to ash, his extremities blackening even as I watched. Someone had killed my lead. Again.

My evidence was disappearing.

I struggled, claustrophobia making my head spin. If I didn't get a handle on my breathing, I'd pass out, and whoever had killed the demon could decide to kill me too.

Why kill me when they can frame me and have Samael kill me instead?

I swallowed back bile and forced myself to count to ten. All I had to do was draw some blood and I could likely break the ward. It would hurt like a bitch, but I could do it.

My lungs functioned, my eyes blinked, but my hand was still frozen in the air, the knife making it clear I'd been threatening the demon. I stared at my hand, willing it to twitch. If I could just move the knife, just curl it back until it sliced into my palm, I could attempt to break the ward and get out of here.

Time crawled by as I strained. It felt like I'd been standing in the alcove for twenty minutes, but it had likely only been a few seconds. Samael's security would be here any moment. I needed to get gone.

Okay, the knife was a no go.

My mouth was slightly open, frozen on my last word. I dropped my shields and focused every ounce of my will on my teeth. Maybe I could bite my tongue.

Move. Move damn you.

This was my own fault. I'd let my magic languish, buried it deep and ignored it, and that decision was going to kill me. *No.* I wasn't going out like

this. I refused to die until I found the creature who killed my mother and made them pay.

Black spots formed in front of my eyes as I strained. My teeth moved a fraction of an inch and I poured more of my will into making them move.

Something wet slid from my nose and into my open mouth. I must've given myself a nose bleed from the strain.

The sharp taste of copper was a gift.

I was sure there was a much more elegant way to break wards that didn't involve blood, but I'd use what I had. I concentrated, drawing every last ember of my magic into me, and for a single moment, I could see the ward around me— a deep, midnight blue, shimmering silver in places.

How something so deadly could be so beautiful was beyond me.

I strained further, tasting more blood, and with a 'pop' the ward broke. I stumbled forward, narrowly missing Vercan's body as I twisted in the air, panting. I turned just as a shadow approached. I was out of time.

A high demon blocked my only exit. A high demon who *burned* with power and fury.

DANICA



I was dead meat. I was going to be killed by a demon so beautiful, it almost hurt to look at him.

Blue-black hair stood ruffled on his head, as if he'd just pushed his hand through it in frustration. I'd seen the lower half of his face once before, so my gaze darted over the sharp line of his jaw, the scruff along his chin, and the cheekbones that seemed to be slashed through a face that would make angels weep.

His silver eyes burned into mine, his lush mouth twisted, and a scar cut through one eyebrow—the only flaw in an otherwise perfect face.

“Well, this is interesting.” I flinched at the promise of death in his voice. His gaze shifted to the demon on the floor, his extremities already ash. The older demons were like that when they died, as if their body belonged only to the underworld, and when they were done using it, the underworld snatched it back.

“I didn't kill him,” I blurted out, and Samael shifted his gaze back to me, scanning me from head to toe. His gaze lingered on my face and I wiped at the blood smeared above my lip.

“You broke my ward,” he mused. I didn't know how he could make such inane words sound like a death threat, but my hand tightened on my knife. At the very least, I could go out fighting.

“It wasn't easy,” I admitted. “Listen, I think I have some explaining to do. This isn't what it looks like.”

“You didn't come into my territory and threaten one of my patrons with bodily harm, even though violence is forbidden without my permission? That

patron wasn't killed by someone who managed to escape my ward while you were trapped in it?"

I blinked. "Fine. Turns out it's exactly what it looks like." I attempted a nonchalant shrug. Samael ignored me and turned his head as another demon approached.

"Get Sitri," he ordered, and the demon faded away. Just a few seconds later, another demon appeared.

Where Samael was beautiful, this demon was almost pretty. His dark hair fell over his face, hiding his eyes, which were a pale purple—almost lavender. Those eyes seemed lost, even as he focused on my face, his lips forming in a pout that told me clearly, without words, that I was in deep shit.

"Invitation," Samael ordered, and I tensed. "Please," he murmured, "disobey me. I haven't gotten my hands dirty for *weeks*."

I shuddered, opened my tiny purse, and withdrew the invitation.

Samael jerked his head and the other demon stepped forward, taking the invitation.

He smiled at it, like a kid who'd been given a lollipop. "Ooh," he said. "Whoever made this is *interesting*."

I shuddered again. Appearing interesting to these demons could only be a bad thing.

"Give it to the witch," Samael told Sitri, and I froze. He wasn't talking about me. I shouldn't be surprised that the scariest demon on the East Coast had a personal witch doing his bidding, but I was.

Samael's eyes met mine. "Wipe that disgust off your face," he ground out, and I forced my lips to untwist.

Sitri disappeared and I stood still, waiting to hear my fate. I wasn't stupid enough to try to escape just yet. I'd only have one chance, and until then, I needed to appear non-threatening.

Samael stepped forward and yanked my purse off my shoulder. He rifled through it, snorting as he shoved a collection of small throwing knives aside. Finally, he pulled out my ID card.

I hadn't had time to get a fake. I'd burned my last fakes a few months ago on a job in Mississippi, and these days, fake IDs were expensive and time consuming to get.

"Danica Amana," he read. "I've heard of you, bounty hunter. You've made quite a name for yourself in the past six months."

Yeah, because unlike most other bounty hunters, I wasn't motivated by

money but by something much more important.

I stayed silent as he studied me. His voice was an amused purr. “It won’t work, you know.”

“What won’t work?”

“Waiting for your chance to escape. There are no chances here.”

I bared my teeth at him. He bared his back. His teeth were scarier.

Sitri reappeared. “It’s a fake,” he sang out. “A very good fake, but a fake all the same.” He held up a picture of Steve. “According to the witch, this man is responsible.”

Sickness rose, and I felt the blood drain from my face. It was one thing for the consequences to be my own, but I couldn’t let Steve die for my actions.

“You have two choices,” Samael said, and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like either of them. I tilted my head, refraining from waving him on. Being a smart-ass wouldn’t win me any points with this guy. “Your first choice? Both you and the traitor die. This *Steve* dies harder, begging for death for daring to cross me.”

He’d do it too. I could see it on his face. He’d squash me like a bug, and leave my corpse lying here on the floor. He’d make Steve wish he’d never met me before he died. Then he’d have a drink or two with his associates before he tucked himself into bed, where he’d sleep like a fucking baby.

Dread filled my stomach. “And the second choice?”

“You work for me.”

“In what capacity?”

His gaze dropped to the demon on the floor. “This isn’t the first death in the past few weeks, although it’s a different method. Something is hunting demons, and your reputation precedes you. You’ll be *my* personal bounty hunter.”

I squashed down every instinct urging me to tell him to go fuck himself. “For how long?”

He tilted his head in that alien way that told me, more clearly than words, that he was not— and would never be— anything close to human. Both demons stared at me like I was a particularly dense brand of stupid and I ground my teeth. Demon vows were—

“Forever,” Samael said, pure male satisfaction dripping from the word.

I stared at him. I couldn’t— *wouldn’t*—work for a demon for the rest of my life. Mom had warned me off demons from the moment I could talk, and

turning my back on the Mage Council was a good way to end up dead. On the other hand, a short-term job would give me free access to his demons, and there was a chance one of them would know why Vercan was near my mom's body. If I was careful, I could walk away from this with more information than I'd ever had.

"I'll make you a deal."

The corner of his lips curled in an expression I'd call amusement on anyone else. On him, it just looked like he was considering doing murder.

I pulled on my metaphorical big-girl panties. "If I figure out who's killing your demons within a month, you let me go."

Languid amusement rolled across his eyes. "Why would I do that?"

"Don't you want someone extra motivated to solve your mystery before more of your kind die?"

"I hold your fate in my hands, little witch. How much more motivated do you need to be?"

I reached deep and grabbed onto what little courage I had left. "Lookit. All I'm saying is, this is a good opportunity for both of us. You need this solved in a timely manner, and I don't want to be working for a demon for the next sixty years."

"Sixty years?"

I shrugged. Odds were high that I would be dead well before then, but I liked to be optimistic.

His amusement deepened.

"One week," he said.

I tamped down the panic that made me want to scream at him. If I wanted him to negotiate, I needed to be calm and smart.

"At least make it achievable, demon. Three weeks."

Sitri's eyes widened at me, as if he was questioning my sanity. Samael angled his head, reluctant interest in his eyes.

"Two weeks," he said, holding up a hand when I opened my mouth. "Find whoever is killing my demons and kill them within two weeks and you may walk free."

The expression on his face told me clearly that arguing wouldn't help. At least I had a chance to escape servitude.

"Fine," I ground out. Today was Saturday. I could do this. I just had to be focused.

Sitri handed him a blade, his eyes bright with suppressed mirth. Glad

someone was having fun.

“Hold out your arm,” Samael said.

My mouth went dry. I was really doing this. I glanced down at the body on the floor. The fact that I had no choice should’ve made it easier, but I’ve never done well when my back’s up against a wall.

I shoved my left arm at him before I could lose my courage. His hand was hot as he wrapped it around my wrist and I shivered. My body was unreasonably aware of his every movement. I guessed that made sense, since he held my life in his hands.

The demon pulled me close, until I was just inches from him. He smelled like burning wood in a winter cabin—the comforting smell at odds with who he actually was. Demons had an affinity with fire—something I wouldn’t forget.

Samael turned my arm over with a hum. “Usually, I use the inside of the arm. But for you, I like the idea of my mark being a little more... visible.”

I ground my teeth. The demon had decided to torture me. It wasn’t surprising really. He knew I’d be shunned the moment the Mage Council knew I was bonded to a demon, and the thought pleased him.

The pain was sharp, his hand a blur as he cut a long line down my forearm. I gasped, instinctively attempting to pull my hand away and he tightened his hold, shaking his head. His thumb danced across my inner wrist, and he handed the knife back to Sitri.

The demon smiled at me and then sliced down the inside of Samael’s arm.

Samael leaned close. “You smell familiar, little witch.”

I swallowed. If he connected me to the witch who stole from him six months ago, I’d soon be begging for death.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. Guess I’ve just got a generic scent to me.”

Silence stretched between us. I loathed demons. Always had, always would. Yet something about *this* demon made everything feminine and needy inside me sit up and take notice.

That’s what demons do. They take your desire and twist it, until you can’t tell where you end and they begin.

Samael gave me a slow smile that was all twisted sheets and hot, sweaty bodies. “There’s nothing generic about you.”

I didn’t need *Samael* finding me interesting in any way. “I’m just a basic witch,” I mumbled.

He inhaled my scent again. "There's nothing basic about you either."

I was pretty sure that wasn't a compliment, but before I could ask, he pressed his arm to mine, and I was engulfed in fire.

It ripped through me and I fell to my knees, my arm still in the demon's hand. His eyes burned into mine, his expression hard as tears dripped down my cheeks. I grit my teeth and forced myself to stand, glowering at him.

The demon's eyes glowed. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said. He removed his hand, and I breathed around the urge to puke.

Gold twined up my left forearm in an intricate design. It danced in the dim light like it was alive. On anyone else, the shimmering color would be beautiful. On *me* it marked me as Samael's. My hands itched with the urge to grab the knife and slice it off.

"It would reappear on your scarred flesh," Samael said softly, warning dripping over every word.

I was barely holding onto my sanity. I stared at my arm, my whole body trembling. "You can read my mind?"

He shook his head. "I can read your face, little witch. You'll have to do better if you are investigating creatures who've been alive since before your great grandparents were born."

With that, he glanced at Sitri, who nodded. Samael swept out, and Sitri's gaze dropped between me and the body.

"Samael's second will be in touch tomorrow," he said. "For now, I think it's time for you to leave."

I stayed where I was, glancing down at the body on the floor.

"I want the arrow."

The demon tilted his head, and I stared him down. "Whoever killed Vercan did it so he couldn't answer my questions. I need to find out who it was."

I had the other arrow, safe at home. But I wanted this one too. The more evidence, the better.

"I don't think so. Vercan may have been an annoyance, but he was one of ours."

Sitri crouched down and cut the arrow from Vercan's body. Fine. At least I had the other arrow. And I sure wouldn't be mentioning it to these guys. The demon clutched the arrow in his hand, ignoring the dripping blood as he gestured for me to follow him out of the alcove.

My face burned. Every eye was on me, and I forced myself not to hunch

my shoulders, wishing I had a jacket to cover the mark on my arm.

I'd bet there was another exit closer to that back alcove. Samael was using me as an example to anyone else who thought to cross him. "*See what happens to people who fuck with me? They're publicly humiliated.*"

I breathed out, staring each demon in the eye as I passed. For the next two weeks, they couldn't touch me.

"It had to be done," Sitri said. "This protects you too."

I sneered at him. "Protects me? My reputation is now dirt."

"But you're alive." He shook his head at my expression. "Humans. Your constant emotions must be exhausting."

Samael

I stared out the window, enjoying the silence. These parties were necessary for my long-term plans, but after so many years, I was beginning to run out of patience.

Durham was sprawled far below me, the warm glow of lights disguising its seedy underbelly. The population had tripled since the portals opened, and the paranormals lived side by side in a way they never had before. Some days, the city felt like a powder keg, one lit match away from exploding.

“Samael?”

I glanced over my shoulder as Sitri approached and he bowed his head.

“I informed Ag of the bounty hunter’s new allegiance. He will take her to the most recent scene after he returns tomorrow.”

I nodded. My second was currently investigating where, exactly, the mages were getting their power. As he had been for centuries. Mage power shone a dark, dirty brown, and I was certain it didn’t belong to them.

My thoughts returned to the bounty hunter. I was almost certain I’d met her before, but the past few years had been a blur of planning and then adjusting those plans when Lucifer retaliated.

“I want her followed.”

Sitri’s brow creased but he nodded. “I will have her every move reported back to you.”

“Good.” My deepest instincts were telling me that the witch would be important to my plans somehow. If there was one thing my father had taught me, it was to listen to those instincts.

“I want my orders broadcast across my territory,” I said, turning back to the window.

“Your orders?” Sitri asked, and I shook myself out of my mood.

“No demons travel alone until the threat is contained.”

I could practically feel Sitri raise one eyebrow. “They won’t like that.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’ll see it done.”

I nodded absently as he left, my thoughts returning to the little witch. No one had dared defy me in my territory before, and I wasn’t sure if I was impressed by her courage or disgusted by her stupidity. Likely, a little of both.

There was no question that she was beautiful, with her smooth skin, dark hair, and flashing green eyes. But it was the sharp, stubborn jut of her chin that interested me. The way her hands fisted as if she imagined wringing my neck made me want to circle her throat with my own. The way she curled her lips in disdain that made me want to slam my mouth down on hers.

I've killed others for even planning to do what she did tonight. I've brutally punished those who attempted to bargain with me, and none who have broken the rules of my tower have lived to speak of it afterward.

And yet, I found myself strangely intrigued for the first time in decades. My demons were struggling to gain traction in the search for the killer, with most paranormals refusing to cooperate with them, and humans too terrified to answer their questions. The bounty hunter had a reputation for getting answers, but more importantly, she was a neutral party, with the backing of the Mage Council. Putting her on this investigation was a smart use of my resources.

I turned away from the window. The little witch would fall in line with the rest of the creatures in my territory. Or she would learn why I was the most feared demon in this world.



I was in a dark mood the next day as I drove to the Mage Council facility. I was armed with a takeout coffee in my cup holder and the arrow that had killed the lesser demon in my backpack.

I needed to make this a quick visit before Albert got wind that I was here. Albert was the most powerful mage in the state, and he'd never liked me. Ultimately, he only tolerated bounty hunters because he needed contractors to help his mages hunt the paranormals who treated humans as prey. With the number of paranormals in the Triangle growing every day, he'd been forced to hire bounty hunters like me. It offended him that I had no interest in one day testing to become a mage.

To say that he wouldn't be pleased to learn of my bond with Samael was an understatement.

I parked and slid out of my car, forcing myself to push my shoulders back when they wanted to hunch self-consciously. Thanks to the gold mark on my arm, I'd been forced to wear a long-sleeved shirt in the heat. Unfortunately, I didn't think I'd be fooling anyone for long, since the tail-end of Samael's mark covered my upper hand, peeking out from beneath my shirt.

The mark shimmered in the sun, and if it had been anything else, I would've admitted it was gorgeous. Since it meant I was bonded to a demon, my stomach churned every time I glanced at it.

There was now a tie between us. I don't know where it led to— if it was tied Samael's soul, or the deep well of his power. Supposedly, demons didn't

have souls. But I could feel him at the end of the bond— an ominous, masculine presence— and the thought made panic creep up my spine.

No. I had no time for panic. I'd fix this little mess, figure out who was killing Samael's demons, lose the bond, and get back to my regularly scheduled programming before my deadline.

The whispers started the moment I entered the facility and I ground my teeth. The lobby was packed with mages, and every head turned as I stalked toward the front desk to sign in.

I held my hand over the wide crystal bowl, and the water glowed green, allowing me entry. The receptionist gave me a shaky smile, her eyes wide, and I stalked toward the elevator.

On the fifth floor, the stares continued, along with a healthy side of disgust. Ben sneered at me and I raised one eyebrow, staring at him until he glanced away.

Keigan leaned against an empty desk and waited for me, his brown eyes mournful as he watched me approach. His face was boyish, almost innocent, and his eyes were usually lost in thought, a crease between his bushy eyebrows as he considered whatever problem he was working on.

Today, that problem was me.

My eyes stung, and I forced myself to keep walking, no matter how much I wanted to slink away. His disappointment hurt worse than anything else, and I bit my lower lip as I dropped my gaze to the floor.

Keigan was one of five Discipulus Mages who were in charge of the day-to-day running of the facility and all of the people who worked and trained in it. Since the moment I'd begun working for the Council, Keigan had seemed to know I needed *someone*. He was careful to give me space, but he'd always been a sounding board when I needed one.

"What happened?" he asked, and I glanced over my shoulder. Keigan followed my gaze, raising his eyebrows, and everyone immediately found something to do.

"I made a mistake," I whispered. I took him through the events of last night, ending with "I have two weeks to solve the murders and then I'm free."

Keigan lifted one eyebrow. "Samael isn't known for negotiating."

I shrugged. "He must've been in a good mood." My skin prickled at the memory of the rage in his eyes. He hadn't seemed like he was in a good mood.

“I hope for your sake you solve his mystery by his deadline. You’ll let me know if I can help in any way.” Keigan said, and I nodded.

“The biggest issue will be staying off Albert’s radar.”

Keigan’s face lost some of its peaceful cheerfulness. Discipulus Mages trained for years before they were given the opportunity to study for their positions. From there, the only way they could join the Mage Council was by proving themselves inherently indispensable to the Council, either through the amount of power they were able to channel, the cases they supervised—and their close rate—or through ‘furthering the Mage Council’s interests.’ Keigan had never mentioned if he’d like to join the council, but I knew he disapproved of many of the decisions Albert made.

“I believe in you, Danica,” he said. “I’ve always thought you had it in you to do great things.”

With that, Keigan gave me a gentle smile and I gave him a wave as I walked through the wide doors leading to the assignment counter.

A mage name Charles was on job distribution today, and he scowled at me as I approached the counter. I held out my hand and his scowl turned to a smile as he handed me the piece of paper with my next bounty.

I let out a low growl as I read the summary. The mages were unhappy I was working for Samael, but they knew better than to take it up with the demon. Instead, *I’d* be on the receiving end of their displeasure.

This assignment involved tracking down a witch. Only, most of the actual details were missing from the summary. The only information included was that she’d failed to appear at her sentencing for a magic-related crime. The crime itself was sealed.

Failure to appear.

I glanced up from the summary. “Are you serious?” Failure to appear cases were given to first-year baby mages.

Charles just stared at me, blank-faced. I sighed. I anticipated a lot of bad jobs in my future. One more thing to blame Samael for.

This assignment was likely to involve long days of stakeouts. Witches were social creatures, mostly preferring to stay in the comfort of their covens. That meant I’d need to keep an eye on her house, while also following up with any known contacts.

I reached for the thin folder Charles held out to me, and the muscles around his eyes tightened as he glanced down at the demon mark poking out from beneath my sleeve.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. “I fucked up.”

Ignoring his snort, I opened the folder, scanning the photo of the witch. Mary Johnson was in her mid-fifties, and her face was familiar. Maybe I’d seen her around when I was a child. Her dark hair had been ruthlessly straightened, and her grey eyes were tired.

This wasn’t the full file, but I was hoping I wouldn’t need it for a failure to appear. I took the paperwork with me, inputting her address in my phone.

After two and a half years on the job, I was no dummy. I stopped at a gas station to use the bathroom and stock up on snacks, then checked that I had my phone charger so my battery wouldn’t die.

When I had everything I needed, I drove toward Mary’s home in Trinity Park.

Trinity Park was a mish-mash of bungalows, period revivals, huge, looming Victorians, and Neo-Colonial architecture. The Brightleaf/Trinity Park neighborhoods had been home to the witches since portals opened and they found themselves able to harness power.

Mary lived in a three-bedroom brick bungalow on Dacian Ave. Thankfully, it was eight blocks north and a block east of my sister’s, but visiting the neighborhood still made me twitchy.

I got out of the car. Mary hadn’t done much with the front yard— a few sad shrubs were planted here and there, and her lawn desperately needed a mow.

The back of my neck itched as I walked up the steps leading to her porch and rang the doorbell. I followed it up with a knock on the door and waited for a few minutes.

No answer.

I moseyed around to the back of the house, feeling the brush of Mary’s wards against my skin. Any closer, and I’d have to break them, which would alert her that someone was on her property. I flicked open the latch of her gate and wandered around to her backyard.

Nothing. The house was empty.

I unapologetically emptied her mailbox, taking the mail back to my car, where I sat and rifled through it. Witches always forgot to ward their mailboxes.

Bills, a subscription to Witch World magazine, a postcard, and a letter from Fight Against Fae, thanking her for her donation. I frowned at that. The witches and the fae weren’t typically best buddies, but as far as I knew, most

witches usually pretended the fae didn't exist.

Even the darkest witch was usually no match for a high fae— of either court— and witches were more likely to put their effort into taking down the mages.

While witch magic was hereditary, no one quite knew where exactly the mages got their magic. It was a secret that mages only learned themselves when they passed their testing and made it to the upper echelon. Many witches took offense to this, and those with less magic than the mages often loathed them, some of them actively planning how to dismantle the Mage Council for good.

Curious and curiouser.

I placed the letter on my passenger seat to read later and examined the postcard. Three cartoon witches were positioned around a cauldron, the oldest witch wearing a pointed hat, her mouth open in an obvious cackle. While the witches were dressed in bright yellows and greens, the cauldron shone gold, slightly raised on the postcard.

I wrinkled my nose. That was offensive as hell, and full of stereotypes more commonly held by humans who had no contact with paranormals. Witches didn't use cauldrons, demons didn't steal souls, and the fae didn't replace human kids with changelings. Shaking my head at the sheer ignorance, I flipped the postcard over. The return address was a town I'd never heard of in Ohio, and the only thing written on the postcard itself was an address on Massey Ave. I frowned. That was the edge of dwarf territory.

Someone banged on my window and I jumped. Served me right for not paying attention to my surroundings. I muttered a curse and pressed the button to wind down the window, kicking myself. Rookie mistakes like this are how you get dead.

“What are you doing here, Danica?”

I squinted at her, and then recognition hit me. “Gail?”

She sniffed. “You don't belong in this neighborhood,” she warned, and I let out a bitter laugh, ignoring the twinge of hurt that burned deep in my chest.

“The Mage Council says I do,” I said, and she bristled, her hands fisting. I eyed her. When I'd last seen her, Gail had had a full head of blonde hair and her eyes twinkled with suppressed laughter. Now, her hair was gray and her eyes were haunted. Was something happening with her coven?

My stomach twisted. If her coven was in trouble, my sister could be in

danger.

“What’s going on, Gail?”

“None of your business. You need to leave. Your sister doesn’t want you here.”

Of course she didn’t. Nothing had changed, but that didn’t make the words any easier to hear.

“Evie has nothing to do with my job,” I snapped, losing my temper. “I suggest you leave me alone before I report you for interfering with my duties.”

She cast me a disgusted look and I couldn’t exactly blame her. Threatening to narc on her to the council was dirty.

Gail stalked down the street and I watched her, barely resisting the urge to lean my head against the steering wheel. I’d bet money that I was being watched by numerous witches along this street.

The Mage Council knew exactly how much I enjoyed dealing with witches, and was well aware of how uncomfortable it would be for me in their territory. This was a punishment they knew damn well would sting.

And it was all Samael’s fault.

I flipped through the rest of the mail and a scrap of paper fell from the pile. It was an advertisement for Gary’s store. I wracked my brain. He’d grumbled relentlessly about how much it was going to cost him to run that ad in the paranormal newspaper *Durham Denizens*. When it finally ran, he’d had so many lookie-loos walking into the store that he’d sworn he’d never do it again.

It was... five months ago. I vividly remembered, since it was the first time I’d gone to his store after stealing the dagger of truth, and he’d turned the air blue with his curses when he’d seen me with it. So why had someone placed this in Mary’s mailbox? I needed to talk to Gary. Maybe he’d recognize a photo of the witch.

I scarfed a bag of Doritos for lunch, and when nothing had happened by mid-afternoon, I started to get antsy. My file said Mary was distantly related to a werewolf, and while it was unlikely they would harbor a witch, I may as well check it out. I started the car, glancing down at my phone as it vibrated with a text.

W Greer parking lot. That was all it said, but they’d dropped a pin with the exact location. I ground my teeth. A demon was summoning *me*. Oh, the irony. “Get it done, solve the mystery, and get the mark removed,” I muttered

as I gave up on my werewolf visit and turned the car around.

A demon stood on the far end of the lot, his gaze cutting to me as I parked on the street.

I scanned him as he strode toward me, his feet punching the ground. Like every high demon I'd come across so far, he was beautiful. His hair was a glossy black, the hard block of his jaw said he could take a punch, but his gold-flecked brown eyes seemed ancient.

"A demon was killed here five days ago," he said as soon as he was a few feet away. "He was waiting for his friend to finish work." He gestured toward the tattoo shop and I nodded.

"And you are?"

"Agaliarept," he said.

"That's quite a mouthful."

"Search for evidence, witch."

I shot him a look but turned away, knowing he'd chafe at the dismissal in my body language. I had to get my kicks somehow.

The parking lot was empty. At the far end, it jutted out over the bank of a hill, which led down to an empty field. A wire fence encircled the lot, although it was reinforced with steel bars on the west side, where it overlooked the back of a restaurant.

"Where was the body found?"

"Shouldn't you know that?"

I glanced over my shoulder and he folded his arms, his muscles bulging.

"You just told me it's been five days," I said very slowly. "Which means there's likely no physical evidence left. Why don't you just tell me where to start looking so I can get to work?"

He scanned my body, sizing me up. I was glad I'd tucked the Mistilteinn Dagger under my shirt where it was hidden away. With a shrug of one shoulder, he jerked his head toward the left side of the parking lot, about halfway down.

I smiled sunnily at him. "Thank you."

Ignoring his snarl, I strode toward the area he'd indicated, close to the outdoor area of the restaurant. A group of trees bordered the parking lot behind the wire fence, and I moved closer. Someone could've waited behind those trees if they'd been targeting this exact demon.

"Did he know this area?"

"Yes."

I nodded and took a deep breath. I still hated using my magic, but if it got me out of this deal with the demon, it was worth it.

I slowly dropped my shields, shivering as power flooded through me. Behind me, the demon muttered a curse, and I ignored him, focused on the black smudge a few feet away.

I pointed. "His body was found there?"

A pause. I'd surprised him. "Yes."

"Strange."

"Why?"

"Demons get their magic from the underworld right? Even if they're located in this world?"

I could practically feel him grinding his teeth behind me and I rolled my eyes. "It's relevant."

"Yes."

"Everything in this world contains magic. It's why so many paranormals enjoy it here— because compared to their worlds, this magic is untapped. It makes them stronger. But this area is completely bereft of magic. It's like it was sucked away." I shivered. "It feels... empty."

"What could do such a thing?"

I considered it. "I don't know much about demon power. A high-level mage might be able to wield a spell like this. A black witch would likely feed off the earth's magic if she could. I don't know about the fae— they keep their abilities under wraps."

"Werewolves?"

I shook my head. "Werewolves don't have power the way we do. Their magic is intrinsic to their biology. It's why they can see through glamor and most magic doesn't work on them."

Silence. I turned to find him frowning at me.

"What?"

"How do you know so much about paranormals?" Suspicion dripped from his voice and I rolled my eyes.

"I work for the Mage Council. And my mother made sure I was educated."

He seemed to chew on that. "A werewolf was seen running from the scene."

I blinked. "I highly doubt that a werewolf was involved."

He simply stared at me and I threw my hands up. "Fine. I'll go talk to the

werewolves tomorrow.” I needed to ask them about Mary, anyway. May as well kill two birds and all that.

I leaned closer, peering at the ground. What could burn away magic like this? I wandered around the parking lot, but couldn’t find anything else. I squinted through the wire fence and down at the empty field, but nothing jumped out at me.

I wandered back to the black smudge and glanced at the brooding demon. “Where’s the body?”

“Cremated.”

Awesome. To be fair, if the demon was old enough, he’d probably naturally cremated the way Vercan had.

“How far up the demon hierarchy was this guy. Or girl?”

Agaliarept stared at me and I let out a low growl. “You want me to find out who did it? I need all the information.”

He shrugged. “It’s not my place to give it to you. You can talk to Samael tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

A hint of amusement entered his eyes and I had a feeling anything that amused him didn’t bode well for me.

“Everyone bonded to Samael is expected at Monday dinners. No exceptions.”

I opened my mouth and he shook his head. “Attendance is mandatory.”

Great. Just great. Today was Sunday, so now I had to figure out how to get out of the dinner. I shifted my attention back to the weird black smudge. “What if I need answers before tomorrow evening?”

Agaliarept rattled off a number and I held up a hand, making him repeat it so I could add it to the contacts in my phone.

“That’s Samael’s direct line. If you have questions I can’t answer, you can ask him.”

I shivered at the thought of calling the demon, remembering the burning rage in his eyes. Samael wasn’t exactly the kind of guy you called up for a chat.

Agaliarept’s lips twitched at whatever he saw on my face. How lovely that my terror of his boss lightened his mood.

“You’ll need my number as well,” he said, handing me a card. “Call it and leave a message after you’ve talked to the werewolves.”

With that, he strode away, leaving me frowning at the black smudge on

the ground.



I headed to the werewolves' territory early the next morning. Most of the werewolves lived on the edge of Duke Forest. It was close enough to the city that they could attend their day jobs, yet their territory was vast enough for them to strip off their clothes and howl at the full moon or whatever it was that werewolves did in their free time.

It had taken me twelve minutes to get out here, and I could see the appeal of the area. I'd slid my window down, inhaling the fresh air as I drove, and there was barely anyone on the roads this early in the morning. The sun was rising over the trees, the birds were chattering amongst themselves, and I was clutching a take-out coffee like it was a lifeline.

The wolves were notoriously private. They kept to themselves, and their natural abilities to cut through most magic meant that the vast majority of paranormal creatures in Durham treated them like they were poisonous.

I hadn't expected to get a meeting with the werewolf alpha, but he'd agreed to talk to me in the interest of 'helping the demons with their investigation.'

I figured it had more to do with the fact that many werewolves still weren't out of the closet, and the overprotective alpha was doing what overprotective alphas did best.

When the portals first opened, anyone who carried a particular gene mutation instantly underwent their first werewolf transformation. The resulting carnage it caused was still taught in history classes around the

world.

Imagine going about your daily life, when— out of nowhere— you slowly, and painfully, begin transforming into a beast. A beast with claws designed to slash through flesh and teeth, designed to hold their prey in place.

Fear and fury caused similar biological reactions in werewolves, and when their adrenaline spiked without warning, new wolves attacked. A rampaging werewolf could lay waste to a city block within ten minutes. And they did. To say the wolves were out of control is an understatement.

It hadn't seemed like the werewolf gene was random. Over the years, there had been numerous studies theorizing exactly why people who had been predisposed to dangerous jobs were more likely to become werewolves. There was also the little matter of the lack of female werewolves— they were exceedingly rare.

Some people theorized that those who craved adrenaline were more likely to have the gene mutation. Others figured it was about testosterone levels. Either way, the wolves who raged through the city were the type who would usually be protecting it.

Firefighters, cops, active military personnel— many of the people the citizens had counted on to save the city were instantly one of the biggest threats to their lives.

It wasn't until a werewolf named Nathaniel managed to regain control, fighting his wolf until his human self could intervene, and forcing the other wolves to fall in line. The alpha had fought to clean up the werewolves' image, slowly transforming their reputation as rampaging killers, into the people who were called when the shit really hit the fan, and humans needed saving.

There were still plenty of people who despised werewolves. Sure, the other creatures who poured through the portals had been just as bad. But werewolves had been human first. Their inability to control themselves was seen as a betrayal of humankind. Now, most humans lived in fear that they carried the genetic marker, and if bitten, would rampage in the exact same way— even though the alpha had maintained full control of his wolves for decades.

There were a number of cul-de-sacs out here, all surrounded by forest. Nathaniel lived down the end of one of them, and I examined his house as I closed my car door and crossed the street.

I'd expected a mcmanion, but this was the kind of home most people

dreamed about buying one day when they retired.

While the house was certainly large, it seemed to melt into the woods behind it. The ranch was clad in wood siding, but most of it was glass—the floor-to-ceiling windows reflecting my body as I walked down the front path. According to my research, Nathaniel’s home boasted thirteen bedrooms. And yet, it almost felt like a deserted cabin in the woods.

I knocked, and a second later, a man dressed in a gray suit opened the door.

I gave him a smile. Always start out with as much charm as you can muster. “I’m here to speak to the alpha.”

The man’s gaze scanned me from head to toe, lingering on the Mistilteinn Dagger beneath my shirt. He could obviously feel it somehow. I shrugged at him. The dagger of truth wouldn’t work on the werewolves, in fact when I inched my shield down and poked at it with my magic, it almost seemed like it had gone to sleep.

I pushed away the memory of the Mistilteinn Dagger’s low purr when I’d first found it. There was something very wrong with that knife, and yet I needed it more than anything else.

Story of my life.

“My name is Tobias. Please follow me. He’s expecting you.”

Tobias opened the door wide and waved me into the entranceway. Two sets of stairs wound up either side to a landing and my feet itched to explore. The werewolf alpha didn’t need all this space to himself, right? Did the other werewolves live here too? Or just the ones he couldn’t trust enough to allow them to live alone?

“Right this way.”

I dragged my gaze away from the landing, meeting Tobias’ amused eyes. They were the same color of his suit and they gleamed at me.

“Werewolves are mysterious,” I defended myself. “This may be the closest I ever get to you guys.” I winced, not liking how that sounded. “I didn’t mean—”

“To make it sound like you are visiting a zoo?”

I spun, vaguely aware of Tobias excusing himself behind me. My gaze was stuck on the alpha as he walked in another door behind me, gesturing to the sofa in front of him.

I sat before I realized I’d moved. I frowned at the alpha, and he smiled, revealing straight, white teeth. I’d seen photos of Nathaniel, and his eyes

were usually an unfathomable dark blue. Today, they'd shifted to a blue so light it was almost the color of a winter's frost.

"Excuse me," he said, toning down his alpha-ness. "It has been a rough morning. One of my wolves—" He cut himself off and took a seat across from me in a delicate armchair that definitely did not look designed to hold his weight. Ignoring me, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and slowly let it out.

I'd known the alpha was dangerous, but I hadn't exactly realized *how* dangerous. If there had been someone else in this room— even someone who meant me harm, I wouldn't have noticed them at all, every ounce of my attention on the man in front of me.

His eyes were still closed and I gave him the moment he obviously needed, sitting back on the plush, sand-colored sofa. The sofa was positioned in front of the window, and behind me, the sun spilled daylight onto the back of my head. Nathaniel had positioned himself so he could keep an eye on the street outside.

A round, polished table sat between us, made from some kind of wood. It looked like an antique. The floor was wood too, but the walls were plastered in the same gray-sand as the sofa, sweeping up to tall ceilings with exposed wooden beams.

Nathaniel still had his eyes closed as he blew out a long breath and I took the opportunity to examine him. Unlike Tobias, Nathaniel was dressed casually, in light jeans and a blue t-shirt. He was built like a linebacker— his wide shoulders squared as he went through some kind of meditation routine. A few seconds later he opened his eyes; they'd darkened back to their normal color. But I knew what I'd seen, and I raised one eyebrow.

"Just like everyone else, wolves struggle for control," he murmured. "However, unlike most, when we lose control, people die."

"That must be difficult."

He shrugged. "Most of us are used to it. New wolves are taught by those who have fought the same battles. Now, what can I do for you, Danica Amana?"

I smiled. "I have a few questions for you, if you don't mind?"

He waved one hand, sitting back in the delicate chair. It had to have been magically reinforced, because it didn't even creak.

"Something or someone is killing demons," I said, and his face stayed neutral. There was no way for me to know if he was surprised by this

information, or if he'd already known it.

"How worrying for the demons," he said, and I tilted my head. His eyes laughed at me. "I have nothing against Samael's demons, unless they threaten my territory or the lives of my wolves."

"A werewolf was seen fleeing from the scene."

His expression turned serious and he went eerily still. "Which scene and when was this exactly?"

I filled him in and he glanced toward the door. A moment later, Tobias appeared. "Find me a list of any wolves who didn't attend the pack meeting that night, and their reasons for not attending," Nathaniel ordered.

Tobias nodded and hurried away.

"I have a few more questions while we're waiting," I said.

He waved one hand. "By all means."

I had a feeling I amused him. It didn't put me in a good mood. "Mary Johnson," I said. "She's a second cousin to one of your wolves," I pulled out my phone and glanced at my notes. "Jose Martinez."

Nathaniel pulled out his own phone, pressed a button, and muttered in Spanish. A few minutes later, he ended the call and glanced back at me. "Jose described the witch as a bigot. The moment she learned that he had been bitten, she worked to make sure everyone in the family disowned him. He would never harbor her, and neither would anyone loyal to him."

"Thank you."

Tobias reappeared with a piece of paper in his hand. Nathaniel scanned the list and then glanced up at him, his eyes once again that disconcerting ice-blue.

"Find Matt."

Tobias strode away and Nathaniel turned to me.

"You don't believe my wolves had anything to do with this."

I shook my head, choosing to ignore how well he could read my body language. "I'm just crossing off suspects. But if your wolf was there, he might've seen something that can help."

A man appeared in the doorway, his shoulders hunched. His head was carefully angled so he didn't meet the alpha's eyes, and shame practically radiated from him.

"Matthew," Nathaniel growled.

The wolf dropped to his knees, and I had the strangest urge to slide off the chair and do the same. My hands fisted. That was enough.

I dropped my shields and reached for my trickle of power. My head was instantly clearer, and I relaxed back against the sofa. Nathaniel glanced at me, his brow lifting like I'd done something interesting.

He turned back to the wolf. "You know why you're here."

"Yes, Alpha."

"Tell me."

Matthew gulped. Fear radiated from him, and my opinion of Nathaniel plummeted.

I've spent my entire life suppressing my instinct to rebel against any and all authority. And yet, compared to my sister, I was the chill one. A few hours with this guy and she would've been planning how to make his life a living hell.

I rubbed at my chest, at the ache that was a constant presence. Sometimes, no matter how much you tried to forget about someone, everything you encountered reminded you of them in some way. It was a special kind of hell that could drive you crazy if you let it.

I turned my attention back to Matt. "I wanted to see Rebecca," he admitted, his eyes wet. Nathaniel gave a heavy sigh, and Matt crawled toward him, his gaze on the alpha's feet.

"You know the rules."

Matt let out a whine that sent a bolt of fear through me. If he turned, I could be dead before I realized what had happened. I angled my body so I could reach for the knife in my boot. It would still take precious seconds but it was better than nothing.

Matt turned his head and gazed at me hungrily. Nathaniel tensed and the wolf immediately turned away from me, curling further into himself.

"I just wanted a glimpse," he sniffed. "She was getting a tattoo. She's always wanted one."

"And if you'd seen her, and she had said something you didn't agree with, you might have ripped her apart."

Matt flinched and my chest tightened. If the woman had been getting a tattoo, she was a human, a mage, or a witch. Any other creature would heal too fast for the ink to stay in her skin. He'd been forced to leave the woman he loved so he could learn how to stay in control and not tear her apart.

Nathaniel sat further back in his chair. "We will discuss this later. What did you see in the parking lot that night?"

"Darkness," Matt said with a shudder. "I cut through the park and I was

waiting behind the restaurant between the parking lot and the tattoo shop. They had red Chinese lanterns outside, and I was sitting on the back stairs.”

His face turned pale and he shuddered. “It was dark, and I was hiding. I didn’t want to scare Rebecca, and she wouldn’t be expecting to see me. I just wanted to see if she was okay.”

He went silent and Nathaniel reached out, placing his hand on the wolf’s head. “It’s okay,” he said. “Tell me what you saw.”

“Darkness,” he repeated. “A darkness so encompassing that I knew if I got any closer, it would rip out my soul. I heard... laughing.”

“Male or female?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell. It was... evil.”

“Anything else?” Nathaniel asked, and Matt shook his head.

“Rebecca hadn’t come out yet, so I ran,” he admitted. “I’m sorry. I ran.”

“You did well,” Nathaniel said. “If the evil had encompassed you, a new werewolf, who knows what would have happened? Do you see why the rules are in place now?”

Matt nodded, and I shifted uncomfortably as a tear slid down his face. “I just miss her,” he managed to get out. “I miss my wife.”

“I know. Follow Tobias now. We’ll discuss your punishment later.”

Matt got to his feet and glanced at me. “I hope you find whoever did it,” he said.

“So do I.”

He left, and Nathaniel took another of his long, slow breaths. His eyes were still ice-blue when he opened them once more.

“You think I’m a tyrant.”

I blinked and he smiled, but not like it was funny. “Disgust has a scent.”

Great. So not only did my dagger not work here, but the alpha was a walking lie-detector. “I don’t like bullies.”

He tilted his head, and there was nothing human about the way he appraised me. He may not currently be furry, but he was all wolf.

“My wolves could kill every human in this city within a day or two,” he said. “They’d regret it— many of them would spend the rest of their lives wracked with grief. But while it was happening, they would enjoy it. We’re monsters, Ms. Amana. And while the way I rule my werewolves may offend your delicate sensibilities, those rules keep people alive.”

I wanted to kneel again, and I bared my teeth as I reached for more power and stood instead. The alpha stayed seated— secure in his dominance— and

while it was now impossible for me to meet his eyes, I stared at his chin. The fact that he'd justified himself to me— a stranger— was telling. I had a feeling Nathaniel didn't particularly enjoy being king of the monsters.

“One more question, if you don't mind.”

He raised his eyebrow, still relaxed, but something about the predatory way he watched me let me know I was pushing my luck. I pulled the picture out of my pocket and showed it to him. I highly doubted I'd ever get another chance to talk to the werewolf alpha. “Have you ever seen this woman?”

He was polite enough to study the picture, instead of simply glancing at it like most people did. “She's beautiful. Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“I haven't seen her. You may ask any of my wolves about her on your way out of my territory.”

“Thank you for your help.” I reached into my utility belt and miraculously found one of my cards. “If you learn anything about the murders, will you get in touch?”

He got to his feet and offered his hand. He didn't squeeze or give a limp-wristed shake and I appreciated the gesture.

“Yes.”



Samael

I strode through my club, opening my senses to the lust that permeated every inch of it. Upstairs, some of the most powerful creatures in Durham gambled and drank with my demons, unaware that everything they said made its way back to my ears.

