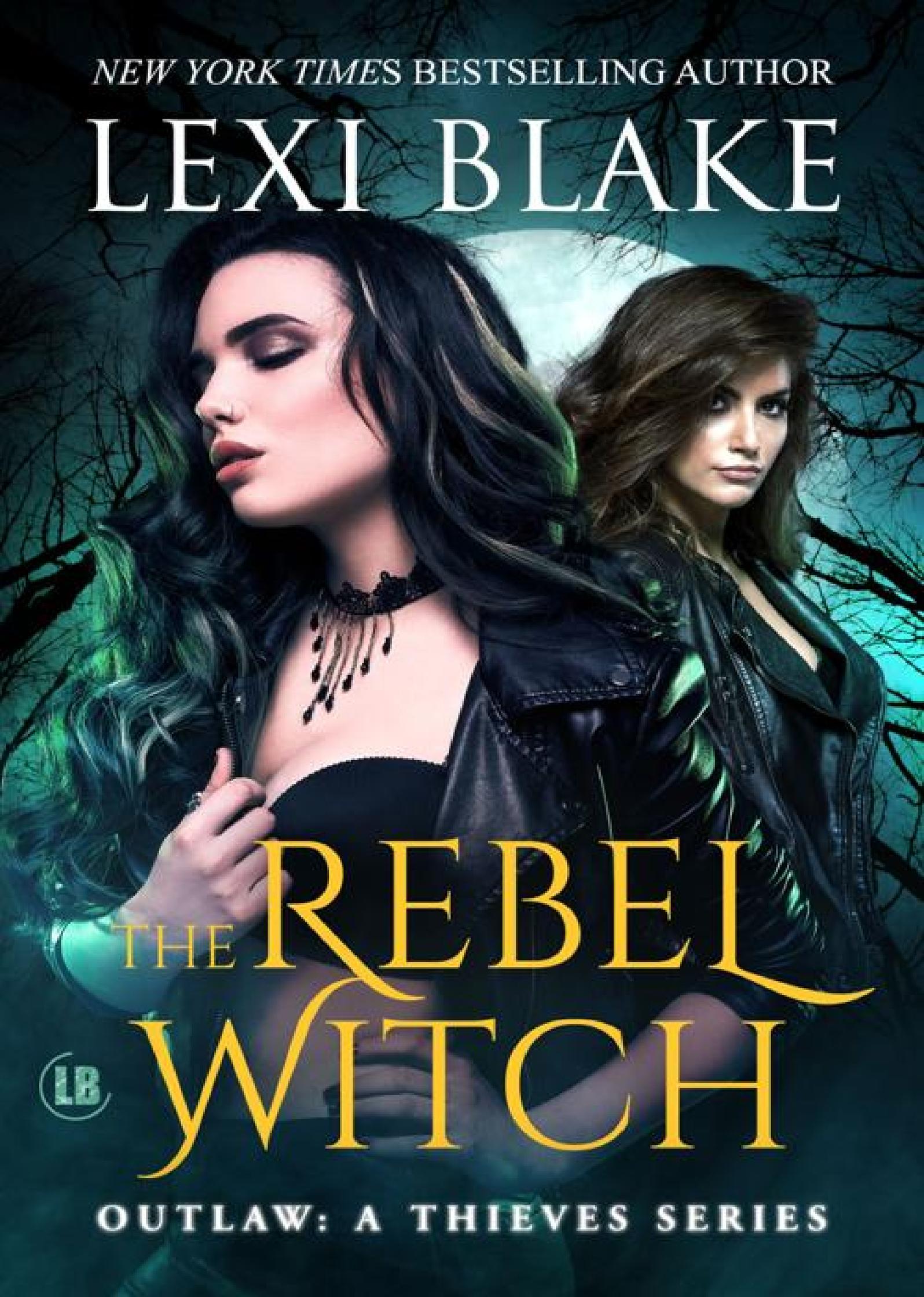


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEXI BLAKE



THE REBEL
WITCH

OUTLAW: A THIEVES SERIES

The Rebel Witch



Outcast: A Thieves Series, Book 3

Lexi Blake

The Rebel Witch

Outlaw: A Thieves Series, Book 3

Lexi Blake

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Acknowledgments

This book was supposed to be about Evan. I even said this book will be about Evan. I called it *The Rebel Princess*, and it was going to finally bring Evan and Fenrir together.

Sometimes things go awry, even in a fictional world.

I started writing and realized Evan's story isn't close to being done, but I had a character to deal with. Olivia Carey.

Like so many things, Liv's story started out as one thing and twists into something else. Way, way back when I wrote Kelsey's first book, *Ripper*, there's a scene where Kelsey and Liv go to the university and talk their way into a missing person's dorm room. The scene is important to that book, but it's Kelsey's observations about the college girl they talk to that are so important to this one. Kelsey makes the observation that it's often the people with perfectly happy childhoods who struggle when real tragedy hits. When the world has always been steady, even something minor can feel like an earthquake.

Like the world does now.

Liv's story could be a lot of people. Anyone who's lost something, who finds themselves on the wrong side of some kind of conflict with no way out. What happens to Liv is horrifying and nothing she deserved, but the why is what I found interesting. What happens when you lose something essential to who you are? What happens when someone tells you they can give it all back to you? How do you come back from years of war tearing you apart piece by piece?

So this is how I hope it would happen. This, like all my books, is a hope for the future. That we are not all lost. That we can come back from the seemingly unforgivable if we open ourselves to love and compassion.

This book is dedicated to the woman I based Liv on.

To Kim. If you ever Dark Willow on me, I will deprogram your ass...

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Chapter One



Liv

I hate being in this place, but when I close my eyes it's where I come back to again and again.

I thought this space in my head—when my subconscious takes over—was my prison, a place to pay for my sins—and there are many. No matter what I do during the waking hours, no matter the power I find and make my own, when my eyes close I am here again.

Blood is everywhere, the coppery scent like a nauseating wave of perfume that rolls over me and won't quite dissipate. It saturates the ground as they drag me toward the altar. There are three of them. Altars, that is. We came to Wyoming to find a possible rogue wolf, but evil found us instead. Three torture spaces. Trent lies on one. It's his blood staining the hem of my pants. I don't know how long he has to live. His body is so wrecked.

The boy Kelsey found is quiet on his table. It was this kid Fenrir we found when we went looking for the wolf. Unfortunately, we weren't the only ones looking for him. The whole of Lupus Solum wants the abomination dead, and they don't care that he's nine and so sweet it hurts my heart to look at him.

He's still asleep.

I wish I was asleep. I wish I didn't know what was coming for me.

"Tie her down," one of the witches says.

I fight, but in this dream, as it was in life, I do not win. They get me on the table, banging my body against the hard

rock top so harshly I swear I can feel my bones moving. My head aches from where it slapped against the rock.

Beyond the pain, what I hate is how helpless I am.

I am a witch. I have power in my body. The innate knowledge of how to bend the universe to my will lies in my brain, but I am useless against this coven. They have forced me to do things I couldn't conceive of doing. Mere hours before I'd pulled my best friend's soul apart. I'd felt when her she-wolf had scampered up my arms, whispering through my brain. I'd told the wolf to hide in Trent, but now I worry when he dies, she will, too.

They'd held a stake to Casey's heart. My beautiful vampire. I couldn't let him suffer a final death. I couldn't. I've loved that idiot almost since I met him. He's invaded my heart, and I was so afraid of loving him.

It doesn't matter now.

All is lost.

And then I realize how much more I have to lose as the witch holds up a ceremonial knife and in an instant, drives it through my chest. I feel skin split, bones crack, but beyond that I feel something slipping from inside me. Something essential is leaking out. A trickle at first, and then the chanting begins and the speed builds.

All of my light. All of my magic. I feel it leaving my body. That unique part of me is draining away, and I can do nothing to stop it.

The coven around me hold their hands to my body, groaning in pleasure as they take my power.

They are taking the best part of me and eating it up like it's a fucking treat.

When they are through and I am nothing more than a hollow vessel, they toss me away like garbage. They don't even bother to pull the knife out of my chest. They simply pick me up and toss me to the side. They don't bother tying me up now because they know I have nothing left.

I lay in the bloody grass, staring at the stars as I die. All around they cackle and play with my power. They get ready to do something terrible to Grayson Sloane, and they'll likely kill my Casey.

Sometimes I wish I had died that night. I wish that had been the end of it and Casey hadn't fed me his vamp blood and brought me back.

The vampire blood healed my injuries. It did not return what they had taken.

I turned in bed and remembered that now I have an actual physical prison to deal with. My bestie came back after twelve years on the road and she didn't like my costume change, so she put me in prison.

Okay. I might have been in a place where people who might or might not work with and for me were trying hard to kill her son. But I wasn't. And he's like a full-ass grown wolf king now, so I don't think he needs his mommy, but Kelsey disagrees.

"Rough night?" a familiar voice said.

I gritted my teeth because apparently I didn't get any privacy in this well-warded room that has become my cage. I tried to shake off the aftereffects of the dream because this one person can't see how weak I have become. He can't see that my hands are starting to shake because it's been days since I last took my medicine.

I don't like to call it what it is. An addiction. Demon blood. It enhances my magical abilities.

I don't want him to see I'm starting withdrawal.

Casey.

I can still feel that freak of nature Dean whispering around in my head, looking for anything he could use against me. Dean was a wizard baby Kelsey had brought back from one of the faery planes she'd been on. He had odd powers, though at the time they'd felt like familiar powers.

It all made sense once we figured out Dean is the son of Myrddin Emrys. Myrddin, who saved me. Myrddin, who carved out a piece of my soul in payment.

She still feels for Kelsey and Casey.

Dean had felt my emotions. I didn't want to feel for anyone. I didn't want to feel at all.

“Go away, Casey. Can't I even get some peace in prison?” I turned away from him, not wanting even a glimpse of his face. “If you're here to tell me you love me again, I get it. You love me. You've never gotten over me. You're still writing songs about me.”

It hurts too much. I'd done everything I could to cut this vampire out of my heart, but he was a virus that still infected my blood. Still made me do stupid shit.

“I'll stop that since it seems to bother you so much. Kelsey thought I might be able to get through to you, but the truth of the matter is the Liv I loved is gone, and you're what took her place. I'm sure you would love to be alone. I'm sure at this point you've tried to poke through those wards in any way you can.” Casey sounded so different. He'd become an academic over the last twelve years. All vampires belong to a class, and they're sorted by their powers. Casey's real power is almost entirely intellectual. Oh, he's still much stronger than a human, and he can hold his own in many a fight, but the things he can do with his brain...

He liked to call himself a technophage. He can fix anything, build anything. He can speak most languages and has become the group's historian since Marcus Vorenius never came back.

When the war started, we were on opposite sides. I could not get him to see reason. I could not get him to choose me.

“The wards are great. I love Iceland. Why would I ever try to leave?” I wasn't going to argue with the man. I sighed and sat up, my stomach starting to rumble.

“You should know I argued with Kelsey about bringing you here.” He stood near the door, which would happily open

for him but remained stubbornly shut when I approached. Whoever did the wards was good. She was probably also the reason my team had never been able to find Frelsi, this rebel encampment I was currently housed in.

“What? Kelsey didn’t listen to the world’s smartest vampire? What a surprise. I know that somewhere in that brain of yours you’ve rewritten history and now Kelsey’s some kind of saint, but you forget how often we had to save her ass.”

“Now I have to save her ass from you. I know you’re going to try to play to her best nature. In her head, you changed overnight. She didn’t live these twelve years of watching you slowly turn into a monster.”

“Monster? That’s a bit of an overstatement. I’m a witch. We have a king. The same way you have a king, vampire. You’re going to tell me you don’t do Donovan’s will? He was gone for twelve years and you did everything you thought he would want you to do. You kept his crown polished while the demons bit and clawed at all of our heels. Do you know what would have happened if my king hadn’t taken control? Do you think the wolf council could have kept the demons in their place? How about that ridiculous Faery ambassador? Devinshea’s brother. Do you think he was going to save the Earth plane?”

Casey’s eyes rolled. He wore the academic uniform of slacks and a button down. When had he started to look like his mentors? When we’d been together he’d been a jeans and T-shirt guy, and he’d still been skateboarding. Unlike most vampires I knew, Casey was a baby. He’d died when he was in his early twenties, and in human terms he would roughly be thirty-two. I’m older than he is in so many ways.

And I suppose if I hate his new armor, then he likely loathes mine, too.

“Myrddin isn’t planning on saving the Earth plane. He’s going to hand it over to the demons,” Casey said, parroting what every rebel in the world wants us to believe.

Myrddin is evil. Myrddin hates all non-witches. Myrddin is power hungry.

The last one is probably true, but then the man has been the real authority behind the throne for thousands of years. And for thousands of years the supernatural world has been ruled by vampires. Wasn't it time my people got a chance to lead?

"Keep it up with the propaganda, but you know the truth," I replied. "The academics have been weaving a nice fiction in order to keep the other supernaturals from joining with us."

Casey's head shook, his arms crossing over what I happened to know was a pretty nice chest.

Sometimes I don't fall into that terrible dream. Sometimes it's worse and I dream that he's still with me. I feel his arms around me and for a moment I am content. I wake up and reach for him.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry, Liv. If you really believe that, then there might be hope," he said, his eyes going grave. "But the more likely scenario is that you know what he's doing and you simply don't care."

"There might be hope if you would pull your head out of your ass and talk to your king," I explained with a patience I didn't really feel. I was sick of going over this, sick of being made to feel like I'm the bad guy. "I'm not the person who followed his queen and left his kingdom behind for twelve years. Donovan made the choice to leave us without a leader, and Myrddin picked up the pieces. I'm not the one who had everything working on the knife's edge. It fell apart without him. So talk to him and let him know that when he's ready, my king will be happy to talk to him."

"I bet he would." Casey stepped back as I moved slightly toward him.

Like I'm something untouchable. "He stands ready. Giving me back would be an excellent move politically."

His hand went to the door. "That won't be happening. I came to tell you that Kelsey's decided we're going to the Hell plane for a couple of days. They're setting up a space where you'll be kept."

"In Hell?"

“Yes, you should feel at home there,” he replied, opening the door. “It’s where Myrddin wants all of us. And Liv, I know you’re not the one who set up the trap that kept Donovan away all those years. You’re just the woman who sleeps with him.”

The door closed between us, and I felt every word like a knife to my gut.

Because I hadn’t. Never once. I’d allowed Myrddin to carve a piece of my soul out, but I never gave him my body. Nor my heart.

They still fucking belonged to the man who was walking away from me.

But I’d fix that, too.

One day. Maybe I’d find a way in Hell.

* * * *

Kelsey

“Are you sure the wards are working?” Daniel Donovan sat at the head of the large table. Back when the kids were, well, actual kids, he would have had a plate of food in front of him, despite the fact that he didn’t eat and hadn’t for a long time. Donovan liked to feel normal. Nothing was normal here. Now he sat at one end of the table and Sasha Federov sat at the other, two big-ass, no-real-food kind of vamps.

I, on the other hand, was pregnant and something of a werewolf, so I had all the food in front of me.

“Your chicken wings, mistress.”

My butler sat the platter of perfectly cooked Buffalo wings in front of me, not bothering to mention that it was barely ten a.m. and I was downing what seemed like a group sampler platter from Chili’s. Eddie just kept it coming.

Donovan's brows rose as I dipped one of those suckers in the bleu cheese dressing and pretty much sucked the meat off the bone.

I shrugged. "I'm carrying a future Hell lord. He likes things spicy." I wasn't sure I was pregnant enough to have cravings. Although when you really thought about it, I'd been pregnant for twelve years. Huh. That meant I should get all the hot wings I wanted. "As for the wards, pretty sure they're working since Liv hasn't busted out yet, and I know she's tried."

I'd made the decision to go all in with my bestie. Sure, she'd gone Dark Willow on me and things looked super bad, but I was choosing optimism today. I'd had every chance to kill her when we'd fought in the Under a few days ago, but I knew where she was. I knew how she felt.

I remembered the day when I'd thought all was lost and I'd tried to end it. Liv had been the one to hold me together, to beg me not to let go.

I still loved her. I had to take this chance. But I wasn't going to make the king take it, too. If he had a better plan, I would listen to it.

"The wards I had our witches place around Ms. Carey's room will hold her," Sasha assured him.

"They might not stop me." The queen sat beside her husband. Zoey Donovan-Quinn was going to be the hardest one to deal with. Sasha seemed like a perfectly logical general in this war we found ourselves in.

Zoey was running on pure rage, and I didn't blame her.

Liv had tried to kidnap her children more than once. Liv was one of the reasons Rhys, Lee, and Evan had been forced to run.

And I still couldn't give up on her. Not until I had a chance to break through. "I need a couple of days with her. She still cares about me."

"Why would you think that?" the queen asked. Though I happened to know she was pregnant, too, she did not have my

appetite. She had a cup of tea and the tiniest bit of toast on her plate.

Sometimes I felt like a hulking monster to the queen's gossamer Fae creature.

Oh, ribs would be nice. See. My brain doesn't need a reason to think of another meat to eat.

"Because she basically told me she did. In a super creepy, 'I want to take you home with me and brainwash you' way," I admitted. "But I think that was progress. Look, Liv is still in there. I really believe that she wouldn't have killed me and that she was only going to bring in your daughter because she was ordered to by Myrddin."

"So that's fine?" Devinshea Quinn finally spoke up. It's weird because the man does not have a problem talking. "It's great that Liv nearly killed our children because she was only following Myrddin's orders."

"Says the man who had a thrall stone in his head for years and didn't even know," I shot back because glass houses and all.

"I never did anything that went against my moral code," Dev replied, his emerald green eyes steady on me.

"No, the magic he used on you was softer. He took a piece of her soul, Dev." This wasn't a thing I was willing to back down on.

"A piece she gave willingly, according to every report we've had." Donovan sat back, looking every inch the King of all Vampire, even in the early morning light.

"Is anyone in a cult truly willing?" I'd had long discussions with Gray about this very issue. Trent was surprisingly cool with Liv being here given that he was one of the people she'd tried to capture over the years.

My husbands. It was still weird to say since in my head we'd only been married a couple of weeks. They'd had twelve years without me. Twelve years to form a family.

I really hated Myrddin Emrys.

“She saved Sarah, you know.” I had put everything I’d learned from the angel known as Duffy in a report. I’d gotten a magical replay of what happened the day Myrddin took over. It had been my bestie who gave Sarah the chance to get her family out.

Duffy had been trying to show me the way to the portal Sarah had used. It would have been great because then we could have opened that sucker and popped her and Felix and Mia right back onto the Earth plane.

Yeah, that would have been awesome.

Except the queen blew up the building and the freaking portal along with it.

“We don’t know why she did what she did,” the queen replied. “And that was a long time ago. She’s changed. I do understand what she meant to you, but I don’t know if that woman exists anymore.”

I pointed a wing her way. “I’m telling you that she does. She’s in there. She’s angry with me for leaving her.”

“You didn’t leave her,” Dev protested. “Her boss had you sucked into a magical painting. He meant for that to happen.”

“So he could have more influence on the king,” I pointed out. “And that’s not what I’m talking about. After what happened in Wyoming, I kind of sank into my life and forgot about her.”

Another thing I’d thought a lot about lately. I could still remember seeing Liv’s body on the ground, knowing she was dead. Only Casey’s blood had been able to save her, and it had been a close thing. He’d moved her into his place, and I’d told myself he would take care of her, that they needed time.

It was much nicer to concentrate on my wedding and on keeping a pair of pants on Fenrir. When I went to visit Liv, the heavy weight of guilt sat between us. My guilt. She’d lost her magic because I’d taken her into those woods.

“This is not your fault,” Donovan said. “If that is the problem, then I absolve you. You did not push Liv into Myrddin’s arms. Liv had a good life and a ton of people to

support her. Any one of us would have helped her if she'd asked."

"But that's why it's hard for her to ask. She's never been in this position." I needed to make them understand. The truth of the matter was the queen, for all her troubles, had always had friends around her. She'd had a loving father, and she'd had Daniel almost all of her life. "She had a great childhood. She had a career she loved. She knew exactly who she was. She never questioned it when she was younger, and when she suddenly didn't, she had no idea how to handle it. Maybe if I'd been here, I would have come back from my honeymoon and seen what was happening and been able to stop it, but I didn't. So now I have really hard work to do."

"Olivia still had friends," Dev insisted. "Until she decided to kill them. Casey would have done anything for her."

"And I believe she still loves him," I replied. "She told me flat out she wasn't trying to kill him. She was trying to catch him. She wanted to do creepy brainwashing stuff to him, too. It's her love language now."

"She could have reached out to anyone." The queen wouldn't move.

"I don't know about that." Sasha had been so quiet I'd almost forgotten he was there. Now there was a look in his eyes that let me know he was thinking about his human life. "I believe I can understand Olivia more than the rest of you since I once lost everything, and though I didn't mean to, I became something of a villain. I didn't lose my magic as the witch did. It was my memory they took, but I imagine it's similar. It was something that grounded her, a piece of her that was necessary for her happiness. When I no longer had my memories, I did almost anything I had to in order to survive. The doctor who experimented on me made me do terrible things. Should I have said no and allowed her to torture me further? My king, there is a point at which people break. I found mine to my shame. Olivia Carey found hers. I was blessed with redemption because my death led me to this new life and I was able to see things in a different way."

“You were tortured,” Daniel pointed out.

“And we don’t know what she went through.” I would totally share my wings with that Russian if he could eat. “I know you all think she chucked everything for power, but there is more to this story. You know what Myrddin’s capable of, what he’ll do to get what he wants. How he can manipulate a person. Can’t we give her the smallest amount of grace? In a few days we’re leaving for Camp Hell, and I promise I will take her with me. Gray’s got everything ready. Until then, I assure you I’ve got her under control. Lily tells me the wards will work, and she and the other witches bound her magic in a way that lets me move her around more easily.”

She’d been pissed about the large dog crate I’d shoved her in, but beggars can’t be choosers and all that. Lily Tucker promised me the spell she’d fashioned would bind Liv’s magic and allow her to move around. Within reason, of course. I wouldn’t let her roam all over Frelsi, gathering information she could take back to Myrddin, but I absolutely could let her roam around Gray’s cabin in Hell. I’ve been assured no one leaves unless the master wills it, and the master likes to get into my panties as often as he can.

Daniel sighed, a weary sound. “If Sasha is confident in the security protocols, then she can stay, but you have to figure this out, Kelsey. For her sake as much as mine. There are people in this camp who lost friends and family because of things she did. I won’t be able to keep them off her forever. A couple of them are my children.”

And mine, but I knew the one I worried about the most. “I’ll talk to Lee.”

“I’m more worried about Evan,” Dev said, his eyes trailing toward the door as if he expected her to appear. “I wish I knew more about what happened to her in the Under.”

Well, she’d pretty much died when she’d thrown her body on Gladys in order to prime her. My sword—technically it’s called the Sword of Light—was a gift to the Amazons long, long ago. She’s good at killing assholes, but her real talent is sucking in all the power of whoever she kills. Or doesn’t kill.

All she really needs is a little blood. At the time we'd been surrounded by witches and things were pretty dire. Apparently at some point Myrddin had bled on her, and she'd been able to infuse me with his power.

It had been a heady experience, and a bloody one since in order for Gladys to work, a royal Amazon—now known as companions—had to sacrifice.

Evan was the one to sacrifice and I was in battle, unable to get her father's blood to her in time. We had the king's blood, but it was too far away for Fen to get it. So another vampire stepped in and offered his blood. A primal. Sometimes things go wrong when a primal shares blood.

We're all still waiting to see what changes it would bring in Evan. I couldn't deny the darkness that shrouded her now.

At first we thought she was simply getting over the trauma of what we'd gone through, but now I wondered if there wasn't something more.

My son loves Evangeline Donovan-Quinn. He plans to marry her. I've seen how in synch they are, and now she flinches when he touches her. She tries not to, but it's there, and I know it kills Fen.

"I'll make sure to keep Liv in her room while she's here in Frelsi," I admit. I'd been planning on taking Fenrir with me, and taking Fen meant taking Evan. If I left Evan here, Fen would stay with her. I wished I could put this trip off, but I doubted Liv being here in Frelsi was going to get any easier. "Liv is important to this war we find ourselves in. Duffy made that plain. I need to find that piece of her soul and shove it back in before you find Mia Day. As you intend to leave for Faery soon, I've got to get moving. And let's not forget that Gray was willing to take her with him a few days ago. The king wanted to talk to her."

"She hasn't exactly been forthcoming," Donovan admitted. "The two times I've tried to talk to her she's managed to ignore me."

"A little torture could fix that," the queen murmured.

“I told you no.” I had to stand firm. “I don’t care what she’s done. I’m not torturing her.”

Not that she hadn’t accused me of it. I already mentioned the dog crate, right? She hadn’t been the only one in a crate. Puff the Magic Hellhound had been right beside her in his own crate, and sometimes he got gassy.

I turned to the king. “I need to know if you intend to start fighting like Myrddin. He does torture people. He manipulates and uses his skills to get people to give up their souls, so he has an army of soldiers with no real will of their own. That is not Liv, but she is in there somewhere. She was in there when she saved Sarah. She was in there when she didn’t kill me. I’m going to find my friend and then we’ll have taken a massive weapon from Myrddin. She knows everything. Mia might be his intended bride, but Liv has been close this whole time.”

“Yes, which is why I have a hard time believing she doesn’t know what he intends to do,” Devinshea argued.

“Liv was a member of the Profane.” Sasha was our expert when it came to the war we found ourselves in. He’d been the one who’d taken in Trent and the kids when they’d shown up on his doorstep. Well, Marcus’s doorstep, but it didn’t matter. In his human life, Sasha had been both a soldier and a spy. He’d taken those skills and used them to keep the resistance—and our kids—alive. “They were his strongest witches, but I do not know how closely he holds them. I suspect he would trust them with his life since he allows them close physically, but I don’t know if they would fully understand his plans. Much of our knowledge of what he is planning has come from the demon side. I actually think losing Nimue made him pull back significantly. The Profane were weapons. I’m not entirely sure they were confidantes.”

“Do we know if they were his lovers?” the queen asked. “After he beheaded Nimue, did he take the Profane to his bed? Although Nim probably wouldn’t have minded. She’s a sexually liberated woman. Goddess. Whatever she is. All I’m saying is he might be more talkative with his lovers.”

I didn't like to think about Liv sleeping with Myrddin. It kind of made me want to throw up. It's not that the dude is unattractive. He's gorgeous. He's also evil as fuck, and I know how much it kills Casey to consider the thought.

"I don't know," Sasha admitted. "I only know that at some point the Profane lived in the penthouse with Myrddin. I believe they acted as a form of security for him."

"Do we know where he is now that someone blew up Ether?" I asked, trying to keep the irritation out of my tone.

Dev took a long drink of his orange juice, and I swear the man swiped away a tear. He'd loved that club.

"I'm sorry." The queen sighed. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Donovan turned my way after giving Dev a supportive pat on the shoulder. "To answer your question, we're not sure. We do have some solid intel, but we can't pinpoint him. It's one of the things I'd like to talk over with Olivia, if I could get her to talk at all."

"I thought I might be able to hear some gossip while we're on the Hell plane," I explained. "If I learn anything, I'll let you know. Are you ready to head out to Faery?"

"Yes," Donovan replied.

"Absolutely not," Dev said at the same time.

"It's important to reestablish relationships with the Seelie and Unseelie." Donovan was almost always the voice of reason. "Not only to keep them on our side in this war, but to help Rhys get used to his powers. We also think being back on a Faery plane will aid in healing Nimue. We're picking her up from the lake later today."

Nimue was used to hanging around in cold-ass lakes. After all, she was once known as the Lady of the Lake. When Myrddin's thrall stone failed after more than a decade of working on the gorgeous sorceress, she'd been pissed that she'd basically been raped, and that was when her beheading happened. He'd kept her head in a box until the Hidden Ones

found her and brought her back, and apparently cold water is great for regrowing a body.

Sometimes I'm happy all I have is a demon hand and some werewolf senses. The whole immortality thing seems super weird to me. If I get beheaded, I want to go straight to the afterlife. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. Do not get shoved into a closet with all of the queen's shoes.

"Well, I'd love anything you can find out about where Myrddin's gone off to. He's been awfully quiet the last couple of days, and I find that alarming," Donovan admitted.

"Which is precisely why I should stay here." Sasha's eyes seemed brighter in the light of morning. Every now and then he would look down at the big gold ring on his left hand, the one that allowed the warrior to daywalk like an academic. Or a king.

"Lily has things under control," Donovan argued. "I want you with us. No one will guard Rhys and Shy as well as you will. We might have to split up, and I would feel better if I didn't have to choose between my wife and son. Lily is going to get everyone ready to move to the New Zealand camp. I know the ring solved your problem, but with more vampires coming to the camp now that I've returned, we need to stay in winter."

One of the things the big Russian vamp and my werewolf hubby had done was establish two sanctuaries for the rebel forces. One in Iceland and one in New Zealand. They moved with the sun, always staying where winter kept the nights longer for the vampires. Though Frelsi was basically made of magic, it couldn't stop the death that came with the daylight hours for normal vampires.

So they moved twice a year, chasing longer nights. That time was coming up. But they were forgetting something. "Trent and I will be back very quickly. You know how time works on the Hell plane. We could be there for weeks and show up a couple of hours later here. Don't worry. Trent will take care of everything. We might even be back in time to say good-bye to you."

“And we have to deal with the Fae time changes,” the queen said with a sigh. “It’s longer on this particular Fae plane. We’ll hopefully only be gone for a few days, but a month will pass here. Can’t Evan come with us? I know why it’s important for Lee to go with Kelsey, but I haven’t had time with my daughter.”

I felt for the queen. I had spent time with Fenrir. He’d come with me to the Under. “I can do the job with just Lee. I’m afraid if you take Evan, you’ll have to take Fenrir. He won’t let them be separated, but he’ll have my blessing to go with you.”

“I don’t think Evan wants to go to Faery,” Donovan said quietly. “I think she feels like she might figure some things out on the Hell plane. I’m going to ask you to let her go. She needs time.”

Tears shimmered in the queen’s eyes, and I knew this was killing her. She pushed back her chair and stepped away, Devinshea following her.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“It’s not your fault.” Donovan watched as the door closed. “Evan made the choice she made, and now we have to figure out the consequences. Something has changed in her. I don’t know what it is, but her glow is different now. I can...feel her in a way I didn’t before.”

“Do you think she’s going to become a primal?” It was my worst fear. That the blood that saved her would change her into something else. I liked the primals. They’re the gentlest of vampires, but they were physically different than a normal vampire. They must hide in their nests. I can’t stand the thought of beautiful, smart, loving Evan stuck forever in a cave.

Fenrir was a wolf. He couldn’t live underground.

“From what I understand, if that was going to happen, it would have.” Donovan seemed to think for a moment. “I don’t think she could fight that. It would be too overpowering, but some of the smaller changes, she might be able to fight for a

while. I've talked to the primals, and they believe there might be changes coming. Physical changes."

"Can we help her fight it?" I wanted to talk to Liv about it. She'd been excellent at healing.

"I don't know if we even should," Donovan replied, pushing back from the table. "Maybe someone in Gray's house will have some knowledge, or perhaps simply being away from this plane will help. I don't think she wants to make the transition in front of her mother and her papa. I know she doesn't want it to happen in Faery where it could have political implications. No one on the Hell plane will care if she grows claws or her eyes change to full black."

They wouldn't. Demons were pretty tolerant of physical weirdness. "I'll take care of her, Dan."

He gave me a ghost of a smile. "I know you will. I think it's easier for her to relate to you. I have to hope it gets better with time. Sasha, thanks for your counsel, and I promise you'll enjoy the Faery plane. It's not as bad as it sounds, and I will speak with the witches about taking care of your problem. I know why you really don't want to go, and I'll fix it for you, my friend."

Donovan left, likely going to find his wife and partner.

I was out of chicken wings and seriously considering how rude it would be to lick the plate. I was also curious. "What's your real problem?"

The Russian turned my way, his lips curving up. "Only you would ask, Kelsey." He stood and walked to the door that led to the kitchen. "Eddie, your mistress is out of food."

I heard a gasp and knew Eddie was hustling.

"As for my real problem," Sasha began, "I find it hard enough to avoid sex with a Green Man around. Over the years I've gotten used to Rhys's power. Mostly because he hadn't truly come into it until recently. Now there are two fully powered sex gods walking about, and I'm struggling."

My heart hurt for him. Vampires feed on blood and the energy that comes from sex. "You haven't...?"

I let the question dangle, knowing it wasn't really my business.

"I have," he replied. "I've been in two relationships over the last twelve years. We were friends, and I cared for them both. But they weren't my wife." His hand went to his chest as though there was a knot there he could ease. "Two years ago, I felt her. Maybe I'm fooling myself, but I felt her. Her soul is out there on one of the planes, and that means everything I have belongs to her. I cannot share that part of myself with anyone but my wife. She is coming."

"Let Devinshea focus some of the energy," I advised. "Maybe if he hits you with a big bang, you won't need it so much on a daily basis."

"I would bet that is quite the experience," he said, obviously amused. Then he sobered. "There is something we haven't talked about. Something about Olivia that I don't believe you've factored into the equation."

"What's that?" I could hear Eddie banging pans around.

"She's been on demon blood for years," Sasha said, a grim look on his face.

"I know. I'm hoping once it clears her system she'll be more like herself." I'd noticed her veins were starting to look more normal and not like they were a vessel for evil.

"She'll be in agony. She's addicted to it. She can't be anything else. I believe the demon blood was another way for Myrddin to control his Profane. He got them addicted and then controlled the access to the blood. When you said you wouldn't torture her... Well, I think she will feel tortured. Good day to you, Hunter."

My stomach dropped as the kitchen door opened and Eddie ran through. "My poor mistress. What was I thinking? I have made sliders for you, and fried cheese with a lovely spicy marinara sauce."

"Whoa, something smells delicious." My son walked in the room, sniffing the air like the wolf he was. He downed two sliders before Eddie could even get them on the table. "I am

enjoying your pregnancy, Mom. You go, little demon bro. Keep asking for the apps.”

I’d finally found something that made me stop eating. I sat back as Fenrir started in on the cheese sticks.

My friend was addicted to demon blood, and I had a decision to make.

Chapter Two



Liv

“You hurting yet?”

I groaned. Kelsey was either incredibly naïve or had become brilliant at torture because this whole “no privacy, anyone could come in but I couldn’t get away from them” thing was truly my version of hell. I thought about the fact that I would probably like actual Hell more than I enjoyed this fucking cheery room in fucking Faeville, Iceland.

Evangeline Donovan-Quinn leaned against the open door to my prison cell, which happened to be decorated like someone’s grandma loved them very much. I’m not joking. That sucker had quilts and crocheted shit, and absolutely none of my clothes. So I was wearing jeans that were the slightest bit too tight and an overly large concert T. I didn’t know who the Drive-By Truckers are, but someone here liked them.

Thank the dark lord there was a mirror so I could see that I look like a strung-out junkie.

One more bit of torture I wasn’t sure Kelsey meant to hand out.

“I’m fine.” I wouldn’t be here too long. One way or another I would either escape or more than likely my heart would explode and then what was left of my soul could fly happily into the darkness and serve whatever Hell Lord Myrddin wanted me to for all the rest of eternity.

I didn’t like the voice inside me that whispered this was a bad fucking life plan and I should get my shit together. The one that said this might be a chance I hadn’t expected.

I didn't like that voice at all. Especially since it sounded a lot like Kelsey Owens.

Was that even still her name? Did one take on all of the hubs' names when one married more than one? The queen had, but Kelsey tended to do her own thing. Maybe they took hers. It wasn't like either of her dudes had great family lineages.

Trent's family had helped those witches defile me. They'd been sitting around those altars in their powerful wolf forms ready to tear me to pieces if I made the horrible mistake of running.

And Gray's father had been watching like it was a great movie he could see over and over again.

You know who hadn't been there that night? Myrddin Emrys.

"I don't know. You're looking pretty ragged there." Evan gave me a once over.

"Well, if I'm bringing down the vibe, you could break that ward and I'll be right out of your hair, Princess," I vowed.

Evan snorted, an oddly regal sound, but then she kind of hit all the lotteries when she was born. Her mother was a companion—as a class of women they are unbelievably attractive, and not only to vampires. Her bio dad was an actual sex god. And her bonus pops was the king. Or he had been. Yeah, Evangeline Donovan-Quinn should have had a cushy life. She was all of seventeen and should have been pampered and coddled.

Instead she stared at me with cold eyes that had already seen way too much. "I could get you out of my hair, Liv. Permanently."

Were we about to fight? I had to admit if I could avoid the withdrawal-seizure, exploding-heart thing, I was good with that. Evan had her uncle's archery skills. Arrow through the heart worked for me. Or a knife. I was certain she had a couple of those on her body. Bare hands could work, but then we would do that whole two-chicks-fighting thing, and that

always feels uncouth to me. There's a reason I prefer to fight with magic. Hollywood battles are carefully choreographed. In the real world, hair pulling is a choice that is made way too often.

My fingertips felt like they were vibrating, proof that the demon blood was leaving my system rapidly at this point and I was going to have so much fun with the shakes. I wouldn't be able to hide them in a few hours, and the thought of Kelsey seeing me like this made me want to puke.

I would probably be doing a lot of that in the future, hence my willingness to die.

"You want to try me, let's go, Princess," I said with way more bravado than I actually possessed.

The truth of the matter was I didn't care. I would never have admitted it, but I was tired. Tired of having a million accusations thrown my way. Casey is certainly not the first to spin a yarn about what Myrddin was doing. I was tired of being hated.

If I'd succeeded in ever taking Evan in when she was younger, she would still have been treated like the princess she was. She wouldn't have gone on the run and eked out a crappy existence over shitty plane after shitty plane.

She would have had a place of honor in the Coven House. They all would have.

But no one was going to believe that because the fucking academics know how to propagandize. I knew it was either Henri or Hugo who came up with the ridiculous idea that Myrddin was looking for a way to close the lower planes off and let the demons run wild.

Then why does he need the Sword of Light? Why did he want Evan if not to prime it?

Fucking Kelsey. I ignored the doubts. Who the hell was I to question him? Myrddin was the one who was there for me when I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror. When everyone else told me to give it time, Myrddin showed me how to get my power back.

“I thought I would offer you a deal.” Evan stepped inside, though the door stayed open. She reached into the pocket of her jeans and came out with something that made my mouth water.

A capped syringe. It was small. There was maybe an ounce in there. Way less than I was used to, but I wanted that taste like I’d never wanted anything in my life.

And that made me feel something I loathe. Shame.

Still, I didn’t prevaricate. She was lucky I didn’t attack her for it. “What do you want?”

I tried to imagine what the princess could want with me, but in the end it didn’t matter. I probably would give it to her.

A brow rose over her emerald eyes. “You don’t want to know where I got it?”

My eyes stayed on the syringe in her hand and the ink black blood it contained. The blood was like fire in my veins. The first time I took it, I screamed and cried for hours. I bashed my head against the floor and had to be treated for a concussion.

And then I worked my first spell and realized it was worth the pain.

“I figure it’s either Al’s or more likely that idiot Eddie’s,” I replied, still mesmerized. I had to wonder if Eddie’s blood would hit me differently since he was kind of a freaky demon. Eddie was a satan, a specialized demon class. They’re capable of judging contracts, but they aren’t the strongest at magic.

It would do in a pinch, though.

“Eddie is a kind being, but I did have to lie to him and tell him it’s for Puff. Feeding a hellhound demon blood bonds him to his house,” Evan explained, pushing her braid over her shoulder. Her hair had once been a brilliant auburn, matching her mother’s, but now there were streaks of pure black, and I kind of thought there were more of them than I’d seen before. “Eddie was thrilled I asked him instead of Albert. Al would have had questions.”

Of the two demon butlers, the queen's Al was definitely the sharper one. Twelve years on the run hadn't toughened Eddie up a bit.

"So what do you want?" It hit me hard. It had only been a couple of days since I'd thought she was going to bleed out on the floor while I battled with my bestie. When I thought about it, it was truly Evan's fault I was here. If Evan hadn't primed that damn sword by shoving it through her torso, Kelsey wouldn't have been able to tap into Myrddin's power through Gladys. The Sword of Light. Not Gladys. Except she did kind of look like a Gladys. I knew that a primal had saved Evan. I also knew what primal blood could do to anyone who wasn't a primal. "You want to know if I can stop what's happening to you."

Her whole body went tight, and she wouldn't look me in the eyes. "Yes. I want to stop it. I can feel myself changing. My body aches in places."

"Because you're fighting it. If you would submit, it would simply happen and you could get it over with and move on with your happy-ass self. I suspect your hair will likely go full-on obsidian and your eyes will be pitch black. There are sunglasses in your future, baby girl. You might get some nice fangs, but they probably won't function because you're not a real primal. Does it help that I think you'll keep your hair? Primals usually lose it and get all Nosferatu-like, but that would have happened overnight. This is going to be a more subtle change."

She was so pale now I could see the veins in her neck. "It doesn't feel subtle. I don't want this. Whatever it is, I want to make sure it doesn't happen."

I didn't know what made me say what I did next, but it was out of my mouth before I could think to stop it.

"He'll still love you. Fenrir, that is. He'll love you no matter what. You're his mate. He sees you differently than you see yourself."

Like Casey had.

She wiped at her eyes, but that Donovan-Quinn stubbornness was plain on her face. “Can you teach me how to fix it?”

That word. *Teach*. It got me every time. See, one of the things I liked about all that demon blood was the clarity of thought I got. When I’m on the blood, I didn’t care about the past. I cared about my goals. I cared about my spells.

I’d been a teacher. I’d had werewolf kids and teen shifters and a couple of halflings over the years. So many teen witches had come through my door.

I’m so sorry, Olivia. They did it to themselves, when you think about it.

I shoved the memory away, not letting that awful day take hold. They didn’t matter. All that mattered was the syringe in Evan’s hand. “Sure, kid. I can teach you a couple of spells to keep it at bay, but I don’t know how long they’ll work. If you go all monstrous, there’s always glamours.”

I’d never had Evan in my class. Any of the kids. They were too young for high school English, and by the time they were old enough, I only taught death.

“Give me a list of what I’ll need and I’ll give this to you. I can keep it up with Eddie for a few weeks, but by then my father will have decided what to do with you and it won’t matter,” Evan said with a practicality I’d come to appreciate her for.

I agreed with her. This would all be over in a couple of days, one way or another. I quickly told her what she’d need to make the spell work and promised to teach her. I would have promised her the world. The whole fucking world just to get that blood in my veins.

I might have given up Myrddin for that blood.

Had he intended that affect? Or had he simply always meant to be the one supplying it?

I was the last of the Profane—his most powerful witches—and it struck me in that moment that the only strong thing about us was an appetite for that blood.

When she tossed it my way, that syringe was in my vein so fast I couldn't breathe.

And then I could as it raced through my system. Maybe it was the amount. So little, but it didn't hit me the same way. For a moment I thought Evan might have poisoned me. Oddly, it felt cool this time. It didn't give me that hideous rush of pain I'd come to associate with the blood. But the power was absolutely there. That blood calmed my shakes, and I felt more settled than I had in forever.

It would pass, I told myself. I was just relieved.

I didn't know that the blood I'd put in my veins was the beginning of the end for me.

"Hey, babe. Whatcha doing?" a familiar voice said. "Hope it's a friendly visit and not one where we kill prisoners because we were told by the 'rents we shouldn't do that."

Fenrir's eyes were big and wide, as though he expected to walk in on a massacre.

Evan had already palmed the syringe again, and she eased it into her jeans. She didn't want her boyfriend to know what she was doing. Probably because of the whole "I'll love you no matter what" bullshit I'd laid out to her. "I was checking to make sure she's safe behind these wards. I wanted to let her know I'm watching her. Always."

Fenrir grimaced. "Okay, babe, well, sounds creepy and stuff. Hot, but creepy. Uhm, you should know I overheard your parents talking about us not going with my mom and like doing the Faery plane thing."

Evan's eyes flared. "Oh, that is not happening."

The princess turned and stalked off, and I for one was glad she would be going to the royal house to have her argument.

I was feeling calm. Magnanimous, even.

If I had the blood, I could wait for a while. I could bide my time. I might even escape with some valuable information.

Or I might be able to take one of them with me. Casey or Kelsey. Whichever one was handy. Once they'd seen the light,

I would have the other one, too. If I played my cards right, I might even be able to get that big old scary vampire king to see reason. How pleased would Myrddin be if I managed to mend his relationship with Donovan?

We could still be a family.

Yeah, that blood was heady shit.

I stared at Fenrir, wondering if I was about to get the whole “don’t you dare touch a hair on my beloved’s head or I’ll murder you” lecture. I get that more often than you would think.

Instead, Fen walked right in and tossed his lanky body on my couch. Not my couch. Someone’s grandma’s couch. There were doilies on the table and everything. I noticed Fen had a bag of chips in his hand, and he pulled a bottle of soda out of the pocket of his cargo pants.

That big dopey werewolf king propped his feet up, avoiding the aforementioned doilies, and gave me a grin. He was so fucking young and yet heartbreakingly handsome. “Hey. I was hoping we could talk.”

He was definitely going about the threatening talk in a different way. He had some serious sunshine vibes going on while Evan was totally playing the grump. As reverse tropes went, I approved. Still, I could get this out of the way.

“I’m perfectly harmless.” I gestured around. “The wards bind my magic. No one left any hand weapons around, and without my magic I’m pretty helpless.”

I wasn’t, but I didn’t want him to think that.

Goddess, it felt good to not hurt. It’s probably why I didn’t tell Fenrir to fuck off. I’m sure that was it.

“I doubt that,” Fen allowed, opening up the chips. “But I didn’t want to talk to you about how you’re planning on getting revenge on all of us. I’m sure you’ve got an excellent plan, but that’s your private business. I wanted to talk about my mom. What was she like? Like was she cool or was she a total nerd? My dads only know her from her badass period,

and I haven't been able to spend a bunch of time with my grandma and uncles.”

Because we'd made a deal to stay away from Kelsey's relatives as long as they lived human lives. Mostly human lives. I'd pushed Myrddin to make that deal and hadn't thought at all about the boy. He'd been with Trent and the royals. He hadn't known his adoptive mother's family, so it didn't seem like something wrong. I couldn't stand the thought of killing Jamie and Nate and the woman who always made my favorite buttery carrots with dill whenever I came to dinner.

“You want me to talk about your mom? You do remember the times I tried to bring you in, right?”

“The times you tried to kill me?”

“I never tried to kill you, Fenrir. If I'd tried to kill you, you would be dead.” I'd even stopped my Profane sisters from killing him on occasion.

He shrugged that off as he reached into his other pocket and pulled out a bottle of beer. “We're going to have to agree to disagree about that. As to sitting and having a chat with a person who's tried to either kill me or take me to their evil leaders, well, if I didn't do that, who would I talk to? It would be Lee and Rhys and my girl. Look. I brought you beer. It's stolen straight from Dev's fridge. So, my mom. She was cool, right?”

This was surreal. I wasn't sure what to do. How long had it been since I sat down and had a beer with someone? I know you would think the Coven House would be an all-day party, but Myrddin was serious about the whole take over the supernatural world thing. The truth of the matter was when you're a superpowered witch enforcer, there was not a lot of time for friends. I didn't even like my Profane sisters. They were kind of bitchy.

I grabbed the beer. I was usually a wine chick or a fruity cocktail, but it had been years because Myrddin didn't want his Profane to come under the influence of alcohol.

Just highly addictive demon blood.

Shut up, Inner Kelsey.

I was feeling chill, and a beer kind of sounded nice. As long as I was in prison, I should enjoy the amenities. “Your mom was so not cool. She was a hot mess in high school. I was absolutely the cool one.”

