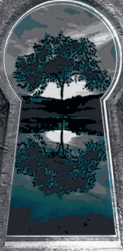


SOMETHING WICKED  
IS COMING.



CITY OF  
**SOULS**  
AND  
**SINNERS**



A  
HOUSE  
OF DEVILS  
NOVEL



KAYLA EDWARDS

PENGUIN BOOKS

# CITY OF SOULS AND SINNERS

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*

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CITY OF SOULS AND  
SINNERS

HOUSE OF DEVILS  
BOOK TWO

KAYLA EDWARDS



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*For my family—  
The light in my dark.*

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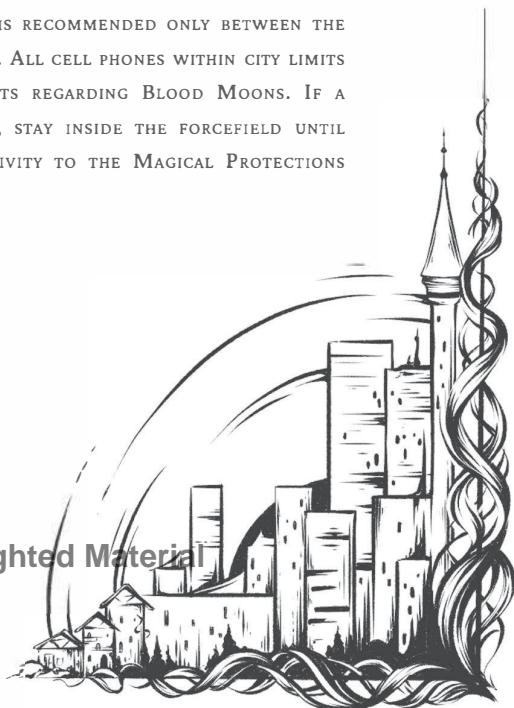


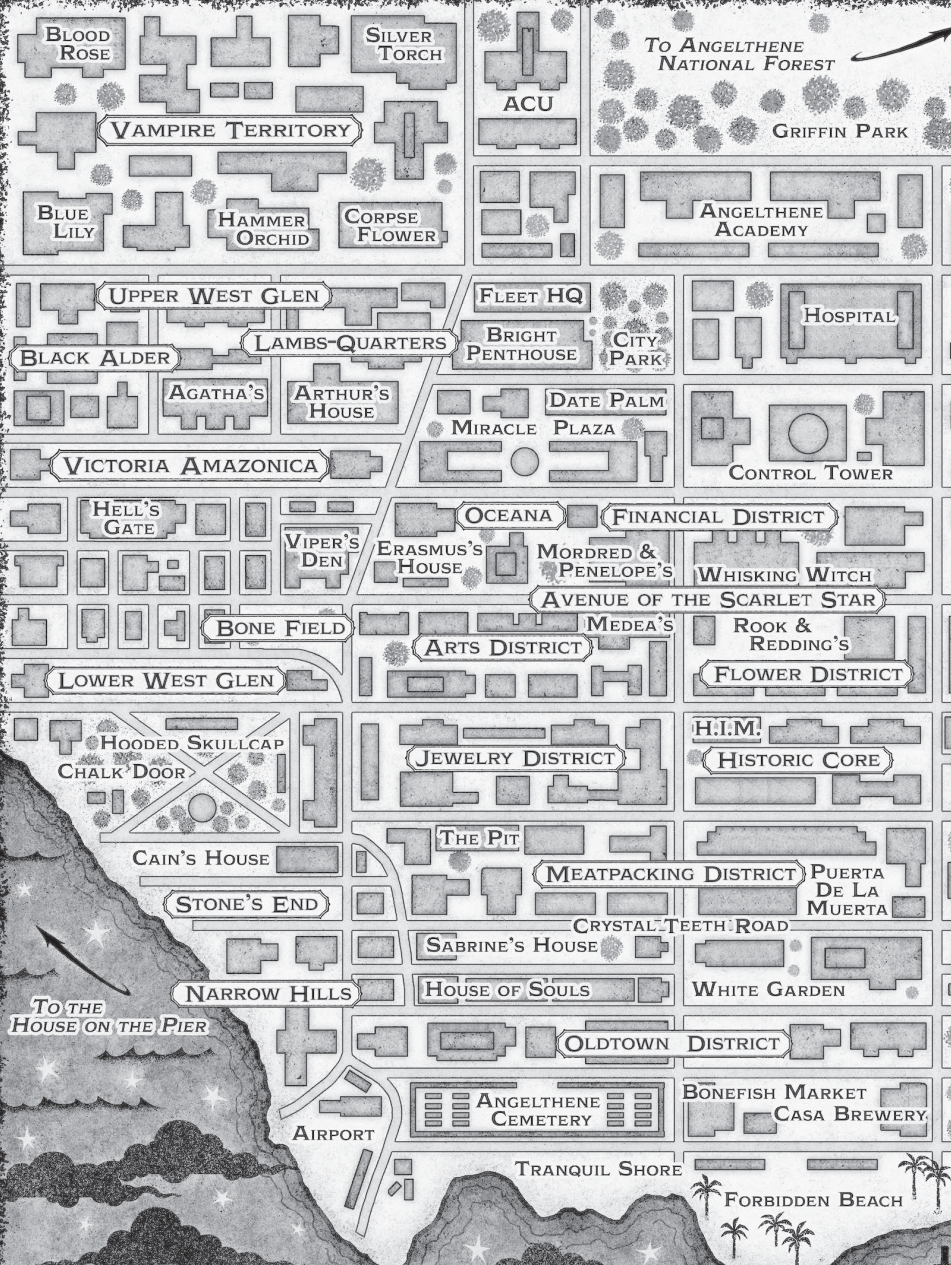
## WELCOME BACK TO ANGELTHENE

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, EBOFIELD, 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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TO ANGELTHENE NATIONAL FOREST

GRIFFIN PARK

ANGELTHENE ACADEMY

HOSPITAL

CONTROL TOWER

WHISKING WITCH

ROOK & REDDING'S

FLOWER DISTRICT

H.I.M.

HISTORIC CORE

PUERTA DE LA MUERTA

WHITE GARDEN

BONEFISH MARKET  
CASA BREWERY

FORBIDDEN BEACH

W E L C O M E T O

WE HOPE YOU

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TO THE HOUSE ON THE PIER

TRANQUIL SHORE

AIRPORT

ANGELTHENE CEMETERY

OLDTOWN DISTRICT

HOUSE OF SOULS

SABRINE'S HOUSE

CRYSTAL TEETH ROAD

MEATPACKING DISTRICT

THE PIT

JEWELRY DISTRICT

CAIN'S HOUSE

STONE'S END

NARROW HILLS

HOODED SKULLCAP  
CHALK DOOR

LOWER WEST GLEN

BONE FIELD

ARTS DISTRICT

AVENUE OF THE SCARLET STAR

ERASMUS'S HOUSE

MORDRED & PENELOPE'S

OCEANA

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

HELL'S GATE

VIPER'S DEN

MIRACLE PLAZA

DATE PALM

BRIGHT PENTHOUSE

CITY PARK

LAMBS-QUARTERS

AGATHA'S

ARTHUR'S HOUSE

BLACK ALDER

UPPER WEST GLEN

FLEET HQ

BLUE LILY

HAMMER ORCHID

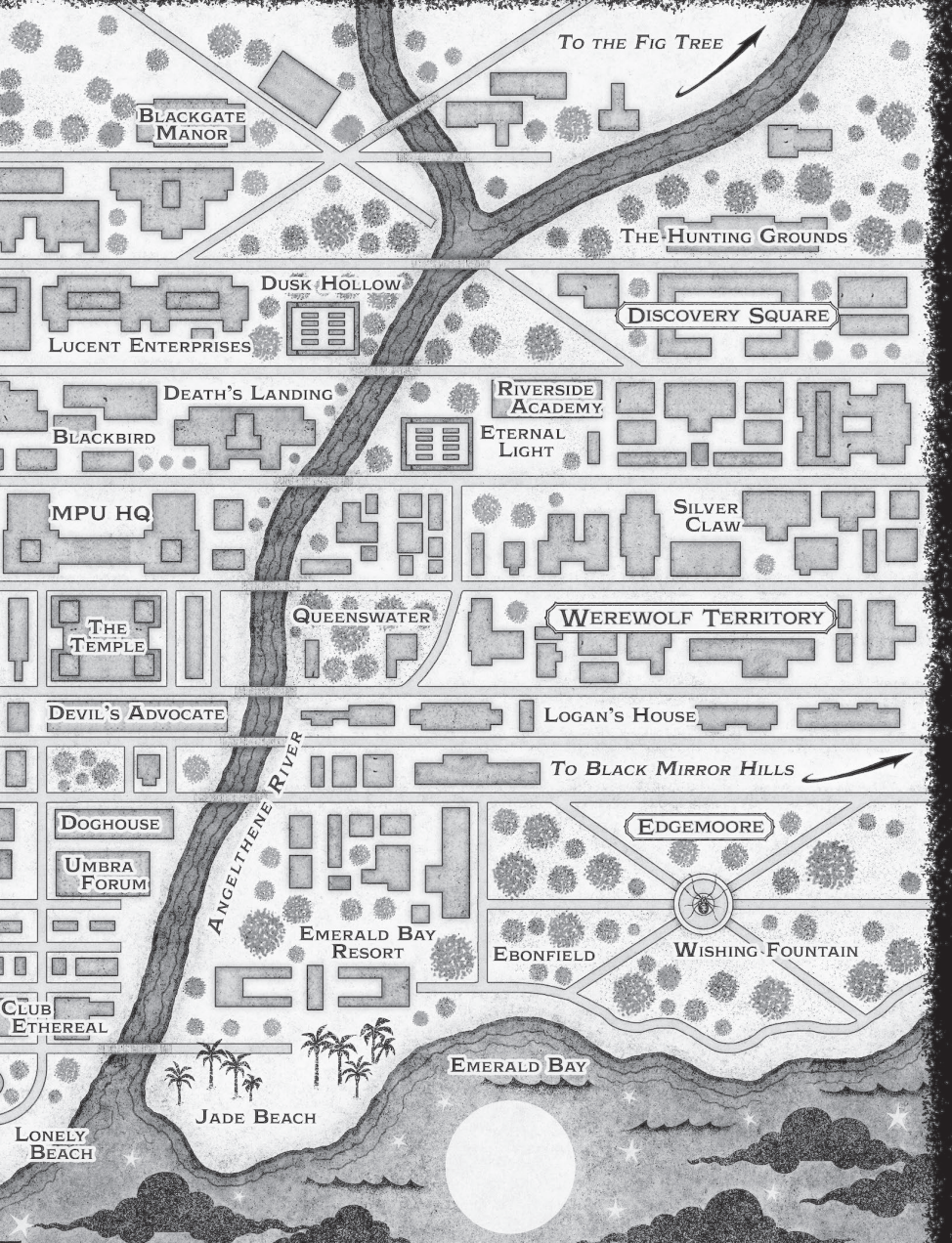
CORPSE FLOWER

VAMPIRE TERRITORY

SILVER TORCH

BLOOD ROSE

ACU



BLACKGATE MANOR

TO THE FIG TREE

THE HUNTING GROUNDS

DUSK HOLLOW

DISCOVERY SQUARE

LUCENT ENTERPRISES

DEATH'S LANDING

RIVERSIDE ACADEMY

BLACKBIRD

ETERNAL LIGHT

MPU HQ

SILVER CLAW

THE TEMPLE

QUEENSWATER

WEREWOLF TERRITORY

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

LOGAN'S HOUSE

TO BLACK MIRROR HILLS

DOGHOUSE

EDGEMOORE

UMBRA FORUM

EMERALD BAY RESORT

EBONFIELD

WISHING FOUNTAIN

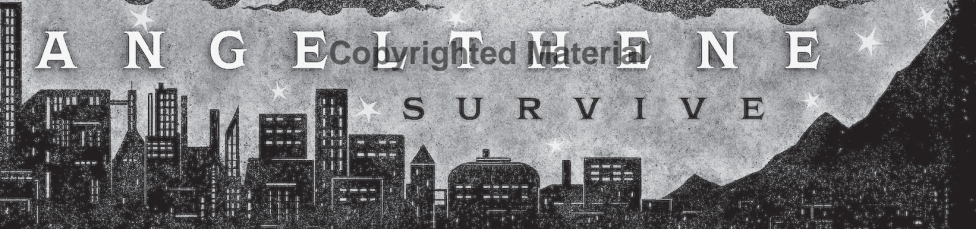
CLUB ETHEREAL

EMERALD BAY

JADE BEACH

LOVELY BEACH

ANGELTHENE SURVIVE



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## DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

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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

---

### 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

---

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*After the unexpected death of Randal Slade, who the Darkslaying circles of Angelthene answer to is to be determined. No one outside of these six circles may operate on Angelthene 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 violence, graphic language, domestic violence and child abuse (shown in flashbacks), substance use disorder, bullying, sexual harassment, death, grief, gore, and suicidal ideation. This book also contains explicit sexual content. Please read with caution and prepare to return to Angelthere...

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# PART ONE

THE DEVIL AND THE WHITE LILY

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# I

Being human in Angelthene felt a lot like walking into a party you weren't invited to, only there was no end to that party, no quick escape by simply walking out the door.

Loren Calla had spent twenty years getting used to that feeling. As one of the only human students at Angelthene Academy for Magic, the party truly never ended. The whispers were constant, chasing her down every hallway and into every classroom. Balled-up sheets of paper were forever thrown at the back of her head. Students made it their daily goal to trip or bodycheck her into rows of lockers. Sure, there was the odd time when she made it through a whole school day without being the victim to any of these things, but those days were rare. And when it wasn't whispers, paper cannon balls, or feet swept out to trip her, her problems usually involved trying not to be killed by one of the magical beings that made Angelthene such a dangerous place.

Whispers, paper cannon balls, and feet were far better forms of conflict than bullets, teeth, and claws. Bullies, she could handle. Bullies, she had a high chance of surviving, as long as their attempts at making her life a living hell did not extend beyond these walls. But vampires, werewolves, demons, veneficae, and hellsehers? She was still learning how to live with those.

A lot had changed for Loren since her first day at Angelthene Academy, but as far as the other students were concerned, she was the same person she had always been.

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Human. Weak. Ordinary. An easy target.

That was fine with her. They didn't need to know the truth, nor did

she want them to. Better to be targeted for being human than to be targeted for housing the coveted powers of a legendary magical artifact.

Loren was doing her best to ignore the students seated at the table behind her in history class, but as the minutes wore on, and more balls of paper struck the back of her head, the harder it became to resist the urge to tell them off.

The students—three male warlocks who excelled at sports and not much else—were some of the most persistent bullies she had ever encountered. It hadn't taken long after her first day here at AA to conclude they were worse than the kids she'd dealt with in high school, the ones who'd vandalized her locker and poured orange juice into her lap in the cafeteria on a near daily basis.

But she wasn't the same girl she was back in high school, nor was she the same girl who'd stood outside on the academy lawn with the other freshmen of the House of Salt last Septem. She wasn't even the same girl who'd walked the hallways before Kalendae. And if they threw one more ball of paper at her head, she just might lose it.

Roughly three weeks had passed since the city had been leveled by the explosion of the Arcanum Well replica, less than two weeks since she'd met her father on the dock at Jade Beach, and she had yet to recover from the shock of both events. But she tried not to dwell, especially on anything having to do with Erasmus Sophronia, creator of not only the Arcanum Well but of hellsehers. Thoughts of the man who'd introduced himself to her as her father didn't just make her head feel like it was being turned upside down, but also like it was being shaken. Vigorously.

She hadn't seen or talked to Erasmus since that windy afternoon at Jade Beach, but she was supposed to meet him at his house for supper tomorrow. Loren hadn't thought twice before accepting her father's invitation. She was desperate for answers, and even having to wait these few days to get those answers was torture.