I fed automatically, but it held no true pleasure. Feeding from crowds like this was like ordering a salad when I really wanted a juicy steak. If that steak would taunt me, defy me, and plan to escape me.

Forcing my thoughts away from the little witch— and the thought of feeding from *her* lust while I moved within her— I watched as Bael exited the elevator and moved toward me.

“You canceled Monday dinner. You never cancel Monday dinner.”

I raised an eyebrow. It was the early hours of Tuesday morning and Bael was usually balls-deep in Lilith by now. She must be curious enough to have sent him to attempt to get in my head. I almost smiled at the thought.

“You have an issue with having your Monday night free?”

He tilted his head. “It was because of the witch, wasn’t it?”

“The witch doesn’t factor into my plans.”

He gave me a long look. “You didn’t want to force her to come to the dinner so soon after becoming bonded to you. So you canceled the dinner itself.”

Bael always assigned honorable motives to my actions whenever he could. But he was wrong.

The little witch feared and loathed me in equal measure. Her terror and fury called to the deepest part of me, urging me to *make* her follow my orders. But I’d seen the way she looked at me— dread warring with an inquisitiveness she couldn’t hide. She was like a rabbit— curious enough that she couldn’t resist the urge to poke her pert nose out of her burrow.

And I was a patient predator.

The crowd parted as Agaliarept stormed toward us. An ember of rage took up residence in my gut at the thought of what had likely put that expression on his face.

I jerked my head and we moved to the smaller bar area behind the club where it was quieter.

“Tell me.”

A muscle twitched in Agaliarept’s jaw. “We’ve had another attack. Three demon females.”

Bael cursed and my wings ached with the need to unfurl as I struggled to stay in control. In this world, demon males outnumbered females by almost two to one. Most females preferred to stay in the underworld, and those who did make it through the portal were often disappointed by what they found.

I shifted. “Where?”

“Trinity Heights.”

“Take the bounty hunter.”

He nodded. “I messaged her and she’s on the way. She questioned the werewolf alpha yesterday.”

I tilted my head. What had the alpha thought of the little witch? What had she thought of him?

Bael’s gaze was knowing and I forced the thought away, turning my

attention back to Agaliarept. “Go.”



A galiarept's expression was stone when I arrived at the apartment in Trinity Heights the next morning. I hadn't been summoned to Monday dinner last night, but I'd made sure I was away from my apartment running errands just in case anyone came for me. Talk about dodging a bullet. Agaliarept had obviously decided to mess with me by threatening me with a dinner at Samael's tower, and I was definitely going to make him pay.

I glanced up at the apartment building and he gestured for me to precede him inside. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, I had to suppress a smirk. I highly doubted Agaliarept was an old-fashioned gentleman. He didn't want me at his back.

Was he truly wary of little old me?

"Sixth floor," he growled behind me and I pressed the button. The doors opened instantly and I stepped inside. Agaliarept scowled, shifting awkwardly, and I jumped as soft feathers brushed my cheek.

He cleared his throat and the sensation disappeared. "My apologies."

I didn't inform him I was barely suppressing the urge to reach out and stroke the invisible wings. I could hear them rustle, could see how cramped the demon was in the elevator, and yet they were still hidden.

"Why do you guys use glamor on your wings?"

"It's not glamor. That's a fae word. This is... an instinct. When we came through the portal, our wings were invisible. We can lower the veil over

them, and sometimes the veil... falls. But most of us prefer to keep them hidden.”

“Why?”

He obviously decided he'd told me enough because he closed his mouth and stepped out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened.

I was guessing there wasn't enough room for him to allow me to slide in front of him without touching his wings, because he kept walking, allowing me at his back as I followed him down the hall.

The Mistilteinn Dagger let out a sound like a low hum. I was wearing it in a sheath on my belt, hidden beneath my long t-shirt, and I couldn't be sure if I was the only one who could hear the sound, or if it would be audible to anyone who got too close to me. I frowned down at it, my heart pounding. If Agaliarept found the dagger on me, I was in deep shit. As Samael's second, I would bet Samael had informed him when the dagger went missing.

The apartment door was already open, and Agaliarept stepped aside, gesturing for me to walk through. From the look on his face, I didn't want to see whatever was waiting for me in the apartment. I glanced down at the gold mark on my forearm and forced myself to step inside anyway.

My entire body went cold. So cold that I almost expected my breath to turn to fog. My teeth chattered, and I glanced back at the demon. His face was set in its usual inscrutable expression. If he was uncomfortable, I couldn't tell.

Agaliarept gestured for me to keep walking and I squared my shoulders and forced myself to move. The entranceway opened to a small kitchen, and I noted an open bottle of wine and a small collection of take-out containers on the counter.

The kitchen led to a cramped living room, where three bodies lay in a heap on the floor. I knew what I'd find when I dropped my shields, so I used my eyes first. The bodies were... desiccated. They looked like every ounce of blood had been sucked from them, their jaws open in a soundless scream.

I glanced around the apartment. “Women?” I asked.

“Yes,” Agaliarept replied. “Demon females.” He glanced down.

“What were their names?”

Surprise flashed across his face, but he read the names off his phone. “Tataka, Labassu, and Ahchazu. Labassu and Ahchazu lived together a few blocks away. This is Tataka's apartment.”

I took a deep breath and gave him a nod, turning my attention to the

apartment itself. It was small but homey. Tataka had obviously loved to read, because her living room was lined with bookshelves on two walls, and a stack of books sat on her coffee table next to two glasses of wine. A third glass was lying near the bodies.

They'd been three friends who'd been relaxing together. Maybe they'd caught up after a few busy weeks. Maybe they did this once a week. Maybe one of them had news she simply had to share. Or it was just an impromptu gossip session. I pushed the thought away. What would I know about what women did with their friends?

"Witch?"

I jolted, glancing over my shoulder at Agaliarept. "I have a name." My voice sounded like it was very far away.

"Danica," his voice was surprisingly gentle. "What do you see?"

"Three friends catching up. They weren't expecting their lives to end last night. It was last night, wasn't it?"

He nodded and I blew out a breath. There was something that hit especially hard about these murders. They'd been relaxing, enjoying their friendship. And something had stolen their lives from them.

I didn't have friends. Before mom died, it was too dangerous. We'd been on the run, and while we'd been perfectly pleasant to those we came into contact with, mom had made it clear that to invite anyone else into our lives was to invite death. Since I'd been back in Durham, I'd spent all my time working. I had no social life, no real friends, and I doubted I'd have either anytime soon. And now I was spiraling into depression when I should really be hunting down whoever had killed these poor women.

I dropped my shields, ignoring Agaliarept's indrawn breath. Something about my magic obviously gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Witch life, yo.

There. One entire half of the apartment was just... gone. The shimmering glimmer of magic had disappeared and was replaced by thick black muck.

"What about the apartment underneath this one?"

Agaliarept was silent and I glanced back at him. "The black stain permeates that entire side of the bodies. It's as if someone sucked the magic out. Oh my god, that's what they did. They sucked out their magic and used the loss of it to kill them."

Agaliarept stepped closer, rage written over every inch of his face.

"What. Do. You. Mean."

“Every creature has some level of magic. The werewolves can’t *use* magic like mages and witches, but it almost uses them— making them shift and allowing them to see through our magic. The fae have all kinds of magic, depending on whether they’re part of the seelie or unseelie courts. Demons... I don’t know much about you guys, but something allows you to hide your wings and feed on other creature’s... sins? Is that what it is?”

Agaliarept stared at me, mouth pressed into a thin line, and I shrugged. “Never mind. Anyway, humans also have a spark of power. It’s what keeps them alive.” I swallowed and forced my gaze back down at the bodies. “Even corpses have a seed of magic for a few days after death. And yet these women have nothing. If you look a few feet around them— the floor, the walls— they’re magically dead.”

“Magically dead?”

“Yeah. Some witches don’t have enough power to use themselves, but they can channel it through spells. I think... I think if they were standing in that spot, where those poor women are... I think those witches would be completely unable to access any power at all. Because there’s no power left here to be used. But demons... you guys radiate power. Having that cut off would be like becoming brain dead. That’s how these women were killed. The loss of their magic would’ve meant the loss of their lives.”

My dagger’s hum had become more insistent, and I attempted to ignore it.

Agaliarept’s spoke very quietly. “You need to explain this to Samael.”

“Isn’t that your job?”

“Don’t fuck with me, witch.”

I stiffened, but he was already stalking closer to the bodies. He stopped inches from where the black smudge began. Maybe he could instinctively sense it somehow.

“Why would someone drain their magic?”

I shrugged. “It could be a side-effect of whatever killed them. Maybe the murderer required the magic in their victims’ bodies for their attack to work.” The thought made me shiver.

The demon cursed. “Do you need anything else from here?”

The Mistilteinn Dagger hummed even louder and I jolted. It was a warning hum that seemed to burrow deep into my brain.

Agaliarept narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I’m just tired. Give me a minute.” It crept me out— the idea that the dagger was trying to tell me something. I shivered at the memory of its voice

in my head when I'd stolen it. I'd assumed it was only temporarily sentient—because it'd been kept so close to the dragon for so long.

If it was... alive, I could have problems.

I filed that information away to worry about later. Instead, I scanned every inch of the room, careful not to get too close to the black smudge. I leaned close to the bodies. "Has anyone moved them?"

"No."

"Can I search under them?"

"Yes." The demon made no move to help me and I scowled at him. He simply stared back at me.

I threw my shields back up. Knowing the dark smudge was there was bad enough. I didn't need to see it.

I have my own magic. I can still use it in the black smudge.

I'd never appreciated my magic before— what little of it I had. But the thought of being magically dead— of never being able to drop my shields and feel the gentle breeze of it winding through me... it was terrifying.

One of the bodies had fallen on her friend. I crouched next to her, wondering if she'd attempted to protect her friend from whatever had killed them.

I glanced over my shoulder at Agaliarept. "Were there any signs of forced entry?"

"No. They let their murderers in."

I sighed and peered beneath the body on top. Better to get it over with. I pushed gently at the husk, attempting to forget that it had once been a person.

"There! Come help me."

Agaliarept stalked closer, clearly unhappy.

"Hold this," I ordered, and his growl let me know how displeased he was with my tone. I ignored him since he did what I asked, and I reached for the object.

The dagger let out a low purr in my mind, as if pleased, and I ignored that too.

"It's a knife." I pulled it free and Agaliarept gently lowered the body back down. I got to my feet and examined the knife.

"Someone hasn't been looking after their blade. I don't know many bounty hunters who use knives with wooden hilts like this because, unless they're stabilized, they tend to break down over time, especially when exposed to water. You can see it here— see how it's warped? Sloppy of them

to leave it behind.”

“What are those symbols?”

“Some kind of runes. I’ve never seen them before though. I think this knife was used as part of whatever ritual allowed the murderer to drain these women of their magic. Maybe I can find someone who can tell us who it belongs to.”

Agaliarept nodded, then glanced at the bodies. “Demons are vicious when cornered.”

“Yeah. I think they were taken by surprise. Incapacitated by magic. The woman at the bottom of the... pile... she fought back and the others tried to help her but they were too late. The autopsies will tell us more.” I glanced down at the curled black feathers surrounding the bodies, swallowing around the lump in my throat.

I’ll find out who did this to you. And I’ll make them pay.

I hoped wherever these demon women were, all three of them were together.

I turned away. “Show me the apartment downstairs, please.” We filed out, and I didn’t have it in me to be amused by the displeased look on Agaliarept’s face when we squeezed into the elevator again. We probably could have taken the stairs, but I was betting the stairwell was so narrow it would squeeze his wings.

The apartment on the floor below was home to a dark fae woman who introduced herself as Bethaney. She reminded me of Snow White, with her curly black hair, white skin and red lips, and she tilted her head as I explained what had happened above her.

“I wasn’t here last night,” she frowned. “I think I would’ve noticed if the magic was sucked out of my apartment, but you can take a look.”

“Thank you.”

Her entranceway led directly into her living room, and I glanced up.

“Further down,” Agaliarept said his first words and Bethaney waved us on. If the demon wasn’t happy with me behind him, he definitely wouldn’t be pleased as the unseelie fae followed us, but he kept his face carefully neutral as I glanced back at him.

“Nothing,” I said when we got to Bethaney’s kitchen. I glanced up at her roof. Could I see a slight grey smudge, or was that my imagination? I wasn’t used to using my magic, and the strain was giving me a headache.

“Should I be worried?” Bethaney asked, and I shook my head.

“You should make sure you check who’s at your door before you answer it.” But that went without saying. “But so far, it has only been demons targeted.”

I could feel Agaliarept’s displeasure at my admission, but I wasn’t going to make this woman terrified in her own home. He could take it up with me when we were alone.

One awkward elevator ride later, and we were standing on the sidewalk. I’d parked a few streets away, and I eyed the demon as he fell into step beside me.

“Is there a reason you’re following me?”

Agaliarept gave me a look that said, quite clearly, that I was an idiot. “The demon in charge of watching you was called away.”

Samael had someone watching me from afar? And he was making Agaliarept follow me home like a lost puppy?

“Lookit. I’m taking the knife to be analyzed and then I’m going home.”

“Are you going to be difficult about this?”

I glowered at him. “You bet your ass I am.” He raised one eyebrow and I clenched my fists, unreasonably furious at the entire situation.

The world spun around me, and my back hit the sidewalk.

DANICA



The beast's drool dripped onto my face from fangs the size of my fingers. It roared at me, and I had a glimpse of leathery red skin, and then it was gone. I attempted to suck in a breath as Agaliarept leapt on its back. He pulled out a long knife he'd had stashed somewhere, and stabbed into its side.

The creature was the size of a minivan and it stunk like decomposition. It rolled its shoulder, throwing Agaliarept off and slashing out with its claws.

I sat up and swiped a throwing knife, nailing it in the forehead. The blade sunk deep in its crimson skin and the beast snarled at me. But I hadn't slowed it down.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Agaliarept got to his feet, his knife in his hand as he crouched in a low fighting stance.

"What is it?" I gasped out.

"A hellhound."

I stared at it. The beast looked like a 'hound' like I looked like a fucking pixie.

"Run," Agaliarept ordered me, his eyes still on the beast.

I ignored that and threw another knife. The beast was too slow to dodge, and the knife got stuck in its neck. It bled, but the hellhound didn't seem to care.

Fine. I reached into my utility belt and rooted around until my fingers hit a cool stone. Just because I didn't like using my own magic didn't mean I was opposed to buying witch spells. I muttered the incantation and the spell

lit up as I threw it, hitting the creature in its left flank. It exploded like a grenade on contact, and red flesh flew through the air.

The hellhound roared, turning on me, and Agaliarept took the opportunity to leap at it once more, plunging his knife deep in its side.

I pulled my Nim Cub and circled behind the beast. Distantly, I could hear people screaming. Hopefully, they were also running, instead of becoming standing targets.

The beast knew I was behind it. It turned and lashed out with a huge, clawed paw. Fuck it was fast.

I said a mental goodbye to the skin on my back and took a running leap, sliding beneath the hellhound's paw and under its belly.

"You idiot!" Agaliarept roared.

"Heckling isn't helping."

I stabbed up into its soft underbelly, sliding my knife down. Intestines slid out in wet ropes, falling onto my legs, the ground, and the hellhound's feet. My ears rang as the beast's howl shook the ground.

"Move," Agaliarept growled, leaping forward onto its back again. The hellhound was already healing the damage I'd inflicted.

I couldn't die yet. I hadn't killed whoever murdered my mom. I hadn't repaired things with my sister. This couldn't be it.

The beast lowered its head, readying to tear me in two. I rolled, narrowly missing being crushed again. I could feel Agaliarept gathering demon magic. I just had to hold on.

I couldn't dodge the next slash of its claws, and dots appeared in front of my eyes as they ripped into my side. Vicious pain bit into me and time warped, slowing to a crawl. Everything turned sharp. If I was going to die here, I was taking the hellhound with me.

I cracked my shields, hoping for anything I could use. My magic took its sweet time, likely because I was already weakened. I snarled and reached for it, forcing it into me as I rolled free.

Agaliarept lit up with a red glow. Demon fire. I was lucky he was here, because my magic felt like a tiny ember that could be blown out at any second. I got to my knees as a lesser demon appeared behind Agaliarept—obviously summoned. Horror ripped through me like the beast's claws and I screamed a warning. Too late. The demon slammed into Agaliarept, its claws ripping at him as he moved to attack the beast.

Agaliarept turned his demon fire on the lesser demon and it howled as it

burned. I hurled another throwing knife at the hellhound, following with an explosive spell, but Agaliarept's distraction cost him. The hellhound disemboweled him with one slash of its claws.

I choked back bile as Agaliarept fell, blood instantly pooling around his body. The creature roared in victory, moving in for the kill, and I charged it, stabbing desperately at its throat. My blade dug deep and the hellhound's blood spurted, but I was only pissing it off.

I threw my last spell, but it had gotten smarter, and it dodged, ducking the worst of the damage. One of its paws exploded and it shrieked, but I had no doubt it would regrow in the next few minutes.

Not that we were likely to live long enough to see it. The hellhound snarled at me and crouched, its muscles trembling as it readied itself to leap. Time froze.

There. On its back. The creature was covered in a thick, leathery skin that healed almost instantly. But there was a patch on the back of its neck where that skin appeared much thinner, allowing it to move its head almost a hundred and eighty degrees. If I could get to that vulnerable area, I might have a shot at taking it down.

The beast lowered its head, readying itself to charge. Behind it, Agaliarept's entire body lit up red once more. It was a shadow of what it had been just a few minutes ago, but the hellhound yelped as demon fire hit its back legs. It turned and snarled at Agaliarept and I launched myself forward, sprinting for the dented, blackened SUV parked a few feet away.

I scrambled up onto the hood and leapt at the hellhound just as it turned toward me. I hit its back with a thump and it went crazy, bucking and tossing its head. I slammed the Nim Cub between its shoulder blades, and it wailed.

I was right. it had a vulnerability after all. I desperately held on with my left hand, but the hellhound bucked again and I slipped, barely clutching to the beast as I lost my hold on the knife. It slipped to the ground.

I reached for the Mark II in my spine sheath. The knife was wickedly sharp, but it was designed more for up-close fighting—stabbing into an opponent. Cutting the beast's head off would take time, and the hellhound wasn't likely to go quietly.

I shoved the knife deep into its neck and carved downwards. The hellhound bucked, frantically attempting to shake me off, but I held on with everything I had, my thighs clamped around its neck.

I sawed at the beast, but my blade was losing its sharp edge. Frustration

roared through me. The hellhound was already healing the damage. I mentally counted my knives but I had nothing left. Nothing except the Mistilteinn Dagger.

The hellhound dropped its shoulder and ran in a circle, attempting to roll me off. My hold on the knife stuck deep in its neck helped me stay on its back, but the blood covering my hand was slippery as oil.

I had no choice. I left the Mark II in its neck and pulled the Mistilteinn Dagger from my belt sheath.

“Sorry,” I told it. The dagger hummed.

I stabbed the blade into the other side of the beast’s neck and the hellhound squealed, dropping to its knees as blood gushed. Had I hit an artery?

More lesser demons appeared, their bat-like wings flapping. I was going to find whoever summoned them and make them wish they’d never been born. The lesser demons bared their teeth, one of them attacking Agaliarept while the rest seemed to be gathering, ready to charge me.

Even as wounded as he was, Agaliarept could defend himself against lesser demons. I focused on my grizzly task, distantly noting that the Mistilteinn Dagger never lost its sharp edge.

Its hum intensified and I got the feeling it was enjoying its taste of blood. Feeding ancient fae artifacts with demon blood wasn’t my smartest move, but desperate times and all that.

I ground my teeth as the lesser demons approached. One of them jumped toward my leg in an attempt to pull me off the hellhound, and Agaliarept’s demon fire burned through it. I snarled at the other demons and shoved the dagger harder into the hellhound’s neck as the lesser demon screamed and burned.

Shit. Agaliarept was attempting to get up. The attempt might kill him if the blood loss didn’t.

The hellhound shuddered and my knuckles turned white as I desperately fought to keep my balance.

It collapsed. If it wasn’t dead, it was at least unconscious. For now, that was enough for me. The world swam around me and my side burned as I panted. The air lit up with green sparks as I ripped the dagger free, shoved it back in its sheath, and slid off the hellhound. My hand shook as I swiped my Nim Cub from the ground next to its body.

A lesser demon lunged toward me and screamed as it was engulfed in

demon fire. I dropped to my knees next to Agaliarept.

He cracked open his eyes as I ripped off my t-shirt and attempted to pack his wound. “Run.”

I’d maybe pay attention to what he had to say if he wasn’t bleeding out. “Why aren’t you healing?”

“Claws. Poison.”

Well that didn’t bode well for me. And it explained why my side felt like it was engulfed in acid.

A peal of laughter reached my ears as I attempted to push Agaliarept’s guts back into his body.

Whoever had let out that creepy laugh was approaching. I could feel them stalking closer.

“Hand over the knife, witch, and we’ll let you live.”

What were they talking about? Were they planning to steal the Dagger of Truth?

“Mine,” I slurred as my vision dimmed. “Dead body.”

“We *will* take it from your dead body, thank you.” That menacing chuckle again. “But it’s not yours, is it?”

I frowned. How did they know I had the Mistilteinn Dagger? Then it finally clicked. They wanted the knife from the apartment. I’d shoved it in the sheath in my boot and forgotten about it.

“Go fuck yourself.” If they wanted the knife, it was because they were the ones who’d killed those poor demon women. And it could help lead back to them.

The voice laughed again and I realized it was a woman. “Kill them both,” she ordered.

The world was getting soft around the edges. Distantly, I knew the lesser demons were gathering to charge us, and I fought to get to my feet.

I made it as far as my knees, barely staying conscious. Enemies surrounded us— I could see their bodies in the edge of my vision, blurred as it was. This was it.

The night sky suddenly lit up with an opalescent, purple-gold light. It shimmered and danced, trapping us inside, protecting us from the demons.

I gaped at its beauty, even as my hands shook with relief. Help was here. The lesser demons began to run into the ward, screaming in frustration as their prey was stolen from them. I crouched over Agaliarept, facing the demons, my knife clutched in my hand.

If he could set this ward, the least I could do was keep his body safe while it attempted to heal.

The lesser demons exploded, turning to mist. In a split second, there was nothing but puddles of blood and goo where they'd stood. The beast was gone too, and the world went eerily silent. Footsteps approached as I slumped over Agaliarept's body.

"Little witch," a voice crooned. When had I closed my eyes? I managed to crack them open, and Samael's face danced in front of me. He was frowning, and his silver eyes were so dark they appeared black. "Lower your ward, Danica."

"Not mine," I slurred. "Agaliarept's."

His face hardened. "If I have to break it, it'll hurt," he warned, and I frowned in an attempt to understand.

"Can't set wards," I explained, hating that my discussion with him was using the last of my precious energy. "I can only break them."

"Very well then."

A look of what might've been regret crossed his face as he slammed his hand against the shimmering golden purple glow, and the ground rose up to meet me.

Samael

“How is he?”

“The poison struck deep,” the fae male said, tutting as he worked his magic. “He’s lucky to be alive. The healing spells will be particularly brutal due to his other injuries. If he wakes, it may not be for some time.”

I closed my eyes briefly. The hellhound and the lesser demons had both been summoned to attack my second and the witch. Both had been unconscious ever since— Agaliarept fighting to cling to life, and Danica...

“Do what you can,” I said, and Eldan nodded. I still questioned why he worked for me, but his loyalty was true. The seelie fae rarely shared their healing powers with other paranormals, but after all these years, Eldan had a vested interest in keeping my people alive.

I stalked back to my rooms, frowning at the witch in my bed. It hadn’t occurred to me to take her elsewhere, and from the befuddled looks Sitri continued to send me, the choice had been noted.

“Give me an update,” I ordered. Eldan had already seen to the worst of the witch’s injuries, and I’d instructed Gloria to examine her as she slept.

The witch frowned. She was powerful, but in her nineties, and unable to serve me in the field. “I sense power, but can only see a trickle of magic. Even that trickle is untapped, and would be all but useless if not honed.”

“What does that mean?”

She sighed, leaning back in the armchair as she gazed at the witch, her brow creased. “I believe she has some kind of suppression spell on her magic. Such spells are forbidden against all but our most dangerous criminals.”

“You believe she is one of these criminals?”

“I am an old woman,” Gloria said. “And I have long been part of the witch community. Even now, when shunned due to my relationship with you and your people, I have one ear to the ground. I would know if such a spell had been cast. Witches talk.”

“If not for criminal behavior, why would the spell have been placed?”

Gloria shrugged and got to her feet. “Your guess is as good as mine, demon. But it’s certainly a mystery that needs solving.”

“Does she know about the spell?”

“I don’t know. If, as your sources said, she rarely uses her power, it may be due to trauma. She may have asked for the spell to be placed herself,

although I can't fathom why one would do such a thing. If not, she may imagine that the tiny drop of power she uses is all she possesses." Gloria frowned. "It would take incredible power to suppress another's magic this way."

I nodded and dismissed the witch, taking her seat as I glanced between the woman in my bed and the pile of weapons on the bedside table next to her. Asleep and silent, she was much smaller than she appeared when she was awake and challenging me.

The little witch presented a mystery that I needed to solve. I allowed my gaze to travel over her face and across the vulnerable line of her neck. I wanted to run one finger across her collarbones. Wanted to run the edge of my teeth along her vulnerable throat as I hissed filth in her ear.

The thought made my body harden and I stood with a curse. Danica was unlikely to wake for some time, and I had things to do.



I was lying on the softest pillow I'd felt in my life. It held a scent that almost made me purr in pleasure, and I nestled deeper, filling my nose with cedar and citrus.

The pillow cupped my cheek like a lover, supporting my head and neck in all the right ways, while the cool touch of silk urged me to go back to sleep. It was that thought that made my eyes fly open. My pillow was old, lumpy, and I kept forgetting to replace it. And my pillowcase sure as hell wasn't silk.

I rolled and let out a strangled sound. My side ached from hip to ribs, as if I was bruised deep inside, and I panted as I slowly rolled onto my back.

My eyes met liquid silver and my breath hitched in my throat. This was Samael's bed.

There was another pillow next to me and I grabbed it, panting some more as I shoved it beneath my head so I could sit up slightly. We stared at each other in silence.

"How long have I been sleeping for?"

"Sleeping is an interesting term for it. It's Friday morning."

Dread warred with panic in my stomach. I'd gone to the demon woman's apartment on Tuesday morning. I'd lost three days. Oh god.

"I have a cat," I choked out. Samael tilted his head.

"Bael handled it."

I wrestled with that for a long moment. Samael had known I had a cat, and one of his demons had strolled into my territory, likely sliding past the

ward I'd paid far too much money for.

But at least Lia was okay. Me? I'd just lost three days. Three days I desperately needed.

Samael watched me silently panic. Maybe he'd give me an extra three days to add onto my two weeks. I opened my mouth, snapping it closed as the demon tossed something in the air and caught it. I went very still.

The Mistilteinn Dagger. Better known as the Dagger of Truth. *Samael's* dagger.

I was going to have to give it a better name, I thought distantly as I watched the demon. Maybe "DOT" for short? Something cute like "Misty"?'

My heart was flipping as fast as the dagger Samael was throwing through the air. I cleared my throat. "Um."

He caught the dagger and turned his gaze to my face. I shivered. My knives were within reach, but it would take me a second to get to them. And I was injured. I was betting Samael could kill me before I could even arm myself.

He tilted his head as if reading my mind. "You saved my second's life, which is why I won't kill you for this."

Well that was kind of him. Something dark stirred deep within me. Something that didn't take kindly to his death threats. I frowned as I shoved it back down behind my shields where it belonged.

"In fact," he continued, "since I like the idea of you being able to tell exactly who is lying during the course of this investigation, you may borrow it. But you owe me." His stare hardened. "Say it."

"I owe you." My voice was hoarse, but triumph burned into his eyes as the vow slid into place. My hand burned and I cursed, turning it over. A black slash appeared on my inner wrist, our new bond made visible. It was now impossible to use this hand without flashing a demon mark— both sides showcasing my stupidity.

The demon was tying me to him in all kinds of ways.

That thought was enough for me to struggle to sit up further. I hissed out a breath and the demon watched me, his face blank.

"You could help me, you know," I snapped, and his eyes glittered.

"Why would I do that?"

"So I can get back on my feet and get out of here?"

He waved the hand holding my dagger. "You have no need to do that. You're staying here now. Where I can keep an eye on you."

“Over my dead body.”

“Yes, it almost was.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He narrowed his back. His scary look was better than mine. So I backed off. Let him think he'd won.

Mom had always told me that there were some people you couldn't argue with. Not because they were right, but because they were in positions of authority. That meant that you had to be sneaky.

Samael's lush lips curled in the hint of a smile. My every atom stood at attention. He glanced at the nightstand next to the bed, and my pile of weapons.

“Butterfly knives?” he asked mildly, and I squinted my eyes at him.

“They look cool, and if I pull them out and twirl them around, most would-be muggers decide they have something they need to do elsewhere.”

He gave me an absent nod at that and leaned closer. The scent of him engulfed me and a tiny part of my brain urged me to close my eyes and simply bask in it. “Did you enjoy fooling me the night you stole this dagger?”

I met his gaze, my fight or flight instinct failing me as I froze. “What do you mean?”

“Oh I remember you, little witch. It took me some time to match your scent, but discovering my dagger helped me connect the dots.”

I couldn't have him connecting too many of those dots. Other people had helped me get my hands on that dagger. “How's Agaliarept?” I blurted out, and his expression went blank once more.

“It remains to be seen. You saved his life.”

I shook my head. My magic hadn't worked. Even the few sparks I had didn't help me against the beast.

“Tell me,” the demon purred, “who put the suppression spell on your magic and why?”

I gaped at him, and the shock was enough to startle me out of whatever lustful thoughts I'd been having about the arrogant, bossy bastard sprawled in the armchair in front of me.

Well, almost.

“What are you talking about?”

His gaze burned into mine but I was too confused to be afraid. A suppression spell? No one would bother suppressing my magic. It was a trickle at best.

He'd gotten it wrong. I scowled. I felt like shit. I was grateful to whoever

had healed me, but there was always a price to healing spells. I'd lost three days in my search to find whoever was killing Samael's demons, and now I'd be weak and groggy for the next day or so. I scowled at the demon, entirely pissed off.

"I don't have time for this," I said, and Samael leaned close. That tiny move radiated threat, and if I wasn't so panicked about the clock ticking down on my freedom, I might've worried about it. Instead, I swung my legs out of his bed.

Those sweatpants weren't mine. I pushed away the thought of someone dressing me while I was unconscious, and instead focused on not puking over Samael's gorgeous hardwood floor.

"I suggest you make time, little witch."

He placed one finger against my chest and nudged me, and that was all it took for me to sprawl back onto the bed.

I grunted, my side burning at the sudden movement. "What the hell, Samael?" I scowled up at the demon as he leaned over me and he pushed my hair back from my face. His hand was warm—almost hot, his fingers rough with calluses. A tiny part of me wondered what those fingers would feel like elsewhere on my body.

"Who suppressed your magic?"

I blinked, my mind still blank at his proximity. Amusement flashed through his silver eyes as he waited for me to pull myself together.

"What are you thinking about?" he purred.

Exactly when did I begin having dirty thoughts about the demon? This was not okay. It must have something to do with being weak and healing from the attack. Witches did *not* lust after demons.

"I'm thinking that you're wrong."

"My witch found a suppression spell when she examined you."

I breathed through the fury at the thought of another witch leaning over my unconscious body and focused on what he was saying. "No one would suppress my magic."

"Oh, but they did."

I attempted to come to terms with that while he leaned on one elbow, his eyes on my face. I'd never heard of anyone having a suppression spell on their magic before. Other than witches who'd, you know, murdered a bunch of other people. "Okay. Say your witch is right. Why would someone suppress my magic? And how do I get it lifted?"

He raised one eyebrow. “My sources say you don’t often use your magic.”

“I don’t. I prefer not to think about it. But if I’d been able to use it against the hellhound, Agaliarept wouldn’t have been hurt.”

Tuesday was also the closest I’d ever come to dying. I was used to being able to go up against almost anything and come out swinging. I wouldn’t admit it to the demon, but my close brush with death had shaken me to my core.

Beneath my smart mouth was a healthy survival instinct. If my magic could protect me, I’d use it.

“I’m unsure how to lift it,” Samael said. “From the way you created that ward, you may have already begun breaking through it. Spells as powerful as a suppression spell should be renewed, especially when containing a magic as strong as yours.”

“I can’t set wards,” I said automatically. Who was the witch he was talking about, and why was she working for the demons? Or maybe it wasn’t voluntarily. “Why is a witch working for you?”

“Of course you can,” Samael said, ignoring my question, and I ground my teeth.

“I can’t set wards. I can only break them,” I ground out. “I have to pay the witches for the wards on my apartment. Much sneering and whispering ensues. Believe me, if I could do it myself, I would.”

“I know the taste of your magic, little witch. The ward was yours. Something about the attack allowed you to access enough power to set it.”

My mind raced as I considered this. On one hand, if I no longer needed to hire a witch to set my own wards, I’d be spared the humiliation and gossip. On the other hand, it was scary how much I didn’t know about my own magic.

“Think,” Samael said. “How did you set the ward?”

“*If* that ward was mine, it was instinctive— my magic has usually been instinctive. I don’t know how I did it.”

He nodded. “Children have instinctive magic,” he said, not unkindly, but I felt my face heat anyway. “I will give you ward lessons myself.”

I felt my eyes widen. More time spent with the demon who currently held my leash? I don’t think so. “I’m good, thanks.”

His smile said I was being particularly adorable, and my hands clenched into fists.

The demon leaned so close he was inches away. His gaze dropped to my mouth before returning to my eyes. “You will attend these lessons for as long as I believe they are necessary.” He stroked one finger down my forearm in clear admiration of the gold design.

I glowered at him. “Why do you even care?”

“You’re my tool,” he told me. “I don’t like when my tools are broken before I’m finished using them.”

“That’s real nice.”

He raised one eyebrow and I scowled.

“Will you get off now?”

Amusement gleamed within his eyes and my scowl deepened. “Get off *me*.”

The amusement disappeared and I shivered at the expression on his face. That warning look told me exactly how he felt about taking orders from a witch.

“What did the demons want?” his tone made it clear I was going nowhere until he *allowed* me to.

“The knife we found at the last scene,” I pushed against his chest. “Where is it?” The thought of losing my only lead made my stomach clench.

“On the table with the rest of your weapons,” he said. “Tell me everything you remember.”

I sighed and relaxed back into the soft bed. The sooner I cooperated, the sooner I could go home, so I filled him in, up until the hellhound collapsed. “I heard a voice,” I frowned. “I don’t think the demons attacked on their own.”

“You’re correct. Lesser demons wouldn’t dare attempt to harm my people unless they were summoned and ordered to do exactly that. Tell me about the voice.”

I glanced away. I’d just pretend the huge demon wasn’t lying on top of me, that’s what I’d do. “I thought it was male at first, but the laugh... it was female.” I huffed. “I couldn’t place it, and I didn’t see its owner. But I’d know if I heard it again. Whoever that voice belongs to... they practically radiated power.”

Samael climbed off me, and I pushed up on my hands. “If they had that much power, why didn’t they attack us themselves?” I mused.

“They likely thought the demons would kill you and deliver the knife. They were wrong. So they decided to get the job done themselves, risking my

wrath.”

“You didn’t see them either?”

“My attention was otherwise occupied.”

I shivered at the memory of Agaliarept’s choked breaths. “Agaliarept is your second. Why did he...”

“Succumb to an attack by lesser demons? His current weakness is his own business. Rest. I will have someone bring you food.”

He strode out the door and I positioned myself until I was leaning against the pillows once more. I let my gaze explore. Was this... Samael’s room? That would explain the scent of sin wafting from his sheets and pillow. If anyone had asked me what his bedroom would look like, I would’ve told them it would be unrelenting black. Black walls, black carpet, black sheets, black on black on black.

I would’ve been wrong. Oh it was dark. The furniture— including the bed — was a gleaming mahogany, while crimson drapes were held back by gleaming gold ropes. A lush, black rug covered the hardwood floor in front of the fire, and I itched to spend a rainy day reading on the dark chocolate-colored sofa positioned invitingly near the empty fireplace.

The light-colored walls were interrupted with sweeping windows on one side and sliding doors on another. They were currently closed, but offered access to a private balcony.

And I needed to get out of here. I had a job to do, and if someone was after the knife, it was even more important that I get it analyzed. I wasn’t risking being bound to a demon for the rest of my life just because I felt a little weak.

Okay, I felt very weak. So weak that the thought of getting out of bed was one of the worst thoughts I’d had all month. But if I was going to sneak out of here, now was my chance. Samael wouldn’t be expecting me to try to leave until after I was fed.

My stomach rumbled and I sighed. Food sounded good, but you know what sounded even better? Not living life as an indentured demon servant. It took me a few tries to find my feet, and my head spun around me.

I glanced around until I found my clothes. No luck. I was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt and I peeked down the neck of the t-shirt. My own bra. Excellent.

My head whirled and I reached out to steady myself on the armchair Samael had been sitting in as I hunted for my boots. They were tucked under

the bedside table, and I took one look at them and froze.

The last time I'd seen my boots, they'd been covered in hellhound blood, and I'd already begun to mourn the loss of them. They'd served me well, and while I'd planned to attempt to scrub the gore off them, they'd never be the same.

Except, they *were*.

I could never call them pristine— they were too old for that. But they looked better than they had on Tuesday morning when I'd pulled them on. Not only were they spotless, but someone had replaced the frayed laces and polished the leather until it gleamed.

I sat on the bed as I pulled them on. I didn't know quite what to make of the gesture, so I shoved it down to think about it later and gathered up the rest of my weapons.

I slid the knife I'd found at the crime scene into the sheath in my right boot. I wasn't planning to make myself a target by carrying it around Durham, and the sooner I could hand it off to an expert to analyze it, the better. Ignoring the way my muscles trembled, I strode toward the door, cracking it until I could see down the hall. Empty. I had no idea which floor I was on, so I peeked out the window.

My stomach swam dizzily, reminding me of how much blood I'd lost, and how little food I'd eaten. This was the penthouse. The stairs weren't an option unless I wanted to be found in a humiliating heap on the floor, and if I attempted to slip into the elevator, Samael would likely be immediately notified. He'd ordered me to stay put.

Without warning, panic climbed up my throat, choking me. I leaned over, heaving, and forced myself to count my breaths. The gold mark taunted me as I fought back the nausea.

I couldn't stay here. Wouldn't. This couldn't be my life. I still had eight days left. Eight days to regain my freedom.

In the wild, animals will chew off their own paws to escape a trap. As I stared at my arm, I understood exactly why.

Unfortunately, even if losing an arm could free me, the mark was just a representation of the bond, and not the bond itself. I blinked back tears, and it was the burning in my eyes that shocked me back to myself. I wasn't this person. I was just tired. I'd figure this out. I used the palms of my hands to wipe away the wetness and forced myself to focus.

Hello sweet thief, the Mistilteinn Dagger purred in my head and I jumped.

The demon blood. Oh shit.

“You’re uh... alive?”

I see all. Occasionally, when I have been fed blood, I do more than see.

That explained a lot. When I’d first found the dagger, it had urged me to feed it. Then, it’d helped me hide from the dragon.

If I’d been terrified before, this fear went soul-deep. Stealing the dagger and waking it up had been one of the worst things I’d ever done. It had burrowed deep into the heart of me, rifled through my memories, and finally decided I was worthy enough to take it from Samael’s horde.

I took a deep breath and blew it out. Then another. If the dagger was already awake, and if it had hidden me once before...

“Can you help me get out of here?”

I remember the witch’s look-away spell.

“You can use it again?”

Feed me.

“No way. I already fed you plenty of hellhound blood the other day.” And even my desperation wouldn’t allow me to feed my blood to something this old and dangerous. Again.

You’re no fun.

I shivered at that. The dagger had been given to Samael centuries ago, and he’d held onto it, with no need to use it... as far as I knew. I had a sinking suspicion that the dagger’s new fondness for modern-day colloquialisms was due to the way it had rifled through my memories six months ago.

Awesome.

“If you help me, we’ll go see a witch,” I cajoled. “Otherwise, we’ll be staying in this boring room until the demon allows us to be free.” And how that thought burned.

Very well.

The dull pop told me the spell had taken effect, and I gathered up the rest of my things and opened the door again.

I walked out into Samael’s huge living room. It was as impeccably decorated as his bedroom, but the living room was done in shades of gray, with a mammoth stone fireplace as the focal point. The U-shaped sectional could comfortably seat at least eighteen people, and the TV was massive. Did Samael have friends up here? Did he spend time watching the game on that sofa?

Four doors led off the living room, but I continued walking until I got to the one that seemed the most likely to lead me to freedom. I cracked the door open and peered out.

A woman was walking down the hall, a tray in her hands, and the scent made my stomach rumble.

“Shit.” I closed the door, stumbled dizzily across the room, and back into the bedroom. The next door I opened led to an enormous bathroom. I darted into the bathroom just in time.

“Food,” the woman sang out, and I leaned against the door. Torture. This was torture.

“I’m going to rinse off,” I called back. “Would you mind just leaving the tray?”

“Of course, dear.”

The bathroom was bigger than my entire apartment. Along one wall, a huge tub stretched, with enough room for a group of six. A spacious, multi-headed shower occupied the opposite wall, and I cast it a longing look as the woman delivering the food bustled around the room. As soon as I heard the door click behind her, I abandoned the bathroom and marched over to the tray.

Steak. Potatoes. Green beans. It was the early hours of the morning, but demons didn’t exactly operate on a 9-5 schedule.

I breathed out a curse and cut off a little of each, stuffing it in my mouth. As much as I wanted to wolf down the food, I had no idea how long the spell would keep me invisible.

I stalked over to the bed, tucked Samael’s pillow beneath my arm, and prepared to sneak out of the demon’s lair.

SAMAEL



“*T*he witch has left.”

I spun, turning my back on the window and the city below. Sitri’s lips quivered and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“How did she leave?”

“We’re unsure. There’s nothing on the security footage except the door to your rooms opening and closing.”

“She doesn’t have access to enough of her power to use an invisibility spell. Even if she did, she was completely drained.”

Sitri nodded. “If she wasn’t bonded to you, the wards wouldn’t have allowed her to leave without permission.”

I tilted my head and he gazed steadily back at me.

“Do you have something you’d like to say?” My voice was soft, but the demon tensed anyway.

“Since Ag is out of action, I believe it is up to me to say what he would also be thinking.”

“And what is that?”

“Bonding the witch was a mistake.”

I raised one eyebrow. “And why would that be?”

He gave me a look. “There was no need to bond her. You could have given her a single mark and she would still have been locked into your service.”

Not enough. A demon mark was a single slash along the palm, easily hidden.

Sitri leaned against the wall, nodding knowingly. “You’re overly

possessive of this witch.”

“For the next week— and likely the rest of her life— the witch is mine,” I said. “I’m possessive of everything that belongs to me, and the witch is no different.”

Sitri opened his mouth but I shook my head. “Your concerns are noted but unwarranted. The witch pushed me and I retaliated. A single mark on her palm wouldn’t have humbled her enough.”

Sitri’s expression said he didn’t believe me, but I ignored him, stalking back to my rooms. I froze as I stared at the bed where the little witch had pushed and prodded, butting up against my natural dominance.

A slow smile curved my lips. Yes, I was entertained for the first time in decades. And I’d tasted the little witch’s magic when I slipped beneath her shields. She wasn’t all witch, and if she was what I thought she was, then she had just become very interesting indeed.

