

THE CLOSER THE LIGHT,
THE GREATER THE SHADOW.



CITY OF
SMOKE
AND
BRIMSTONE



A
HOUSE
OF DEVILS
NOVEL

KAYLA EDWARDS

PENGUIN BOOKS

CITY OF SMOKE AND BRIMSTONE

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.

Copyrighted Material

BOOKS BY KAYLA EDWARDS:

Dreams of Ice and Iron

The House of Devils series

City of Gods and Monsters

City of Souls and Sinners

City of Lies and Legends

City of Smoke and Brimstone

Copyrighted Material

CITY OF SMOKE AND
BRIMSTONE

HOUSE OF DEVILS
BOOK FOUR

KAYLA EDWARDS



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First self-published by Kayla Edwards 2025
This edition published by Penguin Books 2025
001

Copyright © Kayla Edwards, 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Map illustrations © Virginia Allyn
Proofread by Christina Routhier

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-405-98886-5

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

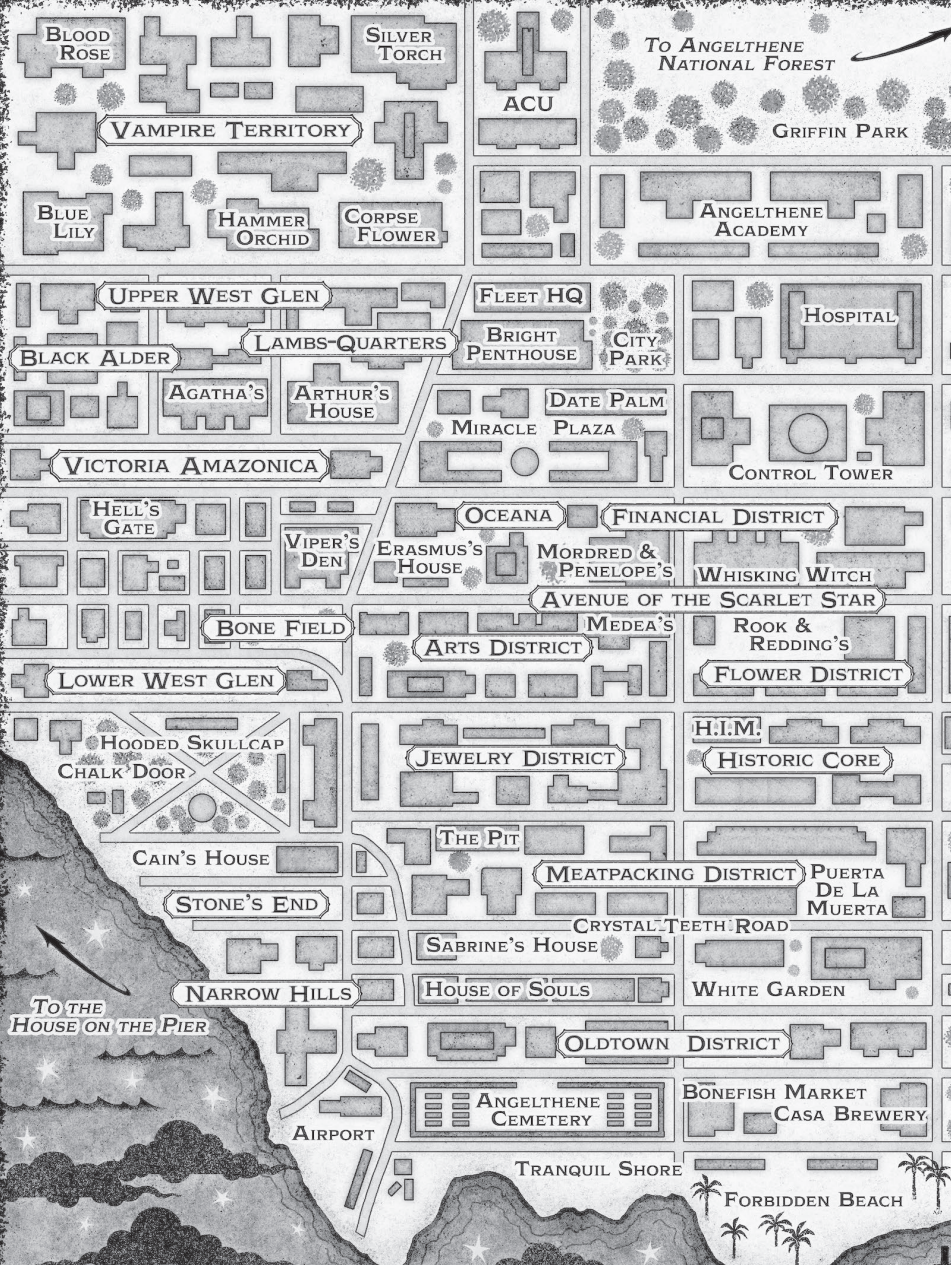


Copyrighted material

For the Dariens and the Romans—those who shelter others when the rain gets heavy.

Remember to look after yourself, too.

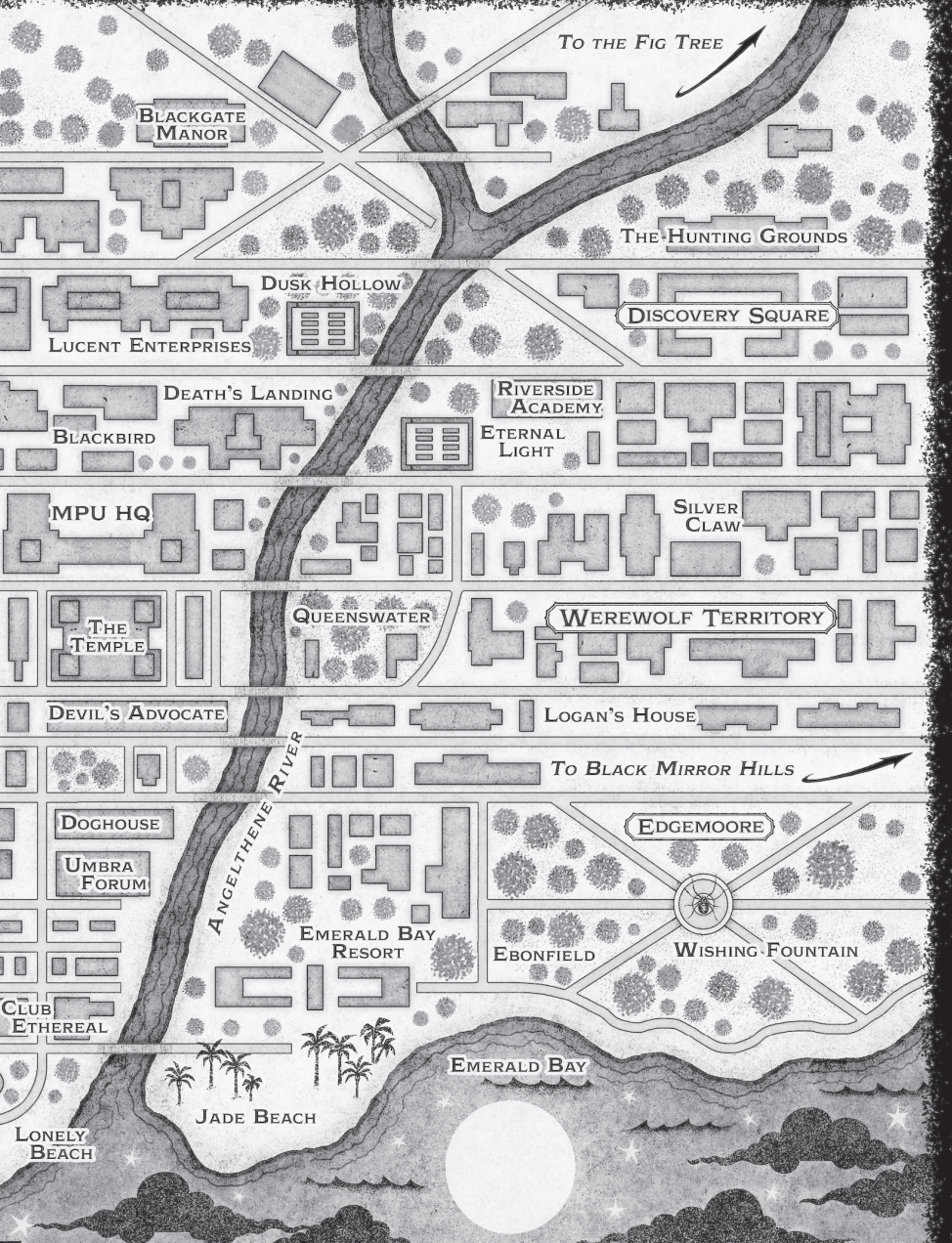
Copyrighted Material



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

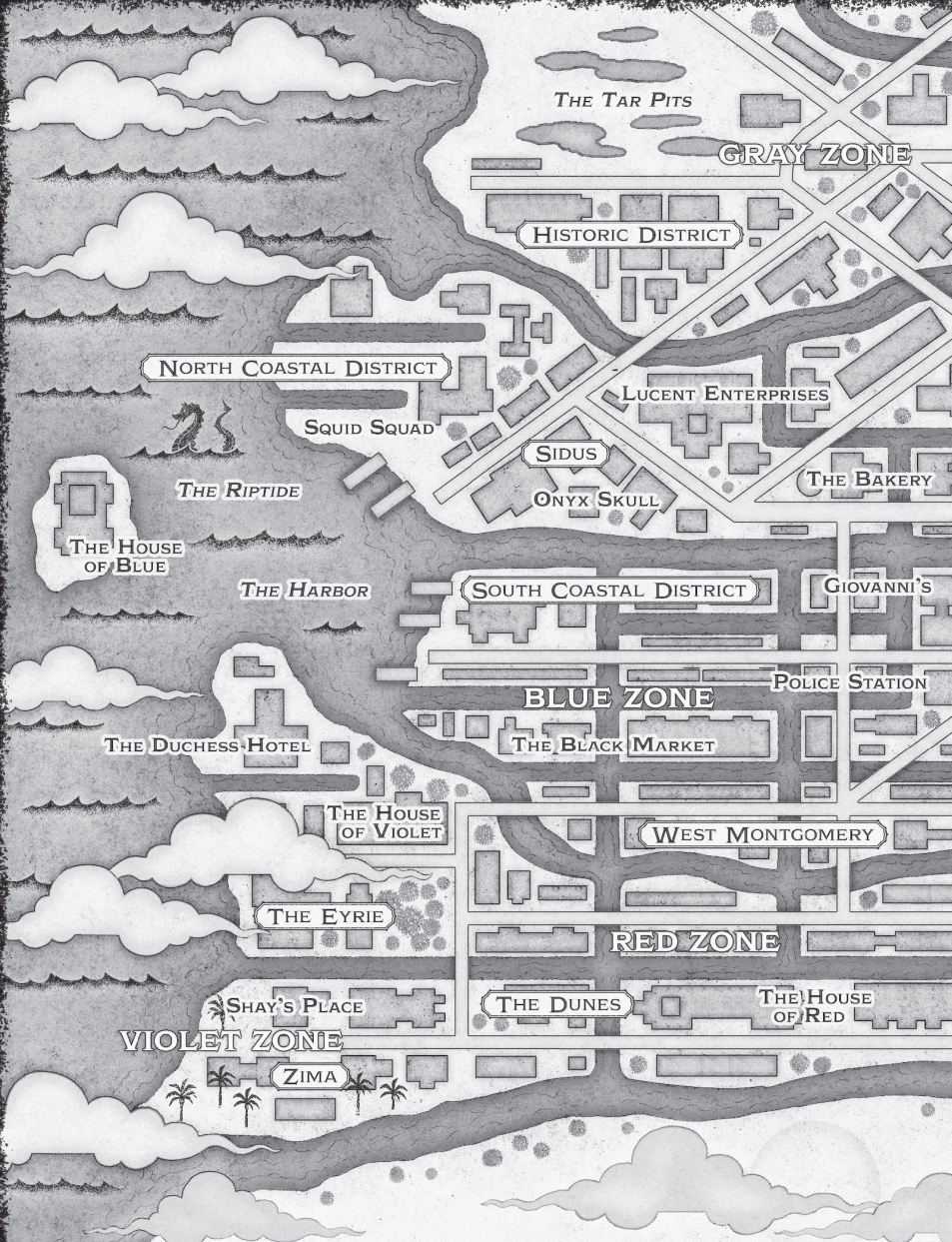
Copyrighted Material





ANGELTHENE
SURVIVE

Copyrighted Material



THE TAR PITS

GRAY ZONE

HISTORIC DISTRICT

NORTH COASTAL DISTRICT

SQUID SQUAD

LUCENT ENTERPRISES

SIDUS

ONYX SKULL

THE BAKERY

THE RIPTIDE

THE HOUSE OF BLUE

THE HARBOR

SOUTH COASTAL DISTRICT

GIOVANNI'S

BLUE ZONE

POLICE STATION

THE DUCHESS HOTEL

THE BLACK MARKET

THE HOUSE OF VIOLET

WEST MONTGOMERY

THE EYRIE

RED ZONE

SHAY'S PLACE

THE DUNES

THE HOUSE OF RED

VIOLET ZONE

ZIMA

N O W E N T E R I

Copyrighted Material

K E E P O U T





Y V E S W I C H

Copyrighted Material

O F T H E F O G



Copyrighted Material

DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

THE SEVEN DEVILS

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

THE REAPERS

Marked with the cloaked and masked god of death, they answer to Malakai Delaney, Head of the House of Souls and Right Hand of Darien Cassel

THE HUNTSMEN

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

THE ANGELS OF DEATH

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

THE WARGS

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

Copyrighted Material

THE VIPERS

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

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

DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF YVESWICH

THE SHADOWMASTERS

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

In some parts of Terra, they are better known as ‘Wraiths’

THE SELKIES

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

THE WYVERNS

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

In some parts of Terra, they are better known as ‘Flameweavers’

THE JACKALS

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

Copyrighted Material

THE SYLPHEN

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

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

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

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

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

Angelthere was always quiet at night, but here in the sequestered district of Ebonfield, the thick silence felt especially eerie. Fog curled around the car, making it difficult to see, and although the sprawling city was baking in the heat of a long, dry summer, the temperature in these parts took a sudden plunge, the shift a warning to all who wandered too close to the Crossroads. *Turn back*, it seemed to advise, *while you still have a chance*.

Cyra Sophronia held her breath, her wide eyes scanning her surroundings for any sign of movement as Erasmus steered the car through the fog.

It was the sky that drew her focus. Rather, what flew through it.