How was he mortal again? How was it possible that he could still be alive after his skeleton—*his* skeleton, this fact confirmed by a DNA test at Lucent Enterprises—had been dug up in a grave in Angelthene National Forest? Why had he waited until she was nineteen to come looking for her? Did he ever regret abandoning her at the Temple of the Scarlet Star when she was a baby? Had he missed her at all?

It was these gnawing questions—and plenty more—that had led to their dinner arrangement, Friday evening, six o'clock. But now, as the seconds ticked away, and tomorrow loomed, she felt less like the newer, braver version of herself and more like the old.

She propped her chin in her hand and chewed her lip, tapping the worn eraser on the end of her pencil against her notebook, eyes that were glazed with disinterest flicking about the spacious classroom. Professor Griffith's lesson was dragging by at a snail's pace, her monotonous voice droning on and on. Loren couldn't recall one word that had left her mouth since the lesson started. She was usually attentive in class and looked forward to learning Terran history. Today? Not so much.

As she tapped her pencil on the page and stewed over having dinner with the father she barely knew, she considered inviting Darien to go with her. The more she entertained the idea, the more tempting it sounded. If the conversation got awkward, she knew Darien would jump in and encourage her to voice all the questions she wanted to ask. Aside from that, she certainly wouldn't mind having him at her side. After all, he *was* the tastiest eye candy in all of Terra. And there was a solid chance he would hold her hand under the table the whole time, which still gave her butterflies, no matter how many times he did it. All he had to do was look at her and she melted.

Man, she was a sucker for him.

The crunch of paper being packed into a ball sliced into her thoughts. She braced herself, counting the seconds based off memory, before ducking her head to the left to dodge the incoming assault.

The ball of paper bounced onto the table she was sharing with Sabrine Van Arsdell and Dallas Bright. It rolled to the very edge before stilling, knocking another just like it to the scuffed floor. The balled-up papers scattered across the table were covered with words scrawled in black ink, but she hadn't bothered to unfold and read them. She didn't need to be a genius to know there was nothing on them but insults and filthy comments. Whispers were hard enough to ignore, and unless she wanted to wear earplugs twenty-four-seven, hearing them was pretty much unavoidable. In this case, she at least had a choice.

It was times like these that made her wish all eight-point-seven million people in this city had memory of the events of Kalendae, how they'd all died in that blast and were only here, at this very moment, because of her. The wish her father had purchased for her from Tempus the Liar, God of Time, had certainly helped. But if it weren't for the elusive power that hadn't graced her with its presence since that day, no one would be here. This city wouldn't even be standing. Instead, Darien was the only other person with full memory of Kalendae and time's reversal, though of course they'd trusted the others who were involved that day with the truth—the Devils, Dallas and Sabrine, Arthur, Logan, the Angels of Death, the few

Vipers who had been present. The last thing she wanted was to be placed on a pedestal, but a little kindness and respect wouldn't hurt, especially after twenty years of being denied both.

Speaking of respect...

The warlocks behind her were snickering. The sound of another piece of paper being torn out of a notebook ripped through the otherwise silent classroom, and one of the boys started kicking the leg of her chair. *Thump, thump, thump*. Her seat was jarred forward with every strike of his shoe, until her torso was pressed right up against the edge of the table, wood digging in. The professor was too absorbed in her lesson to notice that the lone human in the group was being harassed.

Story of Loren's life.

Blood boiling, Loren lunged over the table and grabbed one of the balled-up papers—the one with the words *half-life* and *slut* glaring at her through a sharp crease. She turned in her seat, wound her arm back, and threw it straight at Ethan McIntyre's smug face.

It nailed him right between the eyebrows.

His jaw dropped open, the snickering of his two bonehead friends fading into silence. They all gaped at her, mouths hanging open like fish gasping for air.

"The next thing *any* of you idiots throw at me is getting stuffed down your throats!" Loren hissed. The other students within earshot either stared at her in shock or laughed under their breath.

Loren waited, providing Ethan and his friends an opportunity to talk back and see where it got them. But they said nothing. With one last glare directed at Ethan, she turned back around to face the front.

She might pay for that later, when there was no professor around to intervene, but right now she simply didn't care. Though she made a mental note never to get caught anywhere alone with them.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she forced her rapid breathing to slow and deepen. The jittery feeling shaking through her body—and the tiny stars drifting across her vision—had less to do with Ethan and his pals than it did the magical tattoo warming the skin on the inside of her left forearm. Morning was winding down, and she'd had nothing but coffee and an apple for breakfast. Her heart was palpating, and her lungs felt small and hot.

She should've known better than to eat so little.

Where she sat at Loren's right, scribbling flowers and vines on a page in her notebook, her sleek copper hair hiding part of her softly freckled face,

Dallas gave a snort. “I have to admit,” the witch whispered, “I’m enjoying this new side of you.”

It had been a while since Dallas had found it necessary to fight Loren’s battles for her. Loren decided her adoptive sister deserved the break, especially after all those years of nearly getting kicked out of middle and high school for defending her. Sometimes the arguments had escalated to physical fighting in cafeterias and schoolyards, the cheers of other students goading her on.

Taega and the Red Baron hadn’t liked that.

“At least one of us is having a good time,” Loren whispered back. She drew another deep breath in through her nose, then slowly exhaled through her mouth. The edges of her vision were fogging up with the threat of a fainting spell, though the stars were now gone.

Sabrina, who sat at Loren’s left, shushed them. Her almond eyes were glued to Professor Griffith, who waddled before the floor-to-ceiling chalkboard in a gray pencil skirt and blazer, rambling on about the legend of Spirit Terra and the Crossroads. The dusty chalkboard was marked up with a diagram of three circles drawn in a straight row, a thin oval stretching diagonally across all three. White, green, and blue, the oval consisting of dashes instead of a solid line. Scrawled across the board beside the diagram was a list of words Loren was having trouble reading from this distance.

When was the last time she’d had her eyes checked? She squinted, barely making out the words *Ignis*, *Crossroads*, and one that looked like it said *Sunstone*. Or was it *Sandstone*? Cripes, her eyes were burning.

Where it sat at the edge of the table, sandwiched between stacked textbooks and grimoires, Loren’s cell phone pinged—quietly, thank the skies. She must’ve forgot to mute the volume before coming to class. She checked to make sure the professor’s back was facing the room before she leaned forward, pried the phone free, and hid it under the table.

Sabrina fidgeted, her fire-colored eyes—warm as two suns against her honey-brown skin—darting to the phone in Loren’s hands. “She’s going to catch you,” she warned.

“Not likely.” Loren unlocked her phone with her thumbprint. “She’s too busy with her lecture.” She pulled up the long message thread under the name DARIEN CASSEL and read what the leader of the Seven Devils had sent her.

DARIEN

Morning, beautiful. When’s your

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The endearment made Loren's heart sing. She checked the time on her phone.

LOREN

In twenty minutes.

DARIEN

I'll meet you outside. You forgot your medication.

Loren glanced down at her purse that was sagging by her feet.

That was strange. She remembered checking to see if the bottle was tucked in its usual side pouch before leaving Hell's Gate that morning. But it wasn't there now.

While she usually saw Darien strictly on weekends, they stole the odd weeknight together as well. Since they'd started dating, she found it even more impossible than before to stay away from him for long periods of time—and he was always more than willing to pick her up whenever she asked him to, which was exactly how she'd wound up at Hell's Gate on a Wednesday of all nights.

Loren typed up a reply, her nails—painted sparkly black and filed into points, a safety habit she wasn't willing to break, regardless that she spent most of her time surrounded by seven deadly Darkslayers—clicking on the cracked screen.

LOREN

It was in my bag this morning.

As she wrote, she took care to keep her phone partially hidden in the folds of her plaid skirt.

LOREN

Did you take it out so you would have an excuse to come and see me, Daredevil?

DARIEN

You know I always love to see you every chance I can get, but I would never take your medication, silly girl.

She already knew that; she just liked to tease him. Besides, he wasn't at Hell's Gate that morning, after being gone nearly all night, so how could he have possibly taken it?

Darien added,

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When I got home, I found Mortifer in the sitting room, shaking the bottle like a tambourine.

Loren was trying not to laugh when Darien sent another message.

He was dancing on the record player and damn near broke the thing. The guy's a menace. Mortifer the Menace—that's his new nickname. Did you know he likes country?

This time, she barely managed to contain her laugh. Loren wrote back,

Did he swallow any?

DARIEN

Who knows? The cap's childproof, but I don't think they come Hobproof, do they?

She was full-on grinning now. She knew she was pushing her luck, but she typed up another message. Rain plinked against the arched windows lining the wall, the sound blending in with the clicking of her nails on the phone screen. Another day of lousy weather.

LOREN

Sooooo, did you have a nice night getting those knuckles bloody for Perez?

She added a winking face to the end of the message and hit SEND. She was always trying to make light of his need to fight at the Pit these days, since she knew how badly he wanted to change, not only for her but for himself. Since the events of Kalendae, his Surges had doubled in intensity and frequency. Loren hoped they would wear off soon, but until they did, she would be there for him in whatever way he needed her to be. No matter how many nights it took.

Darien wrote back:

Sweetheart, I'm insulted. I don't fight for shiteheads like Perez, you know that.

Though she was suppressing a smile, Loren rolled her eyes. Leave it to Darien to get defensive over a harmless little comment like that. He fought only when *he* wanted to, not answering to anyone but himself. While

people like Antonio Perez might benefit financially from Darien's participation in the fights, no one held him on a leash.

Darien added,

And I wouldn't call ripping out demon throats a nice night, but you're a doll for pretending that you're okay with this.

Loren chewed her lip. She checked to make sure Professor Griffith was still preoccupied with her lesson before she began typing.

Well, I don't know about that... We might need to come up with some sort of deal. You have no idea how cold the bed gets when you're not at home. My ass is freezing without you there.

Darien's reply came through so quickly, she barely saw a typing bubble.

If we talk about your perfect ass right now, I might roll the car into a ditch.

Her face warmed.

LOREN

Are you texting and driving?

DARIEN

Never.

Her smile grew too wide to contain.

LOREN

Liar.

She was just about to hit SEND when a wooden ruler thwacked against the table.

She jumped out of her skin, the legs of her chair squealing across the floor. Dallas jolted as well, as if she had fallen asleep. Loren wouldn't be surprised; the witch was always tired these days.

"*Miss Calla!*" Professor Griffith barked.

Loren shut off the screen, dropped her phone on her lap, and looked up at the professor. "Yes?"

The professor was glaring down at her with a look that could cut

through stone. “This is the third time in two days that I’ve caught you texting in my class. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Every student in the room, regardless of where they were sitting, managed to turn and stare at her. Until Darien had come along, she’d had no problem leaving her phone untouched for hours at a time. How quickly things had changed. But she figured it was to be expected when you were dating a hot-as-sin bounty hunter—especially one who’d pinned her to the wall of the shower before leaving Hell’s Gate last night and fucked her breathless. She’d had a really good sleep after that.

Loren straightened her spine. “Umm.” Words escaped her, and her phone was still buzzing on the lap of her skirt, making it impossible to think of an answer as her mind drifted to the new messages flashing across her screen. Was Darien saying more about her ass and how perfect he thought it was? Was he telling her all the filthy details about what he planned to do to her later? Maybe it involved the shower again and him standing dripping-wet before her—

Loren forced the sinfully delicious image out of her mind. “I’m sorry?” she tried.

Dallas snorted a laugh.

Professor Griffith’s attention snapped to the witch, whose smile immediately faded. “I fail to see what’s so funny, Miss Bright. If you continue to use enchanted stationary in my class, your chances of passing won’t look any better than Miss Calla’s.”

The blood drained from Dallas’s face. The last time Loren had seen the witch so pale was when Darien had brought them to the maze of abandoned warehouses and butcheries that made up the Umbra Forum, where they’d nearly been made into a meal.

That was one memory she could do without.

Flicking the mute button on the side of her phone before the professor could catch her, Loren jumped to Dallas’s rescue. “I really am sorry, Professor. I swear it won’t happen again.”

Professor Griffith arched a slender brow. “It better not.” She pointed her ruler at Loren’s half-hidden cell phone. “If I see you with that phone in your hand one more time, I will take it away. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Professor Griffith.”

Magenta-painted lips formed a tight line. “You get one more chance, Miss Calla. After that, I won’t be so forgiving.” She rapped the table with the ruler again and then pointed it at Dallas, who visibly recoiled in her seat. “You too, Miss Bright. If you fail my class, I’ll make sure not even the

Red Baron will be able to bail you out.” She strutted back to the front of the room to resume her lesson.

Loren didn’t dare grab her phone for the rest of the class. She kept her arms crossed, resisting the urge to even glance at the screen that kept lighting up with incoming messages from Darien. Those last few minutes took forever to pass, but the bells above the academy finally chimed, the tuneless clanging filling the stone hallways and drifting through the open classroom door.

Dallas was one of the first students to stand, her books already stacked and in her arms. Loren pushed to her feet and hurried to gather up her own things, Sabrina doing the same beside her. Sab was the only person in the room who looked more disappointed than relieved that class was over. While the students of AA were always excited to practice magic, classes such as history tended not to be a favorite.

“*Really?*” Loren said to Dallas as they wove their way around tables and chairs. Ethan and his friends were wise to keep their distance, though Loren could feel them watching. “Enchanted stationary?” She had never heard of such a thing, but in a world of magic, there were few limits to what could be invented.

Dallas glanced over her shoulder, a smile playing on her lips—painted red with a glamor instead of makeup, as usual. Loren resisted the urge to give her hell for it. “My hand cramps up if I write for too long,” Dallas said. “I got Maximus to grab some from the Umbra Forum. It does the writing *and* the listening for me.” The fact that Dallas had to send a Darkslayer to one of the most dangerous places in the city to find the paper told Loren all she needed to know about it.

Sabrina gave Dallas a look of horror. “That sounds like a one-way ticket to a big fat F, Dal.”

Dallas waved the conversation away. “Enough. I’m starving. Let’s get to the dining hall before everyone beats us there.”

“Actually,” Loren piped up as they neared the door, “I’m spending lunch with Darien today.” The students ahead of them shuffled out of the classroom, giving them a clear path into the hallway. “I’ll see you guys next period.”

Dallas threw her free hand in the air. “*Again?*”

But Loren was already halfway down the hallway, squishing through clusters of werewolves, vampires, and veneficae. “I forgot my medication, so he’s bringing it to me!”

“You mean *this* medication?” Dallas called.

Loren turned to see Dallas making a crude gesture with her tongue and fist.

Her face turned beet-red. "*Dallas!*" she hissed.

Dallas barked a cackle that chased her down the torchlit hallway.

Loren skipped down the staircase and across the foyer, where she pushed through the towering arched doors of the academy. The rusted hinges emitted a deep groan as the doors lurched open.

It was still raining, which came as no surprise for this time of year, considering Januarius was Angelthene's wettest month. The sprawling academy grounds were drenched, the shaggy palm trees saturated and dripping. The humidity in the air weighed down her lungs and clung to her skin like an invisible coat.

Clutching her books and water bottle to her chest, she hurried down the stone steps, water splashing underfoot, and made her way across the lawn, the lush green grass flooded with rain. No other students were around—except for one.

Loren didn't know his name, and she hadn't seen him around campus until yesterday. He was sitting way off in the distance near the Old Hall, on a picnic table beneath the sparse shelter of a palm tree. His light-brown hair and clothes were soaked. He had no books with him, no bag. Nothing.

He was just watching her. He always watched her. Yesterday, she'd tried smiling at him, in case he was suffering from new-kid syndrome and was having no luck at making friends. But he hadn't smiled back.

Talk about creepy. It was like something she might see in a movie—the weird new kid that watches people from afar and never bothers to smile or speak.

