

LINDSEY DEVIN



# FIGHTING FOR DEMON KING

SHADOW  
HUNTRESS 3

# Fighting For The Demon King

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*A Paranormal Demon Romance*

Shadow Huntress

Book 3

Lindsey Devin

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# Chapter 1

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## *Domenico*

Shock pulsed through me in a series of relentless waves. I had a white-knuckled grip on my phone, as though the little rectangle of metal and glass could act as an anchor. Natasha's smiling face stared up at me from my lock screen. She was my wife; she was my whole world. Below her, in stark, brutal contrast, the text message was still visible.

*Your move. xoxo, Dad.*

We'd been caught off guard yet again. Lucifer, my bastard of a father, had stolen the spell book. Gabriel's spell book, kept safely hidden by Liz's wards for thousands of years. It had been the most promising of the extremely limited weapons we'd had to face him, and now it had been stolen right out from under our noses.

My stomach roiled, and I forced down a jolt of nausea. When I managed to tear my eyes away from my phone, I realized that Liz looked just as shaken as I felt.

"I don't know how they managed to get into my vault. Hell, I don't know how they managed to get into my house in the first place," Lizbeth was saying. She was pacing the length of the guest room frantically, her lavender eyes wide and worried. Her face had gone a ghostly shade of white. "They didn't trip a single one of the alarms, magical or technological. My security system is quite extensive, and it did absolutely nothing to stop them. It was like they knew the place inside and out already."

Liz's hands were shaking, the tremor faint but unmistakable even across the room. I had known her for thousands of years, had considered her a close friend for many of them, and I couldn't think of a single time that I

had seen her so rattled. It made me even more uneasy, seeing her usually limitless poise falter like that. I had been leaning on her for support in the face of everything that I was dealing with, I realized. A small, selfish part of me wondered if I would be able to find a way to cope without her steady, determined reassurance to count on.

I drowned that voice out as quickly as I could. There would be plenty of time to worry about myself later. Right now, my friend needed me.

“Come on,” I said, taking her gently by the elbow. “Let’s go down to the vault, see if we can find anything.”

Without meaning to, I’d slipped into the voice I used when talking to younger demons who had just seen their first gory fight: calm, level, unflappable in my confidence that things would be alright, no matter how I actually felt. Sounding soothing and authoritative without being patronizing was a difficult balance, but after the first century or so, I’d gotten very good at it.

Liz let me steer her downstairs without complaint, which was also worrying. She usually radiated an air of calm, regal hospitality, politely but firmly refusing to let guests take the lead on anything. Now she seemed almost shell-shocked.

When we got down to Liz’s sprawling underground library, one of the heavily laden antique bookshelves had been smoothly pushed aside to reveal a sleek, top-of-the-line array of computer monitors, each showing a different security camera angle of Liz’s house or the surrounding area. Cristiano was bent over the keyboard, switching through the feeds too quickly for me to follow.

“They managed to avoid the cameras,” he said grimly, not even looking up at us. His shoulders were a tense line, and there was a deep furrow between his brows. The cold light of the computer screens cast a blue-white glow over his curls. “Whoever did this was a pro, there’s no question about that. And they could only have pulled this off if they had someone on the inside, too, or a shitload of time to case the joint. There’s no way they could’ve done this spontaneously; there are way too many moving parts to account for.”

Liz’s arms were wrapped around herself tightly, an undisguised attempt at self-soothing. I tried to gently guide her to one of the overstuffed leather sofas, but she stood rigid and tall in front of the screens. Her ramrod-straight posture seemed to be the only thing keeping her from collapsing.

“There,” she said suddenly, jabbing a manicured finger at one of the feeds. “No, no. Go back to the previous one.”

Cristiano did as she told him, then leaned even further forward until his nose was almost touching the screen. “Holy shit,” he said. It came out in a stretched-out drawl. *Hoh-leeeee shit.*

On the screen was the grainy image of a demon. She was staring right through the camera as if to make eye contact with us, smirking like she’d just issued a challenge that she knew we wouldn’t be able to rise to. Her brazenness wasn’t the most surprising part, though.

No, the real surprise was the way that the intruder looked. Her skin was puckered and twisted, her eyes black and cold as a shark’s. Her hands were elongated into sharp, deadly-looking claws. She was in her true form, her demonic form. The form that, since the Fall, demons could only manage to return to once they were dead and their souls had been driven from their bodies.

“Well,” Liz said blankly. She stared at the screen, apparently at a loss for words. “Well,” she repeated, as if the word might kickstart a new thought the second time around.

Cristiano paced over to lean against the back of one of the sofas, tiredly dragging his hands down his face.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen anything like that,” Liz finally said. “Honestly, I’d nearly forgotten about my own true form. The humanoid one suits me so much better. I...I cannot imagine returning to the way things were back then.”

I could sympathize. Demons had a natural tendency toward vice, and vanity was an eternally popular sin. Many of us delighted in the little details, in the manicures and hair dyes and skin creams and tattoos. They were a way of asserting ownership over a body born out of tragedy, a way of turning a shelter into a home. The idea of having that stripped away back to blistered skin and utilitarian claws was chilling.

My attention flicked back to Liz. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and blew her breath out. She turned her back on the security monitors.

“Alright,” she said. “So, the spell book is gone. What do we do next, gentlemen?”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the back of the sofa next to my cousin. He leaned toward me just enough for our shoulders to brush briefly. Cristiano had always been tactile, especially when he was stressed out.



“This is a blow, certainly,” I said. My voice sounded incredibly tired, even to my ears. “But it could be much worse. My father doesn’t have the power to make the spells work by himself, after all. I’m guessing he’s just figured that out, which means he’ll be furious. He may lash out, but it’s more likely to be sloppy if he does. If we can react quickly enough, then we may be able to use that to our advantage.”

“He needs Natasha’s magic to make the spells work,” Liz said with a quick nod. I suspected she said it to reassure herself more than anything else.

“He just needs her blood,” Cristiano corrected. I glared at him. “What?” he said. “Look, I know that you don’t want to have to think about it, but I’m just saying he might go after her from some angles that we haven’t considered if he doesn’t need her to be, uh, you know.”

He trailed off with a wince, but the thought still hung in the air between us. If he doesn’t need Natasha to be alive, I silently filled in.

“Regardless,” I said through clenched teeth. “We have to assume that he’s going to redouble his efforts to take Natasha. Now he doesn’t just need her to open the Gates of Hell, but to cast spells for him, too. Rogelio’s assured me that wherever he’s hidden her away is secure enough that she’ll be safe, but we should let him know what’s going on. If he has any further security measures at his disposal, I want him to bring them into play as soon as possible. The risk will only get higher.”

Liz nodded, clearly pleased to have some sort of next step laid out. She had always felt more comfortable when she had something to do. “Get in touch with him and tell him what’s happened,” she said. “Cristiano, you should see if you can find out anything about demons in their true forms being spotted in this part of London. Someone who looks like that is going to draw some attention, no matter how careful they try to be. Check local CCTV, make some calls, have someone look through social media posts tagged nearby to see if there are any mentions of strange sightings. I’ll talk to the domestic staff to ask if they saw or heard anything unusual and to see about getting this place taken care of while I stay somewhere else.”

It was more than a little reassuring to see Liz relaxed enough to give orders again. I pressed a hand to her shoulder as she passed me, and she gave me a thin but determined smile.

“I’ll call Rogelio,” I told her. “Let me know if you find anything out, alright?”

“Of course, darling,” Liz said.

Once her back was turned, I shot Cristiano a glance that I hoped he would understand. *Keep an eye on her*; I tried to get across. *She’s scared*. He gave me a brisk nod and headed after her, already distracting her with a low, murmured conversation.

I pulled out my phone and brought up the most recent contact information I had for Rogelio. I wasn’t optimistic that he’d answer my call; he seemed like the type to buy burner phones in bulk, so there was a decent chance that the number he’d last called me from wasn’t active anymore. Still, I had to try.

I pressed the call button. The phone rang once, twice, three times. Halfway through the fourth ring, Rogelio finally picked up. Surprise and relief hit me in equal measure.

“Domenico,” he said in his calm, lightly accented baritone. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Lizbeth’s house is no longer secure,” I said bluntly. “A team managed to get into her vault, and Gabriel’s spell book is gone. We should assume that it’s on its way to Lucifer, if it isn’t in his hands already.”

“And if he has the book, then it won’t take him long to realize that he needs Natasha,” Rogelio said, his voice grim as he filled in the blanks. “She’ll be safe here, I promise you. Her training is coming along very well. Even if Lucifer’s people manage to track us down somehow, by the time they get here, she might be ready to take them on herself.”

“I’m not eager to test that out anytime soon,” I said. “Keep her safe, Rogelio. If anything happens to her, I promise you that I will kill you.”

“Easy, Domenico,” he said. “She’s my flesh and blood, and I look after my own. I’ll keep her safe. No threats required.”

“Tell me how she’s doing,” I said. I meant for it to be a command, but it came out with an unfortunate tinge of desperation.

Rogelio paused. For a moment, I thought he was going to hang up on me, but then he sighed, sending a burst of static down the line.

“She’s doing well,” he told me. “Tired of training, but not willing to give it anything less than her best. You should be very proud of her, Domenico.”

He hung up, his patience for humoring me apparently at an end. I couldn’t find it in me to be bothered by it. Natasha’s doing well, I thought to myself over and over. Natasha’s doing well.

I pocketed my phone and tugged my suit jacket straight, trying to center myself enough to do something useful. *Natasha's doing well. Natasha's doing well.* I couldn't dwell on that now, of course. I needed to figure out our next steps. I was preparing for a war; I didn't have the luxury of being lovesick, no matter how overwhelming the impulse might be.

I huffed out a sigh through my nose and turned to leave the library. As I did, I nearly crashed into Cristiano, who could walk surprisingly quietly for such a loud person.

"Shit, sorry," he said, barely keeping himself from toppling over. "I just wanted to tell you that I haven't managed to find anything about shifted demons in the area. I've got some of Liz's people still digging, but I'm not gonna hold my breath. Whoever did this was careful and quick. And, ah... look, I don't think you're going to like this."

"I like it even less now that you've prefaced it like that," I told him.

"The security camera that we spotted the thief on," Cristiano said, biting the inside of his cheek nervously, "it was new. Lizbeth had it installed last week."

A chill tingled down my spine. "New enough that a mole might not know about it," I said.

"Exactly," he confirmed with a nod.

I hissed out a swear from between my teeth. "You've told Liz about this?" I asked.

"Yeah, as soon as I figured it out," Cristiano said. "She's, uh, she's not taking it well."

"And you?"

He shrugged. "I'm pretty fucking rattled, but it's not my house. I am, y'know, a little freaked out about the whole..." he made a ghoulish face and held up his hands, his fingers hooked like claws. "I don't like it, and I really don't like that we don't know how it's happening."

I settled onto one of the plush sofas that were dotted throughout the library and rested my elbows on my knees, looking up at my cousin. He looked almost as tired as I felt. "Lucifer must have figured out how to remove their souls," I said heavily. "Some spell, or an artifact, or... something."

"Or he's just figured out how to break whatever glamor was put on us after the fall," Cristiano suggested.

“I don’t know if that’s better or worse,” I admitted. “Either he can remove souls, or he’s gotten powerful enough to counteract the full magical strength of an archangel. Neither of those options strikes me as all that reassuring.”

Cristiano’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Either way, he’s one scary son of a bitch.”

I couldn’t help but agree. For the first time in a long time, a spike of anger at my mother went through me. If she hadn’t bargained away all of my magic before I was even born, maybe I would have had a real chance of facing my father head-on. As it was, I was reduced to constantly being on the defensive, trying to anticipate the next move of a man who was equally likely to act on a years-long Machiavellian plot or a random impulse.

I let myself fantasize for a moment about finding some great internal font of magic and easily trapping my father with a single spell, overwhelming him before he could do anything else to hurt me and mine. But it was just a fantasy; I knew it would never be anything more. I had about as much magic in me as the average banana. Potentially less, depending on where the banana was from.

I heaved out a sigh, and Cristiano echoed me.

“We should get some sleep,” I said. The exhaustion that had slowly but surely built up over these past few months was a constant weight on me. “Tomorrow, we go to Tokyo.”

“You want to go through with the trip?” Cristiano asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We still need Hou Jun’s help,” I pointed out. “And it’s not like we need to stick around to get Liz settled into her next place. We both know what she’ll be like if she thinks we’re trying to coddle her.”

Cristiano shuddered at the idea. “Yeah,” he said. “Alright. I’ll let the others know.”

I clapped him on the shoulder as I passed him. “Tell them to rest up. They’re going to need it.”

Despite what I’d said, as soon as I got back to the guest room, I was completely unable to sleep. I lay between the cool, soft sheets, staring out the window at the shadowy suggestion of Regent’s Park. I was painfully aware of the empty spot next to me. I kept wanting to talk to Natasha for advice or reassurance or just to tell her about little things I’d seen over the course of my day. I felt her absence acutely and almost constantly. The

moments when I forgot were the worst. I would glance over to see what she thought of something and immediately be hit with the realization that she was gone all over again. I rubbed my thumb over her hair tie, which I'd slipped onto my wrist. It was old, with the elastic on its last legs, but still tight enough to press a faint indentation into my skin.

*She was safe*, I tried to reassure myself. She was with Rogelio, and that man, for all his (many, many) faults, was deeply protective. If anyone could keep Natasha safe, it would be him, with his deep well of resources, knack for staying hidden, and limitless supply of stubbornness. I still wasn't sure how much of his protectiveness was out of genuine care for her as opposed to guilt over what had happened to James, but frankly, I didn't care. Either way, he was taking care of her.

I tried to focus on that as I closed my eyes. I would see Natasha again, and in the meantime, I had to do my best to take care of myself so I could keep the war effort on track.

After what felt like countless hours, I finally managed to drift off to sleep, my fingers still pressed to the hair tie around my wrist.

## Chapter 2

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## *Domenico*

Luxury could only change so many things. Some problems persisted no matter how much money you could throw at them, and a seventeen-hour flight was one of them. Sure, the seats were more comfortable, and the food was closer to being edible, but the time didn't go by any faster.

Zander, who had an enviable ability to make himself comfortable anywhere, was curled up in one of the plush armchairs, apparently riveted by the book he was reading. *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, according to the elegant white text on the cover, which was splashed above a Victorian oil portrait, cropped to just show the male subject's hands.

Manning was nursing a cup of coffee and looking out the window at the fat white clouds scuttling below us while Liz occasionally tried to engage him in conversation, with limited success.

"And what did you do before you began working for Domenico?" she asked.

"I was a sailor for a while," Manning said, offering no further information.

"Ah! A seaman," Liz said innocently.

Manning shot Zander a look. "I'm gonna make more coffee. Anyone else want some?"

Liz and I politely declined, but Cristiano (busily playing a brightly-colored game on his phone) and Zander took him up on it. When Manning came back from the little kitchenette with the steaming mugs, Zander pressed a hand to the small of his back.

"Thanks, sweetheart," he murmured. Once Manning set down the mug, Zander caught his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. Manning

immediately went an incredibly vivid shade of pink, which clashed horribly with his rusty hair.

“Ah,” Liz said. Her eyes widened slightly, and she looked at me with a faint embarrassed flush. I raised my eyebrows and nodded only slightly awkwardly as Zander directed a Cheshire cat grin at her. Manning smiled down at his feet, settled himself with his hip against Zander’s chair, and stared out the window once again.

Natasha would’ve enjoyed seeing that scene play out. She would’ve cracked little jokes with me about it once we were in private, I was certain of that. I must’ve been doing a worse job of hiding my melancholy than I thought because after a few moments, Liz leaned over and gently patted her hand against my knee.

“She’ll be back with you soon,” she murmured. I shot her a small, grateful smile and may have even managed to look like I meant it.

Narita International was an airport like many other airports. Lots of glossy white floors, lots of confused and exhausted people, lots of overpriced fast food. We made our escape as quickly as possible and found the bulky black town car waiting for us.

There was a woman waiting for us, her hands clasped behind her back. She looked young, but it was impossible to tell how old a demon actually was, and she had an unmistakably demonic aura. She was tall and slim, with a neat moss-green bob and a sleek suit with a black-on-black snakeskin print.

“Welcome to Tokyo,” she said, offering her hand for us to shake. “My name is Emiko. I’ll be bringing you to Hou Jun’s estate.”

I took her hand, which was surprisingly callused, and shook it firmly. Next to me, I felt Cristiano stiffen, and a rush of worry went through me. But when I glanced at my cousin, I could see I didn’t have to worry. Not about a threat, anyway.

“Hi,” he said dumbly, sticking out his hand. “I’m. Hi. Cristiano. People call me Cris. I mean, okay, people don’t usually call me Cris, but you could if you wanted to. I mean. Hi.”

Emiko shook his hand with polite amusement. As soon as she moved on to the next person, Cristiano closed his eyes slowly and mumbled something to himself that sounded suspiciously like “absolute fuckin’ idiot, holy fuck, shouldn’t be allowed in public.” I clapped him on the shoulder and nudged him into the waiting car.



“How was your flight?” Emiko asked us once we were all settled and the car had pulled smoothly away into traffic. “Uneventful, I trust?”

There was a chorus of nods and murmurs of assent. Liz studiously avoided eye contact with any of us, and Cristiano stammered something about how it had given him a chance to catch up on his reading.

“What were you reading?” Emiko asked him politely, hands folded in her lap.

“Science?” Cristiano tried. I pinched the bridge of my nose. For someone who’d been alarmingly sexually active since the dawn of humanity, he was remarkably bad at flirting.

“Right,” Emiko said after an agonizingly long pause to see if Cristiano would elaborate. “Well, I’m afraid that Jun won’t be able to meet us at the estate. He’s dealing with an incident in Hong Kong that required his immediate attention and sends his regrets. He should be returning shortly, but he told me that you should have lunch without him before I get all of you settled in.”

“What sort of incident?” I asked, leaning forward in my seat. Judging by how Liz did the same, she was interested, too.

Emiko gave me a polite diplomatic smile that gave absolutely nothing away. “I think it would be for the best if I let Jun explain that.”

The vague mention of an incident wasn’t exactly soothing. Incidents, in my experience, were almost exclusively negative. But even with the trickle of worry that went through me, I had to respect the practiced, genial stonewalling that Emiko seemed to excel at.

Jun’s estate was a massive, sprawling thing, built in a subtly diplomatic blend of styles. No matter where in his territory a subject was visiting from, they would find something they recognized from back home. Given the breadth and dizzying diversity of the continent he ruled, it was genuinely impressive that he’d put in that much attention to detail and found enough room to display everything without making the place look catastrophically cluttered.

As our bags were carried off by an army of uniformed servants, Emiko led us into a sleek dining room. The floor was pale wood, the walls a stark white with the occasional panel of dark wood carved into elaborate geometric latticework. The table, a massive lacquered thing, was loaded with covered dishes.

“Please, help yourselves,” Emiko said, waving a hand at the laden table. “I need to take care of a few things, but I’ll return shortly.” She left, and Cristiano stared at her retreating form.

“She’s perfect,” he said dumbly. “I think I’m in love.”

Zander rolled his eyes at Manning, who bit back a smirk.

“I’m sure you are, dear,” Liz said with as much careful seriousness and respect as someone who’d just been handed a banana phone by an emotionally fragile toddler.

“I’m serious,” Cristiano insisted. “I’m going to marry that woman someday.”

There was the polite, stifled silence of several people trying not to laugh.

“Let’s save that thought for after we save the entirety of demonkind,” I said, not unkindly. Cristiano looked uncharacteristically serious about it, and it seemed rude to discourage him outright.

“We should save the proposal for after lunch, at the very least,” Lizbeth said. “I don’t know about you boys, but I’m absolutely famished.”

Lunch was excellent—crispy duck on a bed of rice with a savory, rich sauce. We ate in relative silence as the strange fugue state of travel lifted, and we realized that we were ravenously hungry. Even Liz was too busy eating to try to make conversation, opting to eat incredibly quickly and with impeccable table manners. It looked like someone had put a formal dinner scene on fast-forward.

We had just finished devouring our meal when Emiko returned. She’d removed her jacket, leaving her in a dark green turtleneck that we could now see was sleeveless, showing off her heavily tattooed arms. I gestured at my face, trying to show Cristiano where he’d smudged sauce onto his cheek. He caught my meaning, scrubbing at his face with his napkin frantically. His eyes traced the lines of a dragon that curled up Emiko’s bicep, and he let out a noise that might have been a whimper. Because I was a good cousin, and because I owed him several favors, I decided not to tease him about it later.

“Hou Jun’s flight has just landed,” she told us. “I’ve had tea prepared in the sitting room, if you’ll all be so good as to follow me.”

Cristiano immediately sprang to his feet without bothering to push his chair back. The legs screeched across the floor, and he visibly forced himself not to facepalm. The rest of us followed at a more measured pace

and were led into a room with low sofas in an intricate gold and black brocade. A pot of tea surrounded by small stoneware cups was already set on the table between the seats.

"Please," Emiko said, "make yourselves comfortable."

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said. "Lunch was delicious."

She smiled, which pressed dimples into her cheeks. Cristiano's knuckles went white on the arm of the sofa. "I'm glad you enjoyed it," she said. "Jun brought the chef with us from Beijing."

"You came with him as well, then," I said. "Have you been working with Jun for a long time?"

"Yes," she said, fixing me with an odd, slightly amused look. "You could definitely say that."

Before I could ask her anything more, Emiko turned for the door. "If you'll excuse me, I have a few more matters to see to, and then I'll be all yours."

I stepped in front of Cristiano to hide whatever face he was making, for all our sakes.

"Of course," I said.

The tea was excellent, although the sofas had clearly been picked for their appearance rather than comfort. Out of all of us, Lizbeth was the only one who managed to look poised and at ease, perched on the cushions as if they were the coziest thing she'd ever felt. Cristiano, on the other hand, looked about as relaxed as a cat who had been hoisted up by the armpits by an over-eager small child.

It didn't take long for our host to join us. There was a brief commotion downstairs, with the low rumble of Jun's deep voice and the lighter note of Emiko's.

"*Bàba*," Emiko said.

"*Lăobăn*," Jun replied. The rest of their conversation was too quiet for me to hear, but the tone seemed fond.

Hou Jun practically filled the doorway of the sitting room. He was tall and immensely broad, and although his tailor had clearly done his best to make him look svelte, he still had a massive presence. There was something statuesque about him, the sort of sturdiness that usually came from several hundred pounds of marble or bronze. It was easy to imagine how much care a sculptor would have put into the arch of his cheekbones, the sharpness of his stare. He was clean-shaven and wore his hair cropped short. It was

equally easy to picture him in a boxing ring or a boardroom and equally clear that he would dominate either.

We stood to greet him, and he bowed his head slightly, a gesture that I mirrored.

“You look good, old friend,” I told him as we straightened up.

He laughed, a low, warm rumble that made his shoulders bounce. “I look tired, but it’s polite of you to lie.”

He waved us back into our seats, settling into a throne-like chair and stretching his legs in front of him with a groan. Liz’s eyes flicked down and then back up to his face, quick enough that I wouldn’t have caught it if I wasn’t paying attention. As she had once told me after a great deal of sherry, she’d always had a bit of a thing for men with muscular thighs. (Zander had told me the same thing about himself, but he’d been mildly concussed at the time. I feared the day the two of them figured out how much they had in common.)

“Whatever you had to deal with in Hong Kong, I trust it’s been resolved?” I asked, trying to get things back on track. “Your assistant didn’t tell us anything about the details, and I was hoping you could fill us in.”

Jun heaved a sigh and turned to Emiko, who was standing near the door. He spoke a few words to her in a language I didn’t recognize. I caught a few words in Mandarin, but the grammar was unfamiliar to me and some of the words sounded Persian. Toward the end, I caught a word that sounded suspiciously like “iPad.”

Emiko pulled a tablet from a drawer on one of the console tables that lined the room and tapped at it intently. When she set it on the table in front of us, a man with a microphone was speaking to the camera, gesturing at a building behind him. The news ticker on the bottom third of the screen had rapidly scrolling lines in Cantonese.

“—senseless attack,” the man was saying. My Cantonese was rusty, but I could more or less follow along with what he was saying. “Both of the young women who were involved have been hospitalized and are currently receiving medical care. At the time of reporting, one of them is still unconscious. The police are not currently offering any comment on the identities of the assailants.”

The feed shifted to a blurry security camera clip of two men lurching toward two girls, who were oblivious to the danger behind them. It was hard to make out details, but even so, I could recognize the way the light

caught on puckered skin, the jagged lines of their backs, the flash of claws. The attackers could only be demons. I felt Cristiano stiffen on the couch beside me, and I leaned forward, clasping my hands together.

Emiko shut the tablet off and returned to her post at Jun's right side, half a step behind his chair.

"I spoke to the woman who was still conscious," Jun said, steeping his fingers. "She seemed to think that the men who attacked her and her friend were wearing masks. At the moment, that's the story the news is running with, and I'd like to keep it that way. I sent my people out to sweep the streets, and they managed to find the two responsible for the attack. I have them in custody as we speak."

Jun glanced up at Emiko, then back at us. "I have some...concerns," he told us. "The two that we brought in seem...feral, for lack of a better word. Untethered. Whatever it was that bound them to civilization is gone."

I stared at him. The shifted demon we'd fought before had seemed angry but sane. She'd been coherent. It was hard to imagine seeing that stripped away.

"I think it would be simpler if I just showed you," Jun decided.

We loaded ourselves into a town car. It could have been the same one that had met us at the airport or another of the fleet of discreetly expensive cars that Jun favored. The drive to the warehouse was short and only slightly awkward; Jun drove, with Liz riding in the passenger's seat. In a show of cousinly affection, I sat in the far back with Zander and Manning, leaving Cristiano free to make a fool of himself with Emiko.

"ACDC, you think?" Manning murmured to Zander, jutting his chin discreetly at Emiko. Zander considered her, then nodded.

"Chicken's trolling for palone, for sure," Zander replied, so quietly that I could barely hear him. "Punching above his weight, though."

"Isn't he always?" Manning said. Zander snorted.

I let them be, not even trying to parse the code that flowed between them as easy as breathing. I was aware of Polari but had never had much of a knack for it. It was a cant language that Manning had picked up during his time as a sailor and that Zander had learned during a period when I suspected, but couldn't confirm, that he'd been working as a professional stage magician. Demons, especially the older ones among us, tended to learn so many languages that it was difficult to have a private conversation

in one. We often resorted to niche dialects and dead languages when we wanted to discuss something without being overheard.

We pulled up in front of a relatively well-maintained warehouse. Some of the paint was barely beginning to flake away around the door, but as someone who had unfortunately become a connoisseur of warehouses-turned-cells, I recognized it as camouflage rather than neglect.

Jun swung the door open, shepherding us all in before locking the door securely behind us. As soon as I entered the building, I could feel the unmistakable thrum of demonic energy, the sort that was usually muffled by our humanoid forms. I managed not to flinch as it washed over me, but it took some effort.

The energy sent a chill up my spine. I hadn't felt that much unrestrained demonic energy since...well, since before the Fall. Since I was home. I shuddered a little and felt a big hand clap onto my shoulder.

"I feel it, too," Jun murmured to me, squeezing my shoulder reassuringly. "The level of raw power is unsettling, I know. We'll get out of here as soon as possible, don't worry."

I gave him a grateful look, and he turned and led our little group down a narrow hallway. At the end was a row of large cells made of thick panes of glass, etched with so many runes and sigils that it was a bit difficult to see inside. There were four cells, but only two were occupied. The forms inside were small and hunched, with blistered red skin and wide, dark eyes. They saw Jun first and immediately began to hiss and scramble backwards, but when they caught sight of me, their demeanor changed completely. They staggered forward, pressing their hands against the glass and staring at me, their mouths sagging open to show off their sharp teeth.

"Mm..." one of the demons said, its voice coming out low and guttural, as if it was trying to talk through a mouth that had never been intended for speech. "Mas...master..."

I stared at the demon, searching for anything familiar in its face, but there was nothing there. The demon who had spoken pressed its entire body to the glass. The blood-stained fabric of its t-shirt left a smudge on the wall. It watched me intently. Then something in it snapped, and its face warped into a horrible snarl.

"Not the master!" it shrieked, slamming itself into the glass. "Traitor! Traitor!" It made an awful garbled noise that could have been a sob.

I took a step back, prepared to defend myself if I had to, but the enchantments on the cell held.

“It must have mistaken me for my father,” I said. My voice came out thinner than I would have liked, and I cleared my throat. “I’ve been told that our auras look similar, and in that state, I can’t imagine it would be able to tell us apart easily.”

“It barely seems sentient,” Liz said, sounding horrified.

The mangled thing in the cell was still beating itself against the walls while the other demon stared at me blankly, swaying slightly from side to side. I pushed some of my power over them, more to keep the rabid one from injuring itself than anything else. They hissed pitifully but dropped to their knees without even trying to resist. The quieter demon had pressed its cheek against the glass, and its eyes were half-closed as if it was struggling to stay awake. I crouched

“Do you know who sent you?” I asked, putting some of my power into the words. “I need you to tell me if you know.”

“The...the master,” the demon said. Every syllable sounded painful, as if the pitiful thing had to force them out through a damaged throat.

“The master,” I echoed. “And is the master Lucifer?”

The creature in the cell stared up at me. For a moment, I was certain that it wouldn’t answer, but it finally nodded with just the slightest movement of the head. It looked like even that movement was a struggle.

“Do you remember your name?” I asked. “Can you tell me where you came from?”

The demon whined, pawing a clawed hand against the glass between us. Its face creased in pain, and it folded in on itself, then bowed backward, limbs spasming.

“What’s happening?” I asked Jun. “Has this happened to them before?” But when I looked back at him, he was pale-faced and grim. He shook his head.

The creature in the cell in front of me was making a low, barely noticeable sound. I leaned closer, trying to hear it. I was man enough to admit that I flinched when the demon lurched forward and slammed into the glass, but I stayed close. Something had changed, I realized. The horrible blistered skin had faded around one of the demon’s eyes. Now there was a small circle of pale, freckled skin around a wide brown eye, jarringly human in the ruined wasteland that made up the rest of its form.

“Please,” the demon whispered. “My name is Sammie. I’m sixteen, I never wanted this, I, I didn’t want to hurt anyone, please—”

He—the demon had a soft, lilting accent that was distinctly masculine—cut himself off with a horrible gurgling shriek. He slammed his head against the glass, and when he reeled back again, his eyes were the familiar demonic black. Whatever secret reserve of strength Sammie had drawn on to speak to me had run out.



## Chapter 3

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## *Domenico*

The ride back from the warehouse was quiet. The air in the car was tense and grim; all the cheerful banter and flirting had vanished completely.

Once we got back to Jun's estate, we all separated quickly and without discussion. With a wave of her hand, Emiko directed some of the servants to show us to our rooms. I was distantly aware that mine was filled with dark lacquered wood and flowing white drapes, but I was too distracted to appreciate the opulence around me.

My thoughts were still with the demon in the cell. Sammie. He was a child. Just a kid, and he'd been turned into that...thing. He should have been worrying about grades and getting his learner's permit, but he had been turned into yet another weapon in my father's arsenal. The thought made something greasy and off-putting settle into the pit of my stomach. The wild, animal fear in that one humanoid eye was impossible to forget.

I lay on the bed, staring sightlessly at the wall. I could feel the jet lag beginning to weigh me down, but I knew instinctively that if I slept, I would be plagued by nightmares. I allowed myself the indulgence of lying there for a while, trying not to think about Sammie. For once, I was glad that Natasha wasn't with me. I didn't want her to see Sammie, and frankly, I didn't know if I would've had it in me to comfort her.

The light slipped across the walls of my room as the sun dipped toward the horizon. Now that I was at least somewhat put together, if not rested, I glanced around the room with new eyes. The bed was large, with a round canopy that sloped up smoothly from the head and foot of the structure, making it feel cozy and oddly nest-like. The carving and inlay that

decorated it had no doubt cost a fortune when it was made. Judging by the look of the thing, I guessed that it had been made at least two centuries ago.

The bed dominated the room. Against the pale wood floor and the cream-colored walls, the dark lacquer of the other furniture stood out starkly. It was somewhat austere but in a doubtlessly expensive way. Under other circumstances, I would have taken more time to appreciate it, but my mind was still occupied with other, more pressing matters.

I found Jun in a sitting room, much less formal than the one we'd been led to earlier. There was a potbellied cast-iron wood stove in the middle of the room, its chimney stretching all the way to the tall ceiling. Thick pillows were scattered around it invitingly. Jun was sitting on one of them, tending to the stove with a careful, confident touch that spoke of years of practice. He glanced over his shoulder at me; apparently I hadn't been as quiet as I'd thought, even though I was wandering around the house in my sock feet.

"Ah, Domenico," he said warmly, waving me into the room. "You're just in time. The kettle just boiled."

I settled onto one of the cushions, and he rose to his feet to grab an inlaid box with claw feet and a delicately inlaid scene of mountains on the top. He set it on the floor in front of me, along with two ceramic tumblers, both an appealingly earthy shade of green. He poured water into each cup from a squat brass kettle, then settled onto his cushion and flipped open the tea chest. Inside were tidy rows of Swiss Miss cocoa packets. I bit back a snort of amusement and grabbed myself a dark chocolate one. Jun eyed my selection with apparent approval, then snagged a milk chocolate with mini marshmallows for himself.

We stirred our cocoa in companionable silence, watching the fire through the grate of the stove. Finally, Jun heaved a sigh and began to speak.

"I've never seen anything like what happened to those boys," he said. His voice was a quiet rumble that would have been soothing under other circumstances, but as it was, just thinking about those children in their warped forms made the warm air of the living room feel stifling.

"Neither have I," I told him. "They were so...it seems silly to call them inhuman when they were never human in the first place, doesn't it? But it was like the core of them had been taken out."

“Frankly, I’m amazed you got as much from that boy as you did,” Jun said. “I couldn’t get either of them to speak to me on the flight back. Maybe your power has a signature close enough to Lucifer’s that it let you undo some of what he did to them.”

I shuddered, pressing my hands against my warm cup of cocoa. “I know I shouldn’t be surprised that he’d stoop low enough to bring children into this, but I really didn’t think he’d go so far so quickly. He’s willing to go farther than I expected to win this war, and we can’t let that happen.”

Jun sipped his drink thoughtfully, then wiped a bit of cocoa foam from his upper lip. “What do you think our next steps should be here? You know your father better than any of us, after all. I think it makes sense for you to run point on the tactical side of things.”

I stared into the flames as though they would have answers for me. “We summon the other kings,” I said finally. “There are already three of us here. It would be foolish for us to leave the other three out of the loop, even if it seems risky to take them away from their home turf.”

Jun nodded, unflappable as ever. “There’s plenty of room for everyone to stay here,” he said. “And my security is good enough that we won’t have to worry too much about a direct attack on the estate. I think it would also be wise to send teams out to look for the Gates so that we can act as quickly as possible.”

“About that,” I said. “Natasha is the only one who can open the gates. As long as we keep her away from Lucifer, he won’t be able to move forward with that part of his plan, but it also means that we can’t act until she’s back with us.”

“Where is she?” Jun asked, blunt but not unkind.

“With Rogelio,” I told him.

He winced, rubbing a large hand over his cropped hair. “And you think that she’s...safe?” he asked delicately.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead, resting my head in my hand for a moment. “Rogelio is her biological father,” I said. Might as well rip the Band-Aid off and get it out in the open as quickly as possible. When I glanced up to gauge Jun’s reaction, he was watching me with a level of impassivity that would have made him the envy of any professional poker player.

“It’s a long story,” I told him, heaving a sigh. “The gist is that he and Natasha’s father used to be close, and he essentially tricked the man into

artificially inseminating his own wife. It's, uh, messy, to say the least."

Jun blinked at me, then downed the last of his cocoa like it was a shot. "Well, at least you know that he has a vested interest in keeping her safe."

I shot him a weak smile. "That is the bright side," I agreed.

I was still feeling remarkably drained, so I made my excuses and headed back to my room. I did my best to rest, but I was still nervy and on edge from what we'd seen. Eventually, there was a polite, quiet knock at the door, and I opened it to find a covered tray on a small folding table. Beneath the cloche was a steaming bowl of congee, heaped high with chicken and scallions. The rich, savory scent hit me, and I became aware that I was ravenously hungry.

I ate the rice porridge quickly and with frankly abhorrent manners. It was excellent, comforting and flavorful. Exhausted and full of carbs, I finally managed to drift off to sleep.

The next morning dawned bright and agonizingly early. I'd been haunted by bad dreams all night, but when I tried to remember them, they melted away before I could grasp them. I managed to peel myself out of bed, egged on by the smells that were wafting in from the dining room.

Jun and Emiko were the only ones at the table when I wandered in. The table was laden with bamboo steamer baskets and tea cups, with a squat orange teapot in the center. Jun seemed as alert as ever, but the smile that Emiko gave me as she clutched her tea was distinctly sleepy.

Breakfast was strong tea and pork-filled steam buns. It wasn't lost on me that Jun was determined to keep aspects of his Chinese origins despite having lived in Japan for decades. After being cast out of Hell, many of us had become deeply and inextricably connected to the places we now called home. Liz, for instance, was the most aggressively English person I had ever met, despite having been born and raised in a different plane of existence. Jun, on the other hand, played a careful game with what he showed the outside world, showing respect without showing favoritism. I didn't envy him the tightrope he had to walk.

"I got in touch with the other kings," Jun told me after I demolished my second plate of steam buns. "They'll all be here as soon as possible. I can't say that I envy them the travel time, but it'll be good to discuss these things in person and without a time difference."

I nodded, sipping my tea. "Excellent. As soon as they've all had a chance to settle in, we should start talking strategy." It would be a while, I

knew; of the three other kings, the closest was in Sydney, which was still a twelve-hour flight away. “That gives us some time to try to solve the puzzle of our feral demons.”

“I’ve had some of my scientists studying them,” Jun said, “But it’s slow work, and the subjects aren’t exactly cooperative. Getting any solid research done on them will take time.”

“If I may,” Emiko piped up, straightening her back and setting aside her tea, “I’m not sure that we have the time to let science run its course right now. There are other avenues that we could look into. I believe we may have something that can help.”

I looked at her, quirking an eyebrow. Across the table, Jun gave her an indulgent smile. “We’re listening,” he said.

Emiko nodded, her green hair bouncing with the motion. “My mother was a member of the Akai mining family. They were, ah...” She scowled, clearly frustrated, and murmured something to Jun in the language they’d spoken in before.

“Robber barons,” he translated.

“Robber barons,” she repeated, as if trying to commit the phrase to memory. “They had a great deal of money and power, and they used some of it to collect artifacts. Most of their means were...you could call them dubious. Many of the items were stolen. My grandfather had a particular interest in enchanted items. He was a powerful demon, but he didn’t have any magic of his own, so he hoarded these artifacts. I have some of them. There’s one in particular that could be useful. It’s a pendant that was rumored to be able to restore health. I don’t know if it’s just physical health or if it can heal the mind as well, but...”

“But either way, it’s worth a try,” Jun said. He was proud of her, I realized. His eyes had gone soft, and a slight smile tugged at his lips.

“If you’re willing to let me borrow it, I promise to treat it with the utmost care,” I told Emiko.

She gave me a pleased little smile and stood. “I’ll go find it,” she volunteered.

As she disappeared around the corner, I turned to Jun. I had heard of the Akai family. Most politically savvy demons had; they had made a fortune for themselves mining copper and gold and had kept that fortune growing by skirting around environmental regulations. They had been incredibly

wealthy, and several of their corporations were still going strong, even though a clan of hunters had managed to take the family out for good.

“How on earth did you find a surviving Akai?” I asked Jun. “Let alone get her to work for you?”

He gave me an easy grin. “She’s not just an Akai,” he said proudly. “She’s a Hou.”

I must have done a bad job at hiding my surprise because Jun let out a rumbling laugh.

“I’m not surprised you didn’t realize,” he said. “She has her mother’s face. She has my biceps, though.”

I laughed, still surprised but also a little bit delighted. “Well, when you put it like that, I guess I can see the resemblance.”

Jun smiled, leaning back in his chair. “Back before I was king, I had a brief stint working as a bodyguard for Chiaki, Ichibei’s daughter.” Akai Ichibei, I knew, was the man who had brought the family to prominence in the industry. “Chiaki was...she was incredible. She was an absolute wild thing. She would drag me out mountain climbing whenever her father’s back was turned. That woman could scale a tree like nobody else I’ve ever met.” He glanced down at his hands. He looked deeply fond and quite sad, but I could see where the edges of his grief had been worn away with time. “I was smitten. It was love at first sight. Well, for me, anyway. But over the years, she grew to love me, too.” Jun’s eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Her father didn’t approve,” he continued. “He would never let his daughter be with someone who didn’t have assets to offer the family. He was much more interested in being a businessman than he was in being a father, unfortunately. His disapproval wouldn’t have stopped Chiaki, but I wanted to do things right. I wanted to marry her.

“So I decided that I had to become impressive enough so that stubborn *lǜ chá biào* would have no grounds to keep me from marrying his daughter. It took twenty years of hard work, but I was determined to give it my all. I worked my way up through the ranks. I became king.” There was pride in his voice and the set of his shoulders. “Chiaki had waited for me the whole time. We were married in the spring. And just when I thought I couldn’t get any luckier, along came Emiko.”

Jun reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick wallet. From somewhere within it, he pulled out a photograph, which he handed to me. It was a scan of a much older picture printed on heavy card stock. It had the

distinctive look of a sepia photograph that had been colorized. In it, a beautiful woman in a blue kimono was holding a toddler that someone had crammed into a fancy little outfit. The little girl's legs were slightly blurred, as though she had been too impatient to stay still while the photograph was taken. Behind them, Jun stood, a hand resting on his wife's shoulder and amusement sparkling in his eyes. Despite the fact that he hadn't aged since then, he somehow looked much younger in the photo.

"She's beautiful," I told him, handing the picture back to him. He stared at it for a long moment before tucking it away again.

"She was visiting her parents when the hunters attacked," he said, then lapsed into silence for a long moment.

"Emiko barely remembers her," he said eventually, his voice carefully even. "But as she got older, she got more curious about her mother's side of the family. I thought that finding the artifacts the Akais had hoarded might help her. It was far too late to get all of them, but the ones we recovered seemed to give her at least some sense of connection."

"I had no idea," I said. The words didn't feel sufficient, but I didn't know what else to say. I had known Jun for centuries, and I'd never known about his family.

"I keep it private," he told me. "I have plenty of enemies, and if they found out about her..." He trailed off uneasily.

"I understand," I said. "Thank you. You didn't have to share this with me, but I'm grateful you did."

"She means the world to me," Jun told me, his voice quiet but fierce. "I can't let anything happen to her."

"Believe me," I said, "I get it."

With our conversation still ringing in my ears, I decided to try to talk to the person who had become my whole world. Unfortunately, when I hit the call button, it was Rogelio who picked up.

"I want to talk to Natasha," I said, trying not to feel like a teenage boy asking my girlfriend's dad if she was free to talk.

"She's busy with training," Rogelio told me shortly.

I forced myself not to sigh. "Things have gotten worse," I said bluntly. "I need to talk to Natasha for my own peace of mind, if nothing else."

"Worse how?" he asked.

I treated myself to a vicious smile, knowing that he couldn't see me. It was deeply satisfying to feel the exact moment someone took the bait. "I'll



tell you all about it after I speak with my wife.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and then Rogelio spoke. “Fine,” he said. “That wasn’t a bad bit of negotiation. There might be some hope for you yet.”

I rolled my eyes, which didn’t help with the persistent teenage boy feeling.

“Don’t make her lose focus,” he said. “She’s doing well, and if you throw her off her game, then you and I will have words, Domenico.”

I didn’t have it in me to be annoyed by his grandstanding; I was too excited to talk to Natasha. My heart pounded in my chest as I waited to hear her voice. My hands went embarrassingly clammy.

“Domenico,” Natasha said. I felt like a dog whose favorite person had just said, “Walk?!”

“I’ve missed you,” I told her immediately. It had been a month since I’d seen her last, but it felt like an eternity.

“I’ve missed you too, babe,” she said. I could hear the smile in her voice. “Training’s going really well, though. If I keep this pace up, hopefully I can see you soon.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” I said. “I want to see you, obviously, but I don’t want you to exhaust yourself.”

“You’re making that face, aren’t you?” she teased.

“What face?”

“The painfully noble one with the big sad eyes.”

I glanced at a mirror hanging on the wall. She had described the face exactly. “No,” I said.

“Domenico,” Natasha said, her voice warm, “I promise to take breaks, okay? I’ll hydrate and do warmups and cooldowns and everything.”

“Good,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for taking care of myself,” she told me.

“I do when I’m not there to take care of you.”

“Oh my god, you’re such a sap,” Natasha said, but she sounded impossibly fond of me.

I smiled to myself. “I can’t help it,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she replied immediately. “Like, so much that it’s genuinely embarrassing.”

I snorted. “I promise not to tell anyone, don’t worry.”

“Good, it’d ruin my street cred.”

It was so good to hear Natasha's voice again. When I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine that she was right there with me.

"I've gotta get back to training," she told me reluctantly. "I'll see you soon, okay? I love you."

"See you soon," I replied. "I love you, too. Be safe."

She ended the call. I cradled my phone in my hand as if I could touch her through it.

Then, with a rush of childish glee, I realized that I hadn't told Rogelio anything about what was going on.

## Chapter 4

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## *Domenico*

Over the next few days, the other kings began to trickle in. Anahera Gold was the first to arrive. She was a tall, solidly built woman with nut-brown skin and a mane of curly black hair. Her chin was marked with tattooed swirls, and her lips had been tattooed black as well. She wore a blood-red power suit, slightly wrinkled from her painfully long flight. She strode over to me and pressed our foreheads and noses together in a firm hongī while one of Jun's servants brought her luggage inside.

"Hell of a fuckin' flight," she said once we parted, speaking with all the meekness and diplomacy of somebody who'd spent most of the last few centuries bouncing back and forth between Wellington and Canberra. "If this is some shit that could've been an email, I'm gonna be all sorts of fucked off."

"It's good to see you, too, Anahera," I said mildly. "I promise you, this is important, and it's not something to be discussed over unsecured channels."

"So this is about Lucifer, then," she said. It didn't sound like a question.

"It is," I confirmed. "I'll tell you more when the others arrive, but in the meantime, you should get some rest."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Anahera said. She shouldered the last of her bags and waved a hand at Emiko, who was watching her with the delighted fascination of an elementary school student who'd just heard a beloved teacher swear for the first time. Emiko led her deeper into the house, speaking to her in halting Te Reo. Anahera laughed, clearly delighted, and gently corrected her pronunciation.

The next to arrive was Thema Abimbola, regal as ever in a severely cut kente cloth dress. Her jet-black hair had been twisted into hundreds of tiny braids and was swept up into a bun. The gold beads placed throughout gleamed in the light, the protective sigils etched into them sparkling as she moved. She bowed her head to me, then gave me a firm handshake with her free hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you for having me,” she said. Her voice was musical and held unimpeachable confidence. “How is Natasha? I hope she’s doing well.”

“She’s great,” I told her. “I’ll let her know that you asked about her.”

Thema was not only fond of formality but was one of those people who had an immaculate memory for names and interpersonal connections. I’d once heard her ask after the health of Liz’s eldest daughter’s cat by name. According to Liz, soon after that encounter, a care package had shown up containing cat treats and toys. None of us had ever figured out how Thema had found out Liz’s daughter’s address.

“I hate to be abrupt,” Thema said, “but it seems that I need to know as soon as possible. Is war coming for us, Domenico?”

I hesitated, but whatever expression she saw on my face was enough of an answer for her.

“I thought so,” she said. The beads in her hair shone as she nodded her head. “If you will excuse me, I should make some calls to my lieutenants.”

The last of us to make it to Jun’s estate was the king of South America, Gloria Moreno. She had a tendency to be a bit irritable at the best of times, and I wasn’t sure what state she’d be in after the thirty-hour flight from Brasilia. When she finally arrived, she looked haggard and had a death grip on a huge plastic coffee cup. The sticker on the side read, “lg cold brew + 3 dbl espresso, no sweetener.” The handwriting was slightly shaky, as though even the barista had been horrified by the order.

Gloria was by far the most casually dressed of the new arrivals, wearing a battered leather jacket over faded jeans and a black t-shirt. The handshake she gave me was bone-crushingly firm, and her hands had the sort of calluses I would associate with a farmer, not a career politician. She wore no makeup or jewelry except for a simple gold band on her ring finger, but the sharpness of her silver crew cut and the shine on her boots made it clear that she put plenty of care into her appearance. She’d been in charge of South America since Rogelio had decided he’d be better suited to a life of crime, and she’d been running it with careful, unflappable competence.

“You’re looking well,” I told her.

Gloria snorted and took a swig from her coffee. Demonic constitution or no, I was fairly sure that the amount of that liquid monstrosity she’d just had would’ve given me heart palpitations.

“As well as can be expected after a trip like that, maybe,” she said, shrugging off her jacket and folding it over her arm. “The others are all here?”

“They are,” I said. “Once you have some time to settle in, we can all—”

She cut me off with a brusque wave of her hand. “No need. I can manage just fine. Let’s get started.”

Emiko gathered all of us into a meeting room with quiet efficiency. The other kings had already had chances to catch up with each other, so Gloria said a brisk round of hellos and settled into one of the big leather chairs, still clutching her coffee in a way that suggested she was ready and willing to fight anyone foolish enough to try to take it away from her.

There was a massive screen set into one wall of the conference room. Prompted by a nod from Jun, Emiko began playing the news clip about the demon attack. I felt no need to watch it again; instead, I watched the faces of my fellow kings. Thema looked horrified, with one hand pressed to her lips and her eyes wide. Gloria looked grim, but that wasn’t terribly different from her usual expression. Anahera looked like a scientist making a concerning discovery and trying not to look worried enough to scare the lab techs.

The feed shifted from the news clip to footage of the creatures—the boys—in the cells. The one that had once been Sammie was curled up into a small, listless ball on the floor, either too far gone to recognize the bed in the corner or simply not interested in it. His companion in the next cell was scrabbling at the glass. His knuckles were bloody, and the glass was streaked with red. It wasn’t clear if he was trying to achieve something or if he was simply unable to think clearly enough to stop what he was doing.

Thema let out a ragged gasp, muffled by the hand pressed against her mouth. “How is this possible?” she asked. Her voice was quiet, but against the backdrop of the silent footage, it might as well have been as loud as a gunshot.

“We’re not sure yet,” I said. “Jun has a team of his best scientists studying them, but as far as I know, there haven’t been any breakthroughs.”

I looked to Jun for confirmation, and he nodded. “Unfortunately, that’s correct. No leads have been found so far. This sort of research is usually a matter of years, not days. Even untangling spiritual causes from physical ones in a case like this could take months, at the very least.”

“So we have no idea how Lucifer is managing to make this happen,” Thema said, worry heavy in her voice.

“I wish I could give you more solid information,” I said, spreading my hands across the cool surface of the table. The smooth wood was reassuringly solid, and I tried to focus on the feeling of the knots and minute ridges under my fingers. Anything was better than looking at the live feed of the children in the cells. “Unfortunately, we know very little. As far as we can tell, they aren’t being actively controlled by Lucifer. They seem to have free will, although they aren’t...”

“Their cognitive abilities seem to be severely limited,” Jun said. “Although obviously, we don’t have enough information to tell if that’s consistent from subject to subject.”

I nodded, glancing around the table and making a point to meet the eyes of each king. “One of the demons in the footage you just saw responded to my commands, so whatever’s been done to them, it hasn’t made them immune to our gifts. He managed to talk to me very briefly before he lost himself again. He told me that his name is Sammie, and he’s sixteen years old.”

Several people sucked in a sharp breath at once. “He’s using children?” Anahera said.

“It seems like it,” Jun said. “Sammie may be an outlier, but knowing what we know about Lucifer’s tactics...”

“We have to assume the worst,” I said.

There was a moment of silence around the table. Finally, Gloria rapped her knuckles against its surface.

“Right,” she said. “How do we fix it?”