I started to talk and felt...comfortable.

It was the weird demon blood. I was sure of it.

* * * *

Kelsey

Hellhounds are super cute when they're puppies, but don't think that those suckers can't trip you up.

Puff was following at my feet as I climbed the stairs up to Liv's room. I liked to call it a room and not what it was. A magical prison.

Ever since Sasha had mentioned Liv's problem, my gut had been in knots, and I was pretty sure it wasn't because of the chicken wings. I'd started this pregnancy out with all the joys of nausea, but the past few days had seen a massive change. I'd gotten back to Frelsi and my appetite had come with me, and poor Eddie was trying so hard to keep up.

I wasn't feeling that endless hunger now, though.

I felt annoyed because someone had left a hellhound at my place when she'd run off to yell at her parents. Oh, Evan hadn't told me that was why she was dumping the cutie who sometimes farted fire, but I'd seen the look in her eyes. Also, she'd asked me where her mom had gone in a way that let me know she was irritated.

And she'd told me she was coming with me and that was that.

So Fenrir had overheard and talked. I couldn't blame him for it. His hearing was really good and honestly, gossip was hard to not listen to.

“Yes. That's exactly what she did. She walked straight into a vampire club.”

See what I said about gossip? I heard Liv's voice and I stopped. She sounded so... She sounded like Liv. Since she'd put on all the leather and her boobs seemed to have magically gone cast iron, her voice was always so serious. Deeper than before. She had “I'm going to destroy the world” vibes.

My heart constricted because now she sounded like my friend.

“She barely knew what a vampire was.”

“Seriously? She just walked right in?”

I started hustling up the stairs because that voice sounded like my son's, and what the hell was he doing in Liv's prison cell?

Puff barked as I picked up the pace and then ran up ahead of me and stopped to make sure I was still coming, and then I nearly tripped and he yelped and I finally picked the little guy up and he started trying to lick my mouth.

Fen's head poked out of the door that was freaking standing open. “Hey, Mom.”

Did anyone understand the meaning of prison cell? I might not have wanted to acknowledge Liv was in a holding cell, but we could at least keep the door closed.

“What are you doing up here?” I hustled, the puppy wriggling because he saw Fen, and Puff loved Fen.

Puff loved everyone. He was a terrible hellhound.

Fen gave me a heart-stopping grin. “Well, I'm finding out you were a little reckless in your youth.”

I finally made it to the door and saw Liv sitting in the rocking chair, looking totally comfortable and not at all like a woman desperate for a fix. She had a beer in one hand and sat

cross legged in that way that reminded me how much yoga she did.

I wasn't sure what was happening. "Is everyone okay?"

"Well, your reputation is taking a beating, but otherwise the wolf king and I are getting along swimmingly," she said with a twist of her lips.

"Liv was telling me how you met Marcus Vorenius." Fen winced. "I was curious because Pops kind of curses when the name is used, and Dad totally avoids the subject." He brightened suddenly. "But she also told me about your high school years and how incredibly cool you were."

I set the puppy down. He was calmer now, sitting at my feet. "I bet that's what she said."

How much had Liv told my son? Had she told him things I would definitely prefer he didn't know?

Had she laughed about the night I tried to get out of my hideous life? About how the man I'd thought was my father abused me and neglected me?

All of the warnings I'd heard in the last few days came back to haunt me. I was vulnerable to her in so many ways, and I had no real way of knowing how far she would go to hurt me.

"I was telling him about the night you staked out a vampire club." She snorted. "Staked out. That would be funny. You scared the shit out of me, and then we drank a bunch of beer and you ran when Marcus Vorenius crooked his little finger."

A wild wave of relief flooded my system. Fen didn't act like he'd been told his sainted mother had once tried to end herself. He had a goofy grin on his face, and it looked like he'd gone through a bag of chips after he'd stolen my cheese sticks.

Liv's memory was faulty. "I didn't go into the vampire club that night. Marcus did invite me politely, and Gray showed up and was an asshole to him. I didn't go to the vampire club with Marcus until after Gray and I tried to sneak into Ether and Dev had him thrown out. I was working on a

missing persons case and I needed into that club, so Marcus took me.”

“Dev threw Pops out?” Fen asked.

“Right on his keester,” Liv said before tipping back the beer and nodding my way. “That’s right. Gray showed up and whisked you away, and then the king sent Chad to test you that night. You were coming into your power.”

“And you knew he was testing me,” I pointed out.

Some of the joy of the room fled like I’d popped a balloon.

Liv’s eyes seemed darker than before, and I wished I hadn’t said it. “Yes, see. I was evil back then, too.”

“Okay, and this got awkward.” Fen grabbed his soda. “Liv, thanks for talking to me. I appreciate it.”

Liv simply sat there as Fen stepped out and I followed.

“You have to be careful,” I whispered. “I thought all you kids were cautious around Liv.”

“She’s got a million wards on her, and honestly, I had questions no one else can answer. Especially you. I would never, ever know about the Great Toilet Paper scandal of your sophomore year if I hadn’t talked to her.”

I was pretty sure my face went blood red. What had she done? It wasn’t my fault I’d walked around half a day with toilet paper stuck to my ass, which would never have happened if Liv hadn’t talked me into wearing a mini skirt.

I never did again.

“It was not my proudest moment,” I replied. “But you should still be careful. I need time to figure out how to get to her.”

Fen winked my way. “Talking works. I’ve found being charming and awesome sometimes makes my enemies not want to murder me. Not all the time, but sometimes. Sometimes people are just looking for a reason to change. You have to give them some space to make that choice. And don’t get that look on your face. I can be patient. Goddess, can I be

patient. I learned that from my dad. The one who didn't get kicked out of Ether." His jaw dropped. "Dude, did Dad bounce Pops? Because Dev couldn't do that himself."

"That was your Uncle Zack," I corrected. I didn't mention that Trent and Gray had an odd relationship back then. Gray had pretty much loathed Trent, and Trent had an inkling that Gray was important to him. On a couple of levels.

Fen nodded. "Ooo, I haven't talked to him today. I'll go see what I can get out of him while Evan's yelling at her mom. I try to stay out of that. You want me to take Puff?"

Puff was in a marking phase. My house was protected, but the minute he trotted into another house the peeing started. I didn't think my uncle needed that. "He can stay with me."

I was surprised when Puff didn't try to run after Fen. He stayed at the door until I walked inside and then carefully followed me.

"Did you have to tell him about the toilet paper?" I wasn't sure what to say to her. I'd kind of avoided seeing her. I'd thought it would be easier to talk to her when I wasn't actively imprisoning her. She would totally be watched while we were in Hell, but she would be able to move through Gray's cabin because it was his safe space. Gray had become the head of House of Sloane, and as Lucifer's favorite focus, no guest could harm him or a member of his family while on his land. His demesne, as Eddie put it. It was a safe place to keep her for the time being.

"Well, it was that or tell him Mommy was a freak who couldn't handle her own supernatural status and tried to off herself. Would you rather I had started with that?"

So we were choosing violence. I simply glanced up and down, giving her my most judgmental look.

She shrugged and took another drink of beer. "This is not about my supernatural status, sister. I handled that fine."

"No, but losing it made you lose your damn mind."

"Or it freed my mind," she countered. "When I lost my magic, I figured out who was there for me and who had merely

been using me.”

Yes, this was one of the reasons I’d been avoiding her. “I didn’t use you, Livie.”

“I disagree. You used my magic on many occasions.”

“And my Hunter skills saved you just as many times.”

A humorless laugh huffed from her chest. “Sure. That’s what you tell yourself. I needed you to save me because you put me in danger in the first place. You’re the one who dragged me into your world.”

Oh, no. She hadn’t chosen violence. She’d selected hypocrisy. “You have rewritten a whole lot of history. You are the one who dragged me into this world. I had a perfectly good detective agency, then you sent Helen my way and you did it because the king told you to. You obeyed his orders over our friendship. I guess that’s kind of a thing with you. You like following orders, don’t you, Liv? You can’t think for yourself. First it was Donovan, and then Myrddin.”

She pointed a finger my way. “Don’t forget there was you in the middle there. There were definitely a couple of years where I did what you told me to do. Once you got a bit of power, you didn’t mind shoving your friends around. You spent a couple of days in my world and decided you knew everything.”

Maybe we did need this fight. “Sure. I think I’m so smart.”

“Well, you sure as hell don’t listen to anyone, and you never compromise.”

I felt my jaw drop. “You think I don’t compromise? That’s bullshit. What you’re really saying is you don’t think I’ve had to sacrifice. Not the way you did.”

Her eyes flashed fire, and she was out of her seat. “No. You didn’t.”

A low growl had started, and Puff was standing between us, the dark hair on the back of his neck standing up.

“You didn’t sacrifice anything, Kelsey,” she said, a fire in her eyes and her hands twitching like she knew the magic

should be there. “You never have to. You fuck up time and time again and everything works out for you. Whatever you need it’s provided for you, and you don’t even have to work for it.”

Did she remember my childhood? “Yeah, I’ve never felt a second’s pain.”

Her eyes rolled. “You don’t feel it the way the rest of us do.”

“I assure you I do.” I was sick of this and I’d only had to deal with it for a couple of days. “Olivia, I’m sorry for what happened to you, but I lost twelve years. Twelve fucking years, and I’m still not certain you weren’t involved. After all, the queen mentioned you had something to do with the search for Dev. Arwyna died, you know.”

Arwyna was the queen of the pixies. Her kaleidoscope had moved to Dallas years before when Devinshea had become the High Priest of the Fae. Liv had decided to spell the little queen in order to find Dev. The spell had not gone well. I’d been there when she’d come through the painting and died in Dev’s hands.

Liv waved a hand in the air. “And she came back to life. And that should prove to you that I had nothing to do with that painting. I didn’t know. If I did, why would I bother spelling a pixie? I would have known Dev was on some outer Fae plane.”

“Would you have warned me? Or would you have chosen Myrddin?”

She shrugged. “We’ll never know, but we do know who I’ll choose now. I’ll choose the one who picked me.”

“I hate that you’re like this. When did you become the *pick me* girl? I’m sorry. I was getting married. I’d just found Fenrir. I wanted to be happy for a couple of days. You seemed to be happy with Casey.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I did not need you. What would you have done for me? You would have been like all the rest. You would have told me lies about being patient. You would have

kept me down, and when I couldn't help you anymore, you would have forgotten about me. Did you think I was going to be satisfied being Casey's nightly meal?"

"I thought you were in love."

"You didn't think at all about me," she said with a dismissive wave. "I wasn't useful to the *Nex Apparatus* anymore, so I wasn't on her mind. If you hadn't been getting married, I doubt I would have seen you at all. I often wonder why you didn't have your new bestie be your maid of honor."

"The queen isn't my best friend. I am sorry for what you went through." I sank down on the couch, utterly exhausted by the conversation. "I really am. I did think about you, but I know what Meredith said."

Liv took a step back and Puff stopped growling, jumping up on the couch beside me.

"Meredith? The liar? The fucking companion who tricked Casey into becoming addicted to her blood and sold us all out?" Liv asked.

I did understand why she might not want to believe what Meredith had said that terrible night, but I had my reasons. "She was dying, and Eddie felt no lies from her. I know she wasn't talking about her contract when she said what she said, but Eddie believed her, too."

Meredith had been drained by a rogue vampire that night and as she lay dying—not so far from where Liv was doing the same—she'd told me that Liv could get her magic back if she was patient.

Liv had proven less than patient.

"It wasn't coming back." Liv's arms crossed over her chest, turning away from me. "It was gone."

"Like my wolf was gone?"

Now she turned my way, righteousness stamped on her face. "I made sure the wolf part of your soul was safe."

Could she not hear herself? "You're the one who ripped her out of me, Liv. And I forgave you. I didn't even question

it. I knew you loved me and they forced you to do it. You can't give me the same grace?"

"The situations are different," Liv said stubbornly. "I was trying to save Casey."

"And I never forced you to follow me into danger. You wanted to help. You wanted to be a hero and you were."

"And I am today. I use my power to help my people."

"I was your people once." I could hear the wistfulness in my voice. I missed Liv. I missed my best friend, the one who knew me before I was this me.

"And now you're not," Liv said with a sigh. "You don't know me anymore. I don't know what you're trying to do. I'm not going to break down and tell Donovan everything. You and I are strangers now. You might as well kill me because whatever this is it won't work."

I stared at her for a moment, that truth washing over me. I didn't know this Liv. She still knew me. I'd been gone for a couple of weeks, but she'd lived over a decade without me. Even if she'd stayed with Casey and followed the rebels, she would be a different person. Maybe not a murderous traitor, but I could only work with what I had.

"What's your favorite TV show right now?"

Her head tilted like that had not been what she expected me to say. "I don't watch TV. We don't have one in the Coven House."

I shook my head because that was awful. "You haven't seen the dating show where they pick dates based on design preferences? *Designing Love*? It sounds dumb and it totally is. It's a big-ass train wreck. Two of the women got into a fight over a dude because they loved his use of wainscoting. They're designing fantasy rooms next week."

I hoped we had good reception on the Hell plane. I had high hopes since I happened to know that demons were addicted to coffee and reality TV. Eddie had told me it used to be soap operas. The Hell plane had been big fans of *Days of*

Our Lives until the Marlena demon possession plot. They felt it was too outlandish even for them.

Liv's head shook. "That's...ridiculous, and I wouldn't waste my time."

I shrugged. "You would love it. Read any good books lately?"

"Kelsey, what are you doing?"

"You said I don't know you. I'm getting to know you again. Maybe we could ask Eddie to make you a pitcher of margaritas and we could talk."

She sniffled, a superior sound. "I don't pollute my body with alcohol."

I pointed to the beer in her hand.

"I was trying to fit in with Fenrir," she said with a shrug.

"Dude, you take demon blood. I don't think some tequila is going to hurt you." I realized I shouldn't have said that when she completely closed down.

Her eyes slid away from me. "That's nothing for you to worry about."

"Not according to Sasha."

Her eyes were back up and steady on me. "That Russian idiot? What would he know? Do I look like I'm jonesing for a hit?"

She didn't. She seemed calm and in control. "You look better than you did in the beginning."

"I would look far better if you would give me back my clothes," she pointed out.

I had to shake my head. "I can't let you do that. Friends don't let friends look like they stepped out of a leather factory. I would think you would be happy to breathe. We make fun of people who wear corsets to a fight." She simply stared, and I got the feeling she was done with my sarcasm. "Are you all right? I can try to find something to ease the pain."

Her brows rose. “Or you could give me some demon blood.”

“I’d like to avoid that.”

She turned away and walked back to her bed. “Then I have no use for you. Keep me with you and my master’s rage will reign down on you.”

I didn’t want to tell her. It seemed cruel. But the new intelligence we had was also verified as the truth. “He’s already appointed a new Profane. He had a ceremony for his new unholy trinity three nights ago. He’s not coming for you.”

She didn’t turn, but I saw her shoulders stiffen. “He thinks I’m dead. I’m behind all these wards. He can’t find me. When I escape, he’ll know I’m alive. He’ll feel it.”

I worried he’d already forgotten her. My heart hurt despite the fact that I hated she was mourning the loss of an asshole. “Did you love him?”

“With all my heart.”

I stood because that wasn’t what I’d wanted to hear. “We’re leaving for the Hell plane in the morning.”

Puff followed me as I walked to the door.

“Kelsey,” Liv called out.

I turned, praying she would take back what she’d said. “Yes.”

“You’re just like them, you know.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “Just like who?”

“The witches who ate the best part of my soul. You put these wards up so I can’t use my magic. So it feels like snakes under my skin, nicking me from within. You only loved the weak Liv.”

“The weak Liv is standing in front of me, but I’ll find the real one again,” I vowed.

I was worried, though.

A loud, blaring siren split the air around me, and my heartrate shot up. I knew that sound. It meant something had gone terribly wrong, and the enemy was at the gates.

Liv gasped. “He’s here. He’s come for me.”

I started to run because I knew she might be right.

Chapter Three



Kelsey

I ran down the stairs, Puff sprinting ahead of me like he knew something was wrong and he had a job to do.

Trent walked out of our bedroom, pulling his T-shirt over his head. He'd patrolled the night before and slept in. I'd woken warm and cuddled up in his arms. If Gray had been there, it would have been my happiest place.

Trent's brows rose as he closed the door. "Hey, baby. You okay? Is it Liv?"

Each question was asked with the certainty of a man who knew he could handle whatever was coming our way. My wolf was calm in a crisis.

I, not so much.

The alarm kept blaring, so I shouted over it as I made my way to the front door. "She's upstairs. The wards are working. She didn't even try to kill our son when he went up to have a long visit with her."

Trent followed me out, jogging beside me as we started to make our way down the path to the royals' house. "He did what?"

Puff powered ahead of us, speeding up as he caught sight of Evan walking out of the house, her bow in hand. Fen was already there, but he hadn't changed to wolf form yet.

"He decided to join his meanest auntie for a debrief on my high school years. Is it Myrddin?" It was my greatest fear. That bringing Liv here had invited Myrddin to our doorstep.

“I don’t think so,” Donovan replied as he jogged down the steps. “Someone sounded the alarm from the outside. I doubt Myrddin has figured out how to do that. I worry someone’s injured. I’m going to take a look from above in case we need to block them off.”

Donovan took off, and not running. He did this knee flex thing and then he was flying.

Nice work, if you could get it.

Quinn walked out wearing a not normal for him jeans and T-shirt. He was a fancy fucker, but there weren’t a lot of three-piece suits in Frelsi. “The signal came from the Reykjavík mirror. Someone’s portalling in and needs help, but we have to be ready for the worst. Evan, you should get back in the house with your mother and Shy.”

That was when I noticed Shahidi standing near Evan. The gorgeous girl had been quieter the last few weeks since she’d lost Harry Wharton. For years she’d housed Harry in her soul. From what I’d been told, Shy was a psychic. She could communicate with the dead. Usually she seemed ethereal. Now she looked like every other twenty-something being treated like a kid.

She rolled her dark eyes and shook her head, looking Evan’s way and completely ignoring Quinn’s comment. “Rhys and Lee went into town with the new guy. Something’s gone wrong.”

Evan also ignored her Fae father and took off running toward the portal.

“Devinshea.” The queen bit out his name. “I thought we talked about this.” She shook her head and started after her daughter.

“Not cool, dude. Your daughter is a warrior. Treat her like one or she’s going to shove that bow up your ass,” I explained before following the kids, who I probably will always refer to as kids. Even when they’re older than I am now, they’ll still be kids to me. But they were exactly what I said they were—warriors. Every one of them battle tested. Shy had a small

pistol in her hand and a knife strapped to her thigh. Did Dev think they were there for looks?

“I’m sorry. She’s my daughter, and Shy is practically my daughter-in-law. It’s my nature to protect them.” Dev’s long legs easily kept up with me.

“And it’s not Donovan’s? Your wife and daughter are companions. It’s literally written into his DNA to hide them away,” Trent pointed out. “And you should watch out for Zoey because she won’t take the whole stay-inside thing well, either.”

“You want to protect me, too, Quinn?” I asked, knowing damn well I was using my “I will kill you and eat you” voice.

We stopped at the entrance to the portal. Evan, Fen, and Shy were already standing around the door, weapons at the ready.

“No, I’m perfectly comfortable with you saving my ass, Hunter,” Quinn offered. There was a semi in his hand, and I happened to know he could use it.

The queen was out of breath when she joined us. “It’s good to know he trusts at least one of us.”

Quinn frowned his wife’s way. “Well you, my goddess, are pregnant.”

“So is Kelsey,” she pointed out.

“Kelsey is carrying a Hell lord. Her child will likely fight from inside the womb,” Quinn said, his eyes on the door.

So much hypocrisy today. “Uh, I’m not the one carrying... What did Myrddin call her?”

Zoey sighed. “A destroyer of worlds, but it’s Myrddin and he lies. Baby girl is going to be every bit as sweet as my other daughters.”

Sure. One of them currently powered the outer planes with her unique magic and ruled as a goddess, and the other one liked to shoot arrows into her enemies and impale herself on swords, so I didn’t have high hopes that baby Harriet would be some shy, retiring girl.

Donovan landed on the ground in front of the kids, taking the lead position. I noted that unlike what they'd done with Dev, the kids did not argue with Donovan. But then he was the King of all Vampire, whether or not Myrddin had physical possession of his crown.

I moved in next to him because if he was the king, I was the sheriff.

Fenrir and Trent still moved to my side, and Evan to her father's. Puff was already growling at the door.

Quinn moved in right beside her.

He was a stubborn man.

But I didn't have time to deal with their damage as the door began to open and adrenaline flooded my system.

If the door was opening, then either one of the kids was coming through or someone had one of the kids because the portal was warded.

"If it was Myrddin, the witches who run the book shop would have alerted us," Donovan said calmly. "They have a couple of devices in the shop that they can easily get to."

Then Rhys was pushing through the door, opening it for Lee, who held a young man in his big arms.

Dean.

"What happened?" Donovan moved in.

"He needs to get to a healer. Dad, I can't fly yet. I don't know how much time he has." Lee had lost his normal swagger. He looked scared, and that scared me.

"Your dad will take him to Lily, but what happened?" I asked, wanting Donovan to know what to say because it didn't look like Dean would be saying anything.

"We were outside town visiting the Hidden Ones." Rhys looked exactly like Lee, but normally it was easy to tell them apart. Rhys was the serious one, the Green Man who had been born with the knowledge that he was important to the Fae world. It had been Rhys's power that brought the legendary

Hidden Ones to our side. “A group of witches were waiting for us when we left the pocket world. It’s my fault.”

He was also the one with the most defined sense of guilt. I didn’t have time for that now. “What did they hit him with?”

Donovan took Dean into his arms, the young wizard looking so pale I worried it was too late.

“I don’t know,” Lee admitted, his face even paler than normal. Lee was a vampire but like Donovan, he was classified as a king. In this case it didn’t mean he had a crown, merely that his physical and mental powers were far above other vampires. He was a super predator. The alpha of alphas. But he was also a twenty-three-year-old who’d seen too much tragedy in his time. “I don’t think they were trying to kill him.”

“No, they weren’t,” Rhys agreed. “They were trying to kill Lee. Dean threw himself in front of him.”

Donovan simply nodded. “Then we’re looking for something that could hurt a vampire. I’ll let Lily know. Try to remember the words they used.”

Donovan took off for the short flight that would take him to the witchville section of Frelsi. Lily Tucker lived in a cottage that also served as the town’s small hospital.

Lee’s eyes watched as his father flew away. “Why the hell would he do that? What was he thinking?”

“That he was trying to save his friend.” I’d met Dean Malone on the outer planes. If I was right, Dean was one of the two creatures in all of the planes who could kill Myrddin Emrys. Lee was the other one. Taking out either of them would mean Myrddin—at least according to prophecy—was safe. But I got the feeling Myrddin would prefer killing Lee to taking out his long-lost son, Dean.

Lee shook his head. “It was stupid. I could have handled it.”

“You don’t know that,” Rhys replied.

“Son, let’s get to Lily’s and see what’s happening.” Quinn put a hand on Lee’s shoulder and then looked to Rhys. “You have no guilt in this. Myrddin would have found us eventually.”

“He didn’t find Frelsi,” Rhys argued. “He found the Hidden Ones. I transformed their homelands with my magic. It breathes with it. That’s how Myrddin found us. The three witches are all higher-ups in his group.”

“The new Profane, I bet,” Evan said as we started across the field that would lead to Lily’s.

The queen was at her son’s side, though it was Shy who took Rhys’s hand.

“He could just as easily have been tracking Lee,” Zoey said. “He knows we’re in Iceland. He knows we’re somewhere close to Reykjavík. He tracked us down before. We need to be more careful. We’re moving in a few weeks, and then maybe it’s time to look for other accommodations.”

“And leave my people?” Rhys looked offended.

“I wouldn’t say we were leaving them as much as protecting them,” the queen replied. “I’m only saying it might be best for the royals to be in a different place.”

“I won’t leave. You can go find a palace and let Papa pamper you there, but I’m never leaving my people,” Rhys said stubbornly. “I’m going back to my place. Lee, let me know if there’s any way I can help Dean.”

Rhys and Shy broke off.

The queen stopped, tears in her eyes as they walked away. “I can’t seem to stop screwing up.”

Lee put a hand on his mother’s shoulder. “It’s a hard transition, and Rhys really does feel guilty. He doesn’t know how to handle his power. He froze when the witches sent that bolt out. Normally Rhys is cool under pressure and we would have come back with at least one of the suckers wrapped up in ivy, but he hesitated and they portalled out. They didn’t come for a fight. They came for an assassination. Give him a couple of minutes and he’ll be more reasonable.”

“He won’t be able to handle his magic until he’s handled his...” Quinn began.

The queen rounded on him, a finger pointing his way. “Don’t.”

Fenrir leaned over, whispering in Evan’s ear. “I think he’s trying to say Rhys needs to get laid.”

His whispering wasn’t exactly quiet.

“Fenrir,” I admonished.

Fen shrugged. “Well, we all know it’s true. Look, I’m the same, but my sexual frustration doesn’t grow grass and trees and stuff. I chase down a deer and feel better.”

“You keep doing that,” Quinn said under breath.

Evan groaned. “I’m eighteen in a couple of weeks, and then I intend to save the deer population of Scandinavia with or without my papa’s permission because I have this weird thing called bodily autonomy. Mama, and you wonder why I’m not coming to Faery. It’s because Rhys will shock the court with his chastity, and Shy will be blamed for it. Conversely, the fact that I want to get it on with my long-time boyfriend will be seen as scandalous because he’s a werewolf and grandmother already has some nice *sidhe* I should marry.”

“I would never allow your grandmother to force you into a marriage,” Quinn argued.

The queen put up a hand, stopping him. “Evan, I only wanted to spend time with you. I don’t care if you sleep with Fenrir. I would be a terrible hypocrite if I did. Your brothers were wrong to force Fen to promise to wait until some arbitrary date when you’re deemed smart enough to decide. I slept with your dad when we were way too young, but I wouldn’t have taken it back for the world. It’s your decision. Yours and Fen’s, and no one else’s.”

There was a reason I liked the queen.

Fen shook his head. “I needed boundaries. Rhys and Lee were only trying to look out for her. But the time is almost upon us, and I’m glad we waited and we can do this right.

Your Grace, I am going to marry your daughter. You can accept me or not. It won't matter."

"She's too young," Quinn said with a sigh. "I want her to see more of the world. Not just war and horror. I want her to see what Faery has to offer. It's part of her heritage."

Evan shrugged. "So is the Hell plane, and no one there ever tried to kidnap me."

"No, they'll try to drain you. Demons like companion blood, too," Quinn argued.

The man didn't know when to stop. "I'm going to check on Dean."

I started down the hill and suddenly there was a hand in mine.

Lee. "I'm coming with you. I love my papa, but I can't handle more of this."

I squeezed his hand. "It's going to be okay."

The queen caught up to us, taking Lee's other hand. "They can fight this out on their own. I'm here for you, baby. I'm done fighting. I'm proud of all of you."

We made our way to Lily's, hoping Dean was okay.

An hour later, Lily stepped out into the crowded waiting room. Rhys and Shy had joined us, and it seemed Quinn had at least a cease-fire with his daughter, though she'd walked in and defiantly placed herself on Fenrir's lap, her arms around his neck and head resting on his shoulder.

Couldn't he see how in love they were? I knew what he wanted. He wanted them to be five again, wanted to be one of the primary forces in her life, but that chance was gone, and we all had to make a place for ourselves now.

Trent stood, the first of us to realize Lily had joined us. Lily was almost fifty, but she looked far younger given how

witches age. There were streaks of gray in her brown hair that seemed incongruous with her unlined face.

Frelsi's chief witch had been joined by two others, but they seemed to be staying with Dean.

"I've got him stable, but I'm worried I don't understand what happened," she said. "I'll be honest, some of Myrddin's magic is a mystery to me. This doesn't feel like an Earth plane spell. There's a lot of brimstone surrounding him right now."

"I don't smell it," Trent admitted.

"Neither do I." Donovan's senses were almost as good as Trent's.

"I can." Fenrir's arm tightened around Evan's waist. "I can smell hints of brimstone and soot. Like a fire that's still smoldering."

No one could touch my son's senses.

"Yes, that's a good description," Lily replied. "I take it there were three witches who attacked."

Lee nodded. "It was the new Profane. Is he awake? Can he talk?"

Lily shook her head. "No. I gave him a sleeping potion. He's very weak, and I don't understand why. He did regain consciousness and told me his chest ached and burned."

"That was where it hit him," Rhys explained. "We exited the Hidden Ones' domain and started for the Jeep. The Profane were waiting for us. I felt myself slow down."

"Is that what it was?" Lee asked. "You didn't react."

Rhys shook his head. "There was something tossed my way, and then it was like my body was heavy. I could move but it was hard to. Dean didn't seem affected by it at all. Neither did Lee."

"Likely it was meant specifically for you," Lily said. "Despite being twins, the two of you are unique creatures. What works on Rhys won't necessarily work on Lee, and vice versa. In order to take out your brother, they had to slow you

down. I believe they didn't anticipate Dean being there or they didn't think he would react the way he did."

"They might have been told to leave him out of it," the queen offered. "When Myrddin came to us in the café, he seemed intrigued by the idea of having a son. He wants to keep his while taking mine."

"Lee is extremely hard to kill." Donovan had spent a lot of time out on the porch talking to his partner in the last hour, but now he seemed focused on the problem at hand. "He could be bound by silver chains. Too much silver to the heart would work. He daywalks far better than I do. I require Devinshea's magic to allow me to daywalk, but it comes naturally to Lee, so a focused UV ray wouldn't hurt him."

"It bugs him, but he doesn't admit it," Rhys replied.

Lee frowned his brother's way, sending him a what-the-hell look.

Rhys shrugged. "We have to talk about it. Dean's in trouble. Very bright sunlight bothers you. I told you some of Papa's or my energy could fix that, but you refuse."

"Because your energy is sex magic," Lee shot back.

"You don't have any problem with sex on any level," Evan snarked. "All of the planes know this."

"He's my brother," Lee pointed out. "I'm not going to let him put a hand on me and give me some weird orgasm. That's...ick. It's fine. I can handle it. Also, I can sit outside Mom and the Dads' place and soak it up since they don't scrimp on the sex rituals."

Such a weird family. "So we have to put sunlight back on the board. If a hyper-focused ball of sunlight hit someone, what could it potentially do to him?"

"Well, it could absolutely kill a vampire. It would likely cause him to burst into flames. For a human I would say it could cook him from the inside." Lily shuddered at the thought. "That's what could be happening inside Dean. His magic would try to counter the effect, but I don't know if it

can win. I don't know what the spell was so it's hard for me to counter it."

"Do you remember any of the words?" I'd come to care for Dean. I'd promised him I'd look out for him. He had a whole life on another plane, but he'd come here to try to save mine.

I rather thought he was getting close to Lee, and it would kill Lee to lose him. Lee might be free with his body, but not his heart, and Dean was working his way in there.

Lee closed his eyes as though trying to concentrate. "Something Latin. Latin something." His eyes opened. "I'm sorry. I was freaked out at the time. Something was wrong with Rhys, and then Dean was shouting and what looked like a damn fireball was coming my way."

"What color was it?" Lily asked.

"I don't know. It was fiery," Lee replied, an almost helpless tone to his voice.

"It wasn't simply one color. It was everything associated with fire. Red and orange and that blue that shades around a flame." Rhys sat back on the sofa, a weariness to his expression. "It definitely felt like dark magic. Have you consulted with the other witches we know?"

Lily nodded. "Of course. I had some of the smartest I know on the mirror network while I was examining Dean. It's how we got him stabilized, but if I'm right, I've only postponed the inevitable. At some point the spell will flare again and he will be torched from the inside. All I can do for now is keep him sedated so he doesn't feel any pain."

Shy gasped, and there were tears in her eyes as Rhys wrapped her up in his arms.

Dean had been here a short time, but he'd made an impression on these young people. He'd become one of them.

"And if there is a witch we could call on? Someone who might know what spell was used?" It made my gut clench, but I didn't know what else to suggest.

Donovan's arms crossed over his chest. "We cannot allow Olivia her freedom. She knows too much about us."

"And if Dean dies, then we lose our best chance at beating Myrddin. Maybe our only chance," I pointed out. "He's one of two."

"According to prophecy," Donovan countered. "And sometimes we don't understand those. I've learned that pretty much any way I go, if I'm fucked I'm fucked. I know damn well if Olivia gets out of here, she'll find a way back. She's likely heard about our plans to move to the southern sanctuary. If she gets out, we'll have to spread to the four corners of the Earth plane, and years of mobilization will be down the drain. No."

"Dad, he's dying." There was desperation in Lee's voice.

"And we will find another way," the king promised. "He's stable for now. Honestly, we can't trust a thing Liv says anyway. She could kill him simply because she knows it would hurt us."

"I want to talk to her." I wasn't willing to let this go, and the situation had far more nuance than Donovan was giving it. "You try to find your experts, and I'll work on her."

"You don't have much time," Donovan advised. "This attack pushes our timeline up. I want everyone out of Frelsi by the end of tomorrow. We can't know how close he's getting, and no one leaves the village via portal until we're all ready to go. Kelsey, call Gray. I want you and your crew, including Olivia, out of here tonight, if possible. If you don't want to take her..."

"I'll take her." I didn't want to know what the king would do if I didn't. My bestie was on a knife's edge, and I needed to find a way to get her off.

"Your Highness, I can't move Dean," Lily said.

"I'll find a way," I promised.

It looked like it was time for another talk with my best friend.

* * * *

Liv

I wished the one fucking window in this prison of mine was facing the other direction.

I didn't know much about this village since it was hard to take in the sights from an extra-large dog crate. Yeah, I was going to pay Kelsey back for that one. I stared out the window I did have, hoping and praying to see fire begin to ravage the stupidly charming land around me. I guess it's not hard to keep the place green and bountiful when there are two Green Men running around.

My own garden at the Coven House looked limp and lifeless compared to the abundance here. Well, some things grow better than others. I could grow belladonna without a thought, but my basil struggled. If I needed marigold for a spell, I had to haul myself to a nursery and buy some.

It even smelled nice here. Like lavender and baking bread and freshly tilled earth.

I'd gone a bit nose blind to sulfur.

As though being around a portal to the Hell plane had an effect.

Not that we have a Coven House anymore, if what Kelsey told me was true.

Yes, and if you'd been there you would likely be dead, so you should probably thank her for bringing you someplace nice.

I wasn't sure what that voice was trying to do, but I intended to shut it the fuck up the minute my sisters freed me.

I was sure that was exactly what they were going to do as that awful clanging surrounded me and I watched all the Fae creatures rushing toward a place I couldn't see.

My sisters would come for me. Oh, Kelsey had killed the two closest to me, but more would be brought in. Myrddin wouldn't have replaced me, but he would absolutely raise up another two worthy witches to take their places beside me. Those sisters would be here, fighting against my captors.

Not because they loved me. Love was a ridiculous reason to stay with a person. What my sisters and I had was more important.

A joined purpose. To raise our kind up and show the supernatural world they couldn't kick us around anymore, that we could rule as well as any vampire. Fear was in there, too. They should understand that if they didn't save me, I would be cross when I inevitably escaped.

But they were here and they would have been given some of the master's power, and they would defeat the vampire king.

Yeah, not even my delusion-riddled self truly believed that. Unless Myrddin himself was here for me, they would probably fail because Donovan was a force of nature, and now so was his son. Two fucking vampire kings.

How would Myrddin handle them, unless...

The clanging stopped and so did my hopes. They wouldn't have turned off the alarm if the raid had gone well.

If there had been a raid at all...

I couldn't help but think about what Kelsey had said. Myrddin had appointed a new Profane.

She could be lying. Except she never lied. It was hard to remember that she hadn't changed. She'd only been gone for a few days. She was still the same stubborn idiot she'd always been, and that meant she wouldn't lie to me. And why should she lie when the truth hurt far more?

I turned and realized I'd let my guard down because there was a vampire standing in my doorway.

Sasha Federov. A massive pain in my ass.

Also the one person I might really fear because he was ruthless and had zero ties to the me I used to be. If Sasha thought the children he'd spent years protecting would be made a bit more comfortable with my beheading, he would do it and not think twice.

I didn't have a single power to call on because my "friend" had taken them all from me.

Yes, I needed to hold on to this feeling whenever I started to wish for the old days. I needed to remember Kelsey wanted all the power for herself.

"Shouldn't you be rushing out to fight the battle, General?" I asked the question with far more bravado than I felt, but then I'd learned to mask my emotions.

Emotions didn't serve me well at the Coven House. Emotions were weakness, and weakness did not serve the cause.

The dark-haired vamp stared at me for a moment. "There's no battle. It was a medical emergency. I came by to ensure you didn't use the distraction as a means to escape."

My gut tightened when I realized I hadn't even tried. I'd stood at the window and hadn't thought to poke holes in the wards those dumbass witches had thrown up hastily. What had I been thinking? "Well, I'm still here, big boy. What are you going to do about it?" And then it struck me. Sasha Federov was standing in the light of day. He wasn't an academic like most of the other vamps here in the village. He should be dead. My eyes hit on the chunky ring on his finger. "Who killed Alexander?"

Alexander Sharpe had been given that ring by my master for being a loyal soul. Oh, sure he'd been Jack the Ripper in another life, but this was war, and beggars couldn't be choosers. Alexander had given us vital information. We'd known about Frelsi and the base somewhere in the South Pacific because of Alexander, though he'd always been portalled in and out, so we hadn't been able to pinpoint them. The ring had been his reward.

Myrddin certainly hadn't allowed the man to go back to his favorite craft. That was a rumor at the Coven House. That was all. People liked to gossip. There were a lot of nasty rumors about Myrddin out there, and he started some of them himself. A fierce reputation was important even when it wasn't earned.

Sasha looked down at the ring, flexing his hand around it. "Ah, yes. The queen, actually. He murdered her son."

"Well, it's not like he didn't come back." I ignored the hollow feeling in my gut when I thought about Lee Donovan-Quinn being killed. Kelsey hadn't talked much about how he'd turned. Why he'd turned. Somehow in the back of my head I'd kind of rationalized it as an accident.

When we'd fought that day in the Under, something had happened. I had been planning on dragging Kelsey back with me through the portals I'd created. Unfortunately, the Coven House had been destroyed by the queen, and that had wrecked my portals, ensuring I couldn't win the fight between us, locking me in the Under with my enemies and killing my sisters.

Because getting to the Coven House at that moment would have been awesome. You could have died with two bitches who hated the very sight of you. They weren't sisters. They were wicked stepsisters always plotting your downfall.

"I think it's lucky for you that happened." Sasha leaned against the bookshelf that had a ton of crappy paperbacks.

"Well, in Alexander's defense, they were in the Coven House without authorization. You have to know there are bounties on you and your little army."

"Yes, I believe they're wanted dead or alive," Sasha pointed out.

I made a huff, a sound of pure frustration. "Myrddin has laws he must uphold, but I assure you those posters are all for show. He wants them alive. He wants to reason with them. We can find things we agree on."

"You told the royals they would be put to death when they returned home." The vampire seemed determine to relitigate

history. “At the time the royals and Kelsey had done nothing but return to a place that was once their home.”

I didn't really remember it like that. Myrddin had realized his old spell had triggered and sent me down. He'd given me a big dose of demon blood and a fraction of his power. Often when I went into battle, Myrddin occupied some space in my brain. It wasn't like he was there, but I knew what his bidding was and I did it. That particular time, I did remember certain things like what Dean had said and then nothing else.

Sometimes I didn't remember what I did in his name at all.

Which was fine because I was his good right hand.

“There are things we say that are for political purposes. You should understand that, spy. Those wanted posters were merely deterrents, and the announcement of the royals' execution was the start of negotiations. Myrddin plays hardball, but I assure you he wouldn't have marched in his former ward and executed him,” I said. “I would think you of all people would understand that this is war. Myrddin did attempt to negotiate with the king and Quinn several days after they returned. They were supposed to meet the day the queen blew up our home.”

The truth of the matter was I had been doing my own thing at the time. I had been trying to bring in Kelsey, and I hadn't paid attention to what was happening beyond the fact that Myrddin was supposed to meet with the king. I hadn't deemed that to be a dangerous thing because I trusted both my master and Donovan. They were rational beings and could find a way to coexist.

Sasha seemed to study me for a moment, and I rather thought he was deciding how to deal with me. “The queen deemed it the best time to get back the sword and grimoire.”

“Well, as Kelsey had Gladys in her hands during our fight, I'm going to deduce that she managed it. So I don't know why you're complaining. She came out of it with everything she wanted, and a superpowered vampire son. You're welcome.”

His head cocked slightly. “You don’t know. Kelsey didn’t tell you. I have to wonder why.”

“Don’t know what? Is this part of the torture?”

“Oh, little girl, you know nothing of torture, and I will not be the one to teach you. I do know a bit about it, which is why I promise you a quick death if it comes to it. I cannot promise the same from Lee’s parents.”

“Again, he was doing criminal things.” I wasn’t sure what any of this had to do with me. I hadn’t been there.

“Do you know he talked about you in the beginning? He—and I mean Lee—was concerned that we left you behind,” Sasha said.

“I wasn’t left behind. I was with my people.” Except that hadn’t been how it felt at the time. I’d had no idea what was going to go down that day. I wasn’t powerful then. I was a charity project of Nimue’s. I, like the rest of the supernatural world, woke up to blood and death and the realization that witches could rule as well as any vampire.

I prayed no one ever knew what I’d done that day. I prayed no one ever learned that I’d been the one to give Sarah Day a chance to flee, to hide my master’s grimoire and the sword he desperately needed for his good works.

The heavenly sword that had no place in Hell and could never be used by Myrddin.

Doubt kept creeping in, and I hated it.

“Lee cried that night. For many reasons. He’d lost his family. He’d lost his home. He was eleven years old and he was angry with me because I wouldn’t go back to try to save you.” Sasha’s gaze was distant as though he could remember that day like it was yesterday. “He and Rhys approached me that night with a plan to get you out. They loved you. You were a part of their lives they thought they could save, and turning them down was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.”

By the time the children had made it to Venice, I’d been in Myrddin’s temple pledging myself to him.

Because there had been nothing else to do. Because I could pledge myself to him or die.

“Well, if you’d tried, you would have failed and my master would have killed you. It would have been fine for the children though. Myrddin would have treated them like royalty.”

“Then why did he send someone to kill Sarah?”

The question made my gut turn. It wasn’t that no one had asked me the question. Donovan had been here the night before along with his boy toy asking me all kinds of questions that I wouldn’t answer. Somehow it hit me differently this morning. I could remember Myrddin confronting Sarah and Felix. I’d been trying to get to them. I hadn’t known where else to go. I’d panicked and run to the only person I was sure was still around after I couldn’t find Casey.

I’d wanted Casey so much in that moment. Discovering that he left me behind, that was what killed something inside me. Kelsey was gone and Casey left me. Casey had run with the academics. If I’d known that at the time, I might not have saved the Days. Or maybe I would have because I’d heard something. Something terrible.

She can be my queen one day.

Myrddin had been talking about Mia. Sweet, eleven-year-old Mia. Mia, who loved her friends and family and played video games with me and told me I made the best grilled cheese and don’t ever tell her dad, but he burns them a little. Mia, who held my hand after Wyoming and tried to give me some of her magic.

I’d rolled the portal crystal I’d meant to use on myself and sent it at Myrddin. It was an impulse. One I wished I regretted more.

“Sarah had the grimoire and the sword the queen had stolen. And she fought him,” I explained. “Sarah was never going to do anything but bring trouble to my master. I’m sure he would have offered her exile to one of the outer planes if she’d been reasonable.”

But he might have tried to keep her daughter.

“I doubt that very much. I’ve started to wonder if you’re truly evil or if you got caught up in circumstance. I understand this as well. When you lose a piece of yourself, well, sometimes you will do anything, rationalize anything, in order to get it back.”

“I don’t have to rationalize anything,” I argued.

“You don’t believe Myrddin would ever lie to you.”

“If he did, he would have his reasons.”

“You don’t believe the plans I’ve uncovered are real?”
Sasha asked.

I was so sick of that question. It infantilized me. Like I couldn’t think for myself, couldn’t use logic and reason. “The ones where my master gives the Earth plane to Lucifer Morningstar? No.”

“I have no doubt Myrddin thinks he’s going to rule the Earth plane,” Sasha allowed. “Even a madman can be naïve. Do you truly believe my charges would have been safe with your master?”

“Yes.” A weird sense of relief slid over me. Someone was finally asking the right questions. “If you had brought them in, I would have cared for them. It might have cost me my position as a Profane, but I would have given it up to take care of them. It’s what Myrddin promised me. What you don’t understand is that promise holds true to this day. If I’d brought the princess back with me, she would have been given a place.”

“Yes, she would have been used to draw her parents out or potentially taken her mother’s place as a sacrifice to activate the Sword of Light.”

And that hope was doused in an instant. “Well, you know everything so let’s get to the quick death part. I’m sick of this.”

“I came up here because I believe the king is about to announce we’re leaving this place, and you’ll be going with

Kelsey. I might not see you again. I think Hell will either break you or force you to see the truth. So I want to leave you with a little of my own. You said Myrddin didn't want to kill the children. The wanted posters were nothing more than a deterrent to crime despite the reward they offered."

"Every witch knew what Myrddin truly wanted, but we had to show we take the crimes of treason seriously. As to the night Lee turned, he was breaking into a secure location," I insisted. "And Myrddin wasn't there. He was meeting Donovan. He told me that much before I went to the Under. Look, turns out we're all lucky Lee was a latent."

I didn't understand why Sasha would believe Myrddin would kill one of Donovan's children. There would be no negotiations then. Myrddin needed Donovan to be rational. The loss of Lee would send him into a rage. If we'd killed Rhys or Evan, Faery would have joined the war. Though some wolves would be happy Fenrir was dead, others would use his killing as a reason to rise up.

We had talked a good game, but we weren't foolish. Myrddin always knew the royals might return one day. It was why he'd made deals where he could. My master's plans have plans and backups.

"Myrddin knew Lee was a latent."

I was back to rolling my eyes. "He did not. How could he know Lee would become a vampire?"

"Because Donovan had his suspicions."

Why would... The truth was right there. "The thrall stone. It would have made Donovan trust him enough to confide his thoughts and worries. Which he should have."

His eyes lit, and I knew he thought I was caught. "But, my dear girl, if Myrddin knew and didn't want to kill Lee, why did he send Alexander in with the Dark Dagger?"

The words were like ice in my veins because I knew what the dagger did. "He didn't."

"Lee has it with him now. He only survived the transition because he was a king. Myrddin knew a few things. He knew

Donovan suspected his son was a latent, and he also had to guess that if Lee went on a mission, he would be on his father's blood. As a preventative measure. He could have chosen to wound Lee."

The Dark Dagger would have ensured Lee couldn't recover. The king's blood in his human system would turn to poison in his veins. Using the Dark Dagger meant killing Lee, and if he somehow managed to rise, stabbing him with it again would have ensured a final death.

The Dark Dagger was for emergency use only. It was never meant to be given to an assassin.

But Myrddin wouldn't... "Alexander must have taken it. Yes. He was afraid of the king's blood in Lee's system."

A brow rose over intelligent eyes, and I felt a bit pinned by the vampire's gaze. "Shouldn't he have been more afraid of his master's wrath? If what you say is true and Myrddin didn't want Lee dead."

"Alexander could be foolish at times." I could come up with a million reasons. "I'm sure he was thinking about his position as a spy. If Lee lived, he wouldn't have been as valuable."

But Lee was valuable. That was what Myrddin had told her. Especially with Donovan back on the plane. He was in a human form and more easy to handle, but his death would bring Donovan's vengeance. Though he wasn't Fae, with Quinn back and willing to share his blessings, the Fae armies—especially the brutal Unseelie—might have been talked into war.