Firebirds. No bigger than the average crow, they lit up the starless expanse with shimmers of gold and ruby, their radiant plumage impossible to miss, even through dense fog. The birds' most active time was the end of the growing season, the period during which they gathered tinder to build their funeral pyres. Once built, they would brood their glasslike eggs in the nest of wood and spices for a fortnight, then set the nest ablaze with rapid flaps of their wings, cremating themselves in a show of flames and combustion. This sacrifice was necessary for the hatching of their chicks—a cycle of life and death that was tragic, yes, and yet strangely beautiful, in its own way.

Cyra's throat tightened at the point of pain, her heart pulling downward as if fastened to an anchor she dragged behind her.

The Firebirds were so like the phoenix. And the phoenix would always remind her of her many, *many* mistakes.

The tires thumped about as the car rolled down the dusty, uneven road. Peeking through the fog up ahead was a second road—one that intersected with this one to form an X. As that second road loomed, Cyra concentrated on steadying her breathing, her perspiring hands squeezing and twisting her seatbelt into a tube.

All at once, the fog cleared, and the field on the other side of the barbed wire fence spread before them, the gold of the waist-high grass reduced to a gray blur under the velvet cover of night.

Erasmus stopped the car just shy of the intersection.

They sat awhile in the quiet. Minutes passed, and during this time neither of them dared to even move.

Cyra was about to risk breaking the silence when a brittle voice beat her to it with a whisper of her name—her old one.

“Helia.”

Her head snapped toward Erasmus, the rasp of that ancient and terrible voice slashing deep into her bones, like a knife freshly sharpened on a whetstone. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” He glanced about, the round lenses of his glasses reflecting the cool glow of the dashboard.

Cyra’s mouth dried out. “It must’ve been the wind.”

As if her words were a summoning, a supernatural draft crept through the vents, the clammy tongues of otherworldly spirits pebbling the skin on Cyra’s nape.

Once upon a time, she had been a part of the spirit realm, roaming the mist-veiled land of the dead as goddess of neither here nor there, her every step jingling with the ring of keys that could open any door, any latch. But centuries had passed since then, and those long centuries had changed her, molding her into something new. Ground that was once familiar was now foreign; beings she once considered friends were now strangers. She no longer belonged, nor was she welcome, on the other side of the curtain.

We’re here to talk, she reminded herself, *not trade*. Surely no harm would come from talking.

Right?

Erasmus must have sensed her distress, because he said softly, “All we’ll do is talk.” He shut off the car, the sudden absence of the engine’s purr causing the silence to swell like a too-full balloon. “There’s n-nothing to be

afraid of, my love.” Despite the reassurance, the smile he gave her wobbled. “Ready?”

Cyra drew a breath, the scent of magic—warm sugar and smoke—coating her tongue, and said on the exhale, “Ready.”

Erasmus cracked open his door. Cyra followed suit, her fingers trembling on the handle.

The moment she was out, the wind picked up, blowing her hair upward like a flame. Tree branches creaked and cracked like frail bones, and fallen leaves and palm fronds swooshed by in gusts of unseasonably cool air. The sounds were oddly amplified, as if boxed in by walls no one could see.

They walked, side by side, across the field—to the old, crumbling fountain squatting in the center of it. Thousands of fountains just like this one were scattered throughout Terra, but only one was home to the granter of wishes the world called *The Widow*.

A rusted pail sat on the fountain’s edge, a hungry mouth begging for a meal.

The sight of the pail brought Erasmus to a sudden stop, his throat jouncing with a swallow.

He hated this part. Cyra didn’t particularly enjoy it either, but it had to be done.

So she retrieved the switchblade from her pocket. “It’ll be over quickly,” she promised, the reassurance blown away by another gale that howled through her ears. She couldn’t promise that he’d feel no pain, but she could promise that the pain wouldn’t last.

She dragged the sharp edge of the knife across her palm, a hiss of discomfort catching in her throat as her skin split open. After wiping the blade clean on her pants, she cupped the back of Erasmus’s hand and carefully cut an identical line across his palm. Where his skin was weathered and wrinkled, hers was smooth and ageless, its only imperfection the single scar that ran from the heel of her hand to the base of her pinky. Human and hellseher blood welled in the moonlight, the smell drawing the attention of the predators skulking in the dark gaps between the trees.

They held their fists above the pail and squeezed, blood dripping, then tossed in the coins they brought as payment. The pieces of silver clanged when they struck the bottom, but the pail itself made no sound when dropped into the fountain. Not even a splash.

“Ready?” Erasmus asked, his fingers taking her good hand into his.

She nodded, the wound already clotting. “Ready.”

They stepped up onto the stone rim...and waited, as if ringing a doorbell.

Two heartbeats passed before a fresh blanket of fog folded over them like a sheet. For a moment, nothing existed except the sound of their breathing and an endless canvas of white.

And then they arrived, the fog dropping to the floor like spilled milk, leaving them standing in a dark room, the walls of which were curved.

Crossing made them feel nauseous, so they took a moment to compose themselves before stepping off the edge of the fountain. Muck splashed beneath their shoes.

The spider had wedged herself into an alcove on the other side of the room, her gargantuan body supported by a hammock of webs that sagged under her weight. Wispy shadows clung to her like affectionate pets to their master, briefly tricking Cyra's eyes into seeing more than eight legs.

"Well, isn't this a delightful surprise?" the Widow remarked, her curious voice bubbling through the room. "I cannot say I expected to see the Sophronias anytime soon. How very delightful, indeed."

"We come for advice," Cyra began, tripping over her words. She was out of practice. Nineteen years—that was how long had passed since she had last sought out a creature of the Crossroads. Nineteen years since her last bargain.

Nineteen years since her greatest creation...and her biggest mistake.

The spider made a hungry, smacking sound. "And what have you brought me in exchange?" The webs of her resting place were studded with cocooned insects, their dead bodies sparkling like berries crusted with frost.

Cyra shared a glance with Erasmus. "Well, we—" She cleared her throat, the sound carrying. "We don't..."

Foolish—they were foolish for coming here. The Nameless were chronically bored, chronically starving creatures with endless time at their disposal. Time to feast—to torture the poor souls they deemed unworthy.

Quite plainly, this was suicide.

But the Widow did the unexpected. The exhale she let out was one of... of understanding, Cyra thought. "You do not have anything left to trade."

"We realize this isn't customary," Erasmus said tightly.

The spider chuckled. "Not at all. But I suppose I can spare you a listen."

"Our daughter is **Copyrighted Material**," Cyra confessed, the words turning her stomach. The running, the hiding, the many sacrifices they'd made—were

all their efforts for nothing? “We come to you seeking advice on how to help her.”

“Liliana Sophronia.” The Widow spoke their daughter’s name as if it were a bird she’d held captive for quite some time, and was desperate to set it free. The name given to a mortal baby with a rainbow aura, who’d watched quietly—no tears, no fussing—as she was lifted from a pool of impossibly deep water, her skin scented with the delicate fragrance of violets.

Cyra swallowed the lump in her throat. “Yes,” she whispered.

It was the reason they had come back to Angelthene. The minute they’d received word of the bounty on their daughter’s head, they had vowed to find a way to make her safe again. No matter how steep the price.

The Widow added, “She goes by ‘Loren Calla’ now.”

Cyra turned the name over in her mind, committing it to memory.

Loren Calla—the name her new parents had given her.

The name her new, *better* parents had given her. Had they raised her properly? Given her a full and happy life?

Did they love her?

“Will you show her to us?” Cyra blurted, regret piercing a hole in her heart. Not just regret, but guilt too—so much guilt, she knew it would hold her prisoner forever, even after death.

As the creature considered the request, she kept her gaze fastened on Cyra, reading her like a book. Cyra dropped her own under the scrutiny, studying the muddy water at her feet as the spider judged her for her sins, seeing far beyond what lay on the surface. The monster wearing a hellseher’s skin. That was all she was now: a monster.

“Your heart is heavy,” the spider observed.

Cyra lifted her head; it, too, was heavy. “It is.”

“You’ve made many mistakes.”

“I have.” A sob cracked the confession apart.

A peculiar silence. Then the Widow whispered, “But you’re sorry.”

Tears slipped down Cyra’s cold face. “I’ve never been more sorry in all my life.” But being sorry, she’d learned, did not fix anything.

Erasmus came closer, taking her hand in comfort.

“You’ve been alive for a very long time,” the spider said. “Everyone makes mistakes, even those who have lived a fraction of your years.”

Cyra knew the Widow was right. And maybe this was a truth she desperately needed to hear, after spending many years beating herself up for

her missteps and oversights. But she would never forgive herself for her many blunders—that, she refused.

The Widow seemed to already know this, because she said then, her words coasting on a saddened sigh, “Look into the fountain.”

Cyra’s heart swelled with hope as she and Erasmus stepped up to the fountain’s gaping mouth. The water inside was no longer murky, but sprinkled with stars and motes of light. A miniature galaxy.

As they stood there, the churning water stilled, turning glass-smooth. The stars winked out, and fat drops of liquid dribbled from the ceiling, casting new ripples across the surface. Slowly, the face of a young woman took shape in the water, and Cyra had to concentrate on breathing as she beheld her adult daughter for the very first time.

Her hair was honey-blonde, her skin fair, her eyes a vivid blue. A smattering of freckles dotted her nose, her smile bright and carefree. Cyra watched, enraptured, her shaking hands moving to grip the fountain’s rough edge, as the girl tipped her head back and laughed. She was lounging on the dock of a sunlit beach with two friends—two witches, one a redhead, the other a brunette.

Cyra swallowed. “When?” she asked the Widow.

“Two weeks ago.”

Her throat tightened with emotion, but she managed to say, the words strangled, “And where is she now?”

“Sleeping. Safe.”

Cyra couldn’t tear her eyes off her daughter as Lily and her friends jumped to their feet. They raced each other to the end of the dock and jumped, laughing and shrieking, into the ocean.

“She’s beautiful,” Cyra whispered. Erasmus came closer, wrapping an arm around her. Tears sparkled on his cheeks. “Erasmus, isn’t she beautiful?” She extended a hand toward the water—reaching for Lily, who’d resurfaced in the ocean, laughing as she pushed her wet hair back.

A flood of black engulfed the image, and Cyra’s stomach sank with disappointment as Lily disappeared, leaving Cyra’s own reflection—the face that hadn’t changed in a hideously long time—staring back at her in the gloom.

“Your daughter is being hunted,” the Widow said, reiterating Cyra’s confession in a metallic tone. “Many a person looks for her.”

“Bounty hunters,” Cyra asked. The Widow’s idea *who*, exactly, was hunting Lily—only that many people were.

“Some.”

“We have to stop them.” Cyra stepped around the fountain, pressing her hands together in supplication. “How do we stop them? Please. *Please*, if you can help us, just tell us what to do. I’ll give anything—”

“My dear, you must hire someone stronger,” the spider said.

Cyra blinked. *Hire someone stronger...* It wasn’t a stupid suggestion; in fact, it was...clever. What better way to deal with an opponent than to hire someone who could beat them at their own job? Someone who could find Lily and...well, Cyra wasn’t certain what would happen after.

“Are you saying,” Cyra began, her brows knitting together, “we should hire someone to act as her...*bodyguard*?”

“Precisely.”

Her shoulders sank. A moment ago, she’d considered the Widow a genius. But now...now, she wasn’t so sure.

Still, she wet her chapped lips and asked the spider, “Who do you recommend?”

“Only the best,” she said plainly. “Only the strongest, most capable person in all of Angelthene would be fit to protect your daughter.”

Cyra mulled it over. The strongest people were Darkslayers. But that couldn’t be the answer here, because Darkslayers didn’t protect—they hunted and they killed. In what world would a slayer be willingly saddled with a human girl—

“Darien Cassel,” the Widow said. But—

“*No*.” Erasmus’s rebuke—shaky with fear—clapped against the walls. “Ab-*absolutely* not!”

The Widow stirred, rock clacking. Mist coiled around her legs like agitated snakes. “Do you take issue with my advice, Erasmus?”

Cyra’s lungs tightened with terror. She looked toward the fountain—their only way out. Gauged how many steps it’d take them to get there—how long they’d have to wait for the magic to spirit them away.

When Erasmus spoke again, he did so carefully. “I beg your p-pardon, Araneae, but yes, I do take great issue. I mean, let’s be reasonable here—” A nervous chuckle. “This man you speak of is *Darien Cassel*. The m-most ruthless Darkslayer in the entire city!”

“In the state.”

Erasmus glared, throwing caution to the wind. “Pardon me?”

“I was simply correcting you.” The Widow blinked her many shining eyes. “He is the most ruthless slayer in the city, yes, as well as the state.”

Erasmus threw his hands in the air. “Unbelievable! We’re wasting our time—”

“Darling,” Cyra tried.

But Erasmus wasn’t listening. “This must b-be a joke. Allow me to make sure I understand what you’re saying. You expect us to hire the most d-dangerous Darkslayer in the city—a man who’s killed hundreds, maybe even thousands of people, someone who kills because he *enjoys* it—and trust that he will—*poof*—” He flourished his hands. “—miraculously choose to *protect* our daughter?”

The Widow blinked. “Yes.”

Erasmus pushed, “*Randal Slade’s son?*”

“Yes.”

“What are the odds?” he demanded. “A thousand to one?”

“Perhaps.”

Erasmus shook his head in disbelief and started to pace, water sloshing around his shoes.

“You came to me seeking advice, Erasmus, and I have given you exactly that. You don’t have to do as I say, but I am not in the habit of changing my answers simply because someone does not agree with me.”

Cyra and Erasmus had been gone for a long time, it was true, but there wasn’t a soul alive who hadn’t heard of Darien Cassel. Son of Randal Slade... Fearless leader of the Seven Devils... A spawn of evil—spat out of the deepest pits of hell. He’d broken Darkslayer records, having slaughtered more people and monsters at the age of twenty-three than most of his kind killed in a hundred. No mercy, no regret—just coldblooded killing. Merely the thought of him was enough to tempt Cyra to find Lily herself and take her far away from here. Surely there had to be *someplace* where no one would find her—

But she knew that was foolish. After all, she herself had spent decades in hiding; if anyone understood how difficult it was to remain hidden, it was Cyra. Only a near-impossible trade had allowed her and Erasmus to start over with new lives, new identities, new auras... If a Darkslayer as gifted as Darien Cassel wanted to locate someone badly enough, there was no place in the world where a person could hide—no land, sea, or sky where he couldn’t find you.

“A word of caution,” said the spider, her echoing words stilling Erasmus’s restless feet. “Place your daughter’s life in the hands of anyone other than Darien Cassel, and she will be butchered.”

Cyra’s skin prickled. “How could you say that?”