We loaded into Jun’s cars and headed over to the warehouse. On the way, Emiko filled the others in about the artifact, which was tucked safely away inside a plain metal box—an uninteresting shade of brown and about eight inches on each side—that she held in her lap.

“You should prepare yourselves for the worst,” Jun warned us as he reached for the door of the warehouse. “Those demons are starving and mad. What little of their essence they had left has faded away even more.”

The overwhelming crush of energy was even worse than last time. Sammie had dragged himself to the side of his cage and was leaning against the glass, eyes wide and unseeing as he stared blankly ahead. The other demon was snarling halfheartedly, like a terrified dog finally succumbing to exhaustion. The tension was palpable, not just from the caged demons but also from the other kings. Seeing the corrupted boys on screen was nothing compared to seeing them in person. Every detail of their blistered skin was thrown into sharp relief by the fluorescent lighting. The smell of blood and sulfur was thick in the air.

Thema stepped up to the etched glass that separated us from the nameless demon. He bared his teeth at her, but the reaction seemed less angry and more scared. I watched her take a slow, measured breath and let it out again.

“These poor children,” she murmured. She pressed a hand to the glass, and the boy scrambled away from her. “If we can’t help them with the relic, then...then we should put them out of their misery. This is no way to live.”

“The information that we could learn from studying them...” Jun began, but Thema wheeled to face him, barely holding back her anger.

“Is not enough to justify keeping them as lab rats,” she said in a frigid voice that left no room for argument.

Jun stepped away as if he had been knocked backward by the force of her words. Thema turned back to the cage, watching the boy inside with the air of someone bearing witness.

Emiko undid the clasps on the box and lifted the lid. As soon as the seal on the lead-lined container was broken, a wave of power poured out of it. If the power coming from the corrupted demons was dark and rancid, this power was strong and clean. It felt like standing underneath a waterfall, being pounded with icy meltwater from the top of an untouched mountain.

“Well, fuck,” Anahera said. “I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“I don’t think that there is anything else like this,” Emiko told her.

“May I?” I asked, gesturing to the box. I waited for her nod of approval before I reached inside and unfolded the layers of fabric protecting the item inside. The necklace was incredibly simple: just a comma-shaped jade bead about two inches long, strung on a thick silk cord. The pendant was scratched and pitted with age, and it gleamed dully in the room’s artificial lighting. If I’d seen a picture of it, I wouldn’t have given it a second glance, but seeing it in person, it looked like it was warping everything around it



very slightly. I lifted it out of the box with careful hands, making sure not to touch the bead itself.

“Just touch the pendant to the person’s bare skin,” Emiko said. Her voice was hushed and reverent. It seemed fitting, somehow. I was, for obvious reasons, not a religious man, but being around that necklace made me feel the way I had the first time I’d seen a temple. “Sacred” wasn’t a word that held a lot of meaning for me, but I suddenly felt that I understood it now more than I ever had before.

“How long do I need to keep it on them?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m not sure,” Emiko replied. “It may not even work on illnesses of the mind, but if it’s going to work, then there should be an immediate reaction.”

I reached out and gave her shoulder a light squeeze. “It’s the best chance we have, and you gave it to us. Even if it doesn’t work, it’s a step in the right direction, okay?”

She gave me a small smile and a nod before she stepped aside. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, then opened the door to Sammie’s cell and stepped inside.

If the boy noticed me, he didn’t show it. His chest was heaving as though every single breath he took needed an enormous amount of effort. I wasn’t sure if he was wasting away from the lack of souls or if he had been malnourished before he’d been corrupted, but he was stick-thin. The fine bones of his wrist stood out sharply where he had one arm wrapped around his gangly legs. I’d seen healthier-looking people in hospices.

The pendant was a heavy weight in my hand. I found myself desperately hoping that it would work, that we wouldn’t have to kill this fragile, terrified boy.

Sammie didn’t react to my presence at first, but once I got within a few feet of him, his eyes snapped to the pendant. He let out a horrible, animal screech and scrambled away from me, moving so fast that he slammed into the back wall of the cell before I could catch him. I tried to follow him, but he called on some hidden reserve of energy to dart away, crashing to the floor and hiding under the narrow cot set up for him in one corner. I crouched down to look at him. His eyes were squeezed shut, and he was trembling like a leaf.

“I could use a little help in here, I think,” I called over my shoulder, not taking my eyes off the boy.

I heard the click of the door opening behind me. Sammie heard it, too. His head snapped up, and he ran for the door, low and loping like an animal. His escape attempt would have gone better if Jun wasn't filling the entire doorway, however. He tried to change direction at the last moment but tripped over himself and careened forward.

Jun caught him easily. The boy snarled at him and tried to bite, but Jun just eased him down to the floor, keeping him pinned. Anahera stepped into the room behind him, and they each took one of Sammie's arms. He tried to kick at them, but whatever strength he'd called on earlier had faded; his attempts were weak.

I knelt next to the boy's head and pressed the pendant to the hollow of his throat with two fingers. Touching the jade itself was bizarre; it sent a vibration into my bones and an odd tingle across my skin. Beneath the three of us, Sammie writhed and screamed, a horrible sound that a human throat wouldn't have been able to make. Beneath his ear-splitting shriek, I could hear Anahera murmuring to him.

"You're alright, son," she was saying, like someone trying to soothe an animal. "You'll be alright. Almost over, kid, you're doing so well..."

From beside us, there was the *thud, thud, thud* of the other corrupted demon flinging himself against the glass over and over again. He was screaming as well, a high, reedy sound. Sammie strained under our hands, trying to fight us off.

Suddenly, everything was still and silent. Sammie lay limply on the ground. The other demon had apparently slammed himself against the wall of his cell so hard that he had knocked himself out. There was blood on the glass, and his temple was wet with it where he had collapsed.

I lifted the pendant away from the boy's neck. I was eager to stop touching it. The sensation of it on my bare skin had been building into something hard to withstand, but it eased as soon as I pulled away and held it by the cord once again. Slowly, cautiously, Jun and Anahera let go of Sammie's arms, waiting to see if he would start flailing again.

He didn't. He just lay there, looking small and ragged between the three of us. For a long, long moment, I stared down at him. My hands hung limply by my sides. He looked dead. I couldn't bring myself to feel for a pulse, not just yet.

Suddenly, Sammie heaved in a massive gasping breath. His eyes fluttered open slightly, and I could see that they were a warm, human shade

of brown. He looked up at me for an instant before his eyes fluttered shut again, and he passed out.

# Chapter 5

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## *Domenico*

Now that all the kings were gathered in one place, the days became almost entirely focused on strategy and intel. There was only so much we could do—we knew the eclipse was coming, and we had a reasonable guess as to what Lucifer’s plan was, but we didn’t know what steps he was planning to take to get there. Still, we had to prepare however we could. For now, the day’s agenda mostly centered on the transformed teenagers.

Before going to the first of many meetings on the schedule for the day, I stopped in to check on Sammie. There was a small private room stocked with top-of-the-line medical equipment tucked away deep in a quiet corner of Jun’s estate, and the boy had been set up there. A doctor had been brought to the house and paid very generously to stay on call and sleep in the bedroom across the hall from the makeshift private clinic. Sammie was still dead to the world, but when I stuck my head into the room, the doctor nodded at me.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” he told me. Dr. Oyama was the best demonic pediatrician in the area, or at least the best who’d been willing to make a week-long house call in exchange for an obscene amount of money. He was a tall man, as bald as an egg, and had been in a different brightly colored bowtie every time I’d spoken to him.

Dr. Oyama finished checking Sammie’s blood pressure and ushered me out of the room. Today’s bowtie was bright blue with a pattern of clouds.

“Any news?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. “As I told Mr. Hou, Sammie regained consciousness two days ago, but he seems to be so exhausted that

he's been deeply asleep since then. His form is still demonic, as you saw, and when I checked his eyes this morning, they still looked human."

"Thank you," I said. "Please let us know if anything changes."

I checked my phone on the way to the meeting, hoping for an update on the other boy who'd been caught alongside Sammie, but there was no news. After a brief but intense argument in rapid-fire Arabic between Thema and Jun, the other boy (whose medical records would refer to him as John Doe) had been moved to another facility, a discreet and very secure clinic where he could be treated and observed without putting himself or others at risk. I was privately grateful that Jun had won the argument as quickly as he did. I'd been trying to prepare myself to wade into the fight to keep the boy alive, but I certainly hadn't been looking forward to it. There was going to be enough bloodshed in the coming days without adding that boy to the list of fatalities.

The other kings were already in the meeting room when I entered, and their quiet conversations petered out as I took my seat at one end of the table. Jun was at the other end, and I was quietly grateful that there had been no need for a petty squabble about who would lead things. We were on his territory, but I was still the one who was in charge.

"I just spoke to the doctor who's been treating Sammie," I said. We'd been embroiled in meetings for long enough that greeting people seemed unnecessary; we barely had the luxury of spending time apart. "There's been no progress in his attempts to figure out why the boy is still stuck in his true form." That wasn't surprising, unfortunately. It wasn't as if there was any sort of precedent for the situation. "I'll be honest, the lack of information has the potential to be extremely dangerous. We have to figure out what Lucifer did. As it stands, we have no idea how many people he's done it to, how to help them, or who else he might be able to turn. I trust that I don't have to tell you how bad it could be if he managed to turn one of us."

The other kings shuddered. Liz went pale.

"If any of you have any ideas about what he might have done, I'd love to hear them," I continued. "Anything could help, no matter how small or unlikely."

Gloria spoke up first. "The first thing that comes to mind for me is that Lucifer talked demons into making a deal with him in exchange for their

souls, and then he used his power over them to turn them into those things—those boys,” she corrected herself.

“He can move his soul from vessel to vessel,” Anahera said, leaning forward in her chair. “If he can move his soul, he may have figured out how to move another person’s essence, too,” she said. “Some sort of...soul magic?” I quirked an eyebrow at her, and she shrugged. “No bad ideas in a brainstorming session, right?”

“And he has the spell book,” Thema added. “He may be using one of the spells in it on his recruits to undo them so that he can turn them into those things.”

Liz shook her head. “Even if Lucifer had the ability to use the spell book, which he currently doesn’t, Dom had an encounter with a shifted demon well before it was stolen.”

“He can’t use the book?” Anahera asked.

“As far as we can tell, only Natasha is able to use it,” I told her. “It’s her angelic blood. The book only responds to descendants of Gabriel.”

There was a relieved exhale from Thema. Across the table from her, Gloria looked darkly delighted.

“All that effort to steal a book, and he can’t even use it,” she said gleefully.

“But that gives Lucifer even more of a reason to target Natasha,” Jun pointed out. I envied him and resented him in equal measure for how calmly he could talk about it. Just thinking about my father going after Natasha made me feel unhinged.

“If Natasha has control over her angelic magic, maybe she could figure out a way to undo whatever Lucifer did to those boys,” Gloria said. “Where is she? We could use her help.”

I very carefully kept myself from fidgeting in my seat. “She’s with Rogelio.”

Several of the kings looked shocked at my words, but Gloria just raised an eyebrow. “Go on,” she said.

“He’s training her,” I explained. “He has a particularly deep understanding of her magic. He, ah, we recently found out that Rogelio is Natasha’s biological father.”

Even Gloria looked surprised at that, although even at her most shocked, she only ever looked slightly nonplussed.

“So she’s not just angelic,” she said. “She’s also the direct descendent of an incredibly powerful demonic bloodline.”

“That does seem to be the case,” I said. “It’s been a...complicated couple of months for her.” I managed to sell the understatement with a perfectly straight face, but the effect was diminished somewhat by Liz’s barely suppressed noise of amusement. She was far too ladylike to be accused of snorting, but she came close.

“It sounds like she could be even more useful than I thought,” Gloria said.

“We should get her here as soon as possible,” Thema said, drumming her fingers on the surface of the table.

“Believe me, I would love to see her again, but—”

My explanation of her training was cut off by a commotion in the hallway outside the meeting room. I heard Emiko yelp from down the way, and all the kings sprang to their feet, bracing themselves for an attack.

The door burst open with such intensity that if it had hinges, it would have slammed into the wall. Instead, since it was a paper screen door, it just slid somewhat aggressively. There, standing in the doorway, her chest heaving and a massive grin on her face, was Natasha.

In an instant, everything and everyone else in the room fell away. Natasha, my Natasha, was right there. I was frozen in shock for a moment, but then I practically charged forward. Natasha met me halfway across the room, her eyes locked on mine. I pulled her close against me and kissed her, deep and desperate. I tried to pour everything I felt for her into the kiss, every minute I’d spent missing her, every second I’d spent counting down until I could see her again. She gave as good as she got, and we were both breathless and flushed when we pulled apart. I cupped her cheek, beaming down at her.

“Hi,” I said dumbly.

“Well, that was horrible to see,” came a familiar baritone from the doorway. I glanced up and saw Rogelio leaning casually against the doorframe, giving me an amused look.

I held Natasha close, reveling in the warmth of her. “What are you two doing here?” I managed, still a little addled from the kiss. I stared down at my wife, not even trying to hide my adoration. Even though it had only been a month, she looked different. More confident, maybe. Her aura was



different, too. It had always been stunning, but now it was even stronger, full of light and darkness in equal measure.

“I’ve learned a thing or two,” Natasha told me. “Rogelio decided that I was finally ready to come back to you.”

She took half a step away from me and squeezed my hand tightly before letting go. She turned to the other kings, who were watching us with varying degrees of poorly hidden interest, and bowed her head.

“My name is Natasha Monroe,” she said. “I’m the last descendant of the Archangel Gabriel, and I have Rogelio’s blood in my veins. My mother’s blood was used to open the gates of Hell and free Lucifer. I am going to end him.” She was radiant. There was a regal certainty to her that I had never seen before, and I was utterly entranced by it.

Natasha closed her eyes and took a breath. The energy of her aura built and built, and suddenly a shimmering golden glow manifested around her, hovering just above her skin. She opened her eyes and turned to me, a proud smile on her face. In the light of her magic, her eyes shone with a brilliant shade of gold.

## Chapter 6

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## *Natasha*

I took a deep breath, trying not to let myself get distracted or intimidated by the curious, unfamiliar faces surrounding me. I could feel the power of the demon kings in the room, and the scent and odd pressure of their mingled magic was impossible to ignore. I refused to let anything distract me, though.

*Showtime*, I thought, in a tone that sounded more like Rogelio than I wanted to admit.

The room around me went honey-gold as my magical shield shimmered into place around me. It felt warm and safe, like wrapping myself up in a blanket fresh out of the dryer. Across the room, Domenico was staring at me, his eyes wide and his mouth in a surprised *O*. He looked shocked, proud, and completely adoring. God, I'd missed him. I smiled at him and held out a hand, inviting him to join me.

He rose from his chair and strode over to me, staring at me like I was the only thing in the world worth looking at. He had this way of looking at me that made me understand why sunflowers turned toward the sun. He didn't even hesitate as he walked up to the perimeter of my magic, his eyes never leaving mine. Intellectually, I knew that Domenico trusted me completely, but it still warmed my heart to see that trust in action. I took his hand, and as soon as I did, the shining light of my shield surrounded him, too. My magic poured over him, the warmth of it brushing over his skin in a strange glowing caress.

For the space of a heartbeat, we just looked at each other. It was strange to be in front of him again, and I almost had to reassure myself that he was actually there. Then we surged towards each other, all grasping hands and

messy clashing lips. The kiss was a little clumsy; our noses mashed together, and our teeth clacked briefly. Still, it was perfect. It settled into something sweeter, slower, less frantic. *I'm home*, I thought. *I'm home again*.

The kiss didn't last anywhere near as long as I wanted it to. Of course, if I'd had my way, there would've been a lot fewer people around. A lot fewer clothes, too. But there was time for that later. Now, Domenico pulled back just a little, enough that he could look at the golden barrier surrounding us.

He let out a gasp of pure delight, craning his head around to look at the golden glow around him like a little kid on their first visit to a planetarium. Seeing his amazement at what I'd done almost made those weeks of separation seem worth it. I squeezed his hand tight. It felt so goddamn good to touch him again. I could have stayed in that moment forever, the two of us wrapped up in my magic and together again at last.

"It's so beautiful," he murmured. "What is it?"

Before I could say something mushy that would embarrass Domenico in front of the other kings, Rogelio sauntered over to the meeting table and picked up the carafe of cucumber water that had been set out for the kings. He hefted it in one hand, testing the weight, then reeled back and whipped it directly at Domenico's head. Domenico, who was still making big soft eyes at me, didn't notice in time to duck. He let out an undignified yelp and flinched as he caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, ducking toward me to act as a human shield.

Luckily for him, I had an actual shield. The carafe smashed against my magic, the shards of glass bouncing to the floor harmlessly. Not even the water had gotten through. One of the cucumber slices had hit the barrier right in front of Domenico's chest and was sliding slowly to the floor.

Domenico blinked at it, watching its journey with a bemused expression.

"It's a shield," I said, grinning up at him a little smugly. "You probably just figured that out, though."

I gave Rogelio a thumbs-up, and he shot me a lazy salute. I'd felt the impact of the bottle against my magic, but it had been like a blunt tap instead of sharp pain. Blocking it had tired me out a little, and I leaned against Domenico as I released the shield. Just as it faded into nothingness, I saw Rogelio's smirk widen and his fingers twitch. I rolled my eyes and threw the shield back up just in time to deflect the fireball he threw at us. It

bounced off the surface of the shield, sending tongues of flame toward the other kings. Lizbeth calmly extinguished it a few inches away from her face.

“No fire magic in the house, please,” said one of the kings, a huge man who looked like he was actively forcing himself not to snap at a guest.

“That was amazing,” Domenico told me earnestly, not even bothering to glare at Rogelio for the fireball. “You’re amazing, Natasha.”

He led me to one of the big wheeled chairs that surrounded the meeting table, looking like he was just being doting instead of looking like he was supporting half my weight.

“She’s been practicing that one for a while,” Rogelio said. “I honestly wasn’t sure if the shield would work that well when it was stretched over two people.”

“So you could have just smashed me in the face with a large glass object?” Domenico asked. “And a fireball?”

Rogelio gave him a lazy one-shouldered shrug. “I decided that it was a risk I was willing to take. And if the carafe had hit you, I wouldn’t have bothered with the fireball,” he said. “Besides, I’ve been throwing things at Natasha for weeks, and I barely ever made it through her shields.”

Domenico growled at that, and I put a calming hand on his arm. “We started with pillows, babe. Don’t worry,” I said.

“I wouldn’t actually try to hurt her. You must know that,” Rogelio said. Down the table, a butch woman in a sweet leather jacket snorted. Rogelio completely ignored her, although a muscle in his jaw twitched slightly.

“You never gave me the intel you promised me,” Rogelio pointed out, sinking into one of the chairs. He grabbed himself a glass, glancing around for the carafe before realizing it was smashed to pieces on the floor. “You owe me. Come on. Get us up to speed.”

“You’re not going to like it,” Domenico warned us. “It’s a new low, even for Lucifer.”

The Chinese guy at the end of the table, who was built like an absolute brick shithouse, sighed. “Domenico is correct. Lucifer seems to be recruiting children and forcing them into their demonic forms to create an army of child soldiers. Their mental capacity seems to be severely limited, leaving them in an almost bestial state. We’re not sure how he’s managing to transform them at this point.”

I froze. “Kids,” I said blankly. “He’s going to try to make us fight kids.” I’d done a lot of shit in my career as a hunter, and some of it I wasn’t proud of, but I’d never even considered going after a child.

“We’re exploring alternate avenues for dealing with them,” the man said. “None of us want to fight children. Finding a low-impact way to stop them from attacking is one of the things we planned to discuss today.”

“Jun here’s got two of the transformed kids locked up right now,” said one of the women, who had a cool tattoo on her chin. “We managed to use a magic necklace to cure one of the boys, but he’s still stuck in his true form. He seemed to get control of himself before he blacked out, at least.”

“We thought that you might be able to use your magic to help him get back to his human-looking form,” Lizbeth said to me.

“Right,” I said. “Okay. I have absolutely no idea how I would even start to do that.”

“There’s time,” Domenico told me. He was still holding my hand tightly, as though he was afraid I’d leave again. “Sammie—the boy we cured—is still asleep. Whatever my father did to him, he’s exhausted. We can try to figure this out together.”

“I’d love to help, obviously. I’ll do whatever I can,” I said, smiling at him warmly. “But can it wait for a little while longer? Stretching my shield that far kind of took it out of me.”

“Of course,” said the huge man from the head of the table. “I can have a member of the staff show you to your room if you’d like to rest, or...”

“I’ll show you the way,” Domenico said quickly, tangling our fingers together. “We’ll, uh...” He cleared his throat and glanced around at the other kings. “We can reconvene later.”

I recognized the look of barely restrained glee on Lizbeth’s face, so I tugged Domenico to his feet and headed to the door before she could give in to temptation and wolf-whistle at us. Dom led me deeper into the house quickly and quietly, his hand warm and solid in mine. The relief of seeing him again was overwhelming. I had missed him so much that it had been like a physical ache, always there and impossible to ignore.

The part of the estate that Domenico led me to was more Western-looking than the area we’d been in before. The walls and doors were solid, instead of the paper screen of the meeting room, and I was incredibly grateful for that. I really didn’t want to worry about staying quiet at the moment.

As soon as the door closed behind us, I crowded Domenico against it and pulled him down into a searing kiss.

“Missed you,” I gasped against his lips. “Missed you so fucking much, you have no idea.”

“I have some idea,” Domenico said, then dove down to kiss me again, licking into my mouth eagerly. I moaned, pressing against him. Heat was already pooling between my legs; if I was being honest, that had started as soon as we’d left the meeting room. The kiss we’d shared before had been passionate, yes, but it had been sweet, too, almost reassuring. That kiss had been about how much I’d missed having Domenico beside me, how much I’d missed telling him dumb jokes and waking up next to him. This kiss was about how much I’d missed the rasp of his stubble against my thighs, the sweet stretch of his cock filling me up, the sound he made when he came.

Domenico slotted one firm thigh between my legs, and I rutted against him shamelessly. His hands squeezed my waist, keeping me close. It was hot but not exactly necessary. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere, especially not now that I was so turned on, my skin felt hot and tingly.

I could feel the hard, hot line of his erection pressed against my hip, and I slid a hand between us to cup it. He gasped into the kiss, and I grinned.

“Bed?” he murmured.

“Bed,” I agreed.

We stripped quickly and a little clumsily, too worked up to bother putting on a show. I could tell that Domenico must have been desperate for it; he didn’t even bother to fold his pants. We practically crashed together into another kiss, but my hair, which had been messed up when I’d yanked my shirt off, was in my face and tickled my nose. I scrunched up my face and pulled away a little.

“Sorry,” I said, “My hair tie finally gave up the ghost on the flight over.”

A strange, soft look came across Domenico’s face. He pressed a hand to one of my cheeks, then kissed the other very, very gently. He pulled something off his wrist and handed it to me like it was precious to him. I looked down. Sitting in the middle of his palm was one of my hair ties.

“Here,” he said softly.

I looked up at him, completely adoring. “Thank you,” I said. It came out achingly tender. Nobody could have mistaken it as just being a thanks for the hair tie, especially not someone who knew me as well as Domenico did.

I pulled my hair back into a ponytail as quickly as I could, eager to get it out of the way so I could kiss my husband again.

“No weird hair lumps?” I asked, waving a hand at my head.

“You look beautiful,” Domenico replied. I couldn’t help but notice that that wasn’t what I’d asked him.

“So there’s definitely weird hair lumps,” I said.

“A couple. You still look beautiful.”

I snorted at him, shaking my hair out and putting it up again. “You’re such a dork,” I said. I was overwhelmed by how much I loved him. The raw, desperate passion from earlier had softened into something a bit more tender. Still pretty damn desperate, though.

Eventually, we made it over to the bed. It took a while since neither of us could bring ourselves to stop touching the other. I wound up on top, straddling Domenico’s hips. He was deliciously hard, and he ground himself against the slickness of my cunt. I let out an impatient whine, and he grinned up at me. I would’ve been embarrassed by my neediness, but my self-consciousness had gone offline around when Domenico had taken his shirt off.

“Not in the mood for foreplay, I’m guessing?” he said, rubbing a hand over my thigh. I shivered.

“Definitely not,” I told him. “I need you in me.”

“What do you need, exactly?” Domenico asked. There was a glint in his eye that made me want to do whatever he asked.

“I need you to fuck me,” I said. My voice came out more breathless than I’d expected. I shifted my hips, and the head of Domenico’s cock slid against my clit. “I need your cock in me. Please.”

“Fuck,” Domenico hissed. He must not have expected me to go along with his little game so quickly. I could feel him twitch underneath me. He slid a hand between us, and I rose on my knees enough to let him take himself in hand.

I sank onto him in one smooth motion, and it punched a groan out of me. He felt so fucking good inside me, huge and hot and perfect. I stayed like that for a moment, gently rocking my hips with him buried deep in my cunt. Domenico’s hands came up to my waist, and he looked up at me reverently, his eyes half-lidded already. His lips were bitten-red and wet, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward to kiss him, soft and sweet, before I began to ride him properly.



I set a quick, rough pace, bouncing on his cock like I was made for it. He gave as good as he got, snapping his hips to meet me and pulling me down onto his length.

“Touched myself,” I gasped out. “Thinking about you. Thinking about this, you inside me, fuck, fuck, *Dom*, you feel so good, you feel perfect...”

Domenico made a rough, broken noise in the back of his throat and thrust up into me even harder. “Show me,” he said. “Touch yourself for me. Let me see you.”

I groaned, my head tilting back. I dropped a hand between my legs and rubbed my fingers over my clit, sending pleasure zinging through my body. He stared up at me with dark, dazed eyes, looking totally debauched. I began to squeeze around Domenico in time with the motion of my fingers. I only managed a few pulses like that before he snarled and surged forward, pressing me back against the mattress.

With the new angle, Domenico made stars burst behind my eyes with every thrust. It was perfect, deep and hard. I felt claimed and loved in equal amounts. I was making wild, desperate noises, clawing at his back with my free hand.

I could happily have stayed like that forever, but the pleasure was building and building inside me.

“Close,” I gasped. “I’m close, fuck, please...”

Domenico nosed against my neck, then bit down at the curve where it met my shoulder. The pain shot through me, and I was lost in a feedback loop of pleasure/pain/pleasure. I cried out as I came, pulling Domenico tight against me with a leg wrapped around his hips. He fucked me through it, only slowing down when I’d gone boneless and relaxed against the bed.

He eased himself out of me, then began working his cock with rough, practiced strokes. I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him down to kiss me, and as I stroked my tongue along his, I could feel his come spatter against my stomach.

Domenico slumped down next to me, and I curled up on him immediately. If he minded the mess he’d made being pressed against him, he didn’t show it.

“Fuck,” he said, sounding exactly like someone who had just had his brains screwed out.

“Mmhm,” I agreed sleepily.

“I missed you,” he said, running a hand over my back.

“I missed you, too,” I told him. “So goddamn much.”

I buried my face in his neck. The familiar scent of him surrounded me, and his arms were a solid warm weight around me. I was distantly aware that I was the most relaxed I had been in weeks, but I didn’t have time to tell Domenico that before sleep took me.

## Chapter 7

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## *Natasha*

I slept like a log for what felt like days, the deep, dreamless sleep that comes from bone-deep exhaustion. I'd trained constantly for a month and slept like shit without Domenico beside me. Now that he was by my side again, it was like a switch had flipped, and my body had decided to catch up on all my sleep debt at once.

I woke up feeling safe and warm. My face was pressed against Domenico's chest, and he was running a gentle hand through my hair while he read something on his phone. I let out a massive, jaw-cracking yawn, and he looked down at me with affectionate amusement.

"Good morning," I said, trying to blink the sleep out of my eyes.

"Good afternoon," Domenico corrected gently. "It's nearly two o'clock, but I didn't want to wake you. How'd you sleep?"

"Better than I have since I left," I admitted. I stretched, throwing an arm across the firm planes of his chest. "You could've gotten up, you know."

Domenico shrugged. "I wanted to stay with you," he said simply.

"That's sappy as shit," I said fondly, then propped myself up to kiss him. He smiled against my mouth.

"We should get up," he said, a little bit of regret tinging his voice. "Apparently, Sammie's awake, and he says he's only willing to talk to me."

"Huh," I said. "Weird. Any idea why?"

"Possibly because I was the one to heal him," Domenico told me. "Or possibly because I'm my father's son." He sounded as grim as he always did when he mentioned his father.

I kissed him on the cheek before rolling out of bed. I stretched my arms over my head, long and luxurious, and didn't miss the way Domenico

looked at my tits as I arched my back.

"I'm gonna grab a quick shower," I said.

"Do you think you could use a hand with that?" Domenico asked, the picture of innocence.

"I think I probably could," I said seriously.

After a shower that went on slightly longer than planned, full of lazy kisses and gentle touches, we finally managed to get dressed. Other than what I'd arrived in, I hadn't had any of my clothes with me on the private island where Rogelio had been training me. The shirt was bloodstained so badly that no amount of soaking and stain remover could save it, so I'd been stuck with an ugly, oversized t-shirt. There had been two ten-packs of them in the emergency supplies Rogelio had stocked, which I assumed were there in case he needed to provide twenty people with unflattering outfits. My jeans had been salvageable, luckily. Thank god for black denim. If I'd gone with something in a light wash, I might have been stuck with the horrible scrub pants from Rogelio's stash.

I tugged the jeans back on and stole one of Domenico's dress shirts. It was way too big for me, but once I'd rolled the sleeves and tucked the shirt into my skinny jeans, I looked pretty good. Judging by how Domenico's eyes darkened when he saw me, I was confident that he agreed.

"There's gonna be plenty of time for that later," I promised when he reeled me in by the waist and kissed me. It still took a lot of effort to pull away from him. "C'mon. We've got a freaked-out demon kid to talk to."

Downstairs, we bumped into the huge Asian man and the girl with the green hair I'd run past earlier on my way to the conference room.

"We weren't properly introduced earlier," the man said. "My name is Hou Jun. It's a pleasure to have you here, Natasha. Domenico has told me a lot about you." He gave me a firm handshake.

"Thanks for having me," I said. "And, uh, sorry for barging in on you guys yesterday. I was pretty excited to see Domenico again."

Jun waved off my apology with one giant hand. "Don't worry about it. I understand completely."

The woman next to him stepped forward. "Hou Emiko," she said, offering me her hand. Her handshake was even stronger than her father's; I could feel the bones in my hand squeezing together as my polite smile became more of a grimace. "Welcome to Kyoto."

“Thank you,” I said, extracting my hand from hers a little too eagerly. There was a glint in her eye that I knew very well. She was clearly someone who was used to having to prove that she was a force to be reckoned with. We could always recognize our own.

“You’re going to go talk to Sammie?” Jun asked us.

I nodded. “I know he said that he only wants to talk to Domenico, but I figure I can hang out and see if he’s willing to talk to me a little. Worst case, I can take a look at him and start trying to work out how to fix whatever’s going on with him.”

“Good luck,” Emiko said. “I’ll have the kitchen prepare a late lunch for you when you’re done.”

Domenico nodded his thanks and then led me deeper into the house. The door that we stopped outside had a guard in front of it, a bored-looking man with a scar on his chin and the sort of slightly baggy suit that people wore when they were more focused on being able to throw a punch than looking good. He stepped aside to let us in without having to be asked.

The room was comfortable in a sterile, easy-to-clean sort of way. There was a hospital bed against one wall with an array of medical equipment mounted above it, although the monitors were off, and the IV pole had nothing hanging from it. A window was set into one wall, and there was a boy curled up on the wide ledge that made up a window seat. He looked incredibly small and fragile. Someone had brought him a sweatshirt that was way too big for him, and it practically swallowed him up. There was a tall ceramic tumbler on the table next to him, along with a bottle of water that looked untouched.

When Sammie turned to face us, I forced myself not to flinch. He looked horrible, his skin an angry blistered mess that looked painful. He was clutching his knees to his chest with clawed hands that barely peeked out of the sleeves of his sweatshirt, and his teeth were unnaturally sharp. His eyes, though, were wide and brown and very worried. I’d seen demons in their true forms before, of course, but usually when I had just killed them. Seeing such human eyes in a face like that made it more unsettling, somehow. It was uncanny.

I also wasn’t used to seeing demon kids. Back when I’d been hunting, I’d usually found my targets at nightclubs, casinos, the sorts of places where humans might make themselves easy targets. The overlap between places where I could track down targets without drawing too much attention and

places where kids weren't allowed was pretty big. I'd always been sort of grateful for that. When you're preparing to kill someone, it's easier if you don't let yourself think about the possibility of them having a family waiting for them back home.

The kid moved slowly, as if afraid that any wrong move would be mistaken for an attack. His hands were pressed firmly against his knees, like he was trying to stop them from shaking.

"Hi, Sammie," Domenico said. He kept his distance, sitting on the foot of the bed. He rested his elbows on his knees, his shoulders slumped. He was trying to make himself look smaller, I realized. As nonthreatening as possible. I followed his lead but stayed near the door so it wouldn't look like some sort of interrogation. "This is Natasha. She's my wife, and she has magic that might be able to help you out of this situation. Is it alright if she stays in the room while we talk?"

"I guess," Sammie said, uncurling a little. He had a lilting Irish accent, and his voice was very quiet.

"I'd like to know why you asked to see me in particular," Domenico said. He sounded level and calm, and although he was being cautious, he managed not to sound patronizing.

"It's about Lucifer," the kid told us. I saw the line of Domenico's shoulders stiffen a tiny bit, a small enough tell that Sammie didn't pick up on it. "I wanna tell you what I know."

I tried not to look too eager. It wouldn't help to scare the kid off, and we didn't even know if whatever he told us would be true.

"I don't know all that much about his plans," Sammie continued. "But I know he's working on making himself an army. He's finding people who are down on their luck, I guess. Poorer families. People who've lost someone. A lot of the ones I met were...angry."

He paused and took a sip of water. I'd been right earlier. There was a tremor in his hands that made the water slosh in his bottle. He set it back down before he kept going.

"Lucifer said that he would make us all stronger. He said that we'd be powerful enough to take whatever we wanted. I thought...I thought that I might be able to get myself a real place instead of sleeping rough. He never said anything about turning us into these things.

"He gathered a bunch of us in a field and cast some sort of spell on all of us. It hurt. It hurt so bad. After that, all of us started to...change. We

started to look like this. The others, they all..." He trailed off, turning to look out of the window. It had a view of one of the gardens surrounding the estate, and there was a bird feeder right by the window. Small brown birds were busily investigating it. He watched them for a while.

"What happened to the others who were with you?" I asked.

Sammie started a little, like he'd forgotten we were in the room with him. "Their minds started to go. Slowly at first, but it got faster and faster. I could feel it, too, but I managed to hold on for a bit longer. I pretended I'd lost my mind, too, but after a while, I couldn't tell how much was me faking it and how much was real. Soon, all I could think about was how much I hated you." He pointed at Domenico. "I didn't even really know who you were, but I hated you."

"And then he set you loose?" Domenico asked.

"Some of us. A couple of us were sent to get you," he said, pointing at me. "And some of us, like me and Taavo, were sent out to try to take souls. He said it was the only way for us to get stronger, and it wasn't like we could do anything else."

"Taavo was the other boy who was with you?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sammie said. "He was a little older than me. We were bunking together, so we talked a lot before the spell happened. He was nice, I guess. Didn't speak much English. Is he...?"

"He's doing as well as can be expected," Domenico told him. "We moved him somewhere safe, where people can help him."

I was clenching my fists so hard that my nails were biting into my palms, but I kept them behind my back so I wouldn't freak Sammie out. He was so young, so goddamn young. Just when I thought I couldn't hate Lucifer more than I already did, he hit a new low.

"Good," Sammie said, letting out a relieved breath. "He has a kid sister he was trying to look out for. I don't know if there's any way to let her know what's going on."

"I can have my people look for her," Domenico offered. "They're good at what they do. If anyone can get in touch with her, it'll be them."

Sammie looked at him with wide eyes, as if that was way more than he'd expected. "T-thanks," he stuttered. "He was from a town called, um...a town called Püssi."

I did a frankly incredible job of not laughing. Whatever happened, I wasn't going to laugh in this traumatized child's face, no matter how



embarrassed he sounded when he said a word that sounded like “pussy.”

“I’ll send out a team to try to find her,” Domenico promised, quiet and serious. “They’ll make sure that she’s safe and cared for.”

“I can...I can tell you some more,” Sammie said. It was pretty clear that the offer of help had made him open up a little, and he started talking with way fewer pauses. “He sent a bunch of us to go guard the gates of Hell. I’m pretty sure that he’s going to try to get his old body back, but he can’t figure out how to make his spell book work. He wants Gabriel’s heir or whatever to help him.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

Sammie shrugged a little, looking quietly proud of himself. “People don’t watch what they say when they think you’ve gone full murder zombie,” he said. “I eavesdropped a lot.”

“That’s all you know about his plan?” Domenico said.

Sammie seemed to wilt at the question. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“No, you have nothing to be sorry for,” Domenico replied quickly, obviously noticing Sammie’s reaction, too. “That was more than I was expecting. You’ve done very well, Sammie. My father tends to keep his cards close to his chest.”

The kid bit his lip, glancing back and forth between us. “There is one other thing,” he said finally. “He said he was going to cast another spell on all of us. One to make us way more powerful. I wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth about it or not.”

“Oh, we’re pretty sure that he was telling the truth,” I said. “Just not the whole truth. When we looked through the spell book, we found a couple things that he could use together. If he wanted to, he could bring you guys back to your full power and then suck all that magic out of you and into himself.”

“Shit,” Sammie said. His hands started shaking again. He reached for the water bottle again and downed the rest of it in a few quick gulps. Outside, two birds were having a spat about who got to eat at the feeder. “You really think that’s what he was planning? I knew I shouldn’t have trusted him! Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he muttered to himself.

I didn’t point out that he probably should have known it was a bad idea to listen to somebody who was literally called the prince of lies. But Sammie was just a kid. Everybody did stupid shit when they were sixteen, even if it wasn’t usually shit that stupid.

“Did he ever mention anything about a way to turn you back to your usual form?” Domenico asked gently. “Anything at all? Even the smallest detail might help us figure out how to change you back.”

“I don’t think so,” Sammie said, twisting his hands together in his lap. “Believe me, I listened for that pretty hard. Do you think...do you think that I’m gonna be stuck like this?”

“We don’t know,” I said, trying to make my voice soothing. Bedside manner wasn’t exactly my strongest area, but I didn’t want to freak the kid out. “But I’m going to try to fix it. It might not be quick, but I can promise you that I’ll keep trying to find a way.”

Sammie’s eyes were a warm golden-brown in the light from the window. They looked very human and very, very young. “Thank you. I... thank you.”

Lunch was quiet and a little weird. Everybody else had already eaten, but Liz decided to sit with Domenico and me and sip a cup of tea while keeping us company.

“It sounds to me like the majority of our attention should be divided between two tasks,” she said as I dug into my second bowl of noodles. “We need to keep you safe, Natasha, and we need to round up as many members of Lucifer’s army as we can. Not just so that we can diminish his forces, but so that we can try to help them.” She took a delicate sip of her tea.

“I agree,” Domenico said. “But I’m sure that you can guess where my priorities lie.”

Liz inclined her head gracefully. “I understand,” she said. “The third thing that we should focus on, of course, is trying to channel Natasha’s magic to help the corrupted demons.”

“I don’t know how much I can do without the spell book,” I said, wiping sauce from my mouth with a napkin so white that I felt a little guilty about using it. “I mean, I know how to make a shield, and I remember a couple of the little spells that I did in London, but I don’t think any of that will be useful for this. The spell that creates a temporary fart smell probably isn’t going to do us a ton of good.”

“Then perhaps we should try our hands at coming up with some new spells,” Liz suggested.

“Wouldn’t that be dangerous?” Domenico asked. “Especially with magic as powerful as yours, Natasha. If something goes wrong, it has the potential to be catastrophic.”

“It may be risky,” Liz admitted. “But this is a risky time.”

“Rogelio told me that spells are pretty complicated to come up with,” I said. “Like, there are all sorts of internal rules. It’s not just making a sentence; there’s grammar and calculations and shit.”

“Complicated, but not impossible,” Liz said.

“Not impossible, but also not quick,” I countered.

The image of the poor scared kid watching the birds flashed through my mind, and I sighed. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t give this my absolute best shot.

“I still think we should try,” I said finally. “We have to figure out a way to help them.”

## Chapter 8

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## *Natasha*

Now that I'd decided that I wanted to try my hand at making my own spells, it seemed like the next step was to call in some better-qualified reinforcements.

Rogelio, Cristiano, Domenico, and Liz gathered in the meeting room with me. One of the panels on the wall had been slid aside, revealing a floor-to-ceiling glass whiteboard. I wasn't sure what the point was of having a whiteboard with parts you couldn't reach, but I had to admit it looked very sleek.

We unanimously picked Cristiano to write things down. Weirdly, he had the best handwriting, a tidy, round script. It was the type of writing that I'd only ever seen in Instagram posts with pictures of bullet journals. In the handwriting power rankings, Liz was the runner-up with a copperplate hand so fancy that it was pretty much unreadable, and the rest of us had varying degrees of chicken scratch, ranging from "doctor trying his best" (Domenico) to "genuinely not recognizable as words" (Rogelio).

I'd written out the few spells that I could more or less remember. Cristiano had stared at my writing with a look of politely blank horror and then carefully rewritten them into something legible. They were in a tidy list on the left side of the board, but that list was depressingly short.

"Okay," he said, "So, right now we have four spells. In descending order of usefulness, a fireball one," he tapped the board next to the spell, then moved on to the next entry on the list, "a light spell, a spell that makes...bad smells, I guess? And one that makes birdsong."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Not a ton to go off of," I admitted. "Sorry, guys. I don't think we can save demonkind with a stink spell."

“Don’t apologize,” Liz said. “You didn’t get to spend much time with the book, after all. It’s perfectly reasonable that you didn’t memorize much.”

“Besides, this isn’t about the uses of the spells you already know,” Rogelio said. “This is about studying what we can get our hands on to figure out the proper construction of new spells. Anything you remember could be useful. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

I shot him a grateful glance, although it probably wound up looking like more of a grimace.

“Do you think we have enough to go off?” I asked, swiveling my chair around a little bit. “It’s not much to reverse-engineer.”

Rogelio blew out a sigh through his nose, staring at the whiteboard and drumming his fingers on the conference table. “I’m not sure,” he said finally. “But it’s better than nothing.”

From there, things turned into a mess of sentence diagramming and conjugation charts. Or maybe they were declension charts? I could never remember which was which. My eyes glazed over pretty quickly; the week or so of tutoring that I’d gotten in the demonic language wasn’t enough to prepare me for anything this intensive and complicated. Every time the others put a new attempt at a spell up on the board, I tried to cast it, but they all fizzled out without doing anything. I couldn’t feel even the tiniest hint of the rush that magic gave me. There was just nothing for my power to latch onto in anything we came up with.

After a few hours, everyone around the table looked tired and frustrated. Cristiano was massaging his writing hand, and Rogelio was rubbing his temples absently, like he could feel a headache coming on.

“I think it’s well past time for all of us to take a break,” I said. “We can sleep on this, alright? Maybe we’ll have more ideas once we get some rest.”

“Good idea,” Domenico said, turning to me. “I think we could all use a breather.”

Across the table, Rogelio sighed. “For the record, I don’t think that this is what we should be devoting our attention to. Coming up with new spells from whole cloth is going to be time-consuming, frustrating, and draining. Some of us haven’t so much as thought about Adamic in decades, and this is something that would be difficult for a professional linguist. We should be focusing on strategy and preparations for the war.”

“I don’t care if it’s hard,” I told him firmly. “I promised that kid that I would do whatever I could to help him.”

“But—”

“But nothing. I made a promise to him, Rogelio.” I stared him down. “I think you of all people should understand why I want to help a scared, abandoned kid.”

He made a face like he’d bitten into a lemon but didn’t try to talk me out of it.

“I’m gonna stretch my legs for a bit,” I said, ducking down to give Domenico a quick kiss. “I’ll be in the garden if you need me.”

Jun’s garden was a huge, sprawling thing in a walled-in space behind the main house. The paths were full of twists and turns, leading anyone in them to fancy little scenes and carefully curated views.

I settled onto a bench next to a massive, pitted rock surrounded by willows and tall, gnarled pine trees. There was a pond, too, and every now and then, I could see flashes of gold as the koi swam beneath the blooming lotuses. I closed my eyes and tilted my head to enjoy the warmth of the sun on my face. I tried to breathe the way that Rogelio had taught me during our meditation lessons. But the stress that was making my shoulders tense and my jaw clench didn’t seem to care about my 5-5-5 breathing technique.

I heard the quiet sound of footsteps on the stone path and opened my eyes. Emiko was standing there with a small tray held in her hands. Her green hair blended into the trees behind her, and with the sun behind her, she looked fey and ethereal. At least, she would have if she weren’t in plaid pants and a crop top. It was hard to imagine some sort of nature spirit wearing patent-leather platform creepers.

“Hey,” I said, lifting a hand in a lazy wave.

“Hello,” she replied. “Domenico said that you seemed tense, so I thought I would bring you some tea.”

“Oh,” I said, blinking up at her. “Thanks. That’s really thoughtful of you.”

She shrugged. “I enjoy being hospitable.”

I patted the bench next to me. “Wanna sit?”

Emiko set the tea tray next to me, then sat on the other side of it. She filled two tea bowls from the squat green teapot that took up most of the tray and handed me one. I cupped it in my hands and hummed appreciatively.

“How are you managing?” she asked me, gazing at the pond.

I gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I mean, I’ve been better. I kinda feel like I’m not doing this right. Maybe I just bit off more than I could chew. I just wanted to be able to help that kid. It’s...I don’t know, maybe it’s stupid, but there’s so much shit going on that I can’t help with. I just wanted to be able to fix this one simple little thing and help someone.”

“It’s not stupid,” Emiko said. “Well...no offense, but it might be a little bit stupid to think of undoing Lucifer’s magic as a simple thing.”

I snorted. “Yeah, okay, you might have a point,” I admitted.

“And you are helping. You’re the one who’s going to win this war,” she said with such absolute confidence that I didn’t even think about not believing her.

“You’re really good at pep talks,” I told her.

She smiled a little. “Decades of practice.”

“God, that’s so weird,” I said. “I mean, you look like you’re my age, but you’re actually, what...?”

Emiko squinted for a second. “A hundred and twenty-five? No, a hundred and twenty-six.”

I let out a low whistle. “I bet you looked cool as fuck in the seventies.”

She laughed. “Oh, I’ve always looked cool as fuck. But glam rock was a revelation.”

We talked and drank our tea for what felt like barely any time, but by the time the pot was empty, the shadows were starting to get long. Sometime between Emiko telling me about her time performing Faust with the Takarazuka Revue and me telling her about the time one of my hunts was interrupted by a raccoon charging out of a nearby dumpster, I realized that maybe, possibly, we were starting to become friends.

I’d never had a lot of friends. Between the secret demon hunting and the constant moving, not to mention my baggage around trusting people, I had never had the knack for making friends. Even Manning and Zander were Domenico’s friends before they were mine. I liked them, and they liked me, but I was also very aware that even if they hadn’t liked me, they’d have to humor their boss’s wife. Liz seemed nice, but she was also kind of terrifying and made me feel broke and rude. Emiko, though? Emiko seemed like someone I could talk shit with.

“And then he told me that my tattoos were unladylike,” Emiko was saying. “And that I should try American men because they were more



masculine.”

“Ohhh my god,” I said. “What did you do?”

“I broke his jaw,” she said happily. “And then I got more tattoos.”

“Good for you,” I said approvingly. “They look really fucking awesome, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Emiko said. “I could give you my current artist’s number if you’d like.”

“Oh, uh, I’m good,” I told her. “Don’t laugh, but I have a thing about needles, so…”

“Why would I laugh?”

“Well, I’ve got this whole leather-jacket-and-super-cool-knife thing going on. Plus, I’ve been stabbed, like, a lot. It seems dumb to be scared of needles after that.”

Emiko shook her head. “Sometimes the little things are the scariest.”

“Yeah. If I had to pick right now, I’d prefer a one-on-one fight with Lucifer to giving blood.”

She laughed at that and launched into a story about the time she’d gotten lost in the catacombs on a trip to Paris.

“Hey,” I said when there was a break in the conversation, “thanks for hanging out. I think I needed this.”

She gave me a dimpled smile. “It was my pleasure. I’m just happy to have someone around who appreciates my tea. My father is obsessed with these little packets of instant cocoa. He doesn’t even appreciate a good Da Hong Pao; he only keeps it in the house to impress guests.”

I shook my head gravely, pretending I knew what she was talking about. Luckily, I was saved from a pop quiz about tea by the buzzing of Emiko’s phone. She pulled it out of her pocket, and when she checked the screen, her face went grim.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re needed back at the house.”

I was extra glad she was with me now; following the path all the way back to the entrance of the garden would have taken me at least fifteen minutes. Emiko led me between two tall bushes, and we were right by the big round gate that led back into the house.

Inside, Thema was pacing around the sitting room. Gloria was watching her, her jaw clenched and her hands balled into fists. Domenico and Jun were on one of the sofas, talking to each other in an undertone while Anahera stared intently at her phone in the chair next to them, her lips

pressed into a flat, worried line. Rogelio was leaning casually against one wall, staring out the window.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“They’re attacking,” Thema said.

“What? Attacking where?” I said.

“Attacking everywhere,” Gloria said. “Cities all over the world. All of our home bases.”

“Shit,” I hissed out through my teeth. “Shit.”

“Indeed,” Jun said. “I think we should go talk to Sammie.”

“Oh, is it time to interrogate the prisoner?” Rogelio asked snidely.

Jun gave him a polite, genteel smile that made it clear that he would love to break Rogelio’s nose. “It’s time to talk to my guest,” he said firmly.

When we got to the infirmary/makeshift prison, Sammie was curled up on the bed on top of the covers. He was staring blankly at the door and barely reacted when we came in.

“He’s found me,” he said. His voice was hoarse, like he’d been screaming. “He’s found me, and he won’t stop talking to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Jun said. “Who’s talking to you, Sammie?”

“Lucifer,” Sammie said. “He’s...he’s in here, and he won’t stop...” He raised a shaking finger to his temple. “And it’s...I don’t know if it’s real or if I’m just—”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said. I had no fucking clue how we’d manage, but I wanted to try. “But right now, I need you to tell us if you told him anything about us.”

Sammie shook his head slowly. “No. I wouldn’t do that. Not...not now that I know what he was really planning. Not since he turned me into that thing.” I could feel enough of Domenico’s power in the room that I could tell Sammie wouldn’t be able to lie. It wouldn’t take much to make him tell the truth, given how weak he still was.

“You expect us to believe that the attacks happening as soon as you saw all of us was a coincidence?” Gloria asked levelly.

“Uh, yes?” Sammie said. “Um. No offense, but I don’t know who most of you guys...actually are? So, it would be sort of hard to tell anyone about you. Besides, he was going to send us to attack all over the place. He didn’t tell us when it would happen, though.”

A little bit of the tension went out of the room. None of us had wanted Sammie to be involved in the attacks. I wasn't sure what we would've done if he had been, and I didn't really want to think too hard about it.

"There's going to be more," he added. "More attacks. A lot more. He wants to overwhelm the humans. And to scare the shit out of them, too. He said that once more demons saw that they could go back to their true way of life or whatever, they'd decide to follow him."

"Thank you for telling us, Sammie," Domenico said. "Can you let the doctor know if Lucifer says anything that might be important? Anything at all."

Sammie nodded. "Can you ask him to give me something to help me sleep?" he asked quietly.

"Of course," Domenico said. "We'll let you rest now."

As soon as we were out of earshot of the room, the kings were all on their phones, each one giving their orders in a different language. None of them were being quiet, and soon the noise was overwhelming, just a tangle of words I couldn't understand.

My head was pounding. I couldn't stop thinking about how resigned Sammie had looked. How small he'd been, curled up on that sterile, unwelcoming bed. I wanted to help. No, I needed to help. I needed to find a way of keeping Lucifer from corrupting anyone else.

