

WHEN A DEVIL IS HUNTING YOU,
THERE IS NOWHERE YOU CAN HIDE.



CITY OF
GODS
AND
MONSTERS



A
HOUSE
OF DEVILS
NOVEL



KAYLA EDWARDS

PENGUIN BOOKS

CITY OF GODS AND MONSTERS

Kayla is the author of the House of Devils series – *City of Gods and Monsters*, *City of Souls and Sinners*, *City of Lies and Legends* and *City of Smoke and Brimstone*. She is also the author of the upper-YA romantasy novel, *Dreams of Ice and Iron*. She started writing *City of Gods and Monsters* when she was in high school, so the characters and the world they live in are very close to her heart. When she isn't writing, she enjoys traveling, spending time in nature, and binge-watching her favorite television shows with her husband.

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CITY OF GODS AND
MONSTERS

HOUSE OF DEVILS
BOOK ONE

KAYLA EDWARDS



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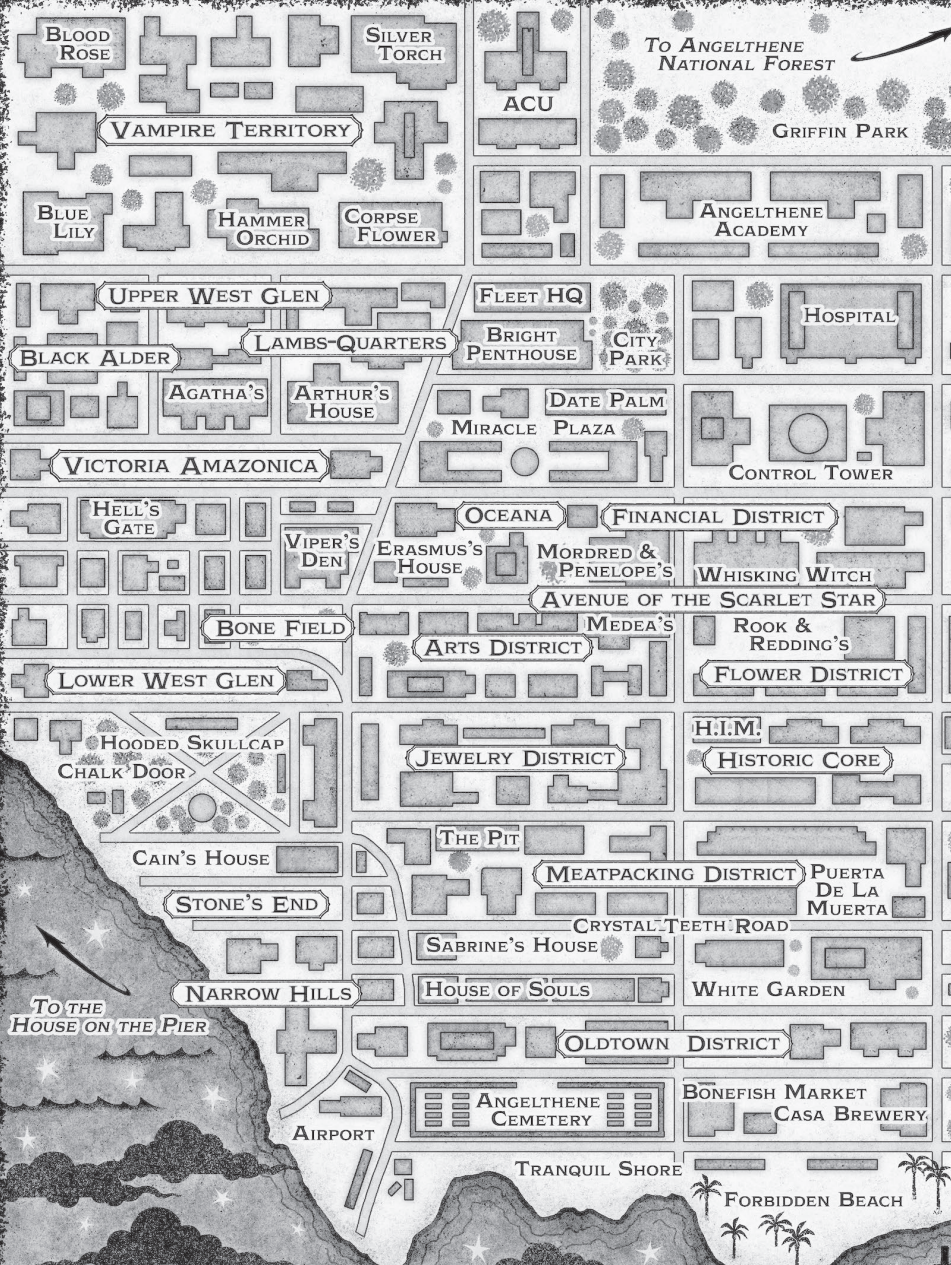
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*For Jeff—
My rock, my best friend, my safe harbor.
My everything.*

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TO ANGELTHENE NATIONAL FOREST

GRIFFIN PARK

ANGELTHENE ACADEMY

HOSPITAL

CONTROL TOWER

WHISKING WITCH

ROOK & REDDING'S
FLOWER DISTRICT

H.I.M.
HISTORIC CORE

PUERTA DE LA MUERTA

WHITE GARDEN

BONEFISH MARKET
CASA BREWERY

FORBIDDEN BEACH

W E L C O M E T O
WE HOPE YOU

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TO THE HOUSE ON THE PIER

AIRPORT

TRANQUIL SHORE

ANGELTHENE CEMETERY

NARROW HILLS

HOUSE OF SOULS

SABRINE'S HOUSE

MEATPACKING DISTRICT

THE PIT

JEWELRY DISTRICT

HOODED SKULLCAP
CHALK DOOR

CAIN'S HOUSE

STONE'S END

BONE FIELD

ARTS DISTRICT

AVENUE OF THE SCARLET STAR

ERASMUS'S HOUSE

MORDRED & PENELOPE'S

OCEANA

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

HELL'S GATE

VIPER'S DEN

MIRACLE PLAZA

DATE PALM

BRIGHT PENTHOUSE

CITY PARK

LAMBS-QUARTERS

ARTHUR'S HOUSE

AGATHA'S

BLACK ALDER

UPPER WEST GLEN

FLEET HQ

BLUE LILY

HAMMER ORCHID

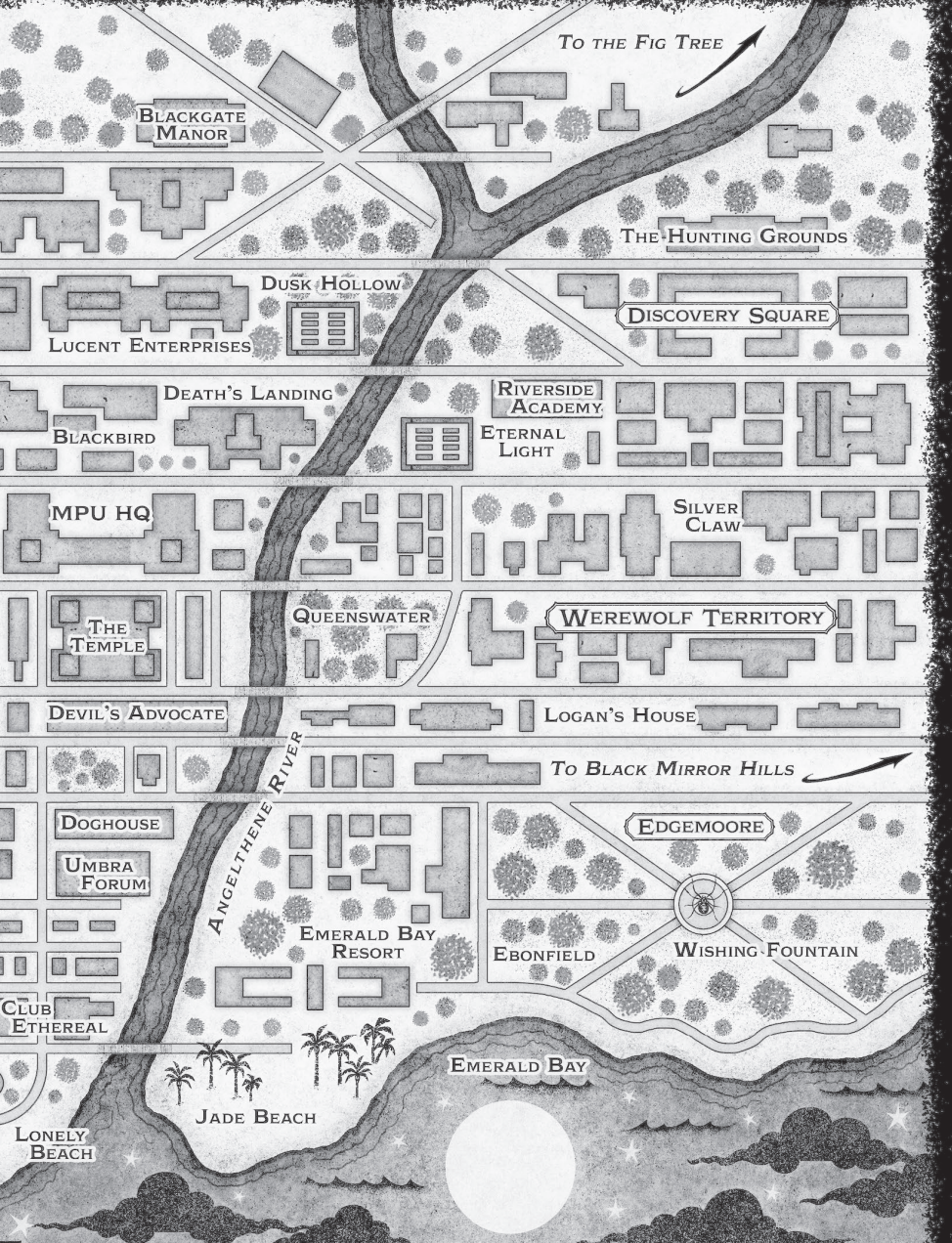
CORPSE FLOWER

BLOOD ROSE

SILVER TORCH

VAMPIRE TERRITORY

ACU



BLACKGATE
MANOR

TO THE FIG TREE

THE HUNTING GROUNDS

DUSK HOLLOW

DISCOVERY SQUARE

LUCENT ENTERPRISES

DEATH'S LANDING

RIVERSIDE
ACADEMY

BLACKBIRD

ETERNAL
LIGHT

MPU HQ

SILVER
CLAW

THE
TEMPLE

QUEENSWATER

WEREWOLF TERRITORY

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

LOGAN'S HOUSE

TO BLACK MIRROR HILLS

DOGHOUSE

EDGEMOORE

UMBRA
FORUM

EMERALD BAY
RESORT

EBONFIELD

WISHING FOUNTAIN

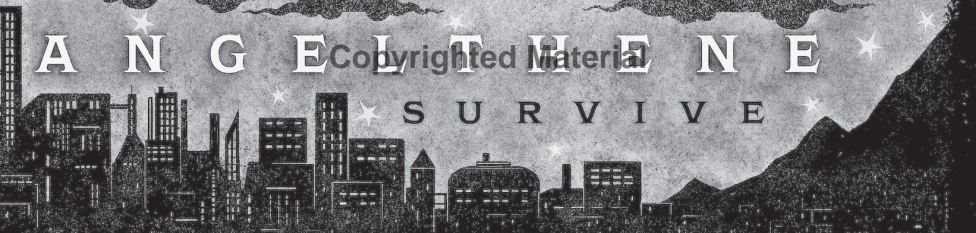
CLUB
ETHEREAL

EMERALD BAY

JADE BEACH

LOVELY BEACH

ANGELTHENE
SURVIVE



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DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

THE SEVEN DEVILS

Marked with a horned letter S in the gothic script of an ancient world, they answer to Darien Cassel, Head of Hell's Gate

THE REAPERS

Marked with the cloaked and masked God of Death, they answer to Malakai Delaney, Head of the House of Souls

THE HUNTSMEN

Marked with a Hellhound, they answer to Lionel Savage, Head of the Hunting Grounds and Right Hand of Randal Slade

THE ANGELS OF DEATH

Marked with overlapping wings in white ink, they answer to Dominic Valencia, Head of Death's Landing

THE WARGS

Marked with a crescent moon in luminescent ink, they answer to Channary Graves, Head of the House on the Pier

THE VIPERS

Marked with an animated striking serpent, they answer to
Jude Monson, Head of the Den of Vipers

*All Darkslaying circles in Angelthene answer to Randal Slade, Head of
all circles in the city. No one outside of these six circles may operate on
Angelthene soil. To do so is punishable by death.*

This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers, including violence, graphic language, substance use disorder, death of an animal, sexual harassment, panic attacks, grief, depression, and suicide. This book also contains explicit sexual content. Please read with caution and prepare to enter the city of Angelthene...

