

TRUTH OR *LIE*?



CITY OF  
**LIES**  
AND  
**LEGENDS**



A  
HOUSE  
OF DEVILS  
NOVEL



KAYLA EDWARDS

PENGUIN BOOKS

# CITY OF LIES AND LEGENDS

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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*Dreams of Ice and Iron*

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The House of Devils series

*City of Gods and Monsters*

*City of Souls and Sinners*

*City of Lies and Legends*

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# CITY OF LIES AND LEGENDS

HOUSE OF DEVILS

BOOK THREE

KAYLA EDWARDS



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*For anyone who feels trapped in a dark place—  
May you find the light again.*

*And for Jeff—  
My leap of faith.*

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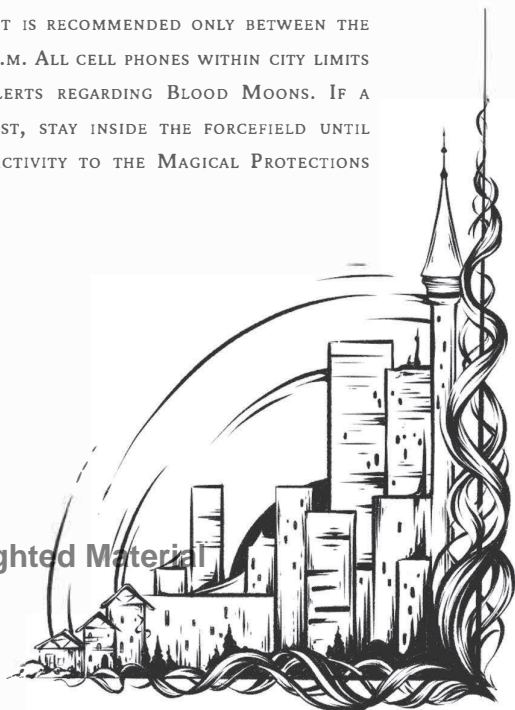


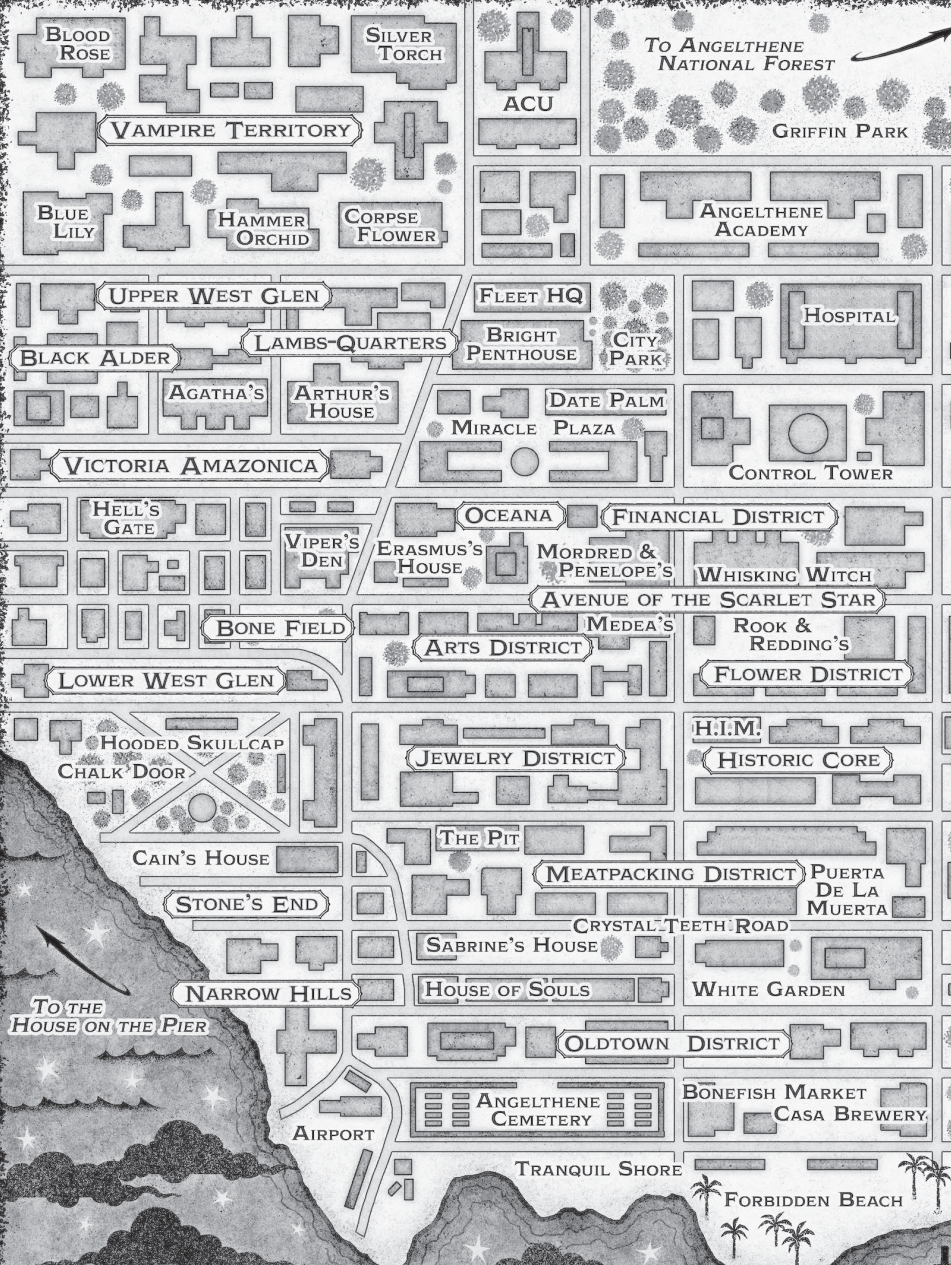
## WELCOME BACK TO ANGELTHENE

AS ALWAYS, WE HOPE YOU ENJOY YOUR STAY. PLEASE AVOID GOING OUT AFTER SUNSET, AND KEEP A FORM OF PROTECTION ON YOU AT ALL TIMES. THE USE OF BLOOD STAVES IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED. DARKSLAYERS OPERATE IN THE CITY, SO EXERCISING A HIGH LEVEL OF CAUTION IN ALL DISTRICTS IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED FOR RESIDENTS AND VISITORS. AVOID UNNECESSARY TRAVEL TO THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT, HOODED SKULLCAP, STONE'S END, EBNFIELD, OLDTOWN, THE NARROW HILLS, AND THE BLACK ALDER DISTRICT. TRAVEL TO ANGELTHENE NATIONAL FOREST IS RECOMMENDED ONLY BETWEEN THE HOURS OF SEVEN A.M. AND THREE P.M. ALL CELL PHONES WITHIN CITY LIMITS ARE PROGRAMMED TO RECEIVE ALERTS REGARDING BLOOD MOONS. IF A BLOOD MOON IS IN THE FORECAST, STAY INSIDE THE FORCEFIELD UNTIL DAWN. REPORT ANY SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY TO THE MAGICAL PROTECTIONS UNIT IMMEDIATELY.



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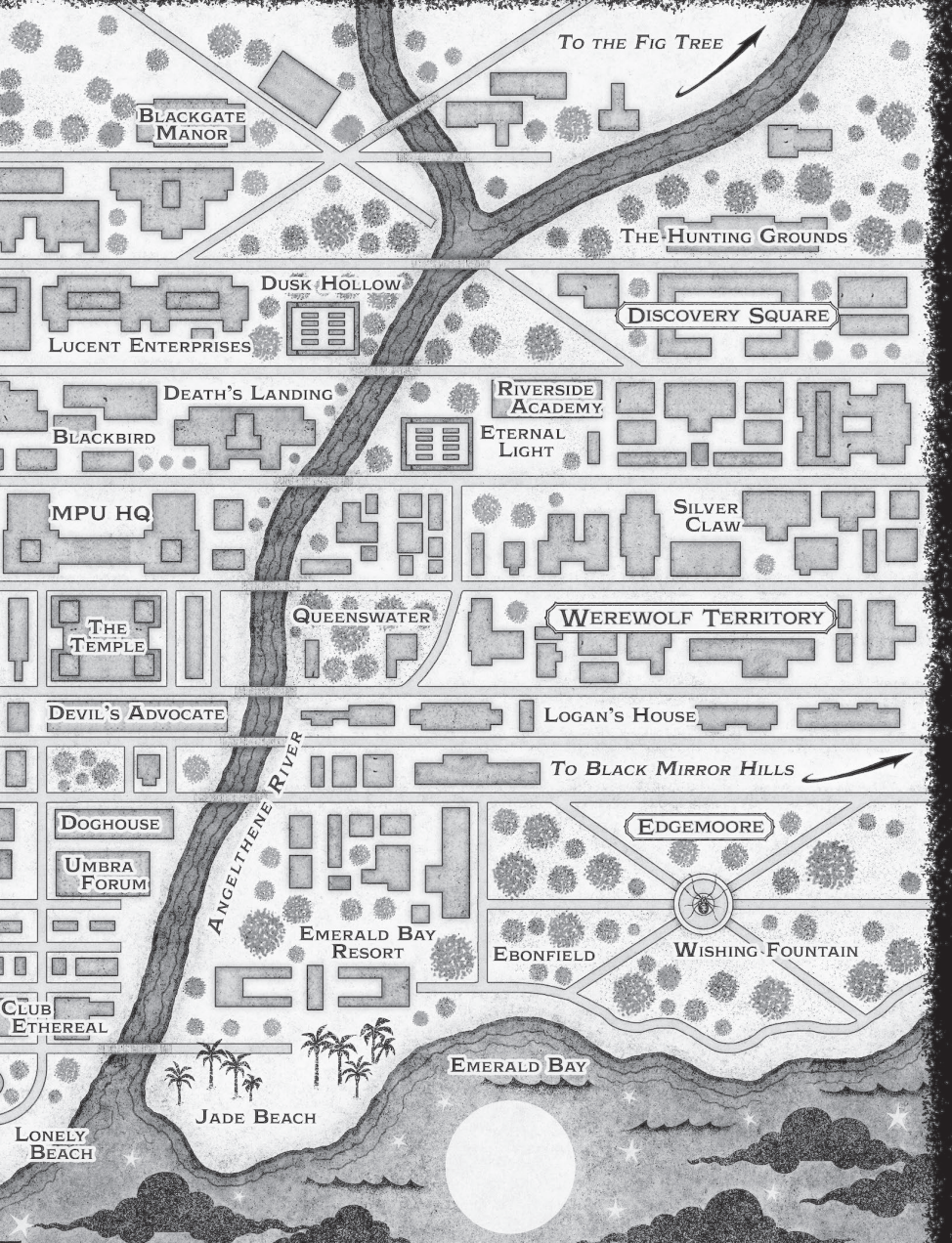


W E L C O M E T O

WE HOPE YOU

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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

LOVELY BEACH

JADE BEACH

ANGELTHENE  
SURVIVE



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## DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

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### 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 and Right Hand of Darien Cassel

---

### THE HUNTSMEN

Marked with a Hellhound, they answer to Lionel Savage, Head of the Hunting Grounds and former 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 Darien Cassel, 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.*