Did he know something he shouldn't? She felt paranoid for even thinking it, but she couldn't erase the eerie feeling that overcame her every time she saw him, as if he hadn't come to the academy to learn, but to watch her. After the threats made against her that day in the limousine, she wouldn't be surprised if her movements were being monitored. Rules had been set, and the consequences for breaking them had been outlined very clearly.

If someone had been instructed to watch her, they were wasting their time. She had no intention of jeopardizing the safety of her friends and family by stepping out of line, so it was only a matter of time before they got bored and found something better to do.

Hopefully.

With a shudder, Loren looked away from the student and picked up her pace, ascending the hill to the wrought-iron gates.

Darien was parked farther away from the gates than usual, and just as those gates swung open with a squeal, the rain picked up. The joyful chirping of birds enjoying an afternoon shower in the trees was barely audible over the thundering downpour.

Clutching her belongings with one arm, Loren held her other over her head and sprinted for the gleaming black sports car, her polished shoes splashing in puddles. Water cascaded in small rivers alongside the curb and bled into gurgling storm drains. The sidewalk was sprinkled with palm tree fronds and the same blue jacaranda petals that dusted the roof and hood of Darien's car.

By the time she reached the passenger's-side door, her white button-up blouse and skirt were soaked, her hair flattened to her head. But she was still smiling as she swung open the door and launched herself onto the leather seat. Closing the door on the drumming rain, she shivered as the heat floating from the vents caressed her skin with an inviting kiss.

Loren was all too aware that Darien's full attention was on her as she dumped her books and stainless steel water bottle on the floor, the latter clanging as it tipped over and rolled under the seat. She drew her sopping hair over her shoulder and into her hands, and she began to twist it, wringing the water out onto the floor, as she slowly, *slowly* raised her eyes to Darien's face.

The Devil was watching her intently, a hint of a smile on his sculptured mouth, the look in his steel-blue eyes heavy and heated. His dark hair was styled back from his face, the strands damp from either the rain or a shower. His left wrist was slung over the steering wheel, the silver rings he wore on his index and middle fingers shining despite the lack of sunlight. The raindrops sparkling on the sleeve of his black leather jacket and the armrest of his door suggested he'd driven here with his window down.

"You know I always think you're beautiful, no matter what you're wearing," the Devil began, his deep, rich voice sending Loren's stomach into a dizzying flutter. "But I have to admit, watching your breasts bounce as you run toward me is truly a sight to behold." His gaze drifted down her body, over the shirt that was wet and clinging to her skin. He gave a low whistle of approval. "I can now die happy."

Loren grinned. "Hi."

"Hi." He mimicked her breathy tone, his eyes gleaming with amusement. She snickered, and he lifted a brow. "Where's my kiss?"

Loren tapped her lips with the tip of her index finger. "Right here. Come and get it."

Darien tsked. "Always making me work for it."

“Always.”

But he closed the distance between them, took her face into his large hands, and kissed her deeply. Loren’s own hands immediately went to his soft hair, pulling him closer to her. She breathed him in, the heady scent of him filling her lungs. His tongue swept into her mouth, brushing against hers in a way that made them both groan.

*I’m home*, her heart sang. *This is home*.

But Darien broke the kiss too soon. He pulled back just far enough to assess her, the space between his brows creasing with worry. “Are you feeling alright?” He was so close she could see every tone of blue in his eyes, every inky eyelash, every small scar flecking his skin.

“I’m fine. Why?”

“You’re not fine,” he accused, his rough thumbs tracing the curve of her jaw. “Baby, your heart is skipping beats. And don’t try to tell me it’s because I make you swoon like the guys in those tacky romance novels you read.”

Loren fidgeted. He kept her face in his hands, thumbs still tracing her jaw, his touch leaving trails of heat on her skin. “They’re not tacky,” she said. “You just don’t like their covers. You can’t judge a book by the abs on its cover, Darien.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re avoiding the question.”

“Maybe that *is* the reason why.” It wasn’t a total lie, considering he *did* make her swoon like the guys in the books she read. Correction: *more* than the guys in the books she read. He was a book boyfriend dream-come-true. But that wasn’t the reason for today’s irregular heartbeat. At least, not the *whole* reason.

Darien seemed to really think about her answer for a moment, and then he declared, “You’re a liar.”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “Oh, who cares about my stupid heart?” She tried to close the distance between them, to taste that irresistible mouth of his again, but he held firm.

Darien was looking at her as if she had kicked a puppy. “*I* care, Loren. I care.” He let go of her face so he could retrieve her medication from his jacket pocket. He tried to hand her the bottle, and when she didn’t take it from him right away, he shook it in agitation, pills rattling.

Loren lifted a brow. “Are you pretending it’s a tambourine like Mortifer the Menace?”

Darien shot her a stern look that would’ve sent her running for the hills when she’d first met him. “Loren, take one. Please.”

With a sigh, Loren bent down to retrieve the water bottle from under

her seat. She hated taking the medication on an empty stomach; it never failed to make her feel like throwing up. She supposed that was what she got for skipping out on proper meals.

When she straightened, water bottle in her grip, she flicked her hair over a shoulder, the motion causing several raindrops to spatter Darien's face. She stifled a laugh as he wiped the water off his cheeks with one downward swipe of a tattooed hand.

She snatched her medication out of his grip. "Only because you asked so nicely." She pushed down on the cap and popped it off.

"So stubborn," he sighed, shaking his head. "You still test me like no one else, you know that?" His eyes softened as he watched her balance her water bottle between her knees and unscrew the lid. "But god, do I love you." The statement sent a rush of heat from her face to her collarbones.

She shook a pill into her palm and placed it on the center of her tongue. Just as she was about to take a swig of water, she paused, side-eyeing Darien. "Don't watch me, or I might choke."

Darien snorted a laugh, but he did as she'd requested and turned to stare out his rain-streaked window until she was done.

Her lunch break passed quickly, as time always did when she was with her favorite person. She spent most of it studying for the quiz she would be taking next period, cramming as much information into her brain as possible, while Darien spent most of that time trying to distract her. He also forced her to eat the leftovers he'd grabbed from the fridge at Hell's Gate, even going so far as to handfeed her until he was satisfied with how much she'd eaten. She had a feeling he was listening to see if her heart was still skipping beats.

When barely thirty minutes of her break remained, Loren set her pen in the crease of her notebook and sighed. "I think I'm going to fail."

Darien, who was tracing shapes and Ancient Reunerian letters into the fogged glass of his window, turned to face her, a cunning smile playing on the curve of his lips. He was up to no good, for sure. "You know what you need?"

Before she could speak, he snatched her book out of her grip, threw it onto the dash, and grabbed her around the waist. She let out a squeak of surprise and took care to duck her head as he pulled her out of her seat and into his lap. She banged her knee on the gearshift and the steering wheel, nearly elbowing Darien in the face, her legs tangling with his.

He gave a low grunt and ducked his head to the left, narrowly avoiding another elbow. "I can't tell if you're trying to gouge my eye out or knee me in the balls."

“I’m *trying* to—” She bumped something with her arm, and the turn signal began to tick. The windshield wipers came on, sliding back and forth across the glass with a squeal.

A low laugh slipped out of Darien’s lips. It was her favorite sound in the world, even when she was fighting for her life in a cramped car.

Finally, she managed to maneuver her body until she was straddling him, her knees braced on either side of his muscular thighs, and she felt proud of herself for not gouging out his eyes *or* kneeling him in the balls.

Loren’s heart was pounding, a frantic rhythm she knew Darien could hear. Desire pooled in her core, sending a spear of heat right down to her toes. He seemed to like having her on top of him; he’d chosen this position nearly every day since their first time. Now that Darien had turned off the wipers and the turn signal, the car was quiet, the dreamlike reality of being this close to him surrounding her like a warm hug. He was looking up at her, one corner of his mouth twitching with amusement, the shallow dimple in his cheek fluttering.

“You were saying?” she prompted softly, tracing the shape of his lips with her index finger. She would never get tired of the way he looked; his features were flawless, as if an artist of the highest talent had carved him from marble. She pressed a kiss to his mouth and whispered against his skin, “You still haven’t told me what it is that I need.”

With his lips grazing hers, she could feel the playful smile spreading across his face. “A stress reliever.” He snaked his hand between her thighs and up her skirt, the movement so sudden and unexpected that her stomach did a backflip. While the steel of his rings was cold on her skin, the heat from his hand was inviting—a flame she felt all over. “And I’ve got just the thing.” He nipped at her bottom lip and hiked up her skirt, exposing her backside to the cool air, and pushed her red thong—made of barely-there lace—to one side.

“*Darien!*” she hissed. Reality hit her like a slap to the face as she realized he had much more than kissing in mind. This time, when her stomach dipped, it was for an entirely different reason. “We *can’t*.” She looked over her shoulder at the academy. Through the rain, the building was barely visible, but still far too close for comfort. The professors, the other students... What if someone saw them? “This is so bad.” She knew she shouldn’t be surprised; he had a taste for all things scandalous.

“Look at me,” Darien commanded. She did as she was told, tearing her wide-eyed gaze off the school, as he began to unbutton her shirt.

He undid the first one with his teeth. She wasn’t sure how, but there didn’t seem to be a thing he wasn’t good at. As the second button sprang

open, courtesy of his deft fingers this time, his mouth brushed across the skin below her jaw. She shivered as his hands moved lower, slowly undoing the buttons, one by one, drawing out each movement in a way that left her whole body quivering with need.

When the last button sprang free, he reached around her and unclasped her bra. And then he removed the bra *and* her shirt. Eyes on her, he threw them onto the passenger's seat.

"What if we get caught?" Loren barely finished her question as Darien bent his head and drew her left nipple into his mouth, his tongue teasing the sensitive skin. His right hand returned to the space between her thighs—

A gasp floated off her lips as he began to play with her clit. His fingers, so rough and warm, rubbed her in the best way. The right amount of friction, the right pace.

"You're worrying too much, sweetheart," Darien said. She nearly groaned, the precision of his movements threatening to push her straight to climax. He pressed a kiss to the skin between her breasts, tongue sweeping out to taste her. The way he touched her, the way he tasted her, the way he looked at her, was like a worshipping of her body. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, but she couldn't get enough of him either. "Besides," Darien continued with a wicked smile, breath tickling her skin, "I had Mortifer cloak the car with concealment spells before I left, as a little favor for stealing your medication."

"How long do they last?" The words were breathy, and she was already so wet for him, his fingers slick as they slid up and down, up and down, teasing her entrance and circling her clit. Oh, it was so good. The effect he had on her was dizzying; she could barely think. "An hour?"

"We don't need an hour, Lola. Only three minutes." He winked up at her, that adorable dimple reappearing.

Three minutes—*right*. He could last for so long she sometimes had trouble walking afterward. "Says the man who kept me up till five a.m. last weekend—" She barely got the last word out, as he abruptly grew serious, his carnal focus entirely on her, and pushed a finger inside her.

She *did* groan this time, the sound filling the car. He added another finger while his other hand cupped her ass, fingertips digging in possessively. She loved when he handled her like this.

It didn't take long for her rational thoughts to cloud over with lust, and she willingly spiraled into it with every stroke of Darien's hand. As he played with her, he watched her with a predator's focus, the heat of his stare like a fire she would willingly throw herself into.

“Spread your legs a little for me, sweetheart,” Darien told her. She did, shuddering with pleasure at the feel of the new angle. “There you go. Just like that.” He slapped her ass, making her gasp, and squeezed. “You’re so wet, Loren. You’re going to feel so good on my cock.” His words dried out her mouth, while another part of her got even wetter, her stomach tightening with a fresh wave of arousal.

“I want it,” she panted. She clung to him, fingernails clawing his shoulders. He was so close she could feel him everywhere, but it wasn’t close enough, and she wanted him so badly. “Give it to me.”

A dark smile teased his mouth. “Not yet.”

He brought his fingers out to swirl her wetness around her clit, the sensations causing her thighs to clamp around his hand.

Her breathing hitched, her pleasure building at a staggering pace. She tried grinding on his cock, but it was difficult to do from this angle.

That hand on her ass tightened, stilling her movements, holding her away from what she wanted. “What did I just say?” Darien berated, his words a low growl. He pushed two fingers back in, right up to the knuckles. “Fuck, you’re tight.” The approval in his husky tone had her insides clenching around his fingers.

A whimper slipped through her lips. “Darien, please—”

“I know, baby. I’ll let you ride my cock once I’ve had my fun with your pretty little pussy.” He drew her lower lip into his mouth and sucked on it, teeth grazing. When he let go, he stayed close enough to breathe her air, that hand pumping into her relentlessly, the friction from his touch turning her body into a living flame. “How does that sound?”

“Good.” The word was barely a whisper.

He nipped at her lip again. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

His thumb pressed even harder into her clit, building up the pressure, making her squirm in his lap. Her nipples were so hard they felt raw.

Every kiss Darien left on her body tripled her want. Her *need*. Although a part of her still worried about being caught, she found that she liked it—the thrill. Knowing her school was right there, and she was in here, the hand of a Devil between her thighs, turned her on, her need for him too great to contain.

“You want to come, baby?” Darien’s question was voiced so roughly and so deeply, she felt it in her belly.

“Yes,” she gasped. Those fingers moved faster, sliding in and out of her, that friction pushing her pleasure closer, the promise of release making her vision shimmer at the edges. “God, yes.”

With a rocking of her hips, she chased her orgasm to his rhythm, desperate to come, her breathy moans the only sound in the car. She clung to the worn leather of his jacket with one hand, zipper digging into her palm, the other grasping the back of his neck, her thumb grazing the Devils tattoo below his ear.

Her orgasm was so close her legs were jerking from the staggering force of it. "Don't stop—"

He covered her mouth with his, the kiss hungry and claiming as he swallowed her cries, not breaking it until all the breath was out of her lungs. Her pulse pounded everywhere, but mostly between her legs, where his hand moved with wicked precision.

"So beautiful," he breathed, a sound of approval climbing up his throat. That hand pumped into her harder. Faster. She fell into him from the sheer force of his movements, her breasts flattening against his chest, her mouth once again finding his. His other hand went to the back of her head, grabbing a fistful of her hair and tugging it back. "Come on, sweetheart," he growled, breath sweeping across her mouth. "Let me feel that tight pussy come around my fingers, and maybe I won't tell your professors what a naughty little fucking brat you are." He curled his fingers inside her, just a little, hitting that spot—

Pleasure exploded through her, every muscle going taut as she came with a high cry. Her thighs pressed together with her release, trapping his hand between them, her whole body quivering in his lap. "Oh *god*." She could feel her inner muscles squeezing his fingers, so tight he could hardly move them, but it only turned her on more, especially when he kept going, the area so sensitive she almost had to beg him to stop.

"Fuck yes." He tightened his fist in her hair and covered her mouth with his, swallowing her new cries as she rocked into his hand, again and again. He carried her through her orgasm, right to the very end of it, his movements only slowing when hers did.

When she broke the kiss, gasping for air, heart galloping in her chest, she looked at Darien, only to find that he was already staring at her, that gaze of his devouring.

"You dirty girl," he accused, a dark and sinful smile creeping across his mouth. "Getting fucked right in front of your school."

"That was your idea," she panted.

"It was, wasn't it?" He took his hand out from under her skirt, the sudden absence of his touch making her whimper and bite her lip.

And then, slowly, his gaze holding hers the whole time, he brought that hand up to his mouth...and sucked on his fingers.

A low groan rose in his throat. "I fucking love how you taste." And just like that, she was wet all over again.

"I need you," she breathed, reaching down between their bodies to palm his hard cock through his pants.

The stroking of her hand caused him to draw a hiss in through his teeth. He swore, trembling from the contact—just as she too was trembling. The way he bit his lip, his head tipping back against the seat, was quite possibly the single hottest thing she'd ever seen.