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PART ONE
ANGELTHENE ACADEMY FOR
MAGIC

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I

“ If you so much as *look* at her again, I will break all four of your legs, pup.”

If it weren't for Dallas defending her, Loren Calla might've run out the metal doors of the nightclub called Her Infernal Majesty right then and there. The dry-ice smoke choking the dance floor did nothing to hide the hundreds of faces that were watching the scene unfold beneath the blue strobe lights, their eyes hungry with curiosity.

The werewolf standing before Loren—on two very human legs, despite Dallas's insult—had dumped a full glass of beer over her head. Her waist-length golden hair was dripping wet, the white fabric of her short, skin-tight dress soaked and see-through. The beer was fresh off the tap, but regardless of how cold it was, her entire body was heating up from embarrassment.

Witches like Dallas usually got along quite well with wolves. If it weren't for the fact that Loren was human and therefore didn't quite belong in Angelthene—otherwise known as the City of Everlasting Hearts, a sprawling metropolis that catered to and favoured an immortal demographic—the night might've passed without incident.

Might've passed without her friend and adoptive sister—a pure-blooded *venefica* held in far higher regard than Loren—needing to step in and defend her.

When the werewolf had swaggered up to Loren and asked her to dance with him, she had declined as politely as possible. Turned out, he didn't take well to rejection, no matter how polite the rejection may be. But this was girls' night; Dallas had made herself *very* clear about this before dragging Loren and Sabrine Van Arsdell, who was currently fetching another drink across the room, out club-hopping. Dallas would never allow a summer to end without a bang, especially this one—the summer before they would start their freshman year at Angelthene Academy for Magic.

And while most girls Loren's age would've jumped at the chance to paint the city red, Loren had only wished to curl up on the couch. Couches were safe. Couches were ordinary. Exactly how she preferred everything in her life.

The wolf's fire-colored eyes flashed with anger as he looked Loren over, his hands vibrating at his sides as he fought the Shift. Beneath the medley of sweat, puke, and cigarette smoke, the odor of wet dog swept through the room. "Is she your bodyguard or your cock-block?" he said of Dallas.

"She's my sister," Loren bit out in a wavering voice. Her fingers curled into tight fists, nails digging into her palms. "And you've just made an enemy of her."

He glanced between her and Dallas. "A human with a witch for a sister?" He snorted. "What do you think I am—*stupid*?"

"Apparently you are," Dallas said coolly. "Because I literally just warned you that I would break your legs if you looked at her again."

"You want to take this outside, *venefica*?" he sneered.

A second werewolf wearing an ACU letterman jacket stepped up to his friend's side. There was caution in this one's

gaze, and even with the music thumping through the building and shaking the floor beneath Loren's pearlescent leather pumps, she didn't need immortal hearing to make out the words he hissed into his friend's ear. "I'd cool it, Jerome. That's Dallas Bright."

There was nowhere to look without meeting a pair of prying eyes. Loren wrung her fingers before her, looking mostly at the grimy floor than anywhere else. For the hundredth time that evening, she wished she had the power to turn herself invisible. Or, at the very least, teleport herself back to the four walls of her safe and ordinary bedroom at the penthouse.

When she risked a glance up from the floor, she caught sight of half-witch Sabrina heading this way—hand cupped over her glass, elbows shoving clubbers aside with impressive strength for someone her size. Her angular, deep-set eyes narrowed as she took in a soaking wet Loren and an angry Dallas whose expression was utterly murderous.

"What's going on?" Sabrina demanded.

Jerome didn't deign to glance her way. "Stay out of this, half-breed." The ugly insult had Dallas throwing the wolves a cold smile.

Loren's whole body turned rigid at the sight of that smile.

Here we go, she thought.

Dallas stepped forward, her hip-length red hair swaying, an eight-inch ash-wood Focus in a freckled golden hand.

"If you boys knew how to think with the right head, you'd scam before I muzzle your filthy mouths." The chunk of amethyst nestled within the entangle of wood at the point of her magic stave pulsed brightly. Magic sparked, the smell of it—like smoke from blown-out birthday candles—coating Loren's tongue as it swept through her airways.

But Jerome didn't seem to care who any of them were, least of all the pure-blooded venefica standing before him with rage in her silver-green eyes. Dallas's father was general

of the Aerial Fleet, the country's organized military force equipped for fighting in the sky. Being threatened by the Red Baron's daughter would've convinced most people to stand down—but apparently, this pup really didn't know how to think with the right head.

Or perhaps he was simply too drunk to realize he'd met his match.

"All right, all right, that's enough," boomed a deep voice. Tension melted away as everyone in the club turned to see a six-foot-seven warlock bouncer pushing his way through the crowd with beefy arms. He pinned their group with a cold stare. "You all know the rules: anyone who starts trouble gets the boot."

Jerome raised his hands in surrender and backed up into the crowd, his friend following suit. "No trouble on my end, sir. I'm not the one threatening someone with a Focus."

Dallas swung around to face Jerome, a strand of her hair catching in her mouth. "You started it by dumping a beer on my friend, *asshole!*" She made to lunge for him, but Loren stepped forward and grabbed hold of her arm.

"Let it go, Dallas!" Her voice was barely a croak, every word trembling harder than her legs. "He's not worth it."

The werewolves disappeared into the throng of people, and after giving Loren and her friends a few stern words, the bouncer returned to his station at the entrance. Now that the excitement was over, the crowds of bystanders returned to their dancing and drinking, releasing Loren from their gazes at last.

Sabrina's mouth curled into a frown as she looked at her cell phone, the screen illuminating her silken black hair and the sharp planes of her honey-brown face. "Girls, it's almost Witching Hour. We should reserve a cab." Oh, crap.

Loren pulled her own phone out of her cross-body purse to check the time—wishing thinking that it might display different numbers than Sabrina's. They'd gone and done the

one thing Loren had always promised herself she would never do after sunset: lose track of time. City buses didn't operate this late at night, so cabs were their only option.

Dallas gave a thoughtful hum. She shoved her Focus into her purse, the glowing amethyst reflecting in the black leather of her dress—a strapless number that hugged every curve and dip of her hourglass figure. “What’s tonight’s forecast?”

Loren felt the blood drain from her face. “Don’t even think about it, Dal. That’s how people get eaten or attacked by machetes. Did you forget what happened last summer?”

Dallas rolled her eyes. “Relax, Lor,” she sighed, snatching up her vodka soda from the sticky linoleum. She took a sip, being careful not to smear her ruby lips—colored not with makeup but with a glamor, though still susceptible to touch. “I was just asking. I hope you realize how long we’re going to have to wait for a cab.”

Loren hated to admit it, but Dallas made a point. Although nightlife in Angelthene was limited, the few clubs and cabarets dotting the downtown core were packed on weekends, so cabs were a rare commodity. Nobody walked anywhere after sunset, not unless they had a death wish.

Or unless the moon was full, and they decided to take their chances.

Sabrine’s stiletto nails clicked against her phone screen. “Skies are mostly clear. Sturgeon moon.” She quirked an arched brow and gave Dallas a look heavy with implication.

Dread curled in Loren’s stomach. “If you guys want to walk, go ahead. It’s not my funeral,” she said. “But I for one would rather take my chances with the cabs.” She peeled a strand of wet hair off her cheek. As soon as she got home, she would take a shower—but first she would have to worry about making it there in one piece. While most cities had rat infestations, Angelthene’s pest problem involved feral demons that crawled on all fours and cared about only one thing: the taste of flesh.

Especially human.

Dallas gave a shrug and drained the last of her vodka soda. The look in her eyes suggested she was itching to argue about the situation further, or perhaps call Loren out on how there was no way in hell she would ever choose to split up from them. But a meaningful glance from Sabrina stilled her tongue.

“Call a cabby, then,” Dallas told Sabrina. But Loren was already on it.

She wasn’t surprised to find the lines tied up. She got through after making two dozen calls to several different companies, but by that time the clock was inching past Witching Hour.

They waited for the cab out front of the club, beneath the bright, protective glow of the HID lamps that were normally seen at sports stadiums and warehouses. The dry, late-summer heat threatened to bake Loren’s very bones, and she found her eyelids drooping shut as she sat at the base of the winged statue of Ignis, Her Infernal Majesty of the Seven Circles. Only the honk of car horns slicing through the night and the music that dribbled through the metal doors of the club kept her from drifting off.

The full Sturgeon moon shone as brightly as the city’s display of billboards that advertised everything from grimoires and magic staves to blood donor clinics for the more civilized vampires of Angelthene. Palm trees lined either side of Gamma Pagasi Street, fronds swaying in a balmy wind that carried the smoky hint of creosote and the cool bite of sage.

If Loren tipped her head at just the right angle, she could make out a faint greenish cast from the protective forcefield that formed a dome over the city, its magic stemming from the Control Tower in the heart of the North End. The forcefield wasn’t perfect by any means, but it served as protection for its citizens from outside forces, namely the creatures that awoke during Blood Moons. Of course, it did nothing to shield them

from the dangers that were already under the dome, but Loren didn't let herself think about that. Her mind was a dangerous place, especially when she was this tired.

The club began to empty at one in the morning. Werewolves, warlocks, witches, vampires, and humans piled into taxicabs that took off as quickly as they rolled up to the curb at the brightly lit entrance. The odd limousine flitted by, windows half-down, the bass of the sound systems thumping over the asphalt.

Loren sighed. "Our cab driver's sure taking his sweet-ass time."

"School starts in seven hours," Sabrina grumbled. The harsh light of the HID lamp she was leaning against turned her face a sickly shade of gray. "At this rate, I'm not going to get any sleep."

"We *could* start walking," Dallas said. She bent over to rub at her ankles, the skin scraped raw from the straps of her heels. At the sight of her muscled golden legs on full display, a wolf and a warlock staggering by leered and catcalled at her. She rolled her eyes and flipped them off.

The werewolf slowed. His gaze snagged on Loren...and lingered there. He was cute, in a boy-next-door sort of way.

Before he could look away, Loren beat him to it, dropping her eyes to the ground and feigning a sudden interest in the cigarette butts and neon glowsticks littering the sidewalk. Immortals had little interest in humans, and if they did it was only for an hour or a night. Another reason she hadn't cared to dance with Jerome: all she was to guys like him was something pretty to look at. A mere blip in a gloriously immortal lifespan. A *half-life*.

Dallas's voice made Loren jump. "Don't even think about it, fur-face!" Loren looked up in time to see the wolf and his warlock pal scurrying toward their cars.

Loren sighed. "I could've handled that myself, Dal." Maybe she should give Jerome's question—about Dallas

being a bodyguard or a cock-block—some more thought. Even though Dal always had Loren’s best interests in mind, sometimes she wondered if there were times when the witch simply couldn’t handle not being the center of attention.

Dallas snorted and gave her a once-over that was anything but kind. “As if *you* were going to tell him off.”

“Maybe I was,” Loren snapped.

Every trace of humor vanished from Dallas’s face. “You’re grumpy tonight.”

“I never even wanted to come out.”

“Whatever.” She waved her away like she would an insect buzzing in her face. Loren tried not to bristle—not to say something she might regret. They were family—and family was in short supply for Loren. “What are you doing sexting over there, Sab?” Dallas peered over Sabrina’s shoulder. “Holy burning Ignis, don’t tell me you’re actually studying right now!”