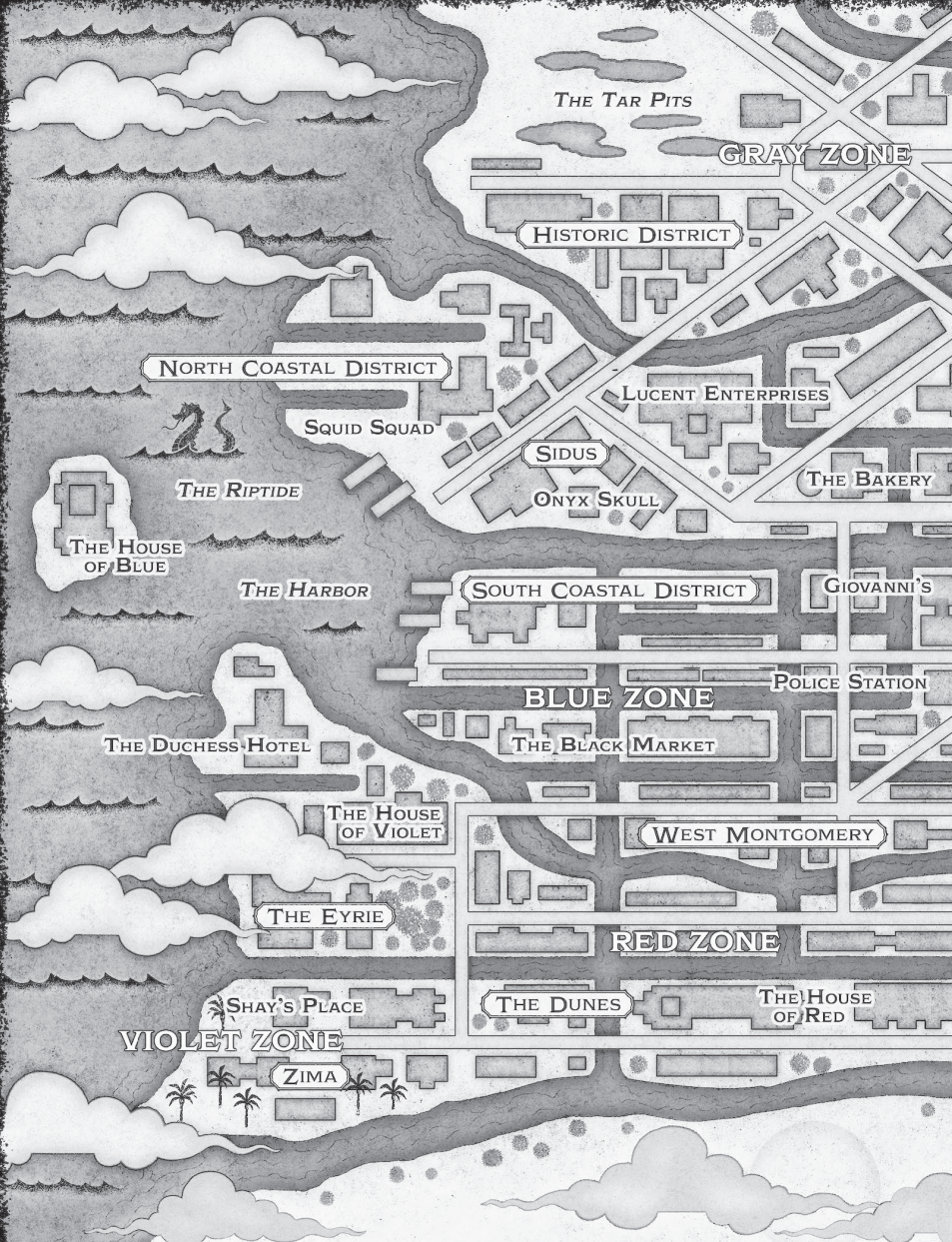


## NOW ENTERING YVESWICH,

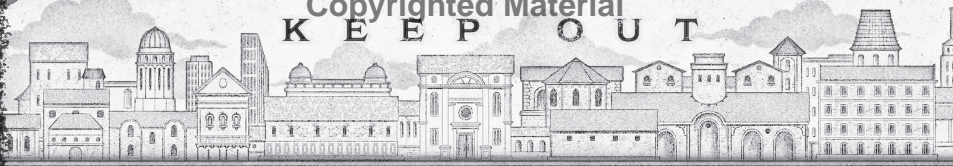
THE STATE'S HISTORIC CAPITAL. WHILE WE ENCOURAGE OUR VISITORS TO EXPLORE THE MANY THINGS THERE ARE TO SEE WITHIN THE CITY, WE URGE YOU, DUE TO THE HIGH PRESENCE OF DARKSLAYERS AND OTHERWORLDLY CREATURES, TO EXERCISE CAUTION. WHILE ALL ZONES ARE OPEN TO TOURISTS AND ORDINARY CITIZENS, IT IS HIGHLY ADVISABLE TO AVOID ANY GRAY AND RED ZONES AND USE CAUTION IN THE BLUE. ABOVE ALL, WE WOULD LIKE TO REMIND OUR GUESTS TO KEEP AWAY FROM WATERFALLS AFTER SUNSET, AVOID SWIMMING BEYOND THE BUOYS, AND—MOST IMPORTANTLY—KEEP OUT OF THE FOG.



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**K E E P O U T**





THE HOLLOW

THE HOUSE OF BLACK

GRAY ZONE

ARDESIA

ROMAN'S HOUSE

CALIGINOUS ON SILVERWAY

EAST YVESWICH INDUSTRIAL PARK

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

NEUTRAL ZONE

OSWALD'S

MPU'S HEADQUARTERS

AVENUE OF THE WANING MOON

MECHANIC

ARCHIE'S ARCADE

NECROPOLIS

PAX'S SCHOOL

THEATER DISTRICT

CONTROL TOWER

THE TEMPLE

RED ZONE

THE HOSPITAL

AITHNE

THE PURPLE HOUSE

EAST MONTGOMERY

GREEN ZONE

THE HOUSE OF SAGE

THE LABYRINTH

YVESWICH ACADEMY FOR MAGIC

HIGHWAY 1-5

TO ANGELTHENE AND MOTEL 58

# YVESWICH

OF THE FOG

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## DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF YVESWICH

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### THE SHADOWMASTERS

Marked with the bleeding black skull of Obitus, god of death and the dying, they answer to Roman 'Shadows' Devlin, Head of the Hollow and the House of Black

*In some parts of Terra, they are better known as 'Wraiths'*

---

### THE SELKIES

Marked with the teardrop of Caligo, goddess of water, mercy, and rebirth, they answer to Athene Cousens, Head of the Riptide and the House of Blue

---

### THE WYVERNS

Marked with the flame of Ignis, goddess of fire and the Seven Circles, they answer to Cerise Brinton, Head of the Dunes and the House of Red

*In some parts of Terra, they are better known as 'Flameweavers'*

---

### THE JACKALS

Marked with the eye of Tempus the Liar, outcast of the Terran pantheon and god of time, they answer to Griffin Brand, Head of the Labyrinth and the House of Sage

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### THE SYLPHEN

Marked with the white feather of Vita, goddess of the sky and flight, they answer to Raina Cruso, Head of the Eyrie and the House of Violet

---

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

*For a full list of characters, flip to the back of the book*

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This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers, including intense violence, violence against children, brutal injuries, graphic language, discussion of domestic violence, substance use disorder, drug dependence and symptoms of withdrawal, death, gore, suicidal ideation, and physical and psychological torture. This book also contains explicit sexual content. Please read with caution and prepare to return to Angelthere...

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## ELSEWHERE

In the heart of the universe, in the middle of nowhere, a great tree stood sentinel over a small body of water. While the surrounding land was shrouded in thick darkness and creeping mist, the tree and pond glowed with ethereal light. It filtered through the crystalline branches and teal leaves, casting dappled shadows across the water.

A young woman sat upon the gnarled roots that domed above the pond, the soles of her bare feet skimming the surface of the water as she swung her legs back and forth. Wind stirred her hair, but try as it may, its touch went unfelt. She felt nothing here—not the splash of the water under her feet, not the ridges of the tree bark against her palms, not the tiny legs of the luminescent fireflies as they alighted on her arms and knees.

The strapless dress that hugged her body was colored like an opal, with many small points of shifting color that looked like indecisive stars. The hem that fell to her ankles fluttered as though it were alive, looking every bit as otherworldly as the brooding tree.

There was no sun here, no moon. No way of telling how long she had sat below the shelter of this tree. She might have been content to stay here forever, had her heart not begged for the opposite.

It wanted her to remember, to leave this silent womb of the universe behind. *Go back*, her heart whispered. *You must go back*. Where, she didn't know. Even her own name escaped her. Her age, her past—everything was gone. At first, the fear of her empty mind had been so great that she had nearly succumbed to the force of it. Now, fear was simply another thing

that did not exist here. It was just her, the tree, the pond, and an endless, starry night sky. But—

At the very edge of her mind was a face. It was blurry—nothing more than streaks of black and tan, with a smudge of steely blue.

Eyes. Those were eyes. Whoever she was seeing through the foggy lens of her memory had eyes like a stormy sea.

But soon, that face was gone too, just like her memories.

And her heart, just like her mind, went quiet.

PART ONE  
THE RIPTIDE

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# I

## OLDTOWN

### ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

In just over twenty-four years, Darien Cassel had fought and defeated more monsters than he could count.

Except grief. Grief was the worst monster of all.

Twice, it had sunk its claws into him, both wounds so deep that he wondered how the fuck he was still breathing. The first time was when he'd lost his mother. The second was when the love of his life had fallen into a coma.

He recalled that horrible stretch of silence when Loren's heart had stopped beating, remembered how the brightness in her eyes had dulled, every muscle in her beautiful face falling slack as she slipped away from him. The memory was seared into his mind; awake or asleep, he saw it constantly. And every time he saw it, it felt like someone was driving a knife into his heart.

*Dead.* She'd died that night. Her heart had started again, sure, but she was still gone. She had never woken up.

Darien was still waiting. He would always wait.

For one split second, the memory was so debilitating that he forgot where he was. Forgot that he was in a back alley somewhere in Oldtown, beating the absolute shit out of one of Gaven's men.

Blood sprayed through the air. Bone snapped and cartilage crunched, but he kept hitting, even as the man he was pinning down with a knee to the chest begged between punches for him to stop. The air was hot tonight, the sunset bathing the city of Angelthene in thick, orange light. The heat

clung to him like a wool blanket, warming up the black leather of his jacket as he struck—

Someone cleared their throat. Maximus Reacher, who stood with Jack Steele and Travis Devlin near the mouth of the alley, the three Devils observing from afar. The sound was a signal they had agreed upon—a simple noise meant to snap Darien out of a frenzy before he could go one punch too far.

Nights like tonight had become routine. A week straight of hunting, and Darien had no intention of stopping, not until one of these pigs finally squealed and told him where Gaven Payne was hiding.

Darien shook the blood off his right hand and used the left to push the loose strands of his sun-warmed black hair out of his face.

And then he grabbed the man by the collar and yanked his head up off the ground. “Where,” Darien whispered, leaning in close to the man’s ear, “is Gaven?”

The other targets Darien had tracked down had received a slightly different hand of cards, but the game still ended the same way—in death. Darien had asked those targets a few simple questions before he’d started doling out punches, but his patience had worn thin. Tonight, it was hit first, ask questions later. The monster inside him needed to feed, and it was tired of being caged, tired of being thrown measly scraps and bones.

It wanted flesh. Blood.

“He l-left,” the man spluttered, spittle flying from his cut-up lips.

“Left town?” Darien prompted, pulling back a little. He tightened his grip on the man’s collar, twisting the blood-dampened fabric with inked fingers.

Another of the poor fuckers he had tracked down had told him the same thing, but as for the others, they had refused to speak, even when Darien and his Devils had gotten a little more creative than usual with their interrogation tactics at the Chopping Block, going so far as to shatter a few knees and remove some limbs. The Butcher had been more than willing to lend Darien the same room as last time—‘for the comfort of his victims’, Casen had said with a booming laugh.

Gaven would be last. Initially, Darien hadn’t planned it this way; all he’d wanted was to find and kill the man responsible for manipulating him and burning Blackbird 88 Above to the ground. But now, with Darien picking off Gaven’s men one by one, the prick could see him coming—and was likely pissing himself with fear, knowing he only had so much time left.

This was better. More rewarding. More tantalizing to someone with such an appetite for blood.

“Where did Gaven go?” Darien said, studying the man’s puffy, blood-soaked face.

He tried to look away, but Darien wrenched his collar, making him whimper. “You’re going to tell me where Gaven went,” Darien hissed through bared teeth, “and you’re going to tell me right now.”

“O-okay, okay,” the hellseher stuttered, a web of blood thickening his words. “H-he said,” a heavy swallow, dark red blood oozing out of his clogged nostrils, “he was going back.”

Back to whatever hellhole he’d crawled out of. Running away, maybe. Leaving, before Darien could catch up with him.

Good. It was more information than the others had given him.

Which meant his family would be safe—for now, at least. And even safer once he finished tracking down and slaughtering the last of Gaven’s men, if there were any left in Angelthene. If they were smart, they would’ve already fled, but if this waste of skin pinned under his knee was any indication, they were stupid as could be.

“And where is ‘back?’” Darien asked. Magpies squawked out a death prediction on the roof of the consignment store to his left.

“I don’t know.” His cheeks puffed with labored breaths. Both of his hands were broken, fingers bent and scabbed. Darien had taken his sweet time snapping all ten. “He never told me.”

Darien drew a switchblade, his other hand still fisting the man’s collar—holding him in place in case he tried anything stupid. “You sure about that?”

He flicked open the blade.

The coward’s eyes widened, his pupils dilating as they fixed on the knife, the edge of that blade glinting in a streak of sunlight. “*Yes!*” he exclaimed, his voice cracking. “I swear it, I swear to you—he didn’t tell me shit! I swear on my life, I’ve told you everything I know! *Please!*”

Darien let go of the man’s collar with a shove. “Thank you,” he whispered.

A tremor wracked the man’s body. “Will you set me free now?”

“A promise is a promise, isn’t it?” It certainly was.

He slashed the hellseher’s throat.

Freedom—but in death instead of life.

The man’s back arched in agony, the back of his head grinding into concrete, feet thumping. The sounds of his suffering sliced through the alley, the gurgling and gasping enough to make anyone physically ill. Anyone other than Darien—and the men watching from several feet away. Anyone who wasn’t sick in the fucking head.

With a stare as dead as he felt, Darien watched his target fight for oxygen. Watched him die, just like he had the others. With mangled fingers, his victim clawed at his gushing throat in a feeble attempt to pinch it shut. A sea of red spread across the ground and seeped into Darien's knees, the black denim of his pants lapping it up like a thirsty beast.

It didn't take long before the man's body went limp. His hands collapsed to the ground, his bloodstained fingers curling with one final spasm. His aura dimmed like a lightbulb, until not one speck of color was left.

The smell of blood choked the air. The magpies quieted down.

And the monster inside him laid down to rest, its hunger sated once more.

Darien shut his eyes and tipped back his head, breathing in deeply through his nose as a rush of sick satisfaction crackled through his veins. He sensed the others watching, their concern hanging in the air, heavy as the heat, but he didn't turn.

Slaying gave him a high stronger than any drug. Spilling blood had always been his most addicting thrill, but in the ten days that had passed since Loren was admitted to the hospital, he had become more dependent on it than ever.

Without it, he didn't feel alive. With it, he felt vile. His self-loathing had reached a boiling point, and he avoided mirrors more than ever now.

At least the hatred he felt for himself was better than feeling nothing.

## 2

### THE HOSPITAL

ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

**M**aximus Reacher had spent so much time in Angelthene General Hospital these past few days that he was beginning to forget what Hell's Gate looked like.

The hospital staff had moved Loren to a different room under Darien's command. She was on the fourth floor of the Healer's ward, her door facing a quiet waiting area where Max and the other Devils took turns keeping watch. But tonight, Max wasn't here to keep watch.

His boots pounded as he neared the ward. The hallways were quiet, save for a handful of exhausted nurses and Healers, who nodded in greeting. It had been an adjustment, but the staff had grown used to seeing Max and the others—not just the Seven Devils, but also the few Angels of Death and Reapers who popped in. They no longer gawked or stuttered over their words, though they still chose to keep their distance, their attempts at making conversation short-lived and half-hearted.

The edge of the curved desk that occupied a large portion of the waiting area came into view. Five steps later, Max rounded the corner.

Eight plastic chairs were set up along the perimeter of the room. Two were occupied.