"Or it could have been an accident," I allowed.

"So your master leaves valuable weapons around?" Sasha asked, waving a hand blithely around. "Is there an armory where anyone can check out a weapon? Do you sign for it? How long is the loan-out period on a weapon made from Lucifer Morningstar's bones?"

Of course there wasn't. Something was building inside me, a noxious combination of rage and helplessness and what felt

like endless darkness. “I don’t know what happened, but it wasn’t Myrddin. You’re looking for any excuse to fight.”

He shook his head. “I don’t need an excuse to fight, Olivia. I had it the minute your master took my king’s crown and sentenced his children to death. I think you’re looking for any excuse to stay the course because you know if you open your eyes you will have to deal with all the guilt of your actions over the last decade. I know how that feels. If it helps at all, I don’t blame you. I think we’re very alike. I had to die to find my redemption. I had to step in front of a bullet meant for my brother. I call him my brother, though we don’t share blood. Time and experience can be as much a maker of family as DNA. Think about that when you’re attempting to find a way to escape. Think about the fact that perhaps you already have, and it’s time to find a way to ask your family for forgiveness. That won’t be the hard part. The hardest part is forgiving yourself. It is not your fault they took your magic. It is not your fault they violated your soul. It is your fault for how you handled it.”

I was so glad I didn’t cry anymore. The impulse was there, like a phantom limb. I could feel it under the surface of my skin, but it couldn’t well up and release. It was trapped with all the other human emotions I’d given up when I’d let Myrddin pull a piece off my soul.

“I don’t need to forgive anyone. I owe no one.”

“Think about it.” Sasha started for the door. “Hell is an odd place, from what I hear. Sometimes it’s what you make of it, and our pasts can come to light in different ways. I know you will not believe this, but I wish you luck, Olivia Carey.”

He turned away, and I didn’t understand him or his purpose. “Why? Why would you wish me luck? I wouldn’t have saved you, you know. I would have done anything to learn all of your secrets.”

He turned slightly, and there was a weary look on his face. “I know this and I still wish you well because I heard all the stories about you. About how brave you were. About how kind and loving. Something terrible happened to you and you’re

angry at that woman, the woman you used to be. I was, too, even though I could not remember him. When you forgive yourself, you can find a new you. One with all the will you have today and the love that filled you then. Your true power never left you. You gave it away. So make the decision to get it back.”

He turned and walked out, and I tried to punch my hand through a wall.

That was warded too. All I got was pain.

Story of my life.

Chapter Four



Kelsey

I made it back to my house and was walking up the stairs as Sasha was walking out.

We don't do locks in Frelsi. It's kind of weird that people walk in and out, but that's the human part of me. On a werewolf compound there's no real privacy. Packs are always up in each other's business. It's probably because their senses are so good that locks and alarms aren't needed to know a threat is coming.

Or when to not open that door because you're going to see way too much behind it.

I didn't even ask the vampire what he was doing here. I was far too worried about Dean, and there was only one person who would know what kind of spell the Profane would use to assassinate a target like Lee.

I had to hope that she was willing to talk.

I rushed up the stairs and found her cradling her hand.

I shook my head. "What did you do?"

Her eyes came up, shooting fire my way. "Nothing that matters. What the hell do you want, Kelsey? I'm sick of every single person you know coming in here to feed me propaganda. If you're back to give me more lies about my master, save it. I'm not listening anymore."

I didn't have time for her damage. "What would you use if you wanted to kill a vampire?"

"A stake is always handy."

"I mean a spell."

Her eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

I wasn't sure I should tell her, but I also didn't see a way around it. I didn't think she was going to consider hypotheticals. I also had to tiptoe around a couple of truths since my bestie looked a bit overstimulated. “Someone tried to kill Lee.”

Her eyes rolled, and she shook her hand out as though trying to shake off pain. “Some dumbass witch tried to murder a vampire king?”

I would go with that. “Yup. So what spell would said dumbass witch use?”

“She wouldn't because there's no one that stup...” She went still for a moment, obviously considering the situation. “There is one spell that could potentially work. Only the highest-level of witch would even try it. Are you really telling me there was an attempt on Lee's life?”

I didn't like that she was putting the pieces together so rapidly. “Yes. He's okay because someone who was with him stepped in front of him and took the spell.”

Her eyes widened, and I would have sworn there was a moment of panic in there. “Rhys?”

I shook my head. “Dean.”

Now I didn't have to swear. The panic was right there. “Myrddin's son? A witch killed Myrddin's son? We have strict orders not to hurt him. We're supposed to bring him in.”

I'd been hoping she would react like this. She might be able to shrug off Rhys taking the hit or someone in the rebellion she didn't know, but Myrddin had been interested in his biological son. I'd had to hope that would transfer to Liv since she seemed to kiss the man's ass. “He's alive, but Lily doesn't think he has long, and the king wants us to move to Gray's tonight.”

“Because the attempt happened somewhere close and the king isn't willing to risk the witches finding this place and laying waste to it,” she mused. “Lily is an idiot who can't possibly know how a proper witch works.”

I couldn't not sigh at her pretentious words, but I had to ignore them because I had a job to do. "That's why I came to you, the expert at killing people with dark magic."

She frowned my way. "I certainly wouldn't say that. You know I haven't actually killed a lot of people. Most of the creatures I killed, I did it for you. When you think of it that way, you're the worst leader I've ever had."

She was good with throwing the blame around. "Sure thing, sister. Killing the demon who was trying to freeze me to death was a tragic mistake on your behalf. Can you help me with Dean?"

"What do I get?"

That one question was such proof that I wasn't dealing with an Olivia I understood. "You get to not let Myrddin's son die. And I won't put my foot up your ass. Look, Livvie, I told the king no torture when it comes to you, but a beat down is something different."

She stood, her teeth peeling back in a snarl. "I'd like to see you..." She stopped. "Why am I arguing? Myrddin wants to know his son. I will get great glory for being the one to save him. I don't know why I'm fighting it. The logical thing to do is to save the boy."

Excellent. We were getting somewhere. She talked a lot about logic, but this was the first time it resembled my Earth plane logic. "What spell would you use?"

"Any number of spells could harm a regular vampire. A king is different. Lee is daywalking like his father." She seemed to think about the situation. "Although from what I understand, his father's daywalking ability came from Quinn's magic. However, Lee has a lot of Fae in his parentage, so that might account for why he doesn't need Quinn to supercharge him. He would have some of it locked in his DNA. So a sun spell likely wouldn't work."

"Lily says it's like he's being burned from the inside."

Liv's eyes closed, her jaw going tight. "Damn fools." She opened them. "I need to see him but if it is what I think it is,

getting him to the Hell plane could save him, though he'll be in for a long recovery."

"What is it?"

"Uro. It means to incinerate. The witches would have been working on it for days, so likely they began right after the queen blew up the Coven House," Liv explained. "I've never worked the spell because it's said to be painful as fuck, and it's a bit extreme. A simple sun spell will usually torch a vamp, so why put yourself through Uro?"

"Put yourself through?"

"How many were there, Kelsey?" she asked softly.

I sank down onto the sofa. I'd already told her the truth, but this felt like salt in a wound. "There were three. I wasn't there so I didn't get a chance to recognize any of them. Not that I would. Hell, I barely recognized you."

She didn't react to that, merely turned to the window and stared out, her hand back up to her chest. "Like I said only the highest in the coven would even attempt a spell like Uro. By highest, I mean only the Profane. So he's given me up for dead and selected another unholy trinity. I suppose I can understand. I was stupid enough to get myself captured."

"It's not your fault." I mean it kind of was because she'd been doing bad shit when I'd caught her, but it seemed like the thing to say at the time.

Her head shook, but she didn't look back. "Oh, but it is. Witches take responsibility. Though I seriously doubt whoever he elevated will explain that the spell will now kill the master's only child. They'll try to cover it up. If I were the one doing it, I would spread the rumor that Liv Carey has joined the rebels and killed her master's son. It would be a good play. If they know I'm not dead, and they will at some point. They'll know I wasn't in the Coven House. You can use all the wards you like, but they'll figure it out. I would simply make up a couple of rumors to cover my idiocy, so the only way to fight that is to help Dean."

I didn't care how or why she got there. I only wanted her to help Dean. "Myrddin would obviously be grateful. Tell me about Uro."

"Well, it's a spell that is only possible if one has access to the Hell plane. Demonic energy is required. Demons have classifications, as you know, and they can sometimes share their powers with chosen ones if they're willing to pay the price."

I could guess what that price was. "Their souls?"

"Oh, in this case not. These witches owe their souls to Myrddin, and I don't think he would give that up. Myrddin's good relationship with the demons means the price for helping is much lower. Pain. They would have to endure pain to prove they were worthy to wield the power of Those Who Burn."

"Okay, that sounds terrible."

She shrugged. "I'm sure they're used to it. These are a small class of demons who gain their power from the Hell plane's sun. It burns hotter than the one here, hotter and deadlier. The witches would have spent days soaking that power into their skin, burning it along with their internal organs. Only demon blood would keep them alive until they purged it through the spell. I take back what I said about Lily. If she's kept Dean alive after that, she's excellent at what she does. Though I suspect his father's ties to the Hell plane helped. Myrddin is the son of an incubus. That DNA could help Dean fight the spell, though not forever."

"How do we clear it?"

She finally turned. "There is only one thing that can reverse an Uro spell. Dark Light."

"Awesome." Now we were cooking with gas. "And where do I get that?"

Her lips curled in the vilest smirk. "Dark Light is not a thing. It's a spell. I'm going to need some ingredients. Mostly regular components that can easily be found on the Hell plane, but there is one thing I'll need that could be tricky. It's the

most important part of the spell. It's what will give the spell its light."

"And what's that?"

"You're going to have to steal one of Lucifer's feathers. Specifically from his heavenly wings."

"I'm sorry, what?" I prayed she was joking.

She was not.

"What do you mean we need to steal something from Lucifer Morningstar?" Casey's jaw had dropped when I'd explained to him what Liv had told me.

"I don't think he's a dude we want to steal from." Trent wasn't happy either.

"This is going to be so fucking cool." Lee was the only one who looked enthusiastic.

It had been a mere hour since Liv had explained to me that in order to save Dean, we would have to create a Dark Light spell to counteract the Uro spell. Donovan had put in the call to Gray, or at least he'd left a message. I wasn't sure where my dark prophet husband was in the world. Likely witnessing something. He did that a lot.

Of course he also served as Lucifer's focal point, so he had access to the big guy.

"Liv thinks a Dark Light spell will save Dean?" Evan proved she was the smartest person sitting around the table. She had Puff in her lap and Fenrir sitting at her side. "So we're dealing with an Uro spell. That's nasty. I've read about it, but I've never seen one done before. Poor Dean."

Lee had sobered. "Yeah. I think he's in pain. How long do we have and do we trust Liv?"

"I'm right here." Liv sat in the corner. I'd let her out of her room once she'd agreed to wear a collar that bound her magic.

I hated the sight of it around her neck. It reminded me of all she'd lost and that I was her jailer now. It was also the only way I could let her move around the house. Her room was far too small for this meeting, and I needed to get everyone on board.

The Fae contingent was having their own meeting since they were planning on heading to Dev's homeland sooner than expected as well. They would be looking for a way to find Sarah, Felix, and Mia Day, who we believed were currently residing on one of the many celestial planes. They should be safe from Myrddin.

We had to deal with the fact that he might knock on our freaking door.

Lee looked her way. "Yes, you are, Ms. Carey, and I ask again, why should we believe you?"

"Because Dean Emrys is the logical heir to my master's throne," she said in a big old lofty tone that did not match the fuzzy socks on her feet. She wasn't sitting at the table with us, preferring to perch on the window seat. "The Profane should have taken better care with their spells. If Myrddin finds out they attempted an Uro with his son in the vicinity, he will likely show them his own sun spell. Exuro. He won't need to burn them from within. He'll just set them on fire."

Lee touched his chest. "They were trying to burn me from within?"

"Not even a vampire king can survive a direct hit from an Uro spell. Hell's sun is much brighter than the Earth plane's," Liv said with obvious relish. "It's powered by the souls of the damned and a unique class of demons."

Fenrir frowned my way. "I don't think Lee should go with us if there's like demons running around in the sun. I know he can daywalk, but that sounds sus to me."

A lot of things sounded sus to my son. It also proved that his demon father had never once taken him to his home. "Your papa's house is in a moonlight portion of the plane."

Evan scratched between Puff's ears, and the hellhound puppy practically purred. "Hell is actually made up of a lot of smaller interconnected planes. Like the Heaven plane. There are a lot of different landscapes. The House of Sloane rules over what's called a midnight kingdom. It's always dark. The moon is always full."

"You will be far more powerful there, son," Trent advised. "And far more tempted by your wolf instincts."

Lee winced. "So we should take condoms?"

Evan gasped, and her hand came out, smacking her brother. "Lee!"

"Ow." Lee scooted over as though that little distance would stop his outraged sister. "Dude, I thought you would be grateful. Rhys and I talked and we're letting Fen out of his promise. Mostly because it's been pointed out to me that I'm keeping up the patriarchal hierarchy or some shit. Also, Papa makes it look bad. And the word *hypocrisy* has been thrown around a lot."

"We are not talking about this right now." I wasn't letting this devolve into sex talk. Lee was right. If Quinn found out the Hell plane could make my son even hornier than he already was, we would be right back at square one. "We have other things to worry about like saving Dean, and that apparently means running a damn heist on Lucifer. Who probably has some harsh penalties when it comes to thieves."

"Have we thought about asking him?" Trent sat back, his arms crossing over that manly chest of his. "He has a relationship with Myrddin. He might want to help out. Gray could ask him and then we don't need to steal."

"Ask him what?"

I practically jumped out of my skin because the deep, familiar voice came from behind me.

Grayson Sloane chuckled as he put his arms around me. "Sorry, Kelsey mine." He smiled down at me with those gorgeous violet eyes of his. "Damn, but you're beautiful. It's

going to take a while to get used to being able to see you again.”

His lips came down on mine, and I relaxed against him. It was good to hold him again, to be with him. Trent was with me every day, but Gray had business that led him around the world and across the inner planes. He sighed and settled his forehead against mine as though reveling in the contact.

“How are our boys?” he asked as though we were perfectly alone.

“Well, apparently Fenrir is about to become a man,” I whispered back.

Lee laughed but Evan groaned.

“Hey, Kels, I get enough sarcasm from my mom. Be better,” she said.

Gray stepped back, confusion on his face. “What’s going on? Donovan called me and said I needed to get here immediately. Luckily I was already on this plane. Fen, are you okay?”

“I’m good, Pops. Lee is being a bitch, and Dad thinks I’m going to get to our Hell plane home and become some ferocious beast,” Fen explained. “Just for the record, my vow still holds. Legally I can’t claim her as my mate until her eighteenth birthday. I will give the wolves no reason to invalidate my claim. It was always about more than a promise to her brothers. She is more important to me than her brothers or parents or even you and Mom.”

I understood that. His mate always had to come first. Though I hadn’t considered pack laws. It wasn’t like there weren’t teen wolves who fooled around. Everyone turned a blind eye, but my son was right. He would be held to an impossible standard, and the wolves who didn’t want him to take a crown would look for any excuse. “It’s okay, Fen. I was only joking. We won’t anymore.”

“It’s not like he’s going to fall on me at midnight three months from now,” Evan said under her breath.

“No, I’m going to let you run from me and I’ll hunt you down, mate,” Fen promised.

Evan’s eyes rolled and she shook her head, but there was a flush to her face.

“Dude, not around me,” Lee complained.

“To get us off uncomfortable subjects, let’s try one that’s even worse,” Trent said, looking up to Gray. “Donovan called you because we need to get out of here tonight. There’s a new Profane in town, and they caught Lee, Dean, and Rhys coming out of the Hidden One’s compound. Dean took the hit for Lee, and Kelsey has assured me the only way to save him is to let Liv here work a spell. Liv, tell the dark prophet what you need.”

Gray turned, and his violet eyes went black as he confronted my bestie. I heard a growl coming from the back of his throat and knew his horns were probably threatening to come out.

Liv frowned his way. “What is that about? It’s not like I ever came after you, Gray. Way to hurt a girl’s feelings.”

“You came after my children,” Gray said, speaking around his fangs. They were sexy fangs, but I didn’t need them right now.

“I was unaware you had any of those.” Liv’s eyes narrowed as she proved she knew where to stick the knife in.

Fenrir and Gray had a rough last twelve years. Gray had been forced to remain neutral given his dark prophet status, and he’d had a hard time adjusting to being the new head of the House of Sloane. In order to maintain his control on the house and not have it fall back into his father’s hands, he’d had to descend regularly, and he’d struggled with it. He’d scared the hell out of Fen and they—being men—had let years go by without talking. When I’d returned Fen didn’t even call Gray papa. Naturally I put a stop to that. Puff had been a “sorry I nearly decapitated you, son” present along with some jerky, and all was forgiven.

I don’t know why men make these things hard.

“Fenrir is his son and you know it. So is this baby in my belly, and he’s also talking about the royals and Shy.” I turned to Gray. “And she can’t do that anymore because she’s all bound and stuff. We need her, Gray. No one else can work the spell to save Dean.”

“I’m not the one who spelled the boy,” Liv pointed out. “I was being a good girl in my cell. Also, I wouldn’t have bothered. I wouldn’t have been foolish enough to burn myself from the inside to kill Lee Donovan-Quinn when I could simply send a hooker his way and give him the equivalent of vampire gonorrhea,” Liv replied.

“What?” Lee was the one who paled now. “That exists? That was not covered in the welcome letter.”

“She’s being a bitch.” Vampires didn’t catch sexually transmitted infections. There were very few ways to kill one, but sending in a pretty body with a stake might work on Lee. Send in a couple of those and he wouldn’t even notice someone with a sword. “Gray, Trent is right about us needing to move. Can we do it tonight?”

He seemed to shake something off and turned his attention back to me. “Of course. The House of Sloane is always available to you and Trent and the children.”

“Then why didn’t you take us there?” Fen asked.

Gray huffed. “Because Dad thought you would go a little crazy. Our moon is powerful. The one time I took your dad there...” He seemed to stumble, and I swear that demon blushed. “Well, let’s hope you handle yourself better than Trent did. Kelsey, you should understand Trent is going to be needy.”

My mind went all kinds of places. I knew my men had turned to each other but we hadn’t talked about how far it had gone, and I hadn’t gotten to watch. Which made me sad.

I intended to work on that while we were in Gray’s kingdom. If being there made my men more open to all things hot and sexy, I would revel in it.

“I think I can deal with that,” I murmured. “But we do have to talk about the fact that we’re going to need one of Lucifer’s feathers for the Dark Light spell.”

“Absolutely not.” Gray had gone stony. “We’ll have to find another way. I’m not bringing the king’s son to Hell so he can be devoured by the Morningstar. That’s what will happen.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty good.” Lee sat back, an arrogant look on his face.

I worried that would be the look on his face when he died—a real death this time. “Gray, we can’t lose Dean.”

I didn’t want to talk about why in front of Liv, despite the fact that I knew she was well aware we thought Dean was one of two beings on the plane who could wield the weapon that could kill Myrddin.

“She thinks Dean will turn on his father.” Liv threw it out there, letting me know she wasn’t going to sit on the sidelines. “He won’t once he takes his place at his side.”

“Myrddin sent his mother away. I’m not sure why he wouldn’t kill Dean since the initial plan didn’t work,” Lee pointed out, not looking Liv’s way.

“You do understand that Myrddin didn’t realize he was sending his son away. The prophecy he discovered with the help of Gray’s brother was revealed to him long before Dean’s conception.”

“Yes, it’s why he killed my grandfather.” Fenrir was looking at her, and there was a darkness in his eyes that worried me.

“Myrddin didn’t kill Lee Owens. My, my, you people like to make things dramatic,” Liv cooed.

“He knew what would happen to my father when he sent the royals and their guards out of the pocket world they were protected in.” I wasn’t going to allow her to rewrite history. It had been Liv who helped me deal with learning what Myrddin had done to ensure my biological father was no longer a threat.

“My master tends to like to give a guy a chance,” Liv allowed. “All Lee Owens had to do was run. And I don’t understand why we’re all so upset. It’s not like the fucker didn’t come back. He’s literally sitting right there.”

Rage filled me, and before I could really think about it I had my hand wrapped around Liv’s throat and she was two feet off the ground. Her eyes widened, and she suddenly looked more human than I’d seen her since I came home to find out she’d become an evil motherfucker.

“Kelsey,” Casey began.

A whole lot of things hit me when Liv had finally poked a place that I couldn’t bounce back from. “Myrddin knows. You told him.”

I don’t know how the weeks had gone by and I thought our secret was still safe—that Lee Owens, the soul from the prophecy, lived inside Lee Donovan-Quinn’s body.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I thought you would know it had to be her.” Trent sat back as though I could kill Liv here and now and he wouldn’t be bothered at all.

Evan stood, Fenrir beside her, but they made no move to stop me.

Liv’s legs started to kick. “I didn’t mean to tell him. Not in the beginning. It’s...”

Myrddin knew. Myrddin understood Lee could kill him.

“Kelsey, this is something he’s known for a long time,” Gray said quietly. “You might need to blame me as much as Liv. I believe he actually heard the news from Lucifer. I am Lucifer’s focal point. There’s not much prophecy he can’t find when he filters it through my soul. It was years before Myrddin knew. I don’t like Olivia, but I do believe she kept the secret for a long time.”

“Until the veil was lifted from my eyes,” Liv spat back.

I let her drop.

I knew what she meant. Until Myrddin had taken a piece of her soul.

I stepped back because I couldn't be rational right now. I could deal with Gray. I could even accept the fact that he'd had a hand in the knowledge coming out. He'd been forced to work for Lucifer because he was trying to protect my family and stay in a position of power to continue to monitor the situation in a way Trent and Sasha couldn't.

Liv just wanted power.

Liv put a hand to her throat. "I guess you're happy Myrddin killed my whole coven since they knew the truth."

I shook my head. "What are you talking about? I thought the covens were with Myrddin."

"Not Liv's," Gray said quietly. "There were several covens who were already working with Myrddin, but not the thirteen witches who made up Olivia's coven. Some of the thirteen got out, but the ones who were trapped at the Council House were killed with the exception of Liv. I don't think Myrddin gave them a chance to join him. They were deemed traitors and too close to the king."

"I suppose I should have let myself die, too. Then the great Hunter could have mourned me. Sorry, Kelsey. My coven members were idiots who couldn't see greatness in front of them," Liv said, her voice croaky. "Yes, Myrddin knows, and he also knows that it will take both of them to have a shot at killing him. I suppose while Lee was human and Dean was off plane, he didn't worry about it. It's why he didn't kill Lee before."

"He tried many times," Lee said with a sigh. He'd turned toward Liv and stared down at her.

"He was trying to bring you in so I could work on you," Liv insisted.

"That is not logical, Olivia." Casey was staring at her, too. "Why would Myrddin allow Lee to live if he knew?"

"Because he promised me." She looked at him like he was an idiot who couldn't understand English.

"Liv, Myrddin has sent witches to kill all of the kids at one point or another." Trent stood beside Gray, a curious look on

his face. “I was there. The witches weren’t trying to kidnap Lee and Rhys and Fen. I’ll allow that a couple did attempt to bring in Evan alive, but there was no thought to bringing in the boys.”

Her eyes seemed unfocused for a moment as she considered the words. “You’re lying. You want me to do your bidding so you’re giving me more rebel lies.”

“Liv, you’ve tried to kill me,” Lee said, but there was an odd sympathy in his tone.

She scrambled to her feet. “Of course I haven’t. What is wrong with you? I’ve only ever tried to bring you home, you moron. Do you want to make me think I’m some kind of monster and then I’ll...what? I’ll cry and beg forgiveness and be Kelsey’s doormat again?”

What the hell was happening? “Liv, do you remember choking me the day we returned to the plane? You showed up and damn near killed me and the queen.”

“Why would I do that? Myrddin wants you alive.” She shook her head. “I’m not playing these games anymore. Kill me or get me what I need to save my master’s son. I won’t listen to your lies a second longer. It’s not enough that you lie about my master. You lie about me. You want to make me think I don’t even understand reality. I thought you weren’t planning on torturing me. I guess that’s one more promise broken.”

She stalked out, slamming the door behind her. Casey followed after her.

I should probably be worried about that, but I had other things on my mind.

“What the hell was that?” My rage was starting to dissipate. “Is she fucking with me?”

Lee’s eyes were on the door she’d closed. “I don’t think so. You know Myrddin showed up when my mom and I were in the Coven House. Right before she blew it up. Sorry about that. She’s got anger issues.”

“I know he talked to her through one of his witches.” I’d read the queen’s report. Myrddin had used one of his witches to speak to the queen. The witch had been there physically and had taken the grimoire, but Sarah Day’s wards had held and the witch hadn’t been able to get into the apartment the queen found refuge in.

“Did the witch know what he said? Or does he take over completely?” Lee mused. “How many times has Myrddin taken over Olivia’s body? How would we know?”

“Well, he sounds different for one thing,” Trent said, though I detected uncertainty in his tone. “I’ve heard Myrddin’s voice come from someone else’s mouth.”

“Does it have to?” I’d picked up on Lee’s thought process.

“No.” Gray sounded like he knew what he was talking about. “He can use any part of one of his hosts. It’s a particular talent of his.”

That sent a chill through me. “How do we know he’s not inside Liv right now?”

“He can’t fool me. It’s a demonic talent. A possession of sorts,” Gray explained. “In a regular possession the host is aware of what happens, but those possessions are almost always against the host’s will. For Myrddin to take over one of his witches, they have to offer their bodies to him. That willingness might be enough to suppress the memory of what happens. Or Myrddin might be able to plant false memories. We’re dealing with the greatest wizard of all time. He managed to trick Nimue. It wouldn’t be hard to trick a woman who desperately wanted to be fooled into believing she could get her magic back and not be the bad guy.”

So now I had to consider that Liv didn’t even understand reality as it existed.

It multiplied my problems by a thousand. And gave me a sliver of hope.

* * * *

Liv

I practically ran out of that room, my mind feeling scrambled by their lies. For a half a second I'd felt comfortable, almost remembering what it was like to sit in on those meetings with Kelsey and the gang. Though Lee had been much smaller in those days and Fen and Evan not around at all. It had felt almost right to be there.

Then reality set in. Gray had snarled my way and everyone had started lying.

It was all fucking lies with these people. I had to wonder if they sat up at night making this shit up.

Did they truly believe I didn't know what had happened? I'd been there.

Except when I wasn't. Except when I allowed the master to take over and then the world seemed foggy and unreal to me. Like I was trapped in my body. It was odd because it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. When I allowed Myrddin to take over, the world receded and I floated through. Like a drug.

But I knew what happened. I knew what happened that day when they returned. I had offered to take them to the master, to show them how we'd made the world better, and they'd fought. They'd killed several of our shifters.

They were the ones who'd done the killing.

“Do you honestly believe that bullshit you spouted off in there?”

I stopped in the middle of the hallway, closing my eyes. Of all the voices I didn't need to hear right now, his was the worst. Casey. Fucking Casey. Sometimes I cursed the day he rose.

“Leave me alone.”

“I want an answer, Olivia.”

I turned, letting him feel how much I cared about what he wanted. He stood there, the light behind him glowing around the edges of his form. Sometimes it was like that with supernatural creatures. The light seemed to caress or reject them. In this case, it made Casey look a bit angelic, which was a fucking lie. “You know what I wanted? A boyfriend who didn’t run at the slightest provocation.”

“Slightest provocation? Are you talking about the day when your friends murdered all of mine?” His jaw tightened. His hair was still fairly long. It was hard for vampires to change their appearances. He could get up every day and cut it, but Casey simply pulled it back in a queue.

I used to love running my fingers through his hair. We had such a short time together. When I thought about it, we’d only had a few weeks when I’d lived in his apartment, fed him, loved him. When he’d treated me like I was something precious.

“It was war, and I was in that building. I was mere floors away from you when it started. I didn’t know what was happening that day. I wasn’t as powerful as I am now. I was vulnerable, and you left me behind. You ran the minute things got bad.”

It was precisely why I’d ended up at the Days. I’d looked for Casey and discovered he’d left me behind.

Casey seemed to consider me for a moment. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know.” He’d run with the academics. He hadn’t even given us a chance. “If you’d done the least bit of work to find me...” I sometimes wondered if I would have run with him. Maybe. I was weak back then. I’d clung to him, though I’d hated myself for the weakness. I couldn’t let him see that. “You would have seen that everything would have been okay.”

Casey’s eyes narrowed, and he stalked toward me. “I was there when Justin was murdered by a witch. She was about to kill me when Henri showed up. He knew I wouldn’t leave without you. He also knew how much time you’d spent with Myrddin. Do you think I had a choice? He hauled me from the

building. Likely only moments before we both would have died. They weren't asking if we wanted to bend a knee to Myrddin. They slaughtered us."

More lies. I knew what had happened. The vampires had fought. They'd attempted to kill all the witches. Well, the ones who couldn't give up power and work together. "There are many vampires working with us."

"How many academics, Liv?"

Not a single one. The academics were known for clinging to power, for working behind the scenes to lift themselves up. They weren't as strong as the warrior class, but no warrior could match their machinations. Still, I knew what happened. "They weren't going to kill you."

"Like they weren't going to kill Justin?"

I didn't even understand why we were having this argument. "He must have fought."

"It was daylight." He said each word with conviction. "He was dead to the world. He was a warrior and they slaughtered him as he lay in bed. He was no threat. But he had been turned by the king. Most of the young vampires had. Sasha and I are the last of the king's vampires. Sasha because he wasn't at the Council House and me because Henri cared enough to risk his life to save mine."

His words slashed at my brain, making it ache. "No. It wasn't. It was night. I know it was night."

Wasn't it? How else could the vampires have attacked? They attacked us first. They attacked when Myrddin announced he would need to take the crown for a brief period of time.

Except Myrddin had known Donovan wouldn't be back for years, if ever, since he'd been the one who'd laid the trap. I hadn't known that piece of information that day.

A low throb started in the back of my head.

"It was day, Liv." Casey's voice had gone quiet, and he was closer now.

There was a careful quality to his tone, as though he was worried I would attack. Or flee since I couldn't attack him. Kelsey had taken all my power and left me vulnerable.

“I remember. It was night. Myrddin called a meeting with the most powerful supernatural forces to discuss the fact that the king was missing and someone had to lead our world.”

“The king was missing because Myrddin laid a trap for his closest advisors and it went wrong,” Casey pointed out. “There was no meeting called. There was only an attack from the witches. Baby, why would I lie? What would the point be now?”

My eyes were beginning to ache, and I could feel the pressure starting to build.

“You're trying to trick me.” I didn't like how close he was to me. It had been years since we'd been this close. So close he could touch me. If I reached out, I could brush my hand over his cheek, feel the smooth, slightly cool skin there.

I slept hot. Always. I kicked the covers off even in the winter. But not when he'd been in bed with me. I would wrap myself around him, and it was like he absorbed all that heat, giving it a place to go so it bothered me no more.

He was so close that I had to tilt my head up to look into his eyes. I could feel a bit of his power start to flow. Persuasion. I should fight, but it felt good. It stopped my head from aching, stopped all those questions from swirling.

“I have no reason to trick you.” He was staring down at me with those glorious eyes of his. They were bleeding out, the irises taking over the whole orb. It was something that happened when he was horny or hungry.

Or emotional.

An emotional Casey could be a vulnerable Casey. The idea floated through my brain. If Casey still wanted me, he might be persuadable. He did have a reason to trick me. He was working with Kelsey and the rebels, and they needed my magic. It made sense to send Casey. I'd been vulnerable to him once, so I might be again.

It wasn't true. I wouldn't let myself feel anything for Casey. Dean was wrong. There was nothing inside me that was capable of true emotion, but he didn't have to know that.

He didn't have to know how it thrummed under the surface, taunting me because there was an essential piece of me that was gone, that I'd given away.

Also, it had been a while for me. I told myself that it was because none of the wizards in the Coven House moved me.

I didn't admit that they didn't move me because they were not Casey.

“And I have no reason to believe you.” His mouth hovered over mine, and the years between us suddenly didn't seem so long. I could still remember the first time he'd kissed me, though our first real intimacy had been long before that day.

I remembered the first time I'd fed him. It had been after a battle, and he'd lost a lot of blood. We'd been in the back of Gray's truck, and there was no one else to help him. I remembered how winter had been all around us, and I was so cold. I'd had to stroke his hair and bring him to my neck because Casey wasn't the vampire who would fall on his prey. I don't think Casey thought of the women who fed him as prey at all. Stupid academics. They had to have control always. They had to make you beg for it—even to save them.

“I love you, Olivia,” he whispered, one big palm coming up to cup my neck. “That's why you should believe me. Kelsey loves you. Hell, deep down the kids still love the Liv they remember.”

A memory hit me. It was odd when I thought of those twelve years Kelsey was gone because I lived in the present. From the moment I'd realized I must take my place with my true family—the witches—I had floated through my days, letting the past completely go. When I would remember too much there were spells to help with that. Myrddin helped me to focus on the present.

It wasn't that I didn't remember. I could if I wanted to, but those days didn't haunt me. I still felt a vague residual longing

for certain times in my past, but I didn't obsess about them. With the singular exception of my dreams, and those were always about what happened to me in the Wyoming wilderness. I didn't dream about Casey kissing me or sitting around my apartment with Kelsey watching foolish entertainments.

But standing here with Casey so close to me, with his words tickling at places in my brain I thought I'd cut out, a memory flashed through me.

I'm standing in the middle of the penthouse with early afternoon light streaming in, and Albert is beside me in the kitchen. We talk about silly things, though he sounds serious even as he expresses his admiration for last night's Survivor episode. Sometimes I would join him, and the big demon and I would pop some corn and drink Coke from real bottles and argue over how an immunity idol should be used. The sun is warm on my skin and I can hear the kids giggling in the other room and smell the scent of cinnamon from the French toast I'm making. It's a lot because Kelsey will be back soon, and she's been out investigating something with Marcus and she'll eat and eat and eat. Marcus loves my French toast. He begs her to put more syrup on. I flip over a piece and wonder what it would be like to have a vampire adore me so much he could taste the food I ate, the wine on my tongue. Rhys runs in, and he's so heartbreakingly adorable I can't help but grin. Miss Liv. Miss Liv, come dance with us. It's our song. Florence and the Machine. It's a joyous song, and Albert chuckles and takes over for me because Rhys has his hand in mine and he's pulling me in. The playroom is a mess, but I don't care because Lee has the music too loud and Mia is dancing with Zack's little girl, Courtney. They all light up when I start dancing and I feel...I feel...I FEEL...

I pushed him away, shoving as much at that memory as I was him.

I didn't want to feel. Not like that. I didn't want to remember how I'd loved to dance and feel the sun on my skin and flirt with Casey and have Albert teach me how to cook. I

didn't want to remember how my parents had cuddled me and loved me and they would be so...

"Fuck off, Casey." I forced the words out of my mouth.

"I've been wrong this whole time, haven't I? I keep snapping at you, but that's the wrong way to deal with you. That's what you want." If he was angry I'd pushed him, I couldn't tell. His gorgeous face looked almost sad as he stared at me.

"Yes." I pretended to misunderstand him. I pulled my cloak around me tightly because to let anything else in would crack my world in a way I couldn't come back from. "You've been wrong. Myrddin is building a better world."

"No, baby." He didn't follow me as I backed away from him. "He's building a world for him, but I think while he did that, he took yours away. He took more than your soul. He warped your memories. It's okay. You hide for a little while longer. I'll still be here. I won't allow anyone to take me from you this time, Liv. You'll remember who you are and I'll be there. Kelsey and I will be there to pick up the pieces. We will still love you. When it hits you—what happened, what you did—know in all that pain that we still love you."

Something nasty welled inside me, and I wanted to blast him back. I could feel the spell. It would obliterate him, and then I wouldn't have to worry about his words anymore. I wouldn't have to ever feel this vulnerable again. I wasn't vulnerable. I wasn't the stupid Liv who danced with children and offered her blood up to a needy vampire. I didn't have friends because friends took and took and didn't give back. I was Olivia Carey, dark witch and Profane.

I was Olivia. Prisoner. Bound. Without access to any of the power I'd given my soul for.

I was done. I turned and started for the door that would lead me out of this prison. I didn't care what they did.

"Liv," Casey called out. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

He wasn't me. He was whole. He was strong. He wasn't wrapped in wards and bindings.

I would walk out and let the king kill me so I didn't have to feel anything again.

I put my hand on the door and was blasted backward. My back hit the wall, head banging against it hard.

Casey was there, lifting me in his arms because the world was starting to recede around me. His lips curled up. "Should have known there was only one way I would be able to hold you again. Thank the goddess you're so stubborn."

My head fell back, and I let the darkness take me.

What I didn't admit to myself then was I thanked the goddess, too. Because for a bare second, before the darkness crowded out the world, I felt safe.

Chapter Five



Kelsey

I kept my eyes closed for a second longer than I needed to because I kind of wanted to put off the moment that I had to fully recognize that I was in Hell. Real Hell. I married a demon and he ruled a section of the Hell plane and now I was pregnant with his child and had to face whatever awful fiery pit of torture would be my home for the time being. I was going to smile and take it all with grace.

Yup. That's what I told myself as I stood there, Eddie's hand in mine. I wasn't going to let Gray know how awful this place was. I was being a good wife.

"Mistress, we're here."

Deep breath and I opened my eyes, ready to ignore the body parts that would likely be used as décor.

And I was confused because we were in a garden. A gorgeous garden filled with lush vegetation. Silvery moonlight coated this world, making the white flowers to my left shine against the darkness. I leaned over, and they seemed to reach out to me, releasing a scent like jasmine but deeper, richer.

"I think we're in the wrong place, Eddie."

A huff came from behind me. "Did you think I was taking you to a torture chamber, Kelsey mine?"

I turned, and Gray was frowning down at me.

Trent had a shit-eating grin on his face as he stood by his partner. "Told you she would be surprised."

I glanced around the large garden with wonder in my heart. The whole place was drenched in moonlight. It looked like a

set from Bridgerton, one where the hero and heroine go for a stroll and end up making out and being forced to marry. It was that romantic.

I turned and saw the old-school mansion a couple hundred yards away. It was massive and as surprising as the gardens.

“The House of Sloane rules over a midnight kingdom,” Eddie explained. “This is considered one of Hell’s more beautiful planes, though you should understand there are dangers here as well.”

“Not to her,” Gray said, moving beside me.

Lee stood beside his sister, looking around as though evaluating this new plane we found ourselves on for threats. I couldn’t help but notice his fangs were out.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Lee’s head shook, and he seemed to force himself to focus. “I feel different here.”

“I feel stronger here.” Fenrir stared up at the moon. “I want to change.”

“I bet you do.” Trent put a hand on Fen’s shoulder.

“Go ahead.” Gray nodded Fenrir’s way. “You’ll feel better once you’ve satisfied the urge. It’ll be easier to ignore if you run once a day. Or rather once a twenty-four-hour period. We don’t have days here. I’ve informed the staff that my family is coming. They have protocols in place since the last time Trent was here he ate half the livestock.”

“If you didn’t want me to eat the cows, you wouldn’t make them taste so good.” Trent grinned and pulled his shirt over his head. “Come on, son. Your papa is right. We’ll feel better after a run. Evan, you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she replied quietly.

The gang was all here. Well, the gang that wasn’t in prison or in a fuguelike state due to being torched from the inside. Eddie and Casey had taken Liv and Dean ahead of us. Liv was thoroughly bound by the collar I’d attached to her throat, cutting her off from her magic. Part of that collar was a spell

that would confine her to the grounds. Keeping her in a single room had never been my plan.

Something had happened between her and Casey, and I hadn't figured it out yet. She'd attempted to flee our home in Frelsi and gotten her noggin knocked. When she'd woken up, she'd been sullen and silent. I was sure she was somewhere in that big house plotting revenge.

"See you later, baby." Trent had shucked his clothes and moved in front of me, kissing me briefly before he changed. Trent's change was effortless. One minute he was a man and then he was a gorgeous gray wolf who came to my waist. His tail wagged and I ran a hand over his coat. Fen had already changed by the time I looked his way.

My son was a massive wolf with the darkest fur, a black so deep it was almost purple.

I couldn't help but think that he looked right here. Somehow, despite all the heartache, he did have something of his demon father in him.

Puff bounced Fen's way as though begging the big wolf to play. Fen's head came up, asking Evan a silent question.

She nodded. "Of course. Take care of him, though. I know the other hellhounds were mean to him."

Fen growled as though saying anyone who messed with Puff would mess with him, and then the wolves and puppy were off, racing away in the moonlight and headed for the woods in the distance.

"Will they be okay?" I had to ask.

"They'll have a blast," Gray promised. "They're safe here."

I glanced over to where Evan was studying one of the big blooms that seemed almost iridescent.

"Not too close," Gray warned. "They emit a scent that makes you want to touch the petals, and that's when the flower gasses you. It's great if you need a nap. Not so great if you

want to get some work done. It's one of the only things I can't control here."

"What do you mean by control?" Evan turned, her eyes looking darker than they had before.

"Lord Sloane is the master of this plane," Eddie explained. "The house and the land itself have adapted to his needs. You should understand that the house is unlike any domicile you've encountered, mistress. The house itself has some sentience, but it's nothing to worry about. The house can be very helpful."

"I can talk to the house?" That would be weird.

"You can. While there are bells and intercoms to connect us to the staff, you can also simply say you need Eddie and the house will find a way to let him know," Gray explained. "If the house knows where you want to go, it will help you find your way."

"However, there are many dangerous creatures here, but each one of them owes fealty to the master and would never harm a member of the House of Sloane. You are promised to a son of the house, therefore no one will harm you here. However, the plants owe no such fealty. Be careful around them." Eddie frowned at the blossom. "Yes, I see you trying to drag the princess into your games. That will not happen on my watch."

I swear that plant moved, turning its nose up at my butler.

"Your watch? I assure you this is my watch, and our bushes will behave while our guests are here or they will get no more blooded mulch," a new voice announced. "How will you like that? I'll turn you into ground cover, you moldy old vine of a plant."

Tix had joined us. I'd met Tix shortly after I'd returned to the plane and discovered my husband had thoroughly taken over his father's former realm and was playing the focus for Lucifer. Tix ran the House of Sloane, though for some reason I thought of him as a younger demon. By young I mean anyone under five thousand.

“The mistress and her comfort are still my purview, even here.” Eddie was significantly shorter than the other demon, but he stood up to him. “You care only for the master and his needs, as you proved when you left my mistress to die in the Under.”

It hadn't been Tix's finest moment. He was responsible for ensuring Gray's survival, and he'd decided that Gray taking part in the fight with the witches wasn't appropriate. He'd teleported Gray out of there against his wishes.

Tix wasn't my favorite person at the moment.

“I take my duties seriously, and the mistress is here and well, and the baby is coming along nicely.” Tix stopped as though listening and then frowned and turned my way. “The child needs more meat, mistress. He does not like this... What is granola?”

I was confused, though I had been feeling a bit hungry earlier in the day and downed two of Al's homemade granola bars he'd been making for the royals to take to Faery with them.

I was taking my own personal everything with me in the form of Eddie.

I put my hand on my belly. “Are you trying to tell me you can talk to my... I don't know what stage we're in. Probably still an embryo.”

“The baby can talk telepathically?” Lee asked.

“I assure you I can communicate with the entire line of Sloane when I wish to,” Tix replied. He was in full-on demonic form. When I'd met him he looked like a male model except for the horns and red eyes. Now he wore a suit that fit his slender body perfectly. I was surprised to find his skin was not red like Eddie's, but a deep midnight blue. “I bound myself to the House of Sloane, to the very land we stand on so yes, I can communicate with the child. He's happy to be here, by the way, and thinks Liv is mean. Shall I kill her for you?”

Whoa. I did not like the thought of my son sitting in utero thinking about what was going on in the world outside. He

was supposed to be...I don't know...sleeping, growing. He was definitely not supposed to have opinions on what I ate. "Absolutely not. And stop talking to my son."

"He has a name, you know," Tix said as though it was perfectly normal.

"No, he doesn't." I hadn't even really thought about names yet. It was so early.

"He does," Tix assured me.

I turned to Gray. "Why didn't you tell me Tix could talk to our unborn son?"

Gray winced. "I didn't know. I'm pretty sure he's bullshitting us."

Tix shrugged one elegant shoulder. "And yet it is in the handbook I gave you on your ascension to the throne of this plane."

"There's a throne?" I had a lot to learn.

"Of course. It's made of the bones of our enemies, and when the master is angry it bleeds. It's lovely," Tix replied. "His crown is made of the teeth of enemies. I polish it once a week to keep it shiny."

"I've never put that crown on my head," Gray promised me.

So I wouldn't be visiting the throne room. Eww. "I think I'd like a look at that guidebook."

"Why don't you come into the house and I will give you the grand tour." Tix swept a hand around, emphasizing the glory of the house. "I assure you everything is in readiness for you and your family. Princess Evangeline, I hope you'll enjoy the room I prepared for you. I worried you would not fit in here, but I can see I was wrong. You've changed, and it's for the better."

"I've changed?" Evan had perked up. "You can see a change?"

Flame red eyes swept up and down her body. “Of course. There’s a darkness to you now. I heard the story of your survival. A primal shared his blood with you. That almost always brings about some form of physical change. You’re fighting it. Why?”

“Because I don’t want to change,” Evan replied.

“Change is the only thing in all the planes that is inevitable.” Tix turned as though he found the conversation dull. “Please follow me. Don’t mind the smurfs. They’re harmless.”

“I’d like to...what?” I had to stop again. “Smurfs? Like the cartoon characters?”

Tix shrugged. “You will find that the demesne adapts to its ruler, and sometimes that includes the ruler’s oddities. The house can sense dreams, and often those will show up. I do not know why the master likes bright blue faery-like creatures who are overly concerned with a cat, but he does. Or did. I think those are dreams from his childhood and therefore they show up from time to time. The house wants to please the lord of the manor and sometimes goes to odd lengths.”

“One time when I accidentally ate a psychedelic mushroom I had a long talk with Kim Possible,” Lee added.

“Accidentally?” Evan’s eyes rolled.

“I liked the show as a kid,” Gray admitted, a flush coming across his skin. “I sometimes have dreams about just sitting around and watching cartoons. It was a nice part of my childhood. I’m afraid when I first came here, I wasn’t used to controlling the space the way I do now. There’s a demonic version of Scooby-Doo running around in the woods. I should have told Trent he could eat that fucker.”

“He is surprisingly hard to catch,” Tix agreed. “Come along. I have everything in readiness and stand perfectly prepared to execute the witch if you need me to.”

“No one is executing the witch.” I had to make that plain. Executions were a serious thing, and I worried Tix might treat it as a light recreational activity.

“And we’ll see if things are truly ready for my charges,” Eddie huffed.

We started to head for the house, walking along the white-stoned path, Gray’s hand slipping into mine. Lee and Evan followed behind Tix while he began pointing out various spots of interest. Gray let them get ahead and then stopped, pulling me close.

“Are you okay?” Gray asked.

I was surprisingly okay. I’d expected to feel awkward here, but I felt oddly settled. As if some piece of me had fallen into place. “Why didn’t you tell me how beautiful your home is?”

“It’s only beautiful because you’re here.”

He was charming, but he still had questions to answer. “I was expecting a hellhole.”