Gloria said something I couldn't follow in Spanish, and Rogelio replied, scowling and waving a hand dismissively. Thema said something sharp to him, also in Spanish, clenching her hands into fists. Soon, all the kings were arguing, going from language to language without warning. Liz was yelling in German, and Anahera was yelling back in Mandarin, saying something filthy enough to make Jun blush.

I closed my eyes, trying to drown out the cacophony. I just wanted to help, I thought. I just wanted to help. I just wanted to...

Suddenly, words came to me. It didn't feel like they were coming out of nowhere; it felt like I was suddenly aware of something I had always known deep down. Immediately and with complete certainty, I knew that it was a spell.

"*Da mihi dilizanz animarum,*" I said. I spoke quietly, but it seemed loud as a gunshot, completely cutting through the noise of the argument behind me. I closed my eyes and felt the rush of magic running through me. It was

warm and tingling. It collected in my chest, then, quick as lightning, shot down into my right hand.

When I opened my eyes, there was a cylinder resting in my palm. It looked like carved ivory, wrapped in bands of gold with geometric patterns etched into them. The patterns made me a little dizzy if I tried to follow them. The cylinder was solid and slightly warm in my hand. It fit in my grip perfectly. I turned it, wrapping my hand around it more solidly. There were worn grooves, as if it had been carved into a handhold for me specifically.

I rubbed my thumb against the gold band just above the grip. It moved very slightly. I frowned and pressed down on it, then yelped as both ends of the cylinder slammed outward. It was a spear, as long as I was tall. The whole thing was covered in elaborate carvings, and it felt...

It felt familiar. It felt like my knife. Gabriel's knife.

I finally realized that everyone was staring at me. I pressed the button on the spear, and it retracted again, the ends disappearing into the handle.

"Huh," I said. It didn't seem to quite cover the gravity of the situation, so I tried again. "Cool."

## Chapter 9

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## *Domenico*

The new spell that had pushed itself out of Natasha's mouth went up on the whiteboard in Liz's elegant, looping handwriting. The more academically inclined demons among us descended on it like a pack of piranhas.

"I'm fairly sure that this part says blade," Liz offered, furrowing her brow. Because she was physically incapable of holding herself back from being dramatic, she'd put on one of her many pairs of non-prescription glasses. She was peering at the board over the top of the jade-green tortoiseshell-patterned frames.

"No, no, that's just the root word. See, the suffix is completely different. So it's...I think it means spear," Cristiano said, frowning at the board. "I mean, that bit seems pretty safe to assume," he added, flapping a hand at Natasha, who was watching this curiously, spear in hand.

"And this bit?" Liz gestured at one of the words, a dry-erase marker held elegantly in her hand.

"It says soul," Anahera said. "Or souls, maybe. In the older form, I'm pretty sure that it's plural, and if it's the classic angelic dialect, then it seems like a safe bet that it'll be the older grammar structure."

"So this is—"

"Does that mean...?"

"It couldn't be."

"Stranger things have happened," Rogelio said. He was leaning forward in his chair with his elbows on his knees, frowning at the board. He hadn't deigned to offer anything to the discussion, but I could practically hear him trying to translate it in his head.

Natasha was sitting on top of the meeting table, kicking her feet back and forth and turning the spear over and over in her hands. Occasionally, she pressed the mechanism that extended and collapsed it, which made Jun's eyes flick from the tip of the spear to his ceiling, as though he was worried that she would accidentally poke holes in it. "If anybody wanted to fill me in on what's going on, that'd be great," she said, watching the group gathered around the whiteboard.

"So sorry, darling, that was terribly rude of us," Liz said, turning to her with an apologetic smile. "It's just...well, we can't be sure, of course, but it seems like—"

"It's the Soul Spear," Rogelio cut in.

I froze. "You really think so?" I asked, leaning forward. My hands were pressed onto the glossy surface of the table so hard, they were going white. If Rogelio was right, and it really was the Soul Spear...

"Like Lizbeth said, we can't be completely sure," Rogelio said. "Well, not without testing it, anyway, and I'm guessing none of us are exactly keen to be the guinea pig for that little experiment. But it matches the description I heard, and the text of the spell seems to line up with it, too."

"What's the Soul Spear?" Natasha asked, cocking her head to the side.

"A very powerful weapon that was used in the war between Heaven and Hell," Emiko said. Her forehead crinkled as she thought, and she drummed her fingers against the table in a quick staccato rhythm. "I think I might have..." She trailed off, then turned to her sleek little laptop and began typing furiously.

"Here," she said, turning the laptop to face us so we could see the screen. Displayed on it was a high-quality photo of a scroll covered with tight, cramped symbols. The material it was made of had gone splotchy brown with age, and the bottom of the scroll was gone completely, burned away into blackened tatters. In the middle of the fabric, however, was a perfectly preserved drawing. It was a detailed ink sketch of a spear with a wavy blade, the shaft wrapped with bands of patterned metal. There was no mistaking it. It was the exact same spear that Natasha was holding in her hands.

"This is a scroll written by the first king of Asia," Emiko said. "After he was cast to Earth, he named himself Jae-Seong. He was one of Lucifer's generals in the war, an incredible warrior according to his peers, but his real passion was for research. He made it his mission to record everything that

he could remember about the war, no matter how small. He gathered all sorts of eyewitness accounts, with a particular focus on the weapons used by the angels. Jae-Seong wanted to be as prepared as he possibly could in case there was another war. Everyone deals with trauma differently, I guess.” She shrugged. “Anyway, this is a report he got from one of his soldiers. She said the spear was ivory and gold and four cubits tall, with the shape of a hoko yari. According to her, it was used by the Archangel Gabriel to pull the souls from the demons he faced in battle.”

“You found that really quickly,” Natasha said, sounding impressed.

Emiko shrugged again. “I digitized our archives last year. I told you it would come in handy,” she said to Jun, giving him a pointed look.

He raised his hands in a gesture halfway between a shrug and a surrender. “As always, I must bow to your superior wisdom, *lǎobǎn*.”

Emiko accepted his defeat with a gracious nod. When she turned back to the computer, he smiled and rolled his eyes very slightly. He looked so softly fond that I felt a prickle of guilt at seeing the moment.

“Nobody’s managed to get a glimpse of the Soul Spear for millennia,” Liz said. “Not since the war. I always assumed that it was in some vault in Heaven, gathering celestial dust.”

“Maybe it was,” I said.

Natasha twisted around to stare at me, her eyes wide. “You think I called this thing to me all the way from...?” She pointed a finger upward, looking a little dazed.

I shrugged. If anyone could do it, it would be Natasha, not just because of her innate magical ability but because of her seemingly limitless reserves of sheer stubbornness. “We have no way of knowing for sure. Right now, I’m less concerned about where it came from than how it got here. You said the spell just popped into your head?”

“Yeah,” she said. “But not really? It was like it had always been there, but it was hidden. I don’t know if that makes any sense, but that’s what it felt like. Halfway between *déjà vu* and seeing something that makes you realize you had a dream that you’d completely forgotten about by the time you woke up. And then...I was kind of freaking out about the war and not being able to help Sammie like I promised, and the next thing I knew, I had this.” She wiggled the spear a little. It made a quiet, rough sound when the blade cut through the air, like someone was tearing silk in the next room.



“Maybe some element of your magic reacted to your emotional state,” Liz said thoughtfully, watching the flame-shaped blade of the spear catch the artificial light of the meeting room as Natasha fidgeted with it. “Perhaps there’s something in your angelic blood that gives you a natural path to channel your power when you need it most.”

“That would explain why the angels we faced off against in the war rarely seemed to use the same spell twice,” Jun said. “There was some amount of repetition, sure, but the sheer variety was impossible to prepare our forces to counter. It always seemed like they had so many options at their disposal that there was no way for us to keep track of them.”

“Maybe the spell book was less of an instruction guide and more of a journal. Lab notes, essentially,” I put in.

“Without being able to examine the book again, it’s impossible to say for sure, I’m afraid,” Liz said. “But it’s beginning to seem like a very real possibility.”

“Guys,” Natasha said. “Guys, I think you’re missing the most important part of this.” She retracted the spear and extended it again for emphasis. “If I can get close enough to Lucifer to use this, then we won’t even have to try to open the Gates of Hell. We could end this thing. One quick stab, and he’s done for.”

My stomach turned at the idea of Natasha getting close enough to my father to spear him, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to dissuade her. Her place was in this fight, and my place was by her side. Besides, if the spear was Gabriel’s, it stood to reason that only Gabriel’s flesh and blood could use it. Like his magic, it would answer only to his heir. There was no one who could do this except for Natasha.

“What do you think it would do if I used it on one of the corrupted demons?” she asked. “God, we need to figure out something catchier to call them. The...husks?”

“Well,” Anahera said slowly, “there’s one way to find out.”

“No,” Thema said immediately. “Absolutely not. What if it kills them?”

Anahera looked like she wanted to argue, but a quelling glance from Gloria had her twisting her mouth shut.

“I’ve been thinking about the husk problem, and there may be something we can try,” Gloria said calmly. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but personally, I’m not willing to fight brainwashed children. The other day, I was talking to the doctor who’s been working with Sammie, and

he said that the boy seems to react more strongly than expected to the medicinal plants that usually have a mild effect on demons. Something about the spell Lucifer used must have made him more vulnerable to them. The doc said they had a strong soporific effect. Maybe if we go over his notes, we could make up a solution that would work as a tranquilizer.”

“Even if we could, we would have to figure out what to do with them afterward,” Jun said.

“Afterward, when we’ll have the luxury of time and resources,” Gloria replied. “It’s worth a try. And it definitely beats the alternative.”

Anahera opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Gloria raised a hand to stop her. “I’m a parent,” she said. “So are most of you. Lizbeth, your youngest just started university, didn’t they? And Jun, you have your Emiko. Thema, you told me this morning that your little one has just started walking. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I want to be able to look my boys in the eye when I get home, and I won’t be able to do that with the blood of children their age on my hands, husk or no.” She glared around the table, as if daring anyone to disagree with her.

“What I was going to say,” Anahera said dryly, “was that I think you’re right.”

“Oh,” Gloria said, sounding very slightly sheepish. “Well. Good.” She sniffed and straightened her shirt.

“I agree,” Jun said. “We can’t stoop to Lucifer’s level, so we’ll have to innovate. I’d like to volunteer some of my scientists for the research and development.”

“As would I,” Liz said. “I know a few alchemists-turned-pharmaceutical chemists who would be eager to help.”

“We’ll need them to work as fast as possible,” Gloria said. “Tell them that energy drinks are on me. The best-case scenario, as far as I can see, is that we manage to roll out something usable before these kids figure out what they’re doing. Right now, they’re sloppy and untrained, but it’s only a matter of time before they begin to adapt.”

“Now that we seem to be on the same page,” Thema said, “I believe it’s time for me to return to where I’m needed the most. I have more territory to cover than almost all of you, and there’s only so much that can be delegated remotely.”

I nodded. “Of course,” I said. “And your people need to be able to look to you, now more than ever. We’ll keep you up to date, of course. If we

make any progress on the sedative or on healing the husks, you'll be the first to know."

Later, after we had seen Thema off and consumed copious amounts of gyudon and tea, we reconvened in Jun's study. Emiko wheeled in a smart board and brought up a world map on it. The blue-green glow it cast over the darkened room made us look slightly ghoulish, at least until she clicked on the desk lamp. All of us, armed with laptops and phones, began to look for anything we could find about the husk attacks.

It was slow-going. There was no way to look up "demon attack" without finding a lot of very strange forum posts, and almost all of them were useless. "Creature attack" seemed to turn up an equal mix of weirdos and people being bitten by raccoons. "Demonic cult" brought up a lot of Facebook pages, along with a smattering of articles.

Eventually, Cristiano struck gold—a thread on a Reddit group for humanoid encounters. There, people commented on all sorts of local news stories about twisted, dark-eyed creatures attacking people. A few even claimed to have been attacked themselves, although it was rare that they offered any evidence.

"The news seems to think they're just people in masks or something," Cristiano said. "But these guys think it's aliens. Or some sort of, uh..." He checked his screen. "Goblins? Okay, why not. Goblins, I guess."

Emiko nodded distractedly, pushing her hair out of her face. "Young people are very into goblins right now," she said confidently. Cristiano stared at her as if she'd hung the moon.

With the help of a surprising number of very odd people on the internet, we eventually wound up with 57 red dots on the map, with one dot for each confirmed attack, and another four dozen yellow dots that represented unverified claims.

"I'm sure that there are many more," Emiko said. "Most of the news coverage is focusing on large urban areas. We have very little reliable information available on rural communities that might be dealing with the same thing."

"Some reporters are already starting to connect the dots," Manning said. Out of all of us, he was the one who subscribed to the most news sites, so he'd been running point on checking the bigger papers. "A few are calling it a cult. Some of them are blaming the internet, but that seems pretty standard."

“At least half of Twitter thinks that it’s a false flag attack, for some reason,” Zander said. “The who and why seems to change a lot from person to person. This guy thinks it’s the Soviets.” He showed us a profile picture of a remarkably ruddy man with wraparound sunglasses and a bushy beard, sitting in the driver’s seat of a truck. “But he also spent multiple tweets bragging about paying thirty bucks for a mug that says ‘conspiracy realist,’ so I feel like we should take that one with a grain of salt. And this guy says it’s all fake and supposed to be viral marketing for a horror movie.”

“I think it might be time for you to close Twitter,” Manning said gently but firmly. It sounded like he’d had to say those exact words plenty of times before.

I snorted. “The humans will believe what they want to believe for as long as possible. They always do. They don’t want to think about the other possibilities. It’s much easier to stay comfortable and not question things too much. To them, the only things that are demonic are Dungeons and Dragons and a few pop stars. Preconceived notions can be very useful if you know how to manipulate them.”

“The Dungeons and Dragons thing was a while ago, babe,” Natasha said, turning her face toward me without pulling her eyes away from the screen. “I’m pretty sure that these days, the people who were upset about that have moved on to being super-antisemitic shitheads.”

“Fair. For the record, those weren’t the notions I was planning on manipulating,” I said. Natasha shot me a thumbs-up.

“I think they prefer the term ‘conspiracy realists,’” Zander told her in a stage whisper. “It’s much easier to fit on bumper stickers.”

Natasha snorted. Zander grinned at her, then pointedly closed the tab he’d been browsing, angling the screen toward Manning as if to show off that he was, in fact, capable of closing Twitter.

I stared at the map. The dots seemed to stare back at me. It wasn’t reassuring.

“Still, even with public opinion far away from the truth, we should try to reduce the damage wherever possible,” I said. “I’m going to send my people to the areas in my territory where attacks have happened. I plan to tell them to stop the husks nonviolently whenever possible and to avoid blows to the heart at all costs. I want all of you to do the same. Gloria’s right—a drug would be incredibly helpful, but we can’t wait until it’s

finished before we try to deal with this. So for now, we're on the defensive. Tell your people to use non-lethal force only."

"Might be a hard sell," Manning said. "They could wind up feeling like the higher-ups are holding them back for no reason."

"Then we tell them the truth," I said sharply. "We tell them that Lucifer is using children to fight his war, and we make it clear that we won't sink to his level."

Natasha looked up at me with pride in her eyes. "They'll listen," she said. "Or I'll kick their asses."

I took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Either way, this is going to get messy. Are you ready for that?"

"I was born ready," Natasha said immediately, then paused. "Well, okay, I should probably learn how to use a spear first. But then I'll be ready."

## Chapter 10

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## *Natasha*

There was a compact, tidy dojo in one wing of Hou Jun's estate. One wall was lined with mirrors, and the wall opposite was made up of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out into the garden, making the room seem way bigger than it was. The reflection of the garden made the whole space brilliantly green and somehow made it feel like a secret, as though we were tucked away under a protective canopy of leaves.

The floor was covered with springy mats, each one slightly ridged. At first, I thought they were woven rush tatami mats, the kind I'd seen in a few other rooms around the place. But when I looked closer, I realized that they were rubber designed to look like the real deal.

Emiko caught me inspecting them and shrugged. "The fake mats are much easier to clean. You can just blast the blood and sweat off with a hose."

"Blood?" I asked. "Isn't sparring supposed to be, you know, just for training?"

"Knowing how to take a blow properly is a valuable skill," she told me. "And one that should be learned before you get into a proper fight. Besides, everyone who uses this dojo is a demon. We heal fast."

"Makes sense. This place is mostly used by your dad, right?"

Emiko grinned. "Oh, no," she said happily. "This place is mostly used by me."

I grinned back at her. "Hell, yeah," I said approvingly.

Emiko disappeared into a back room and came back a few minutes later. She'd changed into leggings and a sports bra patterned with twisting

snakes. They were in the same shades of blue-black and red as the snake tattoo that curled around her bicep. It was, I had to admit, a hell of a look.

I'd already changed into the workout gear from the large box of clothes that had shown up in my room, so I shrugged off the shirt I'd thrown on over the top and twisted my hair into a bun. My sports bra and leggings weren't nearly as cool as Emiko's, so I would just have to compensate by being a very cool person.

I kicked off my slippers and tested the give of the floor under my feet. It had enough bounce to cushion a fall but not so much that I'd have to change up my style to compensate.

Emiko slid back one of the shoji screens. Hidden behind it was a dizzying range of weapons—swords, staffs, knives of all shapes and sizes, axes, maces, and something that looked like a sickle. Some of them were made of gleaming metal, but each real piece had a practice weapon to match, made of wood or dense-looking black plastic.

My host considered the selection for a moment, fingers trailing over a few options before she grabbed one and turned to me.

I looked down at the weapon in Emiko's hand. It was a long shaft of pale wood with a black rubber spearhead at the top and a ball the size of my thumbnail at the very tip. She held it very confidently, which I noticed with a flutter of nerves.

"Just one dummy spear?" I asked. "Don't I need one, too?"

"You already have a spear," Emiko pointed out patiently.

I ran my fingers over the cylinder in my hand, then pressed the button to extend it.

"Yeah, but it's...I mean, it's pretty sharp," I said. I'd tested the edge with my thumb earlier and now had a bright purple Band-Aid wrapped around the cut. "Aren't you worried that I'll hurt you?"

Emiko let out a tinkling laugh. "Oh," she said, looking a little embarrassed when I didn't join in. "You were serious."

"I'm pretty lethal," I told her. It came out sounding a little more petulant than I would have liked.

"With a knife," she said. "The spear is a very different weapon. The knife is an extension of your arm; the spear is deceptively simple, but it can do many more things than your blade. It's not just an offensive weapon but a defensive one as well. You will take time to adjust to it, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. You're learning, and being clumsy and unpracticed is an



important part of learning. Besides, I'm not going to let you jump right into sparring without teaching you the basics, and it would be best for you to learn those with the weapon you're actually going to use."

"That...does make a lot of sense," I admitted, my righteous indignation rushing out of me like the air from a balloon, although luckily without the goofy noise.

Emiko took a stance on the mat, spear in hand, and I stood by her side and copied her pose. We ran through kata after kata, going for what must have been hours. It wasn't the most exciting way I'd ever spent a morning, but as Emiko had explained with seemingly limitless patience, the basics could be the things that kept me alive in a fight.

She'd been completely right about the differences in weaponry, too. I was quick—very quick—with my knife, but getting six feet of weapon where I needed it to be as fast as possible was a whole other skill. Getting a grasp on using the leverage to my advantage was tricky, and it was something that I knew I couldn't commit to muscle memory in a day.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity of sore muscles and politely corrected stances, Emiko gave me an approving nod.

"I think you're ready," she told me. "Now we can spar."

"Really?" I perked up.

"Really," she confirmed.

We squared off on the mat. Emiko gave me a regal nod, looking every inch the poised and respectful demon princess.

Then she proceeded to hand me my ass. She was a ruthless, precise fighter, perfectly choreographing every strike. I was used to fighting demons who were bigger and stronger than me, using my speed and agility to get inside their reach and take them down from up close. I couldn't do that with Emiko, and I definitely couldn't do it with a spear.

Over and over again, I wound up flat on my back on the mat with Emiko's spear at my chest or neck. I swallowed down my frustration and focused. She'd been studying the spear for decades, and I'd only been at it for a couple hours. The only hits I was managing to land were glancing, barely enough to slow an enemy down, let alone stop them for good. I wouldn't be able to beat her in a competition of pure technical skill, but there was so much more to a fight than just technique. I just had to find an opening, and if I couldn't find one, I would have to make one.

Emiko was confident, and she had plenty of reason to be. That could be dangerous, though. The next time I hit the mat, I made sure to let out an exhausted groan. I was tired, but so was she; she was still moving inhumanly fast, but she was starting to lag just a little, and she wasn't watching her back leg enough. I could use that.

I struck out with a flurry of blows, as rapid and unpredictable as I could manage, keeping her focused on her right side, then swung out the butt of the spear and caught her in the back of the left knee. She didn't go down but faltered enough that I could press the advantage. Lightning-fast, I got the head of the spear against her sternum.

Emiko grinned at me, blowing a strand of sweat-dampened green hair out of her face. "Very good," she said proudly. "Again."

After a few hours of sparring, I could consistently beat her at least half the time. Exhausted, sore, and very proud of myself, I headed back to the room I was sharing with Domenico to hit the shower. The water pounding down on my overworked muscles felt fantastic, and I lingered under the hot spray for way longer than I needed to. I stole some of Domenico's shampoo and conditioner while I was in there. For all that he had explained to me that we had completely different hair types, I knew he liked it when I smelled like him.

Eventually, when the steady pounding of the water had gotten me so relaxed and floppy that I was pretty sure I was about to fall asleep standing up, I toweled off, shrugged on the clean clothes I'd picked out for myself, and padded back into the bedroom. Domenico was already in there, bending over a suitcase with his back to me. I took a moment to unapologetically ogle his butt before announcing my presence with a wolf whistle.

"Hey," he said, turning to me with a pleased, private smile. "How was training?"

He leaned down for a kiss, and I stretched up just a little into it.

"Pretty great," I told him. "I totally kicked ass."

"I knew you would," he said.

"The whole 'ancient magical angel spear' thing definitely helped, though," I admitted. "It was like some sort of angelic steroid. I was so fast, it was kind of freaky."

"Emiko mentioned something to that effect," Domenico said. "I thought that since you apparently need far less training than we'd initially assumed, it might be time for us to head out. There have been an increased number of

sightings being reported in small towns, so I thought we should check one out and see what we can figure out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “There’s just, uh, one thing I want to do before we go, okay?”

Domenico studied my face, then gave me a soft, sad smile. “I thought that that might be the case,” he said. “Go talk to him.”

There was a different guard positioned outside the door to the clinic this time, but he stood down quickly to let me in.

Sammie was back in his window seat, watching the afternoon light playing over the leaves outside. He was in a different oversized hoodie this time, and his claws barely stuck out from the end of the sleeves. With the hood up, he looked young and small and painfully vulnerable.

“You’re back,” he said in his lilting accent. I was pretty sure that this was the first time I had heard him speak unprompted.

“Yeah,” I said. “I wanted to come say goodbye.”

“Oh.” Sammie looked out the window again. The light reflecting off the leaves made his skin look faintly green, which didn’t make him look any less like some sort of cursed doll. “You’re leaving?”

“Pretty soon, yup. There’s a bunch of shit that we have to take care of, and we can’t do most of it from here.”

Sammie nodded but didn’t reply.

“I wanted to ask you something,” I said. He glanced at me, guarded but clearly curious. “Is there anyone you want me to get a message to? Someone who you want to know that you’re okay? Your family, maybe?”

Sammie flinched as though he’d been struck. “Not my family,” he said quickly. “I don’t...I don’t want them to know anything about me. They...I left a long time ago. I don’t want them to know where to find me.”

I almost asked him if he was sure, but one look at his wide eyes told me that he was. I tried not to think about what he would consider “a long time ago.” How long had he been on his own?

“Alright,” I said instead. “You can ask Emiko if you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” he said. I believed him. “I’ve been on my own for a while. They don’t need to hear it.”

“I was on my own a lot when I was your age,” I told him. “It was pretty shitty, but I like to think I turned out pretty okay.”

The look he shot me told me that I might as well have sat backwards on a chair and started talking about how Shakespeare was the original rapper. I

tried not to think about the fact that I was apparently old enough to be sorted into a teenager's "try-hard old person" category.

"Alright," I said. "Well. I've gotta head out soon, but I'll be taking care of some stuff before I leave. I can see about having some stuff brought to you, if you'd like."

"Better socks?" Sammie asked after a moment. He had on a pair of those awful grippy socks they gave out in hospitals, the kind that never quite fit properly.

"Better socks," I agreed. "And I'll see about getting you some books and games and shit. Maybe some snacks to keep in here, so you don't have to ask someone to get you something every time you get hungry?" If he'd been on his own for a while, having to rely on strangers for food was probably pretty uncomfortable. Having supplies of his own would help.

The look that the kid gave me was still cautious but much more appreciative.

"Thanks," he said so quietly that I could barely hear it.

"Yeah, kid. Don't mention it." I was hit with a sudden urge to ruffle his hair, but I figured that if I was in his shoes (or in his horrible hospital socks), someone doing that to me would make me want to kill them, so I held back. Instead, I just gave him a wave and a smile as I left.

He returned the wave and made a solid attempt at returning the smile. I counted that as a win.

That night, once bags had been packed and dinner had been eaten, our little team said our goodbyes. Jun gave us each a polite, personal, only slightly formulaic goodbye, which I tried to respond to with the right amount of fanciness. Given the look on Jun's face, I had definitely missed the mark. In retrospect, the attempt at a curtsy had probably been overkill.

Emiko said goodbye to me with a massive bear hug that made my back pop in two places.

"I'm gonna miss you, too," I wheezed.

She grinned and gave me a light punch on the arm. "Come back soon, okay? I need a real sparring partner."

"I'll do my best," I told her.

"You'd better keep in touch," she added. "Here, let me..." She pulled a business card out of her wallet and scribbled something on the back. When she handed it over, the front had a serious and professional-looking design that just said "Hou Emiko" and a phone number. The back, on the other

hand, had a completely different phone number scrawled on it in green glitter gel pen, with a smiley face added for good measure.

“I’ll text you, I promise,” I told her.

Cristiano was looking at us with a weird, worried expression, like a small elderly dog who knew that they were about to do a no-no on their owner’s favorite carpet. I raised an eyebrow at him, and he grimaced. Domenico’s eyes flicked between him and me.

“Natasha, can you come here for a moment?” Domenico asked. I gave Emiko one last hug and then went over to him.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he replied quietly. “I just wanted to give those two a moment alone.”

He was watching Cristiano and Emiko out of the corner of his eye, like he didn’t want to be caught staring. I didn’t give a shit about that, so I just looked right at them.

Cristiano was stammering something out, looking flushed and miserable. I couldn’t see Emiko’s face, but I could see her shoulders heaving when she sighed. When Cristiano came back over to us, he looked more dejected than I’d ever seen him.

“So, what was that?” I asked him.

“That,” he said, “was me absolutely crashing and burning.”

“Huh,” I said. I looked at him, then at Emiko, then back at him. “Huh.”

The ride to the airport was full of quiet chatter. Zander and Manning were murmuring to each other in their private code language. Domenico and Liz were speaking something that sounded like German, but I really couldn’t be sure. Rogelio seemed content to look out the window and watch the city zip past us. Cristiano spent the whole drive sulking, and I spent it on my phone, a shiny new replacement for the one that had been left behind when I went with Rogelio for training.

Once we were at the airport, Liz kissed each of us on both cheeks, somehow managing not to leave lipstick smudges.

“This is where we say our goodbyes for now,” she said. “I’ll let you know when I land in London, and I’ll keep you up to date on all the important goings-on.” With that, she turned and headed into the crowd, where she quickly disappeared in a swirl of perfume.

We found our own flight easily enough. It was a small private jet, decorated in cream and pale blue. Someone else would have thought it was

tasteful, but I thought it looked like a nursery themed after a Greek restaurant. It was only after the plane had taken off and the city had turned into bright pinpricks of light below us that I realized I had no idea where we were going.

“Hey,” I said, resting my head against Domenico’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he replied, pressing a kiss to my hair.

“Where are we, uh...flying to?” I asked.

“The happiest country in the world,” he told me. “We’re going to Finland.”

# Chapter 11

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## *Domenico*

As soon as we stepped outside the cozy walls of Kittilä Airport, we were blasted with frigid wind. Luckily, Jun's people had seen to it that our plane was stocked with winter gear, but the cold air relentlessly sought out every single gap between the heavy wool of my hat, gloves, and scarf and the thick down of my coat. Next to me, Natasha shivered as we rushed toward the waiting car.

"How the fuck are people here so happy when it's so goddamn cold out?" she grumbled once we were safely inside the Subaru with the heat blasting.

"It's socially acceptable to get drunk at home alone in your underwear here," Cristiano said, tugging off his mittens and rubbing his hands together.

"Yeah, okay. That explains a lot," Natasha said, nestling against my side. I put an arm around her shoulders, which felt much less intimate with a solid six inches of fabric and insulation between us.

With Manning behind the wheel, we headed north. The world outside the tinted windows of our car was stark, all dark gray pine bark and bright white snow. It was still and very quiet. The headlights of our car cutting through the dark felt like an intrusion, somehow.

Between the jet lag and the darkness outside, it was hard for me to gauge how long we drove. Eventually, we passed a battered metal sign, which flashed bright yellow as our headlights caught it.

*Tervetuloa Keksitty! Pop. 748*, it read in bold black letters.

"Almost there," Manning said, checking the car's built-in GPS display. A few minutes later, we pulled up outside a cluster of A-frame houses sheltered by tall pines. Spots of red shingles were visible here and there



where the tree boughs had blocked the snow from landing. The buildings seemed to stare down at us with dark glass faces. It wasn't a particularly comforting sight.

"How did you even find this place?" Zander murmured, peering out the window.

"One of my old drinking buddies got it into his idiot head to build a luxury campground in the ass-end of nowhere," Cristiano said. "Obviously, nobody wanted to go, so he sold it to me for cheap. It's pretty sweet, aside from...well, the location, which is kind of a big thing when it comes to camping."

"We'll pair up," I said. "Two to a cabin. The central one will be used for meetings and weapons storage."

"Sweet," Cristiano said. He elbowed Rogelio, then raised his hand for a high five. "Roomies!"

Rogelio looked at him like Cristiano had just asked if he'd like to eat a nice big bowl of gunk scraped off the floor of a bus. Next to me, Natasha did a frankly terrible job of turning her laugh into a cough.

The cabin that Natasha picked out for the two of us was minimalist but welcoming in an aggressively Scandinavian way. It was full of blond wood and dark iron, open-concept, with the triangular walls made up almost entirely of windows. There was a small, tidy kitchen tucked into one side of the building and a spiral staircase leading to a cushy loft with a massive bed, separated from the windows by thick curtains. There wasn't a wardrobe, I noted with some dismay. Sacrifices had to be made in a war, and sometimes one of those sacrifices was letting your suits get creased.

We'd all managed to get some sleep on the flight, and despite the darkness outside, it was barely 7:30. I was too restless to do anything more than bring our suitcases up to the loft before I went to the cabin I'd picked out to be our makeshift war room. Zander, Manning, and Cristiano were already there, and Rogelio was loitering by the door with a cigarette in hand.

"Come inside," I said. "It's time for a team meeting."

"You're the boss," he said dryly, flicking his cigarette butt into the snow. It hissed and died out quickly.

Inside, the others had pulled down a large projector screen and set it up with the map tracking demon attacks. Emiko had had someone set it up as a private database shared with all the kings so that we could see it update in

real time and make our own additions. Right now, it was zoomed in so that an area of rural Finland was being shown to us. The tiny towns clustered around us were almost all marked with red and yellow pins.

“Boss,” Zander greeted. “Hey. I was thinking about what our plan of attack could be.”

“Divide and conquer, I think,” I said. “There are too many sightings in the area for us to check them out one by one. If we split into teams, we’ll be able to cover much more ground.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Manning asked quietly, staring at the map. “We don’t know what we’re walking into. If we split up, we’ll be easier to take out.”

“You have a point,” I said, “But it’s a risk we have to take. I would be surprised if Lucifer was willing to waste any truly powerful fighters by sending them to the middle of nowhere, and we’re all pretty adept at handling ourselves in a fight. Besides, we’ll be in teams of three.”

Manning nodded, apparently mollified.

“Why do you think he’s sending his people up here at all?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t think he’s sending them here,” I said. “I think he’s sending them home. The sense I got from Sammie is that my father is recruiting demons who are desperate. Demons who will take anything they can get. I’m willing to bet that plenty of those demons come from towns like these.” I gestured at the map. “And knowing my father, he would think it was the peak of comedy to send them back where they came from to attack the same families they left home to make a better life for.”

Natasha shuddered. “God, what a fucking asshole,” she muttered.

“He is sort of known for that,” Cristiano pointed out, as helpful as ever.

“Tonight, I think it would be wise for us to start local,” I said. “Cristiano, Zander, and Rogelio, I want you to try to pinpoint more attacks locally. Natasha, Manning, and I will go see what that’s all about.” I tapped a spot on the projector screen where half a dozen pins were stuck into one tight, angry cluster.

“There’s a backup car in the campground office, just down the road,” Cristiano said. “So we won’t be stranded if shit hits the fan. You crazy kids go and have some fun.”

“Yippee,” Natasha said, completely deadpan.

Keksitty was more of a village than a town; we passed a handful of houses on the way there, but they were few and far between, each half-hidden from the road by a dense tangle of trees. The village had one main street, which was home to one church, two tiny stores, and a pub. There were about another two dozen buildings clustered together as if huddling for warmth. It was very dark and very, very quiet. Few of the houses had lights on inside, and no one was out on the street.

“Where is everybody?” Natasha asked. “It’s like a ghost town.”

“It is a bit eerie, isn’t it?” I remarked.

Down the street, a curtain in the pub window twitched aside, letting a beam of light out onto the snowy street. The curtain was quickly pulled back into place, but the damage had been done.

“Let’s go ask,” I said.

A bell jingled merrily above us as we opened the door to the pub. It smelled strongly of stale beer and fish, along with the distinctive natural scent of demons. The place was mostly empty; a kid who looked twenty at the oldest was behind the bar, and another kid was wiping down tables. Two old women were in a corner, speaking in quiet, fast-paced Sami. A tired-looking man sat at the bar, holding his head up with one hand and visibly sagging downward.

“Fun place,” Natasha muttered to me.

“Hello,” said the boy who had been cleaning tables. “Please sit wherever you would like.” His accent was thick, smoothing his consonants into something soft and round. His voice was shaking. So were his hands.

“Thank you,” I said, and we settled into the seats surrounding the table closest to the door. The boy behind the bar was watching us now, his eyes very wide. One of the old ladies glanced over at us, then patted her companion on the arm and tilted her head toward the door. They bundled up in thick coats quickly.

“*Kerro muille!*” the boy behind the bar said to them, smiling brightly. It looked slightly manic. His knuckles had gone white around the glass he was holding.

“*Olla turvassa,*” one of the old women told him sadly. The bell above the door jingled as they left.

“What can I get you to drink?” the other boy asked. “Or would you like to have something to eat?”

I sighed. The kid had no poker face to speak of. “You know who we are, don’t you?”

“What?” he let out a nervous laugh. “N-no. You are just visitors, yes?”

“Lucifer told you we might be coming, didn’t he?” I asked.

The boy shook his head frantically, but it was clearly more of a “please don’t make me answer that” than a “no.” His friend behind the bar wasn’t even trying not to stare.

“You feel that, boss?” Manning murmured. I did; the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. There was a presence that had been barely brushing up against the edges of my perception a moment ago, but it was approaching fast.

“I think you boys should go home,” I said, gentle but very firm.

“You’re being watched,” the waiter whispered.

“I know,” I told him. “We can handle it. Take your friend and go. Get somewhere safe, okay? And we’ll forget we ever saw you here.”

“Thank you,” the boy managed in barely more than a whimper. Behind the counter, the other boy seemed to be going through the motions of closing up the pub more out of habit than anything else, too scared to realize he was wasting precious time. His friend grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to the door, whispering in rapid-fire Finnish.

Just like that, we were alone. Well, nearly alone. Behind me, the man at the bar let out a ragged, slightly muffled snore.

“Do you think we should wake him up?” Natasha asked, glancing over at the man with her brow furrowed.

Before I could answer, there was a massive crash as the door to the back of the pub was kicked open. There was a tall, weasel-faced man in the doorway. He had the sort of muscles that came from a bottle, and they sat on him oddly, as if he was wearing a padded costume suit meant for someone else. His hair was white-blond, shaved on the sides with long, matted braids on top. His neck was ringed with runic tattoos. They could have simply been celebrating his Scandinavian lifestyle, but given his bargain-bin Viking look, I doubted it. The ratty t-shirt with a sonnenrad printed on it was also a hint.

Across the table from me, Manning sighed and cracked his knuckles.

“It took you long enough to make your way to my kingdom,” the newcomer boomed.

Natasha snorted. “I’m pretty sure kingdoms are supposed to be bigger than this, dude,” she said, climbing to her feet with the lazy grace of a panther that’s just heard an injured deer stumbling towards it.

“This is just the start,” the demon snarled. “Lucifer has granted me this land to rule as my own! Finally, my ancestral land will be cleansed. The human scum will be driven away, and only the chosen will remain. Once I prove my worth to him, my kingdom will grow! Soon I shall rule all the way from here to Pikkukaupunki! Perhaps even Huono-kylä will fall before me!”

“Isn’t Huono-kylä less than an hour from here?” Manning asked mildly.

The demon snarled at Manning, his matted hair swinging rigidly behind him. “You’re a fool,” he spat. “Soon all will know Antti’s name!”

“Oof,” Natasha said under her breath. “Third person alert.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said pleasantly. As I spoke, I stood and began methodically removing my suit jacket and undoing my cufflinks. Next to me, Natasha was taking out her earrings. “Every demon gets to be king of his own town. And when you do well, you get more territory.”

“Yes!” the demon—Antti, apparently—crowed.

“So, when your territory expands, you’ll drive out whoever was given the nearby town to rule,” I said. I put my cufflinks in my jacket pocket, draped my jacket over the back of my chair, and began rolling up my sleeves in neat, magazine-perfect folds. “Doesn’t it seem like Lucifer will run out of towns to give away pretty quickly? And what’s to stop him from giving away your territory?”

“I—” Antti deflated a little. “No! My territory is my own! None shall take it from me!”

“God, I love it when they monologue,” Natasha murmured to Manning. “Gives you time to do some warm-up stretches before things kick off.”

I paced over to Antti casually. He was taller than me, but...I glanced down. His combat boots had the suspicious thickness of elevator shoes. I bit back a laugh.

“We must secure the existence of—” Antti began, but he cut off abruptly as my fist met his nose.

“Talk shit, get hit, asshole!” Natasha yelled from behind me. I grinned, wide and predatory. Antti bellowed like a stuck ox, clutching his broken nose. Blood streamed over his lips and chin and splattered onto his cheap t-shirt.

When Antti cried out, a handful of demons poured in from the back room. All of them were in their demonic forms, but even past the blistered skin and jagged teeth, they looked terrible—gaunt and manic. There was something empty in their eyes, and they looked more like rabid dogs than people.

“What are you waiting for!?” Antti yelled, his voice slightly garbled from his broken nose. “Attack them!”

As if to demonstrate what “attack” meant, he swung at my head. I sidestepped the punch neatly and kicked him hard in the knee as he stumbled past me, sending him sprawling to the well-worn floor of the pub. He didn’t get his hands out in time to break his fall, and he yowled as his nose crunched into the wood.

The children sprung forward to attack us. And they were children, there was no mistaking it; most of them were at least a head shorter than me, and even the taller ones had the knobby, lanky look of teens who had hit a growth spurt recently enough that they weren’t yet sure where their knees and elbows were.

I glanced at Natasha and Manning. Natasha looked coldly furious, and Manning looked horrified but resigned. They’d realized what we were facing, too, then.

One of the teens climbed onto the bar and pounced at us. Just before he could reach us, Manning extended a shield around himself, a bubble of shimmering gold. The boy bounced off it and landed on top of one of the tables, which broke under his weight. Dazed, he blinked at the ceiling as his companions surged forward.

It was a careful dance, trying to incapacitate the demons while hurting them as little as possible. Manning’s shield popped in and out of existence, bouncing attackers away from him and often into each other. Natasha spun her spear deftly in her capable hands, sweeping the legs out from under everyone who came near her. Under all the chaos, I could hear the low, steady snores of the man who was still asleep face-down on the bar.

In the middle of the chaos, something caught my eye. Antti was crawling away, his mop of matted hair a bright spot against the dark wood of the floor. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted out through the back. I strolled after him.

Some of the light from the pub streamed out onto the deep snow. The stars were impossibly bright above us. Antti was a dark shape in the night,

running for the tree line. No, I thought. That wouldn't do.

I pushed out a pulse of my power, and Antti fell like he'd been shot. The weak ones never could stand up to my power. My steps crunched in the snow as I approached him. It was brutally cold, but the sheer burning force of my rage kept me warm.

The would-be king lay whimpering in the snow. He was shaking slightly. I didn't know if it was from the cold or from fear, and to be quite frank, I couldn't have given less of a shit. I loomed over him, and he stared up at me with eyes filled with a dumb, animal panic. I sighed.

"You miscalculated," I told him. My power kept him pinned down, but for good measure, I put a foot on his sternum and pressed down until he wheezed. "You put your faith in a liar and a fraud. A fallen king who only planned to use you for his own ends."

"No," the demon spat. "He's doing this for us. He's going to free us from your stupid rules, so we can live as we were always meant to!"

"And the children?" I asked. "It doesn't matter to you that he's turning them into his feral little soldiers?"

"It's for the greater good," Antti insisted weakly. "They wouldn't have done anything with their lives, anyway. They were useless eaters, taking and taking without doing anything for their betters."

"They are children!" I roared. "Innocent children being forced into a doomed war! Children that Lucifer is using as cannon fodder so he can steal your power!"

Antti hacked and tried to spit on me, but gravity was working against him; the goblet of spit landed on his shirt, mingling with the blood from his broken nose. "He's the true king," he said. "He's doing what he has to for all of us. For the greater good. And he's going to kill you. He's going to kill you! He's going to take back what he's owed, and you'll be dead."

I heaved a weary sigh. "I know you won't manage to grasp this, but it's really embarrassing for you that you bought into his propaganda so wholeheartedly."

"He's going to kill you," Antti said again in a sort of mumbling chant. "He's going to kill you, he's going to kill you..."

I hauled the pathetic mess up to his knees by his collar and drove my fist into his chest. His ribs caved in under the force of my blow, and finally, I felt his heart still in my hand. I wiped my gore-covered hand on his shirt and dropped his corpse back into the snow.

I heard the crunch of footsteps behind me and turned to see Manning.

“Boss,” he said, “You should come see this.”

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“You should see for yourself,” he told me.

The inside of the pub was blissfully warm. The only sounds inside were the drip of alcohol from smashed bottles and the snoring of the man at the bar, who was impressing me at this point.

In the middle of the room, Natasha stood over a pile of unconscious bodies, each one carefully wrapped up in a curtain or tablecloth. On her other side, two bodies lay at her feet. They were gangly and ragged, and most importantly, they looked incredibly human.



## Chapter 12

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## *Natasha*

The claustrophobic little pub had turned into a whirlwind of activity. Manning and I fell into a pattern quickly and easily, like we'd been fighting side by side for years. He flickered his shield bubble in and out of existence, bouncing the charging demons away from us with well-practiced timing. While the attacking boys were off-balance, a quick snap of the Soul Spear's shaft to the back of their knees toppled them into groaning heaps on the floor. I followed up each blow with a quick tap to the solar plexus with the butt of the spear, just enough to leave them gasping but unhurt. Just as each kid tried to scramble back to their feet, we sent another one of the attackers crashing down on top of them.

They didn't charge at us with any sort of strategy that I could figure out. If there was any higher thought happening at all, it didn't show on their faces. They just snarled and kept throwing themselves against our defenses. It didn't take long before all the kids were in tangled piles on the floor. Manning looked down at them and let out a heavy sigh.

"Come on," I said. "We should make sure that they won't be able to attack us when they recover."

Manning gave me a businesslike nod and went to the pub's front windows, which had thick cotton curtains with a sun-bleached floral print. As I watched, he pulled out a pocket knife and cut them down in efficient strokes. I went to one of the tables and yanked the tablecloth like the world's shittiest magician. Little condiment bottles clattered to the floor. A salt shaker smashed, sending tiny white granules bouncing across the uneven floor, which I was pretty sure was supposed to be bad luck. Oh, well. I could add it to the list of unlucky shit that had happened to me.

Swaddling teenagers in restaurant linens wasn't something I'd ever done before, but Manning and I figured it out: strips of torn-up tablecloth to tie the wrists, then awkwardly wrapping the legs. It did the job, though they wound up looking like little kids playing mermaid. Well, growling, demonic, pretend mermaid kids, more like the Fiji mermaid than Ariel.

"Well," I said, looking down at the pile with my hands on my hips. "That fucking sucked."

Manning snorted. "Yeah, I would prefer to not fight kids. I may be a demon, but I have my limits."

I fidgeted with the collapsed spear. The cylinder was pleasantly heavy in my hand and warm like it had been left in the sun.

"Do you think—" I started, but before I could say anything else, there was a furious, raspy sound from behind me. I spun around to face it, my eyes wide.

For a moment, everything seemed to go in slow motion. It was like I had all the time in the world to watch and react, but I was also lagging as my muscle memory took charge of the situation. A furiously snarling teenaged demon had burst out of his hiding spot behind me, and he was clambering onto the top of the bar, his teeth bared. He flung himself toward me, claws reaching for my throat as he leapt down from the scarred, beer-sticky wood.

I knew instinctively that I didn't have time to dodge. Numbly, like I was watching a movie that happened to be starring me, I watched as my hands came up to protect my chest. The spear was still in my hand. In one impossibly slow, incredibly awful moment, I felt my hand tighten around it. My thumb dug into the etched band at the top of the dense tube. In the space of a heartbeat that was both incredibly slow and impossibly quick, the spear extended, sharp and divine and...

And buried itself in the boy's chest.

He dropped to the floor, writhing and moaning.

"Oh, god," I said. "Oh, god. Oh, oh, shit, fuck."

I stared at the spear in my hands. My grip was shaking a little, and I tried not to think about how the shaking would make droplets of the boy's blood spatter on the floor. Except...

The spear was still completely clean. The smooth ivory of the blade didn't even have the tiniest speck of red on it. On the ground, the boy had gone still. His chest was still rising and falling, heaving like he'd just run a

race, but he didn't look hurt. There was something happening to his face. My stomach lurched, but I forced myself not to look away.

Sometimes, when I was kinda drunk and pretty bored, I watched furniture restoration videos on YouTube. My favorite part was when they brushed on the paint stripper, and I could watch the shitty old age-darkened varnish bubble up and peel away from the surface in real time. I didn't think I'd be able to watch those videos the same way ever again after seeing what happened to the kid. His skin warped, split, and fell away in thin, scabby chunks. He was molting, I realized, with a feeling somewhere between horror and relief.

As the blistered, reddened skin peeled away, it left a pale, unblemished face behind. The kid's eyes moved behind his eyelids, and his mouth fell open in a gagging gasp. Again, it felt like my hands were moving without my permission, but this time it was to roll the boy onto his side in case his gagging brought something up.

"He's alive," I managed. "He's alive! Manning, quick, go get—"

"Already on it," he said, hurrying toward the back door.

I bent down and brushed the shed skin away from the boy's face and hands. When I pressed two fingers to his neck, I could feel the sluggish but steady beat of his pulse. He was feverishly warm to the touch, but he was also undeniably still kicking.

The back door slammed open. Domenico stood in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the kid at my feet.

"He's humanoid again," Domenico said, sounding dumbfounded as he picked his way through the boys to approach us. "Natasha, what did you do?"

"I'm not sure. He jumped at me, and I...the spear got him in the chest. He fell, and then...I think the spear cured him," I said slowly.

We had to be sure, I realized. We had to double-check. I looked up at Domenico.

"I'm going to try it again," I said, and he nodded somberly. Carefully, I pressed the tip of the spear against the chest of one of the other captured demons. He hissed at me as I got close, wriggling against the strips of fabric binding his hands. "It's gonna be okay, kid," I murmured, even though I was almost certain he couldn't understand me. "This'll help, don't worry. It'll be over before you know it."

I kept up my soothing nonsense babble as I pressed down on the spear. The blade slid into his body with only the tiniest bit of resistance, like I was sticking a fork into Jell-O. The blade came out clean and didn't leave any mark behind. There wasn't even a tear in the kid's clothes. His protesting noises faded away, and his face went slack as he passed out. His skin began to flake away just like the first boy's had.

Slowly, like I was in a trance, I went through the little pub and pressed the spear into each boy's chest, one by one. With each demon I used the Soul Spear on, some of the pressure eased out of the room.

Suddenly, I stiffened. It wasn't just the feeling of pressure that was fading away. With each kid I turned back, the sulfur and clove scent of demons got fainter and fainter.

"Do you feel that?" Manning asked, his voice quiet and tense.

Domenico crouched down and pressed his fingers to one kid's neck. "I do," he said grimly.

"What?" I asked. "What are you guys feeling? Because I can tell that something's changed, but I can't tell what it is."

"Their auras have changed," Domenico told me. "They're...they're human."

"Yeah," I said. "They've gone back to looking human now."

"No," Domenico said. He stood, taking a step away from the unconscious kids. "They don't just *look* human. They *are* human. Natasha, there's no trace of demonic energy in them anymore."

Manning squatted by one kid's head and closed his eyes, then gently brushed away the flakes of his husk skin. "He's right," he said finally. "They're humans now."

I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, pulsing loud and frantic with each heartbeat. I leaned my weight on the spear, staring down at the teenagers' limp bodies.

"Boss," Manning said quietly, "we should probably clear out before we attract more unwanted attention."

Domenico straightened up and nodded briskly. "You're right. Bring the car around," he ordered Manning. "We'll take the kids back to the cabins and keep them there for observation, at least until they wake up. We should talk to them before we try to figure out where to send them longer-term."

"Yessir," Manning said, already digging the car keys out of his pocket.

The two of them started to load the unconscious kids into the back seats of the Subaru. I wanted to help, but my limbs felt leaden and disobedient, and the kids deserved to be carried by people who could be confident about not dropping them.

It had started snowing sometime during the fight and the chaos afterward; fat flakes landed in my eyelashes as Domenico led me to the passenger seat.

There was movement from down the street, and I was immediately on my guard, but it was just the kid who'd let us know that we were being watched. His eyes went to the teenager Manning was carrying, and his hands flew up to cover his mouth. His knuckles were red and cracked from cold weather and working with his hands.

"Keijo," he gasped. "You helped him!" His eyes began to well with tears.

"You know this boy?" Domenico asked. "Do you think you could help us identify the others?"

"Keijo is my older cousin," the kid said. "And..." He looked into the car. "That one is his younger brother. And that's Mika from down the street. Those two are Taavetti and Sepi, Susanna's boys. Are you..." The boy bit his lip, looking up at Domenico with huge, worried eyes. "You're taking them away?"

"We just want to keep an eye on them until they wake up," Domenico said gently. "We don't know if what we did is permanent, so we need to make sure that they won't revert to their corrupted forms. We'll get them back to their families as soon as we can, but we want to make sure that it will be safe for them and the people around them first. If you want to help them, you can give us their addresses, and we'll make sure that they get back home safely."

The boy nodded frantically and dashed into the pub. He came back with a little notepad and a pen and began scribbling frantically, his hands shaking from excitement or cold or both.

"Easy," Domenico said. "It's alright. We've got time."

The kid took a deep breath and began writing more slowly. Soon, he tore the page off the pad and handed it over.

"Thank you," Domenico said. "Now, can you tell us if there are any others like that? Anyone else we need to look out for?"

"Just Antti," he said. "He will probably come back for you."

Something odd crossed Domenico's face. "I don't think we have to worry about that," he said eventually.