Tanner Atlas was slouched by the windows, his ringed thumbs flicking across his phone screen. The music tinkling through the speakers told Max he was playing that same old frog game again.

In the chair closest to the vending machine sat Dallas Bright. The witch was fast asleep, an open bag of candy-covered chocolates in her loose grip, her Fleet wings draped across the empty chairs on either side of her. The

steady rise and fall of her stomach threatened to scatter the candies across the floor.

Tanner looked up, blinking the glaze out of bloodshot eyes. “Hey.”

Max gestured to Dallas. “Did she go to class today?”

Tanner’s grimace was enough of an answer.

Max sighed. “Her parents are going to kill her if she keeps missing class.” Not to mention training with the Fleet. Had Dallas’s parents been anyone other than Roark and Taega—anyone *decent*—they would’ve been empathetic toward their daughter, would have even slept here, in this waiting area, the way Dallas had done so often, showing their support not just for their biological daughter, but the one they’d adopted too.

He sighed again and studied Dallas’s sleeping form. Her copper eyelashes twitched, the thick hair she wore in an unruly knot atop her head fluttering in a draft of cool air blowing from a vent.

Her tangled, hadn’t-been-washed-in-days hair. Even asleep, she looked exhausted. Ever since Loren had wound up in the hospital, Dallas only slept when she passed out, her body giving her no other choice. It was the reason Max was here right now: if Dallas was going to refuse to take care of herself, then *he* would take care of her.

Max closed the short distance to her chair. He looked down at her, waiting for her to wake up, but she didn’t stir. He brushed a strand of hair off her face, the task made difficult by the patch of drool drying near the corner of her mouth.

Dallas jerked awake. “What—” Her bag of candy fell, spilling its contents across the floor. Witch Whoppers clattered and rolled, the noise causing one of the receptionists to peek over the desk.

Max turned in the direction the candies were rolling—

And saw Darien heading this way. He didn’t slow down, nor make eye contact, not even when a couple of the candies bumped into his boots.

Darien had stopped at Hell’s Gate to shower and change into a clean hooded sweatshirt and jeans. There wasn’t one drop of blood on him, not even on his boots—a different pair than the ones he wore to collect or fight. It was one of the few requests the hospital staff had been daring enough to voice: that they come to the Healers ward dressed in clothes that were as clean as possible. Blood was a big, fat ‘no’, but expecting Darkslayers not to have *any* blood on them was...kind of laughable, really.

Max understood why, though. This part of the hospital was full of Tricking patients with heavily compromised immune systems, some on ventilators, others fed by IV lines. New strains of the Tricking were

appearing almost weekly, so it was because of this and the rising number of cases that the Healers had been forced to make adjustments.

It was either that or the staff was trying their best to make the visiting Darkslayers appear less frightening for the other patients.

As if clean clothes had anything to do with that.

Darien disappeared into Loren's room without a backward glance.

"How's he doing?" Tanner asked, taking care to keep his voice down.

Max sighed. "How do you think?" he mouthed.

He had never seen Darien so...empty. And he'd known him for a long time—practically his whole life. Darien was now a shell of himself, but he wasn't brittle like one. If anything, Loren being in a coma had forged him into something else, something more dangerous than the old Darien, if that were even possible. He was a newly honed weapon still glowing red, his edges sharper than ever before.

Max had to admit, it scared him, and he wasn't the only one who felt this way. When Ivy had come to him two nights ago needing to vent, she had surprised him by speaking his thoughts aloud. She felt as hopeless as Max—as hopeless as *all* the Devils. Hopeless and utterly desperate to help Darien but not knowing how. All they could do was be there for him as best as they could. Even when there was nothing to say, nothing to do but listen if Darien was willing to speak, or sit with him in silence if he wasn't.

Dallas scrubbed her hands over her face and sat up. "How long was I out?" With a big yawn, she stretched her arms and fanned out her wings.

Max looked at Tanner for the answer.

The hacker shrugged. "Two hours, maybe?" He flashed them his phone screen, where pixelated frogs snatched flies into their mouths with pink tongues. "I've been busy."

Dallas glanced in longing at the Witch Whoppers scattered across the floor, a couple of them having already been crushed by the shoes of Healers bustling by. "I didn't even get to eat any of those," she mumbled, her eyes still watering from her yawn.

Her attention abruptly shifted to something—or someone—behind Max. She stiffened, the silver in her eyes flashing once before dimming.

Max turned, reaching for the gun that was tucked into his back waistband.

He froze at the sight of the man coming down the hallway.

The amber eyes. The tall, proud form. The harsh face. The swept-back hair, the smooth strands the same shade of polished copper as Dallas's.

Was he dreaming? Because Roark Bright was heading for Loren's room.

Hell if he was going to let *this* happen tonight.

Max crossed the room, hand drifting toward his gun again.

Was he really going to shoot the Red Baron? Gods, it would probably feel good as hell.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” Max’s voice lashed out like a whip in the dead silence.

“Max!” Dallas hissed, stumbling out of her chair.

Max stepped in Roark’s path before he could reach Loren’s open door, his gun burning a hole in the waistband of his cargo pants.

The Red Baron slowed his pace to a smooth stop. “I need to have a word with Darien.” His stare settled on Max, the reluctance in the action tangible.

Max’s hand twitched toward his pistol again. “I’m not letting you in there.”

Roark’s upper lip curled like he’d stepped in dog shit. “Those are bold words to use on a general.”

“That’s a shit tone to use on a Darkslayer,” Max countered. “If you set foot in that room, Darien will eat you alive, so you can either tell *me* what you want, or you can get the hell out.” It may seem like an overreaction, but this man hadn’t bothered to check in on Loren all goddamn week, and neither had Taega. He couldn’t imagine what it had been like for the poor girl while growing up.

Same with the one standing at his side.

Erasmus, on the other hand, had tried to visit Loren several times, but Darien refused to let Erasmus—or *anyone*, really—get anywhere close to his girl, least of all the father who’d failed her, time and again. Max couldn’t blame Darien for acting this way, but once in a while he’d feel a twinge of pity for the old guy. Sometimes, the man slept in the waiting area until Cyra came and urged him to go home. Two days had passed since Erasmus had last been here, two days since anyone had so much as heard from him or Cyra—two days since Darien had lost his temper and literally pulled a gun on Erasmus.

He’d left, of course. Literally ran out of the hospital as fast as his age would let him. Darien hadn’t fired any shots, but with the way things were going, with no sign of Loren waking up, it was best if Erasmus stayed away.

Roark glanced at his biological daughter—just for a second. Not long enough to really *see* her—to see how gaunt and pale her face had become, how tired her eyes looked.

“Give us a minute, Dallas.” Roark’s dismissal was brusque.

Max grabbed Dallas by the wrist before she could step away, his thumb pressing on her racing pulse. “You’ve been telling her to give you a minute

for the past twenty years,” he growled at the Red Baron. “That’s *her* family in that room, and if what you have to say has anything to do with Loren, then it’s just as much Dallas’s business as it is ours. She *stays*.”

Landlines droned with incoming calls. The receptionists let them ring, which meant they now had an audience.

Roark’s eyes flicked toward the desk. Aside from a lone muscle ticking in his clean-shaven jaw, he showed zero emotion. No surprise there.

Max was debating blasting him in the head when Roark spoke.

“I know of a way we might be able to wake Loren up.”

Max blinked. Well, *that* was unexpected.

Dallas stepped forward. “How?” Max knew the fresh skip in her pulse didn’t have anything to do with her asshole of a dad.

A shadow moved in Max’s periphery.

Darien filled the doorframe. He didn’t say anything, his face sharper than shattered glass. He hardly spoke at all anymore. Never smiled, and sure as Ignis’s tits never laughed.

When Max addressed Darien, he kept his voice down. “Roark thinks he knows how we can wake Loren up.”

For several minutes, the Red Baron and the Devil sized each other up. With the two of them standing across from each other like that, Roark looked...small. Insignificant. Then again, Darien tended to have that effect on a lot of people.

Roark’s attention strayed to the room that was partially blocked by Darien’s menacing form.

And the girl lying unconscious on the bed inside.

Darien didn’t move a muscle, but that perpetual threat in his eyes deepened. If Max hadn’t known him so well, that deadly look would’ve made him hightail it out of the hospital—maybe even hightail it out of the goddamn city and never come back.

Darien had been dangerous his whole life—there was no doubt about that. But as a man in love, he was lethal.

The last of Roark’s hesitation vanished as his attention returned to Darien. This time, there was no disdain in the Red Baron’s stare, not even when the look Darien gave him in return was so sharp it would have sent a lesser man running.

Roark drew a deep breath. “You would have to go to Yveswich.”

# 3

## SIDUS

### YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

Roman Devlin's equivalent to counting sheep was counting rabbits. Not the kind you bought from a pet store or chased out of your vegetable garden with a broom.

These rabbits were Darkslaying messengers. According to old stories, the first person to seek out a hellseher and hire them for a job wore a rabbit mask to hide their identity. The masks had instantly caught on, and soon the tradition had spread to every corner of Terra.

Here in Yveswich, there were more messengers than the local Darkslayers could keep up with. Endless messengers touting endless Darkslaying jobs in exchange for endless money, and still the city's crime level was at an all-time high.

While most people considered this a problem in immediate need of fixing, Darkslayers like Roman saw it as a good thing. More crime meant more money, more ways of entertaining his overactive mind. More ways of staying sane—or as close to sane as a person like Roman 'Shadows' Devlin could get.

"Twenty-two..." Roman murmured. He sat on the edge of the rooftop of the Onyx Skull, a nightclub with the best strippers in the city, his eyes shining with the black of the Sight as he scanned the district far below the soles of his dangling feet. This here was a Gray Zone—a section of the city owned and operated by the members of the Hollow. "Twenty-three..."

The rabbit masks in Yveswich were black instead of the white commonly found in other cities. The masks owed their dark shade to the rare material from which they were crafted, the magic in the masks allowing

them to be seen with a hellseher's Sight. Inanimate objects didn't typically show up in a hellseher's vision—not unless they had some form of energy running through them, or were in contact with something that did, something that contained enough energy to spread beyond itself. Clothes were a good example; no matter how bright or strong the aura of the person who wore them, Roman never could see clothes.

He studied one of the masks now, watching the way the messenger's aura threaded through the material in bands of dull color. This messenger moved with apprehension—new to the job, probably. She walked the shadowed streets roughly four blocks from here, hoping for a Darkslayer to seek her out and accept the job she had to offer.

A different one caught Roman's eye, this one ducking in and out of buildings farther north. She passed under a mercury vapor street light, her mask reflecting green.

"Twenty-four..."

Roman knew it was a strange way to relax: counting rabbits on the rooftop of a nightclub, music thumping at his back. But *he* was strange, and so he did strange things.

The door that led into the club clanged open behind him, setting free the clamor of drunken voices, blaring song lyrics, and clinking glasses.

"There's a messenger here to see you," came a male voice.

How bold.

Roman kept his focus on the glimmering streets below. *Twenty-five...  
Twenty-six...*

The tangled streets of Yweswich were old and narrow, some of them seeming to meander without direction. In all its years since the city had been built, very little pavement had replaced the cobbles, and most of the buildings were so ancient they seemed to lean toward each other, gossiping about centuries past. The city had been built on sharply elevated terrain, and there was an abundance of waterfalls, the rapids draining into canals that bled into the nearby ocean. The waterfalls brought in droves of starry-eyed tourists year-round—thousands of souls foaming at the mouth for a glimpse of the unmatched beauty of the rapids.

The locals were smart enough not to fall for that trap. More waterfalls meant more Hounds—more monsters in general. And more monsters meant higher death tolls.

Tourists made up most of those deaths.

"Have Kylar take care of it," Roman clipped.

"She said her boss asked specifically for you."

Roman turned to look at Otto. He was a hellseher and a member of the

Hollow, someone who assisted the Shadowmasters in running the Gray districts and the many businesses within. “Who is she? You seen her around before?”

Otto shook his head. “Probably another new hire.”

Not surprising. With too many messengers and not enough Darkslayers, the competition often led to an influx of turnovers. And, thanks to the turnovers, a lot of newbies toed the line of disrespect when interacting with Darkslayers, desperate to earn a job for their bosses so they could see a cut of that wealth.

No one had ever dared toe that line with Roman.

He got to his feet. The act of turning his back on the sheer drop to the street below sent a thrill of excitement up his spine. Maybe tomorrow he’d find a building to jump off of—one high enough to feed his appetite for adrenaline, but not quite high enough to kill him.

It was always the jumps that teetered on the brink of life and death that gave him the most satisfying rush.

Otto held the door open for him.

“Where?” Roman demanded as he descended the stairwell. Voices and music swelled to a cacophony, swallowing up the pounding of his charcoal combat boots.

“By the bar.” The door clanged shut as Otto followed behind him. “I told her to wait by the Hollow Eyes sign.”

The Onyx Skull was one of countless businesses that fed Roman’s wallet, so between this and the simple fact that he was a Shadowmaster walking a Gray Zone, people gave him a wide berth. No amount of drugs or alcohol could make them stupid enough to get in the way of the Wolf of the Hollow.

As Roman crossed the room, he caught sight of four Shadowmasters standing in a group by the stage. Willow Adams and Kylar Lavin worked directly under him—the only two Shadowmasters who didn’t first answer to his dad. The other two—Blaine and Larina, brother and sister—only came around when Donovan requested they keep an eye on him. Roman had decided he hated Blaine the moment he met him, and he’d quickly learned that his sister was just as awful. The only thing Larina had going for her was her looks—beautiful, blonde, and blue-eyed, the three B’s most men fell to their knees over. The rest of her was as poisonous as cyanide.

Roman tore his eyes off the group and focused on the job at hand, trusting Kylar and Willow to get rid of those two within the hour.

Colorful lights oscillated through the smoky gloom of the building. Hundreds of people crowded the dance floor, their bodies oiled with sweat,

eyes bleary with substance abuse. Everyone present was here because they wanted to be, so even if the rabbit messenger would've drifted from her post, she would've been easy for Roman to pick out in the crowd, simply due to the way she held herself.