Sabrina cupped a hand over her screen. “I need to get a head start!”

“Always such a bookworm,” Dallas tsked.

Warmth bloomed across the inside of Loren’s left forearm. She looked down at the medical tattoo that was visible only when her blood sugar levels dropped dangerously low. The serpent-entwined rod was emitting the same pale blue light as the glowstick she wore around her neck. Blue wasn’t as bad as red, at least.

She unzipped her cross-body purse and fumbled through the contents in search of her medication, which was the next best thing when she didn’t have access to food. Dread coiled tightly in her stomach as she realized she had forgotten it.

“Lor,” Sabrina said, cutting off whatever Dallas was saying to her. “Don’t tell me—”

“I’m fine.” Loren forced a close-lipped smile that neither of them bought.

“I think we should walk,” Dallas said. She looked Loren

over with narrowed eyes. "I thought I told you to keep that stupid bottle in your purse."

Loren had just about had it with this night—and Dallas's attitude. "You didn't give me much notice before you dragged me out the door!"

"That has *nothing* to do with it," Dallas hissed.

Loren felt her face turn hot. She squeezed her fingers into fists between her knees, willing herself not to be the first to break eye contact with her sister. "You don't have to be such a bully all the time, Dal—"

"Quit arguing!" Sabine exclaimed, pushing away from the HID lamp. "You guys are giving me a headache." She blew out a sigh, a strand of dark hair fluttering in her face. She studied Loren, her brows knitting together. "Loren, she has a point. The last thing we need is you fainting on us."

"I said I'm fine." But she wasn't—not really. Her vision was gray and splotchy, and she was starting to feel like she was floating, like she was one of the many palm tree fronds scattered across the sidewalk, stirred about by gusts of wind.

Sabine sighed. "Do you think your mom would care if I crashed on your couch?"

"Who cares what Taega thinks," Dallas grumbled. "If she doesn't like it, she can kick us all out." While Loren and Dallas lived on the North End, the shack Sabine called home was in the South. If she were to walk from here, it would take hours, and she would have no choice but to venture through the tangled streets of the Meatpacking District, which simply wasn't an option. People went missing from there all the time, and if they turned up, they were never alive.

"Lor," Dallas beseeched, her face lined with frustration. "We should get you home."

They didn't have much of a choice anymore. Her Infernal Majesty would close at two a.m. and as soon as the doors were locked, the HID lamps would shut off. Which meant the demons that prowled the sewers would no longer have a

reason to keep away. No reason but the moon, whose brightness was at constant risk of being stifled by the few fleecy clouds drifting across the sky.

Although ice coursed through her veins at the thought of walking at this hour, Loren kicked off her heels, scooped them into a hand, and heaved herself to her aching feet. "Let's go, then." She raised an index finger. "But no back alleys, or I'm turning around."

They began the trek down Angelthene Boulevard, staying in the light of the streetlamps whenever possible. She joined Dallas and Sabine in their drunken, bawdy singing as they ambled along, but she soon fell silent. Her aching feet were speckled with blisters, and they were black and sticky with the-Star-knew-what. This had to be the longest walk of her life, and to make matters worse, not a single empty taxicab rolled by.

Traffic lights flicked from red to green to amber and back, without one car passing under them. Rats rummaged in overturned trashcans, and cats suffering from the mange watched with glowing eyes from dark alleys. While most cities had their share of vagrants huddled beneath awnings or sitting on the benches at transport shelters, Angelthene's level of crime—along with its pest problem—was so severe, only stray shoes and articles of clothing littered the sidewalk. Not one person could be seen for miles.

There was a scuff and a shuffle in a nearby alley.

Loren's lungs tightened. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling. Dead leaves crackled across the asphalt.

She saw something standing at the end of that alley. Something with bony, slumped shoulders and great horns. Loren squinted, blinking hard. Willing it to be a mere trick of the eyes.

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But the thing lurched forward and began to scuttle toward her on its hands and knees.

Her breath stopped in a wild gasp as terror stole through her veins. She found herself immobile at the end of the alley as the creature crawled toward her, and when she couldn't hold it back any longer, she blinked.

In the millisecond it took to rewet her eyes, the thing had disappeared.

"Did you guys see that?" Her soft words were nearly drowned out by Dallas and Sabine's singing. She hurried after them, a chill dripping like a spider down her spine.

"Come on, scaredy-cat!" Dallas called. "Get your butt moving and maybe you won't get eaten." Despite her teasing, she knew Dallas well enough to detect an edge of concern in her words.

"It's not funny," she grumbled. Multicolored chalk runes decorated the sidewalk beneath her filthy feet. "Unlike you two, I don't have a Focus I can use if anything goes wrong." No, as a human, all she had was her nails—painted hot-pink and manicured into long, sharp points—and the useless pepper spray she kept in her bag for a false sense of security. It might protect her against humans, at least. Which she supposed was better than nothing.

Sabine—bless her—was staring at Loren in concern. "Do you need to stop for a rest?"

"I'm fine." Loren tried not to make it obvious that she was blinking away fog that shouldn't be there. Her tattoo was flaring brighter now, a constant warmth spreading up her arm.

"As long as you're sure," Sab told her. Loren was too distracted by the feeling of her heart in her throat to answer. Too distracted by the misty gloom lurking in every alley.

Loren squinted to make out the letters on the sign above the closest intersection.

It read *Canopus Street*. Which meant they were nearing the Avenue of the Scarlet Star, where Loren worked on weekends at a sentient-plant apothecary called Mordred and Penelope's

Mortar and Pestle. She wondered if it might be a good idea to unlock the shop and stay there until sunrise. They would have to sleep on the floor, but...it was better than being outside any longer. And her dog was there—Singer. He would love the company.

Not to mention that her collection of essential oils was *also* there—the peppermint and lavender blends that helped calm her heartrate whenever her panic attacks closed in. Those oils were a godsend; she didn't know how she had ever lived without them.

Dallas fell into step beside her, jolting her back to the here and now. "Relax, Lor!" As if reading her mind, she threw an arm around her stiff shoulders and said, "If it'll make you feel any better, we could go to Mordred and Penny's and call for another cab there. You think they'd mind?"

Loren nibbled on her bottom lip. "I could call them and ask."

"It's going to take us hours to get to the penthouse if we don't," Sabine chimed in. She was right: they'd underestimated how long it would take to walk to the apartment at Santa Aria Flats. To be fair, they didn't do this walk often. And *often* meant never.

Regardless, Dal's suggestion didn't totally ease her concerns. Several blocks still stood between them and the apothecary, and it wasn't just the demons she was worried about.

In the world of Terra, society was dominated by an array of beings, all more powerful than humans: werewolves, vampires, witches, warlocks, and hellsehers. Loren didn't know which would be worse: running into a vampire who didn't bother with blood donor clinics, or one of the bounty hunting hellsehers called *Darkslayers* who sometimes killed simply for the sake of killing.

She supposed she had her answer: running into a Darkslayer would be far worse than running into a vampire. Espe-

cially one of the Seven Devils, the most feared Darkslaying circle in the city, who'd risen to the top of Angelthene's Darkslaying hierarchy in recent years.

The thought made her shiver, despite that the night was warm and dry. "I think we should go to the apothecary. I'll worry about Mordred and Penny's wrath another day." She only hoped the conjoined witch twins wouldn't kill her for entering their precious shop after hours.

They started walking again. This time, no one bothered to sing. Loren might've blamed it on the alcohol or exhaustion, but she had the sense that Dallas and Sabrina were sobering up the longer they walked. Wind blew hollowly through the streets, sending palm tree fronds scraping across asphalt. For a city of eight million people, it was eerily quiet.

They made it another two blocks before a pair of headlights swept across the road behind them, reflecting in a stop sign up ahead. The harsh, ascending squalls of birds that were huddled in the date palms cut through the quiet, followed by the crunch and pop of gravel under tires as the vehicle rolled toward them.

Loren slowed. "*Please* tell me that's a cab." But she couldn't say; the vehicle's headlights rendered her mortal eyes useless.

The driver lurched to a stop, and Loren found herself stepping off the sidewalk as Dallas and Sabrina continued walking.

It wasn't a cab, Loren realized. Her dragging feet stilled, and her heart skipped two beats. It was a dark sedan.

Everything happened very quickly.

Two men got out—a copper-haired warlock and a blond hellseher. The latter's eyes—whites and all—were solid black. The color indicated that he was a Darkslayer out on a job—and was calling upon his magical ability known as the *Sight* to track the aura that belonged to his target. Aside from the black that swallowed their eyes while using the Sight, hellse-

hers looked like mortals, for they, unlike vampires and wolves, had no other characteristics that set them apart. The Sight was an ability exclusive to hellsehers; it allowed them to not only track people by the colors of their auras, but also see through the magical wards on buildings and vehicles that were put in place specifically to *bide* auras.

Dallas sprinted to Loren's side, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her behind her. The sudden jerk of her arm sent pain rippling up to Loren's shoulder. Her heel caught on the curb, causing her to stumble, her shoes slipping through her fingers and clunking to the sidewalk.

Dallas's Focus sparked a glaring white. "*Exarmaueris!*" she bellowed.

Her spell blasted the warlock into the sedan, the windshield shattering as her magic launched him right through it.

But the hellseher barely budged, absorbing the impact of Dallas's spell as though it were a breeze—as though he *enjoyed* it. He flashed them a wicked smile as he cast his own spell—with hellseher magic that didn't need a Focus, nor fancy incantations to set their powers into motion.

A hellseher's magic was utterly lethal.

The force of his attack slammed into them like a battering ram.

Loren and Dallas flew backward. They hit the asphalt, rolling over top of each other in a tangle of limbs. Loren cried out as her bare arms and legs were shredded open, gravel ripping into her.

Sabrina was shouting hysterically into her cell phone as she ran after Loren and Dallas, begging City Rescue to send officers to Canopus Street immediately.

The hellseher was striding their way, rallying his magic with arms held aloft at his sides, palms facing forward. Gravel hovered above the road, the tendrils of his shoulder-length blond hair drifting above his head as though he were underwater.

There was a symbol tattooed below his right ear. All Darkslaying hellsehers were marked with one, but Loren didn't recognize his. She sorted through the options in her mind, but came up empty; the Seven Devils, the Angels of Death, the Huntsmen, the Wargs, the Reapers, the Vipers... It was *none* of them.

It was the head of a phoenix.

Wincing in pain, Dallas pushed herself to her feet and thrust out her stave. From her shadow sprang her Familiar Spirit, a winged tiger called Ghost. Black and stark as a silhouette, Ghost sank into a protective stance before them, a guttural snarl ripping through his bared teeth.

"Run, Lor." Dallas stepped in front of where Loren was still sprawled on the sidewalk. The witch's body trembled, and blood streamed down her legs.

Behind the hellseher, the warlock was recovering from Dallas's disarming spell. His arms were bloodied up, and he looked more than a little pissed off as he leapt off the crumpled hood and followed the Darkslayer toward them.

"Quit playing!" the warlock snarled at the Darkslayer. "We need her *alive*."

Loren pushed herself to her feet. "Dallas—"

"*RUN, goddamn it!*" Dallas shouted. "We'll hold them off. They're not after us, Loren. They're after *you!*"

At the same time as Sabrine, Dallas bellowed, "*Exar-mauris!*"

Magic erupted in unison from their staves, and a smattering of lilac sparks floated into the sky. Dust blasted down the street as the spells cleaved the air. The force of the magic shook the trees and buckled the glass of shop windows, the sound like bones breaking.

Loren cried out and covered her face as shards of glass zipped through the air. The magpies huddled within the trees cawed and fled into the night with an explosion of feathers.

Dallas shoved Loren. "Go!" Her voice cracked. "We'll

catch up with you—I *promise*.” The sheer terror in Dallas’s gaze was the only thing that spurred Loren into action.

She broke into a limping sprint. Her breath tore apart her lungs, the muscles in her calves shrieking in pain as she fled. Every instinct screamed at her to turn back—to help her friends, despite that a human could literally do *nothing* against a warlock and a Darkslayer.