"It's just those five, then," the boy said. "They were...they were so different. They chased off most of the humans. Antti started demanding things and sending them to collect. The humans couldn't take it anymore."

Domenico put a hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed gently. "Thank you," he said. "You've been a huge help. Now, go home and get some rest, okay?"

The drive back to the cabins was quiet. Between the dark and the snow, Manning had to take the trip slowly.

I held my collapsed spear in both hands and stared down at it blankly. It had given me an unexpected advantage today. I'd known that it was powerful, but seeing it in action was completely different. I hadn't thought that using a weapon meant for an angel could make me feel so unclean. It had changed those boys. It had *remade* them. But the spear had just been the tool; I'd been the one holding it. I'd been the one who used it.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd taken something that I should never have been able to take. The spear's unnatural weight, which had felt reassuring just an hour ago, seemed like a horrible, uncanny burden. I might have saved those boys from Lucifer—and that "might" was doing a lot of work—but I had stripped away countless years of their lives. I had taken away their immortality, their powers, their entire way of life, and I hadn't even been able to explain what I was doing to them. I felt queasy just thinking about it.

"We're going to figure this out," Domenico said softly. I jumped a little in my seat. I'd been so out of it that I hadn't even noticed his eyes on me. "It's going to be okay."

"You don't know that," I said. I wanted him to contradict me, to tell me that we would find a perfect solution. He didn't.

## Chapter 13

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## *Domenico*

Once we got back to the campground, Manning began carrying the boys to one of the empty cabins. Natasha was still distant and drawn, and I couldn't help but worry.

"Come on," I said gently. "Let's get you inside."

She leaned against me as I led her to the cabin we'd chosen as our own. I wasn't sure if she was resting her weight on me for comfort or physical support, but either way, I wrapped an arm around her. Inside the cabin, I flicked the lights on and settled Natasha onto the plush, bland sofa. I took the spear from her hands and placed it on a side table out of her sightline, then went to the little kitchenette to make her a much-needed cup of tea.

Through the big windows, I could see the others going out to help Manning. They had a quick, tense conversation. I couldn't hear them, but I could see the tight line of Manning's shoulders, the way Rogelio went rigid, and the frantic gesticulation that meant Cristiano was upset. Moving as one demon, they all turned to look at us. It wasn't subtle, but I couldn't say I blamed them. At least Natasha wasn't paying any attention to them.

I waved an imperious hand at them, and they got the message and turned back to the boys in the car. Between the four of them, they managed to get the kids inside quickly. The cabins were arranged in a shallow curve, so it was impossible to see into the other buildings from the front windows, but my phone buzzed with a text.

*Taking first watch over the kids with the Z-man*, the message from Cristiano read. I shook my head. At least he'd moved on from the brief (but not brief enough) period where he'd insisted on calling himself C-man.

Steam began to waft from the spout of the big enamel camping kettle I'd found in a cabinet. I pulled it from the heat and poured the hot water into a mug with a teabag I'd found in a dusty box covered with illustrations of Moomins. The smell of black tea and strawberries filled the air as I carried it over to my wife.

"Here," I said, pressing it into her hands. I folded myself onto the sofa next to her, and she leaned against me automatically.

"I fucked up," she said. "I think I really fucked this one up."

"What do you mean?" I asked cautiously.

"I turned those kids human, Dom," she said. "I took away everything they've ever known, just like that."

I paused, trying to puzzle out my words in advance. "Lucifer was the one who took advantage of them," I said finally. "You got them out from under his thumb. Counteracting magic that powerful was always going to have a price, Natasha." A wriggling, grasping part of me was desperately glad that the price hadn't been paid by Natasha. I felt for the boys, of course, but if something had happened to her...

"Besides," I added, "They would have killed you if they had the chance. It was far from an ideal situation, and you did what you had to do to keep yourself and your team safe."

"I changed them," she snapped. "I literally changed their species, Domenico. They're going to have to completely change their lives."

"But they get to have lives," I said, gentle but firm. "And they'll have their own opinions about this. I think you should wait to see how they feel before you beat yourself up about this."

I watched as a muscle in Natasha's jaw flexed and then unclenched. She was fidgeting, balling her hands into fists and then flattening them out against the fabric of the sofa over and over again.

"I should stop trying to talk you into feeling better, shouldn't I?" I asked wryly.

Her hands twitched, then relaxed. "Yeah," she admitted with a sigh. "Yeah, you're kinda just making me more tense."

"Sorry," I said. "Would you prefer if I kept you company, or would you rather have some alone time?"

"Alone time, I think," Natasha said after a moment.

I nodded and pressed a kiss to her hair, then stood. "I'll be with the others if you need me. Let me know if you need anything, alright?"

“You’re such a mother hen,” Natasha said, but it came out gruffly fond.

I let her be and headed to the cabin I’d assigned as the war room. It was dimly lit and peaceful in a manufactured sort of way. The string lights were a bit much, but they provided nice atmospheric lighting, even if they looked strange when paired with the projected map and the bags and boxes of supplies. Otherwise, it was decorated the same way as the one Natasha and I occupied.

I sat on the identical sofa and pulled out my phone; war or no, emails were a constant, and it helped to stay up to date.

I’d gotten a message, presumably when I was talking to Natasha. It was from Jun, and it was extremely to the point.

*Breakthrough in husk tranquilizer research, it said. Expect a package tomorrow, 1600 at the latest.*

I took a deep breath and blew it out again, feeling some of the weight ease off my shoulders. If we could tranquilize the husks quickly and effectively, then Natasha could turn them human without putting herself at unnecessary risk. Hope and relief bloomed in my chest, twisting together like the tendrils of strange, unfamiliar plants.

I wasn’t sure when, but at some point, I must have drifted off to sleep, lulled by the falling snow, the warmth of the cabin, and the good news. I jolted awake to the sound of a high-pitched shriek from outside. My first thought was Natasha, of course, but our cabin was in the opposite direction from the sound’s origin. I tugged on my boots and went to investigate but nearly crashed into Zander on my way out the door.

“Boss! I was just coming to get you,” he said. “The kids are awake.”

We rushed over to the cabin where the former husks were being kept. Natasha wasn’t far behind us. She must have heard the yelling and decided to find out what was going on.

The main floor of the cabin was a mess. The sofa had been folded out, and a cot had been located from somewhere, but the floor between the two pieces of furniture was covered with a mound of pillows and blankets. If not for the terror on the kids’ faces, it would have looked like a sleepover.

Two boys—Taavetti and Sepi?—were on the sofa bed, looking around with bleary-eyed panic. The other pair of brothers were nestled in the pillow heap, blinking dazedly as they pushed themselves onto their elbows. Mika, who was by far the youngest, got the cot all to himself. He was still deeply

asleep, clutching a throw pillow like a teddy bear. (*Home Is Where the Hygge Is!* the pillow exclaimed in embroidered text.)

“*Missä olemme?*” one of the twins asked. “*Gosa moai?*” he tried after getting blank stares. Then finally, “Where are we?”

“You’re at a safe place just outside of town,” I said. I let my shoulders slump a little, making myself less physically intimidating as though I was trying to approach a stray cat. “My name is Domenico. These are my companions, Zander and Natasha.”

“What...what happened?” the boy asked. “How did we get here? The last thing I remember is...” He trailed off, his brow furrowing.

“The last thing I remember is Antti coming back,” one of the kids on the floor said. He’d pushed himself to his feet and tried to puff out his skinny chest. “He said he was going to help us get what we were owed.”

“I remember that, too,” said Taavetti or possibly Sepi. “And then there was another man. He felt...different.”

One of the other boys said something in rapid-fire Finnish, and the first kid who’d spoken nodded in agreement.

“Keijo says that the other man felt, um...I think the right word is “rancid.” He took us out to a field, and he did...something. There was pain, and then...that’s the last thing I remember.”

“Do you remember what day that happened?” I asked.

The boys glanced at each other and gave me a date. It was only a few days ago, I realized, looking sharply at the other adults in the room. Judging by the looks on their faces, my friends realized it, too.

If it had happened so recently, there was a chance that my father was still nearby.

There was a loud yawn from the cot. Mika had woken up and was rubbing his eyes with the heel of one hand. I could see the moment he realized he was cuddling a pillow; he froze and threw it away from him like it had bitten him, trying with all his might to look like he’d never cuddled anything in his life. Demon or not, some parts of being a teenage boy were universal.

He mumbled something in Finnish, and our ad hoc translator replied quickly.

“He says he feels weird,” he told us. “I feel strange, too. Are we sick?”

Natasha sucked in a ragged breath next to me. I looked at her, and we had a quick, tense conversation made up entirely of glances and subtle head

movements.

“You’re not sick,” Natasha said. “You’re, uh...you’re human.”

The boys stared at us, then at each other. There was a flurry of discussion, filled with confused mutters and hand gestures before they turned back to us.

“No, miss,” our translator said. “We’re not humans, we’re demons.” He curled his pointer fingers and held them to his forehead to mimic horns. “Demons.”

“Do any of you have powers?” I asked.

Our translator nodded. “I can go invisible for a little bit.”

“Can you show us?” I prompted.

The boy screwed his face up in concentration for several seconds. Nothing happened. He looked down at his hands with a frown.

“We’re human?” he asked after a moment. “How did this happen?”

Natasha opened her mouth, but I caught her eye and shook my head. If Lucifer was still nearby, it wouldn’t do to have word spread about the Soul Spear.

“We can’t tell you just yet,” I told them.

“And this is permanent?” the boy asked.

“It is,” I said gently.

He stared at me with wide green eyes, then whooped and punched the air. The others began cheering, too, immediately giddy with excitement.

“Uh...” Natasha said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Not really the vibe that I thought this was gonna have,” she said.

“It’s a bit of a surprise to me, too, honestly,” I admitted.

“You don’t understand,” our translator told us breathlessly. “We’re human! We can age like normal people! We can go to regular school and buy houses and stay in one place! We don’t have to hide anymore!”

He rushed toward us. We automatically shifted into defensive stances, but he flung himself at me and hugged me tightly. I patted his back awkwardly.

“No need for that,” I said, glancing to Natasha and Zander for help. They didn’t offer any; I would have to look out for myself, then. “You know, Natasha over there is the one who healed you.”

The boy disentangled himself from me and immediately flung his arms around Natasha. He left a solid six inches between their bodies, though, I

noticed with some amusement.

“Well,” I said, projecting to make sure my voice carried over the sound of celebrating teens, “if you’d like to go back home, I can have my people take you there. Your friend told us where all of you live, so it won’t be any trouble.”

Our translator explained that to his friends, and they all nodded frantically.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, all of you. We would like to go home now.”

The drive into town couldn’t have been more different from our previous trip. The back seats were filled with chatter, most of which I couldn’t parse in the slightest. Natasha was riding shotgun. She still looked rattled, but it was clear that the more time she spent around the boys, the less she was self-flagellating.

We dropped off the boys, starting with one set of brothers and then the other. Mika was the last to go. We pulled up to a small, tidy house, and a small, tidy woman peeked out the window at us. When the car door opened and she saw Mika, she shrieked and bounded out of the house to scoop him up and hug him close. I didn’t know the words he said in reply, but I didn’t have to. Some sentiments don’t need translation, and “ugh, mooooooom!” is one of them.

Mika’s mother didn’t speak any English, but she disappeared into the house and came back with a basket of fragrant cardamom buns, still warm from the oven. She pushed the basket firmly into Natasha’s hands, not listening to any of her protests.

“Well,” Natasha said when we were back in the quiet warmth of the car, “that definitely didn’t go the way I expected. They all seemed so... relieved.”

“They’re young,” I said. “Some of us have had thousands of years to get set in our ways, but for them, they just see the things they’re missing out on. They get to have normal lives now. And even if there are others who wouldn’t be so happy about it, it’s better than being stuck as a husk. You’re giving them their freedom back.”

She looked down at the spear in her lap for a long moment, then took my hand and squeezed it.

“I’m glad that it’s not...I’m glad I can help,” she said quietly.

I brought our joined hands up to my mouth and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I knew you’d find a way to save them. Although, admittedly, the specifics are a bit of a surprise.”

The campsite seemed oddly empty without the kids around. It was so late that it had circled back around to being early, so Natasha and I went up to the massive bed in the loft of our cabin and fell asleep almost immediately, lulled by jet lag and the comforting warmth of our bodies. When we woke, bright sunlight was streaming through the wall of windows.

I was halfway through a cup of tea and a truly excellent cardamom bun when I saw a battered box truck coming down the wooded drive. A harried-looking man in a parka and neon blue toque stepped out, holding a clipboard.

I watched as Rogelio peeled himself away from the tree he’d been leaning against, tucking his cigarette behind his ear. He signed the clipboard, handed it back over, and waved a hand at one of the cabins. The man heaved a large wooden crate out of the back of the van, visibly struggling with the weight. As soon as he drove out of view, Rogelio hefted it easily and brought it to the war room.

“Looks like Jun’s little care package has arrived,” I said, wiping icing sugar from my mouth.

“Let’s go check it out,” Natasha said, doing a bad job of hiding her excitement.

Rogelio had set the crate squarely in the middle of the floor, speaking to both an impeccable sense of drama and a total lack of practicality. The others were gathered around it curiously, with expressions ranging from kid on Christmas (Cristiano) to hungover dad who was slightly interested in seeing what his wife had put under the tree for the kids (Rogelio). Zander had managed to find a crowbar somewhere, and he was turning it idly in his hands.

“Go on, then,” I said.

He grinned and practically leapt forward to lever the lid off the crate. We rummaged through the packing peanuts and pulled out two large metal briefcases.

“This feels like some secret agent shit,” Natasha said happily. She popped open the first case. Inside, a thick envelope lay on top of a layer of protective foam.

“Domenico,” she read, “these boxes contain the most promising tranquilizer that we’ve been able to develop so far. It’s a combination of yew, tulsi, mistletoe, verbena, yarrow, and frankincense. I took some creative liberties with the delivery system, but I think you’ll appreciate what we wound up with. The sedative takes effect quickly, but larger demons may need two doses.”

When she lifted the layer of foam, it revealed row after row of little gleaming darts. They were silver metal with yellow-gold tufts surrounding black plastic shapes, and they looked oddly familiar.

“Huh,” Zander said, picking one up and examining the same plastic bit that had caught my eye. “They have nocks. Like an arrow,” he added, seeing Natasha’s blank look.

“Wait,” Natasha said. “Holy shit. Do you think the delivery system is...?”

Natasha, Zander, and Cristiano crowded around the second metal case. As soon as they opened it, their eyes widened. Their faces split into massive grins.

“Ohhhh my god,” Natasha breathed.

“Holy shit,” Zander said gleefully.

“Fuck yes. Fuck yes!” Cristiano said, punching the air.

Manning and I shared a fondly amused look.

“Well, come on,” Rogelio said. “Show the rest of the class.”

Natasha lifted a bundle of black fabric and metal. She slid the fabric part of the device onto her hand. It looked like the illegitimate love child of a fingerless glove and an orthopedic hand brace. She fiddled with the metal bits, and two sprung out on either side of her knuckles.

“Crossbow!” she crowed. She loaded in a practice dart and fired it straight up. It stuck into the lampshade above us, making the light swing wildly.

The others surged forward to grab their crossbows. Even Rogelio shrugged off his carefully studied indifference and joined the fray.

“We have crossbows,” Natasha said, incredibly gleeful. She pulled one out of the box and handed it to me.

“We do indeed,” I said, turning mine over in my hands. “How long do you think it’ll take before Cristiano tries to instigate some sort of game with them?”



Natasha considered it, folding the arms of her crossbow back in. “Fifteen, twenty minutes?” she guessed. I nodded.

“Feeling better?” I asked her, too quietly for the others to hear. “Between these darts and the spear, we have a much better chance of ending this with minimal bloodshed.”

“Much better,” she told me. “It’s a pretty huge relief. I—”

“You know, I bet we could start our own version of laser tag with these,” I heard from the other side of the room.

Natasha and I turned as one and spoke in perfect chorus. “NO!”

## Chapter 14

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## *Natasha*

Later that night, armed with our sweet new crossbows and bags of tranquilizer darts, we loaded ourselves into the car and headed to Pikkukaupunki. Cristiano had decided to stay behind, both because he wasn't all that great in a fight and because it seemed like a good idea to have someone holding down the fort. If shit went bad, it would be good to have someone who could call in reinforcements. Besides, we had to be careful with our darts since we had a pretty limited supply. There had been bandoliers included in the crate of goodies, but we'd decided that they looked a little suspicious for a first visit. I was pretty excited about how cool they would look, though. Oh, well. Maybe next time.

I spent a pretty big chunk of the drive eating candy; deep in the bottom of the crate, I'd found a cloth-wrapped bundle from Emiko, full of little crispy sesame candies and squishy melon-flavored chews. I'd generously allowed the others to have some, even though I had the biggest sweet tooth out of everyone in the group. I'd grabbed some of the candy and given it to Cristiano before we left, and he had immediately eaten his portion with so much reverence that it was honestly embarrassing to look at.

The streets of Pikkukaupunki were tiny and mostly paved in rough cobblestone. Our car, specifically chosen to fit six people and all their gear, was too big to wind through the narrow streets comfortably, so we parked on the outskirts of town and continued on foot. It would be easier to detect demons if we were out in the open, anyway.

We loaded up with our gear, taking a crossbow and a bag of darts each. We fell into a loose clump, with me in the lead and Domenico and Rogelio on either side of me. Zander and Manning watched our backs. Manning was

still working on a mouthful of chewy melon candy, looking for all the world like a small dog who'd been given a too-large spoonful of peanut butter.

Pikkukaupunki was barely bigger than the last tiny town we'd driven through. It had two restaurants, and one of them was even still open, which seemed downright metropolitan for the area. It was early enough in the evening that the sun was barely starting to dip to the horizon, and the sunset's golden light was making the red siding of the neat little houses stand out even more vibrantly against the snow. It was like something from a Christmas card, if Christmas cards gave you the prickly, raised-hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck feeling that you were being watched.

There was an unsettling, tense energy in the air, like a thunderstorm was on the way. The sky was completely clear, though. I pressed my fingers against the solid shape of the spear in my jacket pocket for reassurance. It felt heavy, and I could have sworn it was warmer than usual.

"Well, there are definitely demons around," I muttered to the others.

Domenico nodded. "And lots of them, from the feel of it," he agreed, shifting a half-step closer to me, as if fighting the urge to put himself in front of me, and that was the compromise he was giving himself.

We passed a handful of people who were still out and about as we headed down the main street and into the center of town. Most of the villagers we saw were on the older side, and none of them looked particularly happy. All of them were watching us. Some of them were more subtle about it, just peeking at us from the corners of their eyes, but a few were outright staring at us from their windows.

"They know something we don't. They're waiting for something to happen," I said, quiet and grim.

"They definitely are. And I don't think it's going to be a fun surprise for us," Rogelio replied, keeping his voice low enough that even the most sharp-eared villager wouldn't be able to hear it. "What do you think the odds are that we're walking into a trap?"

"Very high," Domenico said. "We should make sure to stick together, and I need you all to stay on high alert. If they have something planned, I want all of us to face it together. Safety in numbers, and all that."

Just then, a little old lady crossed the street in front of our little defensive cluster. She had a cheerfully craggy face, like a kitchen witch carved out of an old apple, and her eyes were bright green underneath her traffic-light red hat. I braced myself, but her aura was completely human. I

was pretty confident that I could take on a regular human old lady if I had to. (I really didn't want to have to, though. I'd done a lot of unpleasant shit in my time, but punching a senior citizen wearing a hat with adorable little reindeer on it would be a new low.)

"Be careful," she said in thickly accented English, talking out of the side of her mouth and not looking at us. "You are being watched."

She didn't break her stride, just hustled off down the street.

"Well, that felt like the start of a horror movie," I said, trying to sound more relaxed than I felt.

"Natasha, you're surrounded by demons," Zander pointed out. "It's more like the end of a horror movie."

"Thanks," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "That's super reassuring."

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure that no amount of dumb jokes would distract me from the jittery, off-putting feeling in the air. Oh, well. No way out but through, right?

"Come on," I said. "Let's see what we can find out."

As we got deeper into the little village, the locals got even less subtle about their staring, and they were clearly trying to give us a wide berth. Their muttered conversations ground to a stop as soon as we got within earshot, and they quickly began to disappear into their houses. Whatever was coming for us, they knew that we were getting closer and closer to it, and they wanted to stay as far away from it as they possibly could.

The town's central square was quiet enough that I was hyper-aware of the crunching sound of the snow under our boots. If it weren't for every single one of my hunter instincts screaming at me that there were demons nearby, I would've felt like the five of us were the only people in the whole town.

On one side of the square was a small wooden church with a tall, spindly tower. The planks that it was made of had gone gray and black with age, and it looked severe and weirdly intimidating, even with the snow on the roof softening its sharp angles. Across the street was a cluster of little markets. The flower beds outside were covered with snow, which turned the bushes underneath into lumpy, rounded shapes, like cartoon sheep. The town square itself was a small cobblestoned area with a few benches in the middle, surrounding what must have been a small garden in the warmer months. Somebody had tried to shovel, but the snow between the cobbles had been packed into dingy gray ice, making the ground incredibly

treacherous. I tried to keep my center of gravity low without looking like I had some sort of butt problem, but I was pretty sure it didn't work.

I started heading over to check out the markets—places like that always had plenty of nooks and crannies for people to hide in—but Domenico stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Wait,” he said. I almost asked him what was wrong, but I could feel it, too. There were waves of power coming from the little church, dark and frigid. “He’s here.”

I didn't bother to ask him if he was sure. I swept my eyes across the square around us, trying to be discreet about it. Then a shadow shifted in the alcove of the little church.

“It took you long enough,” said a voice. It was deep, smug, and unfortunately, way more familiar than I would have liked. I shivered involuntarily, and the cold had nothing to do with it.

A man was leaning against the weather-beaten door. He was tall, with a hawkish nose and dark red hair severely slicked back. He was bundled up for the cold like the rest of us, but he managed to make his dark wool coat and leather gloves look fashionable and regal instead of frumpy and puffy. I didn't recognize his face, but that didn't surprise me. Snakes always shed their skins when they outgrew them.

“Father.” Domenico sounded stilted and oddly formal. I couldn't help but imagine him as a little kid, using that tone whenever he was brought before the dickhead who was supposed to take care of him.

“Son,” Lucifer replied, packing a single syllable full of more sarcasm and disdain than the average teenager could generate in a calendar year. “I really thought that you would find me more quickly. I suppose I should have lowered my expectations. You did get your smarts from your mother, after all. And when I say ‘smarts’...”

I began to inch my fingers toward the pocket that held my spear, but Domenico stopped me with a tiny shake of his head.

“And Natasha’s here, too,” the former king of Hell purred. “It’s been far too long, but you have to understand, I’ve been so very busy. You’re looking good these days. Finally managed to tap into some of that power buried under the surface, hm?”

I snarled at him, and he raised his gloved hands in mock defeat. “Easy, easy,” he said cheerfully, like this was all some big joke that he didn't plan to let us in on. “I’m just glad you’re still in one piece. It would’ve been a

terrible waste if one of my little experiments managed to get the drop on you and tear your pretty face to shreds, don't you think?"

His eyes flicked over our group, landing on each of us one by one. I hoped none of us would show this asshole the tiniest shred of the fear he was looking for.

Then, something incredibly weird happened. Lucifer's eyes widened the slightest bit, and he took a tiny step back. He was staring at Rogelio.

"Didn't expect to see me here, did you?" Rogelio asked calmly. He pulled a battered silver cigarette case from his pocket and stuck one of his carefully crafted roll-your-owns between his lips. He snapped casually, and the tip of his finger caught fire. He blew on it until it was just a small flame, then pressed it to the end of his cigarette. I watched with horrified fascination as he took his first pull and exhaled a plume of smoke as casually as if he faced half-crazy kings of Hell every day.

"I'll be honest," Lucifer said. Domenico snorted. "I thought that you would take your time to think about it, but you would ultimately agree to take me up on my offer. It was incredibly generous, after all—your own part of Hell to rule. The chance to pick whichever dukedom you like. Not many demons would be magnanimous enough to promise you that."

"Clearly, you miscalculated," Rogelio said. "First of all, I tried my hand at ruling, and if I'm being honest, I didn't really care for it. Too much responsibility, too much paperwork. Second, you can't grow coffee or tobacco in Hell, so even if I believed you were going to let any of your allies live, I wouldn't want to. Third, there are more important things than power."

Lucifer barked out a laugh at that. "More important than a dukedom? More important than being able to shape the raw aether of Hell to your will, than being able to build your own little world?" He shook his head, carefully mimicking disappointment. "No, that can't be it. There's something keeping you here, isn't there? Something more important than your petty vices. You try to hide it, but you're the sentimental type, just like your father was. So, what is it? Not a partner, surely."

"No," Rogelio said. "Not a partner."

Lucifer's eyes were on him, cold and shrewd. I was suddenly aware that I was standing right next to Rogelio, close enough that the resemblance between us would be easier to spot. As far as I could tell, Rogelio was

maintaining a perfect poker face, keeping his lazy smirk from budging an inch, but Lucifer spotted something I couldn't see. He grinned.

"Oh. Oh! How delightful." Lucifer clapped his hands like an excited little kid and turned the full weight of his attention to me with a flourish. "I can't believe I never noticed the resemblance before," he cooed. "You really do have your father's eyes, don't you, Natasha? And Rogelio, I'm surprised at you. Your best friend's wife, huh? That's cold, even for you. Oh, this makes things so much more fun."

"So much for keeping that detail to ourselves," Domenico muttered to me under his breath. I reached out and brushed our fingers together, wishing that there weren't two layers of gloves between us. I shot my best glare at Lucifer, my head held high.

I hadn't thought it was possible for the way he looked at me to get worse. I was wrong. I'd seen plenty of people try to undress me with their eyes before; in my line of work, I'd wound up in a lot of seedy places, and people tended to leer. But I'd never seen someone try to dissect me with their eyes until that exact moment. I forced myself not to flinch, but it took a hell of a lot more effort than I would have liked, especially when I realized that there was more than a little bit of undressing in that gaze as well.

"You're a very rare specimen," Lucifer told me. "No wonder I could sense so much power buried inside you. A demon and an angel, all in one tidy package. There are so many delightful things that I could do with you, Natasha."

Next to me, Domenico was practically shaking with rage. I brushed my gloved hand against his again.

"Rogelio's a special little thing all by himself, of course," Lucifer said. "Such a good bloodline. Very pure. Honestly, I wish I could claim him as my own. He would've been an infinitely more suitable heir than this waste of space." He waved a hand dismissively at Domenico, whose only reaction was a blink-and-you'll-miss-it eye roll.

"It's shocking, really, that you managed to marry so far above your station, given how much of a shit-for-brains you are," he told Domenico mildly, like he was having a casual conversation about the weather. "I know some things skip a generation, but it's incredible that you managed not to inherit even a single one of my strengths. You're practically a scientific



marvel, Domenico. My little baby boy, proving that there's always potential for a fucking dud, no matter how good the breeding stock."

Domenico's face had gone rigid, but he'd stopped shaking. It was pretty easy to tell that he was more comfortable being insulted than he was hearing me be insulted. "I'll remind you, Father," he said, his voice as cold and dark as the night around us, "that my magic was traded away because the woman you forced to marry you wanted to hurt you. Every second you spend dwelling on it is another second where she's beaten you. You may have driven her to suicide, but you'll never truly be rid of her." Domenico's smile was a brutal, ugly thing. "Any power you managed to give me was stripped away by her. You're not my only parent, *Father*. The blood of the woman who beat you is in my veins. I'm going to end what she started."

Lucifer's face spasmed, like he'd gotten so pissed off that he'd forgotten how to control his vessel's facial muscles for a moment. He was going beet-red with rage, which was his own fault, really. If he'd wanted to be able to hide shit like that, he should've known better than to occupy a redhead.

"You stupid little boy," Lucifer spat. "You have no idea what you're talking about. She's dead, you hear me? Dead. And you're just as useless to me as she was..." He ranted on and on, clearly building a head of steam. I figured he'd be going for a while, so I took advantage of the time to look around the square, trying to get a sense of what we'd be facing. I could see movement in the shadows around us. Husks were creeping out of the little side streets, clambering out of windows, sneaking out from behind buildings.

"Heads up," I murmured to the others. "They're all around us, and it looks like they're all kids." Rogelio nodded minutely, and I heard Zander and Manning step closer, slipping into a loose back-to-back formation.

The husks were staring at us. There were a lot of them, and they kept coming until they had practically formed living barricades in all the streets around us. My heart clenched hard in my chest. There were so many of them. So many kids whose lives had been turned upside down just because they wanted a fresh start and some money to send back home. I slipped my hand into my pocket, tugging the little pocket crossbow over my glove. I promised myself I would be as careful as I physically could be. They were still just kids, no matter how they looked. They didn't deserve the shit they'd been thrown into.

From the sounds of it, Lucifer's spiteful monologue was finally coming to a close. "Even a moron like you must have known that this day would come sooner than later," he was saying. "Your throne will be mine, Domenico. The world will be mine. Finally, *finally*, I'll get what I deserve, what my sanctimonious prick of a father was too short-sighted to give me. This is a war, my child. And it's a war that I'm going to win."

Lucifer paced down the steps of the small wooden church, his footfalls slow and deliberate. "I'm going to take everything you have, Domenico," he said softly. "And then I'm going to take your wife." He grinned, toothy and dead-eyed as a shark. "I thought the girl was interesting before, of course. But now? Now she's fascinating. I wonder if half-demons can die. I'll save testing out that little question for later, though. There are so many other tests to run first. I want to take her apart and see what makes her tick."

"That's enough," I said firmly.

"Don't interrupt me, brat," Lucifer snarled, whipping his head to look at me.

"I said that's enough," I repeated. I pulled out my spear and extended it to its full length, slamming the butt of it onto the frozen cobblestones beneath our feet. "I'm not available for the taking."

All the color drained out of Lucifer's face instantly. "Where did you get that spear?" he demanded. "It should be gone. I destroyed it with my own hands. I destroyed it!" His face contorted into a monstrous snarl, and he lurched backward like a badly controlled puppet.

"Attack them!" he shouted to the husks hiding in the shadows. "Destroy the spear but don't hurt the wielder."

He met my eyes. I tilted my head up in challenge and clenched my jaw.

"Kill the others," he snarled. "But bring the girl to me."

## Chapter 15

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## *Domenico*

I glared at my father, letting my anger burn through me. How dare he? How dare he try to hurt Natasha? I couldn't let him lay a finger on her. I knew, of course, that she was more than capable of looking after herself, but...she'd been such an unexpected force in my life, sweeping in and making everything immeasurably better. The idea of her being hurt made me feel like a starving man who'd been given a feast and then someone trying to steal it away. It made a feral, protective part of me roar and twist in my chest.

I poured every shred of my hatred into my stare as Lucifer's eyes met mine.

The husks swarmed around us like vermin, moving with inhuman speed and empty, hateful eyes. They were unsettlingly fast, lurching towards us on knobby legs, uncoordinated but too riled up to let that stop them. The sheer number of them quickly hid Lucifer from our view. I knew there was no way he would stay and fight; he'd always hated getting his hands dirty. He would be leaving, then. I tried to keep track of him, but it was impossible to hear his footsteps over the shrieks and strange, rattling hisses of the boys. I didn't think he'd go far unless he saw the tide of the fight starting to turn against him, but I didn't have time to worry about that now.

I yanked my crossbow into place and jammed a dart into it, managing to fire just before a husk leapt at me. He staggered and tried to rally, but then his eyes went glassy, and his snarl became half-hearted. He stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Fire at will," I barked to my team. "Remember, minimum damage, and stay in formation! We can't let them separate us!"

The unsettlingly animalistic sounds of the boys were joined by the hiss of darts cutting through the air. One of the boys managed to lurch a bit too close, and Manning threw up one of his golden shields with a practiced gesture, giving himself time to reload, aim, and fire. On my other side, there was a rough noise as Natasha collapsed her spear. I shot her a surprised glance, and she shook her head.

"I can turn them afterward," she said, raising her voice over the sounds of the fight. "I'm not used to using a spear with people behind me, and I don't want to accidentally whack one of our guys in the legs. Besides, I need both hands free to use the crossbow."

I nodded. "Good call."

I let myself fall into the simple mechanics of the fight, although it seemed unfair to call it that. The boys didn't seem to care at all about defending themselves, and they just ran at us blindly. As long as we were quick enough to shoot them down before they could reach us, things were relatively simple, and it got easier as the ring of unconscious bodies around us grew larger and larger.

It became a straightforward pattern: pull back the string of the crossbow until the latch clicked, grab a dart, load, and fire. Even aiming was unnecessary since wherever I looked, there was another husk. Speed was more important than accuracy.

At first, the husks just clambered over their fallen companions, but the pile of them grew as they passed out on top of each other, forming a sort of gruesome makeshift barricade. I tried to remind myself that the boys were just unconscious, not dead. It made things slightly better, but it was still hard to stomach the fact that I was essentially using brainwashed teenagers as cover.

One of the boys reached over the bodies toward me, flailing in a way that looked oddly self-conscious. I fired a dart into his chest, and he slumped, his face squishing into another unconscious husk's back. Next to me, Natasha spat out a curse, and I had to force myself not to turn all my attention to her.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The stupid string on my crossbow broke. I have to switch to the spear," she told me, sounding annoyed but not, I was relieved to hear, worried. She pushed a bundle of darts into my hand. "Here, take my extra ammo."

“Did everyone hear that?” I asked, raising my voice over the noise of the fight. “Natasha’s switching to the spear. Extra darts are with me if you need them.”

“Yessir,” Zander said distractedly, reloading his crossbow. Rogelio just grunted in reply, and Manning reached over to grab a few tranquilizer darts.

Natasha extended her spear and began to jab it over the barrier. It sank into the chests of the husks without leaving a mark, and as they fell, their rough demonic skin was already starting to fall away, leaving pale human skin behind.

There were barely any of them left standing. The ones who were still upright looked strangely nervous, like barking dogs that were starting to get worried that someone would bark back. It was almost painfully easy to take them out. It didn’t feel like a victory.

The last boy fell to his knees, and the little town square was still and quiet. Around us, the ground was littered with unconscious bodies, husk and newly-transformed human alike. Lucifer was nowhere to be seen.

I hissed out a curse between my teeth and turned, searching the darkened streets around us for any sign of him. Just as I’d expected, my search was completely fruitless. My father must have taken advantage of the chaos to make his exit. I couldn’t find it in me to be surprised. He’d always preferred to run and regroup instead of making a stand.

We began to heft the unconscious boys off each other, laying them down on the snowy cobblestones as gently as we could. For once, the cold was to our benefit. With their breaths fogging the air, we didn’t even have to check their pulses.

My team wasn’t alone, though. I could hear the crunch of boots in the snow coming down one of the side streets, and I spun to face it, sliding another dart into my crossbow. The footsteps were slow, measured, and far steadier than any of the husks had been.

Soon the source of the sound came into view. There was an old woman coming down the street toward us, apparently unfazed by the heap of unconscious teenagers filling up the center of the town square. She had bright green eyes and a red wool hat with a reindeer pattern on it. She was familiar, I realized. We’d spoken to her before the fight, and she’d warned us that we were being watched. I lowered my arm but left the crossbow cocked.

“If you are looking for the *perseennuolija*, he’s already gone and fucked off,” she said serenely, as if chatting about the weather and not insulting my father. I didn’t mind, of course. I’d always had a firmly held belief that my father should be insulted as much as possible.

I blinked at her. “What?” I said dumbly.

“The slimy one,” she said impatiently. “He’s fucked off.”

“Yes, he tends to do that,” I managed.

“Yes, I thought he might,” she said, then pulled her gloves off with brisk, businesslike movements and knelt next to a few of the unconscious kids. She checked each of their pulses in turn, then nodded approvingly. “Very good. The children are alive. Different now, changed, but alive. The thing inside that man’s body would have seen them dead without a care in the world.” She gave me a brisk nod. “Thank you. You are not like him.”

“I try my best. We’re here to—wait, did you see where he went?” I asked her. She’d managed to get me off-kilter, although that hadn’t taken much effort; I had been fairly off-kilter to begin with.

She looked up at me. Her eyes were cool, shrewd, and green as a cat’s. They almost seemed to glow in the low light of the town square. “No,” she said eventually. “But I can’t feel him anymore. He was like...the smell of a storm coming. Now he is gone.”

Nearby, the others were checking the fallen boys. Natasha gripped the Soul Spear and began to use it on each husk. The old woman watched her with a calm, clinical look as the boys began to change, as if taking mental notes to refer back to later.

“You could sense him?” I asked the woman.

She nodded. “I can sense all of you. I’ve always been able to sense the *piru*. And I can tell that these boys are no longer touched by that rancid magic.” She gently smoothed the hair back from one boy’s forehead and stood. Her knees creaked like a wooden ship at sea.

“Katariina Laine,” she said, sticking out a knobby-knuckled hand. “I am the *tietäjä*. The...how do you say...cunning woman, if you like.”

“Domenico,” I said, putting my hand in hers. “A *piru*, but hopefully not a *perseennuolija*.”

Katariina’s eyebrow raised appraisingly, but her handshake was firm and warm. It was clear that she worked with her hands and equally clear that she wasn’t someone who felt the need to turn a handshake into a pissing match.

“Always an honor to meet one of the wise ones,” I added in rusty Finnish that was probably a few centuries out of date, bowing my head to her.

I’d met people like Katariina before, but not many, and I’d never gotten to know them well. Humans with the sight were rare, especially these days. I’d always taken care to treat them with cautious respect and a polite degree of distance. Back in the old days, many of them had become hedge witches and wise women, making herbal medicines and helping the locals with their problems. Most of them had learned to deliver a child and a calf with equal ease, and many had learned how much belladonna it took to help a woman who kept coming to them with bruises. A few berries slipped into the husband’s food usually did the trick, one healer had told me over a bottle of eye-wateringly strong mead. I knew better than to underestimate them, no matter how sweet and nonthreatening they pretended to be.

Katariina looked from me to the boys and back again before nodding to herself. “I think you may be a *roisto*, but you are not a *perseennuolija*. You have my blessing to stay in my territory, and I will let you and your people help me fix this. Most of these boys are from this town, and many of the ones who aren’t are still locals. A few of them I do not know, but I will ask around.”

“You’re taking all of this in stride,” I remarked.

The cunning woman shrugged, tugging her gloves back on. “It is my responsibility to help my people. All of them, even the *piru*. Even these boys who used to be *piru*. Human or no, no parents should have to mourn their children. I will get them home if I can, and I will find ways to help the ones who have no homes to go back to.”

“And the other people who live here would be willing to help you with that?” I asked curiously.

“It is a very small town,” Katariina said. “It is easier to overlook differences you may have with your neighbors when you need more hands to help with the harvest.”

Now that the sounds of the fight had died down, some of the townspeople were beginning to creep out of their homes to see what all the commotion had been about. There was a gasp from behind me, and a tall, lanky man ran into the square. He scooped up one of the boys and cradled him in his arms. The two of them had the same cheekbones, the same nose, and the same floppy, straw-colored hair.



“Veeti,” he gasped. “Veeti, my boy, my *poikakulta*.” The man looked up at Natasha, his eyes wide with shock and gratitude. “You healed him. You healed my son. *Kiitos*. Thank you!”

“I helped him the best way I could,” Natasha told him quietly, crouching next to him. “But he’s going to be...different, now. I’m so sorry. It was the only thing I could do for him.”

“I don’t care,” the man said, immediate and fierce. “I have my son back. I thought that...” He trailed off, rocking back and forth with the boy in his arms, as if he could still soothe his son like a baby. He smoothed the kid’s blond hair back and pressed a kiss to his forehead for a long moment.

He and Natasha began to speak to each other quietly, and I turned away to give them some semblance of privacy. It was a relief to see a demon embrace his newly human son so unconditionally, but I still felt a pang of grief. The wise woman’s words rose in my mind: no parents should have to mourn their children. But the parents of these boys would have to, sooner or later. Their sons would age. They would be changed by the world in a way that demons rarely were. They would go off and live human lives, and one day, they would come back to visit and look older than their parents ever would. They would die human deaths, and their immortal parents would bury them in human graves. But for now, the boys were still breathing, and I could only hope that would be enough.

I looked over the town square, where more and more people had found their missing loved ones. Scattered across the snowy cobbles, they hugged their sons and brothers and cousins to their chests, a dozen pietàs in bobble hats and winter coats. Every one of them wore a look of joy and love and gratitude so intense that it nearly hurt to look at. They had already lost those boys once, I realized. They had already worried, and some of them must have already mourned. Borrowed time was better than no time at all.

Katariina went to help one of the families, looking for all the world like some sort of supernatural first responder. There was a light tap on my arm, and I turned.

“Boss,” Zander said, “Manning and I can stay here and help get the kids back to their homes. You should probably get Natasha somewhere private... she’s starting to look a bit...” He wiggled a hand back and forth with a slight wince and a worried glance in her direction.

He was right, I realized. Natasha looked faintly gray and was leaning on her spear like it was the only thing keeping her on her feet. I mentally

kicked myself for not noticing it sooner, but I knew she would have wanted me to focus on the newly-turned boys before trying to take care of her.

“Good looking out,” I said, clapping Zander on the shoulder. “Thank you. I’ll take her back to the cabins, but let us know if you need reinforcements, alright? I know Cristiano and Rogelio aren’t exactly the most naturally gifted at bedside manner, but...”

“We’ll be okay,” Zander said. “Especially with the witch lady helping. Or, uh...” He glanced over his shoulder, where Katariina was staring at Rogelio with an incredibly steely expression. As we watched, she gestured pointedly at the unconscious boys, and Rogelio sheepishly put out his cigarette. “With us helping her, from the looks of it. I’m pretty sure she’s in charge now.”

As soon as we got back to the campground, Rogelio pulled me aside, keeping me from following Natasha into our cabin. She didn’t seem to notice, which only made me worry about her more.

“I need to have a word with you,” he told me quietly.

“Go on,” I said, a little impatiently, tearing my eyes away from Natasha’s retreating back. Facing my father without warning was draining enough, but the pivot to seeing families crying with joy at the sight of their healed sons had left me completely exhausted. There was also a millennia-old bit of hurt worming its way through me, and I was too tired to suppress it the way I usually did. I truly wasn’t in the mood to deal with any of Rogelio’s mind games.

“I think you two should go back to Vegas,” Rogelio said.

I blinked at him. I didn’t know what I had been expecting, but it certainly hadn’t been that. “I’m listening,” I said, still somewhat cautious.

“Lucifer knows that Natasha has the Soul Spear now,” he said. “You saw the look on his face when he saw it. That prick is scared, and that’s not necessarily a good thing for us. Any hunter worth a damn will tell you that animals are at their most dangerous when you have them backed into a corner.”

“You think he’s going to move up his timeline,” I said.

“I think it’s a very real possibility,” Rogelio said. “And it’s one that we would be foolish not to prepare for. Right now, your territory is vulnerable. Trust me, I know how a mean bastard thinks. If I were in his shoes, I’d do something big on your turf. Make a big statement, go all shock and awe

right in your hometown. He'd be able to spread fear and make you look weak at the same time."

I stared at the woods around us, considering. "You're right," I said finally. "It's time to go home."

## Chapter 16

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## *Natasha*

The next morning was freezing cold, bright but cloudy in a way that turned the whole sky a pale, gloomy shade of gray, like someone had forgotten to make weather happen that day.

I was in the cabin Domenico and I were sharing, nursing a big ceramic mug of shitty instant coffee beside the fire. I was willing to bet that the mug was from Ikea—I'd lived in enough cheap hotels, student hostels, and pre-furnished studio apartments to recognize a *Färgrök* when I saw one. The coffee was bland but somehow still incredibly bitter. It left a weird taste in my mouth, but it was getting the job done. I'd found the dusty little canister of grounds in the back of a cabinet. It had been expired since 2016, and the granules were a little gray and barely had any smell to them, but I needed all the caffeine I could get. After everything that had happened in the village, I hadn't managed to get much sleep last night.

I'd tried to get some rest, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw the faces of the boys I'd turned human. Intellectually, I knew that I had done the right thing. Hell, I had done the only thing I could do in the circumstances, but it was still a weight on me. It barely helped that I'd seen how much the parents appreciated me. It barely helped that Katariina had agreed that I'd saved the boys' lives by changing them. I knew all too well what it was like to have the life you knew torn away from you when you were still young.

I had to keep reminding myself that this situation was different. I was helping these boys, getting them away from a lunatic who was all too happy to use them and toss them aside. I just couldn't make myself forget that they were just kids, young and skinny and foolish. They'd listened to Lucifer

because they were desperate for a change and felt like they were out of choices. Now I'd taken away something that they could never get back.

It wasn't surprising, then, that when we'd gotten back to the cabins, I'd gone off on my own. I'd shut myself in the cabin's little bathroom and focused on my breathing. In through the nose for five seconds, out through the mouth for five seconds, hold for five seconds. It was a trick I'd picked up at a walk-in clinic. I'd needed treatment for an infected stab wound left by a faster-than-average demon, and one of the people next to me had been in the middle of a panic attack. Their friend had talked them through it in a low, calm voice—in through the nose, out through the mouth, hold. I had run through the cycle a couple of times in the cramped cabin bathroom until the knot of dread-guilt-shame-sadness in my chest had started to loosen a little.

Now, though, every time I managed to turn my thoughts away from the kids, another horrible memory popped up: the way Lucifer had looked at me. It made my skin crawl, even hours after it had happened. The scientific curiosity was bad enough, but the lust in his eyes had made it so much worse. I tried not to think about what he might do if he ever managed to get his hands on me, but it was hard to suppress. My mind was full of scalpels, syringes, and probing, grasping hands. I shuddered and took another sip of my awful coffee.

Outside, the others were loading bags and boxes into the back of the rental car. It felt weird, thinking about how we'd showed up, completely changed so many people's lives, and now we were leaving again. All those families would have to figure out how to deal with a completely new reality, and they would do it without our help. It didn't seem to bother the guys, or if it did, they were doing a great job of hiding it. Maybe it was different for them. They hadn't been the ones to change everything for those boys, after all. Hell, maybe they'd just lived so long and lost so many people that it didn't hit them the same way anymore. The kids were still alive. Maybe they were just counting that as a win and moving on with their lives.

As I watched, Cristiano's foot cracked through a thick crust of ice, plunging deep into the frozen slush underneath. When he tried to pull his leg out, his boot stayed behind, and he began trying to tug the drenched boot free while balancing on one leg, wobbling violently. His sock was

neon purple, and it stuck out like a sore thumb against the bright white snow.

Manning was suppressing a smile as he watched Cristiano flail. Rogelio wasn't even trying to hide how funny he found the whole thing, cackling so hard that his whole face had gone beet red.

I breathed in for five, out for five, held for five. I watched the weird family I'd found act like idiots. Cristiano's sock was vibrantly purple against the snow, like the first crocus pushing up in the spring.

The boys were still alive. They would have a chance to heal.

I heard footsteps behind me, and then Domenico's warm, solid arms wrapped around me. I leaned back against the solid bulk of him, closing my eyes as he pressed a kiss to my temple. "Are you up for company?" he asked. I could feel the rumble of his chest against my back. As a treat to myself, I shamelessly groped one of his biceps, and I could feel his chest shake against me as he laughed silently.

"Yeah, I think so," I said. I had needed plenty of time alone to decompress and get myself back together; I loved Domenico more than anything, but I was still getting used to having another person by my side all the time. Now that I had had a chance to put the first few pieces of myself back together, I was ready to let someone else help with the rest of the puzzle. "It's just all a lot to handle, you know? I was barely keeping it together when it was just about saving the world. The human transformation thing is way more than I can process right now, and it fucking sucks that I just have to keep doing it, no matter how I feel about it."

I let out a shuddering breath, and Domenico squeezed me gently, one of his hands settling over mine where it was still wrapped around his arm. "And I'm really scared?" I said, my voice going high and quivery on the last word no matter how hard I fought to keep it level. "I'm really fucking scared that your dad is going to manage to...to separate me from you guys somehow, and he's gonna—" I wiped at my face roughly. When had I started crying?

Domenico took my coffee cup and set it down, then hugged me close. I buried my face in his neck as he stroked my hair, letting myself shake. Every now and then, a jagged sob tore itself free from my chest, and every time he went still, as if he was holding himself back from squeezing me tighter when he didn't know if it would be too much.

“We won’t let that happen,” he promised. “Natasha, you’re an incredible fighter, and you have a weapon that can defeat Lucifer. You’re more than capable of protecting yourself. But you know what the best part is?” He pulled back enough to look me in the eye, his hands on my shoulders. “You don’t have to,” he said firmly. “You don’t have to protect yourself single-handed. I would do anything to keep you safe. Anything. You know that, don’t you? And I intend to keep proving it over and over until you know it instinctively. It’s not just me, either. All of us are looking out for you.”

Domenico gestured out the window, where the situation had somehow devolved into Zander playing keep-away with Cristiano’s rescued snow boot. Zander kept teleporting away, just out of reach, and Cristiano was hopping after him with handfuls of snow, trying to chuck them at the other demon. Both of them were cackling.

“Those demons out there would move mountains to protect you,” Domenico told me. “Every single one of them thinks you’re fantastic. So does Lizbeth. So does Emiko. There are a lot of very powerful people who are going to do everything they can to keep you safe.”

I pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. He hadn’t shaved yet, and the prickle of his stubble was a sharp contrast to the plush warmth of his lips. “Thank you,” I said, soft and serious.

“Any time,” Domenico said, looking down at me with so much love in his eyes that it gave me butterflies in my stomach. It made me feel like a blushing teenager, not a married adult woman capable of incredible violence. I kissed him again, properly this time, and he cupped my face in his hands as he kissed me back.

When we broke apart, I tangled our hands together. A snowball hit our window with a thump, and I flipped Cristiano off through the white powder that had splatted across the glass. He shrugged, unrepentant, and went back to trying to hit Zander, who was hiding behind an amused-looking Manning. Every time a snowball got anywhere close to them, Manning popped one of his shields into place, and the snow bounced off it, falling harmlessly to the ground.

“What do you think, should we break things up out there?” Domenico asked, watching his best and brightest lieutenants wreak havoc.

“Nah,” I said. “Let them have some fun. God knows all of us need to blow off some steam, and it’s not like they’ll hurt each other.”

“You’re right,” he said. “I’ve been asking a lot of them lately.”



“Uh, yeah, because there’s a war that we’re in the middle of,” I pointed out. “It’s not like you’re trying to push them just for shits and giggles. They chose to follow you, and they chose to do this with you. They’re pretty ride or die.”

“Sometimes I just wonder if I’m really suited for this,” Domenico admitted quietly. “There are...aspects of being a king that I struggle with.”

“Hey, you know how you just gave me a big talk about how the people close to me want to help me?” I said. “Imagine I just did a whole speech like that for you.”

Domenico snorted, and I flicked him on the arm. “We can help you, dummy,” I said fondly. “What do you think you’re not good at? Is it delegating? Because if so, getting someone else to help with that might be kind of a struggle.”

“It’s not delegating,” Domenico said, giving me an amused look. “In wartime, it benefits a leader to be...well, a bit of a conniving bastard. My father is a devious prick, and I’m just not equipped to outmaneuver him. Clearly, he’s willing to go to extremes that I’d never sink to, and I’m not a strong enough tactician to overcome that.”

“If only we knew a conniving bastard,” I said, looking pointedly out the window at Rogelio.

“Ah,” Domenico said. Then, a moment later, “Huh. Yeah, it would probably help to have his input more often, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe just a little bit,” I teased. “Hey, Lucifer seemed pretty freaked out by seeing him. And all that stuff he said about Rogelio being special, what was that about?”

“Well,” Domenico began, then quickly cut himself off. Cristiano had accidentally gotten Rogelio square in the face with a massive snowball, and Rogelio was wiping the snow out of his eyes with a rigid fury. Then he began grinning, wide and predatory, as he channeled his magic and made his balled fists catch fire. He stalked toward Cristiano, and Domenico sighed.

“Okay,” I said, “Now it’s probably time to break it up.”