She stood under a white neon sign featuring a pair of watchful eyes, hands gripping the straps of her backpack. Her posture was terrible—toes pointed inward, shoulders slumped. Her black rabbit mask and plain, all-black outfit gleamed under the strobe lights. The string that held the mask to her face had mussed up her hair—a thick and wavy fall of strawberry-blond frizz that likely hadn't seen a brush in days.

Her head snapped his way as he approached, though she didn't budge an inch from her spot against the wall. Her shoulders curled forward, as if anticipating a punch to the stomach. Pathetic.

Roman stopped several feet from her, and Otto took his leave with a respectful dip of his chin. Roman assessed the rabbit messenger, wondering how much of his time she was going to waste before she finally spit out her words.

"Are you Roman?" The messenger's voice was high and timid, and although the mask hid the entirety of her face, Roman could feel her eyes on the small tattoo high up on his cheek.

"Breed, payment, and whereabouts," he instructed.

"Hound." Her voice was quiet; he had to strain to hear her. "One hundred thousand gold mynet. The canals on West Montgomery."

"One hundred thousand is a Green's pay," he said. "Grays charge double, and I charge triple."

Her hands twisted the straps of her backpack with a white-knuckled grip. "Three hundred thousand?"

"You know basic math," Roman clipped. She shrank back, hair slipping over one shoulder. "Yes or no?"

Her head bobbed. "Y-yes."

"My clients are to pay in full at the time of the agreement. Is your boss aware?"

Another nod.

Roman took out his phone. The messenger mirrored him, her hands trembling.

"Cold?" Roman smirked.

A light passed over them, turning her mask a vibrant shade of purple, the sharp grooves that accentuated the eyes sparkling.

"Nervous," she mumbled, bumping her phone against his. A beep sounded, indicating the wire transfer.

“At least you’re honest.” He glanced at the screen, making sure the right amount was there, and pocketed his phone. “Meet me back here tomorrow night. I’m assuming your boss wants the head?” It was the most valuable body part, but once in a while a client wanted more. A claw, the spine, sometimes the poisonous barbs on the tail—all ingredients for certain spells and potions. They fetched lower prices and catered to a limited clientele, but it was worth it for some, if the demand was there.

She gave another nod.

And then she paused, leaning forward a hair’s breadth. Roman felt her attention on the pendants glimmering in the hollow of his throat. One in particular—and that made him stiffen.

“Is that the Skull of Obitus?”

“No,” Roman lied, and walked away.

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IN A BACK ALLEY in the district of West Montgomery, behind a thick wall of fog, Roman slayed the Hound.

The monster put up a good fight—they always did—but in the end it was no match for him. By the time he cut off its head, he had hardly worked up a sweat.

Blood sprayed as the head thumped to the ground. The body followed a moment later, crumpling like a boneless sack of flesh. The blood draining from the neck sizzled like acid as it trickled between the cobbles.

Roman took a moment to catch his breath. He pocketed his blade and wiped the lone drop of sweat off his forehead with the back of his wrist.

The alley was dark, the only street light on the block too far away to reach him. The fog was so dense, he could barely see the corpse of the Hound bleeding out on the street as he retrieved the canvas bag from the back pocket of his gray jeans and shook it open.

Tonight’s fog was different than the kind that warranted the blaring of a civil defense siren. While just as utterly blinding, this fog was otherwise harmless. But the kind that caused city officials to sound an alarm? Now *that* was the type of fog that prompted every citizen in the area to get inside and *stay* inside. Even people as crazy as Roman knew better than to step outside during a fog warning.

Dropping into a crouch before the slain monster, Roman reached for the head with a gloved hand—

And froze. It was gone.

The hair on his scalp prickled with a warning.

He wasn't alone.

Adrenaline sparked in his veins, making him smile like a wolf. Oh, this was going to be *good*.

Slowly, Roman lifted himself to his feet. As he surveyed the soup of fog and darkness swirling around him, that predatory smile spread across his face until it was more a hungry baring of teeth.

"Little pig, little pig," he drawled, his husky voice growing louder with every word he sang. "*Come on outtttt!*"

Nothing. It seemed he'd stumbled into a game, and he had every intention of playing.

He walked slowly. Soundlessly. Turning in place, he picked apart the alley with eyes that were now black with the Sight. There was no aura, but he could feel that someone was here. Watching him.

Movement on his left.

Roman struck—not with his body, but with his magic. His shadows.

He could command the darkness as he saw fit, and his command tonight was for the shadows of the alley to apprehend this nosey little pig.

A tendril of blackness slashed through the air. It grabbed hold of an ankle, causing whoever it was to trip. They—*she* grunted and fell.

Roman reeled those shadows in, dragging the female back this way—

And slammed her up against the brick wall. Whoever it was, she gurgled and squirmed—his victims always did. And they always begged before he gutted them like fish.

A faint trickle of moonlight cut through the fog, and Roman stepped into it, shadows wreathing his fingers. "What do we have here?"

He paused. Cocked his head.

It was the rabbit messenger. The strawberry blonde who'd hired him not one gods-damned hour ago.

"Bold little bunny," Roman drawled. He glanced at the bag she'd dropped—the one containing the severed head of the Hound—and clucked his tongue. "Thieving little bunny."

The rabbit struggled, thrashing against the shadowy restraints. She smelled like apples—those green ones that were so sour they made him want to shave off his tastebuds.

"I didn't know you could—" She writhed and bucked, but his shadows didn't yield. "Control them," she concluded, panting.

A thrill of pleasure skittered up Roman's spine at the sight of her breasts rising with every inhale, at the sound of her pulse skipping like a flat stone on water. Fear, most likely. Maybe even a touch of excitement, if the

feel of her aura was any indication. Both were turn-ons for him. Was she enjoying this?

Roman stepped up to where she was pinned. She tried to shrink away from his advance, but his shadows gave her no leeway. A wisp of black snaked around her throat, squeezing tight.

Her gulp carried through the alley. The sound made Roman smile—and his smile made the bunny hold her breath.

He was close enough now to touch her, to kill her. She knew it too—he could tell from her reluctance to expel the air from her lungs.

“They call me ‘Shadowmaster’ for a reason,” Roman said, watching the freckled skin on her chest pebble with goosebumps. “How can I be the master of something if I cannot control it?”

He plucked the mask off her face.

Eyes the prettiest shade of green stared back at him. There was a split in her left iris, one portion a darker green than the other. With her sneakers dangling nearly three feet above ground, her head was slightly higher than his. Her brows, the same strawberry blonde as her hair, were straighter than they were arched, her mouth full, jawline soft. There were freckles all over her face, too, and just below her right eye was—

A small tattoo. A raindrop.

Roman’s face twisted with a scowl. “You’re a Selkie.” He flung the mask over his shoulder. With a baring of teeth, he growled, “What are you doing working a Gray Zone?”

“None of your business.”

He tightened his shadows around her wrists and ankles, splaying her limbs like a starfish. “No one talks to me like that.” She was a doll on strings, and no doll was going to mouth him off like this.

“Looks like I just did.”

“What do you want?”

“I wanted that Hound.” Those brilliant green eyes flicked to the beheaded monster. The color was so bright and clear, her face so unthreatening, it was hard to picture this girl wearing the black of the Sight. A part of him wanted to see it—this pretty face with black eyes instead of green.

“Why not hunt your own?” Yweswich had more than enough Hounds to go around. Why was she insisting on pestering him?

She winced, her fingers spreading as the whips of his shadows flexed, digging into her pale flesh like wires. By the time she answered him, Roman had already figured it out. “I’m not strong enough,” she muttered.

He smirked. Not strong enough, nor big enough to handle a Hound. What was she, five feet fuck-all? Pathetic little thing. Soft, too, by the looks

of her, not nearly enough muscle on her frame to justify her occupation as a Darkslayer. Which meant—

There was only one slayer in the city who couldn't take down a Hound on her own.

“You're Shay.”

She tensed, her stony expression lit up by a flash of lightning. A mist of rain started to fall, dampening Roman's dark hair.

“The ‘miserable little wallflower’, they call you. The ‘baby seal of the Riptide’.” Those were the nicer of the nicknames she'd earned. As the newest member of the Riptide, Shay Cousens had very few friends—aside from her sister, but siblings didn't count, not in the way that mattered. If anything, they were seen as a crutch—an undeserved boost to the top. As the eldest of three brothers, Roman knew that better than anyone.

Shay Cousens was an outcast.

Kind of like him, if he cared to admit it.

“I've heard a lot about you too, Roman Devlin.”

Fuck, the way she said his name made him feel...weird. Like his skin was suddenly too tight.

Her ginger lashes dipped as her eyes skirted down his body. The longer she looked at him, the quicker her heart moved. “Some say you're a sadist,” she went on. “Others claim it's a front—that you're not as unstable as you pretend to be.”

“What do you believe?”

“I believe it's a bit of both.” When her attention returned to his face, she angled her head like a bird, not seeming to care that his shadows were still forming a noose around her throat. “How do you plan on killing me, Shadows?”

Roman's jaw flexed as he watched a raindrop roll down her cheek.

Something about the way she'd voiced her question sounded more like an invitation than the kind of fearful inquiry a victim might ask her perpetrator. Was *he* in charge here, or was she?

He'd never had to ask himself that question before.

Roman gave her a cold smile. “I'm not going to kill you.” No—for her, he had something much worse in mind than an easy kill. The shadows pinning her to the wall unraveled. “I'm going to send you back to the Riptide empty-handed.” Back to the tyrant known as *Athene Cousens* empty-handed.

For a moment, Roman kept the shadows that were around her throat in place, listening to her heart stutter. Watched her choke, gag—just for a second. He was into that—breath-play. The kinkier the better. And maybe

he was just plain fucking horny tonight, but he swore this bunny liked it too.

Roman reined in the last of his power, the tendrils of darkness melting into the alley.

The Selkie dropped and stumbled forward. She planted her palm on the wet ground to push herself back up, keeping her bright eyes on him all the while. Her breathing was shallow and rapid. Almost too rapid.

Was she faking it—her fear? It would be a first.

No, there was a definite skip in her pulse—hard to fake. That, and her aura had taken on a malleable feel that frequently accompanied submission. And auras never lied. Not without the aid of an illicit drug, anyway, and his intuition told him she wasn't on any.

“If I catch you anywhere near a Gray Zone again, seal pup, I will skin you alive. Understand?”

“Y-yes.”

He leaned in, getting close enough to make her flatten her back against the wall. “Leave me alone,” he whispered.

Head down, arms now hugging her middle, she inched away, staying as far from him as possible, and scurried down the alley, picking up her backpack as she went.

Roman watched her disappear around the corner—watched her glance over her shoulder at him, her long, thick hair fanning out with the movement.

And then she was gone, the pattering of her feet swallowed up by rain and thunder.

He shook his head. “Yeah, you're a pup, alright.” She was bold, he had to give her credit for that. But she had no claws—only flippers. The few rumors about Shayla Cousens had proven true, but they'd failed to mention that she had a clever streak.

His boots swished through puddles of mud as he strode over to the canvas bag the Selkie had dropped. He stooped down, thunder rumbling overhead, and picked up the rain-dampened bag. Gods, these things stunk. They were his least favorite monsters to hunt, but they brought in fat pay cheques.

He was about to call it a night when something made him pause.

There was no blood on the canvas. And that tart scent, the one he hadn't noticed a moment ago, thanks to the Hound's corpse steaming in the rain—

He undid the drawstrings.

The bag was filled with apples—green ones.

Roman's scalp prickled.

When he pulled his phone out of his pocket to check the wire transfer, what he saw was so absurd, he couldn't even feel angry about it.

His account balance had dropped...by exactly three hundred thousand gold mynet.

Roman's cold laugh scraped against the alley walls. He tipped his head back with a groan, hand raking down his face. "Well, fuck me sideways," he muttered. "I've been played."

*What else did she take?* The question shot into his mind like a bolt of lightning—one of those random afterthoughts that usually didn't deserve an answer.

But his stomach dipped like he was in an elevator.

*What else did she take?...*

Roman patted his pockets, feeling for his wallet and keys. Both were exactly where they should be.

That dipping feeling came back as his hand flew to the chains he wore around his neck.

One was missing—the most important one. Not the bleeding black skull of Obitus, the pendant she had feigned interest in at the nightclub.

The pendant she had feigned interest in while she'd taken the time to inspect the piece of jewelry that had *really* caught her eye.

His face hardened into stone.

She was good. *Too good.*

A female voice spoke from within Roman's shadow. '*This is what happens when you let a pair of big goo-goo eyes distract you,*' Sayagul, his dragon Familiar, accused with a squawk and a hiss.

He hurled the bag into the shadows. It cracked against the wall, apples rolling out in pieces. Damn rights, he'd been played.

Roman groaned again, his hands squeezing into fists so tight his knuckles popped. "This isn't funny anymore," he growled.

# 4

## THE HOSPITAL

ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

Darien stood at the foot of Loren's bed, arms folded across his chest, as he surveyed Roark, who stood facing him in the small room.

The Red Baron's wings were tucked away with a spell tonight, no trace of them visible. His distant, icy expression was exactly what Darien had expected from someone like him, but there was something about the man's aura that Darien had *not* predicted—an emotion his sixth sense could barely pick up on, that was how buried it was.

Roark Bright was hurting—for the girl lying behind Darien on that cold, uncomfortable bed. It was such a rare emotion for a man like Roark that Darien wondered if he was reading him correctly.

He decided he would allow Roark's next move to answer that question. Darien hoped, for the Red Baron's sake, that he had something to say that was worth his time, something worth the small but dangerous flame that had sparked inside his chest the moment Max had uttered that handful of words.

*Roark thinks he knows how we can wake Loren up.*

Fuck, if that wasn't enough to get his heart going again. This was the most alive he'd felt in ten days, and the contrast between now and before was staggering. Since the night Loren had said his name for the very last time, Darien had been on a downward spiral to madness, and now...now, he didn't know what to think.