“You’ll find Hell is like all places. There’s a wide diversity to it, as seen in our various kingdoms. There are desert kingdoms where the sand is on fire and breathing hurts your lungs if you’re not used to it. Ocean kingdoms where you really have to watch out for krakens. A twilight kingdom where you’re always on the cusp of darkness or dawn. I expected to hate it here. I never came as a child. When I did as an adult, it was to find the decay of my father’s rule. It did not always look like this or feel like this. There’s a softness to it that didn’t exist before. When my father ruled, there was a malice to the moonlight, I’ve been told. You should understand that not everyone who lives here thinks it’s a good change.”

The previous Lord Sloane had ruled for thousands of years. Change was hard anywhere. “They like malice in Hell. I guess it’s not so surprising. Do you worry about a coup?”

“Not from inside my house.”

He was leaving something out. “You said I didn’t have to worry about anyone harming me here. Why?”

“Because every member of the household is blood oathed to me. It’s the only way I can trust them. When my father was punished and lost his kingdom, I inherited the crown and

everyone on this particular plane of Hell. They were required to either make the vow to me or leave this place. With the exception of my father's butler. I dismissed him entirely."

"So Tix is new." I was glad to know my instincts were right with him. "What did he mean when he said he was bound to this plane and the land?"

"When I took on the responsibilities of the House of Sloane, I performed a ritual that bound him to the house and myself in a way that's stronger than a mere blood oath. Though I screwed something up because he is far too willing to ignore my wishes when he thinks I'm in danger. I'm working with some scholars to see if I can fix him. What happened in the Under was completely unacceptable."

"Do you really think he can hear the baby?"

Gray's lips curled up slightly, and his hand went to my belly. "I think he's teasing you. Tix, like the rest of this place, has adapted over the years. He wasn't as comfortable in the beginning. He's become infinitely more human, and I think that includes joking around. I know I certainly can't hear the little guy." He turned me around so he could cradle my slight bump that probably was from all the hot wings rather than my pebble-sized baby boy. "I know I swore I would never bring you here, but it feels right, Kelsey mine."

"You brought Trent." I was still trying to figure out how close my guys had gotten over the years.

"Yes," he replied, his breath warm against my ear. "Once when he needed to hide out. I warn you, he gets horny here. I wasn't joking about the whole animal-instincts thing."

"That must have been sad since he had no one to help him with that," I replied, just begging for him to tell me I was wrong.

He kissed my ear. "That's a story to tell when he's here." He was quiet for a moment. "It wouldn't bother you, would it? If Trent and I had sex."

"Nope. Not even a little." I was all up for my guys getting it on and getting to watch. And honestly, why did I have to be

the only one who got stuff shoved up her butt? It didn't seem fair.

“We were comfort for each other,” he admitted. “In the beginning, he was a replacement for you. He was someone I could have a physical release with and not break my marriage vows. And then somewhere along the way, I just loved him.”

Tears pierced my eyes, my heart filling with love for them both. “I'm so glad for that.”

He breathed me in, holding me close in that satiny moonlight. “I don't know if we would have gotten there if you'd been here. I will never be thankful for losing twelve years with you, but I can see what it brought me. I found peace with this place, with who I am. I found a soulmate in Trent. I want this war over, Kelsey. I want our family safe. I want this baby and eventually his sister to never know a moment when they weren't loved.”

He was referring to the baby she-wolf I'd seen in a vision so long ago. I'd seen my demon boy and she-wolf daughter. “We'll get there. I promise.”

“Unless Lucifer murders us all,” Gray said with a sigh. “I know Lee thinks he's the greatest thief in the world, but he's never run a job on the Hell plane. I don't even know how we get him to Lucifer's plane. I really don't see how this is going to work.”

I was taking a page from my new angel friend. I'd met the newest angel during my time in the Under. Duffy had said if his boss didn't want something to happen, then it wouldn't. And if he did... Well, I was hoping the big guy was on our side. “We'll figure it out. Time moves more slowly here, right?”

“We won't be missing much,” Gray replied. “Even if we're here for a month, only a few days will have passed above.”

So we could take our time. We could wait for the right moment. After all, we had a secondary goal here. We were going to try to figure out where Myrddin would keep Liv's soul and how we might get it back.

So it was good we had time.

“And we’re not worried that Myrddin comes down to the Hell plane on the regular?”

“Myrddin visits with the Morningstar. He certainly doesn’t come here. For all my father’s bragging, we’re considered flyover country here in Hell. This entire plane is dedicated to food production. I’m afraid we’re not important enough for Myrddin to visit,” Gray stated. “Though you should understand he couldn’t do anything even if he did. Not here on my lands.”

“I’m not worried about me.” I was the mistress of a Hell plane. I had some protection. “I’m worried about Evan and Lee. Lucifer is allied with Myrddin.”

“Not technically. I think you’ll find Lucifer is harder to pin down than that. There is no formal alliance between the two. The demonic world has supported him, but technically they’re neutral. Lucifer isn’t certain Myrddin can deliver what he promised. Until he does, there’s a chance Donovan could win this war.”

Politics. I hated them, but it sounded like they worked in our favor this time. “So Lucifer won’t turn in the kids because he’s hedging his bets.”

“That has been our saving grace for a long time. Unless Myrddin proves he can do what he says he can, Lucifer isn’t going to show his hand and potentially start a war he can’t win. The vampires are still strong. There’s also the possibility of the Heaven plane weighing in if they have the chance,” Gray explained and then straightened up as though sensing something coming. “Kelsey mine, I want you to stay very still. There’s a creature coming our way. Like I told you, it can’t hurt you, but I don’t want to startle it either.”

I did as he asked, going still, but I couldn’t stop the rush of adrenaline that poured through me. See, this was the way I expected to feel on the Hell plane—on guard, ready for a fight.

It slunk out of the shadows, four big feet prowling along the garden path.

“This is not your territory.” Gray moved in front of me.

I saw its silhouette in the moonlight. It was larger than a tiger, but definitely reminded me more of a cat than a canine. Its eyes glowed in the darkness, and I heard a guttural growl come from its mouth.

“Go back to your pride,” Gray ordered in a voice that brooked no disobedience. I could see his horns grow longer and his talons pop out.

“He does not look like he wants to do your bidding, Lord Sloane.” I needed to call him that a couple of times to remind myself it was his title now, and we had some protection because of it. It hurt to call him that because his father had been so awful.

“Something’s wrong with him. He’s a drixelranous, a feline predator from the mountains to the north,” Gray explained, never taking his eyes off the big cat. “Highly intelligent. They keep our deer and bovine populations in check. They never come close to the mansion, though.”

The cat kept coming, slowly, as though trying to decide when to pounce. Or as if fighting some instinct. I couldn’t tell, and it didn’t matter when the fucker went back on his haunches and leapt. My breath caught as I watched that massive predator jump through the air toward my husband.

And then he took one swipe at Gray and made his way toward his real prey.

Me.

* * * *

Liv

I pulled at the thing around my throat as I woke.

“Hey, don’t fight it. Do you need some water? How is your head? You took a pretty hard hit.”

Casey. Casey was here.

I opened my eyes and Casey stood above me, but we weren't at Kelsey's house in Frelsi. I knew that immediately. There was a hum that went through my veins, an unpleasant energy that I'd only felt a couple of times.

Not unpleasant. I couldn't ever say that because Myrddin took that to mean I didn't belong here. The first time I'd complained about how being on the Hell plane made me feel, he'd left me behind until I had enough demon blood to counter the effect.

Witches were born from Hell.

Except we weren't. We were found on all the planes. We were natural. We could be good or evil or something in between.

"We're at Gray's?" I forced myself to sit up. I was in another prison, and I could feel that collar at my throat as though Kelsey had tightened it. She hadn't, but it felt that way.

Something was building inside me, and I worried I would explode at some point.

There was a part of me that hoped I took a couple of the fuckers with me when it happened.

"Yes, we made the decision to descend early." Casey poured water from the pitcher at my bedside. "We wanted to avoid the Profane if we could, and it was deemed better for Dean's recovery."

I did have a job to do, and that was ensuring my master's son survived. I knew deep down Myrddin would want Dean alive. Dean was his only blooded child. He should be my master's heir, and therefore it was my job to care for him. "Can I see him?"

Casey frowned, though his hand came out to help me up and off the bed.

I thought about refusing him, but spitting bile his way hadn't worked. I needed to play him a different way. Casey could be the weak link. I was on the Hell plane, and if I could

get away from Gray's house, there would be many beings who would love to have Myrddin owe them a blessing.

"I don't know that's a good idea," Casey said as I got to my feet. "Kelsey and the others just got here. I should talk to her."

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to treat the boy if I'm not even allowed in the same room with him." I tempered my tone and hoped I remembered how to make my eyes wide and guileless. Although I worried the whole pitch black eyes thing would make flirting hard. "I have the collar. I can't harm anyone, though you should understand I wouldn't harm Dean in any way."

"Okay. I'm going to figure out the logic. I would think you would want him dead."

"He's Myrddin's son." When he hesitated, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Was he trying to figure out how to tell me about the prophecy? "You believe he's one of two. You think he's one of two creatures in all the planes who can harm Myrddin. I don't know if I buy that, but let's go with it. Do you honestly believe my... Myrddin didn't study that prophecy further? He's had many demonic focuses help him in refining our knowledge of the prophecies surrounding the two."

What had really happened was he'd burned out demon after demon searching for the right prophecy. Prophecy is a clusterfuck, in my opinion. It's a way for the Heaven plane to mess with everyone's heads. Myrddin can be a bit paranoid about it.

"Then I don't understand why he wouldn't want to kill Dean Malone," Casey pointed out. "If he kills Dean, then his chances of the prophecy coming true are cut in half."

I laughed because they really thought we were idiots. "They have to be together for the prophecy to work, silly man. That's why I know Myrddin means Lee no harm. He sent his own son off plane so he wouldn't have to kill Lee."

"He didn't know, Liv. Not then," Casey pointed out. "He didn't know that it took both, and he didn't know he'd sent

away his son. He only learned that later. It wasn't like he hunted Dean's mother down himself."

An ache began in my head, and I didn't want to talk about this. "I'm not arguing with you. If you're here to fill me with your lies, then begone."

I turned and walked to the window, pushing the filmy curtains back. The room was large and lovelier than I'd suspected a room on the Hell plane could be. I'd only ever been to neutral sites where Myrddin would meet with the demonic council. Everything was red and black and brimstone. They had a brand, after all.

This place was softer, more romantic. Like a B&B. I wondered if all the newlywed demons found their way here for the honeymoon.

"It's prettier than I thought it would be." I should have kept quiet and maybe Casey would have walked off, but my mouth kept right on working.

"It's better now." Casey moved behind me, so close I could feel him brush against my back as we stared at the gardens and low-hanging full moon. "When I first came here there was still a pall on the place. There was a lot of rot. I thought maybe Gray had renovations done, but then I realized it was the house itself that changed."

"Yes, the lands are a reflection of the lord," I murmured, not wanting to think about how nice it was to have him close. I could smell him, smell the soap he used and the fabric softener on his clothes. "I never thought Sloane would be such a romantic. I bet if these were Trent's lands, it would be one big dive bar that served the best burgers and had a ton of big screen TVs playing sports all the time."

Casey chuckled and wrapped his arms around my waist. "If it was Lee's, it would be one big brothel."

"What are you doing?" I asked, breaking his hold and turning his way.

He stood there like the big, gorgeous nerd he was. "Trying something new. Fighting with you hasn't worked. So let's not

fight. How about we make a deal. I'll give you an hour a day to tell me how amazing Myrddin Emrys is, and you let me point out three logical fallacies in your beliefs."

"Why would I ever do that?"

"Because I'm going to point out those flaws while I'm eating your pussy," he replied in that no-nonsense fashion he'd perfected in the last decade. "I'm done fighting my instincts. You are my bonded mate."

I shook my head. "We broke that bond a long time ago. I'm not a companion."

Vampires lived for companions like the queen. Like Evan. They often couldn't control themselves around those women who glowed for them. With the exception of academics, of course. Academics loved a good companion, but they bonded with other beings as well. There's a biological component to the bond between vampire and companion. They exchange blood. It's a marriage in our world and it's usually for the life of the companion, though sometimes they bond so tightly the vampire can't live without her. But the point is the vampire gets something from the exchange. A vampire on companion blood is faster, stronger, smarter than a vampire who drinks human blood. Therefore vampires mate with companions.

Except the stupid academics, who don't give a fuck about biology and follow their dumb hearts.

"I think I made it clear who I loved that day in the woods, Olivia." Casey took a step back. "I told Meredith I didn't give a fuck about companion blood. I needed something else to sustain me, and I could only get that from you. You are my companion, Liv. You are the only woman I will ever love, and now I fear I gave up too quickly. I'm sorry, baby. I did leave you alone. I should have put every ounce of my energy into getting you back and getting you healthy again."

I wasn't sure I liked this turn. "I am perfectly healthy."

"You're not, and I don't think I realized how far gone you were until this afternoon. I guess I thought you were always a willing participant."

“I am. I’m fighting on the right side of this war.”

His stare pinned me. “You might not have a thrall stone in your head, but he’s manipulated your version of reality. You can’t even think logically when it comes to him. My Liv is so smart she shocks me sometimes. My Liv is independent and knows when to stand up to everyone. My Liv challenges the people around her to be better.”

“Your Liv is dead. She died that night in Wyoming.”

He stared at me for a moment. “She didn’t, and I know that now. She got scared and then impatient, and finally circumstances put her in Myrddin’s path and he used her. He knew a good thing when he saw it. He knew how talented you are, and he warped that brilliance to his own ends. He knew how to hurt the rebels. He knew how important you were to us.”

Oh, he was wrong about that. “I was nothing to you. I was an afterthought.”

“You were never an afterthought to me,” he said, passion in his voice. “You were my first thought in the morning and the last when I closed my eyes to rest. You weren’t some sidekick to me. You were my everything. That’s how the bond forms. It’s two souls recognizing each other.”

“The bond was only from your side. I don’t feel it.” I was lying. I had felt it back in the day. From the moment I met him, I fought that invisible rope that bound me to him. I was attracted when I met him and I still felt something, something that whispered this was the right one.

“I don’t think so.” He stepped in again, challenging me to move away.

I held my ground. “It doesn’t matter what you think. I’m not your companion and I don’t have to listen to anything you say.”

“You do if you want an orgasm.” His voice went low. Like sexy-as-hell low. “Tell me you don’t feel it, baby. We’re on the Hell plane, and it amplifies all our base instincts. Tell me you can’t feel the need low in your pussy.”

Fuck him because suddenly I could. Heat had pooled low in my pelvis. It had been so long since I felt the tug of arousal. I'd locked that piece of myself away. When Myrddin had offered me a place in his bed, I'd told him no and took a vow of chastity because I was Profane and if he wasn't able to have me, no one could.

But it was always Casey. If he couldn't have me, I didn't want anyone else.

We were on the Hell plane. I was his captive. When I thought about it, did I really have a choice? I would be violating my oath to the master, but I had to use every trick in the book to get away and take Dean with me.

"You know I do, but I will not listen to your logic." He already thought the worst of me. I didn't buy his whole rapid change. This was a tactic. Clever vampire, but I was smarter. I could use this to my advantage.

"You will if you want my tongue on you," he whispered. "If you want my fangs in you. It's been twelve long years, Olivia. Do you know how hard I'll fuck you?"

Every word threatened to light me up, but I resisted. "You've had other women."

"Not a single one. I've fed, but I've been true to my companion even when she tried to kill me," he said gravely.

My stupid heart clenched because I almost believed him. "Vampires need sex."

"And I've done without. I told you. I will have no other. It didn't hurt that there was a Green Man running around most of the time. Rhys didn't know how to shield when he was younger, and it soothed Sasha and I to be in his presence. It was harder for Sasha. He's taken a few lovers over the years, but I refused them all, and I assure you Henri paraded them in front of me."

"I never slept with Myrddin." The words were out of my mouth before I could think to stop them.

His head shook slowly. "I don't care, Liv."

Somehow, I had to tell him this truth, to let him know I'd been faithful in one way. "I didn't. I...have been purely focused on magic for these years. Any sexual relationship would have been a distraction. I was too important to the cause."

A soft look hit his face, and I couldn't help but admit how beautiful he was. "I would take you back no matter what you've done. Especially now that I believe you don't even know what you've done. He used your body from time to time, right?"

It was a form of possession that allowed the master to be with us when we needed his strength. He used our bodies to communicate, to work his will. But he always told me what happened.

Didn't he?

Casey leaned over and shoved a hand in my hair. "It doesn't matter. Not tonight. I'm going to sleep with you tonight. You can stake me if you want to. I'm done living without you."

The idea of sleeping with him shocked me in a way having sex with him hadn't. It was too close, too intimate. "You can't stay here."

"I can and I will. I won't touch you if you don't want me to, but the minute you give me the okay, I'll be inside you again. I'll be home again. Don't make me wait too long, Olivia. I've missed you. Think about it. All the orgasms you want and all you have to do is listen to a couple of questions."

I'd underestimated him. "This is insane. I'm not doing this with you."

He took a step back, and I immediately regretted the words. I wanted him close, but I didn't want to want him close. We were on the Hell plane. The fucker should take what he wanted but no, that academic had to torture me.

"When you're ready I'll be the one beside you in bed. Don't try to go to Gray and protest. Despite the fact that

Donovan doesn't have a contract with the demons, Vampire rules are still in play here. You belong to me, Olivia."

He was wrong about that. "I haven't taken your blood in years."

"That is the claim a warrior makes. I am not a warrior," he pointed out needlessly.

An academic claimed a different bond, though the blood bond would work. "It's been years."

"And yet I know you ate oatmeal this morning with a hint of brown sugar, and for lunch you ate a brown bread and ham sandwich and an apple that wasn't as ripe as it should have been. Really, my love, you can send that back. Eddie would find you a sweet one," he said.

The world seemed to stop. He could still taste what I ate? That bond should have broken years before. Years. Distance alone should have broken that bond. How could he...

"I can prove my claim on you." Casey was talking like this was a casual thing and not my whole existence. "While Donovan won't enforce it, I assure you Grayson will. He won't want a vampire going to the demon council complaining that the rules aren't being followed."

"You wouldn't."

"I would," he assured me. "You'll find me changed in certain ways. I'm more ruthless than I was before, and I will use any law I need to in order to keep you close to me. I'll use my place in the rebellion to further my pursuit. The only thing I want more than my king back on his throne is you."

I hadn't thought about the claims he could make on me, hadn't thought he would even want one. "You can't have me."

"On that we will have to agree to disagree. So what will it be, Liv?" He stood across the room from me, but I could feel his hands. I could remember every time he'd touched me, every brush of his fingers over my skin.

We'd first made love when I was weak and vulnerable. How would it feel now? How would it feel when I was the

powerful one? I could ask the question because no matter how fast they bound my magic, I was still powerful. I was a predator waiting to break her leash. Why shouldn't I enjoy myself while I was here?

It wasn't like he could break me. I simply wouldn't let his lies trick me.

Maybe I would take him with me when I left and then he would know what it meant to be my captive.

My whole body suddenly felt alive and then...

A scream split the air and I looked out the window to see a massive beast about to tear my best friend apart.

Chapter Six



Kelsey

I really hated the fact that I screamed as the big cat leapt my way. It's not like it was a new experience for me. I've had lots of weird creatures try to kill me. I always meet them with my usual calm, stoic demeanor.

But this thing was drooling, and not like clear mucous, which would be gross enough. Nope. The Hell plane version of Cocaine Cat drooled something black and icky, and I remembered I was pregnant.

Fighting while pregnant, while necessary in some cases, also sucks because it's impossible to not be worried about the tiny baby growing inside me.

So I did what I always do. My arm changed, skin going a demonic red complete with a nasty set of talons I did not use on the thing. Nope. I reared back and punched the fucker with everything I had.

I was surprised when the giant snarling cat flew back a hundred yards. I'm strong. I've got supernatural strength when I call on that arm, but this was something different.

Still, the cat was back on its feet in an instant, and Gray was moving in front of me.

“Get in the house, Kelsey,” Gray ordered.

Like I was doing that. That cat looked tough, and I wasn't having Gray lose a limb even if it would grow back. I was sure he had some insane healing powers on this plane, but I had plans for him while we were here, and they did not include me playing nursemaid.

I moved beside him, taking the semiautomatic out of its holster and pointing it the cat's way. I'd been forced to send Gladys with Sasha to protect her. I couldn't bring her with me to the Hell plane, so here I was with human weapons up against a Hell beast.

"I thought nothing could hurt me here," I muttered as the cat huffed and looked ready to pounce again.

"Yes, my dear, something has gone wrong. You should go investigate it," Gray said, and it was obvious he'd gotten way better at talking through his large fangs. He was in what I liked to think of as a mid-change. He'd allowed his more demonic attributes out but kept his human size. His demonic size would rip through that gorgeous suit of his.

He'd also developed a sense of humor he hadn't had before. "Will do, as soon as we put this thing down."

Gray ignored me and moved toward the cat. "I am *the* Sloane, master of this plane, and you will calm down."

The cat swiped a giant clawed paw his way.

"Kelsey, I think you should get back," a new voice said.

I took the chance to glance behind me, and Liv and Casey were on the stairs that led up to the big house. I hated the fact that my eyes went straight to that collar Lily had promised would keep her under control. I could use some of her magic right now.

Liv had been the one to tell me to get back. I was surprised at that. "I thought your life would be easier if some Hell beast ate me. When did you join the 'protect the women' contingency? Myrddin is hell on your feminism."

She frowned and put a hand on her hips. "I was trying to be nice. Fine. Let that thing eat you. Also, I wasn't thinking about you. I was thinking about the baby. If you want to let some gross tiger thing eat your baby, who am I to tell you no."

Casey was frowning my way, too. "Hey, she's trying. She didn't want you to die. It's progress."

I would have said something sarcastic back, but Gray suddenly had a like five-hundred-pound cat trying to take out his throat. They were rolling around on the ground and Gray was trying to punch the cat in the face, and it was undignified.

So I walked up and put two bullets in the cat's head. Bullets worked on the Hell plane nicely, and I didn't have to worry about anyone stealing my gun and using it to close the door to the Heaven plane.

The night went quiet again, and Gray's dark eyes were staring up at me.

"I almost had him," Gray said, pushing the cat off.

He so hadn't. He'd been a couple of inches away from having his throat slashed open and ruining that suit, but I did understand delicate male feelings. "Sorry, babe. I panicked."

He sighed. "You did not. Damn it. What was wrong with him? He should never have attacked me like that. He shouldn't even be here."

Gray got to his feet and dusted the grass off his slacks. I hoped Tix knew how to get those stains out.

"Aren't all the creatures here supposed to be oathed to you, Lord Sloane?" Casey asked.

Gray stared down at the corpse. "Yes. They are. The weird thing is I couldn't feel him coming. I'm connected to these lands. When I want to, I can feel every living creature here. At least the ones born here. The drixalranous are indigenous to this plane."

"That doesn't mean he couldn't have been bred on another plane and brought here specifically to attack you," Liv mused, coming in closer. There was a look of pure curiosity on her face.

Despite her rewriting of history, Liv was usually the one to insert herself into the cases I investigated. She'd called herself Watson to my Holmes, though you should understand that I do not play the violin and I drink way more beer than Sherlock ever did. But Liv was an excellent Watson, and she'd always

had my back. “What do you know about this oath thing? Is it a spell?”

Liv knelt down, studying the cat who was covered in that icky drool and now sported a couple of neat bullet holes, one through his left eye. “It’s more a function of how the Hell plane runs. I know this is going to surprise you, but Hell lords aren’t the sort of beings who normally inspire loyalty. So in order to be sure there weren’t constant coup attempts and utter chaos, the idea of the oath was born. Think of it as fealty reenforced with biological constraints. Any creature born or made of this plane can’t harm the head of the house. It’s why it was such a big deal when the previous Lord Sloane was cast out.”

“If Gray hadn’t been willing to take control of the house, they would have slaughtered every creature here and started over,” Casey explained.

“That’s awful.” I didn’t love the idea of Gray ruling a plane of Hell, but I also didn’t think it was fair to murder everyone and start over. Talk about a shitty layoff plan. “So how do we explain the cat thing?”

I don’t do demonic names. That beast I’d killed would be “cat thing” to me for the rest of time.

Liv stood. “Like I said, someone smuggled one off the plane and bred it in captivity and released it back here. Likely after they trained it to kill Lord Sloane. Is your father still alive?”

“He’s on a lesser plane with no way to get back here,” Gray assured us.

“I’ll make sure the former Lord Sloane is where he’s supposed to be,” Casey promised. “Because killing Gray would be an excellent way to force himself back in. It would be one thing if Gray were dead with no heirs.”

But I was pregnant, and I’d been told demon babies are tough. There was every reason to believe I would carry through this pregnancy and Gray would have an heir who

wouldn't be old enough to rule on his own. "What would happen if Gray died?"

"The Council of Demons would appoint a regent," Gray said with a frown. "Even if the babe was still in utero, a regent would be found, and he would rule until our son was deemed old enough to handle it on his own. Due to the unique nature of the kingdoms, they would select a blooded relative."

"I'm going to kill him." There was zero doubt my father-in-law was behind this.

"Kelsey, I don't see how he could have done this. He doesn't know you're pregnant for one thing. I've kept it quiet. Second, he would have to find a drixelranous, and gain access to this plane. There are only a few ways off and on." Gray slipped out of his ruined jacket.

"Then I'll start there." I already had a case, and the worst kind. I wouldn't get paid for it and it involved people I loved being in danger.

"I think we should start with trying to figure out if it was born here," Liv countered.

I was going to use her curiosity. She hadn't been willing to talk before now. If we were working a case together, it might help warm her up. "How would we tell?"

"There are a couple of spells," Liv mused.

Oh, I had a problem with that. "You can't work spells."

She sighed. "They're not dangerous, and you know you're going to have to allow me to work the Dark Light spell when the time comes. I can't leave that up to the princess, who is the only one here with any magical ability. Not that it's a lot."

"She's quite competent," Casey argued.

"With Fae magic, so the spell I'm thinking about to determine where the beast came from will work, but the Dark Light spell is pure blood magic." She put a hand to the collar around her neck. "So this will have to come off if you expect me to save Dean's life. While you're at it, I'm not going to

help you do anything if you don't remove Casey from my room."

I was confused. "We're not in your room. How can I remove him?"

"You can explain to him that he is not sleeping in my room." Liv carefully enunciated each word, as though I didn't speak the language.

Casey was sleeping in her room? "Do we not have enough rooms?"

Hah, this was what I'd been waiting for—Hell to play its games with me. What if that big, gorgeous house was like a reverse TARDIS? What if it was way smaller on the inside than it looked on the outside, and we were all going to be cramped and up in each other's business? That would feel more like Hell than this nighttime Bridgerton set.

"There are twenty-five bedrooms, if you don't include staff rooms," Gray announced. "I assure you Casey was assigned one, and it would have everything he needed. Tix would have made sure. He's nervous about Eddie being here. He wants things to run perfectly so you don't have him remade."

"Okay, that sounds terrible. I'm not going to remake him." I looked to my problem children. "Casey, you don't have to stay with Liv. Lily assures me the collar will do its job, and we'll assign a guard outside her room."

"I explained to Tix that I would be staying with my wife," Casey said.

Suddenly the giant cat thing with drooling pus wasn't what had my attention. "Wife?"

"You really want to go that way?" Gray whistled when Casey gave him a short nod. "Can you back that claim?"

"In the tradition of my vampire class, I have bonded with the witch known as Olivia Carey." Casey kept his eyes steady on Gray. "I can taste the food she eats, feel her emotional state when she is not shielding from me. I felt her again for the first time in years this afternoon."

“He can’t prove that,” Liv said, her face flushing. She looked like my Liv in that moment. Embarrassed to be caught in something so intimate. She’d had a hard time accepting Casey’s love.

“I certainly can,” he replied. “I’ll sequester myself in a room on the other side of the manor, and Liv can have a meal. I’ll have my review of it ready for you.”

“Really?” Gray asked. “After twelve years?”

“It doesn’t work over long distances,” Casey said quietly. “I was surprised myself, but it’s proof that she is not so far gone. She’s still mine, and that means something on the Hell plane. She is the acknowledged wife of a vampire.”

“She’s not a companion.” I knew some academics married non-companions, but I wasn’t up on the laws concerning them.

“That doesn’t matter when it comes to academics,” Gray replied, seeming to think about the situation. “They had rules about their mates written into our laws a long time ago. They’re even tighter than the ones concerning companions, in some ways. I’m sorry, Olivia. As long as we’re here in my kingdom I must comply with the laws we have on the books.”

“You are talking about a contract that expired years ago,” Olivia pointed out.

“We have no new contract with the vampires,” Gray allowed, “and that means we follow the old rules until a new contract binds us or until we’re told we don’t have to. Myrddin completely left vampires out of his contract with us. I’ve been given no instructions to disregard the old laws, so I must follow them. You belong to the academic Casey Lane.”

“What does that mean?” I didn’t like the wording my hubby was using. I mean he belonged to me and I belonged to him and Trent. It was a hot triangle, but this felt more like ownership, and I took offense to that.

“It means as long as we’re here, we follow Hell’s laws and not Donovan’s.” Gray’s horns had receded along with his claws. “It means Casey is the ultimate authority when it comes to Olivia Lane.”

Olivia gasped. “That is not my name.”

Casey shrugged, and there was a smirk on his face I’d never seen before. “It is if I say it is. I think you’ll find the marriage was registered shortly after we came back from Wyoming.”

“You didn’t.” I knew he hadn’t. He would have told me if he’d registered a marriage with the Council. There would have been tons of gossip and talk of a double wedding.

“I think you’ll find all the records are in their proper place. We managed to get a copy of the system out during a raid.” Casey said the words with the smoothness of a man who knew he’d covered his tracks.

Because Casey didn’t fuck up when it came to technology. There would still be a council record, and he was just the vamp to fix them so it looked like he’d registered properly. He’d hacked the system. Or he hadn’t had to because he probably was the one who managed the system. His academic buddies would all back him in public no matter what they thought privately.

“I never agreed to that.” Liv looked genuinely horrified.

“That’s the best part. You don’t have to here,” Casey replied. “I can’t enforce it back in Frelsi. We do follow Donovan’s laws, but we’re here now. I claim all my rights to my bride, and that includes being in charge of her. I’ll decide if and when that collar comes off. Not Kelsey.”

It was my turn to be offended. “I’m Donovan’s sheriff. She’s a prisoner. I assure you I have the authority here.”

“You have the authority there, Kelsey mine,” Gray said quietly. “Here, he does. He’s put me in a corner. If I don’t acknowledge his claim, he can call the demon council against me.”

“He’s a rebel. He wouldn’t do that.” I knew Casey Lane.

“I would. And I might be a rebel when it comes to Myrddin, but officially the Hell plane has taken no real stance,” Casey pointed out. “I assure you if I contact the council, they will take my call, and the law is clear when it

comes to my wife. I am in charge of all things concerning her.”

Why was he suddenly being such a massive ass? I moved to Liv’s side. “I’m not going to let you rape her.”

Liv snorted as though that thought was ridiculous.

“I have no intentions of raping my wife. In fact, I’ve already offered her a deal concerning physical intimacy. Though I would dearly love to have sex with my wife again, I won’t touch her until she agrees to it.” Casey was every bit the arrogant academic. The years had given him a gravity he hadn’t had before.

He was almost sexy.

That grossed me out because he was totally like my brother, and while I had handled this new world a little better than the queen, sometimes I longed for the old one. The one where Casey sang sad songs and didn’t lay weirdly sexy claims to my best friend.

“He couldn’t rape me if he tried,” Liv snarled.

“I wouldn’t,” Casey agreed. “I’ll never try. Seduction is another thing altogether, and you should think about that, Liv. Something’s changing inside you. I can’t put my finger on it, but you’re starting to feel again. You’re starting to want things you haven’t wanted for a long time. You didn’t like the apple this morning. It disturbed you that you didn’t like it because you’re supposed to be beyond simple pleasures. Myrddin turned you into his automaton, but my gorgeous, funny, wickedly sexy woman is waking up, and I’m going to be right here to meet her every need.”

I turned to Liv. “What did you do to him? Is that collar not working? That is not Casey. Casey is a weirdo who writes songs about feelings and gets scared of dead bodies.”

“He’s not,” Liv said, pointing a finger my way. “He’s matured since you left, and honestly, you never really saw him for who... Damn it. I am not doing this. I meant what I said. I’m not helping...”

“So you won’t help save your master’s son?” Casey’s brow rose. “Should we tell Myrddin that blocking me from sharing the same room with you was far more important than his only blooded child? Where is your logic, Liv?”

“Fuck you.” She turned and practically ran up the stairs.

“Who are you?” I was still in shock.

“I’m Liv’s husband by all vampire laws, and I will not let her down again,” Casey announced. “And I’ve given you the perfect way to get in good. You get to listen to her complain about me.” He sobered. “There’s something wrong with her. I can’t tell if it’s a spell or simple conditioning. She doesn’t remember things correctly. I think Myrddin’s used her body on a couple of occasions, and she can’t remember what happened. Her view of reality is warped. She genuinely believes the things she’s done are justified.”

It was hard for me to comprehend what she’d been through, what she’d allowed in her attempt to get away from the pain.

But I knew there were things the mind could do to justify the need to not feel pain. “You really think she might be starting to feel like herself again?”

“I know she is, and she’s going to fight it with everything she has,” Casey replied. “I meant what I said, Kelsey. I will not allow you to come between the two of us. Don’t try. I’ve got the time we have here to make it work. Now I have to go and drink some nasty microwaved blood and start some research on that thing down there.”

I kind of thought we should talk some more, but Tix was suddenly standing on the big porch above us, frowning down. Evan and Lee flanked him, with Eddie rushing out to join.

“What has happened?” Tix asked. “Why is there a dirixalranous corpse on our beautiful lawn? Was that gunfire I heard? I was conducting a very informative tour, and I had to break it off to find my lord and lady playing with predators.”

“I wasn’t playing, Tix. I was about to get my throat torn out,” Gray informed him. “We need this big guy’s body saved.”

Someone's going to get to do an autopsy."

Eddie was a bit out of breath as he joined Evan. "If we must investigate, then I will find a good place for you to do your work, Mistress."

Tix turned his way. "Oh, you will find a place? You have barely the knowledge of this palace to find the kitchens."

I shook my head and started up the stairs.

"And Rain was disturbed by the gunfire," Tix complained. "It was loud, and he was trying to sleep."

"Who is..." I realized who he was talking about. "I'm not naming my baby Rain."

"Of course not. His name is Rainier. I'm using the playful, diminutive version," Tix agreed.

I huffed and stalked off.

My first day in Hell was not going as planned.

* * * *

Liv

I was feeling better after I ditched Casey and managed to find my way to the room they were keeping Dean Emrys in. I was surprised no one stopped me, but then I realized the mansion I found myself in had eyes. Actual eyes. They were embedded in the walls in places, camouflaged by elaborate wallpaper.

I thought about poking the fuckers out, but they would probably like that and still be able to report on my movements through the house.

I chose to pretend I had some small freedom.

Dean was pale as a ghost on the narrow bed they'd laid him on. He looked like he could be as much of a corpse as that

cat that nearly killed Kelsey. I couldn't imagine what was happening inside his head.

I didn't like how tight my own chest felt at the thought. At all the thoughts going through my head.

Wife? I wasn't his wife. What had that moron done? I knew damn well he hadn't filed a claim on me back when he could have legally made one. The entire idea of filing a claim was ludicrous. Fucking vampires think they can own a person. Casey wasn't that vampire. Casey had given me freedom when we were together. He'd been on the clingy side, but I'd liked that at the time. Casey wasn't the vamp who imposed his will on his wife and walked around jealously guarding her at all times.

But I also didn't think he was bluffing. Despite what Kelsey believed, Casey had been serious for a long time. Oh, he'd written that dumbass musical because there was still some emo boy hiding deep inside him, but Casey was smart, and he did have a ruthless streak inside.

What the hell was his game?

"I think you should step back."

I closed my eyes and really wished I could get a fucking minute alone. I'd expected a whole lot of those because I was supposed to be locked in a room somewhere, but once more Kelsey found a way to torture me. "I'm not going to hurt him, Lee. I'm literally here to fix him."

I felt Lee move in beside me. Of all the kids, I think it was Lee who disturbed me the most. I didn't see Mia anymore. She was lost to us, so she was still a child in my head, but there was no way to avoid the fact that Lee Donovan-Quinn was a man. Well, a male. He left his human form weeks ago and already seemed more settled as a vampire.

I glanced up at him and noted the color of his cheeks. They'd been much paler before. "You've already found a creature to feed you? I've heard there are interesting cattle here."

“There are also willing demons,” he replied. “You know demons can get off, too. They like a nice bite.”

Yes, Lee was a fully grown, functional adult male, and never let anyone forget it. It was disconcerting.

And then it hit me why he’d told me that bit of news. He wanted me to think about Casey feeding.

Which I didn’t think about. I hadn’t fed the vampire in twelve years.

I hadn’t thought about his fangs in my neck, his body up against mine. He was so affectionate. He would hold me for hours, nuzzling my neck and playing with my breasts. He would drag his fangs over my skin and make it hum for him.

Who was feeding him tonight? Would I be able to smell her on him when he came to my room? My brain had come damn near that word I was avoiding. Our.

I had shared nothing with anyone for years. When Myrddin elevated me, I received my own quarters.

I had chosen one of the guest rooms in the penthouse, one I’d never been in before. I’d avoided the children’s rooms.

I remembered how Calliope and Shera had gleefully destroyed those rooms. They’d played music and set fire to Evan’s dolls. They’d danced around and smashed all their toys and school projects. They’d torn up the photos and pictures. All the things that might have reminded them of their childhood before that day.

Join us, Liv. It’s fun. Those brats will be in the fire soon, too.

I put a hand to my head.

No one had said that to me. No one had done those things. Why was I making it up?

“Are you okay?”

“You sound like you give a shit.” I didn’t like whatever was happening to me. “I think that witch of yours put more than a binder on this collar.”

“Lily?” Lee asked with obvious surprise. “She wouldn’t. She’s a white witch.”

I barely managed to bite back a groan. I should have known the rebels would keep old harmful myths around. “There’s no such thing. That’s a myth meant to put us in our place, and I don’t like using the colors white and black to denote good and evil. Everything is gray, Lee. You should know that by now.”

“I know there are some people who are better than others.” He moved around the bed where Dean lay and stared down at him for a moment. There was a wistful expression on his face, and I wondered exactly what had gone on between him and Myrddin’s son. “You know Lily Tucker was a legacy, right?”

“I know both she and her sister, Sarah, were under contract to the Hell lord Brixalnax. Her parents belonged to a coven with strong ties to the Hell plane. So the coven sold their souls, and they were to join their lord and aid him in creating magic here on the Hell plane.”

That brought a booming laugh out of the queen’s baby boy. He doubled over and seemed extremely amused for a good two minutes. He finally put a hand on his stomach and shook his head. “That is brilliant. I don’t think I’ve heard a load of shit like that in...ever. And Rhys is my brother.”

“Their job was to work spells.” I didn’t see what was so funny about it.

“Their job was to be tortured.” Lee had gone serious. He was an odd mix of his parents. On the surface he looked so much like Devinshea Quinn, though his eyes were a rich brown to his brother’s emerald. But he held himself like the male who’d provided his vampire DNA. Like a king.

When he stared at me like that, I could forget he’d been a child who held my hand and asked for chocolate milk. I could forget how much I’d wanted a kid like him.

“Torture is in the eye of the beholder. Is there a point to this lecture, Prince Lee?”

His eyes narrowed. “No one calls me that.”

“But you are.” I liked the fact that it bothered him. “At least you are to the rebels. You could have kept your royal status had you not run from Myrddin.”

“Yes, I’m sure he would have handed me a crown.” Lee chuckled again, but there wasn’t a lot of humor in the sound. “And I am more than a prince, Liv, and you should remember that. I know my reputation, but you underestimate me at your peril. And torture is torture. I know Sarah was still affected by the months she spent down here years later. Mia would wake up to the sound of her mother screaming and her father soothing her. It took us a while to figure out why she did that. Lily was there, too. They would have been there forever if it hadn’t been for Felix Day.”

“Their mother signed a contract,” I replied. “Rather like Gray’s. They were literally conceived to serve on the Hell plane.”

“And in witch law at the time, it was acceptable to sell a child’s soul, a child’s entire future.”

I shrugged, not liking the fact that there was a big part of me that agreed with him. I didn’t want to agree with a rebel. “I didn’t say it was fair, and we don’t do that anymore.”

“It’s happening every day, Olivia, but that is not why I brought up the practice. I suspect you’ll lie and tell me I know nothing about your world. Myrddin is perfect and wonderful and would never do a single thing to hurt any of us.”

When it was put like that even I had to admit it sounded stupid. “I never said he was perfect.”

He held a hand out, forestalling me. “You’re in a cult. I get that. You got brainwashed or something, and you’re perfectly happy to walk around like a moron so you don’t have to face what you’ve done.”

He was playing on the razor’s edge of my temper. “I’ve done nothing.”

He nodded as though placating me. “All right. You’re perfect like Myrddin. The rest of us can’t touch your

marvelousness. Awesome. You know it's normal for amazing people like yourself to be feared and reviled."

I waved that off. "It's jealousy."

"It's not," Lee returned. "It's fear for some, and pity from me."

My hand came up of its own volition, willing a fireball to strike him.

Nothing happened because I was impotent. Rage seethed inside me, and I could see plainly what I wanted to do to him.

What I'd done to many before him at my master's behest.

"It must be hard to not be able to kill the way you have these last years," Lee said with some small amount of sympathy. "That would bother me, too. My point is Lily doesn't do that. Lily saw the worst of the world and turned from it. Unlike you, who had a minor trauma and threw a fit about it for twelve years."

"Minor?" I wanted to wrap my hands around his throat. How fucking dare he? "I was violated on a level most people can't understand."

"Really? Most women can't understand what it means to be violated?" Lee asked.

"They took something fundamental from me."

"Like your childhood?"

I wasn't playing this game with him. "Like my soul."

"No, they didn't take your soul," Lee countered. "You gave that away. They took your residual magic. If you'd been patient, it would have come back."

I was confused at why we were even having this conversation. It annoyed me, sent my nerves firing off like something was wrong with my brain. "It wasn't coming back, and how do you know any of this?"

"Because you were my case. When we came back from Wyoming, I was worried about you. You were one of my favorite people. In the idiocy of my childhood, I thought we

were a team, you and me and Casey and Kelsey. We saved the world. I thought I could save you. So I did some research about what happened to you. I talked to witches and read up on the subject. I can explain what that coven did. They scraped your cells of the magical energy they contained, but cells regenerate. The scientific term is apoptosis. Your cells didn't actually die, but they were damaged. However, what I learned was the DNA of a supernatural creature will heal itself. Your magic was written into your DNA."

"They meant to kill me."

He nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's why they stabbed you with a big old knife right in the chest. That's what would have killed you. The truth was they could have stabbed you anywhere. The spell would still have worked. And that was only what? An hour or so? Lily was in Hell for what seemed like forever having her body ripped apart, her magic feeding demon after demon, and I'm fairly certain there's a reason she's celibate to this day. She didn't have an angelic presence beside her the whole time. She saw the darkest things a being can see and when she was freed, she found the light."

I hated every word that came from his mouth. Mostly because they were like a mirror. "There was no light to be found."

"Because you're weak. That's what I learned. I saw you as this incredibly strong woman like Kelsey or my mother. I put you in that class. But your goodness was a façade. It's easy to be good when you're surrounded by it. It's hard when the world falls apart and you find yourself on the wrong side. Some fought. Like my grandmother."

He was accusing me of rewriting history? "The Queen of the Seelie Fae didn't fight at all."

Lee's head shook. "I wasn't talking about her. I was talking about my witch grandmother."

It took me a moment to connect the dots. "Christine? She worked for the master for years."

“She was a spy.” There was an arrogant smirk on his face I longed to wipe off. “Christine Wharton gave us everything she could. She never betrayed us. She seemed like a bit of fluff my grandfather loved, and when her world fell apart, she found the strength to become something incredible.”

Christine? She was a minor witch. I’d been surprised she had any power at all, but she’d worked her way into a middle position in the coven.

I’d been heartbroken to see her there, cheering with the others. And then I’d thought if she did it, why shouldn’t I? I’d seen Christine as practical. Her husband, Harry, had been killed while trying to attack Myrddin, but she seemed to take that with equanimity. I’d admired her calm acceptance of the situation.

She’d been fighting us all along?

“She gave her life for me and my mom that day,” Lee said quietly.

I had a bone to pick with this kid. “The day Alexander apparently stole the Dark Dagger? Yes, I’ve heard that tale. You trying to create a myth around your transition? That sounds like your Fae father at work.”

If there was one thing Dev Quinn knew how to do it was build an excellent lore. Every king needed a story, and Dev could weave one that had his followers willing to die for their king. It appeared he meant to do the same thing for his son.

Lee pulled his shirt over his head. Before Lee had become a vampire he’d been covered in scars from years and years of battle. He’d become a soldier at the ripe age of eleven, taught by Sasha and Trent and taken across the planes to learn how to wage war. He’d lost an eye to a group of Fae who’d come for his twin. When I’d seen him for the first time after years, I’d... well, I’d felt nothing more than pity because if he hadn’t fought, he’d have been fine.

“Is this a myth my father created?”

I stared at the dark scar on his chest. It was right above his heart. I knew that mark and what it meant. Only a few

weapons in all the planes could damage a vampire in a way he couldn't heal. "Alexander Sharpe had the Dark Dagger? How did he steal it from Myrddin's vault?"

"He didn't, Liv." Lee pulled his shirt back over his head and gave me an exasperated look. "He didn't steal anything. The dagger was placed in his hand because Myrddin wanted me dead. Had my mother not gotten me behind Sarah's wards, Alexander would have used it on me when I turned, and that would have ended my threat to your master. He would have taken my mother into custody and used her to prime the Sword of Light, and then it's game over for the Earth plane."

We were back to that again. "I don't know how Alexander got the dagger. Do you still have it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? Wouldn't it be an excellent weapon down here on the Hell plane?" Lee stalked close to me, looming over me. "I know it will kill you, though you should understand that I don't need a weapon made from the Morningstar's bones to get rid of you. I can do that with my own two hands."

"I'd love to see you try."

He stared at me, and I saw a hint of fangs when he spoke. "If you do anything to harm my sister or Dean or anyone I care about, your wish will be granted. I might be here to do a job, but I can handle a side project. I'm good at it."

"And then Dean won't get what he needs." I didn't mention that Evan wouldn't get what she wanted either, but I didn't need for him to know about my connection to his sister.

"Which is why you're still alive," he said and stepped back. He moved to the chair someone had placed by Dean's bedside. "I'll stay here with him tonight. You can go. Just know I'll be watching you."

Arrogant prick. But I could do nothing to him, and my head ached worse than it had before. I was starting to question things that had been firm reality for me only days ago. The ground beneath me was starting to shake, and I didn't like it one bit. I turned to leave. I would go back to my room and try

to find a way to barricade the door so Casey couldn't come in and fuck me up some more.

“And Liv? What do you think Myrddin would do if he ever found out that it was you who saved Sarah, Felix, and Mia that day?”

My blood threatened to turn to ice in my veins. I turned, not able to keep the shock off my face. “What are you talking about?”

The smirk was back. The “I know something you don't know” smirk. “I'm talking about what happened the day Sarah went missing. The day your master announced that my companion would make him a lovely bride.”

The smirk had transformed to a deadly look as he completed the sentence.

It was my deepest secret, and my enemy knew. “How do you know that?”

“It doesn't matter how I know. Only that I'm sure you were the one who used the *sphaera motus* to transport Myrddin away, thereby giving Sarah and Felix time to get out. And time to activate the wards she'd placed on her apartment long before. They held for years, and those wards are the only reason Myrddin didn't get to use that dagger on me a second time. We were safe behind those walls, and you are the reason for that. I wonder what he would think. Maybe I'll tell him one day. Maybe I won't. I suppose that depends on how you treat the people I care about. Good night, Liv.”