“I merely speak the truth,” the Widow said. “I see a thousand different

futures for your daughter; trust me when I say they are all ugly. Shall I list the outcomes? Tortured. Beaten. Raped—”

“Stop,” Cyra whispered, her voice weak with fright.

“All ugly...except for one.” The future that involved Darien Cassel.

But how could that be? When Cyra had gazed upon her daughter in the fountain, she had seen a ray of sunshine. A beauty. A bright and bubbly personality who simply didn’t fit, didn’t *belong* in the underworld. Was it possible that the man she’d heard such vile things about could fall for Lily? Protect her? *Love* her, even?... Cyra could not imagine it.

“Let’s go.” Erasmus stepped forward, winding an arm around Cyra’s shoulders. “We’re d-done here.”

Cyra shrugged him off and approached the spider.

“*Cyra*,” he hissed, his heart pounding through the Crossroads.

She ignored him, turning her focus to the infernal being squatting in the bluish light. “Tortured, beaten, raped...,” Cyra croaked. “Darien Cassel will do none of these things?” She was asking too many questions, her time nearly spent, but she *had* to know.

“Nothing is set in stone, my dear—they call it *free will* for a reason. But believe me when I say he is your best option. With Darien Cassel’s protection, your daughter may stand a chance. May yet survive...in a world of people who will soon want her dead.” Her words brought a fresh wave of goosebumps to Cyra’s skin.

Erasmus hurried forward, taking Cyra by the arm. “Let’s g-go.”

“Thank you, Araneae, for your time,” Cyra said as Erasmus pulled her toward the fountain. Their time was up; they couldn’t linger—not without payment.

‘*Helia*.’ The Widow’s voice floated through Cyra’s mind—audible only to her now.

She turned.

‘To forgive is to set yourself free. Tormenting yourself over your past mistakes will not fix them. What you choose to do with your future is far more important. If you truly love your daughter, I implore you to heed my advice—heed my warning, and find Darien Cassel.’

The pit in Cyra’s stomach widened. *‘But he’s a monster.’*

‘I don’t deny that. But he may be one of the only monsters capable of changing. Should he choose to protect your daughter, there will be nothing he wouldn’t do for her. You Gossypigited Material and only chance.’

The fog thickened before Cyra could reply. It carried them away—back

to Angelthene. When it finally cleared, they stood in the grass of Ebonfield, the faint sounds of cars and sparse nightlife trickling through distant streets.

Cyra crossed her arms, her skin tingling with chills. “What should we do?”

Erasmus lifted his hands in defeat. “It’s y-your decision. Say the words, and we’ll do it.”

Butchered, the Widow had said.

Tortured.

Beaten.

Raped.

Could Cyra live with herself if she chose to ignore the creature’s warnings? If Lily ended up dying because Cyra was too afraid to trust the one man the Widow claimed would protect her? The Nameless were incapable of lying, their knowledge of the world and its occupants deeper than the deepest ocean. Vaster than outer space. If the Widow said they could trust Darien Cassel, not only did she mean it, but it was also the gods’ honest truth.

Erasmus awaited her answer.

Place their trust in the leader of the Seven Devils...or sentence their daughter to death.

Take a chance...or risk losing everything.

“We trust the Widow,” Cyra decided, the winds of change gusting around her. “And we hire Darien Cassel.”

PART ONE
THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

EMERGENCY ALERT: EXTREME

ISSUED BY THE YVESWICH MAGICAL PROTECTIONS
UNIT: POWER OUTAGE

IN EFFECT FOR THIS AREA UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

AT 6:03 A.M, THE YVESWICH MAGICAL PROTECTIONS UNIT
ISSUED A RED WARNING FOR A POWER OUTAGE OF
SUPERNATURAL ORIGIN THAT MAY BE DEADLY TO THOSE CAUGHT
WITHOUT SHELTER. THE CAUSE OF THE OUTAGE IS NOT CLEAR
AND IS CURRENTLY UNDER INVESTIGATION.

IF YOU ARE IN THE AREA, SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. IT IS
UNSAFE TO DRIVE IN THESE CONDITIONS. FLEET RESPONDING.
AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS AND FOLLOW ADVICE FROM
EMERGENCY SERVICES AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

I

SOUTH FINANCIAL DISTRICT

YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

Loren Calla met death when she was only a child. As a human living in a world of monsters and godlike immortal beings, her mortality was simply *there* all the time—as constant as her shadow.

At the age of five, Taega and Roark had sat her down and explained to her the unfortunate truth about her life. *You're different*, they'd said. While others stopped aging, she would continue to grow old, forever careening toward the end of a too-short existence. As the years passed, the pain of this harsh reality had dulled from the sharp pang of a fresh cut to the periodic ache of a bruise. Eventually, she'd even come to accept it. Death was simply a part of her life, and nothing would ever change that fact. Yet despite how many years she'd spent preparing for her end, being told she had less than ten months to live was a surprise she hadn't seen coming.

As unsettling as it was to know there was a strong chance she wouldn't make it to her twenty-first birthday, her biggest concern lay not in her own heart ceasing to beat, but Darien Cassel's. The man who'd tied his fate to hers. The incredibly selfless leader of the Seven Devils, who was somewhere out there right now, in this dark city, hopefully, *hopefully* still breathing.

She clung tightly to her faith that she would see Darien again—tighter than she clung to Malakai Delaney's hand—as she navigated predator-infested streets. Her strange magic allowed her to see with vision similar to a hellseher's, but even so, navigating the dunks of the city was difficult. The buckled roads, the shattered sidewalks, the dust choking the air... It was endless. And they were a long way from home.

As she walked with Malakai, she tried to keep her feet from shifting too loudly in the rubble, while the Reaper used his magic to mask their human and hellseher scents. Monsters lurked on every road, hunting for prey. Most of these breeds were unable to see in the dark—a blessing that had kept her and Malakai alive this long, though Loren shuddered at the thought of what might happen if they ran into one that could.

“Any idea where we are?” Malakai asked, speaking quietly.

She scanned her surroundings, her all-white eyes gritty from exhaustion and burning from the smoke. The buildings in this area were aglow with rows of colorful symbols, though most were weak and flickering, the spell systems hanging on by a thread.

“There’s a mall over there—to your right,” she said, using her Sight to read the magic flickering weakly through the sign. The patchy words just *barely* managed to spell out *Starling Shopping Center* in sky blue and cherry red. She still wasn’t used to seeing the things she hadn’t been able to see before. The colors burned to look at, as if she were staring directly at the sun, and sometimes they all bled together into a muddy mess. “Starling Shopping Center.” She blinked to ease the stinging in her eyes. “Can you see the sign?”

Malakai’s frustration was tangible, his hand tightening slightly around hers. “Where am I looking, exactly?”

“Umm...one o’clock?”

A beat of silence. And then: “Fucking barely.”

They kept walking, moving more carefully as they passed the mall—past a pack of monsters chowing down on something near the entrance. Loren didn’t want to know what—or who—they were eating.

Although her powers had kept the Well replica from razing all of Yveswich to the ground, she had failed to save the city in its entirety. The destruction had snuck through the apertures—of which there were many—carving Yveswich apart like a snowflake. While some streets and neighborhoods had been completely pulverized, others had stayed mostly intact, save for perhaps a shattered window or a few overturned cars. It had no rhyme or reason. But then again, not much in her life made sense these days.

Instead of trying to understand her magic, her past, and her life in general, she focused on her goal: get back to Roman Devlin’s house and find the others.

Find *Darien*. **Copyrighted Material**

“You’re thinking about that asshole again, aren’t you?” Malakai’s ques-

tion was nearly drowned out by a guttural growl from somewhere behind them—one monster scuffling with another for control over a food source.

She sighed, the exhale wobbling from the cold. Her fingers were so numb, they felt permanently frozen to Malakai's hand. "I'm always thinking about him. And he's not an asshole."

"He is, actually. He's just not an asshole to *you*."

Rock clacked as Malakai suddenly tripped, stumbling blindly. With her hand in his, Loren stumbled too, her arm jerking about as he nearly took them both down.

"Fuck, man," he grumbled, regaining his balance. "I can't wait till I can see again."

Neither could Loren. It wasn't that she was bothered by his tendency to trip on the many obstacles strewn about the streets, but if they were attacked right now—something they'd managed to avoid thus far—Malakai would be just as likely to shoot her in the head as he would a monster. He couldn't see the many creatures slinking through the dark, could just *barely* see the faint colors on the buildings that still had partial protection. It was strange; Loren was the farthest thing from a hellseher, and yet she could somehow see better than anyone. *How* was simply another of the maddening questions the universe had tossed her way these last approximately six months.

She tried not to consider what this might mean for the others. How they could ever find their way back to safety if they couldn't see. Couldn't protect themselves.

If they were even alive.

She banished the horrible thought from her head. They were alive—she wouldn't settle for anything less.

"How do you feel about the whole *you-die-be-dies* thing, anyway?"

"Pissed," she admitted, a shiver shaking through her. She shut her eyes, remembering the look on Darien's handsome face when she'd told him that she hated him. "Hurt. Betrayed." Hurt and betrayed—exactly how he, too, must have felt in that moment. He had certainly looked hurt and betrayed.

Malakai merely grunted. Such noises seemed to be a frequent response for him. But she wasn't complaining; she would take his grunting over his smart and oftentimes crude comments any day, though she'd spent enough time with him to notice that he took it slightly easier on her with his jests than he did the others. **Copyrighted Material**

Slightly.

“You know,” the Reaper began a few moments later. Loren braced herself for another of his famous jabs. “I never imagined anyone could hate your prick boyfriend more than I do...but I think his sister might actually beat me this time.” He wheezed a long, drawn-out chuckle that hopefully no predators would hear.

Loren wouldn’t be surprised if Malakai was right. To say Ivy had been upset upon learning of her brother’s trade was an understatement, though they’d all had to leave Roman’s so hastily that not many words had been exchanged.

Apart from the words Loren had said to Darien, and Darien to her.

‘How could you?’ she’d demanded of him.

‘I hate you for doing that,’ she’d blurted.

And: *‘I don’t want to talk to you right now, I don’t want to see you.’*

‘I hate you.’ That one bothered her the most.

She may be angry still, may feel deeply hurt and betrayed by his decision to part with his life, but she wished she’d handled the situation differently.

“So, what happened, anyway?” Malakai asked. “Your dog died, Cassel went to the Widow to get it back, and he what, tied his life to yours?”

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. Another nosebleed, if the rusty taste on her tongue was any indication. “Basically, yeah.”

“FYI, a dog doesn’t cost that much. Not when a hellseher can live forever if they’re in perfect health. Your dog would’ve lived, what—nine, ten years?”

She looked at him in question—at least, she tried to, but he might as well have been invisible. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying he parted with more by choice.”

She nibbled on her chapped lip, her teeth chattering so hard they nearly pierced the skin. “So, the Widow could’ve given Singer back for...like...a decade of his?”

An upward tug on her arm suggested Malakai had shrugged. “Maybe two decades, maybe three. Depends. Immortal years are worth triple or more what yours are—no offense.”

“None taken,” she muttered.

“I’m not an expert on this shit, though, so don’t go quoting me. All I’m saying is I guaran-fucking-tee a dog didn’t cost him his entire immortal life. Just doesn’t make sense.”

They walked for a few minutes in silence, foot shifting underfoot, the soles of their boots slipping every now and again on sheets of smooth ice.

When she got back, she decided, she would get the story from Darien in

full. No leaving anything out—she wanted to know every detail. And maybe she would still be angry with him, maybe she would still feel like he'd betrayed her, but at least she would know the truth.

For a city with a population so large, it was horrifyingly quiet. Whenever Loren wasn't thinking about Darien and the others, which was seldom, her mind was plagued with the question of how many people had died—how many might still die, given the sheer number of predators prowling every block, starving for flesh.

Monsters aside, time was running out in other ways, thanks to the spirit dimension blending with their own, slowly siphoning the life out of everything it touched. The darkness of the Void reminded her of quicksand. It wasn't natural, but like quicksand it had a peculiar way of making you feel like you were sinking or being pulled on. Sucked into a vortex of freezing-cold night.

The temperature was good for one thing, though—it made it *slightly* easier to bear the pain of her wounds. Her back had been blistered by the blast, her hair clinging to the clotted blood. The white armor she wore—a sleek, magically enhanced bodysuit that fit her like a glove from neck to toes—had sustained so much damage, the protective barrier that made it special no longer worked. She could feel everything now, even something as minor as the press of the rocks under her feet. One bullet or bite in a vital area, and she'd be done for.

“Okay, so...Starling.” The direction of Malakai's gruff voice suggested he was staring blindly over his shoulder. “Where is that, anyway? Where *are* we?”

She hummed. “I remember driving through this area after Darien brought me to the Avenue of the Waning Moon.” The afternoon they'd spent together at the bakery, stuffing themselves with those delicious cinnamon buns, was only yesterday, but it felt like a hundred years had passed since then. He'd asked her if she wanted kids one day—had talked about the future as if she had one to look forward to. As if she weren't mortal, and he an immortal hellseher who should never have fallen in love with a human.

As if they hadn't been doomed right from the start. Since the moment they'd met, they'd been thwarted with bad luck. Everything that could go wrong in their lives had indeed gone wrong. But they'd fought it—had fought hard for each other. For love. But in the end, death always won—even when pitted against the force that could move mountains.

Love.

“The Avenue of the Waning what-the-fuck?”

“Waning Moon,” she repeated, breathing deeply to soothe the sudden ache in her chest. It felt like a bullet had sliced into her heart.

How badly she wanted a future with Darien couldn’t be expressed in words. She wanted it—wanted *him*—more than she wanted anything in the world. Wanted to live with him and love him forever.

“It’s a tourist area like the Avenue of the Scarlet Star,” she forced out, swallowing her emotions. Hammering them down the way Darien had hammered his own down for twenty-four years. How he did it so expertly, she had no idea. “I think we’re close to there.”

“Which puts us how far away from Roman’s?”

She did the math in her head. “A while,” she admitted.

“Okay, Miss Vague, what’s ‘a while’ mean?”

The air far above their heads began to pulse. A rapid thumping sound ricocheted through the area, starting from one end of the street and carrying onto the other. *Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...*

“What is that?” Loren wondered aloud. It was by habit that she craned her neck to see, but there was nothing around, below, or above them that wasn’t suffocated with shadow. Not even her Sight picked up on what was making that sound.

“Helicopters,” Malakai said. Of course—it seemed obvious now.

The rotary wings chopped apart the air like blades, the currents pulsing heavily in her ears, but from way down here they couldn’t feel any wind.

“Don’t get your hopes up.” Malakai sighed. “If we can’t see them, they can’t see us, either. They won’t be coming down far enough to do us any good.” He tugged on her hand, urging her along. “Hurry it up, Blondie. I’m tired of this shit.”