Every day that passed was harder than the one that came before it. Whenever Darien inhaled, it felt like he had a bunch of glass in his lungs.

Now that she was gone, everything hurt—hurt so much more than it ever had in the years before he'd met and fallen for her. Physical pain was a drug for him—same as killing. But this? This glass-in-lungs sensation, this...this fucking *raw*, peeling soul...

He had no words for it.

Darien's attention flicked to Max, who entered the room next, followed by Dallas and Tanner.

"Shut the door," Darien said.

The hacker, looking equal parts intrigued and confused, closed the door and leaned back against it with crossed arms. Dallas took up position beside Max, her eyes bright with hope.

Darien's next command was for Max. "Spells, please."

Max acknowledged him with a sharp dip of his chin. A single, heavy blink darkened his eyes with the Sight as he pushed a wall of magic outside of his body, forming a sound barrier around the room.

Darien checked the magic for apertures with his own Sight. Only once he was certain that no one could hear them did he risk speaking to the Red Baron.

"What's so special about Yveswich?" Darien demanded.

"Caliginous chambers," was Roark's only reply. No elaboration—nothing. His amber eyes flicked to the monitor displaying Loren's heartbeat.

Darien drew a calming breath. Once he'd leashed the monster stirring inside him, the thing already hungering for more blood, he said, "Caliginous chambers are for *draining* magic."

Roark tore his attention off the array of equipment keeping Loren alive. "Those chambers are the most common, yes." The reply was loaded, and the time it took Roark to expand upon his statement made Darien's palms itch with the need to strike something. But he waited, every beep of the ECG machine cooling his blood.

For Loren. He had to stay level-headed for Loren. If he fucked this up, there was no telling if Roark would speak to them again.

"There is...another type of chamber," Roark finally explained. "One that has been kept secret from the general public." He drew a deep breath and clasped his hands before him. "While the most common type of chamber is used to drain magic, there is another that does the opposite. It funnels magic into a person's body instead of drawing it out."

"For what purpose?" Darien had a solid idea, but he was tired of guessing. And this man, who had been known as *Elix Danik* in a different life, had made them guess way too many times.

"The Fleet has utilized these chambers during wartime. As you can

imagine, a person's magic gets spent very quickly when on the battlefield. The chambers have proven useful in helping restore depleted magic levels, allowing us to fight longer—”

“Wait,” Darien interrupted. The monster inside him stirred again, and he felt a warning prickle up his spine, the edges of his vision flickering with the threat of a Surge. “Loren's human. Her body isn't built to handle magic.” He gestured behind him with frustration—at the girl whose every breath tore him the fuck apart.

Breathing, but not living—that's what this was. And Roark spoke of Fleet soldiers, the most powerful people—aside from Darkslayers—in all of Terra. Not a mortal girl.

That glass-in-lungs feeling was back, but this time the shards were on fire.

“Right.” Roark spoke with a surprising level of patience. “Which is the number one risk to trying this. Even magic-born people can have trouble with this chamber. If their body isn't strong enough to handle the chamber's supply of magic, their heart can give out.”

Loren's body already couldn't handle magic, which was how she had gotten into this mess in the first place. She'd used her magic to seal the rip into the realm of the dead, and the amount it had demanded of her had stopped her heart. But...

He thought it through.

There had never been anyone like Loren before. She was human, sure, but she was also born from the Arcanum Well. And if there was even the slightest chance that this would work...

Darien needed her. Call him selfish, but he needed her more than he needed anything. She was his sun, and if he didn't have her, he'd be swallowed by the dark.

“Where is this chamber?” Max asked. “What's it called?”

Roark kept his eyes on Darien, refusing to look at his daughter's boyfriend. “The Fleet calls it the ‘Reverse Chamber’. You would need to go to Caliginous on Silverway, on Yveswich's neutral ground, and request Chamber Number Five.”

*Request.* Darien wouldn't request anything, he'd fucking demand it.

Caliginous on Silverway was a business name he'd heard before. It was the place where his cousin Roman Devlin went to deal with his Surges.

Roman—who'd called Darien after Angelthene had nearly been destroyed by the monsters of Spirit Terra. Roman had seen the horrors of that night all over the news. Darien hadn't been able to explain the situation to him in full, so Roman and the other Shadowmasters in the House

of Black were under the same impression as the rest of the world: that Angelthene had suffered a security breach during a Blood Moon.

It was the farthest thing from the truth, but revealing such sensitive information over the phone wasn't a wise thing to do.

As for Roman, Darien knew his cousin suspected there was more to the story than he was willing to share. But Roman hadn't prodded—he never did. The only thing that mattered to him was that everybody was okay—especially his brother, Travis. Roman was the reason Travis was here in Angelthene; he had given him a way out years ago, all but forcing Travis to leave the House of Black so he wouldn't need to remain under their father's strict control. Part of the deal was that Darien would keep Roman in the loop regarding Travis's safety—and would make sure Travis never returned to Yveswich.

"Are there any chambers closer than Yveswich?" Dallas asked Roark.

"No," Roark replied. "One is being built at Lucent Enterprises, but it is strictly for government use. The chambers in Yveswich are the safer choice for Loren. The *only* choice right now."

"Has the chamber ever been tested in other ways?" Atlas asked. "Like seeing if it can heal the Tricking?"

"It cannot," Roark replied. "The magic it gives is temporary, sort of like a battery charge. It's not a miracle machine." Which explained why the emperor hadn't attempted to use the chambers, either to open a gate into Spirit Terra or to fuel his supply of aura ammunition, instead of going after Loren and the Elementals for his diabolical plans. Clearly, there were limitations—lots of them—surrounding the magic generated by these chambers.

There was only one miracle machine, and it was sealed away in Spirit Terra.

Darien said coldly, "Not like the Arcanum Well, then."

Silence.

Darien held Roark's stare. "You wouldn't finally be willing to discuss that with us, would you?"

Roark's unwillingness to speak prompted Max to mutter under his breath.

But then the Red Baron reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a small, black-cloth carrying case with a zip closure. He opened it to reveal nine empty syringes and nine vials filled with luminescent teal liquid.

Darien straightened. "Where did you get those?" It was the serum the emperor used to enter Spirit Terra, the same serum Darien had injected into Loren's heart to get it beating again.

“Lucent Enterprises. It’s the only place in the world that has it. They keep their supply under heavy surveillance, so this was the most I could take without raising suspicion.” He zipped it shut and handed it to Darien. “They should keep her alive long enough to get her to the chambers for treatment.”

Dallas said, “What happens if he runs out?”

Nobody answered.

“Monitor her closely,” Roark said. “Clocks aren’t a part of the makeup for these. They were an extra feature the emperor added to his own supply.” Clearly, Roark had been digging since the night of the Blood Moon; Darien wondered what else he’d unearthed.

Tanner said, “What about all of this?” He gestured to the machines, the IV lines, the heart monitor.

“You won’t need any of that when the serum’s in her bloodstream. It’ll keep her body in a state of limbo—frozen, in a sense, until she wakes up or —” He didn’t finish his sentence. Darien watched as the Red Baron’s eyes fell to the floor, his throat shifting with a swallow. He stepped toward the door. “That’s all the information I have for you. It’s rare for a person to survive in a coma for longer than two, maybe three weeks.” Darien heard the implication behind his words.

It had already been ten days.

“Why did you wait this long to tell us?” Max called, following him to the door that Tanner was still blocking. “You haven’t even been around. What do you care if she wakes up?”

Roark spun on his heel, a flush of anger reddening his face as he came within three inches of Max. “Don’t ever ask me such a disrespectful question again, Reacher. I’ve been the closest thing to a father this girl has had for the past twenty years, and you haven’t even been around for one.”

He didn’t wait for Max to reply; his next words were for Darien, fire still burning in his stare. “I had hoped she might wake up on her own. The chamber is a last resort—whether or not you risk using it is your choice. But as her *father*,” he added, enunciating the word with a glare in Max’s direction, “you have my support.”

He made for the door again, waiting for Tanner to let him through.

The hacker didn’t budge, face cold as stone. After a moment, Tanner looked at Darien for instruction.

Darien nodded once, and Tanner shrugged away from the door.

The Red Baron left. The room descended into quiet once more.

And then Dallas was hurrying into the hallway. It didn’t take long before Max was following her.

Darien stayed where he was, but he listened, his Sight allowing him to sense that they were only several feet away, the Red Baron stilling midstride at his daughter's words.

"Why?" Dallas's voice might've been too quiet for mortals to pick up on, but not for hellsehers—not for immortals.

Roark said nothing, nor did he turn.

As Dallas persisted, Darien kept listening, ensuring no one said anything that might damn what they'd just discussed. "You could tell us." About the Arcanum Well, about the Phoenix Head Society. She tried to address her father with a respectful tone, but Darien heard the hint of betrayal that forever colored any words she said to, or about, her father. She added, "I know you could."

The hallway grew quiet. If Darien didn't have the Sight, he might have thought everyone had left.

Then Roark said, "You're a smart girl, Dallas."

That was it. And then he was gone, his polished shoes tapping with his brisk departure.

And Darien might have been the only one to pick up on the words Roark didn't say, the words that would've added so much more to that simple statement, had he merely voiced them.

*Figure it out.*

---

MAX SHUT the door to Loren's room. He faced Darien, who used his own magic this time to cover the walls, ceiling, and floor with spells that would mask their voices. They were alone in here, Dallas and Tanner having given them space to talk, as per Darien's request.

Max waited until the black in his friend's eyes faded away. And then he said, "We're leaving. Aren't we?"

Darien studied him for a long moment. Try as Max may, he couldn't read his expression. And then Darien said, "I will be leaving."

The clock on the wall ticked as Darien's words sank in.

"Fuck that," Max bit out. "If you think for one second that any of us are going to let you go alone—"

"Of course not." Darien's voice was softer than it had been in nearly two weeks, and Max sensed that he was trying very hard to control it. "I'll be taking Jack, Ivy, and Tanner with me. Joyce too, if she's willing." Darien drew a breath, the arms that were crossed over his chest tensing. "God, I

hope she'll be willing, because I need Loren—" He paused, his throat shifting with a swallow. "I need this to work."

Max's head spun. He might've blamed it on a lack of sleep, coupled with the stress of these last few weeks, but the truth was, he didn't know what to think, how to feel. He'd been working at Darien's side for so long that the thought of him leaving made him feel...lost, if he wanted to admit it.

"And what about me?" Max asked, his words choked by emotion he suddenly found impossible to control. He'd managed to keep himself together since the Blood Moon, but now he could feel himself splintering, the glue that held him together finally snapping. "I'm your Second, Darien."

"Which is exactly why I want you here. I'm leaving you in charge of the Devils and Hell's Gate. You need to look after the others while I'm gone, make sure they don't get into any trouble—keep them safe, the way I've always done." The order was firm. Darien added, "And I want you working with Delaney—he'll be handling the other houses in my absence."

"You haven't even talked to him."

"I know he'll agree," Darien said. Max saw his next words coming before they were out. "I want you to find Maya, Max."

Max didn't know what to say.

"You've been a fucking amazing friend," Darien continued. "A better friend than I've deserved. I want you to find your sister."

Max wanted that too. He'd been fighting the urge to go looking for MJ since the night Blue had revealed to him that she was still alive. She might be known as 'Scarlet' now, but she was still his sister, and she was out there somewhere—had been out there this whole damn time. All these years, he'd believed she was dead, that she had died in a house fire—a drug lab explosion, really—a bunch of corrupt cops had decided was an accident.

But...Darien was Max's brother in his own right. They were family, and if Darien needed him, he'd be there, no questions asked.

Max swallowed. "Darien—"

"I'm not asking, Max. I'm telling."

"Fuck you," Max snapped.

A smile tugged at the corner of Darien's mouth. "Fuck you too."

Max smiled back, but it was soon fading as reality set in. "When are you leaving?"

"In the morning. I'll have to talk to Joyce first, make sure this can work." He looked over his shoulder at Loren, his hand tightening around the small black case Roark had given him. "If there's even a single risk..."

His voice trailed off, but Max knew Darien wouldn't do it—not if the time it took to get Loren from Angelthene to Yveswich would result in her death.

Max said, “So I guess this is goodbye.”

It took Darien a moment to make eye contact again. “Unless I see you at the house before I leave, then yeah, this is goodbye.” He pushed away from the bed and stepped toward Max. “But not forever.” He extended a hand.

Max shook it, clasping tight. “You sure this is what you want?” He wasn't asking about Loren—that one was easy. He was asking about Darien giving him permission to find Maya.

Not that he'd ever needed permission. Darien was the type of person who wouldn't have hesitated to say yes, had Max merely asked him. But Darien had gone through so much shit lately that Max hadn't wanted to.

And besides, he didn't know where to begin in his search for Maya. Blue's ability to communicate was still somewhat shaky, her knowledge of her own past even more so, but going to her with his questions would be a good start.

Darien replied without hesitation. “When you find Maya, tell her I said hello.”

# 5

## THE HOUSE OF SOULS ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

Travis Devlin couldn't remember the last time he had been on a date. Had he ever actually been on one? Did the school dance in seventh grade count? Maybe not...

As he waited in his car—a top of the line model he'd purchased fresh off the lot, since Darien had totaled the last one—out front of the gates to the House of Souls, he fidgeted with his collar, glancing continuously at the clock because he just couldn't fucking help it.

Was it hot in here? Was his shirt the right size? And where the hell was Jewels, anyway?

His phone buzzed in his back pocket. Half-expecting it to be Jewels bailing on their date, he lifted himself up in his seat to retrieve the device and saw a text message from Max.

MAX

You with Jewels?

TRAVIS

Waiting.

MAX

What the hell does waiting mean? You suck at texting.

TRAVIS

WAITING FOR JEWELS!!!!

MAX

Tell Malakai that Darien needs to speak with him.

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TRAVIS

Tell him yourself.

MAX

He's not answering his phone.