She was helpless. *Pathetic*. Never had she hated being human more than she did in this moment.

She risked a glance over her shoulder.

Dallas and Sabine were sprinting after her, Ghost bounding at their heels. But the hellseher and the warlock were gaining on them. Had the Darkslayer not been a half-breed—half-warlock, half-hellseher, judging from the silver that glinted in his irises whenever he wasn’t using his Sight—he would’ve already caught up to them.

She wasn’t sure what would’ve happened next if sirens hadn’t sounded. They wailed through the night, bouncing over buildings and cutting down alleys.

“Help!” Loren’s voice was a high-pitched crackle. “*HELP!* Please—we’re over here!” Dallas and Sabine joined her in shouting, their heels clacking on the road. But two sets of boots were getting louder, gaining on them by the second.

Red and blue lights reflected in the dark windows of buildings up ahead. Loren sobbed in relief at the sight of them—

A familiar scream tore through the panic barking in her head.

Loren staggered to a stop, Dallas doing the same just behind her.

For one terrifying second, time seemed to still. Loren drew in a ragged breath through her teeth, blood roaring in her head, as she took in the scene two blocks behind her.

The Darkslayer had Sabine in his grip, the muzzle of a

pistol pressed against her temple as he towed her toward the car. Toward the back door the warlock was throwing open.

Pavement stretched between Loren and her friend, endless as the ocean.

Loren stumbled forward. "Let her go." Although her voice was a whispered sob, she knew every pair of immortal ears on this street could hear her. "*Please*. What do you want?"

"I want you to get in the car." The Darkslayer's words were aimed at Loren. Not the pure-blooded witch at her side, whose life was worth so much more than hers—than a human's.

Dallas was right: they *were* after her.

Loren gaped at the hellseher, her heart pounding so hard, she thought she might throw up.

Why did they want her? *Why?*

"She's not going anywhere with you," Dallas said, her voice hoarse and trembling. The light of her staff was barely a weak flutter—a mirror of her exhaustion. Even Ghost was spent; Dallas was only a student of magic, so her power reserves were shallow. "*None* of us are."

The hellseher gave a cold smile. Made to say something—

Two squad cars spun around the corner, sirens wailing. The warlock swore at the sight of the peace officers behind the wheels.

Loren saw it coming.

She made to move—to stop the slayer and the warlock from wrestling Sabine into the back seat as the squad cars came to a screeching halt, lightbars on the roofs flashing.

But they were already in the sedan. They spun around, smashing into the bumper of a squad car before peeling off, tires burning up a reeking black cloud behind them.

Loren took off after the sedan, her heart in her throat, her reflection flitting like a spirit through shop windows. She screamed herself hoarse. Begged them to stop—to let her

friend go. She knew it was no use. Her words would make no difference.

But she had to try—for Sabine.

She had to try for Sabine.

One of the squad cars raced after the sedan, but they would never make it—and neither would she.

Still, she hurtled along the dark street, dodging piles of trash, feet ripping open on stones and fragments of glass. No matter how fast she ran, the sedan only got farther away.

Loren would never forget the sight of her.

Of Sabine—thrashing against the hellseher's hold, staring helplessly through the back window as the sedan disappeared around a corner up ahead. Sabine's gaze was utterly broken and full of anguish.

Just like Loren's heart.

2

The wild cheering that barreled down the damp hallway that led to the Pit was music to Darien Cassel's ears. The excitement of the rowdy audience encircling the sunken fighting ring in the distance told him his opponent tonight would be worthy. If he was lucky, whatever manner of creature he would soon be facing might even make him sweat a little.

Darien kept his eyes shut as he rolled his muscled shoulders and shifted his weight. This idle fidgeting was for the benefit of the half-human bouncers waiting near the latticed grille at the end of the hallway; he had a habit of standing so still, it unsettled anyone in his vicinity, even here in Angelthene—a place where most of its inhabitants could live without sleep and preferred the blood of a freshly killed corpse to the burger joints found on most city blocks.

But as a pure-blooded hellseher and the leader of the Seven Devils, he supposed he could understand their apprehension. If only a little.

Down the hall, the ring-announcer was declaring his reputation. As the undefeated champion of the Pit, he was a favorite of the lowlifes and career criminals who clawed out a

living making bets on those who entered the ring. Pathetic wastes of life, but it wasn't his business. He came here, sometimes seven nights a week, strictly to take the edge off his temper and combat his Surges—though tonight it wasn't just his temper or his Surges that needed reining in.

Eight years ago, his mother had died. And while fighting served as a useful channel for his rage, it also provided him with a way to forget, even for a few hours.

And tonight, he needed nothing more than to forget.

Darien ran a tattooed hand through his hair, pushing the black strands of his undercut back flat, entirely aware of the bouncers assessing him with caution as they awaited the ring announcer's signal. Even from this distance away, he could smell fear emanating from them like cologne. He supposed he should take it as a compliment that they were still so afraid of him—of the man who'd replaced the heartbroken fifteen-year-old boy who'd stomped in here eight years ago in search of an outlet.

What he could scent more than their fear, however, was the demon—the flesh-hungry beast prowling the Pit on all fours. The oily reek of its hairless, mottled skin snaked down the hallway, burning his airways.

A creature of the storm drains that hated the light. They left their dens only during the darkest hours of the night, which was why the Head of State had recently proposed the idea of a dusk-to-dawn curfew for the city, keeping the citizens safe while giving Pest and Disease Control a chance to scale back the capital's rising numbers of ravenous vermin. No one would face more than a small fine for breaking the said curfew—but might very well pay for their lack of intelligence with their life, and their body dragged into the sewers to be chewed into ribbons.

The thing was agitated, a sign that it had been caught only minutes ago. Judging from the sound of its flesh-shredding claws gouging lines into the concrete walls of the Pit, it didn't

like being caged. Nor did it like the glaring LED lights mounted above the audience.

One of the bouncers whistled the signal, and Darien opened his eyes. The crowd's cheering rattled the exposed rafters of the vaulted ceiling and set the floor beneath his combat boots rumbling. He let the familiar sounds wash over him, electrifying his blood.

His mouth curved into a lethal smile as he stalked forward, toward the Pit. Toward the creature that had a population of eight million people hiding inside after dark.

It was time. Time to lose himself to blood and gore for a while.

Violence was his drug. His own personal demon.

He only hoped the one waiting in the Pit would put up enough of a fight that he might not feel the need to return here tomorrow.

DARIEN DRAGGED out the fight for longer than he usually cared to. He was beginning to tire of this, but not from exhaustion. He could easily keep going for far longer than the sixteen minutes and thirty-four seconds the timer hanging above the Pit displayed.

He was simply getting bored.

The demon reared back on hind legs, releasing a wet roar that rattled his eardrums and set the crowd foaming at the mouth with excitement.

The feral thing had a maw of serrated teeth, black as obsidian. The curved horns on either side of its near-translucent head were evidence of how long it had been alive. This was one of the stronger ones, yet it bored the hell out of him. He needed to find better opponents, a challenger that was actually worth his precious time.

Sensing that he was being watched by a gaze unclouded

by liquor and opioids, Darien tipped his head back to observe the screaming audience. Hundreds of piss-smelling drunkards were packed from the stands to the rafters, shouting out bets and exchanging gestures to communicate as they waved fistfuls of mynet in the smoky air. There were no ropes around the perimeter of the Pit; if anyone fell in, they were fair game. In the years in which Darien had fought in this ring, several people had done exactly that.

Not one of them had lived to tell of it.

As Darien had suspected, far above the walls of the Pit, he spotted a familiar figure. In the sea of sweaty, thrashing bodies, the messenger was the only person standing still. They wore the same white rabbit mask as always, their black clothes nondescript. It was a call all Darkslayers answered: when the mask appeared, it meant a job offer was coming his way.

It was time to end this.

Darien lunged at the same time the demon made a move. It dove for his jugular with a roar, jaws snapping together.

Veering to the left of those gleaming teeth, Darien struck hard, his fingers bursting through the creature's esophagus. The thing gagged and writhed in agony, its beastlike feet fumbling for purchase in the sand behind it.

Darien dug his hand in deeper, twisted —
And ripped out its throat.

The body collapsed to the blood-soaked sand in a heap of quivering flesh.

If he'd thought the crowd was cheering loudly before, it was nothing compared to the noise now thundering through the arena, the racket threatening to shatter the foggy skylight far above.

"*Call it,*" Darien barked at the half-human ring announcer, whose face had blanched.

"Victory is yours," the man choked out.

Wiping his bloody hands on his torn and stained jeans, Darien swept the audience again.

Only to find that the rabbit had already disappeared.

AS SOON AS Darien had finished cleaning up in the shabby change room in the basement of the arena, he made his way to the wrought-iron gates out front of the crumbling building.

His dark hair was still wet from the shower, his long-sleeved white shirt and faded jeans clinging to his damp, suntanned skin. The duffel bag slung over his shoulder was stuffed full of bloody clothes and the kind of weapons only a Darklayer could get their hands on, along with the Stygian salts that aided his Sight. The salts were a gateway drug—literally. They opened the floodgates of a hellseher's magic and allowed them to see a person's aura—and see through the magical wards on most buildings and vehicles—for extended periods of time, making the act of remotely tracking targets a cinch for people like himself and his Devils.

Wind blew down the dusty street in gusts, setting the palm trees and cypresses lining the sidewalks swaying. Aside from the odd desperate junkie or prostitute straggling through the shadows, the city was mostly deserted at this hour, especially here in the slums, where most of the streetlights had been shot out long ago. The Sturgeon moon was slipping below the horizon, the sky in the distance staining a dull gray as dawn made its approach.

Another night well-spent at his favorite shithole. The no-holds-barred underground fighting ring was in the Meatpacking District, not far from the slaughterhouses that processed every type of flesh a person could name; in a place like this, anything that could breathe was on the menu, and no preference—no matter how foul—was off-limits.

Across the street, where it was parked by the trash-covered curb, his car lurked like a bat in the lingering dark. Unlike any other vehicle whose owner dared to park here, the glass of every window was still in one piece. No keys had scratched the black paint, no graffiti artist had tagged the hood. The people who frequented these parts of town not only knew who he was and to stay away from him—they also knew to stay the fuck away from his car. Some days he enjoyed the infamy that came with ripping apart whoever was stupid enough to walk into that pit with him more than he enjoyed the mynet he received for doing so.

He took his cell phone out of his pocket to find half a dozen unread messages from his sister, along with several from the other Devils and a handful from Valary Sternberg, his most recent fuckbuddy who was starting to get a little too clingy for his liking. This came as no surprise; it was always only a matter of time before women decided they wanted more than rough, no-strings-attached sex from him, but he was never willing to give it.

His mouth twitched into a frown as he skimmed over the messages his sister had sent him, the weight of reality returning as the adrenaline from fighting in the ring vacated his system far too soon.

IVY

Where are you? Don't tell me you went to the Pit...

I thought you meant it this time—that we were going to the cemetery together.

IVY

It wasn't your fault, you know. If Mom was able to talk to you, she would tell you the same thing. You need to stop blaming yourself.

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I'll bring extra flowers to Mom's grave for you... Hope to see you there.

The last message was sent two hours after the previous.

IVY

You can't keep running away, Darien. You're not the only one who's hurting.

He shut off the screen so hard, the button jammed.

It didn't matter that he wasn't the only one who was hurting. Ripping apart actual demons was one thing—but confronting his own wasn't something he was ready to do yet.

Blowing out a sigh through his nose, he slid his phone back into his pocket. So much for calming the Surge that had taken over his mind earlier that night; it seemed he would have to return here tomorrow after all.

As he drew closer to the gate, gravel crunching beneath his combat boots, the rabbit stepped into view from where she was waiting for him near the safety of an unshattered mercury-vapor streetlamp. Out of what he knew was respect and more than a hint of fear, she stayed a careful distance away from him—and close enough to the greenish glow of the lamp to feel somewhat of a sense of protection from the demons. Demons like the one whose throat Darien had ripped out with his bare hand minutes ago.