They walked a bit quicker now, still taking care not to trip, both eager to get out of here. Whoever was in those helicopters might not be able to help them, but maybe there were other poor souls who they could locate. People they could save. Maybe some of those people would be her family. Her friends.

Darien. Her fragile, lovesick heart tacked his name to the end of every thought that crossed her mind.

Please be alive, she begged.

During the long trek, she’d had plenty of time to think. About bargains. About life and death. About everything Darien had given her in six months, everything he’d sacrificed. And she asked herself what she would give—what she would sacrifice—for him.

Anything.

Everything.

Warm tears that glowed with pastel light slipped down her icy cheeks, and she blotted them dry with the back of her gloved hand.

Please, please be alive.

2

UNDERGROUND YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

‘**I** hate you.’

For Darien Cassel, being told by the woman he loved that she hated him was worse than being shot or stabbed. Since the moment the bomb went off, those three words had circled him like hungry vultures, yapping a cruel and tuneless song.

‘I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.’

He was disgusted with himself for walking out on her. For leaving while she was upset. He’d sped away from Roman’s house stupidly believing he’d get the chance to fix the hurt he’d caused her, and now he’d consider himself lucky if he ever saw her again.

He’d fucked up. Badly. Hate was the least he deserved.

‘I don’t have time right now,’ he’d told her, in a tone so sharp, he was ashamed to have used it on her. *‘We can talk about this when I get back.’*

That was the problem with time: everyone always thought they had more of it.

What a fucking joke this had turned out to be. He and Roman had been trapped down here in these tunnels, blind and running out of air, for gods knew how long. Hours, definitely, though he’d lost track of exactly how many. One minute, one *second* was too long, but *hours*?

He had to get out of here. For Loren. For his family—who, apart from Roman, Darien had no one else to turn to. A missile had blasted through the city, swallowing everything like a black hole.

Cell reception was down. No light—not even the tactical lights on their

guns—could penetrate the gloom. Tracking did sweet fuck all when everyone's auras were untraceable.

Useless. He'd never felt so useless.

'*I hate you.*' He'd use the memory like a weapon—would cut himself with it a little more each time, until he found the strength to get the hell out of here, Loren safe in his arms again. Even if she *did* hate him, even if she wanted nothing to do with him, even if she wanted to break up with him, for the gods' sake...he refused to rest until he knew she was safe.

He lifted the sword of adamant with his good hand and studied the reflection in the blade. The once black material had transformed into a mirror shortly after the explosion, its mysterious power allowing him to see through the darkness that blinded the naked eye. If he looked over his shoulder, he saw nothing but thick, choking darkness. But if he looked into the blade, he could see everything, clearer than crystal, in its reflection. Every last detail, right down to the pebbles on the ground. He hadn't a clue how, but it wasn't the first time the sword had changed itself in a time of need.

A miracle, that's what it was. A *miracle*—and the sole reason he and Roman had managed to make it more than three feet without tripping, staggering into walls, or falling prey to the beasts hunting in their vicinity.

'*I hate you.*' The vultures were circling again, and with them came another unwelcome reminder.

Ten months. Loren Calla, the sweetest, most beautiful woman who'd ever walked into the ashes of his life, would die sometime in the next roughly ten months. Darien had known for a while, but had buried it down, deep in the graveyard of the rest of the shit he suppressed, for as long as he could stand it. Now that the cat was out of the bag, it was all he could think about.

Ten. *Fucking*. Months.

Fuck if he was going to just *let* her die. He still had time, however short—a chance to save her before that bullshit prophecy came to fruition.

He drew a deep breath, the cold air of the Void sawing apart his lungs like jagged shards of glass as he walked with Roman through the tunnels, forever looking into the blade to help him navigate.

After the explosion, the temperature had plunged below freezing, puddles crackling as they iced over in the dark. Shortly after the cold had arrived, the monsters had spilled out of the dead Realm and into the living. Now, they were everywhere—horrid creatures of every shape, size, and breed.

Darien watched one in the sword—a thickly muscled canine with milky eyes, its form rippling with lightless green flames—as it crept by, entirely unaware of them thanks to the coat of magic Roman kept in place, masking their scents and sounds. It was a handy trick, but Darien knew Roman couldn't keep it up forever. They were both faint with exhaustion, their limbs stiff and slow-moving in the cold.

And it was getting harder to breathe by the minute.

Darien studied his cousin's grimy, scratched-up face in the sword's reflection. He mirrored Darien's steps, each inhale shallow and quivering.

"You all right?" Darien whispered, ice breaking under his boot as he took another backward step. That was the sword's one flaw: Needing to use the reflection to see meant they had to travel backward. If they wanted to walk forward, they first had to make damn sure they wouldn't bump into anything before trying, which would be plain stupid while surrounded by this many ravenous beasts.

"Been better," Roman admitted, matching Darien's volume. "I feel like I can't breathe." He rubbed at the chest of his battle-suit, another inhale shaking through him. "I need a paper bag or something."

"It's not you, it's the Void—it can't support life," Darien explained. "And it's only going to get worse, so we need to hurry."

At first, he'd believed the lack of oxygen was the fault of the debris choking the ventilation passages, and while that was true to an extent, Spirit Terra was a place of death. And death was spreading, seeping into Yveswich like a poisonous gas, poised to kill everything it touched.

Darien figured they were getting close to where he'd slew the Basilisk. They'd decided to head to the cavern the moment the blade had modified itself, giving them a way to see in the gloom. Climbing out of the same chamber they'd rappelled down would take a long time, and might very well be impossible given its extreme height. But right now it was their only option.

On they walked, maneuvering around rubble and stalagmites. Bandit stayed alert in Darien's shadow, Sayagul doing the same in Roman's. The Familiars had been very quiet since the bomb went off, but Darien suspected they were speaking to each other in private.

As if sensing his curiosity, Bandit said down the Spirit Bond, *'I hate to admit it, but...I'm worried about her.'* A whimper drifted down the bond. *'Do you think...do you...'*

Darien drew a deep breath, cold air needling his throat. Merely the thought of her not being okay caused him unbearable agony. But he told

the dog, who waited for an answer on pins and needles, *'I'm sure she's fine.'* He took a moment to appreciate his own lie. *'And I'm sure she's far away by now.'*

Bandit accepted the lie without argument, which was for the best. Darien didn't have the heart to tell the dog what he really thought.

Because he didn't want to admit it to himself, either—that there was no chance in hell they'd still be alive if Loren hadn't done something to tip the odds of survival in their favor. He and Roman were far too close to the Well replica to have lived through the blast. Not only should they have died—*instantly*—but the tunnels also should've collapsed. *Instantly.*

She had stayed in Yveswich—Darien could feel it. Had stayed long enough to suffer that awful blast. Which could only mean one thing.

Malakai had broken his promise. He'd given Darien his word that he would get Loren out of the city, and if he hadn't followed through...

Darien's blood heated to a rolling boil, but he clung to the hope—the chance, however slim—that the Reaper had at least been smart enough to get her out of here *after*.

If she hadn't made it out of the city, if she was stuck somewhere in this blinding darkness, if she had suffered so much as a scratch...

Darien would lose his goddamn mind. No amount of fighting or killing would quell the rage he'd feel if he discovered she was hurt.

Stagnant air, thick with rot and blood, wafted down the tunnel.

"What is that?" Roman whispered.

They closed the short distance to the arched doorway that led to the Basilisk's habitat and pressed their backs up against the wall. The vast room echoed with the crunch of bone and the slurp of something wet.

Darien steeled himself, hoping like mad that he wouldn't see the bodies of Jack and Tanner in there, who'd vanished during the explosion...and angled the blade so he could see into the cavern.

Sitting on their haunches in a lake of black blood were pale, skeletal bodies, all of them huddled around a mass of scales.

Monsters. Fucking *hundreds* of monsters, packed inside the room like sardines, leaving little space between here and the door on the other side. They were feasting on the corpse of the Basilisk—sharp teeth grinding against bone, scaled tongues lapping up blood.

"What now?" Roman whispered.

He tipped the blade **Copyrighted Material** from side to side, assessing the room and the many different beasts gorging on the Nameless creature. "We go around."

Easier said than done. As they crossed the cavern, it was impossible to

avoid bumping their legs into monsters, some turning toward them with eyes a milky blue. Most resembled canines, though closer to the Basilisk were the more humanoid breeds with wings, spiked spines, or horns, a few with bodies like arachnids or bats.

Something nudged his leg. Angling the sword downward, he saw a demon—vaguely canine in appearance—frantically sniffing his thigh. Its teeth were permanently bared, no lips to cover them, its hairless skin oozing with something black and bubbly.

He jabbed Roman in the side with an elbow. “*Shield*,” he hissed.

“*I am*.” But Roman had been shielding for a long time, and Darien sensed that his hold was slipping.

So he snapped a shield of his own up—for now. Roman had suggested he be the one to shield so Darien could reserve his magic in case of an emergency. But shielding for hours was more than even Darkslayers could handle.

Finally, they made it out of the Basilisk’s chamber and into the empty tunnel beyond. And they continued to walk. The ground was sloping upward now, so they had to exert more strength to crest it. Soon, they were both out of breath.

Darien used the blade to look up the tunnel—

And stopped with a curse on his lips.

“What’s wrong?” Roman asked.

“Look.” He passed the sword to Roman.

The chamber they’d rappelled down was drowning in rubble. The whole skyscraper had likely been demolished, slabs of concrete, cristala, metal—you name it—crammed inside.

So much for their escape plan. Sure, it would’ve taken them a hell of a long time to climb out, but they didn’t exactly have options. And there were elevated walkways every few hundred feet for maintenance workers, where they could have rested, making the ascent a little easier.

Now?... Simply put, they were screwed.

Roman was still using the sword to see, but he wasn’t looking at the chamber.

“What are you looking at?” Darien asked him.

Roman gave him back the sword. “To your right,” he instructed.

Darien turned the blade—

And saw tunnels **Copyrighted Material** in the rubble. New openings in the walls—gaping holes and narrow gashes that appeared to have been ripped open by the blast. But no indication as to where they might lead.

Roman caught his eye in the reflection and shrugged. “What other choice do we have?”

None. There was zero choice here, except which of those tunnels they would walk. He looked one more time, weighing their options.

He gestured with the sword to the one that led east. “Let’s take this one.”

Darien entered the tunnel first, the opening too narrow for both of them. Once they were in, it widened slightly, though not quite enough for two people, forcing them to walk single file.

“Backward or forward?” Darien asked.

Roman thought about it. “Forward. I’ve had enough of walking backward. I’m getting dizzy.”

Darien looked at the tunnel one more time. It was pretty straight—they could probably go for a while before needing to turn.

He tightened his grip on the sword, keeping it in hand in case they needed it. Without it, they were well and truly fucked. “Let’s do this.”

They started walking, bits of stone crunching under their feet. The ground softened as they ventured deeper, mud sucking on their boots.

“You good?” he asked Roman, his bass voice echoing.

“Fine,” Roman mumbled. “Just...thinking.”

“About what?”

“Everything.” He inhaled, the sound scraping across the walls like sharp talons. “You ever reach a point in your life where you feel like you totally fucked everything up, and there’s no going back?”

“All the time,” Darien said, Loren’s pretty face flashing into his mind. He sighed, missing her so goddamn much it felt like someone had punched their way to his heart and ripped it—raw and bloody and still beating—out. “All the damn time, man. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not very good at this whole *life* thing. Mistakes, though...I’ve always been good at those. My life is one big train wreck. So yeah, I’ve definitely reached the point where I feel like I fucked everything up. I feel like that right now.”

“You’ve done better than me, in a lot of ways. Least you don’t have your psycho dad to deal with anymore.” A beat of silence, and then Roman confessed, “I’m worried Paxton’s dead.”

Darien’s scalp prickled. “He’s not.”

“How do you know?” Roman challenged. “We don’t—that’s the problem. I promised to keep him safe, and what’d I do? I *left* him. I left my little brother all alone. And now I’m stuck in these gods-forsaken tunnels...” The

grinding of his teeth was audible. “Meanwhile I have no clue where he even *is*—”

“You didn’t know what was going to happen. None of us did.”

“Doesn’t matter. I still screwed up. I made a mistake, and I’m not going to even try to pretend that I didn’t. He’s probably scared. Probably wondering where the hell his brother is. If he’s dead, I’ll have no one to blame but myself—”

“I need you to listen to me,” Darien said, lifting the sword so he could see Roman in its reflection. He looked haggard, dried Venom and blood streaking his cheeks, his eyes wild with rage. With self-loathing. Darien had been in his shoes many times; he wouldn’t stand by and let Roman spiral like this. “We’re alive right now when we shouldn’t be,” he began. “So I need you to trust that Paxton is alive, too. You’re going to see him again—I promise you that.” He clapped Roman on the shoulder. “The best thing you can do for Pax right now is stay strong and get out of these tunnels. All right?”

His next inhale trembled. “Gods, I hope you’re right. About him being alive, I mean.”

“I am. I can feel it.”

A pause. And then Roman said, “I don’t suppose you can feel if Shay’s alive, too?” He huffed, disappointed with himself all over again. “Another of my many screw-ups.”

Darien considered how he should answer. He could tell Roman another lie, if only to make him feel better. But he didn’t want to—not when it wouldn’t solve anything, and not when promising Pax was okay was enough of a risk. So he settled on, “One step at a time. Let’s get above ground, and we’ll go from there. Good?”

Roman gave a rigid nod. “Yeah. Good.”

They walked on, the tunnel soon stinking of iron. The ground was still squelching—muddy in feel, but with ridges that felt like roots, making it a little easier to find purchase.

“I gotta say,” Roman began a few minutes later, “I never really took you for the romantic type.”

He smirked, grateful for the distraction. This was the most they’d talked in hours. “No?”

“No.” The smile in Roman’s voice was audible. “But it kind of suits you. *She* suits you.” **Copyrighted Material**

Darien’s own smile widened. “Thanks.”

“I’ve been dying to know what made my cousin—the famous *Darien Cassel*—”

“Famous? I don’t know about that.”

“—decide to protect this girl. She give good head or something?”

Darien chuckled. “Fuck off.” He paused. “She does give good head though, yeah.” Fuck, did she ever. She’d only gone down on him once, but it was the most unforgettable experience of his life.

Roman let out a husky laugh that bounced down the tunnel. “What was it then, if not the life-changing head?”

Darien thought about it, but there weren’t enough words to describe all the good Loren had brought into his life.

“Everything,” he said on a heavy exhale. “That’s the short answer.”

“What’s the long one?” Roman murmured, every trace of humor gone as he waited intently for his answer.