He might not call himself a prince, but he had the royal dismissal down to a science. He turned his attention back to Dean and I walked away.

But I knew what I would do.

I was going to heal Dean Emrys, and then I would find a way to deliver him straight to his father.

Chapter Seven



Kelsey

I was still thinking about Casey and Liv hours later as the moon slipped under the horizon and the stars became the only light to see by out in the wild. I'd been told the moon would rise again in a few hours and this was the moonlight kingdom's version of night. I stood on the balcony, the velvety darkness all around me.

Inside the suite Gray had shown me to, there was soft candlelight filling the space thanks to magical candles I'd been informed were made in the village beyond the woods.

The evening had been spent with Tix telling me everything I needed to know to be an informed lady of the manor, and none of his words penetrating my brain.

What was Casey doing? He was going to push Liv over the edge.

And a voice inside me insisted that might be exactly what she needed.

I rather thought that idea came from my wolf. She often thinks more clearly than I do in times of crisis. And sometimes she's a ruthless bitch, but I've come to appreciate that part of myself.

"Are you all right?" Gray moved in behind me, his hands on my shoulders. "You didn't clear out the kitchens when they served dinner, so I'm worried."

Dinner had been excellent, but it was hard when the dinner party had been just me and Gray and Evan, who I swear is hiding something. I didn't know what, but I'd spent enough time with the princess to know when she's holding back. She

hadn't eaten much either. Liv had refused to leave her room. I was fairly certain I heard her moving heavy objects in front of her door to keep Casey out. Lee had claimed he needed to watch over Dean. Casey was busy studying up on our predator, and Fen and Trent had still been hunting.

All in all, it wasn't the family dinner I'd envisioned.

I could lose Liv, and having to face that fact made me sick inside.

"Sorry. I was thinking."

"About Liv?" Gray asked.

"Yes." I sighed and turned, wrapping my arms around him and breathing him in. "It might have been a mistake to bring her here."

What I wasn't saying was it might have been a mistake to bring her anywhere at all. It might have been a mistake to not kill her.

"I don't think so. I think she's exactly where she needs to be. She came when she heard you were in trouble," Gray pointed out.

"And then complained about everything I did," I noted. But he was right. She'd come running at my girly screams that had way more to do with nasty drool than the teeth that had threatened to take my throat out.

"Yeah, baby, you need to remember how your missions used to go. In this case, despite the fact that you've only been gone for a couple of days, and I haven't hung with Liv in twelve years, I can tell you the interaction between the two of you this evening was far more normal than anything I've seen up to this point."

We'd had some snark between us, and as two stubborn, know-what-we-want women, we'd butted heads more than once. Hell, there had been a good half year when I didn't speak to her because I was pissed off. I'd forgiven her because I'd believed she'd genuinely had my best interest at heart.

How did I forgive her for this? We do strange things when we're grieving, when we're in pain. Her whole world had upended, and Liv had never faced that before.

She had looked worried. And now I was worried about Casey's hard-core approach. "What if Casey pushes her back over the edge?"

"Do you want me to ask Casey to leave?" Gray took a deep breath and his lips kicked up. "Trent's back."

I heard the outer doors open, and then my glorious wolf was walking through the bedroom toward the balcony.

"What's up? Why would you ask Casey to leave? Pretty sure we can use him. He's the best researcher here. If anyone can figure out how to handle the upcoming heist, it's Casey. I worry Lee will go for it without thinking, and his vampiric life will be short and not so sweet. He's also looking into who we should talk to about finding Liv's soul." Trent had excellent hearing. He'd obviously stopped somewhere and taken a shower since his hair was still damp. He'd put his jeans back on, but his gorgeous chest was on full display.

My Boston boy was a perfect example of glorious wolfy masculinity. His brown and gold hair had just the right amount of curl and framed a face that I adored. Gray was male-model beauty. He could grace magazine covers, but Trent looked like he belonged out in nature, chopping wood with his big muscular arms.

Gray turned and leaned against the stone banister that ran around the balcony. "You missed so much fun stuff tonight. Casey announced that Liv is his wife, and he expects me to follow all vampire law concerning her."

Trent's eyes went wide. "You're shitting me."

I wished. "He's not. It was a whole thing. He also claims that his commands concerning Liv supersede mine as the king's sheriff."

Trent frowned, seeming to think that one over. "Liv's committed crimes. We could make a case that she's under your jurisdiction. But why would he do that? Casey's been

reasonable when it comes to Liv. He's never denied what she's done. At least not in the last couple of years. We were gone in the beginning. I know Henri had to stop him from trying to meet with her."

"I think he's got it in his head that maybe she wasn't the one in control when she did the worst of her crimes," Gray explained.

"It's hard for me to believe Liv doesn't understand what's happened. I was there when she greeted us. She announced that the royals were to be executed," I explained, remembering that day not so long ago. She'd nearly killed the queen and Quinn. "But then she claims she would never have hurt me."

Either she'd become a spectacular liar since I'd been gone or she believed it.

"We can talk to Tix in the morning. I've learned he's got a wide breadth of knowledge when it comes to what demons are capable of, and he's excellent at detecting lies," Gray said, pushing off the banister. "But that is a problem for another day. Tonight we have to deal with a few other things. Kelsey, take off your clothes. We're going to the playroom."

This activity had not been mentioned before. I didn't know we had an itinerary. "There's a playroom? What do we play?"

He stared at me for long enough that I figured it out. Sex. He was talking about sex.

He was talking about kinky, tie me up and fuck me any way he wanted sex.

Trent was grinning my way. "Do you have any idea how long he's wanted to get you in that room? He's spent years perfecting it."

"You've seen it?" I asked the question with genuine curiosity as I followed him through the big bedroom.

Our rooms were even more luxurious than our suite at the old Council building, which didn't exist anymore. But it had been hella nice, and this was even nicer. I'd explored a little, and our private rooms included the massive bedroom and bath complete with a soaking tub for three and a shower you could

have a large orgy in. There was a sitting and dining room, and what Tix had called an entertainments room, which included a larger screen than ever seen in a private residence on the Earth plane.

And there was a small room off the main bedroom that contained a crib with the ceiling painted like the night sky.

Tix had been busy getting ready for baby boy, and I wasn't sure if I was amused by his enthusiasm or scared by it.

"I've seen it, but don't think I've played with him in there," Trent replied with a grin. "I'm not sexually submissive."

"You can be," Gray said, opening a set of French doors.

"No, I can enjoy some rough sex," Trent clarified. He stepped up and got into Gray's space. "If you think I've been submitting to you, demon, you should think again."

"I'm going to need to see this and make my own judgment call." My heart rate had ticked up at the sight of those gorgeous men looking at each other.

A brow rose over Gray's eyes as he turned slightly to look my way. "You are not going to be a spectator this evening." He turned back to Trent. "Neither are you. I finally have you both here at my mercy, and I'm not going to waste the experience. However, I will give you something to think about, Kelsey mine."

One big hand moved around Trent's neck, cupping it, and then his fingers slid into Trent's hair, gripping him and tugging his head back before Gray kissed him.

Really kissed him. Kissed him like he needed Trent to breathe.

Was that how we looked when Gray kissed me? Because it was hot and hit me in all the right body parts.

When he released Trent, my wolf took a breath in, scenting the air around him. His eyes were hot as he looked my way, but his words were for Gray. "We can tell her everything, show her everything. There's zero need to ease her into what

happened between us while she was gone. It'll get her hot. I told you she wouldn't care."

He was wrong about that. I moved in, my heart so filled with love for them both. "I do care. I care that you comforted each other. I care that you had each other to love. But it sucks that I didn't get to watch. Did anyone get spanked?"

I gasped as I was on my feet one minute and hauled over Gray's shoulder the next. A big hand came down on my ass, sending a sharp shock of arousal through me.

"You're the only one I spank, baby," Gray announced as he walked through the doorway and into the playroom he'd spent years perfecting for me.

"I am not submissive to anything except my wife's desires," Trent clarified. "You want to spank me, baby?"

Gray set me on my feet.

I looked Trent's way, my nipples tight against my bra. "Nope. I think you both know exactly what I like, and this room proves it."

Room? It was more than a room. It was like a wing. A sex wing. The whole place was done in gorgeous jewel tones and had heavy Fae influences since the walls were covered in glossy green vines and big, gorgeous flowers that I hoped wouldn't roofie me because I wanted to remember this experience.

Trent moved in behind me, and I could feel his erection against the small of my back. "I think we should probably talk about some things since I'd like to know why I smell cat everywhere, but I don't think the big guy is going to be patient."

"Ask her anything you like. If she doesn't have my cock in her mouth, she'll be able to answer," Gray replied. "But get her naked while you're doing it."

He tugged his shirt over his head, and I couldn't help but drool a little. The day had been stressful, and the idea of not having to think about anything but how hot my husbands were got my motor running.

Trent chuckled and then I felt his hands run under the shirt I wore, dragging it up and over. My muscles already felt loose and warm, so I simply moved with him, allowing him to lead. I felt his breath against my ear as he whispered to me. “See, he thinks this makes me submissive, but I’m only doing exactly what I want. Let him play his games. The truth is I like it when he gets bossy.”

I did, too. Sometimes the sex between Trent and I was primal and fast, and that was great, but I also liked to take my time. Gray forced us to do that, to revel in each other’s bodies and the pleasure we could share. I breathed in as he expertly removed my bra, and my breasts felt cool air. The whole space was built for sex, and I could practically feel the walls pulse with desire. There was a low light that contrasted with Gray’s skin in a way that made him almost luminous. His violet eyes flashed over me as Trent’s hands cupped my breasts, offering them up to Gray.

“I think most of my questions can go to you, Gray,” Trent said as he nuzzled my neck.

That was good because I didn’t think I could answer a bunch of questions right now. My brain felt fuzzy.

“Take off her pants and we’ll talk,” Gray offered, standing close to what looked like a bench, except it was inverted. Likely so someone’s ass would be in the air so someone else could smack it until the first person was so overwhelmingly aroused she couldn’t stand another second of the torture.

Me. That was me and Gray. Or rather it would be in a couple of minutes.

I sighed as Trent ran his tongue along the shell of my ear and his hands worked the button of my pants, fingers slipping under the waistband. “First of all, because our lovely wife is going to remember at the most inopportune time that she was worried about how our son would handle the Hell plane, I’ll give her a debrief on the last couple of hours. We ran and hunted, and he’s twelve kinds of tired out and sleeping in the room he’s sharing with Lee. I know. There are plenty of rooms, but he’s a wolf and he sleeps better with his pack near.

They're in a big suite with Evan's room connected, and they're close to Dean. I think Lee's planning on staying up to watch over his friend. He's nervous about Liv being close."

Fen was okay. He'd had a good time, and he wouldn't go moon crazy or something. Check. I could let that worry go. "Thank you."

"Now you should answer Gray's question and then you can stop thinking," Trent promised. "He asked if you wanted him to send Casey away. We would miss his organizational skills, but if it makes you more comfortable, we'll get by."

There were problems with that scenario that went beyond the heist we were planning. "If you sent Casey away, he would have the right to take Liv with him, wouldn't he? According to the rules which he suddenly seems really strict about."

"I suspect that's exactly what he would do if I tried to push him out," Gray confirmed. "I think it's better to keep them both here where we can monitor the situation. Let Casey deal with Liv for now. Do you believe he loves her?"

I did and I also knew that—despite what Liv had accused me of—Casey was smart and seemed to be a bit ruthless now. If he was right, he'd given me a way to rebond with Liv. Complaining about him. Complaining about overbearing men had been a go-to in our friendship.

Trent dragged the slacks I was wearing down my hips and I stepped out of them, leaving me wearing nothing but a pair of cotton undies that were kind of already soaked through because my pussy was in overdrive.

"I'll let it be for now," I agreed.

"Excellent." Gray was standing a few feet from me. It was too far away. "Then what you should know, Trent, is that something that should have been harmless to Kelsey and I attacked us tonight. That's the scent you caught. It was out in the garden, and we need to figure out who sent it."

"Your fucking father." Trent proved we were all on the same page.

“Almost certainly, but I have to figure out how he did it and who’s working with him,” Gray agreed. “But that is a problem for another day. Like how we’re going to steal from Lucifer Morningstar without him killing us in a particularly nasty way. Well, killing you. He can’t destroy me, but he’ll murder my whole family and then I’ll go insane.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you could talk him into it? It might be better if we negotiated.” Gray was Lucifer’s focus for a couple of weeks yet. He had to have some small power. What was a single feather really worth?

Trent’s fingers slipped inside the band of my undies, and my breath caught as they moved closer and closer to the place they needed to be.

“I could offer him more service,” Gray said.

And then I wasn’t thinking about sex anymore. I stepped away from Trent and pointed a finger Gray’s way.

“Absolutely not.” I wasn’t going to be the reason my husband lost his mind from time to time, because that’s what happened when one worked for Lucifer. He’d come out of it okay for the most part, but I knew what it cost him, and he wasn’t paying that price again. “You are almost out of that goddess damned contract, and I will not have it. I swear if you sign another contract we’re going to have trouble, Sloane.”

His eyes flashed fire. Like actual fire. It was only for a moment, and it probably should have scared me more than it did because I thought it was kind of hot. That momentary flame told me I’d gone way too far, and I was about to get everything I wanted.

“Remember she’s pregnant,” was all Trent said, his head shaking like I’d really put a foot in it this time.

“With Hell spawn,” Gray growled. “I assure you, she can take it.”

Then he picked me up and carted me off like a bag of flour, upending me so my whole view of the world was his muscular ass cheeks. As views go, pretty nice. Especially since that part

of me that liked to give over and simply feel was anticipating what was about to happen.

I don't cry as a general principle. It's not that I think it's a girly thing to do. I was raised by a man who thought if I was crying, he should give me something to cry about—despite the fact that he'd usually been the reason I was crying in the first place. My adoptive father was an abusive prick, and all his hate was focused on me, so I'd learned to shut down.

Gray had given me a safe way to unleash all those emotions, and they were trapped inside me in that moment.

What he was about to do would release them, and I would feel better, think better, when he was done.

He manhandled me onto the spanking bench, laying me on my stomach. I found the armrests and where my shins met the warm, oddly soft leather.

That was the moment that soft leather became hands covering my wrists and ankles and holding me in a gentle but firm grip.

“What the hell.” I had not been expecting the bench to grow hands.

“Yes. Hell, baby. Did you think there wouldn't be some fun things to do on the Hell plane?” Gray chuckled, but it was a sound of deep satisfaction. He really had me where he wanted me, and I couldn't get out, couldn't get away.

I liked it.

“Will it spank me, too?” There was no small amount of challenge in my question.

“No. That's a job I relish. I wouldn't give it to anyone else.” And then that big hand came down on my backside, the sound cracking through the playroom.

Pain hit me hard and fast. He hadn't been playing with that one. He hadn't been warming me up. He was pissed, and that smack to my ass proved it.

“You don't talk to me that way in this room, Kelsey Jean.” Another hard smack. “I'm the king here. You rule everywhere

else, but in here you will show me deference.”

I supposed I could have waited until exiting Gray’s pleasure palace to explain the way of the world to him, but I’d been riding high on emotion. And fear. “You want me to be okay with the fact that Lucifer gets to play around in your soul?”

Another hard smack. “Well, baby, if I didn’t, we would have absolutely no way into his realm. Have you thought of that? Have you thought about the fact that if I wasn’t Lucifer’s focus, getting close to his wings would be an impossibility.”

I wasn’t giving in on this. “We would have found a way.”

Three hard smacks and the tears were rolling down my cheeks. Something loosened inside me. I needed this. I needed this to be able to let out all the stress of the day. I couldn’t go out and run through the woods tracking down fluffy things and filling my gut. I didn’t get to run off my stress, though the impulse was certainly there. This made up for it. The pain heated my skin and flipped some switch deep inside me that turned it into something pleasant. Even the tears felt good, cleansing.

Gray’s hands wound into my hair, forcing my head up so I could look into his eyes. “What have you learned from this, Kelsey mine?”

“To wait until we’re outside of this room to enforce my will on you,” I replied.

Gray growled, an entirely sexy sound. “Trent, get the violet wand. It has a mind of its own, too, and I’m going to light you up, baby.”

“Absolutely not.” Trent had ditched his jeans, and his cock jutted up against his muscular stomach. “I am dying here, and I didn’t offend the lord of a Hell plane. Gray, you’re going hard core, and I’m here to soften you up. We agreed she could use a spanking, but the use of electricity on her pussy is going to have to wait until she’s no longer pregnant. She’s had a cry. Now she needs an orgasm.”

“Spoilsport,” Gray complained, but his hand was on the button of his slacks, and he shoved them off his body. His fangs were large in his mouth, and his horns had made a reappearance. They hooked over his silky dark hair, curving in a classic fashion.

He was one gloriously sexy demon.

“She didn’t cry much.” Gray put a hand on my head, stroking my hair. “I expected her to get emotional. She hasn’t since she got back.”

“Because I don’t need to. Because I know whatever happens we’ll get through it.” I hadn’t been entirely calm, but I didn’t feel the desperate need to act out that I would have in the past. I knew why. It was the same reason Grayson Sloane had relaxed and started being the family man he always wanted to be.

We were back together, and not a one of us had to face anything alone. We were back where we belonged, and it felt so fucking right.

“She lost it in Louisiana. I’m sorry you weren’t there to help her,” Trent explained. “It was the first time she saw me.”

Gray leaned over and kissed my cheek. “As long as she got it out. I’m glad you were there for her, love. Now, Kelsey Jean. I want you to suck our husband’s cock. You take him deep and, no, I’m not letting you out of this bench. Do you want to know how it’s holding you? I had my essence imbued in it. Those are my hands holding you, my flesh stroking yours. You are safe here.”

Safe to indulge in anything I liked, and damn, but I loved that cock coming at me. The hands that held me down seemed softer now. And there were a couple more of them. It was like getting the sexiest massage from about four Grays. My whole body relaxed as firm hands stroked across my arms and legs.

Then there was the real thing on my sensitive backside. “Take his cock, Kelsey. Then I’ll give you mine. You love this, don’t you? You love it when we’re both inside you.”

“I love it so much.” It was when I felt the safest, when I was with them both and I knew our son was sleeping somewhere close. There was nothing I wanted more than to settle into a boring, glorious life with these men. I wanted to watch my kids grow up. I’d been cheated out of that time with Fenrir, but it wasn’t happening again.

We were together, and we wouldn’t be apart again. Not if I could help it.

“And I love you,” Trent said before his hand sank into my hair and I settled my cheek against the bench. My wolf husband looked like he’d reached the end of his patience and likely wouldn’t allow me to lick and suck and play with him to my heart’s content.

Sure enough that cock invaded. I managed to whirl my tongue around him, loving his scent and taste and the way I could feel Gray, too. Now that he’d told me how the bench had been enchanted, I could feel his presence, the calluses on his hands, the way he liked to hold me down. My heart rate ticked up as I sucked Trent’s cock and felt Gray’s actual hands on my ass.

“So pretty,” he whispered as his fingertips traced the likely rosy-skinned cheeks. It would be gone by morning. Gray never left a mark even when I kind of wanted him to.

Trent stared down where his cock disappeared into my mouth. “Beautiful. Being together again... It was worth the wait.”

“Worth every second,” Gray agreed, and I felt him between my spread legs. “But never again.”

They’d been the ones who waited. They’d been the ones who bore all the pain of those long years, and I wouldn’t have been able to blame them if they’d found a way to move on without me. Instead they’d remained steadfast. They’d protected everything I loved so it was all here when I returned.

I felt Gray’s big cock sliding along my pussy, getting good and wet from the arousal he’d drawn out of me.

My whole body went on alert, nipples tightening in preparation for what was going to be a good couple of minutes.

I let my teeth scrape lightly across Trent's cock, eliciting a deep groan from him. His hand tightened on my hair, and he gave me another inch, his cock starting to tickle the back of my throat. Lucky for him my gag reflex was well controlled. It had to be because my men liked to fuck my mouth.

Then I was the one groaning as I felt that magnificent stretch that came when Gray slid his cock inside me.

I would never get used to fucking him. It was always a revelation.

I concentrated on Trent's cock as Gray started to work his way deep, his hands gripping my hips, though there was no way I was going anywhere.

He stroked inside me, thrusting in until I'd taken every inch of that demon cock of his.

They seemed to find a rhythm between them, Trent thrusting while Gray withdrew, and then the reverse. I didn't care. All that mattered was being here with them and the wild pleasure that built through my whole system. It wasn't more than a few strokes and I was flying on that high. Trent fisted my hair as he filled my mouth with his unique essence.

And then I heard Gray curse as though he wanted this to last longer but he couldn't hold out. He held himself tight against me as he came.

A peace descended over me, and the hands that had held me down now stroked me with what I could only read as deep affection.

Trent knelt down, a big grin on his face. "You okay, baby? You like Gray's weird sex toy? He's got some wild ones in here."

"You should see what you can do with a vibrator on the Hell plane," Gray said with a happy sigh.

I was ready for everything these men could give me.

The night had barely begun.

* * * *

Liv

I came awake to the nicest sensation. Warmth. Coziness. The blanket must have gotten wrapped around me sometime during my sleep, and it felt like I was being held in the sweetest way possible.

I cuddled down, and for a second I could fool myself. I could pretend the last twelve years had been a terrible dream and I'd never gone to Wyoming, and I would get up and Casey and I would dance around each other and I would sit in Kelsey's office and go over midterms while she worked. At some point in time little Lee would walk in and we would go grab some lunch, all four of us, while we talked through Kelsey's latest case. There was always some dumbass in the supernatural world who needed a detective. Mostly silly things like who was sleeping with who, and why did my supposedly werewolf child suddenly look so catlike? Then it would be all about stopping the pack war that the revelation of why Johnny had whiskers would surely start.

Damn, but I loved that time.

I breathed, trying to stay in that twilight between sleeping and being wide awake.

Wide awake sucked.

At least I hadn't had the dream the night before. I'd actually slept and hadn't dreamed. I wasn't sure why since it had been over a decade since I hadn't woken up screaming.

Why should I scream? It was over. It had been horrible, and I was giving those wretched dead witches space in my head, and that wasn't justice. There might not be justice for me, but there could be some semblance of peace if I only allowed myself to find it.

Or I could fuck over everyone here and get my place at Myrddin's side back.

Why was this even a question in my head?

"Stop wriggling," a deep voice said. "I was up late doing research, and then someone pushed a heavy dresser in front of my door."

Casey.

I sat up straight in bed, clutching the sheet to my chest. Not that I was naked. I wouldn't allow myself to be vulnerable in this prison of mine, but I'd gotten down to a tank top and undies. I twisted around, scowling at the vampire who'd invaded my bed. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought that would be obvious." His eyes slitted open, and there was a frown on those generous lips of his. "Trying to sleep, wife."

Asshole. "I'm not your wife."

He seemed to give up the whole sleeping part, and he yawned behind his hand, rolling over. He didn't clutch a sheet since I'd taken most of it. It left his chest on display. Casey was built on lean lines, like the hottest swimmer you've ever seen. He wasn't bulky like a warrior. His strength was disguised. "Tell it to the Council, wife. According to all laws, you are the wife of an academic. When I think about it, I could have made this claim years ago. You're lucky I let you hide from me for so long."

I certainly hadn't hidden. I'd actually tried to bring him over to my side. It was too late now, and he was wrong. "You need a companion."

"No, I don't. Fuck that light. I'll take my baby's pitch black any day of the week." His lips curled up. "That might make a good song."

He would do it. He would write some dumbass, slow, guitar-picking song about how he loves my dark. This was a man who wrote an entire musical about the war that followed the royals' exit from our plane. Naturally I was the bad guy and he was the lovesick good guy who simply wanted to make

me see the error of my ways. “You had a lot of problems with my pitch black. You complain about it constantly.”

I rolled out of bed, wanting to know where I’d gone wrong. That dresser had been solid, and I’d found a way to wrench that sucker in. I was almost certain even vampiric strength couldn’t wreck it. Sure enough, the dresser was still in front of the door.

Casey stared at me from his place on the bed. “I’ve come to the conclusion that you were too nice before. Something had to give. No one can maintain that level of reason and sweetness forever. You were bound to explode, but you also can’t keep up this level of delusion.”

“You are the one who’s deluded.” I wasn’t looking forward to another day of the people around me telling me I was the one twisting reality. I knew what the truth was.

Didn’t I?

When I thought about it, it made some sense that Myrddin would keep a few secrets. I wasn’t his wife. I was his strong right arm, and I shouldn’t question him. What if he put out the rumor about closing all doors to the Heaven plane? I wasn’t sure why he would do that, but I also didn’t have the thousands and thousands of years of wisdom he’d acquired.

“Not the comeback you think it is,” Casey said with a shake of his head. “I have to admit I preferred your wit when you weren’t constantly high on demon blood. By the way, you’re handling that well.” He studied me for a moment. “Who’s giving it to you?”

If I had been capable of blushing, I would have. “No one. I’m simply stronger than you can imagine.”

He shook his head. “Nah, your veins are blacker than they were yesterday.”

I should have worn a turtleneck to bed apparently. Instead, I’d opted for comfort. And that was why I failed.

“Kelsey could likely be persuaded,” Casey mused. “If she saw you in pain.”

“But you wouldn’t care about my pain,” I shot back.

“Oh, I would. I assure you, I would feel that pain,” he said quietly, though I could see that big brain of his working overtime. “Lee would let you rot. He’s a grudge holder. So is Trent. Gray might do it if he had a plan for you. Fenrir would go ask his grudge-holding father before he did anything, and Trent would tell you to fuck yourself. So that leaves the princess.”

Damn him. “Like Evan Donovan-Quinn would help me.”

“She would if she thought you had something she needs. Unlike her brothers, Evan can be a practical person,” Casey deduced. “The question is what does she need? Is she trying to fix whatever the primal did to her?”

“She’s scared. She knows she’s changing.” I didn’t like that I understood what Evan was going through. I’d been through such change in the last decade plus that I often didn’t recognize myself.

“I suspect she’s already changed and she’s simply too stubborn to let it be,” Casey replied. “Are you planning on hurting her?”

“She’s nothing to me. I don’t care enough to hurt her.” I didn’t tell him that lately I’d been remembering how sweet she’d been when I would pick her up and how she would fall asleep on my lap as I rocked her when she was a baby. How I’d looked forward to having her in my class one day. “She wants help with a spell to stave off the transformation. It won’t harm her. It gives her some more time to process. I suppose you’re going to tell Kelsey and I get to go through the demonic DTs. I bet rehab on the Hell plane is so much fun.”

“You know there is another way.” Casey’s voice sounded like pure temptation as he held up his wrist. “One you could take right from the tap, so to speak.”

Vampire blood would take away the shakes. It would make me strong. It might take away my addiction.

Or simply transfer it to something else. To him. “Not on your life. Are you going to tell her?”

Casey seemed to think about that for a moment. “No. I don’t think Kelsey needs to know. Evan is a smart kid. She knows what she’s doing, and if she needs more time to process what happened to her, I think you’re certainly the one to give it to her. I hope she doesn’t take as long as you since you still haven’t come out the other side.”

“I assure you I have.” Dreaming about it every night wasn’t a weakness I was willing to share with anyone.

“You’re putting off the inevitable. You’re going to come out of whatever Myrddin did to you, and I’m going to be waiting for you. Save us all some time and take the sweet woman you used to be and pair it with your badass self, and we’ll have a lovely couple of hundred years together. Give or take.”

“And then I’ll die and you’ll find a new me.” It was how a relationship worked when one loved a vampire. He could focus all that affection on you, but you’re not immortal. Even if I took Casey’s blood every day, I would still die at some point and he would move on.

“No, baby. I won’t.” He sat up and the sheet dragged down, showing off lean hips and a distinct lack of undies. There was a look on his sleep-softened face that disturbed me. When he got this serious, it almost always was something that could wreck me. “Have you ever heard of sympathetic transference?”

Of course I had, and my heart clenched at the thought. But there was one problem. “Again, that is a companion issue. I’m a witch.”

“And again, I’m an academic.” His hand went to the center of his chest. “They took your soul from here. This is where I felt it. Like they’d taken a knife to me. It was seven years ago. That was when you became Profane. Why did he wait?”

The ceremony that had made me Profane had involved Myrddin taking a piece of my soul, and it had exited my body from exactly where Casey had touched on his own. From right above my heart. I’d lain on that altar, by choice this time, and

prayed to whoever would listen that the piece Myrddin took would be the part of me that loved Casey.

Turned out all of me loved him.

“He didn’t require an unholy trinity for many years. Also, I had much to learn. In the beginning I spent time in the schools,” I explained, my mind racing.

“You mean the reeducation centers.” His eyes had flared like I’d dropped a clue right on his lap. “I was unaware you spent time there. I always thought you simply took your place at his side. He and Nimue were training you.”

“And then the world was chaotic, and he certainly didn’t have time to train a witch who’d lost her power.” I didn’t like to think about the training houses. They were meant to build the best of the best, and that meant they broke everyone else. I’d had to be strong to survive and take my place. Nimue came for me one day about two years in and declared I was properly educated in Myrddin’s ways. I had been relieved to go home again. “When I was ready, I came to the Coven House and took my place. It was decided that given my ties, I could potentially find a way to communicate with some of our enemies.”

“You mean lure us out and kill us.”

“I meant what I said.” But the logic wasn’t logicking. Why had I never thought of it? Why would Myrddin allow an academic in his Coven House when he’d been the one to put out the tale that Marcus Vorenius had killed the king? That the academics were behind everything. Why would he allow me to bring one into my home?

“I know you mean it and that’s the problem, but we’ll deal with that another day,” Casey promised. “None of this tells me how you can deny my claim. I knew where they took a piece of your soul, Olivia.”

“That proves nothing. You would have gotten word of the ceremony from your spies. I know you have many. That Russian is nothing if not an excellent spy master,” I returned.

“And the fact that he took it from above my heart only makes sense. The heart is closely aligned with the soul.”

“How do I know it hurt?” He asked the question with a note of sympathy that had me clenching my fists. “How do I know it felt like burning at first? Like the heartburn you get when you give into the urge and eat something fried. But it built until it felt like he was going to break your chest bone, until you almost welcomed it happening because it would mean it was over.”

Goddess, he had sympathetic transference, and I wasn't a companion.

Vampires don't die naturally. You have to behead or stake or blow one of those suckers up. Getting them to ingest silver has been known to do the trick for some. But there is one way for a vampire to die a natural, almost human death, and that is when the vampire bonds so deeply with their companion their bodies work overdrive to keep them alive. Vampire blood alone can't make a companion immortal. Nothing can. But love can allow a vampire to go with his mate when she dies.

What Casey was telling me was bullshit because there's no record of some academic dying with his non-companion mate.

It was one more trick he was trying to pull on me. He had to be lying. He was testing my every defense.

It had to be because if he was right, then he loved me in a way I couldn't comprehend, in a way I wasn't sure I wanted.

No. I was absolutely certain I didn't want it. I didn't want his arms around me or to hear him playing that sad fucking guitar in the background while I lesson planned or read essays from the teenaged supernaturals I taught.

I wasn't a teacher. I was Profane, and nothing could touch me.

The window. I focused on that. It was slightly open, and I knew I'd shut it the night before. Or whatever they called the sleep cycle here because the moon was high in the sky right now. “You got in through the window.”

His shoulders came down slightly as though he was disappointed I'd changed the subject, but he seemed to let it go. He ran a hand through his shoulder-length hair. It was wavy right now, and I liked seeing it out of the queue he normally wore it in. "I climbed right up the trellis and had to avoid the plants that apparently like to roofie a dude. I actually punched one of the suckers."

The idea of him getting a face full of plant GHB and falling to the ground below for a nap amused me. I would ask if we could get a few more of those out there. "I'll remember to lock the window tonight."

"And I'll find another way in, wife. You will not be able to keep me out. I'll find you and lay down and sleep beside you." He stood, and I couldn't help the gasp that came from my mouth.

He was completely naked. He'd slept beside me all night, and there had been nothing between us but my clothes. If he'd nuzzled me while I'd slept, I might have been able to trick myself into believing it was all a dream and I could have had him again.

What would Casey's bite do to me now? During the brief time we'd been together that bite had been pure ecstasy.

"Put on some clothes." I turned away, looking for his pants.

"I don't see why I should," Casey said with a deep chuckle, his hands in fists on his hips as though offering that gorgeous body up for my delectation. "Clothes have no place between a husband and a wife."

"Normally, I wouldn't mind at all, vampire. I think clothes are overrated, however, I'm here on business so I have to agree with the witch. You should have pants on, son."

Now I gasped for a completely different reason because there was a man standing in the door that led to the living area of the suite. He was roughly six foot five, with broad shoulders and a face that could make an angel weep. Probably because

he'd once been an angel himself. He'd been closer to the deity than anyone could imagine, and now he was here.

My blood went cold because I realized who was standing in the room with me. The demon blood that ran through my system recognized him. Everything inside me told me to bow to the being who stood in my doorway because he could incinerate me with a single thought.

Kelsey had been worried about how we would get into Lucifer's realm. She should have worried about the man, the myth, the legend getting into ours.

Lucifer Morningstar was here.

And we were all in trouble.

Chapter Eight



Liv

“Greetings, Lucifer Morningstar. Though I shouldn’t be the one welcoming you.” My heart caught in my chest, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the fear that this being could eviscerate Casey with a thought or excitement. Lucifer worked with Myrddin. He might be here to save me.

The master would have outdone himself in proving his commitment to his Profane if he’d sent the Morningstar himself in to save me.

And I wouldn’t see Casey until we were on opposite sides of this war again.

Casey nearly tripped over himself trying to get his legs into his pants. “Lucifer? Like *the* Lucifer?”

A smirk hit the Lord of Hell’s face, curling his lips up slightly. “In the flesh. And might I say your flesh is lovely, vampire. As I mentioned, I wouldn’t mind a little fun if I wasn’t here on business.”

I have to admit I liked the fact that having Lucifer hit on him seemed to poleaxe the man who claimed to be my husband.

He wasn’t. Not that Lucifer would let a wedding band stop him.

“I...uhm...totally flattered but really straight and also married.” Casey fumbled his way through the explanation.

“No one is straight enough to not enjoy an encounter with me.” Lucifer shifted his attention between the two of us as though trying to figure the situation out. “Well, I came to this room because the lord of the house takes advantage of his

marriage vows. He was pretty much balls deep in the Hunter, and that werewolf was working pretty hard, too. Normally I would stop and watch, but there were all kinds of... feelings.” The Morningstar shuddered. “It felt better to be in here since this one is so deliciously angry. And confused. I find that comforting. Thank you, dear.”

I wasn't confused, but I also wasn't about to argue with Lucifer. It was good he'd felt my rage. He could pass that on to my master so he understood I'd played no part in getting stuck here.

This could be my way out.

If Lucifer took me with him, I wouldn't have to face Casey or Kelsey or Lee. I wouldn't need Evan because I could get my own fix. Dean could be on his own. At least until his father rode in to save the day. I would be rewarded for bringing Myrddin valuable intel, and I would pick whichever bitch annoyed me the most and murder her because there were only three Profane and she was wearing my crown. I would take my place at the head of the unholy trinity, and my life would be back on track.

I went down on one knee. “How can I aid you, Lord Lucifer?”

“Get on your freaking feet, Olivia.” Casey was at my side, trying to haul me up. “You do not bow to him.”

“Oh, but she seems to,” Lucifer said, walking in like he owned the place. Pitch black eyes fastened on me. “Olivia Carey. A witch of some power, but you didn't come into it until later in life, and it was taken from you. You're more powerful now. You've got rage to fuel you. What...ah...it was a violation of your person that sent you careening over the edge. I like you. There are people out there who would have found a way to hold on to their humanity, but you just went for it. One bad thing happens and you're ready to toss it all out and take down the world and burn it all down around you.” His eyes widened. “Oh, and you're missing a piece of your soul. Yes, that's the way to handle trauma, girl. Go for it.”

I didn't like Lucifer. And he was way more sarcastic than I thought he would be.

He turned his attention to Casey. "Casey Lane. A young academic. You were lucky. So many vampires don't turn until they're far too old to enjoy vampiric life. You know your parents had a life insurance policy on you. I'm sure that was helpful with all their partying. I do believe they keep a picture of you. They find grief a great icebreaker."

The fallen angel really knew where to stick the knife in. I knew that wasn't how it had gone down, but I wasn't about to argue with Lucifer.

Casey's expression didn't change at all. "Good to know I could help."

He wasn't giving Lucifer anything. Like vampires, demons have different classes and innate talents. With the exception of Lucifer, who had them all. In this case he was calling on his empathetic and clairvoyant talents. He was better with supernatural creatures since we were closer to demons than humans. He would have more trouble with, say, a companion or a Fae since they were closer to angels than demons, but he could see through to my soul.

I did not like what he saw.

Lucifer paced, his hands behind his back. "An interesting pairing. Most vampires don't bond so closely with anyone but a companion. Academics are the freaks of the vamp world. So much weaker than your warrior brethren, and yet history has proven your class almost always controls the Council in one way or another. This war on the Earth plane harmed your relationship. I can sense it. As to aiding me, witch, you can tell me how long the Sloanes usually go at it. I know the Hell plane is considered chaotic and lawless, but we do have formalities I insist upon observing. One of them is to announce myself to the lord of the realm I'm visiting. Lord Sloane has been helpful to me these last few years, and I don't want to upset him."

Every word was said with smooth surety, his voice like a rich, velvety wave over my ears. "I can go tell them you're

here.”

There was a frantic knocking on the door. “Ms. Carey? Please open this door instantly.”

“Oh, I think someone knows I’m here.” Lucifer’s lips curled up again. He enjoyed freaking everyone out.

“Fine.” It was Tix behind that door. “I shall do it myself.”

There was a snapping sound and then the big dresser was gone and the door was coming open. Tix stood there, his head nearly scraping the doorjamb. He bowed his midnight blue head, a hand over his heart. “My lord, Lucifer, I welcome you to the House of Sloane.”

“You’re no fun, Tix,” Lucifer said with a sigh. “I was only talking to them.”

“I was surprised you did not announce yourself to the master of the house.” Tix managed to say the words with a hint of rebuke.

Lucifer shrugged. “Well, the master and mistress and their pet were quite involved this morning. I sent a polite aspect of myself, and I chose not to interrupt. You know for a demon, Lord Sloane is quite uptight about sex. Not like his father at all. Now if the old Lord Sloane had been the one fucking his lady, I would have simply joined in.”

“My master would cause trouble should you try that,” Tix replied. “He is a possessive lord.”

“He spent too much time on the Earth plane and will likely make the same mistake with his son.” Lucifer waved a hand as though such things were far beneath him. “Let him know I am here and requesting an audience.” Lucifer leaned toward the butler. “How is...” He stopped and shook his head. “I require sustenance, Tix.” He sniffed the air around him. “Is there a satan here?” A gasp had Lucifer smiling again. “The Hunter’s butler. Yes. So entertaining what he did to the old Sloane. I’ve heard he makes the most delicious muffins. Tell him I want some. I’ll dine in the great hall in, say, an hour. I suspect the lord and lady will need some time to ready themselves. Until then, I’ll be in the garden.”

Tix nodded. "All shall be in readiness."

Lucifer walked out the door, and my heart sank. He hadn't said a word about saving me, though he knew everything there was to know about me.

Casey moved to my side. "You have to be more careful, Liv. He's a dangerous creature."

"Not to me, he isn't."

"That is the most naïve thing I've heard you say in years." He shoved his big, dumb, weirdly sexy feet into his loafers and pulled back his hair. It was like he'd put on his academic costume and was ready to play his part. "I think you should stay here."

I was already walking out the door.

"My lord, Lucifer." I wasn't willing to let this chance go by. Something deep inside me told me if I stayed here much longer, I would lose some essential piece of myself, something I wouldn't be able to fix again.

That's the funny thing about delusion. We make up excuses to stay in the safe place we've made. We change the meaning of words to suit our purposes.

I wasn't truly afraid to lose a piece of myself. I was terrified to get one back because that fucking demon lord was correct. I'd tossed away my humanity because it hurt.

I didn't want to hurt.

The Lord of Hell stopped at the top of the landing. "You wish to speak with me?"

"No, she doesn't." Casey had caught up.

"I do," I corrected.

Lucifer snapped his fingers, and suddenly we were in the middle of the garden, the softness of the night all around us. Somehow the moonlight felt like morning to me, like all of this world was beginning to wake. We were in the middle of what looked to be a large hedge maze. There was a white marble fountain at the center, and Lucifer lounged on it,

looking up at me with what I could only describe as mischievous eyes. “Are you looking to cuckold your vampire husband? That could be a bit of fun.”

He was far more impish than I would have believed. “No, my lord. I wanted to ask if Myrddin sent you to rescue me.”

His head fell back, a long laugh issuing forth. He sat up, putting a hand to his gut, and I couldn’t miss the way those dark eyes teared up in pure glee.

I stood there, a pit in my stomach, humiliation washing over me.

“Oh, dear. Thank you for that.” Lucifer took a long breath as though savoring the air around him. “For both the laugh and the delicious shame that just went through you. You are extremely open for a dark witch with a piece of her soul missing.” He stared at me for a moment. “Ah. He didn’t take the piece you wanted him to take. That’s the funny thing about making deals with a creature like Myrddin Emrys. You think you control it, but you almost never know exactly how to maneuver around him. I bet you didn’t even call in a lawyer to advise you.”

“I don’t need a lawyer. Myrddin is my master.”

“Yes, and a slave is always so well protected,” he replied with that odd smile that held no humor. “He must have been thrilled when you got caught on his side of the war. You must have looked like a sweet treat to him. Why did the vampire let you go?”

“He went with his academic brothers. He didn’t care about me.”

His head tilted slightly, considering me. “A lie. Interesting. Child, you might be able to lie to yourself, but you cannot lie to me. I am the father of lies. However, I’m enjoying your delusion and the information it’s giving me on how the spawn operates. You see, he is one creature I cannot read.”

I hadn’t known that Lucifer couldn’t read Myrddin Satanspawn. “I thought perhaps he’d sent you to find me.”

Lucifer went still, and suddenly the air around me didn't seem so soft. Menace crept along my skin, making my gut turn. "You thought I was Myrddin's errand boy?"

I'd stepped in it. He was presenting almost human, but I forgot who he was at my own peril. I went to one knee as I'd been taught in the education houses. This was how to show deference to our demonic leaders. I lowered my head. "No, my lord. I simply was hoping my master had communicated with you. I am a captive here, and I long to return to my coven house and take my place at my master's side. I meant no disrespect."

I heard him walking my way, his boots crunching on the obsidian gravel that formed the path around the fountain. I kept my head down, my heart pounding in my chest.

He could kill me with a thought, and a few days ago I might have welcomed it. I'd been taught to view my life as mere service to my coven.

Then fucking Kelsey came back and reminded me of what the world had been like before.

Black, perfectly manicured claws came into my line of sight before he placed them on my chin, gently pushing me up so I looked into his eyes. They were endless black orbs of... nothing. A void I would lose myself in if I let it. A void of absolute nothing.

That was Hell. Meaninglessness. The idea that we are nothing. That we are born without purpose, and all suffering is simply inconsequential and random.

"Olivia Carey, you are nothing. You are a speck in the universe. You would do well to remember your place. If you want out of this prison, you know how to free yourself."

An image shot through my head. An image of blood. I could break a glass and open my veins. The demon blood inside me wouldn't save me. It didn't work the way vampire blood did. If I was careful and did it while Casey was sleeping, I might get away with it. He might not feel it if I was quick. He'd only felt the soul spell because it had taken hours and

hours of agony, or perhaps because on some level our souls had connected.

“Do you want me to help you, child?” Lucifer sounded comforting now, a warmth creeping along my spine. “I could get into a bit of trouble, but if your misery is too much, I will chance it.”

He could use that talon and split my throat. My blood would spill on the infertile ground and soak into this realm. I wouldn't hurt or ache any longer.

I would be nothing.

“Olivia!”

Casey. He was calling for me. His voice brought me out of that horrible space and I moved, breaking the contact and shaking off that feeling I'd had.

“So be it,” Lucifer announced and then he was gone.

My hands were shaking when Casey got to the middle of the maze long before anyone else would have.

“Baby, are you okay?” He moved in like it was his right to comfort me.

When he put his arms around me, I let him.

For a moment, I felt something, something that wasn't darkness.

It scared the fuck out of me.

* * * *

Kelsey

I stood in the hallway that led to the great room and stared at my husband because he couldn't have said what he'd said.

“I'm sorry. Who is here?”

Gray was in his best suit, looking every inch the leader of a demonic realm. His horns were out and he was taller than normal, though mostly human. I've come to realize that Gray's control of his form is proof of his royal nature and strength. Those horns being out and beautifully rounded while his face remained perfectly human was kind of showing off. His violet eyes were darker than normal as he seemed to be psyching himself up to walk into that room. "Lucifer Morningstar. According to Tix, he's here and demanding breakfast."

Somehow I hadn't had *Lucifer wants some mini muffins* on my bingo card for this trip.

"Not 'according to.' He *is* here." Tix moved in, fussing with Gray's tie. There was an unmistakable air of anxiety around the usually chill demon. "And uninvited and unannounced. What is this world coming to? We have protocols."

Eddie was at my side. He was never chill. He took my hand in his, staring at my fingers like he was trying to decide if we had time for a manicure.

"Do we?" Gray asked with a frown, though I noticed he allowed Tix to fix his tie. "Because usually he summons me to his realm and I don't have a choice."

Tix stopped, his alien eyes widening. Though he was so demonic in this form, there was something still human about Tix's expressions. "You are right. It's not like the Dark Lord to leave his realm if he doesn't have to. Do you think?"

Gray's lips curled up. "Holy shit."

Trent moved in behind me. He had not dressed for the occasion. He was still in PJ pants and had a T-shirt on that read *Get it at Guidry's Best gumbo in LA*. All in all, not how I would expect him to greet the Lord of the Hell plane. "What are we holy shitting? And do I really need to be at this thing because I was thinking I could slip into the kitchen and eat there."

He was not leaving me alone. I'd already been rudely awakened and had a bunch of small demons do a Cinderella

number on me. I'm not kidding. Eddie had ordered them to transform me, and they had. They were like the mice and birds except with leathery skin and teeth, and instead of a gorgeous ball gown I was in a freaking corset. A leather corset right after I woke up. I don't know if it can get more torturous than that. Luckily there was a businessy aspect to the "proper dress." I'd been attired in soft leather slacks and given a blazer that still didn't hide how big my boobs looked.

Not my style.

"Lucifer didn't summon me," Gray said, his eyes trailing down to my chest. "He showed up here. He can't summon me." Gray lowered his head until it met with mine. "It means my contract is fulfilled."

The idea that Gray was out of that infernal contract he'd signed sent a shockwave of relief through me. "I thought it was six weeks. It's only been three."

"Ah, but I had a clause, baby. Hugo made sure I got time off for good behavior. If I aided Lucifer in one of several ways, it took a week off the backend of my contract," Gray said with a smile. "I was never told whether or not my focus work did the job he wanted it to, but there is a record with the satans. Not even Lucifer can break that. He's here because he could not summon me to his realm."

"Thank the goddess," Trent whispered, his hand coming around to cup the back of Gray's neck.

"Thank the goddess for putting us all in harm's way?" Tix was not relieved. "You three might be excited the master has fulfilled his contract, but I assure you the Dark Lord is plotting something new. Mistress, you did not put on the jewelry I sent you."

Eddie shook his head like he'd told me so.