Danica

I first met Gary when I moved back to Durham. I'd quickly realized that if I was going to survive, I needed weapons, spells, and information.

It was the third item on that list that I needed right now, and I had a feeling the information was going to cost me. Unfortunately, I was still so tired I could barely keep my eyes open, and the sun was still a few hours away from rising. Thankfully, gnomes were mostly nocturnal, and they needed much less sleep than humans.

Gary's store was cluttered. A mishmash of weapons, spells, and various knick-knacks greeted visitors, all organized in some way that only Gary seemed to understand. Tall shelves were bolted to the floor, jostling for space in the tiny room. It seemed all the smaller for the two kids that played some kind of game that involved ducking behind shelves and yelling made-up incantations at each other.

The gnome shrugged at me as I walked in. "School got out early. They've sucked the life out of me."

It was the most personal information Gary had ever offered and it surprised a chuckle from me. He shrugged, flashing his sharp, pointed teeth in a snarl as one of the kids almost bumped into me.

"Sorry, Miss," the little gnome grinned at me, and I couldn't help but reach out and ruffle his hair. His grin widened as he spun away, his gray hand waving as he pretended to throw a spell at his brother.

I turned back to Gary. Once, when I was flipping through a history book, I'd come across a picture of what humans had imagined gnomes to be before the portals fell. The cute old men with the long beards and pointy hats have nothing in common with Gary and his kids.

Sharp, pointed teeth, grey skin, and nocturnal habits. Gnomes may be lesser fae, but they were still part of the unseelie court.

I pulled out the knife. "I need some way to trace the owner of this knife. Or at least narrow down my options."

Gary studied the knife. "I can't help with that." His mouth turned down slightly. "But I can give you the name of someone who can. For a price." He stuck out his lower lip before sucking it into his mouth. I waited while he shoved his thumbs into the belt loops of his specially-made jeans and rocked back on his heels. "There's a witch who is good with stuff like this."

I sneered at him. "I know plenty of witches."

None of them would give me the time of day. But that wasn't the point.

"Trust me, this witch is different. A lot of witches, they scry for an object and inadvertently tip off the owner of the object. The owner starts paying attention, increases security. I'm guessing that's the opposite of what you want."

"You're guessing right."

"This witch doesn't make those kinds of mistakes."

"Okay. How much will that information cost me?"

"She's private. Doesn't like to be bothered."

"Uh-huh. How much for a piece of that privacy?"

Gary scowled at me, but I had his number. If I wasn't careful while negotiating with him, I'd lose my shirt.

"\$400."

I studied him without speaking. He raised one eyebrow.

"\$300," he said finally, and I sighed.

"Look, we both know you're going to charge me a hundred bucks because you like how much business I bring in with referrals. How about we skip the song and dance?"

He angled his head, and I moseyed over to a stack of explosive spells, thankfully stored high enough that his hellion kids couldn't reach them.

I grabbed a few and placed them on the counter, raising an eyebrow. A little reminder of how much money I spent in here most weeks.

One of the kids let out a sharp cry and ran to his dad, throwing his arms around his legs. Gary frowned down at him, but sighed.

"They're overtired," he said. "I need to close. Fine. A hundred bucks. But only because I don't have the time to negotiate."

I threw in an extra fifty, because I'm a softy, and because his kid was blinking up at me with watery eyes. Gary's lips twitched and he shook his head at me, but he wrote down the name I needed and handed it to me.

Selina Henderson.

"Thanks. One more thing," I remembered, and Gary gave me a look that warned it better be quick. I held a photo of Mary up for him to see. "Have you seen this witch?"

He showed me his teeth. "People aren't going to come to my store if they know I'm giving information to bounty hunters."

That was a yes.

“Look, she’s not even in that much trouble. But the more time goes by without her turning herself in, the worse it’s going to be for her.”

He shook his head, turning away dismissively and I tried again. “It’s a misdemeanor. She’s probably terrified and acting against her best interests. Let me help her, Gary.”

“God you’re a pain in my ass.”

I nodded. I was.

He heaved a sigh. “She came in a few weeks ago.”

“What was she looking for?”

Gary angled his head and I fought the urge to curse at him. The kids were here. Plus, if I pissed him off, he’d clam up. I leaned against the counter and waited him out.

“Witchweed.”

My mouth dropped open, and for a moment I couldn’t get a single word out.

A few decades ago, witches began experimenting with potions made from ingredients found in the other realms. Witchweed was one of those ingredients, and it was only used for one kind of spell: A forget-me spell.

As soon as the witches figured out what witchweed could do, they advertised to humans. Forget-me spells became disgustingly popular and were used during all kinds of crimes. Rapes, murders, wiping witnesses’ memories before they were due to testify... it got to the point where restaurants were closing as trust disappeared. Customers never knew if a waitress or chef had been bribed to slip a potion into their food. Then, someone figured out how to fix the spell so it didn’t need to be ingested. That’s when the Mage Council got involved.

These days, the spell was highly regulated. It was occasionally used by therapists for the treatment of severe trauma and PTSD, but I’d heard that a patient who agreed to such a treatment had to go on a waiting list for at least a year to ensure they didn’t change their mind. Witches who wanted to use the spell had to apply for a license, justifying their use.

I had no doubt that the occasional black witch still used the forget-me spell when it couldn’t be traced back to them, but Mary Johnson was a gray witch. What would she be doing with a forget-me spell?

A flash of what might’ve been guilt crossed Gary’s face, although it was gone before I could be sure. He straightened his shoulders, planted his feet, and stared me straight in the eye.

“I don’t sell it to any witches who stink of black magic,” he said defensively. The kids had gone quiet, and I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Okay. How much did you sell her?”

“I couldn’t sell to her. I’d sold the last of my stash to another witch a few days earlier.”

“What did Mary say when you told her that?”

“She was disappointed. And a little pissed. She asked me the name of the witch and I told her I didn’t know.”

I opened my mouth and he narrowed his eyes at me. “Now, I know you’re not going to ask me about my customers’ private information,” he said.

I gave him a hard stare. Gary sure was acting indignant for someone who was selling witchweed on the downlow.

He crossed his arms defensively at my silence. “I got—”

“Kids to feed. Yeah, yeah. Give me the name Gary. I won’t let it come back to you.”

“She didn’t tell me her name.”

I waited him out. Gary was a lot of things, but he wasn’t an idiot. He may be avaricious, but he would’ve taken the witch’s name just in case she did something with the spell that ended up on the Mage Council’s radar.

He thinned his lips and I sighed. “How much is it gonna cost me?”

“I can’t be bought.”

I glanced down at the cash I’d just paid for Selina’s information. Gary snatched it off the counter and glowered at me, his gray cheeks heating. His chin jutted out and I sighed.

“Two hours of babysitting.”

Interest lit his eyes, and he glanced from me to the kids who’d gone back to fighting with each other. There may have only been two of them, but it usually felt like there were about sixteen of them in here.

“Five hours.”

I scowled at him. Five hours and I’d go quietly insane. “Three.”

“Four.”

Double what I felt I could handle without losing my mind, but if someone was selling a forget-me spell, I wanted to know who.

“Fine.”

He nodded and turned away, going through his records. A moment later he took the paper with Selina’s name on it and wrote down another name

below it.

Beatrice Philips.

“Thanks. How’d you get her name?”

“It was on her ID when she opened her wallet. You didn’t get that information from me.”

I nodded and my body chose that moment to warn me that if I didn’t lie down soon, I’d hit the ground. I was so tired, the store was spinning around me.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” If I collapsed in Gary’s store, my badass reputation would be dented even worse than it already had been— if I wasn’t killed first. Mage Council bounty hunters weren’t exactly popular in this neck of the woods.

“I’m going to need some myrtle balm.” If I was going to be hunting a witch who had access to witchweed, I needed to be prepared. My memories were mine, thank you very much. Even my worst memories. No one would be taking them from me.

Gary turned and picked up a small jar, placing it on the counter. “On the house.”

I gaped at him. He must really be feeling bad about selling that witchweed. But with my finances the way they were, I wasn’t going to look a gift gnome in the mouth.

“Thanks Gary.”

I turned to go, freezing as the gold mark on my hand began to heat up. I pushed up my sleeve and glared down at it as it shimmered like it was alive.

Looked like the demon had just found out I’d given him the slip. I petted the Mistilteinn Dagger as I strode out the door, tempted to go check into a hotel.

No, I wouldn’t give Samael the satisfaction of seeing me run. He may be displeased, but I doubted he’d waste his resources bringing me back to his tower.

I kept one eye on my rear-view mirror the whole way home, just in case.

DANICA



The sound of my alarm was like a knife through my brain, and I groaned. My head throbbed—likely the after-effects of whatever healing spell Samael’s people had performed to heal my wounds.

It was almost ten and I could feel my time counting down. Today was Saturday, which meant I only had a week until my time ran out. My skin itched with the need to take my life back. Lia jumped up on the bed, walked up onto my chest and nuzzled my cheek, her throat vibrating with her wild purrs. I scratched behind her ears and she chose that moment to bite me.

“Hey!”

She shifted her head back under my fingers as if urging me to get back to work and I narrowed my eyes at her.

“So that was just a love bite, huh?”

I spent the next five minutes running my leg under the covers while Lia pounced, attacking my foot like a rabid dog. Eventually, I hauled myself out of bed and stumbled to the coffee pot, cradling the mug to me like it was a lifeline. I took it into the shower with me, placed it on the small shelf out of the water, and let the heat pound away some of the tension in my neck.

I gulped down another cup of coffee while I got ready, fed Lia and then headed straight to the witch’s house.

Many paranormal creatures were nocturnal, which was good news for the innocent citizens of Durham, but bad news for bounty hunters like me. Witches could go either way, but it was worth seeing if Selina was awake. If she wasn’t, I’d go back to the parking lot on west Geer Street and figure out

my next move.

Selina lived in North Trinity Park. Her home was dusky light-blue with white trim— white enough that it had obviously recently been repainted. On the second floor, a balcony ran the full length of what were likely bedrooms, offering views of the street. Green shrubs framed the path leading to her door, and her lawn was perfectly uniform and lush with health.

I walked up the porch steps and tapped my knuckles on the door. A few moments later, a woman answered the door. Her skin was a deep black, her eyes an intense, otherworldly blue. A simple peach-colored floral dress swirled around her ankles and she looked like she'd just stepped off a catwalk.

I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt with a coffee stain on the boob. I'd noticed the coffee stain approximately two minutes ago. I'd taken a shower, but I still had to resist the urge to give my armpit a sniff.

She tilted her head, her eyes curious. "Can I help you?"

"I think so. Are you Selina?"

She nodded, her lips curving in a smile as she threw her long, braided hair over her shoulder.

"I got your name from Gary. I'm hoping you can help me."

Silence stretched between us as she ran her gaze over me, obviously deliberating whether she should let me in. Finally, she opened her front door and gestured for me to enter. I stepped inside, inhaling the scent of incense mixed with some kind of soup.

"I'm just making an early lunch," she said. Obviously she wasn't a nocturnal witch. "Come sit in the kitchen while I check it, and then you can tell me what you need."

I followed her down the long hallway, noting the soft carpet under my feet. Witches were notorious for walking around with bare feet. They said it helped ground them.

Selina glanced over her shoulder at me. "You don't like witches."

I checked my shields as she led me into a huge, open kitchen. They were holding strong, and I frowned at the witch. I wasn't that transparent. Was I?

She watched me as she tied an apron around her waist, then turned her back on me and lifted the lid of a pot simmering on the stove.

"Don't take it personally," I sighed, exhausted. "I don't like most people."

Surprisingly, Selina shot me a grin over her shoulder. "I don't quite

believe that. I think you don't *want* to like most people. That's a different thing entirely."

I frowned at that, and she turned back to her soup, letting out a hum as she stirred. Her kitchen was painted in soft grays and whites. Two metallic gold lights hung above the island I was standing behind, and the same gold accented her cupboards and drawers. Above the oven, long cabinets sheathed the walls, and three wooden stools were tucked in beneath the island.

On the other side of the room, a long, scarred wooden table dominated the space. Next to it, French doors could be opened to allow access to the small backyard. It was a cheerful kitchen—the kind that was designed to be the heart of a family's home.

Selina placed the lid back on the pot, wiped her hands on her apron, and turned back to face me with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

I pulled the knife from my utility belt and placed it on the counter. "This knife was used to murder at least three demons—likely more. I need to find out who it belongs to."

She examined the knife where it lay on the counter. "My magic doesn't work like that," she said. "I won't be able to tell you exactly who it belongs to, but I believe I should be able to narrow down your suspects."

"That would be great."

"My services are expensive," she warned, and I shrugged.

"I don't have much choice at this point." I held up my arm, and her eyes widened as she examined the mark.

"A demon bond?"

"Yes. I have a chance to break the bond if I can solve these murders in time, so I'll take any help you can give me."

She nodded. "Pick it up and bring it over to the dining table," she instructed me. "I'll need to sit down for this."

I did as she asked, and we both sat at the wooden table. Selina took a deep breath and then squared her shoulders, giving me a firm nod. I handed the knife over and her whole body jolted as her eyes rolled back into her head. My hands fisted as she went so still it was as if she barely breathed.

"Not demon," she muttered. "Not werewolf. Not mage."

She frowned, trembling as her hand tightened around the hilt of the knife. "Either a witch or a fae owns this knife," she said finally. "I'm sorry I can't narrow it down further. This knife has seen... a lot of blood."

Witch or fae. Great. There was no way I'd be able to get an audience with

either of the fae kings, but I should be able to meet with one of their representatives if I flashed my demon mark around. The fae and demons had a tentative truce, and no one wanted to push them into war.

Selina placed the knife back on the table with a shudder and opened her eyes. They were haunted.

I cleared my throat. “Do you... see what happened?”

“I see flashes. I feel the emotions of both the victim and the murderer. You should be careful,” she warned. “Whoever owns this knife has no conscience. They would enjoy killing you if you get in their way.”

The memory of that chilling laugh swept over me and I shivered. “Yeah, I got that.”

Selina held her finger close to the hilt of the knife, pointing at the runes, which looked like upside-down letters. “Whoever created this knife is certainly not an expert. This rune represents deception, lies, trickery.”

“What about the U?”

She smiled. “Think of it more like an upside-down N. This is Uruz. In this case, it likely represents someone’s strength being used against them, and a loss of health. Finally, Thurisaz reversed”— she pointed at the final rune, which was a stick with a triangle jutting out of it— “that likely means defenselessness, compulsion, and betrayal.” She sighed. “Ugly business. The demons killed would have died a terrible death.”

I thought of that black smudge. “They did. Thanks for your help. Uh... one more thing if you don’t mind.”

She nodded and I pulled the picture from my pocket.

“Have you ever seen this woman?”

Selina narrowed her eyes thoughtfully.

“Her face seems familiar, but I can’t place her. I might’ve seen her once before, but nothing comes to mind.” Her mouth twisted in sympathy at whatever she saw on my face. “Your mother?”

“Yes.” Something about her made me trust her enough to ask the question that had been burning through me like acid since I left Samael’s.

“If a suppression spell was placed on a witch’s magic, how would she go about lifting it?”

She gave me a tiny, knowing smile. “Theoretically?”

I rolled my eyes at myself. In for a penny, in for a pound. “I have a suppression spell on my magic,” I admitted. “I just learned about it. I always thought I was one of the least powerful witches around, but it seems I may

have more magic than I'd thought."

"Do you know why the suppression spell was placed?"

I shook my head. "It must've been placed when I was young enough that I can't remember it."

Selina angled her head, the rainbow hoops in her ears swaying with the movement. "A suppression spell is one of the most traumatic events a paranormal can go through. It's possible that you were old enough to remember it, but your brain has shielded you, blocking it from your memories."

"I don't understand why someone would've blocked my magic."

Her lips curved. "You're far too young to be a threat to the witch community, and if the High Coven had ordered for the spell to be done, it would be public record."

Of course it would. And I'd find copies of any High Coven rulings in the Mage Council library at the facility.

"If you like, I can take a look. I understand if you would prefer for me not to check beneath your shields, however."

I bit my lip. I'd just met Selina. Yet, unlike Hannah—the witch I'd met while stealing the dagger from Samael's dragon—Selina didn't seem like a threat.

Oh, she was powerful. But she radiated peace. A tiny voice in my head wondered if that was her power—the ability to make me drop my guard.

One of the nastier skills that witches kept hidden from the public was the ability to harness each other's power. White witches wouldn't consider such a thing, but most witches ran the gamut from lily white to as black as a demon's feathers. Just like most people, no witch was truly all-white or all-black. Everyone had shades of gray.

But I needed information. I needed to know who'd placed the spell, why they'd placed it, and how I could break it. Because whoever was killing these demons was powerful, and accessing more of my magic might just keep me alive.

Selina waited patiently while I weighed the pros and cons, getting up from the table to stir her soup before reaching for a loaf of bread and cutting it into slices.

"Okay," I finally said, my stomach fluttering like there was something alive in my gut. "Let's do it."

She placed her knife back on the counter, wiped her hands on a towel and

sat back down across from me.

“Your natural instinct will be to push me out,” she said. “Try to avoid that until I’ve had time to examine the suppression spell.”

I’m good at many things. Allowing people close when I’m vulnerable is not one of them. But if I wanted the information, I needed to suck it up.

I nodded. Then I took a deep breath and slowly dropped my shields, gritting my teeth as Selina gently inched her power beyond them. She was respectful, but I still had to tamp down the urge to slam my shields shut and run. Only the knowledge that I’d hurt the witch kept me from doing exactly that.

“I see what you mean,” she said. “The spell is here, but it seems... ragged around the edges.”

“Why can’t I see it myself?”

“That would be part of the spell’s function. In the witch community, this type of spell was originally created to block the most evil witches amongst us from accessing their powers. If they could see it, they would spend the rest of their lives attempting to undo it.”

Made sense. I’d only just learned about the spell and I already felt a sense of claustrophobia, knowing there was something inside me blocking me from accessing such an important part of myself. It was ironic— I’d spent most of my life hating that I was a witch and refusing to use my power. Now, here I was trusting a witch to help me access more of it.

Panic began to rise up. Between the suppression spell and the demon bond, I felt like I was lost, not myself. With my shields down, I could feel Samael’s masculine energy at the end of that bond, and the thought made my chest tighten.

“You’re okay, Danica,” the witch said gently. “Just relax and give me one more moment.”

I blew out a breath and forced myself to calm down. An excruciatingly long minute later, Selina withdrew.

I let out a long, slow breath. “Well?”

“It’s definitely frayed. When a suppression spell is placed on a witch who has been sentenced by the High Coven, that spell includes regular... updates. That prevents the spell from decaying. Your power naturally wants to break free, and it’s been pushing at the spell for all these years, fighting to be released. Whoever placed the spell left you just enough power for basic tasks, and while that was kind of them, it also left a kind of ‘back door’ within the

spell. That back door is cracked a few inches so you can use a sliver of your power. Now, your power is likely pushing at that back door in an attempt to widen it.”

I frowned at that visual but nodded. “I... created a ward yesterday. I’d never done it before— didn’t know I could. It was so strong. My magic was... beautiful.” I blinked back tears, mortified, but Selina reached for my hand.

“It *is* beautiful. And it’s tired of being restrained. When you finally break free of the spell, you will be a force to be reckoned with.”

“How do I break it?”

“Unfortunately I have no experience breaking these kinds of spells, and while I could try, I wouldn’t want to risk doing damage. You could go to the High Coven and ask for them to examine it...” she shook her head.

I frowned at her. “What?”

Her hand squeezed mine. “Your magic isn’t entirely witch magic.”

I frowned at her. “I’ve always assumed my father was a human or a low-level mage at best.”

“No. A low-level mage couldn’t access this power, and their magic is much different— borrowed from the demigods.” She scowled, and I opened my mouth to ask exactly what she meant but she was still talking.

“Your magic is different. If I had to guess, I would say dark fae or demon.”

My mom had a dark fae friend when we were young. I remember him coming around while they talked in hushed voices. I’d never met a high fae from the dark court myself, but I remember the way my mom looked at him. Her eyes had said he was the moon and all the stars. For the life of me, I couldn’t remember if he’d looked back at her the same way.

Selina reached out and squeezed my hand at my silence. “Do you have any siblings?”

And the hits just kept on coming. I swallowed around the sudden lump in my throat. “I have a sister. We have different fathers. Neither of us have met them.” Thanks Mom.

Selina nodded. “If the High Coven were to discover your power, it likely wouldn’t end well for you.”

She was right. The High Coven were a bunch of bigots who believed witch blood should remain pure. Since witch power traveled down the maternal line, they allowed matches with humans, but they saw anyone with

mixed blood as a threat. I may not be able to access my fae power now, but that made me a target and they'd strike while I was vulnerable. I went very still. Was that why Mom had run with me? A headache began to throb above my left temple and Selina patted my hand. "I believe the spell is close to crumbling."

"How do I make it crumble faster?"

"Embrace your power. Even the parts that scare you."

I shivered. I didn't know exactly how Selina had guessed I was terrified of the dark magic I occasionally sensed beneath my shields, but she was right. I needed to figure out how to use it if I was going to stay alive. I squared my shoulders. Selina wasn't the only witch who knew I had a suppression spell. Samael's witch knew too, along with any demon he'd told. It was only a matter of time before someone sold me out.

"Work fast," Selina advised me. "But don't panic. And for your sake, learn to wield your power without needing to completely drop your shields."

"What do you mean?"

"Your shields aren't there to hold your magic back. They're there to keep others from entering your mind or playing with your magic. You should only ever be dropping them for people you inherently trust, otherwise they should remain up."

One more way I was doing it all wrong. I frowned. "So it's possible to use my magic while keeping my shields up?"

She nodded. "Tell me, how do you visualize your shields?"

"They're like a stone door that I slam up and down. Impenetrable."

"That's why you can't get your magic through them. Instead, try visualizing something translucent but still strong. Something that would allow your magic to get out, but wouldn't allow anyone to get in."

"I'll work on it. Thank you. I really appreciate the help."

I got up to find my wallet and she smiled at me. "Anytime. I enjoy talking shop with a fellow witch. Will you stay for lunch?"

I blinked and her lips curved. The invitation was genuine. "Um. I need to get back to work." My stomach chose that moment to let out a long rumble and my cheeks heated.

Selina laughed. "I won't poison you," she promised. "I'm not that kind of witch."

I barely restrained myself from asking exactly what kind of witch she was. Her home *seethed* with power.

I'd be interviewing the fae representative after this, and probably wouldn't get a chance to eat. Plus, Selina was... kind. Her kitchen was homey and warm, and I couldn't bring myself to decline again.

"A quick lunch would be great," I said, and she beamed.

"Excellent."

DANICA



A demon waited outside Selina's house.

A demon with dark curly hair, a hint of scruff along his jaw, and dreamy brown eyes that reminded me of someone. I studied him.

“What fresh hell is this?”

He gave me a wide grin.

“My name is Vassago,” he said. “But you can call me Vas.”

“Alrighty, Vas.” His name was familiar enough that I vowed to research him later, but for now I needed to figure out exactly why he was lingering outside Selina's door. I had a sinking suspicion I wasn't going to like the answer to that question.

“What exactly are you doing here?”

His gaze examined me, amusement flaring in his eyes. I gave him my best scowl, and the amusement deepened. Great.

“Samael wasn't pleased with your little escape,” he said. “I'm your new bodyguard.”

“Like fuck you are.”

He shrugged and shot me another heated smile. “I don't really need your permission to follow you around and keep you alive.”

I bristled at that, and he lost the smile. Invisible feathers rustled as he pushed off from where he was leaning against the porch. “Samael wants you breathing. There aren't many people he likes enough to care if they're dead or alive.”

I rolled my eyes and held up my arm, attempting to ignore the way it glinted in the sun. I should've been warned when it heated up and then went

ominously silent after Samael discovered me missing.

“I promise not to die until after I’ve found out who’s killing his demons, okay?”

Vas shook his head and I ground my teeth, reaching into my back pocket for my phone.

I found Samael’s number and waited while it rang.

“Call off your bodyguard,” I ordered when he answered. Yes, I was much braver when I couldn’t actually see the scary demon. Sue me.

“He’s there to keep you safe.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the way Vas stared at me like I was some kind of endangered species he’d never seen before. “Agaliarept almost died, and you’re going to send this guy with me? No offense, but he looks like a puppy.”

Vas shook his head at me, but he didn’t seem offended. If anything, he seemed even more amused. That relaxed amusement meant he had nothing to prove, and I’d taken one look at his face and underestimated him. I filed that away to think about later.

“Agaliarept was unprepared for you to be targeted. Vassago has some of the best shields I’ve ever seen— something you need. Or have you forgotten?”

I scowled. “Look, I appreciate the thought, but I work best alone. I don’t want to have to worry about anyone else—”

“It’s happening. I expect you at my tower at five pm for your first ward lesson.”

This day sucked.

I opened my mouth to argue some more, but Samael’s tone changed to a low purr. “I missed my pillow last night.”

My cheeks heated as Vas’s eyes widened. Demons had superior hearing.

Samael’s bed had been overloaded with pillows. He was just messing with me.

When in doubt, go on the offensive.

“It’s mine now,” I said. “It’s the least you can do for all the crap you’ve put me through over the past week.”

He laughed, and I struggled to reconcile his teasing tone with the *you will do what I say or I will kill you* voice from a few moments ago.

“You don’t need my pillow to be reminded of me. All you need to do is let me know when you’re ready to come to my bed.”

I gaped, speechless. Distantly, I realized the demon was still talking.

“Did you do filthy things with my pillow, little witch? Did you think of me?”

I spluttered. “Absolutely not. Your pillow is more comfortable than mine. The end.”

I ended the call and barely resisted throwing my phone as I stalked down Selina’s steps.

Vas fell into step beside me. “Did you seriously just hang up on Samael?”

I glanced at him. “He deserved it.” And once I cooled down, I’d replay that conversation in my head and figure out how he got me mad enough to forget the reason I called him in the first place.

I sighed. “I really appreciate that you’re willing to put your ass on the line, but I really don’t want your death on my conscience.”

Vas narrowed his eyes at me and I finally figured out why he seemed so familiar. “You’re related to Agaliarept,” I blurted out. “His son?”

“Nephew. And he still hasn’t woken up. So believe me when I say I’m just as motivated as you are.”

I frowned at him, but the moment he’d talked vengeance, he’d begun speaking my language.

“Fine,” I said. “But don’t get in my way.”

He grinned at me. God, I hoped he didn’t end up dead.

“Where are we going?”

I opened my car door and gestured for him to get in. “We need to see a fae about a knife.”

Vas was quiet as we drove, seemingly content to stare out the window, deep in thought.

The fae enjoyed the finer things in life. While lesser fae like Gary tended to work 9-5 jobs, high fae were typically powerful enough that they’d built up a sickening amount of wealth over their long lives.

In Durham, most of the high fae lived in Hope Valley, where stately mansions jostled for space amongst new, modern monstrosities. Thankfully, I wouldn’t need to go out to the valley since the light fae had an office in the center of Durham, close to Samael’s tower. I glanced at Vas as we climbed the steps, but he seemed content to let me lead the way, his expression carefully neutral.

The light fae representative’s building had been decorated in gold and white. The carpet was so thick I wished I could take off my shoes and let my

feet sink into it, and a receptionist sat behind a long marble counter. To the left, a small sitting area waited, the white armchairs huddled around a gold table.

The receptionist gave me a bored look. I gave her my best hard stare back.

“I need to speak to whoever is in charge.”

She attempted to hide her sneer behind her fake smile. Her eyelashes were so long they almost touched her eyebrows, her eyes so bright they looked neon. I suppressed the urge to advise her to tone down the glamor.

“You’ll need an appointment,” she said. “Mariam doesn’t have anything available until next week.”

I held up my arm. As much as I hated the stupid mark, I may as well use it.

“This says she’ll be able to fit me in. Now. I’m investigating for Samael, and he’s interested in a fast resolution.”

Those long eyelashes fluttered, and a hint of fear entered her eyes as she stared at the gold mark on my arm. “Take a seat,” she said, the sneer gone. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I nodded and she closed her eyes, likely communicating with her boss. Was leaned against the wall as I sat in one of the padded, white chairs.

“Vassago,” I clicked my fingers as it came to me. “Known for discovering a woman’s deepest secret, finding lost things, and foretelling the past, present, and future.”

He gave me a satisfied grin, and there was nothing innocent in it.

“That’s right.”

I checked my shields.

“I can’t read your secrets, so feel free to tone down the fear,” he told me, something like disappointment flashing across his face. I couldn’t be sure if it was disappointment at my fear or the fact that my secrets were mine alone.

“Did you... learn anything about the murders?”

He shook his head silently and I opened my mouth to press him further, but he nodded toward the long hall to our left. A woman was stalking toward us, her heels sinking into the carpet. A wide smile was pasted on her face, but beneath the glamor she could have been glowering at me, and I’d never know.

There were many reasons why I stayed away from the fae.

I got to my feet and held out my hand.

“Danica Amana,” I said, and the scent of saltwater hit me as the fae shook my hand. I’d bet she was some kind of water fae.

She released my hand and glanced at Vas, who nodded at her, pushing himself off the wall.

“I’m Mariam,” she said. Like demons, most of the fae didn’t have last names. Mariam was also not her real name—the fae didn’t share their true names with anyone.

“Nice to meet you. Do you have somewhere we can talk for a few minutes?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

We made our way down the hall, Mariam practically sprinted in her six-inch heels. I took the opportunity to examine her as we walked toward an elevator.

The fae was taller than me, with a wealth of curly blonde hair that fell almost to her butt. She wore a snug green dress that managed to flatter her figure while still remaining office-appropriate.

I gazed ruefully down at my coffee-stained t-shirt, meeting Vas’ gaze as I glanced up. He grinned at me, his eyes dropping to the stain.

At least one of us was amused.

The elevator was tiny, and I had a sneaking suspicion it was to discourage demon visitors. Of course, if they truly wanted free reign of this building, they’d land on the roof, but without an invitation, that would likely be seen as an act of war.

Unlike his uncle, Vassago showed no discomfort as we squeezed into the elevator. The fae jumped, glancing at him, and he smirked at her.

“Apologies,” he said. “My wings are... big.”

He gave her an ‘ain’t-I-irresistible’ grin that implied it wasn’t the only thing about him that was big, and the fae sent him a flirtatious smile in return. Feathers brushed my neck as Vas slumped in the elevator, and I had a feeling he’d wrapped his wings around him like a cocoon. I pushed down the urge to ask him to show them to me.

Almost twenty-six years I’d gone without seeing demon wings, and now I was surrounded by them at every turn. It wasn’t surprising that I burned to see them.

Mariam’s office was roomy, with floor-to-ceiling windows which offered sweeping views of the city and allowed the sun to stream in. She gestured for us to sit in the plush chairs in front of her desk and as I turned, my shirt slid

up, revealing the Mistilteinn Dagger in my belt sheath. Mariam's eyes widened as she stared at the dagger's hilt. "Where did you get that?"

"I have Samael's permission to use it," I dodged the question, well aware that my trusty dagger would narc on me if I lied. I sat down and made sure the dagger was covered by my shirt. I didn't need to use it here. The high fae couldn't lie.

Disgust mixed with avarice in her eyes and I tilted my head. Her glamor had slipped, and she couldn't hide exactly how much she wanted to get her hands on my dagger. I'd bet she thought it should be returned to the fae.

Not if I had anything to do with it.

Next to me, Vas shifted, likely arranging his invisible wings around the back of the chair. I shifted my attention back to the fae.

"We just have a couple of questions for you regarding some recent murders," I said, and Mariam's eyes lit with interest.

"Murders?"

I nodded and gave her most of the details, leaving out the knife and the fact that it had pointed to either a fae or a witch.

"Both the light and dark fae kings are currently in a truce with the demons. None of their subjects would dare disobey them in this."

"The bodies had been sucked dry of all magic," I told her, and her brow furrowed.

"The dark fae could do that," she murmured. "But there would be no point. Fae create their own magic—stealing it from others would be useless to us."

She clamped her mouth shut and I gazed steadily at her. Like most paranormals, the fae kept their exact powers—and the way they worked—to themselves.

"Look, I'm not here to dig up dirt about your magic, or the way you use it. I'm just trying to find out if a fae could've killed those demons. It was a bad way to die," I said, and her eyes turned brighter.

"I'm sure it was," she said, nibbling at her lower lip. Finally, she sighed and leaned back in her desk chair.

"I can tell you for sure that the light fae couldn't have done it. Seelie power is too different from demon power, and they likely would've become poisoned in the process."

"And the unseelie?"

Her nose wrinkled and I almost rolled my eyes. Even amongst their own

race, most fae seemed to hold onto ancient grudges.

“The dark fae could do it. But there would be no point. It would take an incredibly powerful unseelie to be able to wield demon magic, and a fae that powerful would have no use for it. They could level this city with barely a thought.”

I shivered at the thought of that much power. No wonder most humans wanted laws in place to tamp down the paranormals’ powers. Mariam seemed to realize she’d freaked me out because she gave me a wide smile, which she also turned on Vas.

“The fae have no need to start a war with demons,” she said. “Many of us enjoy this world, and those that don’t have plenty of other worlds available to them. Besides, none would risk either of the fae kings’ wrath.”

She paled at the thought, and I nodded. “Any chance I can speak to the light fae king?” Mariam would be unlikely to be able to get me close to the dark fae king.

Mariam’s eyes widened in a way that suggested I’d asked to dance naked on her desk.

“Neither of the kings are residing in this world at the moment,” she said. “I will pass on your concerns.”

I pulled the picture out of my pocket, conscious of Vas’ curious gaze. “One more question if you don’t mind. Do you recognize this woman?”

She glanced at the photo and shook her head. “No. Should I?”

I sighed and slid it back into my pocket as she got to her feet— a clear indication that this meeting was over. Mariam’s eyes lingered on the slight bump of the dagger beneath my shirt.

“I wouldn’t get overconfident with that dagger,” she said silkily.

“What do you mean?”

“The high fae may not be able to lie, but we can bend the truth with our words,” she warned. “If we chose, we could wind a net of words around you, trapping you within them without speaking a single untruth. So could many of the other older creatures.”

I met Mariam’s eyes. The hint of a smile played around her mouth.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You have an ancient fae artifact in your possession, and you wield it with no understanding of what it can truly do.” Her eyes hardened. “Your ignorance will get you killed.”

With that warning, she gave us a bland smile and got to her feet. “Good

luck finding your murderer.”

We were dismissed. Vas was silent in the elevator on the way down to the lobby, and I stared at the numbers as they counted down the floors.

I may not know much about the dagger, but I knew it had some level of sentience. And it could replicate spells. That made it dangerous as hell. If I were smarter, I’d give the dagger back to Samael.

But I wasn’t going to give up my best tool in the search for my mom’s murderer. I’d just have to be *very* careful from now on. No more allowing the dagger to get me out of sticky situations.

“Where to now?” Vas asked as we got into my car.

I slammed the car door behind me and sighed.

Vas shifted in his seat. “What’s wrong?”

“If the fae aren’t responsible— and just because Mariam says they aren’t doesn’t mean they’re off my list of suspects— then we need to talk to the witches.”

“What’s wrong with the witches? Aren’t you a witch?”

“It’s... complicated.” But it had to be done.

It was a coven of determined witches who were to blame for the portals being opened in the first place. I couldn’t imagine a world without paranormals, but there’s no doubt that the coven was responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of millions of people.

The witches decided they were tired of the tiny ember of power they had access to and went searching for ways to increase that power. They followed the myths and scraped together enough power to wake a demigod.

Unsurprisingly, demigods don’t like to be woken. And they’re sleeping for a reason. Their power is tied to the portals between our worlds, and the moment one of them woke, those portals opened, the werewolves turned, and paranormals streamed through.

Covens of witches had been causing trouble ever since.

Beside me, Vassago’s wings rustled. Traveling in the enclosed box must be hell for him. “I can meet you there if you want to fly,” I mumbled, frowning at the road in front of me.

“That defeats the purpose,” he rumbled, amusement clear in his voice. “Bodyguard, remember?” He pushed the car seat back as far as it could go and arranged his wings in an attempt to get more comfortable.

I snarled at that, opening my mouth, and the gold mark on my arm chose that moment to begin tingling as if in warning.

I glowered at it and Vas barely suppressed a laugh. “It’s almost 5pm. Samael ordered me to make sure you visit the tower for your first ward lesson,” he said.

“I don’t have time. I need to go and do my real job— you know, that whole bounty hunting gig that pays my bills? And then I need to talk to the witches about the murders.”

Vas slid me a look. “This may be shocking to you, but Samael doesn’t care.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Fine. We don’t have time to go interrogate the witches. But I still need to follow up on the witchweed.”

I muttered under my breath as I pulled away from the curb. Vas was deep in thought, his brow furrowed as he shifted his wings uncomfortably and stared out the window.

As soon as his attention was elsewhere, I focused on the knot of tension in my chest. The problem was that not only was I terrified of the demon and resentful of the fact that I was currently his witch-lackey, but he also did something unusual to my stomach.

Something that felt suspiciously like butterflies. Flesh-eating butterflies that rampaged through my body.

I didn’t know exactly why Samael made everything feminine inside of me sit up and take notice. But it was likely something to do with the gold mark winding up my arm.

That was it. I’d always been wary of demons and resentful of the way they wielded their power. I wasn’t the type to fantasize about one of them. The bond was doing something to me.

My hands shook and my pulse pounded in my ears. I was going to teach Samael all about why he shouldn’t bond people against their will.

Wait until I learn how to use my fae powers, Samael. I’ll make you pay when you least expect it.

My mom had always been closed-lipped about my dad. She told me he was passing through Durham and they’d had a brief affair, but it never would’ve lasted. She never specifically said he was a human, but she’d implied it.

Why not just tell me what I was? Was she planning to tell me one day, but died before she could? And who would suppress my magic? Mom seemed like the obvious answer, but she’d always been... disappointed by

how little magic I had. While Evie was able to do basic spells from a young age, and had an instinct for magic that charmed and wowed everyone in her vicinity, I was the opposite.

For me, using my power had always felt like pulling teeth. When I couldn't even raise a ward, mom had shaken her head sadly. It was one of the few times she'd been disappointed in me.

And yet, she'd always made it clear that I was never to use my blood for magic. Was that because I was dark fae?

If I strained my memory, I could picture the fae man... could hear his gruff voice as he talked to my mom. I was so young that I must've only come up to his knees, and I remembered him ruffling my hair as I gazed up at him. I shivered. I knew nothing about the dark fae, other than the fact that on the power hierarchy, they were right up near the top.

I didn't *feel* like dark fae, but what would I know? My magic had been suppressed all these years. And it sure as hell felt dark when I attempted to use it.

"Danica?"

I jolted. I'd driven on autopilot, and the car was parked outside Beatrice's house.

"Sorry. Here, take some of this." I reached for the jar Gary had given me, and Vas narrowed his eyes at it.

"What is it?"

"Myrtle balm. It protects you from forget-me spells. I don't know if they work on demons, but let's not risk it."

I smeared some of the balm on my forehead, and Vas did the same, wrinkling his nose at the smell. I couldn't blame him.

"Okay. Let's go see what this witch has to say for herself."

DANICA



Beatrice lived in Trinity Heights, a few blocks from Tataka's apartment. I knocked on her door a few times, and her ward licked warningly at me. If I broke it, Beatrice would feel it, and she'd know someone was onto her. On the other hand, if she was cooking up forget-me spells, I needed to report her to the Mage Council ASAP.

Choices, choices.

"I'm going to break the ward," I told Vas. "She might have it booby trapped. "You should probably move back."

Unsurprisingly, Vas wasn't at all pleased by suggestion. His brows came together and his chin stuck out stubbornly. "Bodyguard," he rumbled.

I closed my eyes, searching for patience. "It's witch magic. You can't protect me from any tricks she's got up her sleeve, but if you don't get hit, you'll be around to help if things go wrong."

He stepped back and I tilted my head. "More."

Another step, and he stopped, the sharp angle of his chin making it clear that he had no intention of retreating any further. Fine.

I took one of my throwing knives and sliced my forearm, wincing at the sharp pain. Then I raised my hand, pressing it against Beatrice's ward. She was powerful. But if there was one thing I was good at when it came to magic, it was breaking wards. Likely because there was no true elegance to ward breaking. You simply had to pit your will against the ward-setter and see who came out on top.

Brute force for the win.

If I didn't have enough power to break it, I'd end up with one hell of a

headache, and I'd lose any element of surprise that we had. Beatrice would know we were onto her, and she'd immediately hide any evidence tying her to the witchweed.

I attempted to use my power with my shield up, but it was like brushing a feather against a steel door. After what Selina had told me, I knew I needed to practice, but now sure wasn't the time. I dropped my shield and the ward glowed in front of me— a translucent magenta which hung around the house and swirled as if alive.

Oh yes, Beatrice was powerful. But I'd broken Samael's ward just a few days ago. If I could break one of his, I could break this one too.

Beatrice's ward bit at me, as if unhappy that I was messing with it. I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and concentrated, pulling my own magic from where it was stored, far beneath my shield.

It came easier than it ever had, but it still felt like attempting to suck a thick shake through a straw. The effort gave me an instant headache, and I planted my feet, pushing harder.

POP

I fell forward, but Vas was there, reaching out to catch me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Now that the ward was gone, all that was left was some old-fashioned breaking and entering. I reached into my utility belt, pulling out my kit. Within a few minutes, the door swung open, and Vas was let out a low whistle.

"Remind me not to lock up anything important around you."

Beatrice's home had been ransacked. But if that had been the case, the ward wouldn't have been in place— whoever had broken in certainly wouldn't have bothered to set the ward behind them.

The power had been shut off, and I breathed through my mouth as the scent of rotting food assaulted my nose.

Her living room was small but homey, but clothes were strewn throughout, a half-packed suitcase lying open on her coffee table.

"Someone was in a hurry," I muttered. Behind me, Vas was rummaging through her kitchen.

"I don't know what witchweed looks like."

"It's a weed the color of eggplant," I said and left him to it, making my way into her bedroom.

Another suitcase, this one empty, but there was a pile of clothes on her bed, still attached to their hangers— as if she'd been meaning to pull them off and pack them. My witchweed-buying suspect was on the run.

“She knew we were coming for her,” Vas said, his gaze scanning the room.

“Yeah. I'm too late. I need to report this to the Mage Council. If someone's planning unsanctioned Forget-Me spells, they need to know.”

We spent another five minutes poking around, but shockingly, nothing jumped out at me and announced it was a clue.

By the time I was standing outside Samael's tower, I'd gone over a number of possibilities in my head. Someone had tipped Beatrice off, and Gary was my prime suspect. But it made no sense— the guilt he felt for selling witchweed had been written all over his craggy face.

Who else knew I was looking for the witch? I wracked my brain, but I just couldn't put it together.

Vas left me in the lobby. “I need to go take care of some business,” he said. “Good luck for your lesson.”

My stomach churned uneasily and the anxiety pissed me off. I squared my shoulders and stalked toward the elevator, where a demon was waiting for me. Recognition flashed through me at the white-blond hair tumbling over his shoulders, noting his ice-blue eyes. I'd seen this demon before— the night I stole the dagger from Samael.

“Witch,” he acknowledged.

“Demon,” I replied, striding past him into the elevator. He let out a snort and got in with me, pressing the button for the 75th floor.

“What's your name?”

“Bael.”

“I'm Danica.”

He smiled. “I know.” His eyes turned blurry and distant and I backed up against the wall of the elevator.

“Are you reading me?”

“The sight happens occasionally,” he shrugged. “I can't see anything around you except pain.”

Sounded about right.

A thought occurred to me and I reached for the knife I'd found in Tataka's apartment.

“Is there somewhere safe we can put this? It's important to whoever is

killing the demons, and this tower is more secure than my apartment building.”