“She just...dropped into my life one day like an angel. I took one look at her, and I was obsessed. *Completely* obsessed.” As he spoke, he almost forgot Roman was there. He could feel his heart peeling open like a flower, baring the thoughts and emotions he’d kept locked behind bars for so long. “The more time I spent with her, the more addicted I got. She taught me how to feel things again—taught me how to...how to love. She saw past the ugly parts of me, and...” He drew a shaky breath and said on the exhale, “I don’t know what she found there, but she hasn’t run yet. So there must be something she likes.” Darien didn’t bother adding that his mother being human had a lot to do with it; that was a wound he didn’t feel like opening right now.

Roman was quiet for a while. Darien thought he was maybe done with this conversation, but then he said, “The head, probably.”

Darien shoved him in the shoulder. “Get out of here.”

Roman staggered, laughing. “You sure it wasn’t you who put the hit on her? Gave yourself an excuse to track her down, take her home, feel her up a little? Get between those legs?”

He smirked. “Yeah, right.” But his humor was soon fading. “Her price would’ve been higher if it were me.” No price was high enough for her.

“How did she not run away screaming from your crazy ass?”

“She did—initially. Then she came back. Invited me out to lunch.”

“No way.”

“It’s the truth. She was completely honest with me too, right from the start. Didn’t lie when I asked her questions. She didn’t even make up a fake name.” His mind flashed between the dark tunnel and that fateful day on

the sunlit Avenue of the Scarlet Star. How beautiful she'd looked. Scared, yeah—of him. But still so damn beautiful. "She didn't trust me at first," he went on. "I had to work on her for a bit. But she came around."

"Hm," Roman said. "Interesting."

"Yeah, very. It's been a journey." That was a wild understatement.

"Jokes aside...I'm happy for you."

"Thanks."

Roman abruptly stopped, staring over his shoulder.

Darien's smile melted. His scalp prickled with a warning. "What—"

"*The walls*," Roman hissed. "The walls—look at the walls!"

Darien lifted the sword—

And saw in its reflection that this tunnel wasn't made of rock or adamant—not anymore. Somewhere along the way, it had turned inky and ropelike, the walls dripping with slime—

Roman stumbled back and slammed into Darien. "Holy shit, do you see that? It's moving."

Darien tried to take a step, but his feet were stuck. Vines were wrapping around his boots, pulling down on them. Constricting.

He pried his feet free and stomped on another vine.

Another reached for him, trying to snake around his throat. He ducked right on time—

The tunnel rumbled, as if from an earthquake. Quickly, he used the blade to look behind him.

The tunnel was caving in.

"Run," he bit out. He grabbed Roman by the shoulder, pushing him down the tunnel. If either of them was getting out of here, it was Roman. "RUN!"

They bolted—fast as they could go. The tunnel began to shrink, the vines piling up, reaching for their throats.

Darien pointed the sword upward, the blade carving the ceiling apart. Vines dropped to the ground and curled up in pain. More screaming rattled the tunnel, but the shrinking slowed. Receded before picking up again.

"I'm not gonna die like this!" Roman shouted.

"No, you're *not!* So keep moving, goddammit!" Darien shoved him faster as they tore down the tunnel, unable to see a damn thing, forever in danger of tripping or running into a wall they couldn't see. "*Faster!*"

Another thirty feet, and he heard the start of white noise. He followed the sound, using it to guide him. Smelled something fresh.

Water. That was a waterfall he was hearing. Water he was smelling.

They rounded a sudden bend, smacking into the curve of the tunnel with surprised shouts. They rebounded off the shifting wall, ripping their fingers and feet free of the grasp of the vines, and kept running.

Fresh air kissed his face. With renewed energy, he sprinted toward it, right on Roman's heels—

And finally, they were out.

He blinked in disbelief as he thumped to a slower pace—as the darkness abruptly lightened, turning from pitch black to dark gray.

“Holy shit,” Darien breathed, squeezing his eyes open and shut. He could see.

He could finally *see*.

Roman let out a sob that echoed, his legs visibly shaking in relief.

They'd made it. They were still far from the surface—from safety. But they'd made it this far. That had to count for something.

But fuck, was he ready to drop. His lungs were begging for oxygen, his mouth metallic from all the running. He allowed himself a minute to catch his breath, bending to brace his hands on his shaking knees. Roman did the same beside him, his legs still wobbling, too. They both needed the break. They'd been on the move for hours. Without rest. Without food or drink.

And they had no Venom left.

Roman gave him a little smile, strands of dark, sweat-damp hair hanging in his face. “Close one, hey?”

“Close one,” Darien agreed, still panting. Still exhausted as hell. He rallied his strength—his will—and shoved off his knees.

They were in a cavern that was even bigger than the Basilisk's habitat. In the center of the space, tumbling down out of nowhere, was a giant waterfall, the rapids emptying into a deep pit.

Darien stepped up to the edge, tipping his head back to glimpse the top of the roaring falls.

The overspray was refreshing. He shut his eyes, beads of water pattering against his tired, filthy face like rain. The sound reminded him of the ambient videos his mom used to put on to help him fall asleep. Rain and ocean waves were her favorite. His, too.

He opened his eyes to the scuff of Roman's boots as he walked over to join him.

“Think that's coming from Spirit Terra?” Roman asked. He squinted up at the raging torrent, his eyesight dimming in his neck.

Darien swiped the water off his face. “I'd bet money on it. Which means *that*—” He pointed at the pit looming near the toes of his boots. “—

could lead there too.” If they fell in there, who knew where they’d end up. Somewhere in the Void, probably. Which would suck.

They skirted the pit so they could see past the wide waterfall—to the other side of the cavern. There was another tunnel over there—just one—but it was stuffed with shadows from the Void.

“That doesn’t look inviting,” Roman said, his mouth quirking with dark humor.

“No, it doesn’t,” Darien agreed. “But we’re fresh out of options.”

“Dark, foreboding tunnel...,” Roman mused, weighing option one on his left hand, “or Spirit Terra.” He weighed option two on his right.

Darien pursed his lips in thought. “Is it bad if I want to say neither?”

Roman was about to reply when claws scraped against stone.

“Shit,” Roman muttered as they whipped around. “We’ve got company.”

Monsters were pouring out of the tunnel in droves. While some crawled on the walls and ceiling, others stalked forward on all fours—snapping at the air in a show of claim.

Darien lifted the sword with a steady hand. He took up a defensive stance, one foot behind the other, Roman guarding his back.

“Any ideas?” his cousin asked him.

If they ran, they would be chased. But if they fought... They were outnumbered. And they were already surrounded—backed against the pit with nowhere to go.

Like it or not, they would have to fight their way out of this.

Flecks of half-frozen water pelted their backs, dense clouds of vapor fogging the area.

“Focus on the ones on your side,” Darien instructed, his words nearly swallowed up by the crashing of the falls. He tried to rally his magic, but all he got was a cooling ember. If he ran out of power, he’d have to use the sword—not ideal, given the state of his right hand. Still, he said, “I’ll handle the ones on mine.”

“Copy.”

The air stirred with a warning, and Darien readied to meet it.

A blur to his left.

Another to Roman’s right.

And with a blink that turned his eyes black, Darien let his own monster off the leash.

Copyrighted Material

3

NORTH FINANCIAL DISTRICT

YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

Maximus Reacher awoke to the sound of screaming. He opened his eyes to a blur of darkness and firelight. He lay sprawled across the ground, his blood-soaked cheek stuck to rock. Where he was, he didn't know. A tunnel, maybe. Or a cave. It was too smoky to tell. But if there was one thing he knew for certain, it was that he should be dead.

He should be dead.

The screams were coming from a female hellseer. She knelt close by, her body all fire, her glowing hands digging through piles of rubble.

The names she was calling out were...strange. They weren't names, he realized—at least, not common ones. They were colors.

"Magenta!" she wailed. "Gold! VIOLET! SAAAAAAGE! Answer me!"

The shouting continued. Magenta. Gold. Violet. Sage.

Max tried to sit up, but he couldn't move. Couldn't feel his body. He could hardly even twitch his fingertips. An otherworldly darkness oozed through the area, spreading like an infection. It felt...alive. Unconquerable, even by firelight.

Passed out on the ground beside him, on stone hot to the touch, was a witch with red hair. A pair of magnificent white wings were fanned out at her sides, more than half of the feathers singed to a crisp.

The witch was bleeding—drip, drip, drip. Max watched the hypnotic drip of blood from her dainty, freckled nose, his eyelids opening and closing with heavy blinks. Drip, drip, drip.

Blink, blink, blink.

Shit, that was Dallas. Dallas was hurt.

He peeled his face off the stone, his pulse lurching into a sprint that sent bolts of pain shooting through his chest, as if Obitus himself still had his deathly claws in his heart. Wringing out what was left of his lifeblood.

The fiery one was still screaming. Screaming and sobbing, flames and sparks bursting from her body with each heart-wrenching cry.

That was Maya he was looking at. Maya 'MJ' Reacher, burning from head to toes, just like in Max's terrible nightmares. Only now, she was alive. And those flames? They were a part of her. Controlled by her.

All of the Elementals were dead. Crushed by rubble or incinerated by the blast, no suits to save them. All except Maya, who Max had hurled himself at with a hellseber's speed, pulling Dallas along with him. He'd shielded them both with his body, his suit taking the brunt of the explosion.

Every Elemental, except Maya—dead.

And the pink one, he realized. By some miracle, the one with the hot-pink braid had made it, too—injured but still breathing.

"Magenta," Maya croaked. She dug the Elemental out of the rubble, where the rest of their friends lay in crushed pieces. She hooked her arms under Magenta's shoulders and tugged her across the ground. Sat down and cradled her head in her lap. "Stay with me," she was saying, her tone frantic. Pleading. "Magenta, stay with me." Magenta was young—fourteen, at most. A child still.

With a grunt of pain, he pushed himself onto his hands and knees, a thick line of blood streaming out of his mouth like paint. His vision shimmered, the ground beneath him going in and out of focus.

It cost him the last of his strength, but he got to his feet. Swayed—

"Max!" Maya shouted. Her voice echoed, over and over again. She eased Magenta's head onto the ground, preparing to stand. "MAX!"

The ground tipped. Maya shot to her feet just as Max fell—

"MAX," Dallas said, shaking his shoulder.

Max blinked the memory away.

They were out of the tunnels—walking the streets of Yveswich. It had taken them hours of **Copyrighted Material** stumbling, but they had finally made it out of the dark shroud that was swallowing the metropolis like a monster's mouth.

This section of the city seemed to have not been hit as badly by the

Void, the street dark but still visible. How, Max had no clue. The sky was pitch black, the sun nowhere to be found, but if Max was calculating correctly, it had to be nearly midday.

Just ahead limped Maya and Magenta, conversing in Ilevyn. The pink Elemental's arm was slung across MJ's shoulders, her skin marbled with bruises. In the time in which their group had staggered through the streets, those two hadn't said a word to anyone but each other.

Max was still trying to decide how to feel about that.

"You okay?" Dallas asked, stepping into Max's vision. For a moment, he saw two of her, then three, her head haloed by a streetlight. He was still deaf in one ear, the other ringing. He wondered if the damage was permanent.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice sounding lopsided. "Just trying to figure out where we are." And how long he'd been out of it for.

Up ahead, the streets were packed with people. Cops, paramedics, firefighters, and ordinary citizens were everywhere, many of the latter injured and hysterical with fear. LED street-lamps lined the roads, white pooling across asphalt, and red and blue light bars flashed atop dozens of ambulances, fire trucks, and police cruisers. The lights were behaving...strangely. As if they were covered by a thick haze of fog or smoke, and constantly in danger of guttering out like flames.

"Look there," Dallas said, pointing out a street sign. "North Financial District. That's not far from Roman's house, right?" She turned to him with eyes bright with hope, her copper ponytail catching on a warped wing.

He sighed. "I don't know, Dal." There were many things he didn't know anymore—things he wasn't sure he even *wanted* to know. Such as where his family and friends were—which of them were alive...and which were dead. He didn't think he could stomach it—seeing them if they were... gone. Nothing left of them but corpses. Burying the people he loved was something he hoped he never had to do. He'd rather *they* bury *him*.

"It's going to be okay, Max," Dallas said. But her voice cracked when she said his name, her chin shaking. "It *has* to be."

He cupped her face with a filthy hand. "It will," he told her. Because it was what she needed to hear, even if it ended up not being true.

Max prayed that it would be—prayed to every deity of the Terran pantheon. If the others were dead... If he was the only survivor...

Gods, he couldn't do it—*life*. He couldn't live without them, couldn't imagine a world without *the only* *Devs*.

As they limped down the crowded street, Max must've scanned nearly a hundred faces. People did the same to him, as they, too, searched for loved

ones. Some sat on curbs, sipping hot chocolate or tea from paper cups, thermal blankets wrapped around them. Others had their vitals checked in ambulances, while the less fortunate were wheeled away on stretchers.

There were people from all walks of life here—vampires, werewolves, veneficae, humans, hellsehers. There was no division on a day like this. Today, they were just people, all of them in need. Funny how the walls came down when it felt like the world was ending.

Still no sign of anyone they knew. Max couldn't decide if that was a good thing.

His ears started shrieking again. Blood rushed through his head, weighing it down. Roaring like a great flood of water.

Something wet dribbled down his lips. His chin. He cursed, pressing a fist over his nostrils to stop the bleeding.

Dallas reached out to steady him. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just another nosebleed." He tipped his head back, blood trickling down his throat. "Maya!" he called. She was about a dozen paces away now, but she turned. "Hold up, I need a sec."

"We can sit and rest for a bit," Dallas offered.

He shook his head. "We have to find the others." He wiped his nose on a clean part of his sleeve—the waffle shirt peeking through the rips in his black armor. "I'm fine—bleeding's already stopped."

Dallas suddenly turned. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" He scanned the crowds. "I'm still deaf in one ear."

But then he heard it, too. It was faint, but... It was a voice—calling his name. Not one voice, but several.

Three.

He pushed back down the street, his heart jumping up his throat.

Was he hallucinating?

No—no, he wasn't, because he heard it again, and he knew in his heart that it was real.

"Max!"

He staggered forward, not believing his eyes.

A tall, black-haired female was heading this way. An even taller male kept pace beside her, his short hair dark. Their eyes were an identical shade of almost-grey blue. The third in their trio was platinum blonde, her figure statuesque, her narrow face worthy of runways.

His family. Not all in the same part of the whole.

"Max?" called the dark-haired female. That was Ivy—it really *was* her, shouting his name. She grinned upon confirming it was him, moving faster

now through the crowds. Tears sparkled on her face, visible even from way over here. “*Max!*”

His heart stumbled. Pounded all throughout his body. “Ivy?”