I sat on the sofa and watched the boys argue as Domenico went outside to calm things down. I considered holding my still-full coffee mug, just for the cozy warmth of it in my hands, but I didn’t want to risk getting distracted and taking another sip without thinking.

I was about to text Emiko when my phone buzzed. One of my news alerts had sent me something. I clicked on it and froze, my blood going cold in my veins. Quickly, I stuck my head out the door.

“Guys!” I barked. “Inside. Now!”

To their credit, none of the demons asked any questions. They piled into the cabin immediately, all their silly schoolyard fighting forgotten.

I turned on the TV and flipped through channels until I found a news station. The text on the screen was all in Finnish, but it didn’t matter. The shaky video playing on the screen spoke for itself.

It showed hundreds of full-grown, feral husk demons charging through New York City’s Times Square in broad daylight.

## Chapter 17

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## *Natasha*

It went without saying that our plans had to change pretty quickly after that. It was lucky that we had already packed our things, and our shit was mostly loaded into the car.

Things went incredibly tense and weird. I volunteered to drive us all to the airport since I figured I had the least to contribute when it came to using demon political connections. The others went into damage control mode, calling and messaging and refreshing the news frantically. There was barely a pause to get onto the plane, with Rogelio counting out an eye-wateringly large stack of crisp bills for each security guard who was supposed to check our bags.

We strode through the airport until we reached the terminal. It was a small enough airport that there were only two terminals, so it didn't take long. This was good news because none of us were feeling all that patient.

Once we were on board, there was a flurry of activity as all the demons grabbed whatever tech they had with them and set up makeshift workstations. Domenico paced up and down the length of the plane, head up and shoulders back, like he was forcing himself to look as composed and in control as physically possible.

"Zander, Manning, you know our command structure the best. I need you to take point on coordinating the defenses in America. Get in touch with all the regional leaders. I want all of them on the same page, prepared and ready to react the instant we get word of another attack. Ask me if they have any major questions that you're not sure how to answer, but for everything else, I trust your judgment. Is that clear?"

“Yes, sir,” Zander and Manning said. All of the casual teasing and familiarity had gone out of them, and suddenly there was no forgetting that they’d been higher-ups for the most powerful demon in the world for a very long time. They looked professional and calm, and there was a surprisingly dangerous glint in Zander’s eyes.

“Good,” Domenico said, giving them a brisk nod and turning on his heel to face Cristiano. “I want you to reach out to all your contacts and get every single scrap of intel that you can. The instant any of them see anything even slightly suspicious, they are to contact you. Bribe them if you have to—you have the full extent of my resources at your disposal. If any of them are resistant to that bribery, don’t shy away from threats. Burn bridges if you have to, because if you don’t use those connections now, you may never get a chance to use them again.”

“On it,” Cristiano said, immediately turning to his laptop.

“Natasha,” Domenico said, “I need you on research. Keep an eye on the news and on social media. We need to keep track of this as it evolves. Not just information on the attacks, but the public opinion and emergency response as well.”

“Sure,” I said. “Can somebody let me borrow—” I started, but Zander was already pressing his laptop into my hands. “Thanks,” I told him.

“Rogelio,” Domenico said.

Rogelio looked so alert that it was honestly worrying. I hadn’t thought anything could shake him out of the easy, relaxed confidence that he wore like a much-loved jacket. He was a man who was simply built to slouch. Seeing him at attention like a career soldier was jarring. It made the threat we were facing seem much more real.

“Rogelio,” Domenico said again, “you’re our best liar.”

“Thanks,” Rogelio replied.

Domenico’s expression went pinched, but he didn’t let himself lose focus. “I need you to come up with a PR strategy. There’s no way to gloss over this, but the news doesn’t have solid answers yet. Telling people that demons are real and around them at all times will cause even more widespread panic, which is exactly what my father wants. We have to minimize this as much as possible. We need a comfortable lie to tell the humans, and you’re the best demon for the job.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Rogelio said. “And I can reach out to some people. I’ve got some...associates...who can get in touch with the higher-

ups at a few of the major news organizations. If I can dip into some of that bribe money you're letting Cristiano use, I can probably get stories tweaked, maybe even delayed."

"What about you?" I asked Domenico. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll be keeping in touch with the other kings. Right now, they need my leadership, and I need their strategic input and resources on the ground. It would be foolish to assume that these public attacks will be limited to America, and I want to make sure we're coordinating our responses together."

Quickly, the plane was filled with voices as everyone threw themselves headlong into their jobs, talking into their phones urgently in a wide range of languages.

The back portion of the plane was walled off to make a small bedroom. Set into the side of the wall that faced out into the main room was a large TV screen. I turned it on and set it to the first news station I could find that was in English, then dropped the volume low. I settled into one of the big leather club chairs that faced the television and cracked open Zander's laptop to get to work. His background was a photo of an incredibly put-upon-looking Manning being swarmed by tiny white kittens, one of which was making a valiant effort to climb onto the top of his head. I made a mental note to tease both of them about it when we weren't dealing with the potential end of the world.

In a way that wouldn't have surprised anyone who'd ever spent too much time on the internet, people weren't handling the attack all that well. Tweets from religious leaders ("Repent and turn to the Lord for your #salvation before the #endtimes") were interspersed with posts from the terminally online ("life hack: if you get k-worded on your way to work then you don't have to pay off your student loans. hope this helps <3"). The governor of New York had officially declared a state of emergency, and it seemed like the president was going to make the emergency national. Pundits were talking about martial law. A former mayor of New York City was trying to get back into the press circuit in a clumsy attempt to make himself relevant. Every time I saw a clip of him, he looked even more sweaty and ghoulish than before, like a piece of old lunch meat that had been left out in the summer sun.

"ok as the resident horny bitch im gonna say what we're all thinking," one tweet read. "obviously the monster attack thing is bad but like what sort

of dick situation do you think they got going on down there?" I stared at the tweet for a long time, then resignedly clicked "like."

"Well, there does seem to be some good news," Rogelio told me and Domenico. "All of the husks I've spotted in the news clips so far look like adults."

"He was using the kids as a distraction," I realized. "To give him time to train the grown-ups to fight well. Christ, the kids are just cannon fodder to him."

"It seems like that's the case, yes," Rogelio said. "In every clip that I've been able to find, the husks in New York are fighting completely differently than the boys we faced before. There's intent there. Strategy. They may be half-feral, but they're being positioned and deployed by someone who knows what they're doing."

"Which means it'll be a lot harder to pull our punches," Domenico said grimly.

"We don't even know if the tranq darts will work on adults," Rogelio said. "They're bigger, bulkier, more resilient. I don't think it would be a good idea for us to count on the darts working on them. We need to bring out the big guns for this."

"Which big guns?" I asked. I patted the spear at my side. "You mean this guy?"

"No," Domenico said quietly, not meeting my eyes. "He doesn't mean the spear."

"I didn't know we had other big guns," I said.

"It's not...it's too risky," Domenico told Rogelio.

Rogelio sighed like a disappointed school teacher and pinched the bridge of his nose before straightening back up. "Domenico, the whole situation is risky. Letting it continue has the potential to claim countless lives, demon and human both. You're supposed to be a leader, aren't you? And that means you have a responsibility to your people. If you're not willing to use the tools at your disposal to protect them, then you don't deserve their obedience, and you sure as shit don't deserve their respect."

He was standing now and had gotten right into Domenico's space. Domenico snarled at him, refusing to back down.

"This is bigger than you," Rogelio continued. "And this is bigger than your daddy issues. You may not be willing to accept who you really are, but

that's not a luxury I can afford. I know who I am. I know what I'm capable of. And I know that I'm going to use it to protect my fucking daughter."

"That's not the same," Domenico said tightly. "You know it's not."

"Why?" Rogelio spat. "Because I'm a bad guy? Because I've done bad things? Get your head out of your ass, Domenico. It's a fucking war! It's not about ideological purity or some shit; it's about the body count. I know you think I'm a bastard, and you're right about that, but at least I recognize who I am. I'm going to fight, and I'm going to hurt people, and at the end of the day, I'll be able to live with myself. But if you back down, if you run away from this because you're too fucking scared to use your full strength, then you'd be worse than a coward. You'd be proving that you're exactly who your father thinks you are. So get your shit together and fight for what you love before it's taken from you!"

Domenico and Rogelio were nose to nose now, panting like they'd just run a race. The plane had gone very quiet around them. Then there was a sudden blur of motion. Domenico's fist connected with Rogelio's jaw with a visceral crack of flesh on flesh. Rogelio's head was snapped to the side by the impact, blood and spittle flying from his mouth. A few droplets hit the wall, dripping down the window and leaving blood-red streaks over the view of the clouds below us.

Domenico stalked past us into the sectioned-off back room and slammed the door behind him. In the middle of the plane, Rogelio spat out a goblet of bloody saliva. He rubbed a hand over his jaw, grinning like a lunatic.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked.

"That was me getting him angry enough to bring out the big guns," Rogelio said with a self-satisfied cackle.



## Chapter 18

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## *Natasha*

JFK International was in absolute chaos. As soon as we got off the plane, it was like being hit by a wall of sound. Everywhere I looked, there was a vignette of some of the most stressed people I had ever seen, like a Bosch painting but with more suitcases. There were kids crying all over the place, adults arguing, harried-looking airline reps trying to hold their own in the face of pissed-off New Yorkers. I saw a couple of people shoving handfuls of money at the people manning the desks, trying to pay their way into not getting kicked off their overbooked flights. A woman rushed past us, sobbing into her phone so hard that it seemed like she could barely breathe. She almost ran into a middle-aged couple in matching light-wash jeans and bright red fanny packs. The man caught her elbow and gently steered her aside with an “Ope, gotta watch where you’re goin’ there, bud” that the woman barely managed to respond to.

“Mommy loves you,” she said into the phone between wracking sobs. “I love you so much, baby. I’m going to be home soon, okay?” Another shuddering sob that she tried to muffle. “Be good for your dad, alright? Will you promise me?”

The arrival screens dotted throughout the airport had been switched over to show waiting passengers the news, where a frazzled-looking Anderson Cooper was reporting that emergency shelters for evacuees had been set up in New Jersey, Connecticut, and upstate New York. Clips of busses packed full of escaping locals streaming through the streets played next to him, of people leaping onto waiting ferries and tugboats, of traffic streaming out of the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels as all lanes opened to

getting the hell out of Manhattan. The bridges were clogged with cars; people were abandoning vehicles and simply running.

And then it cut to scenes of the attacking mass of demons tearing through the city. Tanks were rolling down the streets toward them, but the demons were either too far gone to care about the humans' attempt to defend themselves or strong enough to not give a shit. Maybe one in ten demons who got shot went down, with most of them back on their feet almost immediately.

I shuddered. Where the hell were all of the demon hunters? Last I'd heard, there were at least two dozen clans operating out of New York City, but all I could see on the footage was the military response.

"Well, this is about as organized as I thought it would be," Domenico muttered dryly to me. "Alright, we need to stick together and find the path of least resistance."

Staring down the crowd flooding the airport terminal, Domenico took point. Rogelio and I took up position on either side of him, with Zander and Manning behind us and Cristiano hiding somewhere in the middle. I wasn't afraid to make heavy use of my sharp elbows, and neither were Domenico or Rogelio, so the three of us pressed forward relentlessly in a wedge formation. I couldn't help but think of a cowcatcher, the angled grate on the front of old-fashioned trains that shoved stuff off the tracks before it could derail the train.

The other demons huddled close behind us as we carved a path through the crowd to where the same type of sleek black car that I'd gotten very used to being shepherded into in the past few months was waiting for us. The driver peeled away from the curb as soon as we were all loaded in, dodging and weaving between cabs and pedestrians.

The mood in the car was tense and quiet. Several demons were on their phones, either checking in with contacts or restlessly scanning the news. Rogelio was staring out the window, his fingers fidgeting in a way that meant he was missing the days of indoor smoking. If I spent the whole ride sitting in twitchy silence, my brain would start melting, so I pulled out my phone and checked some of the demon hunter groups I lurked on online.

It didn't look good. The hunters who had tried to jump in and fix things had been immediately shut down by the authorities, labeled as fringe weirdos with a reckless vigilante streak. A whole clan of hunters in Hell's Kitchen had been put in protective custody and had only managed to escape

when a pair of husks had thrown a Kia through the wall of the jail. Luckily, the car was empty at the time.

I'd never exactly had what you could call a good relationship with the other hunters; they were so dedicated to the clan structure that I'd always been seen as...well, a fringe weirdo with a reckless vigilante streak. Still, a part of me had hoped that they'd see what was going on and rise to the occasion. I felt a pang of sympathy for them. I was way too familiar with what it felt like to be kept out of a fight that you'd spent years preparing for.

"The hunters have been sidelined," I said quietly. "We're on our own for this one."

Domenico nodded absently. His posture was rigid, the way it was when he was so stressed that he defensively retreated into king mode, like if he projected enough authority, no one would notice that he was spiraling. He had barely been willing to acknowledge Rogelio's existence since their fight in the air. In all honesty, I still wasn't sure if it could even be called a fight. It seemed more like Rogelio had intentionally and systematically pushed all of Domenico's buttons until he snapped. I wasn't used to seeing Domenico so closed off, and I wasn't sure if it was because he needed time to process or because he was trying to pull away. I would've been less worried about him if he was engaging with any of us, but he spent most of the ride staring at his hands. When I leaned against him, he didn't even look up, but he swayed into the touch a bit.

The further we got from the airport, the quieter the streets were. By the time we hit Tribeca, the whole place felt like a massive, glittering ghost town. The quiet had been one thing when it was in a tiny Nordic village with more livestock than people, but it was a completely different beast here. I hadn't spent much time in New York City, but even I knew that the place was supposed to be bustling with activity at all hours of the day. There was a vibrating sense of wrongness in the air that set my teeth on edge. It was like the city itself had been turned into a husk, too, drained until it was something dead-eyed and empty.

Eventually, our car pulled to a smooth stop outside a cluster of tall brick buildings. Their rows upon rows of windows were almost entirely dark. It was hard to shake the impression that each window was a huge, empty eye staring down at us. Maybe the tension in the car was getting to me, or maybe it was seeing the bustling city so empty, but either way, I was painfully aware of how on edge I was.

The last time I'd been to New York City was for my honeymoon. The city had seemed like one massive, sprawling creature, welcoming us with open (but admittedly gruff, handsy, and often weirdly greasy) arms. Now, it felt like we were inside its long-dead ribcage. I couldn't help but think of a scene in a documentary I'd watched a long time ago, where tiny crabs swarmed a beached whale and stripped away its flesh bite by bite.

"I'll take the guys and do a quick sweep of the penthouse, just in case," Cristiano said, snapping me out of my morbid mental spiral. "We'll let you know once we've made sure the place is secure. I'm sure the two of you have a lot to talk about," he added, shooting his cousin a pointed look.

"Are you okay?" I asked Domenico as soon as the car door slammed shut, leaving the two of us alone. He clearly wasn't, but I wanted to give him a chance to talk about it on his terms.

"You should stay behind," Domenico said at the same time.

I stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "What the fuck are you talking about?" I asked. My voice came out calm yet icy, and I could see Domenico suppress a wince.

"You should stay at the penthouse with Cristiano," he said. "Stay out of the fight. Let me and Rogelio deal with the husks."

Just like that, my concern was overwhelmed by anger and frustration that prickled hotly behind my eyes. If there had been room in the car to stand, I would have shot to my feet. As it was, I had to make do with balling my hands into fists so tight that my nails bit into the meat of my palms. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I spat. "How many times are we going to have this argument, Domenico? I can take care of myself. You know I can."

"It's not about that," Domenico said, raising his hands placatingly.

"It better fucking not be," I said coldly. "Alright. Explain."

"You're our ace in the hole," he said. "You're Gabriel's heir, and you're the only one who has access to his magic and his weapons. The demons attacking the city are a threat, but they're a symptom, not a cause. We can't risk losing you or your weapons in a fight that the rest of us could take care of. I know you hate having to sit by the sidelines, but you're too important to face every fight with us, Natasha."

I leaned back in my seat, some of the fight draining out of me. I unclenched my hands, rubbing at the little red crescent marks my nails had left behind.

“The fact of the matter is that we need you,” Domenico told me. “You’re the only one who can use the Soul Spear, and as far as we know, that’s the only thing that can kill my father. We can’t risk losing you in a battle when we need you to win the war. And to be completely honest? I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a part of me that wants to keep you far away from all of this, but it’s not because I don’t think you can take care of yourself in a fight. Believe me, I know you can. I’ve seen you in action. It’s because I love you, and it would kill me to lose you.”

I stared at him for a long moment. There was love in his eyes, yes, but there was also a steeliness that I wasn’t used to seeing directed at me. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Domenico was a king and had been ruling for thousands of years. This wasn’t one of those times. Right now, he was full of calm, determined power.

“Okay,” I said finally. “But I want it on the record that I still completely hate this.”

“Noted,” Domenico said, giving me a small, grateful smile. “I’ll admit that there’s also a less strategic reason that I don’t want you to be there for this fight. There are...aspects of me that I haven’t—”

He was cut off by the quiet creak of the car door swinging open, letting in a blast of cold air. Cristiano stuck his head into the car and gave us a thumbs-up. The other three demons were behind him, talking quietly while Rogelio rolled himself a cigarette with practiced hands.

“Penthouse is all clear,” Cristiano said. “What’s the plan, Dom?”

“Excellent,” Domenico said. “Natasha, Cristiano, you two stay here with Manning. Zander, Rogelio, and I will go deal with our husk problem.”

“Sounds good. Madam?” Cristiano said, offering me his arm with a ridiculous flourish.

I snorted and rolled my eyes at him, and he grinned unrepentantly. I took his arm to get out of the car and gave him a dumb little curtsy, which made his grin amp up past its usual toothpaste-commercial level to something much less practiced and much more charmingly dorky. His eyes creased into happy little crescent moons. I realized suddenly that somewhere along the line, I’d become deeply fond of Cristiano, even if I still thought he had the energy of someone’s dipshit little brother.

“Domenico,” I said, turning back to the car. “I love you. Be safe, okay?”

He raised a hand to my cheek, and I leaned into the warmth of his touch as he kissed me. “I will be. I promise. I love you, too, Natasha. So, so

much.” I tried to ignore how much that sounded like a goodbye.

I watched the car until it turned a corner and disappeared out of sight, then let Manning and Cristiano lead me inside. I couldn’t say that I really minded. The atmosphere on the streets still gave me the creeps. At least inside, I could have the creeps with Wi-Fi and plumbing.

The lobby of the building looked like it had last been redecorated when people were really, *really* into cocaine. The walls were mint green and salmon pink and covered with oversized Patrick Nagel prints in bulky Lucite frames. There was a bar on one side of the lobby, sectioned off by glass bricks with wavy patterns stamped into them. There were a disturbing number of palm fronds, which somebody had probably thought looked chic, but it just looked like that one bedroom from the *Golden Girls*.

“Holy shit,” I said, “This is a nightmare. Jesus, is that an ostrich feather chandelier?” And...wow. Yeah. It was. It was baby pink, too, and dangled from the lobby’s ceiling like a sick jellyfish or some sort of evil cloud. I was morbidly fascinated by it. “I cannot believe somebody thought that that was a good idea. Who the hell designed this place?”

Cristiano rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Look, it was the eighties. I got really into conversation pits. And, uh, other stuff. And the ostrich chandelier is classy!”

I stared up at the chandelier. It wasn’t. It extremely wasn’t.

“How do they dust it?” I wondered out loud. Cristiano just shrugged, which made sense. I was pretty sure he’d never cleaned anything in his life.

The penthouse, luckily, was a little more tasteful, although there were a lot of white shag rugs and mirrors for my taste. On one wall was a massive black and white painting of a zebra, easily six feet tall. It was positioned so that it stared down at the conversation pit with an expression of equine disdain. I tried not to think about the things the poor zebra must have seen here.

“Wow,” I said. “This is...definitely a look.”

“A lot of look,” Manning agreed faintly.

“Thank you,” Cristiano said with a complete lack of irony.

I flopped onto the rust-red ring of sofas that made up the conversation pit and reached for the remote. I might have been staying out of the fight, but I was sure as shit going to watch it.

“Wait,” Cristiano said. “There’s something you should probably—oh, shit...”

I'd found a news channel. There was shaky footage playing, clearly from a hand-held camera. It showed two figures, both in suits. One stood tall and proud. His hair was slicked back, and even from the shitty camera angle, I could see the way his warm brown eyes caught the light. The other was leaning casually against an abandoned car, lighting a cigarette with a touch of his finger.

I leaned forward, my eyes glued to the screen. As I watched, Domenico took a slow breath, then glanced at Rogelio, who nodded back. The camera went blurry for a moment, then zoomed in even closer. My breath caught in my throat. Whoever was unlucky enough to be behind the camera let out a ragged gasp, then clearly tried to muffle it to avoid drawing any attention. Their shaky breaths were loud enough to be picked up on the broadcast. Part of me was impressed that they'd had the mental space to clip on a microphone. Or maybe it was just journalistic instinct, the sort of automatic professional response that kicked on when shit went down.

Then any thoughts about the reporter were shoved out of my head. On the TV, Domenico was changing, a 4k HD nightmare. His body shifted and contorted, and suddenly he was taller, easily eight feet. He was broader in the shoulders, too, and the seams of his suit split, leaving the fabric to flap uselessly around thick arms corded with muscle. His legs had an odd shape to them, like they were bent back on themselves. His smooth tan skin had gone dark red. He bowed his head, hands pressed to his temples, and when he straightened, I couldn't hold back my gasp. His eyes were pure black, with dark spidery veins spreading across the skin around them. When he panted for breath, I could see a pair of sharp-looking fangs jutting down.

Two long, curving red horns had sprouted from his head, nearly meeting in a circle. They looked for all the world like a jagged, broken halo.



## Chapter 19

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## *Domenico*

I couldn't stop thinking about the anger on Natasha's face when I told her that she had to stay behind. I'd told her the truth about why I wanted her to stay out of this particular fight, but I hadn't told her the whole truth. There were parts of me that I kept locked away, buried so deep under the facade of a respectable (well, semi-respectable) businessman that, on the good days, I could forget about them entirely. Parts that I hadn't managed to come to terms with, even after thousands of years.

So much of who I was, who I had chosen to shape myself into, was bound up in the idea of being as different from my father as possible. Where he had been cold and ruthless, I had forced myself to be fair and balanced, even when my instincts screamed at me to be brutal. The part of me that I kept hidden was...well, demonic. Not the kind of demonic that loved gossip, trickery, and silly power plays, but the part that was truly dark. The part that humans told their little children cautionary tales about. And these weren't the cautionary tales about the dangers of making deals with well-dressed men at the crossroads. These were the stories about blood on the snow and creatures made of claws and teeth and malice.

Rogelio had been right. I knew it, even if I hated to admit it. It was my duty to use that cruel, vicious part of me. I also knew I wouldn't be able to hide it from Natasha for much longer, but it was going to be hard enough to tap into that part of myself without having to look the love of my life in the eye while I did it.

The streets were deathly still around us as we made our way toward Midtown. It wasn't hard to tell where we had to go. The energy coming from the mass of husks was unmistakable, nearly overwhelming. I could

feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. Besides, even without the crushing weight of demonic energy, the sounds of gunfire and screaming would have been pretty hard to miss. They echoed through the empty streets, bouncing off the blank faces of empty skyscrapers until reaching us as a garbled, overlapping mess of noise.

“You ready to give the whole human world a show?” Rogelio asked me. He sounded casual, but I could see the tension in the rigid line of his shoulders and the twitch of his fingers. He was just as worried as I was. At our backs, Zander was rock-steady, radiating the calm confidence of a man who knew he could teleport out of danger if he had to.

“Oh, I’m not ready in the slightest,” I said. “But that doesn’t really matter, does it?”

A helicopter went by overhead. I wondered idly if it contained emergency responders or a news crew.

“The time for hiding is over,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “If Lucifer is trying to shock the humans by revealing the existence of demons to them, then the best thing to counteract the fear is to show them that some of us are on their side. We have to let them know that they’re not alone in facing this threat.”

Rogelio clapped me on the back. There was a glint of approval in his eyes. “This is going to put you squarely in the spotlight. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I said. “And it may very well put me at risk. Better me than any of the others, though. At least I can handle it.”

“And your daddy dearest won’t see it coming,” he said. “He thinks you’re too much of a chickenshit for that.”

I blew out a sigh through my nose. “Yes, thank you for that,” I said dryly. “I’ve already agreed to do this, you know. You can stop baiting me.”

“I know,” Rogelio said. “That one was just for the joy of it.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to Zander, who was politely trying to pretend that he wasn’t listening to everything we were saying. Over the centuries, he’d perfected the art of blatantly eavesdropping while keeping up a perfect expression of innocence and mild boredom. In the face of that expression, it seemed almost rude to accuse him of listening in, and he used that to his advantage constantly.

“Keep an eye out for an art supply store,” I told him. “There are a few things that I’m going to need.”

Eventually, we passed a store that would have the supplies I was looking for. The big front window had been smashed, and the shelves inside were knocked over in a way that made it clear that somebody had been thrown into them. I pushed the door open, and the bell jingled cheerfully, announcing my arrival to the trashed, empty store. Stepping around debris and spilled paint, I grabbed the biggest roll of paper I could find, along with a handful of thick black markers. I also grabbed a pair of scissors with blades that ended in viciously sharp points.

The cash register was long gone, but I tucked a crisp hundred-dollar bill into a box of pen nibs behind the counter. Hopefully, the owners would find it when they came back, but if somebody stole it before then, I didn't mind. Anyone who looted pen nibs in the middle of a national emergency probably needed all the help they could get.

I rolled out a few yards of paper and began to write on it in quick, precise strokes. Soon, the whole thing was covered with dense, looping characters, forming intricate patterns that were a little dizzying to look at. If you looked at them out of the corner of your eye, they seemed to squirm across the paper, but if you looked directly at them, they froze as though they were embarrassed to have been caught in the act.

I tore the paper free and folded it carefully. A few of the sigils I'd used were volatile enough that it would be dangerous to crease them, and this was going to be risky enough as it was. There was no way to quickly get a four-foot by six-foot piece of paper into a neat bundle, but I did my best.

While I worked, I discussed the details of the plan with the others. They both listened intently, Zander leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed, making sure we weren't interrupted, while Rogelio asked questions and messed with a Frida Kahlo bobblehead, wiggling its plastic head back and forth by the flower crown.

"You know what you have to do if things start to go sideways, don't you?" I asked Zander.

"I know," he said. His face was pinched and grim.

"It's a last resort," I reminded him gently. "You'll only need to do it if I lose control to the point that I can't be reasoned with. If we're lucky, it won't be necessary at all."

"I still don't like it," Zander said.

"Well, good," I said. "I'd be a bit worried if you were excited about it."

That got him to crack a small smile. I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “I need you to promise me you’ll go through with it if it has to happen. You know it won’t be permanent.”

“Yeah,” Zander said. “I’ll do it. I promise.”

“Just remember all the sappy shit you care about,” Rogelio told me. “Natasha. Your friends. Puppies and kittens or whatever. Keep the reasons you’re doing this very close, and it’ll help you to come back.”

I nodded, tucking the folded paper under my arm. “I will. Alright. Let’s get this over with.”

Zander put a hand on each of our shoulders, then closed his eyes. Simultaneously, there was a loud pop of displaced air and a queasy jolt in the pit of my stomach, and then we were in the middle of Grand Central Station.

The main concourse was swarmed with husks. Human bodies littered the ground, and the pale stone of the floor was slick with blood. The smell of viscera was heavy in the air, cloying and metallic. There were demons everywhere, tearing into the corpses, scaling the columns, pouncing on the few people who were still standing. They were trying to trap people in the city, I realized with a jolt of horror. They were cutting off access to the trains.

There were a few people in uniforms scattered around the room, mostly cops, but I spotted a few national guard members as well. They were pointing guns at the husks, but most of them were shaking too hard to aim properly. One of the police officers fired, but the shot went wide and hit a running human man in the thigh. He screamed and went down hard, and the husks descended on him immediately. The man briefly got much louder, then stopped making any noise at all.

The concourse was chaotic enough that our arrival was barely even noticed by the humans for a long moment, but then the husks must have picked up on the new source of demonic power in the room. Their heads snapped toward us in unison, and they began to charge, leaping down from the walls and bounding over bodies, slipping in the gore on the tile but still propelled forward by their manic rage and bloodlust.

I calmly unfolded the piece of paper and laid it out on the floor. The dark lines of the sigils stood out starkly against the white background. I looked down at them for a brief moment before I pulled out the scissors and jabbed them into my fingertip.

I smeared the final rune into the middle of the paper, using my blood as the ink. As soon as I did, a shockwave rushed out from the paper, followed by a shimmering silver-blue wall of protective magic. The wall of magic blew past the charging husks, trapping them in a neat circle.

A second shield formed around the three of us, giving us a few moments of protection. I hadn't put much power into the inner shield so it would drop quickly, but we didn't need much time. The closest of the charging husks bounced off the shield, crashing into the ones behind them. In the eye of the storm, I glanced back at Rogelio, who had inexplicably found time to roll a cigarette. He nodded at me, then blew out a plume of smoke.

The transformation was just as easy as I remembered. It was a bit like slipping into a very hot bath, uncomfortable at first and then intoxicatingly welcoming. Power surged through me, transforming me from the inside out. It was incredible. I couldn't believe I'd ever given it up. I was so *strong*. I could do anything I wanted. I could take anything I wanted.

I lowered my head as the exquisite pain of my horns growing hit me. It had been so long since I'd felt that. Too long. It was as if I'd spent thousands of years with my eyes closed, and now I was finally allowing myself to see sunlight again.

I straightened up. My horns—my crown, my birthright, an undeniable symbol of my bloodline—stabbed into the air as I threw my head back and roared. Behind me, I could feel the punch of power that meant Rogelio had transformed, too, but he wasn't important right now. All that was important was the hunt, the kill, the wet sound of flesh parting beneath my claws.

The inner wall I'd created flickered and sputtered like a candle in the wind, then disappeared. I grinned. I was distantly aware that the humans were yelling. Some of them were shooting at us, but their bullets collided uselessly with the magical barrier. I didn't pay them any attention. They were like insects, really. Short-lived and ineffective, pitifully unaware of their insignificance. They didn't matter.

"Kneel before your true king!" I commanded in Adamic.

The husks collapsed like puppets with their strings cut. A few of them tried to press their hands over their withered ears to drown me out, but it wasn't any use. My power was too strong for them to muffle it. My voice was echoing inside their minds, controlling them from the inside.

It wouldn't be fair to call what happened after that a fight. I strode through the pathetic mass of demons, putting them out of their misery. Rogelio was doing the same. His true form, although less imposing than mine, was still impressive. He was tall and wiry, with reddish-purple skin and curling ram's horns. His eyes, like mine, were jet-black, but his magic manifested in his physical form; his hands were covered with red-gold cracks, completely covering his fingertips and thinning out as they reached his elbows. They shifted and flickered. He had fire in his blood, and it showed. He grinned at me, bright and wide, as he drove his fist all the way through the chest of a husk.

The humans outside the barrier were shouting about something, but their words were lost on me. They'd stopped their pathetic attempts to shoot us, at least. It was nice that they had managed to learn something. Most of them were running, but there was a woman tucked behind the railing of the balcony. She was pointing a camera at us. I stared at her. She was pale and shaken but not running.

Making use of my brief distraction, one of the husks tried to scramble away, stumbling like a drunkard. It tripped over one of the corpses and fell to its knees. I watched it dispassionately, then strode over to it and slammed it back down to the ground with a foot between its shoulder blades. It let out a panicked, animal sound. I pressed down harder and harder until there was a wet crack, and its ribcage gave way. The thing gurgled as it died.

It was glorious. The adrenaline and power swept through me as I cut through my enemies. I wanted more. More blood, more fear, more of the heady rush of killing and taking and destroying.

It felt right. It sated some deep need I'd kept suppressed for far too long. More than that, it felt *fun*. This was what I was—a beast made for ending things.

The bodies piled up around me, useless chunks of flesh with empty eyes and gaping wounds. Rogelio began incinerating them, sending them up in flashes of golden fire that smelled of sulfur and cooking meat. Things became quiet. The only noise was the crackle of fire, the dripping of blood, and the pounding of my pulse in my ears.

Then, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on tile. My head snapped up, every predatory instinct in my body screaming at me to hunt down new prey. It smelled delicious. The soul inside my prey's body was fresh and sweet. It would taste wonderful once I separated it from the creature

surrounding it. I ran my tongue over my teeth. They were predator's teeth, meant for tearing muscle and sinew.

The prey was on the balcony, her camera still pressed to her eye. I paced toward her, slow and steady. I had time. She couldn't go anywhere where I wouldn't be able to find her.

Then there was a hand on my chest and a muffled source of power before me. There was a human in front of me. No, not a human, a demon who'd smothered his true strength inside a humanoid shell. It was shameful, hiding like that, denying the world the force of one's true power. It was our duty to tear through the fragile threads of the human world, to make it clear that we were the apex predators, the things that went bump in the night.

The pathetic thing in front of me was staring at me with dark eyes. There was something familiar about those eyes. Something that seemed important. He was speaking, but the words didn't make any sense. The shape of them felt wrong, garbled. He had abandoned the true speech of our kind and was speaking some lesser tongue that the vermin of this place had come up with.

"You need to remember who you are, Domenico," he said. "Think about Natasha. You need to come home to her, remember? She'd kill me if I let you go too far."

I might as well have been trying to comprehend the noises of an animal. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been important. I pushed past the little man and turned toward my prey. Next to me, the pest sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Time for plan B, Zander," he said.

There was a hand on my arm, and then a lurch of wrong-strange-directionless-weightless, and then I was in an empty room with the annoying talking man and the strange demon who'd touched me. I turned to destroy him for his impudence, but he was faster than I expected. There was a flash of silver, and things became very cold. Blood covered the floor beneath me, pouring across a white rug.

I looked into the eyes of the annoying talking man. They were so familiar. Natasha's eyes? No. No, Rogelio's eyes.

Everything was going distant and cold. "Natasha," I tried to say. "Gotta get back to Natasha." When I looked down at my hands, they were brown and clawless and covered in blood. Human hands. I looked up at Zander—up? But I was taller than him, I knew I was...no, I was on my knees. When



had I fallen to my knees? There was so much blood soaked into the rug under me. I wasn't cold any more.

"Thank you," I tried to say, but my tongue felt thick and heavy in my mouth. I closed my eyes. I would probably feel better after I rested.

## Chapter 20

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## *Natasha*

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the massive screen of the penthouse's TV. The creature—no, Domenico, I reminded myself, that was my Domenico—moved toward the camera with the predatory, lazy grace of a lion that's spotted a wounded gazelle. Everything before that had been barely anything more than a blur of motion, completely impossible to make sense of. Domenico and Rogelio had been moving too fast for the cameras to pick them up. They had just been captured as faint blurs for split seconds here and there.

Around them, the husks had been completely obliterated. I recognized Rogelio's fire magic, but I'd never seen anything like it on such a huge scale before. I'd only ever seen him use it to light cigarettes and, once, a fussy stove burner. Watching Rogelio and Domenico tear through the husks without having to catch their breath was like seeing a beloved old family dog suddenly revert to a wolf. Intellectually, you knew that that was where they came from, but seeing it in action was completely different.

The camera zoomed in shakily on Domenico, and it took a second to get him in focus. His skin was the dark, rich red of arterial blood, and his horns gleamed in the artificial light of the main concourse. When he grinned, I saw that his canines had gone inhumanly sharp. His eyes were pure, inky black, without even a hint of the whites showing.

Then, with a click, the TV shut off. I looked up at Cristiano, who was standing in the middle of the conversation pit, the remote in one white-knuckled hand.

"Well, I guess by now you've probably figured out why I tried to stop you from watching the news," he said. He sounded harried but not even a

little bit surprised. “Do you want me to get you a blanket? In TV shows and movies, humans get blankets when they’re in shock. Or...” he frowned, looking around the living room like he was trying to find inspiration. “CPR? That doesn’t sound right.”

“If you try to give me CPR, I will not hesitate to fucking gut you,” I said automatically. “I’m not in shock.” I paused, taking a mental inventory of myself. “I don’t think I’m in shock,” I corrected, slumping back against the sofa.

“So that was what Rogelio was talking about on the plane,” I said after a while. “About letting loose or whatever. This is why he was trying so hard to piss Domenico off.”

Manning sat heavily, far enough away that he wasn’t intruding on my personal space but close enough to give me his quiet support. “Domenico didn’t know how to tell you about this. But he wanted you to know. I’m just sorry that you had to find out about it like this.”

When I closed my eyes, the image of the Domenico I’d seen on the screen was there. There was no way around it—it had been monstrous. It was almost exactly what I’d imagined when I was little, when Elena told me that demons had killed my parents. It was nightmarish.

“Can you guys change your shape like that, too?” I asked Manning and Cristiano. Getting new information was good, I reminded myself sternly. Dwelling on things was bad. Keep moving forward, like a shark.

Manning shook his head, and Cristiano shrugged. “Only the most powerful demons are able to do it. So, pretty much just the kings. Or former kings, in Rogelio’s case. Anybody who’s become powerful enough to transform like that is powerful enough to fight their way to a throne.”

“They looked...different,” I said. “Not like the other demons I’ve seen turn into their true forms.”

It was true. All the husks I’d come across so far had looked warped and blistered, and the demons I’d seen after they died hadn’t been so...well, regal. They’d been all jagged needle teeth and cold shark eyes, with none of the quiet, undeniable power of Rogelio and Domenico’s true forms.

“A lot of us older demons, the ones from before the Fall, are still a little bit, uh...” Cristiano scrunched up his face. “There’s still a bit of divinity left in us, even if it’s corrupted. Over time, the new generations have gotten further and further away from that. Does that make sense?”

“You guys have evolved to be more demonic the longer you’ve been on earth?” I asked. Manning nodded.

“Yeah, pretty much. It’s like...animals evolving to need less sunlight,” Cristiano said.

I was suddenly struck by the mental image of deep-sea demons. I did my very best to forget that angler fish existed at the best of times, and it definitely wasn’t helpful to think about them right now. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the visual of Cristiano with fins and a little light dangling over his face.

“Wait,” I said. “Hang on. So, really powerful demons can transform into their true forms like that whenever they want to?”

“From what I’ve been told, it takes them a lot of energy to do it, no matter how powerful they are,” Cristiano said. “And it can be pretty risky, but yeah, I guess so.”

“What about powerful half-demons?” I asked.

Cristiano dropped the remote and fumbled to catch it, barely grabbing it before it smashed into the glass-top coffee table. Manning raised an eyebrow.

“Clearly, Rogelio is capable of transforming,” Manning said slowly, his voice thoughtful. “And we know that you’ve inherited some of his magic.”

“A lot of his magic,” I said. “But I can’t do the...” I wiggled my fingers in a way that I hoped got across the idea of fire.

“Not yet,” Manning said. “You have to keep in mind that Rogelio’s been practicing his magic since before the dawn of humanity. You’ve been practicing for, what, six weeks?”

“So, what, I should put down being able to shape-shift into a super-powerful mega-demon form as a ‘maybe?’” I asked, a little more shrilly than I would have liked.

“I would put it down as a ‘probably not,’” Cristiano said. “After all, you’re half-human. And with the angelic blood mixed in there, who knows? Maybe that would stop you from transforming at all. The bloodline Rogelio was born into was crazy powerful, but angel blood makes everything weird.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I muttered. “Wait, what’s so important about Rogelio’s family? Lucifer mentioned something about it, too, didn’t he?”

“You should probably ask Rogelio about that,” Cristiano said apologetically. “I’ve only heard bits and pieces of what went on, and I’m

guessing you're gonna want to know the whole story."

Just then, Manning's phone buzzed. When he checked it, he relaxed a little. "Zander says they're headed back. Domenico's still out, but he should be back on his feet soon. He's always bounced back quickly."

"Out?" I asked.

"They must have had to knock him out to get him out of mega-demon mode," Cristiano said.

"Yeah," Manning said. "They knocked him out. Look, Natasha..." He trailed off with a slight wince.

"What?" I prompted.

"Being in that form puts a lot of strain on them," he said. "It takes a heavy toll. There's a reason the kings keep that as a last resort. From what Domenico's told me, it can be pretty intoxicating. Based on what Zander told me, they may have had to go to some extreme lengths to get him to come back to himself, but you need to remember that he will recover."

"What the hell do you mean, extreme?" I asked.

Before he could answer me, there was the familiar popping sound of Zander's teleportation. I quickly realized that it must have come from the entryway. Zander had a thing about not teleporting into the middle of houses. According to him, it was rude, so he usually made himself appear just inside the front door.

I scrambled over the back of the sofa and ran to the entryway to welcome them back, but what I saw stopped me in my tracks.

Domenico was drenched with blood from the neck down. His suit was a disaster, even where it wasn't dripping with gore. It had split along the seams when he had transformed, and now it flopped strangely. His eyes were closed, and his head was lolling to the side. Zander and Rogelio were holding him up between them, and they looked completely exhausted. Both of them were smeared with blood. Domenico's blood, I realized. There was a gash along his neck, so covered with blood that I couldn't tell if it had closed all the way. I felt like my heart had just stopped beating.

"What happened to him?" I asked. My voice sounded distant. Blood was rushing in my ears, and I couldn't tell if I was angry or scared.

"We had to get him back to normal," Rogelio said.

Ah. Well, that settled it. I was definitely angry. I could feel fury buzzing in my chest and wrapping around my throat, so tight it felt like I could

barely breathe. “So you slit his fucking throat?” I yelled. “What the fuck is wrong with you? We have tranquilizer darts!”

“I tried that,” Zander said. “He didn’t even seem to notice when I stuck him with a handful of them. Don’t worry, he’ll be back on his feet in no time.”

“Back on his—” I let out a frustrated noise between a growl and a strangled scream. “Did you slit my husband’s throat and then Weekend at Bernie’s him through New York City?”

Manning came up behind me and went to Rogelio’s side. Between the two of them, they managed to swap places without letting Domenico sag too much. Manning and Zander exchanged a look and began carrying Domenico to the conversation pit. I wasn’t sure if they were trying to make him comfortable or if they were trying to escape me yelling at them. I couldn’t bring myself to give a shit.

Rogelio stayed behind, watching me cautiously. “You know, don’t you,” he asked, though it didn’t sound like a question. He didn’t bother to clarify, and he didn’t have to.

“I saw it,” I said. “The news showed the whole thing.”

Someone who hadn’t just spent a full month with Rogelio might not have noticed that he was trying to hide a flinch, but I could tell. “You saw our true forms,” he said, like he was prodding at an injury to see how bad it was before figuring out the treatment.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I did. I think it’s safe to say that it was a bit of a surprise.” Understatement of the century.

Rogelio straightened up with a sniff. “And what did you...were you...scared?”

“Of course I was. I was watching my husband and my...you...pick a fight with a ton of feral demons on live news,” I told him. “But I wasn’t scared of you.”

“Oh,” Rogelio said. He blinked a few times, then cleared his throat. “Well. Good.”

“I’m not gonna be scared of some jackass who managed to give himself a smoker’s cough even though he’s got magic demon super healing,” I said, putting a nice, safe wall of jokes between the two of us. “Besides, at least you’re not as gross-looking as the husks. They’re all scabby and horrible. Just looking at them gives me flashbacks to using that apricot scrub on my teenage acne.”

Rogelio's mouth quirked into the shadow of a smile that looked so much like my father's, it hurt. "I'll get you some towels so you can clean Domenico up."

Soon I was crouched next to Domenico's body. There was a pile of soft white towels on the coffee table and another pile of crumpled damp ones, wet with blood. Cristiano had brought me an ice bucket full of water that was quickly going rusty with blood.

I was wiping Domenico's neck clean carefully. The cut had closed up, leaving just a thin line of faint pink scar tissue behind, but I figured it was probably still pretty sensitive.

I was being way more gentle and delicate than I usually was with wound cleaning, using tiny dabs and pats so it would hurt as little as possible. It was kind of a novelty for me; I usually cleaned injuries as quickly as possible, without worrying too much about any pain it might cause. Of course, I was usually cleaning myself up. I decided not to examine that too closely. Maybe when all of this was over, I could find a nice demonic therapist to help me unpack that.

The news was playing quietly in the background, and I listened with half an ear as I took care of Domenico. Somebody from something called the Space Aggressor Squadron was being interviewed by a harried-looking reporter. "Have to consider the possibility that the events in New York City were an extraterrestrial attack," I heard. "And if that's what we're looking at here, it could just be the first wave of an invasion."

I snorted at the TV. "Aliens. Yeah, alright, sure. Might as well say that it's aliens."

There was a rattling breath from the sofa. I whipped around just in time to see Domenico's eyes flutter open. I'd known that he would come back, but there's not much that can fully calm you down when you're looking at the love of your life's corpse. Seeing him gaze up at me settled something loud and frantic in my chest. I smoothed his hair back from his face, and he looked up at me like we were the only two people in the world.

"Hey," he rasped. His voice sounded rough and hoarse, bad enough that I couldn't help but wince sympathetically. I took his hand in both of mine and held it tight.

"Hey," I said. "Back with us, huh?"

Domenico nodded, then winced. "Water?" he said, barely more than a whisper. I flapped a hand blindly at Cristiano until he went to get a glass.



I helped Domenico sit up gingerly and held the glass up to his lips. He drained half the water before I pulled it away. He swayed forward, trying to follow the glass, but I put a hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.

“Wait a little before you have more,” I said. “I don’t want you to shock your system too much.” Was that a thing for demons? I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to risk it. “If you drink too fast, and it winds up making you throw up, it’s gonna hurt your throat even worse.”

“I’m back,” Domenico said, raising a hand to my cheek. His touch was still slightly damp from the towels I’d used to wash the blood away.

“Yeah, you and the guys made a pretty memorable entrance,” I said gently, leaning into his touch. His hand was reassuringly warm.

“Not much is known about the mysterious figures who stepped in to help,” I heard from the TV, “but I’d like to implore them to come forward.”

When I looked back at the screen, blurry closeups of Rogelio and Domenico’s human-looking faces were shown as a woman with a sharp suit and a haircut that looked like it had been designed by a committee spoke to the camera. “As the mayor, I have a responsibility to do everything I can for the people of this fine city, and in these unprecedented times, that means reaching out to allies, even if those allies only just made themselves known. Again, I’d like to encourage these unlikely heroes to come forward, and I’d like to remind everyone that there will be a reward for verifiable information about them.”

Domenico’s face was drawn as he stared at his image on the TV.

“If you’re out there,” the mayor said, “we need your help. Please.”

The other demons looked at Domenico, and I saw the moment that he felt their eyes on him. His shoulders stiffened, and his hands went tense.

“Alright,” I said. Someone needed to take charge, and Domenico wasn’t in any state to do it just yet. “Everybody leave him alone. The man just came back from the dead. He needs some time to regroup.”

I took Domenico’s hand and pulled him to his feet. He went with me easily but slightly unsteadily as I led him to one of the bedrooms and closed the door behind us.

“Talk to me,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out almost before I’d finished speaking.

“What?”

“I’m sorry that you found out that way. I’m sorry that I couldn’t find a way to tell you. I’m sorry that I tried to hide that part of myself from you.”

His hands were balled into fists at his sides, and his expression was pinched and miserable. “And...I’m sorry that you had to see me like that.”

I sighed and stepped closer to him. “Domenico,” I said softly, “it wasn’t bad, seeing you like that. Different, of course, and I’m pretty pissed that it was a surprise, but it was just another part of you. And I love you so, so much. I’m gonna love that part of you, too.”

Domenico let out a sound that was both wounded and relieved and practically sagged against me. I cupped his face and pulled him into a kiss.

## Chapter 21

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## *Domenico*

Natasha's lips were soft and plush against mine, perfectly warm and sweet. Emotions flooded through me: love, yes, and the ever-present buzz of lust I felt whenever I thought of Natasha, but gratitude, too. It was so strong that it was almost dizzying. I was unbelievably lucky, I realized, to have this incredible woman in my life. She had seen the worst side of me, the part that I had chosen to keep hidden away for thousands of years, and she still loved me just the same.

The kiss began as something breathtakingly tender and gentle, but it didn't stay that way for long. I cupped the back of Natasha's neck, and she let out a pleased little sound of approval.

"Babe," she murmured when we pulled apart for air, "there's something I should probably tell you."

"Okay?" I said cautiously. I must not have done a very good job at hiding the spike of anxiety that lanced through me, because she smiled up at me reassuringly.

"It's nothing bad, don't worry," she said quickly. "It's just, um. Well..."

"Well?" I prompted gently.

"I thought your true form was really fucking hot," she blurted, then immediately turned bright red.

I stared at her. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't that.

"Really?" I managed.

"Really," Natasha said. "Sorry, is that weird? I'm pretty sure that it's weird."

"I don't think it's weird," I told her. "I'm just...surprised, I guess."

“It was all, you know...” Natasha let out a flustered little noise. “The horns, and the eyes, and the fangs. I mean, fuck. Honestly, it was...” She squirmed a little, plopping down on the bed and squeezing her legs together.

“Natasha,” I said, letting my voice slip into something low and rough.

“And then when you were, like, stalking toward the camera like that? It was pretty freaky, don’t get me wrong, but it was also...I, um, I got really wet.”

A low animal sound filled the air, and it took me a moment to realize I’d let out a growl. Natasha was staring up at me with wide dark eyes, her lips slightly parted.

“Show me,” I said.

Natasha’s cheeks went pink. “Um,” she squeaked.

“I want to feel it,” I told her. “I want to feel how wet you got for me.”

She looked a little dazed. Her eyes didn’t leave mine as she flicked the button of her jeans open and spread her legs. I stepped closer and slipped my fingers down her fly, and she sucked in a breath as I pressed against the wet fabric of her panties.

“You were serious,” I said. “This is just from seeing me like that?”

“And watching you fight,” Natasha said. Her hips twitched toward my hand, but I pulled away just enough to deny her any friction.

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” I murmured.

“I’d rather be full of something else,” Natasha said.

I let out a low chuckle, pushing her panties aside as best I could in the confines of her jeans. The pads of two fingers teased against her entrance, slick and hot and tempting.

“Patience,” I said. “We’re doing this at my pace, not yours.”

“Oh, fuck yes,” Natasha whispered to herself.

I grinned. I channeled my power, not enough for a full transformation, but just enough to make my eyes go black and menacing. As soon as I did, Natasha’s cunt let out another gush of wetness between my fingers. I grinned at her, showing off slightly sharper canines, and pulled my hand out of her jeans. She whined at the loss, but her eyes glazed as I licked the taste of her off my fingers. The salty tang of her was perfect on my tongue.

“You liked seeing me like that,” I said, stroking her hair. “Wild. Predatory.”

“Dangerous,” Natasha said. “Strong. Sexy as fuck.”

“Then I think you should show me your appreciation,” I told her. “On your knees.”

She was kneeling at my feet before I even finished the sentence, looking up at me with big eager eyes.

“Good,” I said. “So good for me.”

“Dom,” Natasha said. “Fuck. Please, let me...?”

I thought about teasing her, about making her ask for it properly, but I already knew I wouldn’t have the patience to draw it out. Instead, I reached for my fly. Natasha braced her hands eagerly on my thighs as I unzipped, watching with wide eyes. I was fairly sure that she was holding her breath. I was aching hard and suddenly realized that I had been for a while.

As soon as my cock was out of my suit pants, Natasha leaned forward and lapped at the tip. I let out a pleased groan, which she took as encouragement, licking up my length before taking me into her mouth. She looked up at me through her lashes, teasing her tongue just under the head of my cock in a way that she knew would drive me crazy. My hips twitched forward involuntarily, but before I could pull back, Natasha let out a delighted moan. Her hands flew to my hips, and she tugged me forward. It was clearly a request, and I was all too happy to give her what she wanted.

I started off gently, of course. I knew it wasn’t what Natasha really wanted, but going slow would serve two purposes. One, it would give her time to adjust to it, and two, it would make her even more eager. So, almost teasingly slowly, I thrust into her mouth.