Bael studied the knife, then my face. Finally, he nodded, pressing the button for the 18th floor.

The elevator doors opened a few moments later, revealing a long, gray-on-gray corridor which led to a metal door. Bael gestured for me to follow him, and my shoes squeaked as we strode toward the door. Bael stopped, lowered his face to a scanner, and waited until it blinked green. The doors slid open, revealing another corridor and another door.

This time, I could feel the wards from several feet away. I automatically stopped, and Bael glanced at me, nodding at my arm. “Your bond to Samael will allow you to get through the second level of security.”

I ground my teeth a little at that, but trailed after him as he mouthed an incantation and the doors slid open. The ward felt achingly familiar. Samael’s magic.

The room was vast, silent, and filled with safes. From floor to ceiling, they gleamed silver, each of them guarded with personal wards.

Bael held out his hand for the knife and I gave it to him, watching as he strode over to the left side of the room.

“Safe 383 is empty. If you need to access it, just let me know.”

“Thanks.” I’d had Selina examine it and she’d taken multiple photos. If the witches wanted it badly enough that they’d almost killed me, this was the safest place for it.

Bael held his hand up, and the main ward surrounding the safes let him through. Then he placed the knife inside, shut the door, and closed his eyes, setting his own ward around the safe.

His power reminded me of Samael’s, but it was... different. Sharper. Once he was done, I followed him back through the metal doors and to the elevator. A few moments later, the elevator opened to a floor I’d never seen before. “Gym is that way,” Bael pointed to a corridor on our right. “Sauna, steam room, basketball court...”

I blinked at the thought of the demons playing basketball.

“No wings,” he said, and I poked at my shields, ensuring they were tight. “We like the challenge.”

I’d pay to see a bunch of demons running around and fighting over a ball while they fought not to get their wings tangled. I’d pay good money to see that.

I followed him down another hall to the left, until he pulled open a door. The breath left my lungs as Samael's eyes met mine.

He was standing next to the window, dressed down in a black sweater and gray sweatpants. I forced my eyes up from the bulge that proved he was a lefty. His eyes stayed on my face, and I forced myself to walk closer.

"How do you fit your sweater around your wings?"

His mouth quirked. "You're a witch in my lair and *that's* what you want to know?"

I squirmed. "Just curious."

Samael nodded at Bael who turned and strode out, shutting the door behind him.

"Perhaps one day, if you're a *very good* little witch, I'll show you."

I rolled my eyes at that. The sooner I had this stupid mark removed, the sooner I'd no longer have to spend any time with the huge, lethal pain in my butt.

Samael sat down on a gray sofa and gestured for me to take a seat on the padded armchair in front of him. "Okay," I said as I sat. "What do I do?" As irritated as I was at Samael's high-handedness, I wasn't an idiot. If he could teach me to ward, maybe two weeks as his lackey would be worth it.

"Close your eyes."

On the other hand...

He smiled at me. His teeth were very sharp and very white.

I *loathed* being vulnerable in any way in front of this demon.

"If I wanted to hurt you, you wouldn't see it coming, witchling. Close your eyes."

I ground my teeth but managed to find my lady balls and complied. Something about closing my eyes while I was in the same room as him felt oddly... intimate. I didn't know if it was the bond, or just the sheer dominant energy the demon exuded, but I could still *see* him in my mind's eye. And he hadn't moved.

"Interesting," he said, and I opened my eyes.

"What's interesting?"

"Close your eyes."

I blew out a breath but shut them again.

"Take your mind back to the attack," he instructed. "Tell me what happened in as much detail as you can."

I ran through the attack, shivering as I got to the part where Agaliarept

was lying almost dead on the ground.

“Hand over the knife, witch, and we’ll let you live.”

“I hadn’t known which knife they were talking about,” I admitted, and Samael hummed. “I thought they meant the Mistilteinn Dagger.”

“What happened next?”

I forced my pulse to slow down, taking deep breaths.

“Mine,” I slurred as my vision dimmed. “Dead body.”

“We will take it from your dead body, thank you.” That creepy laugh again. “But it’s not yours, is it?”

The knife from the apartment. I’d shoved it in the sheath in my boot and forgotten about it.

“Go fuck yourself.”

The voice laughed again and I realized it was a woman. “Kill the demon,” she ordered. “He will want the witch.”

The world was getting soft around the edges. Distantly, I knew the lesser demons were gathering to charge us, and I fought to get to my feet.

I made it as far as my knees, barely managing to turn my head as six or seven lesser demons approached.

“Stop,” Samael ordered, and I froze. “Keep your eyes closed. Now reach deep inside. What were you feeling?”

My hands were wet with blood from attempting to shove Agaliarept’s intestines back inside him. Demons could heal incredible damage, but he was unconscious and they were approaching and we’d both been poisoned...

“Panic,” I admitted. “We were outnumbered. Agaliarept was down, and we’d barely killed the hellhound. The voice said they were going to kill Agaliarept and ordered someone to take me to *him*.”

“Him who?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and Samael moved on.

“What did you feel when you knew Agaliarept was going to die?”

The night sky lit up with a purple-gold light and I gasped at its beauty. It shimmered and danced, trapping us inside, protecting us from the demons.

My hands shook with relief. Help was here. The lesser demons ran into the ward, screaming in frustration as their prey was stolen from them. I crouched over Agaliarept, baring my teeth.

If he could set this ward, the least I could do was keep his body safe while it attempted to heal.

It was embarrassing to admit, considering how much more powerful the

high demons were than me. But if I wanted to get out of here and back to work, I needed to play by Samael's rules.

"Protectiveness," I sighed. "And rage. I thought Agaliarept set the ward and I just wanted us both to stay alive until help arrived."

I'd known Samael would come, I realized. I didn't know anything about him, other than he was a scary son of a bitch, but I'd somehow known that if we could just stay alive for long enough, he'd arrive and keep his second from bleeding out. I shoved that thought down deep where I could examine it later.

"Interesting," Samael said again, and I fought to keep my eyes closed. "Since your magic is mostly instinctive, the best way to recreate that ward is for you to feel those same feelings. Take yourself back to that moment and imagine yourself there again. Feel the vibrations of fear in your body. Now imagine a shield against that fear."

I tried. I must've looked constipated as I squeezed my eyes shut and attempted to raise the ward once more.

I attempted it over and over again, until Samael finally told me to open my eyes.

"It's not working," I said, as if he hadn't been watching my futile attempts for the past hour. "Are you sure that ward was mine?"

The corner of one side of his mouth quirked up. He was completely unruffled, as if he had all the time in the world. I guess with his lifespan, he did. "Yes I'm sure, bounty hunter. You're tired. You will return tomorrow afternoon for another lesson."

I gaped at him. "Are you kidding me? How am I supposed to solve these murders and keep my real job if you're stealing multiple hours out of my day?"

The demon stared at me and raised one eyebrow, as if asking whether I'd like to rephrase that question.

I got to my feet. "Screw you."

He stood, and I cursed myself for the way my gaze clung to his body. The demon seemed deep in thought, and whatever he was thinking was unlikely to be good for me. I licked my lips nervously and his gaze turned predatory. He gave me a very slow, very male smile, and I froze.

"You have an attitude problem, little witch."

I glowered at him, frustration coursing through every inch of my body. "You have an attitude problem."

Unsurprisingly, he didn't reply to that striking example of maturity. Instead, he simply studied me, waiting for me to fall in line.

I spun on my heel, striding toward the door.

"Enjoy my pillow." His words sent a flush through my whole body, and I knew exactly how he wanted me to *enjoy* his pillow.

"Eat shit, demon." Ignoring the rumble of his laugh, I stalked out.

I should go home. I sure as hell needed the sleep. But after the way I'd just regressed to the maturity of a kindergartener in front of the demon, I needed a drink. I was ninety percent sure one of Samael's demons was following me, but since I couldn't see them, I ignored them.

I shoved my way through the crowd until I was pressed up against the bar. A succubus chose that moment to vacate the stool next to me, her long-lidded purple eyes focused on a group of light fae males who had just walked in. I narrowed my eyes at her as I slid onto the empty stool and she ignored me, squaring her shoulders, curling her red lips and flicking her long black hair over one shoulder. Her hips swayed enticingly as she walked toward the seelie.

Succubi weren't exactly lesser demons, but they weren't high demons either. Like many demons, they had enough power to travel through the portals without being summoned, but like incubi, they gained their power solely through sex.

I turned away and waited for Mere as she chatted with one of her regulars down the other end of the bar.

Another bartender had arrived and was tying an apron around her slim waist. Either human or witch, she was too far away for me to tell.

"I see you hired some more help," I said as Meredith approached, and she smiled. "I did. I can finally afford it, although it's still tight. If I'd known how bad my dad had screwed up the books for this bar, I would've let the creditors take it," she said and I grinned at her.

"Sure you would've." Anyone who wanted to take this bar from Mere would have to pry the deed out of her cold, dead hands.

She winked at me and poured a vodka soda, handing it to me. "You look like you need this."

"You have no idea."

"I've heard rumors. Samael?"

I nodded, scanned the vicinity, and slid my gold-decorated hand onto the bar.

“Wow. It’d be beautiful if it wasn’t so deadly.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Be careful,” Meredith warned. “If there’s one thing I know about demons, it’s that they’re as territorial as they are unpredictable. Especially *that* demon.”

“Yeah. Honestly, the only thing getting me through is the thought that if I solve the murders, I can break this bond by the end of next week.”

“Good luck,” she topped up my drink and turned away to serve a female goblin who was tapping her long claws on the bar impatiently.

“Danica?”

I turned at the familiar voice, my mouth dropping open.

“Harriette?”

The light fae laughed, her eyes bright, and I took her in. Harriette had been good to my mother right before we left Durham. She’d taken us in for a night and spent hours speaking with my mom in hushed voices, handing her a stack of cash when we left.

She stumbled slightly and her grin widened. “Apologies, I’m here celebrating with some friends— one of them just got a promotion. Wow, it’s been so long, and you’re so grown up.” She blinked furiously, as if holding back tears as she scanned me. “You look like her, you know.”

I disagreed. My sister looked like my mother. I looked like the father I’d never met.

Harriette smiled. “Your eyes,” she said. “You have your mother’s eyes. Not the color, but the shape. Tell me everything,” she instructed. “Are you married? Charlotte always dreamed of watching her girls walk down the aisle.”

I shook my head and attempted a smile. “Single and ready to mingle,” I joked lamely, and she shook her head.

“You girls today. How’s your sister?”

The smile froze on my face. “She’s good.” I assumed she was, anyway. She sure as hell wanted nothing to do with me.

Harriette blinked and swayed slightly on her feet, obviously intoxicated enough that she couldn’t tell exactly how much I wanted to get out of there.

“Let me get your number,” she said. “We should catch up.”

She waved her hand and her phone appeared as I rattled the numbers off automatically.

“I’ll call you,” she said. “We can do lunch. Your mother would’ve

wanted me to keep an eye on you. I left town shortly after you did and recently returned—it's fate telling us we need to be friends."

I was no demon, but even I could tell that Harriette stunk of guilt. It wafted from her in waves, evident in the hunch of her shoulders and her inability to meet my eyes without immediately glancing away. The question? What kind of guilt was it?

There's the guilt that's normal when someone you care about dies. The little voice in your head that insists if you'd just called them at that exact moment, they wouldn't have gotten into their car and died in a car accident. It's the guilt that whispers in your ear that maybe if you'd been a better friend, sister, daughter, they'd still be here.

Then, there's the other kind of guilt. The guilt that chokes you when you're directly responsible for another person's death. When you *know* there was something you could have done to prevent their death. Or, when something you did caused that death in the first place.

Something about the frantic look in Harriette's eyes made me want to investigate exactly what she'd been doing for the past few years and why she left Durham when we did.

"Take my card too," she pressed it into my hand. Then she froze.

"What's this?"

She knew what it was, and I stayed silent while she filled in her own blanks. "A demon bond?" she inhaled and choked, speechless.

"It's not what you think."

"You didn't bond with a demon?"

"Fine, it's exactly what you think." And I wasn't going to justify myself to a woman who hadn't been in my life for over a decade.

A tear rolled down her cheek and my chest clenched until she opened her mouth. "Your mother would be so disappointed."

High fae couldn't lie. Her words stabbed into my gut and *twisted*.

Because she was right. I'd always promised my mom I wouldn't go near the demons. And twenty-five years I'd kept that promise—only getting close enough to haul them into the Mage Council.

My eyes burned but I wouldn't let her see me cry.

"My mother is dead, and you know nothing about my life. Nice seeing you, Harriette. Maybe we can catch up again in ten years."

I put my drink down on the nearest table and pushed past her, ignoring her as she called my name. Then I drove home, pretending not to see the

shadow of wings on the road in front of me the whole way.

SAMAEL



The little witch wasn't in a good mood the next afternoon, and I couldn't help the twitch of my lips as she shot me a dark look and stalked to the same chair she sat in last night.

"Well?" she waved her hand at the sofa in front of her. "Can we get on with this? Things to do, murderers to catch, you know how it is."

I stared at her. I didn't *think* the witch had a death wish. She'd certainly seemed cowed when I first bonded her, but even then, she'd dared to *bargain* with me. Perhaps that was what had drawn my interest after the boredom of the past century.

Danica thought she could sit here, make a pitiful attempt at a ward to placate me, and return to her busy schedule. She frowned at my silence, and shifted in her seat, obviously disconcerted.

I held her gaze. "I've just been notified that someone has been hunting lesser demons and slaughtering them without permission. You wouldn't know who would do such a thing, would you?"

"That's illegal. All kills have to be either sanctioned or in self-defense." Interest flickered in her eyes. "Were they killed with an arrow?"

"No. They were tortured."

The thought made me want to let my fire free to burn this world. *My* people. They may be lesser demons, brought here by stupid humans who thought they could control them, but they were still *my* people.

I pushed the thought away and strode to her. "Hold out your hand."

Danica gritted her teeth at my order but after a moment she complied. She'd given me her left hand, and I stroked a finger down my bond, admiring

the intricate gold that curled along her skin.

Mine.

“What are you doing with that?” The little witch attempted to pull her hand from mine as I pulled a small knife from my pocket.

“You were bleeding when you created the ward. You were also bleeding when you broke *my* ward at my club,” I said, ignoring her struggles. The witch kicked out at me and I paused, staring down at her face.

She glowered up at me but after a moment where she struggled with herself, she stilled, allowing me to cut her palm. The strangest feeling of protectiveness welled in my chest at the sight of her blood and I forced it down. The little witch was vicious in a fight, with a healthy survival instinct. But if she gained control of her wards, she would be much safer— meaning she would be more likely to live long enough to discover exactly who dared to murder my demons.

“Now,” I said, taking my seat as blood welled in her cupped palm. “Go back to the moment you raised your ward. Recreate those feelings.”

She sighed but complied, obviously motivated to complete the task and get back to work. Her face screwed up in a way that made my lips want to curl into a grin for the first time in decades. “You’re trying too hard.”

She growled but her face went blank— except for a slight crease between her brows.

“Feel the fear,” I instructed. “Feel the protectiveness. Now *visualize* your ward. Remember the colors, the feeling of it between you and danger. Stretch like a butterfly escaping a cocoon.”

The slightest hint of purple-gold magic spilled from her chest, pushing toward me. It slid past my body and I raised my eyebrow. The little witch had encompassed me within her ward instead of warding against me.

“Strengthen it,” I ordered her, but she was panting, her face pale. Whoever had suppressed her magic had done such a good job that accessing it seemed almost impossible for her. Retribution made my hands fist. *Why* would someone magically neuter the little witch?

“More,” I demanded, and she strained in an attempt to boost the ward. I knew witch magic, and this wasn’t it. Whoever the little witch’s father was, his magic had mixed with her mother’s, creating something unique.

Finding out who he was had just become my next task.

Danica opened her eyes, wonder flashing across her face as she took in the ward, even though it was a colorless shadow compared to what she was

likely truly capable of.

“That’s really... mine?”

“Yes.”

I reached out a hand and stroked the ward, feeling it almost snap against my tendril of power.

“You’re not trying hard enough.”

She gaped at me, and I fought not to lean down and take her mouth with mine.

“Are you serious right now?”

I would push this woman until she was the best she could be, even if she fought me the entire way. Even if I had to drag her through hell to watch her rise like a phoenix on the other side. I didn’t know where the urge came from, but I was done suppressing it. I pushed harder and snapped her ward, ignoring her curse at the headache that would be assaulting her.

“If you’re incapacitated whenever someone breaks your ward, you’ll be a sitting duck for anyone more powerful than you.”

She got to her feet, her face pale, and I gestured at Vassago who was lounging in the window seat. He nodded, turning away to find the healer.

“Thanks for the advice,” the little witch said, sarcasm heavy in her voice. She winced as she turned to leave and I reached out, catching her wrist.

“The healer is on the way.”

She attempted to shake me off. “I don’t need your healer.”

“Regardless of what you *think* you need, you will accept my help with grace and dignity.”

Her eyes widened and my lips wanted to curl once more. I couldn’t resist poking at the little witch, if only to watch her attempt to control her indignant fury.

I was centuries old, and yet I found myself needing to know how this little halfling would react in any given situation. The thought was... uncomfortable, and I studied the witch as she sneered at me and pulled her wrist from my grasp, pacing to the window where she stared out at the city below her as she waited.

Vassago reappeared in the doorway with a nod. His gaze found the little witch, as if checking she was still safe, and I tamped down the fury that burned through me at the presumption.

The fae male was with him and I nodded at him as the witch turned back, her green eyes narrowing on his pointed ears.

“You’re fae.”

“I am. My name is Eldan, and you must be Danica. I’ve only ever seen you unconscious.”

Her eyes widened at that, and the fae shifted on his feet awkwardly. Danica chuckled at this nervousness, the sound burrowing its way deep into my chest until my claws extended, itching to rend the fae in two for being the first to make her laugh.

When would she be amused with you? When you were bonding her into servitude? Maybe when you threatened her life and the life of her friend? Or perhaps when you gave her the beginnings of a migraine from breaking her ward?

“You look like you’re in pain,” Eldan said, and the witch smiled at him. The male was light-fae, with white-blond hair, a slender build, and a soothing countenance. He would never think of bonding a woman against her will. Would never itch to dominate her in *every* way.

And if I ripped his head off his shoulders, my alliance with the seelie king was dead.

“I’m okay,” Danica said, her eyes flicking to me. She paled at whatever she saw on my face and I mentally reached for her at the end of our bond. Her anxiety radiated through that bond and it made me... restless.

Her stubborn, sharp little chin jutted out, and the anxiety shifted to... determination. I had no doubt that the witch was planning her vengeance against me for what she undoubtedly considered my high-handedness.

Pleased with her shift from fear to retribution, I strode out the door.

Danica

“So,” Vas said as we walked out of the tower. “Where to now?”

After Samael broke my ward, I’d been sure I’d need to go home, take some painkillers and sleep off the headache. I’d never admit it to the demon, but Eldan had made me feel like a new woman. Other than the bone-deep weariness that came with healing, of course.

I lifted my face, basking in the way the sun heated my skin. “I got a text

from the Mage Council. Albert wants to see me.”

Vas looked like he was trying very hard not to roll his eyes. Most demons didn't think highly of the mages, but Vas seemed to have a real axe to grind. We crossed the street to where my car was parked. Vas narrowed his eyes on the car and heaved a sigh.

I heroically held back a smirk. “Why don't you fly above me and I'll meet you there?” He eyed me and I gave him squinty eyes. “You did it last night.”

The demon grinned at me. “I wondered if you'd notice that.” He sighed. “Okay, I'll fly above you. But only under the condition that you never get out of your car until I've landed next to it.”

It was a compromise I could live with. “Fine. One more thing. I need you to wait outside the Mage Council. I'm getting enough shit over my short-term working relationship with Samael. If I walk in with a demon, my reputation is dead. No offense.”

He squared his shoulders and his wings rustled. A stray black feather dropped to the ground and I barely suppressed the urge to pick it up.

“The mages should be *honored* if a demon chooses to visit their hovel,” he hissed.

Wow. Obviously I'd hit a nerve. “I understand the mages are only operating in this world with the demons' permission,” I said carefully. “But you'll frighten my colleagues, and frightened people lash out. And since *you're* so terrifying, they'll lash out at me. Come on Vas. Do me a solid here.”

He examined me, his eyes frosty. Vas was so laid back most of the time it was easy to forget how dangerous he was. “Fine.” He shot up into the sky and my mouth dropped open as he disappeared.

Another feather floated to the ground and I glanced around, checking the coast was clear before I crouched and picked it up. Vas' feather was a dark, glossy black, there were no words for how soft it was, yet it was also strong, and when I attempted to bend it, it felt like trying to snap a pencil.

I put the feather in the little cubby between my car seats. Finders keepers.

The Mage Council was only a couple of minutes away, back on East Main Street, and Vas kept his word, dropping down to walk me from my car to the door and then shooting back up into the sky.

The stares were just as bad as last time as I made my way through the lobby. It was definitely the right call to leave Vas outside. My insistence on

coming in alone may have offended the demon, but he didn't have to walk into this facility almost every day after my bond with Samael was broken. I did.

Albert's office was on the 9th floor. Unlike the 5th floor, where mages and bounty hunters took jobs, ribbed on each other, and ate in the small lunchroom, the 9th floor was eerily silent. Stepping off the elevator was like walking into a church.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, my eyes met the painted gaze of Colin Smith. The portrait was huge, presenting Colin as a man in his sixties or seventies with a patient, kind face, a slightly befuddled expression, and a soft chin. Before the portals opened, Colin Smith had been an ordinary human man in Guatemala doing volunteer work. When the witches had woken the demigod, he'd been close enough that the resulting influx of power had hit him. Hard.

He should've been dead. But instead, the influx of power had settled, allowing him to fight the lesser demons, fae, and werewolves who were on the rampage. When the demigod went back to sleep, the portals stayed open, and the once previously powerless man vowed to protect humans from the creatures that were pouring through the portals and laying waste to our world. Colin shared that power with ten others who were committed to protecting humanity. So began the Mage Council. No one knew exactly where the apprentice mages got their power from. They were spelled to never speak of it.

Colin's power gave him a remarkably long life for someone who was once human. But eventually he died, passing the mantel to his son, Gabriel, who was notoriously reclusive. Gabriel lived in Chicago, only communicating with the ten other members of the Mage Council located throughout the United States. Albert was one of those mages, in charge of furthering the Mage Council's interests throughout a large swathe of the East Coast.

Albert's receptionist ran a hand through her sleek bob as I approached her desk. "You can go right in," she said.

Albert's huge steel desk was littered with an array of books and papers. The rest of his office was so clean it was as if dust bunnies didn't dare take up residence on the leather-clad books squeezed into his bookcases or beneath the two high-backed grey chairs in front of the desk.

"Danica. Take a seat."

As a kid, I'd never been sent to the principal's office. Evie was the one who couldn't resist getting into trouble at elementary school, while I tended to keep my head down. If the teachers thought *I* had a problem with authority, they must've been in for a rude awakening when they had Evie in their class a few years later.

By the time we were old enough for high school, I was being dragged from one town to the next with mom. Did Evie continue sticking up for the bullied kids in high school? Was she a constant presence in detention, or did she learn to keep her mouth shut and her magic to herself?

"Danica?"

I jolted. "I apologize. What was that?"

Albert gave me a stern frown, his mustache trembling as he pursed his lips.

"I would like you to tell me about this... bond you have with the demon." His gaze fell to my arm, which was covered by another long-sleeved t-shirt.

I need to keep this short and concise, and stick to the facts.

"I went to Samael's club to speak with a demon—"

"Why?"

"I had information that he might know something about my mother's murder."

Albert frowned, disapproval written all over his face. I knew exactly how he felt about what he'd once referred to as my 'side project.'

The muscle next to my eye twitched. I'd never liked Albert. He was a pompous jackass who cared more about rules and appearances than the mages and bounty hunters who were actually on the streets protecting the residents of the Triangle. But I had to respect him. He may spend all his time sitting in his office while the five discipulus mages beneath him handled all training and job distribution, but Albert had done good things for Durham. When Mom and I left the city, the Mage Council was undergoing an upheaval, with no true leadership and infighting that spilled over into the streets. Today, it was a smoothly run machine.

I continued before he could say something I would be tempted to make him regret. "While I was there, the demon was killed."

"Who killed it?"

"I'm not sure. Someone fired an arrow. I was facing the demon." I thought back. "We were in an alcove off the main room, but there was a balcony across from us. The window was open, so someone must have fired

from outside.”

“Someone with wings.”

I shrugged. Albert would want to believe that, since it would mean only the demons or fae could be responsible. However, we both knew that there were plenty of spells that could give witches, mages, and even a magically null human the ability to fly for a short period of time.

“Samael made me a deal. Someone is killing high demons. He’d heard of me, knew I had a solid close rate on my cases, and gave me a chance to break the bond.”

Albert sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his rounded stomach. Unlike most paranormals, who practically *breathed* magic, mages kept their power carefully hidden away. He seemed like a human who was working a nine to five and would go home to his wife and three kids, eat a dinner, make some boring conversation, and go to sleep.

What he didn’t look like was a man with enough power to level this building. But as a council member trained by Gabriel himself, he could likely do it. The thought made the back of my neck itch.

“And how close are you to solving these incidents?”

I tilted my head. Of course the slaughter of demons was an ‘incident.’ Only people with mortal lifespans could be murdered. Albert likely thought demons were simply being put down. Like animals.

And when exactly had I started feeling differently?

“I have several leads,” I said. “I’ll be getting one of the arrows analyzed today, and I’ve spoken to both the fae and the werewolves.”

“So your next stop is the witches.”

“That’s right.” I didn’t tell him about the knife or Selina’s reading, which tied it to either the witches or the fae. If he decided to get the mages involved in a bid to use these murders to further his goals, it could risk my ability to solve the murders myself and break the demon bond. I wasn’t letting *anything* risk that. But I was walking a fine line. Ultimately, my loyalty was to the Mage Council.

“I want to be kept informed about every step of your investigation,” he leveled his watery blue eyes on me. “Are we clear?”

“Of course,” I lied. I may respect him, may even fear what the Mage Council would do to me if they thought I wasn’t being entirely truthful, but I feared the loss of my freedom more.

“There’s one more thing,” I said. “Someone’s buying witchweed in

massive quantities.”

Albert went very still. “Who?”

“A witch called Beatrice Phillips.” I told him everything I knew and he leaned back in his chair, gazing up at the ceiling in thought. Finally, he nodded.

“I will put a red alert out on her name. She’ll be brought in by the end of the week.” Albert pulled a stack of documents toward him in a clear indication that I was dismissed. I got to my feet and hightailed it out of his office and into the elevator before he could change his mind and question me further.

Keigan was waiting for me as soon as the elevators opened on the 5th floor.

“Danica,” he said, and I couldn’t help but smile as he held out his arm for me to take. I found his deep old-fashioned manners charming. Keigan had a way of smiling at you as if you were the only person who could ever possibly be worthy of such a smile. And when he talked to you, it was as if— for those few moments— no one else in the world existed. With my hand clamped around Keigan’s arm, I was able to ignore the sneers directed at me from almost everyone else.

“Tell me, Dani, how is your investigation going?”

No one else was allowed to call me Dani, and Keigan knew it. I laughed and gestured for him to follow me into an empty meeting room. He watched me as I paced from one end of the room to the other, giving him the highlights of everything that had happened so far.

He stroked his short beard, his brown eyes thoughtful. “You’ll be visiting the witches.”

“Yeah.”

Keigan’s eyes turned sad and I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “It’s okay,” I assured him. “I can take anything they hand out.”

“Of course you can.” His smile was gentle, but I had a feeling he could see right through my tough talk. I shifted on my feet. Vas was waiting for me, and I’d feel like a dick if I left him outside in the heat for much longer.

“I need to get back to work,” I said, and Keigan nodded.

“Good luck, Danica.”

I left him deep in thought in the meeting room and took the stairs down to the lunchroom, sliding between mages and bounty hunters who appeared very unimpressed to see me. I darted toward the counter, swooped up a cookie,

and wrapped it in a paper towel.

Moments later, I slid into the elevator as the doors began to close, ignoring the scowl a mercenary named Rose sent me.

“You know my dad was killed by a demon?” Rose asked, her hand slipping down to the knife on her thigh.

I tensed. I’d bet she was considering taking that knife and driving it into my gut. If I was in her shoes, I’d be doing the same. But she wouldn’t come out on top. She had a better reach, but I was faster. Her long arms would only hinder her in this elevator.

“I did know that. I’m sorry for your loss.”

She sneered at me. “No you’re not. If you were sorry, you wouldn’t be bonded to the most powerful demon on the East Coast.”

I was actually relatively sure Samael was the most powerful demon in the country, if not the world, but I didn’t mention that.

“My little situation has nothing to do with how I feel about demons,” I said as the elevator continued down.

“Oh yeah? Then why is a demon standing outside this facility, looking like he’s one bad moment away from slaughtering everyone inside?”

“I made him wait. He’s pissy about it.”

“You’re going to get what’s coming to you, Danica. My father—”

Enough. “Your father summoned a lesser demon because he wanted it to kill his business associate. He didn’t word his orders properly, which gave the demon all the wiggle room it needed to kill him and then slaughter countless innocents. You play stupid games, you win stupid prizes.”

She gaped at me and I shrugged as the elevators opened. I could *feel* how badly she wanted to stab me in the back as I walked into the lobby, but she managed to restrain herself. Rose wouldn’t come after me in public. She wasn’t an idiot. If she killed me, she’d do it somewhere quiet, where it couldn’t be traced back to her.

I gave the mercenary a finger wave and sauntered out of the elevator. I had too much to do to worry about her. If she wanted to rumble, she was welcome to get in line.

Screams and curses lit up the air and I rubbed at my pounding head as I walked through the facility’s lobby. A lesser demon was being dragged in for interrogation, his claws scratching along the stone floor as he fought against the chains binding him. Mages leapt forward to help pull him toward the elevator used for paranormal bounties, and I used the distraction to slip out of

the building without anyone else bothering me.

Vas was leaning against my car. His sunglasses hid his eyes, but his feet were planted, arms crossed, and pedestrians were giving him a wide berth.

Luckily, I'd prepared for this eventuality. I held up the cookie I'd snagged from the lunchroom on my way out of the building, unwrapping the paper towel around it. Keigan's assistant Martha liked to keep the lunchroom stocked with baked goodies.

"I'll give you a cookie if you lose the scowl," I said, holding it up.

Vas lowered his head so he could stare at me above his sunglasses.

"An hour," he said. "I've been waiting out here for an hour."

"It's a really good cookie." I broke a tiny chunk off and slipped it between my lips. Brown sugar, chocolate, and vanilla exploded in my mouth. Yum.

"Give me that."

I blinked. Vas acted so human that I occasionally forgot that he wasn't close to being human. The cookie was out of my fingers and in his before I could blink, and I stared at him. I'm not particularly strong—most paranormals could beat me in a fight. But I'm real fucking fast. Vas might be just as fast as me.

"Uh, just to be clear, the cookie doesn't mean I'm like... yours or anything."

He threw his head back and roared with laughter. A human woman dropped her phone and stared at him, while another walked into a pole. I gave them both a stare that suggested they keep walking.

"Don't fret, Danica. Unlike most demons, I've spent most of my life in this world. I'm not attached to the old traditions."

"Excellent. I *am* sorry about the wait." I heaved a sigh, glancing up at the sky. The sun would set soon, and I felt like a drained battery. Doing another drive by of Mary's house would have to wait until the morning.

"Let's continue this tomorrow," I said. Vas nodded. "I'll follow you home."

As soon as I walked into my apartment, Lia pounced. I scooped her up, fed her, and scrounged around the kitchen until I found a packet of ramen noodles and a banana.

Then I went to sleep and dreamed of black wings and silver eyes.

DANICA



*V*as was waiting for me when I left my apartment after lunch the next day. I'd spent the morning attempting searching online, in a fruitless effort to locate Mary and narrow down the arrows used to shoot my leads. I hadn't found anything helpful about either.

"Where to?" Vas asked.

"Do you sleep on my roof or something?"

He grinned. "Or something. What's our plan today?"

"I need to go back to the Mage Council. I need to research the witch I'm searching for, and I have a friend who I want to take a look at my arrow." I wished I'd been able to do it yesterday, but the library closed early, and when I'd asked if Cara was around, a sneering mage had told me she was out on 'important' business.

"Arrow?"

I filled Vas in on the asshole who was killing anyone who seemed to know anything connected to my mother's murder.

He frowned. "Someone thinks you're getting too close to something they want kept hidden. Have you told Samael about the first arrow? You haven't, have you?"

I stopped walking and my mouth fell open. Then I managed to pull myself together and narrowed my eyes warningly at the demon. "Look, Vas, this is going to shock you, so prepare yourself."

His dreamy eyes sharpened in interest. "What?"

I smiled sweetly. "Samael has nothing to do with my life, other than the fact that I'm temporarily working for him. I know demons can't help their

instincts with people they consider ‘theirs’, but that’s not my problem. In six days, I’ll never see the winged pain in my ass again.”

Vas gaped at me. Then he let out a strangled sound that seemed like a cross between a laugh and a gasp.

“Just tell yourself that, witch. Ignorance is bliss.”

I scowled at him and slammed the door of my car behind me, ignoring his chuckle.

This time, when I arrived at the facility, Vas didn’t complain, simply took his phone out of his pocket and leaned against my car. This seemed suspicious. I gave him a squinty-eyed look and he simply smiled at me.

I sidled up to him, peeked over his shoulder and almost choked as I got a glimpse of the bright pink app. “You’re on Portal?”

He flashed me a wicked smile. “Hey, a guy’s got needs.”

“Why’d you swipe left on that light fae? She was cute.”

“Would you like me to micromanage your dating life?”

“Fine. I’m going, I’m going.”

There were lines forming for all of the elevators, so I took the stairs to the 6th floor. The library was hushed, the books hundreds of years old. No one really read books anymore— everything was digital— but some of the books in this library were also from before the portals opened and during the decade of despair. If the wards ever failed and this building went up in flames, everyone who worked here was expected to get the books out. Even if it cost them their lives.

Humans, witches, demons and mages— all were paranoid about their libraries. But the Mages were some of the worst, and it was almost impossible to actually check a book out of this library. More than any time in history, information was power.

The shelves stood like pieces on a chessboard. They were packed with books, with barely enough room between them for two people to squeeze around each other. A librarian walked past with a stack of books floating in front of her and I stepped around her, heading toward the information desk.

“Hello, Danica.” The selkie smiled at me, stepping forward with a wince. I glanced down at the thick black manacle encircling her ankle, the obsidian chain dragging on the wooden floors. Thirty years after she’d first been imprisoned here, Mella still hadn’t earned her freedom. I’d once asked her what she did to end up here, but she’d been bespelled and was unable to talk about it. From the dark power that dripped from the manacle around her

ankle, someone was concerned about what would happen if she ever did.

Only the Mage Council had access to the Naud Chains. It was rumored that they'd traveled to another realm to find the unbreakable metal, forged the chains, and used them to *entice* the demigod to go back to sleep after the portals opened. I shuddered. I was several feet from the chains, and yet it already felt as if it was becoming more difficult to reach for my own power. The chains felt *hungry*.

"Hi Mella." Whatever she'd done to piss the Mage Council off must have been a doozy. It was rumored that she'd committed an unforgiveable betrayal. Instead of killing her, the Mage council had hidden her pelt, removing her ability to access her magic. The chains were just a symbol, as if she could ever forget that she was bound.

I ripped my gaze away from the chains. "I need anything you have available on a witch, please." I said, and Mella turned to her computer with a nod. I rattled off Mary's name and address, and Mella inputted the information, scanned the screen, and then disappeared into the office behind her desk.

She returned a few minutes later with a thin file in her hand. I leaned against her desk as she opened it, rifled through it, and then clicked a few buttons, printing off a few more pages which she added to the file.

Her shoulders hunched and I followed her gaze, glancing over my shoulder. Bruce was stalking toward us.

Not long after I'd first started working for the Mage Council, I'd quickly discovered that Bruce was only out for himself. The mage was happy to work with others as long as he got all the credit, but as soon as another mage or bounty hunter was recognized by the Mage Council, accidents happened when they were out in the field.

We all knew Bruce was behind those accidents, but he was always conveniently on the other side of town when shit went down. Nothing had ever been tied to him. There were five discipulus mages standing between him and a promotion, and Keigan was one of them. In order for Bruce to be promoted, one of those mages would have to either step down, or die.

I was keeping a very careful eye on Bruce.

"I need you to run a search for me," he snapped at Mella, ignoring me.

"Mella's busy running a search for me," I said sweetly. "You can wait your fucking turn."

His head moved slowly on his thick neck until he was glaring at me, his

beady eyes narrowed. Bruce had a face that only a mother could love, and he wrinkled his crooked nose as he stared at me.

I'd bet numerous people had punched him in that nose over the years. If he wasn't careful, I was going to be one of them.

"I don't listen to traitors and cunts," he said and Mella flinched.

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Mella. "Which one of us is which, do you think?" I turned back to the mage. "Still trying to prove you're a tough guy are you, Bruce?"

"I don't need to prove anything, you bitch." He turned his back on me and growled at Mella. "Hurry up."

"Wow," I murmured. "You must have a tiny penis."

He spun, fist poised in the air. I gave him a wide grin. "Do it," I urged. "See what happens."

Bruce glanced over his shoulder as a librarian approached, her mouth turned down in disapproval. The mage may enjoy throwing his weight around, but he was in her territory now.

"You're not worth it," he hissed, turning and stomping away.

"Thank you," Mella whispered. "But you shouldn't have annoyed him. Now he's going to be a jackass to you, too."

"He doesn't get to talk to anyone like that. You let me know if he bothers you again."

"Why do you care? I'm just a traitor," her lips twisted, her eyes sad. But beneath her obvious grief, rage burned.

"Hold on a second. Why do you get to be the traitor? You know what that makes me, right?" I winked at her shocked laugh. "Look. They're calling me a traitor too, but they don't know anything about my life. Or your life. I don't give a fuck what you did in your past. We've all done things we're not proud of."

Mella stared at me for long enough that it got a little creepy. Then she smiled, handing me the file. "This is everything I could find on your witch. It's not much I'm afraid."

Opening the file, I glanced down at the sheet of paper on top and sighed. It wasn't much at all.

"Thanks Mella."

She smiled. "Anytime. Be careful out there."

"You know it." I hurried out of the library and back down to Cara's office. She was leaning over a stack of paperwork, but she glanced up when I

arrived.

“Ahh, the woman of the hour. Everyone’s talking about you.”

I scowled and she laughed at me. “What can I do for you?”

“Someone keeps killing demons before they can answer my questions. They’re using arrows. I’ve got one of them with me if you have a minute to take a look?”

“Hand it over.”

The arrow was ridiculously light in my hand considering it had the power to take down a high demon. Cara’s face lit up as she examined it, and I took a seat in front of her desk, watching her.

Light brown hair that fell seamlessly into perfect waves, deep blue eyes, petite frame. Cara wouldn’t be out of place working in a fancy boutique. But I’d started working on these streets around the same time that Cara had left them and I’d still heard all about her reputation. She’d worked her way up from bounty hunter to apprentice mage, and her ultimate goal was to be the first female mage on the council.

Cara’s rise through the ranks had been unprecedented. And while I’d never seen her fight, I wouldn’t ever make the mistake of underestimating her.

“What can you tell me?” she asked. I took a deep breath and spilled my guts.

“It must have been dipped in some kind of poison for it to kill a high demon that easily. I was hoping you could analyze it.”

“Sure.” Cara smiled as she examined the arrow, her eyes inches from the black feathers. “Hello, gorgeous.”

I flipped my hair. “Hello, yourself.”

She laughed, but her gaze was still trained on the arrow. “Custom made, I’d say. Four blade. This is some kind of wood insert in here. Strange considering it adds nothing to the bolt. It was designed for accuracy.”

“Aren’t they all?”

She shook her head. “It’s a balancing act. Speed, accuracy, and power. This little beauty wasn’t made to take down anything bigger than a small lesser demon.”

I frowned. “The lesser demon was shorter, but probably twice my weight. The high demon was taller and lankier.”

Cara pushed herself away from her desk and rolled her chair along the wooden floor to the long table in the corner of her office.

“I’m testing for some of the most common poisons,” she said. “Some of these tests will take a while, so I’ll text you with the results.”

I didn’t want to leave the arrow. It was now the only lead I had. But I trusted Cara. “Thanks.”

Vas ignored me as I walked toward him. I’d kept him waiting again. And I’d forgotten to bring him a cookie.

“Sorry. I had to get some information on my missing witch.”

He kept his eyes on his phone. “Why, exactly are you hunting a witch? I thought the Mage Council was only interested in paranormals who came through the portals.”

“Failure to appear.” I scanned the file. “It’s ridic— Are you kidding me?”

“What?”

I raised my gaze from the file. “Her ‘crime’ would get her a slap on the wrist at sentencing. She was channeling too much power through her ward and didn’t calibrate it solely for paranormals. A couple of human teenagers tried to break into her house and got hurt. Their parents found out when they went to pick them up from the hospital and the incident was reported to the Mage Council.” I scowled. “If Mary had been sentenced, she would’ve gotten a fine, maybe some community service making healing spells at the human hospital.”

“So she over calibrated a ward, knocked out some punks planning to steal her shit, and now you’ve got to bring her in?”

“Yeah.”

Vas raised one eyebrow. “That seems like a waste of time considering your experience level.”

Damn right it was. I scowled, kicking at my front tire. “I pissed off the Council by getting bonded to Samael. Now they’re making an example of me with bullshit jobs.”

Vas’s face went cold and he slowly turned his head, staring at the facility with an expression of such wrath that goosebumps broke out on my arms.

“Anywayyyy,” I said quickly, “look at this.”

Vas pulled his gaze away from the building long enough to glance down at the piece of paper in my hands.

“That’s a lot of black.”

“It sure is.”

Mary’s name, date of birth, and address was printed on the top piece of paper in the thick file I held, along with her ‘crime,’ and the name of her

coven. Everything else had been scrawled out with thick black lines. Redacted.

According to the little information I had on the witch, she'd never been in trouble before. She was a member of a gray coven called Walker, named after Jessica Walker, who was the head witch. I made a mental note to talk to Jessica.

"This makes me a curious cat, for sure." I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed a number.

"I'm not talking to you." Steve said and hung up.

Vas raised an eyebrow at me and I shrugged. "He just needs a little moment."

I waited thirty seconds and called him back.

He huffed out a breath as he answered. "I'm serious Danica. I know what happened with Samael. You could've gotten me killed." He ended the connection and I sighed, leaning against my car.

"I don't blame him for being pissed," I told Vas. "I'd be pissed too."

"Who is Steve?"

"He's a friend. A friend who's incredibly gifted when it comes to electronics, hacking, and generally helping me when I need to get up to no good."

My phone rang and I smiled. Steve could never stay mad at me for long. Besides, if he knew what'd happened with Samael, he also knew that my stupid bond had saved his life.

"What do you want?" Steve's voice was carefully neutral and my smile widened. He was even more curious than I was.

"I'm hunting a witch and her file is useless. Any information that could be even remotely helpful has been removed. I need to know her history and any covens she's been a member of over the years."

He sighed. "Text me her name. This will be another favor you owe me. Don't think I'm not keeping track."

"You're a legend. Thank you."

"Enjoy your dinner tonight."

I frowned at Steve's laugh. "What?"

Steve hung up, still laughing, and I scowled. Vas grinned at me. "It's Monday."

"So what? Samael didn't make me go to his dinner last week."

"Dinner was canceled last week. Special circumstances."

I closed my eyes.
Shit.