“*Max!*” This voice was male. The voice of a friend—a brother not by blood but history.

“*Travis!*” Max pushed himself faster, still dizzy but not wanting to slow down, *needing* to get to them. The ground seemed to rise and fall as if it were breathing, creating the illusion of running on ocean waves.

“*Max!*”

Max was full-on sprinting now, sobs tearing apart his lungs. People dodged him as he ran like a madman. “*Travis! LACEY!*”

Ivy was the first to reach him.

He collided with her, crushing her to him as violent sobs wracked his aching body. He spun her around, weeping into her hair, the weight of not knowing, of wondering all these long hours if they were alive, finally lifting off his shoulders, leaving him weak with relief. They were talking over each other, Ivy sobbing too, and then Lace and Travis were there with them, throwing their arms around them. Squeezing tight.

For a minute, Max’s world paused, and it was just *them*—the people he loved, clinging to each other in the flashing lights of a ruined city.

“Oh gods,” Travis was saying, his voice a crackle of emotion. “Gods, we thought you were dead! We thought you were *dead*, Max—”

“Same,” Max said, pulling Travis close. Pulling them *all* close. “I’m never letting go of you idiots.”

“What happened to you guys?” Ivy sobbed. Fresh tears fell from her eyes, clearing tracks in her dirty cheeks. She rubbed them dry with the back of a hand, smearing filth. “Are you okay?” She sniffled. “You’re bleeding.”

“I’m fine—it’s just a nosebleed.”

Lace cut in, “Where were you? We’ve been looking for you for hours.”

“We were underground when the explosion happened,” Max replied. “We took a tunnel that brought us out—just south.” He pointed. “We ended up here.” He scanned the street they’d turned into an emergency medical site. “We got lucky.”

Dallas had come over to join them, but she was looking beyond—for Loren, no doubt.

“Dallas,” Ivy called softly. “Are you okay?”

Dallas hid the disappointment in her face like a pro; she’d always been good at that. “Like Max said,” she began, forcing a smile, “we got lucky. My wings are fried, though.” She peeked over her shoulder—at the

burnt feathers, the wires and framing exposed—and sighed. “What about you?”

“Where are the others?” Max added.

“We were at the tar pits when it happened,” Ivy said. “We were driving back to Roman’s, but we decided to come here first to try and find you guys.” Driving—that meant Darien’s truck had survived.

“Kylar and Asp are with Jewels,” Travis said, indicating to an ambulance parked by a streetlight. He then pointed at a different ambulance a short distance away. “Jack’s there.”

Max blinked. “Wait—*Jack’s* here?”

“Has anyone had any contact with Darien?” Lace asked.

“I was about to ask *you* the same thing,” Max said. “How did Jack get here? What about Tanner? Roman?” He braced himself for bad news, his stomach dropping through his feet. “Where are they?”

They glanced amongst each other. Max’s heart beat faster, pounding in his temples, his back breaking out in a cold, prickly sweat.

With reluctance, Lace said, “We haven’t heard from them.”

“What did Jack say?” Max demanded.

A pause. Then Travis said, “Paramedics found him in Ardesia. In some neighborhood *past* Roman’s house. Like, way the fuck *east*.”

Max gaped. How the hell had Jack wound up way over there? He didn’t know Yveswich very well, but...Roman’s house was pretty damn far away from Caliginous on Silverway. He knew that much.

“He’s still out of it,” Lace added. “He isn’t talking much.” She slid her phone out of a slot in her weapons belt and clicked the button on the side. The screen came on, the soft glow illuminating the striking planes of her face. “Phones are still fucked.” She sighed. “I haven’t been able to get a bar since this happened. No messages have come through since the emergency broadcast.”

“Is that...?” Ivy began, trailing off, her eyes fixating on something behind Max.

Max turned.

Maya and Magenta lingered just down the street. While Maya blended in with a more natural look, Magenta’s pink eyes, pink freckles, and pink hair stuck out like a sore thumb.

“I found Maya,” Max confirmed. “Right when the bomb went off—go figure.” He tried to suppress a grimace, his teeth caked with blood and grit.

“Does she remember you?” Ivy whispered.

Max sighed through his nose. “To tell you the truth, we haven’t talked much. She’s quieter than I remember.” More like closed off, unavailable—and not seeming to want to change that.

Time—she just needed time or something. Max could handle that.

“Can’t really blame her, though,” Dallas said, shrugging. “Pretty much all her friends died in the tunnels.”

Lace’s eyes flared. “No way. The Elementals?”

“The pink one’s the only survivor,” Max said. “Magenta’s her name—fake name, whatever. She hasn’t said a word to me. Three others were with them—they all died.” He scanned the parked ambulances, countless people bustling around. “Where’d you say Jacky was?”

“Over here,” Ivy said. “Follow me.”

She led the way, weaving around citizens and stepping out of the paths of medical professionals wheeling stretchers. Past the ambulance where Kylar Lavin and Aspen Van Halen waited for Jewels. The purple-haired Reaper was receiving a shot in the arm—likely her near-useless medication for the Tricking.

Jewels gave Travis a little smile as their group passed. She looked like she might throw up, her skin waxy and dotted with sweat, but aside from that and a few bruises, she appeared to be okay.

“How’s he doing?” Ivy asked the venefican paramedic tending to Jack. Jack sat on the back step of the ambulance, doors open.

“He has a concussion,” the warlock said, zipping his emergency kit shut. He wore the Star of Life on his uniform, along with five symbols that represented each of the species he was qualified to provide care for—an eye for hellsehers, a stave for veneficae, a blood droplet for vampires, a sickle moon for werewolves, and an hourglass for humans. Not very nice, the last one. “He’s having trouble remembering what happened between now and about six hours ago. Hellseher healing should speed his recovery time along, but we still recommend plenty of rest, cold compresses, lots of water—the usual.”

“I was told you found him in Ardesia?” Max asked.

A nod. “That’s correct.”

“Was he alone?”

“As far as we could tell.”

“No dead bodies?” Max pressed.

The paramedic weighed his response. “A total of people have died tonight. Even more are injured. If anyone was with him, I wasn’t made aware.” Kit in hand, he tried to pass.

Max stepped in his way. “Wait—please. I know you’re busy, but—did you see anyone else with one of these?” He gestured to the tattoo below the ear that was ringing again. It was suddenly hard to hear his own voice, his ear plugged as if with water.

The warlock’s silver-ringed eyes flicked to the horned mark of the Seven Devils. “No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“What about Shadowmasters?” Travis intervened. You’d have to be living under a rock to not know the Darkslaying symbols of your hometown, but Travis still described, “A skull on the cheekbone.”

“I’m sorry,” the man said. “I haven’t seen any other Darkslayers tonight.”

Max stared blankly at the paramedic, not knowing what he was waiting for—a different outcome, maybe. Some reassurance that Darien and the others were okay. Alive. *Safe*.

The warlock’s face softened with compassion. “Feel free to ask around,” he said gently. “Maybe someone else has seen your friends.”

Max felt like he was outside of his body, but he managed to say, “Thank you.” He gazed at the ambulance, his vision fuzzing over.

The warlock nodded in farewell. “Take care.” He took his leave.

Max drew a deep breath, forcing himself to keep a level head. No bodies was a good thing.

Hopefully.

“Hey, Jack,” Max said.

“Hey.” The word was a gruff mumble. He looked dazed. His brow was cut, a ring of bruises around it. A layer of salve that smelled strongly of herbs shone on the wound. Thanks to his hellseher genetics, the bruises were already fading to green and yellow.

“How you feeling?”

“Like ass.” He grimaced. “My mouth tastes like it, too.” He reached for the mini plastic water bottle by his left knee, missing once. He twisted the cap off and swigged, water dribbling down his chin.

“Listen, Jack,” Max began, stepping closer. “I know you’ve got a concussion and all, but do you have any idea where Darien is? Tanner? Roman? No one’s heard from them. I’m starting to get worried.”

Jack frowned. “You heard the guy—can’t remember shit.” He took another swig, swishing the water around in his mouth before swallowing.

Lace pressed, “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Guys,” Ivy warned. “Take it easy.”

But Jack said, “Darien killed the Basilisk.” He squinted up at them, using the near-empty water bottle to shield his eyes against flashing lights.

Max felt a jolt of surprise. “I’m sorry—Darien did *what?*”

Travis whispered, “We might have to fact check that one.”

Jack merely stared into space, uncharacteristically serious. Whenever Jack didn’t smile, he looked like a complete stranger.

Ivy squeezed her husband’s shoulder in encouragement. “Let’s give him some time.” Her tone, although pleasant, said it all: case closed. “This has been one crazy night.” She turned to stare at the busy street, her face lined with stress. “Or day—kind of hard to tell.” She frowned at the chaos going on around them, the city still dark as if it were midnight.

“It’s almost noon,” Lace said. Well, that answered Max’s next question.

Ivy suddenly paled, her heart speeding up. “Shit.” She whipped back around. “Shit, shit, *shit.*”

“What?” Travis murmured.

Max began to turn, wondering what had spooked Ivy so badly—

Ivy stopped him with a hand gripping his arm. “*Don’t turn around.*”

“What’s going on?”

“Shadowmasters,” she hissed. “Right behind us.”

Max caught the eye of Kylar just down the way—near that other ambulance, his face hidden under a blanket he was using as a hood. His eyes were bolted wide; he’d clearly spotted the Shadowmasters, too.

Ivy shifted, putting herself directly in front of Jack—using her body to block him from view. “Nobody move,” she whispered.

The voices of several Shadowmasters came into hearing range as they greeted each other on the busy road.

“Any sign of them?” Male. Brusque. Vaguely familiar.

“No.” Another male—a voice Max didn’t recognize.

“You checked the house?” This question came from a female. Also familiar.

“That’s the first place we went. No one was there but some old dude. Pax’s aura has completely disappeared.”

“Maybe he’s dead,” said a deeper voice, his words coated with sick hope.

Max became aware of the sound of Travis’s heart—thumping with pure rage. His aura had sharpened; Max knew that if he could’ve seen it, it would have been a deep scarlet—

Copyrighted Material

Max placed a hand on Trav’s shoulder—a gesture intended not only to comfort, but to also warn. Restrain. If Travis let his aura get out of control,

there was a chance the Shadowmasters would pick up on it. Even with the Avertera talisman glimmering in the hollow of his throat—glimmering around *all* of their throats—the risk was too great. The Shadowmasters might not be able to *see* their auras, but that didn't mean they couldn't feel them, couldn't detect shifts in emotion if they were strong enough to set off warning bells.

And rage tended to ring a very loud bell.

"Let's split up again," said the first male. "You guys check his school, we'll try the theater. No one rests until we find Paxton. Clear?"

"Clear."

"Meet us at the House of Black in two hours."

They'd checked the house—*Roman's* house. They had to mean Roman's. The very place where Paxton *should* be. There was a chance he'd escaped, maybe—left town with Loren, Malakai, and the others...

But the Shadowmasters had said that no one was at the house except '*some old dude*'. Arthur, no doubt. And if Arthur was still here, there was no way the others had left him behind—a defenseless man in his seventies, who'd done countless favors for them, left to die in a destroyed city. No chance. So—

If they hadn't escaped... If they were still in Yveswich...

Then where the hell *were* they? And what did that mean for Arthur and the others?

"Those assholes are looking for my little brother," Travis said, his voice as lethal as the glare he threw over his shoulder at the departing Shadowmasters. Blaine and Larina Barlowe were among them—the voices Max had recognized from the night Don and his people intruded on Roman's property, dragging him off to the House of Black.

"We have to find him," Max said, his pulse shifting into a determined drumbeat. "Before they do."

4

UNDERGROUND YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

Even without the aid of Venom, his fatigued body ready to collapse, Darien's dark power was a force to be reckoned with.

Lethal waves of his magic smashed like battering rams into the hordes of beasts trapping him and Roman against the pit. Heads were blasted off in sprays of blood. Bodies were launched into walls at lightning speed, necks and spines snapping on impact.

But it still wasn't enough, because the monsters...

They just kept coming.

A winged creature dropped down on them from above.

"*Watch out!*" Roman shouted.

Darien stabbed the sword straight up, skewering the monster through the throat in midair. It slid all the way down to the hilt, smearing the blade with bubbling black blood.

With a battle cry, he flung the corpse off, hurtling it into two more demons. He barely had time to recover before a second monster was dive-bombing for his throat.

He ducked and angled his wrist, blade tilted upward. The beast sawed its own belly open on the sword as it leapt clear over his head. It fell into the pit with a keening yowl, claws scabbling against rock on its way down.

Another dropped on Roman's side, but the thing was swiftly pulled apart by a whirlwind of shadowweaver's magic. Wings were torn to shreds, joints ripping out of sockets with wet *pops*.

Two more attacked in unison. Darien gutted the one while Roman

reached with blinding speed for the knife at his thigh. He flicked his wrist back and threw.

The blade pierced its forehead—no stone in this one. It slammed into the ground and slid in a smear of blood, Roman dodging it as it tumbled by.

Roman was about to say something when he suddenly fell, as if a rug had been pulled out from under his feet. He landed on his back with a *bang*—missing the pit by mere inches.

“What the fuck!” He kicked his left foot, his ankle ensnared with one of those vines from the tunnel. More vines were lashing out, snatching monsters by the leg or wing and dragging them, screaming, into the tunnel. “*Cut it!*” Roman thundered. “Quick—*cut it off!*”

Darien swung the sword—

It struck rock, sparking, as Roman was sucked into the throng of monsters at blinding speed.

Darien’s blood went cold. “*Roman!*” He made to run after him—

Something heavy smacked into his side. The sword slipped out of his hand as sharp teeth clamped onto his forearm, sinking in deep.

He shouted out in pain, his vision going starry as blood gushed out of the wound. The wolflike beast hung on like the jaws of a bear trap—mauling the skin and muscle. He whipped the creature back and forth, working his free hand between its jaws to pry them open—to no avail.

“*Get off!*” Darien kicked it in the chest. Once. Twice. A third time—*harder*.

It let go with a yelp and plummeted into the pit, its chilling keen echoing long after its body had been swallowed by clouds of mist.

He doubled over, panting through his teeth, his arm cradled against his chest. More blood dribbled to the stone, the wound burning as if it were being eaten by acid.

Focus. He had to focus, had to find Roman. There was no time to waste on bleeding.

His ears were roaring, his head featherlight as he stumbled over to the blade. Forced himself to pick it up, to straighten, but—

Pain stabbed through his arm like a branding iron. He choked out a grunt of agony, his heart pounding so hard he thought he might throw up.

Shit. *Shit*. This was bad—

Suddenly, everything felt far away, hazy. A distant, untouchable dream.