The tension between them was so thick she could feel it, like the energy that builds in the air before a lightning strike.

When he spoke, his voice was dark and rich as caramel. "Would you like to get fucked, Miss Loren?"

Her swallow was audible. "Yes, please."

The smile he gave her was one of a true devil. "Such a polite little thing. I love it." He spanked her ass. "Take off the thong."

He began to undo his belt. Just as she was reaching up under her skirt to do as she was told, something over his shoulder caught her eye.

That haze of lust dissipated, and her blood went cold.

She blinked, squinting through the condensation fogging up the windows. Silvery sheets of rain still fell from a low, full-bellied sky, making it nearly impossible to see. But...

"Holy crap," she breathed. There was a squad car parked behind them, nearly bumper to bumper. How long had it been there? "There's a peace officer behind us."

Steadying her with a hand on her waist, Darien turned to look out the back window. After a moment, he said, "Who cares?" He turned back around and tugged on the string of her thong. "Get those panties off. They can't see us."

"I care!" Loren hissed. "What if they come up to the car?"

"Then I'll deal with it." He finished undoing his pants and grabbed her by the chin. "Eyes on me."

Screw it. She wanted him too badly to care anymore.

But then the driver's-side door of the squad car swung open. Loren felt the blood drain from her face as a warlock peace officer, the silver rings around his pupils reflecting like mirrors, stepped out into the rain.

## 2

Darien Cassel was pissed.

What lousy timing for this pinhead to show up. The guy, clearly having nothing better to do, had probably run his plate and decided to give him a hard time for parking so close to AA. Prestigious academies like this one took extra care in keeping their students safe, and while this might seem like a good thing, considering Loren was one of those students, an abundance of bullies roamed the property, their actions flying under the headmaster's radar, thanks to their academic successes and overprivileged parents.

Bullies who got off on targeting humans. Beautiful blonde humans who kept to themselves and had put up with the mistreatment for way too fucking long.

If it were up to Darien, and if it weren't for Loren begging him not to, he would've already put an end to that garbage by holding those assholes' heads under the surface of the academy pool, just long enough to make them remember how lucky they were to be alive—and just long enough for them to realize whose woman they'd made the mistake of fucking with.

Darien forced himself to focus on the problem at hand. He was used to dealing with guys like this warlock prick sauntering up to the car. He would get rid of him as fast as he could so he could get back to taking care of his girl in more ways than one.

He took another drag on the cigar Max had left in his car, letting the potent, velvet smoke fill his mouth and lungs. And then he blew it back out and dispersed the cloud with a wave of his hand while Loren finished

fastening the buttons on her shirt. He would have to thank Max for always leaving these things lying around. They didn't taste too bad. Dark and intense, with earthy undertones that relaxed his mind and muscles instantly.

Mmm...not bad at all.

*Hab.* Max wouldn't like the sound of that. Maybe he shouldn't tell him, or he might make a point of hiding them from now on. Of all his belongings, there were two things Max wasn't willing to share: weapons and cigars.

The officer stopped at the driver's-side door, shifted his weight to one leg, and shoved his gloved thumbs through his belt loops.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Darien flicked the button on the door. The tinted glass lowered with a muffled groan, and cool air scented with flowers swept into the car, rustling his hair and the pages of the notebook Loren held open on her lap. Without the window and the spells to block outside noise, the drumming of the rain swelled to a steady roar. Cigar smoke billowed out of the car in an opaque cloud, hopefully disguising the scent of what they had been doing a moment ago...what the officer had so thoughtlessly interrupted.

Loren coughed once with her mouth closed.

"Afternoon, folks." The officer's eyes flicked to Loren for a fraction of a second before returning to Darien, his attention lingering on the small tattoo—no bigger than a coin—of the horned letter S just below his ear. Judging from the look on the officer's face, he didn't expect to find a human girl in a Darkslayer's car. His jaw worked as he chewed the wad of gum in his mouth. "You Darien Cassel?"

Darien rested his hand on the steering wheel, cigar burning between his index and middle fingers. "Depends on why you're asking."

The officer gave him a humorless smile. "I'm going to need you to come down to the station."

Darien sensed Loren tensing in her seat, but he kept his focus on the officer. "Am I being arrested?"

"Not if you cooperate."

"What's going on, Officer?" Loren leaned forward to make eye contact with the prick. "I don't see what the big deal is. He's just helping me study." In the corner of his vision, Darien saw her gesture to the book spread open on her folded legs—the gorgeous legs that had been braced on either side of his own minutes ago.

Fuck this guy for wrecking this hour.

The officer looked at her for a beat longer than Darien preferred, taking

in every inch of her as if she were an object, not a person. The cigar nearly crumbled to a pulp in his hand as his grip on it tightened, his other fingers curling around the steering wheel so hard the leather groaned.

“Everything’s fine,” the warlock told her. “I just need to have a word with Mister Cassel here.”

Darien looked him over. He had to give the guy credit for not shrinking under his stare—the stare that made most people scamper away with their tail between their legs. But as useless as Angelthene’s law enforcement may be, anyone who trained for the job had to have balls of steel if they wanted to last so much as a day on the clock.

Darien flicked open the ashtray and ground the smouldering end of the cigar into the ashes. “Give us a minute,” he told the officer without looking at him.

The officer nodded, and he was about to walk away when he paused and bent back down to look in the car. He gave Loren a little smile that was nothing short of condescending. “I bet you were able to get a lot of studying done with your book upside down.”

Darien’s head snapped up, his cold gaze zeroing in on the officer. Loren’s heartbeat picked up to a sprint, the sound filling the car. He didn’t need to look at her to know she was staring at the officer like a deer caught in headlights.

The officer gave her a wink. “Just saying.” When he looked at Darien, a taunting grin spread across his face, the gum in his mouth showing.

“If you’re smart,” Darien began in a low voice, “you’ll walk your smug ass back to your car. I’ve been in my line of work long enough to know what I can get away with, so don’t fucking test me.”

A cold laugh rose in the warlock’s throat. “So the rumors weren’t lying. Good to know.” He patted the inside of the window with two firm, prompting slaps. “Make it quick.” He walked back to his car before Darien could say anything else.

Or before he could pull the officer through the window and crack his thick skull open on the gearshift.

Darien took a steadying breath and turned in his seat to face Loren, who was watching him with a pout on her face, the space between her eyebrows scrunched up.

“What does he want?” she whispered.

He flicked the button on the window, and the water-streaked glass rolled back up with a squeak. “I don’t know.” He jerked his chin at the academy. “Go back inside, sweetheart, and I’ll see you later. Okay?”

Loren slapped her book shut. “Okay.” Her frown had deepened, and

pink dusted her ivory skin. Seeing her upset kindled emotions in him that he was still getting used to, still figuring out how to identify.

“Loren,” Darien said softly. With reluctance, she lifted her eyes to his face. “Everything will be fine, I promise.”

Those big eyes searched his face. He didn’t look away from her—not once. Anything she needed from him, anything to make her feel okay about this situation, he would give it to her, even if it was all the time in the universe. Fuck the warlock and whatever he wanted. He’d break off the gearshift and shove it up the guy’s ass if it would make Loren happy.

Darien nearly laughed. That would be a sight to see.

“Okay.” Loren sighed again, her slender shoulders sinking with the exhalation. She gathered up her things, taking care to keep them from slipping out of her arms as she leaned across the car, her ocean-blue eyes—framed in thick, dark lashes—fixed on his mouth. “Thanks for the ride,” she teased.

Darien met her halfway and stole the breath from her lungs with a deep kiss. His hand came around to the back of her head, her sun-bright hair soft under his palm. He felt her tremble against him as he parted her heart-shaped lips with his tongue. When she whimpered into his mouth—a breathy sound that reminded him of the little noises she made when they were fucking—a groan climbed up his own throat, his hand tightening into a fist in her hair. The way her tongue teased his, the stud in the center rubbing in a way that promised pure ecstasy on a much more sensitive body part, made him hard all over again.

When he broke the kiss, they were both out of breath. The tension between them had returned, somehow stronger than before. He couldn’t wait until they were alone again, so he could bury himself in her and forget about the world for a while.

She pressed her forehead against his and closed her eyes. “Later, then,” she whispered, her breath caressing his mouth.

“Later.” He loosened the hand in her hair and kissed the tip of her nose. He hated how cold he felt when she pulled away from him, the space between them expanding. Sometimes, it was so unbearable it hurt like a knife piercing his heart. She was his sun, his silver lining, and when she wasn’t around, everything in his life grew darker. Colorless and cold.

Loren reached for the door handle and pulled it open. She carefully balanced her books in her arms as she stepped out into the rain that was finally dying down to a mist.

She was about to close the door when she stopped. “Oh, I almost forgot.” Darien watched as she fumbled around in her purse. When she

found what she was looking for, she bent down to see him in the car. “I made this for you.” She handed him a keychain.

Darien held it up between his thumb and forefinger. Attached to the gold chain was a glass dome, no bigger than a quail’s egg. Inside the dome sat a tiny succulent, sparkles floating around it like fireflies.

“It’s real,” Loren said. “Mordred and Penny charmed it for me. It won’t die unless the glass breaks.”

Darien smiled. “Thank you, sweetheart.” She was always making things these days; natural candles, body lotions, shower gels, and now keychains. He pinched the clasp open and attached the dome to the rest of his keys.

She returned his smile with a ducking of her head. “Will you go with me to my dad’s tomorrow night?”

“Of course, Loren. Of course I’ll go with you. You don’t even have to ask me that.”

She smiled, reaching for him with one hand, her books nearly toppling out of her other arm. He took her small fingers and gave them a gentle squeeze.

“See you after school.” She blew him a kiss and shut the door.

Darien waited until she was safely through the gates before he lowered the emergency brake and pushed the gearshift into drive.

In the rear-view mirror, he saw the prick of an officer watching the car with a cold smirk, as if he could see right through the concealment spells. At least he wasn’t watching Loren.

What Darien wouldn’t give to smack that smirk off his face. If he *were* watching Loren, he would’ve done much worse than smack him.

Darien was about to drive away when he paused, his attention returning to Loren, just like always.

He was fucking gaga for her. He loved watching her walk, loved the shape of her tight, perfect ass in anything she was wearing. Especially skirts. What a knockout he’d ended up with.

As he watched her, he got an idea. A wicked one that made his blood electrify in his veins.

He closed his eyes. As he stirred his magic awake, the whites and irises were engulfed by the black of the Sight. He coaxed his power up to the surface of his mind, eyelids flying back open as he unleashed the force of it on his girlfriend.

Even from this far away, he could see Loren’s legs shake from the unbridled pleasure he threw onto her. Her knees buckled, and she slipped to the grass, barely catching herself before she could topple down the hill. Darien was impressed that she managed not to drop anything or fall flat to the

ground, though her body visibly trembled. He kept his magic going until he was certain she'd fully climaxed before he reined it in, stamping it down to its place of rest.

An unholy grin spread across his face.

He'd wanted to do that since that night in the dining room all those months ago. Back when they'd barely known a thing about each other, but had wanted to get into each other's pants all the same.

Even through the rain and the concealment spells on the car, Loren's eyes still managed to find his. Her face was red with embarrassment, and her eyes brimmed with accusations—and a threat that he would hear about this later.

He was already looking forward to *later*.

Darien gave a dark laugh as he hit the accelerator and peeled out onto the street.

---

WHEN THE OFFICER had told Darien to follow him to the precinct, the last place he'd expected to end up was at the headquarters of the Magical Protections Unit.

Darien had toyed with the warlock for a while, seeing how well his wimpy cruiser could keep up with him while maneuvering traffic. After easing off the accelerator, the warlock had still barely managed to get in front of him, but once he had, Darien had allowed him to lead the way through Angelthene's North End, down six-lane highways lined with towering palm trees, flashy billboards, and flickering neon signs—and had driven right past the precinct. Although he was suspicious, Darien had continued to follow him, more out of curiosity than anything.

And the temptation that if the bastard were to try anything stupid, he'd get to find out what it felt like to bash his skull open after all.

Now, as the officer led the way through the immaculate headquarters of the MPU, around the desks that were occupied with people who sipped on coffee and jabbered into phones, Darien ignored the many probing gazes that tracked his every step.

The officer stopped at a closed door and gestured for Darien to open it. "After you," the warlock drawled, a smug, infuriating smile plastered to his face.

Darien stifled the urge to punch his teeth down his throat. Now wasn't the time, and it certainly wasn't the place either. Though he might've walked a little closer to the officer than necessary as he passed him, taking

delight in the way the warlock rocked back on his heels, clearly deciding whether the threat Darien posed was great enough to warrant sacrificing his pride by backing away.

It was Darien's turn to smirk as he swung open the door and walked into the small office.

The person sitting behind the desk—a male warlock in his early thirties, with deeply suntanned skin, a trimmed beard, and short dark hair—made him pause.

Darien gave one slow blink, a muscle feathering in his jaw. The man promptly ended the call he was on, mumbling to the person on the other end that he would call them back, and hung up the landline.

“Finn fucking Solace.” Darien was just closing the door behind him when the detective spoke.

“Keep the door open—”

“Nah, I don't think so.” Darien slammed the door in the face of the officer who was lingering outside, looking like he had no idea what to do. Darien strode to the interior window that gave him a clear view of the people sitting at their cozy little desks, every single one of those people peering at him with wide, terrified eyes, and proceeded to pull down the blinds and slant them shut. “Clearly, it was your goal to try to intimidate me by sending one of your boys to find me, so I think it's only fair that I intimidate you in return.”

He faced Finn, giving him an opportunity to argue. The only sound in the room was the swaying tassels jingling against the aluminum blinds. When Finn didn't say anything, Darien strode to the polished mahogany desk and plunked down in the chair across from him. He leaned back, put his feet up on the desk, and crossed one ankle over the other.

Finn's attention went to the mud that was caked to the soles of his black combat boots. Darien swore the guy's eye twitched. “Get your feet off my desk, Cassel.”

“I'm afraid I can't do that, it's far too comfortable.”

Finn blew out a sigh through his nose and laced his fingers on the desk. “I was hoping we could've had a civil conversation—”

“You should've thought that through before sending a peace officer to track me down at my girl's school and threaten to arrest me.” Darien leveled him with an icy stare. “You could've just called.”

Finn's brows shot up. “No offense, but the number of times you've answered your phone are too few and far between for that offer to sound enticing.” Irritation flickered across his features, accentuating the frown lines framing his mouth. “Did you know your voicemail is always full, or

do you just not bother to delete your messages?” Darien didn’t bother to listen to them either, but he wasn’t here to discuss that.

“What do you want, Finn?”

The detective considered his question, a muscle in his jaw twitching as his eyes once again flicked to Darien’s filthy boots, so close to his oh-so-valuable paperwork. “There’s a new Head Detective in town,” Finn began, his voice a bass rumble. “Where he comes from, Darkslayers don’t exist. He has plans to stamp them out in Angelthene, too.”

“I’m quaking in my boots.”

“This isn’t a joke, Cassel. He has the means to take you and your Devils down, and he won’t hesitate to do it. You’re number one on his list, followed closely by Delaney and his Reapers.”

Finn had Darien’s full attention now, if only because he was curious to know what this was all about, and why the new head honcho of the MPU was more concerned with taking down Darkslayers than the thugs and thieves that stirred up unrest in the city’s many districts. If the law was smart, they worked *with* Darkslayers, not against them. It sounded like this guy was off to a real bad start.

“I have a business proposition for you,” Finn began.

Darien allowed for a beat of silence. “I’m listening.”

“Detective Nolan wants to take down Angelthene’s illegal arms trade even more than he wants to take down people like you. I convinced him it would be worth our time to approach you with an offer that would not only help you, but would also help us. As I’m sure you are aware, Randal didn’t just have a large role to play in the routes the dealers use to smuggle the weapons into the city, but he was also a major negotiator with the clients the dealers have had decades’ long relationships with. And with Randal now gone, the assumption is that his former responsibilities will fall to you.” He nodded in Darien’s direction, not seeming to notice how hard Darien was gripping the armrests of his chair, how threatening the look in his eyes had become. They were half a second from turning black—he could feel it. Oblivious, Finn concluded, “His successor in every regard.”