DANICA



I had no intention of going to Samael's tower for dinner. Instead, I was going to take a long, hot shower, wash my hair, and eat Thai food in front of the TV while Lia slept on my stomach.

I ignored the smile playing around Vas's mouth as he watched me get into my car.

By the time I opened my apartment door, I was working on putting the day behind me, as I stripped off my clothes, dumping them in the laundry basket in my room. I walked into the bathroom and found Lia curled up in the sink.

"You know you're not supposed to be in there."

I reached for her, noting that her head was wet. The faucet needed to be fixed, and every now and again, a short stream of water dripped from it.

Lia loved it.

I placed the kitten on my bed, rolled a ball across my sheets for her to play with, and then left her alone while I started the shower.

My arm itched.

I scratched at it idly while I scrubbed my body. My shampoo smelled like vanilla and showering was one of the few moments in my day when I let my mind wander.

My arm began to tingle and I scowled down at it.

The demon clearly wasn't going to allow me to bail on his stupid Monday dinner.

I had plans, damnit. Samael had taken almost every minute of my time for

the past eight days. All I wanted was to veg out in front of the TV and stuff my face with Tom Yum and cashew chicken. Maybe I'd get really wild and open a bottle of wine.

I ground my teeth as the tingling worsened. Samael could fuck right off if he thought I was giving up my one free night to sit around a table and make small talk with demons who'd been doing his dirty work for centuries.

No fucking way.

The tingling turned to a dull ache as I stood wrapped in a towel and dried my hair. I slathered my body in moisturizer and opened the door.

I let out a sound somewhere between a scream and a squeal, slapping my hand over my mouth in mortification.

Vas grinned at me but his gaze dropped to the gold swirls on my arm and he immediately turned his back.

"As soon as I got back to the tower, Samael ordered me to come find you. I'm here to take you to dinner."

"How the fuck did you get into my apartment?"

"You should probably fire whoever has been doing your wards. I bet Samael would teach you how to set them yourself."

Don't kill the demon. Don't kill the demon.

Vas was standing facing my bed, and Lia chose that moment to pounce at his hand, sinking her sharp little teeth into one of his fingers. Vas stared down at her.

"My smallest feather is bigger than you, cat."

Lia didn't care. She let out her squeakiest meow— a clear demand for him to pet her, and I suppressed a grin as the demon gave in and scratched her behind the ears.

"You should get dressed," Vas said, his back still to me. "Samael isn't pleased when we're late."

"I'm not going."

Vas sighed. "Don't make this a thing. I'm tired."

"You're tired? I had plans tonight. Plans that didn't involve hanging out with demons."

"I'll try not to be offended by that," he said, his voice carefully neutral and it was my turn to sigh.

"Look, I just need one night off. One night to not think about demons and murder."

"We'd all like a night off. That's a privilege none of us gets until whoever

is murdering our people is found.”

And now I felt like a petulant brat.

“Me going to this dinner isn’t going to find the murderer any sooner.”

“The sooner you go, the sooner you can leave.”

I sighed. I knew when I was shoveling shit uphill.

“Fine,” I grumbled. He could make me go, but he couldn’t make me have a good attitude about it.

Vas laughed under his breath as Lia purred in his arms and I strode to my closet, grabbed the first dress I saw, and ducked back into the bathroom to change.

I threw on the bare minimum of makeup. Not because I wanted to impress Samael, but because I thought of it like a shield I could raise. At least that’s what I was telling myself as I stroked mascara over my lashes.

I opened the bathroom door in time to hear Vas let out a very un-masculine ‘yip’ as Lia sank her teeth into his thumb.

“Watch it, cat.”

I strapped on my knives, including the Mistilteinn Dagger. Maybe I’d get to interrogate a demon or two tonight. That’d make the experience worth it.

I’d chosen a plain black dress with spaghetti straps that swirled above my knees when I walked. I wasn’t planning to need to fight tonight, and if I had to, I’d be putting on quite the show, but at least it wouldn’t restrict my movements. I grabbed a pair of flat black boots and a small purse and nodded to Vas.

“Let’s go.”

Vas had flown to my apartment, and after a cramped elevator ride, we walked toward my car. I glanced around me at the night-darkened parking lot, soaking in the warm spring air as the steady thump of music leaked from the bars a few blocks away.

“You could fly me,” I suggested, and Vas raised one eyebrow as he shoved his hands in his pockets. He glanced up at the night sky and sighed.

“I believe Samael would very much prefer to be the one to introduce you to that pleasure,” he said, and I gaped at him.

He shrugged. “Your first time flying is an experience like no other.” The hint of a smile crossed his face and his eyes turned distant. “Something tells me that Samael has claimed all of your firsts.”

I glanced down at the gold stain on my forearm.

“That’s cute,” I said, stalking toward my car. If I didn’t already have

enough motivation to solve these murders and break the bond, that little tidbit would light a fire under my ass.

Both of us were silent on the way to the tower. Me, because I was seething, between panicking about the overly possessive demon I'd somehow become tied to, and Vas, because for some reason he'd decided not to fly, and was once again hunched in my passenger seat. His wings were probably around him in a way that couldn't be comfortable.

He shifted, a feather brushed my face, and I sneezed.

"Apologies."

My mood brightened slightly. If he didn't want to fly above me, I wasn't going to feel bad about his current predicament. At least I wasn't the only one having a shitter of a night.

To Vas' credit, he only cast one longing glance up at the roof of Samael's tower when we arrived. It must suck to have to use the elevator when escorting me. Especially since he could land on any of the numerous balconies jutting from the huge building. But at least Samael's elevator was built for wings, and Vas stepped inside without a word.

My phone beeped and I glanced at it. Cara.

No poison found on the bolt. Sorry :(

No poison? How the hell did that arrow take down a high demon then? Unless the arrow that killed Vercan was coated in something that the arrow that killed the lesser demon wasn't? I frowned. If only I'd been able to get my hands on the arrow in Vercan's body.

I wanted to call Cara back, but I couldn't do that until after I'd at least shown my face at Samael's table.

I sighed. "How many people attend these dinners?"

Vas shrugged. "It depends who's in town and who's away on business for Samael. But in general, anyone who is bonded to Samael is expected to attend."

I gaped at that. "You're bonded to him too?"

"Not the same way you are." He glanced down at my arm and his lips twitched. Glad to see someone was amused by my little situation. "Our bond stems from an oath we swore to Samael before we came through the portal."

"How many demons swore the oath?"

"Twenty."

"Huh?"

Vas smiled as the elevator doors opened. "There were four hundred and

forty-four high demons who pledged their allegiance. The oath is different.”

That was a lot of high demons. I opened my mouth to question him some more, but the elevator doors opened and we stepped off the elevator and into a spacious entryway.

The room held a long, rectangular table which spread almost wall-to-wall across the vast room. Vas was striding toward the table, his eyes lit with pleasure as he greeted a demon I hadn't met before.

I turned my eyes to the head of the table, where Samael was getting to his feet. Every molecule of my body seemed to jump to attention.

His silver eyes were dark as his gaze scanned my body, and I could practically see the magic wrapped around him like a blanket.

I attempted to focus on the way my feet sank into the soft carpet beneath my feet. On the mournful wail of a cello, played over a hidden sound system. I breathed in the scent of the cut flowers on the table next to me, along with the mouth-watering smells coming from the kitchen off the main room.

It was a lost cause. I couldn't divert my attention as Samael approached, and the closer he got, the harder my heart thumped in my chest. I instinctively took a step back when he was within touching distance, and he gave me a long, slow smile that told me he was noting my retreat... and the reason for it.

I scowled at him. My body's reaction to him was my business. No one else's. Not even his.

“You're just in time,” he said, taking my hand in his. I glanced around, allowing him to keep my hand for the moment. All eyes were currently on me, and I wasn't going to engage in—and lose—a power struggle with Samael in front of this crowd.

Eat and leave. That's all I had to do.

“This is Danica Amana,” Samael said to the room. “She is my newest bonded.”

All eyes dropped to my arm, and murmurs began almost immediately. I scanned the table, ignoring the faces of those staring at me in favor of checking out their arms. No one else had a gold design similar to mine.

“For now,” I muttered, and Samael's silver eyes went liquid.

“For now,” he said, although anyone could tell he was placating me.

The joke would be on him in just over a week when I solved his little mystery and boogied out of his life.

“Danica is helping with our investigation into the murders.”

“Not just murders,” a woman said, scanning me. From the disdain written all over her face, she wasn’t impressed with what she saw. “Word has spread, Samael. Everyone knows about the black smudges.”

Her hair was a glossy, merlot red. Her skin was as smooth as glass, without a flaw to be seen, and her bright blue eyes glittered as she examined me.

Samael simply nodded and held out a chair for me. It wasn’t until I sat down that I realized I was sitting on his right. From the sneer on the other woman’s face, she very much did not believe I deserved the privilege.

You’re welcome to it lady.

“We’ll talk about that after dinner, Lilith,” Samael said, and my mouth dropped open.

The demon’s expression softened into something closer to amusement. “Yes, I’m *that* Lilith,” she said to me. “Don’t believe everything you’ve heard.”

I smiled at that. “How did humans learn your names before you came through the portals? And how did they get the lore so wrong?”

“The portals were briefly open many times throughout the short history of this world. Before Lucifer’s paranoia, demons were free to come and go as they pleased— as long as they had enough power to travel through the portals without needing to be summoned. For the most part, we preferred the underworld.” Her eyes flicked to Samael. “Until we didn’t.”

I opened my mouth to question her further. Lucifer actually existed? But Samael was already moving on, introducing me to the other demons around the table.

There are some men who radiate sexuality without even trying. Samael was one of them. The demon I was introduced to next was another. He had bright red hair, green eyes, and a smile that made me think dirty, dirty thoughts. His name was Asmodeus. “It’s a pleasure,” he said.

Bael was here, and so was Sitri, but Agaliarept was still unconscious. Lilith I’d remember, since she was the only other woman here. On her right, a demon named Botis nodded at me, immediately resuming his conversation. Abaddon was next. He gave me a grin.

Samael glanced at me and rattled off the next names. “Sathanas, Mammon, Azazyel, and Belphegor.” I blinked at the last, and the demon gave me a shy smile. “Most people just call me Bel.”

The remaining names were a blur and I wished I could’ve taken notes. I’d

likely remember the names of thirty percent of these demons at best.

“I’m starving,” Lilith announced, just as the doors to the kitchen opened.

Samael sent me a sleepy, satisfied smile. “I hope you like Thai food.”

DANICA



I froze, my hand hovering in the air as I reached for my water. Mouthwatering scents were wafting toward me as waiters dressed in white began to walk out of the kitchen.

I stared down at the Tom Yum as it was placed in front of me. Then I raised my gaze to the demon.

He was still looking entirely too pleased with himself as he watched me, and I waited until the other demons began talking before I narrowed my eyes at him.

“How?” I demanded.

“Monday is the night you usually order Thai,” he said. “It was a simple matter to find your usual order. Although, my chefs have cooked plenty of other dishes if you’d like to try something new.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone here prefers a variety of food.”

“Why did you choose Thai?” I gritted out.

“You had plans to enjoy your usual takeout, and my wishes took priority,” he said, and I bit my tongue. His wishes didn’t take priority for *me*.

I wasn’t sure if it was a gesture that said he recognized how goddamned irritating both him and his stupid gold mark were, or if it was one more way for him to prove he knew everything about my life.

Sweet or stalkery. Maybe a little of both.

Samael was studying my face and he seemed satisfied by whatever he saw there. I lifted my spoon and tried some Tom Yum. Incredible. Damn him.

The demon practically dripped with male arrogance, so I chose to ignore him, focusing on my food. He merely turned to Bael, entering a spirited debate about fae politics.

The demon sitting next to me flicked me a glance as he tried his own food. His skin was a deep brown, his eyes hooded. When he smiled, he flashed dimples. “So you’re the witch I’ve heard so much about.”

“That’s me. You’re Romyel, right?”

“You got it. Tell me, how have you found working for Samael?”

I raised one eyebrow. “Working for him?” I glanced down at my arm and the demon followed the direction of my gaze. “Is that what this is?”

He tilted his head. “What would you call it?”

Slavery. I’d call it slavery.

His eyes sharpened. “As someone who was enslaved for centuries, I can tell you that Samael offers you a freedom few other demons would.”

Did he just read my mind? I poked at my mental shields but they were holding strong.

“Your face, witch. You’ll need to learn to school your expressions if you’re going to spend time with immortals.”

If I had it my way, I wouldn’t be spending any further time with them after next week.

Romyel smiled. “Are we really so bad?” He waved his hand at the table, where most of the demons were cracking up at something Samael had said. Lilith threw her head back and roared with laughter.

Samael was different here, surrounded by the friends he most trusted. I still had no idea what I was doing at this dinner, considering these people had clearly known each other for centuries.

“No,” I smiled. “No, you’re not.” They were like a family, I realized, and something deep in my chest ached. Samael chose that moment to lean close.

“Wine?” His voice was hushed and intimate. The was my favorite. I rolled my eyes and waved my hand toward my glass. His mouth twitched as he poured, and the table went silent as everyone watched him.

Watched him serve a human. I opened my mouth— to say... I don’t know what— but the servers chose that moment to take our empty bowls.

Huge platters of food were placed on the table in front of us and my stomach let out a howl.

Of course the demons heard it, their senses superior to mine in every way. Every head turned toward me, and my face flamed.

Vas laughed. “Better feed her boss.”

Oh hell no. Even I knew that little tidbit about demons. Which Vas was well aware of after our conversation about the cookie. Feeding someone was symbolic to demons in ways I didn’t quite understand, and I didn’t need Samael to pull any more of that bullshit with me.

I shot him a warning look and he sat back in his chair, his lips twitching.

Lilith smiled at me, obviously thawing slightly. “I’m starving too,” she said. “I’ll fight you for the yellow curry.”

“I love yellow curry,” I said, grateful for the subject change. “But I *adore* cashew chicken.” And in a fight against *Lilith*, I’d be dead within seconds.

The server placed a huge platter of my favorite dish within arm’s reach, along with a massive bowl of rice. The scent hit my nose and I served myself before my stomach could embarrass me again.

It can be difficult to do cashew chicken well. Thankfully, the chef hadn’t included pineapple— my pet hate. The flavors exploded in my mouth— the perfect amount of heat, salty, and sweet. The cashews crunched, while the chicken was so tender it practically melted in my mouth.

I moaned, and the table went silent again. Asmodeus grinned wickedly. “I think she likes it.”

“I’m just going to crawl under the table to eat the rest of my food,” I announced, and chuckles sounded. Next to me, Samael was very still. I glanced his way, finding his gaze glued to my face. His silver eyes glittered, his cheekbones were flushed, and his gaze dropped to my mouth as I licked my lips.

Lust roared through me, and his eyes darkened even further. He shifted in his seat and his wings rustled. Time slowed.

I took a sip of my water. I would not embarrass myself anymore in front of these demons. I refused. Turning away, I ate the rest of my food in silence, half-listening to the demons talk business, laugh about shared history, and tease each other.

I declined dessert— not because I didn’t want it, but because I felt... sad.

I hadn’t been part of a family since my mom had taken me and run, leaving my sister behind to be raised by her coven. Unsurprisingly, Evie wanted nothing to do with me now.

Sitting at the Samael’s table was nice. Better than nice. I’d watched the way his friends interacted, with the good-natured ribbing and gentle teasing. They’d told stories from the past couple of centuries, steering clear of their

time in the underworld, but including me where they could.

I'd expected many things from Samael's Monday dinners, but I hadn't expected whatever this feeling was that clamped around my lungs and *squeezed*.

"I need to head home," I said as I got to my feet. They called out goodbyes, and Vas stood as well.

"Stay," I ordered him. "Seriously. I'm going straight to my apartment."

He glanced at Samael, who narrowed his eyes on my face. "Yes," he said. "Stay and enjoy the rest of the meal. I'll take the witchling home."

I gaped at him. "That's unnecessary."

"Regardless."

I knew that tone. That tone made it clear arguing was futile. The mark on my arm gleamed gold in the candlelight and I studied it. Finally, I waved once more at the table and walked toward the elevator.

Samael was silent as the doors opened. His wings brushed my face and I glanced at him, but he was staring at the elevator doors as if nothing had happened.

"Are you seriously going to try and squeeze into my car?" It was one thing when Vas did it, but I couldn't imagine Samael fitting his huge body in my passenger's seat.

"No." He glanced at me and his eyes warmed. "My wingspan is too... big for me to fit comfortably."

My mind went to a dark, dirty place, and Samael's eyes turned heavy-lidded with satisfaction.

Focus, Danica.

"I need my car." I attempted a cajoling voice, "I'll call you as soon as I get home."

"Unacceptable. I will fly you, and one of my people will deliver your car to you later tonight."

I almost choked as I sucked in a breath. Fly? Clamped in Samael's arms? Close enough to feel every inch of his body? Close enough to scent his skin?

"No thank you."

"Ahhh Danica. You're not a coward."

I glowered at him. "Maybe I'm scared of heights."

The elevator doors opened and that's when I realized we hadn't gone down to the lobby. We were on the roof instead.

Samael took my hand and led me across the vast space to the edge of the

roof.

“Wouldn’t you like to see this city from above? Feel the wind in your hair as you enjoy an experience few mortals will ever have?”

I would. Maybe, if I flew with Samael this one time, he would no longer care if Vas flew me occasionally. The other demon would no longer have to wrestle his wings into my car, and I could enjoy all the benefits of flying without my body attempting to betray me every second.

I didn’t dare suggest that to Samael. Something told me he wouldn’t take kindly to my preference for flying with Vas over flying with him. The difference was that Vas didn’t make my mouth go dry with a mixture of terror and lust.

“I’m wearing a dress.”

“I’ll preserve your dignity.”

I wanted to fly. More than almost anything.

“Fine,” I said, and Samael’s hand whipped out, caught my gold-clad arm and pulled me close.

“Hold on,” he grinned, and my breath caught. It was the first time I’d seen him truly smile, and I was so busy staring at his face, that I barely registered when his other hand slid under my legs.

A second later, I was lying bridal-style in his arms. I tensed, opening my mouth, but his invisible wings extended with a ‘snap’ and we shot into the sky.

I screamed, but it turned into a laugh as Samael banked left, giving me a view of the tower as we climbed even higher.

Holy shit, this was incredible. For a moment, I longed for my own wings so deeply that it felt like my back ached for the missing heaviness of them.

“Look down, little witch.” Samael murmured against my ear and I shivered. He chuckled. The son of a bitch knew exactly what he did to me.

I made myself glance down. My hair whipped around my face. The wind almost choked me as Samael plummeted several feet, and my eyes streamed water.

It was still the most fun I’d had since my mom died.

Beneath us, the lights of Durham glowed, the sight oddly comforting. Durham didn’t have a skyline even close to being as impressive as New York or Chicago, but that allowed Samael to dodge and weave between the tallest buildings, drawing delighted laughs from my chest.

I turned my face to his so the wind wouldn’t steal my words. “I can’t

believe you guys get to see this every night. Why do you ever walk when you can fly?”

Samael’s mouth curved against my neck and I broke out in goosebumps. I was so distracted by his proximity that I barely paid attention to the rest of our flight. Damn him.

We landed in the shadows next to my apartment, and Samael slowly put me back on my feet. I turned to face him, and his hand was suddenly cupping the back of my head pulling me toward him as he fit his mouth against mine.

I gasped and he let out a sound that was pure *need*. That sound did things to my body and I shivered. One of his hands slid to my lower back as he pressed me against him. Warmth radiated up my spine, and I attempted to ignore how *good* I felt, wrapped in his arms.

I still hadn’t seen his wingspan, but I was guessing it *was* huge. Because the hard length of him was now pressed right up against my stomach, and I was aching for it to be pressed much lower.

His tongue thrust against mine, caressing, teasing, and the taste of him made my head spin. I let out a startled yelp as he lifted me, his hands sliding beneath my butt. He pressed me against the side of my apartment building, and I swear I went blind for a moment as he was lined up right *there*.

Groaning against his mouth, I writhed against him like a hussy. Samael growled, his tongue warring with mine as he held me suspended with one hand. His other hand fisted my hair, angling my head so he could kiss me even deeper.

Every inch of my body was on fire for him. I shivered in need and his lips left mine, drawing another groan from my throat as he pressed kisses down my neck, giving me the occasional nip.

“Give into me, little witch. Come to my bed. I’ll give you more pleasure than you’ve ever felt before,” he crooned, and his words were like a splash of ice water on my face.

I was grinding against the king of the demons outside my apartment where anyone could see.

No dummy. You shouldn’t be grinding against the king of the demons, period.

I stiffened, pushing my hands flat against his chest. His lust-blurred eyes began to clear as he raised his head from where he’d been nuzzling me.

“Put me down please.”

He frowned incredulously.

“I’m serious.”

I was on the ground before I’d finished speaking, Samael a few feet away. I leaned against the wall, my body mourning the loss of him.

“This can’t happen,” I said, attempting to ignore the way my body insisted that it definitely could happen.

“Why?” he asked.

“Um. I’m a bounty hunter. And a witch. And you’re *you*.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and he was instantly 100% arrogant, powerful demon. “And just what is that supposed to mean?” his voice was a low rumble.

I wasn’t going to go into *all of* the reasons why this couldn’t happen. But I needed to address the reason that kept me up at night.

“I’m bonded to you. How do I know these feelings are real, and not just because of the mark on my hand?”

Surprise flashed through his eyes. “My bond can do many things, but creating lust is not one of them. I *feed* on lust, witchling. I don’t create it.”

I gaped at him. “Were you feeding on me just now?”

His tone turned cold, all warmth leaving his eyes. “You’d know if I were feeding on you, bounty hunter. Because you’d experience more pleasure than you’d ever felt before.” He stepped back, his expression remote, aloof. “Go inside, Danica.”

I hesitated, but he was already turning away. Silence stretched between us, and I searched for something to say, but it was as if there was a wall between us.

Had I... hurt him?

I shook my head. This was dangerous. Dangerous and stupid. I whirled and stalked into my apartment building, raising my hand for the main wards to scan me and allow me entry. The lobby glowed green, and the elevator opened for me.

I forced myself not to look back. This was a wakeup call. I didn’t have time to fuck around. If I didn’t find the murderer soon, I was going to end up in Samael’s bed.

There. I’d admitted it. My body didn’t care that he was an arrogant, possessive control freak. It didn’t care that I had goals that would be much more easily achieved if I didn’t have a reputation as ‘that witch who slept with Samael.’ Because it would get out. It always did.

I needed to focus on the investigation.

Lia pounced at me the moment I entered my apartment, and I scooped her up, scratching under her chin while she purred. I felt bad leaving her alone all day. Maybe I should get her a friend to keep her company.

Yes, because the answer to my problems was definitely another kitten.

I fed Lia and then sat in the armchair next to my window, staring down at the parking lot.

Motive. I needed a motive.

From what Selina had said, the knife had been wielded by either a fae or a witch. The fae were more powerful, but they had no reason to start a war with the demons.

The mages would benefit, for sure. Mages hated demons, and if they could, they'd eradicate them from this world and every other. Even Gabriel ultimately had to follow Samael's orders, and the mages only ruled because the demons allowed it.

The witches would benefit. Most witches didn't have a chance if they were up against a demon. But they were usually more consumed with finding ways to remove power from the Mage Council. Early on after the portals opened, the council checked the witches' power, came to a mutual agreement with the demons, and ruled when the witches couldn't.

The fae could benefit, but it didn't feel right. Most of the fae had no interest in Earth's politics. They stepped in when necessary, but the dark and light fae kings typically spent most of the time in their own realms. The status quo worked for them, and if the demons fell, the fae would probably be targeted next.

I sighed, rubbing my forehead. And then there were the arrows. Those arrows made it clear that my mom's murder wasn't a random case of wrong-place-wrong-time. If whoever had killed her thought they could scare me off by killing my only leads, they were about to learn differently.

Even I could admit that my warding lessons were a good thing if my wards could help protect me from someone armed with a crossbow. Because eventually, whoever was killing my leads would solve all their problems by taking me out instead.

DANICA



“*A* gain.”

I ground my teeth at Samael’s imperious command, meeting his hard stare. I saw all sorts of things in his eyes. Things that did nothing but confuse me.

I heaved a sigh and closed my own eyes. My hand stung from the deep cut in my palm, and a small voice in the back of my head reminded me that witches didn’t need blood to set wards. Only to break them.

I was a freak.

“You’re not focusing.”

He was right. And the sooner I satisfied Samael— and didn’t that thought bring up all kinds of visions of twisted sheets and hot skin— I could get back to work.

“Danica.”

“Sorry.”

I repeated the same steps as last time. The thought of Agaliarept on the ground— he still hadn’t woken up— and the fear that ate its way through my body as I felt our enemies approach.

“More.”

I didn’t open my eyes. I could *feel* that the ghost of my ward was there, and I reached for the trickle of my power, cajoling it into working with me.

“You’re not trying. This ward wouldn’t stop a pixie from giving you a papercut.”

I opened my eyes, a savage reply on the tip of my tongue. Someone knocked on the door. Samael didn’t take his gaze off my face, and I refused

to be the first one to break our little staring competition. In spite of his obvious irritation, the corner of his mouth lifted.

“Enter.”

I glanced away as the door opened, and a demon from Thursday dinner gave me a grave nod. Sathanas, that was his name. He held a tablet in his hand, and his gaze left mine as he addressed Samael.

“We have a problem.” He handed the tablet to Samael, who watched whatever was on it, his face darkening. A muscle twitched in his jaw, and I fought not to demand that he tell me what was going on.

He raised his head and offered me the tablet, turning to Sathanas. I blocked out their conversation as I watched the video, my stomach churning.

On the screen, a demon was standing in the corridor I’d walked down with Bael just a few days ago when we put the knife in a safe. The demon onscreen moved weirdly, taking a few steps forward before jumping back, his hand stretching toward what I knew was the elevator. Eventually, his slow amble took him to the first metal door, and after a few minutes of jerking his head back and forth, he lowered his face for it to be scanned. The door opened. I glanced at Samael. Something told me I didn’t want to see what was on the rest of this video.

On the tablet, the demon continued his odd walk, until he got to the main ward. After a long moment, that door slid open too. The demon’s feet seemed to scramble along the floor as he fought with himself some more. Someone was controlling him, and when I found out who, they were going to regret it. I glanced at Samael again. He was murmuring to Sathanas, his face blank. But his eyes burned with retribution.

On the tablet, the demon stopped at the safe. 383. He was after the knife that had been used to kill the three demon women. His hand was held high as he attempted to break the ward, but the air around the safe shimmered, glowing red as he was denied entry. He tried again and again, alternating between slamming his hand into the safe, and attempting to walk back out of the room as he clearly fought the compulsion.

I jolted as he smashed his head into the safe. My stomach swam, but I made myself watch as he threw himself against the steel, again and again and again.

Finally, when his head and face were little more than mush, he slid to the ground, where he stayed.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to choke out around the lump in my throat. Both

demons glanced at me and I handed the tablet back. “I gave Bael the knife to store here.”

The expression on Samael’s face told me he was ready to go on a murder spree. “It wasn’t your fault. Someone got to one of my people. You couldn’t have seen that coming.” He turned to Sathanas. “Is he dead?”

“In a coma. His injuries have healed, but the fae says that the struggle against the compulsion caused his brain to shut down. It’s unlikely that he will wake.”

I turned away, stalking toward the window, where I stared sightlessly down at the city. Behind me, Samael relayed a few more orders to the demon.

It wasn’t truly my fault. I *knew* that. The blame belonged to whoever had gone after that demon. And yet, my mouth tasted like ash at the thought of how terrified he must’ve been. Whoever had managed to make him get that close to the knife was powerful.

A hand on my shoulder jolted me from my thoughts and I let Samael to turn me to face him.

“I won’t allow you to blame yourself for this.”

In spite of myself, I had to smile. “Oh, you won’t *allow* me, your majesty?” The smile fell from my face. “If I hadn’t stored the knife here—”

“That could’ve been you.”

I flinched at the thought of being under someone’s control that way. I shook his hand off and strode back to the sofa, where I sat and rubbed at my temples. “How powerful was the demon?”

Samael followed me to the sofa. I breathed through my mouth in a useless attempt to not get distracted by his scent.

“Low level. His name was Golen, and he barely had enough power to travel through the portal without being summoned. Whoever did this knew exactly whom to use for their best chance at getting close to the knife.” The muscles around his eyes tightened.

“I’m sorry.”

He closed his eyes. “Thank you.” Samael sat down and reached for me, dragging me to him. I allowed it, taking comfort in the feel of his arms around me.

I’d let go any minute. Any minute now.

Another knock on the door. I pulled myself out of his arms, ignoring his muffled oath as I got to my feet and moved back toward the window, where I could hopefully locate my sanity.

Bael's expression was rage incarnate. "There's been another murder."
Samael tensed, his fury sucking all of the air out of the room.

"Who."

"Tarel," Bael said, his expression somber. Samael let out an audible breath and ran a hand over his face. He'd known this demon personally. And he'd liked him. Perhaps even called him a friend.

Something uncomfortable took up residence in my chest. This whole time, I'd assumed the only reason Samael gave a shit about these murders was because they were *his* people, being killed in *his* territory. But he also *cared* about these demons. I didn't quite know what to do with that information, but I shifted my gaze to Bael, giving Samael a private moment with his grief.

"Where?" Samael ground out, and Bael's eyes met mine before he addressed his boss.

"A gas station in Brightleaf."

I tensed at that. The murderer was either escalating in an attempt to give Samael a giant 'fuck you,' or they were getting sloppy.

I got to my feet. "Let's go."

Samael raised his head. "I'm going with you."

I nodded, and Bael cleared his throat. "You have a meeting with the unseelie king."

I lifted one eyebrow. I hadn't been able to get an appointment with either of the fae kings, but Samael could obviously meet with whoever he chose. I'd love to be a fly on a wall for that conversation.

Samael opened his mouth and then snapped it closed. "I want a full report as soon as I'm finished with this meeting," he ground out.

Despite myself, I couldn't help the urge to wipe that expression from his face. This was the first time I'd seen Samael sad. And for some, unknown reason, it was... disconcerting.

"I'm happy to take the meeting with the dark fae king if you'd like to switch places," I said brightly. "I've heard he's so beautiful, the sight of him can make your heart stop in your chest."

Samael went still. Then his eyes darkened as he shifted— the movement predatory as he slowly unraveled his huge body from the sofa. He took two steps closer to me, the hopelessness in his eyes instantly replaced with fury and... lust.

"You just ensured you'll never meet him, little witch."

I gaped at him. Okay, that was unnecessary. The ghost of a smile touched his mouth and he reached out a hand. For once, he moved human-slow, so I had more than enough time to jerk my head back, but I allowed it.

His thumb brushed over my bottom lip, and the moment stretched between us like a rubber band, close to snapping.

Bael cleared his throat again and Samael's gaze left mine. "Go with them," he ordered the demon. "We'll continue this later," he said to me, and I felt my eyes widen. I hadn't intended to start something I couldn't finish. Samael picked up my hand, the cut still fresh and I fought a blush. He'd meant our ward lesson.

His eyes lightened and I checked my shield. Nope, he wasn't reading my mind, just my face. Again.

"Have the fae healer see to your hand before you leave," he ordered. I knew better to argue when Samael was in this kind of mood, so I simply nodded. His gaze examined my face for one fraught moment, and then he strode out the door.

I huffed out a breath, my shoulders slumping as there was oxygen in the room again.

Bael's gaze was steady on my face. "That was well done," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He gave me a knowing look. "Let's go."

Samael

I studied the unseelie king as he stretched out his legs in front of me. Two of his guards were outside the door with two of mine, although we'd both agreed to keep our meeting private.

Finvarra *dripped* with power. So much so that it was practically overflowing from where it coiled around him. When I reached out with my own power it felt foreign, made of stardust, where mine was made of the fires of the underworld. Between us, I didn't know who was the more powerful, and the uncertainty was rare enough that I had to resist the urge to find out.

The hint of a smile on the other male's face told me he felt the same.

Danica's words echoed through my mind as I examined the unseelie king who seemed relaxed enough that he could've been lying on a beach somewhere.

"I've heard he's so beautiful the sight of him can make your heart stop in your chest."

My lips twitched. The little witch may believe she wanted nothing to do with me, but I saw through her goading. She'd known the news of Tarel's demise had hit hard— I hadn't bothered hiding it from her. But instead of using my weakness against me, she gave me a single moment of diversion. A gift.

"She must be one hell of a woman to distract Samael himself."

My eyes met ancient, burnished gold. The dark fae king's eyes had always reminded me of Scylla, my dragon.

"I know well the dark history your people have when it comes to human women," I said languidly, but the warning was clear.

Finvarra laughed. "We don't do that anymore."

I merely raised one eyebrow. Many of the dark fae males had toyed with human women over the centuries, sneaking through rifts in the portals and stealing them away. Rumors were, Finvarra's father had been well known for his obsession with mortals.

He gave me a long, slow grin. Women likely clawed each other to pieces for an opportunity to get close to this male. Would Danica?

She would never get the chance. I meant what I said to the witchling. If she wanted to enjoy the sight of a beautiful male, she could look at me.

The unseelie king tilted his head at my silence and I inwardly cursed. If he hadn't been curious about my witch before, he certainly was now.

I bared my teeth in what was likely a feral smile. "Will we have a problem between us after all these centuries?"

Finvarra's eyes flared at the question, and I kept my expression neutral as I inwardly cursed myself. It would have been smarter to challenge a werewolf. The dark fae were notorious adrenaline junkies, rarely backing down from a challenge.

However, the dark king had had centuries to learn how to control his urges— he was perhaps even older than I was. He relaxed back into his chair and lifted his eyebrow.

"I think we are getting off-topic," I said. "Three centuries ago, you pledged your help for when the time came to put my plans into motion."

His eyes sharpened with interest. “It has taken you long enough to prepare, my friend.”

“I spoke to a seer. Several years ago. She mentioned a series of events that would occur when it was time. Those events have begun.”

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “Our pact stands.”

A hint of relief lessened some of the tension in my shoulders. Finvarra would give me his people to take to war when I needed them. In return, I would help him when it was time to remove the light fae king from his throne. The two kings had been bitter enemies since well before I was born.

Finvarra glanced at his phone as it beeped and then silenced it. “I must go soon. How goes your investigation into the murders?”

“Slow. There has been another today. The victim was a... friend.”

I didn’t know why I was telling him this, but understanding flashed across his face.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you.”

He was silent for a long moment, then tilted his head, seemingly coming to some decision.

“Our pact still stands,” he said. “You will have my armies at your disposal when it’s time to march on your enemies. And I will have yours for my own. However, I would like to propose an additional alliance.”

I sat back in my chair. “What kind of alliance?”

“An expanded pact that allows our people to travel freely within our realms.”

“I no longer have access to my realm, as you well know.”

The king waved that away. “You will. And when you do, my people will benefit, just as yours will benefit from free travel to the unseelie realm, and fae territories in this world.”

It was an interesting offer— one I’d never thought I’d hear him make.

“And what, exactly, do you need from the underworld?”

“A scroll. Hidden in Lucifer’s study. It holds answers I’ve been seeking for many years.”

An alliance that allowed my people free travel could only be a good thing.

“Very well,” I said, and his eyes lightened with satisfaction.

DANICA



Vas was waiting for me in the lobby of Samael's tower, his face blank. "You heard about Golen?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yeah. I didn't know the guy, but no one deserves to be controlled like that."

We walked to my car in silence. Ten minutes later, I was parking outside the gas station. Barriers stretched across the perimeter, preventing lookie-loos from getting too close. A crowd had already gathered, and Vas escorted me through the police barricade and toward the body.

Tarel lay next to a gas pump, sprawled on the ground. The demon was emaciated, nothing more than a husk, but the wide span of his shoulders hinted that he'd been a mountain of a man. Dried, wrinkled black feathers surrounded his body, the power that had kept his wings invisible no longer active.

Vas cursed as he crouched next to the body, his jaw clenched. The gas station's manager shuffled from foot to foot, wringing his hands as he watched us. The two other employees looked to be in their early twenties, and they were currently speaking with the human authorities.

"What was he doing here?" I asked. I'd never heard of a demon filling up their own tank of gas.

A muscle ticked in Vas's jaw. "Tarel liked to pretend he was human. He found their ways fascinating. Samael's orders were for no demons to be out alone, but I'm not surprised that he disregarded them. He was an old demon who thought he was invincible." Grief coated his words. "Someone was watching him. They must've known he'd stop by for gas and set him up."

Vas turned away as one of the cops signaled to him, and I approached the gas station manager with what I hoped was an encouraging smile. “I’m Danica. I’m working for Samael.”

He blinked, still staring at the corpse as if expecting it to come to life. It took him another few moments before he could pull his gaze from the scene in front of us. The man was about my height, but so pale he may pass out before he could give me any details.

“What’s your name?”

“Bob,” he croaked out. “My name’s Bob.” He swallowed, his gaze wandering to where the two demons were discussing the body, and his face turned even whiter.

My instincts had been correct. If the demons tried to question Bob, he’d probably pass out. It wasn’t every day that a demon was killed in your business. If Bob was like most humans, he did everything he could *not* to attract this kind of attention from paranormals.

“Do you have somewhere we could sit and talk?”

“Inside,” he muttered, turning and shuffling toward the building. He led me through the brightly lit station and behind the counter, where a door opened to a small break room. I examined the TV screens, which currently displayed Bael and Vas, still deep in discussion.

“Can I see the footage?”

A jerky nod, and Bob sat in front of an ancient computer. A few hoarse voice commands later, and the video was cued for an hour earlier.

Cars pulled up and drove away, customers came in and paid for snacks or used the bathroom. I kept one eye on the screen displaying pump number two, where the body currently lay.

The screens began to go dark, one by one. It was as if some kind of dense, black smoke rolled over the cameras. I drummed my fingers on the desk. Whoever had done this was a pro, and they’d taken care of the cameras before they’d entered their range.

“Walk me through it, Bob.”

Sitting down had steadied him, and he took a deep breath, turning in his chair until his eyes met mine.

“It was a normal day, I swear. Customers were coming and going— one of them screamed at Rachel because gas prices have risen again. She called him a bad name and I had to give her a warning.” His lips quirked. “She’s a good kid, but she has a hell of a temper.”

He was leveling out, but his face began to drain of color once more, his hand trembling as he pointed toward the pumps outside.

“I didn’t know anything had happened until people started screaming. I ran outside, and it was just *there*.”

“Tell me about the other people and cars who were here.” The human authorities would be interviewing those witnesses now, and everything they learned would automatically be passed onto Samael.

“Two trucks,” he said, his gaze turning distant. “One entering, one leaving. I’d noticed them a few minutes earlier because they were taking too long and blocking the entrance.”

We could see if any other cameras from buildings nearby had caught the license plates on the trucks, but I wasn’t holding my breath.

“Then what happened?”

Bob frowned, and his pupils dilated “I don’t know.” His voice turned higher-pitched. “Why don’t I know?”

“It’s likely that whoever killed the demon also cast a wide-range forgetfulness spell over anyone in the vicinity,” I said. And I had a feeling I knew who that person was. My search for Beatrice had just become my top priority.

Bob recoiled, stumbling to his feet. “And you? If you’re with the demons, you could do something like that too, couldn’t you?”

I kept my voice quiet in an attempt to soothe. “I’m what you might call a magical dud,” I gave him a tiny smile. “And even if I could, I wouldn’t. You’ve been helpful, and it wasn’t your fault your station was targeted.”

His shoulders slumped, but his face twisted a moment later. “This is what it’s like for us, you know. Paranormals wonder why we hate them? We’re playthings to them. To *you*. They’re my memories. *Mine*. What else did they take? What else?” He ran his hand through his hair and I got slowly to my feet.

“Bob,” I made my voice sharp. “I’m not going to hurt you. *No one’s* going to hurt you. We’re going to find whoever did this and make them pay. Do you understand?”

He nodded, but he took a step back as I approached. I sighed. I wouldn’t get anything else out of him, and the best I could do for him was get out of his station, and his life.

“I’ll take a look at the body now.”

The demons were both talking to the human cops. One of them— a

grizzled older man with an expression that said he was tolerating us only because he had to—glowered at Vas but answered his questions with short one- and two-word answers. His partner didn't seem like he was old enough to grow facial hair, and his hand kept dancing toward his weapon in jerky movements as Bael's expression became darker and darker.

I crouched over the corpse. It was easier to think of it that way, instead of remembering that it was a demon with a name. *Tarel*. Who'd liked to pretend he was human. Something in my chest wrenched and I forced myself to drop my shields.

The same dark smudge, although it was smaller this time, confined only to the body itself and a few inches around it.

Vas finished with the cop and wandered over to me, shoving his hands in his pockets as he gazed at the body. "What are you thinking?"

"Whoever did this took a risk coming here. Any paranormal could've been in the area and come to investigate. The humans had their memories wiped, and I'm pretty sure I know who's responsible."

"Beatrice. You think she used witchweed to do this."

"I do."

It was the first lucky break I'd had. If I hadn't asked Gary about Mary, we wouldn't have a clue who'd managed to wipe so many memories at once.

I rubbed at my temple.

"If she did this, she obviously had help. We need to figure out who she's working with and what motive they have for killing demons. There's some end game here that I'm not seeing."

My head pounded, and even Vas looked wrung out. Both of us were having an exceptionally shitty day.

May as well make it worse.

I sighed. "Time to talk to the witches."

"Which ones?"

"As many as we can. I have a few we can start with. First up is a witch named Hannah..." I trailed off and Vas raised his eyebrow at me.

"When I... liberated Samael's dagger, a witch helped me with a look-away spell."

Vas' dreamy eyes sharpened. "I wondered how you did it. The spell hid you from the dragon?"

"Kind of." That little interaction between the dagger and I, and the resulting power it had used, was my business. I had no doubt that if Samael

suspected the dagger was occasionally sentient, he'd take it back from me before I could even blink.

Vas's expression was carefully neutral as he watched me. He knew I wasn't saying everything, but he didn't press. Because if Samael asked him, he'd have to tell him everything I'd said.

"Anyway," I said into the awkward silence, "The witch I paid for that little spell is powerful. And she's a black witch. If Samael finds out who helped me, her life could be in danger. But she'll know if it's possible for a witch to harness demon power, and she might even know where we should look."

Vas studied me, then finally sighed. "If visiting this witch can help us narrow down our suspects, I won't say anything to Samael unless he specifically asks."

"Thanks."

Vas merely nodded and walked me to my car, flying above me as I drove toward Trinity Park.

Most white witches lived in covens simply because it was safer that way. Black witches were not to be trusted for many reasons, but their lack of scruples was at the top of the list. One never knew when your sister-witch would go full-dark and attempt to steal your powers. If that witch knew you had a coven of witches ready to back you up, she'd usually think twice.

Usually.

When the portals opened, black witches quickly learned that sacrificing a human did incredible things for the amount of power they were able to channel.

Luckily, the Mage Council had quickly laid down the law when they came into power. If a black witch stepped out of line, she'd have the Mage Council to contend with. And if they didn't handle it, Samael's demons would.

I was sure most of Hannah's neighbors would prefer for her to not live in their territory— my sister's coven lived just a few streets away, and I grinned at the thought of them brainstorming ways to drive Hannah out.

Hannah lived a few blocks from the gas station where the demon had been found, in a mint-green bungalow with a sizeable front yard. The roses she'd been deadheading the last time I was here were now in full-bloom, their sunny yellow color luring visitors closer for a sniff.

"I'd expect black roses," Vas muttered.

“That would be a cliché, don’t you think?” The voice came out of nowhere and I tensed, my hand sliding toward my Nim Cub.