The effect was immediate. Natasha’s eyes fluttered shut, and she groaned around me, tugging at my hips again. I curled a possessive hand into her hair, guiding her down to take me deeper, and she went eagerly. It was intoxicating. It wasn’t just the eagerness that was getting to me, but the trust as well. The hot, perfect slide of her around my length was addictive. My hips were snapping forward more roughly now, but she was happy to take it.

I pulled her off my cock to give her a moment to catch her breath, knowing that Natasha considered her limits to be mild inconveniences. As soon as I did, though, she swayed forward, trying to get her mouth back on me. She looked practically drunk with it. I liked to consider myself a strong-willed man, but I could only resist so much.

I pressed back into the wet heat of her eager mouth, and she let out a pleased whine as she swallowed around me.

“Your mouth is perfect,” I told her. My voice came out deep and rough. The pressure was building at the base of my spine, and I knew I was close.

“Natasha,” I said. “Natasha, I’m going to—”

She grabbed my hips and pulled me in deep, staring up at me with wide, devoted eyes. I couldn’t stop myself. I came in long pulses, so intense that they were nearly blinding. She swallowed every last drop.

“Fuck,” I rasped.

Natasha rested her forehead against my hip with a little laugh. “Yeah,” she said. “Fuck.”

“You’re incredible,” I told her. “Absolutely incredible.”

I tugged her to her feet and practically threw her onto the bed. She landed with a bounce and a delighted little squeak. “You’re wearing far too many clothes,” I said, reaching for her jeans. She lifted her hips to let me tug down her pants and underwear, yanking her shirt off over her head as I did so. The bralette she was wearing didn’t hide anything, and my mouth watered as I took in the plush curve of her breasts, the tempting peaks of her nipples.

I undid the bra and pressed my lips to one nipple, lapping at it gently. At the same time, I gave the other a vicious pinch. Natasha bucked up against me with a moan, and I grinned. I bit the underside of one perfect, pale breast, then slid down her body. She spread her legs for me desperately, canting her hips to show how much she wanted me. I ran teasing fingers up her inner thigh, and she whined.

“C’mon,” she said. “Don’t be mean. I need you, babe.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” I said, sinking two fingers into her. She threw her head back against the bedspread and moaned, loud and shameless, as I curled my fingers with relentless precision.

“Dom,” she gasped. “Fuck, *fuck*, please...” I bit the soft skin of her thigh hard enough to make her gasp, then sucked a bruise on the same spot. She was practically shaking with arousal, and it was all for me.

I lapped at her clit lightly as I slid another finger into her, and she clenched tight around me in pulsing waves, moaning and trembling as she came. I fucked her through it until she got twitchy and oversensitive, then slipped my fingers out of her. She whined at the loss, and I grinned at her.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’re not done yet.”

When I finally emerged from the bedroom much later, happy and significantly more relaxed than I had been earlier that day, Zander was

sprawled in the conversation pit, messing around on his phone. Manning was sitting next to him, bolt upright with his arms crossed over his chest. He had his eyes closed and was snoring gently. I knew from decades of working together that Manning could and would sleep absolutely anywhere. It was honestly more impressive than his actual demonic ability. Glowing magical shields were well and good, but they paled in comparison to the time I'd seen him sleep standing up in a corner, dead to the world, while Cristiano and I argued loudly.

"Wow," Zander said, glancing up from his phone to look at me. "Nice sex hair, boss."

I shot him a glare, but we both knew that it was playful. "Where are the others?" I asked.

"Cristiano is out trying to see if he can find any restaurants that are still open, and last time I saw him, Rogelio was on the roof chain-smoking and pretending he didn't hear any of your sex noises," Zander said as I tried fruitlessly to smooth my hair down. When I checked my reflection in one of the many mirrors that lined the penthouse walls, my hair was still a disaster. I tried not to think about why there were so many mirrors on every surface of the room.

I got myself a glass of water and drank it slowly while I checked my phone. I had an alarming number of texts and missed calls, mostly from the other kings. All of them were voicing their support, which genuinely came as a huge relief to me. I'd done what I knew was right, but I had also broken the most important of my rules for demonkind. I wouldn't have blamed them for thinking I was being a massive hypocrite.

*Incredible showing, darling! Give my best to Natasha xoxoxo* Lizbeth had sent me, with a surprising number of emojis for someone so refined. Gloria, on the other hand, had sent me a single thumbs-up emoji and the word *nice* and left it at that. I knew they trusted me to make the right call, but it was still massively reassuring to see that trust in action. I had more than enough to worry about without trying to regain the support of my most important allies.

Each of the kings, though, had reached out with encouragement. One of the difficult things about trying to save the world was that if you succeeded, the world would still be there, and you would have to face the consequences of your actions. Laying the groundwork for the idea that some demons were helpful—heroic, even—seemed vital. If we managed to defeat Lucifer



(*when*, I told myself sternly, *not if*), we would still be living among the humans, still sharing streets and grocery stores and schools with them. A true return to the way things had been before would be impossible, but I had to do what I could to give my people the lives they had grown accustomed to over the centuries.

Showing my true form would help. I was sure of that. I wouldn't blame humans for being terrified of strange creatures showing up out of nowhere, but seeing us fighting for them would assuage some of their fears. And as a bonus, it would make my father absolutely furious. He'd expected to have a weapon that nobody could face, both in terms of force and PR. He'd been aiming for shock and awe, and I'd taken the wind out of his sails with one act.

I was in one of the large chairs by the windows when Rogelio came back in. The chair was a massive s-curved lounge in tufted white leather with angular chrome legs, and it was amazingly uncomfortable. I felt like I was about to slide out of it. Rogelio leaned against the matching one angled towards it and stared out the window at the shadowy form of a mostly dark New York City. He smelled of cigarette smoke and winter air.

"We should talk," he said. I set my phone down on the side table next to me—a Lucite monstrosity with iridescent leopard print on it—and turned to face him.

"I've been keeping an eye on the news," he said, waving his phone. "The Times, the Daily, and CNN are cautiously optimistic about what we did. The Post thinks we're here to kill the president, and Fox thinks we have space lasers, so it's a bit of a mixed bag on that front. We need to take advantage of the attention and address the public directly if we want to spin this in a way that'll benefit us."

"The mayor did say that she wanted to speak with us," I said.

"No," Rogelio said immediately. "That's way too risky. It would be far too easy for her to find a way to trap us, and I'm not particularly eager to be dissected any time soon."

"You think they'd dissect us?" I asked, letting skepticism color my voice.

"Of course they would," Rogelio said confidently. "They're going to be curious, and they're going to be scared. They'll want all the information they can get, and we don't have enough of a concrete public presence to keep them from simply making us disappear."

“You’re a cynical bastard,” I told him.

“Years of practice,” he said dryly. “You know how I feel about people in positions of power.”

I, the king he had deserted, stared at him blankly. “Yes,” I said eventually. “I think I have some idea.”

“Anyway,” Rogelio said.

“Anyway,” I echoed. “I still want to meet with the mayor, but I agree that we should be cautious. Let’s see about doing a video call. Cristiano can get us a meeting, I’m sure.”

“And in terms of the angle to take,” Rogelio said, sitting down in the other lounge and drumming his fingers against the white leather, “I think we should be vague. Let them make assumptions. If we tell people that we’re demons, they’ll just panic. The whole alien thing that people are running with could work in our favor. Just keep it simple, and keep it vague.”

“I’ve been a politician for millennia,” I pointed out. “I can do simple and vague.”

“I’ll coach you, obviously,” Rogelio said. “I’m not going to send you into this blind. “You’ve got the face for politics, but you don’t have the instincts to lie quickly.”

“Thank you?” I said after a moment.

Later, after Cristiano had returned and started to work his magic, I went to wake Natasha. She was still out like a light, sprawled on the bed with her hair splayed over the pillows. I set down the tray I’d brought on the bedside table and called her name quietly until she stirred.

“Hey,” she said groggily. “Wh’ time’s it?”

“Nearly seven,” I told her, smoothing her hair back from her face. “I brought you something to eat.”

“It smells fucking great,” she said, pushing herself against the cushions. “What is it?”

“Well,” I began, “technically it’s pizza.” I looked down at the slices on the plate with a skeptical grimace.

“Ohhhh shit!” Natasha exclaimed, her eyes going wide. “Is that Nonna Bruna’s frozen pizza?”

“It was all Cristiano could find,” I explained sheepishly. “There weren’t any restaurants open, so he broke into a bodega. There’s also a lot of snacks and a case of those iced tea cans.”

“This is the best frozen pizza in the world,” Natasha told me confidently, grabbing her plate. “It’s, like, this little old lady in New Jersey and her nephews. It’s impossible to find outside of a twenty-mile radius from Hoboken.”

She ate the slices of frozen pizza with the ferocity of a stray dog that’s found a whole rotisserie chicken. I watched her with adoration in my eyes.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” she told me. “I mean, empirically, it’s a pretty bad pizza, but in the best possible way.”

After she’d eaten and downed a few glasses of water, she blinked up at me sleepily.

“You can go back to sleep if you want to, Natasha,” I told her fondly.

“Nah,” she said. “I’m good. I’m ready to go.” She yawned so widely that her jaw popped, and I stifled a laugh. “Okay, actually, I might just rest my eyes for a minute.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” I told her seriously, pressing a kiss to her forehead as she nestled back against the pillows. She was asleep before I even made it to the door.

## Chapter 22

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## *Natasha*

Our breakfast spread was an elegant and refined buffet of canned cold brew (Storkbucks, according to the label, which had a logo of a stork laid out in a suspiciously familiar white and green design), slightly squished and oddly sticky-looking packaged muffins, and granola bars, along with those little yogurt squeeze packs that looked like they were meant for people too young to consistently use a spoon without adult supervision.

The sight of some of the most powerful demons in America pensively sucking on packets of Busy Baby Bangin' Berry Blast Yogurt On The Go! would stay with me for a very long time. ("No spoon! No mess!" the label on each packet promised.) In what I could only guess was a desperate attempt to make them look more appetizing, all of the snacks that Cristiano had managed to scrounge up from the bodega had been laid out on the plates that Zander had found in one of the kitchen cabinets. They were black and square, with large stylized calla lilies painted on them diagonally across one side of the plate. They were so eighties that they might as well have been made out of shoulder pads and scrunchies.

"The mayor's people have already gotten back to me," Cristiano said, typing on his laptop so fast, his fingers almost blurred. I wasn't sure if it was demonic super-speed, the secret nerd powers that he did his best to hide, or the number of cold brews he'd had. He was surrounded by empty muffin wrappers, and the crumb-covered paper liners had been folded into tidy little triangles and tucked into one of the plastic wrappers, like a much tamer version of frat boys saving their empty beer bottles. "Apparently, the whole 'possibly world-ending, complete change of life as we know it alien

attack' thing is a pretty good motivator. Really cuts through all the usual red tape. Her team says that she can meet with us in an hour."

"You guys aren't planning on meeting with her in person, right?" I asked, setting down my horrible can of coffee, which was somehow mouth-puckeringly bitter and nauseatingly sweet at the same time. I glared at the cartoon stork on the label, but it didn't seem to notice. "You'd have to be a total idiot to waltz right into a government building in the middle of this absolute fucking shitshow without a solid plan."

"First of all—" Domenico began, pointing his granola bar at me. It dropped little oat and chocolate chip crumbs onto the glossy black surface of the table.

"Hah!" Rogelio exclaimed triumphantly at the same time, cutting him off. He jabbed a finger at Domenico emphatically. "See? I told you! It would be so incredibly stupid."

Domenico let out a pained sigh through his nose. "Which is why we're not going to talk to her in person," he explained with the kind of long-suffering patience usually only seen in parents whose young kids have just entered their "why?" phase. He set his granola bar on one of the plates, where it immediately disintegrated into crumbs. "We'll do the entire meeting over a video call, and I've already asked Cristiano to deal with any security issues that he thinks are likely to come up. We'll have plenty of precautions in place, and no one is going anywhere."

"I'm setting us up with a VPN so that nobody on the other end of the call can track our IP to figure out our location," Cristiano said. "If they try to get a bead on us that way, they'll register our call as coming from Anchorage, Alaska."

"Nice work," I told him. He flashed me a thumbs-up and took a slurp from his yogurt packet before turning his attention back to his laptop. (The yogurt flavor he'd chosen was called Banana Bonanza, according to the packet. Beneath the big, friendly-looking hand-lettered text was a drawing of a cartoon banana in sunglasses doing a skateboard trick. It looked like something that a try-hard youth pastor would unironically call "rad" or maybe even "hip." A pretty significant part of me wanted to get it on a t-shirt, or at least a tote bag. After we stopped the apocalypse, I would have to see if Busy Baby Yogurt On The Go! had any merch.)

"So, what's the game plan? What will you tell her is going on with this whole mess?" I asked Domenico. He shot a glance at Rogelio, who gave

him a reassuring nod.

“Rogelio thinks that the easiest tactic is to let her and her people carry on with the assumption that we’re aliens,” Domenico said. “Given his particular skillset, I’m inclined to follow his lead on this.”

“Huh,” I said. “Makes sense, I guess. Telling her that there are demons everywhere all the time probably wouldn’t be great for keeping up public morale. And we don’t want to freak the mayor out any more than we have to. This is going to be hard enough as it is.”

“Exactly,” Domenico said. “We need to keep people as calm as possible if we want to talk them into accepting our help.”

“I don’t think they really have another option right now,” I pointed out. “We’re kind of their only hope of getting out of this alive.”

“Not an angle I would open with,” Rogelio said mildly. “Sounds a little too threatening.” I waved him off, and he pretended to look affronted.

Domenico ignored Rogelio and tilted his head to the side, considering. “We need to keep people calm if we want them to act as our allies,” he corrected himself. “And if we want to avoid being dissected once all of this is over.”

It took us a little while and a lot of bickering to figure out the right setup for the call, but eventually, we landed on one that worked. Rogelio and Domenico sat on a sofa in one of the penthouse’s smaller rooms, facing the windows so the laptop set on a stool in front of them wasn’t facing the skyline. I thought dragging in one of the kitchen stools was pretty silly, honestly. There was already a perfectly good coffee table in the room, but when I’d pointed that out, Cristiano had slipped into an extremely thorough lecture about good selfie angles and proper lighting, so I didn’t push it.

“And the thing about the rule of thirds is—” he was saying.

“Hey, why don’t you double-check the VPN?” I cut in.

Cristiano blinked at me, then nodded. “Cool, cool, VPN, no problem.”

In the end, we wound up with a setup that was well-lit, flatteringly framed, and carefully stripped of any clues that could help people figure out where we were. The TV off to one side of the room was set up to mirror the laptop display so that the rest of us could see the other side of the call without being caught by the camera. So far, the news only knew about Domenico, Rogelio, and Zander, and we’d all agreed that it made sense to keep it that way for as long as possible. After all, we didn’t know how much of the conversation with the mayor would make its way onto the

news, and the humans wouldn't be the only ones watching that. Even though Lucifer probably assumed we'd all stick together, it seemed unnecessarily risky to give him proof.

The alert for the call came through with a little musical *bloop bloop bloop*. On the screen, the slightly pixelated image of a woman with a dark blunt bob in a boring blue suit came into view. She had a small, brightly colored enamel pin in the shape of an American flag on her lapel. The office behind her had framed photos of famous New Yorkers. It was probably supposed to be tasteful and inspiring but wound up looking like one of those walls where restaurants showed off celebrities who had come to visit. The mayor was talking in a quiet undertone to someone offscreen, and when she realized that the guys had picked up the call already, she straightened up and plastered on a welcoming, sunny smile with the speed and grace of a true professional.

"Gentlemen," she said warmly. "I'm so glad that you could take the time to speak with me." She had a light Bronx accent, the type that said, "I may have graduated at the top of my class at Cornell, but don't worry, voters, I'm just like you!"

"It's our pleasure, Madam Mayor," Domenico replied.

"Please, there's no need for us to stand on formality," she said with a little wave of her hand. "You can call me Susan."

"Susan," Domenico echoed. "You can call us Domenico and Rogelio." I was a little surprised that they'd chosen to use their real names, but then I remembered that "real," in this case, was pretty subjective. They'd had plenty of names over the years, and it wasn't like either of them were easy to track down.

"I wanted to thank you for all the help you gave us yesterday, boys," the mayor said. "You really got us out of a tight spot. I don't think our people would have been able to handle it without you. Whatever those creatures were, we just weren't equipped to tackle them. I've never seen anything like them before."

It was pretty easy to figure out what she really wanted to ask. Rogelio could sense it, too, I could tell. It was clear from the quirk of his eyebrows and the not-quite-smirk that was threatening to break through.

"I have to ask," Susan began cautiously, her eyes flicking to someone behind the camera and back again lightning-quick, "what exactly are you folks?"



“What, isn’t it enough to know that we’re concerned citizens?” Rogelio asked blithely, pasting on his most irritatingly polite smile. It was a surefire way to piss off absolutely anyone he turned it on. I could see the mayor’s expression get a little more fixed.

“The details aren’t important,” Domenico cut in, stomping hard on Rogelio’s foot where it was safely out of the frame of the laptop’s camera. “My people and I have been living alongside humans for a very long time. The overwhelming majority of us mean you no harm, but, like with any group, there are always outliers. We have our own justice system, and we make sure that those who break our laws are punished.” He’d neatly skirted around the whole soul-eating thing. I wondered what he would say if the mayor asked him more about the laws that had been set up.

The mayor stared into the camera for a moment. I could pretty much hear the gears turning in her head. “When you say you’ve been living with us for a very long time, what exactly do you mean?” she asked eventually.

Rogelio took his smile up a notch until it was knife-sharp and truly infuriating. “We’ve been here since the very beginning.”

All the color drained out of the mayor’s face until she matched her boring-yet-practical cream blouse. “The beginning,” she repeated blankly.

“We’ve been living alongside humans for as long as there have been humans,” Domenico explained calmly.

I could practically see the mayor trying to rally her thoughts. “Right,” she said. “Okay. And are you...I’ve reviewed some of the footage of the attack, and it seems like your kind are...resilient. Do you...can you die?”

“We can,” Domenico said. “But it takes a lot more than it would to kill a human. We’re functionally immortal. We don’t age the same way that your kind do, and we don’t die of old age or natural causes.”

“How can you be killed?” The mayor asked.

Domenico raised an eyebrow. “You can see why I don’t intend to give you instructions on killing me and mine, don’t you? I’ll remind you that in millennia of co-existence, this is the only large-scale attack on humankind. You have a responsibility as a leader to keep your people safe. I have the same responsibility. I have to ask you to respect that.”

The mayor plastered on another sunny smile, although this one looked like more of a worried grimace.

“Of course,” she said. “I know that you have to protect your people. But you have to understand that this is a matter of public safety. There are...

creatures swarming our streets, killing people left and right. We don't know anything about their weaknesses or their strengths. We need to be able to protect ourselves. I'm grateful for what you did yesterday, but you can't be everywhere, gentlemen. There are two of you. There are thirty-six thousand members of the New York Police Department. I need you to tell me how they can intervene."

Rogelio straightened up from his trademark slouch and squared his shoulders. With the way he usually carried himself, it was easy to forget that he was a pretty tall man, but now he seemed to fill the space. "We're handling things. This isn't just a random attack out of nowhere; it's part of a larger internal conflict. It's ours to take care of. Our kind are law-abiding citizens," he lied smoothly.

I snorted, quietly enough that it wouldn't be picked up by the shitty laptop mic. Domenico shot me a stern look.

"We have the capacity and the manpower to handle this ourselves," Rogelio continued. "Sending your people to the front lines would only put them at risk. Let your boys in blue do what they do best, which, if I'm reading the city budget and press releases right, seems to be stop-and-frisking and standing around with guns to stop people from hopping turnstiles at subway stations."

It was a cheap play at putting her on the defensive, but it worked. Susan's smile stayed in place, though it went dead behind the eyes. "Our police force is a vital—" she began.

"Regardless," Domenico cut in smoothly, "the fact of the matter is that we have the resources and the know-how to stop this attack, and you don't. Focus your energy and funds on evacuation and getting support to the refugees. We'll deal with the rest."

The mayor bit her lip but finally nodded. "Fine. But I need to know if there's another wave of attacks on the way."

"It's not likely that there will be another attack in New York City," Domenico said. "The man who organized the first attack is doing this in an attempt to cause confusion and fear. It's not a play to take over the city or anything like that. There will almost certainly be more attacks, but they'll likely be in other major cities. Our opponent has already succeeded in his main goal; he's exposed our existence to humans. He just didn't think that my associate and I would be willing to expose ourselves as well. He gambled, and he lost."

“I’m responsible for my people,” Domenico continued. “It’s my duty to resolve this issue with as little bloodshed as possible. Whichever federal agencies are listening in, they’re free to question me as much as they’d like when this is all done. I’ll gladly come with them and tell them anything that they want to know. Right now, however, I need to take care of this. If any of them try to take in myself or my associate, they’ll be stopping the only people who can truly stop this threat. This is a global issue. I seriously doubt you want the weight of that on your shoulders.”

The mayor’s eyes flicked to someone behind the camera again, and she nodded.

“Nobody in the United States government will try to stop you,” she said. “You have our support if you need it, but we will need to be notified as soon as the person behind these attacks has been taken care of.”

“We’ll make sure that you’re informed as soon as he’s been stopped,” Domenico said. “I appreciate your cooperation.”

The mayor opened her mouth to say something, but before we could find out what it was, Cristiano ended the call. As soon as the camera was off, Rogelio relaxed into a comfortable slouch.

Domenico sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Well, that went about as well as we could have hoped for. Cristiano, did your precautions hold up?”

“Yeah, one hundred percent,” Cristiano said, checking the laptop. “They definitely had someone trying to figure out where we were calling from, but they didn’t have any luck. Ya boy’s too sneaky for that.” He helpfully hooked a thumb toward his chest in case we couldn’t figure out who “ya boy” was.

“Excellent,” Domenico said. “Good work, Cris, thank you.”

“So, what now?” Zander asked. “Are we sticking around New York for a while or what?”

Domenico sighed and shook his head. “We should get out of the city. It’s too risky to stay here for much longer. Rogelio’s and my faces have been plastered all over the news. The longer we stay here, the more likely it is that we’ll be recognized. We need to lay low while we plan our next steps. Besides, what I told the mayor was true. I seriously doubt that Lucifer would use more of his forces here. Shock-and-awe campaigns don’t work if you just do the same thing over and over again.”

“So, what, are we going to another secret safe house somewhere?” I asked.

“Not this time,” Domenico said. “It’s time for us to go home.”

## Chapter 23

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## *Domenico*

Traveling through the airports in or surrounding the city was a risk we couldn't afford to take. I was eager to avoid being recognized, and I was certain that whoever had been listening in on my call with the mayor—FBI? Homeland Security? Both?—would constantly check the security camera feeds for all the major transit hubs. I trusted that they wouldn't be self-sabotaging enough to try to take us in, but I didn't know if my father had ways of accessing their information. Dooming the entire world because I'd flown out of Newark didn't seem like it would be worth the risk.

Luckily, I had plenty of less traditional resources at my disposal. An old ally of mine had a place nearby, a luxuriously appointed mansion he'd built for himself and his rotating selection of mistresses in the 1870s. Irwin Murray IV had made a name for himself as a steel magnate when the railroads started spreading across the country. He had leveraged his considerable fortune into the purchase and running of several newspapers. He'd also made sure that a generous portion of his funds regularly and discreetly made their way into the pockets of certain politicians he'd decided would be useful. Despite his business success and skill at political manipulation, he wasn't exactly a creative man; before he'd been Irwin Murray IV, he'd been Irwin Murray III, and Irwin Murray II before that. Oddly, he'd never been simply Irwin Murray. Before he'd settled on that particular name, he'd made the baffling choice to live for several decades as Cornelio Cornelius.

Regardless of his frankly terrible taste in names, he had something that we very much needed at the moment. Deep in the extensive grounds of his

mansion, tucked between his polo field and pickleball court, was a small but well-maintained private airstrip.

Manning had volunteered to drive us there. Irwin's mansion was in Morristown, a surprisingly charming part of New Jersey that was within driving distance but far enough from the demon attacks that things wouldn't be too chaotic.

The drive out of the ghost town version of New York was quiet and oddly peaceful. The roads were empty around us. The trees lining I-80 blurred past, and soon we were driving past the ostentatious gates of Irwin's estate, frothy confections of gilded wrought iron. The grounds were as gaudy and over-the-top as one might expect from an impossibly old robber baron. I wouldn't have been surprised to see peacocks wandering the grounds. I could only hope that someone had managed to rein Irwin in before he'd gotten that far. I'd never had a pleasant experience with a peacock, between the horrific screaming of their call and their tendency to shit often and with relish.

There was already a small private plane waiting for us on the tarmac. Zander, ever hyper-organized, had arranged it before I'd even found the time to ask him to take care of it.

I turned to Manning as he began hefting our bags out of the trunk and handing them off to our pilot, a stocky man with thinning gray hair and very bright blue eyes. He had the expression, bearing, and sweater of a haggard sea captain and the haircut of a middle manager from rural Indiana.

"I'm going to need you all to keep an eye on things in New York for me," I told Manning. "Tell Rogelio not to hold back if there's another attack. The cat's out of the bag with the transformation thing, and he'll need to properly hold his own if another fight breaks out."

"Yes, boss," Manning said. "The plan's still for the rest of us to join you back in Las Vegas in a week?"

"For now," I said, "but keep your bags packed. I may need you to come home on short notice. We should be able to pivot fast if we have to."

Manning gave me a businesslike nod as he passed over the last of our things. "Stay safe, boss. I'd like to see both of you in one piece when we meet next."

"We'll do our best," I told him.

Our plane had barely left the ground before Natasha was drifting off next to me. She was curled up into a tidy little bundle, her legs tucked under

herself and her head resting on my shoulder. I wrapped an arm around her, and she snuggled closer, awake enough to respond to my touch but too sleepy to open her eyes.

“Get some rest,” I murmured, pressing a kiss to her hair. “I’ll wake you when we land.”

She gave me a drowsy hum of agreement, and soon she’d gone lax and peaceful as sleep took her. I was glad that she was getting some time to rest. Ever since we’d met, things had been completely crazy for her, and it didn’t seem like they would get calmer anytime soon. If—*no, when*, I told myself strictly, *when*—we managed to defeat my father, things would still be chaotic. There would be fires to put out, both metaphorically and quite likely literally. I would shoulder the responsibility, but Natasha was incredibly stubborn when it came to helping. She would insist on being by my side while we cleaned up my father’s mess. It was likely that my place in the public eye would become permanent, and she would be dragged into it with me.

I stroked Natasha’s hair and tried not to drown in my introspection. Every time I got too deep down, I matched my breathing to hers until the slow, steady rise and fall of our chests were in perfect sync.

Seeing the lights of Las Vegas below us was strange, like running into an old friend and realizing how much you’d missed them. As our plane came in for a landing, I looked out at my city and felt just a little bit of the tension knotted inside me untangle. So many places had been my base of operations over the years, but this one truly had become a home for me.

Despite what I’d told Natasha, I didn’t wake her up when our plane touched down. Instead, I scooped her up into my arms and carried her all the way to the waiting car. She made a sleepy noise of protest against my chest but didn’t wake fully.

As much as I wanted to go back to my penthouse, I knew it wasn’t possible. Even if Lucifer hadn’t set off a bomb in the building, it would be far too risky for us to return to a place he could access. Instead, I instructed the driver to take us to my safe house outside the city. It was possible, I considered grudgingly, that I didn’t have a leg to stand on when I turned up my nose at Irwin’s opulent tastes, but I maintained that my personal style was far more refined than his would ever be. The stark black and white lines of the mansion rose elegantly over a carefully curated garden of native



plants, and I could see the welcoming light of the living room chandelier through the massive windows.

As the car glided to a stop by the front door, I finally woke my wife. “Natasha, we’re home,” I told her softly. I had to repeat it a few times before she stirred, and when she did, she blinked up at me blearily.

“Wh’zzit?” she mumbled.

“We’re back at the mansion outside of Vegas,” I said. “I thought it would be wise to let you sleep until we got here.”

“I didn’t drool all over your shoulder, did I?” Natasha asked. I adjusted my jacket to make sure the damp spot she’d left on my shirt was hidden.

“No,” I said innocently. “Of course you didn’t.”

“Hmm,” she said, narrowing her eyes and giving me an incredibly skeptical look.

“Anyway,” I said, “It’s been far too long since I got to make you dinner.”

Natasha’s eyes lit up immediately, and she practically charged out of the car. I laughed and followed.

Zander had worked his magic and seen to it that the mansion’s spacious kitchen was stocked. I fell into an easy, familiar pattern as soon as I was comfortably surrounded by gleaming counters and top-of-the-line appliances. I would make something simple tonight, I decided. Eggs, bacon, parmesan, pasta.

As easy as breathing, the carbonara came together. I did my best to drown out the part of me that was incensed that I didn’t have pancetta on hand; we were in the middle of a war, after all. Bacon would have to do.

Behind the house was a short path that led to a small patio, tucked neatly between the whirling, gnarled trunks of bristlecone pines. I set our dinner there, arranging our plates and glasses of wine on the simple glass and iron table. There were lights in the trees and candles on the table, but this far from the city, the stars were so bright that we barely needed them. The moon was nearly full, a fat silver globe looking down at us.

I heard footsteps on the path behind me, and when I turned, my breath caught in my throat. Natasha had changed into a form-fitting black dress, and her hair fell around her shoulders in loose waves. She looked radiant, darkly ethereal in the moonlight.

“You look beautiful,” I told her. My voice came out hushed and sincere. In the quiet, cozy darkness, we might as well have been the only people in

the world. I couldn't have been happier.

"It's been so long since we got to have a real date night," Natasha said with a little shrug. "I thought it'd be nice to dress up for the occasion."

I couldn't help myself; I had to kiss her. Her lips were soft and inviting, and she brought her hands up to my chest when I pulled her in close.

"You're gonna have to go easy, babe," she teased. "If you keep that up, our pasta will get cold."

"I could make more pasta later," I said, only half joking. Natasha laughed and pulled away, pulling out her chair and sitting. I pushed her chair in for her. Maybe it was old-fashioned of me, but a demon could only change with the times so quickly.

"We haven't had much time to ourselves since you finished your training with Rogelio," I said. "I've missed it. I've missed you, Natasha."

"I missed you so much, you have no idea," she told me. "Training with Rogelio really took it out of me. I know it was important for me to focus, but I still missed you like hell every single day."

"He didn't work you hard enough to take your mind off it?" I asked.

Natasha laughed brightly. "Oh, he tried," she said smugly. "But he underestimated my limitless reserves of stubbornness."

"Like many before him," I said.

"You're goddamn right," Natasha said, raising her wine glass in a toast. I clinked my glass against hers, both because I agreed with the sentiment and because it pained me to see a toast ignored.

"Don't get me wrong," Natasha said, "Rogelio worked me as hard as he could. It was exhausting. There's not really a way to quickly improve at something that's pretty much impossible to explain, so half the time, he was trying to figure out how to get his point across. It's also...if I think of it as magic, I kind of shut down a little. It doesn't feel like it's a real thing that it can be possible for me to do. It's easier if I just think of it as energy. When I make a shield, all I'm doing is pushing my energy outside of my body. It's like throwing a punch but with my brain. But not really my brain? Just sort of..." she waved a hand at her chest, then up to the base of her throat and then down around her stomach.

"I...see," I said. I didn't see. "I'm beginning to understand why Rogelio had a hard time explaining this."

"Figuring out my limits was also super tricky," Natasha told me. "There were a couple times where I just completely wiped myself out before I

learned to recognize the warning signs. I've gotten a lot better at it, but let's be honest—checking in with myself about my limits has never really been my strong suit.”

“I hope you know that's not at all reassuring,” I said dryly, taking a sip of my wine.

Natasha shrugged. “Hey, at least I'm aware of it. I'm trying to work on it, I promise. Plus, it's less of a problem these days than it used to be. Now I have people around me who can help. You, obviously, but also the rest of the guys. Zander and Manning are great about that sort of shit, and Rogelio is a cranky prick about it, but he does care. Cristiano, too, even if he isn't necessarily the most...” She trailed off, clearly searching for words.

“Emotionally literate?” I offered.

She nodded. “Yeah, that's pretty much what I was going for. He's kind of a lot, but it's clear that he's trying. I think it's sweet.”

“Frankly, I'm a little impressed that his social skills are as polished as they are. He may think of himself as a party boy and a lady killer, but he spends most of his free time doing research.”

“Research into what?” Natasha asked me.

“All sorts of things,” I told her. “Every few years, he gets a new degree. He's got a filing cabinet full of PhDs and a bookcase full of theses and scholarly articles.”

“Goddamn. I never would've guessed any of that,” Natasha said.

“He does an excellent job of hiding his intelligence,” I said wryly.

“And a terrible job of hiding his crushes,” she replied. “Did you see the way he got around Emiko? That was pretty much thirteen-year-old boy levels of awkward crush.”

“It was a little hard to watch,” I agreed.

“You didn't have to watch. You realize that, right? You could've looked away,” Natasha pointed out.

“He's my cousin,” I said. “Watching him make a fool of himself is my birthright.”

“Well, when you put it like that, it sounds totally reasonable,” Natasha said.

It felt so good to just sit and talk with her again. I knew this brief moment of peace wouldn't last, but it was vital. It was a taste of what I was fighting for, a taste of what I could look forward to once the war was over

and done with. Suddenly, fighting my father didn't seem quite as intimidating. I would have been willing to take on anyone to keep it.

The conversation flowed easily as we ate. Sometimes I felt like I had already known Natasha for decades, and this was one of those moments. We jumped from topic to topic in a way that probably would have seemed nonsensical to anyone else but made perfect sense to us.

Once we finished our pasta and made our way through most of the bottle of wine, Natasha stretched her arms over her head, feline and fluid. I didn't bother to be subtle about watching the way her breasts moved under the black fabric of her dress. Judging by the smirk on her face, she'd noticed my reaction.

"You know what I could go for?" she said. "A nice soak in the tub while a gorgeous man pampers me and maybe makes out with me a bunch."

"But where are you going to find a gorgeous man who's eager to pamper you out here in the middle of nowhere?" I teased.

She laughed and took me by the hand, pulling me toward the house.

The master bathroom of the mansion was spacious and quietly elegant, with black hexagonal tiles and just the right amount of chrome. The tub itself was a sleekly carved piece of marble, big enough to fit four people (although only, I had discovered, if they were very close together. That had never been an issue). As the tub filled, I looked through the collection of oils and salts displayed on a set of shelves. I settled on a rose and vetiver oil that I knew Natasha liked.

As the clouds of fragrant steam began to fill the air, Natasha turned her back to me and brushed her hair aside.

"Unzip me?" she said.

I put one hand on her waist, and with the other, I took the tiny zipper pull. Slowly, the smooth, pale skin of her back came into view, and I ran a finger down the line of her spine. She shivered. I pressed a feather-light kiss to the back of her neck. One of the straps of her dress was already doing its best to slide down her shoulder, and I helped it along. The dress slipped down her body and dropped to the floor. I let out a ragged little breath.

"No underwear?" I murmured, resting a possessive hand on the bare curve of her ass.

Natasha shrugged, meeting my eyes in the mirror. I kissed the curve of her neck again, not breaking eye contact.

"I had a plan for how the night might go," she said.

“How very prepared of you,” I teased.

She grinned, then spun to face me and started undoing the buttons of my shirt. “Come on. It’s time for some well-earned rest and relaxation.”

## Chapter 24

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## *Natasha*

We slipped into the bath, which was perfectly hot and smelled amazing. The worst part of any bath was obviously the part where you were already used to the hot water, but then you had to psych yourself up to lean back and let your back touch the cold tub wall. I cleverly found a workaround by leaning against the firm, warm plane of Domenico's chest. He let out an amused snort but wrapped an arm around my waist and boosted me so that I was sitting in his lap, my legs tangled with his. He pressed a slow, lazy kiss to my neck, and I let my head fall to the side to give him more room.

"Missed this," I said. "Missed you."

"Missed you, too," Domenico murmured, then nipped at the delicate skin of my neck. My breath hitched, and I could tell from the pleased rumble he let out that he had noticed. "Let me take care of you. Let me help you relax."

"Well, only since you asked so nicely," I teased, then squeaked as he pinched my thigh in retaliation. Even with the pain—or, if I was being honest with myself, because of it—I spread my legs a little as I settled back against him, boneless and happy from the hot water and his touch.

Domenico ran a hand up my side to cup my breast, teasing his thumb over my nipple until it hardened for him. I made a contented little noise that turned into a moan as he pinched the pink bud.

"You make such wonderful noises," Domenico told me. I felt my face go hot as I blushed. "They're intoxicating."

"You make it hard to—ohh, fuck," I said. Domenico had brought his knees up between mine and then spread them, which pulled my thighs wide. A pulse of heat went through my core. I felt shamelessly open, put on

display and deliciously trapped in place. I wanted to close my eyes and let the sensations sweep me away, but I couldn't get myself to look away from Domenico's large, tanned hands moving over me with an expert touch.

He licked a stripe up my neck as his fingers traced a path down between my legs. My thighs tensed as he brushed a delicate touch over my clit, barely enough to tease. I groaned and tilted my head back to rest against his shoulder.

"That's it," Domenico murmured, so close that his lips brushed my ear. "Just let go. Make your gorgeous noises for me."

"Fuck, Dom," I said. He laughed at how flustered I sounded as he rubbed his fingers over my opening. "Gonna spoil me."

"Good," he murmured, sliding a finger into me ever-so-slowly. "You deserve to be spoiled."

I moaned. It was so good, and it wasn't anywhere near enough. "Please. Please, Domenico, c'mon..."

"Well," he said in the tone that I knew all too well meant he was about to tease me, "only since you asked so nicely."

He pulled out, and I let out a disappointed noise that turned into a gasp of ecstasy when he pushed back in with three fingers. He gave me a few shallow thrusts to get used to it before he began curling his fingers, rubbing my G-spot relentlessly.

I was pretty sure I was saying words, but my vocabulary had shrunk down to "Dom," "fuck," "yes," "please," and "more." Then he ground the heel of his hand against my clit as he fingered me, and I managed a few more.

"Love you," I gasped. "Fuck, love you, more, please..."

That triggered something in Domenico; he let out a low animal sound and pulled out. Before I could protest, he shifted angles, and the hot blunt head of his cock was pressing against my entrance.

"Yeah?" he said, barely more than a grunt. I could feel his hips twitching with the effort of holding himself back.

"Yes, fuck, yes," I said, and he sank into me as soon as the words left my lips.

The stretch was delicious, filling me up perfectly. I made a sound that I had honestly thought nobody made in real life. I'd never felt so vulnerable and so safe at the same time. I could relax, let him take control, let him make me feel good, and make him feel good in turn.



With the position we were in, I could barely even grind down against him. I just took what he gave me, every thrust and every kiss. I let out a low, constant stream of noises, amplified and bounced back to us by the bathroom's acoustics. The sounds made total sense to the distant, dick-drunk thing that might, at one point, have been my brain. My pleasure felt bigger than my body, so it only made sense that my moans would, too.

I barely had any warning before my orgasm hit me in pulse after pulse of blinding sensation. Domenico fucked me through it, his thrusts getting rough and desperate as he got closer and closer, and then, finally, he came deep inside me.

For a long moment, the only sounds in the room were the gentle sloshing of water and our mingled panting.

Once we had dried off and flopped on the massive four-poster bed, I rested my cheek on Domenico's chest. My hair was damp from the steam rising from the bath, but he didn't seem to mind. He carded his fingers through it lazily, brushing it off my face.

"Natasha," he said. I could feel the rumble of his voice through his chest, and I nuzzled closer to the feeling of it.

"Mmhm?" I responded sleepily.

"Do you ever think about starting a family?" he asked.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but it hadn't been that. I pushed myself onto an elbow so I could look down at him. Whatever he saw on my face made him wince and backtrack.

"You know what, forget I brought it up," he said quickly. "We don't have to talk about it right now. I don't want to ruin the afterglow."

"No, no, it's okay," I said. "If I'm being totally honest, it's not something that I spend a lot of time thinking about. You know my childhood wasn't exactly normal, so...I guess that sort of thing was always pretty loaded for me. I had to grow up pretty fucking quickly, so I'm not even sure what most kids need from a mom. I don't know how to take care of a tiny person."

I leaned against the mound of cushions with a sigh. "And, y'know, I started working as a hunter when I was still really young. I figured I'd just keep doing that until someone got lucky and managed to kill me, so I didn't want to have someone who'd depend on me. It's a pretty shitty way to raise a kid. Trust me on that one."

“It’s alright if you don’t want them,” Domenico said, trying and failing to hide the tinge of sadness in his voice. “I would understand. I honestly would.”

“I didn’t say that,” I said. “Honestly, the idea of bringing a kid into this world still kind of scares the shit out of me. Plus, if this war doesn’t wind up going our way...I was gonna say that I wouldn’t want to make a child deal with that, but let’s be realistic. If the war doesn’t go our way, there won’t be any ‘us’ to have babies.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Domenico said fiercely.

I patted his chest reassuringly. “I know, babe,” I said. But this is out of your control, I thought, and very carefully didn’t say it out loud. “It’s just all big and messy and complicated. I do like the idea of being a mom someday, but I don’t know if I’d be any fuckin’ good at it, and I don’t want to mess up a kid.”

Domenico kissed me, feather-light and heartbreakingly gentle. “I think you would be an excellent mother. And if you ever decide that you do want to start a family, I would love that, but it’s obviously your decision.”

“You’re the best,” I told him, settling back down against his chest and throwing an arm across him to rest on his hip.

“If you want to keep kids out of the picture for now, though, we should probably start using protection,” Domenico said.

“Nah, I have an IUD,” I said. “So we don’t have to worry about...”

Suddenly, a frigid bolt of dread shot through me. Before I’d left my shitty little apartment, I’d grabbed my mail from the half-rusted-shut mailbox and chucked it on the counter. On the top of the pile was a pastel-colored, carefully non-intimidating card from my gynecologist; a reminder of the appointment I’d scheduled to replace my IUD.

“Fuck,” I said. Domenico started to say something, but I shushed him, counting in my head. I tried not to panic. With the implant, it wasn’t that uncommon for me to miss a period or two, and stress could make it worse, but...

“Okay,” I said faintly. I felt dizzy and weird. “Okay, so, the thing is, my IUD might be a little bit expired.”

“Natasha,” Domenico said, sounding a little bit strangled. “What are you saying?”

“I haven’t had a period in two months,” I told him. I looked down at my bare chest, considering. Sure, my boobs had been a little tender lately, but

that didn't necessarily mean anything. "Domenico, do my tits look better than they usually do?" I asked frantically.

He blinked at me a couple of times. I could hear his brain trying to switch gears. "I...yes? That feels like a loaded question."

"It can be one of the first signs of, you know..." I trailed off with a wince.

Domenico had gone slightly pale, with two blotches of color high on his cheeks. "Alright. "I'll be right back, okay?"

I made a quiet little noise of protest as he got up from the bed, and he came back to my side immediately, pressing a kiss to my lips. "Everything's going to be okay. Seriously, I'll be out of the room for less than a minute."

I nodded, and he tugged on a robe and strode out of the room, looking like he was barely holding himself back from breaking into a sprint. I sat curled up on the bed, feeling very small and incredibly alone, but as soon as the door closed behind Domenico, it opened again.

"Phones," he said. "I forgot about the existence of phones again."

"Again?" I asked, but he had already grabbed his phone from the bedside table and was tapping at it frantically. He called someone and grabbed my hand in his as he waited for the person on the other end to pick up. He didn't have to wait long.

"Send one of the guards to get pregnancy tests as quickly as possible," he barked into the phone. He paused, listening. "I don't know, a normal number. Five? Six?" He paused again. "Good. Make it clear that the quicker they bring it, the more I'll pay." Another pause. "Yes, they can—of course they can put it on the company card. Look, just make it happen, alright?"

He hung up the phone and tossed it onto the bed, then sat down next to me. "I'm gonna put on clothes," I said, still feeling out of it. "I don't think I can deal with this while my entire ass is out."

Domenico stayed on the bed as I threw on a t-shirt dress and underwear, looking like it was taking every ounce of his willpower not to hover.

"I think we're both doing a great job of not freaking out," I said, flopping back down onto the bed next to Domenico.

"Yup," he said. "Definitely. Really great job. This could be really bad."

I jerked back like I'd been stung, and he immediately realized what he'd said and blanched. "Not like that! Not like that. I'd be happy to raise a baby with you, Natasha. You're incredible, and I'm embarrassingly deeply in love with you, and—"

“Okay, take a deep breath and tell me what you think could be bad,” I said, putting him out of his rambling, frantic misery.

Domenico closed his eyes for a moment and took a breath in through his nose, out through his mouth.

“If you’re pregnant, and my father finds out about it, then he’s going to want our baby,” he said.

I paled. “A baby who would be not only Gabriel’s heir, but his.”

“And Rogelio’s,” Domenico said.

“Okay, I think it might be time for me to find out why the fuck Rogelio’s bloodline is so important,” I said.

“What, right now?”

“Unless you’d rather sit here and stare at each other until your underling or whatever gets back with the pregnancy tests,” I said.

Domenico sighed. “No, you’re right,” he said. “It’s important for you to know, now more than ever. But he should probably be the one to explain it.”

I called Rogelio, and he picked up on the second ring. “Natasha, is everything alright?” In the background, a shrill scream split the air.

“Uh. Is...is everything okay on your end? Are you torturing someone, or something?” I asked.

“What? Oh, no. We were watching *Rosemary’s Baby*,” he said. As though he was holding the phone to his chest, I heard him say, “Pause it, will you? I don’t want to miss anything. Alright, what can I do for you?”

“I might be pregnant,” I blurted out.

There was complete silence on the other end of the line for a painfully long moment, and Rogelio said, “Hm.”

“Hm? That’s all you’ve got?” I said.

“I’m just...processing,” he said. “Is Domenico with you?”

“Yeah, he’s right here.”

“Good, good. Put me on speaker, will you?”

I did, setting the phone on the bed between us.

“Have you told her about my family history yet?” Rogelio asked.

“I thought it would be better if you told her,” Domenico said.

“Reasonable,” Rogelio said. “Alright, settle in. This is going to be a doozy.”

“Back before the war, my father was one of the strongest demons in Hell, second only to Lucifer, of course. He served as Lucifer’s right-hand

man, working by his side and helping him build his kingdom's armies. You've probably heard of him, actually. His name was Beelzebub."

I sucked in a breath, looking up at Domenico with wide eyes. He nodded solemnly.

"I thought Beelzebub was just made up," I said. "Like a demon version of King Arthur, you know? Some mythological great leader who would come back someday."

"Bad example," Rogelio said. "Arthur was real."

"I—okay, we can put a pin in that," I said. "So, your dad was really, really powerful, is what I'm hearing."

"Very powerful and very popular," Rogelio said. "Where Lucifer was all charisma and scheming, my father was solid. Dependable. He listened. Demons who had problems would talk to him, and he would find a way to get Lucifer to help them when he could. For a time, they worked together well, but it didn't last.

"My father began to realize that Lucifer was petty and vindictive, caring more about revenge than he did about making a new life for his people. Lucifer, in turn, began to realize that Beelzebub was better-respected and had more sheer brute strength. The people feared Lucifer, but they respected my father.

"They had known each other back before Lucifer was cast out. My father rolled with the punches and figured out how to make things work as best he could down in Hell, but Lucifer was too hurt and furious to give his energy to making things better for the denizens.

"Lucifer was already obsessed with power and revenge, and things only got worse when he started trying to conceive. My father already had plenty of healthy, powerful sons. I was the baby of the family, of course." I could practically see the little flourish that Rogelio was doing, even though we were on opposite sides of the country. "And Lucifer hated him for it. In the last days of the war, Lucifer sent Beelzebub off to die for him. Everyone knew that he'd been given a suicide mission, but my father was too loyal for his own good. My brothers and I went with him to try to get him out alive. I was the only one who came back."

There was a certain kind of cadence that, before the past few months, I'd only heard in support groups when new members would try to recount all the horrible shit that had happened to them as quickly and clinically as possible. The wound might have scabbed over, but it was still there,

untreated. Now, I was getting used to hearing it from the demons in my life when they told me about the early days; it was like they were trying to get all the information across as fast as they could, so they wouldn't have to think about it for any longer than was absolutely necessary. All of them, I thought, needed therapy so goddamn badly.

"All that, and humans just think he's a big bug," I said, trying to cut through some of the tension.

It worked. Rogelio let out a surprised laugh that only sounded a little wet. "His demonic form did have fly wings. He used to take us for joyrides."

"He sounds nice," I said.

"He was," Rogelio said. "The seven most powerful demons in Hell each embodied one of the seven deadly sins, you know? And my father, his was gluttony, so he would cook mountains of food for us all the time."

"Thank you for telling me about him," I said softly.

"If Natasha really is pregnant," Domenico said, meeting my eyes with a flustered smile as he said it, "would you be willing to tell me about some of the things he made for you? So I could try to make them for the...the baby," he managed. Warmth blossomed in my chest. I loved this earnest, loyal man so goddamn much.

"I can try," Rogelio said. "But it was thousands of years ago, and some of the ingredients don't grow outside of Hell."

I added "plants?" to my running mental list of things I knew about Hell. "So, if I'm pregnant, the baby is going to be a descendent of not only an archangel but some of the most powerful demons to ever exist," I said. "Lucifer is going to try to get to it."

"We won't let that happen," Domenico said.

"Goddamn right," I said, feeling fiercely protective of a hypothetical cluster of cells that I hadn't even known about half an hour before. "I'm not letting that son of a bitch hurt my family anymore." Then, remembering who Lucifer was the son of, I sent an apologetic glance upward along with a muttered "sorry" just in case.

There was a knock at the door, and I called for them to come in. A nervous-looking guard came in and set a plastic grocery bag on the table by the door before leaving as quickly as he possibly could.

"Alright, the tests are here," I said for Rogelio's benefit. "We'll call you back, okay?"

“Absolutely not,” Rogelio said. “Don’t you dare hang up on me. I’m staying on the line.”

I rolled my eyes, leaving Domenico to talk about food with Rogelio as I went into the bathroom. It was impossible to pinpoint the moment where my life had turned into this; a few months ago, I’d been eating ramen for most meals and killing for a living, and now I was listening to two demons talk about potential substitutes for herbs that could only be watered with the tears of the damned while I peed on a stick.

The bag was full of pregnancy tests. When I dumped it out onto the bathroom counter, at least a dozen boxes clattered onto the smooth marble surface. I grabbed the least pink one and followed the instructions carefully.

I spent the next few minutes alternating between pacing frantically and meditating with my eyes closed so I wouldn’t spend the whole time staring at the little piece of plastic that would reveal a huge part of my future.

I wasn’t ready. There was no way I was ready. I barely even knew how to hold a baby. I had never changed a diaper in my life. I was pretty sure the last time I’d seen a diaper had been at the fetish club where I’d met Domenico, and it didn’t seem like a good idea to treat any of that as an instruction manual.

The three-minute timer I’d set on my phone went off, and I sprang up to look at the test. In the little cavity on the stick, there was a helpful diagram: one line for not pregnant, two lines for pregnant.

There, in the middle of the test, were two bright pink lines.

## Chapter 25

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## *Domenico*

“I don’t know if I’m prepared to handle this development, honestly. It’s a lot of responsibility,” Rogelio said over the phone. “Sure, I make a great DILF, but a, what, a GILF? Is that even a thing that people say?”

“I’m so glad you’re not making this all about yourself,” I said, my voice drier than the Sahara.

Luckily, before Rogelio could rant in my ear any longer, the door to the bathroom swung open. Natasha stood in the doorway, her face pale and her eyes wide. She held the pregnancy test in one shaking hand, but I didn’t need to look at the results to know what it said.

“Are you still there? Is the test done?” Rogelio asked, his voice going strained. “What? Come on, Domenico, you have to keep me in the loop! What did the test say?”

“I have to call you back,” I said absently, then ended the call, cutting off his indignant squawk. In the place where my brain should have been, there was just static. I wasn’t sure if I could remember how to blink.