Leaning forward in his seat, the anger inside him a snake coiled to strike, Darien bared his teeth. “I want nothing to do with my father’s throne of shit.”

“That’s fine.” Finn held up his hands. “But if you change your mind, and if you accept my proposition—”

“That’s a massive *if*, Finn.”

“You’ll have to pretend that you want every bit of that throne. I’m asking—*begging* you to consider my offer. If you can get in close enough to

get us some names and locations, and we can take these sons of bitches down, you and your Devils will be in the clear. I give you my word.”

“And how do you propose I do that? Considering Randal’s dead, I wouldn’t be surprised if someone’s already managed to steal his title.” It had been on his mind since Randal died, but the last thing he’d wanted was to get into a new mess, especially when he’d just got out of one.

And especially when he’d never been happier in all his life. Why would he want to invite trouble to his door when he now had Loren to consider? He’d made a promise to keep her safe, and that promise would last for as long as she lived. The decisions he made affected them both now, and he would make them wisely.

“You would’ve heard by now, no?” Finn gave him an incredulous look. “*You*—Darien Cassel. I mean, come on.” He leaned back in his seat and crossed an ankle over a knee. “Nothing happens in this city without you hearing about it.”

“You flatter me.” Darien forced himself to relax in the seat. He sighed... drummed the armrests...looked about the room. Eventually, the Surge stopped knocking, leaving him safe for a little while longer, the colors of auras and energies fading into regular vision. “Does this have anything to do with the murders caused by Blood Staves?”

The look shining in Finn’s eyes suggested he was impressed by the question. “It has everything to do with the murders caused by Blood Staves. We might’ve put Cain Nash behind bars with your help, but after some recent events, we’ve realized we might’ve been chasing after the wrong players in this game.”

Darien made a sound of agreement in his throat. He always knew going after someone like Cain wouldn’t fix the problems the law enforcement wanted to fix. Cain was only one of many people who brought danger to Angelthere’s streets. You couldn’t take out a measly pawn and expect the king and queen to fall too.

Finn was watching him. Waiting.

Darien watched him back.

“I’m doing this because I like you, Cassel,” Finn said. “Even though you’re a pain in my ass, and you should be behind bars too, I like you, and you have a lot to offer this city that you can’t give if you’re locked up in Blackwater.”

Darien had been inside the walls of the twin prisons known as Blackwater and Darkwater Penitentiary before, but only as a visitor. It was hell on earth, a cold and hostile facility where the worst of the worst were sentenced to rot. A place where his father had served time on multiple occa-

sions, only to be let off far too easily, slipping through the many cracks of the unjust system. Blackwater was the worse of the two; it was more like one big fighting ring, a place that just might kill you before you had a chance to face execution.

As Darien thought everything through, he scanned the office: the shelves that were filled with plaques and books that looked like the pages had never been cracked open; the collection of framed photographs on the desk; the black filing cabinet that was so pristine there wasn't a single fingerprint marring its surface.

"This *Detective Nolan...*," Darien began, looking back at Finn to see that he was still watching him. "Where is he? Maybe he'd like to speak to me himself."

"He's out today."

"Figures," Darien muttered. "How serious is he?"

"I've never met a more serious guy in my life, let me tell you that. He isn't messing around." Finn leaned forward in his seat again, his expression all business. He was a big fucker, the scars on his knuckles and palms suggesting he was one of the few people in this line of work who was actually willing to get his hands dirty. "If you do this, you're going to need help. Who do you have that would side with you if—and I'm saying *if*, so don't get your back up here—you took Randal Slade's place?" Before Darien could object to the question, he added, "Just enlighten me for a minute, will you?"

Darien sighed. "All right, fine. I'll enlighten you." He drummed the armrests of his chair again, his eyes flicking to the ceiling. The Surge was threatening to come back. "The Vipers and the Angels of Death are some of the few people I call friends. They'd back me up on just about anything. I wouldn't exactly call anyone from the other circles a friend, though they're not all my enemies either."

"It's a good start." Finn thought it through for a moment, rubbing the dark stubble on his chin. Darien could practically see the gears turning in his head, and because of this, he felt them turning in his own. Something told him he wouldn't like where this was going. And he was correct in thinking so as Finn began, "You know... I think if you were to speak to Malakai—"

"No," Darien bit out. The armrests of his chair crackled in protest as his fingers curled into the leather, squeezing tight.

"Just listen."

"No, *you* listen," Darien snapped. Finn sat up straighter, but he wisely kept his mouth shut as Darien went on to say, "Considering I killed two

Reapers with no explanation as to why, Malakai will be more likely to throw hands than he will to listen to me.” To be completely honest, Darien was surprised Malakai hadn’t come for his neck yet. And it wasn’t just the head of Tyson Geller that Malakai cared about. It was the other guy, Liam, who was with Tyson that night outside of Blackbird—a Reaper Darien hadn’t recognized at the time. When a Darkslayer got killed, their circle came for the person who pulled the trigger. Killing Tyson and the other guy outside of Blackbird 88 Above had been an act of defense, it was true. But Malakai didn’t know that.

Usually, something like this wouldn’t bother Darien so much. He’d been handling Malakai—and people who were far more dangerous than him—for a long time. But since he’d started dating Loren, since she’d started sleeping under his roof...

He wouldn’t risk it. It was better to keep people like Malakai at a distance, where he couldn’t find out about Loren and decide to retaliate by targeting her.

“So, let him get it out of his system,” Finn suggested, his husky voice cutting into the bubble of bone-deep rage that had enveloped him. “Make him an offer he can’t refuse. If you don’t get the Reapers on your side, people like Lionel and Channary will be challenging your claim in no time. You *need* him for an ally, Darien, or this isn’t going to work—”

“I’ve heard enough.” Darien shoved away from the desk and got to his feet. His hands were beginning to tremble, and the Sight was threatening to swallow his vision again. His pathetic attempt at quitting smoking—an attempt he’d committed to only yesterday—was making it even harder to keep the Surge at bay. The cigar he’d smoked outside of AA had only caused his need for nicotine to resurface with a vengeance.

Finn made to stand. “Hold on just a second.”

But Darien was already across the room. “I don’t need you talking to me as if I’ve already agreed to this bullshit plan.”

“Cassel—”

“I’ll think about it.” He swung open the door, denting the drywall with the handle. “And the next time you need something, you will call or text me like a normal person instead of sending one of your dogs to track me down.”

The warlock who’d led him here was still lingering outside the door, and he straightened from the wall he was leaning against as Darien pinned him with a cold stare.

“And *you*,” Darien snarled, pointing a finger at his face. His voice was so fierce, he drew the attention of every person in the area. For the first time

all day, the warlock had the wits to look worried as Darien bore down on him. “Don’t ever look at or speak to my girl again, or I’ll carve your eyes and tongue out of your head.”

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DARIEN WASN’T sure how he made it through the sprawling headquarters of the MPU without stopping to wring the blood out of someone’s neck, but the next thing he knew, he was in the parking lot.

It was still pissing down rain, as if the ground wasn’t wet enough. Stormy weather was usually his favorite, but today was the first heavy rainfall they’d had in weeks, and already the drains were flooded with a soup of debris, animal waste, and litter. Combined with the heavy humidity, it only made the urban funk of Angelthene worse than usual, even in a district as clean as this one.

Jaw clenched, temples throbbing, Darien stalked over to where he’d parked his car, right at the very end of a line of cruisers and motorcycles that belonged to law enforcement and the MPU, pristine paint streaked with water.

He slumped against the driver’s door and fished a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket—the cigarettes he’d stopped to buy on his way here, forcing the disgruntled peace officer to wait for him outside.

He took a minute to breathe deeply, to listen to the sound of the palm trees swaying in the breeze and the cars zipping past on the highway not far from where he stood. The last thing he needed right now was a full-blown Surge, especially this early in the day. And especially when there was a target he needed to track down before his deadline at midnight. He would never make it in time if he had to stop at an underground fighting ring to wrangle his inner turmoil.

What a mess of a day. Was it too much to ask for life to be normal for just a *little* while longer before another, more irritating pile of shit hit the fan? After everything that happened on Kalendae...after he’d experienced firsthand what it felt like to be alive when his family was dead...when *he* himself had died...

A break—they couldn’t catch a break.

He took out a cigarette and placed it between his lips, and he was just about to spark his lighter when a familiar face made him freeze.

Malakai Delaney was walking out the doors of the building. Malakai. Fucking. Delaney. What were the odds of that? The last person he’d expected to run into was the same asshole he’d just been arguing about in

Solace's office. Sometimes, for a city with a population of over eight million, it felt horribly small here. If Malakai saw him, Darien wasn't sure if they'd both wind up dead or in holding cells by the time they were through with each other.

As bad as he knew it would be to indulge in this violent fantasy, a fight would do him some good right about now. And if there was anyone in this city who was a worthy opponent, it was this asshole.

Darien found the corners of his lips tipping up. What he wouldn't give to realign this guy's nose and jaw. But as Darien continued to study Malakai, he realized someone had already beat him to the punch.

With his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black leather jacket, and his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, the leader of the Reapers looked a little worse for wear. There was a limp in his step, and dried blood was caked on his left eyebrow and lower lip. His shoulders were hunched, and his black steel-toe boots were untied, the laces dragging through mud puddles. From what Darien could see of his shirt through his unzipped jacket, it was filthy and torn in more places than one. So were his jeans, as if a wild animal had ripped into him.

Darien snorted a laugh. What a sight that would've been.

Strutting at Malakai's side in chunky platform sneakers was a petite female with purplish-blond hair that fell to her hips, a leather skirt and crop-top, and fishnets that made her moon-pale legs look like they were glowing. She wore a skull-print hoodie that had to be at least two sizes too big for her, and around her throat was a black necklace that looked more like a dog collar.

Jewels Delaney, Malakai's sister. Judging from the look on her face, and the way she was waving her hands in the air dramatically while she spoke, she was giving him shit for something. Malakai was too distracted to notice Darien as they made their way to a flashy motorcycle, the sides painted with the Reapers' logo.

When they reached the bike, Malakai got on first, shaking his shoulder-length hair out of his face as he handed Jewels the only available helmet. She put it on and swung her leg over the bike to perch on the seat behind her brother. She was still giving him hell as she buckled and tightened the straps on the helmet, and Darien had to admit it was amusing to see her smack the back of her brother's head with an open palm, and even more entertaining to see Malakai shrink under the punishment, looking more like a little boy getting scolded than a twenty-six-year-old man who slit throats for a living.

The engine rumbled to life, and they sped away in a flash, Malakai

refusing to let up on the accelerator until the whole city could hear that blasted motorcycle ripping through the streets.

Gritting his teeth, Darien shoved a finger into an ear, holding it there until the bike was far enough away that the sound of it stopped grating on his nerves. With a shake of his head, he returned to sparking the cigarette.

“You look like you could use a drink,” said a husky male voice.

Blowing out a breath of rippling smoke, Darien turned to see an Angel of Death approaching, ebony wings tucked in tight behind him.

Whenever Darien saw Dominic Valencia, the Angel wasn't usually dressed in blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and sneakers—and he usually wasn't looking like a bus had run him over approximately ten times. His eyes were bloodshot, the purple half-moons ringing the skin underneath suggesting he hadn't slept a wink last night. There was a gash in his left eyebrow, and dark bruises were scattered across his cheekbones and the column of his throat. He looked just as rough as Malakai, which made Darien realize it likely wasn't a coincidence that the two of them were here at the same time.

Dominic liked to fight, which was why Darien didn't feel guilty for smirking as he took in his friend's battered appearance. Darien hadn't seen Dom this messed up since their high school days, when they used to beat the living daylight out of the students they didn't get along with. They didn't always win, but they always had fun.

Darien's lips twitched with a smile. “Are we having a Darkslayer reunion or something?”

The Angel grinned, his teeth a bright white against brown skin. “I take it you saw Malakai.”

“Sure did. And his cryptic little sister, too.”

Dominic laughed.

Taking another drag on the cigarette, Darien jerked his chin at the bruises on Dom's throat. “You look like you got choked.”

“I did, and it wasn't the fun kind.” Dom answered Darien's growing smile with one of his own. “That's actually why I'm here.” He shifted his weight to one leg, winced, and then shifted back to the other. “Got into a fight with Delaney last night. He tried to choke me, I smashed an ashtray over his head... I think we're even for a while.” Dom's wings twitched, feathers rustling, as if simply remembering last night's events gave him an instant rush of adrenaline.

“Shit,” Darien chuckled. “I would've liked to see that.”

“I could've used the backup.”

“Where was Conrad?”

“Ah, you know how he is. He was getting his cock sucked by some

chick in the bathroom and didn't hear anything until Delaney came after me with a meat cleaver. People were screaming by then, emergency was called—it was a full meal-deal at no extra charge.”

Darien laughed, picturing it.

“The peace officers thought it would be a good idea to bring us here instead of to the precinct. More magic spells and all.” He winked.

“Right. You look hung over as shit.”

“Thanks,” Dom snickered, kicking a pebble away from his shoe. A question sparked in his eyes as he looked Darien over, no doubt searching for evidence to suggest he'd been locked up here as well. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Got called in by Finn Solace.”

The Angel's mouth twitched. “Something tells me you're pissed.”

More smoke rippled past Darien's lips. “I'm livid.” He couldn't deny that the cigarette was helping with his mood, but his blood was still boiling in his veins. It would take more than a little nicotine to fix how he was feeling right now.

Dominic was watching him with understanding. The Angel had known Darien for so long that he was one of the few people who understood the path he'd walked to become the person he was today, and how steep that path was. He'd seen the journey, not just the destination. The hardships that had pounded him into this flawed version of himself, the dreams that had been crushed and replaced with those of his sick father's, the innocence that had literally been beat out of him—he'd seen all of it, and he'd still stayed. Those people were the best kind—the ones who didn't run away when shit got tough.

“You want to talk about it over that drink?”

Darien had to smirk at that. “You're already hungover and you want a drink?”

“Always.”

Darien looked up, where six magpies were soaring through the overcast sky. “I've got a collection to make. But if you want to talk about it over blood instead of booze, that can be arranged.”

Dominic flashed a grin. “Hell yeah.”

Unlocking the car with the remote, Darien flicked the cigarette to the damp pavement and swung open his door. “Get in.” He paused, eyeing Dominic as he made his way around the car. “And watch your wings, will you? I'm not in the mood to vacuum up a bunch of feathers today.”

The Angel scowled. “Would you quit bringing that up?”

“It looked like someone plucked a chicken in here.”

“You’re an asshole. And you really need to stop telling everyone within earshot when you’re drunk too. How would *you* like it?”

Darien winked. “Still want to join me?”

“Yeah, I still want to join you,” he grumbled. He got in carefully, reclined his seat, and added, “Dickhead.”

# 3

Loren checked her phone for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past thirty minutes, the screen lighting up her face with a ghostly glow in the rain-drenched twilight.

Had thirty minutes passed already?

Where she stood just outside the wrought-iron gates to Angelthene Academy for Magic, Loren tapped her foot on the sidewalk, water splashing her sneakers and gray leggings. It was unusually cold tonight, even for late Januarius, her fleecy sweatshirt barely staving off the chill in the damp air. She was looking forward to her time at Hell's Gate, where she could bundle up in a blanket with a hot cup of tea, her favorite Devil cozied up beside her.

The same Devil who wasn't answering his phone.

Even though she knew not enough time had passed for the clock to have changed yet, she checked the time again, squinting against the bright glare of the phone screen.