The mask she wore was like something from a horror film. The mouth was pulled into a gaping smile lined with jagged teeth, and the grotesquely large eyes were as white as the rest of it—no pupils. It was no harmless little bunny like those sold at the pet shops on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star—that was for gods-damned certain.

"You're Darien Cassel." *No shit*, he thought. If the ring announcer declaring his reputation had been too subtle for her, the horned letter *S* tattooed below his ear should be an obvious indication of who he was.

Never mind the ever-changing gossip that floated about the streets. People with too much time on their hands enjoyed making up rumors about him, mainly ones that suggested he'd sold his soul to the devil to get to where he was today. He supposed he had sold his soul in a way, but in doing so had more or less become the devil himself.

"That's the rumor." He dug a metal lighter and a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, placed one of the smokes between his lips, and lit it. "Give me the name and the price and be on your way," he said around a mouthful of smoke. He slid the cigarettes and lighter back into his pocket. "I've had a long night."

"The boss is offering two million gold mynet."

Well, shit. It was a lot of mynet. He couldn't remember the last time a single target had been worth more than a million.

"The name?" he prompted.

"There is no name."

Darien quirked an inky brow. Usually, those who hired him knew the name of who—or *what*—they wanted dead or in captivity. It was rare when he was approached with an offer to find a nameless target, though he could locate them without a problem. He was one of the only people in this city who could. "He would like you to track the target via aura only."

He took another drag on the cigarette as he eyed up that stained and cracked mask.

Tracking auras was not only a lengthier process but a harder one. If he knew the target's name, he could tap into his sixth sense—and the ability to remotely track someone via Sight—a lot sooner. All he would need to do was hack Angelthere's citizen database and pull up a photograph of his target; having a clear mental image of the person he wanted to locate would make remotely tracking them a cinch.

Finding an aura without the aid of a photograph and then

trailing it to its current location could take days. Maybe even weeks. And the process often required that he start at the target's origin—either their place of birth or somewhere similar, such as their childhood home, where the aura would be the least diluted—to get a distinct read on who he was looking for. Such methods were also expensive, since he would have to use the Stygian salts for the whole process, and it would require him to tunnel deep into the limitless reserves of his magic, which was no easy feat.

He adjusted the strap on his duffel bag and tapped the ash off the cigarette. “Your boss knows what he wants but he doesn’t know *who* he wants,” he observed. Pulling up the strap on his duffel had drawn the messenger’s attention to the tattoo peeking out from beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeve. Even through the mask, he could tell that she was staring at it—at the tattoo of Elsie Cassel’s face.

The rabbit wisely tore her attention from the tattoo and gave a nod. “The target was an orphan. You should be able to pick up on the aura at the Temple of the Scarlet Star. The boss says the target was left there as a baby and adopted soon after.”

She retrieved a vial from the pocket of her jacket. Inside the vial was bone powder—the DNA of what was likely one of the target’s ancestors. The demineralized bone was the quickest way to help him identify the aura—a field of energy that radiated from every living person or thing, invisible to anyone without a hellseher’s Sight—that he was looking for. If the target had indeed spent time at the temple as a baby, then with the help of the bone powder the aura should be easy to pinpoint. And once he became accustomed to the feel of that aura, he would be able to trail it like a wolf trailed its prey, eventually digging up the target’s current location.

How the client had retrieved the bone powder—and how they knew who the target’s ancestor was but hadn’t a clue of

their actual target's identity—wasn't his business. He didn't concern himself with the reasons why his elusive clients wanted to track anyone down. Asking questions was not only suspicious and unnecessary, but it was also unprofessional. He was in this line of work only for the cash, and nothing more.

The several minutes he took to consider the offer probably seemed like years to the messenger, because it wasn't long before her pulse was thrumming in her golden neck. There was a scar below her jaw, no more than a pock in her skin. Either from a viral disease or from being held at knifepoint. If this rabbit returned to her employer after failing to negotiate a deal, the cost—if she was lucky—would be her job. If she wasn't lucky, it would be her life.

It was an unjust world he lived in, but nobody got anywhere in life if they gave a shit about the bottom-feeders of this corrupt society.

"Dead or alive?" Darien asked.

"Alive. Preferably unharmed if you can manage it." It went without saying that he could manage it. As leader of the Devils, there was little he couldn't do.

So, Darien said, "I can." He paused. "But I want three million gold mynet."

The rabbit didn't flinch. "Two-point-five." Darien almost laughed. Whoever her boss was, he'd given her clear instructions on haggling.

"Three million, or I'm not playing."

Another beat of silence. And then the rabbit stepped forward and offered him the bone powder. "It's a deal."

Darien's fingers closed around the vial. "I'll need about a week to locate the aura, but it won't be long after that before I can track down the target. Wire me a mil by midnight tomorrow or the deal falls through." He shoved the vial into the pocket of his jeans and then handed her a card that had nothing on it but the number for his wire transfer.

“We’ll be in touch with you soon.” When the rabbit spoke again, there was a hint of a smile in her voice. “Pleasure doing business with you, Slayer.”

His mouth quirked in answer as he tossed the cigarette to the ground and crushed it beneath his boot. “Likewise.”

3

Lo ren stared into the two-way mirror as the peace officer that sat across from her at the dented metal table in the interrogation room shuffled his papers into a stack.

The girl in the reflection was a stranger—a ghost. Hollowed out and drifting through a world she no longer recognized.

She looked like hell. Makeup was smeared across her sticky, tear-stained face, her hair was crusted with beer and road dust, and her dark blue eyes were bloodshot and void of emotion. Even the sunburn on her cheeks did nothing to bring color to the ivory skin that had taken on a sickly pale shade these past two hours.

Sabrina was gone. Sabrina was missing, and it was all her fault.

No one believed her. Not a single person at the Angelthene Law Enforcement holding center had looked at her with anything but disbelief when they'd heard her side of the story. She knew Dallas would be telling the other officers the very same thing—the truth of what happened tonight—in the room adjacent to hers. Maybe they would be more

inclined to listen to the Red Baron's biological daughter than the human orphan who had never been—and never would be—anything more than that: *human*.

"Let me get this straight," said the peace officer, in that gruff, no-bullshit tone.

Loren tore her gaze from her reflection—and the people she knew were watching from behind the glass—and turned to face the warlock. The expression he wore was as harsh and unyielding as the room they were in; the frigid concrete beneath her bare and blistered feet, the hard chair she was sitting on that was bolted to the floor, the glaring white light-bulbs stabbing into her eyes from where they were mounted in the corners of the room.

She slid her hands between her scraped knees to stop them from shaking. The tattoo glowing on the inside of her forearm had changed from a pale blue to a glaring red. If she didn't get some medication or food into her soon, she would faint.

The warlock was middle-aged as far as physical appearance went, though the watery cast to his eyes hinted that he was far older than he looked—and had likely abused the reserves of his magic in his years as commissioner to soon come down with the Tricking. In fact, she would be surprised if he hadn't already been diagnosed with it.

The officer laced his fingers on the tabletop and looked her over with a steely gaze. "You believe the Darkslayer was after *you*?"

"I already told you." Loren barely recognized the crackle of her own voice. It was as cold and void of emotion as the expression she could feel herself wearing. "When he held a gun to Sabrina's head, I asked him what he wanted. He said, 'I want you to get in the car.'" This was the third time she'd explained it to this bastard.

He blew out a huff and pretended to look over the paper

at the top of the stack. “You are nineteen, Miss Calla. Correct?”

“Yes.” Her voice broke.

“And you’ve lived in Angelthene your whole life?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t think I need to explain to you that hellsehers are a very powerful breed.” He set the paper back on the stack. “Their magic is not as restricted as that of *veneficae*, nor *lamiae*, and because of this, they know their worth. Hellsehers who hunt for bounties charge hefty prices, Miss Calla. Those prices can run as high as one million gold mynet. Sometimes even higher.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Commissioner.” He was saying no hellseher would bother with someone like her—with a human target whose life had no value worthy enough for them to track down. There was no reason for anyone to want to hunt her, nor pay a Darkslayer’s outrageous cost to find her. And yet, she *knew*...

She knew it was supposed to have been her who was taken tonight.

The officer sat back, his chair creaking under his weight. “Can you describe what the phoenix tattoo looked like, Miss Calla?”

She held out a hand in request for a pen. After a moment, he handed his over, along with a piece of ruled paper he tore from his notepad. The scratch of pen on paper was loud in the otherwise silent room as her trembling hand swept across the page. When she was finished, she spun the paper around and slid it his way.

Half a second was all he spared for her drawing. “How’s your vision, Miss Calla?”

She stiffened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a simple question.”

“My vision is fine.” It wasn’t twenty-twenty, but it was clear enough that this jerk shouldn’t be doubting her. “I know

what I saw. The tattoo was a *phoenix* head, Commissioner.” Not the over-lapping wings of the Angels of Death; not the God of Death that was the symbol of the Reapers, nor the striking serpent of the Vipers; not the hellhound of the Huntsmen, nor the crescent moon of the Wargs. And it certainly wasn’t the horned letter *S*, the sigil of the Seven Devils, the most feared Darkslaying circle in the city.

The officer stuffed the drawing into his shirt pocket. “Your guardian has been contacted. She will be here shortly to take you home.” Loren’s head turned featherlight, her fists slackening.

Taega Bright, Dallas’s mother, had been contacted. As if this night—she supposed it was technically morning now—could get any worse.

“Is there anything else you would like to say?” the officer asked. The silver ringing his pupils—a peculiar characteristic all *veneficae* possessed—was as reflective as mirrors under the lights. “Anything worthy of pointing out that we haven’t already covered?”

Loren remained silent for so long that he made to stand. But her voice froze him in place.

“You may feel we’ve covered a great deal, Commissioner. But I don’t. Every statement I’ve made tonight is the truth, yet you’ve done nothing but dismiss my claims.”

He settled back into the chair with another of those heavy sighs that was more of a growl. The badge pinned to his dress-shirt gleamed in the fluorescents. “Can you think of any reason as to why they would’ve been tracking you?” The tone he used was flat, his disinterest in entertaining what he believed was a cry for attention blatantly obvious. “Is there anything of value on your person that they might’ve been looking for?”

Loren mirrored his no-bullshit expression. “I have a tube of lip gloss, a half-empty pack of gum, and barely three hundred gold mynet in my bank account, Commissioner. Do

you think the Darkslayer might've been after any of these things?"

"Miss Calla—"

"Sabrine was held at gunpoint as a strategy to get *me* in the car." Loren's voice came out as broken as she felt. "They only took her instead of me because they ran out of time when your officers came flying around the corner." Tears burned her eyes, and her lip wobbled. "If you're not going to believe me, then that's not my problem. But I want my friend back, so I beg you to reconsider your opinion after what I just told you."

He assessed her for a moment. "I assure you, Miss Calla, that we will do everything in our power to bring Miss Van Arsdell back home safely. We have a strong team of officers, and our hellsehers are tracking her—"

"Have they figured out where they're keeping Sabrine?" Loren felt a spark of hope in her chest, and she found herself sitting up straighter. It was something the city needed more of: hellsehers working as local law enforcement officials, using their Sight to track down suspects and people who went missing. The process of remotely tracking someone certainly wasn't foolproof, hence why there were so many unsolved crimes, but it couldn't hurt to have more people who were gifted with the Sight looking out for innocent civilians. Most hellsehers either chose not to use their Sight at all due to the Tricking or decided to chase after the fat paycheques that came from illegally tracking down bounties.

The officer merely shifted in his seat. The look on his face told her everything.

"They can't find her," Loren concluded hollowly. She slumped against the backrest of her chair. "Does that mean she's dead?" Her heart was bleeding out in her chest. "She's dead, isn't she? They killed her."

"Loren—"

"It's *luh-ren*," she retorted. He pronounced it like *Lauren*,

and it wasn't the first time she'd corrected him. Just as it wasn't the first time that she had explained the night's events to him, only to be received so disrespectfully. "I would like to be excused now."

As finished with her as she was with him, the officer led her out of the interrogation room. Loren limped after him in silence, barely registering the pain that crackled through her cut-up feet with every step. Although he didn't say anything else to her, he no longer looked at her with disdain.