He staggered to one side, the roaring in his ears shifting into a piercing,

buzzing scream. The dozens of bloodthirsty creatures packed inside the cavern shimmered. Blurred together into shapeless smears.

He shook his head—once, twice.

Demons that looked like Ignis's wild dogs advanced on him, their maws dripping saliva.

He swung the sword, nearly falling over from the momentum. Staggered like he was drunk.

'*Bandit*,' Darien tried. His inner voice echoed—again and again.

No response, but...Darien could sense him—a smoky flame taking the vague shape of a dog. He lay in the shadows of Darien's mind, too drained to come out, to speak.

Another two monsters launched themselves at him in a blur of mottled flesh, their eyes feverish with hunger.

Darien punched the sword through their guts, then bisected another, and it crumpled in twitching halves at his boots. Several fled from his wrath, making a beeline for the farthest tunnel with their tails between their legs.

He whipped around, scanning the area. His vision was still warped and muzzy, his ears whirring.

Roman. He had to get to Roman.

But where the hell was he?

"Fuck."

On clumsy feet, he trudged through the cavern—through the thick of the flesh-hungry monsters. He could barely see through the mental haze, but he didn't let this stop him. He chopped his way through, hacking apart anything that moved. Duck, stab, slash. He was soaked in gore, his hair dripping with water and sour-smelling blood. There were teeth everywhere—teeth and claws and leathery wings and eyes straight out of hell.

"*Romaaaaaaaaan!*" he called, every breath a labored pant. Blood trickled down his arm and dripped off his fingers, leaving a trail of red everywhere he went. "*ROMAN!*—"

"*Darien!*"

Relief hit him with the force of a truck. "Oh thank gods." He spun in circles, searching for Roman with fierce blinks, his star-flecked vision pulsing to the rapid thumping of his heart. "*Where are you?*"

"Over here!"

Darien plowed on, moving clumsily through the carnage. Following the sound of Roman's voice—

There. There was Roman, crouching on the ground a few feet away. He

was surrounded by barking beasts that paced restlessly from side to side, his only means of protection a flickering barrier of shadow as he fought to wrest his foot free from the vine.

“Darien, get this thing off me—I don’t have a knife!—”

The vine suddenly whipped upward, pulling Roman into the air. The movement was so swift it caused him to fall backward, the back of his head smacking against the ground.

Darien dove, grabbing onto Roman’s outstretched hand with his broken one. “Hold on!” he gritted out. “Hold on, I got you—”

“Don’t you dare let go!”

“I’m not fucking letting go!”

But the vine wasn’t letting go either, and to Darien’s horror, his boots began to slide across the ground as it pulled and *pulled* on Roman. His hand burned, his arm still leaking blood.

The creatures pushed closer, barking and snapping.

“Stay back!” The air whistled as Darien cut it apart with his sword. To Roman, he shouted, “*Shoot it!*” He pulled as hard as he could, gaining two meters, the vine stretching taut as Roman wrestled a handgun from his weapons belt. “You have to shoot it—I can’t reach it from here!”

An inhuman scream shook the cavern. It was so loud, it vibrated Darien’s eardrums, making him holler in pain.

Roman screamed too, nearly letting go. All around them, monsters yawped and hissed, pawing at their ears and bowing their heads to the ground in agony.

Darien’s eyes watered, his attention snapping to the tunnel.

Writhing vines framed the entrance like thick worms, a few lashing out to grab more prey. Inside the tunnel, monsters cried as they were devoured—as whatever that *thing* was crushed their bones into powder. As it *ate* them.

His boots skidded with another yank, the immense force behind the action causing his upper body to snap forward. “*Shoot it, Roman!*” He pulled, gaining a meter back, then dug his heels in with a grunt as he was again tugged back the other way. “*Shoot it!*”

The air was cleaved by another deafening roar. Darien tucked his head against a shoulder, jaw clenching tight as the sound shot like a missile into his ears. Worse was the red-hot pain blistering through his hand, the bones threatening to splinter from the place that was still healing.

He could barely breathe, barely think, but he managed to bellow, “*Shoot the fucking thing!*”

"*I'M TRYING!*" Roman roared as he took aim. His face was flushed from hanging upside down, his body constantly wobbling in midair like an elastic band.

He fired the first shot from his handgun, missing by millimeters.

A demon that looked like a wolf dove for Darien's throat.

He swept the blade up. Unable to balance himself properly, he carved its arm off instead of its head, pulpy blood showering his face.

Roman fired a second round. Missed *again*.

"*Come on, man—I thought you were a good shot!*"

"*I AM!*"

He pulled the trigger again. The bullet hit the side of the vine, its insides wriggling like maggots.

The cavern shook with another howl, shards of rock clacking down and bursting into dust. One struck Darien between the brows, splitting his skin open. Blood trickled between his eyes, streaming down the bridge of his nose, his lips. Monsters yelped as they, too, were struck with bits of rock. A few fled the scene, while others were so disoriented they banged into each other and tumbled into the pit.

The vine began to thrash. Back and forth, back and forth, dragging them from side to side. Darien squeezed Roman's hand as tightly as he could, biting back the pain as he was whipped about like a rag doll, boots thumping and sliding. More vines reared up and dove for him, but the moment he swung the sword they screamed and cowered away from it, as if afraid.

"Hold on!" Darien shouted, his grip slippery with blood. The few remaining monsters chomped at the air, leaping for Roman's sides. "Hold on, don't let go—"

Brutal claws caught Roman in the hip. The Shadowmaster barked a profanity.

Darien kicked the thing in the skull, sending it sprawling with a yelp.

His hold on Roman began to slip, the pain in his hand getting worse—

"Fuck—my *hand, Roman!*" His vision went white. His boots slid another meter as the vine gave up thrashing, pulling again toward the tunnel.

Darien feared he was going to let go. He was going to let go, and if he did, he'd lose Roman forever.

"*My hand!*"

Copyrighted Material

"I know, I know! *Just hold on—*"

He was going to faint. Throw up. Stop breathing.

Roman kept firing, shots popping through the cavern.

A bullet hit stone—bursting a chunk into dust.

Another sliced through a monster's neck, ripping through an artery with a squirt of blood.

"Let," Roman spat, firing another shot, "*the fuck*," another, "*GO!*"

One shot—he had *one* round left.

Roman squeezed the trigger—*POP*. Darien held his breath as the bullet sped out of the muzzle in a silver blur.

It sliced into the vine, spraying brown sticky liquid.

Another mind-rattling scream.

Darien let out a mighty roar of his own, of triumph and rage, pulling as hard as he could—

The vine let go, retreating toward the tunnel with an eldritch screech.

Roman fell—crashing right into Darien.

Their limbs tangled as they were launched backward, Darien taking an elbow to the jaw, feet tripping over creatures that hissed and scattered.

He felt the heel of his boot teeter on an edge. But he didn't have time to shout out a warning before gravity was sucking him backward.

He took Roman down with him as he fell. Into open air—

Straight into the pit.

5

THE IN-BETWEEN

Darien braced himself for impact, but it never came.

Instead, he and Roman were airborne—caught in a vortex of wind and water, lightning flashing without pause.

Darien tried to reach for Roman, but he couldn't control his limbs. He couldn't feel his body, his face. Couldn't even *scream*.

A rush of shadow came out of nowhere, and suddenly everything went dark. Quiet. A womb full of nothing.

This is it, Darien thought, preparing for the worst. All he could hear, all he could feel, was his heartbeat. Nothing else existed.

But then—

In the space of one dizzying second, he was launched back to life, a flood of freezing liquid crashing around him as he came to at the base of a waterfall, banging his knees against mossy rocks.

He staggered away from the cascade with a ragged inhale. Roman appeared a moment later, spitting up a mouthful of water as he half-crawled, half-walked away from the tiered falls, the pond shallow enough to stand in.

Darien's head whirled as he tried to make sense of where they were—of what the hell just happened.

The first conclusion he drew was that this wasn't Spirit Terra. He could still breathe, still see... If they traveled to the void, not only would they have stopped breathing instantly, but they also wouldn't have been able to see. That was promising.

“Roman,” Darien panted as his cousin sloshed up to his side. The black sword slipped from Darien’s hand, dropping into the pool with a *plash*. He braced his hands on his knees, coughing so hard his chest burned, his eyes flooding with tears that dripped off his cheeks. “You alright?” This pond they were in was manmade—dug into the ground by landscapers, the small waterfall behind them also manmade.

“I think...,” Roman gritted out, clutching his gut, “I’m going to be sick.” He barely got the last word out before he was scrambling up the muddy bank and throwing up the meager contents of his stomach.

Darien stood there awhile in the water. Bleeding and shaking from the cold. He wasn’t as dizzy as before, his stomach settling, but his arm still hurt like a son of a bitch.

“You going to live?” he called to Roman, his breaths puffing in the air. He bent to pick up the sword and briefly dipped his other hand in too, the bitter temperature numbing the pain.

Roman coughed and spat. Once. Twice. “We’ll see,” he panted. His face was pallid, his eyes red from hours of trying to see in the dark. He shoved off his knees, tipping his head back to look at the sky. Murmured, “Holy shit,” and walked out onto a paved road.

Darien splashed up the bank and followed him in sopping boots, suit dripping.

They stood side by side, taking in their surroundings in disbelief.

Holy shit was right.

Yeswich was under siege. The Void was devouring the city in a colossal wave of thick, pitch black shadow. It ballooned up toward the darkened sky and just kept going, spreading in every direction. Thunder rumbled and cracked, and way off in the distance, in other parts of the city, helicopters flew. Looking for survivors, no doubt.

Although the sky was entirely dark, that massive cloud slowly suffocating everything it touched, this place where they stood...it was lighter here. Not daylight, but half-light, like the sky just before dawn.

They were in a residential area. A treed street with a dog park and perfectly constructed waterfalls.

Now that they were above ground, Darien felt hope swell in his chest. Out here, they stood a greater chance at finding the others. Out here, he felt like he actually had a shot at getting out of this city and back to the woman he loved.

Copyrighted Material

I’m coming, baby, Darien thought, wishing Loren—wherever she was—could hear him. *I’m coming. Hold on.*

Darien swept the icy beads off his numb face. “What does that say?” He gestured to a street sign with a throbbing, shaking hand.

Roman squinted. “Larkin Street.” His brow creased, gold eyes meeting Darien’s. “We’re in East Montgomery. South of the Control Tower.”

Darien didn’t doubt his cousin—not when Roman knew the city as well as Darien knew Angelthene. But—

“That makes no sense,” he said.

He turned to look at the waterfall rushing at their backs, his face smoothing in shock. “No way,” he whispered.

Roman’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Tamika...she was right.”

“Who’s Tamika?”

“The waterfalls...,” he murmured, gesturing for Roman to hold on as he thought it through—as he pieced the puzzle together. As he remembered Tamika’s words as if she’d said them just yesterday.

‘Back in old times, people used to visit the Crossroads to speak to loved ones who had passed away. They would go on the shortest night of the year, when the divide between our world and the spirit realm is rumored to be at its thinnest. If a Crossroads wasn’t handy, a person could seek out a weak spot by going to a place of heavy darkness, or perhaps an area where elements meet with constant movement, such as waterfalls.’

Waterfalls. Places of constant movement.

Holy shit.

Darien had believed the waterfall in the cavern would take them to Spirit Terra, but—

But maybe they didn’t *just* lead to the spirit realm. Maybe...maybe, now that the Veil was falling, they led to other places, too. A glitch in the fabric of the universe.

His eyes snapped to Roman’s confused face. “The waterfalls,” he said again. “They’re *portals*.”

6

BLACKSTONE ALLEY

ANGELTHENE, STATE OF WITHEREDGE

Sabrina Van Arsdell crept across the living room, taking care not to wake the man dozing in the recliner. The bottoms of his socks were blackened with filth, his weather-beaten face peppered with stubble. Scattered around the chair were empty beer cans, cigarette packets, and oily takeout bags that had probably been there for days. Weeks, even.

He was Claude Van Arsdell, and he was her father. A drunk, a layabout, an abuser...and the reason Sabrina never bothered to come home anymore.

Home. Is that what this place was? She glanced around, her stomach twisting into knots at the sight of this stinking pigsty she'd finally managed to escape last fall. This was still her legal residence, but she had no plans to return here again, unless it was to collect her mail. Hopefully *that* would be changing too, once she packed up the last of her belongings—which, if all went according to plan, would be happening right now.

As she tiptoed across the living room, feet sinking in the soiled carpet, her sharp wolf hearing picked up on the voices drifting quietly through the television speakers. The news channel was on. All morning, the anchors had been covering what they knew of the incident in Yveswich, which wasn't much. A power and spell outage, they were calling it. An outage so bad it was record-breaking, shutting down every power and magic grid in the city—no spells, no alarm systems, and no lights, an equation that always equaled disaster. **Copyrighted Material**

Sabrina had a feeling it was worse than an outage. In the hours that had passed since the first report, she had tried calling her friends who were in

Yveswich, but no one had answered. Not Dallas, not Max, not Loren. For all she knew, the latter might still be in a coma, but she had phoned her anyway, just in case. She had even tried Darien, but her only response was a beeping line. No power, no service—just like the news channels said.

But there were two big things about the reports that didn't sit right with her.

Thing number one: The first, unedited video clips—the clips that had shown multiple cameras in Yveswich being swallowed by a blast of darkness—were no longer being aired, as if someone had ordered them taken down.

Thing number two: The reporters were claiming that every power grid in Ker's capital had gone out. If that were even remotely true, the cameras should have stopped working the moment that strange, sinister cloud of darkness hit. Instead, they had remained on, broadcasting the most disturbing, spine-chilling sounds Sabine had ever heard.

Someone was trying to cover up the truth. And there was only one person in Terra who had the kind of power and influence to do it quickly.

The emperor. The man who'd run off to Yveswich with the blueprints for the replica of the Arcanum Well. The man who'd relentlessly made their lives a living hell for over half a year.

With most of her friends in Yveswich, there weren't many people left in Angelthene who Sabine could talk to. People she could trust. But there *was* one person...someone well versed in Spirit Terra and Yveswich's dark history. Someone Sabine planned on visiting within the hour.

But—one step at a time. *Literally.*

She hurried into her bedroom, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The tiny space hadn't changed since she'd last seen it, though it was messier than before—that was a given. Dresser drawers had been thrown open, closet doors had been ripped off their hinges, and clothes had been strewn across her bed among the contents of her lone jewelry box.

Her father had been in here. Hunting for spare change to fuel his alcohol dependency or help pay the rent. Most months, he barely scrimped by, and now that he no longer had access to the shallow pockets of his only child, Sabine knew that his life had taken a turn for the worse.