TRAVIS

I'm not talking to that psychopath.

MAX

Too bad. Boss's orders.

Travis sighed. He shut off the screen and threw his phone onto the dash.

His hellseher hearing picked up on the creak of the front door to the House of Souls swinging open, sounding every bit as haunted as that dark, towering mansion looked.

Travis leaned forward in his seat—and cursed under his breath at the sight of the Reaper storming through the gates.

The wrong Reaper.

It took Malakai Delaney exactly three seconds to reach the driver's-side door. And then—

*Pound. Pound. Pound.* The window quivered as the Reaper's heavily tattooed fist thudded against it.

Travis bit the inside of his cheek, stilling the words—none of them kind—that were clawing to come out as he flicked the button to lower the window.

As soon as the glass was down all the way, Malakai gave him a cold grin, silver canines gleaming in the street light. “Yeah, hi, it's me. Bet you weren't expecting to see me here.”

“Nope,” Travis lied, rolling his eyes again. He might not know Malakai very well, but he'd known *of* him long enough to suspect this might happen tonight. If his little sister Jewels went on a date, it didn't matter who with, Malakai would be having words with the guy before they left. And Travis, until proven otherwise, was exactly that: just a *guy*.

Travis had never wanted to be more than ‘just a guy’ to any girl. He had always been eager to learn their bodies, never their minds or hearts, but Jewels was...he didn't want to say *different*, considering he barely knew her. Maybe he had simply reached the age where getting to know someone's heart didn't make him cringe as much as it used to. And maybe, if he was willing to admit it, seeing Darien and Loren together had tempted Travis to find something like what they shared to call his own. Just a bit.

The fake smile on Malakai's face had faded, leaving only rage in its wake. "Just because she agreed to go out with you doesn't give you the green light for any first-date hanky-panky," he warned.

"Right."

"There are three things I need butt-heads like you to understand," Malakai continued. He held up his thumb. "Thing number one: no sex on the first date."

"Second's good then?"

Malakai's eyes flickered into black pits, his glare hotter than lava.

Travis held up his hands in a sarcastic show of innocence. "Third then, got it."

Malakai's pointer finger joined his thumb. "Thing number two: if you're going out with my sister, you're a listener, not a talker. The one thing I hate is a guy who can't shut up about himself. You'll show respect, you'll listen to her when she's talking, and you'll be a gentleman in every regard. Which means you'll hold doors open for her, you'll—"

"That's a lot more than two things."

"Onto thing number *three*, smartass," Malakai growled, his middle finger joining the pointer and thumb. "If she decides she likes you—emphasis on *if*—you will not, under any circumstances, break her heart. We clear?"

Travis couldn't hold back any longer. First date be damned, he would not take this shit for another second.

The words came out in a rush—and damn were they a heavy weight off his chest. "You seem to know a lot about relationships for someone with a track record of commitment issues and threesomes."

Malakai grabbed him by the collar and yanked him halfway out the goddamn window.

"Hey, guys!" a voice hollered. It was Jewels. She stood on her tiptoes on the front steps of the House of Souls, waving a pale hand in the air. "GUUUYYSSSSS!"

"She sure has lungs on her for someone so small," Travis said.

"All the better to yell at you when you piss her off," Malakai growled.

"Get in here!" she shouted. "*Both of you!*"

Malakai released Travis with a shove, practically throwing him back in the car. Travis rolled up the window and cut the engine. He opened his door, and when he was halfway out Malakai slapped it shut, nailing Travis in the knee.

Travis swore.

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“Pussy,” Malakai muttered as he made for the gates, his shoulder-length, reddish hair blowing behind him in a breeze.

“You look like you belong in a shampoo commercial!” Travis called. “You sure you’re in the right line of work?”

Malakai gave him the middle finger.

It was cool tonight, but spring was coming up quick. With the Veil having nearly fallen not even two weeks ago, Travis and the other Devils found themselves on edge whenever the temperature dropped, or the sky decided to open with rain.

But this was normal. Angelthene had always experienced rain and cooler spells in the winter months.

Funny how a person could wind up fearing something that had once been so innocent.

Travis limped after the Reaper, barely making it through the gates Malakai tried to shut on him.

“*Malakai!*” Jewels snapped. “Quit being an ass and leave him alone, will you? This is important.”

She disappeared inside the house, her short leather skirt swishing. She wore a cropped tee with a heavy metal band logo on the front, tour dates listed on the back. Travis didn’t catch the name of the band, but he made a mental note to bring it up later. He loved that kind of music; it would be a good conversation starter for someone who loathed conversation.

Sex, he was good at. Really good at, if he felt like boasting. Talking? Ehhh...not his strong suit.

Malakai fell into stride beside him as they neared the steps. “You’d better hope it’s important,” the Reaper threatened, eyes flickering black again.

“Why are you such an asshole?” Travis demanded.

Malakai merely gave him the middle finger again before stalking up the front steps and through the door—another door he shut in his face.

Travis considered himself lucky that the asshole didn’t lock it.

The inside of the house was quiet, save for the droning of voices on a television. Travis followed the sound into the living room, where he found Jewels standing in front of the TV, remote in hand. Her brother stood beside her, arms crossed, a muscle in his jaw ticking as he glared Travis down. Valen Hayes and Sylvan Wolfe were lounging on the leather couch, glasses of whiskey in hand, looking just as miffed as Malakai to see Travis here.

**Copyrighted Material**

Jewels said, “Would you forget about protecting me for five minutes

and take a look at who's on TV?" She used the remote to gesture to the screen in frustration.

Travis gave up on his staring contest with Malakai, the Reaper doing the same. Looked at the screen—

And blinked. Stepped closer.

Travis couldn't believe his eyes.

The Terran Emperor was on television. The emperor—who should have died in Spirit Terra when Loren shut the rip in the Veil.

"Is this live?" Malakai bit out.

"It was," Jewels said. "Earlier this evening. I recorded it."

Quinton Lucent was speaking about the losses and damages the city had sustained during the Blood Moon. Of course, he said nothing of Spirit Terra, nor his direct involvement in the whole mess.

Jewels hit the pause button on the remote. "Look!" She waved wildly at the TV. "Right there!"

Malakai's brow creased. "What am I looking for?"

She stepped up to the TV and jabbed her finger into the screen.

The emperor was looking to the left, the angle showing a sheen of teal in his pupils.

Valen said, "I still don't see what you're talking about."

"The teal!" she exclaimed.

"It might just be the lighting," Sylvan offered.

"Or," she said, pinning them all with an intense stare, "it's that glowing shit we saw coming out of the monsters."

Malakai prompted, "And that would mean...?"

Her face went blank. "I don't know," she admitted. She gestured to the screen. "But how the hell is he still alive?" She flicked her brows up. "Any ideas?"

"If he *is* alive," Travis said, "the others could be too." The emperor's men, his son Klay—the people they'd believed were inside Spirit Terra when the Veil was shut. Which meant— "We need to tell Darien." He patted his pockets—and cursed. "I left my phone in the car."

Malakai was already calling, phone at his ear. It rang several times before it went to Darien's voicemail—full, as usual.

He hung up. "He's not answering." He slipped his phone into his pocket and disappeared down the corridor that led to the front door.

"Where are you going?" Jewels called.

"To tell Darien." He poked his head around the corner, his eyes meeting Travis's with hesitation. "Where is he, anyway?"

Travis scowled. "Why should I tell you?"

Malakai held up a finger in thought. “The hospital,” he concluded. *Damn*. “Duh!” He grabbed a jacket off the coat rack and swung open the front door.

Jewels snatched Travis’s wrist and tugged him toward the corridor, her touch soft and warm on his skin. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“With Malakai, obviously.” She slowed, studying him with big eyes that were lined with kohl. “Don’t you want to talk to Darien about this?”

“Yeah, but...what about our reservation?” They were supposed to have a late dinner—everything Darkslayers did was late—at a new restaurant in the Financial District, and after that they had tickets to see a Broadway play. The last one was Jewels’s decision. Obviously.

“Are you kidding?” She grinned, letting go of his wrist so she could put on her black-and-purple platform sneakers, stuffing her feet in and lacing them quickly. “Trust me when I say this is way more fun than dinner, at least for me. I watch a lot of shows about unsolved mysteries—I practically live and breathe this stuff.” She opened the door and clomped out into the night.

Travis tried not to groan. Maybe he would’ve been into it more if it didn’t involve following her brother to the hospital.

Malakai was waiting in the driveway by his truck, one foot on the running board, a hand propping the driver’s door open.

Why wasn’t he leaving, for shit’s sake?

Travis attempted to direct Jewels toward his car, nudging her with his arm like he was a herding dog and she the sheep, but they didn’t make it past Malakai before a sharp whistle cut through the Reaper’s lips.

Now who was herding who?

“Uh-uh,” Malakai drawled, shaking his head. His cold stare was all for Travis. “You can get in my truck or you can drive yourself—*without* Jewels.” *Damn*, was he controlling.

Jewels shot Travis a pleading glance. “Just come with us,” she whispered. “We’ll lose him later, I promise.”

“I heard that,” Malakai said darkly.

Travis relented. Using the remote to lock his car, he followed Jewels to the passenger’s-side door and slid into the cab. There was no back seat, so he was stuck in a romantic sandwich with Jewels and her dickhead brother, who insisted he sit in the middle, refusing to make any of this easy on him.

So much for that date.

# 6

## THE HOSPITAL

ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

Darien sat in one of the chairs in Loren's room, watching the green line of the electrocardiogram bob up and down.

It was nearly ten. Through the window on the west wall, the city lights glimmered, lines of traffic threading through streets that were mostly barren at this late hour.

Looking out at that city, it was hard to imagine it had faced such destruction not two weeks ago. Most of that destruction had already been repaired, thanks to the magic that allowed for the swift clearing of debris and the reconstruction of buildings. Magic could fix a lot of things, but it couldn't fix this.

He looked at Loren, at those eyes that had been shut for far too many days, at that perfect face that showed not a hint of emotion. She just...*was*. Existing, but stuck in place. Breathing, but not living.

Darien got up and shut the door partway. The staff would need access to the room during their nightly rounds, so he never fully closed it.

He crossed the room and laid down beside Loren, being mindful of the equipment keeping her alive. The bed was small and uncomfortable, but if she had to sleep in here, then so would he.

He'd spent every night with her since her heart had stopped. Stopped and started again. Tomorrow, they would both be on their way to Yveswich. He tried not to think about the Caliginous Chambers; those details would come tomorrow. Tonight, he had to try his best to shut off his mind in preparation for the long drive.

Talking to Doctor Joyce Atlas was the first step. As soon as she was on shift, Darien would find her and get this show on the road.

As he slung an arm across Loren's waist and closed his eyes, he felt a shift deep inside him, an ember burning in the ashes of his life.

It was hope.

Sleep claimed him with swift claws, and this time he didn't dream. He just slept.

---

DARIEN STIRRED. Sleep had gripped him tight, dragging him down deep, and he had trouble shaking it off. It weighed on him like a heavy blanket, and he fought to lift it, becoming aware of his surroundings bit by bit.

He registered the sound of the heart monitor first, the soft beeping floating through a room that smelled faintly of bleach and hand sanitizer. He felt the cool press of the hospital sheets next, and the plastic of an IV line pushing against the inside of his wrist.

He opened his eyes to a dark room. A nurse must've come in while he was asleep and turned off the light.

Angling his head to see the clock on the wall, the starched pillowcase scratching his cheek, he read the time.

Witching Hour was coming up quick. He'd been asleep for less than two hours, but it was better than what he got most nights.

He studied Loren in the dark, the soft curves of her face illuminated by the light of the ECG machine. He imagined her opening her eyes and giving him one of her drowsy little smiles that made his heart flutter.

Sleep threatened to reclaim him as he let his imagination soar, envisioning Loren stretching her hands out above her head. She would ask him what time it was, her lips parting with a yawn.

*Time to get up, sweetheart,* he would say.

She would curl up against him, tucking her head against his chest. *Five more minutes.*

---

HE MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP AGAIN. When he woke back up with a jolt, his face had broken out in a cold sweat.

Twenty minutes had passed, but it somehow felt like years.

He forced his ragged breathing to slow, matching his heartbeat to the

one zigzagging across the monitor—Loren’s heart. Fuck, tired wasn’t a good enough word to describe how he felt right now.

As he laid there, he quarreled with the need to sleep, focusing instead on the ordinary sounds of the hospital, like he did so many nights. Checking to make sure everything was as it should be.

He listened to the familiar drip of the coffee machine at the nurse’s station, the hum of the vending machine in the waiting area, the ticking of the clocks in different rooms. Phones droned a floor down; the calls never stopped coming, not in a city swarming with monsters and crime.

The hair on his scalp prickled. The stiff sheets rustled as he sat up, listening harder—not for those mundane, everyday sounds, but for something else, the reason why he was awake right now when he was so fucking exhausted.

Something seemed...off.

He got up, and as he moved, he slid free the pistol concealed near his hip. Bandit was slumbering in his shadow, but at the *click* of the safety being released, the dog began to stir.

Walking heel to toe, Darien crossed the room, checking the corners as he moved. He flipped on the light, blinking in the sudden brightness, and eased open the door.

The hallways and waiting area were dim and empty, not a nurse in sight, not even at the desk. The smell of roasted coffee beans filled the air, the drip of the espresso machine tapering off with one last *plink*, but no one came to pour themselves a cup.

Still shaking off the remnants of sleep, he drew in a deep breath and pushed the Sight into his eyes.

The auras of other sleeping patients filled his vision. There was a nurse five rooms down, swapping old bedding for new.

The attack came from behind him—from *inside* the goddamn room.

Darien shouted in surprise as the Familiar Spirit—a wolf with glowing white marks under its eyes—attacked him with enough force to send him flying into the door. It slammed back against the wall, ripping through plaster, as the wolf’s teeth shredded the sleeve of his hooded sweatshirt.