He must've realized that she was standing on a ledge. She was about to break, and not in any way that benefited them as a person of interest in Sabrina's case.

Her friend was gone. And the worst part about it was that it was her fault.

4

Orientation for the first-year students of Angelthene Academy who were sorted into the House of Salt took place at seven in the morning.

The rain was drumming a steady rhythm on the umbrella that was propped up on Dallas's shoulder, shielding mostly Loren from the downpour than herself. Loren sagged against Dallas's side as they waited for the last of the Salt freshmen to join the group and announce their names to the upper-level half-vampire student holding a clipboard in his milk-white hands. The roster fluttered in the wind, threatening to break free of the measly spring-clip that held it in place.

Loren hadn't slept a wink last night, and she didn't think Dallas had either. After Dallas's mother had picked them up from the holding center, they hadn't said a word to each other. And Taega hadn't bothered to offer her condolences for their missing friend. In fact, she hadn't uttered so much as a word to either of them until they'd entered the penthouse.

"Clean yourselves up in the spare bathroom and sterilize it when you're done," she'd told them as she swept into her immaculate foyer, the lean muscles in her golden thighs

straining against the white fabric of her pristine pencil skirt. "The smell of you both is making me sick."

It would've been better if Taega simply hadn't said anything, but nearly nineteen years of living in the Bright penthouse was long enough for Loren to know what to expect from someone like Commander Bright. Loren had let Dallas clean up first, and when she was finished, Loren had locked the door and sat with her arms wrapped around her knees on the marble floor of the shower. For a long time, she had cried in silence, analyzing the events of the evening. She was so lost in trying to remember any details that might help her find Sabrine that she hadn't noticed when the hot water ran out.

Sometime during the hour in which she'd slumped beneath the stream of water, Dallas must've had an argument with Taega. When Loren had gone to bed afterward in the room they shared, Dallas's back was facing her. But when Dallas had reached over to flick off the lamp, Loren had caught sight of the purple mark on her cheekbone. Dallas hadn't been willing to talk about it, which came as no surprise; she never talked about the things that hurt her. She preferred to swallow her pain like a big pill and pretend she couldn't remember how it'd felt going down.

Loren blinked away the recent memory and surveyed the cluster of students talking animatedly as they awaited the tour of the grounds.

All students at every campus in the city were divided into Houses, the process of which was based off their heritage and the most dominant type of magic in their blood, if any. The House of Mercury was for water, the House of Salt was for the earth, and the House of Brimstone was for fire.

As one of the very few humans whose application had been accepted at the academy, Loren had been put into the House most connected to the earth—to the cycle of life and death. Loren tried not to think about that rain-damp roster; the surname *Van Arsdell* at the very bottom of the alphabetical

list. The only name with no checkmark beside it. Or perhaps it had already been crossed off, for by now the news channel and the front page of the *Daystar* would've certainly notified the whole city of Sabrina's abduction.

Loren tried not to think about it. Law enforcement would find Sabrina and bring her home. They *had* to.

The professor who was tasked with directing the orientation meeting for the new students of the House of Salt was Professor Grayson Phipps. A pure-blooded warlock, he was golden-haired and handsome, with the kind of sharp jaw and five o'clock shadow that made heartrates increase and toes curl in shoes.

Professor Phipps joined the group of chattering witches, warlocks, half-breeds, humans, and vampires and gave a brief introduction of himself.

Something sharp struck Loren in the ribs.

She drew in a hiss through her teeth, staggering away from the elbow she was certain had left a nasty bruise. "Ouch, Dal!"

"He's hot," Dallas hissed. "I would ride that broomstick any day." Loren felt her cheeks turn red. She shushed Dallas and ducked back under the umbrella.

The muggy air was frizzing her space buns. Not that she'd spent much time on her hair that morning; the usual things she cared about had taken a back seat. It would be a miracle if she had remembered to bring all her textbooks and grimoires.

Dallas followed Phipps across the lawn, alongside the rest of the students. Loren hurried to keep up with her, the soaking wet grass squeaking against the leather of her uniform shoes. The white button-up blouse—the left chest embroidered with the crest of Angelthene Academy—and mid-thigh-length plaid skirt did nothing to keep her warm. Her teeth were chattering so loudly that Dallas eventually shushed her.

The tour was long and detailed, but Professor Phipps

explained the academy's history in a way that held the attention of every student as they made their way from landmark to landmark.

"I wonder if he's married," Dallas went on. Professor Phipps slowed before a statue of a warlock and proceeded to give a brief history of the founder of the academy.

"I'm trying to listen," Loren whispered. It really wasn't true, but she wanted Dallas to shut the heck up before she got them both kicked out.

But the professor heard them. At the head of the group, near a copse of blue jacaranda trees that sheltered the statue, Professor Phipps stopped talking and turned to face them.

"Miss Dallas Bright."

Dallas went rigid as Phipps's eyes found hers in the cluster of umbrellas. One by one, the students turned around to stare.

Loren ducked her head, the weight of all those eyes unbearable.

Phipps was frowning. "Would you care to share with the rest of us what you've found so important as to interrupt my tour?"

Dallas lowered her chin in feigned embarrassment and shook her head. If Loren hadn't known Dallas her entire life, she might've fallen for the act. But she could see, clear as day, the smirk playing on the generous curve of Dallas's lips, painted a shade identical to her hair. A glamor, Loren knew—no lipstick could look that perfect. She would give Dallas hell for that later; she shouldn't be using her magic so carelessly, not when the Tricking was running rampant and hospital beds were few and far between.

It was why magic staves had been invented in the first place. The Tricking was a disease that had been around for centuries; if a person abused their power reserves and used their magic for anything and everything—such as makeup glamors—they were more likely to contract the sickness. It

plagued immortal people with old age and eventually killed them.

A Focus served as a conduit, the staves a channel for a person's magic to flow through, resulting in a decreased risk of contracting the Tricking. It wasn't a permanent fix, but it worked—for now. Witches and warlocks had been using magic staves for so many years, that few of them could perform magic without one now.

"No thank you, Professor Phipps," Dallas replied in a saccharine voice. "I apologize for interrupting you."

The professor gave a thoughtful hum. "Well, as someone whose job is to answer my students' questions, I would certainly hate to leave yours unanswered, Miss Bright."

"My question?" This time, she wasn't faking the surprise glinting in her gaze.

"I *am* married." Although he wore a poker face, amusement danced in his eyes. "And even if I wasn't, I am two hundred years old. Which is far too old for you."

Students snickered. Girls pressed their hands to their mouths, and grinning boys elbowed each other in the side.

"Now," the professor went on, "can we focus on the tour, Miss Bright?"

Splotches of color bloomed across Dallas's cheeks, but she smiled and replied sweetly, "You have very keen hearing, Professor."

He merely smiled and resumed his tour.

The tour was nearly at a close when Loren slowed to a shuffle before a crumbling building surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with loops of barbed wire.

Oblivious to Loren having stopped, Dallas continued walking, taking the shelter of the umbrella with her, her kohl-lined eyes trained on Phipps's ass. Loren rolled her eyes so hard, she swore she saw her brain.

"What's in that building, Professor?" The storm threatened to swallow Loren's words.

The students slowed as Professor Phipps turned around, holding his clipboard above his head to shield himself from the rain that was increasing in tempo. Suddenly, there was nowhere to look without meeting a pair of curious eyes. Loren felt her shoulders curl in for what seemed like the hundredth time that morning, and she interlocked her fingers to keep from fidgeting.

“That building,” he said, “is strictly off-limits.” He made to turn away, but Dallas spoke up.

“No, seriously,” the witch said as she made her way toward the fence, shaking a strand of hair—frizzed by humidity—out of her face. “What’s in it?”

“Seriously, Miss Bright,” Professor Phipps said in a mocking tone, “it’s off-limits.” He started walking again, his pantlegs soaked by the lawn. But he barely made it two feet before his reluctance to talk about the building set the entire group of students to whining.

The professor stopped walking. Turned around. Even with the clipboard he held above his head, his hair was darkened with rain.

Dallas smirked and said of the students, who were belting out their own questions about the building, “It seems we’ve gained a small army.”

The professor surveyed Loren and Dallas for a long time. When the murmuring finally quieted, he relented with a sigh and gave up holding the clipboard as a makeshift umbrella, instead using it to gesture to the building. “This is the Old Hall. It was where classes were held when the academy was established several thousand years ago. When the new academy was built to accommodate the growing number of students, this building was forgotten. It was no longer used for anything except storage.”

The vampire who held the roster said, “Is it true there used to be a secret society on campus?” Now *this* was the kind of information Loren was looking for.

“What kind of secret society?” Loren asked.

The vampire’s eyes met hers. “A blood magic society. They would sneak into the building at Witching Hour and perform ancient rites to see who was worthy of joining their cult—”

“Not a blood magic society or a *cult*, Stephan,” corrected the professor. “It was more a society of outcasts. According to the stories, it was a social club a small number of humans organized to make new friends. They chose the Old Hall as a place to hold their meetings and other activities—a place they could call their own.”

Loren stepped up to the fence, gritting her teeth against the magical barrier humming through the air. Interesting how the schoolboard would arrange to give such an old structure an extra layer of protection.

Storage house, my ass.

Squinting her eyes to see better through the rain falling in sheets, she studied the shape etched into the damp threshold.

The next question came from one of the students at the back of the group. “What was the society called?” Loren recognized the familiar shape carved into the wood half a second before the professor spoke.

“The Phoenix Head Society.”

THE VAST ARCHWAY of the academy entrance passed over Loren’s head, the warmth of the firelit interior wrapping like a blanket around her chilled bones.

Students were packed like sardines in the entrance, chattering about their summer adventures. Wolves, witches, and vampires who’d graduated from the same secondary school as Loren and Dallas greeted the latter with varying smiles, waving their hellos from across the room. No one acknowledged the human friend standing at the witch’s elbow, but

Loren wasn't fazed—she'd had nineteen years to get used to this kind of treatment.

When they made it to the staircase in the entrance hall, they began their ascent to the House of Salt, consulting the map that was marked with a red X to show where they would find their hall of residence.

Dozens of steps and corridors later, they were greeted by a forked staircase. Each fork led to a different House; the left was for Mercury, the middle was for Salt, and the right was for Brimstone.

They made their way up the middle staircase and down a torch-lit corridor. At the very end of it, an ornamental gilt mirror covered the wall from floor to ceiling. There were no doors—they weren't needed here. The mirror was the entrance into their hall of residence. From what Loren had heard, all three Houses were entered into the same way, though each reflection displayed different alternate realities of the corridor that now lay behind them.

For the House of Salt, it was a corridor of sunshine streaming through tangled green foliage; for Mercury, it was coral walls and white sand that crunched beneath feet; and for Brimstone, it was walls of stone with a floor of magma.

The sight of the forest in the reflection left Loren momentarily stunned. Even though she spent every minute of every day surrounded by the magical and the extraordinary, some things never ceased to amaze her.

"Dal," Loren said, shaking her head to clear it. Dallas had almost made it to the mirror when Loren hurried forward and caught her by the wrist. "Did you hear what Professor Phipps said?"

Dallas whirled around to face her. "About what?" Her eyes were as hard as the spotless glass at her back.

Loren dropped Dallas's wrist like she'd been zapped. "About the Phoenix Head Society."

"What about it?"

Loren blinked. "Didn't you notice that the Darkslayer who took Sabrina had a phoenix tattoo?"

"So?" She crossed her arms and tipped her weight to one muscled leg. "Don't all Darkslayers have the symbol of their circle tattooed on them?"

"That's the thing." Frustration edged Loren's tone. "There *is* no circle of Darkslayers with a phoenix head as their symbol."

Dallas's mouth was set in a thin, bloodless line. "Don't read into it too much, Lor. I wouldn't want to get my hopes up if I were you."

Loren felt like ripping out her hair. They were sisters, yet Dallas had a nasty habit of doubting her. Loren sometimes thought the armor Dallas wore was thicker than her own.