Darien was late. Under any other circumstances, she wouldn't have minded, but ever since that peace officer had interrupted their fun during her lunch hour, she had felt uneasy. He hadn't texted or called since he'd left, not even once. Usually, she wouldn't have minded, but again: *circumstances*.

Had something bad happened to him? Had he been arrested, and if so, why? Was he hurt?

She wished Dallas and Sabine were out here, so she could vent her worries to listening ears. But they were currently holed up in the dormitory

of the House of Salt until suppertime. Dallas wouldn't be coming to Hell's Gate until after school tomorrow; as a venefica, she had more classes to attend this semester than Loren. Sabine had more classes as well, and then she would be spending her weekend in the Silverwood District with Logan Sands, the werewolf she denied having feelings for but was constantly unable to stay away from.

So, it was just her. Just her, Singer, and the last of the rain that had painted the evening a sleepy shade of blue.

As Loren waited for Darien, she took in her surroundings, forcing herself to focus on anything other than her phone. More specifically, the clock on the screen.

Palm trees sagged with moisture, rain dribbling off fronds. Sidewalks were flooded, every patch of grass waterlogged. The storm drains in the parking lot gurgled as streams of water swirled beneath the city, the swift currents carrying debris that would soon clog them up, an accumulation that would stink to high heaven the moment Angelthene's hot sun came out to bake the city. In the fragrant jacaranda trees dotting the area, magpies chattered, their bodies hidden behind fat clusters of the forever-blooming flowers of Angelthene.

Loren squinted against the dark and scanned the closest jacaranda tree. It was the largest of its kind in the area, its canopy of branches stretching toward a bench near a garden of rocks and succulents. Loren recalled the day she'd collapsed onto that bench several months ago, minutes before Darien had pulled up and brought her and Dallas to Puerta de la Muerta to find answers about Sabine's disappearance. The stretch of sidewalk under the broad shelter of the tree was speckled with purple-blue petals, the velvety flesh of them smeared into the ground by the shoes of passers-by.

It took a while to count the magpies in the tree, the dense shadows nearly swallowing up several of the black-and-white bodies perched on the branches. Loren counted them a second time, just to be sure.

There were six of them. How did the rhyme go again?

*Five for heaven*

*Six for hell...*

Loren stared at the tree. The birds rustled their wings, their piercing cries echoing far into the coming night.

It was only a stupid rhyme—no reason to break a sweat over a few birds. Contrary to what most people in Terra believed, she knew better than to think they were wise, all-seeing animals capable of predicting the future. Whoever had invented that silly superstition was full of it. The

future could always change. Nothing was set in stone, and no feathered critter had the right to tell her that hell was coming.

A shadow caught Loren's eye. A shadow with a tail that curled up over his back.

Singer was snuffling around the creosote and cacti near the gates, ears erect with curiosity. Like all Familiars, his eyes glowed like gemstones, the shade of them—white like diamonds—bright against his misty body.

Loren snapped her fingers. "Stay close, buddy," she whispered. He raised his head to look at her, cocked it to one side, then promptly returned to snuffling, though he didn't stray any farther.

As the minutes wore on, Loren found her feet drifting toward the gates. It might be a good idea to get back on campus—just in case. If she had known Darien was going to be later than usual, she never would've come out here, especially not by herself. By now, the demons that dwelled in the sewers would be stirring awake in their dens of bones, eager to hunt on this moonless night. They would be looking to feed, and the biggest and oldest ones wouldn't settle for measly sewer rats.

"Singer," she said quietly. Sensing the tension in her voice, the Familiar trotted to her side and looked up at her in question. "Let's go back inside until Darien messages us."

Together, they walked back to the gates. It took a couple seconds before they swung open, the magic spells tasting her aura as they prepared to let her back onto school property.

The pop of gravel under tires made her pause. As she looked over her shoulder, she was careful to keep her body inside the barrier of protective spells, the gates still open. No threats could touch her here.

Beams of white swept across the road, the wet pavement reflecting the headlights like a mirror. Loren held up a hand to block the glare as a moon-gray sports car glided to a stop beside the curb, the deep engine giving off a vicious groan that screamed wealth and speed. The windows were tinted, fully concealing whoever drove it, and when the glass on the passenger's side lowered, she recognized the husky voice before she could make out his face in the murky darkness of the car.

"What the hell are you doing outside the gates?" Travis Devlin demanded. Well, that explained why she didn't recognize the car; she usually saw him on motorcycles.

She stifled a smile. "Technically, I'm in them."

"Which means you were *out* of them a minute ago." Travis's watch glinted in the glow of a streetlight as he waved a hand, his lightly scarred

skin tattooed with blue pigment in geometric designs. “Get in the car before I tell Darien to whoop your ass.”

The spells fluttered as Loren passed through the barrier and stepped off the sidewalk. She opened the passenger’s-side door, the warm air inside the car wrapping around her like a hug. Singer bounded into her shadow with a joyful yelp in Travis’s direction, as if to say hello, and disappeared, not a wisp of dark mist left behind.

Having Singer as her Familiar was an adjustment she was still getting used to. The dog accompanied her everywhere now, so she no longer had to feel bad about leaving him alone at the apothecary. Sometimes, he was so silent in her shadow that she would forget he was there until she heard him panting or yawning. Because Singer couldn’t talk, her connection to him wasn’t quite the same as the one Darien shared with Bandit. But sometimes she caught Bandit and Singer conversing, their words silent to her ears. Loren kept meaning to ask Darien how the Spirit Bonds worked, but she always forgot.

Just as she was about to get in Travis’s car, something made her pause. She looked over her shoulder at the academy as a damp breeze blew through the area, carrying tendrils of golden hair across her face.

She could’ve sworn she felt someone watching her, but when she scanned the twilight grounds, no one was there.

“Are you getting in?” Travis called through the open door. “Or are you hoping I’ll have to kill a few demons before supper?”

“Sorry,” Loren mumbled. Ducking her head, she eased herself down onto the low seat, the protective spellwork on the car raising a shiver on her skin, and closed the door. The interior smelled of spearmint and the woody aroma of leather cleaner. Now that the door was shut, she felt the last of the tension in her muscles subside, especially as she took in Travis flicking through the playlist on the touchscreen in the dash, not a hint of fear on his face. “Where’s Darien?” she asked, reaching over her shoulder to grab her seatbelt and buckle it. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.” Travis turned the music down a few notches and pulled out onto the road. The headlights drove away the shadows lurking between the jacaranda and palm trees, the darkness not nearly as frightening now that a Devil was with her. “Took him longer than he thought it would to gut a target, so he asked if I could pick you up.” The engine snarled as they zipped down the hill and into the city, tires splashing through puddles.

As if Darien heard their conversation, Loren’s phone buzzed in her hand. She unlocked it and read his message.

DARIEN

Hi, sweetheart. Sorry for not texting sooner, I got caught up with something. Travis there yet?

LOREN

Yes, he just got here. Is everything okay?

A typing bubble popped up on the screen. Loren watched it, chewing on her pinky nail, ignoring the acrid taste of sparkly polish seeping across her tongue. The suspense of hearing what the law enforcement had wanted from him today was killing her, and she found her foot tapping out an anxious beat on the floormat.

Finally, his answer came through.

DARIEN

Everything's fine. I'll see you at home in a couple hours, okay?

She didn't believe that everything was as fine as he was making it out to be, but she supposed she could wait until she saw him in person before she dug deeper.

LOREN

Okay.

She added a heart symbol to the end of the message before hitting SEND. She clicked off the screen and set the phone on her thigh.

Travis stole a glance at her as he maneuvered the last of the day's traffic. "That him?"

Loren nodded, pulling the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her numb fingers. "Yeah. He said he'll be home in a couple hours."

"See? Told you not to worry."

They drove in silence for a while. Angelthene's spotless northern districts were bright with streetlights, billboards, and rows of skyscrapers dotted with hundreds of glowing windows. In the heart of the North End was the Control Tower, the reflective cristala of Angelthene's tallest building shining like silver. The sight of the blade-like finial that pierced the starry sky, projecting the forcefield over the city, threw Loren back in time—to the events of Kalendae and everything that had transpired on that tower. She forced herself not to think about it as they made their way to the Victoria Amazonica District, breezing through dimly lit tunnels, across overpasses, and down stretches of winding highways.

Travis's voice slightly startled her in the quiet of the car. "You don't say much when Darien's not around, do you?"

She pulled her attention from the billboard flitting by her window—the neon letters advertising what the city claimed were the best protection spells on the market. Some of the billboards lining the roads were so large, they swallowed up the buildings behind them. After spending a little time with Darkslayers, Loren had learned a thing or two about spells. If a person wanted the best, they had to pay a visit to the Umbra Forum, and they had to not only be able to afford the spells sold through the black market, but also have the strength and status to walk out afterward without getting mugged or murdered.

Loren twisted in her seat to face Travis. "I've always been pretty quiet," she said.

Travis merely nodded.

"I like your car. Is it new?"

"Brand new. Just got it last week."

Silence resumed. It seemed Travis wasn't much of a talker either. Or maybe it was just her. Maybe she was making it awkward.

Kicking off her shoes, she put her cold feet up on the edge of the seat and hugged her knees. "So, what's your story with Darien? I mean, I know you're his cousin. But what made you decide to be a Darkslayer?" As soon as the words were out, she felt a prickle of embarrassment. Did anyone ever really *decide* to be a Darkslayer? Her question made it sound like she was inquiring about his choice of courses in university.

As if he could read her thoughts, Travis said, "I wouldn't really say I *decided* to become one. It fell onto my shoulders like an inheritance, I guess. My father is a Darkslayer in Yveswich. For reasons we won't discuss, I didn't want anything to do with him, so as soon as I turned seventeen, I left the city with Roman's help—Roman's my older brother—and came to Angelthene. Started hanging out with Darien again. He formed the Seven Devils, and the rest is history."

Interesting. There was still so much she didn't know about them, Darien included. She wondered if Roman was a Darkslayer as well, and if he was, she wondered which house he belonged to in Yveswich. Most of the capital cities sprinkled throughout Terra had their own tiers of Darkslayers, and Yveswich, being even bigger and more populated than Angelthene, was no different. Yveswich was the capital of the state of Ker. It was home to the infamous Shadowmasters, a circle considered by some to be as dangerous and capable as the Seven Devils.

"Randal was your uncle?" she asked.

“Yup.” Travis made a popping sound on the *p*. “This might be hard for you to believe, but my dad made Randal look like a saint.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “I know what you’re thinking. ‘What’s up with all you guys having lunatics for fathers?’” He huffed a laugh and turned to look at her again, one scarred eyebrow raised. “Am I right or am I right?”

“No judgement.” Loren shrugged. “So, if you didn’t want to be a Darkslayer, then what *did* you want to be?”

Travis looked away from her so quickly, it was as if she’d slapped his head to the side. She eyed him as he readjusted in his seat and leaned an arm on his door.

Was her question really so bad that it had managed to unsettle him like this? *Strange*, she thought. But if she’d learned anything lately, it was that everyone had something that struck a nerve in them, even the Devlin Devil. Even *the* Darien Cassel had a lot of hidden demons she never would’ve guessed existed, had she not been given the opportunity to get to know him as well as she knew him now.

“If you want the truth, I was pretty artsy in school,” Travis said at last, his voice so low it was practically a mumble. “I’ve always wanted to be a tattoo artist.” A brief pause. “I was also into drama.” He said the last part so quietly, Loren barely heard him.

“Drama?” Her brows flicked up. “I have to admit, I’m surprised. You don’t really strike me as the type.”

Travis laughed. “I know, right? All everyone ever hears about are drama and band geeks.” While Loren’s smile grew at the thought of Travis being labeled a drama geek, his faded a little. “I was always into it, geeks or no, but if I had to pick one, it’d probably be tattooing.” He gestured to the sleeve on his left arm, the black muscle shirt he wore allowing every bit of the artwork to be seen. “I did a few of my own tattoos actually. And a couple of Darien’s.”

“Impressive.” Maybe she was imagining it in the darkness of the car, but she thought his cheeks were reddening.

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean it,” she insisted. “I’ve taken a good look at Darien’s tattoos. There was a lot of detail that went into those.” Every tattoo on his body was incredible. A work of art, each one, just like the man who wore them. Sometimes, when she couldn’t sleep at night, she would study them in the candlelight in their bedroom until exhaustion finally overcame her, his ink a lullaby for her eyes.

“If you’re talking about his backpiece, that was Kyle at Diablo. I’m not that talented.”

"I'm sure you're just being modest."

Travis merely shrugged.

She studied him as he switched lanes on the highway, passing several cars whose drivers were going way under the speed limit. He seemed to be avoiding looking at her.

"I say, do it," Loren said. Travis's head turned, ever so slightly, in her direction, but he kept his eyes on the road, the pavement washed in the white of the car's headlights. "Try it one day, if only to say that you did."

He seemed to really consider her words. He was quiet for so long that she was beginning to think he wouldn't say anything more, but after a moment, he shook his head. "Nah."

"Why not?" She took care to keep her tone polite.

"I'm a Devil." The way he said it implied it should be enough of an answer for her. "When we're sworn into a circle, in a way we are reborn. And when you're born a Darkslayer, you die a Darkslayer. Everyone knows that."

Loren lowered her feet to the floor, balancing them on her shoes, and folded her hands in her lap. "That sounds a little...dark."

"There's nothing light about this life, Loren," he said, his face lined with the kind of regret she couldn't even begin to fathom. "Don't ever forget that." The words were slightly bitter, the tone causing a tremor to dart up her spine.

"Well, I think you should still consider it. Okay?"

"Sure." When he smiled, it was a cold thing. He flicked up the volume of the music, his empty gaze on the road. "I'll consider it."

Loren couldn't stop replaying those words in her head for the rest of the ride. Even long after Travis had clearly forgotten all about their conversation, busying himself with mouthing the lyrics to the heavy metal song punching through the speakers, she still thought about it.

When you were born a Darkslayer, you died a Darkslayer. Did that mean Darien would always be one, too?

# 4

Maximus Reacher hated the smell of blood. He found his aversion to it kind of funny, considering he killed people for a living. And considering he was currently standing in the middle of a spacious industrial freezer in the basement of a nightclub in Oldtown, the corpses of two vampires bleeding dry at his feet.

As he lowered himself to a crouch in the puddle of blue-tinted blood, and began severing the target's head from the body, he felt like laughing.

Had he finally lost his mind?

Where she was squatting before the other victim, Lace Rivera looked up at him in question. She unsheathed the knife strapped to her thigh, her curtain of white-blond hair nearly draping in puddles of blood. Countless weapons were concealed in her black bodysuit, so many weapons that she probably couldn't run out of options to kill people even if she tried.

"What are you smiling about?" Lace's breath fogged before her. She grabbed the vampire's head by the hair and began cutting into the flesh of his throat. Blue blood swirled into the drain in the center of the floor, gurgling as it trickled down.

"I was just thinking that I might've finally lost my last marble."

Her ruby-painted lips parted with a smirk. "Honey, you lost that last marble a long time ago."

"Thanks."

She winked. "Don't mention it."

Max felt his cell phone buzz in the pocket of his brown leather jacket. He ignored it and kept cutting, flesh squishing beneath his blade. Blood

bubbled up between his fingers and dripped to the cold floor. Mixed with the floral stench of vampire flesh, the metallic tang of it was nearly unbearable, especially in a confined space like this. With the freezer door shut tight, the distant thumping of music from the club one floor above could barely be heard in here.

They didn't usually collect in freezers—in fact, this was a first—but it was their best option at Club Ethereal, the only place in the building where they were least likely to be caught. The kitchen was rarely used, and their only chef was usually smoking out back for most of his shift. No one ever ordered food here, not unless they wanted to puke up their guts so hard they'd wind up in emergency.

When his pocket buzzed again, he stopped and wiped the sweat off his brow with the clean skin of his wrist. He grabbed his phone out of his jacket with the hand that had less blood on it than the other.