"Because it's bones," I replied. I'd drawn the line there. "And I think there was still meat on that necklace."

Eddie's horns shook. "I did mention I didn't think it was to the mistress's style."

“The mistress’s style is late nineties lumberjack lesbian with a hint of the kind of assassin who allows Groupons,” Tix said with a hand to his chest. If he’d had pearls, they would have been clutched so hard. “Seriously, I expect her to drive a Jeep or worse...an Outback.”

Those were good cars, and my style was comfort. “I’m not wearing meat or anything that used to belong to our enemies.”

“The mistress would wear the skins of her friends?” Tix gasped and sized me up again. “That’s a ruthlessness I didn’t expect.”

“Tix, come on. You know she’s not used to our ways,” Gray said with a shake of his horns. “Bring her something else associated with the house. The Eye of Night will look beautiful on her.”

“But the Eye of Night doesn’t scream ‘fuck with us and we’ll deny all of the Hell plane sustenance,’” Tix insisted. “‘You will starve and know hunger forever more if you play games with the House of Sloane.’”

Gray sighed and placed a hand on the wall briefly. Within seconds a raven was flying our way, a large necklace in his beak.

It was good to know we had a whole animal errand system. The raven dropped the gemstone into Gray’s palm.

“The Eye of Night is hers, as it never was my mother’s,” Gray said, moving behind me to place the dark diamond around my throat. I shivered because a chill went through me at the touch of that gem.

It felt far too much like a collar, like something that tied me to this place.

But I was going along with it because there was a fallen angel in my dining room, and Gray knew how to handle him far better than I would.

Gray frowned Trent’s way. “Next time I’ll know to send staff to help you get ready, too.”

Trent's head shook. "Nope. I'll sit it out if you like, but I'm not important here. In Lucifer's mind, I'm Lord Sloane's sex toy. No need for a suit."

"How about a thong and we can oil you up?" It wasn't fair that Trent got to be comfy and hadn't had shriveled rat things climbing all over him ensuring the seams of his clothes sat properly. Although I will say they did a good job on the makeup. It was restrained for the Hell plane.

Tix shrugged a single shoulder, looking Trent over like he could already see him lubed up. "It could work. The wolf is attractive, and Lucifer does not discriminate."

"I'll pass on the thong and lube. I am a laid-back sex toy," Trent proclaimed. "And seriously, I'll go to the kitchens with Fenrir. I don't particularly want the Lord of Hell to get a look at our son. I'll get the kids and stay out of the way."

That sounded like an excellent plan. "And check in on Olivia. You don't think Myrddin would have sent Lucifer to steal her back, do you?"

Gray snorted. "Lucifer wouldn't do Myrddin's errands, and you shouldn't imply that he even might. He will take offense." Gray looked up at Tix. "How would you describe him? What part did he send?"

"Part?"

Tix got his "I'm giving the lady of the house an education" expression. I was seeing that look on his face a whole lot. "The Lord Lucifer is far too large an entity to send all of himself into a single realm. Being in the presence of the whole of the Morningstar would be far too much for anyone without a majority of royal demonic blood."

"Or angelic," Eddie corrected. "The angel wouldn't even have to be royal."

"Of course, though, we don't have a lot of angels requesting an audience. Honestly, it can be a bit much for certain types of demons. Our lesser servants would likely fall dead if they found themselves in the presence of the whole of Lucifer's being, and that would cause a mess. A terrible mess,

and then chaos because I would assign cleaning duties to higher-ups and they would take such offense.” Tix shuddered as though he could think of nothing worse. “Anyway, to avoid such a terrible scenario, Lucifer sends aspects of himself. To answer your question, my lord, we are dealing with the imp.”

A long sigh of pure relief came from my husband’s lips. “Then he wants to negotiate. Baby, we’re dealing with a part of Lucifer that loves to tease. He can be quite charming, and he’ll likely talk about your breasts.”

I could feel Trent stiffen behind me. “Perhaps I should come.”

“Go to the kitchens, you jealous wolf,” Gray said with a frown. “I assure you I won’t allow Lucifer to run away with our wife. But he will use your possessive nature against us. I know you don’t like it but sending this aspect means he’s playing things with caution, and I might actually get good information out of him.”

I turned to Trent and could see he was conflicted. Trent would be our vulnerable spot. I wished I could go to the kitchens and leave this all to Gray, but I’d been told it would be rude for Lady Sloane to not make an appearance. “Please take care of Fenrir and the kids. I don’t want them around him. Casey will watch Liv.”

Trent leaned over, brushing his lips against mine. “All right. Be careful.”

I heard a raucous laugh from the great hall and wondered who was already in there. Trent went to the stairs, heading up to where the kids were staying.

“I’m sorry, my lady. I did not realize you wanted to visit with Lucifer in private,” Tix said. “The vampire was already in the great hall when I realized Lucifer was there.”

“Casey?” *Please let it be Casey. Please let it be Casey.*

“The king’s son.” Tix confirmed my worst fears. “I believe the academic has the witch out in the gardens. She seemed upset about something.”

I couldn't think about Liv right now. Lee was hanging with Lucifer, and that was not what I'd promised his mom. We'd thought he could get in trouble in Faery. Good goddess, what was happening?

I shoved through the big doors and practically launched myself into the dining hall.

To my abject horror, Lee sat right next to the Lord of Hell, leaning over like they were the best of friends and having a lovely time.

"And then I left the merking standing there with his dick in hand, and that's how the merpeople's civil war started," Lee said.

A stunning, dark-haired man threw his head back and laughed. His hand came out, slapping Lee on the shoulder. "Oh, that is delicious. I don't tend to keep up with the outer planes. They seem very lively." He looked up, and his eyes lit on me. He held up a golden goblet. "Lady Sloane. My, you are looking lovely this morning. I'm sure all that double penetration is responsible for your rosy glow."

Well, I was probably rosy now. "Hey..."

Gray caught up, wrapping an arm around me. "She is beautiful, and she is also with child, as you surely know, my lord. I'm certain that is why she glows with life."

"Yes, the child is strong and growing." Lucifer stood. "It's good to see you here, Grayson. You look comfortable. I'm afraid I'm only truly acquainted with your dark prophet aspect, and he can be on the dry and boring side. Unlike this lad here. How have you not introduced us, Grayson? He's a remarkable young man."

Lee shrugged and sat back as though to say "well, of course I am." He sent a wink my way.

Someone should have spanked him more as a child, and that someone was my husband. I was having such a talk with Trent.

Did Lucifer know who he was? My anxiety went through the roof, and I actually got a little light-headed.

Lucifer was at my side in an instant, his hand gripping mine as the other went to my back, as though he worried I would fall over. “Lady Sloane, there is nothing to worry yourself about. I was enjoying my time with Prince Lee. Poor dear. Sloane, she’s shaking. What stories have you been telling about me?”

“I think the history of the world and all of religion teaches her to be afraid of you.” Gray’s tone had taken on an unemotional bent, as though he couldn’t really care less.

I needed to be the same, but it was hard. I wasn’t used to having the feelings I had, much less ignoring them. The whole kids-are-in-danger thing freaked me out, and it didn’t matter that Lee wasn’t a kid. Or human. He was a flipping vampire king who could daywalk from the moment he rose, but I wanted to stand between him and the Lord of Hell.

“I’m worried because I know Lord Lucifer understands what’s happening on the Earth plane and that we are at war with one of his closest allies,” I pointed out. “Killing the king’s son could be exactly what he has planned.”

Lucifer stepped back, putting a hand on his chest as though to say *what, me?* “I would never. We’re on Lord Sloane’s land. It would be rude of me to eviscerate one of his wanted guests.”

“This aspect of Lucifer follows the rules set forth long ago,” Gray explained, taking a seat at the head of the table.

There was already a massive amount of food on the gleaming marble top. It was a feast fit for a king. I was happy Eddie was here because I only recognized some of the dishes laid out for us. I was sure I had him to thank.

“There are other aspects, of course,” Lucifer said, holding the seat out for me. I looked down the table and saw Gray’s nod, telling me he was allowing Lucifer to give me such courtesies and I should play along.

“I know I’ve heard a story of the queen meeting you. She didn’t mention your obvious charms.” I could do this. I could sit here and eat some lovely food and not run screaming from the hall all the way back to the Earth plane.

How did I expect to steal from the man if I couldn't sit in a room with him?

Lucifer seemed to search his memory and then nodded as he reclaimed his chair and the goblet he'd been using. "Ah, you mean the Queen of all Vampire. Yes, though when I met her she was merely a companion. I believe I called her a fuzzy bucket of blood."

"This was when she was fighting that demon," Lee recalled. "Halfer or some nonsense."

"Brixalnax." Lucifer sighed. "I miss him sometimes. Then I remember that he brought an angel down to the Hell plane and I pick my teeth with his bones. I have them, you know. Very handy at times. And when I met Queen Zoey, I was in one of my more irritable aspects. And apparently one with a good dose of misogyny because I utterly underestimated her. I didn't even go deep enough to figure out she's a nexus point. Do you know how few nexus points there are in all of the universe?"

"A handful throughout time," Gray replied.

A nexus point is simply a weird name for a creature who has no fate. Apparently there's really a thing called fate and most of us have one, but when we come into contact with these weirdos who don't have a thread, we get pulled into their world and our fates can change based on how we interact with the nexus point. Zoey Donovan-Quinn was such a creature, and she'd been lucky that day because I would bet Lucifer would have had more interest in her had he realized how unique she truly was.

"Nexus points tend to change the world." Lucifer looked thoughtful in the glow from the candlelight. It was stronger than it had been at dinner the night before, obviously trying to imitate something akin to morning light. "The fact that the queen is back at a crucial moment in time is precisely why I'm here today."

"You want to meet my parents?" Lee asked.

“Oh, to that I say an infernal no.” Lucifer shuddered delicately. “I find your fathers to be annoyingly noble, and your mother, well, she’s simply annoying. If rumors are true, unlike the lovely Lady Sloane, the queen is carrying a pure abomination in her womb who could take us all out, but that’s a problem for another day. And before you scream how dare you call the sweetest babe in all the planes an abomination before it’s even been born, you should understand I like an abomination. Really gives one a good jolt of adrenaline.”

Lee’s expression had lost its placidity. “Why would you say that about my sister?”

“Which one? Because they both have obvious problems, but I assume you’re talking about the babe and not the dangerous creature sulking through the house and listening at the door behind us.” Lucifer sat sideways in his chair and pointed toward the kitchens. “Helloooo, Princess. Why don’t you join us?”

The door slammed open and there was Evan, her hair in a braid across her shoulder and her eyes narrowed in irritation. “Yes, I’d like to know why Lord Lucifer thinks the new kid is going to be a monster.”

Lucifer looked offended. “I never once said monster. I’m sure she’ll be perfectly lovely. She will also likely be a vampire, and a glowing one at that. Or perhaps something even worse. You see there’s a reason vampires can’t procreate, but as I said, that’s a problem for another day. Hello, you gorgeous princess. Is there a reason you don’t want your wings?”

Evan stopped, her whole body going stiff. “Wings?”

“Yes, they’re right there.” Lucifer’s tone went crooning as though he was talking about some amazing, decadent experience she would enjoy. “You can feel them under the surface of your skin. It itches sometimes right between your shoulder blades. The same way you feel your claws and fangs. Tell me something, Princess. Have you started craving blood yet?”

Evan's jaw went tight, and there were tears in her eyes. "I never will."

She turned and fled back to the kitchen, and I prayed Fenrir didn't rush out here to defend his mate.

"Ah, there's the dick," Lee said with a shake of his head before taking a long drink from the goblet in front of him.

"Of course," Lucifer agreed. "I wouldn't be a good king of the demons if I wasn't a massive tool. But I'm right about your sister." He sat back up before leaning my way. "In this aspect I'm quite empathetic, but I can't see everything. I can only do that when I'm whole, and even then there are creatures who I can't read at all. Like the dark prophet. Or yourself, Lady Sloane. Or the baby king here. I understand Lord Sloane. His nature makes him unique in all of the Hell realms. He's the only one of my nobility I can't directly control if I like."

And he didn't like. As charming as he was attempting to be, there was still a hint of malice in every word. He didn't like not controlling every aspect of his realm.

"You know biology plays tricks with us." Gray had a plate of food in front of him, laid out by Tix. "The universe seeks balance, and you would be far too powerful if there wasn't a single check on you, your infernalness. The vampires are a check on the power of the Hell plane."

"Only God himself is a check on me." Now there wasn't a hint of malice. It simply pervaded the air around me, making it seem thicker than before. Like the very air could choke me if it wanted to. If he wanted it to.

If Gray was worried, he didn't show it. "Of course. I was only trying to explain why you can't delve into Lee or Kelsey's heads the way you're used to. Could you hear Evan's fears?"

"No." And he was clearly irritated. "You're all annoyingly closed off, except the witch. Even the academic is muddy. I've always had trouble with the fuckers, but I can feel his desperation to save the witch. It's funny. It tickles."

“Then how did you know what happened to Evan?” Lee asked.

His lips curled up in a smirk. “Well, my darling boy, I do have spies in the world. I would be a terrible ruler if I didn’t keep up with the players of the plane, so to speak. I did receive a report that the king’s daughter had been injured and was revived by a primal. I caught a hint of her physical duress, and I do believe it’s because she’s fighting the change. She’ll lose in the end.”

“Evan will be all right. I’ll make sure of it,” Lee vowed.

“Of course she will be. Is she trying to stave off the change with king’s blood?” Lucifer sat straight up, his eyes flaring with recognition as he turned Gray’s way. “Is the princess on king’s blood? Does she take it so she remains young for her wolf king mate?”

“She takes it so she’s tougher to kill,” I replied. “If it matters so much, so do I.”

“And that is also why you can’t read Lee,” Gray pointed out. “He’s a king, like his father.”

Lucifer considered the prince. “Yes, it seems Donovan has much power. I suspect he’s busy getting ready to take back his crown. One of the reasons I came today was to explain my position in this war.”

“You’re with Myrddin.” I knew where he would stand.

Lucifer shuddered. “Not at all. Myrddin is a prick who thinks far too highly of himself.”

“But he’s planning on closing the doors to Heaven so you can take over the Earth plane,” I pointed out.

“Is he? I don’t see a closed door. In fact, the veil between Heaven and the Earth plane is thinner than it’s ever been,” Lucifer complained. “I’ve heard rumblings that a few of the celestial planes are bleeding into the magical planes.”

That had me sitting up straight and paying attention. “Like the attached Fae planes?”

“The very ones,” Lucifer confirmed. “Myrddin had twelve years to do what he promised he would do, and now, if I am correct, he no longer has the Sword of Light. You do, Lady Sloane.”

“He hasn’t had it in years. He stole it and the queen took it back. Gladys belongs to me.” I hoped he wasn’t about to ask me to take one for the infernal team because I wasn’t handing Gladys over. “She was given to me by the heavenly prophet Jacob.”

“Yes, he gave the sword to the Amazons long ago,” Lucifer agreed. “I take it you’ve figured out that piece of your history. Likely when you slew the angel Jude with the Sword of Light. Lucky queen. The king’s blood saved her from the sacrifice the sword requires. Yes, having the queen and her husbands back on the plane changes things. To answer your question, Lady Sloane, I am remaining neutral until such time as one group or the other gives me a reason to back them. I fear the balance shifted the minute the royals returned. The Heaven plane has always favored the queen. And you, Hunter. I heard rumor a Day helped you a little while ago.”

He was referencing the gnome who’d shown me how to find Sarah Day. Sarah was married to a fallen angel, and his family still gave us aid and shelter. Duffy was the newest of the angelic trio, and he represented faith. Angels came in trios, and they each represented an aspect of heavenly teaching. Duffy was faith, while Felicity Day was love and Oliver justice. “I think he found it interesting to reach out through the sword. He’s new and trying out his powers.”

“He might be new, but I assure you if he’s been assigned the role of faith, he takes his job seriously, and that means not giving Heaven another reason to meddle,” Lucifer explained. “You were only back on the plane for a few days when they helped out, and now my only view into the future is gone. Grayson, I’m sure you’ve concluded that I came because I can no longer call you. I needed you this morning and you did not hear my call.”

“Because my contract is fulfilled,” Gray said.

Lucifer sighed, a long-suffering sound. “Because of that damned clause. One of the visions you helped me consider aided in putting down what apparently could have become an actual rebellion. The satan judging the contract decided it was enough to wipe out the last three weeks of your service.”

“I’m glad I could help.” There was a calm smile on my husband’s face.

“I came hoping to get you to consider a new contract,” Lucifer said.

“Absolutely not.” I wanted this fucker out of my Hell McMansion as soon as possible.

“Lady Sloane, I’m hurt,” Lucifer purred. “But really, you must hear me out. There are reasons for your husband to maintain his position. It does bring me closer to the king, does it not?”

“Somehow I don’t think my father will like the idea of Lord Sloane helping you see the possible outcomes of this war,” Lee replied.

“Oh, I’ve seen the possible outcomes,” Lucifer assured us. “I need Lord Sloane to help me pick the likeliest of those and help me decide how to nudge along the ones I prefer. I’m in a fixed point in time here. I’ve mostly studied the ones that might have been, had your parents not returned. I assure you if I think the king will win, I’ll be a good ally.”

Lucifer was the definition of bad ally. “And if you decide the king most likely fails?”

“Then I have to figure out if that’s the outcome that will benefit me the most,” Lucifer admitted, and then pushed back from the table and stood. “Don’t answer me now, Lord Sloane. Think it over. I would be much more open to some of your clauses now that I know you’re about to be a father. Can’t have our little one raised by wolves now, can we? Less time with me, more perks for you. Think it over, and we’ll talk at the dinner I’m throwing. Bring your family. I find them amusing. I’m not sure about the date, but soon. I’ll send the

invitation to Tix. And we should talk about the boy you have here. I can hear him screaming. Was he hit with an Uro spell?"

I felt my jaw drop.

Lucifer continued on, not waiting for an answer. "Yes, we should definitely talk about that because I'm really the only one who can help you, and I think you know it. See you soon."

There was a puff of smoke and then brimstone hit my nose.

"Well, fuck," Gray said, slumping back.

Yup. We were fucked.

Chapter Nine



Liv

An hour after Lucifer Morningstar had let me know what my place in the world was, I stood in my cell, overlooking the magnificent gardens. The moon was high in the sky now, and I'd already watched two big wolves run off toward the bioluminescent forest in the distance.

Trent and Fen. They'd been playing like puppies, and I'd wondered what it would feel like to walk in those woods, to chase after them knowing nothing could harm me because I was with my friends.

Except I'd been with my "friends" when I'd been violated.

I was also wondering if I'd made a mistake by turning down Lucifer's kindly offer to put me out of my misery by slashing my throat.

"Hey, come down to the lab with me." Casey's hands were on my shoulders.

If I fought him, I would merely look ridiculous. It's not that I wanted his hands there. It's not like I felt the impulse to lean back against his strength and feel like things might work out. I simply didn't want to look silly, and he seemed so good at making me look that way. "I should stay up here."

I felt him kiss my hair. "So you can find new ways to keep me out?"

At least I'd made one decision. "I've thought about this. Why should I bother? I've decided I should use you on a sexual basis, and when you think you have me in your thrall, that's when I'll be able to slip away."

He chuckled, the sound reverberating across my skin in the most pleasant fashion. “You think I want to fuck you?”

It came out teasing, but I still went stiff in his arms. The truth of the matter was he probably didn't. He was playing me. He likely had no real honest desire for this version of me. “Guess you don't like the new look. You always were a bit vanilla in your tastes.”

He stepped back and turned me around, looking down into my eyes. “I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. You were when you had hair that had all the colors of autumn in it, when your eyes were warm and your skin was golden tan because you love to sit out in the sun. And I think you're beautiful now. Do you want me to show you? I can. I'm always ready around you, and like I said, it's been over twelve years...”

That idiot was leaning in to kiss me. To really kiss me. If he kissed me, I would remember every instant of what it felt like to be wrapped around him. To be weak and powerless. To have him promise to protect me every time I tried to use my powers.

He would tell me to stop. That I didn't need them because he would never let anyone hurt me again.

I pushed him away because I couldn't be that Liv, the one he wanted. The one he'd seemed determined to make me into back then. Helpless. Weak. Dependent on him.

“I'm not going with you, and we don't need to talk about your nonexistent sex life.” I turned away from him.

I was feeling the lack of daily demon blood. Whatever Evan had given me hadn't lasted, and I needed more. Though I was surprised it wasn't more physical. Before when I'd been deprived, I'd started to shake after a full day. This was more a hunger pain than desperation.

“How are you going to lull me into a false sense of security if you don't actually sleep with me?”

I couldn't see him, but I knew the look on his face. He would be giving me a slight frown, one that told me to push

further, go deeper.

I had said those things. “Maybe I’ll keep you on my string.”

He sighed, and I heard him walk to the door. “It’s okay. You can hide for a little while longer. I don’t guess you want to tell me what Lucifer did to you? I’ve heard he’s in the dining hall. I could go and maybe get a sucker punch in before he sets me on fire.”

“Or you can write a song about what a massive asshole he is,” I countered before thinking.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I could do that. Seriously, I’m here if you want to talk.”

I didn’t. I couldn’t tell him that Lucifer had laughed at the idea of Myrddin sending him for me. I couldn’t tell him how alone that made me feel. Abandoned. Like he’d abandoned me.

“All right, baby. I love you. I’ll be down in the lab if you get curious and want to help me autopsy a demon cat. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t learned things from Henri. I really should have had Hugo as a mentor. The law stuff doesn’t require me to extract brains.”

Only because he hadn’t practiced the right type.

It struck me suddenly that I hadn’t seen my parents in years. Twelve, to be exact. I’d been told that to keep them out of the war, I’d have to stay away. It was dangerous for them.

Had I abandoned them? I hadn’t fought the Coven House matriarch when she’d told me they’d been placed under a spell that would allow them to remember they had a daughter but not have any impulse to see me.

“Good morning, Evan,” Casey was saying. “Are you okay?”

I turned because she was the only one I really wanted to see. The princess was in her usual outfit of soft leather pants and a tunic with sturdy boots and a heavy leather belt that I happened to know held some enchanted items. Even with the

binders on, I could sense some of the magic coming off the princess. There was a streak of pure black that split her auburn hair and twisted through the thick braid swung over her left shoulder. She was a lovely girl, and it was obvious to me that she wasn't pleased with whatever had happened this morning.

Well, that was two of us. "Lucifer's an ass."

Evan's hands fisted on her hips. "He is a total jerk, and Lee's down there having a beer with him. Trent and Fenrir didn't like how he smelled and took off for the woods. I can't change into a wolf and escape my problems, so I was left with 'I'm turning into a monster and my baby sister is going to be an abomination.'"

"The baby the queen is carrying? Myrddin was concerned with her pregnancy, too," Casey said, going serious in a heartbeat. "I need to do some research."

Of course he did. It was what he lived for—being around stuffy, dusty books or hunting some antiquated fact down on the Internet. "Excellent. Go and save the queen. I need to talk to the princess."

His eyes narrowed. "About what?"

"I'm having my period," I tried. It usually sent men running.

Not vampires, though. Casey took in the longest breath, scenting the air. "No, you're not, baby. You know how horny I get when that happens, and I'm only a regular amount of horny now." He shook his head. "You can't embarrass me anymore. I've lived through Lee's puberty. Nothing can embarrass me." He turned to Evan. "Is there something I should worry about?"

Evan's expression went blank. "Not at all. I wanted to talk to Liv."

"Then why did you bring her demon blood?" Casey asked.

The world seemed to stop. Was he going to take it away? Now I could feel my hands shaking because I didn't know what I would do if he refused to let Evan give it to me. I'd

been on a knife's edge before she gave me a dose the day before.

Evan sighed and pulled the syringe out of her pack. "I should have used a scent charm, but I gave Fenrir the last one. I take it you can smell it?"

Casey took it out of her hand and held it up to the candlelight, inspecting it. The blood was black against the light, but there were flecks of red spinning around in it. Like it was alive.

I'd never studied the blood before. I'd simply stood there and allowed Myrddin to give me unholy communion.

That was a dumb, pretentious name for it. It wasn't freaking communion. It was control. It was addiction.

I still needed it.

"Evan, is this Eddie's blood?" Casey asked the question with a tightness that worried me.

"Yes. He knows what it's for. I didn't steal it or anything. I told him in the beginning that it was for Puff, but it was pointed out to me that one dose should have worked with a hellhound and I had to come clean," Evan replied. "But Eddie agreed this is the right thing to do. He feels sorry for her."

A brow rose over Casey's eyes. "Really? He feels sorry for her?"

I didn't like the sound of that, but I wasn't going to argue.

Evan's jaw firmed stubbornly. "He claims his blood is like methadone."

"I bet he did," Casey said under his breath and his head came up. "All right, then. Give me your arm. I would bet I'm far better at this than the princess. Or have you been doing some hard drugs I don't know about?"

"Feel free." Evan stood back. "I hope you're not going to go straight to the *Nex Apparatus*. I'm only trying to help Ms. Carey."

Oh, she was doing more than that, but who was I to correct her. If Casey was going to be our accomplice, I wouldn't have to worry about hiding it from him. I placed my hand in his and he quickly found a vein. Vampires are the most natural phlebotomists in the world. If you have tricky veins, find a vamp to help you out.

Sweet poison started flowing, and I felt that slight chill that flooded me when I took the satan's blood.

Casey handed the syringe back to her. "She'll need it at least once a day for the next few weeks. Don't make her wait too long. She should have it at roughly the same time every day for it to work properly. Liv, if you change your mind, you know where I'll be, and I would bet Kelsey will want to complain viciously about Lucifer, too."

That would be fun.

Casey closed the door behind him, and I had the feeling I'd missed something in the exchange between him and Evan. "What did he mean by methadone?"

"Satan's blood won't have the same high effects that the blood you've been receiving does."

I'd noticed. "It also doesn't hurt as much."

"Because Eddie gave it willingly. Part of the burn you like is because the blood was stripped from the demon for the black market. What you feel is their dying pain and horror. I've heard it's a great high for a witch. The sad part is the blood would work without it, but some witches enjoy the sensation, so it's a big black-market item."

My heart felt like it twisted in my chest.

No one had ever told me that. I'd been taught it was a sacred thing between witches and demons, proof that we help each other.

Evan was lying.

Well, of course she was. It's all they did. They lied. They had nothing better to do with their time than to lie and make me feel like a fool. And they were doing it for...why? It would

have been so much easier to simply murder me. So they were doing it because they lived to torture creatures or they wanted to see if they can save me.

At least Kelsey and Casey.

Or they wanted to turn me so I would tell them all of our secrets. Yes. My mind caught on that thought. That was an excellent explanation.

I longed for a time when I wasn't constantly fighting in my own head.

“Can you tell me anything about what I'm turning into?”

I glanced back to where the princess stared at me, her arms around her chest as though she needed protection.

She didn't. What could I do to her? Well, I could always be cruel.

You're going to be a big bat, Princess. With wings and fangs and a hunger for blood you'll never be able to fill because you're not really a vampire and you're not just a girl anymore. But it's cool because in a couple of months, like eight or so, you won't be the biggest freak in your family because I know why Myrddin would fear the queen's child.

“Whatever happens, you'll be able to handle it.” I wasn't sure why I chose to go that way. It felt...better than cruelty. Besides, if I was going to get out of here, maybe it was time to see if I could catch more flies with honey. “What are your symptoms like and what did Lucifer say to you?”

She studied me for a moment. “Why are you being nice to me?”

It was the question of the day. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because I need something from you.”

“Then you know why I'm being reasonable around you.” It was more than that. I didn't actually want to hurt her. Why should I? “Do you have an update on Dean?”

I was feeling so much better with Eddie's blood running through my system. I felt more...me than I had in forever.

Like I could make decisions, could do what I needed to do.

Which was to get out of here. Eventually.

“He’s stable. The cooling spell seems to be working, but I don’t know how long it will. And Lucifer apparently knows he’s here.” She sat down across from me, in the rocking chair I’d thought about breaking up and staking Casey with.

Damn. That would make everything harder, but it wasn’t my problem. “That was inevitable. He’s got a couple of days. He’s stronger than any other witch I’ve met beyond his father.” I sat down on the bed I’d made when Casey had brought me back to the big house. “It’s likely he’s handling the magic better than he should because his magic recognizes it. I would be interested in who his mother was. A witch?”

“A woman Myrddin met at a music festival, believe it or not,” Evan explained. “It was somewhat random. It happened during the years between when he healed my father’s heart and when he showed back up at the Council House to mentor him.”

Myrddin had taken a decade to walk the Earth with Nimue. I would bet there had been many random encounters. “So she was human? That would make Dean half human and a quarter angel and demon. Incubus, to be exact.”

“I’d put a little more on the angelic side,” Evan mused. “Turns out the mom was a companion. When he sent her off plane, she ended up on a vampire plane married to another version of the man she’d loved here on this plane.”

Oh, that was interesting. DNA was playing a part in all the discussions of the day. “That’s a lot of prime DNA.”

“I have to wonder if Dean’s unique parentage is why he resists the dark side so well. He cured my uncle.”

“Zack? He cured Zack?” I tempered my reply because that had almost sounded like I was happy. I mean, I knew Zack Owens. I knew Kelsey would be happy he was healthy. I’d had dinner at his place and watched little Courtney, who was the sweetest baby wolf I’d ever seen. “I mean, I’m surprised.

Myrddin cursed him. The only reason he'd survived so long is all the king's blood he took."

Donovan's blood was some good shit. It could work miracles, and as the king's servant, Zack had a lot of it over the years. But even king's blood should have failed eventually. The curse had been so dark it would have driven Zack mad at some point.

"I tried once, you know." I was feeling weird. Maybe it was being in close quarters with Lucifer, but I wanted to ease some of the tension between me and Evan. "It was shortly after I left Myrddin's academy and learned what had happened to Zack. I tried to give Lisa some advice on how to handle it."

Evan went still. "Olivia, how could you find out what happened? You were there."

What stories had they been told? "I wasn't. Zack was injured early on. I wasn't part of the army then."

"Liv, there are tales of how fiercely you fought the day the Council was taken over."

I hadn't. "I hid that day."

"It's why seeing the vision of you saving Sarah Day made no sense to me. There were multiple people who saw you at Myrddin's side the night of the slaughter. I wondered how you could save her in the morning and then execute prisoners that night."

"I couldn't have done that." My head was starting to hurt again. "After I saved the Days, they closed the door to their place before I could let them know I was there. I thought about trying to go with them, but I waited too long. So I made my way back to my apartment, hoping Casey would be there. I was in there hiding when I was taken by some higher-up witches and I went straight to the reeduca...to the new safe house."

Evan's head shook. "No. You were right the first time. You were taken to a reeducation camp. Liv, what do you remember about it?"

Pain. Fear. Loneliness. “I was turned into a strong witch. They helped me not only get my power back, but I was far stronger than before.”

“Do you remember specific days? How long were you there?”

“Of course I remember days,” I replied. They were right there. Right on the tip of my brain. I’d had roommates. So why couldn’t I remember their names? “I was there for two years.”

There was the headache.

“It’s okay. Don’t think about it, Liv. You know what happened.” Evan was on her feet, looking at me with concern.

“Of course, I do.” I tried to shake the ache off. “Now about your spell. Did you bring me what I need?”

Evan started to unload the packs on her belt. “Eddie said we can use the kitchen if you need a space.”

I bet Eddie would be sitting right there watching over me to ensure I didn’t do something that could harm his precious charges. Still, I would need a mortar and pestle. “While we’re at it, I’ve got a couple of salves I’d like to use to keep Dean’s temp down. Let’s go do this.”

Evan nodded and seemed far more comfortable than she had before. “I was hoping you could teach me.”

I loved to teach. That word sparked such a sweet longing.

I shook it off.

But as I followed Evan, I realized that I didn’t have anything else to do this afternoon. Maybe I would join Casey and the others.

Make myself useful. For the time being.

* * * *

Kelsey

I was anxious, but that was probably a good thing to be when one is invited to the Hell plane version of a dinner party. I paced the big office I'd retreated to. After Lucifer had gone, Gray had been called in on what he'd described as an agricultural emergency, and Tix had shown me to this office where I'd been told I could fret and pace to my heart's content.

Lucifer knew about Dean, but he couldn't know what we were planning. Could he?

Pacing wasn't helping.

Trent was wolfing it up along with Fenrir. Lee was checking on Dean, and Casey was currently slicing open our friend from the night before, and he wasn't exactly happy about it.

I would have helped him but...the smell. God, the smell. After heaving a couple of times he'd banished me.

Eddie had asked me to stay out of the kitchens because Liv was brewing some kind of salve for Dean, and he wasn't sure what was in it and if it could affect the baby. So I was stuffed in here with nothing but a pitcher of sweet tea and a single charcuterie board. Which I mostly ate. Okay, I ate all of it, but I did mention the hurling, right? And I hadn't done breakfast justice because I'd been trying to figure out how to shove a knife in that asshole's face.

The door opened and Evan strode in, looking more comfortable than she had hours before. "Hey, Kelsey. I heard we were supposed to be meeting to find out what Casey's discovered. You mind if I bring a friend?"

Liv stood in the doorway, a certain caution in her gaze as she looked my way. "By friend she means prisoner, and a harmless one at that. I'm bored. If I have to stare out over the moonlit garden for another second I'm going to go mad, Kels."

Goddess, she sounded like the old Liv. I would have sworn that her hair looked lighter, too, but that was probably a trick of my eyes and a longing for my best friend.

I had to be careful around Liv no matter how much I wanted to throw my arms around her and ask her how to handle this whole awful situation we found ourselves in. “Are you okay, Evan?”

The French doors that led to the servant’s hall opened and both Eddie and Tix entered, each carrying trays. They were large and laden with food.

“I’m good.” Evan watched as they entered but replied my way.

“Mistress Evangeline.” Tix placed his tray down on the table and turned the princess’s way. “Are you feeling better now that the witch has spelled you?”

Eddie gasped and barely managed to save his large tray of what looked like cookies and cakes. “You were not supposed to speak of it.”

I’d gone still because it appeared they’d wanted to keep this from me. I could deduce what had happened. Evan turned to the only witch she knew, likely with some kind of bargain, but I wasn’t sure we could trust Liv.

“I keep nothing from my master and mistress,” Tix replied primly. “Unless the master wants me to hide something from the mistress, and then I would cut my own tongue out so I would obey. I would be required to cut it out because I love the mistress so much, but I must keep my master’s secrets.”

“And if Kelsey wanted you to hide something from Gray?” Olivia draped herself over one of the big, comfy chairs, her knee bouncing as she dangled it off the arm.

“I would tell him immediately.” Tix put a hand to his heart. “Though it would harm my heart greatly since I love the mistress. I would betray her and then likely spend a good long time in self-flagellation.”

“Kelsey, I...” Evan had paled.

I turned to Eddie because I could figure out what had happened. “So Evan is terrified of the change coming and no one else has been able to help her. She goes to Liv and makes

a bargain, but only if you supervise the actual spell because you would know if Liv is breaking her word.”

It was what satans did.

Evan was a smart girl.

“Yes, my mistress, but...” Eddie began.

I didn’t have time to soothe him, but I would let him know I understood. “Evan came to you and asked you to not tell me. You worried she would try something even more dangerous. Eddie, I trust you. You are not bound by the same rules as Tix. I trust you to make your own decisions when it comes to things like this. You did the right thing. I take it Liv did what she said she would.”

“She walked the princess through the spell since she couldn’t work it herself,” Eddie explained.

“I feel so much better, Kelsey,” Evan said. “My back doesn’t hurt.”

“Well, it wouldn’t if you would let those wings out, child.” Tix did not appear amused that I was cool with what was happening. “Mistress, this is a demonic household. What Eddie has done...”

“Is fine by me.” I meant what I’d said. Eddie can pretty much do no wrong in my eyes. If he kept it from me, it was because he had the situation in hand and me knowing could upset the balance. “As long as Eddie doesn’t think the princess is in danger, Liv can continue to teach her.”

A shudder of relief went through Evan. “Thank you, Kelsey. I just need to buy some time.”

“That’s all it will do,” Liv said from her comfy chair. “Nothing can stop the eventual change.”

“I’m hoping my father’s blood will overwhelm the primal blood.” Evan poured herself a tall glass of some purplish drink.

“It will not,” Tix said with a twist of his lips. “It will only cost you time when you could be flying.”

“And getting fangs,” she shot back.

“Fangs you can use on your enemies.” Tix sighed. “I don’t see what the problem is. You were vulnerable. Practically human, and now you have a chance at survival. You should thank the primal and learn how to use your new talents.”

But I knew why Evan was afraid, and if Eddie didn’t think it would hurt anything, then I wouldn’t fight her. She needed time to process. I would give it to her. She was practically my daughter. She would be someday. Probably in three months or so if my son didn’t screw things up. I rather thought he should be here with her.

“It’s fine, Evan.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “You take all the time you need to make sure you can’t reverse it.”

“Thank you, Kelsey,” she replied, her eyes shining with tears. “I know I should have talked to you and Mom about it, but it’s hard. Dad is the one who wanted to try giving his blood a shot. I’m on a double dose, and if I run out I’m supposed to tap Lee’s non-fighting arm. I think he fights with both of them, though, so Dad was likely joking. Papa doesn’t know anything at all because he freaks out so easily. I would have found myself being carted across Faery looking for a wise woman to fix me.”

“Oh, you would likely eat the wise woman,” Tix said with a clucking sound. “Not that it wouldn’t help, but it could get messy. Do you want me to find you a healer to eat?”

“Tix,” I said.

“Well, it would make her feel better, and there are a couple hanging about who I think drag down our vibe,” Tix admitted. “Pretentious things. And I’m right about not trusting the witch. The witch lives in two realities, and until she admits it, she’ll be trouble for everyone. The master is altogether too happy about being out of his contract. His smugness will make Lucifer angry, and that is not a fun time. Prince Lee is likely going to die because he’s plotting something. I haven’t figured it out yet, but I think it’s bad. He’s worried about dying. He’s worried about dying before he can find someone.”

I forgot that Tix was an empath at my own risk. “Don’t worry about Lee.”

Tix wasn’t done. “The wolf is so horny, being around him makes my dick go hard. It’s disconcerting, and there is no need for it. There are any number of demonesses who would be happy to help. They would be thrilled to sexually serve the wolf king.”

“And then you’ll have any number less demonesses,” Evan promised.

“See, she wouldn’t be so violent if she was fucking. Humans. I don’t understand them. They fear perfectly good fangs and wings and think they can ignore their Hell-given needs. In Hell. It’s not happening.” Tix put a hand to his head. “And the sick boy keeps going on and on about something. I was so excited about hosting my lovely family, and it turns out you’re all fucked up, with the exception of Trent, who gives me nothing at all. The silence in that wolf’s head is like a beautiful melody of absolutely nothing. I think I love Trent most of all. And yes, child, I understand. I cannot forbid your mother from doing things that are normal and natural. Yes, even while she’s pregnant and can’t get any more with child.” He frowned. “Can’t you consider it something like a massage? Or a roller coaster? Oh, you will love those, and in some ways the motions are similar.”

He was staring at my belly.

He better be joking. “You are not talking to my embryo.”

“He is insistent on asking if you wouldn’t mind keeping it down. It’s not the movement that bothers him. It’s all the terrible sounds you make,” Tix said with a shake of his head. “Yes, Rain, I know. The Dark Lord was here. He’s not going to harm your mother. He would have trouble if he harmed an unborn duke of Hell. And your fathers are fine. Kelsey, he’s concerned because his wolf father said something last eve about whatever he was doing being too tight. Rain is concerned because he sounded like he was in pain.”

I wasn’t having sex ever again. Ever. “He’s fine. Trent is great. He must have misunderstood that.”

Evan hid a smile behind her hand.

Tix stood up straight. “I don’t believe he did. I think he might not have enough information to understand fully what you and the masters have put him through. Just keep your eyes closed, Rainier. It will all be over soon, and you will no longer worry that a sword will pierce your amniotic sac.”

Now I knew he was being an asshole. “My son doesn’t know what an amniotic sac is.”

“Doesn’t he, mistress?” Tix’s head tilted up, and his lips formed a mulish expression. “Then you certainly understand the nature of the demonic soul better than I. I can see that you need no aid from a son of Lilith.” He started to walk out but turned at the last moment. “And if mistress is unaware, that’s Lilith, the First Woman.”

I was, in fact, unaware. “I thought Eve was the first chick. Biblically, of course.”

Liv snorted. “She didn’t have to go through the same classes the rest of us did. When you join the supernatural world after living in the human one, there are these classes one normally takes. Kelsey got the short, here’s how to kill things version. Not the understanding our world and all the demons who can fuck you up version. Lilith could fuck you up, Kels.”

“According to Judaic belief, Lilith, not Eve, was actually the first wife of Adam,” Evan explained. “Adam rejected her because she wasn’t submissive enough and Lilith joined Lucifer in Hell and became known as the mother of demons. Tix, are you really a son of Lilith?”

“I’m one of her favorites,” he confided. “All of my brothers are horrible conversationalists. It’s all death and pain and mutilation with them. My mother is actually quite cosmopolitan. She’s into fashion and gossip, and we have a standing date to watch telly once a week. You do not want to be a reality TV show personality who gets on my mum’s bad side. Things go wrong when she’s annoyed. You know it’s really sad that of all her sons, I’m the only one she can talk to.”

“How many brothers do you have?” I was curious.

He seemed to think about that for a moment. “Two thousand seven hundred and forty-two. No. Forty-one. Jesiliax, you fool. I told you not to try skiing down Mount Viscera. Where did you think that they got all the viscera? I know it seemed like a fun time, but now you’re dead. No. I cannot help you. You fucked around and found out, and now your viscera will stay on the mountain for the next idiot who wants to snowboard down a Hell mountain.”

“Tix, are you actually communicating with the dead? I need you to stop teasing me because I’m confused.”

“Yes,” he agreed, turning like I’d made a point for him, “you are if you think you can...” He stared at me.

I was crazy for thinking I could steal...

“Steal?” Tix’s jaw dropped. “You don’t have to steal. Everything is yours. Please tell me you’re not thinking about stealing something that’s not on this particular Hell plane. Please, mistress.” He seemed like he was about to hyperventilate. “Maybe you could steal something from a minor plane. I know several awful, low-level barons who could use a good stealing from.”

I tried to shut down my every shield. I was good at shielding.

“Dear Lord Lucifer.” Tix was staring at my belly again. “Not him. We’re all going to die. Die. It will be so embarrassing. Oh, we’re going to die, and I might end up someplace terrible. Like a celestial plane.”

Tix ran out of the room like the sky was falling.

“Is he going to tell on us?” This heist might be over before we even decided if it was possible.

Eddie moved to go after Tix. “He cannot betray Gray. Not even to Lord Lucifer. He will suffer whatever fate befalls Gray. They are bound. I will go and calm him down.”

“Eddie, can you hear my baby?” I hoped the kid wasn’t complaining to every demon around that his mom had noisy

sex.

“No, mistress, though I can feel him because he is exactly what Tix called him. He is a duke of Hell, but a different one than we’ve ever seen before.” Eddie started through the door.

It closed behind him.

“Rainier?” Liv asked.

Tix was wrong about so many things. “Nope. His name is going to be something simple. John. Or Matt.”

“Did Trent really think you were so tight?” Liv asked with a light of amusement. “Oh, Kelsey, you’re still so tight after all that demon cock.”

“Hey,” I said. “There is a child in here.”

But almost eighteen-year-old Evan was standing by Liv. “Did he? Did he say it, Kelsey?”

He had. It was a go-to saying for him. But it was also an obvious thing to say during sex. “It doesn’t matter. My son is not named Rainier, and he’s not in a particularly sentient phase of his life.” I was pretty sure about that. “So we’re not worried Tix is going to say something?”

“I would be more worried about Tix teleporting Gray out of what he perceives as danger,” Liv replied. “Isn’t that what he did when we were fighting? I was surprised he wasn’t there with you.”

“Yeah, I was, too.” This was the first time we were talking about the day that didn’t include her yelling or me feeling guilty about that choker around her neck. “One minute he was about to have my back, the next Tix had taken him through space and time and held him there until it was safe for him to come out.”

“You would think he would have done the same for you,” Liv complained. “You were pregnant. Rain is going to be Tix’s master one day, and he will remember that the dude was fine with his mother fighting for her life.”

“Uhm, I would have murdered him because that would have left Fen and Evan alone and probably in your mercy,” I

pointed out.

“And then maybe we would have truly talked, and you would be able to see reason.” But she wasn’t as confident about that statement as she’d been yesterday. There was something in how her eyes didn’t quite reach mine that let me know she was unsure.

“You remember the fight in the Under?” Evan asked.

“Of course. I was there,” Liv pointed out. “Kelsey got lucky because an angel decided to weigh in. And you did the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen. You impaled yourself on a sword. Well, at least now we’re sure you can prime the Sword of Light.”

“Yes, I’m sure that would thrill Myrddin if he actually knew about it,” Evan pointed out, but she seemed deeply curious about Liv. “But you don’t remember the time you lobbed spells at Lee and Rhys when you caught them spying on the Council House?”

A confused look came over Liv’s face. “I must have forgotten.”

“You hit Rhys. He was in a coma for two weeks. We thought he would die,” Evan explained.

Liv sat upright and stood. “Well, I guess I was bad at my job then. That’s why the moment was so forgettable. I’m going to find Casey. I’m bored here.”

She turned and walked out.

“I don’t think she remembers, Kelsey.” Evan was staring at the place where Liv had disappeared.

“What do you mean?”

“You know how the demons keep joking about Liv being confused? I think they’re right,” Evan replied.

“At one point in time today, Lucifer called her delusional. What do you think he meant by it?” I’d dealt with too many empaths today. I rather wished I’d dealt with the same aspect of Lucifer the queen had met years before. He wouldn’t have thought I was a threat at all. I worried this version of Lucifer

saw me all too clearly. “He said something about finding her delusion amusing. I was really happy he only mentioned family when he talked about the dinner party. If he’d used another word, I might have to bring Liv.”

Evan’s jaw dropped. “There’s a party?”

“Yeah. After you left, Lucifer invited us all to his place, though he didn’t tell us a time. I get the feeling it’s going to be very formal and annoying.” I was still not wearing the meat jewelry. Though I was fond of the Eye of Night. It was beautiful, and it felt warm against my skin now. It felt right to wear it. I found myself touching it unconsciously.

Evan’s brows rose. “Seriously? I’m going to a party in Lucifer Morningstar’s actual realm?”

“Of course not.” I wasn’t about to let her go to Lucifer’s realm. Her parents hadn’t been happy about her coming to a realm where Gray ruled. They definitely wouldn’t want her in the heart of the Hell plane.

“Kelsey, of course, I’m going. This is exactly what we need. How else are we going to get onto Lucifer’s section of Hell? We won’t get another shot at this,” Evan pointed out. “This feels like luck. Lee luck. He’s always had it. My grandfather used to tell us that he could teach everything but luck. A true thief was simply born with it. This is proof of pure Lee luck. Does he know?”

“Yes, he does. He had the exact same reaction and might have pointed out that this was lucky for us. What isn’t lucky is that Lucifer knows something’s wrong with Dean. From what I understand, Lucifer himself could heal Dean, but for anyone else to they need the feather. Wouldn’t he know that?” I was worried that they were right, and this was our only real shot. But it felt so much like a trap.

“Would he?” Evan asked. “We still don’t know if it will work. I don’t think Lucifer knows every spell and counterspell. He works with witches, but he’s not one. Even if he did, would he honestly think we would be stupid enough to steal from him? Sometimes arrogance is a thief’s friend.”

I put a hand to my belly as though trying to calm my child. But I was the one who needed calming. If there was one thing I'd learned over the years, it was that if something seemed too good to be true, it usually turned out to be something that wanted to eat me. "We have some planning to do. We should be contacted in the next couple of days with the invitation. If Lucifer's realm works the way ours does, then I don't see how he won't immediately know what we've done."