She fought the urge to tidy up the mess and instead got to work, shaking open the tote she'd tucked into her book bag. She moved quickly, filling the bag with photo albums, her favorite vintage books, old school assignments she was still proud of and mementos from her childhood. Anything that held sentimental value to her, she took it, keeping an ear on her father's incessant snoring.

Once the bag was full, she secured the strap to her shoulder and picked through the wreckage on tip-toes.

Glass crunched under her sneaker. She paused, bending to pick up the framed photograph of her, Dallas, and Loren, the picture taken by Taega when they were kids. It was summertime, and they were smiling brightly at the camera, Angelthene's old lighthouse standing stately in the background. Loren was in the middle—the very heart of their friendship. Her hair was saturated with ocean water, that same solar amulet hanging from her neck.

Now that Sabrina knew the necklace had contained a wish that would save them all from death a decade later, she found herself viewing the simple piece of jewelry in a different light. It was strange to think that something so important—something they'd played with when they were children, as if it had no greater value than a plastic toy—had been around Loren's neck all these years, waiting in patient secrecy for her to unlock the wish inside it.

Heart aching with memories gone by, Sabrina flipped the frame over and popped it open. She removed the picture and tucked it into her bag, being careful not to mar it with creases or fingerprints.

"Hell are you doing here?" came a grating voice.

Sabrina's head snapped up, her heart skipping like a stone on water.

Claude pushed into the room, his reedy form staggering into the dresser so hard it rocked. "Thought I told you not to come back here." He scanned the space with bleary eyes, his breath reeking of alcohol and stale cigarettes. "You stealing from me? Are you stealing from me, bitch?"

Sabrina's mouth dried out, her palms prickling with sweat. Suddenly, it didn't matter that she was an adult. A werewolf capable of shredding him apart. She was the little girl in the picture again, who spent her days in fear of walking the wrong way, talking the wrong way, *living* the wrong way. Nothing had ever been good enough for him, and nothing ever would be.

Claude moved toward her. "Stealing from your old man?" His graying brows flicked up. "That's low, Sabrina. Real low." He reached for her. "Give me that bag," he rasped.

Not today. This wasn't her life anymore.

With a battle cry, she pushed past him, shoving him into the dresser. He shouted out in anger, the dresser tipping onto its side with a *crash*.

Sabrina bolted toward the kitchen, her bags thumping against her hip.

Glass smashed and wood snapped as her father burst out of the bedroom and raced after her, screaming his lungs out. If he kept up with the hollering, Logan would surely come in here and maul him to death—exactly why she'd instructed the alpha to wait outside and let her deal with

her deadbeat dad on her own. She could handle this—she *wanted* to handle this.

Her sneakers squealed as her feet hit the kitchen tile, her speed sending her straight into the counter. Her hip took the brunt of the collision with a bone-deep bruise, the dishes in the cupboards rattling. Claude's footsteps shook the house, his nearness charging the air with a warning.

Sabrine grabbed a knife from the wooden block and spun around, pressing the tip against her father's jugular.

He slid to a stop, rocking back on his heels.

Slowly, he lifted his chin, looking down his nose at her.

Sabrine nudged the tip of the knife against his stubbled throat. "Put your hands on me, you *filth*, and see what happens," she snarled, adding a second hand to the knife to steady it.

He stared at her, stupefied, finally seeing her clearly for the first time.

But then he laughed—a low, wheezing sound. "I was just playing, Sab." His fake smile sank into a sour grimace. "You know that."

The corners of Sabine's lips twitched upward, and she felt something sharp scrape against the bottom one. "I wasn't," she crooned.

She felt it, then—the Shift. Her body temperature cranked up, her eyes glowing like two small suns. The shaking in her hands...it was not from fear at all, but restraint.

Her wolf wanted to play.

Claude's gaze flicked between her eyes and teeth, her canines elongating into wicked, pearly white points.

"What the hell is this?" His question was hollowed out with surprise. Hollowed out—just like the rest of him. "What's happened to you?"

She sidled toward the door, her bag scraping against the cupboards. "Don't follow me," she instructed. "After today, I never want to see you again, do you understand me? I have no need for you in my life, and if you try to get in touch with me—" She let her teeth show, just a little, and gestured to the knife in her hands. "I've got forty-two of these in my mouth now." Her wolf teeth—all forty-two of them—continued to lengthen, her gums stinging as the extra teeth pierced through and claimed their spots.

Claude merely gaped as Sabine backed toward the screen door. His daughter was not the same anymore—in more ways than one.

With a backward kick, she opened the door and stepped over the threshold, letting it slam shut behind her. She crouched down, her father barely visible through the mesh, and set the knife on the porch.

Then she hurried down the steps and into the street, not looking back—not once.

Logan Sands was waiting for her in his truck, the exhaust stinking up the neighborhood with an old fuel called *diesel*. Sabine got inside, her skin still flaming hot, and dumped her bags at her feet.

“I take it that didn’t go well,” Logan said. His long, dark hair blew softly in the breeze coming in through his cracked-open window.

“It went as well as I expected,” Sabine said, barely able to speak as her jaw slowly reset, her teeth shifting back into place.

Logan’s brow creased. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Honestly, I just want to get away from here.” She buckled up, her dusky razor-sharp nails scraping the seatbelt. Her cuticles stung, but at least they weren’t bleeding this time. A small improvement. “If you’d do us the honors.”

Logan put the truck in drive and pulled out onto the narrow street, weaving around trash bins, yard sale tables, and other random junk.

It had taken Sabine a long time to get used to her new wolf side, and even after several months she still wasn’t *quite* there.

There were some days, however, when being a werewolf simply felt *right*. People treated her with far more respect than they had when she was a half-breed—she still hated that horrible slur—and she knew, if she ever ran into danger, her wolf side would gladly handle the things her old self wouldn’t have been able to. Werewolves, being strong, fast, and at times unpredictable, were some of the most feared people in Terra. Behind hellseers, of course. They were in a league of their own.

As they drove north, toward the Victoria Amazonica District, the threat of the Shift began to subside.

She exhaled slowly, the last of her teeth sliding back into their rightful places.

“Better?” Logan asked, rolling up his window. Spring might’ve arrived in Angelthene, but some days were still cool enough to need a light jacket.

“I don’t think I’ll be shredding one of your seats today.”

He gave her a wistful smile. “I appreciate that.”

She grabbed her cell phone out of her book bag.

“Anything?” Logan asked her as she pressed the button on the side.

Sabine crossed her fingers.

But no messages filled the screen aside from the automated ones from campus. The silence was unsettling. When you had Dallas Bright for a

friend, your phone never knew a moment's peace. Sabrina missed her. Loren, too.

"Still nothing." She sighed. "Can we listen to the news?" She put her phone away and flicked on the radio.

The host was covering the incident in Yveswich, but it was the same information they'd been recycling all morning—nothing Sabrina hadn't already heard a dozen times. A city-wide power outage, panicking citizens, the Magical Protections Unit working tirelessly to rectify the issue... She grew frustrated by the idle chatter and shut it off as Logan took the exit that led into the Seven Devils' neighborhood.

Sabrina still couldn't get over how beautiful it was in these parts. While Angelthene had more than its fair share of dangerous and ugly districts, there were also plenty of safe and aesthetically pleasing ones, and Victoria Amazonica fell firmly into the latter two categories. Add a house of Dark-slayers to the mix, and it was probably one of the safest places in the city.

Tamika Isley lived several blocks from Hell's Gate. They'd only visited her residence once, so it took them a few wrong turns before they finally found the right house.

The driveway was long, the house that sat at the end of it so large, it was practically a resort or a small castle—maybe *slightly* smaller than Hell's Gate, Sabrina decided. Hell's Gate was the most impressive house Sabrina had ever set foot in—no contest, not even this one. The Devils had great taste.

Gravel crunched under the tires as Logan pulled over by the gates. Sabrina hopped out, leaving the door open behind her, and rang the buzzer.

A balmy wind drifted through the district, spurring wind chimes into making music. Sabrina's wolf hearing picked up on the chattering of magpies and the scratching of squirrel feet on palm trees.

She rang the buzzer again. Tamika's car was outside, and light glowed in several windows, despite that it was daytime and bright enough outside not to need the extra light.

'Maybe she's in the shower,' said Pebble. The crow flapped out of Sabrina's shadow and alighted on her shoulder, talons curling in the slippery material of her jacket.

"She has a butler, though," Sabrina said, poking the button for a third time. "Maybe it's broken."

'If it is, can we take the button home?' Pebble tipped her head, ogling the button—shiny and red, her favorite color—with one eye at a time.

Sabrina waited another minute before heading back to the truck, the shadows of flying birds darting across the pavement.

“Not home?” Logan asked as she hopped in.

“No one’s answering, but that’s her car.” She pointed.

“Maybe some friends picked her up.”

She shut the door. “What about Harold?”

Logan’s brow puckered. “Who?”

“Her butler.” She chewed her lip. “I think that’s his name.”

“Butlers have to run errands sometimes, Sab.” He eyed her while she stared at the quiet mansion in thought. It was too far away to hear anything, and she saw no movement in the windows. “Try again, if you want,” he offered. “Or we can wait and see if anyone comes home.”

She buckled up. “No, let’s get going. Maybe we’ll come back later.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s take a drive by Darien’s, though.” This would be their third time checking on Hell’s Gate since the last of the Devils left town. While wolves lacked the Sight that would show them the otherwise invisible spell systems, what they didn’t lack was a sense of smell that would tell them if any lurkers had come by.

They pulled out onto the peaceful, palm-lined street. Not a minute later, the red-brick mansion came into view, the house quiet and empty.

Logan pulled over parallel to the gates.

“Be right back,” Sabrina said. She got out and shut the door, the muffled voices filling the truck as Logan flicked the radio back on.

Sabrina switched from her witch senses to canine, as if tuning in to a different radio station. She didn’t need to shift to get the job done, but she did need to summon her wolf in spirit to filter through scents.

She began by walking along one side of the gate. Nostrils flared, she sorted through the many different smells, being very thorough. Fresh-cut grass, mellow jasmine, dry earth... Spring blossoms, mulch, week-old paint from the neighbor’s house, candle smoke...

Her hair blew back as the wind changed directions. It smelled like...

Blood.

A tremor ran up her spine, her skin quivering.

A short distance away, closer to the neighbor’s house than Hell’s Gate, a brunette witch lay unconscious in the grass, a tangle of bloody hair obscuring her face. **Copyrighted Material**

Sabrina paled. “*Logan!*” She lurched into action, gravel crunching

under her sprinting feet. “Call an ambulance! *We need an ambulance!*” She threw herself to her knees beside Tamika in the cool grass.

Logan was there in a flash, phone pressed against his ear. “What happened?”

“I don’t know—I just found her like this!”

“Yeah, we need an ambulance,” Logan was saying into his phone, his voice tight with urgency.

Tamika’s pulse was faint—a mere flutter against Sabrine’s fingertips.

“Venefica,” Logan said, answering the dispatcher’s questions.

“Location?” The voice was muted. Miles away as Sabrine begged Tamika to keep breathing. “Keep breathing, Tamika, keep breathing.”

“Victoria Amazonica District.” Logan searched frantically for the address, finding the numbers by the gate. “775237.”

“What’s the emergency?”

Sabrina’s head spun at the sight of Tamika’s shirt—wet with blood. “Oh gods. Oh gods, Logan, she’s been stabbed—”

“Sir?” the dispatcher prompted.

Logan managed to spit out, “There’s been an attempted homicide.”

7

NORTH FINANCIAL DISTRICT YVESWICH, STATE OF KER

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this!” Loren hissed.

She stood beside Malakai on the sidewalk as he directed his stream into the darkness. He’d insisted she wait right beside him for her own safety while he relieved himself. But now that this was actually happening, she had never regretted anything more. The fact that she couldn’t see him was a small blessing, but as for the sound of his pee splashing on pavement...

That was a sound that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

The Reaper gave a theatrical sigh of satisfaction. “Ahhhhhhhhhh.” A beat of silence passed. And then: “Want to help me shake it?” he offered, a big grin evident in his tone.

Loren rolled her eyes. “Say *one* more inappropriate thing to me, Malakai, and so help me, I will leave you here by yourself and see how you fare then.”

He wheezed a chuckle. “See how you fare then’,” he mimicked in a squeaky voice. “I hate to break it to you, Blondie, but hanging out with Darien has given you *major* tiny dog syndrome.”

She arched a brow. “Tiny dog syndrome?”

“It’s where a small dog develops this attitude where it thinks it can beat the snot out of anything bigger than it—”

“I know what it means.”

“Watch the tone, Tiny Dog—your Rottweiler’s not here to bite for

you.” His zipper hissed through the quiet, his elbow bumping her arm as he slid his ring back on. He was lucky the magic in the bodysuit still worked enough not to have to manually strip it off.

“Alright then, Eyeglasses,” Malakai said, adding yet another nickname to his endless list as he fumbled for her hand in the dark, “lead this old dog home.”

“I think I prefer ‘Blondie’,” Loren muttered, lacing her numb fingers with his. She blinked the white into her eyes and started walking.

They’d made it north of the Avenue of the Waning Moon. The streets were calmer up here—less monsters—but they still hadn’t run into any people. Not living ones, anyway. Loren had a feeling there were plenty of dead ones, but unless they were actively being eaten by monsters with detectable auras, their bodies were invisible in the dark.

“Where are we now?” Malakai asked. “Which district?”

She scanned the block, searching for a sign bright enough to read. On the corner of an approaching intersection, there was a business called *North Financial Corner Store*. According to the sign, it was one of those rare places that offered diesel and gasoline as alternative forms of fuel. Not many models took liquid fuel anymore; engines, like most things in Terra, had been modified to run on power from the anima mundi, though most were still equipped to take diesel or gasoline in the event of an emergency.

“I think we’re in the North Financial District,” she said, her eyes flicking with longing over the sign advertising slushies, pizza by the slice, fried chicken, and fries. Her stomach gurgled. What she wouldn’t give for a slice of cheese pizza, or some of that crispy, piping hot chicken. Better yet, make it both, and add the fries. Plus a slushie. And maybe a chocolate bar or ten.

“*Finally*,” Malakai said. “*Now* we’re getting somewhere.”

As they covered more ground, the spells on the buildings grew brighter and more crisp, and Loren felt a glimmer of hope upon hearing more helicopters flying nearby.

“You hear that?” Malakai asked, his tone optimistic.

“Yeah.” She nodded, nearly weeping with joy. “Helicopters.”

“Not just helicopters, Blondie. *Cars*.”

She strained to hear them, but the chopping of rotary blades drowned most everything else out. Was that a siren she was hearing? An ambulance, maybe? Or a fire truck. **Copyrighted Material**

Her heart picked up speed, and so did she, rubble clacking under her