The screen was full with messages from Darien. He unlocked it with face recognition and read the messages.

DARIEN

Team meeting

The second one said,

Is Lacey with you?

Approximately ten minutes later, another message had come through.

Where are you?

And then, two minutes ago:

Answer me, fucker.

Max took a clean end of his glove into his teeth and tugged it off. He placed it on his knee and started typing with one hand.

MAX

You know, it helps if you actually plan these team meetings instead of springing them on us like this.

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Barely two seconds passed before Darien's reply came through with another loud buzz.

DARIEN

Be at Hell's Gate in one hour.

Max sighed.

MAX

My hands are a little full.

DARIEN

Then bag whatever you're carrying and get home.

Damn, he was bossy when he wanted to be.

Max looked down at the partially severed vampire head. What a goddamn mess they'd made. He almost felt bad for whoever would have to clean it up. Whenever they collected, they usually disposed of all evidence themselves to avoid problems or delays, but tonight was an exception. Law enforcement had been chasing after these vampires for some time now. The two had carved quite a path of destruction through the city by feeding on unwilling humans and veneficae until the victims were nothing but husks. Needless to say, these two were criminals who wouldn't be missed, least of all by cops and the MPU.

*Alright*, Max wrote back. He hated texting; his fingers were too big and clumsy for this tiny screen. Though he had to admit he'd improved since he'd started dating Dallas. The witch sent so many messages in a single day, he had trouble keeping up. *See you soon, boss*.

Lace was already on her feet, the duffel bag containing the first severed head sagging on the floor. She sparked a cigarette, her softly angled gray eyes roaming his face. "There's blood on your cheek."

"There's blood on your cigarette."

Lace examined the cigarette pinched between her manicured fingers, blood soaking through the cylinder.

She merely shrugged and took a long drag.

"Gross." Max put his glove back on and finished cutting the vampire's head off. He would've been finished with this a whole lot faster if they'd had the option of smuggling bigger knives into this shithole. But the bouncers at the door had insisted on patting everyone down, and there were limits to what could be hidden with spells—even when someone like Tanner Atlas was the mind behind the magic.

When he was done, Max shoved the head into the duffel bag beside the other one—the evidence he would deliver to the rabbit messenger who'd come to them seeking business for a client. A client Max would be willing

to bet was an officer of the law, likely someone who was at their wit's end trying to find peace for the family members of the victims.

"Who texted you?" Lace asked.

"Darren." Now that business was done, he peeled off his gloves and stood, the floor beneath his boots tacky with blood. "He said we're having a team meeting at the house in an hour."

"What for?"

"He didn't say."

"Shit." She blew out a long stream of smoke that made his eyes instantly water. Cigars, he loved. Cigarettes? Hated with a capital H. "I bet you it has something to do with Randal."

"Can we not be pessimistic right from the get-go?" He plucked the cigarette out of her fingers, threw it to the floor, and stamped it flat under his boot, blood splashing his pants.

"I wasn't done," she objected.

"I am." He gestured with a large hand to the freezer door. "Ladies first. I need a shower."

Upstairs, Club Ethereal was packed and noisy as hell. Sweaty bodies were crammed together like sardines, drinking and shouting and dancing, lost in an alcohol-soaked haze. Naked women and men gyrated on metal poles and hoops that hung from a low ceiling. The place was dusty and airless, and it reeked of vomit and booze and...and kerosene. He hadn't been able to pinpoint the smell right away, but now...

On the small stage, not far from where he was walking, were fire performers. Men and women dancing with fiery hoops and batons they waved through the smoky air. Cheers rippled through the building, spurring the performers to give them more. Max walked faster, bumping into bodies as he moved, his stomach and head spinning at the same pace. Behind him, Lace was trying to say something, but his ears weren't working. He had to get out of here.

Why did there need to be fire performers here? *Now?* While *he* was here? A perfect example of wrong place, wrong time.

The crowd screamed with excitement as one of the dancers breathed a stream of fire into the air above the stage.

Max flinched. He rocked back into the crowd, breathing hard. He slammed into a witch, who spilled her drink down the front of her dress.

"Hey!" the woman protested.

Max mumbled an apology and kept walking away from the flames, steering his clumsy body toward the door. Sweat was beading on his skin, and suddenly he couldn't remember how to breathe, how to move his feet

at a pace faster than a shuffle. The sound of a girl screaming filled his head, and he tasted smoke at the back of his throat, could feel ash coating his skin, the powdery residue jammed up under his nails.

He had to get out of here. Where in Ignis was the damn exit? His eyes wheeled, looking but not seeing amid the panic—

*There.* The exit sign glowed like a beacon, close but still too far.

He walked faster, sweat running in steady tracks down his cheeks, making his hair cling to his forehead.

They were nearing the doors when he heard a commotion behind him. Swallowing bile, he forced himself to stop and turn around...

A man was blocking Lace's path, his broad back facing Max. He was speaking to her in a voice that was too low for Max to hear from this distance. But as he listened, he was able to pick up on a few words between thumps of music, between the waves of panic gripping his mind and heart in a fist.

He recognized that husky voice immediately, and even if he hadn't, the tattoo of a Hellhound marking the golden-brown skin below the man's ear would've clued him into who he was. A full-blooded hellseher, he was eternally stuck in his late thirties. He had a full head of gray-flecked black hair and a groomed beard, the natural hue of his eyes so dark it was almost as black as when he used the Sight.

Max's fingers curled tightly around the strap of the duffel bag as he waited. As he prepared to act, should Lace need the help. He wasn't sure how useful he would be in his current state, but he had to try. He was Maximus Reacher, for shit's sake. Years and countless therapy sessions had passed since that night. *Years.* He had to get a grip.

"Get out of my way." Lace spoke through clenched teeth. She tried to move past the Hellhound, only to be fenced in again by his stocky form, partially obscuring her from Max's view. "I said get out of my way!"

When Lionel Savage of the Hunting Grounds still wouldn't budge, Lace's eyes flicked to Max.

Max moved. His gut was roiling, and his heart was pounding like the music shaking the ground, but he moved.

He pushed through the crowd and stalked up to Lionel, who slowly turned around to face him, a smile playing on the curve of his scarred mouth. Two big hellsehers, Seth Marksman and Colton Adler, separated themselves from the crowd of people, making it known who they'd come here with tonight. Max would be willing to bet there were more where these two came from. As former Right Hand of Randal Slade, Lionel

fought dirty. He took zero risks, always bringing more backup than he allowed you to see.

“Reacher,” Lionel drawled. “I would say what a pleasant surprise it is to see you here, but I have to admit I half-expected you to still be serving as Lacey’s chaperone.”

“I don’t need a chaperone,” Lace hissed.

Lionel exaggerated the act of looking between Max and Lace. “I can see that.”

“Is there anything else you want to say, Lionel?” Max drawled, stepping closer. “Or can we quit fucking around and cut to the fun part?” He inched his hand out of his pocket, the brass knuckles attached to his fist gleaming in the strobe lights. “I’m itching for a fight, and your face would make a fabulous punching bag.” Truth be told, he still felt like hurling, but he hoped the lighting would disguise the truth. If it came down to a fight, he was less likely to win and more likely to vomit all over Lionel’s shirt.

Lionel gave him a cold smile. “A tempting offer, but I’ll have to take you up on it another time. Maybe we can all meet at the Pit.” He winked, that wolfish smile broadening.

“Yeah, maybe,” Max taunted back, knowing exactly what this asshole was alluding to. It was to Lace that Max mouthed, “Let’s go.” He could smell the kerosene again.

Thankfully, Lace didn’t hesitate to push past Lionel and make her way to Max’s side, her expression as cold and hard as a statue.

They turned and began to walk into the crowd. Max thought—and hoped—they were in the clear.

But then Lionel spoke. And Lace froze.

“If you ever feel like returning to a line of work that you’re actually good at, I could use some extra pocket change. You always were better at fucking strangers than you were killing them.”

Max stiffened. “Lacey,” he tried. He felt tension rippling off of her, more intense than his own. When he saw her upper lip curl back over her teeth, he knew they were done for.

She was whirling on a heel and lunging for Lionel before Max had a chance to react. “You asshole!” she barked. The music picked up tempo, nearly swallowing her words. The strobe lights matched it, plunging their surroundings into flashes of distracting color.

“Lacey—*don’t!*” Max bellowed. Shouldering the duffel bag, he dove across the distance separating him from Lace, catching her mere seconds before her fist could connect with Lionel’s nose.

The Huntsman was smirking, daring her to make impact, while his

men stood by and watched, the same identical looks of sick pleasure on their faces. He wondered if these assholes had been around all those years ago, when she'd lived under his roof.

Max picked Lacey up mid-jump, her body snapping back against his like a rubber band. She was flailing, the back of her head nearly colliding with his face. Guttural snarls and curse words tore out of her, the force she threw into her struggles nearly sending them both crashing to the floor. Max held onto her tightly, his body absorbing every kick, every twist and lunge.

"Stop!" He grunted as she threw her elbows into his ribs. "Lacey, *please*. This is what he wants, can't you see that?"

Just like that, Lace went limp as a ragdoll in Max's arms, the tension vacating her body as if it had never been there to begin with.

"This is what he wants!" Max hissed again. Maybe that was what had made her listen, what'd made her realize this battle was futile. Her chest was still heaving, and her heart was fluttering like a hummingbird's wings beneath his palm, but aside from that, she was still.

Lionel and his men snickered. Clubbers stared, a few reaching for their phones, as if to call the emergency line or snap a picture. The fire performers were gone, thank gods, but the place still reeked of kerosene and smoke.

"We need to go." Max's words were voiced in a quiet volume only Lace could hear.

"Put me down," she panted.

He set her on her feet, grabbed her by the wrist, and pulled her through the crowd of people, some of those people nearly tripping over their own feet in their efforts to get out of the way.

Lionel called from behind them, "Tell Darien I'll be seeing him soon." Max felt Lace's body go stiff at the threat, the pulse in her wrist skipping twice.

"Don't worry about that," Max said, lightly squeezing her wrist in comfort and warning. "Darien can handle him."

Max nearly knocked several people to the floor as he scrambled to get Lacey out of the club. And when they got outside, she rushed around the corner of the building and down a grimy alley, where she started pacing back and forth near the dumpsters.

The air was heavy from the day's rain, the humidity turning the medley of smells in the district into a pungent and fishy soup. Grateful to be free of the oily stink of kerosene, Max sucked down the repulsive air like it was fresh coffee or flowers as he followed Lace into the damp alley.

She was breathing heavily through her teeth, her pale throat bobbing as she swallowed back what Max knew was the urge to vomit. That made two of them, but for far different reasons. She ran a shaking hand through her hair, followed by the other, again and again.

“I hate him,” she choked out.

When Max spoke, he was careful to keep his tone soft. “I know—”

“You don’t know *anything!*” she shrieked, the words slapping against the alley walls. She kept pacing in deep puddles, her fingers in tight fists. “*No one* knows what it’s like to live under his roof. To be in his *care*.” With a shake of her head, she repeated, “In his *care*.”

Lionel was Lace’s uncle, and one of her only living family members. After her parents died when she was a teenager, the social workers had carelessly dumped her on his doorstep like a sack of trash. From there, he’d put her to work in ways that had done a thorough job of scarring her soul as much as they had her body, forcing her to collect under the Darkslaying table before she even reached legal drinking age.

Killing targets for him had wrecked her so thoroughly that she’d briefly turned to another form of income, one she’d given up pursuing after her first week, realizing that it, too, wasn’t the right path for her. Lionel had denied her a way out of Darkslaying until she’d turned eighteen, and even then, she’d found it difficult to fully escape him and rinse her mind clean of the poisonous thoughts he’d forced her to believe, how worthless he’d made her feel. Always criticizing her, always taking every last copper she made, and barely giving her food on her plate in return for the endless emotional scars.

When she’d turned eighteen, she’d left, and along the way she’d met Darien, who was forming the Devils at the time. Not knowing where she belonged in life, she’d accepted a position in his house, clinging to the exceptional patience he’d had for her, such a change from what she was used to. Darien understood what she’d gone through, and because of this, he’d never pushed her to collect more than she was comfortable with. Like so many others, she’d felt trapped in the Darkslayer life, unable to walk away from it. And even now, even years later, it was the only job she knew how to do, the only path she knew how to walk, no matter how much it tore her apart.

Max waited in silence. He simply watched her, trusting that her blind rage would soon set her free from its chokehold. That was what she needed whenever something like this happened. Patience. Silence. The space to let her emotions loose after repressing them for so long while growing up. Eventually, her breathing slowed, and so did her pacing.

She froze in the middle of the alley. “I want to cut his heart out, Max.” Although the words were quiet, they weren’t weak. “I want to cut it out and shove it down his throat. I’ll never forgive him for everything he did to me.” A tear slipped down her cheek, clearing a track in her makeup. She scrubbed it away with black-gloved fingers. “Every time I see him, it throws me back to when I was sixteen, and I feel helpless all over again, like I haven’t just spent the past five years running with Devils.” With every word spoken, her voice grew thicker with emotion, and although her breathing had slowed, it was still ragged. “And I feel...alone. I think that’s the worst part: feeling alone. Nothing in the world is worse than that.”

Max took a step toward her, but forced himself to stop, giving her space. “You’re not alone, Lacey. Not anymore.”

A gust of wind swept down the alley, garbage scraping across uneven pavement. “He shouldn’t even be allowed to breathe.”

“One day, he’ll be rotting in the ground like the piece of shit he is. I promise you that.” Even if he had to be the one to cut out Lionel’s heart and feed it to him, he would do it, if only so she could finally have peace.

When she spoke again, Lacey still wouldn’t look at him. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Maximus.”

She walked out of the alley, her vacant eyes on her boots. Max followed to where his SUV was parked in a dirt lot across the street from the club. Tanner Atlas was leaning back against the hood, legs crossed at the ankles, glasses sliding down his nose. The tinny music drifting through the speakers on his phone told Max he was playing one of those old videogames that used to only be available in arcades.

“Playing that frog game again?” Max asked.

The hacker glanced up. “I might be a touch addicted.” Pushing his glasses back up his nose, he closed the game and slipped his phone into his back pocket. “Took you guys long enough.”

Shouldering the duffel bag, Max shoved his hair back—the hair he now wore longer on the top and shorter on the sides, after Dallas had told him how much she liked not only the length, but the lightened pieces from the sun. “If you want to switch jobs next time,” he said, “I’d be happy to let you get your hands bloody for a change.”

“Pfft.” Tanner pushed off the hood and made for the back door as Lacey headed for the passenger’s side. “You couldn’t hack a spell system to save your life.”

“Would you open the bloody door already, Atlas?” Lacey’s words were scathing.

Tanner unlocked the doors with the remote, and then tossed the keys to Max. “Something happen in there?”

“Lionel happened,” Lace mumbled. She swung open the door and got in. “Lionel *always* happens.”

Max forced his jumbled thoughts into order as he got in the driver’s side and started the engine.

They drove in silence for several minutes along the dark curve of the Angelthene River. For once in his life, Max didn’t mind the fishy scent permeating this district. He gulped it down, hoping it might disguise the kerosene and smoke lingering in his airways.

Speaking of smoke... Max grabbed the cigar from the cupholder, placed the end between his lips, and lit it, hurrying to snap the lighter shut. Even a small flame like that could sometimes unsettle him.

That first lungful was exactly what he needed to relax his muscles and his mind, to stop hearing those horrible screams echoing in his memories. He nearly groaned with pleasure, eyelids sliding shut.

“Please,” Lace muttered. “I hear enough moaning from you every time Dallas sleeps over.” Whoops—guess he *had* groaned out loud. Where was his mind at?

Tanner, who was slumped against his door, head resting against the glass, warned in a tired voice, “Pothole.”