‘*Bandit, wake up!*’ Darien bellowed. He kned the wolf in the ribs, but it wouldn’t let go. Sharp teeth latched into his muscle, drawing blood. Darien sensed the other presences in the room now—more Familiars, which explained how they’d got in without him noticing. ‘*Bandit, WAKE UP!*’

The dog jolted into consciousness—right on time to jump out of

Darien's shadow and intercept a different Familiar Spirit, this one a dog bigger than Bandit.

Darien wrenched his arm free of the wolf's maw and kicked it in the side of the head, sending it smashing into a shelf with a yelp.

An arm wrapped around his throat from behind, while another five men burst through the door, weapons drawn. Six more followed—all of them hellsehers, armed to the teeth, Familiars at the ready.

Fuck.

Darien surrendered himself to his rage, and for several minutes he blacked out—he just fought.

Every move he made was deadly. He never missed—slashing arteries, ripping open throats, and blasting bullets into skulls. But these men had come prepared, and Darien realized, as he fought to keep them from laying a single finger on Loren, that he was—truly, for possibly the first time in his life—outnumbered. There were too many men, even for someone like him, and he was half a-fucking-sleep.

Darien plunged a knife into an ear of one man and slashed another's throat, blood spilling to the floor like a waterfall.

He ducked under a blade and kicked the guy's feet out from under him. Shot him in the head. *Bang.* And then—

One of the men reached for Loren's IV—

And Darien lost it.

His magic erupted—and it was like a bomb went off.

He threw out a shield of protection, forming a bubble around Loren, as his magic laid waste to almost everything in sight.

Darien got down and covered his head as wood and glass and metal and plastic flew through the room. His magic obliterated his assailants, blood spraying what was left of the walls.

Turned out the hospital staff had made the right decision by keeping the rooms on either side of Loren's empty; Darien could see through the gaping holes in the walls now—the demolished furniture, the shattered windows and fluttering blinds, the broken televisions.

Slowly, he pushed to his feet, debris slipping off his clothes.

The first thing he did was check on Loren. Glass crunched under his boots as he crossed the room to her bed, Bandit trotting beside him. The dog's cropped tail twitched with pride.

*'I was having a very pleasant dream,'* Bandit said.

*'Yeah?'* Darien replied. *'What about?'*

*'Fetch.'*

Darien checked Loren. Not a mark was on her—not one glass sliver,

nor one drop of blood. Even the heart monitor was untouched. He watched as her chest rose with even breaths, her heart beating out a steady rhythm on the monitor.

The sound of wet coughing filled the room.

One of the men was still alive, but barely. He was slumped against the wall by the shattered window, wincing in pain, hands clutching his guts that were spilling out onto the floor.

Hostility simmered in Darien's blood as he stalked around the bed like a predator, Bandit on his heels, and dropped to a crouch before the man.

"Who sent you?" Darien demanded, eyes like fire. He forced the man to meet his gaze with the muzzle of a gun jammed below the chin. "Gaven?" Bandit growled at the prick's name, hackles rising.

The man coughed again, blood filling his mouth. "Who the fuck's Gaven?"

Darien's scalp prickled.

They weren't here for him.

"You were after *her*," Darien growled. "*Why?* Can't you see she's in a fucking *coma*?"

The man choked, blood dribbling down his chin.

"Answer me, you piece of shit." Darien grabbed him by the shirt, yanking him forward and shaking him. "*Answer me!*"

But he was already dead. His mouth fell open with a croak, one last line of blood dripping down his chin.

Hurried footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Darien shot to his feet, taking aim as he turned—

Travis, Malakai, and Jewels appeared in the doorway.

With wide eyes black with Venom, Malakai took in the wreckage of the room—and swore. "What the hell happened?"

Darien put the safety on the gun and tucked it away. "What does it look like?"

Travis, still panting from running, said, "The imperator's still alive. We just saw him on the news."

"That's why we're here," Jewels explained, beads of sweat on her face. She was pale and winded, all thanks to the Tricking. "We thought we should warn you, but...looks like we're a little late."

"You should feel flattered that he felt the need to send eleven—wait, *twelve* guys?" Malakai gave a dark laugh as he finished counting the mutilated bodies.

Darien crossed the room and pushed his way through. Out the door, to the nurse's station. The waiting area was destroyed, the desk in pieces. The

vending machine was absolutely shredded, as if by claws, candy and leaking soda cans spread across the floor, puddles fizzing with carbonation.

He found the two nurses on shift, hiding behind what was left of the far wall behind the desk. They nearly screamed when they saw him.

"I need you to page Joyce Atlas," Darien said. Her shift was supposed to start at Witching Hour; she should already be here.

They gaped at him, faces white.

Darien prompted, "You okay? Can you do that for me?"

The younger one recovered from her shock first. She got up on shaking legs and disappeared into a room in the back. A moment later, Darien heard the click of a landline being lifted off its receiver.

"Darien," said a male voice.

Darien turned to find Malakai standing several feet away in the destruction of the waiting room. Behind him, Jewels and Travis stood in the doorway to Loren's room. They spoke to each other in quiet tones, their eyes on Darien.

"What's going on?" Malakai asked.

"I'm leaving," Darien said. "Tonight."

---

"COPS ARE COMING," Travis declared as he joined the others in Loren's destroyed room, stepping over dead bodies and puddles of blood.

Doctor Joyce Atlas was here now. She sat on the side of the bed, filling a syringe with glowing teal liquid. She set the empty vial aside and administered the serum via a vein in the crease of Loren's right arm.

Darien had filled Travis and the others in, his magic allowing them to talk without being heard. Roark Bright had stopped by several hours ago to tell Darien of the Caliginous Chambers, and he'd given Darien nine vials of serum from Lucent Enterprises. Travis hoped it would be enough to keep Loren alive while Darien got her from here to the chambers.

Travis focused on his cousin now, who spoke to Malakai.

"Tanner will be handling all the transactions, so there's not much else you'll need to do," Darien was saying. "But I trust you'll do a good job."

"Pfft." Malakai smiled. "I'll do a better job than you."

Travis said, "Will you be stopping along the way?" Darien was going to Yveswich—Travis's hometown.

And he would get to see Roman. Years had passed since Travis had last seen his brother; now, he barely knew him, barely even remembered what he looked like. The last time Travis had spoken to Roman was the day he'd

left Yveswich, and all he knew of his brother now was whatever Darien and the others decided to share with him. But even their information was limited; Roman rarely called, and when he did he rarely spoke. He had never been much of a talker—that, Travis remembered vividly.

Darien said, “Only to charge the vehicles.” His eyes flicked to Joyce. “How’s it going?”

“She’s stable, but we shouldn’t delay.” Joyce stuck the cap on the empty syringe, hurried over to the sharps container, and dumped it inside.

Sirens wailed. They weren’t far away—a block or two, at most.

Darien stalked to the bed and picked up Loren, wrapping her legs around his waist. Joyce had dressed her in a pair of her own black workout pants from the trunk of her car and one of Darien’s hooded sweatshirts—the only clothes they could find. She had no shoes on, just socks, but Darien would need to stop at Hell’s Gate to grab some things before leaving.

Travis hoped he would get the chance to speak to his cousin in private. About Roman, about...about Paxton.

Joyce made for the door. “Follow me,” she said, stepping over debris and into the hallway. “If we take that route,” she said, gesturing to a hallway to her left, “we should be able to take the staff staircase to the ground floor and get out without being stopped.”

Travis and the others followed Darien, who was already making his way to the door. In his arms, Loren looked like she was merely asleep, her cheek resting against his chest. Travis hoped, for both her sake and Darien’s, that she would wake up soon.

Because Darien now spoke with a note of hope in his voice, the kind of pure, innocent longing that could spell destruction, should this plan they’d concocted end in death. “Good. Let’s go.”

# 7

## ELSEWHERE

Something had changed.

The girl stood in the heart of the universe, looking down at the soft blue glow outlining her body.

Minutes or hours ago, she couldn't be certain how long, the crack of bullets and the shouting of male voices had severed the eternal quiet. The noise had startled her so badly that she'd leapt off the dome of tree roots and splashed through the shallow rim of the pool, her bare feet catching in her dress as she fled.

But no danger had come. And the echo of the bullets had rippled out across barren land, leaving her alone in silence once again.

Now, as she stood by the edge of the glowing pool, she stared out at the fireflies flitting across the still surface.

Something about her had changed—that much she knew for certain. Her skin, yes, but something else too. She didn't know what, but she could feel it.

In her peripheral vision, just behind the tree, something moved.

She stood tall, steeling herself for what might come. "Who's there?" she called, her soft words echoing far and wide.

A branch snapped. Dark grass rustled.

The girl held her breath—

A glowing white dog stepped out from behind the gnarled trunk of the tree. Slowly, he crept forward, bushy tail drooping between his legs.

Those floppy ears...she had seen those ears before. And those eyes—

She loosened her fists. “Singer?” Memories of this dog flooded her mind, like puzzle pieces falling into place, but everything in between was still shrouded in fog that wouldn’t thin.

Singer gave a soft whine.

Slowly, she dropped into a crouch, being careful not to startle him away, and gently snapped her fingers. “Come here, buddy.”

His tail rose with a wag, and he trotted over, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. His eyes twinkled like diamonds, and there was love in them—so much love.

The girl sniffled as she pet the dog’s ears, wishing she could feel their velvet softness. He pressed his head into her palm, back leg thumping with delight as he savored the feeling. “Look at you!” she blubbered. “You’re all... wispy. Like a cloud.” She hugged him. “My cloud.”

He barked, the sound echoing so loudly that he cowered, ears flattening down. But he was soon forgetting all about it, and jumped up to lick her cheek.

She laughed, instinctively reaching up to rub the slobber off her skin, only to realize there was none there. “I missed you too, Singer,” she whispered. “I missed you so much.” If crying were possible here, she would have wept with joy.

Hollow quiet returned the moment the echo of her words faded away, reminding her just how alone she was. She had Singer now, but...

She rose to her feet.

She had to get out of here. There was a fresh sense of urgency in her soul—something that told her she didn’t have time to waste. She had to leave.

Singer sat down in the black grass and looked up at her, as if expecting treats, tail swishing back and forth.

“Do you know where we are?” she whispered.

The dog merely canted his head to one side, ears pricking.

She sighed. “Me neither.”

She started walking, toward the edge of the dome of light surrounding the tree, Singer keeping pace beside her as they neared the thickening darkness. She was grateful that her emotions, like touch, were dulled here; had they been at full strength, she wasn’t sure she would have had the courage to keep walking.

When she reached the very edge of the bubble of light, she stopped, staring at her surroundings that looked very much like outer space—a galaxy that stretched on forever.

She drew a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”

And then she took her first step into the dark.

Water splashed underfoot, but it was shallow, and it didn't glow—not like the pool at her back.

A second step. A third. By the fifth, she was no longer uncertain.

This was the way—she could feel it.

Together, girl and dog walked below galaxies, on and on into the dark, until that blue tree was so far behind her that it no longer provided a source of light. It was just her, Singer, and the stars.

Several paces later, she heard ticking. She moved toward the sound, eventually stumbling upon the great gears of a clock embedded in the pitch-black earth, groaning and ticking with the passing of time.

An ancient, female voice floated through the fog of her thoughts. *You will find your answers in time.*

In time, as in *eventually*?

Or in Time, as in a *place*?

She took another step, her bare toes deathly close to the gears. There were more stars down below—she could see them in the tiny slivers of space between the rotating gears.

Suddenly, the world shook, and gravity shifted, nearly throwing her on her ass.

She flung her arms wide, attempting to balance herself, but the world tilted too sharply and swiftly for her to stand a chance at fighting it. The ground became sky—but, somehow, her feet were still rooted in place. She hung upside down, water dripping from the ground—the ground that was now sky—like rain.

Sunlight flooded the darkness, blinding her. She threw a hand up to block it, squinting her eyes shut tight.

Her feet lost purchase, and she and Singer fell, down and down and down.

They landed on a lush green hill.

“Oof!” She rolled several times, Singer doing the same beside her, until, eventually, they stilled.

She looked up at the sky, watching as the gears, the stars, and the darkness faded away, leaving a canvas of sunlit blue in its place.

She took a moment to catch her breath, and then she turned to Singer, who looked at her with curiosity, ears standing up.

“You okay?” she whispered.

The dog stood and shook himself off, blades of grass flying off his ghostly body.

She smiled. “I will take that as a ‘yes’.”

The girl stood too, and dusted off her opalescent dress. She turned, looking down the hill that was studded with jacaranda and palm trees.

An old, towering building sat at the base of the hill. A school.

Students were breezing in and out of the arched doors, a number of them sitting among the grounds, grimoires spread before them. A few ate lunch, and a small group of veneficae practiced spells, waving magic staves through the air.

A male student—a human—was heading this way, a heavy stack of books and papers in his arms.

She stepped aside as he trudged by. His short, wavy hair was the buttery shade of sunlight, and round glasses that were taped in the center were perched upon his freckled nose. He was tall and gangly, his bony arms shaking under the weight of all those books.

One of those books slid off the top of his stack and thumped to the grass, a few papers fluttering free.

“Dang it all to Ignis,” he muttered. He chased after the loose papers, books teetering in his arms.

The girl rushed forward. “Here, let me help you.”

As she reached for a sheet of paper on the grass, she froze, reading the name scribbled at the top of it.

*Erasmus Sophronia.*

He stomped over, muttering under his breath, and snatched the sheet from her reaching hand. He stacked it with the others and took a quick glance around the hill—

The girl froze as he made eye contact with her, but...something wasn't quite right. Instead of looking *at* her, he looked *through* her.

“Can you see me?” she whispered.

Erasmus Sophronia advanced on her, his speed too quick for her to step out of the way—

He walked right through her. She gasped as her body melted away like smoke and solidified again a moment later.

She stared after the student as he rushed down the hill, toward the towering building. The stone slab out front read ANGELTHENE ACADEMY FOR MAGIC, most of the letters embedded with moss.