The next thing I knew, I had somehow made it to Natasha’s side. I swept her up into a massive bear hug, pressing kiss after kiss to her face. She was shaking like a leaf in my arms, letting out choked little noises, and I felt a moment of panic before I realized that she was giggling.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pulling back enough to look her in the eye.

“If it’s a girl,” she said between wheezing laughs, “I’m gonna name her Angela.”

I stared at her for a moment, then broke into laughter as well.

“We’re gonna have a baby,” Natasha said, whispering it like a secret. She lifted the pregnancy test as if she would bop me on the nose with it,

then presumably remembered what it was covered with and wound up waving it in front of my face instead.

I beamed down at her. “I’m going to be a dad,” I whispered back, giving her a gentle squeeze. I was grinning so widely that my cheeks hurt.

“This is so weird,” Natasha murmured. “Like, super weird.” She poked herself in the stomach lightly. “That’s gonna be a whole person, with fingers and toes and their own opinions about things.”

“I’ll have to find a doctor,” I said, more to myself than to her. “Someone who can make house calls. And they’ll have to be discreet, obviously. Should we have medical equipment in-house? There’ll be prenatal vitamins, obviously, that’s a given. I’ll have to do some research about—”

“Domenico,” Natasha said, cutting through my babbling. “Shh.”

“But...”

“Sit down, shut up, and cuddle me,” she said firmly but not harshly.

We slumped onto the bed next to each other, holding hands tightly. I looped an arm around her shoulders and made myself exhale.

We sat there in dazed silence for a few moments, but I eventually managed to take a deep breath and form a reasonably coherent sentence. “Look, before we tell anyone else,” I said, “I want to make it totally clear that we don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to. If you decide that you don’t want to do this or that it just isn’t the right time, I’ll support you one hundred percent.” I glanced at Natasha, then looked away, unable to shake the feeling that my gaze on her would make her feel pressured somehow. I stared up at the ceiling instead.

Natasha squeezed my hand and curled closer against me, pillowing her cheek on my chest. She untangled our fingers and slung her arm across my waist. “Honestly, this scares the ever-loving shit out of me, and I did think pretty hard about getting an abortion for a minute there,” she said. “Given, y’know, everything that we’re trying to deal with right now. But...I think I want to keep it. No, I know I want to keep it.”

“I’m glad,” I told her, a little surprised by how deeply I meant it. “I’m so glad, Natasha.” My eyes felt damp. My heart was pounding a frantically excited rhythm in my chest. “I...well...I never thought...there isn’t anyone else I can imagine myself doing this with.”

“There better not be,” Natasha teased. “But we can’t start picking out nursery decorations just yet. We have a war to win, and this changes a lot of things in a lot of ways.”

“It does,” I agreed. “We’ll need to rethink how we’re approaching this whole thing. We know that the eclipse is coming. We know Lucifer will be at the gates. Natasha, we have to kill him, not just settle for keeping him from carrying out his plan. If he gets the chance to try again...the next eclipse is in eighteen months, and there won’t be any way to hide the baby from him for that long. If he finds out...”

“We won’t let that happen,” Natasha said, steely-voiced. “If we can get me close enough with the Soul Spear, then I can end this myself, quick and clean.”

“We’ll need to keep you safe until then,” I pointed out. “I know you’re itching to get into the middle of this fight, but until we get a chance to face him directly, you should be on the defensive. Training and strategizing only. And I’m going to increase security. He’s managed to slip past our people before, and I...I can’t let that happen to you. To either of you,” I added, placing a protective hand on her stomach.

“Lucifer may have started this, but we need to finish it,” Natasha said, her voice full of determination and her eyes full of fire. “We have to end him.”

In that moment, she looked every bit like a warrior queen. My queen, ruling beside me, fighting with me, leading my people. I kissed her deeply, savoring the fragment of time we’d managed to steal for ourselves, and tucked away a few newfound fantasies about thrones and crowns for later exploration.

“I should tell the rest of our team,” I said. “We need to get everyone on the same page as quickly as possible. There’s not much time to prepare for the battle, and we’ll need to set up the security detail.”

“Good idea,” Natasha said. “Divide and conquer? You call Rogelio back, I’ll call Zander?”

“You don’t want to tell Rogelio yourself?” I asked.

“Oh, no, I want to see your face when he yells at you for hanging up on him,” she told me with a grin.

I rolled my eyes, mock-upset. “Gee, thanks,” I grumbled, and she laughed and kissed me.

When I called him back, Rogelio picked up the phone immediately. “I can’t believe you hung up on me!”

“Natasha’s pregnant,” I said bluntly, which shut him up immediately. “We need to completely change our priorities for the eclipse. We have to

kill Lucifer as soon as possible. Can you get us more troops?"

"I can reach out to my contacts," Rogelio said. "I know plenty of demons on the seedier side of things. They can get us fighters and find me information on anyone who might be joining your father's side of the war. I could send a few of them in as double agents."

"You trust them not to turn on you?" I asked.

Rogelio laughed darkly. "I trust that they know what I would do to them if they tried."

"Good," I said. "Get me all the intelligence that your team can find on sightings of Lucifer, anyone he might be meeting with, and any likely recruits."

"On it," Rogelio said. "I may have to go out of touch for a while. Some of these guys are real suspicious bastards, and that's coming from me."

"Check in whenever you can," I said. "But speed is more important."

"I will," Rogelio said. "And Domenico?"

"Yes?"

"Keep her safe."

"She can keep herself safe," I said.

"Yeah," Rogelio said. "Yeah, she can."

Pocketing my phone and wandering over to the sliding doors, I watched fondly as Natasha talked animatedly to Zander. She was pacing around on the balcony, her voice muffled by the glass doors between us, but I could see the wild gesticulations of her free hand and the grin on her face. Eventually, she hung up and came in, letting in a hot gust of desert air with her.

"Cristiano, Zander, and Manning are catching the next flight," she told me. "Zander sounded like he was about to lose his mind. I'm pretty sure he's going to call dibs on being godfather. Which, uh, now that I'm saying it out loud, I'm guessing that isn't something demons really go for."

"No, not really," I said. "We tend to be pretty skittish about the g-word." I'd settled myself on the edge of the bed, and Natasha stood in front of me, one knee up on the bed next to me. I cupped my hands around her waist, trying not to be too obvious about the fact that I was staring at her stomach.

"We'll need to get in touch with the other kings, too," she said. "Gotta let them know that we need to finish this quick. I'm just glad that I'm still able to fight and haven't started to show yet. I can't even imagine how much worse this would get if Lucifer figured out what's going on."

“I have to admit that I don’t like the idea of you fighting while you’re pregnant, even if he doesn’t know,” I said, looking up at her.

Her face pinched with frustration. She held out her hand to the side and muttered a few words under her breath, and her spear appeared in her grip. She thumbed the catch of its collapsed form, and it shot out to its full length, gleaming in the warm light of the bedroom. She stared down at me with a pointed look.

“I didn’t say I was going to try to stop you,” I said sheepishly. “Just that I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, either,” she said. “Believe me, I would love not to fight a war with the actual, literal Lucifer. But I do have to, so I’m gonna.”

“If he has any sense at all,” I told her, “he’ll be absolutely terrified of you.”

“Damn right,” Natasha said, leaning down to kiss me. “Now you go call the kings, and I’m gonna frantically Google ‘pregnancy clothes that make you look tough.’”

“I love you,” I told her, partially because I thought she might need to hear it and partially because I always wanted to say it again.

“I know,” she said, cupping my cheek. “I love you, too.”

Instead of trying to deal with the complications of a conference call with all the kings at once, I just called Liz. She would get word to everyone who needed to know faster than I would, and the part of me that wasn’t thinking about battle strategies wanted her to be the first to know.

“I was hoping you could give me some information about something,” I said when she picked up.

“Oh, darling, of course,” Liz said, doing an excellent job of pretending I hadn’t just woken her up. “I knew this day would come. I really did.”

“Natasha and I...wait, you did?”

“Obviously,” Liz said. “You’re going to want to start small, use plenty of high-quality lubrication, and make sure that the harness fits Natasha properly, or she won’t have full control of the—”

“Not that!” I said. “Definitely not that. That’s not...no.”

“My mistake,” Liz said, sounding completely unrepentant and not at all embarrassed. The speed with which she could go from dead asleep to talking about pegging was frankly incredible. “What did you need help with, then, darling?”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “I was hoping you could give me some suggestions for demon-appropriate prenatal vitamins.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and then Lizbeth, one of my oldest and dearest friends, screamed directly into my ear.

## Chapter 26

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## *Natasha*

The next morning, a woman was brought to the mansion. She had a broad, cheerful face, hair that was doing its best to escape from a bun, and an outfit that struck a pretty impressive balance between being stylish and being good for hiding stains. She had an old-fashioned Gladstone bag made of well-maintained black leather, the sort of thing that a doctor in a BBC show would carry.

“I’m Dr. Yun,” she told me, giving me a firm handshake. “But you can call me Jennifer. Your husband asked me to come take a look at you. Is that alright?”

We wound up in the living room. After a few basic questions (yes, my IUD was expired. Yes, I sometimes had irregular periods. No, I’d never been pregnant before. No, I didn’t smoke), Jennifer had me lie back on the sofa. She popped open the latches on her bag with a satisfying click and pulled out a tube-shaped device connected to a small screen by a bendy tube. She set that on the table, then pulled a little bottle from one of her inner pockets.

“Can you lift your shirt for me, please, Natasha?” she asked. I did, and she popped the cap on the bottle and squeezed some gel onto my stomach.

“It’s not cold,” I said, a little surprised. Jennifer gave me a dimpled smile.

“I keep it inside my coat so that it warms up to body temperature before I use it,” she said. “I like to make this as pleasant as possible for my patients.”

Domenico was standing by the back of the sofa where he could watch without getting in the doctor’s way, and when I reached out for him, he



grabbed my hand immediately. We both watched with wide eyes as Dr. Yun dragged the tube of the portable ultrasound over my stomach. On the little screen she'd propped up on the coffee table, we watched staticky gray blurs slide around. Soon, the doctor found what she was looking for. On the screen was a black circle surrounded by the gray static, and inside the circle was a gray blob shaped like a lima bean.

My breath caught in my throat. Peeing on a stick was one thing, but this was completely different.

"Is that...?" Domenico asked, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Yes, it is," the doctor said. "It looks like you're about eight weeks along, Natasha. Right now, your baby is around the size of a raspberry."

All my breath rushed out of me, and I squeezed Domenico's hand hard as I beamed up at him. "Our baby's the size of a raspberry. A rasp-baby."

"A rasp-baby," Domenico agreed, staring down at me with so much love and adoration in his eyes that it made me go a little bit pink.

When I finally managed to look away from him, Dr. Yun was smiling to herself, politely staring at one of the paintings on the wall to give us some privacy.

"Okay, so this is really happening," I said. "Weird."

The rest of the appointment passed in a blur, and when it ended, I had a giant bottle of vitamins and a stern reminder to reduce stress. I managed to bite back the laugh that threatened to burst out of me at that. Sure, reduce stress. Great, no problem. I'd get right on that as soon as I was done fighting the king of Hell to the death.

When Domenico and I went to find the others, they were in the training room, which until yesterday had been a basement. Mats had been spread out on the ground, and practice weapons had been scrounged up from somewhere. Zander was lying flat on the ground, and Manning was leaning against one of the walls. Both were dripping with sweat and breathing like they'd just run a marathon. Cristiano, on the other hand, didn't have a hair out of place and looked like he was about to do a photoshoot for athletic wear.

"I refuse to believe that you're the most in-shape one in this training session," I said to him.

Cristiano grinned at me brightly. "Oh, this is all for show," he said, waving a hand down the length of his torso. "I'm just running training. I'm

a lover, not a fighter,” he added, then immediately tripped over Zander’s leg and scrambled to keep his balance.

I snorted. “Yeah, I can see why.”

“Don’t let his whole Ivy League fuckboy thing fool you,” Zander wheezed from the floor. “He’s a fucking brutal trainer.” Over by the wall, Manning grunted in agreement.

“He has to be,” Domenico said. “We need to be in top form if we’re going to survive this.”

“Way to bring down the vibe,” I said.

Domenico shrugged, unrepentant. “We need to be prepared.”

I looked at the tired, determined faces of my friends. “I know,” I said quietly. “Believe me, I know.”

A few days later, we were all training. I was running through spear katas while Manning and Zander sparred, and I was getting way better at keeping my focus even when Zander teleported out of Manning’s grip or when Manning’s shield flashed into view with a burst of golden light.

On the other side of our makeshift training room, Domenico was sorting through a rack of training weapons. He was in workout clothes. The outfit was clearly high-end, but it was also very much just shorts and a t-shirt. It was sort of weird to see his knees when he wasn’t naked. He pretty much always wore a suit, so athleisure wear was a hell of an adjustment.

The sudden ringing of Domenico’s phone pierced through the grunts of exertion that filled the room.

“Who’s that?” I asked, dropping out of the training form I’d been moving through for approximately the millionth time. I leaned my weight on the spear to catch my breath.

“Unknown number,” Domenico said, frowning down at the screen. “So it’s either my father calling to posture or Rogelio on a burner.” He answered the call and listened for a moment before mouthing “Rogelio” to me. I nodded and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Good,” Domenico said into the phone. He was quiet for a long time, listening intently before saying, “I’ll see you soon. Good work, Rogelio.” He hung up the phone and slid it back into the pocket of his shorts.

“What’d he say?” I asked eagerly. Behind me, the sparring had stopped, and Manning and Zander were watching Domenico attentively.

“Lucifer is gathering his forces outside of Baghdad,” Domenico said. “And the eclipse is coming. We only have three days.”

“Shit,” I said. “Okay. I guess it’s go-time.”

“It seems like it,” Domenico agreed. “I don’t want to overwork you, especially given the circumstances, but you should get in as much practice with the spear as you can. I know you’ve been training as much as you can, but proper sparring should be a priority now.”

“Yeah, running drills is one thing, but I need a real fight,” I said. “Any of you boys willing to spar with me?” I glanced around the room, but Zander and Manning avoided my eyes.

“I’ll do it,” Domenico said. I looked at him with a grin, and he stared right back, the challenge clear in his eyes.

“You sure?” I said. “Are you gonna sulk when I win?”

“Win?” Domenico echoed. “Confident, aren’t you?”

“Always,” I told him. “And if I think you’re holding back on me, I’m gonna kick your ass even harder.”

“I would never,” Domenico said seriously.

Manning and Zander had a short, intense conversation with their eyes, and then Manning took Zander’s elbow. “We’ll leave you two to it,” he said, steering his partner out of the room.

“But—” I heard Zander say as the door shut behind them.

“Trust me,” Manning replied firmly, his voice muffled as they walked away.

Domenico began to stretch casually, watching me as I padded over to the rack of training weapons. I collapsed the Soul Spear and set it aside, then grabbed a practice spear from the rack, hefting it in my hands to get used to the balance.

“You’re not going to use the real thing?” Domenico asked.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I told him with a smirk.

He gave me a slightly dazed look, the kind that I usually saw when he was so turned on that his brain was about to melt. He didn’t reply, though, just paced to the weapons rack and picked up a longsword made of matte black plastic. He looked shockingly at ease with it in his hand, twisting it through the air casually. Sometimes Domenico did things that made me remember that he’d been around for millennia. Hell, he’d been around back when people thought swords would be a passing fad.

“You ready?” I asked.

“I’m ready,” he said.

We squared off in the middle of the training room. The mirrors that had been dragged in and set against one wall showed two warriors, strong and confident. And, if I was being honest, with incredible butts.

My patience cracked before Domenico's did. I jabbed at him, and he swatted my attack away with the flat of his sword, dancing forward to try to get inside my reach. I sprang backwards and stabbed forward enough to get him to duck away. We slid into the rhythm of the fight easily, fluidly, like we'd been doing it for years. Domenico kept pushing forward, trying to get close enough that the spear would be harder to maneuver, and I kept spinning away, countering every attempted strike. There was something seductive about it, the chase, the constant, burning attention on each other.

We were well-matched. He was stronger than I was, but even without the magic of the Soul Spear giving me a boost, I was much faster. Neither of us could land a hit on the other, no matter how hard we tried.

Then, a crack in Domenico's defenses; he feinted but put himself off-balance to do it, and I struck immediately, swinging the butt of my spear to knock his legs out from under him. He landed hard, and I heard the breath whoosh out of his lungs. I didn't give him any time to recover before I spun my training spear around and pressed the tip of it against his chest, right over his solar plexus.

"Good fight," I said, panting.

Domenico was giving me that look again, and when he pushed himself back up to his feet, he threw his sword to the side and paced forward, slow and predatory. His eyes were blown dark.

All at once, the adrenaline from the fight shot downwards to pool between my legs, burning hot. We practically crashed into each other, our lips meeting in a frantic, biting kiss.

"So fucking hot," Domenico hissed against my lips, grabbing my ass and tugging me closer until we were pressed together. I could feel the hot length of his erection against my hip like a brand, and I groaned into his mouth, spreading my legs enough to get his thigh between mine and grind down on it.

We practically tore at each other, frantic to get our clothes off. Domenico's shirt came off first, then mine. My sports bra was a problem; the tight fabric was a struggle to get out of even when I wasn't distracted, and I was pretty fucking distracted.

“Fuck it,” I said after a moment of clumsily yanking at the bra. I pulled my knife from the back of my leggings and sliced down the front. My tits spilled out of the cut fabric, and Domenico practically snarled, ducking to press a kiss to one nipple, then the other. He bit down on the pale curve of one breast, on the underside where I was more sensitive, and I moaned, my hips bucking against his.

“I thought I was supposed to be the one doing the bodice-ripping,” Domenico said with a breathless little chuckle.

“Next time,” I promised, pressing myself into his hands. I could feel my pulse pounding in my cunt.

I scrabbled at my waistband, shoving my leggings and panties down in one motion. Luckily, I was barefoot so I didn’t have to kick off shoes, but it still wasn’t seductive-looking to wiggle out of leggings. But Domenico didn’t mind, far from it. Judging by the look on his face, he wanted to eat me alive.

The lack of friction was killing me, so I pressed a hand between my legs, rubbing at my clit as Domenico undressed the rest of the way. It didn’t really help to take the edge off. If anything, it only made me more wound up.

As soon as we were both naked, Domenico was pressed close to me again, warm and eager and strong. I pushed him back against the wall, and he gave me a predatory grin, dipping his head for a kiss. Once I was well and truly distracted by his tongue in my mouth, he flipped us, knocking me against the wall. I gasped, dazed and delighted.

When I tried to reach a hand back between us, Domenico growled. His hand clamped around my wrist, then lifted it above my head. Then he grabbed the other and lifted it, too, and then he was holding both of my wrists in one huge hand. I let out a helpless little sound, too turned on to hold it back, and he grinned at me wolfishly.

“Is this good?” Domenico asked. I nodded frantically, and he laughed. “Good,” he said. I tugged against his hold experimentally, and he didn’t budge at all.

“Fuuuuck,” I breathed. “Yes. Yeah, very good, definitely good.”

We kissed roughly, desperately grinding against each other. It felt just as natural as the fighting, like we could each read the other just enough to anticipate a few seconds ahead. Even though Domenico was leading, we were partners in the dance. I could feel my wetness coating the firm planes

of his thigh, and his cock was dripping precome against my hip. I bit his lower lip, and his hand tightened around my wrist.

He broke away for air, staring down at me like he couldn't bring himself to look away. His chest was heaving, flushed pink and shining with sweat. I wanted to lick him.

"Domenico," I said. My voice came out pleading, but I didn't even know what I was trying to ask for.

Domenico let go of my wrists, and I let out a disappointed whine low in my throat. But before I could lower my hands, he grabbed me around the waist and hoisted me over his shoulder as if I didn't weigh anything at all. I let out a delighted laugh, reaching down to pinch his butt, and he laid a quick smack on one of my asscheeks to get back at me. I let out a shocked moan as the sound of the slap rang through the training room.

He carried me to the other side of the training room, then put me down and spun me around to face the wall. No, not the wall, I realized as my own blushing face stared back at me. He'd set me down in front of the mirror.

I looked wrecked. My mouth was red and puffy from being kissed, my eyes were completely blown, and I was dripping down the inside of my thigh. There were still marks on me from the last time Domenico and I had fucked, faint bruises where his fingers had dug into me, hickeys on my chest and thighs. Domenico pressed against me, his cock rubbing against my ass, looking just as debauched as I felt.

"Hands on the mirror," Domenico ordered. And it was an order, there was no mistaking it.

I obeyed, pressing my hands against the cold glass. "Why?"

"You'll need to brace yourself," he told me, and a shiver went up my spine.

I canted my hips back, wiggling my ass a little to watch his eyes go even darker. He took himself in hand and pushed into me in one smooth thrust. I couldn't help the moan that tore itself from my throat, echoing around the training room. I felt perfectly, blissfully full. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against Domenico's shoulder, but he pinched my thigh.

"No," he growled in my ear. "I want you to keep your eyes open. I want you to see how good you look when I fuck you."

I opened my eyes. In the mirror, Domenico was staring at me intently, every last bit of his focus on me.

“Good,” he said roughly. Then he slid almost all the way out of me and slammed back in.

He set a brutal rhythm, pounding into me until all I could do was make a continuous moaning sound. After the adrenaline of the fight and the rush of winning, it was perfect, just as rough as our sparring had been. He’d told me to look at myself, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him. He was gorgeous, with his hair falling into his face, his lips pink and spit-slicked.

I let myself float. All that mattered was his eyes on me, his hands tight on my hips, the way his cock filled me up just right. Soon, the brutal thrusts became a dirty, relentless grind that dragged the head of his cock over my G-spot just right, over and over again until I was a quivering wreck. He was close, I could tell. He was panting against the back of my neck, the hot brush of his breath tickling my ear.

What pushed me over the edge was the moan he let out when he came. I could feel him pulsing deep inside me, and my orgasm crashed over me, making the world go fuzzy and distant.

We stayed like that for a long time, trying to catch our breath. Once I stopped feeling like my legs were about to give out, I leaned back against Domenico and met his eyes in the mirror.

“We’re gonna need to spar more often,” I said.

## Chapter 27

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## *Domenico*

It was early when Rogelio arrived. Early enough that I could still see the last traces of the sunrise painting the desert sky pink and gold, but even that warm morning light couldn't make Rogelio look any less exhausted.

"You look terrible," I told him, pouring him a large mug of coffee. He waved it away, although he did give it a wistful look.

"You always know just what to say," he said dryly. "I'm going to get some sleep. I'm dead on my fucking feet."

"One of the second-floor guest rooms is free," I said. Plenty of rooms were free, but only one was far away from the room Natasha and I were sharing. Giving him that one was not only an act of kindness but one of enlightened self-interest. Nobody involved wanted Rogelio within earshot of our bed. "Third door on the left."

He nodded and headed for the door, groaned miserably, then doubled back and chugged half the mug of coffee in one go. I watched with mild horror as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and left the room once more.

I knew Natasha was still asleep, and I desperately wanted to still be in bed next to her. I was practically yearning for it. When had I become the sort of person who yearned? It had been nearly impossible to extract myself from our bed, both physically and emotionally. To my delight, Natasha was an incredibly clingy sleeper, and I always woke up with her wrapped around me like a very large and determined koala. These days, it was hard for me to fall asleep without her clutching me. This morning, I'd had to very, very slowly wiggle out of her grip while carefully handing her my pillow to latch

onto in my absence, feeling a bit like Indiana Jones swapping out a relic for a bag of sand.

The temptation of curling up with my wife wasn't the only reason I wanted to go back to bed. I was exhausted. Battle planning was complex and often frustrating, and I barely had time to sleep as we put the final pieces into place. On top of that, the weight of what was coming—facing my father, with my pregnant wife leading the charge—was impossible to ignore. Even when I had time to get some rest, I often lay there worrying instead. For now, coffee would have to do. I was just grateful that my demonic metabolism made it much more difficult to get caffeine jitters.

I refilled my mug and grabbed my laptop. As the last traces of dawn faded from the sky, I logged into the day's conference call with the other kings.

I barely managed to fight back a yawn as I joined the call, but judging by the states of the other kings, I didn't think any of them would have judged me if it had managed to slip out. Everyone looked wrung out. The worst part of trying to plan something as elaborate as a war while everyone was spread across the globe was that the time differences inevitably left a few of us miserable and groggy.

"Thank you all for joining me," I began automatically. "As I'm sure all of you are painfully aware, we only have two days left. We're in the last stretch now. According to our sources on the ground, Lucifer's people are on the move."

The kings looked slightly more alert at that. Liz narrowed her eyes thoughtfully as she took a long sip from her teacup.

"We have confirmation that Lucifer is gathering his troops outside of Baghdad, in the same area where we have reason to believe the gates are," I went on. "Given that the eclipse is only two days from now, I think it's fair to say that it's getting less and less likely that he'll try to stage a major attack on us in our own territories. He won't want to divert resources so close to the eclipse."

"I understand, of course, that some of you may not be comfortable with dedicating all your forces to the battle itself, and, purely on a logistical level, there are only so many people we can fit on a battlefield, so I expect that all of you will leave your major cities heavily defended. Rogelio has put out word to some of the demons who are...let's say they're less likely to respond to authority. Anyway, those demons will be on the ground

defending their own areas, so your fighters back home will have strong allies. He just got back this morning, so I'll be confirming that with him, but we should move forward with the assumption that we'll have at least a bit of help.

"I know some of you have already begun to mobilize your troops, but the time has come to send our best and brightest to Baghdad to prepare." My eyes flicked over the screen, jumping from face to face. The kings all looked grimly determined, and I felt a warm flush of gratitude at the knowledge that they all had my back.

"It seems like things are coming full circle," Jun said. "The gates of Hell, right next to the location of original sin."

"It is a bit poetic, isn't it?" I replied with a tired little smile. "My father's showmanship is unquestionable." It was lucky for all of us that he was so dedicated to drama. He'd had plenty of opportunities to kill me, but he wanted that final dramatic confrontation. Hopefully, that would be his downfall. I couldn't help but wish that I felt more optimistic about it.

Jun must have seen the look on my face because he gave me a gentle, fatherly smile. "It's going to be alright, Domenico. We're going to win this. Good will triumph." He paused, then added, "Of course, I'm using the term 'good' very loosely in this case."

That got a laugh out of me. I was incredibly grateful that I had such a solid team on my side, even if I was slightly embarrassed that I'd done a bad enough job of hiding my worry that Jun's paternal instincts had kicked in.

"Jun, I'd like to hand things over to you to get an update on your intel in the area," I said, trying to get things back into war mode.

Jun took the hint with a wry smile and began, although it took several minutes and Emiko's help for him to set up presentation mode so he could show us his maps.

Later, as I ended the call, Natasha wandered into the living room. She still had pillowcase creases pressed into her cheek, but she'd already dressed in her workout clothes and looked surprisingly alert, given how she usually was in the mornings.

"Hey," she said, ducking to give me a kiss. Her mouth still tasted like toothpaste. "You should've woken me. I need to get to training."

"You need your sleep," I insisted. "Depending on how these next few days go, we might need all the energy we can muster."

Just then, Rogelio came in, clutching his half-empty mug of coffee in a death grip. Natasha straightened up and smiled at him.

“You’re here,” she said. “When did you get in?”

“While you were still snoring your head off,” Rogelio said, his voice still raspy with sleep.

“Hey! I don’t snore,” Natasha said. She nudged me. “Tell him I don’t snore.”

I studiously avoided making eye contact with either of them.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Natasha said. “Rude. So rude, babe. I can’t believe you guys are ganging up on me. No loyalty at all. Do our vows mean nothing to you, Domenico?”

I smiled up at her, completely unrepentant. “We never actually said any vows,” I pointed out. “And I think your snoring is charming.” In a burst of self-preservation, I decided not to mention that she also kicked in her sleep. I’d learned early on that it was best to trap her feet between my calves, or I’d wake up with bruises all over my shins. Natasha kicked like an angry mule.

“Where are the others?” she asked.

“Zander and Manning are running drills out in the desert. Apparently, they wanted to get used to fighting on sand before the main event,” I told her. “And Cristiano went into town bright and early this morning to meet with one of his local contacts. Since it’s just the three of us, I thought I’d make something simple for breakfast.”

“Simple by my standards or yours?” Natasha asked wryly.

“I don’t have to answer that,” I said primly.

Really, I showed remarkable restraint. The Eggs Benedict with smoked salmon and avocado on whole-wheat toast came together fairly quickly, and the berry smoothies didn’t take any thought or skill to make.

“Domenico,” Natasha said, sounding a little exasperated as I put her plate in front of her, “how long did you spend Googling foods that are good for pregnant people?”

“I don’t have to answer that, either,” I said, a dizzying array of facts about protein and omega-3s swimming before my eyes.

She snorted and dug in. Across the table, Rogelio shook his head, not even attempting to hide his amusement, and took a sip of his smoothie.

“So, how did your super-secret mission go?” Natasha asked Rogelio between bites of breakfast and longing stares at his coffee mug.

“It went better than I was expecting, honestly,” Rogelio told us. “Many of my contacts are hesitant to join the battle at the gates, but they have a vested interest in keeping their own areas safe. They’ll make sure the humans around them are taken care of, if need be.”

“Seriously? I didn’t see that coming,” Natasha said.

Rogelio gave a one-shouldered shrug. “It’s not exactly out of the goodness of their hearts,” he said. “They want to protect their food source.”

“Yeah, that kinda makes more sense,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes.

“That’s the angle you pushed, I assume,” I said. “Enlightened self-interest?”

“Of course,” Rogelio told me. “I know how to work with scheming bastards.”

“You’ve had plenty of years of experience, I imagine,” I said dryly.

“Some of my people have spotted more demons like the ones we fought in New York City,” Rogelio said, smoothly ignoring my little jab. “They don’t seem to be active yet. My guess is that Lucifer will tell them to attack just before the battle at the gates, to try to draw as many of our resources away as possible. Between my associates and the kings’ people staying behind to defend, we shouldn’t have any major issues.”

“I can’t say I particularly like how easy it is for you to get inside my father’s head,” I told him.

Rogelio flashed me the sort of grin that’s only seen by fish right before a shark’s jaws snap shut around them. “Aren’t you glad I picked your side?”

“What else did you find out?” Natasha asked.

“Not much,” Rogelio said with a frown. “But I spoke to a few of the local leaders in areas where I have...a bit of influence. They’ll get in touch with their followers and make sure they’re ready to deal with any local trouble. We’ll have people with boots on the ground who already know the area, so we shouldn’t have to divert any of our resources from the battle in Iraq.”

“You’ve done well,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“Happy to help,” Rogelio said with an impressive lack of sarcasm.

“Are you coming with us to the fight at the gates?” Natasha asked him, spearing a runaway chunk of yolk-covered avocado and popping it into her mouth.

“I was planning on it,” Rogelio said, giving me a sidelong glance as if daring me to say something. I met his eyes calmly and let what I was

thinking remain unsaid. He didn't want Natasha going into battle without him. I could relate.

"Jun's sent some of his people out to scout the area," I said instead. "They'll see if they can pinpoint the exact location of the gates for us. As it is, he has a place outside of the city, but we may be able to find somewhere closer for our final preparations before things truly begin.

"I also plan on making it clear to all of the generals that keeping you safe is a top priority," I told Natasha. "You're the most important part of this whole thing. If someone manages to get in a lucky hit on you, it would be catastrophic."

"I'll stay on the defensive until the last minute," Natasha said. "But I want it on the record that I'm not exactly thrilled about it."

"Noted," I said.

Natasha pushed her chair back, setting her fork down on her empty plate. "I'm going to go get some more training time in. I'll go find the guys out in the desert."

"Make sure you're loud," I said. "You wouldn't want to, ah...surprise them. Just in case."

"Good call," Natasha said with a small grimace. "Come find me if you feel like getting your ass kicked again, okay?"

"I will," I told her. She kissed me goodbye and left, lightly tossing her collapsed spear from hand to hand.

Rogelio saw the look I sent after her as she left the room, and he sighed, draining the last of his coffee.

"She's very stubborn," he said. "And she's very, very strong. She'll be fine."

"I hope you're right," I said. "I really do."

A few hours later, as I was poring over maps of the Iraq desert, my phone buzzed. Jun's people had found the gates. A chill went through me, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. In two days, this would all be over. In two days, I would face off against my father for the last time.

In two days, one of us would be dead.

## Chapter 28

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## *Natasha*

I was out on the little patio where Domenico and I had enjoyed our makeshift date night, looking out over the desert. In the warm morning light, the sand was golden and inviting, like good caramel.

I'd already had breakfast—another nutrient-dense, dietician-approved, pregnant-person meal, courtesy of Domenico—and I was holding a steaming mug of tea, more for the comforting, solid warmth of the mug in my hands than anything else. I missed coffee already. Decaf just wasn't the same. I didn't mind black tea, but this was some herbal bullshit that tasted like it had been farted in by a raspberry with clinical depression.

I heard the crunch of footsteps on the path behind me, quiet and measured. I didn't bother to glance back. Whichever one of the guys it was, I trusted them at my back.

Rogelio sank into the chair next to me, a coffee cup in one hand. He tried to pass it to me, and I frowned at it.

"I'm not supposed to drink coffee," I reminded him.

"It's a brand made specifically for pregnant women," he told me. "You'll still have to hold back, but you can have a cup a day."

"We had pregnancy coffee?" I asked.

He looked out over the desert resolutely. "I picked some up when I was meeting my contacts," he said faux-casually. I knew that tone of voice; it was the one that meant, "Don't make me talk about this, kid."

I couldn't resist prodding a little. "You saw it and thought of me, huh?" I asked lightly.

Rogelio sighed. "You drank coffee every day during your training. Quitting that habit all at once would mess up your energy levels, and we



can't have that."

"For the battle," I said, giving him an easy out.

"Right," he said. "For the battle."

We stared out at the desert. Some wild plant I didn't know was blooming, its vivid yellow petals catching the sun, and a light breeze kicked up, blowing the sweet scent of it toward us.

"Natasha, I..." Rogelio said hesitantly, then took a breath and started again. "James loved you very much."

I glanced at him, but he was still staring at the desert. His jaw was tense, and his hands were folded together in his lap. I looked away.

"He adored you," he continued. "Every time we spoke, he would tell me how smart you were, how talented. How much you took after him," he added with a sad little laugh. "He would have done anything to protect you. Anything."

I held my mug of coffee tightly. Off in the distance, a bird called, high and piercing.

"If there's a time in the next few days where there's...an opening that you would need a distraction for, you should take it," Rogelio went on. "I can draw focus, and it's...you wouldn't have to worry about it."

I wanted to say that it wouldn't be necessary, that there was no way it would come to that, but I knew I couldn't promise that. I didn't ask him if he was sure. If he wasn't certain, he wouldn't have brought it up.

"You were his best friend for centuries," I said instead. "He was a good man. He wouldn't have loved you if you didn't deserve it."

Next to me, Rogelio let out a gasping breath like he'd been stabbed. I watched the wildflowers bob and weave in the breeze.

"It's...you've done a lot of bad shit, Rogelio. I know you didn't want to take me in when my parents died, and I get that, I do, but you could have done *something*. You were running a criminal network, making bank, and I was eating ramen and trying to make ends meet as a fucking sixteen-year-old. Honestly? I don't know if I'll ever be able to fully forgive you for that. But we're linked together, no matter what, and...and we're the only people who still remember him."

My fingers were pressed against the sides of the mug so hard that they'd gone bone-white, just a shade darker than the porcelain. "But even with all that shit," I continued, "I know you'll do what you can to protect me. And I don't want you to throw your life away to do that."

“I may not have a choice,” Rogelio said, achingly gentle. It was the same tone of voice that my father had used when I’d found a bird with a broken wing and insisted that I could nurse it back to health. It had died in the night, and we’d buried it in the backyard in the shoebox I’d tried to keep it in.

“I know,” I said. “I know. But that’s the absolute last fucking resort, do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rogelio said, and I could hear the tired smile in his voice.

“Besides, somebody needs to be this little guy’s grandpa,” I said, putting a hand on my stomach. “And I’m pretty sure Domenico’s dad wouldn’t be great at it, given, y’know...”

Rogelio groaned, tilting his head back. “Grandpa makes me sound so old, though.”

“You’re literally millennia old,” I reminded him.

“Details,” he said.

We watched the desert. The coffee was good, even if it wasn’t as good as the fully caffeinated stuff. I burned my tongue, but only a little.

All too soon, the day became a blur of cars, airports, planes, tiny cans of cranberry juice, and little bags of peanuts. It was impossibly surreal to think about killing the literal, actual devil—the one all the paintings were about—while also remembering to get gum so I could make my ears pop on the flight.

It was chaotic and stressful but also strangely mundane. Battle plans were all well and good, and we’d trained our asses off, but we still had to sit through a nineteen-hour flight. Eventually, talks about strategy and weapons trailed off. Card games broke out. Manning watched a TV show about a doomed Arctic expedition on Zander’s tablet. We slept in shifts, even though no real threat could reach us.

When we finally touched down on a private airstrip outside of Baghdad, the energy in the air was electric. I’d never been around so many demons in one place, and it made my skin tingle like I was standing a little too close to an open flame after being out in the cold.

Jun was waiting for us on the tarmac, a still, massive shape amid the hustle and bustle. Next to him, just as imposing even though she was about half his size, was Emiko. I grinned, waving like a lunatic, and she waved right back.

“Have the other kings already arrived?” Domenico asked briskly.

“Gloria got in about twenty minutes ago, and she was the last aside from you,” Jun told us. It seemed like everyone instinctively understood that now wasn’t the time to stand on formalities, no matter how important they usually were.

“Excellent,” Domenico said. “I’ll need to speak to all of them.”

The base of operations that Jun had picked out was an abandoned military base, starkly minimal and utilitarian. He led us deep into one of the biggest buildings to a large room that was dominated by a long rectangular table. Sitting around the table were the other kings, looking tired but determined. Each of them had someone with them, a new face that I didn’t recognize.

“First of all,” Domenico said, pacing to the head of the table with his back ramrod straight, “I want to thank all of you for being here. This won’t be an easy fight, but a vitally important one. Each of you has someone with you today who means the world to you. They’re here to pull you back if you get lost in your demon form, yes, but they are also here to remind you what we’re fighting for.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that the fate of the world is at stake, ladies and gentlemen. We have a duty to protect our people. Demonkind is depending on us. It’s worth remembering, though, that they aren’t the only ones. We’ve called this world our home for thousands of years. We’ve been here since the beginning. We’ve watched humanity grow and change, watched them adapt and overcome. We have watched them create horrors and face them down. I know each and every one of you has had humans in your long, long lives whom you’ve loved, and I ask you to fight not just for your citizens, not just for the people here with you today, but for the memory of those humans as well.

“This will be a hard fight. There will be losses. I won’t insult you by telling you that our victory is a sure thing; all of you are smart, and you’ve seen your fair share of combat. You know that things are going to be brutal out there. But you also know that you’ve survived for thousands of years with your cunning, your strength, and your determination. I’m honored to have you all by my side, and I truly believe that we can persevere.

“Be strong. Fight wisely. Remember who you’re protecting,” Domenico finished.

There was a moment of echoing silence when he was done talking, and then Anahera cupped her hands around her mouth and cheered. The room erupted into noise, cheers and clapping and stamping feet. Domenico gazed around the room proudly, and when I slid my hand into his, he squeezed it tight.

The kings settled in to talk about the details of troop movement and resource control, and one by one, the people I didn't recognize got up and clustered in the corner near a battered coffee pot that I eyed longingly. I went over to bask in the coffee smell. Also to introduce myself, but the coffee smell was the main thing.

"I'm Natasha," I said, waving a little. "Hey."

"We know who you are," one of them said. He looked around my age, with dark skin and hair pulled back into a ponytail. Behind his horn-rimmed glasses, he had eerily purple eyes. "My mum told me all about you on the flight over." He nodded over at Lizbeth, who was deep in conversation with Domenico. "I'm Leo," he added, sticking out a hand. His handshake was firm and brief.

"Whetu," said a broad, smiling man with weathered skin and a cloud of white hair. "I'm here to keep an eye on my niece. Bet you can't guess which one she is," he joked. He had a thick New Zealand accent, and it was impossible to miss his resemblance to Anahera.

"Ndidi," said a reedy man in an impeccably cut suit made of bright blue plaid. "I'm Thema's second in command. I don't expect she'll need me to bring her back, but you know..." He shrugged and sipped his coffee. "Better to be safe than sorry."

There was something odd about the last woman, who had an air of calm certainty that you only got from master craftsmen, good emergency room nurses, and middle-aged lesbians. Given the way she looked at Gloria, I figured she fell into at least one of those categories.

"My name is Tamya," she said. She had faded geometric tattoos of fish and snakes on her hands, stretching below her gold wedding band and curling up her arms. "I'm here for Gloria."

"You're a human," I said, finally realizing what had seemed different about her. She gave me a faint smile.

"I am," she said.

"And you're married to a demon?" I asked.

She shrugged a little, making the leather of her jacket rustle. Did she and Gloria have matching leather jackets? Could I talk Domenico into getting matching jackets with me? “So are you,” she said. “We make it work.”

“I’m gonna be Domenico’s anchor person, obviously,” I said. “And Emiko’s going to be Jun’s. That just leaves...” I turned back toward the table.

Rogelio was sitting closest to us, and he cocked his head to the side as he spun his chair just enough to make eye contact. “I don’t need someone to remind me to come back. I’ve had plenty of practice pulling myself away from my true form.”

I gave him a tight little nod. I wasn’t going to point out the obvious. He knew I was going to be there. He knew he was going to have a grandkid to come back for.

We all split off and went to separate rooms for our final preparations. All the rooms were pretty bare, with thin mattresses and small, sturdy windows. In the one Domenico and I were led to, there were three boxes on the bed, two large and one small. We opened the bigger ones first. Inside were sleek ivory sets of Kevlar armor, covered with intricate runes and symbols in gold. They were so densely covered in the writing that from a few feet away, the colors evened out into a smooth, shining white-gold. I hefted the breastplate out of my box. It was surprisingly light and barely felt like anything when I put it on.

“A few of the research teams have been working on these together,” Domenico told me, tightening a strap on his own breastplate. “All the best parts of demon and human defenses, put into one.”

“And they’re so stylish, too,” I said. It was a weak attempt at a joke, but Domenico still shot me a small smile. “It’s pretty impressive that they managed to get these made so fast, I’ve gotta admit.”

“We have a lot of resources at our disposal,” he said. “And now seemed like the right time to call in all the favors we were owed. We won’t have enough armor for everyone, but we have a few thousand suits.”

I let out a low whistle. “Guess that’ll make it easier to figure out who’s on our side.”

“Even the ones who aren’t in armor have been told to wear white and gold,” Domenico said.

“Why white and gold?” I asked.

Domenico reached out a hand and brushed his fingers over my spear. The gold bands wrapped around the carved ivory gleamed in the light. I smiled up at him, then tugged him into a kiss.

"I love you," I told him, soft and serious. We stayed close, our foreheads pressed together, just breathing the same air for a moment.

"I love you, too," he murmured.

Reluctantly, we pulled apart and went back to helping each other into the armor. There was something soothing about it, almost meditative. We were building each other up, making sure the other was defended. I got a little more peace of mind every time another hard plate of shining gold slid into place over Domenico's clothing. Finally, we were fully geared up, and I reached for the last box.

Inside was a note written in green gel pen. *Had this made for you!! - Emiko*, it read. I shook my head a little and folded back the tissue paper covering the box's contents. Lying on the dark paper was a belt made of pale leather, embossed with the same gold patterns as the armor. Two odd shapes hung from it, and when I lifted it, my eyes went wide and giddy.

"Ohhhhh my god," I said. "It's a gun belt." It looked like something out of a high-fantasy version of a Western, and when I put it on, I realized that one holster was the perfect size for my knife and the other was the perfect size for my collapsed spear. I squealed with delight, loading my weapons into it. I looked down at myself, dressed in demonic armor and carrying angelic weapons. I was going to war to protect the people I cared about, the family I had managed to find for myself. A few months ago, this would have seemed impossible to me, but now...

Now, there was a pressure in my head, familiar but still strange. It overflowed, bursting from my mouth, and then I was speaking, saying the words of a spell I didn't know but was still a part of me. I could feel the power of it tingling throughout my body, bubbly and electric. As quickly as it started, it faded away again.

I blinked at Domenico. "What happened? What did the spell do?"

Before he could answer, there was a banging on the door. When I opened it, Manning and Zander were there, both in their own sets of armor.

"What did you do?" Zander asked.

"A spell popped into my head again," I said. "Why, what did you feel?"

Instead of answering, Zander pointed at his arm, where a wide band of woven gold was wrapped around the armor covering his bicep. Manning

held up a wrist, and there was a bracelet with the same pattern curling up his arm.

“Uhhhh,” I said.

Rogelio rounded the corner, power-walking with the sort of intensity that told me he’d rather be sprinting.

“You cast another spell,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“You got magic jewelry, too, huh?” I asked. Instead of bothering to answer, he gestured at his neck. Just above the line of his armor, a gold torc gleamed in the light. Domenico put his hand on my arm, and there was another thick gold band on his ring finger.

Emiko stuck her head out of a room a few doors down. Two gold bangles swung from her ears, barely sticking out from the bottom of her bobbed hair. “Natasha,” she said mildly, “did you summon ancient angelic jewelry to protect us?”

“Seems like it,” I said. I shrugged, a little bit sheepish. “Whoops?”

“No, no, this is wonderful,” Emiko said, coming over to join our little huddle. “I’ve read about these pieces. They were powerful amulets meant to protect the wearer from the worst kinds of dark magic.”

“And now we have them,” Manning said, sounding as surprised as I’d ever heard him.

“What were you thinking about when the spell came to you?” Emiko asked eagerly. I got the impression that she’d be making notes on all of this later.

“Just, uh, you know. Family and stuff. And...protecting. Family.” I stammered. Zander let out an exaggerated coo of adoration, but I could tell he was tearing up a little. Manning put a hand on his shoulder, and he swayed into the touch.

“You wanted to protect us,” Domenico said softly. “And you wanted it strongly enough that your magic found a way to react.”

All the demons considered their new jewelry. Domenico, Zander, and Manning stared at theirs while Rogelio and Emiko ran their fingers over the pieces they’d been given. The corridor filled with the sound of grown demons doing their best not to cry.

In the end, Zander broke first. He pulled me into a short but very tight hug and tried to ruffle my hair as he pulled away. I squawked and kicked him on the shin, and he laughed wetly. Manning clapped me on the back, then looked me square in the eye.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. I could tell he wasn’t just thanking me for his bracelet.

Emiko was next, giving me an enthusiastic fist bump before running back to her room to finish putting on her armor. Rogelio leaned nonchalantly by the doorway until it was just me, him, and Domenico. Once we were alone, he peeled himself away from the wall and came over to stand in front of me. He opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

“Natasha...” he said.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “It’s okay.”

The hug came as a surprise. It was sudden and very awkward; it seemed like Rogelio was pretty out of practice when it came to physical affection. It was over as quickly as it began.

“Be safe,” Rogelio said, then turned on his heel and escaped before he’d have to try for any more emotional vulnerability.

And then it was just Domenico and me. I stood facing him, holding his hands in mine. In my white and gold, I suddenly felt like a bride on her wedding day. I probably had more of a reason to be nervous than most brides.

Domenico looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to memorize my face. He brushed a stray lock of hair behind my ear, letting his hand linger on my cheek.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Let’s do this,” I said.



## Chapter 29

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## *Domenico*

In the middle of a shockingly green valley split by two rivers, there was a perfect circle of desert. It faded away evenly into the reeds and brush of the land around it, a smooth gradient from lush green to barren gray-yellow dirt. The Euphrates flowed by one side of it and the Tigris by the other, two thick bands of brilliantly blue-green water that met deep in the valley, rushing together as joyfully as two lovers reunited after a long journey. Despite all the vibrant life around the spit of land between them—grasses, flowers, ancient trees—the desolate patch of ground would never recover. It had been permanently marred by that first moment of sin, made barren by my father's temptation.

The only signs of life in that circle were two trees, squarely in the middle, their roots digging stubbornly into the sun-bleached dirt. An apple tree and a fig tree, both gnarled with age, their branches tangled together to form an organic arch that shifted in the breeze. Even though the ground around them was parched and bare, they were bright and full of life. Their leaves were so green that they almost looked unnatural, as if someone had taken a photo and turned the saturation up a little too far to be believable. Neither of the trees had any fruit on their branches.

At the base of the apple tree lounged a lone figure in a sharp black suit that was so dark, it looked like someone had cut a hole in the world. The man had chiseled cheekbones and wide, guileless brown eyes. He smiled when he saw me, genuine in the way only a true liar could be. I recognized the smile, even though the face was new.

The air of the valley felt staticky yet oddly still, even with hundreds of demons at my back. Next to me, Natasha put her hand on the still-collapsed

spear at her hip, clearly on her guard. She was watching Lucifer with a level, confident gaze, unwilling to let him rattle her. I felt a surge of pride watching the woman I loved face down the man who had haunted my nightmares for far too long.

“Domenico,” Lucifer said cheerfully, as though welcoming a favorite guest to a party. He pushed away from the trunk of the tree and sauntered forward casually. “You came. I wasn’t sure if you would bother to show your face in a fight you can’t win. And you brought me my new toy, as well,” he said, waving a hand at Natasha without bothering to look at her. “To-your-door-service. How thoughtful of you.”

“Ohhhh my god,” Natasha groaned. “I’m really going to enjoy killing you. And I want you to know that I truly mean that.” She smiled in a way that bared all her teeth.

“Father,” I said coldly. I rested my hand on the hilt of the weapon I’d chosen, a viciously sharp longsword. “I expected you to bring more of your followers. I assumed I’d have a proper fight to keep me busy while Natasha tears you apart.”

He grinned at me lazily and waved a hand in the air. On his signal, there was one pop, then another, and another, until the air was full of the familiar sound of teleportation. Demons appeared in clusters, each one with teleportation powers bringing at least a dozen others with them. Within the blink of an eye, the valley was swarming with them, a roiling mass of demons in ragged makeshift armor, their eyes wild. Some of them were already in their feral states. Many were in their true forms, and the stench of sulfur and magic in the air was overwhelming.

“Is this closer to what you had in mind?” my father asked, his tone all carefully studied innocence. “I’d hate to disappoint you, Domenico.”

I looked around the valley. Their numbers were impressive, dwarfing the group I’d brought with me, but I wouldn’t let myself be shaken by it. Next to me, Rogelio shook his head very slightly and murmured into his earpiece. As soon as he was finished, there was a bellowing war cry from Anahera, quickly taken up by her followers. Then one from Jun, and one from Thema, building and building until the demons at my back were letting out cacophonous, overlapping challenges in countless languages.

Lucifer didn’t seem at all impressed by the display. “You must already know that you’ve limited yourself, Domenico. So, there are two options here. Either you’re too stupid to realize what you’re walking into, or you’re

knowingly sending all these people into a fight you know they can't win. The demons who follow you are weak and foolish enough to swear fealty to a false king who wants them to hide their true power. They've gone soft after countless lifetimes of pretending to be lesser than they really are. None of them have the strength to fight demons who have truly embraced their full strength."

"They follow me because they believe in me," I said calmly. "And because they want to keep the lives they've built in the centuries where they've been free of your rule. The lives they struggled for after the last time you failed them. They're part of this world, Father. They've built homes, families, communities. Meanwhile, you've spent the last few millennia talking to yourself. You have nothing to offer them."

Lucifer threw his head back and laughed. "Ah, son. You're fooling yourself. They've settled for you, Domenico. They only ever followed you because you were my son. Because they thought you could give them the tiniest sliver of what they got from me. But now?" He spread his arms wide, every inch a showman. "Daddy's home!"

"I'm sure they're thrilled that the demon who destroyed the lives they've known has returned. You've lied to them again and again," I said, making sure that my voice carried through the entire valley. I wanted everyone to hear this, allies and enemies alike. "You've promised them riches and power. A long time ago, you promised them a way back into Heaven." I gestured around me at our undeniably earthly surroundings. "You didn't deliver on your promises then. You won't deliver on them now. The truth is that you're doing what you always do: using them for your own ends."