Too late. One of the front tires dipped into it, causing the vehicle to bounce. Tanner cursed as his temple thwacked against the window, jarring his glasses.

“Everyone awake now?” Max joked. His cigar slipped out of his mouth and onto his lap. He fumbled for it while trying to keep the SUV on the road, and he cursed as the stupid thing began burning a hole in his pants. “Oh, for shit’s sake—”

“Can you keep your eyes on the road, please?” Lace drawled around a stifled yawn.

Max fumbled for the cigar that kept slipping out of his grasp. The inside of his thigh turned hot, and he hissed in pain. “Can you let me get this damn thing before it burns a hole in my precious dick?”

Lace bolted upright in her seat. “Max, *look out!*”

He looked up just in time to see a woman standing in the middle of the road.

Grabbing the steering wheel with one hand and the cigar with the other, he swerved to the left and slammed his boot down on the brake.

Tires screeched as the vehicle came to a halt in the middle of both lanes,

steering wheel juddering in hand. Luckily, there were no other cars around but his, no pedestrians except the one.

And luckily, he'd managed not to hit the fool who'd decided to stand in the middle of the damn road at night.

The woman—a hellseher, no older than twenty, maybe twenty-one—squinted in the glow of the headlights. Slowly, she began shuffling toward the vehicle.

But she stopped walking nearly as soon as she'd started, her upper body half-turning in the other direction, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Her white t-shirt and jeans were soaked and speckled with mud. Her chin-length hair might've been blonde, but it was too filthy to tell for certain, never mind how this road was heavily shadowed from a lack of streetlights, making it difficult to see anything. The ivory skin of her arms was flecked with shallow scratches, purple bruises, and more mud.

The leather of the back seat groaned as Tanner shifted forward to get a better look. "Think it's a trap?"

Slowly, Max turned around in his seat.

Tanner was staring through the windshield, head jutting forward like a chicken's. When he noticed Max's attention on him, he began to pull it back. "What?" Tanner demanded.

"Who the hell would be dumb enough to set a trap for three armed Devils in the middle of the night?"

Tanner frowned. "Lionel?"

Lace didn't look at either of them when she spoke. "Lionel's smarter than that. If this is a trap, it's a stupid one made by a stupid person on the wettest night of the stupid year." That about summed up how everyone was feeling after Kalendae. They were all still rattled, still trying to come to grips with the crazy shit that'd happened and move on.

Max put the vehicle in park and opened his door. He placed a booted foot on the running board and rested a hand on the roof.

"Hey!" he called into the damp night. The woman flinched at the sound of his voice. "Are you hurt?"

She gaped at him in confusion, her eyes—bolted wide with fear, the irises a preternatural, crystal-blue—flicking about the area. There was a vacancy to them, as if she were seeing things no one else could. It made Max's skin crawl.

Maybe she was on something. It wouldn't surprise him; Angelthere's drug problem was at a record high, and it was only getting worse every day.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" Max tried again. Her teeth were

chattering, and she mumbled something he couldn't hear. Max cupped a hand to his ear. "I'm sorry, I can't hear you. The river, the rain." He gestured about the area with a sweep of his hand, to which the woman flinched again.

When she spoke, she used a language he wasn't familiar with.

Lace whispered, "What did she say?"

"She's speaking Ilevyn," Tanner replied.

There was a beat of silence as everyone's thoughts presumably went to the same place.

Lace said, "Isn't that a dead language?" It certainly was.

Max made to step down from the vehicle, but just as he was lowering his boot, the woman turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" he shouted. He jumped off the running board and took off after her. Behind him, he heard Lace and Tanner opening their doors.

Max ran down the road, grunting as his boots caught on sharp rocks and slipped in slick mud. Cold air whipped past, filling his open jacket like wind in a sail. He kept calling after the woman, but she did not turn around, nor did she slow.

How was she so fast? Was he really so exhausted and mentally troubled that he couldn't keep up with a woman who was practically half his size, and with far shorter legs than his?

Another minute passed before he cursed and slowed to a stop.

To hell with this. If she wasn't interested in getting help, he would let her run.

Still, he found that he kept watching her, remembering how he'd felt in his days as an older brother worrying about his little sister.

There had to be a good reason she was out here alone in the dead of night in a city like Angelthene. That look of bone-deep fear in her eyes had been *put* there by someone. Someone who'd given her a reason to run, to be reluctant to trust anyone who offered to help her. It was for this reason that Max's boots stayed rooted in place.

The woman continued for several yards before she stopped, finally realizing she was no longer being pursued. She turned around, hugged her chest, and looked about the area. Her lips were trembling, either from the chill or because she was talking to herself, the words far too quiet for even a hellseher to pick up on from this distance.

Lace and Tanner caught up to him, feet splashing through puddles as they slowed at his side. The headlights of passing cars on a road not far from where they stood lit up the area with pulses of white.

"Umm, Max?" Lace said, catching her breath beside him. "You mind if

I try? No offense, but she might be more likely to listen to someone like me and not a...”

“Not a what?” Max prompted.

Lace threw her hands in the air. “A big macho tough-guy chasing her down a dark street while shouting in a language she doesn’t speak.”

He blinked. “Oh.” He felt like an idiot for not thinking of that. No wonder she’d ran from him. “Yeah, sure. You try.”

Lace assessed the woman at a distance, deciding what to do, how to go about calming the stranger. “Here goes nothing.”

She approached the woman with caution, speaking softly as she moved, testing to see if there were any words in their language that the stranger might be familiar with.

Max waited, Tanner observing at his side. Neither of them made a sound. Not even when Lace managed to get close enough that barely two feet stood between her and the stranger. The woman appeared to be more trusting of Lace than she was of Max, though her eyes continued to flick to the blade strapped to Lace’s thigh—one of the only visible weapons on that bodysuit.

It must’ve been nearly ten minutes before Lace began making her way back, the woman trailing behind her. Those crystal-blue eyes flicked from Max to Tanner and back again. Now that she was closer, Max couldn’t help but notice the color of her nailbeds—a blue tone, dark as a sapphire near the cuticle.

Was he dreaming? Maybe this wasn’t real, and he was currently passed out on the floor of Club Ethereal, lost in this strange dream.

“I don’t know what to do,” Lace said. “Maybe we should take her to a hospital.”

The woman backed up, shouting hysterically in Ilevyn. Her eyes were bolted wide with fear, and she was gripping her upper arms so hard that her nails were nearly puncturing her skin.

“Okay, okay,” Lace consoled her, hands in the air. “No hospitals.”

“No...hospital,” the stranger repeated. She quieted after a moment, though she continued to shake her head, lips quavering.

Max’s eyes narrowed. Even her lips were tinged blue. He might’ve thought it the work of a glamor or makeup but...no. He didn’t believe it was either.

Slowly, Lace lowered her hands.

Max shared a look with Tanner. “Let’s get her in the back,” Max said.

They made their way to the SUV. Lace got in the back with the girl,

who scanned the interior of the vehicle like a child seeing something new for the first time.

“Maybe we should call Darien,” Lace suggested as Max got in the driver’s seat.

His eyes flicked to the rear-view mirror; the girl was cowering against her door, scuffed knees tucked up to her chest. She was shivering so hard, her teeth were clacking together. At least those were white. He felt like an idiot for even checking.

Max glanced at his watch—and cursed. “We’re already late.” He scrubbed a hand over his face, callouses scraping his cheeks. “We’ll take her to Hell’s Gate for now. Blindfold her if we need to.” He turned in his seat to look at Lace in search of agreement.

After thinking about it, she gave a faint nod. “Alright. I’ll blindfold her once we’re nearing the district.”

“Darien’s going to flip,” Tanner grumbled. He buckled his seatbelt, the snap loud in the quiet of the SUV. “And I’m going to tell him it was all your guys’ idea.”

“Thanks, Atlas,” Max said flatly.

The hacker, face grave, merely winked behind rain-speckled glasses.

Lace’s phone rang just as Max pushed the gearshift into drive. She checked the caller identification. “Crap,” she mumbled, the screen lighting up her face in the darkness of the SUV. “It’s Darien.”

“Don’t tell him about the girl.” Max started driving, tires splashing through puddles that sprayed the vehicle with mud. “Just let him know we’re on our way. We’ll deal with...whatever this is when we get there.”

Lace took the call mere seconds before it could go to voicemail. Her conversation with Darien was short, consisting of not much more than what Max had instructed her to say. Not a word was uttered about the girl with the blue nailbeds. The blue lips. The blue eyes. The not-blue teeth, thank the gods.

This was...it was messed up, that’s what it was.

Lace ended the call with a sigh. “I think we—”

Her sentence was cut short as the stranger lunged for Lace in a blur, throwing herself across the back seat with a speed that managed to surprise them all. Suddenly, the knife strapped to Lace’s thigh was in the girl’s shaking hand.

Lace shouted, instantly moving to incapacitate the girl.

Tanner swore. He unbuckled his seatbelt, twisting around to jump into the back.

Max swerved to the side of the road, nearly rolling the vehicle into a

ditch, the momentum sending them all careening to the right, bodies smacking against doors and catching on seatbelts. Tanner braced himself against the dash before he could fly through the windshield as Max stopped the vehicle and swiveled in his seat—

Only to see Lace gaping at the girl in confusion, her pistol frozen in her hands.

The stranger wasn't trying to attack. Instead, she was cutting into her own forearm with Lace's blade, a gurgled scream of pain and frustration clawing up her throat.

Blood bubbled through the knife wound.

Max blinked at the sight of it. It was...

Blue. It was blue.

"Fuck *me*," Max muttered.

A throaty scream tore out of her as she cut through skin and muscle, digging around in her arm with the blade, as if...as if searching for something. Breathing hard and quivering, her pallid skin covered in sweat, she threw the knife and the bloody microchip to the floor of the vehicle and stomped the latter beneath the heel of her shoe.

Once it was obliterated to her liking, nothing left of it but silver dust scattered across the floormat, she slumped against the seat. She shut her eyes, her chest frantically rising and falling. Blood dripped onto the seat, running through the cracks in the leather.

Where he was crouching on his seat, still poised to jump into the back if need be, Tanner studied the destroyed object on the floor. "Is that a—"

"Tracking device," Max concluded. "It's a tracking device."

Which raised his next question: in a world with Darkslayers, who the hell needed a tracking device?

# 5

“When I told you to bag what you were carrying, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Darien said.

He stood outside the doors to Hell’s Gate, trying to decide whether it was worth his time to kill the three idiots staring up at him from the front steps, not including the delicate girl sagging against Lace’s side, her blue eyes wider than an owl’s. Her clothes were filthy, her hair was drenched, and her lips were slightly blue and trembling, as if she were standing in the middle of a snowstorm.

“You look mad,” Tanner observed. It was to Max and Lace that the hacker hissed, “I told you he’d be mad.”

“Mad?” Darien’s brows flicked up. “Mad is a huge understatement. I would kill all three of you for being so stupid if it didn’t mean I would have to rename the Seven Devils. *The Four Devils* doesn’t exactly have the same ring to it, wouldn’t you agree?”

Lace shuffled her feet. “We blindfolded her on the way here,” she said in a hopeful tone.

Darien crossed his arms, fingers curling into fists against his hardened muscles. “Again: not what I had in mind.” His focus returned to the girl.

There was a crust of blood on her forearm. It was bluish in color, just like her eyelashes and lips.

When the girl saw that his attention was on her, she looked at the door-mat, her mud-caked hair falling in her face.

“Why is she bleeding?” Darien demanded. “And why is she looking at me as if I’m speaking gibberish?”

“She had a tracking device in her arm,” Tanner said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his gray jeans. “She cut it out.” He added in a mumble, “And she doesn’t speak any common languages.”

Darien sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face, ignoring the dull pain of his rings digging into the bridge of his nose. “Get the hell inside before someone sees us.” He stepped aside and waved them through.

Lace was the first to enter the house, pulling the stranger—who barely resisted, but turned visibly stiff—along by the elbow. Tanner and Max followed them, the latter mumbling an apology to Darien as he passed. Darien simply clapped him on the shoulder; it was the most he could manage right now.

Once everyone was inside, Darien blinked his Sight into his vision. He did a once-over of the yard...the dark, quiet street beyond the brick wall... Lastly, he checked the neighboring houses before stepping inside and shutting the door. They never bothered to lock it, since the spells offered more than enough protection. Besides that, everyone with a brain knew a measly deadbolt would do jack-shit against the supernatural in this city.

Regardless, he locked it this time, feeling more than a little stupid for doing it. But there were people in this house that he had to protect, and even if that deadbolt bought them two extra seconds, those two seconds might mean the difference between the people he loved living or dying.

The others had made their way into the kitchen, where Ivy, Jack, and Travis were waiting, along with Dominic, who’d stuck around after Darien had run into him at the MPU headquarters. They were all at the island, Ivy in her husband’s lap, arm slung around his neck. In the adjoining sitting room, Bandit was pancaked on the couch, nose whistling as he slept—a restful state that was soon interrupted as he became aware of the people around him, eyelids opening in a flash.

When the Familiar Spirit caught sight of the girl at Lace’s side, he lifted his head, a low growl rumbling from deep in his chest.

‘Cool it, big guy,’ Darien said down their bond as he walked past the couch. ‘She needed help.’

‘Another stray?’ Bandit’s voice was a smoky hiss. ‘This isn’t a Darkslayer House anymore, it’s a rescue facility.’

‘If you’re referring to Mortifer, you’re going to have to get over that eventually, and you know it.’ From the moment Darien had brought Mortifer home, Bandit had made it his personal mission to turn the Hob’s life into a living hell, which was why Mortifer chose to spend most of his time on top of the refrigerator. Initially, it had provided security—a safe place to hide from Bandit and the other Familiars. The ice chips were an added bonus,

and it hadn't taken long for the Hob to discover how much he loved those. Now, he barely ever came down from that fridge. Darien was still waiting for Bandit to snap and knock the whole damn thing over.

Bandit whistled a sigh through his nose and flopped his head back down. *'Freeloading demon-monkey...'*

Darien raised a brow. *I heard that.*

Bandit simply closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping.

"We haven't been able to figure out anything about her," Lace was saying to Dominic in the kitchen. "Not even her name." The stranger was still glued to her hip, her eyes flicking about the kitchen as if she'd never seen half the things that were in it. Dominic was seated at the island, finishing off his third beer.

Pushing his hair back from his face, Darien crossed the kitchen and leaned back against the counter near the fridge, where Mortifer was chewing on chips of ice, as usual.

The *crunch, crunch* of ice being crushed between tiny teeth had Darien glancing at Bandit again, just in time to see his left eyelid slowly open as he looked toward the fridge...

*'Don't even think—'* Darien began.

Bandit promptly shut his eye. *'Wasn't even thinking about it.'*

Darien rolled his eyes so hard, he saw gray.

"It seems she can only speak Ilevyn," Lace was saying. Ilevyn—a language that was even harder to learn than Ancient Reunerian. Hardly anyone living knew how to speak it, and the odd person who did only knew fragments of the language, not enough to have a firm grasp on it. Most of it had been lost to time and death long ago, and because it was considered obsolete, not many people bothered to learn it.

The Angel polished off the last of his beer and leaned across the counter to set the bottle in the sink. "I know a little bit of Ilevyn, actually." His tone was casual, like it wasn't the biggest deal in the world.

Everyone's attention went to Dominic. When the Angel became aware of the multiple pairs of eyes on him, his own shifted from side to side, a frown pulling on his mouth. "What?"

Darien smirked. "Only the fact that Ilevyn hasn't been widely known or taught in thousands of years, yet you casually mention that you know how to speak it?"

"Yeah, what else are you hiding?" Tanner crooned.

Dom leaned back in his seat and stretched his vast wings out, the motion causing the girl to flinch. Barely a second passed before she was staring intently at the black feathers, fingers twitching at her sides, as if she