If I’d thought I was tense, I had nothing on Vas. The demon jumped and I couldn’t help but grin. It was the first time I’d seen him truly startled. He narrowed his eyes at me and I attempted to lose the grin. I failed.

Hannah raised her eyebrow at me. She’d obviously been out for a walk, her curly white hair covered by a wide-brimmed hat.

The lines around her eyes deepened as she scanned Vas before glancing at me. “Interesting company you’re keeping, halfling.”

I stared at her. The last time I saw her, I’d assumed she was taunting me about my human half. Now I knew my other half likely wasn’t human at all. I didn’t feel any different than I did when I was here six months ago. And yet everything I knew about myself was changing.

“Yeah, he’s my plus one in life at the moment.”

The witch smiled at me. “Because of your bond with Samael. Word gets around.”

I shrugged, and Vas studied Hannah with an inscrutable expression. Witches like Hannah fed on negative emotions. I hoped the demon had some good shields.

From the way Hannah’s smile widened, he was doing just fine. The witch enjoyed a challenge.

“How can I help you?”

“I have a few questions.”

“About the demon murders.” She mock shuddered. “Horrific.”

She may as well have said ‘delicious,’ in that tone, and I tensed. That’s where her little walk had taken her today. Just a few blocks down to the gas station to suck up all the horror and fear. I forced myself to use a blank, pleasant expression.

“What can you tell me about whoever is doing this?” I didn’t bother asking her if she was the one who was killing the demons. If she was, her arrogance would ensure she dug her own grave. Hannah was many things, but subtle, she was not.

“They’re powerful,” she said, admiration coating her tone. “If it were me, I would’ve drunk down all that delicious power.”

Of course she would’ve.

“What are they?”

She shrugged. “You humans believe only the fae and demons came

through those portals. There are creatures already in this world that you cannot imagine.” She pulled her hat off her head and used it to fan her face. “Although, you’re not exactly human, are you halfling?” She winked at me and I gave her a bored stare.

She waited, and when I didn’t react, she rolled her eyes. “Of course, it could be any run-of-the-mill paranormal. I don’t know who would have the stones to go after Samael’s demons, but I hope you find them soon. Anyone dangerous enough to slaughter the high demon in that gas station is dangerous enough to kill one old witch.”

True fear flashed across her face for the first time, and relief made my knees weak. I hadn’t wanted it to be Hannah who was responsible for this.

“If you had to guess, what kind of creature could it be?”

She shrugged. “Who would benefit from killing demons? From distracting Samael?”

I’d asked myself the same question over and over again since I started looking into the murders. But I didn’t know enough about the politics between Samael and all the other players in the Triangle. I glanced at Vas and he shrugged. He wouldn’t be saying anything in front of the witch. Fair enough.

In a power struggle, most witches didn’t have a hope of going up against a high demon. Black witches could often channel more power— although Selina could probably give Hannah a run for her money and I was pretty sure she was gray, if not completely white. Some witches had access to a deep well of their own power, while some only the ability to channel power from elsewhere. Others had both.

But Samael *was* power.

Who would risk gaining his attention— and his wrath—by killing his demons?

Hannah was studying my face. “White witches hate demons,” she said. “While the dark fae are also a threat, most of the high fae stay firmly in their realm. The light fae’s power stems from nature,” she sneered at that, and the expression was so ugly that she no longer looked like someone’s grandmother. She looked exactly like what she was: a power to be feared.

Her expression cleared but I’d seen the hatred. And I noted it.

“Where do the dark fae get their power?”

Her face paled slightly. “I have no desire to attract the unseelie king’s attention. Let me just say that he is unlikely to draw Samael’s ire. The two

have more in common than you could imagine.” That was similar to what Vas had said. I glanced at him but his eyes were on the witch.

Hannah spoke in riddles. Riddles I’d have to decode later. But from the way she glanced at Vas from under her lashes she was clearly enjoying herself, so I let her talk.

“The mages would love to see the demons fall. But they know better than to go up against Samael. If he destroyed the Mage Council, there would be no one left to protect the humans.” She licked her lips and my stomach churned.

I needed to be careful here. God knew I didn’t want to give her any ideas. But the sight of that demon bashing his head into the safe would forever be burned into my memory.

“How much power would it take to make a demon act against its will? Could a witch do it?”

Hannah shrugged. “Witch magic is too weak to enslave a demon on its own. It comes from our world, while demon power comes from the underworld. The underworld was old when our world was just a thought.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But perhaps if a witch had access to other power as well... They would need to be powerful, but also have access to forbidden spells. The kind of spells the Mage Council makes a point of destroying.” She pouted. “If witches are doing this and no one invited me, I’m going to be *most* offended.”

“I’m going to choose to believe you’re kidding.”

Hannah opened her mouth and a strange expression passed over her face. “Wait here,” she told me, turning and hurrying up her walkway. Her door unlocked and swung open at a wave of her hand and Vas leaned against her gate, his dark eyes inscrutable.

She was back a moment later. “Hold out your hand.”

I complied, and she wrapped a bracelet around my wrist. I swallowed. “Tell me that isn’t human bone.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course not. Do you know how hard it is to get your hands on human bone these days? Everyone’s cremating their family to prevent such a thing. A waste of good power is what it is.”

Each of the small bone discs had a rune carved into the flat surface. “What’s this for?”

“Protection.”

I raised my gaze from the bracelet. “Why?”

“You’re interesting. I haven’t met anyone interesting in the longest time.”

I stared at her and she sighed. “For your silence, child. Samael may have bonded you, but he would do much, much worse to me.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don’t take it off. Unlike *you*, whoever is doing this won’t hesitate to use every ounce of their power to protect themselves.”

“I won’t.” I stroked my knife.

“One more thing, bounty hunter.” Hannah glanced at Vas and spoke more quickly than usual. “Be careful with the demon. Those who give him their allegiance consider him their king. He’ll kill you if it benefits his people in any way.”

My mouth dropped open. Next to me, Vas let out a growl so low it seemed to vibrate through my bones.

“Watch your mouth, witch.”

I turned and gave him squinty eyes, but Hannah was already showing him her teeth. “Watch your tone, demon.”

Vas shook his head and strode back toward the car. I sighed. “Thanks,” I told her, and she nodded, turned away and ambled back up her walkway.

I couldn’t put it off any longer. My sister’s coven was just a few streets away, although I insisted on driving, because I wanted a fast getaway as soon as I was done with this little reunion.

Vas may have been angry, but he gave me a concerned look as I parked the car and opened my door.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked, his voice gruff.

“No.”

“Anything I can do?”

“No.” A bead of sweat rolled down my spine as we stood in front of the coven’s house. It was painted a welcoming butter yellow with white trim. A wide porch swept across the outside of the house, home to a collection of wicker chairs, sofas, and a swing Evie had once loved.

The house encompassed three stories and an attic which had been expanded into two bedrooms before mom and I had left.

I’d spent most of my childhood here, running from room to room, hiding in the basement, exploring the attic with my sister, stealing cookies in the kitchen.

The thought of knocking on the door made me want to throw up.

“It’s huge.”

“It has to be. It’s a large coven. Not all of them live here, but enough of

them do.”

And not one of them had helped me.

I screamed my rage, fighting against the invisible bonds lifting me away from my sister. Evie’s hands clutched at me, her nails sharp, scratching as they slipped from my back and caught on my shirt.

“No, no no! Let me go!” Evie howled.

The coven surrounded us, expressions sad. Mom was crying, tears running silently down her face as she lifted her hands and Evie and I broke apart. Gemma held Evie in place with a single wave of her hand, and my shoes skidded on the pavement as the power dragged me away.

“I don’t want to go!” I roared. “Let me stay here!”

“It’s for the best,” Mom insisted, and I reached blindly for Evie, but she was too far. We’d had no warning. This morning when we woke up, I was told I would be leaving. Evie would be staying.

“I’ll come back for you,” I screamed. “I promise!”

Evie sobbed, her face red, her nose running, she closed her eyes, using her own magic, and Gemma’s face turned pale as her spell slipped for a single moment.

Evie sprinted toward me and I bared my teeth at my mother, but it was too late. Her spell took complete control of me, leaving nothing but my vocal cords free. My body was her puppet, and within moments I was in the car, my hand pressed against the window as Evie stood and stared, once again unable to move.

Noelle wrapped her arm around Evie’s shoulder, but she shrugged her off.

The last time I’d seen my sister before I returned, she was standing alone and silent, surrounded by the coven.

“Danica?” Vas touched my shoulder, jolting me back to the present.

I swallowed down my nausea, strode up the porch steps, and pounded on the door.

DANICA



My sister opened the door.

We both froze. Evie recovered first, glancing from me to Vas. The demon was silent, but I'd heard his indrawn breath. My sister was a knockout.

Unlike me, Evie got my mom's eyes. The blue-green of them was stunning against her perfect skin, the peaches-and-cream interrupted only by the tiniest scattering of freckles across her pert nose.

She had a wealth of curly blonde hair, which was currently shoved up in a messy bun. Did it still drive her crazy? Did she still fight to get a brush through it like she had when we were kids?

"Danica. Why are you here?"

I straightened my shoulders. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I could go to the bar.

"We need to talk to Gemma," I managed to get out. Evie studied me then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Fine."

She was gone before I could say anything else. Bitterness flooded my mouth. I could've handled that so much better.

"What are you doing here?" Gemma's voice echoed through the house before she appeared. Within seconds, she was limping toward the door, brandishing her cane like a weapon.

Gemma had never liked me. The other witches had spoiled us when we lived here, babysitting us while mom worked. But Gemma had always disapproved of me, and by the time we'd left, I'd given up attempting to win

her approval and was actively going out of my way to annoy her.

Unfortunately, we needed Gemma's cooperation. And from the way she was glaring at me, she had no plans to help us. Vas shifted slightly and her eyes darted to him, her gaze scanning him from head to toe. Wariness slid across her face and I was small enough to enjoy it.

"Well?" she barked and I took a steadying breath.

"You've likely heard of the recent demon murders," I said, and she shrugged.

"Demons. Why would I care?"

I didn't need to glance at Vas to know he was pissed. He may be the most laid-back demon I'd met, but even he had his limits.

"Because if something is killing demons, witches would be sitting ducks."

Her eyes narrowed. "Watch your mouth."

I sighed. Gemma was the head witch of this coven, which was the most powerful in the Triangle. If there were rumors about the murders—and the involvement of witches—Gemma would know.

"You're a traitor to witches everywhere," she said. "And you've upset Evie. Get off my porch."

There was no warning. Darkness slid around us and through the witches' ward, as if it were nothing. It clamped around Gemma, holding her steady, and my magic poured out of me. She fought, but it was too late. I had her caught.

"*Tell me what you know,*" I hissed. Distantly, I could feel Vas tugging on my arm, but I was entirely focused on watching the witch squirm.

I didn't have time for her power plays. Didn't have to *listen* while she made me feel bad about myself. I hadn't wanted to leave with my mom, but she'd punished me for it ever since.

This was my *life* at stake. And the lives of the demons who were being targeted. I could kill her if I wanted. Could snap her neck like a twig and watch her fall to the ground, never to open that bitter mouth again.

"Danica! Take it down a notch." Vas was shaking me and I jolted, staring at the witch, who glared back at me, hatred in her eyes.

Bile flooded my mouth. I'd lost control. The suppression spell was weakening enough that whatever dark magic was inside me was itching to get out.

I squared my shoulders and forced myself to calm. Some of the shadows

peeled away and Gemma gasped in a breath. I'd been suffocating her where she stood. My stomach churned but I narrowed my eyes on her.

"Tell me what you've heard."

"Rumors," she gasped out. "Speculation."

"Tell me anyway."

Her face twisted but I'd gone cold. I no longer cared what she thought of me. No longer wondered what I'd ever done to make her hate me so much. I could crush her like a bug if I wanted. Could leave her lying here in her front door—

"Danica!"

I pulled it back. For the first time, fear flashed across Gemma's face.

I liked it.

"Descendants. Of the McCormick coven."

My breath caught in my throat. The McCormick coven had caused the portals to open three centuries ago. The witches had all been killed by the sudden influx of power— their bodies unable to handle it. But some of them must've had kids.

And those kids had kids. Now, they were up to no good.

"Why would you sit on this information for fuck's sake?"

If looks could kill, I'd be incinerated where I stood. "One of the witches was asking around, prodding at younger witches and asking them if they knew anything about the grimoires the coven had used to wake the demigod. I alerted the High Coven."

"What was her name?"

"That's witch business. The High Coven will deal with it."

"Her name, Gemma."

She didn't want to tell me. I wrapped my power around her and squeezed.

"Oh my god, Danica! What are you doing?" It was Evie. Evie who was screaming at me to stop.

I ignored her. Next to me, Vas was very still. "Tell me," I snapped.

"Beatrice Phillips," Gemma gasped out. Her face was turning gray.

"Please, Danica!" Evie let out a choked sob. Bile flooded my mouth and my power disappeared, buried deep beneath my shame.

Gemma stumbled and Evie caught her, turning and calling for Gail. The other witch appeared, glowered at me, and hauled Gemma to her feet, helping her stumble away from the door.

I'd done that. I basically beat up an old lady.

I turned back to my sister.

Evie's eyes were so wide they seemed to take up half her face. Her lips were bloodless. She let out a shuddering breath and we stared at each other for an endless moment.

"Leave," she said.

I left.

Vas followed me, a silent support next to me as we walked back to my car. I got in, turned the key, and stared blankly at the road in front of me.

"You didn't truly harm her," Vas said. He'd obviously decided against flying.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't the best move if you were hoping for future cooperation from that coven, but she wasn't going to tell you anything. You did what you had to do."

Demon logic. Might makes right.

I pulled away from the curb, leaving the house in my rearview mirror.

"Ask," I ordered, and Vas sighed.

"How come you don't see your sister?"

I took a deep breath. Even the question hurt. As a kid, I'd never once imagined that I wouldn't have a relationship with Evie as an adult. But I may need to accept that the gulf between us is impossible to close.

Relationships are weird like that. We all have our own stories about the people we loved the most. In my sister's eyes, she was abandoned— left behind with a coven of witches while our mother took me with her. In Evie's mind, I was the important one. The daughter my mom loved enough to take with her.

And in my eyes, my sister received what I had always wanted— a stable childhood surrounded by people who cared about her. I had a childhood spent on the run, until, one day, my mother never came home.

I glanced at Vas. "I was seventeen when my mom died. Evie was fourteen." The same age I'd been when mom took me on the run, leaving Evie behind with the witches. "We were living in Austin. I don't know why mom came back to Durham— she'd become so paranoid that she never talked to me. I was a teenager and becoming an asshole. I missed my sister and I was tired of constantly moving. When mom left for this visit, I told her I might not be there when she came back. Instead, she was the one who never came back."

Something in my chest wrenched and I forced my voice to be steady. “I was told it was an accident.”

Vas’ eyes met mine. “It wasn’t.”

“No. I came back to Durham and told Evie that mom had died, but she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with me.” Cold. Her face had been so cold when I’d told her. Her eyes had gone blank with what might’ve been shock, but she’d simply nodded, thanked me, and shut the door in my face.

“I should’ve stayed. Evie was just a kid. Just a sad, lonely kid who needed a sister. Instead, I did as she asked. I left Durham. There was nothing here for me except memories. So I went back to Austin, where I’d been training under Edward Sutton—”

Vas’ mouth dropped open. “Wait, wait, wait. You were training under Sutton?”

I smiled. “Yeah. My mom... she was normal growing up, you know? We moved around as kids, but she got transferred for work a lot. One day, when I was fourteen, she just snapped. She came home from work and... I’d never seen her so scared. That night, she left my sister with the coven and took me with her.”

Screams still rang out in my ears in my dreams. I’d *roared* for my sister, and she’d screamed her rage.

I pushed the memories down where they belonged. “Anyway, Mom devolved into full-fledged paranoia. I don’t know where she found the money, but she somehow convinced Sutton to train me.”

Vas tilted his head. “Explains why you’re so fast for a human.”

“Yeah.” Sutton had explained, in great detail, the way muscle memory worked. We spent close to a year working on nothing but defensive drills. From there, he trained me every single day until I moved back to Durham.

“Anyway, my sister hates us both for leaving her. I can’t blame her. She was only ten when we left.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “I need to talk to Mary’s coven leader. And then I need a drink.”

Vas nodded. “Sounds good.”

I found an empty spot a few streets from Meredith’s. I’d walk home after a few drinks if I had to. Within a few minutes, I was parked at the bar, brooding into my drink. Next to me, Vas drank water. He’d said one of us had to stay sober and alert. After all, I hadn’t exactly been making friends

recently.

Meredith's was busy. Mere was hurrying from one side of the bar to the other, and I watched sightlessly as I ran a finger around the edge of my glass.

I had no leads, demons were still dying— and being turned into puppets with a kind of magic I'd never seen before— and I'd burned any semblance of a bridge with the witches.

And my bounty? I snorted. I was useless there too. I'd called Jessica Walker on my way to the bar. According to her, Mary dropped out of the coven with no warning several months ago. Jessica has smugly told me that Mary had already been replaced with a witch who'd moved here from New York for a chance to be a member of the Walker coven.

Then there was my sister. The first time I'd seen Evie since I told her our mother was dead, and I'd scared the shit out of her with power I couldn't control. I should give myself a pat on the back. It took work to fuck things up as well as I had.

"You want to talk about it?"

I glanced at Vas. He was leaning against the bar, facing the rest of the room, long legs stretched out in front of him. He looked like a bodyguard, his gaze sweeping the room as he talked to me.

"Not really." I signaled for another round.

Vas was quiet and I surveyed him. He seemed just as at home here as he did in Samael's tower. And if I had a demon to question, I may as well use him.

"Does Samael have any enemies?"

Vas shot me a look like I was being particularly dense and I sighed. "Okay. Does he have any demon enemies?"

He tilted his head.

"His most powerful enemy is in the underworld."

Well I sure as hell wasn't going anywhere near the underworld. "Could that enemy control a demon in this world while he was there?"

He shrugged, but after a moment he shook his head. "It's unlikely. When we travel through a portal, our wings disappear, and so do most of our ties to the underworld. I haven't experienced it myself, but if his enemy had the power to control demons from the underworld, he would strike Samael directly."

I chewed on my lip. "What about demon enemies in this world?"

"Sure. Samael controls most of the United States, and there are hundreds

of high demons who would love to take that power from him.”

“Who’s the second most powerful demon?”

He opened his mouth and I held up a hand. “Wait. Who’s the second most powerful demon who isn’t loyal to Samael?”

“Elathan.”

“Where does he live?”

“San Diego.” Vas shook his head at me. “Samael would never allow you to go to California without him. Entering Elathan’s territory would be seen as an act of war. Besides, Samael would have considered whether he could be behind the attacks. He likely has his spies in place watching him.”

And another theory bites the dust.

“Who’s this enemy in the underworld?”

Vas shifted in his seat. “You should ask Samael about that.”

I snarled at him and he laughed. “I’m not just being mysterious. I’ve spent most of my childhood in this world, remember?”

The fae bartender practically danced over to me, swapping my drink for a new one. “Thanks.” I turned my body to face Vas. “What about your family?”

He stretched out next to me. “My parents were killed when the portals opened. We weren’t planning to leave. Lucifer had ordered all high demons to stay where he could keep them under his thumb.”

I held up my hand. “Wait. Is Lucifer actually the ruler of the underworld?”

“Yeah. Humans got a few things right, but most of what they know was told to them by lesser demons summoned centuries before the portals opened.” I blinked, a plethora of questions on the tip of my tongue. But Vas was still talking.

“There had already been a rebellion brewing. My parents had joined those who protested Lucifer’s rule. They were members of his court. When he found out, he sent his best assassin to kill them.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged. “I was so young I didn’t know what happened. Daimonion left me alive,” his face went cold. “And that was a mistake. One day, I’ll make him pay for what he did to my parents.”

Vas and I had more in common than I’d realized. “So your uncle raised you?”

“Yeah. He found out too late that Daimonion had been sent. When he

arrived, I was sitting between my parent's bodies, screaming for my mother. A few days later, the portals opened. Ag knew if he left me behind, Lucifer would find out, and kill me to leave an example to anyone else in his court who thought to join the rebellion. He took me with him and raised me in this world."

"That explains why you... blend in more than the other demons."

"Yeah. I've only ever known this world. My uncle made sure I was raised with the traditions of our people, but when I was a kid, I used to sneak out and go play with the human kids in the park."

I gaped at him and he laughed. "Most of our powers don't appear until puberty. My wings were hidden, so people assumed I was a human orphan. The Decade of Despair had just ended when I began sneaking out."

"You guys rebelled against Lucifer, but you follow Samael," I said, and his smile disappeared as he got to his feet.

"All of us would die for Samael," he said, shaking his head as I opened my mouth. "His secrets are his own to tell. But Danica... he's not a monster."

I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about it. Across the other side of the bar, Mere caught my eye. Her eyes dropped to my hand and the gold winding beneath my sleeve, and something like worry crossed her face as she made her way closer to me.

"How are you doing, Danica?" she asked, wiping her hands on a towel as she nodded at someone who called her name.

"Been better."

She smiled. "Well, you're in the right place."

Vas shifted and I turned my head. One of the demons from Thursday dinner had walked in.

"Go talk to him," I said. "I'm fine here."

Vas nodded, stalking away to lean against the wall by the door, his eyes on my form even as he chatted with the other demon.

"He's scary," Mere said and I tilted my head, watching him.

"You think so?"

Vas winked at me and I attempted a smile, turning back to the bar.

"Listen," Mere said, glancing around as she lowered her voice. "I've got something to tell you. I might be overstepping, but..."

"Go ahead."

She nodded at my hand. "I asked around. That's not a normal demon mark, you know that, right?"

“Yeah.” I turned my hand over, showing her the thick, black slash on my inner wrist. “I’ve got one of these too. When Samael found me in his club, he decided to make an example of me. He figured this would embarrass me more, and the asshole likes to see me squirm.”

Mere opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

I gave her a hard stare. “What?”

“I think you need to ask Samael what that mark really does.”

Her bartender was kneeling behind the bar attempting to find something, and he called out to her.

“I better get back to work.” She hurried away, leaving me frowning after her.

I was so sick of being in the dark. With *everything*. I stood up, downed my drink, and walked over to Vas, who was still chatting with the demon next to him. Both of their eyes landed on my face.

“What is it?”

“I need you to take me to Samael.”

DANICA



Was had obviously spoken to Samael, who'd given him the okay, because I was waved through the lobby, and a demon I hadn't yet met escorted me up to the penthouse. I nodded at him and stepped off the elevator, entering the huge suite.

I walked through the living room and into his bedroom. Samael was on the balcony, staring out at the city below him, a glass of what might've been whisky in his hand. He was also shirtless. I attempted to ignore that little fact, but my eyes had a mind of their own and I drank in the smooth muscles of his back and shoulders.

It should be illegal to look that good.

The balcony was vast, probably to make it easier for people with wings to take off. On the right side, two armchairs and a long sofa guarded a small table.

Samael turned, pleasure lighting his eyes. He was far too pleased with himself and I suppressed a groan. I'd voluntarily entered his territory. Of course he was pleased.

Samael lifted his drink to his mouth and I was treated to a view of his muscles flexing. His muscles were perfectly defined, sculptured in a way that made me wish I could run my hands over them. They weren't the kind of muscles that came from the gym. Samael looked like he had seen combat and war, and his power seemed to twine toward me, inviting me to take a step closer. And then another.

I was struck dumb. Completely speechless.

Samael raised his drink again, and this time I caught him flexing. I did

what any smart woman would do in my situation. I let my gaze take one, unsanctioned trip down the taut muscle of his chest and along the ridges of his abs, and then I turned away dismissively, focusing on the city below me.

Samael narrowed his eyes on my face. “Why are you here, Danica?”

I kept my eyes on the golden lights of the city below us. We were so high up, I felt slightly dizzy. “The mark on my wrist. What does it mean?”

“It’s a bond.”

“I know it’s a bond. Why haven’t I seen anyone else with this kind of bond?”

He stepped closer to me, radiating warmth. I carefully avoided looking at him. That way lay madness.

I could feel his gaze burning into me. “Do you usually spend time with people who are bonded to demons?”

“You’re dancing around the subject. The black mark on my wrist is a demon bond. So what, exactly is the gold about?”

“You’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset. You haven’t told me—”

“Not about the bond. What happened today?”

I glanced at him. His eyes flashed, warning me away from the subject of the bond. I would *make* him tell me, oh yes I would. I just needed to find the right way to ask. Maybe I had to stroke his ego a little, or get him mad enough that he said something he wished he hadn’t.

I’d drop it for now and circle back around.

“My power... did something.” The words were out of my mouth before I even realized they were there.

Samael raised an eyebrow. “You mean *you* did something with *your* power.”

I turned and paced away, stopping at the other end of the balcony. “It didn’t feel like that. One minute I was talking to someone and the next I was suffocating her with my magic.”

“How did it feel?”

I blinked at him. “It felt good. I felt powerful.”

“Then what is the problem?”

My hands fisted. “She’s an old lady. Samael. She didn’t want to tell me anything, and I forced her to.” Bile crept up my throat.

“You used her power to hold her in place.” He nodded. “Good work.”

“How can you say that?”

“You were strong. Power makes people think twice before attempting to hurt you. That can only be a good thing.” He studied me like he’d never seen me before. “I find I have a vested interest in keeping you alive.”

I shook my head. “I should go. This was a mistake.” Demons had very different ideas about right and wrong. In the demon world, might makes right.

“You’re still thinking like a human.”

“I *am* a human.”

He snorted and I wrestled with that. There was no doubt that I wasn’t fully human at this point. The power I was using to shield wasn’t witch magic. “I *want* to be a human.”

“The more you suppress your power, the more it’s going to fight against you, and the worse it will be when you lose control. It has already been suppressed all these years, I doubt it will put up with you suppressing it anymore.”

“You talk about it like it’s alive.”

He shrugged. “Some believe it is.”

“I was a monster, Samael. Unrecognizable.”

His eyes seemed to glow like starlight as he examined my face. I sighed. He just didn’t get it. Or maybe *I* didn’t get it. Either way, we weren’t even close to being on the same page. We weren’t even in the same book.

My phone vibrated and I took the distraction, pulling it out of my pocket. Cara. She’d run more tests, but still couldn’t find any reason why the arrow would’ve killed a high demon. Was only one of them poisoned? I wished again that I’d gotten my hands on the arrow that killed Vercan.

I glanced at Samael and he raised one eyebrow. “What?”

His face went blank as I explained the test results and I narrowed my eyes at him. “You know something I don’t.”

He opened his mouth and I held up a hand. “Yeah, yeah, there are many things you know that I don’t. Tell me why those arrows can kill high demons.”

“I don’t think so, bounty hunter. Perhaps when your two weeks are up and you have no doubt about where your loyalties lie.”

“You’ll never have my loyalty, Samael.”

He simply gazed at me, his expression oh-so-satisfied. “I look forward to making you eat those words.”

I scowled at him, turning away once more. Durham stretched out, the

lights warring with shadows, accented by neon signs.

“Something else is wrong,” Samael said.

I threw up my hands. “Everything is wrong at this point. Ever since I walked into your tower, my life has turned into a steaming pile of shit.”

The bastard had the gall to laugh at me. I glanced at him and then immediately ripped my gaze away in an attempt to ignore what the sight of him laughing did to me.

“Am I inconveniencing you?” he sounded completely unrepentant and entirely amused.

“It’s not funny, you know. I was doing just fine before I got involved with demons.”

“And there’s your problem.”

“What?”

I turned, facing him head as he prowled even closer. Soon, he’d be close enough to touch. “You still think it was coming into contact with my people that caused all your problems. And the most remarkable thing of all, is that you believe you were doing ‘just fine.’ You’re so obsessed with your mother’s murder that you stole from one of the most dangerous paranormals in this country. You took the chance that you could sneak past my dragon, all in the hope of—what—vengeance?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Don’t tell me you don’t have scores to settle yourself.”

“Are you presuming to be as long-lived and powerful as I?”

“Of course not.”

He quirked a brow, entirely too entertained by me. But his eyes turned serious, intent. “Until you accept that your power would have manifested anyway—you can’t take back control.” He’d somehow moved even closer to me and I hadn’t noticed. His scent wafted toward me, enticing me to take that final step.

I heard what he was saying, but it was a bit too convenient for me. “So you’re the answer to all my problems?” I was being belligerent, and it wasn’t like me. Pettiness, I excelled at. Belligerence, not so much. But my life had gotten overly complicated, and I needed someone to blame.

“No, little witch. But I’m the man who’s making sure you learn to use your power. I’m keeping you alive.”

I stiffened at that, and his eyes narrowed on my face. “You may thank me however you please, witchling.”

I gave him the look that ludicrous comment deserved and he canted his head, running his gaze over my body. “That suppression spell would’ve crumbled eventually. Likely at the most inconvenient time possible. And you would’ve been all alone, with no idea what was happening to you, with no way to regain control. Your magic flares with great emotion. Who brings that emotion out in you, hmm?”

He knew about my sister. He’d done his research alright. “You son of a bitch.”

“Careful, bounty hunter. I let you get away with a lot. But even *I* have limits.”

“You don’t let me get away with a damn thing.”

“I let you get away with more than you know. I break all my rules for you, Danica.”

I didn’t know what to do with that. I was breaking all my rules for him as well. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be standing on this balcony.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m centuries old, and with you, I feel like a teenage human boy. It’s not a comfortable place for me to be in, and it’s dangerous for you.”

“Dangerous how?”

He gave me a slow smile that made me want to climb him like a tree.

“Why did you come here?”

“Why are you changing the subject?”

He shook his head, obviously tired of me, and turned away. The dismissive move made fury burn through me. It was as if someone else was in control of my body and I watched myself stalk after him, my hand poised to shove him in the back.

The tip of my fingers found impossibly soft feathers, and Samael was suddenly facing me, in a move almost too fast to see. I froze, and the hair on the back of my arms lifted at that unearthly speed.

I was fast. It was my best quality– the one that kept me alive when I went up against paranormals who were way out of my weight class. But he was faster, stronger, and much, much more powerful. Was that why I was so entranced with him?

Samael leaned down, until his face was inches from mine. His eyes were icy. “Don’t presume to touch what isn’t yet yours, witchling.”

I snarled and my hand whipped out, wrapping around his neck, as I pulled his mouth to mine.

From the way he tensed, I'd surprised him. But he took a microsecond to recover, and then I was in his arms, his hands planted beneath my butt, my legs wrapped around his waist.

He carried me from the balcony, and a moment later I was on his massive bed, staring up at the ceiling as he pressed open-mouthed kisses to my neck. He'd lined himself up against me, and my eyes nearly rolled into the back of my head at the feel of him so close, and yet so far. His mouth found mine once more, and I was drunk on the taste of him, on the feel of his tongue, thrusting against mine.

I... melted against him. My hands had a mind of their own, sliding over his wings, before they found smooth muscle, until they wrapped around his back and pulled him even closer.

He disappeared and I blinked, but he'd only moved far enough away to pull my tank top off. Within a second, it was over my head and he was dropping kisses along my breasts.

My bra disappeared, his mouth found my nipple, and a torrent of obscenities poured from me as I gasped.

A strangled laugh. "What a filthy mouth you have," he mused, before lowering his head to my other breast. I writhed, in turns dragging him closer and pushing him away.

I needed to kiss him again. I needed to kiss him and never stop. Distantly, I heard a warning sound in my head, like a siren that blared *danger, danger* but for once, I couldn't bring myself to care.

I groaned at the taste of him, and he responded with a growl. I was surrounded by wings. I could feel them above the place where my hands met his back, and a gentle breeze met my face as he shifted, unstrapping my knife sheaths.

"You're a walking armory," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the tip of my nose. The move was so surprisingly tender that all I could do was stare up at him, momentarily stunned.

He took my shock and used it, peeling my jeans off. I was wearing plain, utilitarian underwear, but Samael made a sound, low in his throat... a sound of such incredible *want* that the world spun dizzily around me.

My thighs clenched, and he laid one hand between my breasts, slowly moving it down my body. The look in his eyes was 100% possessive, satisfied male.

One night. I'd give myself one night to get whatever this was between us

out of my system. In the morning, I'd strap on my weapons and no longer crave Samael. Not even a little.

My underwear was gone, and I gasped as I caught a glimpse of his claws. They were tucked away a second later, and his hand slipped between my legs. My body was shaking, a mixture of lust and anticipation making me tremble for him. Samael brushed one finger over the bundle of nerves that ached for him. I lifted my hips, needing more, and he let out a low laugh.

"I want you beyond reason."

I blinked at that, but he was taking my mouth again, his fingers caressing and stroking. The kiss told me in no uncertain terms that I belonged to him, and his hands played my body like I was his instrument. I slid my hand down his body, needing to feel the thick length of him. He raised his head, his eyes molten silver as he stared down at me, catching my hand in his.

"I need to taste you."

I could get on board with that. He kissed his way down my body, his hands stroking my thighs. Samael gave me one very satisfied grin, and then lowered his head.

I let out a sound I'd never heard myself make before. Something between a moan and a plea. Samael responded with a growl, his tongue swirling around my clit as he pushed one finger inside me.

An ache took up residence somewhere in my lower abdomen. An ache that only he could fix. I couldn't seem to get enough air, my breath coming out in ragged gasps as I writhed, on the edge of something incredible.

Pleasure crested, a wave of intense, unrelenting ecstasy. My climax swept through me and I threw my head back, gasping, unable to utter a sound as I shook, floating somewhere above my body. Samael carried me through it, bringing me back to earth with gentle swipes of his tongue.

I reached for him, desperate to feel him inside me.

Someone knocked on the door.

Samael glanced over his shoulder and let out a snarl that sounded like an enraged animal. They knocked louder.

"What?"

He was poised over me, his body surrounding mine. I wanted to tell him to ignore whoever was at the door, but reality had just knocked.

And it was time to answer.

"I just got a call from Botis. It's Ag. He's awake and able to be questioned," Bael's deep baritone said.

Samael took one moment to glance longingly down at my body, spread out before him. Then he packed it away. I watched as it happened. The glow of lust in his eyes dimmed as he reached for control. He pressed one kiss to my mouth and climbed off me, his gaze promising things he couldn't give me in this moment.

He turned and strode toward his closet, and I watched him go, heat swirling through me as the toned muscles of his ass teased me.

He pulled on a pair of pants and turned to me. "Don't go anywhere," he ordered. I nodded but didn't say a word. He didn't notice my refusal to speak, his mind obviously already on his second, and I blew out a breath.

Samael reached for a pair of shoes and slipped them on. Watching him get dressed was surprisingly domestic. He glanced at me again, his hands fisting as I reached for the fluffy blanket on the foot of his bed, pulling it around me.

With a nod, he opened the door, keeping his body positioned so he blocked any view into his bedroom. The door shut behind him and I let myself fall back onto his bed, allowing the rich scent of his covers to envelop me for one single moment.

DANICA



*M*y phone rang. I opened my eyes and glared at it. Why hadn't I put it on silent when I'd crept back in here? I'd also forgotten to pull the blinds, and the sunlight was stabbing into my eyes. I'd never get back to sleep now.

"You snuck out of my bed."

I yawned. "Good morning, Samael."

"Are you *ashamed* of me, little witch?"

I needed to tread very carefully here. The male ego was a fragile thing, and Samael knew damn well that if word got around that not only was I bound to a demon, but that I'd been in his bed, I was in deep shit.

While I hunted all kinds of creatures as a bounty hunter, my specialty was lesser demons, because the imprint of demon power was found near my mom's body. What would happen when the Mage Council decided I couldn't be trusted to hunt these demons since I was rolling around in the sheets with their king?

The council could continue to give me low-level missing person cases for the rest of my life, and I'd have to put up with it until I avenged my mother. And I'd be stuck in Durham a lot longer if I didn't have easy access to demons to interrogate.

Right now, my job took me all over the Triangle, allowing me to come into contact with paranormals from every faction. And each time I interviewed one of them, I became one step closer to finding the answers I needed.

Yeah, a little voice in my head said *but look at how many people you've*

interviewed since you started working for Samael— high demons, fae, even the werewolf king.

I squashed that little voice. One fact remained: In any kind of relationship with Samael— even if it was just sexual— he would always have all the power. As long as I was bound to him, the power imbalance would mean we were never equals.

I'd enjoyed myself, sure. In fact, just the glimpse I'd had of Samael unleashed had made it clear that being with him would likely be the peak of sex for my life. I couldn't see how it could ever get any better, and certainly not with anyone else. But getting that close once was a mistake. More than once was a pattern.

“Witchling?”

I blinked. Samael was still on the other end of the phone.

“I needed to feed my cat.” I put him on speaker and glanced at the time. 10am.

He heaved a sigh, as if he didn't quite know what to do with me. I rolled my eyes.

“There was an attack on another of my demons. I had instructed them not to travel alone until this murderer was found, and someone targeted a young demon who was visiting his girlfriend. They weren't aware that his friend was nearby waiting for him.”

My pulse sped up. “Is the demon okay?”

“He will be. His friend called for backup, and would have chased the suspects, however he needed to staunch the worst of the blood.”

Holy shit. “Suspects?”

“Yes. A group of them. All in dark cloaks. However one of them stumbled and fell, drawing the attention of a dark fae who happened to be in the area. He held her until my people arrived.”

“Where?”

He gave me the address and I pushed my hair off my face. “I'll be right there.”

Lia was asleep with her paw thrown over her eyes, so I crept out of the bed and pulled on my clothes. Teeth brushed, hair up, weapons in place, I was walking out of my apartment five minutes after Samael's call.

It was already warm— a sign that this spring was likely to be short. But Vas was wearing a leather jacket when I met him outside. His face was hard, shoulders tight, and I studied him as I walked toward my car.

“Samael said to fly you. He wants you there ASAP.”

This was new. I frowned but turned back to him. Vas crouched slightly, wrapping his arms around me until I was cradled in his arms like a child.

“We need to talk about this,” I said. There was absolutely no dignity in this position, and I was going to look like an idiot when we landed.

Vas ignored me and shot into the sky, the wind stealing the air from my lungs as a huge chunk of hair escaped my ponytail. Being carried around like a sack of flour took some getting used to. Thankfully, I wouldn’t be doing it for much longer.

“Are you okay?” I asked Vas. “You seem sad.”

He clenched his jaw as we flew over the city. The wind on my face was a welcome relief in the heat.

“The demon who was attacked today is one of my close friends.”

My stomach sank. “I’m so sorry.”

He nodded, his gaze focused on the distance. “We need to find whoever’s doing this, Danica.”

“We will,” I swore. My chest tightened at the hopelessness in his voice and something that felt uncomfortably close to shame twisted my stomach. Before I got caught in Samael’s territory, I’d thought of demons with nothing but disdain— and let’s be honest— terror. They weren’t human, would never come close to having the same moral code, and I’d listened to the rumors, which said demons were incapable of love.

I’d nodded in agreement when people talked about how much better this world would be if the demons hadn’t come through those portals. I’d sneered at those who found them compelling— who weren’t smart enough to stay the fuck away from creatures who could snap their necks with little more than a thought.

But demons *were* capable of what I’d arrogantly always assumed were human emotions. Vas was proof of that. His love for his uncle, his rage and concern for his friend. His deep respect for Samael— he felt things. Just as deeply as I did.

And Samael felt things too.

I didn’t quite know what to do with this revelation.

I stiffened in his arms as we approached the site. “No,” I barked. “Don’t land in front of everyone! Good God, man. Take me around the corner or something.”

Vas heaved a sigh, rolling his eyes, but my dramatics seemed to have

distracted him from his brooding. The demons were tiny dots below us, but one of those dots glanced up as we flew lower, and I instinctively knew it was Samael.

The other demons hadn't noticed me yet, but they would soon, and my ass-kicker image would take a hit if I arrived clutched in Vas's arms like a baby. If he was going to haul me around, we needed something that would work better. Maybe some kind of rope system?

I closed my eyes as the ground got closer, and Vas grunted as he landed, bouncing me slightly in his arms as his body absorbed the impact. He placed me on the ground and led me around the corner to where a group of demons were gathered.

"Hey Vas? What's a group of demon's called?"

He dragged his gaze away from where it had gotten stuck on a wide pool of blood on the ground and the corner of his mouth curled up.

"An envy. I know what you're doing, you know. You don't have to distract me. I can handle this."

I sniffed. "I don't know what you're talking about." I ignored Vas's snort and rolled my shoulders as we walked toward Samael. The demon's eyes met mine and heat flared in them. It was as if the air crackled between us, and the voices went silent.

I glanced over my shoulder, where a group of humans had already gathered, their phones flashing as they took pictures in the early morning light.

We weren't downtown. This was a residential neighborhood in Old North Durham, and yet the word had already spread, and more cars were arriving as humans fought to get a picture of Samael.

I now understood why Samael was sending us out to do the legwork of this investigation. All the awe was downright distracting. I eyed him as I approached.

"Tell me, does all the bowing and scraping ever get to be too much?"

He stared at me, his eyes wintery. They lightened slightly as I put my hands on my hips, shaking my head as a woman walked past, her eyes firmly glued to Samael's butt.

"Bow for me, bounty hunter," he purred, "and I'll tell you if it's too much."

The moment stretched between us, and his lips quirked before Bael cleared his throat.

Samael gestured at the blood. “This was where Fecor was attacked,” he said. “His friend surprised them and injured one of their people. The attackers were so focused on helping their injured that they left this one behind.” He jerked his head and I froze.

Around the side of the nearest house—a shabby white duplex that needed a refresh—ten or more demons were gathered.

Three of them moved aside and my mouth dropped open. The woman sitting on the ground was draped in chains. She was probably in her fifties, with lines etched into her face that spoke of a hard life.

She let out a growl and I glanced at Samael. “You gagged her with your power.”

He merely nodded. “And now she’s going to tell us everything she knows.”

Samael

The witch let out a muffled complaint and I shoved more power in her mouth, preventing her from speaking until I was ready. I glanced at Bael and he nodded. He would take over the search of the area.

Danica shifted on her feet next to me. The little witch likely wouldn’t approve of what was about to happen.

“This witch was found near the body.”

Danica glanced from me to the witch chained in front of me, wide-eyed. “Do you have proof she was actually involved?”

I waved my hand. “The witch will tell me if she was involved. Won’t you... Mavis?” I studied the drivers’ license in my hand and gave her a wide smile. She ceased struggling and gulped as the blood drained from her cheeks.

“Samael—”

“Quiet, witchling. The demon she attempted to kill is a father. If it were up to this woman, he wouldn’t have lived to see his children grow.”

Danica gazed past me at the witch, her green eyes dark with fury. But they lightened at the sight of the dark power keeping her quiet. I’d had a

feeling that, for all her pragmatism when it came to violence, she wouldn't enjoy torture. The thought made the back of my neck itch, but I ignored it. Danica would belong to me for the rest of her life. She would need to get used to seeing things that her moral compass struggled to reconcile.

I ripped my power away from the witch's mouth.

"If you kill me, they'll make you hurt before you die, demon." She growled and shifted her gaze to Danica. "You and your traitor witch."

Danica angled her head but otherwise didn't react.

I handed the license to Vas. "Give this to Sitri and have him check it."

Vas nodded, and slipped away.

"Now, Mavis," I drawled. "Time to talk."

She immediately clamped her mouth shut and I laughed. She flinched.

"Who are you working with?"

She kept her mouth shut and I took a step closer. With a wave of my hand, I broke her left wrist.

She screamed. I sighed as profanities poured from her mouth.

"If I didn't need your tongue, I'd rip it out, witch. But you don't need your eyes to tell me what I want to know. Do you?"

Her eyes widened and I smiled at her as I opened my hand. I slowly closed it, my power crushing the bones in her right foot. She howled, and I took a step closer.