The demons behind Lucifer who could still control their minds were watching me cautiously. I took a deep breath. It was time to drive another nail into my father's coffin. I was painfully aware that the clock was ticking; there was only so much time left to convince his people to desert him.

"Lucifer has stolen an ancient book of spells," I said, turning the full weight of my attention to the gathered horde of demons. "A book that was written by the most powerful angels, full of magic that could be used to help our kind. But what does he plan to do with it?"

My father had gone pale and still, his arrogant smirk thinned into an unconvincing mask. To a stranger, he would have looked calm, but I knew

him well enough to see that he was deeply furious. I allowed myself a sharp smile. Clearly, I'd landed a hit. If he didn't like me telling his followers that he had the book, he really wasn't going to like what was coming next.

"He plans to use those spells to drain your magic from you!" I shouted to the crowd. "To take it for himself. Everything that makes you a demon, everything that he told you is so special about you, he plans to strip away from you and consume. He's already taken so much from you. Your old lives. The families you had before the fall. From some of you, he's taken your sanity. Ask yourself if you're really willing to let him take even more in exchange for nothing but another set of empty promises."

A murmur went up through the crowd, building and echoing through the valley like the beginnings of a distant avalanche. My father's jaw clenched tightly enough that a muscle twitched in his cheek.

"The only reason," I began, then had to raise my voice over the sound of the demons' rumblings. "The only reason he hasn't done it yet is that he can't! He cannot cast the spells in the book! Why? Because he isn't strong enough!" It was true, although I'd left out a few key details. I'd picked up one or two things from my father, and it only seemed fitting to use them against him. I met Lucifer's eyes, which were burning and furious. "He has lied to you again and again. He failed you once before. After millennia of solitude, kept far away from the challenges we've overcome, stewing in his own anger, do you really think that he's any better equipped to lead you now?"

I could feel it in the murmurs of the crowd, the way the demons behind Lucifer were meeting each other's eyes and then looking away quickly. I was getting through to them. I felt oddly calm; I'd prepared everything that I could. I'd collected all the key pieces. Now I just had to lay them out, one by one, and make sure that everyone my father had tricked into following him understood what they meant.

"Lucifer has no interest in leading anyone. You've never been people in his eyes. You've never been subjects to be helped or led. You've never been anything more than fuel in his eyes. He doesn't want to be a king. He wants to be a child who breaks his toys for fun."

Sweat beaded at Lucifer's hairline, faint but visible.

"There is only one person strong enough to use that book of angelic spells," I continued. "Natasha Monroe, descendent of the Archangel Gabriel, granddaughter of Beelzebub." Next to me, Natasha stood tall and

proud, gazing out over the gathered demons. I didn't think it was physically possible for me to love her any more than I already did, but I was wrong. Pride and adoration swelled in my chest.

With a flourish, she pulled the Soul Spear from her holster and extended it to its full length, slamming the butt of it against the ground so hard that it kicked up a cloud of dust. The flame-shaped blade of the spear shone in the sun, and another wave of murmurs went through the crowd.

"My father has attempted to capture Natasha before. He has tried to break her to his will, and he has failed. If he had his way, he would use her powers to destroy each and every one of you for his personal gain. You've seen what he's done to your friends, your families. You've seen the feral demons roaming the streets, husks of their former selves. Do you really think that he'll stop with them? Do you really think that he'll spare you and your children?"

The murmurs were constant now, twisting and overlapping as the gathered demons listened to my words, not my father's. It felt strange to have the upper hand for once, but I couldn't give myself time to revel in it.

Lucifer looked out over the crowd with a manic rictus grin. "My son. My poor, sweet, naïve son. He's just a bureaucrat, not a warrior. He doesn't see the bigger picture, doesn't anticipate problems, just deals with them as they come up. That's why he's been forcing you all to hide yourselves away. He's too scared to let you do anything more than live in the shadows, stealing scraps to survive. That's why he doesn't want you to reclaim the power of Hell! He knows he won't be able to control you when you're at your full strength!

"Yes, I've asked you all to make sacrifices for me. A true warrior understands that sometimes sacrifice is necessary, and you, my friends, are all true warriors, are you not? Once we get rid of this pretender to my throne and reclaim what's rightfully ours, I will repay your sacrifices tenfold! I will—"

I waved a hand to signal Jun, and he murmured into an earpiece. Immediately, there was a pop as Zander teleported next to me with Sammie. Lucifer's eyes locked onto the boy, flashing with surprise and cold fury. I gave Sammie an encouraging nod, and he swallowed before stepping forward. One of the demons staying at the base had sketched out a talisman to amplify his voice, and he held it tightly in a shaking hand.

“I was a normal demon once, like you. Lucifer’s people found me at a youth shelter,” Sammie said. His voice quivered a little, but he took a deep, steadying breath and went on. The crowd had gone quiet, tense. They were listening so intently that Sammie barely even needed the talisman to be heard. “They waited for new kids to come in, and they would try to recruit us. We were promised food, clothes, places to stay. They said it would be like a big family. We believed them. We shouldn’t have.” His voice broke, and he swallowed hard, looking at his blister-red hands.

“I’m sixteen years old,” he said. “I was one of the older ones that he recruited. Soon I found out that he wasn’t building a big family. He was building a child army. There were a lot of us. He would send us out on missions with no backup. Once, I was sent out with a boy who had been recruited just like me. I never found out his name. I’m not sure he could even remember what it was anymore, and even if he did, he was too far gone to talk. He couldn’t have been older than eleven. Lucifer promised him a home and a hot meal, then sent him off to die.”

The crowd was getting loud again, riled up by every word Sammie said. He had to raise his voice to be heard.

“I’m one of the lucky ones!” He was shouting now, and with the talisman in effect, his anguished, shaking voice seemed to fill the whole valley. “Lucifer turned me into this. I can’t change back. Domenico and his people took me in, and they’ve been doing everything they can to help me. I’m stuck like this, but at least I’m alive. Lucifer doesn’t care about that, though! He doesn’t. He never has. He’ll let you die for him.”

Sammie took a step back, breathing hard. When he released the talisman, the crumpled paper fluttered to the ground. Natasha reached out and squeezed his hand, and he smiled at her weakly.

“Good job, kid,” she whispered to him before letting go. Zander clapped Sammie on the shoulder and waited for the boy’s nod of approval before teleporting him safely away from the brewing fight.

Lucifer let out a strangled bark of laughter. “Now, really, this is just getting pathetic. Who would you rather believe? Your true king, or some child?” He’d lost the crowd, though, and he knew it.

“I can’t blame you for being taken in by my father,” I told the crowd. “Lying is what he does best. I know that he’s found ways to prey on you, to manipulate you when you needed help the most. I’m going to extend the same offer to all of you: leave now, and I will be merciful. My father is

right about one thing: I'm not like him. I've been part of this world for just as long as you have. I've adapted to the changes alongside you. I know the systems that the humans have put in place. I know how to make them work for our benefit. We can fix things together and make our society stronger than ever. But if you continue to follow Lucifer, I cannot help you."

The valley was quiet for a long moment. Then there was a pop of displaced air as a demon teleported away. Another, and another, people dashing to anyone who could teleport them out, and Lucifer's troops were thinning out behind him as his people ran. Around us, the light began to go weak and strange, as if even the sun was trying to get away from Lucifer.

I locked eyes with my father. He snarled at me, feral and furious and unable to stop his people from running.

I let my power simmer in me, filling me with a chaotic energy. I glanced at the sky, where the sun was beginning to slip away behind the dark disc of the moon. The eclipse had begun.

With a roar, Lucifer charged.



## Chapter 30

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## *Natasha*

Around us, the world went dark. There was a sound like a thunderclap, ear-splitting and incredibly close. It was so loud that it was painful, loud enough that it drowned out everything around me and made my head ring. I pressed my hands over my ears, letting out a miserable groan. When I looked around, though, nobody else had reacted. Whatever it had been, they must not have been able to hear it, at least not as loudly as I had. What had it been? Where had it come from? I glanced around the darkened battlefield, then froze when I realized what had caused the noise.

Between the two ancient, twisting trees, a pair of gates had appeared. They were huge, but they somehow felt even bigger than they looked, as if the fabric of the world was warping around them. They were made of dark metal, twisted into flame-like shapes and sculptures of strange creatures with unsettling numbers of heads and limbs and eyes. Looking directly at them made me feel a little queasy, like the time I'd been channel-surfing and had accidentally seen footage of surgery. But this time, instead of seeing into somebody's chest and catching glimpses of blood-streaked bone, I was looking at the bones of reality.

The gates let off a hot red glow, bright enough to illuminate the entire dusty circle of bare ground. There was an overwhelming sense of wrongness. I was seeing something that I shouldn't see, something that I shouldn't even be able to see, and I knew instinctively that if I let myself look at it for too long, it would break me. My eyes wanted to follow the strange curving lines, to try to untangle them and make sense of them, and I had to force myself to look away. Suddenly, Lovecraft made a lot more sense to me.

*You have to destroy the gates, I thought. You have to make sure that nobody can ever use them again. This is your chance, and you have to take it.*

But that wasn't quite right. I didn't think about myself in the second person; I never had. Someone else was thinking those things in my head, in a voice that sounded just like mine. But that wasn't right, either. It wasn't my voice, just a voice similar to mine. A voice that had almost vanished from my memory over the years, a voice I hadn't heard in over a decade.

It was my mother's voice. Shock hit me in a wave, and it was a good thing I'd been hunting for so long, or the demon who charged me might have managed to get the upper hand. As it was, I ducked smoothly out of the way, moving completely on autopilot, and stabbed him in the chest.

"Mom?" I asked. It was barely audible over the noise of the battle that had broken out around me, but I was pretty sure that wouldn't matter.

A rush of love and worry washed over me, and I realized it was coming from my mom, not from me. Another demon charged, and I dropped low, sweeping his legs out from under him with the shaft of my spear and plunging my knife into his chest as he fell toward me. I shifted him to the side as he gurgled and scrabbled at his chest, using his bulk to trip one of his allies. The other demon went down hard, and then Emiko was there, burying her spear between his ribs. She grinned at me and gave me a little thumbs-up, and then she was off again.

Behind me came a bellow and a massive, earth-shaking thud. I spun around, but I didn't need to worry. It was Hou Jun. A version of Hou Jun, anyway, a version that was easily nine feet tall with ruddy brown skin and bull horns, his hair blue-black and pulled back into a severe topknot. He was almost as broad as he was tall, with massive shoulders corded with muscle that barely strained as he swung a huge iron-covered club through the air, mowing down every husk that got in his way. There was a thick silver ring through his nose, matched by wide decorative bands wrapped around his horns. He let out a snort of air and grinned, flashing a pair of thick, silver-capped tusks as he took on a fresh wave of enemies.

Throughout the battle raging on around me, I kept my eyes on the one figure who was staying out of it. Lucifer was standing by the gates, completely separate from the fight. He looked so casual and relaxed that he might as well have been hanging out at a park. His hands were tucked into his pockets, and his head was cocked to the side. Even though he looked

calm, his eyes were fixed on me, and I could feel his stare burning into me every time I had to turn my back. There was a demon by his side, one of the ones who hadn't been turned feral, and Lucifer murmured a few words to him.

Lucifer reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a long, wickedly curved knife. It seemed to trail a cloud of black smoke that looked noxious and oily. Just seeing it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. He handed it to his toady, and the demon scuttled off into the fray.

Lucifer turned and stepped toward the gates as casually as if he was wandering toward a favorite painting in a museum. My mother's words rang through my head again, but I couldn't tell if she was finding a way to speak to me again or if it was just a memory echoing back to me over and over. *You have to destroy the gates. You have to destroy the gates. You have to destroy the gates.* My grip tightened around the shaft of my spear.

I knew that I had to make a run at the gates, but I also knew that it would be stupid to try to do it without warning my people. I looked around the mass of clashing bodies around me until I spotted an unnaturally tall figure with shining horns. Even in the chaos of the fight, Domenico's true form was unmistakable. I cut down demon after demon, the stench of sulfur thick in the air, until I was by his side.

"Domenico," I called, spearing a demon who'd been about to attack him. He turned just enough to see me without losing sight of his opponent. The poor fucker he was fighting swatted at him, and Domenico punched a hole through his chest with one blood-smeared fist.

"I'm going for the gates," I told him, trying to yell loud enough without being overheard.

Domenico's blackened eyes widened. "Are you sure?" In his demonic form, his voice was much deeper and rusty from disuse.

"I'm sure," I told him. "I think my mom told me to."

"Be careful," Domenico rasped. "Do you want me to help clear you a path?"

Before I could answer, the demon Lucifer had been talking to teleported next to us and plunged the black dagger into Domenico's chest.

# Chapter 31

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## *Domenico*

Once, just after the Fall, I'd been stuck in a vast, quiet forest without any supplies. Snow had started to fall around me in the darkening woods, spinning down to the ground in playful spirals. It had seemed so pretty and harmless at first, a fun novelty. I was used to the heat of Hell, so catching the tiny white flakes on my hands had been fascinating.

Then, as the snow had piled up, falling faster and thicker, it had begun to burn my bare feet, a faint stinging that became a painful, radiating cold. Eventually, the pain had transformed into a strange thudding numbness that slowed my blood and stopped my heart. I'd died out there among the pines, half-buried in a snow drift. When I'd woken up, still aching with cold, I was in a cabin, and there was a purple-eyed demon staring down at me.

I'd been lucky enough not to feel cold like that again, the kind that settled into your bones and made everything distant and muffled. At least I'd been lucky enough not to feel that cold until the cursed knife slid between my ribs.

It didn't hurt. If there was pain, it was happening somewhere far away, just another thread in the dizzying tapestry of sensation that was wrapping around me. I was very, very cold. My fingers were numb, and my sword clattered from my grip. I tried to breathe, but my chest felt tight and strange.

I could hear Natasha screaming. That was bad; Natasha wasn't supposed to scream like that. Natasha was supposed to be happy. When I found out what was making her scream, I would have to fix it. I wanted to let her know that I would fix it, but my mouth couldn't make sounds anymore.

The pain was starting to flow in now, filling me and lighting my skin on fire. My knees seemed to be digging into the pale, parched dirt. I wasn't sure when or how I'd wound up on my knees; I didn't remember falling. *Well*, I thought with a nonsensical burst of amusement, *I remember Falling*.

I looked down in case that would give me any clues about how I'd wound up on the ground. There weren't any obvious hints, but there was a lot of blood. Strange. It was pooling in the dirt below me, flowing away into little rivers of dark red. There was a rushing sound, and I couldn't tell if it was from the rivers cutting through the valley or from the trickles of blood below me—or from my own head. I was very tired. I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them again, I was hitting the ground, sending up a cloud of dirt and a spattering of blood.

There was a cool touch to my cheek, then familiar, gentle hands angling my face up. I let myself be guided. Natasha was looking down at me, her eyes wide. She looked impossibly far above me. I would never be able to reach all the way up to her. Her mouth was moving, but her words seemed like they were coming from a long way away.

"...Can't leave me," she was saying, her voice urgent and pleading. "Domenico, stay with me, you have to stay with me, fuck, fuck, please, come on..." There was a hot splash on my face as her tears fell onto me and slid down my cheeks. I tried to put my hand over hers, but my arms were very heavy and had stopped doing what I wanted them to do.

"Need you," she told me frantically. Her voice was fading in and out of my hearing, which was bad because I liked her voice. "I need you, our baby needs you, come on..."

Our baby. We were going to have a baby. Natasha was going to be such an incredible mother. I couldn't wait to meet our baby. But we weren't supposed to talk about our baby, not in front of my father. That was important. If he found out about the baby, he would do something bad. He would hurt them. I couldn't let that happen. Lucifer was here, I knew that, but I wasn't sure where, and I couldn't bring myself to look away from Natasha's beautiful, worried face.

Her face was getting blurry. The darkness of the eclipse was blending into something stronger, making everything seem soft and distant. I tried to keep my head up, but everything felt heavy and sluggish. Natasha's mouth was moving, but I couldn't make out the words. My eyes slipped closed. I was very cold.

Then, suddenly, there was a roar of pain and anger, a scream of raw grief that split the air and transformed into a battle cry. It was the sort of sound that could only be made by someone willing to tear reality apart to get what they wanted. The blackness of my closed eyes went golden pink, and I was flooded with a dizzying warmth. I felt weightless.

My eyes fluttered open, and I winced at the brilliant gold light surrounding me. Power like nothing I'd ever felt before was all around me, flowing through my body and protecting every inch of me. Natasha's hand was on my chest, right where the blade had carved into me, but all the pain was gone. I felt reinvigorated, maybe better than I'd ever felt, even before the Fall. The battlefield seemed distant and irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was her.

Natasha was staring down at me with tears in her eyes. Her hair had escaped from the bun she'd pulled it into before going into battle, and it was floating around her shoulders as though caught in an underwater current. There was a golden shape around us. At first, I thought it was a magical shield, but when I blinked a few times and got my eyes to focus properly, I realized that wasn't the case.

We were wrapped up in a pair of massive golden wings. They weren't made of anything as base and earthly as feathers, though—they were formed of warm, pure, shimmering light, shifting in and out of focus like ripples of hot air in the distance. Each of the wings was easily six feet long, and even though they were intangible, they had the suggestion of powerful, fluid strength. Like every part of Natasha, they were surprising, powerful, and unspeakably beautiful.

"Natasha," I gasped with my first new breath, but before I could say anything else, she was crushing our lips together in a desperate, frantic kiss. The world around us went quiet.

"You're alive," Natasha gasped against my mouth. "You're alive, you're alive."

"You saved me," I told her, holding her as close as I could. "Natasha, you're incredible. And the..." I waved a hand at the wings around us, too dazed to come up with anything more articulate.

"Yeah," Natasha managed. "I think that pretty much sums it up."

Natasha spread her wings wide and stood, holding out a hand to me. I suddenly realized that while my attention had been focused on Natasha, all the fighting around us had stopped. With the sun still blotted out by the



eclipse, the only light had been coming from the gates, but now the brilliant glow of Natasha's wings lit up the battlefield. She looked impossibly divine, holy, and otherworldly in a way that would have driven a human to a fit of lethal ecstasy. Her eyes shone a pure, glowing gold.

It had been so long since any of us had seen an angel. Most of the demons assembled for the battle had probably never seen one, and the strange pull they were feeling behind their ribs—the same pull I was feeling—would be foreign to them. Every ounce of divinity left in our demonic bodies was answering to Natasha, turning toward her like a sunflower toward the sun.

I took Natasha's hand and climbed to my feet, barely having the presence of mind to pick up my fallen sword. Since I was in my true form, I stood head and shoulders (and horns) above her, but I somehow felt like she towered over me. She gazed at the frozen crowd, doing a respectable job of hiding her confusion. This was an opportunity, I knew, and it was one that I had to take.

"My queen," I said. I went down on one knee before her, bowing my horned head. I heard movement next to me, and when I glanced to the side, Rogelio was kneeling as well. He was smiling, as if the pride he felt was too big for his chest and was bursting out of him. I knew the feeling.

Zander knelt. Then Manning. Then Emiko, and Liz, and Jun. More and more of us until the only two people on their feet were Natasha—my incredible, powerful, beautiful Natasha—and Lucifer.

Lucifer met Natasha's eyes, his mouth working as he tried to figure out his next move. Then he swept down into a low, sardonic bow, the courtly kind that had gone out of fashion centuries ago.

"I am honored," he said as he straightened up, "that my bloodline will be carried on by such a powerful warrior. But you've made a mistake, my dear, throwing your lot in with a false king. There's still time for you to choose the winning side."

In the silence of the battlefield, you could have heard a pin drop. Then Natasha began to laugh.

It wasn't a tinkling, angelic laugh or a demonic cackle of glee. It was a snorting laugh of genuine amusement, earnest and painfully human.

"Hoo boy," Natasha said once she caught her breath, wiping a tear from one of her glowing eyes. "Oh, you're fuckin' desperate, huh, buddy? God, that's so embarrassing for you."

Lucifer snarled, the last bit of his mask of civility and poise dropping away. He raised his arms, his hands tensed into grasping claws, I thought I saw the light from the Gates flicker. But that wasn't it, I realized. There were swirls of dark smoke curling toward him, almost invisible in the darkness of the eclipse. They were coming from the corpses of the fallen demons, flowing toward him slowly at first but then faster and faster until he had built a cloud of stolen power around himself.

Lucifer inhaled, drawing all the energy into himself. It flowed into him in thick tendrils until the entire cloud of magic was gone. There was a moment of stillness, and then he dropped to his knees.

There was a bellow, louder than anything a human body could produce, and Lucifer's human body dropped to the ground, lifeless and empty as a cicada shell. A column of darkness shot up from the abandoned corpse, narrow at first and then widening into the cloudy suggestion of broad shoulders, cold red eyes, and massive horns. The legs were strange and shifting, sometimes humanoid, sometimes goatlike, sometimes just a hazy mass. It was like watching a flock of birds in flight, twisting into abstract shapes and falling out of them just as quickly.

He was smaller than I remembered. Maybe I was just larger, or maybe he didn't have the power to take on his full size yet, but he seemed somehow diminished. He still scared me, of course. I knew what he was capable of; it would have been foolhardy not to fear him. But it wasn't the all-consuming dread I had felt as a child, the sort that had frozen me in place and made my mind go blank with panic. Now he just seemed strong. Not awe-inspiring or impossibly powerful. He stood maybe fifteen feet tall. It was impressive, sure, but when I was little, I'd thought that he was unfathomably huge.

His form might not have been enough to shake my confidence, but it was enough to snap most of his followers out of their stupor. They scrambled to their feet, snarling and snapping at me and my allies as if that would erase our memories of them falling to their knees at the sight of Natasha's true power.

I climbed to my feet, my eyes fixed on my father.

"I've never fought anything that big," Natasha said, studying him cautiously. "I'm not totally sure how to start."

"We'll figure it out," Rogelio said from her other side. "We can wear him down and take out as many of his people as possible. You just need one

clean shot, Natasha, and as soon as we can get you an opening for it, you need to take it.”

“Meanwhile, you should go for the gate,” I said. “We can keep my father busy while you figure out what your mother was trying to tell you to do.”

“Your—?” Rogelio started, then shook his head. “Sure, why not.”

I leaned down and kissed Natasha fiercely. “Be careful,” I whispered.

Natasha smiled up at me, her glowing eyes searching my face. “Go give your old man hell.”

## Chapter 32

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## *Natasha*

I studied the arcs and curves of the Gates of Hell. It was impossible to tune out the sounds of battle around me, but I knew I couldn't let myself be distracted. I had to trust that my team—my family—would watch my back and keep me safe.

I tried to poke at the part of my mind where spells had popped up in the past, but I couldn't make anything happen. It was like trying to make myself sneeze on demand.

Between the three of them, Zander, Domenico, and Lizbeth had managed to bait Lucifer into following them away from the gates. Lizbeth was practically a blur. Her true form was a lithe, sinuous thing with pale purple skin and goat-like eyes. Ram horns curled back from her temples, and her hair was a short crop of white fur. She had a long, mean-looking silver rapier in one clawed hand, and she knew how to use it. She moved incredibly fast, buzzing around Lucifer's massive form like a wasp.

Zander kept waiting for Lucifer to swing at him and then teleporting just out of his reach. I got the impression that the only reason he wasn't laughing was to save his breath. Every time Zander disappeared, Domenico lunged into whatever opening Lucifer's attack had given him. He was definitely holding back, saving his strength to draw things out as long as possible. I found myself wishing that I'd seen Lucifer in a real fight before so I could gauge how much strength he was keeping in reserve.

A bitten-off cry of pain in a familiar voice cut through the noise, and my head whipped toward the source. Manning was struggling to stay on his feet, one hand pressed to his face. Blood was flowing between his fingers. My stomach roiled.

I wasn't the only one who'd seen it. I could see the exact moment that Zander realized what had happened. He went deathly pale, his eyes wide in horror. He froze in place, rooted to the spot.

It was like it happened in slow motion. Lucifer's huge smoky hand swept toward Zander, connecting squarely with his ribs. Zander went flying through the air, limp as a rag doll, and slammed into the trunk of the fig tree that stood on one side of the gates. There was a sickening crack, the unmistakable sound of bone breaking, and he fell to the ground. He didn't get up.

I knew that he would revive. I knew that he could only be killed by a blow to the heart. Knowing that didn't make it any easier to see my friend die.

Manning tried to stagger towards Zander's body, keeping his blood-soaked hand pressed over his eye, but Rogelio got there first, stepping neatly into the space in front of the body.

"Focus!" he barked. "I'll keep him safe until he comes back!"

Manning nodded grimly and waded back into the fight, but he was starting to slow down. Domenico's attacks were getting riskier and riskier now that it was just him and Lizbeth facing off against his father. Lizbeth was starting to get slower, too. I clenched my jaw. I had to end this. I had to protect my people.

I took a deep breath and blew it out again, focusing on the flow of magic through my body like Rogelio had taught me.

*I need to help them. I need to stop this before anyone else gets hurt.* I repeated those words to myself like a mantra until they blurred into a loop of syllables. Pride and love and concern filled me. Some of it was mine, but I knew instinctively that some of it was my mother's.

"Mom," I breathed. "I need your help. Please, I have to save my family."

The words of the spell crashed into my mind like a dam had burst. My mother's voice was saying them, and I joined in, letting our voices mingle together in my mind. As the power filled me, I began to feel weightless. I looked down at the blood-smeared dirt. My boots weren't touching it, I realized with a jolt. The shock of it almost distracted me from the spell, but my mom's quiet voice gently pulled me back into it.

I floated into the air above the battlefield, my wings working gently in flashes of gold on either side of me. The words in my head built onto each

other, looping and layering in a way that should have been impossible to say, but somehow they flowed off my tongue easily. Power like I'd never felt before filled me. I felt completely unstoppable and incredibly insignificant at the same time, like I was just a conduit for power that was too awe-inspiring for me to ever fully understand.

The energy built and built. My hair whipped around my face, and my wings pounded the air. I let out a screaming war cry, and the Gates of Hell burst into flame.

"No!" Lucifer bellowed. "What have you done?!"

The white-gold flames licked along the strange lines of the gates, melting the unsettling shapes and animalistic forms. The molten metal pattered to the dusty ground like rain, making silver-black puddles with an odd red sheen.

Lucifer spun to face me, a snarl warping his already-monstrous face. "You stupid little bitch," he spat. "Do you have any idea how much you've just ruined?"

"I've stopped you," I said coldly. "I've ended your war."

"Nothing will ever stop me," Lucifer hissed. "I am eternal, Natasha! I was here at the beginning, and I'll be here at the end. I'm going to—!"

I moved with precise, unstoppable motions, hyper-aware of how my body shifted as I hefted the Soul Spear and threw it into the center of his chest. It passed through him in a shower of sparks.

His eyes went wide. "No," he said, sounding almost annoyed, like he'd just caught an opponent cheating at chess. "No, that's not supposed to happen." His form began to wisp away into something smaller. There was still a cloud of dark magic around him, but the more solid part that made up his body shrank down and down. Soon, there was a shape maybe six feet tall.

It was a lanky, awkward form, handsome in the gangly, unfinished way of a teenager who would be really good-looking in a few years but hadn't quite figured out how to move his post-growth-spurt body yet. He had big black eyes and a mop of curly black hair. He looked shockingly young.

I'd wound up on my own when I was young enough that I could still crash at youth shelters when I went too long without work. I'd met plenty of people who'd been kicked out of their houses, people who were too angry and hurt to contain all of it in their still-growing bodies. There was a certain kind of restless grief that you learned to recognize, the same way you

learned to tuck your valuables into your clothes and sleep curled around your bag.

I hadn't expected to see that look today. I stared down at Lucifer, the real Lucifer, the soul that had been jumping from body to body for years. He looked just like any other angry kid who'd been thrown out by his dad.

"I should have won," he said hoarsely. "I was going to...I was going to win. I was going to finally have what I'd been promised."

A sliver of the sun began to slide out from behind the moon, casting odd, weak light over the aftermath of the strangest fight I'd ever been in. Lucifer turned his face toward it, closing his eyes. I floated back to the ground and landed next to Domenico, who looked shaken to his core.

"He told me that I was his favorite son," Lucifer said. "Morning Star. The light bringer." He smiled once, beatifically, and then began to burn.

His soul disappeared in little wisps of multicolored flame, flickering away into the brightening sky. The cloud of stolen magic around him thinned, then faded away completely.

Lucifer was gone. The eclipse was over. The gates had been destroyed.

At the base of the trees was a crumpled form in white and gold armor with a spear jutting from his torso. A horrified gasp punched its way out of me. Rogelio managed to turn his face to me. He was streaked with blood and grime, and the spear moved with every weak rise and fall of his chest.

"You got him," he said. "James would be so proud, Natasha."

His true form began to melt away, horns and claws fading out of view. Whatever horrified shock that had kept me frozen in place broke, and I rushed over and dropped to my knees next to him just as he passed out. When I pressed my fingers to his neck, just above the gleam of the angelic necklace I'd summoned for him, I could feel the faint beat of his pulse.

I could also feel that there wasn't a shred of demonic energy left in his body.



## Chapter 33

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## *Domenico*

The army base where Jun had set up our people was somehow just as busy as before the battle. Cots that had originally been set up as accommodations for the fighters had been pressed into service as makeshift hospital beds, most of them arranged in one huge room. A few of the more severe cases had been put in private rooms, but it had been silently and unanimously decided that efficiency took priority over privacy for the time being. The air around me was filled with the quiet murmurings of medical staff and patients, punctuated with the occasional groan of pain.

Medics, nurses, and doctors bustled through the space. One benefit of immortality was that it was fairly easy to get the time and money to go to medical school, so plenty of us had at least a little medical training. A lot of the techniques being used weren't something you'd need a medical degree for, however. Demons tended to have a different approach to medicine than humans.

Triage teams directed patients to one of several zones in the makeshift ward, although the groupings were nebulous and informal. One was for more minor injuries that could be treated, and demons passed through it fairly quickly, sporting new bandages and splints, with stern instructions to rest and follow up with their doctors. Another area was for injuries that were severe enough that the easiest solution was to simply kill the demon temporarily and let them revive healed. The doctors picked their way through that section at a steady pace, speaking to their patients in low, comforting tones as they administered injections. Once the demons in the beds had gone still and limp, they were carefully moved to the last zone by the least injured among us.

The final zone of the ward was for patients who had died and were working their way toward reviving. Many of them had been rescued from the battlefield, carried out of the valley by teleporters, but most had been moved there from zone two.

Zander was in the last of the three sections. The medics had barely been able to pull Manning away from his side for long enough to treat Manning's own injuries. His wounds were extensive, but Manning had staunchly refused temporary death, as if he was worried that Zander would disappear the moment he stopped watching him. He'd been very lucky, one of the doctors had told me. If the blow to his face had been half an inch to the left, they wouldn't have been able to save his eye. He was heavily bandaged, clutching Zander's hand with white-knuckled desperation, waiting for even the slightest sign of the revival process starting.

I was making the rounds, checking on as many of the injured fighters as I could. I tried not to be too obvious about the fact that half my attention was on Zander; one of the benefits of the wide-open room was that I could usually keep an eye on him even when I was talking to someone else. At the moment, I was in the second zone, standing at the bedside of a demon with jagged cuts across her chest. The blanket laid over her was soaked with blood, and I was privately grateful that it hid the worst of the damage. I had a strong stomach, but even I had my limits.

The woman was gripping my hand tightly, letting out wheezing breaths through clenched teeth. I kept my voice even and calm as the doctor prepared a syringe.

"You're going to bounce back before you know it," I said. "You did an incredible job out there, and I won't forget it. Thank you for answering our call. You helped save the world."

"Alright, Sofia, we're good to go," the doctor said, leaning down at the other side of the woman's cot. "Just a little pinch, and then you'll wake up feeling much better. Can you count backwards from ten for me? Just in your head is fine; we don't want you to strain yourself."

As I watched, the doctor quickly and neatly gave her a lethal injection. The demon went limp, her hand going slack in mine.

"She's a stubborn one," the doctor told me when he realized I was still gripping her hand. "Wanted to wait it out at first, but with damage like that...anyway, she'll be back in an hour at most." He closed the demon's eyes with a practiced hand.

“You’re doing good work here,” I told him. “I know this isn’t easy, but I want you to know that I appreciate it.”

He shrugged. “Just doing what I have to. If you really want to thank me, you can have someone run food and water to the medical staff.”

“I will,” I promised before I moved on, passing from demon to demon. Across the room, Natasha was checking in with the injured fighters as well, and occasionally we would catch each other’s eyes and share soft, relieved smiles. I knew she was probably desperate to use her newfound healing powers on everyone, especially Zander, but she was exhausted. I didn’t know what overexerting herself would do to her, and I wasn’t keen to find out.

There was a small eternity of holding hands, murmuring comforting words, and watching the people who had fought for me slip away into temporary death. I was sitting at the bedside of a demon whose ribs had been crushed, and I’d granted myself a moment of rest to stare blankly at the floor as I waited for him to be taken away to recover.

Just as a pair of demons came over to move him, a shout from Zone Three made me snap back into the moment. It wasn’t hard to find the source of the yell—Zander had shot bolt upright in his cot and was looking around wildly, dazed and groggy-looking. Manning immediately pulled him into a desperate hug, clinging to him with frantic intensity. After a moment, Zander pulled back just enough to look the other man in the eye, and it seemed as though even that much distance was painful for him.

“Your face,” he murmured, lifting a hand to the bandages covering Manning’s eye.

“I’ll heal,” Manning said softly. Solid, unflappable Manning, whose hands shook as he raised them to cup Zander’s face. “You’re back.”

Then they were kissing urgently. As I made my way through the room to Zander’s bedside, I glanced at Natasha, who’d picked her way between the cots to join us, and we silently turned our backs to the two of them, forming a well-meaning (but probably ineffective) barrier between the two of them and the rest of the room. I wanted them to have at least a modicum of privacy. Natasha’s hand found mine, and I held it tight.

“I love you,” I whispered to her, bumping our shoulders together.

She swayed toward me, resting her cheek on my shoulder for a moment. “I love you, too,” she said. She didn’t even crack a joke or say something pithy and irreverent. I pressed a kiss to her hair, and she squeezed my hand.

Not all of the fighters had been as lucky as us. Many had died their true deaths, my people and Lucifer's alike. We did last rites for all of them. Some of them had fought against us, yes, but I wanted to give them the respect they hadn't been granted in life.

The demons who had been killed on the battlefield had already burned to ash, but even without bodies to burn, the ritual funeral pyres were kept alight long into the night. The mingled scents of elder wood and sweet briar incense filled the air, wafting into the makeshift hospital ward whenever someone came or went. Someone had had the foresight to bring paper lanterns, and the true names of the dead were painted onto them before they were lit and released to float up into the sky so that their souls would be carried up to the heavens. None of us were entirely sure if demons got an afterlife, but it only seemed fair to give their spirits one last chance to see home. Some of the lanterns didn't have names; those were for the demons who had died as husks, nameless and unrecognized. It wasn't enough, but it was all I could do for now.

Eventually, a doctor declared that Zander could leave the ward and go back to the room he'd been sharing with Manning.

"No strenuous physical activity for the next week or so," she said sternly. Judging by the look in Zander's eyes and the mulish set of Manning's jaw, they were trying to guess how much they could do before it would count as strenuous.

Natasha and I walked with the pair of them to the private rooms. Manning and I flanked Zander, who was still a bit unsteady on his feet, and Natasha took the lead, firmly shutting down anyone who tried to ask me anything.

"Not right now," she told a mousy man with a clipboard and an exhausted expression. "Family stuff. Go talk to Hou Emiko if you need something."

Once we had safely gotten Zander to the room, Natasha and I left Manning to settle him in. Natasha stared down the hallway, biting her lip with a frown.

"I should..." She blew out a breath and scrubbed a hand through her hair. "I should go check on him."

I followed her gaze to the door she was looking at, which was a little ways down the hall. "Are you sure you're ready to?" I asked quietly.

“No,” Natasha said. “But that doesn’t really matter, does it?” Before I could answer, she was already striding down the hallway.

The room we stepped into had two small, sturdy windows, and Rogelio was leaning against the wall next to one, staring out at the pyres burning below. He glanced over his shoulder at us as we came in. His arms were mottled with bruises from the fight, blooms of purple and green that should have healed almost immediately on a demon as powerful as him. He’d changed out of his armor into a cheap t-shirt and pajama bottoms. They made him look oddly small and soft. I felt like I was seeing a hermit crab without its shell.

“You’re awake,” Natasha said. The corners of Rogelio’s eyes crinkled slightly as he shifted to face us, but I didn’t know him well enough to guess if it was from amusement or pain.

“I am,” he agreed. He pulled out a cigarette from the battered silver case he carried with him. When he opened it, I could see it was crammed full of already-rolled ones; he must have been eager to keep his hands busy. He placed the cigarette between his lips, then pressed a fingertip to the end of it. He frowned at his finger when it didn’t light, then sighed and tucked the cigarette behind his ear. “That’s going to take some getting used to, I think.”

“I’m so sorry,” Natasha said, sounding as though the words were bursting out of her. “I didn’t know that you were there. I would never have —”

Rogelio held up a hand, cutting her off. “Natasha, I’m upright, and I’m still breathing. That’s better than I expected. I’m not thrilled about being turned into a human, obviously, but...” he shrugged. “Honestly, I hate to admit it, but it’s possible that this is for the best. I haven’t always been the most, ah, in control of my cravings.”

He sighed. He looked exhausted, the weight of it hanging on him in a way I’d never seen before. He usually had a sort of performative loucheness to him, but now he just looked drained. “Besides,” he said with a wry little chuckle, “there’s a certain symmetry to it, yes? I lied about being able to turn James human, and now...” He gestured at himself with a little shrug.

Natasha shot me a look, and I got the message loud and clear. “I should make some calls and check in with the local teams,” I said softly, excusing myself as quickly as possible. I left the room and shut the door behind me, leaving the two of them to talk.

As excuses went, it was a good one since it had the benefit of being true. There were an overwhelming number of calls that needed to be made. Local leaders who'd organized their demonic forces on the ground needed to be thanked and updated on the losses and casualties; teams of people who could track down the last dregs of Lucifer's supporters had to be given their assignments and allocated resources. Human leaders would need to be updated, reassured, and possibly bribed into not trying to attack us. I'd left Cristiano to tell NATO the threat had passed because I was fairly sure that I was too tired to talk to world leaders without causing an international incident. There would be fallout to deal with either way; we were in the public consciousness now, and it would be impossible to avoid questions completely. I'd need to come up with a strategy to spread the word and regroup. There was time for that later. For now, though, I talked to my people. I thanked them for their help and shared in their grief.

\* \* \*

"There's something I have to do," Natasha told me the next morning. We were curled up in our narrow, hard bed together in the early morning light. Both of us had been too exhausted to even undress for bed. We'd just shucked off our shoes and the bulkiest parts of our armor before collapsing on top of the blankets.

"Is this the sort of thing you need to do alone?" I asked, my voice still creaky from sleep. "Or would you prefer company?"

"Definitely company," she told me. "Because if this doesn't work, I'm gonna be pretty fucked up about it, so it would be good to have you there to take care of me."

"That isn't worrying at all," I said dryly. She smacked my chest lightly, then grimaced when her hand came away with a dusting of battlefield dirt and dried blood.

\* \* \*

It took some asking around, but we eventually found the room Natasha was looking for. It had clearly been the office of someone high-ranking once, and the large, imposing desk had been shoved into a corner. Its scarred

surface had a bright blue backpack on it, along with mismatched clothes and a Tamora Pierce novel with a bookmark tucked between the pages two-thirds of the way through.

Sammie sat on a cot that had been set up in the room. He was leaning against the wall, playing with a brand-new phone and hugging a pillow to his stomach. His claws clicked against the screen every time he tapped something. At some point in the past few weeks, someone had found him a phone case with a sleepy cartoon egg on it. Sammie looked up when we came in, and his face brightened when he saw Natasha.

“Hi,” he said, tucking his phone into the pocket of his oversized hoodie. “Emiko told me we won. I mean, I sort of figured it out already since there isn’t, like...hellfire or whatever everywhere.”

Natasha nodded sagely. “Yeah, hellfire everywhere would probably be a clue, huh?” She padded over to the cot and waited until Sammie patted the edge to invite her to sit. “So, there’s something that I want to try.”

“To fix me?” he asked, cautious in the way of somebody who’d been offered a lot and had it snatched away again and again.

Natasha nodded. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure it’ll work, but if you don’t want to try it, I’d totally get it,” she told him. “No pressure, okay? If you say no to this, we’ll still keep trying to find ways to turn you back.”

“What is it?” Sammie asked.

She explained quickly and calmly. Sammie heard her out, and before she’d even finished, he was nodding frantically.

“Try it,” he said.

Natasha grinned at him, then held out a hand and summoned her spear. Very gently, she held the gleaming sharp tip of it out to him, and he carefully pricked his finger on it.

There was a beat of silence.

“I don’t feel any different,” Sammie said.

He held up his hand, inspecting the spot the spear had touched. It looked the same: blistered red skin and cracked claws on full display. Then he shrieked, grabbing Natasha’s arm.

“Look!” he yelled, voice cracking from the excitement. “Look at my hand!”

The pad of his pointer finger had turned smooth and pale. It went slowly at first, then very quickly, spreading across his hand, up his arm, over his



face. The gnarled demonic form fell away, and in its place was a perfectly ordinary teenage boy with a mop of curly hair and a wide, teary smile.

He touched his face, practically squealing with glee. "Mirror?" he muttered. "Is there a mirror? I need to see..."

Natasha was laughing, unrestrained and giddy. I pulled my phone out, put the camera in selfie mode, and handed it over. Sammie stared at himself on the little screen. He let out a strangled little laugh, pressing his hand over his freckled cheeks. Then his face crumpled, and he collapsed into ugly, wracking sobs.

Natasha looked at me for a moment, stricken, then tugged the boy into her arms.

He was crying so hard that he could barely form words, but if I strained, I could figure out what he was trying to say. "It's me again," Sammie sobbed into Natasha's shoulder. "I get to be me."

## Chapter 34

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## *Domenico*

“Okay, but seriously, are you sure this dress doesn’t make me look like I’m trying to smuggle a watermelon?” Natasha said, making her way out of the walk-in closet in a way that I would never, on pain of death, describe as a waddle.

“You look radiant,” I told her.

“Avoiding the question, huh?” she said, pointing at me like she was a hard-boiled detective and I was a suspect she’d just caught in a lie. “I see how it is.”

She really did look stunning. The dress she’d chosen was made of flowing silk in a brilliant shade of sky-blue, cut deep enough to show off what pregnancy had done for her breasts while still being classy. I rested a protective hand on the ever-growing curve of her belly and leaned in to kiss her. She smiled against my lips.

“Radiant,” I repeated. “Gorgeous. Stunning. Breathtaking.”

“Guys, come on, we’re gonna be late,” a voice called from the other room. I pulled away from Natasha with an anguished sigh, and she shot me a fondly exasperated look.

Sammie was in the living room, frowning slightly at himself in the mirror that hung in the entryway. His suit was perfectly cut; I’d taken him to my favorite tailor and coached him on how to ask for exactly what he wanted. I’d even managed to show incredible restraint and held my tongue when he settled on a nightmarish shade of salmon for the suit’s lining. Children had to be allowed to make their own mistakes, according to several of the books on the groaning bookcase full of texts about parenting that now occupied one ever-expanding corner of our library.

“I can’t get the tie right,” Sammie said, barely restraining himself from a full-on whine. He’d relaxed considerably in the past few months as he’d realized we weren’t going to throw him out of our home for minor slights. It was a relief to see him unclench enough to be petulant or sarcastic or grumpy.

“Here,” I said. “Let me do it.”

I’d had the Las Vegas penthouse rebuilt, although it wasn’t the same as before. There was a training room set up for sparring now. The new living room was designed to be comfortable, not imposing. There was a bedroom for Sammie and a home theater with an alarming number of video game consoles. (When Natasha and I had decided to ask Sammie to live with us, I’d gone into a blind panic and bought one of every console available, which my darling wife had made very clear that she would never let me forget.)

I finished the knot and straightened Sammie’s tie, sparing a moment to be silently glad that he hadn’t picked salmon for that, too.

“C’mon, boys,” Natasha said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Sammie spent most of the drive with his nose buried in a heavily bookmarked copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. Every now and then, he scribbled down a note in a battered pocket journal that went with him everywhere and was slowly accumulating stickers. He was starting school in the fall and was determined to be a good student, even if it meant rereading “The Friar’s Tale” four times.

I helped Natasha out of the car when we arrived at our destination. The Valley of Fire curved around us, whorls of red stone creating a stunning landscape. We were a little on the late side—most of the chairs that had been set up in neat rows were already occupied. I helped Natasha to her seat in the front row and hurried off to make sure everything was ready.

Everything was set up. I stood at the head of the crowd underneath an arch twisted with vines and fragrant flowers. As the music started, I met Natasha’s eye, and she smiled at me softly. A few people in the crowd craned their heads to try to see the procession starting, but as they did, there was a familiar pop of displaced air. Zander teleported to the space just in front of the arch, bringing Manning with him. They were dressed to the nines in matching suits. Zander was grinning fit to burst, and Manning’s eyes looked suspiciously damp already.

“Kith and kin,” I began, bringing the crowd’s attention back up to the front, “we are gathered here today to celebrate the joining of these two demons. Their bond has held fast for many, many years, and it will hold for many, many more.”

“Damn right,” Zander said. There was a ripple of laughter from the crowd.

“It’s an honor and a privilege to officiate this for the two of you,” I said. “And I would love to give a long-winded speech about it, but this is about you, not me. And you two have waited for this day for long enough.”

Zander shot me an amused little smile. Manning couldn’t tear his eyes away from Zander.

“May I please have the ribbon?” I said.

Liz stepped forward, resplendent and poised. In her hands was a long white ribbon, woven and embroidered with intricate sigils. It hummed with power as I picked it up, sending warm tingles up my fingers.

I wrapped the ribbon around Zander and Manning’s joined hands. The knots to do the ritual properly were complicated, but I’d practiced them carefully. Once their hands were bound together, I stepped back.

“I’d like you all to join me in the incantation,” I said. The words of the spell began to fill the air, murmured by everyone present. Natasha said the words easily; her grasp of the demonic language was really coming along. Next to her, Sammie read the words off a note card, his face scrunched into intense concentration. On Natasha’s other side, Cristiano was ugly-crying so hard that he could barely get the words out. Next to him, Emiko pulled an actual cloth handkerchief from her pocket and handed it over to him with a surprisingly soft expression. He took it and blew his nose with a resounding honk.

The incantation wove together, dozens of voices joining and twisting as the guests all put their good intentions and well wishes into it. The ribbon began to glow. My part of the spell had finished. There was only one step remaining.

“You may now kiss,” I said, raising my voice to be heard over the recitation from the other attendees.

The spell could have been sealed by even the smallest of kisses. A chaste peck would have done just fine. Given how Manning usually felt about public displays of affection, that had been more or less what I expected.

I wasn't expecting Manning to dip Zander and kiss him fervently. The last words of the spell rang in the air, and the crowd burst into cheers and whistles. Soon the two of them were smiling too hard to kiss properly, but they still stayed close, forehead to forehead, staring into each other's eyes.

As soon as the ceremony had finished, Natasha hurried to my side.

"Heyyy," she said, drawing out the word in a way that I knew all too well meant she was about to tell me something unfortunate. "Okay, so, I didn't want to disrupt things and ruin the moment, but, uh...my water just broke?"

I stared at her, then blinked, then treated myself to another moment of staring.

"Hey, Sammie?" I said, turning my head toward him without taking my eyes off Natasha. I made sure to enunciate clearly and carefully because my white-knuckled grip on my composure was already slipping incredibly quickly, and if I had to repeat myself, I would lose my mind. "Can you go and find us someone who can teleport? Aside from the groom, please."

The next few hours were loud, chaotic, and even sweatier than I'd expected. My hand ached from the vise grip Natasha had had on it, and I was fairly sure that if I'd been human, she might have broken my fingers. I felt oddly guilty about how exhausted I was—after all, it wasn't as if I'd been the one doing the difficult part. All the research I'd done and all the books I'd read had done nothing to prepare me for the overwhelming tsunami of emotions. The fear and worry and gratitude and joy were staggering. The exhaustion didn't matter, though. All that mattered was Natasha—with flyaway hair and smeared makeup, drenched with sweat and more beautiful than I'd ever imagined someone could be—and the tiny bundle in my arms.

I sat on the edge of the hospital bed and placed the baby in Natasha's waiting arms. Even that much separation was a challenge. I covered her hand with mine as we looked down at the tiny face. It was very pink and scrunched, with a scraggly tuft of damp black hair escaping from the swaddling.

"Hi," I said dumbly, looking down at the tiny little person. An entire person! A person that the best woman in the world had made with me.

Natasha smiled, bouncing him a little. "Hi, buddy," she murmured. "Nice to finally meet you."

Our first visitor had spent hours in the waiting room, winding himself up with terrible hospital coffee and relentless pacing. He looked tired but happy when he was finally allowed in, and his face went shocked and soft when he saw us, like he was somehow surprised that there was a baby after all. He had a newborn-size onesie clutched in one hand, and the fabric of it was a little creased from hours of nervous fidgeting. It was bright red, with a cutesy cartoon demon on the front, smiling beatifically above the words “Cute as Hell!”

“Hi, Rogelio,” Natasha said, scooting up a little in the bed. Rogelio lingered awkwardly in the doorway until she waved him closer. “Come say hi to James Rogelio Monroe Stone.”

“Oh,” Rogelio said. It was more of an exhalation than an attempt at communication. “I... oh.” He gingerly approached the bed and held out a finger to touch James’s chubby little cheek. “Hello, James.” The words came out choked and quiet. I pretended not to notice.

James was sound asleep, presumably tired out from the big move. “He’s perfect,” Rogelio murmured, squeezing Natasha’s shoulder. He set the crumpled onesie carefully on the bedside table, as though he was worried that any sudden movement might wake the baby.

“From the tips of his horns to his teeny tiny hooves,” Natasha said. After a moment of enjoying Rogelio’s expression, she said, “That was a joke. He doesn’t have hooves, and look!” she eased back the little knit cap that the demonic midwife had smoothed over his head to keep his temperature regulated. A chaotic puff of dandelion-fluff hair stood on end from the static. “No horns. Which is good because we would’ve had to cut horns in his little hat, and I’m not sure I would be able to use scissors right now.”

“The horns won’t come in until puberty,” Rogelio said, completely deadpan.

“Haha,” Natasha said. “Very funny. That’s...is that a joke? I’m so close to the adrenaline crash. I can feel it coming for me.”

Rogelio laughed quietly. “Get some rest. All three of you.”

“Nah, I’m good, I’m fine, you can stay,” Natasha said, her jaw cracking around a massive yawn. “I’m...fine. M’ggnajus...close m’eyes...”

“Aaand she’s out,” I said quietly as her head slumped against my shoulder. When I glanced up, Rogelio was watching us with an odd, melancholy smile.

“I’m glad she has you,” he said as he left.

“I’m glad I have her,” I said to myself, kissing her sweat-damp hair and picking up our son. “I’m so, so glad.”

Later, there would be pictures. We would frame them, and they would cover the walls, spreading color through my once-minimal home. Toys would pile up, be tidied away, and pile up again. There would be a new spot on the shoe rack reserved for tiny sneakers. The tiny sneakers would get bigger; Velcro would be replaced by laces. Bookshelves would be filled and refilled with board books, picture books, chapter books. Marks on a doorframe would climb higher and higher. There would be a stepstool by the kitchen counter so curious eyes could watch me cook. There would be doting adoptive uncles, and birthday presents, and arguments, and unfortunate haircuts.

There would be an entire life, the kind I’d never thought I could have. A shared life, with the most incredible person fate had ever brought by my side.

Our future would be as brilliant and formidable as lightning from Heaven. We would face it together.

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# Fighting For The Demon King

# Shadow Huntress: Book 3

Lindsey Devin

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