Her eyes flicked up to the banner fastened above the door, the block letters proudly announcing *Graduate Class of 4793*.

“Singer,” she whispered, glancing down at the dog standing at her side. “I think we’ve gone back in time.”

Slowly, she lifted her left hand and inspected it, turning it from side to side. There was a transparency to her skin that hadn't been there before.

Her stomach dipped, and she recognized then how hollow it felt—how hollow *she* felt.

“I think we’re dead.”

# 8

## HELL'S GATE

ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

Darien packed swiftly, taking more than he likely needed, but he didn't know how long he'd be away. The others were either packing their own things or were helping prepare the vehicles in the garage. They would be taking his truck and car, Ivy and Jack driving the latter while Darien, Loren, Tanner, and Joyce took the truck.

He threw on his leather jacket and checked for his wallet, keys, and phone. All were there, along with the last of his Venom and an extra bag of Stygian salts—just in case. Yveswich was a lot colder than Angelthene, so he grabbed a heavier jacket too—black sherpa-lined canvas with a hood—and dropped it on top of his bags.

*'Did you remember to pack Cluckles?'* Bandit's misty voice drifted into his thoughts.

Darien looked toward the door to see Bandit trotting in.

"Sadly, yes."

Bandit tilted his head. *'You're not lying?'*

"I wish I were." That rubber chicken was so damn loud, but it wasn't like he was getting much sleep these days anyway.

Darien zipped up his bags and dumped them outside the door to his suite.

Tanner was coming down the hallway, carrying a duffel in one hand, a backpack and laptop bag slung over his shoulder.

"I'm all packed," the hacker declared. "Need any help?"

"Take these to the truck, please," Darien said, gesturing to his bags.

"Make sure everything's good with Loren and Joyce." Joyce had stopped at

her house to pack before coming here. Now, she was in the truck, monitoring Loren. "I need a few more minutes."

"Sure thing."

Darien stepped past Tanner and into Loren's old suite just down the hall, bracing himself for the memories and emotions that would punch him in the gut the minute he saw it.

Ivy was already in there, juggling two suitcases as she flicked off the bathroom light and crossed the room. One was the bag Loren had used since the first day they'd met—the day Darien had brought her to the Bright penthouse to pack her things for a single weekend. That weekend had turned into a longer stay than either of them had expected.

Fuck, that seemed like a lifetime ago. Six months—that was it. Six months since he'd met Loren. Six months since she'd joined his family and filled in the cracks in his life, the damaged bits he had failed to heal in all the years that had come before her.

"I thought you might like some help," Ivy said, passing him the bag. "I packed several of her outfits, all her toiletries, her makeup, and some extra things I think she'll appreciate when she wakes up."

*When.* The ease with which his sister used this word thawed some of the ice in Darien's chest.

He hadn't realized he had looked away until Ivy stepped closer, forcing him to make eye contact. "She *will* wake up, Darien." Her tone was soft, but the conviction was firm.

"I know." He managed to sound believable, but he'd spent so much of his life getting kicked in the nuts that he wasn't sure of anything anymore.

But *this*...he had to trust that this would work.

"I packed some 'fun' things too," Ivy continued, wagging her brows. "Like lingerie and condoms—"

"Ivy."

She smiled and tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear. "Just trying to lighten the mood." Darien didn't bother telling his sister that he and Loren didn't use condoms—they might be close, but they weren't *that* fucking close.

Darien glanced at the other bag in her hand. A small gray one—another of Loren's. "What about you? Where are your things?"

"I'm all ready to go. I've had years of practice packing for myself and a toddler, remember?"

A groggy male voice behind Darien mumbled, "What toddler?"

Darien turned to see Jack standing there, a bag in each hand, a third

slung over his shoulder. His short brown curls were all mussed-up, and there were creases from a quilt on one side of his face.

“You,” Darien said, and stepped around him.

“You guys all act like I’m so incompetent,” Jack grumbled. He and Ivy followed Darien to the stairs.

“Because you are,” Darien said, Ivy’s voice mingling with his as she said the same thing.

They thumped down the steps, and when Darien got to the bottom, Travis met him there. Darien had lived with Travis long enough to tell when the redness in his eyes didn’t have anything to do with being tired or high.

Travis rubbed the back of his neck. “Hey,” he mumbled.

Darien acknowledged him with a nod. “Hey.”

“I’ll take that,” Ivy said quietly, extracting the other bag from Darien’s grip. She and Jack made their way into the garage.

Darien faced his cousin, giving him time to find his words.

Finally, Travis said, “This is really fuckin’ weird, man.” He gave a husky laugh, but he looked more concerned than anything.

“You’re telling me,” Darien said. “We’ll be back soon.” He had no idea if that was true, but it was better than offering his cousin nothing. He’d shut the door on all of them since Loren went into a coma—not just shut it, but slammed and locked it—and now it was time to crack it back open.

“When you see Roman, can you... Can you tell him—” Travis abruptly went silent, his throat shifting with a swallow.

Darien clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll tell him.” He pulled his cousin into an embrace that was over quickly.

Travis stepped back and crossed his arms. “And Pax?” he said, looking away, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscles fluttered.

“I’ll tell him you still suck at Rushin’ Racers.”

Travis snorted, but the humor was short-lived. “He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

“He does,” Darien assured him, making for the garage. “And he understands.”

Travis followed, their boots pounding in unison. “Mortifer should take a lesson on understanding, actually.” Travis’s words echoed faintly in the hallway. “He’s having a hard time with this.”

“Where is he?”

“Last I saw, he was in the garage. Probably fucking with your wires so you can’t leave.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

Darien pushed open the garage door and descended the concrete steps into the massive room. The other Devils waited by the truck and car, Malakai and Jewels among them.

Dallas and Sabrina were here too. The girls stood by the open back door of the truck, where Joyce checked Loren's pulse in the back seat.

And, sure enough, Mortifer was seated on the hood of Darien's car, getting an earful from Max.

"I'm serious, Morty," Max was saying, a stern finger raised before him. "You don't touch those. You *never* touch those."

"You got caught, didn't you?" Darien said to the Hob as he joined the group. Sabrina turned at the sound of his voice, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Dallas had called her right away, telling her to get to the house if she wanted to say goodbye.

Max said, "I fixed his doctoring before he could do any permanent damage."

Darien loaded the rest of his things into the truck bed and slammed the tailgate shut. "All good?" he called to Joyce.

"She's fine, Darien. Stable as can be."

"Good." He walked around the front of the car and faced Mortifer, who peeked up at him with stubborn reluctance.

"Why the long face?" Darien said quietly. "I'll be back soon."

"He wants to go with you," Lace said as she hugged Ivy goodbye.

Mortifer refused to look at Darien. His smoky arms were crossed, a big frown on his face. The Hob didn't get upset very often, but Darien had learned in his years of caring for Mortifer that if it wasn't ice that was upsetting him, it was the safety of his family. Usually, Darien's safety.

"I need you here, bud," Darien said, trying his best to make his voice sound not so...fuck, *flat*. Disinterested. Cold. But he could hear it in his own words—these past few weeks had changed him, and he wasn't fooling anyone. "I need you to look after the others and keep the house safe," Darien continued. "It's an important job, and I only trust *you* to do it for me. So what do you say? Can I count on the best Hob in the whole entire universe to handle this *very* important, very special task?"

It took him a minute, but Mortifer finally nodded and uncrossed his arms, bracing his tiny hands on the car instead.

"And when we get back," Darien added, "we'll go for some of that shave ice. How does that sound?"

The Hob was quicker at nodding this time, the black-and-red flames on his head rapidly flickering with the motion.

Darien looked between the others, all of them either ready to go or

ready to say their goodbyes. Darien had already spoken to each of the Devils in private, Travis last, so there was nothing left to do except leave. And while he knew this change was only temporary, there was a part of him that felt—feared—it might somehow wind up being permanent.

Max said, “I guess we won’t be talking to you for a while.”

“No phones unless it’s important,” Darien confirmed.

“If you don’t want to come back, I got it covered here,” Malakai said, a smile tugging at his mouth. Darien sensed that the Reaper’s attempt at lightening the mood was half-hearted. He could see the concern in Malakai’s eyes, subtle as it was, though Darien knew he would never admit to caring about anyone but himself or the sister standing just behind him.

Darien smirked. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

That smile grew, the silver of his canines glinting like chrome under the fluorescents. “Just sayin’.”

Lace snickered. “Say hello to Roman and Kylar for us.” Her attention drifted to the truck. Quietly, she added, “And Loren when she wakes up.” Lace had taken this whole thing just as hard as the others. Darien suspected Loren had started to grow on her, even if she, too, would never admit to her feelings.

They were all a stubborn bunch, but Darien suspected that was what had brought them together in the first place.

Ivy opened the driver’s door of the car. “See you soon, fam.” She blew a kiss over her shoulder and got inside.

“Hey,” Jack complained, “I thought I was driving.”

“We’ll switch at the stronghold,” Ivy said, already buckling up, a triumphant smirk on her face.

“*Suuuure* we will...”

Darien headed for the truck, Tanner taking the passenger’s side while Joyce took the back with Loren.

As Dallas passed him, she stopped him with a pull of his sleeve.

“This is the first time I’ll be away from her since we were kids,” she said quietly. Her eyes were glassy, the silver rings around her pupils dim. “I know you’ll keep her safe.”

Darien vowed, “If anyone wants her, they’ll have to get through me.” It had been that way since day one, and it would be that way until the very last.

The witch let go. “Safe travels.”

She stepped aside, and Sabrina came forward to take her place.

“Hey,” Sabrina said with a snuffle. She dabbed at her eyes with the sleeve

of her sweatshirt—one of Logan’s, by the looks of it. Way too big for her—and way too ripped to not belong to a temperamental werewolf.

“I’ve never seen so many tears in my life,” Darien joked. He glanced around the group to see that a few of the others were tearing up as well, though they tried to hide it—Lace, Dallas, Mortifer. Fuck, this was harder on them all than he’d thought it would be.

“There’s no one I trust her with more than you,” Sabine whispered. “But please, take care of yourself too. I think it’s pretty obvious that we all need you around.”

“I will.”

She offered him a hand, and he grabbed it and pulled her into an embrace instead. Her arms closed around him, squeezing tight.

“I’m going to bring her home,” Darien promised.

Sabine nodded against his shoulder, her body shaking with a sob. She stepped back, dabbing her cheeks again with her sleeve.

Darien made for the truck. “Keep that wolf of yours in line,” he called.

Sabine’s laugh was choked by new tears. “I will.”

Darien got in the truck and shut the door. The others stepped out of the way, and Max hit a couple buttons on the wall.

The garage doors rolled open, the rows of bright fluorescents quarreling with the heavy blackness of a starless night.

Darien started the truck and reversed out of the garage, gravel crunching under the tires. He spun around to face the gates that were already swinging open, the magic sensing his departure.

With one last look at Hell’s Gate in the rear-view mirror, and his family and friends waving at them from inside the garage, he left, not knowing when or if he’d be back.

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THE DRIVE from Angelthene to Yveswich would take about twenty-two hours if you drove the speed limit and made no stops along the way. While stopping was inevitable, the speed limit wasn’t, especially if you were good at reckless driving without getting caught.

Darien merged into traffic on the interstate, truck engine giving a violent growl. Beside him, in the passenger’s seat, Tanner had a number of programs open on his laptop, one of them scanning for speed traps. Loren was in the back, her socked feet in Joyce’s lap, Joyce—who hadn’t complained once, and who’d insisted on sitting in the back instead of taking

the front seat when her son had offered it to her. For a woman whose life had been uprooted so suddenly, she sure was handling it well.

Jack and Ivy were following in Darien's car. He checked on them in the mirrors every few minutes, making sure all was good. Without the ability to call or text, they would all need to be more observant.

One last message landed in Darien's phone with a loud buzz that vibrated his pocket. The message he'd been waiting for, the confirmation he needed for ease of mind. He'd sent a single message to Malakai shortly after leaving Hell's Gate, and the Reaper had only just responded. Darien read them both now—his own message and the one from Malakai.

DARIEN

You'll remember what I told you?

MALAKAI

I'm not that forgetful, dumbfuck.

Darien almost smiled. It was the best consolation he'd get from someone like Malakai, and he accepted it gladly. Look out for the others at all costs—*that* was the deal. He'd have to trust that Malakai would see it done.

With a deep breath, he shut off his phone.

As he drove through the dark streets of Angelthene, he cracked open his window, breathing in the smoky hint of creosote and the cool bite of sage—the smells of home.

A swarming of vampire bats flew over the interstate as the truck and car sped under a road sign. This time, when Darien read those three words, printed in stark-white paint, they meant far more to him than they ever had before.

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# 9

## S. COASTAL DISTRICT

YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

The overcast sky began to spit rain as Shay Cousens stapled a poster to a telephone pole in the South Coastal District.

This was poster number two hundred and forty-one. Shay had printed two hundred and fifty, and she'd put up the majority of them herself. She'd brought help in the form of three Selkies, but as it turned out her friends—if she could even call them that—were easily distracted.

Shay turned her back on the missing person poster—the image of her sister that would soon be blurred by the rain—and followed the chatter of voices and the rattle of spray paint cans.

It was mid-morning, and the South Coastal District was bustling with foot traffic. Shay dodged people on the sidewalk as she made her way, turning her body from side to side, others doing the same to keep from brushing shoulders with her. Here in Yveswich, physical contact was avoided just as much as eye contact, especially when you were alone. Especially when you were *female* and alone, a sad reality that stalked every city the world over.

Stranger danger had been nailed into Shay at a young age. Not by her mother, who'd barely had a hand in raising her, but by her older sister Anna. Shay had Anna to thank for most of what she knew, her street smarts being highest on the list. Anna had taught her practically everything—how to cook, how to sew, how to drive, how to throw a punch. The one thing Shay could say she had taught Anna was how to steal—and not get caught.

Stealing from Roman Devlin was the kind of milestone she and Anna would've celebrated by spending a night on the town. But Anna wasn't