"Unless we distract him," Evan said quietly. "With something he really wants."

Gray.

I'd promised I'd never put him in the line of fire again. It looked like I'd lied.

Chapter Ten



Liv

I didn't bother to knock on the door to the lab. First of all, it's weird to have a lab hanging around. Like autopsies happen so often down here there has to be a dedicated space for them. I understood that at the Council House. It's big and kind of a contained community, but this was a mansion occupied by tenants who weren't here most of the time. And honestly, I would think Hell lords wouldn't be that concerned with cause of death.

Coven House. Not Council House.

I lived in the Coven House for years and years longer than I was at the Council House. Shouldn't I refer to it in my head as Coven House? To even think something else is treasonous.

Of course, when it was a Council House, thought wasn't treason. Critique wasn't treason.

I stood in that cool, oddly modern hallway, questions running through my head.

How had we gone from electing our council members to not having a council at all? Donovan called himself the king, but he always took the advice of his elected representatives. There was no witches' council. We were considered the strongest women in the supernatural world, but we had no say over our own government.

Myrddin was a true king. He listened to no one and led with fear.

"Hey, you okay?" Casey pulled me out of my dark thoughts.

He was leaning around the corner and I could see his hands were still in latex gloves, so I hadn't missed the whole thing.

I shook off those dangerous thoughts, though I had no hope they would leave me forever. Until I got out of here, doubt would be my true torture. "I'm fine. Kelsey was dealing with something so I was told I could come here or go back to my room. I'm tired of sitting in my cell."

Kelsey had said nothing of the kind, but I had to rationalize that she was okay with it since she hadn't sent anyone storming after me. I supposed having an entire realm that did one's bidding had its upsides. It meant she didn't have to watch me the way she had in Frelsi. I could hang all over the Midnight Kingdom and not get into trouble. The house itself was an asshole. When I'd tried to find a way out, I came back to this hallway, the one that led to Casey. Even the fucking house was on his side.

Still, being here was better than being back with Evan asking me all sorts of stupid questions.

Do you remember...

"Oh, okay. I'm about to close up if you want to come back here." He disappeared again. "It didn't take too long. Demonic animals usually have fairly simple systems."

I walked around the corner and sure enough, there was a whole morgue down here. I stopped as Casey stood over the dead hellcat. I gestured around. "Why?"

He ran a stitch to start closing the cat's torso. "Because I'm hoping what I've found can help explain why the creature attacked Gray. I've taken a bunch of samples to work with. Maybe you can run Evan through a spell that might help us figure out if he was born here."

He'd misunderstood. "Not what I was asking. I wanted to know why there's an ultra-modern morgue right here in what otherwise appears to be Gray's pleasure palace. I've heard there's a whole dungeon here, and it's not for prisoners."

"Ah, well, it's not usually here. The house is very adaptable," Casey explained. "I asked for what I needed and

now we have a medical wing. When I'm done, it will disappear. The house can expand or shrink as it needs to."

That was some serious magic. But the spell he'd talked about before wasn't. It was the kind of thing I could do in my sleep. "You know I could answer that question for you right here and now. The one about where the kitty's from."

"Only if I was stupid enough to take your collar off." This time he didn't look up, merely kept stitching carefully.

"What did you find out?" I wasn't going to argue with him. Or try reverse psychology. It wouldn't work. He knew damn well if I had my powers I would use them to get away.

What he didn't have to know was that I probably wouldn't use them to hurt anyone. I'd been thinking a lot about how to minimize the damage when I fled. I would need a story for my master, of course, but I was good at hiding certain things from him.

At least I thought I was.

"I believe it's been ingesting something that would make it more open to suggestion. There's some discoloration in his brain that I believe is only explainable by the creature eating an enormous amount of a clover that's found here in the Midnight Kingdom. They feed it to cattle to make the... transition easier."

I snorted at his attempts to soften the situation. "You mean before they turn them into Hellburger Helper?"

Casey shrugged. "Something like that. I actually think it's kind of nice they try to make it easier on the cattle. This cat is a meat eater. He might ingest some grass if he got indigestion, but there's evidence of him eating far more than normal."

I watched him move with pure confidence, a deep competence he'd only been beginning to find when we were together. He used to fumble, used to try to play braver than he was. He'd been such a weirdo, and I'd been drawn to him the moment we met.

I'd been without him for so much longer than I'd been with him. Why did he fill my every thought all of the sudden? I

didn't think about Casey all the time. I wasn't some sad sack, can't live without a man chick. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about Casey, but not like this. Sometimes I'd been able to forget how much I cared.

Because they beat him out of you. They might not have done it with their fists, but it had been a beating all the same. Because they taught you it was wrong to love him. To love anything and anyone except Myrddin Emrys.

"I also found some symbols branded on his back. I don't recognize the characters. I think it's probably some form of Demonish." He started to tie off his last stitch.

I moved in closer. As long as I was here, I could try to help. The sooner I got off Gray's plane, the sooner I could try to escape. "Can I see?"

He carefully rolled the corpse over.

Sure enough, there was a small brand on his right upper shoulder. I leaned in. Casey must have an anti-stink charm somewhere because all I could smell was lavender.

My favorite. But then he would know that.

"I've seen it before. It's a version of Demonish." It was far easier to concentrate on the mystery in front of me than the fact that he'd moved in behind me. "It might be the name of the realm it belonged to. I know they don't brand cats here. This realm raises a lot of farm stock, but this is a wild animal on this plane."

"Yes, I find that curious," Casey admitted. "I would think it's a potential hit on Gray except according to him, this sucker went for Kelsey first. He might have been confused. That part of his brain was affected, too."

I wasn't sure about that. My bestie often pissed off someone enough that they were gunning for her. And she didn't pick a dude who shifts into a golden retriever to piss off. Nope. She went for dukes of Hell and angels from the Heaven plane. I could only imagine what chaos she'd wrought on the outer planes.

I hadn't even asked her what had happened. Marcus Vorenius hadn't come back. I'd heard rumors he'd stayed behind because he'd found a companion. How did she feel about that? Marcus had saved her. They'd been so close, and I didn't even know how she felt about potentially never seeing him again.

But for all that, there were still problems with Casey's theory.

"Why would anyone here want to hurt Kelsey? I mean anyone who would know she's here," I pointed out. "I know she's got a ton of enemies. But we need someone with access to and knowledge of the Hell plane. It's not like she announced the trip on Hell's version of social media."

Casey stepped back, pulling the gloves off his hands. "They all knew. The movements of the dark prophet are followed closely by most of Hell. I wouldn't be surprised if they announced it on their news programs."

I hadn't spent much time here. "News programs?"

Casey nodded. "Oh, yeah. They love to give their take on the happenings around the inner planes. And the movie reviews are hysterical. But there are channels you should avoid. The Gutting Channel isn't a metaphor."

I would stay away from that one.

"Okay, so everyone knew she was coming. Do you think this is about the baby?" I asked.

"I think Gray believes so." But he didn't sound convinced to me.

"His father is still around," I mused. "But he should want to kill Gray, not the baby. If he killed Gray, he would be the only living demonic relative. He would rule in the child's place until he reached his majority."

Not that he would because that fucker would absolutely find a way to murder his grandchild and take his realm back.

"He would also have to have someone working the inside, and because of the rules of binding in demonic households,

that should be almost impossible,” Casey said.

“How does it work?” I knew a bit, but not the ins and outs of the practice. “Did the binding spell immediately transfer the oath from Gray’s father to him when he took the throne?”

“In a sense, yes. The citizens of this realm would have immediately been given a verbal oath, and if the servant was initiated in the past by someone of Gray’s blood, they’re bound,” Casey explained. “So all those who were bound to the old Lord Sloane would simply find themselves unable to betray the new Sloane.”

“What if they haven’t? Or if they’re a guest of the realm?”

“They would require Gray to perform a physical ritual to bind them to the house and the clan,” he explained.

“So we’re looking for someone who came after Gray’s dad’s descent but who Gray hasn’t turned. Do you think there are records? That’s a stupid question. It’s Hell. There are records of everything.” We had always been excellent at research, Casey and I. “Probably including that brand. Someone will know something.”

Casey nodded. “I’ll give Evan and Lee a picture of the brand to show around the mansion. And I’ll ask Gray where the records are and how we can access them. Now tell me what happened that sent you looking for me. Are you still upset about what Lucifer said?”

I knew I shouldn’t have let him hold me. I was so fucking weak, despite the fact that I could feel the demon blood working inside me. It wasn’t a physical weakness. It was pure emotion, and I hated it. “I wasn’t looking for you at all. The house wouldn’t let me go anywhere else.”

His lips quirked up. “That’s because the house knows where you should be. This whole place is made of dark magic. I used to think that immediately meant it was bad, but I’ve come to realize that it’s merely the way the magic forms. It’s not inherently good or bad. Like this house. From what I can tell, like the whole of the realm, it’s attuned to the master. If you listen to the staff, they talk about how the house used to

play tricks on them. It used to lock them in rooms for days and send them down stairs that simply ended and sent the person falling to the next floor. They like the house better now. It's become helpful, and one of the ways it helps is to know where you truly want to go."

"It's faulty then because I distinctly asked to leave and go home and here I am."

He sent me a brighter smile. "Yes, here you are."

I groaned. He wasn't being helpful. "I rather thought it was because the house knows the rules down here and isn't a forward thinker. I thought she was sending me back to my owner."

"I don't own you, Liv. It's the other way around."

"Not according to the rules," I shot back. "Do you want to let me make the rules since I'm apparently the dominant partner here?"

"You don't want to be the dominant partner, baby." There was something in the negligent way he tossed that response that caught every bit of my attention. He was busily packing up things and placing them where they would be cleaned. "You like a little submission in your sex, and not from me."

A thrill of arousal shot through my system. "How would you know what I like now?"

He snorted. "You haven't changed, Liv. And you told me yourself that you haven't had another lover."

"What if I don't want it at all? What if something happened and I don't...can't...enjoy sex anymore?"

His head came up, and he gave me his attention as he pulled the heavy apron over his head and hung it up by the door. "Did something happen?"

I wasn't sure anymore. "Of course not. I don't think about sex the way I used to. I'm not a physical creature. I receive my energy from the Earth plane. I don't need other energy."

"Except the demon blood."

“Except that.” It was only to enhance my powers.

Casey moved into my space, and that chilly room heated up real fast. He stood over me, practically begging me to take a step back.

I held my ground.

He put a hand on the wall behind my head. “I think they convinced you that you needed to be cold and unfeeling in order to serve your master.”

“Logical,” I replied.

He nodded and lowered his head again. “Sure, baby. It’s logical to leave your friends and family behind. You could tell how lucky you were because Myrddin immediately chucked you in a torture camp. Tell me something, Livie, do you remember when you told me that you would have taken the kids in? If Myrddin had found them that first day, you would have been their mentor. If they’d been caught at any time, you would have taken care of them. How would you have done that from the reeducation camps?”

That pain in the back of my head started up again, and it didn’t matter that his lips hovered over mine. I moved to the side, ducking under his arm. “I’ll go back to the room.”

He caught up to me quickly. “Liv, I’m sorry. Don’t go. I won’t mention it again. Let me finish cleaning up and we can find someone who can set us up with the records we need. I’ll even have Eddie find you some research food. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

It had been a joke between our team. If we were stuck inside some musty library poring over a million books, the least Lee and I should get was research snacks. It was usually the junkiest of junk food. Kelsey would come through and eat half of whatever we had so I hid my faves, but then she got hungry and I passed them over. How long had it been since I had some cheesy chips that coated my fingers in orange? Or those overly sweet snack cakes that smelled like my childhood?

It wasn’t a proper diet for Myrddin’s elite.

Still. I didn't really want to go back. "Some chips would be nice. And maybe some cookies. Is Lee with us because he eats..." I had to stop myself. "Nothing anymore. Sorry. I was thinking about when he was a kid and he ate my Twinkies, too. The kid never found a snack cake he didn't love."

"I think he had a whole farewell to food tour planned before he accidentally turned. Although it saved the queen."

"Only because he was a king. If he hadn't been, she would be dead right now and Lee would have a big old complex from eating his mother." I had to wonder if Zoey had known everything would be all right or if she'd been scared out of her mind.

What would I have done if I'd been there instead of fighting Kelsey? Would I have laughed and let it happen? Or would I have found a way to get the queen out?

It shouldn't even be a question.

"Well, we were lucky," Casey replied quietly.

He went about putting the lab in order, and I fought the urge to help him. I used to love to clean. That sounds stupid, but it's true. I enjoyed taking a space and making it sparkle, and it wasn't about magic. Magic could only put a mask on a thing, to make you think it was clean. For something to be clean, hard work was required.

They made fun of me for not using magic to clean my room at the Coven House. Their rooms were covered in magic spells. They looked perfectly clean, but I knew what was beneath them. Rot. Dirt. Mold.

"I heard something about a party," Casey said as he pushed the big tray that held the cat's carcass back into the wall of lockers. "Some of the servants were talking about it. Are we throwing a party? I don't think that's a great idea."

It was good to know something he didn't know for once. "Nope. Lucifer is."

Casey huffed. "Of course he is. I suppose this means Kelsey is going through with this insane plan."

“Doesn’t she always? I think that’s what she was talking to Evan about.” I couldn’t help him with this one. I didn’t see another way out. “It’s truly the only way to save the kid. Do you want to just walk up to that asshole and see if he’ll give up a feather or two?”

“No, but I think we should negotiate.”

“With Lucifer?” I asked. “That seems like a moronic thing to do. Aren’t you supposed to be an academic?”

The words came out of my mouth before I could temper them.

His shoulders went stiff, and he was back to cleaning. “I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree.”

I hated the fact that I’d hurt him. I seemed to know how to go for his throat. It shouldn’t bother me but it did. A few moments of uneasy silence passed between us. So unlike the quiet we had between us before. We could sit and read and never say a word and still feel like we’d spent time together. That ease was natural with him.

“Do you think Tix can hear the baby?” I asked the question because I couldn’t stand the silence.

Casey turned my way, drying his hands on a towel. “Do you want the answer I’ll give Kelsey or the real one?”

“Both.” I was intrigued. I thought he would tell Kelsey the truth about everything since he sometimes treated her like she was some kind of messiah.

Had I been jealous of his relationship with Kelsey?

“Kelsey, of course he can’t hear the baby,” he said as though talking to her. There was an amused sympathy on his face. “That’s impossible.”

“And the real one?”

He winced. “I can’t be sure, but I know a few things. Tix is blood oathed to the House of Sloane, and he’s an empath with strong powers of telepathy. It’s not outside of our reality that he would be able to communicate with his future lord and master. He knows things about Gray that Gray doesn’t tell

him. Like when Gray's in trouble. Tix can feel that across the planes. That kid she's carrying is unlike anything seen on the Hell plane before. He's part demon, part Hunter. We don't know what he's capable of."

Rather like the child the queen was carrying, although I did know what that darling would be capable of. Utter destruction. I didn't think he would want to hear that from me. "So Kelsey's baby is commenting on her sex life, and he's definitely seeing some things he doesn't think he should see."

A laugh burst from Casey's chest. "I hope she never figures out Tix might not be teasing."

I thought he was hedging, and not in the right direction. "I think Tix is being perfectly truthful. You know a demon loves it when the truth is the worst thing he could possibly say. Was he telling me the truth when he said he was a child of Lilith?"

Casey joined me, leaning against the wall and looking out over the now pristine space. "Yes. He's actually one of her favorite children."

"What's Lilith's place here in Hell? I know who she is but not if she has any power here." I know this will surprise a lot of people, but Hell isn't known for its feminist icons. The truth of the matter was most of the demonesses really were kept in the kitchen and barefoot and spitting out other demons. Wives were a thing, but there were usually a bunch of them, and monogamy didn't really matter. Well, it mattered to the husbands, but only where it concerned the wives. They could fuck all they liked. Men that is.

"She's considered the highest female on the plane. She's called the mother of demons. Basically she didn't like the whole 'stand by her man' even when he's a boring, overbearing asshole and chose to leave the Garden of Eden to join up forces with Lucifer. She gave birth to a line of demons who make up a hierarchy of Hell all on their own."

"How did Tix end up here? Or am I not seeing how this is a high position."

“It is among the servants,” Casey allowed. “Tix never talks about this. I had to look up records on him. He’s not a full-bred demon. He’s the product of Lilith’s affair with a reptile shifter.”

I could actually see that. His mannerisms could be reptilian, and sometimes his eyes went cold. “So why can Gray be a duke of Hell but Tix can’t?”

“Because Gray has far more power than Tix has ever thought of. Tix is thousands of years old, and his power never grew past his mental skills. Gray wasn’t supposed to take over for his father. He was supposed to serve his father. He was bred to be a focal point for his father’s needs. That all changed when he became the first dark prophet in a thousand years. He’s considered one of the most powerful creatures in Hell, but he’s also feared because he has connections to the Heaven plane and the Earth plane that bind him as well. Lucifer cannot command him away from his prophet duties. He cannot force Gray to do anything because like a satan, a dark prophet provides balance and therefore is immune to having another’s will forced upon him.”

“It’s why Lucifer had to have a contract with him rather than simply ordering him as he would any other demon,” I mused. I had to wonder if the elder Sloane had understood what he was doing the day he forced his son to take on prophecy. I would bet he’d been blinded with thoughts of how important the House of Sloane could become and not to the fact that there was now another Sloane who could take his place.

“And that’s what I’ve been thinking about. I have to ask if it wouldn’t be smarter to offer up a small contract in exchange for a single feather,” Casey said.

“It wouldn’t be a small contract.” I was surprised at how naïve he was being. From what I could tell, Casey had spent much of the last decade studying the demonic realm. He should know better. “If he gets a hint of how desperate the situation is, he’ll try to lock down Gray for eternity.”

“I still think we should consider it. There’s a lot of risk that comes with stealing from Lucifer,” Casey said.

It shouldn’t bug me, but I had to admit that I wouldn’t want that for myself. Gray had far more power outside a contract. The whole family was better protected that way. “How is Lucifer’s relationship with Lilith?”

A plan was brewing in the back of my head, but it could only work if the two weren’t close. I was betting Lucifer had a lot of pissed-off exes.

“They loathe each other.” Casey confirmed all my hopes. “After Lilith basically gave him an army, he shoved her to the side and never allowed her to take real power. What he gave her was a small kingdom she rules on her own. She’s a bit like Gray in that way. She rules the Daybreak realm that provides the plane with perfumes and oils. Lucifer doesn’t fuck with her.”

“But will she fuck with him?” If we had access to such a powerful person, we should probably use it. Shouldn’t we?

“You want to see if Lilith might help us steal what we need?” Casey asked.

“I think we should feel her out at least,” I admitted. “We need allies who know their way around. Tix is too nervous. He’ll teleport Gray out the minute he thinks his master could get a thorn in his claw. Maybe his mom is tougher.”

“She told God to fuck off, so she probably is.” Casey’s head fell back. “This is going to go sideways, you know.”

“Or you could pull this collar from my neck and I’ll see if I can help him without the feather.” I couldn’t. I hadn’t lied about that. It was the only way to create the dark light I needed to reverse the Uro curse. Only Lucifer himself could reverse it on his own.

Casey turned and suddenly he was in my space, his body up against mine. “See, when you try to not play fair with me, I want to not play fair with you.”

I found my hands up over my head, both wrists held in one of his. “You’re right. This isn’t fair.”

“Neither is lying to me.” He ran his nose over my neck, sending tendrils of sensation all over my body.

My lonely, desperate body.

I couldn't help but remember exactly how good it felt to feed the vampire, the way his fangs would plunge in, and what should have been pain was the most exquisite pleasure.

“I told you I don't want this,” I replied through the hitch in my breath as I felt a fang drag across my skin, threatening to break the surface, to well with blood that would fill his mouth and make him want to eat me alive.

He stopped and took a long breath in. “Then why is your pussy already wet, baby?”

Stupid vampires and their stupid heightened senses.

“Tell me again.” His body pressed mine against the wall, and I could feel his cock against my belly. “Tell me you don't want me and I'll walk away.”

He would, and I would be the one squirming and wishing I hadn't told him to go.

How could I possibly manipulate him sexually if we weren't having sex?

Why on all of the planes was I acting like some mewling prude who didn't want a vampire to go down on me? Because I did. Vampires are really good with oral. I mean it. They are spectacular. And patient. They can tongue fuck a woman for hours and never get bored or talk about their lower backs seizing.

I was Olivia Carey, leader of the unholy trinity. I was Profane.

Why had I been playing this virginal role when I should have been fucking for twelve years?

I tilted my head up and realized Lucifer was right. I was delusional.

I didn't want any vampire. I wanted him.

“Are you going to make me say it?” Pride wouldn’t let me say yes, and in that moment I wasn’t delusional enough to pretend this was about manipulating him. I would go back to that later. For now all that mattered was he was close, and I could feel how hungry he was.

He stared down at me for a moment, his eyes already a deep sapphire. When he got aroused that pure vampire part of his soul came out, along with his fangs and those gorgeous alien eyes that dragged a person in. He could use persuasion on me, but he didn’t. I wished he had because then I wouldn’t feel conflicted. Then I wouldn’t have to make the choice to press my chest against his and offer up my lips.

He answered me by kissing me, his mouth covering mine and letting me close off the rest of the world. I could pretend I didn’t have a choice. Hell, before we’d been on opposite sides of this war, that had been a fantasy of mine. The vampire who couldn’t control himself around me. Not that any woman really wants that. It was a harmless fantasy that my intensely in-control vampire excelled at.

He kissed me like he was dying of thirst and I was his favorite drink. His tongue surged in, and I realized how cold I’d been. He’d accused me of learning to close myself off, and I had to admit that he was right. I had shut down whole parts of my personality. I’d had to in order to survive.

Casey’s kiss reminded me how much I needed arms around me, needed physical affection. It was more than pleasure. It was the reminder that I wasn’t alone, that there was someone who cared if I was cold at night or couldn’t sleep. It reminded me that I was more than a power source for someone else’s spells.

I was...

He...

I pushed back, panic threatening to overcome me. “Stop.”

He stepped back, his fangs out, but I wasn’t afraid of him.

Shouldn’t I be afraid of him? He could rip me apart in every way. He was the enemy. He wanted to kill my master

and send us all back to the past.

“Baby, are you okay? I’m sorry. I moved too fast. Come on. No more pushing you,” he promised.

I was ready to run, to get away from him. I would go and sulk in my room.

“Come and let’s find whatever passes for the Internet here,” he said, taking a deep breath and forcing his fangs back. “We can find Kelsey and talk to her about Lilith.”

I could run but I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to brush against those awful thoughts, but I also didn’t want to leave him. There was something soothing about being close to him, something that felt real and familiar.

I wasn’t ready to face the revelations that simmered under my surface, but I also wasn’t ready to be alone again.

When he started out of the lab, I followed him.

Chapter Eleven



Kelsey

I walked to the end of the gardens, looking out over the tree line I'd been told was the barrier between the mansion and the woods that surrounded the place. There were mountains in the distance, clouds hanging low over it. The clouds were dark, an inverse of the ones on the Earth plane.

There was beauty here in Hell, too. Like many things in life, it all depended on who was in control.

I stared out, watching to see if I could find Trent and Fen running in the moonlight.

“Lady Sloane, you look lovely today. The Eye of Night looks beautiful on you. It’s good to see the lady of the house wear our great treasures again,” a somewhat squeaky voice said.

My hand went up to touch the big stone around my neck. I hadn’t taken it off when I’d showered. I hadn’t even thought about it. “Thanks.”

“May I offer you refreshment?”

I looked down at the small, red-skinned demon who stood there offering me a platter of meats and cheeses. She was around five foot and wore what I’d come to see as the uniform for the mansion’s staff. Everyone with the exception of Tix wore simple gray tunics that flowed around their forms and likely had some magic woven into their fabric because I’d already seen one of the cleaning staff change forms. One minute she’d been a somewhat human-looking lady stretching to get the top of that bookcase, and then next she had no trouble at all because she took her seven-foot demonic form

and dusted that sucker right off. Her clothes had stretched with her.

“Oooo, Crizzelo, that looks delicious,” a familiar voice said. “If I could eat, I would feast and feast here. There is nothing quite like Hell plane cooking.”

Lee was oozing charm as he strode up. And he already knew all the servants’ names. Despite the fact that everyone had thought he was human and wouldn’t get near a throne, Lee had been taught how to run a staff. They tended to adore him.

Crizzelo’s pitch black eyes widened as she took in the gorgeous vampire walking up. “Prince Lee, could I get some blood for you? I have my own, though I will say I don’t know it’s worthy of you. You might spit it out and curse the day you tasted it.”

Lee gave her a smile I’d seen him use when he was a kid and trying to put everyone at ease. “Never, but I’m also full up. Thank you so much. And thank you for bringing your lady some lunch. I was surprised when she didn’t eat at breakfast. That smelled delicious, too.”

The little demon flushed. Or at least I think she did. It can be hard to tell with red-skinned demons. At the very least she simpered and giggled and proved that Lee could charm all the ladies. And a good portion of the men. “Oh, she was nervous about the Dark Lord. But now she knows he can be kind, too. Like Lord Sloane.”

The chicks here loved my husband. Likely because he didn’t rape and beat them like his father had. I’d already heard a ton of horror stories about the previous Lord Sloane. Even in Hell, the serving class prefers to be treated with some dignity.

“I’m not sure about the Dark Lord’s kindness.” I wished Trent would come back. I was worried that he and Fenrir were taking so long. They’d taken off after Lucifer showed up, but that had been hours ago. I’d been invited to join Casey and Liv in the library, but I was feeling restless. “I get the feeling he’s going to put the heat on for Gray to sign another contract.”

“But he’s throwing a party.” Crizzelo placed the tray down and sighed like she was a teenage girl going to a dance. “I wish it was a ball, though. Oh, it’s been an age since Lucifer hosted celebrations. Sometimes when the vampires used to sign contracts with demonkind, there would be these parties and balls, and it was so fun to watch.”

“Did you work the parties?” I hadn’t had a chance to talk to the staff beyond my precious Eddie, and Tix, who I was still uncertain about. I needed to start learning the lay of the land here.

Her scraggly head shook. She reminded me a bit of the brownies who ran much of Frelsi, though the demon was taller and had fierce-looking claws on her hands. “Oh, no. That is for more beautiful servants. For the best of the best. They do not let servants like me work such a magnificent party, but for larger parties, I am allowed in the kitchens, and we can see some of what happens. It’s so lovely. I like the music.”

“Well, if we have a party, you’ll be out there serving drinks,” I promised her.

She gasped, her red eyes widening. “Oh, no, Lady Sloane. I cannot be seen at such a fine soiree. We would be the laughingstock of all of Hell.”

“I don’t think Lady Sloane cares what Hell thinks,” Lee offered.

“She should.” Crizzelo stepped back.

“What does the rest of Hell think of Lord Sloane?” This was what I wanted to gauge. Lucifer would tell me everything was fine, and Tix would say the same. Lucifer would do it because he wouldn’t want me on my guard. Tix would do it because to say anything else would be to demean his master.

I needed some truth.

She hesitated.

“I would prefer honesty.” I sat down on the marble bench that complemented the table. It looked like she’d brought me sandwiches and crackers, with a luscious-looking dip. There were some grape-looking fruits, and someone had made

macarons. Thank you, Eddie. “I need to know the truth so I can help my husband navigate this plane. He didn’t grow up here. He lived a mostly human life.”

Crizz seemed to think about it for a moment. “Well, my lady, they fear him, but every bit as much as they fear him, they hate him.”

Now we were getting somewhere. “Because he’s not a full-bred demon?”

Her head shook. “Oh, most aren’t, Lady Sloane.”

Lee sat down beside me, reaching out to the tea kettle so he could pour me a drink. “Kelsey, like many places across the planes, the idea of purity is used as a political wedge on the Hell plane. This is a regimented society. A demon like Crizz will always be a servant. There is no moving up outside of one’s class.”

“You are born a servant and you serve.” Crizz shook her head Lee’s way and took over the pouring of the tea into a delicate cup. “That is our place. But the current Lord Sloane was born a servant. He was literally bred to be his father’s focus, and yet his father is demoted and he is now our duke. There are some who think a rise like Lord Sloane’s is bad, that it could lead to someone like me thinking I could be something more as well.”

“So they think Gray taking over for his father means there will be disruption in the rank and file demonic world. That’s what the higher-ups of Hell think?” I needed to know who was against us.

Crizz nodded. “Yes, but it is lucky our realm is not seen as powerful. We don’t have the armies the other realms have. We are considered a neutral realm. When war happens here on the plane, we are obligated to stay out of it.”

“Because we provide the food.” Agriculture was a big theme here. I’d been told this plane created most of the food for the Hell dimension. There were crops and cattle, and the lake provided fish. There was a big dairy farm to the south. They milked a lot of things here. A lot of disturbing things. I

planned to not be very hands on. “Could someone else come in and easily take over? If, say, Lucifer decided he didn’t want Gray here, would he simply install someone else?”

“Not unless he wants to start a civil war,” Lee said, sitting back. “You see the only thing that would disturb the aristocracy more than Gray taking the kingdom would be Lucifer declaring the whole place his and taking over. I know Lucifer seems all-powerful, but Hell is a big place, and it’s always on the edge of war. Crizz, have you ever heard of a spell called an Uro spell?”

There was the sound of clattering as her hands went unsteady. “An Uro spell? Is that what happened to the wizard’s son?”

How much did they know here? This was supposed to be a backwater province, but they were up to date on their gossip. She would have seen Dean, but the fact that she knew his parentage shook me. “Who told you that?”

Had we fallen into the trap of not paying attention to the servants? If you ever need information on some rich dick, talk to his staff. I assure you they know all the dirt and are usually not paid enough to keep their mouths shut when you dangle a couple hundred in front of them. But in this case, *I* might be the dick.

“Everyone knows.” Crizz seemed to steady herself. “Myrddin himself announced he had a child on *Hell Tonight*. He said it’s made him even more certain of his path.”

“Did he happen to mention, say, a prophecy?” Lee asked.

“Oh, he addressed rumors of a prophecy concerning him.” Crizz set the tea in front of me. “He said it was all false and started by off-plane witches who want to invade our world. He thinks once the Hell plane and Earth plane are properly connected, we should take out those witches before they can harm us.”

I’d love to see Myrddin take on the witches of Arete. It was good to know he was already setting his sights on who to blame next. Right now, he was telling the witching world that

it was Daniel's people who held them down, and they must take us all out. But what happened if they achieved their goal? Autocracy doesn't flourish in peaceful times. When we're not at war, people tend to like some freedom. Myrddin needed to keep them all scared. "Did he ask for a bounty for the return of his son?"

Had I brought him here and put him in worse danger than he'd been in Frelsi? Would Lucifer let his friend know where his son was? A million things could go wrong with our plans.

"He didn't mention monetary payment. He mostly talked about how hard it is to be a father."

I had to stop my eyes from rolling to the back of my head. Fuck. He would probably be writing a parenting advice blog soon. So he wasn't declaring war. Yet. "You reacted to the idea of the Uro spell."

Her shoulders rounded as though she needed to protect herself. "It is a punishment spell here. It makes you feel like you're burning from within, but you can't move or speak or scream. It is a form of prison."

"How do they reverse an Uro?" If there was another way, I would take it.

"Eventually the demon can break free, though it takes longer for someone of my class. It can be hard to override our need to serve. When our masters tell us they are punishing us, we are trained to agree with them on everything. So we have to find a way to override the impulse to keep ourselves in torment for the master's pleasure."

"It's part of her class. They've been bred to be submissive," Lee pointed out like he wasn't describing a fucking crime against...well, everyone.

"Bred?" The tea sat in front of me, but I wasn't about to drink it until I was sure it wasn't poisoned. I learned from past experiences. Even when they weren't my own.

"Yes, one of Lord Sloane's duties is to match up the servants so they can breed a new line," Crizz said with a nod.

“I am old enough this cycle. I am not looking forward to it, but I will do as the master wishes.”

“He doesn’t wish, Crizz.” It didn’t matter what Gray wanted, though in this case I couldn’t see him setting up his whole staff to basically rape and be raped. That wasn’t happening on my watch. “There will be no forced matings this cycle.”

Or any other.

“Are you serious?” Crizz had gone still.

“You mate with whoever you like, whenever you like. That bod is yours, girl. I know Gray is the king here, but I’m the queen. Bodily autonomy for all,” I declared.

“The butcher’s son told me he would pay the master to pair us together and that he would do whatever he liked with me since all my parts will grow back. I don’t have to endure this?” Crizz proved that demons could do anime eyes, too.

I reached out and put a hand over hers. “You do not have to endure this, and you tell the butcher’s boy that I know how to slice off a set of balls, and he’ll find that out if he threatens my staff again.”

Her eyes shone with tears, and her whole body went soft as she squeezed my hand. “Oh, Lady Sloane, we’re so lucky to have you here.” She sniffled. “But I’m afraid there is not much that can be done for the wizard boy. There is only one spell to reverse an Uro, and it requires an item that is not available. It would be dangerous to even ask about it. I’m so sorry.”

I patted her hand. I knew what she was talking about. “Thank you for your wisdom. Now run and get me a couple of napkins. I can be a messy eater.”

She took off like a rocket.

I turned to Lee. “Can you check this for me? I assume Evan gave you a couple of charms. I used my last one earlier at breakfast.”

Because if it didn’t come right out of Eddie’s hands, I was being careful.

Lee was already in motion. He pulled a small charm out of his pocket. Fae magic. Evan was good with it. She had charms and talisman she always traveled with. This one in particular I found useful. It could tell when there was something dangerous in food. It would glow in the presence of anything that could kill or harm anyone in our group.

It was perfectly flat and unshiny.

I reached for one of the sandwiches as Lee sat back.

“We waiting on Fen?” Lee propped his feet up on the seat across from us.

“I’m worried they’ve been gone so long.”

“The moon’s full,” Lee pointed out. “It’s hard for them to resist. It’s okay. I’ll stay with you.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“I would disagree with you, but I’m not going to bother,” Lee said with a placating smile. “We’ll just call it a fun hang.”

I had to get used to the whole males-watching-over-the-pregnant-lady thing. “I thought you would stay near Dean.”

“Evan’s with him. At least now we know Liv isn’t lying to us.”

“She wouldn’t... I guess I don’t know what she would do now.” I stood because my restlessness was back. I looked to the tree line and saw a big figure stalk out.

It was too big to be Trent, so it was my baby boy who was stalking this way.

I stepped off the path to greet him.

“Kelsey, that’s not...” Lee was on his feet.

That was the moment I realized it wasn’t my sweet wolf son. I heard a low growl behind me.

Hellhounds. And we were surrounded.

* * * *

Liv

I looked down at the image of the brand on the dead cat and back up at the seemingly never-ending pages of recognized brands in the book I'd been handed. Luckily for us, the House of Sloane boasted what Tix had explained was an agricultural and farming library.

It's like a regular library except without any fun books to read.

So it fit the Hell plane motif of pure torture.

I pointed to the page. "This one is close, but not enough."

"I think we might need to go to the night market and ask some questions." Casey pinched the top of his nose as though trying to stave off a headache, which I happened to know he didn't have anymore. But he was young, and young vampires tend to cling to their human mannerisms.

Don't we all cling to what we know, to what feels familiar and safe?

Was I making the mistake of letting myself cling to him?

"I think that's going to have to be a you thing." I closed the book because it had been a while, and I was getting nowhere. "I don't think I'm allowed out of the house." A shiver went through me. The last few minutes I'd been feeling something coming off the walls. At least it seemed to. "Actually, I don't think the house likes me being here at all."

I stood. I was calmer now, though the encounter with Lucifer was still playing through my head.

"What do you mean the house doesn't want you here?"

A flash of cold went through me. "You can't feel that? It's like someone put up a ward."

This was where I would normally defend myself with a charm or talisman, or I would simply find the fucking ward and trash it. But I didn't have any magic, and there wasn't anything for me to punch.

Casey seemed to think for a moment, or try to feel. “Nope. I don’t feel a thing, so I have to think it’s meant for witches. Or it could be calling out to your human side.”

“I don’t have a human side.” The words were automatic. They came from my mouth without any need for me to think them. Those words had been buried deep in my soul, burrowing down.

Casey stared at me for a moment. “Olivia, your parents were human. You were a foundling witch. You didn’t even know our world existed until you were in high school. Did Myrddin make you think your parents were witches?”

My parents were unworthy.

A flash of my mom cuddling me and reading me a story about some fairy princess went through my brain. My dad lifting me up and tossing me in the air, and I didn’t care because he would never drop me.

I cut myself off from them. To protect them.

No. You did it because Myrddin told you to, and you didn’t want another lashing.

“Talk to me, baby. You’re remembering things, aren’t you?” Casey’s voice had gone low and soothing.

I didn’t want to be soothed. I needed to get out of here. “I’m going to be sick.”

He closed the book he’d been looking at and moved to me. “Come on. We can get you back to our room, and I’ll talk to the staff about what’s going on.”

Was someone trying to get rid of me? It would work because I hated that feeling in my gut.

As we walked to the door, a worse flash went through me. Pure ice seemed to stop me in my tracks, and my whole body started to shake.

Maybe whoever had put this ward in didn’t want to get rid of me. What if it was playing a game with me?

“Liv, you just went cold.”

It was good to know it wasn't all in my head. "I don't think I should go that way."

I took a step back, and the cold amped down slightly.

Yep, the fucker was playing with me. Hot and cold. Asshole. "Okay, you want me to go somewhere. Look, house, I can't do your bidding if you freeze off my hands. Same thing with burning me down when I get close to whatever you want me to find. So how about we be a bit more subtle."

"What's going on?" Casey seemed to be at a loss.

"I think we're playing a game of hot and cold. The house wants me somewhere that is not here but not in the hallway either." I was rewarded with the slightest of warm breezes. "Thank you."

"You're still talking to the house, aren't you?" Casey followed me as I turned and started up to the left side of the library. It was a large space with two spiral staircases that led to the upper four stories of the building.

Yup. They had that many agricultural records and not a single romance or mystery.

The air around me chilled.

"Oh, even I felt that." Casey put a hand out as though he could touch the invisible wall of cooler air. "We should go the other way."

I managed to not give him a hearty "duh" as I turned and started moving toward the right-hand side of the library. Warmth seemed to push me along. It was moving me toward the spiral staircase.

"What do you think it wants?" Casey was right behind me.

"How am I supposed to know?" I was at a loss. I'd been in a lot of weird situations, including haunted houses, but this was different. This wasn't a haunted house. It was an enchanted one.

I got to the bottom of the spiral and stepped on, certain I knew now where I was going.

“Uh, baby, I don’t think it wants me there.”

I had managed to get halfway up the first round. I looked down and Casey was still on the ground floor, and there were now a bunch of chairs blocking his way. So it wanted me to go alone. “I’ll be right back.”

“No, you won’t.” He stood there, frowning up at me. “You get down here, Liv. We have no idea what this thing is trying to do.”

But I kind of did. The house wasn’t exactly whispering to me, but I had such a strong feeling. It overwhelmed my senses. I had no doubt that if I hadn’t been wearing that stupid collar, I would have felt the effects but been able to think through them. The collar left me helpless, so this was really his fucking fault. I felt not a hint of guilt as I kept climbing.

“Hey, get out of my way,” Casey was saying.

I glanced down again, and the chairs were moving, keeping Casey away. Those chairs were stacked and moving in perfect synch.

It was kind of funny, and I wanted to watch Casey try to take on the furniture, but I had to keep walking.

Warmer. As I hit the third floor, it was like a blanket dropping over my shoulders, and I turned off there, going to the right...cooler. Left. I moved toward the left and down into the stacks.

It was quieter here. I could barely hear Casey cursing. There were a couple of candles that came on as I walked near. The stacks rose above my head, soaring into the shadows of the library.

I could hear the shuffling of tiny creatures moving, see their shadows before they disappeared again.

I kept walking, turning here and there and becoming entirely lost. When I could no longer hear Casey, I stopped. Here. I was supposed to be here.

Here was a dead end.

I picked up one of the books. It was in Demonish and apparently was all about how to prepare seeds for planting.

Not the one I wanted.

I hadn't wanted a book before, but now the need was right there. I needed to find the right book.

In the dreary dark, I let my fingers slide over the spines of the books. One way they were cooler. When I changed directions, warmth played on my fingertips.

And then I had it. I pulled the book free, ready to see what it had to say.

That was when the whole section clicked quietly and opened, revealing a hidden door.

Shit. I'd been hoping this was the house's way of helping a sister out. Up until this moment, I'd kind of thought the house was tired of watching us fumble and was simply leading me to the book I needed.

This was a whole room, and even with my powers bound, I could feel the magic coming from it.

I didn't want to go in. If I went in, things would change again.

I forced myself through because I wanted this change. I wanted out. I wanted to be free.

I stepped through the doorway and felt the moment I passed through the magical wall that separated these spaces.

This place was out of synch with the rest of the house. It existed in space that both was and wasn't part of the house. I would bet there was another door that led off this plane. This was a senior witch's sacred space.

I looked up in wonder at the vast array of ingredients this witch had acquired. She had bottles and jars that lined the floor-to-ceiling cases. And books. Oh, these were books I was interested in.

But then I caught sight of the big book in the center of the room. It was closed and on a lectern.

A grimoire.

There is nothing more sacred to a witch than her grimoire. It's the place she records everything she has learned. All her spells and curses and bindings. All her tonics and tinctures. A witch puts her soul in a grimoire.

I used to have one. My mom gave it to me when I was figuring out what I was. She'd found it online. It wasn't like the one in front of me. Mine had been new, but my mom told me one day I would find the person worthy of my knowledge. She'd promised one day I would give it to my own daughter.

Myrddin took it from me. He burned it as I stood there.

When you're good enough, you'll have a real one.

I hadn't even been worthy of a grimoire. He didn't think I was smart enough to have one. Why would he hold me above others? Why make me Profane?

"I've been wanting to talk to you," a soft voice said.

I started and turned, my heart racing. "Who are you?"

If this was a trap, I likely was about to die.

A woman stepped from behind the thick red curtain that separated the room from whatever connected to it. She was roughly five-five with flowing golden hair and the slightest glow about her. "I am the House Sloane and the House Sloane is me. Think of me as a physical manifestation of the house. Once I was an earthbound witch. I was taken into the House of Sloane many years ago, and I bonded with the house itself."

There were so many things that were wrong with the Hell plane. "And you wanted to talk?"

"I definitely wanted to meet you."

Was she under a mistaken impression? "You do realize I'm not Lady Sloane."

"Oh, goddess, of course I do. Lady Sloane has the heart of a wolf, and something like the brain of one as well. I can't actually communicate with her. Besides, she's not the one I wanted to talk to. I felt your presence the instant you appeared

on the plane.” She walked up to me, her unlined face frowning as she reached up and touched the collar that bound my magic. “Even in spite of this, I felt you. The power you must have when you’re not chained up like a dog.”

“Can you help me get it off?” She had some serious power, too. If she could break the binding spell, I could waltz right out of here. I could use my powers to transport Dean with me, and Myrddin could save his son.

She appeared to examine it for a moment. “I’ll have to think about it. It’s well done, and it’s perfectly Earth magic. Not a hint of Hell influence. That makes it harder for me. Though I was born to an Earth plane coven, my powers now are exclusively touched by this plane.”

So she was of no use to me. “All right, if you weren’t planning on rescuing me, why did you bring me here?”

“Can’t the physical manifestation of a mansion get lonely sometimes? You’re the only one who can feel me. Oh, I can influence the others, but you I can truly communicate with.” She wore a flowy purple gown that skimmed her delicate figure. She was slender and petite, and I wondered if she weighed a hundred pounds. Most of her weight would be hair.

I was deeply disappointed she wasn’t offering me anything of interest. She’d spent the entire day shoving me at Casey and then splitting me off from Casey and bringing me up here, and for what?

“You won’t be lonely soon because there is a vampire downstairs who will find his way up here.” If only Casey had been so concerned about me twelve years before. If only he’d been willing to fight to get me out.

She didn’t seem worried. “I doubt it. Even if he did, the door is closed. He won’t be able to find you.”

I turned and sure enough, the door had vanished, and I was now alone in a sacred witch’s space with a house. “What do you want from me? Companionship?”

“Is that so much to ask?”

“I don’t think I’m good company these days.” It was time to figure out what was happening here and how I got my ass out of it. “Besides, he might not be able to find the door, but I assure you he’ll start chopping the walls apart if he doesn’t find me soon.”

She frowned my way. “Well, that would be rude of him. Fine. I did want to do you a favor. I know what you’re looking for, and you can skip the night market. They wouldn’t tell you anything anyway. They’re far too scared of her to give away her secrets.”

Now I was interested. “Who?”

“The demoness who’s trying to kill Lady Sloane before she can give birth to her son,” the woman said gravely.

“I thought the murder cat was a mistake.”

“No, you didn’t.” She seemed to study me for a moment. “You knew it was about her because she brings chaos wherever she goes.”

I didn’t really like the sound of that. There were reasons Kelsey got caught in trouble. “She’s a Hunter. It’s her nature. She was put on the Earth plane to protect it. That means putting herself in shitty positions over and over again.”

Kelsey didn’t get to say “nah, I’ll sit this one out,” when trouble happened. She couldn’t skip an apocalypse.

“That isn’t how you’ve thought about her before. At night when you dream, you send them out,” she explained. “What you see when you dream, well, I can sense the echoes of your screams.”

A chill she hadn’t created went through me. Well, her words created it, but we weren’t playing her game anymore. “You can sense my dreams?”

She gestured to the collar. “Normally, no. Normally you would have some well-placed mental walls, I suspect, but she took those down, too. Well, that’s what demonic ladies do. They ensure their survival and the survival of their house above all others. I rather thought she might be different. Are you her servant?”

The question had my spine straightening. “Of course not. I serve Myrddin Emrys. I am the Hunter’s captive.”

Who was pretty much allowed full run of the place and who she was trusting to work with Evan. She’d pretty happily sold me off to Casey, though. I could blame her for that. And for not letting me go when I lost a fight with her where I was trying to haul her back to my house and then reprogram her so we could be a happy fucking family.

I wasn’t sure where my newfound sense of logic and fairness was coming from. Maybe it was my old sense overriding the conditioning I’d received.

Conditioning. Why would that word pop into my head? It wasn’t conditioning. It was an education. I had been raised with humans. What did I know about being a witch? What did I know about witches since I spent all my time with hunters and vampires and the Fae?

That was the conditioning.

Sure, years and years of friendship was conditioning, and two years of beatings and pain and misery was the education part of my existence.

“Her servant. Her prisoner. It’s kind of all the same down here. We’re forced to work for those considered above us. We’re nothing to them. I’ve sheltered the Sloanes for millennia, but the lord of the house cannot even sense me. Tix refuses to acknowledge me. If you wish to get in their bad graces, tell them you’ve met me. They will do whatever it takes to keep us apart.”

I could feel the gentle whisper of persuasion. She wanted to be my friend, to be my helper. Wouldn’t I like that, too?

It oddly moved me not at all. My brain was full of logic and reason, all of which told me this woman... thing... whatever, wanted something from me, and she was going to try to use persuasion to get it. But she’d also told me she would help me. “You said you might be able to get this collar off me. But I don’t see how, so I should probably go.”

“Oh, I can do it.” Her eyes had gone dark, that gentle persuasion fleeing in an instant. Now I could feel her will on my skin. “If I want you out of that collar, you’ll be out of it.”

“And what do I have to do to make that happen?”