"So? Anything?"

She bared her teeth at me, and I turned as Vas approached. Danica was leaning against the house next door, the homes just a few feet apart. I studied her. She stared back at me.

"It's real." Vas said. "Sitri confirmed it."

I lifted my hand, and an orb of power appeared. Danica's eyes widened, while the witch simply gulped.

"Do you know what this is, Mavis?"

"Demon fire."

"So you know it could eat through your body within moments?"

Mavis glared at me. "If you think your power frightens me, you're wrong, demon. There are creatures much more terrifying than you."

I let a tiny fragment of my power float toward her. She turned gray, her terror clear, and a strangled sound escaped her throat.

"And now?" I asked.

Mavis opened her mouth and choked, and I sighed as I poked at her mind.

She'd been bound. While Gloria could likely remove it, it would require Mavis's cooperation. Otherwise, removing it would break her mind.

"She's been spelled," Danica said, and I nodded. Useless. My hand shook with the effort not to burn the witch. But perhaps Gloria could get some small sliver of information out of her before her mind broke.

The witch sneered at Danica. "You, betraying your kind and working for a demon. Do you have no dignity?"

Danica simply stared at her. The witch didn't like that. "Ask him," she rasped, with a glance in my direction. Her eyes darted, as if she could no longer focus. "Ask him why he was seen near your mother's body."

Danica went very still. "What are you talking about?"

"That wasn't in your report, was it? That the imprint of power near your mother's body perfectly matches Samael?"

"How would you know that?"

"Word gets around."

Danica reached for the Mistilteinn Dagger and held it between us, her face bloodless. "Did you kill my mother?"

"No."

The dagger didn't glow, but doubt still flashed through her eyes. "What were you doing near her body? Why didn't you tell me?"

"These are not questions you would like me to answer right now."

The witch cackled. "If you believe a demon, you deserve everything you get. Your mother was tortured, girl. This demon did it, and he didn't even think twice. Your poor mom must be turning in her grave to have her daughter bound to her murderer."

I snapped my fingers. The witch opened her mouth to scream, but her neck broke with a dull crack.

My fire licked at my fingers, and I tamped down the urge to turn her body to ash. I'd have it autopsied just in case it could tell us anything. Next to me, Danica barely breathed.

Danica

The world around us was silent. I could feel Samael's demons watching from a distance, but I was too busy staring at the body on the ground.

The witch was dead. All Samael had done was snap his fingers.

"Sorry to interrupt."

Samael turned his head, and I knew without looking that the demon who'd dared to approach had turned pale. I glanced at him. Romyel. The demon who'd sat next to me at dinner.

"What is it?" Samael's voice was so cold I shivered and his eyes darkened further.

"Sitri was going through the witch's phone, and he recognized a number. One of ours."

Samael went eerily still. "Who."

"A demon named Malgron. He works in the tower."

Samael glanced at Bael, who nodded and stepped away. I wouldn't want to be that demon right about now.

Samael took a step closer to me, and I was suddenly pressed against the wall of the alley, one of my knives in my hand as I stared at him.

He froze. For the first time, something that looked a lot like uncertainty crossed his face. It immediately disappeared, replaced by cool arrogance.

"Come back to my tower. We'll talk."

Translation: Come back to my bed, I'll distract you until you no longer know your own name.

"I have things to do, Samael. My deadline is approaching."

Silence. He examined me, his eyes hard. Samael didn't like anything he couldn't control. And when we'd almost slept together, the line between us had blurred. I was no longer just the witch who was forced to do his bidding. But that didn't mean he wouldn't kill me if he had to. He might regret it afterward, but he'd do it.

"We need to talk about the accusations the witch made."

"You mean the fact that your imprint was found near my mom's body?" That little tidbit had been left out of the crime scene report, and I was kicking myself for trusting Samael enough to fool around with him.

If he'd had anything to do with my mother's murder, I'd make sure he died if it was the last thing I did.

"What motive would I have to kill her, Danica?"

"Why don't you tell me why you were near her body, and we'll go from there."

“Let’s talk about this privately, little witch.”

“Let’s talk about it now.”

He heaved a sigh, and I tamped down the urge to bury my knife in his heart. It probably wouldn’t kill him, but it’d feel damn good.

“Do you really want me to talk about your mother here?” he opened his arms, taking in the alley, along with the demons still gathered and talking in hushed voices.

“Fine,” I said. I stalked toward Vas, unwilling to have Samael’s arms around me right now. Surprisingly, Samael didn’t protest, keeping his eyes on me as he gave me a slow smile and launched himself into the air.

My phone vibrated, and I held up a hand as Vas reached for me. “One sec. Steve just messaged me.”

Mary’s grandmother was a member of the McCormick coven. And Mary was kicked out of her last coven for sacrificing the coven leader’s dog. Be careful.

Why had that information been kept out of Mary’s file? The Mage Council wanted her brought in, so why not give me all the information?

Dread grabbed hold of my stomach and twisted. I’d been so busy focusing on Beatrice that I’d forgotten one important fact: Mary had been searching for witchweed too.

What if they were working together?

I messaged Steve back. *Thanks. Do me a favor– put a trace on her phone? Also, let’s check into all the other descendants of the coven. Facebook, Insta, Portal etc. I want to know who’s involved in this shit.*

Fine. That’s three you owe me.

I rolled my eyes. At this rate, I’d still be paying back my debts to Steve when I was old and gray.

I relayed the text to Vas, yelling over the wind as he flew me back toward the tower.

“We need to pay Mary a visit. I should’ve searched her house when I went looking for her, but she was just a failure to appear.” I shook my head, pissed at myself.

The tower loomed in the distance while Vas searched for the right words.

“You told me about how she was after the witchweed too, and I forgot as well. It’s been an insane few days.”

It was my job to remember, but Vas was attempting to cheer me up, so I’d let him.

“That’s putting it lightly. I’ll talk to Samael at the tower and then we can head to Mary’s. She’s not going to be home, but I need to check anyway, and follow up with some more of her contacts.”

Vas flew close to the tower, and I frowned as I spotted a familiar figure far below me.

“Can you get a little lower?”

We hovered for a moment and then Vas changed directions before dropping closer to the ground.

Yup. Familiar alright. It was Harriette who was pacing back and forth outside the tower, her delicate fae face pale, her hands twisting in front of her.

“She was a friend of my mom’s,” I said. “Let me just see what she wants and I’ll meet you inside.”

Vas nodded absently, the movement slow, as if all the energy had been sucked out of him.

“I’ll fill Samael in before you give him your thoughts,” he said. A hint of amusement entered his eyes at whatever sour expression I made.

Vas landed and I turned to where Harriette was waiting, her eyes darting as she took in the demons hurrying to and from the tower. She flinched as one of them launched into the air with a snap of invisible wings and I narrowed my own eyes on her face. She was incredibly jumpy for a woman who’d lived in this world— with demons—for seven decades now. Not to mention that portals had already existed in other realms, paranormals traveling back and forth between them.

“Hi,” I said, and she gave me a wary smile.

“Hi, Danica. I won’t keep you for long, but I just wanted to apologize for the other night.” She sighed and stared down at the ground, her hands still twisting. “I’d learned some bad news and had too much to drink. But I was out of line. Your mother would be proud of the woman you’ve become.”

I contemplated that. My mom taught me a few things about people when she’d still been alive, and what she hadn’t taught me, life experience had. Drunk, emotional people usually tell you exactly what they’re thinking— things they’d never admit to sober. Sure, Harriette may have regretted the things she’d said when she sobered up, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t meant them.

Harriette had come here to soothe her conscience. Because she was once my mom’s friend, and because she’d never once checked up on us after we’d

left. And because I was the only tie to my mom, and she didn't want me to think poorly of her.

Her eyes darted at my silence and I put her out of her misery. "It's okay, Harriette. I understand. You were shocked. It's fine."

The words were almost robotic, but the relief that flashed across her face made them worthwhile.

"I'd like to... show you a few things when you have some free time," she said. "Your mom left some things with me. She said I'd know when the time was right." Her gaze dropped to my arm. "I think the time is right."

I hesitated, but curiosity won out over my desire to spend as little time with Harriette as possible.

"Okay."

"I'm going out of town for a couple for weeks, but I'll message you when I'm back."

She turned and hurried away, and I stared after her.

"Harriette?"

She glanced over her shoulder and I took a deep breath. "Do you know who my father is?"

Her eyes turned hard. "Your mother gave her life keeping you girls safe. Don't make it meaningless."

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? I watched her walk away, my hands fisting.

Unlike my sister, who'd always longed to know who her father was, I'd never much cared. It had never occurred to me to go searching for someone who'd left while my mother was still pregnant with me, and never returned. If he didn't want to be part of my life, it was his damn loss.

Besides, Mom had gotten such a haunted expression on her face when Evie or I had asked about our fathers that we'd both stopped asking. I'd always assumed my father was a human or a low-level mage who had just been passing through.

Evie and I had agreed that it didn't matter. Mom had been lonely, and she'd had two relationships that ended poorly. She loved us more than enough to make up for the lack of two parents. And we all had each other.

But the dark power that churned deep within me wasn't from a mage, and it certainly wasn't from a human. If my father was dark fae, and alive, I wanted to know who he was. I turned, and something slammed into me with the force of a truck. I slid along the pavement, my hands scrambling for my

knives.

“I’m sorry,” the demon gasped. “I’m so sorry.”

He lifted his hand, claws poised to rip out my throat.

DANICA



The demon was young, likely a teenager, but his face was covered in deep pink scars—something that could only occur if someone had cut him and poured salt into the wound. The scars were fresh enough that a few of them still wept, the scabs flaking as he let out a dry sob.

If I didn't get my head in the game, he was going to kill me. He was on top of me, so I couldn't slide my Nim Cub out of the sheath around my neck. The sheath along my spine was out too.

I bent my right leg, getting my foot as close to my hand as I could beneath the demon's body. He was crouched over me, his hand trembling as if attempting to pause its downward trajectory. It felt like hours later, but I finally clamped my hand around the hilt of the knife in my boot sheath and pulled.

I thrust my blade up, deep into his stomach.

He groaned, falling forward. "Again," he urged, and I shuddered. What kind of sick shit was this?

His hand clamped around my throat, squeezing. "Again," he growled, eyes wild.

I pulled my blade free and shoved it into his throat. The angle was awkward, and I had no room to move, but he gurgled, his hand let go of my throat, and he fell to the side. It wouldn't keep him down for long. I made it to all fours and crawled away, jumping to my feet.

The demon pulled the knife from his throat. I'd somehow managed to miss the major arteries that would keep him down while he bled out before

his body began to heal the damage. Go me.

Distantly, I could hear shouting. No one would expect an attack right outside Samael's tower. The building was probably going into lockdown right at this minute.

The demon charged me and I stepped to the side, tripping him. He was a fast fucker though, and he twisted in the air, teeth bared as he leapt at me again.

I smashed my elbow into his face and he screamed in rage. "Kill me!" I lunged right, but couldn't avoid his hand as he swung, and the edge of his fist caught me in the face.

Pain exploded across my cheek and I went momentarily dizzy, dropping to my knees. The demon advanced on me.

Fuck this shit.

I *reached* for my magic, hauling it up to me. For once, it responded, and I gasped as it swept through my body, pouring out of me in a dark tornado.

The demon went flying into a car.

The shock of it helped me clamp down on my power, which wanted to rip and rend and *kill* whoever had attacked with no warning.

The demon's face twisted, and he moved in odd, jerky moments as he hauled himself to his feet, leaving a body-shaped dent in the Tesla.

"More," he rasped, advancing on me.

Someone was controlling him, and the thought of the amount of power it would take to make him little more than a puppet... bile flooded my mouth.

"Who did this?"

He opened his mouth, looking momentarily lost, but something swept over him and his eyes darkened. A snarl ripped from his throat as he lunged toward me.

"Witch, kill me." he rasped as I sidestepped and he jerkily corrected. "Now!"

I didn't want to.

Along with their normal powers, it was rumored that some older demons came into new powers as they aged. Depending on their origins, they could have an affinity for certain types of magic, and many of them involved forcing humans to do their bidding.

Could one of Samael's enemies have done this? A high demon who wanted to cover his tracks?

That kind of manipulation could be removed. Samael could likely do it. I

just needed to incapacitate this demon long enough that he could be chained up somewhere. And I'd heard rumors that Samael had a dungeon in the basement of his tower.

The demon stumbled toward me, fighting the good fight as he lurched drunkenly in a bid to slow his pace. It didn't work. His face went blank as he moved with demon swiftness, his hand curled as he aimed for my throat. I dodged left, caught his right wrist and wrenched it up. I twisted his arm higher as he snarled, then stepped behind him, kicking out at the back of his knee.

He dropped. I kept his elbow locked and waited.

He attempted to hit me with his left hand, so I lifted his arm, breaking his elbow. My stomach churning at his pained growl. I don't like hurting people who haven't hurt me, and this demon wasn't in control of his body. It felt like beating up a kid.

A kid who slammed one of his invisible wings into me as I fought to hold onto his arm. My hands slid. I was so distracted by the unfairness of it all that I'd forgotten about his wings, damnit.

There was only one option left. For a moment, the demon slumped, and that was the window I needed to jump onto his back.

I could feel his wings, curled tight between us. I had moments before he lost the fight against the witch's spell and used them to throw me off of him. "Kill me," he ground out.

"I'm sorry." I clamped his head in my hands and twisted, my stomach churning as he slumped to the ground. I was panting as I climbed off him, and my eyes met Vas' as he landed next to me, his face white.

The demon on the ground let out a growl, but he could heal a broken neck once he was safely locked away in Samael's dungeon.

He moved, slowly pushing up with his hands. My mouth fell open. His elbow and his neck were both broken. How the hell was his body still functioning?

I moved a few feet to the right, giving both Vas and me room to move. The demon's eyes met mine as he attempted to get to his knees, but he couldn't quite make it, falling back onto his face. He was done.

The demon turned his head from where it rested on the ground and gazed past me, pure relief sweeping across his face. I turned. Samael had landed.

And the expression on his face was wrath incarnate.

Whatever demon magic hiding his wings disappeared and I inhaled so

sharply I choked.

I didn't know if he'd dropped the magic purposefully— or if he was so infuriated he lost control. Either way, my blood froze as I stared at his wings. It was now incredibly evident why he kept them hidden.

I smelled sulfur, burning coal, and smoke. Samael's wings flared, spanning what had to be close to fifteen feet. I'd thought them soft and welcoming. In my weakest moments, I'd imagined stroking them with my fingertips.

There was nothing soft about them now. Samael's wings were so dark they seemed to suck in the light, a glossy obsidian that lightened to charcoal in places.

Sparks fell from the bottom of his wings, flaming out before they could hit the ground. If Samael turned and breathed fire, I wouldn't be at all surprised.

I glanced at the road, where a group of humans were holding up their phones, faces pale as they recorded us. *This* was why demons chose to keep their wings hidden. Because if humans and witches could see demons in their true form, they'd see through their carefully cultivated reputation as benevolent rulers and to the reality beneath.

The demon on the ground let out a rough gasp and I opened my mouth to reassure him.

His head exploded.

I flinched and slowly turned until my eyes met Samael's. Shadows twisted around him.

I glanced from him to the demon. "Goddamn it, Samael. He can't heal that!"

Talk about stating the obvious. My heart hurt at the waste of it. Meanwhile, the people who'd stopped to gape at the fight promptly tripped over each other as they scattered, running for their lives.

"Inside, witchling." Samael's face was blank, his voice quiet. Controlled.

I glanced from him to the demon, and my eyes stung. The guy hadn't wanted to hurt me. I opened my mouth, but a cutting look from Samael made me slam it closed. He stared past me at the body, and my chest clenched.

My shoulders slumped, my hands still shaking from the remaining adrenaline. Vas appeared next to me, and I allowed him to take my arm, escorting me into the tower. My neck prickled at the eyes on me from all directions.

A group of demons landed, surrounding the few humans who'd been brave enough to keep recording. The humans handed over their phones without a word and hightailed it away from the tower.

We stepped into the lobby, everyone silent as we walked past. Lilith stood a few feet from the entrance, white-faced and trembling with fury. Her eyes met mine for one fraught moment, and I tensed. She'd known the demon. And she was suppressing the urge to kill me. She turned away and I let out a shaky breath. If it came down to a fight between me and *the* Lilith, I knew who was walking away, and it wasn't me.

Bitterness coated my tongue. The demon hadn't needed to die. But with so many witnesses, Samael had decided to make an example of him. The guy may have been under a compulsion, but the world would simply see an out-of-control demon. A demon who Samael had put down. His world was full of shitty choices.

We entered the elevator. Next to me, Vas was silent, and I glanced at him. He slowly turned his head.

"What was his name?" I asked.

Sorrow swept over Vas' face. "Ramiel."

It was worse knowing his name. But he deserved that at least.

Vas shifted. "I'm sorry for leaving you."

"I told you to. No one could've seen this coming."

"Samael did. As soon as he saw me land without you, he almost killed me."

"I handled it."

Vas shook his head and turned away as the elevator doors opened. We were on the floor with the gym. The floor where I practiced my wards. I didn't have it in me to argue. I just followed Vas into the room where Samael liked to get under my skin.

I pushed my hair off my face. "Ramiel... he was trying everything he could to fight against the impulse. Someone was using him like a puppet."

Vas lifted his gaze from where he'd been examining the floor, retribution stark in his eyes. "Yes."

"How much power would it take to do that to a high demon?"

"A lot. Samael could do it. He probably wouldn't even break a sweat."

I shivered at that. "Who else?"

"Maybe Ag, before he was weakened. Bael could *maybe* hold a demon for a few minutes, but I doubt he could make one attack like that. I'll ask

around. Find a list of demons. But anyone powerful enough to enslave one of us is loyal to Samael. At least in this realm.”

I nodded absently. “So it’s definitely the witches then.”

“Witches can’t enslave us.”

“They’re doing it, Vas. The descendants of the McCormick coven have figured out exactly how to enslave and kill demons, and it’s only going to get worse if we don’t stop them.”

A dull flush worked its way up Vas’s face and his hands fisted. “We’ll stop them. You can count on that.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I need to get back. Samael asked you to wait here,” he said. I didn’t argue, walking to the window where I stared down at the demons gathered below. Their heads were bowed as two of Samael’s men lifted the body.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Kill me.

I flinched and turned away. All I could see was Ramiel’s face as he begged me to kill him. I couldn’t sit, so I paced the room restlessly. It took an incredible amount of power to bespell a demon. The McCormick descendants had an end-game in mind, so why waste that power attempting to kill me?

Was it less about me, and more about damaging the demons’ reputation? The recordings of that fight would be streamed around the world. Anyone watching it would see a huge, feral demon attacking a much smaller woman. Never mind that I could’ve killed him several times before Samael stepped in. Optics were everything.

“You were nearly killed today.”

I froze. Something about Samael’s voice warned me to tread carefully.

I turned as he entered the room. His wings were hidden once again. “I incapacitated the demon who attacked me. I could have killed him at any time. Maybe you should consider that a warning.”

I’d never treaded carefully in my life. Why start now?

Unsurprisingly, Samael paid no attention to my tough talk. Instead, he prowled close, catching my chin in his strong fingers.

“Hey!”

“You’re only alive because that demon was too young to have come into his powers.”

I didn’t bother pulling against his hold. Samael was in a *mood* and the winged menace would let go when he chose to.

“If he’d been able to control his powers, the compulsion spell wouldn’t have worked on him. I’m guessing there’s a limit to the witches’ spell,

otherwise they'd be trapping demons like Bael and *you* in their compulsion."

"You still can't control your wards."

"I'm getting better. I used my magic to throw him away from me."

He scoffed and I suppressed the urge to headbutt him.

"Not good enough. If you'd tried harder, that demon wouldn't have been able to get close to you. You're barely making any progress. Your fear continues to get in the way of your potential."

"I'm not afraid of my own power."

He let out a humorless laugh. "Then how come each time I feel your power seething deep within you, you shut it down?"

Because sometimes that power felt... evil. I was scared that once I started using it... it would start using me.

Samael's gaze was glued to my face and I had a feeling he saw beneath my false bravado to the coward I truly was. Fine. I was afraid. Sue me.

I'd never longed for power. I'd secretly always wished I was entirely human. As soon as I killed whoever murdered my mom, I was saving every cent I had and moving to California where I'd get a job in a bar or a cafe and start a brand new life. A life without demons and witches. The kind of life my mom had always wanted.

Samael let go of my chin and something that might have been regret crossed his face.

"If you won't use your power, I'll take matters into my own hands."

The threat in his voice unnerved me so I went on the attack. "Dude, why do you care! I promise I won't get killed until after I've figured out who's killing your demons. You've got a damn babysitter with me most of the day anyway!"

He wasn't listening. Instead, he paced the room like a caged tiger, sending me the occasional dark look.

SNAP

A breeze rustled my hair, and a vase crashed to the floor across the room as I gaped. The demon in front of me had just spread his wings. Now that I knew what those wings looked like, the thought scared the shit out of me.

The rage disappeared from his face and a wind blew my hair back once more as he pulled his wings back into himself. I wanted to see them again almost as much as I wanted to take my next breath.

He stalked toward me and I couldn't help but retreat until my back met the wall.

Samael stared down into my eyes for a long moment. Then he seemed to come to some kind of decision, because he fisted my hair in his huge hand.

And his mouth crashed down on mine.

I gasped against him, and he took the opportunity, stroking my tongue with his. The kiss was over too soon, and Samael stroked one finger down my cheek as he stared down at me.

He kissed me once more.

“You won’t enjoy what happens next,” he murmured against my mouth, and I stiffened. “But it’s for your own good.”

DANICA



I pushed at Samael's chest, my pulse thundering at his warning, but he was already gone, closing his eyes for a moment, brow furrowed. A few seconds later, Vas appeared. He must've been waiting outside.

"You asked for me?" His eyes lightened slightly, some of the sadness leaving his face as he took in my mussed hair and what was likely a shellshocked expression. The grin he gave me told me he knew exactly what I'd been doing, and I half expected him to give me a thumbs up.

Samael struck without warning.

He moved so fast my eyes could barely keep track of him. I screamed, shock making my throat tight as he hauled his fist back and punched Vas in the face.

"What the fuck, Samael!"

The demon ignored me and threw Vas against the wall, choking him with one hand.

My own hand was wrapped around the hilt of my throwing knife before I was aware I'd moved. I threw it at Samael's head, but he'd likely curled his wings around him, because my knife hung in empty air several inches from his head. His attention was on Vas as the other demon struggled, his eyes wild. He was probably wondering what exactly had gotten into his boss.

I sprinted toward him, throwing a punch straight at his head. I hit feathers. I attempted a knee to the ribs, but his wings were protecting him. Without being able to see them, I couldn't find his weak spots.

"Let him go, you asshole."

Samael raised one eyebrow as Vas gasped. “Make me,” he purred, and something dark rose from the pit of my stomach. Something dark and twisty that had no business being inside me.

“I’ll kill him,” Samael said. “It means nothing to me.”

I couldn’t tell if he was bluffing, but Vas’s face was now purple. I dropped my shields so fast that black spots appeared in front of my eyes. Samael’s power licked at me, but I pushed him out with a flood of power.

It seemed to take over every inch of my body. Bile crept up my throat at the unfamiliar sensation and I heaved, struggling not to puke.

“Not good enough,” Samael snapped. And then he threw Vas across the room. The demon hit the wall and slumped to the ground, raising his hands in supplication as Samael advanced.

I sprinted toward Vas, leapt over the couch, and pulled more knives, throwing them at Samael.

He laughed, nimbly dodging one before he sent another flying off target with a flick of his hand.

Panic wrestled with fury. But beneath it, was shock. Samael’s face was almost unrecognizable as he smiled at Vas.

“I’ll enjoy this,” he promised, and I gaped at him. Vas choked out a curse as Samael dodged smoothly past me and slammed his fist into the demon’s face again.

Vas spit blood, obviously dazed. It wasn’t a fair fight. Vas hadn’t expected Samael to turn on him, and was still catching his breath after the bastard choked him out.

The Mistilteinn Dagger purred, drawing my attention to it. I was sure the dagger would like nothing more than to bathe in demon blood. I ignored it. If I used the dagger, it would be a last resort.

Vas roared and kned Samael in the gut, and I used his distraction to throw another knife, which sunk deep into Samael’s shoulder. The demon turned and snarled at me.

I snarled back. “Let Vas go.”

“Fine.” He punched the other demon in the gut and took a step back. Vas folded, his eyes dazed.

I gaped at him. “You son of a bitch. What’s wrong with you?”

“You’d like me to stop? Make me. He can’t take much more damage, Danica. Even demons can die if I prevent them from healing.”

“Why?” I whispered, and his eyes cleared for a single moment before he

turned back to Vas.

“Do you, or do you not carry one of his feathers in your car, witchling?”

I choked on my own shock, hauling in a breath.

“Are you kidding me right now?”

I’d let my guard down around Samael. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but I’d started treating him almost like a human man. He wasn’t, and would never be anything remotely close to a human. He was a territorial, possessive, obviously psychotic demon.

I attempted to ignore the squeezing sensation in my chest. It felt a lot like grief, and I ruthlessly pushed it down.

“You’d kill one of your own demons for that?”

“Vassago knows better than to touch what is *mine*.”

For the first time, true fear crossed Vas’ face as Samael advanced once more. I’d raised my shields again at some point, and I dropped them. The expression on Samael’s face was scarier than the magic winding through me, dark and deadly.

Samael may have been fast, but I was fast too. And unpredictable. I wished I’d brought a gun, but my knives would have to do. I threw one of them, aiming low.

It stuck in the back of Samael’s calf. He glanced down, and I used his moment of inattention to duck past him, positioning myself between him and Vas.

The demon *growled* at me, threat oozing from every inch of his body.

Selina’s words echoed in my head.

“*Embrace your power. Even the parts that scare you.*”

I still didn’t know how to keep my shields up and wield my power. There was nothing elegant about the way I used it. But I did it anyway. With a wordless scream, I reached for the dark tendril curling up from somewhere deep within my soul.

Something cracked. I instinctively knew I’d just done damage to the suppression spell.

It was almost impossible to keep my balance as power left me in a *woosh*. Purple and gold swirled around me, Samael on one side and Vas and I on the other. If I’d thought my magic was a gentle breeze, this was a fucking hurricane.

Samael’s face went blank as he studied my ward, and I held it in place as he lifted a hand, his magic slipping toward mine, tasting my ward.

“Now that’s a ward.” Pride dripped from his voice and I blinked at him. I couldn’t keep up with his changing moods. And I didn’t want to. I dropped to my knees, ignoring the male outrage on his face as I turned my back on him.

“Are you okay?”

Vas was wiping blood from his face and he nodded, his gaze wary as he glanced past me to the demon on the other side of my ward.

Samael made an impatient sound in his throat and I turned, meeting his silver eyes.

“You may lower your ward now.”

“You may fuck off.”

His eyes widened and then narrowed once more. “Vas is fine, little witch.” When I didn’t reply, his expression went cold. “Lower your ward or I will break it.”

I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.

“Try it,” I snarled.

He held his hand to my ward, his eyes widening as it stayed in place. Yeah, it surprised the hell out of me too. Blood dripped from my nose and something like fear crossed his face as he stared at me.

“You’re about to drain your power and hurt yourself,” he warned, and I bared my teeth at him.

Vas shook my arm, but I got to my feet in front of him, attempting to push him behind me. He made choking sounds and I whirled on him. “Are you laughing?”

“I can’t help it,” he said. “You’re so... fierce.” He shivered in mock terror and it hit me. Adrenaline drained from my body, replaced by relief. The switch made me dizzy. And pissed. “You set me up.”

He shrugged, a hint of regret entering his eyes. “I do as I’m ordered. I heal almost instantly, Danica. It was worth a little pain to see your ward. It’s beautiful.”

I stared at him silently. Behind me, Samael let out a low growl, and Vas held up his hands.

“Not touching her,” he said, backing away, and I turned back to the demon, who flashed his teeth at me.

“Enough,” he said. “You will drop your ward, or you will end up back in my bed, recovering from the aftereffects of a flame out.”

I wouldn’t do shit for him. He was a monster.

He read my reply in my face and a muscle ticked in his jaw.

“Very well.”

He lay his hand back on my ward, ignoring Vas’ curse. My ward flickered but I held on, pouring everything I had left into it.

“You’re strong, little witch,” Samael purred. “But compared to me, you’re a toddler learning to walk. I’ve been running for *centuries*.”

I poured more magic into my ward, but I was almost blind. If I didn’t stop now, I’d collapse, completely powerless and vulnerable.

I had no desire to end up unconscious in his bed, so I took a deep breath and reached for my power, pulling it back into me. My shields went back up the moment my ward dropped, and I made a mental note to start practicing keeping them up while using my power.

I had *real* power. Not the tiny trickle I’d always assumed was mine, but a deep well of magic that was dark and unfamiliar, yet could be harnessed to keep me from getting killed. Sure, I’d believed Selina when she told me about it, but feeling it stream through me made it real.

“Good,” Samael purred as the purple and gold disappeared. He took a step toward me and I stumbled away until my back hit the wall. He froze as I stared at him.

I’d forgotten. Somehow, I’d managed to forget just who this demon was. I’d managed to forget that demons may look similar to humans, but they had very different ideas about right and wrong.

Of course he wouldn’t see anything wrong with hurting one of his demons to make me perform like his little dancing monkey. Given what I knew about Samael it was entirely on-brand.

“Stay away from me.”

He went still, his gaze steady on my face. I turned and shakily made my way out of the room with my figurative tail tucked firmly between my legs.

Samael

I gazed at Vas, wrestling with the urge to remove his wings for leaving Danica alone and vulnerable. A few months of using the elevator every day while his wings grew back would be a good punishment. But a demon

without wings would be less able to protect the little witch.

I lost control. I lost control and terrified her, hurting the demon she considered a friend. The demon she'd stood in front of, protecting with her body.

The urge to kill him almost overtook me once more, and I forced it away.

One mistake. Vas had made one mistake. A mistake his uncle would never have made. But he was young, and this was his first assignment as a bodyguard.

"I owe you an apology," I managed to get out. The words tasted bitter in my mouth, but even I could admit when I was wrong.

And yet... Danica had finally created a ward that could protect her.

"You really don't," Vas said, shuffling on his feet. A dull flush crept up his neck. "I agreed to put on this little show because I knew she needed to be pushed into using her power but also because I deserved to be punished for leaving her. I knew better and I did it anyway."

"Well. It's difficult to punish you when you're doing it for me."

Vas was silent and the worst of my rage finally disappeared. "You're young. You made a mistake. You were lucky Danica was able to handle the demon herself, but more importantly, you learned a lesson that you'll now carry for the rest of your life."

He nodded, expression miserable. I couldn't help but let out a laugh as I slapped him on the back.

He eyed me. "I didn't give Danica my feather."

"I know. Botis returned her car and noticed it, bringing it to my attention."

"I'm not interested in Danica that way. She's a... friend."

"I know. I apologize. It has been... difficult. The murders, the witch... I haven't been myself."

"I understand."

I sighed. "Try to convince her to see a healer. I expect she'll be too stubborn, but perhaps you can make her see reason."

Vas gave me the look that thought deserved, and I couldn't help the chuckle that escaped me at the thought of her reply to that suggestion.

I turned away as he left the room, staring at the wreckage around me. My calf throbbed, and I glanced down, finding one of Danica's throwing knives still buried in the muscle. I'd already begun healing around it and I gritted my teeth as I pulled it out, ignoring the flow of blood as I reopened the wound.

I held the knife up to the light. Tiny, sharp, and deadly. Just like the woman who wielded it. Whoever was trying to kill her would answer to me, and I would make them regret even thinking about harming the little witch.

Danica

Vas caught up with me by the time I was exiting the tower, landing next to me in a crouch. He straightened, and our eyes met.

“You should see the healer.”

I shook my head. Every inch of my body still seemed to ache from the fight with Ramiel, but other than that and a wicked headache, I was fine.

Physically, that is.

My head spun, and I could see my ward every time I closed my eyes. It had been beautiful. My power hadn't destroyed me. It had protected me.

But another chunk of the suppression spell had broken free. Now, when I reached for my magic, it instantly responded, the trickle now a flood that threatened to sweep through and take over.

It scared the shit out of me.

And yet it didn't scare me as much as Samael had. Killing the witch I could understand. Attacking Vas so he could jump-start my power?

It was a cold ruthlessness that I couldn't fathom. I'd known demons had very different ideas about morality, but somehow, I'd allowed myself to forget.

Samael wasn't human. He'd never be human.

I couldn't forget that again.

“He had to do it,” Vas said. I glanced at him. He was frowning at me, obviously well aware of the dark road my thoughts were wandering down.

“No he didn't.”

“He had to punish me, or his people would've punished me for him. He also needed you to be mad and scared enough that you finally used your power.”

“That was punishment?”

Vas sighed. “He barely hit me, Danica. He could've made an example of

me. If he'd had less control, he would've removed my wings and hung me at the top of his tower as an example."

My lips went numb. "Has he done that before?"

Vas realized he'd erred but he didn't lie to me. "Yes." His face turned hard. "You're determined to believe the worst of him, and nothing I say will change your mind."

"Are you living some Stockholm syndrome bullshit?"

"Samael has been good to you. He doesn't deserve your loathing."

I gaped at him as I attempted to speak but couldn't— so many retorts flying through my head that my mouth froze up as they battled one another for supremacy.

Humor flashed in his eyes at the sight of me, and my mouth started working again. "What exactly has Samael done for me?"

"Let you live after you murdered someone in his territory?"

"He knows I didn't do that!"

He shrugged one shoulder. "You still attempted to interrogate someone who had been promised safety in Samael's club. Not to mention, you stole his dagger. From his *dragon*."

"Great. So the demon hasn't killed me. Clap clap for him."

He gave me a frown that said he was disappointed in me. I ground my teeth.

"Samael sent demons to watch over your every move."

"Yes. Because he's a stalker stalker."

"Because he wants to keep you safe."

I stared at him. "Yes. Until I solve his murders."

"You know nothing about demons, do you?"

I threw up my hands. "Obviously! You know what, let's forget about this. We're never going to agree. Let's focus on our job so I can leave this whole experience behind me."

Vas' face tightened and he glanced away. Silent.

I studied his face. "I don't mean you," I said carefully. "Maybe we could, um, hang out once this is over, if you want? Get a drink? Hit the shooting range?"

My cheeks heated and the back of my neck itched in mortification. I had no idea what friends did together.

Vas grinned at me. "That would be fun."

Alrighty then.

I should go search Mary's house. But everything hurt. Plus, the sun would be going down soon. Breaking and entering would be a lot easier if I didn't need to poke around with a flashlight and alert the neighbors.

"I'm going home," I said, and Vas nodded.

"Good idea."

He followed me home, waiting outside the apartment until he watched me walk into the lobby. I dragged myself into the elevator and unlocked my front door, my whole body aching. Guilt wound its way through my chest as I walked in the door and spotted Lia, curled up on my ancient sofa. She opened one eye, and then closed it again, ignoring me.

I was a bad cat mom.

Before this job, I'd managed to be home most nights, and if I was working, I usually stayed home most of the next day to make up for it. I also came home for lunch when I could so I could hang out with the kitten.

This week, she'd been left mostly alone. I'd rescued her and then abandoned her.

My sister's face, so cold and pale, flashed through my memory. I pushed it away and sat on the sofa.

My throat squeezed, and it was almost impossible to take a deep breath. My living room turned blurry, and I choked on a sob that wanted to rip through me. I shut my eyes and counted to ten. I was just tired. That was all.

Lia nudged me, then clamped down on my hand with her sharp little teeth. I opened my eyes as she let loose a purr that seemed far too loud to have come from her tiny body.

"Hi. I'm sorry." I picked up one of her toys—a fake mouse attached to a plastic rod by a long piece of string. I swiped it through the air and Lia abandoned me, crouching next to me on the sofa, her little body trembling as she eyed the mouse.

She leapt, and I spent the next half hour watching her kill the mouse, until I had to force myself to get up or I'd fall asleep on the sofa. I rolled a ball along the wood floor for Lia to chase as I got to my feet. First things first.

Marching toward my front door, I dropped my shields and examined the ward. It glowed a soft lavender, and Vas was right. It was a lousy job. I wasn't surprised that the witches had phoned it in and overcharged me, but now that I could access more of my power, I could do something about it.

I *could* do better. I just had to figure out how.

In my mind, Samael threw Vas across the room and prowled toward him.

I strained, reaching for my power.

Nothing.

As much as I attempted to use that fear, my subconscious knew Samael wouldn't truly have hurt either of us.

Damnit.

I pictured the demon who'd attacked me, his expression terror-stricken as he jumped toward me. All I felt was pity.

Time to bring out the big guns.

I focused on Evie's face. If I didn't stop these murders, it wouldn't just be the demons who were dying. Anyone powerful enough to take down Samael's demons could likely handle my sister's coven. After the demons, witches would be easy.

Magic roared through me, so fast I swayed dizzily on my feet. I should've waited until I wasn't so depleted. I narrowed my eyes on the lavender, feeding it with my magic. I didn't know if this would work— had never heard of the ability to strengthen other people's wards. But I attempted to channel the power toward the ward.

It slowly began to darken. I gasped and the flood of my power slowed to a trickle. No. More. I needed more. Lavender turned to lilac. Lilac darkened to violet. I strained, and the ward flooded with gold, whirling amongst the purple.

I pulled my power back into myself and stared at my ward. I hadn't set it myself, but it was strong. Pride welled. I could do this. I could learn how to use my magic, could use it to hunt for my mom's killer.

I walked into my bedroom and fell face down onto my bed.

DANICA



It was Friday. I had one day to solve this case or I had no real future.

My head pounded with a tension headache, and I was too stressed to eat. I almost couldn't even stomach coffee, so I was in a foul mood as I drove to Mary's at ten am. I figured most people who were commuting to work would've left by now, which meant fewer nosy neighbors watching us break into her house.

"We do this the same as last time," I told Vas. "I break the ward, and then we poke around until we find something that ties Mary to the murders and leads us to her accomplices."

"And if we don't?"

"I don't need that kind of negativity this early in the morning."

Vas grinned as we climbed the steps leading to Mary's front porch. The porch encircled the house, and we moseyed around to the back entrance, where there would be fewer eyes on us.

This time, Vas didn't argue, staying out of the way while I concentrated on breaking the ward.

Mary's ward was nowhere near as strong as Beatrice's. It was almost anticlimactic how fast it broke. Her lock, on the other hand, was tricky. I wiggled my tools for far too long, sweat gathering on the back of my neck as I cursed.

"We're in."

I kept my shields down, just in case Mary had any magical booby traps waiting for us, but the house smelled stale. Clutter littered her counters and a

thin layer of dust covered everything.

“She hasn’t been here for weeks,” I said as we walked through the kitchen. Mary had cleaned out her fridge. Unlike Beatrice, this wasn’t someone who had just gone on the run. Mary had made sure her house wouldn’t smell like rotting food while she was gone. She was planning to return.

“I’ll check the living room,” Vas said, and I nodded, moving toward Mary’s bedroom. Her bed hadn’t been made, but that didn’t mean much—plenty of people didn’t make their beds in the morning. I was one of them.

I went through her drawers, checked the en-suite bathroom, and scowled. Nothing. I lifted her mattress, although I doubted Mary was dumb enough to hide anything important under it.

It weighed a ton and I bent my knees as I put my back into it.

“Let me help.”

Vas picked it up like he was lifting a sheet from the bed, and I attempted to tamp down my envy. He held the mattress up until I shook my head. He dropped it.

A feather floated to the ground. We both looked at it. Then we looked at each other. I pulled a plastic baggy out of my utility belt and turned it inside out, using it to pick the feather up.

Black, glossy, and unmistakably demon.

“Can you tell whose it is?” I asked, and Vas shook his head.

“It’s a primary feather. That’s all I know. We should take it to Samael just in case he recognizes it. He may even be able to sense the magical imprint it belongs to.”

I closed the Ziplock bag and handed it to Vas. His laugh said he knew I was now avoiding his boss, but he took it from me.

“If a demon was in Mary’s bed, he must’ve had some hint of what she was doing, right?”

Vas shrugged. “She could have lured him here. He might’ve been her first victim.”

“Either that, or he’s working with the witches.”

Vas’s jaw tightened but he nodded.

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it from my pocket. An unknown number had sent me a message and I opened it.

This is Bael. We have autopsy pictures from the witch. Nothing interesting except this anklet.

I studied the anklet. Beads, feathers, flannel, it was almost voodoo. But that wasn't what *I* found interesting.

On the bottom of her foot, she had a tattoo. A tattoo of a cauldron. I studied it, but it was blurry. Bael had focused the picture on the anklet, and I'd have to ask him to send me another of the tattoo itself.

I showed it to Vas. "No witch I know would ever use the symbol of a cauldron. It's taboo at worst, ignorant at most—witches don't need cauldrons when they have a gas stove and oversized pot they can use to create a spell."

After the McCormick coven opened the portals, humans turned against witches—maybe even more so than the way they turned against werewolves.

After all, the werewolves had been turned without their consent. But it was a coven of witches who decided to go searching for power—and led to the slaughter of almost a billion people.

Anyone suspected of being a witch was marked. Humans drew cauldrons on cars, houses, mailboxes—anything that they could find. And the things that they did to women who were—for the most part—low-level witches and powerless humans? It made the witch burnings look like a campfire singalong.

Why would a witch have a tattoo of a cauldron? And especially in that location? I winced at the thought of how painful that would be. Something tugged at my subconscious as I stared at the cauldron, but my phone vibrated, jolting me from my thoughts.

Keigan was calling. "Hey," I said. Vas turned and began rifling through Mary's dresser.

Keigan got straight down to business. "The witch you were looking for just turned herself in."

"Mary?"

"No. Beatrice Phillips."

I glanced around the room. We weren't going to find anything else in this house. Mary had been too prepared.

"We're on our way."

Vas flew above my car for the ride to the Mage Council's facility. Once there, however, he refused to wait outside. His planted feet, wide stance, and crossed arms were 100% pure stubborn male.

"This witch had something to do with the murders of my people," he said. "I'm coming."

As inconvenient as it was for me, I couldn't blame him. I sighed, turned,

and he fell in step with me as I walked up the concrete stairs and through the wide doors of the facility. I held my hand over the bowl of water and signed in, attempting to ignore the stares.

The owners of those stares weren't looking at me though, they were looking at Vas. He glanced once over his shoulder as we made our way to the elevator, and the lobby instantly cleared out. Now that was a power I'd kill to have.

"So this is where you work."

"Yeah. Um. Can you please—"

"I'll behave."

A muscle was already twitching in his cheek and I raised one eyebrow at him. He simply gestured for me to get into the elevator.

I sighed.

I pressed the button for the basement level. The doors opened to cold steel and concrete, and I shivered as we walked toward the main desk.

"Danica Amana and guest to see Beatrice Philips."

The woman behind the desk raised her head, and bright orange curls caught the light. One chunk near her right ear was inexplicably green, and I couldn't seem to look away from it.

"Hand."

I held my hand over the spelled bowl of water, meeting the woman's eyes as it flashed green. She glanced at the demon behind me but wisely decided not to say anything.

"They're interrogating her now. Third cell on the right."

With a buzz, the steel door opened, revealing a long stretch of corridor. I'd always felt claustrophobic down here, and I didn't have wings. Poor Vas.

There was only room for one of us to walk at a time, and I glanced over my shoulder at the sound behind me. Even tucked in, Vas's wings were brushing against each side of the corridor. He sauntered down the corridor like he was on a catwalk, clearly aware that his every move was being recorded. Demons would never show any hint of discomfort in front of the mages.