"I'm getting into that building," Loren gritted out, her fingers curling into fists. "Whether you're willing to help me or not."

Dallas's expression revealed nothing. Students began to emerge from the mirror, carrying grimoires and magic staves.

"Come on," Dallas said, her tone as cold and emotionless as her face. "We need to unpack our bags or we're going to be late for our first class."

5

Clear blue skies greeted Loren early Saturday morning. As she walked through the gates of the academy, hugging the stack of posters she'd printed out in the library on campus, the magical barrier shimmered over her skin, sending a chill from the crown of her head to the balls of her feet.

Her shift at the Mortar and Pestle was to start in roughly an hour. Located in the northern end of the downtown core, the Avenue of the Scarlet Star was about a thirty-minute walk from the academy. Although taxis were plentiful during the day, they could be quite expensive due to how long they might idle in traffic. Besides that, Loren figured the long walk would do her some good. It was an opportunity to be alone with her thoughts, to not have to force herself to listen if someone were to speak to her. These days, she didn't listen to much at all, including her lessons.

The rest of the week had passed by in a blur. Neither she nor Dallas had mentioned Sabine since that first day of school. In fact, they'd hardly spoken to each other at all. And despite that Loren had vowed to get into the Old Hall even if it killed her, her reluctance had stopped her from bringing it

up to Dallas again. Though it killed her to wonder what it all meant—if the secret society was connected to the Darkslayer who'd taken Sabrina.

With a deep breath, Loren set off, heading for the long road that swept downhill and into the city. Blue jacaranda petals drifted down the sidewalk and spun around her wedge heels.

Near the curb that looped around the cul-de-sac sat a sports car as fierce in appearance as it was sleek, with glossy paint as black as its rims. A stupidly expensive model seldom seen on the streets, even here in the glitzy North End. It was the kind of vehicle that would make Dallas swoon the same way she did over hot, sweaty boys in hot, sweaty sports gear.

Smiling a little despite herself, Loren dug her cell phone out of the pocket of her jeans and snapped a photo of the car. The shutter clicked...and she froze.

There was a silhouette in the driver's seat. The tinted windows were so dark, she hadn't noticed them before.

Loren ducked her head, hiding behind her curtain of hair. She shoved her phone into her pocket, rolled up the sleeves of her red V-neck shirt, and made her way down the road. The sprawling city was glittering beneath the sun, already lively despite the early hour.

The temperature spiked at an alarming speed as she walked, the sun soon baking the asphalt beneath her heels. She stopped along the way to put up the posters, tacking them to telephone poles and transport shelters, among collages of business cards, lost-pet posters, and advertisements for demon pest-removal services.

Above a black-and-white photo of Sabrina, the posters read MISSING in large block letters, and just below the photo was a question: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL? With every poster Loren put up, the tighter her throat became. She ran out of posters faster than she thought she would, and as soon as she had tacked the last one to a cork-

board near the arched doors of The Blood and Burger Pub, she carried on, walking faster now.

Having grown up on the North End, she knew every shortcut to the Avenue of the Scarlet Star, and although she was in no rush today, she chose to take the twisty, narrow alleys that meandered through residential areas in favour of the main arteries that were packed from bumper to bumper with cars.

It was also likely that the residential neighborhoods dotting the North End were concealed with spells that deterred most Darkslayers—the same spells that covered the Avenue of the Scarlet Star and Angelthene Academy. There weren't many places in the city that could afford to cloak the locations of their residents and visitors so thoroughly; Loren considered herself blessed for being able to spend most of her days at such places.

But there were some Darkslayers who were advanced in their abilities, and who knew how to utilize illegal Stygian salts to fully open the floodgates of their magic and see past the wards on buildings and vehicles as though they'd never been there to begin with. But she had to try *something*—and walking down the streets that had zero protection wouldn't make her feel any better.

In the trees above an alley that connected one especially ritzy neighborhood to another, the raspy chatter of birds carried through the branches.

Loren looked up, shielding her eyes with a hand as she scanned the sun-bleached sky and the trees.

It was too bright. Laundry and bunches of herbs hanging from a clothesline in a nearby yard fluttered in a stifling breeze.

The chattering of birds grew in volume. From the sounds of it, there were more than she'd initially thought. And when Loren craned her neck back to look again, she spotted magpies huddled on the branches.

The same birds that had been squawking out a death warning the night Sabine was taken.

Her footsteps slowed to dragging, her heart stopping dead in her chest as an old nursery rhyme clanged through her head.

One for sorrow,
 Two for mirth
 Three for a funeral,
 Four for birth
 Five for heaven
 Six for hell
 Seven for the devil, his own self.

She stopped walking, blood rushing in her head. The birds cawed louder, wings rustling.

One, two, three, four, five, six...

There were seven of them. Seven magpies screeching so loudly that she could no longer hear the cars in the distance. The noise clawed at her eardrums until it felt like they were bleeding.

Clapping her hands over her ears, she ran down the alley, her crossbody bag thumping against her hip. She was nearing the end of the alley and the open road beyond when the sight of a familiar black sports car had her skidding to a halt.

Sweat beaded on her brow as the engine snarled, and the car disappeared behind the hedges framing the mouth of the alley.

The sound of her heartbeat in her ears was like a hammer on cloth. Her mouth was parched, her lungs pinched to half their size.

Behind her, the birds fell silent. She turned to look at them, and four flew away.

That left three. *Three for a funeral.*

That wasn't any better than seven. Seven for the Devil.

With shaking hands, she dug her phone out of her pocket. The numbers were near-illegible in the glaring sun, but after a moment of fierce blinking, she saw that it was quarter to nine. If she didn't start walking again, she wouldn't have time to buy food before starting her shift, which simply wasn't an option for someone like her. Judging from how light her head felt on her shoulders, and the tattoo that was now pulsing in warning, her blood sugar had dipped dangerously low. Not even her medication would make much of a difference at this point; she *needed* to eat something.

Gritting her teeth as she scanned the now-empty road ahead, she damned it all to Ignis's fiery realm and set off again to the Avenue of the Scarlet Star.

6

Around the corner from the Avenue of the Scarlet Star, Darien Cassel kept the engine idling as he leaned on the steering wheel, watching the girl cross the cobblestone street up ahead. The blonde waves that fell to her narrow waist bobbed from side to side, glinting like gold in the sun, the frozen coffee in her hand dripping condensation with each hurried step.

Boasting some of the city's most prized restaurants and shops, the Avenue of the Scarlet Star was a tourist attraction, so only foot traffic was allowed beyond this point. Which was why he'd had no choice but to park this far away; to wait and see where his target would go next. Another line of salts snorted into his system had revealed the auras queueing in the Terra Caffe, where he'd found the girl tapping her foot at the back of the line while waiting for her turn to order.

Now, as he watched her weave her way through the crowded street, he realized how conveniently this had worked out, since he'd unknowingly chosen a parking stall with full view of the girl's last destination.

The cauldron-shaped sign hanging above the chipped door, where the girl now fumbled through the contents of her

bag, read *Mordred and Penelope's Mortar and Pestle*. It took her a long moment to locate her keys and then the keyhole—a moment that was extremely painful for Darien to watch, her incompetent hands visibly shaking. Once she finally got the door open, she disappeared inside and locked the deadbolt behind her.

Darien slumped in his seat. How had this turned into such a huge pain in his ass? Not only was a university student his target, but she'd just disappeared into her workplace for what he assumed would be the next six to eight hours. As he considered his options, he remembered the magpies that had squawked so loudly he could hear them through his bullet-proof windows. Those Star-damned, fucking magpies.

Because of them, his target had managed to get not one, but *two* very good, very long looks at his vehicle. Not only that, but she'd managed to take a *picture* of it. Never in all his years as a Darkslayer had he encountered something so ludicrous. When the girl had dug her phone out of her pocket—out of jeans so tight they were practically painted on—and snapped a photo of his car, she hadn't the slightest idea that he was there because of *her*.

Because of the Stygian salts that had led him from the Temple of the Scarlet Star, where he'd pinned down her aura with the aid of her ancestor's bone powder mixed into the salts, to Angelthene Academy for Magic, the limitless power he'd tunneled into exposing what was hidden beneath layer upon layer of expensive spellwork. He and the other six Devils were the only people in this city who were skilled enough to see a person's aura consistently through almost any spell; it allowed them to rake in bounties at an unprecedented speed that had earned them not just the right to call themselves the *Seven Devils*, but their individual reputations as well.

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Those reputations were the reason why everyone was so afraid of them; why they were able to demand such whopping

amounts. When a Devil was hunting you, there was nowhere you could hide.

It was an interesting thing, this girl's aura. When he'd first identified it, it was white. *Solid* white, a sign of innocence, healing, and purity—a color mostly seen in children. Which made sense, considering she was an orphan who was abandoned at the temple as a baby, so the aura he'd located within the walls of the temple would've been in its purest form. But when he'd traced it through the city, to Angelthene Academy, he'd discovered that her current aura was almost *exactly* the same as the trace herself as an infant had left behind at the temple.

In the time he'd spent following her since nailing down her location at Angelthene Academy, the only other glow her aura had displayed was rainbow. Another rare emanation found only in people who were attuned with the fifth dimension and were highly optimistic and full of energy.

The targets he'd tracked down over the years...not a single one had emitted a white or rainbow aura. Most were gray or jet-black, or a mess of muddy, diluted colors that signified a troubled individual. But white and rainbow?

He'd never tracked anybody with a white or rainbow aura before.

He wasn't sure what this meant. Which was why he hadn't acted—why he was still sitting in his vehicle, pissing time away as he watched her go about her morning routine as though nothing were amiss.

Darien watched as the lights flickered to life in the apothecary. Another fifteen minutes passed before the girl flipped the sign in the window, the letters now reading OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

As he settled into his seat, he wondered how in the hell he'd managed to get tangled up in something so ridiculous. Auras didn't reveal a person's breed, but she moved as though she were human. He knew it was impossible; no human life

could be worth anyone forking over three million gold mynet to possess.

Half-breed—she had to be a half-breed. Though he wasn't sure if her being a half-breed would make this situation any better. If he gave enough of a shit to find out, he would have to get close enough to catch her scent.

Any other place, and he would've done it already—would've separated her scent from those of the other pedestrians. But with the restaurants, stores, and food trucks pumping fragrances and fumes into the air—not to mention the fresh smell of the misting systems cooling the avenue, the reek of the overflowing trash bins in back alleys, and the heady scent of the grape-flavored blunts the teenaged warlocks were smoking on a nearby corner—his senses were a little overwhelmed.

In all honesty, he shouldn't care what the girl's scent might tell him. Shouldn't give a flying fuck.

He shook his head. "What a load of horseshit," he muttered.

And then he leaned back against the headrest, closed his eyes, and waited.

THREE HOURS LATER, the avenue was crowded. Most of the red-brick shops lining either side of it were tailored to pure-blooded witches and warlocks, though vampires, werewolves, and even humans could be seen making their way down the bustling street.

It was half past twelve when the door to Mordred and Penelope's swung open. Since the moment the girl had displayed the OPEN sign in the window, countless customers had entered and left with paper bags stuffed with magical paraphernalia, the odd person carrying out armfuls of potted plants. Considering the apothecary's steady foot traffic,

Darien was beginning to wonder if the girl would even bother stopping for lunch, when a familiar head of golden-blond hair finally poked out the door.

Her eyes scanned the avenue, never once landing on his car that was concealed behind groups of tourists, high school students, and businesspersons.

Once she decided it was safe to venture beyond the threshold, she locked the door behind her and tacked a handwritten sign to its worn surface. The distance did nothing to mar Darien's hellseher eyesight—sharp as an eagle's—as he read the girl's loopy scrawl.

CLOSED FOR LUNCH. WILL RETURN AT HALF PAST.

He watched her disappear down the street, her small stature quickly swallowed up by the throngs of people.

Darien flicked open the glovebox and retrieved a semi-automatic pistol. He ejected the magazine, ripped open a new box of cartridges with his teeth, and loaded it with ammunition.

The pistol would probably be a waste, considering how young and strangely *normal* this girl appeared to be. Usually, he was approached with jobs to hunt down criminals or demons—not girls that had barely entered post-secondary school. There was a reason they were called *Darklayers*; they didn't hunt or kill good people, innocent people—and they were rarely asked to, most of their targets having done something bad enough to warrant the price stamped on their foreheads.

The simple fact that he was on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star was a joke. This was a place for families; for men with pockets deeper than their minds to take their trophy wives out for stupidly expensive lunches. Even the ground here was cleaner than the floor of his car.

He almost laughed. Almost said ‘fuck it’ and drove away. Were the other Devils playing some sort of joke on him, and this wasn’t a real job?

But he found himself hesitating; found himself looking toward the street, where he could no longer see the girl, nor her aura, but knew she’d be waiting in line for food somewhere.

There had to be an explanation for this. Although everything about her screamed that she was human, it was impossible.

No—there was simply no way. Absolutely *no* way she was just human. And he wasn’t about to pass up three million gold mynet over feeling sorry for her. Fuck that.

He slapped the magazine into place with the heel of his hand, tucked the pistol into the concealed holster at the front of his black cargo pants, and set off after her.

LOREN TAPPED her foot as she waited in line at a sandwich cart across the street from Mordred and Penelope’s. She hadn’t stopped looking over her shoulder all morning, and every time the bells hanging from the apothecary door had chimed, her heart had nearly jumped out of her chest.

She blamed the magpies. The stupid birds had heralded both her death and the devil, and although nothing sinister had come for her yet, she couldn’t relax. Some people claimed it was only a silly nursery rhyme, but she’d heard enough stories in her lifetime to suggest the words held some truth.

Dallas probably would’ve laughed at her for overreacting. But Dallas wasn’t here right now, and after Sabine’s disappearance—and the little fact that hadn’t slipped Loren’s mind, about the Darkslayer demanding that *she* get in his car, not Sab or Dallas—Loren refused to rule out anything that might alert her to coming dangers.

The line for the sandwich cart moved at a snail's pace, and Loren began to sweat under the glare of the midday sun. The weather had been terribly unpredictable lately, the forecasters even more so. It seemed that jeans and three-quarter-sleeved shirts weren't an option quite yet.

The line shuffled forward, and when she finally made it to the front, she ordered a turkey panini with mustard and extra pickles. She was handing over a crumpled banknote when something compelled her to look over her shoulder.

As she scanned the crowds behind her, her gaze snagged on two figures standing on either side of the apothecary door.

Was it her imagination, or were they watching her?

The sweaty man operating the sandwich cart called her back to attention, shaking her change in her face.

"Keep it," she told him. She turned again to look at the pair standing by the apothecary—a blond middle-aged man and a woman with hair shorn to her scalp.

They were still watching her.

The owner of the sandwich cart began to make her panini, so she stepped out of line. As the seconds ticked by, she kept an eye on those black-clad figures.

Barely two minutes passed before they shrugged away from the brick wall of the apothecary and began making a beeline through the crowd—a beeline that would lead them straight to her.

She considered screaming for help, but she was no stranger to the news channel. She had seen horrifying stories on there that involved innocent civilians slaughtered at the hands of armed robbers and Darkslayers after stepping in to help one another. The immortal leaders of the organized crime groups that ruled from Angelthene's underbelly were so powerful, they often couldn't be stopped—not even by magic.

And unless she wanted to live the rest of her life with blood on her hands for involving innocent passerby, she would have to handle these people on her own.

Loren lowered her gaze, desperately wishing she wasn't wearing these blasted heels, and disappeared into the crowd. The man who'd shaken her change in her face shouted that she forgot her sandwich.

She kept walking, deep into the throng of people. Water from the misting systems lining the restaurant patios cooled her sunburned face. The cooler temperature provided a brief respite from the heat but did nothing to ease the tightness in her chest. The hot air was laden with the scents of sizzling onions, deep-fried pickle spears, and mini doughnuts dusted with icing sugar, all cooked in the restaurants and on the grills in the mobile food trucks that were parked along the avenue.

A glance over her shoulder said she seemed to have lost her trackers. But there were so many people milling about that she couldn't be sure.

When she turned back around to continue, she found two other people—two males old enough to be her father—converging from opposite sides of the avenue. Their eyes never left her face. Their lips were moving, as if they were communicating to each other through wireless headsets. And the tattoos on the sides of their necks...

Phoenix heads.

"*Sbit.*" Her heart was in her throat, and her mind spun as she debated what to do.

There was an alley up ahead that cut between the Salted Caramel Ice Cream Parlor and Medea's Magic Tricks, just to the right of the white marble sundial—built hundreds of years ago out of respect for Tempus the Liar, God of Time.

She darted for the shadows between those two crooked buildings, being careful as she edged around the sundial that spanned nearly the entire width of the Avenue of the Scarlet Star. At the end of the alley, half-starved cats rummaged in an overturned trashcan, the sour odor of fish and spoiled food permeating the air. There was no one down here, and it took her half a second to realize it was a dead end.

With shaking hands, she dug her phone out of her pocket and punched in the emergency number so hard, her nails almost broke. Her legs wobbled as she looked over her shoulder at the bustling avenue, her hair catching in the neckline she always wore.

Her trackers were nowhere to be seen—for a moment, at least. One blessed moment.

A voice picked up after one ring. “Angelthene Rescue—”
“I need help,” she croaked.

“I’m going to need your location and what the situation is.”

The Avenue of the Scarlet Star; she tried to say.

But an arm wrapped around her throat from behind, and the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against her temple.

The line crackled as her phone slipped through her fingers. It struck the cobbles, screen instantly cracking. “Miss—” But that was all she heard of the officer on the other end.

She stopped breathing. The walls of the businesses on either side of the alley shimmered and lurched as a low and lethal male voice hissed in her ear, “Make one sound and you die.”

“YOU’RE COMING WITH ME,” said the voice, every word he spoke rich and deep. The male was so close to Loren that her hair fluttered with his steady breathing, the shell of her ear grazed with every exhalation. “You’re not going to fight me, and you’re not going to make any indication that you are being taken against your will. Do we have an understanding?”

Loren’s knees were quivering so badly, she wondered how it was possible that she was still on her feet. Maybe it was because the man holding her hostage had her pinned against his hard chest, his arm wrapped firmly around her throat. The

gun at her temple hadn't budged—and Loren still wasn't breathing.

She tried to speak, tried to give him an answer. But she couldn't find her voice.

"Do we or do we not have an understanding?" He gave her a warning shake, the muzzle of the gun digging into her temple hard enough to bruise.

Loren whimpered but managed to dip her head in a single nod.

And then...she thought of something.

"I'll come with you without a fight," she began in a strangled voice. Her lips were shaking, and her heart was punching a hole through her chest. "But only if you promise me that my friend, Sabrina Van Arsdell, will walk free."

A pause. "What are you talking about?"

Loren blinked fiercely against the gray clouding her vision. Just beyond the mouth of the alley—empty apart from herself and the man holding her at gun-point—people milled about the sunlit avenue, laughing, chatting, and sipping on smoothies and frozen coffees, entirely unaware of what was taking place in the cool shadows only steps away.

And within the crowd, she spotted those four black-clad figures—the woman with hair shorn to her scalp and the three men who were all old enough to be her father—scanning the faces of the people they passed. Looking for her. As if this could get any worse than having one gun pointed at her head.

But the arm around her throat stiffened. As if he noticed them, too.

As if he hadn't known they were here.

"You bleed gold or something, girl? Why are those fuckers looking for you?" Loren's mind reeled; she'd assumed that every person who was looking for her today was working as a group, including this one. And if they weren't, then that meant...

What *did* it mean? She couldn't think. Couldn't—

“What the *fuck* are you, girl?” he barked, the volume of his voice hurting her ear. “Answer me.”

“I don’t know, *I don’t know!*” It was the first time she had ever wondered if she was as human as she thought. Her throat burned as a sob clawed its way out. “My friend was taken last week by another Darkslayer who wanted me instead. He tried to get me to go with them, but peace officers showed up—”

“Who was it? The Darkslayer who attacked you—which circle did he belong to?”

She couldn’t move her tongue, couldn’t bring herself to answer.

He tightened his hold on her throat, his leather gloves hot on her skin. “Which bloody circle, *girl?*”

“I don’t know!” she cried, every word a sob.

The four figures in the crowd began pushing their way toward the alley, and Loren felt the blood in her head—what was left of it—drain down to her feet.

The man holding her at gunpoint spun her around to face him so quickly, she teetered in her heels, nearly pitching face-first onto the cobbles.

She lifted her gaze to his face—

Her mouth literally fell open at the sight of him.

He was only a few years her senior—twenty-three or maybe twenty-four by the looks of him, though immortality made it a challenge to accurately determine a person’s age. Loren made a point to memorize anything about him that stood out, in case she managed to get away, but she found herself staring at him like an idiot for a much longer length of time than necessary, drinking him in feature by feature, and realizing with each passing second that *everything* about him stood out.

His hair was jet-black and shorter on the sides than the top, the strands slicked-back from a face as striking as it was lethal. His mouth was well formed, his jawline strong. He had

a straight nose that had clearly never been broken before, which was rare for someone of his...expertise. Loren imagined that if she could see his hands beneath his gloves, there would be enough evidence there to suggest he was the one who got most of the hitting in during a fight.

Perhaps his most striking feature was his eyes. A steel-blue she'd never seen before, made brighter by the way they contrasted with his suntanned skin. Those eyes—whites and all—were swallowed up by the black of the Sight as he swiftly scanned her aura. Towering well over six feet in height, he was all muscle and raw masculinity, his broad shoulders and biceps straining against the worn leather of the black jacket he wore, the material embroidered here and there with patches of symbols and words that belonged to a dead language. The zipper on his jacket was down just far enough to show the three silver pendants he wore around his neck: one a religious symbol, another a protection charm, and the third a wing-shaped locket.

Loren had never picked up a paintbrush in all her life, but for one terrifying second she found herself wanting to capture this moment on paper and trap it under glass.

Had she the chance, she would've called the painting: *Devil—King of the Wicked and the Damned*.

And when she took note of the tattoo below the hellseher's right ear—a tattoo of a horned letter *S* in the gothic script of an ancient world—she realized there would be no escaping this. No escaping *him*.

Because not only was this man a Darkslayer—he was one of the Seven Devils. An elite unit of bounty hunting hellsehers known and feared by all of Terra. They had killed, cheated, and clawed their way to the top of an unjust hierarchy, where humans were no better than fodder, and the Terran Imperator ruled from its peak with an iron fist. Needless to say, the Devils and their kingpin Randal Slade held firmly to their

place on the pyramid somewhere just below the emperor himself.

"I don't believe it," the Devil murmured, nostrils flaring wide. "You're human."

Still holding onto her with one hand, the other now pointing the gun below her jaw, the slayer scanned her—the skin-tight clothes that hid nothing—and then went for her crossbody bag.

"I don't have anything." She blinked against the spots of color drifting across her vision. The spots that were making it a challenge to see his face, no matter the fact that he was mere inches away from her. He'd already unzipped her bag and, judging from his unchanging expression as he rifled through the contents, he wasn't surprised to find that his Sight hadn't lied—she had no magical artifact on her, nothing more valuable than gum and lip-gloss.

Still, she found it necessary to voice the obvious as she went on to say, her tone one of panic, "There's nothing on me that's valuable—and I'm *human*. I swear to the gods I'm human. And I don't know how or why, but *I'm* what you're looking. *I'm* what you want!" It wasn't the smartest thing to say, and she figured she had just declared herself to the universe as the next missing person, when he froze.

He dropped her bag and straightened. Loren didn't dare breathe as he scanned the alley behind her with the kind of lethal expertise that only a man ripped from the womb of the underworld would possess. Footsteps echoed against the brick walls of the businesses on either side of them.

Four sets of footsteps.

One of the men in the group of four spoke. "Out of the way, Devil." There was the click of a gun's safety springing free. "Or we'll have to kill you."

Steel-blue eyes met her own. And somehow, despite the threat made on his life—and despite that he was outnumbered four to one—there was no fear in those eyes. And when he