I banged on the steel door and it immediately swung open. "Danica?" Rose scowled at me. "What do you think—" her eyes landed on Vas and she ran out of words. "Demon," she hissed.

Vas gave her one cold look. A look I'd frequently seen on Samael's face. I wondered if Vas had needed to practice that look in the mirror. Rose paled,

clamped her mouth shut, and moved back so we could enter the room.

“Ah, Danica. I held most of the questions until you arrived.” Keigan appeared calm and collected, sitting back in his chair with a file held in front of him like he was reading the newspaper over a leisurely breakfast. Beatrice Phillips sat across from him.

She was thin to the point of scrawny, her eyes dark and haunted. Her wide nose pointed to a narrow mouth, and her face was so pale it appeared almost gray. She was chained in the same types of chains used to keep Mella in the library.

“Beatrice,” I said, taking a seat next to Keigan. “I’ve been looking for you.”

She nodded but her eyes were stuck on Vas. She began to shiver uncontrollably, her chains clinking against the steel table between us.

“I heard you turned yourself in?” I asked.

Behind me, Rose snorted. “She saw the writing on the wall and wants leniency in exchange for turning on her friends.”

Denial flashed across Beatrice’s face and was gone in an instant. “It’s okay,” I said softly. “Why don’t you tell me what happened? We know about the witchweed.”

She nodded. “I tried to buy as much as I could.”

“Why?”

One fearful glance at Vas. “I figured out what they were doing.”

“The demons?”

Her hands shook as she pushed dishwater blonde hair off her face. “No. The witches.”

I frowned. “Why don’t you start from the beginning.”

“I’m a descendent of the McCormick coven.”

“Yes. What is it that you and the other descendants are trying to achieve?”

“That’s just it. I didn’t want to achieve anything. Mary came to me a few months ago, saying we were practically sisters. She’d been approached by another woman— Veronica Holloway. Veronica’s grandmother was the leader of the McCormick coven. Mary invited me to this meet-up. She said it was like a reunion.”

How it could be a reunion when none of the witches knew each other, I didn’t know. But I nodded my head and Beatrice took a deep breath.

“I went. I haven’t been in Durham for long. I wasn’t ready to join a coven

yet, but I guess I was feeling lonely.”

Loneliness could be responsible for all kinds of stupid mistakes. I nodded again and Beatrice gave me a tiny smile.

“It was an informal meetup at this other witch’s house. Her name was Theresa. We had a potluck dinner and introduced ourselves. Everyone was friendly. I was excited to have a group of women I had a few things in common with. And then Veronica got up and gave a speech.” She swallowed. “Could I have some water, please?”

Keigan glanced at Rose, who gave Vas a wide berth as she crossed the room. Beatrice waited until she reappeared with a cup of water, took a few small sips, and then glanced down at her lap.

“They want power,” she whispered. “They said they were tired of being at the Mage Council’s mercy. Veronica found some grimoires under the floorboards of her grandmother’s childhood home. In one of them, there was a spell. I had to join the coven before they would tell me what the spell would do, and I told them I needed to think about it. But when I heard about the first demon murder, I knew it was them.”

“How did they get the power to kill a high demon?”

Beatrice raised the cup and pressed it to her lips, subconsciously trying to prevent herself from saying her next sentence.

“They sacrificed a human. A homeless guy they found begging near a highway.”

The room went silent as we all attempted to process that. Vas was the first to break the silence.

“Why didn’t you turn yourself in earlier?”

She laughed wildly. “And risk my safety with the mages? I would never be believed. Especially after I bought the witchweed. It was stupid, I know, but I panicked. When I learned what they wanted to do, and that they needed a mass forget-me spell, I thought if I could just buy as much witchweed as possible...”

Yeah, it was stupid. There were plenty of ways for the witches to get their hands on what they needed. If Beatrice had been thinking clearly, she could’ve at least sent in an anonymous tip to the Mage Council.

“Who are you running from, Beatrice?”

She went so white I stepped around the table and pushed her head down. “Head between your legs. You’re okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, her head buried in her lap as she bent in two.

“I couldn’t risk him finding me.”

“Husband?” I guessed, and she shook her head.

“Boyfriend. It was great at first, but you know how it goes.”

I didn’t. I’d never experienced domestic abuse, but I’d seen the signs. And it sounded like Beatrice had been a victim for most of her life.

“Okay. So you bought the witchweed, and then what?”

“I knew they’d know it was me. Veronica called me. She said I was a dead witch walking, and I would be the next sacrifice.”

“Where’s your phone?” I’d had a trace put on Mary’s phone, but she’d been smart enough to get rid of it.

Beatrice glanced at Keigan who nodded. “We have it. Our tech mages are currently working on it.”

I glanced at Keigan. “I need to talk to Samael.” Beatrice paled, and Keigan nodded. Rose didn’t dare say what her face said so clearly that she was thinking. Not with Vas in the room.

I stepped out and called Samael. He answered with video. And he was shirtless again, damnit.

He *winked* at me. “Like what you see?”

“I was just thinking that you must have built that muscle throwing your minions around. How much does Vas weigh, anyway?”

His smile said I wasn’t fooling him. He knew exactly how much I wanted him, the bastard.

“Vas knows why I did what I did. He agreed to it before he entered the room.”

I stayed silent and Samael shook his head at me. “Believe what you want, witchling. I won’t apologize for helping you create that ward.”

I shivered at the memory and his eyes sharpened.

“I frightened you,” he crooned, and I shrugged. He was right. He had frightened me.

“I would never harm you, little witch.”

“I know.” Somehow I did know deep down that for all his faults, Samael wouldn’t hurt me... unless I betrayed him.

“Listen, I know who’s killing the demons.” I filled him in, and he listened intently until I was finished. “One more thing,” I said. “Is Malgron still alive?”

Silence. I really, really hoped Samael had managed to keep in control when questioning a demon who’d betrayed him.

“Yes. Why?”

“We found a feather from a high demon in Mary’s bed. We need to know if it was him, or if there’s a chance you could have any other traitors.”

All light drained from Samael’s face, and he looked like what he was: a scary motherfucker. His eyes were distant, the dark color of the kind of smoke you choked on.

“I will have Bael ask him.”

From the retribution written all over Samael’s face, *asking* wasn’t all Bael would be doing to the demon. I’d bet Samael had to get Bael to do his dirty work because he couldn’t be trusted not to prematurely kill Malgron.

“Thanks. Message me when you know. Uh, this clears up our little deal, right? When can I expect the bond to break?”

Samael raised one eyebrow. “You’re forgetting that our deal wasn’t to find the murderers, bounty hunter. It was to kill them as well.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to speak calmly. “I’m telling *you* who is doing it, Samael. It’s the McCormick descendants. We’re setting up a trace on all of their phones now. I know damn well that you’d rather kill them all yourself.”

“You won’t wiggle out of a demon bond that way, Danica. The bond knows when it has been fulfilled.”

“Are you telling me you’re unable to break it?”

“I didn’t say that. But you have ten hours until you belong to me. If I were you, I’d get back to work.” He lowered his voice until it was a purr. “Unless you’d like to crawl back into my bed where you belong.”

“Die, Samael.”

I hung up, ignoring his laugh. I didn’t have time for the fury that burned through me. The McCormick descendants would die— either by my hand, the Mage Council’s, or Samael’s. The only difference would be whether I was a free woman afterward.

The world seemed to narrow around me as I thought frantically. While Bael was interrogating Malgron, I’d make a list of all the descendants of the McCormick coven. Vas and I could start searching their houses for anything that might lead us to wherever they were hiding.

I glanced at my phone. Ten hours. I could do this. I knew they wanted to kill demons. Now all I had to do was find them.

DANICA



Seven hours later, I was walking out of Veronica's house. She lived in Hope Valley, in one of the sprawling mansions surrounded by fae. Her house stank of black magic, but we hadn't been able to find anything that would lead us to their base. We'd searched eight other houses so far, and we had nothing to show for it.

Bael had messaged us earlier, letting us know that Malgron had been spelled. For a witch spell to work against a demon, he would've had to consent. He'd admitted he wasn't the demon who'd been in Mary's bed, but nothing Bael did to him could make him give up whoever else was betraying Samael.

We'd stopped by Mary's earlier, talking to her neighbors.

Mary's closest neighbor, a woman in her seventies, had seen the demon on a few occasions. She'd described him as "tall, dark, and handsome." So basically, it could be almost any of Samael's demons.

I glanced at Vas. He was taking the betrayal hard.

"I don't get it," he scowled. "Samael is..."

"A Machiavellian, underhanded, arrogant bastard?"

He shook his head at me. "He's the best of us. And the worst of us. But he's had to be. We all know why he is the way he is. And for two of our people to betray him..."

At least two demons. I wouldn't be surprised if it were more. "Obviously those demons have decided that these murders will create a power vacuum they can take advantage of," I said slowly. Something pricked at the edge of my brain. There was something I just wasn't seeing.

Frustration gnawed at me. "I've got three hours," I said. "Let's make them count."

Vas nodded and disappeared into the sky, while I got in my car and headed to the next house on my list, back in Trinity Park.

My phone buzzed and I absently reached for it, my mind whirling. "It's Bael," the voice said. "Samael is missing."

I blinked. "I'm sorry, what?" How could a demon as powerful as Samael go missing?

Bael's voice dripped ice, and I was glad I hadn't done anything to piss him off. "He was betrayed. Now's the time to prove your usefulness, witch."

Betrayed. The demon Mary was rolling in the sheets with. It had to be.

Bael hung up on me and I pulled the car over, thinking furiously. I glanced up. Vas was hovering above me, his eyes on my car. I gave him a wave to let him know I was okay, and he waved back.

Who the hell was strong enough to take Samael down? I closed my eyes, blew out a breath, and considered what I knew so far.

The first body was found in Maplewood Cemetery. The second was found sprawled in the middle of Raynor street in Wellons Village. According to the information Agaliarept had given me, whoever had killed the demon there had almost been discovered—the body had been desiccated like the others, but still warm.

Why hadn't they used Sherwood Park, which was right around the corner? My eye twitched and I reached for my phone, marking the site on a map. I found a pen in my glovebox and rifled through the junk until I came across an empty envelope.

Sherwood Park? I wrote on the envelope. The next was in South Durham, on Massey Ave. Again, the demon was killed in the middle of the street, even though there was a parking lot next to where the body was found, and again, there was a park just a few blocks away. A park that was guaranteed to be more private.

Massey Ave. I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned over, groping beneath my passenger's seat. Mary's mail.

The postcard. The address was the same. And the shape of the cauldron the cartoon witches were using was the same as the tattoo on Mavis's foot. I didn't have time to kick myself. I marked it on the map and reached for my notes for the other locations.

The West Greer Street parking lot had been the murder right before I took

the case, and that was followed by the three demon women in the apartment. They'd been near Trinity Heights.

The body from a few days ago was the male demon dumped next to the pump in the Brightleaf gas station. The cameras had been wiped, and so had all the humans in the vicinity. Why choose a gas station in one of the busiest neighborhoods in the city? Why risk being discovered? Sure, they could wipe the humans with their spell, but what if a fae or werewolf had been in the area?

The witches had to take the high demon by surprise and kill him quickly and quietly, while making sure no humans could remember what they saw. At the same time, they'd needed to keep a lookout for any approaching paranormals. They must have operated like a well-oiled machine.

I chewed on my pen as I glowered down at my phone. The last attack was in Old North Durham. Again, not far from a park where they would've at least had a little more privacy.

What did the locations have in common? Why those demons and why those places? The murders hadn't felt like someone was holding a grudge—oh I'm sure Veronica had enjoyed the blood and death. The memory of her bone-chilling voice as she attempted to take back her knife still made me shiver. But it didn't add up.

I called Bael back. "A few days ago, Samael said some lesser demons were also being murdered." I said when he answered.

"That's correct. The high demons obviously draw more notice, but enough lesser demons were murdered in the past weeks that Samael had warned the Mage Council that he expected due process for all demons. The Mage Council denied responsibility."

I was onto something. I knew I was. "Can you send me any locations where their bodies were found?"

"Yes." He hung up. One of these days someone needed to teach Bael how to politely end a call.

As soon as the message came through, I plotted the other bodies. Then I stared at the map. I connected each body with a straight line, and stared at it some more.

Holy shit.

It was an inverted pentagram. And there was one point missing before it would be complete. They were taking Samael to Geer Cemetery.

But how exactly did they think they'd kill a demon as powerful as

Samael?

A headache began to throb behind my left eye. I rubbed at my temple and forced myself to focus. Inverted pentagrams were used to harvest power. But they were also used when it was necessary to expend a great deal of power. Something about the pentagram being inverted allowed the power to replicate itself.

That's how they were going to do it. That's why the black smudge was present at every murder, and why the bodies had been drained of magic. I'd thought they'd used the shock of magic loss to kill them, but their deaths were really just a side effect of the draining itself.

The descendants of the McCormick coven had harvested the power from each demon, slowly working their way up the food chain with more powerful demons each time.

That's how they'd been able to control the demon who'd tried to take back the knife, and the demon who'd attacked me. Only demon power could control a demon, and the witches had been storing it with each death.

The original human sacrifice gave them the power needed to kill the first demon, and the forbidden spell from the grimoire gave them the means of harvesting it. From there, it was like falling dominos— each murder and harvesting of power making the next one easier than the last.

Bile crept up my throat. How much power had they harvested so far? If they'd managed to take Samael unaware, he was either completely incapacitated or close to death. They wouldn't have taken him if they didn't think they'd gathered enough demon power to kill him and harvest his power too. We'd be faced with a coven who was bloated with demon power.

I'd never thought such a thing was possible. I shook it off. Geer Cemetery. My hand automatically moved to my key, ready to turn it, and then I stilled.

I could rid this world of a dangerous demon. I didn't even have to do anything. I could go home right now, drink a bottle of elven wine, and put my head under my pillow. The mark on my wrist would be gone— burned away when he died.

I'd never have to see him again. Some other demon would fill the power vacuum and humans— the ones who weren't fascinated with high demons— would likely dance in the street when they learned he was dead.

I ignored the instant denial that roared through me at the thought and stared down at the gold mark on my arm. My life would go back to the way it

was. I had the Mistilteinn Dagger, and I could go back to focusing all of my time and energy on finding my mom's murderer. My reputation would recover. The mages would assume I'd gotten close to Samael so I could take him down. I'd probably be promoted. I'd sure as hell be respected.

My hands began to shake.

I should make the logical choice. Should be able to push aside the way it felt when he touched me—the way the whole world disappeared when we kissed.

Samael was dangerous. Not in a loose cannon kind of way, but in a strategic, out-for-himself, Machiavellian kind of way. He'd almost certainly had something to do with my mom's murder, and if he hadn't, he'd been sitting on information about it this whole time. The world would probably be better off without Samael in it. I ignored the way that thought twisted my stomach and forced myself to be logical.

But if Samael was gone, we would be left with a coven of insane witches who were bloated with the power of a millennia-old demon.

When it was a choice between the devil you knew and the one you didn't, you chose the one you knew. Samael was the demon I knew. And the damage those power-bloated witches could do to this city—and the world—was unthinkable.

I let out a strangled laugh. That logic made perfect sense. I could justify it to anyone. But at the heart of my decision was one cold, unrelenting fact: I didn't want to live in a world without Samael in it. He'd made his way under my skin like a parasite, and while I wanted my freedom more than almost anything else, I didn't want him dead. I wanted to see the look on his face when I managed to break his bond and walked away.

“Fuck!”

I pounded my hands on the steering wheel and started my car.

This was why you didn't mess around with demons.

I called Bael back. “Get to Geer Cemetery.”

“Don't you dare go in without us.”

I hung up on him, ignoring my phone as he immediately called back. My mind raced as I attempted to remember everything I could about the cemetery.

When we were kids, Evie had to choose a historic site in Durham to present to her class. Evie had chosen the cemetery because, even when she was ten, she'd wanted to draw attention to what she considered a deep

misjustice. The cemetery was the first public burial ground for the city's African American population, and many of Durham's founders were buried there.

Before the portals opened, Durham residents and descendants of those buried in the cemetery had been working toward achieving perpetual care to ensure the cemetery would be looked after.

Mom had taken us to the cemetery one afternoon and we'd walked around, gawking at the gravestones— some of them from the early 1900s. By the time we'd visited as kids, the cemetery was a tangle of weeds, fallen trees, and crumbling gravestones. It had made my heart hurt.

And the coven was planning to desecrate the cemetery with a demon sacrifice. My hands had clamped around the steering wheel so hard they ached. The cemetery was surrounded with roads on three sides and a parking lot at the back. It'd be difficult to sneak up on the witches.

Whatever. Being sneaky was overrated.

Vas was waiting for me outside the cemetery when I arrived. "Your driving could use some work. Also, you sat in your car staring at nothing for almost an hour. Is the pressure getting to you?"

"Blow me."

He grinned as I stalked to my trunk and popped it, revealing my trunk safe. His grin faded as I explained what had happened.

"They think they can kill Samael?"

I paused, fighting the urge to grab my closest gun and storm the cemetery. "Someone betrayed him, Vas. How many people does he trust enough for this kind of betrayal?"

A muscle jerked in his cheek. "A handful. Maybe two."

"That's what I figured." I grabbed my Colt 1911, inserted a magazine, and racked the slide. I flicked the safety on and reached for my shoulder holster, strapping it on my left side. I had a narrow chest and it would give me a shorter reach with my right hand.

Vas grabbed my arm. "Danica. We need to wait for backup."

"We do that and he's dead. The sun will be going down soon."

"Samael would want me to sit on you if that's what it took to prevent you from risking your life."

I bared my teeth at him. "Try it."

Something entered my peripheral vision and we both spun, staring into the cemetery.

The good news? The trees had grown since I was a kid. That made it easier to sneak up on the coven. The bad news? We couldn't see exactly where the witches were. All we had to go on was the thick, black power that was beginning to glow from between the leaves and branches of the trees. It began to creep toward us and I swallowed.

Demon power used by witches. And I thought I'd seen it all.

I pulled one of my favorite knives—the Kershaw Leek. The blade was tucked away, which made it safer to hold in my hand while running through unfamiliar terrain, but once I swung the blade out, the assisting mechanism would take over in an instant.

Vas watched me. His claws were out. He didn't need a knife to rip someone's throat out.

“Why not keep your gun in your hand?”

“Their ward will protect them from bullets. I need to get close enough to break it first.”

And it was going to hurt like hell. I'd need time, and I couldn't risk losing any element of surprise.

I glanced at him. “Can you get above them and be ready to swoop down when I break the ward?”

“Yes.”

I opened my mouth, but a deep, vicious power made me freeze. I slowly turned, conscious of Vas doing the same next to me.

I counted twelve lesser demons. Thick, webbed, black wings, claws the length of my hand, and powerful legs that trembled as they crouched, ready to leap at us. These demons were beasts. Uncontrollable, illogical beasts, who wanted nothing more than to rip and shred and complete the tasks given to them by whoever had summoned them.

And yet, something was different.

They *seethed* with magic.

“Someone's given them power,” I hissed, and Vas nodded, squaring his shoulders. Why would the witches waste the power they'd stolen on these demons?

Unless they planned to harvest that power again when the demons had fulfilled their task.

“Run,” Vas ordered me, and I resisted the urge to tell him exactly where he could put that order. He glanced at me. “Go, Danica. I'll hold them off.”

I didn't want to leave him, and he shook his head at my hesitation. “I can

take them, but it'll take time. Time Samael doesn't have."

"Don't you dare get dead," I snapped at him. I took a deep breath, turned, and sprinted into the cemetery. I attempted to keep my steps light, but branches broke beneath my feet. Thankfully, the loud chanting coming from deep within the cemetery would cover most of the noise I was making.

But *that* noise wasn't from my feet.

I froze and spun, making it halfway around before something hit me, sending me flying. I landed against a fallen gravestone, my head making contact with a thud that instantly made the world dim around the edges of my vision.

I didn't have time to recover. The woman was on me, blade swinging. Her teeth were bared, but I recognized her as one of the descendants. Matilda. I rolled, almost hitting another gravestone, as she rushed me. I needed more room to move.

I kicked out, slamming my foot into her thigh, and she stumbled as I finally made it up to my feet. Movement made me want to puke. Awesome. Vicious pain radiated through my head, my every heartbeat.

"You're dead, bounty hunter."

"Yeah, yeah, let's go."

Matilda grinned at me and I almost rolled my eyes. Attempting to outcrazy an opponent was the oldest tactic in the book. The air began to thicken, the chanting growing louder, and I forced down the urge to empty my stomach.

With a growl, Matilda jumped at me. She held her knife like someone who'd never fought with one before, but even idiots get lucky occasionally. Unlike me, she wasn't injured. I was forced to dodge each slash, attempting to keep my footing amongst half-buried gravestones.

I didn't have time for this. I ducked the next wave of her arm and shoved my knife deep into her left thigh. Blood sprayed. I'd hit the femoral artery. She was dead, she just didn't know it yet.

She weaved on her feet but attempted to advance on me again. Her body knew something was very bad, even if her brain hadn't accepted the fact.

I backhanded her. She went down like a bag of rocks and her eyes rolled. She wasn't getting back up. I gathered a single breath and took off again, darting through the undergrowth. My lungs felt ready to explode. I was fit, but head wounds sucked.

There. The witches' ward glowed an ugly green-brown. I dropped my

shields, and this time I didn't care if my magic offered me a trickle or a flood. I'd drag it up from beneath the suppression spell even if it killed me.

It wasn't a trickle. It was potent and wicked. It twined around me, sparking as if reacting to my fury. I used my Kershaw to slice a cut down my forearm and raised my hand before I could think twice, slamming it against the ward.

The impact punched through me, the magic vast and deadly. Who was I to think I could break it? I was nothing but an almost powerless bounty hunter. I was going to die here, my body nothing but food for the scavengers, and Samael would die, and then the rest of the demons would die...

I pulled myself together. The witches had added a healthy dose of terror to their ward. Cute.

They thought they could come for the demons and no one would care. Because people feared and hated the demons and most would love to see them die.

But I cared.

The ward burst with a dull pop. My headache worsened and I swayed on my feet, leaning over to dry heave weakly. I didn't have time for this. By now, they knew I was here.

With the ward down, I could start shooting.

I unholstered my Colt and slowly began to stalk through the trees. They wouldn't know which direction I was coming from. They may be powerful, but I'd bet most of them hadn't ever touched a gun. I'd get a few shots off before they noticed me.

Slipping past a fallen tree, I crouched as the coven came into view. Dressed in black robes, the witches stood in a circle three-deep. I couldn't see past the witches on the outside, and I had a feeling Veronica had designed it that way. The witches in the outside circle were those who were disposable. Those who'd been recruited into the coven to be nothing but bullet fodder. If they'd had true power, they would've been in the inside circle, shielded from anyone who thought to attack.

One of the witches began to scream orders. "Find that bitch. Now!"

Hello, Veronica.

I recognized her as the voice of the attacker who'd attempted to take back my knife. I hoped she'd had to expend precious power creating a new one. I smiled as the underlings began to spread out, their movements uncertain. The fewer witches in my way, the easier it would be to hit those who were

building their power.

Samael was in the middle of that circle. I couldn't see him, but I could feel his rage down the end of the bond. I flipped the safety and sighted down the end of my gun. I'd only have a few shots before the witches panicked and the most powerful aimed their magic at me.

I aimed, waiting as one of the younger witches turned, gazing uneasily behind her. Veronica was staying hidden, but I now had a shot at one of the other witches in the inner circle. I steadied my hand, took one long breath and went still.

The shot took her in the forehead and she was dead before she knew what was happening. Screams sounded, and I picked off two more witches as the outer circles scattered.

Something snatched at me, pulling me from where I was crouched on the ground. I was suddenly in the air and rising fast, the sound of wings flapping as someone held me by the back of my t-shirt. I aimed my gun up, but it was snatched from my hand and dropped into the small clearing below us. I angled my head until I could see the demon.

Botis. He was the traitor.

He grinned at me, taking me high above the circle. "Safe flight, bounty hunter." He dropped me.

I bent my knees but the ground was uneven.

My ankle snapped like a twig.

DANICA



A scream ripped from my throat as I landed in the circle. Across from me, Samael met my eyes.

If I'd thought I felt rage down the end of the bond before, that was a shadow compared to what I felt now. Samael's fury was vicious, eating at me with sharp, pointed teeth.

They'd bled him. He was covered in so much blood I couldn't tell where he was bleeding from. Each of Samael's limbs was encircled with Naud Chains and my heart skipped a beat. Had they somehow stolen them from the Mage Council? Or had someone given them to them?

The chains encircled a fallen tree trunk. Without the Naud Chains eating his power, Samael could've ripped every one of the witches apart with a single thought. He was lounging against the tree trunk as if he was at the beach, his face blank. But the look in his eyes as they met mine made me shiver. That look told me quite clearly that he was tempted to rip my head off himself.

Botis landed next to me, and then his arms surrounded my body in a bear hug, holding my arms against my sides as several witches stripped me of my knives. I threw my head back and smashed it into Botis's nose. He cursed, dropping his hands and my head swam as the witches moved away and he let go. I leaned to one side, puking noisily. Mental note: don't use your head as a weapon when you already have a head wound.

Veronica approached. The hard lines around her mouth made her look older than she had in her Facebook profile picture. She laughed at me and I shivered. Yep, she was definitely the woman who'd tried to have us both

killed when she came after the knife.

“You’re going to learn to respect your betters, you little bitch.”

I rolled my eyes. “What am I supposed to respect? Your shit-brown ward? I broke it, dummy.”

Veronica snarled. Then a slow smile crept across her face and she took one step closer. She lifted her leg and swung. Her foot met my broken ankle and my vision went white as pain engulfed me.

I must’ve passed out for a few moments, because when I next opened my eyes, Veronica was on the other side of the circle, murmuring something to the witch next to her. I squinted, fighting through more nausea.

Mary.

My ankle throbbed like an open wound. They’d taken my gun and most of my knives, but they hadn’t checked my boot. I’d only have one chance at freedom, and I needed to wait until the moment was right.

“Look at me,” Samael said softly and I did. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“That’s not helpful. How’d you let your ass get kidnapped anyway?” His eyes went cold and I shivered as he stared past me. Botis pulled Mary into his arms, smacking a kiss on her lips. He turned and winked at us.

Mary held up her phone and played a recording. On it, my voice sounded, high and desperate as I screamed for mercy. I glanced at Samael and my heart flipped. Someone had sent him that. His demons had been busy searching for their traitor, so he’d only brought one man for backup with him. And that backup had betrayed him.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

He was silent. He’d thought I was in trouble, but he knew I was so angry at him, I probably wouldn’t take his calls. He’d figured he could check I was alive and move on with his day, likely without me even knowing.

My heart hurt. I got the feeling Samael didn’t give his trust easily. And Botis had likely waited until he was distracted. I turned my attention to Botis and he gave me a wide smile. I gave him a cool smile back. I was going to fuck him up if it was the last thing I did.

Every part of my body ached, and my ankle was killing me. I was lying on my side and I glanced down at my ankle. Bone. A compound fracture.

I ignored the urge to curl into a ball and close my eyes. After a few pained moments, I managed to sit up. My vision blurred.

I searched the faces of the witches gathered around me. Most of them

were steady and determined, although a handful of them kept glancing at us with wide eyes and pale faces. A few of them had their phones out, recording this little moment. Awesome.

The witches were getting themselves organized, joining hands again as they formed a tighter circle. Someone handed Veronica a grimoire and she ignored us as she flicked through the pages. Panic rose in my chest.

I'd always been taught that demons were evil. That they fed on the suffering of others and didn't care about anyone but themselves.

But... *this* was evil. These witches were doing this for one reason only: power.

Samael cared about his men. I'd seen the relief on his face when he'd been told Ag was awake. I'd witnessed how determined he was to protect every demon in his territory.

And he'd even protected me. He could've insisted I stayed at the tower so his little murderer-finder wouldn't get hurt. Instead, he taught me how to ward. The moment he found out I had more power available to me, he showed me how to access it.

I wasn't an idiot— the more powerful I was, the more it benefited Samael. But I'd practice my wards and use what he'd taught me for the rest of my life.

I could feel him gathering power, his gaze on me. I could've told him not to bother— there was no way he could break those chains. I reached for my own power but after smashing through the witches' ward, I was almost tapped out. It answered my call but it was sluggish and slow.

A dark shadow appeared above us and I raised my head. Was slammed into Botis and they rolled. I used the moment of chaos and reached into my boot. Moving my ankle made me want to pass out, but I'd only have one shot at this. Squaring my shoulders, I threw the knife at Veronica.

It lodged in her throat and she choked, her eyes meeting mine. Samael let out a low laugh and I smiled at Veronica as she fell to her knees. Next to her, Mary rolled her eyes, picked up the grimoire Veronica had dropped, and gestured with one hand.

No one moved.

She raised her head, eyeing the witches, and everyone jumped into action, reforming their circles.

Muppets.

The chanting started again. The bitter edge of black magic brushed at my skin and I shivered. Across from me, Samael was still gathering power. He

didn't have a shot of breaking those chains, but he planned to go out fighting. I could respect that.

Mary raised one hand, her voice turning into a high wail. I lowered my shields for a fraction of a second and almost puked at the magic surrounding her. It was thick and evil, and if she used it on Samael, this world would never be the same.

I was running out of time.

The witches began to sway. My eyes met Samael's again. His face was a mask of rage as he stared at me, and the amount of power I could feel him gathering would be horrifying if he could actually access it. It was endless. His power made the dark power the witches were gathering look like a tiny ember compared to his wildfire. If he ever let it loose, Samael could break this world apart. I gazed at him and he gazed back, his expression open.

You see who I am his eyes said. They said other things, too, as he looked at me, but I made myself glance away.

Mary paused in her chanting, staring at Samael. He gave her a vicious smile. She could feel his gathering power, and if she could, the other witches could too.

One of them turned and fled.

Mary shrieked. "Traitor! He can't use his power, you fool!"

It was too late though. They were getting spooked. The less powerful witches had one thing going for them: they knew their limits. And they'd just had a glimpse of an abyss of power so deep, they likely couldn't comprehend it.

"We don't need them," Mary snapped as a few more broke away, sprinting through the cemetery. Some of the other witches looked shaken, but others merely straightened their shoulders and chanted louder.

As a witch from the inner circle broke her chanting and sprinted, I had a glimpse of Vas, on top of Botis, outside of the circle as he slammed his fist into the other demon's face. Still alive. I was momentarily lightheaded with relief.

I was going to die here. Mary craved a witness to her terror. She'd been kicked out of her last coven, and this was her chance to demonstrate exactly how powerful she was. Hence the witch still holding up her phone, obviously instructed to record everything.

The moment Samael died, I was dead too. My mind raced as I gathered my own power. Breaking the ward had taken it out of me, but I attempted to

coax it to me anyway. When coaxing didn't work, I reached out with a clawed hand, deep beneath my shield, and forced it to answer my call.

There.

Evie, I'm sorry. I wish we'd had more time.

I would die full of regret. But that was okay. Samael would live. And that meant this coven wouldn't be able to begin their reign of terror. Evie would be safe.

I made it to my knees. Mary ignored me, her eyes glowing as she stared at Samael, a grin on her face as the coven wrapped up their spell. The other witches all dropped their hands at the same time, then lifted them in sync. Creepy.

I was on one foot. It would have to do. Mary raised her hands toward Samael, her gaze as fierce as a raptor as she poised, ready to rip his power from him.

I leapt, slamming into Samael. My bad foot hit the ground and agony swept through me as I gathered my own magic to me. Then I let it loose.

My ward was beautiful. A sparkling purple-gold that surrounded both of us. But Mary's magic was eating away at the ward and she laughed hysterically as one section began to drain of color. If she cracked it, Samael and I were both dead. I just had to hold on.

Samael clutched me to his chest protectively. Then he kissed me. "You're okay," he said. "My turn."

Dots were appearing in front of my eyes, and I didn't have it in me to protest as he gently placed me on the ground, his body shielding mine.

His chains were gone. How were his chains gone? Samael laughed, and I shivered at the sound. Mary bared her teeth and the witches chanted louder, their stolen demon power pressing against my ward.

"Drop the ward, Danica."

I ignored that insanity. Samael turned and raised one eyebrow at me, his face relaxed, almost nonchalant. "Drop it."

The dots in front of my eyes were spreading, joining together until I was almost blind. I didn't have a choice. I dropped the wards a second before Mary broke through. Samael lifted his arms, and his lips curved into a wicked smile.

The spell hit him, and he lifted one eyebrow as if asking "is that all you've got?" Was he... harnessing *their* power? I saw the moment Mary realized she was about to die. Her eyes widened, and then Samael struck.

The witches *disintegrated*. One moment they were there, fighting to steal Samael's power, and the next, they were gone. It was like they'd never existed— small piles of ash all that remained of their bodies.

The ash began to blow away in the breeze, and I went very still as Samael turned. My body knew exactly what he was. A predator of the most dangerous type. And I was out of power.

“Danica...” his voice was a low purr, and he seemed to inhale my fear as he took a step toward me. He paused, tilting his head. “Are you frightened of me?”

I stared at him. He'd just turned thirty witches into ash, after breaking four Naud Chains. If I wasn't frightened of him, I would be an idiot of the worst kind.

Samael seemed to come to some kind of decision, taking several steps toward me. I shivered, fear slamming into me and he gathered me in his arms, lifting me up.

The movement jolted my ankle and I let out a yelp. “Shhh,” Samael said, a kind, gentle monster. “It will all be fixed soon.”

I blinked at Vas as he stepped close to us, holding out his arms. “Would you like me to take her?”

“No.”

Samael held me in his arms as if I weighed nothing, turning his attention to the piles of ash around me. Distantly, I could hear the rumble of Bael's voice. Samael's other demons were arriving.

“I want everything collected,” Samael said. “Phones, personal items, and especially, that grimoire.”

I opened my mouth to tell Samael he wasn't getting his hands on that grimoire, but my body chose that moment to give up.

The last thing I felt before I passed out was Samael's lips on my forehead.

DANICA



The scent of citrus and cedar surrounded me. I felt cozy, warm, and, most importantly, safe.

It was the last that made me snap my eyes open.

Once again, I was in Samael's bed. I struggled to sit up. Next to the balcony, Samael turned, my kitten in his arms. I blinked in an attempt to clear this craziness from my mind.

Nope. I wasn't dreaming.

Samael strolled toward me, placing Lia on the bed. She immediately raced at me, climbing on my chest and nuzzling at my neck. Tears pricked my eyes. "Hi, cat."

She purred, and I ignored Samael, clutching her close for a long moment. Lia swiped at me, unhappy at having her freedom restricted. Moment over.

"How long was I out?" This was Deja vu. I had to stop ending up here.

"Two days. Vassago thought you might prefer to have your feline brought here."

I gazed at him. Samael was... lying. A tiny crease had appeared between his brows, and he seemed almost confused. The demon had remembered how frantic I'd been when I woke up here last time, and he knew that Lia would bring me comfort.

I smiled and said nothing, running one finger over Lia's tiny ear. I felt good enough to sit up, and I rotated my ankle. Healed. Oh, it ached, but it felt like it was recovering from a small sprain, and not the fracture that I'd had. My head also felt clear, although I could definitely sleep for a few more hours.

“What happened after I passed out?”

Samael waved a hand. “The mages arrived, unhappy to find their suspects were no longer living. However, one of the phones had still been recording.” A hint of frustration covered his face and was gone an instant later. “Vassago missed the phone in his initial search. It had fallen into some undergrowth.”

And it had caught everything. Not only that Samael was powerful enough to turn people to ash with little more than a thought, but that I had fought on the side of the demon. Had tried to save him.

My career was likely over.

Samael reached out a hand, dropping it before he touched my face. “The video was released into Albert’s care before I knew it existed. I paid him a visit and he swore it would not be viewed by anyone else.”

I winced. We both knew the Mage Council was full of leaks. Someone had likely given the witches the Naud Chains. If that video made it out of the Mage Council, I was screwed.

I blew out a long breath. I was alive. Samael was alive. Evie was alive. The witches were dead. I’d worry about everything else later.

I sat back in the mound of pillows. “Botis was bonded to you. So how did he manage to betray you?”

Samael gave a languid shrug of his shoulders. “Those oaths were sworn several centuries ago. They are my equals— not compelled to serve me. They follow my orders because they choose to.”

And Botis had chosen not to.

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

I blinked. It was the most honest Samael had been with me. His expression open, sadness flickering in his silver eyes. I glanced away, and my gaze landed on my arm.

The black slash was gone. Samael strolled closer, then sat on the edge of my bed. Inches away. If I wanted, I could pull him close. “You no longer owe me.”

“Oh yeah? Then how come your gold mark is still all over my arm?”

“I wanted to break the bond. But you didn’t complete the task in the allotted time.”

I went very still. “What are you talking about?”

“You were to discover *and kill* the murderers before the end of the two week deadline. Your deadline ended at 12am when you were holding your

ward against Mary. Besides, you didn't kill the witches. I did."

Rage swept through me and I fought to keep a tremble from my voice. "You son of a bitch."

"Magic has rules."

"You make the rules!"

"If I were a better man, I would release you." He smiled, and it was both cruel and sad. "But I'm not."

"Fuck you." It was lame, but it was all I had. I was so furious I was trembling, and if I'd had a gun within reach, I would've blown his fucking head off.

He was probably old enough to regrow it.

Samael was studying me. "I have something else you may be interested in."

I bared my teeth. "I don't want anything from you."

"Even the dagger?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. I'd forgotten. I was supposed to give him the Mistilteinn Dagger back.

He smiled as he read my mind. "You may keep it."

I blinked at him. He'd been *furious* when he discovered it missing. Why give it to me now?

My eyes were getting heavy. Next to me, Lia was curled up on one of the huge pillows, purring like a little motor.

"I don't want any favors from you."

"Now, now witchling. We both know that is a lie. When you're feeling better, you'll thank me for giving you such a valuable artifact."

"I want to go home."

Samael smiled at me as if I was being particularly adorable. My eyelids were so heavy I was fighting to keep them open. Fine. I wasn't going home until I took a nap. But the moment I could walk out of here, I was done with Samael and his bullshit.

I just had one question I needed answered. "How did you get free of the chains?"

Samael shifted closer, pushing a strand of hair away from my face. "The chains are created from a metal so old it dampens even my ability to access my power. But that power can still gather. In time I could snap them, if I gathered enough power. I almost had it when you jumped at me."

I stared at him and he smiled. "The power of a demon bond is even older

than the chains. When you stupidly attempted to sacrifice yourself for me, the bond strengthened, and the chains were no match for it.”

All the spit dried up in my mouth and I swallowed. “You expected me to sacrifice myself for you.”

“No. But your attempted self-sacrifice will be remembered. And rewarded.”

Dread warred with fury in my gut. Every move I had made over the past two weeks had been with the goal of breaking my bond with Samael. And all I had done was succeed in making it stronger.

“Get out.”

Samael lifted a brow. “Excuse me?”

“Get the fuck out.”

His expression turned dangerous. I gave him a hard stare, but my eyes were fluttering shut.

“I will leave you to collect your thoughts.”

My stupid eyes had slid shut and I forced them back open in time to see Samael’s face, mere inches away. He had no business being so fucking compelling. Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes, and why wouldn’t it? He’d gotten everything he wanted.

I glowered at him, but he leaned closer, his lips meeting mine in an achingly gentle kiss. I reached up to push him away but he was already gone.

“Stay the hell away from me.”

“I don’t think so,” he murmured. “I will see you soon, little witch.”

He strolled away and I rolled closer to my cat. Samael had made a mistake tying me to him. For the past two and a half years, every ounce of my focus had gone into finding my mother’s killer. From now on, that was taking a back seat.

Oh, I would still devote as much time as I could to taking down whoever had dared lure her back to Durham to murder her. But I had a much more important task to focus on for the short term. Because Harriette was right. My mother *would* be disappointed if she knew where I’d ended up.

There was a reason why those arrows could kill a high demon without needing to be poisoned. I was going to find out why. And then I’d break this bond. Even if it killed me.

EPILOGUE

DANICA



I stood on the pavement, soaking in the sun on my skin. After Samael's fae had healed me, it had taken me another day before I could get out of bed and make my escape. I'd rested for another couple of days, and this was the first time I'd left my apartment.

I'd gone to Harriette's, but she'd already left town again. She knew something about my mom's murder, and she *definitely* knew something about who my father was. I was going to find her and discover what she knew.

But first, I needed to talk to my sister.

The memory of sitting in the circle of witches flashed through my mind. One of my final thoughts had been of Evie. The regret had ripped through me, and it was one hell of a wakeup call.

This thing between me and Samael could only end badly. I lifted my hand, examining the gold bond as it glimmered in the sun. One of us was going to end up dead, and it was likely to be me. If the worst happened, I wanted to go without regrets.

And I just plain missed my sister.

Nausea swept through me. The last time I'd seen Evie, I'd scared the hell out of her. All I could hope was that she'd give me a chance to explain.

I hated visiting this house. All I could see when I thought of it was the day I'd been dragged away.

"Why would you do this?" I begged my mom. "I'll never forgive you for this."

Her lips had thinned, and she'd looked away, focused on the road in front of us. "Listen to me very carefully," she'd said. "If you want to keep Evie

safe, you need to stay away from her.”

“Why?”

She'd refused to respond.

I'd been hesitating here for too long. I had no doubt that there were eyes on me. I forced myself into motion, stalked up the steps and knocked on Evie's door. I refused to think of this house as the coven's home. This was where my sister lived and that was all that mattered.

Evie opened the door a moment later. She'd obviously seen me standing like an idiot on the side of the road.

“Danica.”

She no longer called me Dani. I tried not to care.

“Hi.” I blew out a nervous breath, shifting on my feet. Evie watched me silently. *“Listen, I'm sorry about what happened the other day.”*

“What exactly happened? That power was... different. I don't remember...”

She didn't remember me having it as a kid, but she obviously didn't want to bring up our childhood. As far as she was concerned, we probably weren't even related.

“I can explain all of that. It's complicated though...” Evie's gaze shuttered and I shifted on my feet. Something like sympathy shone in her eyes for an instant, followed by a brief flicker of humor. My sister had always enjoyed watching me squirm.

I let out a breath. *“Look,”* I said honestly. *“I miss having a sister. I miss you. I nearly died a few days ago,”* I admitted, Evie's eyes went wide. *“One of my last thoughts was that I regretted everything that happened between us. I'm not asking you to forget it, but maybe we could... grab a drink or something sometime?”*

“You nearly died?”

I probably shouldn't have mentioned that. *“Yeah.”*

Her face was as pale and cold as it had been the day I told her our mom had died. But now I recognized it for what it was. Pure, unrelenting terror. Evie wasn't uncaring. She was just attempting to protect herself.

Oh, Evie.

“I'd like that.”

I blinked at her and a ghost of a smile played around her mouth. *“A drink,”* she said. *“I'd like that.”*

A bead of sweat had dripped down my back. Behind her, the house was

silent. I had no doubt the witches were listening in.

I smiled for the first time since I'd woken up in Samael's bed. "I'd like that too."

The End.

Thank you for reading *Speak of the Demon*. This book was a passion project which turned into an obsession. If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving an honest review— these help readers find our books.

Danica's story continues in book two, *Dance with the Demon* [which you can find here](#).

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Author's Note:

The Geer Cemetery is a real place in Durham. It was founded in 1877 when three former enslaved men— John O'Daniel, Nelson Mitchell, and Willis Moore purchased two acres from white landowners.

The Friends of Geer Cemetery is a grassroots organization founded in 2003. They're working hard to coordinate volunteer cleanup efforts and advocating for perpetual care for the cemetery. If you'd like to donate or learn more, check them out on Facebook— Friends of Geer.

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