She stepped back, her arms crossing over her chest. “Nothing yet, though I doubt you’ll have a problem with what I’ll request of you. You see, I’m tired of being trapped in this house. When I’m not in this room, I’m noncorporeal. But I have a plan. I’ve worked on a spell that will allow me to travel with another being.”

I knew exactly what she meant, and fuck that. “I’m not letting you possess me.”

“If not you, then someone else,” the woman insisted. “Come on, Olivia. I can get you out of that collar in a day or two.”

“You said it would be difficult.”

“But not impossible. You’ll leave if the collar comes off, right? You can teleport.”

She was starting to make sense. “Of course, and I can take someone with me. Maybe even two. If you can find a ride that’s not a member of my party, I’ll take you. But you can’t keep the body. Should we have a contract?”

She bit her bottom lip and seemed to think about the situation. “Oh, I would never be allowed to sign a contract. It will be a breach of trust if I make it out of here. I will have to hide for the rest of my long life. But Lord Sloane doesn’t even like how the house functions. Come on, Ms. Carey. Do you honestly care what happens to me if I get found out? As long as you’re back to your precious master, who cares? Think about how proud he will be. You will have brought back his... son. The boy is Myrddin Emrys’s blooded son?”

Damn Kelsey for putting this thing on my neck and leaving me open to every mind reader on the Hell plane. And there were a lot of them. “Yes. At least that’s what Kelsey and the royals believe. And yes, he will be pleased with me when I

save his life and take Dean Emrys to his one true father. He can take his place at his father's side."

How long would they "educate" Dean?

"Don't you want that chance? You don't have it without me. I really can get that collar off you. Now that I've seen it and have a record of it, I'll make one just like it so they won't fear you." She reached up and touched it.

I fought off a shiver because where she brushed against my skin, I felt a brutal cold. "How long will it take? If I can get out of here before Lucifer's dinner party thing, I would like to. My master will be far better at obtaining the resources we need than this ragtag team."

I did believe that. The likelihood of us getting that feather and getting away without at least a couple of us being eviscerated was low. The more likely possibility was that Lucifer realized we were stealing a freaking piece of him and we all died. Whereas Myrddin was respected by the Morningstar. He could likely ask the Dark Lord, and his son would be saved.

Or he would save Dean himself. It would be better to not owe anyone. If Lucifer made some deal with Gray to heal Dean, then he likely wouldn't help get Dean back to his father. Gray would make sure they kept control of Dean. Of course, to do that he would have to give up a piece of himself.

When I thought about it, escaping was actually good for everyone. If I got out of here with Dean, no one needed to steal anything from the Lord of Hell. Gray wouldn't have to negotiate at all. I was keeping them all safe.

The witch is trying to trick you. This can't be so easy.

That voice in my head was annoying.

And weird, when it shouldn't be. "I'll do as you ask if you answer a few questions for me."

Her eyes flared, and there was no way to miss the triumph there. "Ask. I see all things here."

“Can someone suppress the memories of a powerful witch?” I needed to speak with someone who would tell me the truth. Casey and Kelsey would do anything to trick me into coming back to them. This witch shouldn’t care.

“A powerful witch? Well, she would be smart enough to protect herself,” the house mused. “But there are ways.”

“What if a witch allows her master to use her body in the case of him needing an emissary in a far-off land?”

A brow rose over her ageless eyes. “You allowed him to speak through you.”

“Yes, but I remember what happened.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Because when you willingly allow another soul in, they can suppress you. Unless you fought him.”

He’d said I was the easiest of his emissaries. At the time I thought it was a compliment. What if it was nothing more than his opinion of how strong I was? Or rather weak. “I wouldn’t fight my master, but he’s always allowed me to be there with him.”

“Did he? Or did he plant a memory to replace a problematic one? Well, why would he do that? He doesn’t need to,” the house said, her gown flowing around her as she stood before her lectern and opened the grimoire. “It’s best not to think about such things, Olivia. Go back to where you’re happiest. Once you save the master’s child, you’ll be so far above the other witches that the past won’t matter. There’s freedom in letting go of the past and embracing the future. You were happier in the Coven House.”

I didn’t have to make decisions in the Coven House. I simply did. I simply obeyed.

How the fuck was that freedom?

But I wasn’t about to argue with the creature who could buy me actual freedom. “So you need a day or two?”

She didn’t look up from her grimoire. A green glow came from the pages. “Yes. Only that. Are you going to the party of

Lucifer's?"

I had no idea. "I was hoping we could get this done before the ball."

Her head shook like she hadn't heard a word I'd said before. "No. I need the party as a cover for the spell I'll have to work. Our staff will be distracted getting everyone ready and gossiping, and then they will likely throw their own get together since it's tradition. Lord Sloane won't be here. He might be able to feel that something is off since we're attuned. And that idiot Tix will certainly be at the party ensuring nothing goes wrong for his royals. It's the perfect time for me to slip inside a vessel, and you'll be able to walk out the next morning."

I just had to ensure no one got eviscerated. "In the meantime, you said you knew what I was looking for. If I can further this research thing we're doing, they'll trust me more."

And I might figure out who was trying to kill my...who was trying to kill Lady Sloane.

Dumbass. Kelsey. Good guy. Bad guy. She's still fucking Kelsey, the kid who clung to you when you were in school. The one who helped you figure out why things went weird around you.

My friend. My enemy. It didn't matter. She was always one of the most important people in my universe.

The house didn't look up, and I got the feeling she was ready to dismiss me. "Oh, you're looking for who sold the drixalranous."

"Yes, there was a brand on his body. It was obvious he wasn't a wild creature," I replied. "But there are over three million different brands recorded in the agricultural census. If I had my powers..."

I left it dangling because we all knew I wouldn't be here if I had my powers, but still.

"I'm sure you would already know the answer," the house explained. "Luckily, I have them all memorized, and I've seen the brand. You're looking for the leader of a small plane where

many of our perfumes and oils come from. It's the Daybreak Kingdom she formed on her own. I'm surprised she would be involved. She normally only talks to her sons. Now that might be why. Her favorite son works here."

Shit. "Are you talking about Lilith?"

"Yes, the mother of demons. Though you should know a lot of that is hype. She's not as powerful as the humans make her sound. She couldn't handle her place. She thought she was better than everyone else."

"Well, there were only two people at the time, so I think she just thought she was cooler than Adam," I pointed out.

She looked up, and there was a pit of black where her eyes used to be. "You'll do well to remember what I told you before, witch. There is freedom in knowing where you belong, in having the boundaries of the universe in place. Lilith is the epitome of chaos. It's good that she's shoved away in a nothing plane of existence."

A shiver of fear went through me, the instinct that *this* was a place of danger. I'd pushed this entity and I needed to back off. I was wary of her, but she couldn't know that.

I could still do this. For the last twelve years I hadn't needed to soothe anyone. I'd learned to smash my way through barriers, but there was still enough of the old Liv inside me I could deal with this. I schooled my expression. "Sure. Like you said, I don't actually care about anything but getting out of here. But if we've got a few days, I might as well figure out why Tix's mom wants the new Lady Sloane dead."

She shifted back to her grimoire and flicked a hand my way. The door was suddenly open. "Excellent. I'll let you know if I need to talk to you. You should hurry, though. It appears she's trying again. Well, that's Lilith for you. If she doesn't succeed, she'll give it another go, and with more dangerous creatures."

Kelsey was in trouble?

Damn it. I wanted to say I didn't care, but I was out that door in a heartbeat, yelling for Casey and trying to figure out where the battle was this time.

Chapter Twelve



Kelsey

I found myself in the middle of snarling hellhounds, Lee against my back as we made a slow circle to keep continual watch.

“It’s going to be okay,” Lee promised. “I assure you I can take on a couple of hellhounds. I bet they don’t even fart fire.”

I was glad Evan had taken Puff upstairs with her. If he’d been out here with me, he would already be a treat for these massive brutes.

I counted three and wondered how the hell they’d managed to get onto our land without detection. Although I supposed we had hellhounds running about. Which made me wonder why they weren’t here defending their territory.

“Do you think they belong to the pack that lives here?”

“If they do, then something’s gone horribly wrong because they’re not supposed to be able to harm you,” Lee replied. “Besides, I thought I saw Tix locking them in their kennel earlier today. I don’t think our pack is free to roam around right now.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. It would explain why these hounds hadn’t been confronted.

I heard a howl in the distance.

“That’s Fen,” Lee said with absolute certainty. “He’s picked up the scent, and he’s coming. Do not let them bite you, Kelsey. Sometimes a hellhound is bred with enough serpent DNA that his saliva is venomous. It’s not legal, but here we are.”

On the Hell plane, where rules were both paramount and a suggestion. It depended on how high up you were in the pecking order.

“How far away is he?” I wasn’t sure if his powers worked on hellhounds who weren’t puppies who considered him a dad. I felt a sizzle on my right side and knew I was sporting my handy demon arm, which had tough enough skin it could handle those teeth.

I hoped because getting a big dose of venom probably wasn’t good for Rain.

Not Rain. Damn it. I wasn’t naming my baby Rain, but it was kind of nice.

“From the sound of that howl, he’ll be a few minutes.” There was a tension in Lee’s voice I didn’t normally hear, but then I hadn’t been in battle with vampire Lee. “Really wish you’d brought like a sword or something. I’m worried that gun is going to send them into a frenzy, and that caliber might have worked on the murder cat, but it’s not going to work on the hellhounds.”

I stared at the one who was right in front of me. There was at least twenty feet separating us from the big canine.

Hellhounds are like every other creature. If you love them and treat them well, they’re puppies who will take the heads off of anyone who threatens you and they’ll spend the rest of their time drooling and trying to get treats and belly rubs and cuddles.

If you train them to kill, withhold any kind of affection, they will treat the world like something to put down.

The difference between the two? Fear.

“Kelsey, look at their eyes,” Lee said.

A hellhound’s eyes go fiery red when they’re mad enough to kill.

So why were theirs a milky white? “It’s a spell. They’ve been spelled. We can’t kill them. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Yes, we can totally kill them,” Lee countered.

“No. We can’t.”

There was a low growl from the hound in front of me, and then he leapt.

I’m a pretty solid chick. I’m not like the tallest, but I’m muscular, and I’m pretty sure my bones are way stronger than a human’s. I’d been freaked out by the murder cat, but I’d had really good sex since then, and that always puts me in a calm mood. And then there was all the tension with Lucifer, so I was also ready to choose violence. I heard Lee yell out, but I was busy.

I planted my feet and reared back my demon hand and punched the fucker right in the face.

The hellhound jerked back and flew halfway across the yard.

I wasn’t usually that strong.

I felt a flutter go through me.

Baby boy was in there, and he was lending his mama some serious demon strength.

“Whoa,” Lee said, sidestepping his own hound. “I do not remember you ever doing that.”

The other two hounds were taking up the fight. One leapt on Lee’s back, his mouth open and teeth going for Lee’s neck.

Lee jumped up and back down, pinning the hound behind him and then rolling away.

The hellhound I’d punched was getting up and shaking it off. That was when I heard the growl from behind me.

I ducked as the big body flew over me and landed near its brother. Both hounds settled back on their haunches and then leapt toward me.

See, I was so much looser. I know it’s protocol to take a dose of vampire blood before going into battle, but I’m telling you that an orgasm is every bit as important. I caught the one

to the right with my fist and kicked out left, shoving that one to the side.

Another howl split the air as I moved back, giving myself some space. Lee was rolling on the ground with his hound, growling every bit as much as his opponent.

That was when I noticed they had something I hadn't seen before. Collars.

Hellhounds don't wear collars. Their owners don't dress them in cute sweaters for Christmas or doggie PJs. They do not suffer through those humiliations lightly.

So something was wrong with that collar.

“Kelsey!”

Evan was running down the stairs, and so was my worst nightmare. Now that's a hyperbole for you. Of course my worst nightmare would be the hound chewing Lee's head off and turning him into a big pile of dust. Or Fenrir or Evan, same thing without the pile o' dust. But in that moment with Lee handling his hound, Evan still pretty far away, and Fen being in a massive wolf king body, that puppy running down the stairs like he was three hundred pounds bigger than he was scared the holy fuck out of me.

Lee tossed his hound off and managed to jump in front of me as the one I'd kicked nearly beheaded me.

“Kelsey, what the hell,” Lee said as he diverted the big guy.

“It's Puff,” I yelled as I took off. I was glad I'd traded in the ornate blazer and corset for a sturdy bra and T-shirt, and I'd ditched the heels as soon as I could. Running across the grass in fuzzy slippers wasn't ideal, but it was better than the alternative.

Evan was crying out as she realized what was about to happen.

She wouldn't make it in time. Puff was already facing off with a hound who had hundreds of pounds on him. He looked so small standing there, his front paws planted on the grass

and his tail up and ready for battle. His growls were nothing compared to the deep rage that came from the other hound.

That hound could swallow the pup in one bite. And then he would swallow Evan, because she wasn't stopping. She would try to climb in and save her pet.

"Get him," Lee yelled. "I'll handle these two."

I started across the yard. "Try to get the collars off them. I think that's holding the spell."

I was almost to Puff when another person crashed onto the scene, grabbing the dog with one hand and rolling.

Liv?

She'd come from the side, not hesitating. She simply tossed her body toward Puff, barely missing the attacking hound's jaws. She rolled again and cradled the puppy to her chest, her eyes finding mine.

I nodded her way before sending an elbow back. It cracked against the hound's strong snout, and I heard a whimper.

I didn't want to hurt them, but I had to keep them from killing us.

When the next one came, I sidestepped him but managed to get my fingers under his collar. I lifted him with my demon arm and tossed him aside in a heavy arc. Like I was throwing a shot put.

The hound flew through the air and landed in a heap in the garden.

"Where did that come from?" Liv was on her feet, passing the puppy over to Evan.

"That is a completely new power." Casey jogged up to join us. "Uh, should you do something about that one? He looks angry."

Lee had one of the hounds on its back, and he was pulling at the collar as the dog fought fiercely.

The one I'd thrown was struggling to get to its feet.

And the last one was standing there, growling at me.

I'd had enough for one day. I stared at the big dog and pointed a finger his way. "Look here, buddy. I'm not doing this with you. Stand the fuck down because I will not let you eat my unborn child. He's going to inherit all of this someday, and you are not getting any treats if you come one step closer. I'm not joking. You are on my last nerve."

The hound Lee had on the ground was moving in next to the one in front of me.

She. Suddenly I knew she was a she, and she was bound somehow to the other hound. She made a sound almost like a purr and then she was rubbing against him.

She licked his face, and the big, murderous dog seemed confused.

Liv moved in next to me. "Someone sent them after you. It looks like the spell was in the collar."

It was good to know I was right about that. I moved toward the hound as Lee snuck behind him. I needed his eyes on me.

"Kelsey, how about I be the bait?" Casey said. "I'm not pregnant."

"She's not incompetent," Liv complained. "Do you honestly think a slightly pregnant Hunter isn't stronger than an academic?"

"That's very sexist of you, Casey." Evan looked way calmer now that her puppy was curled against her chest. Puff seemed to have figured out we had this handled. "Don't kill them. They're under a spell."

The hound Lee was sneaking up behind growled and started for me.

Lee leapt on his back, wrestling the big hound. I got in there, pulling on the collar until it came off, and we all fell in a big heap.

I found myself on the ground, staring up at the star-filled night.

And there was a massive canine face above mine, big black doggy eyes staring down, and that sucker could drool.

He leaned over and licked me. Like really licked me.

“It’s cool. These aren’t venomous.” Lee stood over me, too, grinning down. “I think they’re pets.”

“Uh, what’s going on, Mom?” Fenrir was out of his wolf form, and he didn’t have pants on. I’d been so concerned with the hellhounds, I hadn’t seen him join us. He was standing there in all his glory, hands fisted at his hips. “I caught their scent and realized they were coming for you. I didn’t expect to find them trying to lick you to death. Come on, man. Have some dignity. You’re a hellhound.”

The hound did that doggy grin thing, and then he was all about Fen.

All three of the hounds surrounded my wolf king son like they knew he was the leader. Even if he wasn’t wearing pants.

“Yeah, calm down, guys. I’ll figure it out.” Fen looked to Lee. “You got any treats?”

Lee gave him a what-the-hell look while Casey helped me off the ground. “My best friend is a wolf a whole lot of the time. Course I have snackums. Here you go.”

He tossed Fenrir a small bag from his pocket.

I saw the moment my baby boy considered not giving them away. “You are not that hungry, Fenrir Owens. They have been through something terrible.”

“Fine.” He opened the bag and started passing out treats.

I moved in beside Liv, watching the beasts who’d tried to murder me frolic around my son. Who needed pants. “That was a nice save. I thought you didn’t care about small creatures anymore.”

“I never said that.” She was back to frowning and looking broody.

“No. You said something about Myrddin is the way and the only way and he’s also light and dark, and all things should

bow to the master.”

She snorted. “I know I never said that.” She sniffled. “I didn’t want to have to clean up the blood.”

“There wouldn’t have been any blood. That sucker would have swallowed Puff whole.”

“Oh, there would have been blood when the princess went in after her dog,” Liv assured me.

“Thank you for sparing me that.” Evan turned toward the stairs. “I’ll go grab him some pants. He’s too used to being naked, and I see we already have prying eyes. Yeah, she-devil. I see you, and I can use a bow and arrow.”

There was a rustling from the bushes and then something running away.

“Hey, baby.” My wolf had joined us. Like our son, Trent was standing there in all his glory. “Sorry I’m late. Fenrir is fast. It looks like you have it handled. What happened? Did the hounds scare it away?”

“The hounds were it. Evan, grab some pants for Trent, too.” Trent was also accustomed to being naked, and he was superhot. Normally I liked to look at him, but there were a lot of hungry eyes around this place, and I’d been told things could get freaky here. “Someone spelled the hounds.”

Liv walked to where one of the collars was on the ground. She picked it up and examined it while Casey moved in around her, obviously keeping watch. “There’s a symbol.”

Casey whistled. “It’s the same as the brand we found on the Hell cat. We were in the library trying to figure it out when...”

“We did,” Liv announced. “We found the symbol. It belongs to the Daybreak Kingdom not far from here. It belongs to Lilith’s kingdom.”

Well, shit. I’d only just learned the woman existed, and she was already a pain in my ass.

* * * *

Liv

“Hey, what’s going on? I tried to get to you, and this fucking house kept me out. What happened in that library?” Casey asked the question quietly as we stood to the back of the salon where everyone in our party seemed to be meeting.

How many times had I stood in a group like this, offering up my advice as we tried to figure out some mystery or the next best step because some asshole demon was coming after us? We would sit and eat and argue and work it all out.

When I was in conference with Myrddin, I sat silently. I agreed. I praised. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“It led me to the right book.” I wasn’t about to tell Casey I’d made a deal with the embodiment of the house to smuggle her to the Earth plane and have no regard whatsoever for what she intends to do there. I was sure she’d live a fun, safe-for-humans, never-criminal life.

Yeah. Even I wasn’t buying that, but so far she was my only real option to get out of here. I didn’t see how I managed to escape without my powers.

“Why didn’t it let me come up with you?” Casey wasn’t letting this go, and I was starting to get annoyed.

We had other things to worry about. “I don’t know. It’s a house. Why don’t you ask it.”

“I find it interesting that the house always leads you to me. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure it nudged me to the trellis I used to get inside last night. So I don’t know why it wouldn’t let me protect you.”

“From books?” I wasn’t about to tell him that several times during that brief exchange I’d felt threatened. “What were they going to do to me?”

“All right. How did you know Kelsey was in trouble? Don’t deny it. There wasn’t any decipherable screaming when you took off. If I couldn’t hear her, you certainly couldn’t.”

“The house told me.” How to salvage this? See, this was where I’d fucked up. I’d acted emotionally and stupidly, and now I had to lie. Well, twist the truth. “It wasn’t like it whispered. I got the sudden feeling that I should go to the garden, and I knew it was Kelsey. Who else would it be? She’s the one who’s always in trouble.”

“She wasn’t the one you saved.”

Yep. I’d acted stupidly because it was obvious Kelsey and Lee could handle the hellhounds, and the only one who would have died was the farting puppy.

And I’d seen it happen in my head and my body reacted. I’d launched myself across the yard, truly willing in that moment to do almost anything to save that dumb dog.

“The princess would have been intolerable if her dog got eaten.” I tried to shake off how relieved I’d been when Puff didn’t have to try to grow back any of his parts. He’d wriggled in my arms and licked every bit of skin he could find. He hadn’t seen me as a threat in that moment.

“Well, she definitely appreciated the save,” Casey said quietly. “I wish you would tell me what really happened.”

At least this man couldn’t read my mind. I would be in trouble if he could. “I did tell you. I’m sorry I lost the book. It’s confusing up there, and then I knew I had to get to Kelsey. I don’t remember what stack it was in.”

After I’d explained how I knew it was Lilith, Gray had asked me to show them where the book was. I’d had to come up with the confused-girl story really fast.

We’d searched for an hour, all of us in the upper library seeking something that never existed. The other thing I couldn’t find again was that door. I’d broken away and tried to locate the book I needed to pull, but I swear it was gone.

Lucky for me, Gray had another way to ID the brand and the hellhounds.

“I know you trust Tix,” Kelsey was saying, “but this is his mom we’re talking about. From what I’ve overheard, he adores her and she him. Why would he take our side?”

“Because he doesn’t have a choice.” Trent was back in pants. Which he didn’t have to do on my account. Despite the fact that I hadn’t been around Fenrir in years, I totally turned away because...he’s still a kid in my head. The way Lee and Evan are. When I look at them, I see their little faces as they asked for candy or if I would play a game with them.

I always had candy, and there was no game this teacher couldn’t play.

I kept it in my purse. Packs of chocolates or gummy bears and worms.

But Trent was fair game. He was totally an adult the first time I saw him, and he was hot. Like smoking hot. The wolf kept things tight, if you know what I mean.

Trent settled himself beside Kelsey on one of the luxurious sofas. Eddie brought a tray of something and placed it on the table in front of Kelsey. The tray was a beautiful, ornate crystal that looked like it cost a fortune.

“Is that spray cheese and crackers?” It looked like a joke. Like someone was pranking the beautiful crystal tray.

“Yeah, and jalapeno poppers,” Casey whispered back. “She’s got some weird cravings, and Eddie’s running his cloven hooves off to keep up with her.”

Diva. Except I knew it wasn’t Kelsey. Kelsey likely mentioned she was slightly hungry, and Eddie freaked out. He was a high-strung little guy, and taking care of his people was his reason to live.

Kelsey put a hand on Eddie’s shoulder, obviously thanking him.

I used to be able to do that. I would casually mention to Eddie or Albert that I was hungry and suddenly there was food in front of me, and not nutritious crap that’s supposed to enhance our powers. It was good food with carbs and everything.

Now I would get the cold shoulder and be told to rummage through the pantries for myself, and all because of some dumb misunderstanding.

“I’ll figure it out,” Casey whispered in my ear. “Come and sit with me. You deserve to be here. You brought us the most important clue to date. Besides, I’m not letting you out of my sight again now that I know the house has a problem with me.”

“I can stand.”

“Liv, you haven’t eaten. You’re not steady on your feet.”

I wasn’t, and he was right about the food, but I was protesting.

“Do you want me to force feed you, Olivia? Because I will.” He was so arrogant and gorgeous and irritating. “You choose.”

Sometimes malicious compliance is called for. I gave him my sweetest smile. In this case, his status as my husband was going to help me out instead of punishing me. No. I wouldn’t be the one punished.

It was also time for some confidence. “Tix cannot commit any act that could harm his master or his house.”

I walked around to the sofa across from Kelsey and Trent. The kids were sitting together closer to the fire, Evan on Fenrir’s lap and Puff on hers. Lee lounged in his chair looking like the brat prince he pretended to be.

Gray paced, moving to the door and back to the fireplace, over and over again. “The problem is the definition of the word *harm*, but in this case, I do believe he will tell me the truth.”

“And then turn around and call his mom.” Kelsey had a small plate in her hand.

“Not if I order him not to,” Gray said with a sigh. “But it’s possible that there will be gossip, and she could find out that way. Our planes aren’t that far off. We share some specialized workers. They’re bound to talk. Of course those shared

workers could be the way the hounds got on the plane. I seriously doubt Lilith brought them here herself.”

Casey sank to the seat beside me like it was his place. “Someone already knows. The house.”

Gray’s head came up. “The house?”

I looked over the tray, and there was more than cheese and crackers and some poppers. There were mini tacos, and what looked like pan-fried dumplings, and every kind of hot sauce a pregnant wolf could possibly want. There was Tabasco and Sriracha, and what looked like a chili oil for the dumplings. “I skipped breakfast. Would Eddie be offended?”

Kelsey frowned. “Why would Eddie be offended?”

“Because she tried to kill him a couple of times,” Trent said casually.

Guilt flashed through me along with guilt’s best friend, shame. “I never targeted Eddie. I’m sorry if he got caught in the cross fire. I wouldn’t try to take out Eddie. It would be like taking out a puppy.”

“But a puppy can’t teleport an army,” Evan pointed out, scratching Puff’s belly. “He’s always been a target for that alone. Albert’s a target, too. Albert has some important ties to the Hell plane. Not every demon here is all in on the take over the Earth plane plan.”

“Because that’s not...” Why should I bother arguing? I started to stand. “I’ll be up in my room.”

“Olivia, sit down and eat,” Trent said in that alpha wolf voice he rarely used.

I found myself sitting back down.

“Eddie won’t mind if I share with you.” Kelsey frowned. “Crap. Maybe we shouldn’t. I’m afraid I’m all about the hot sauce right now. Everything is infused with it.”

“I love a good hot sauce.” I didn’t. I’m kind of a wimp when it comes to hot sauce, but I knew someone who was worse, and it would be worth it.

“No, you don’t.” Casey sat up, his head swiveling around like he was looking for Eddie. “Let’s get you some pasta or a burger.”

I bet he would love that. I got my own plate and a couple of tacos that I poured some Cholula on. A lot of Cholula, actually.

“Why does it feel like something’s happening?” Fenrir asked. “Also, those tacos smell delish, and don’t tell me I shouldn’t have any. I had to give all those treats to the hellhounds. I didn’t even get one.”

“I don’t know, but I can feel Casey’s fear from here,” Lee replied, sitting up because we now had his attention.

“It’s not fear.” Casey’s jaw firmed. “Liv is welcome to eat whatever she likes, but she should remember how hot that sauce can be. She’s not a big spice lover. Sometimes the pepperonis on her pizza are too spicy.”

“You should allow that twelve years apart can change a girl’s tastes,” I said, putting that taco to my lips. The scent hit first, opening my sinuses. Yeah, this was going to hurt.

“If Casey can taste the food she eats,” Evan began, “would he feel that burn from the hot sauce?”

I bit down and let it flow over my tongue. The burn was instant.

“Motherfucker.” Casey stood, and then he was the one who was pacing.

Gray chuckled, watching Casey. “You do know you just proved his claim.”

Like that claim needed real proof. I took another bite. This one wasn’t too hot, actually. The taco was excellent. “And this is what he gets until he breaks the claim. Hope you like ghost pepper wings.”

“I do.” Kelsey’s eyes had gone wide. “I didn’t think they would be so delicious. I tend to stay away from hot sauce. It gives me indigestion, but I can’t stop eating it. The hotter the

better. Last night I made Gray get me chocolate ice cream slathered in caramel and buffalo sauce. I was so ashamed.”

I should have known her pregnancy would be fun to watch. I finished off my second taco and reached for the dumplings and chili oil. “Nothing to be ashamed of, though you should know that witches follow a particular diet when pregnant. They have to think of the young witches they carry.”

“You know your shoulders straighten back when you go into superior-witch mode.” Kelsey dredged a chip through a rich-looking picante. “I bet I know who their dietician is.”

“Myrddin, of course,” I replied automatically. And then thought about it. What the fuck did Myrddin know about childbirth? About being pregnant? The only child the man ever had he’d shipped off the plane.

Which was a mistake, according to him.

But the queen had told me Myrddin had arranged the death of her old bodyguard, Kelsey’s biological father, because of a prophecy that he was one of two creatures who could kill him. According to what the royals discovered, Myrddin had sent the other off plane before he was born.

Dean.

Why would the royals lie to me?

“Hey, stop thinking.” Kelsey put a hand on mine. “I’ve watched you. When you think about Myrddin too hard, you get sick, don’t you?”

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous.” The fact that it kept happening didn’t make it any less ridiculous. There was another explanation. “You know it all started when you put this collar around my throat. And I’m not used to being around so many different creatures. I’m probably allergic to one of you.”

“She used to say she was allergic to my feet,” Lee said with a grin.

“That was her go to when she didn’t want to deal with something she considered slimy or stinky,” Trent pointed out.

“One time Rhys brought home a perfectly harmless garden snake, and you would be shocked how fast Liv Carey was allergic to snakes.”

The memory struck me, sending a sweetness through my system. Rhys had been so proud and wanted to show me his new friend. “He stuck it in my face. I was also allergic to worms and dirty diapers.”

“Though she changed her fair share of those,” Kelsey reminded me with a smile. “She was the best babysitter when we were in high school.”

I’d been the go-to sitter of our whole neighborhood. Kelsey would come by and sit with me after the kids were in bed, and we would talk and do our homework, and her brother Jamie would pick us up because I didn’t have a car. I’d had the biggest crush on Jamie when we were in high school. Not that I would have told her that. I will go to my grave before I admit it.

How long had it been since I’d gotten to sink into sweet emotion? Since it didn’t wreck me to think of the people I’d loved.

Love.

“Liv, you okay now?” Gray asked.

I was. The pressure that had started to build was gone again. They’d turned it away by getting me to think about something else. Something besides questioning the reality of the last dozen years. “Yeah.”

“Good, because we need to figure out what we’re going to do,” Kelsey began. “If you want to blow out Casey’s mouth, try the poppers. Eddie left all the parts that contain capsaicin oil because I crave it right now. The peppers were grown here on the Hell plane, so they’ve got quite a kick.”

“Or you could give peace a chance,” Casey said with a hint of desperation.

I picked up the pepper. It was way more fun to torture my husband than to think about the past. “Like Gray was saying, I

think Tix is our best shot at getting some intel. Has anyone besides Tix met Lilith?"

Gray's head shook. "I haven't. She keeps a pretty low profile. She's got sons all over the power structure here on the Hell plane, but she's not seen much in politics."

"*Seen* being the operative word." Casey's eyes were still on that popper in my hands. I put it back down, and he seemed relieved. "There have always been rumors that Lilith influences her sons and has a lot to do with the demons who would prefer another leader than Lucifer."

He'd relaxed his guard and was in his happy place, telling us all the stuff that big brain of his knows. So I bit off half that popper.

I had immediate regret followed by sheer joy because Casey actually hit his knees.

"Please drink some milk," he begged.

Kelsey's eyes rolled. "Don't be a baby. They're delicious. Right, Liv?"

Well, revenge was. I didn't know about the popper because my mouth was on fire, and I had to focus to not cry.

"I hope I don't have this power." Lee was watching in horror. "Think about it, Fen. If you could taste what Evan eats, you would have to eat kale."

"It wouldn't hurt him to eat a vegetable," Evan grouched.

"Yeah, it would if it was kale," Fen replied.

"Please don't eat kale." Casey sounded like his whiny, man-baby self from years before.

I'd kind of liked taking care of him. It only worked because he was the type of boyfriend who got up before me to make coffee he couldn't drink.

Wait. Something hit me in that moment. Something I hadn't thought of before.

"You don't like coffee." I stared at him for a minute. He'd talked about how his morning drink had been caffeinated cola

because he didn't like coffee or tea. Yet he'd made both for me on a regular basis.

"I don't." He spoke slowly, like every word bought him a couple of seconds before I blew out his taste buds with satanic sauce. "I hate it, but I got used to it."

"But you made it for me every morning and never told me you hated it." At the time I certainly hadn't known he could taste what I ate.

"Because you love it, so I love it, too. Not for the taste. It tastes like someone wiped satan's butthole and brewed it down," he began.

"It does not," Evan argued.

"Hey, girl who thinks cilantro tastes like soap," Casey pointed her way. "We all have our DNA challenges. I can't stand the taste of coffee, though I quite like the smell. But what really made me happy was how Liv would put her hands around the mug like it warmed her. She would smell it and get this sweet smile on her face, and then she would take that first sip and I would kind of grit my teeth but then I could tell how much she loved it. And I loved her. It's funny. I always wished my dad and mom had been more demonstrative. They weren't the kind to kiss in public or to say I love you a lot. But my dad always made sure she had a glass of wine waiting if he got home before she did, and she watched his favorite shows with him even though I know she didn't like much TV. But he needed someone to talk to. Is it dumb that I can't stop thinking about what Lucifer said about them?"

I knew that had ripped him up, and I couldn't let another moment go past because I knew the actual truth. Lucifer, you see, liked to lie.

"They mourned you." I put the plate aside entirely now because my silly attempt at revenge had blown up in my face. Now there was a hole opening up inside me, one I didn't realize I had. Or I thought I didn't care about anymore. "I think it was hard on them right after you died. You never looked them up?"

Casey's head shook. "It's not something we're encouraged to do. I'm supposed to stay away from my hometown for at least seventy years. I thought it would hurt too much, and then we were in the middle of a war, and I definitely didn't want to point out to anyone that they're alive. But you knew. Are they still together?"

I had looked them up a long time ago. The fact that I'd kept tabs on them even during the war... Well, if I thought too long and hard, that headache would start up again. "Yes. Your dad retired recently, and they're RVing around the States. I have a fake profile I follow their socials with."

He stared at me for a moment, getting that stillness I associated with deep emotion from him. Casey seemed like a guy who wore his heart on his sleeve, but that's mostly a function of his goofball half. There's another part of Casey, the deep part that shoved everything down so he didn't have to confront it. "I'm glad to hear that." He took a deep breath and turned back to Gray. "So, we should bring Tix in and see what he knows?"

"Or we should take Kelsey Jean right back up topside." Gray looked to his wife, and whatever he saw there had him putting his hands up in defeat. "I have to put it out there."

"He never learns, baby," Trent said with a wolfish grin. "It's why I'm always the favorite."

Gray snorted slightly. "Sure, you are."

I was going to ask Casey a question, but the doors to the salon opened and Tix entered, his hands fluttering and followed by three bouncing hellhounds.

"Lord Sloane, the strangest thing has occurred," Tix announced. "These are my mother's sweet pets. Hestia, sit, please. You, too Hercules and Perseus. Everyone sit."

The dogs continued to wriggle and bounce around. Kelsey saved her tray of fire, which was really intriguing to those canines.

Puff was squirming in Evan's arms. "Calm down. We don't know if they'll eat you."

“Perseus,” Tix exclaimed. “That is not proper. Those curtains are expensive. Don’t pee on them. I swear, Lord Sloane, I ensured they had time to relieve themselves. Hestia, that is not a chew toy. That is a very rare artifact.”

“I think that one is a little... Well, he’s found a lover,” Lee pointed out, laughing behind his hand.

It was complete chaos.

“Sit.”

Every canine in the room stopped at the sound of Fenrir’s growled command. I looked over, and he was as relaxed as he’d been before. But there was gravity to his tone.

“Find your place,” he ordered.

Puff sat on Evan’s lap, his head up like he was at attention.

Hestia, Hercules, and Perseus formed a line from tallest to smallest, all three looking to Fen for their next order.

I knew they called Fenrir a wolf king. I’d seen him when he was young, and I’ve seen how magnificently he fights. This was a power I hadn’t heard talk of. Myrddin didn’t believe Fenrir was a true wolf king. In his mind, that was simply something Sasha Federov put out to build a lore around the royal kids. The only one Myrddin took seriously was Rhys, and that was only because he thought he could be a useful bargaining tool when it came to the Fae.

He was wrong about Fenrir. I’d forgotten how I’d watched him call natural wolves to protect him, gathering a massive pack who followed his every command.

He’d called werewolves as a child.

He would command them all if he wanted to. This was what the wolves were afraid of. Not that he wouldn’t be a proper king with a she-wolf at his side.

They feared he would be a tyrant king who could take over their bodies and minds at will.

Like Myrddin Emrys.

A flare of pain went through my head.

“I’m so sorry.” Tix scurried through the room, trying to pick up after the hounds.

Fenrir nodded slightly, and the hounds all laid down, relaxed now.

Relax, Olivia. Everything’s going to be fine, and you’ll remember every moment. Myrddin had smiled down at me right before I was encased in darkness.

And then we’d gone to greet the royals because they were here. They had found their way back, and he’d needed to talk to them.

He’d talked to them as...me.

I remembered that. He’d been so reasonable, and the kids had shown up and we couldn’t convince the royals to talk to us.

I could feel the way my fist closed magically around the queen’s throat. I could see her feet kicking and the thrill it sent through the man who’d taken over my body.

Pain screamed through me, and then I was falling.

I welcomed the darkness.

Chapter Thirteen



Kelsey

I closed the door to the salon with a heavy sigh. It had been a rough couple of days, and I worried it was going to do nothing but get worse. “She’s asleep. Casey’s with her, and Lee went to check on Dean. Did you already talk to Tix?”

Our previous session had been disrupted by Liv’s fainting spell. Evan had looked her over and declared her not to be dying, which was Casey’s assessment as well.

What was going on in my bestie’s brainpan? Was there some kind of war happening in there? We’d talked about the fact that Myrddin might have had more control over Liv than previously thought, but now I had to wonder if that was still affecting her with him miles and miles away.

“No, I wanted to wait for you,” Gray explained. “I gave him some minor duties. He’s freaked about the hounds ruining the house. Says they would never behave like this around his mother.”

Fen snorted. “They’re some seriously indulged canines, but they’re sweet and smart.”

“You know this how? Have you started talking to animals while I was gone?” There was still a lot about my son’s powers that I didn’t understand. Things that scared me a little. Not because I was scared of Fenrir. Because the more powerful he was, the more they would come for him.

“In a way, and also not. I mean they get me when I talk to them,” Fen explained. Evan had moved off his lap when Liv had taken ill. She’d gone up with me and Casey, and now she was off playing nurse while Fen kept watch over this odd pack. “Hercules, talk to me.”

The biggest of the hounds lifted his head and howled, the sound shaking the room a bit.

“Thanks, buddy.” Fen stood, Puff cradled against his chest. He leaned over and gave Hercules a quick scratch, which seemed to please the hound as he lay back down. “See. They’re smart and they’ve had some training. I would bet their mom indulges them.”

“Oh, shamelessly,” Tix agreed as he walked in with a tray of what appeared to be tea. Crizzelo followed him, carrying her own tray of sandwiches and cakes. It was good to know they kept proper teatime in Hell. “She’s always had hounds around. She raises them from puppies and treats them like her children. Since she stopped bearing children they rather are.”

“She’s not in a relationship?” I asked, curious about his mother.

Tix placed the tray down, and then his head fell back and he laughed. And laughed. After a moment, he put a hand to his belly and shook his head. “The mistress is so amusing. No, Lady Sloane. My mother is not in a relationship and hasn’t been in thousands and thousands of years. Her ex is rather daunting.”

“Her ex being the Lord Lucifer,” Crizzelo explained. “Not many demons want to date the Lord of Hell’s ex-wife. It’s said he still has feelings for her.”

“But she has a couple of thousand kids. And I didn’t think they were Lucifer’s.” I remembered what he’d told me.

He waved that off. “No, of course not. Those were all experiments. Only one of them was Lucifer’s, and she was my mother’s only daughter. After Layla was lost to us, my mother broke things off with Lucifer and pursued having the perfect child. She finally got him and she stopped.”

Crizzelo’s head came up, and the expression on her face made me think there was another side to the story, but she simply went back to her work.

Gray snorted. “I take it you’re her youngest.”

Tix shrugged, an elegant gesture. “Well, you can’t top perfection. So now she has these hounds, and there is no way she would allow them to be spelled and sent to take out my master. She knows how seriously I take my job.”

I had to wonder because the hounds had definitely been spelled. Liv had briefly examined the collars and she’d told me she suspected blood magic. She’d thought it was a witch rather than a demon because of something she called the “signature” on the spell. It was some kind of mystical witch thing, like a unique scent or particular handwriting.

The only problem was things like that could be faked or copied.

“Have you informed her the hounds are here?” Trent asked. Hestia had snuck over his way and had her big head on his lap while Trent ran a hand down her broad back. The males had taken up spaces on either side of Fenrir, while Puff stayed on my son’s lap. I swear that puppy had his pride on. Like he was telling the bigger, badder hounds “Look at me. My dad’s the best.”

Tix leaned over to pour the tea with a practiced hand. “I was going to ask Lord Sloane if it’s all right if I send word. Or perhaps I could take the hounds to her dimension myself. It’s been a while since I saw my mother.”

“You visit her every week,” Gray pointed out.

“Only because she would be lonely without me. And we so enjoy watching a spot of television together. Mistress, you must watch *Survivor Hell Plane* with us. It’s so funny when they vote out the demon and he gets eaten by whatever sponsored the week’s show. One time it was a group of demons promoting their cooking show.”

I hadn’t started binging Hell plane shows yet. “I don’t want to know, do I?”

“Let’s just say it was a *Survivor/Top Chef* crossover that you can’t find in the human world. Such fun. And I learned a lot about properly seasoning a marine-based demon. You don’t want to overcook it.”

“Tix, I need to make this plain to you,” I began, my belly turning slightly. “I know I may seem to be the kind of wolf who will eat anything...”

“I would never feed you demon,” Tix said, passing me a cup of tea.

Crizzelo’s eyes went wide. “There is no demon in the cakes, Lady Sloane. I promise. And the sandwiches are ham and salmon from the Earth plane. We had it delivered.”

I wondered if Amazon had drivers on the Hell plane. “That’s good to know.”

“I certainly wouldn’t serve them to a pregnant female,” Tix was saying. “You don’t know how it will affect you. Certainly demon flesh can have an effect on the consumer. Think of it as one last fuck you on the demon’s way to a next life.”

I was curious about how they dealt with death here in Hell. I took the tea but put it down because Eddie hadn’t made it for me, and until I could use the charm Lee had given me, I wouldn’t be consuming anything. “I wasn’t aware the Hell plane believed in multiple lives.”

“That’s my fault, baby.” Gray did take his tea. “I never exactly talked about the ins and outs of demonic religion.”

“I would think they wouldn’t be religious.”

Tix gasped and clutched where his pearls should be. He was a very dramatic demon. “Of course we are. We simply have a different set of values. And though we’re immortal, we can obviously be killed under the right circumstances. Those circumstances include being foolish enough to think you’re going to win a game show when your personality is obnoxious to the extreme. I have no idea what that demon was thinking.”

Crizzelo’s lips curled up, showing off sharp fangs. “I like the show *Nailed It*. If you don’t get it right, they nail you to the wall, and you spend the rest of the show hanging there. It’s fun.”

Tix shrugged. “They don’t even die on that show. Though the moans of pain and begging for sustenance is amusing.”

We had totally different versions of amusing.

“Okay, as a wolf who has on occasion gotten heated in battle and maybe taken a hunk of demon flesh,” Trent began, “what exactly do you mean by have an effect?”

My wolf hubby wasn’t discriminating when it came to fueling up during battle. Or after. Or before. Trent liked to eat, and he definitely liked to try a variety of snacks.

Fenrir sat up and looked less like a decadent wolf king and more like the worried twenty-something he actually was. “I had some belly trouble after we ate that thing last night. You remember the one with five arms?”

The fact that he had to qualify it made me worry. “How many weird Hell plane creatures have you two gone through already?”

“You ate Harold?” Tix asked, shock in his tone.

Shit. “I’m sure they didn’t.”

“Did Harold have three eyes and breath like a fart?” Trent asked.

Tix teared up and nodded.

“Then yeah, we ate him,” Trent said matter of factly. “In our defense, he tried to eat us first.”

“And I’ve still got indigestion,” Fen added. “He was a little gamey. Sorry, Tix. Gray said we could eat anything in the forest.”

“He’s acting,” Gray said with a sigh. “He’s being a dick. I assure you Tix doesn’t go walking in the forest making friends with the demonic equivalent of a moose.”

“They are speaking of the zazalnax,” Crizzelo explained. “It is a common creature and extremely aggressive.”

I wanted to point out that our moose don’t have five arms, but I was caught on an idea.

Tix grinned, all tears fleeing. “Well, it is fun to tease them, Master. As the maid said, what you ate is a common creature here, and you should suffer no ill effects from your meal. Next

time bring the carcass home. I do an excellent roast, and Lady Sloane can enjoy it. Hopefully. I'm not sure since she hasn't touched her tea."

And I wasn't going to until I could test it, but I wasn't about to point that out to Tix. "What kind of effects can demon flesh have?"

"Oh, any number of side effects could occur. Though not in common beasts. Like other planes, Hell depends on a food chain. It's really only the higher levels who have defense mechanisms. Most Hell beasts are consumable." Tix frowned and looked down at the hounds. "Lady Sloane, please tell me you're not considering eating my mother's pets."

"Eww. I would never eat a dog. You know I have the spirit of a wolf inside me. They're like my people." I certainly hadn't been talking about feasting on the sweet hellhounds who were now madly in love with my son. But I was thinking about something. I needed some time before I really asked the question that truly mattered.

If consuming demon flesh could have odd effects, what would mainlining demon blood for years do to a chick?

"Mom, I'm not being controlled by a Hell beast because I ate a few of them," Fenrir said with a sigh. "That only happened once and it was a freaking worm on what can only be described as a psychedelic plane."

"Good times." Trent had a wistful grin on his face. "And the worm made Fenrir not want to eat. We quickly figured out something was wrong. He went an hour without a snack and I knew. Neither Fen nor I have eaten anything that could harm us here in Gray's kingdom. We had a whole lecture while we were in Frelsi."

"Complete with a scent survey that I provided," Tix added. "They know what to stay away from by using their strongest sense. I would never allow anyone in this family to eat something they shouldn't. Especially our wolves. However, none of this solves the problem at hand. How did my mother's pets get into our kingdom? They wouldn't have come on their own. They would never leave her willingly."

I looked to my son because I had to cover all the bases, even when they seemed weird. “Could you ask one of our new friends what happened?”

Fen snorted. “No, Mom. I can’t ask them. They’re not wolves. Even if they were, I would have to order them to change so they have vocal cords. I can’t read minds.”

“But you can control them,” I pointed out.

My son seemed to get serious. “In some cases, but I don’t for the most part. I was a child when I took control of those wolves. I was scared. I have a far better hold of my power now. I know that’s what everyone fears from me, but I don’t have to use the power. As for the hounds, they can follow rudimentary orders, but I can’t speak to them the way I can wolves. I can tell you they were confused and scared until they realized I was in control. They’re pack animals. They want an alpha. And they want their mom. I would actually say the feelings I’m getting off them are definitely for a mom. I make the distinction because while Lilith would be their master, their feelings seem to be more familial than respect for an authority figure. They love her.”

“Of course they do,” Tix replied with a huff as though that should have been evident. “They would never leave her, and they would certainly never hurt an ally of hers.”

“Ally?” I thought Gray hadn’t met the woman.

Gray’s hands came up. “He’s not talking about me. The connection runs through Tix. Technically those hounds are not from the kingdom, so they aren’t oathed to me. But they are related to Tix.”

“Mother would never harm me in this way,” Tix assured me. “She would never join someone who would mean harm to the House of Sloane because she’s well aware what would happen to me.”

“The law is clear. If the lord or lady of the house dies, the keeper of the house is sent along with them,” Gray said, holding his hands up. “Don’t blame me. I didn’t make the rule.”

Tix's fate was tied to ours. That was clear. If his mother did care for him, she wouldn't have done this, but I happened to know that there were moms out there who would sell their children out. Especially if the payout was power. And Tix had a couple thousand years under his belt, so she might think he'd had a full life. But why would she spell her own dogs? "There's no way the collars were a mistake? Is it a training thing?"

"Oh, no. They were confused." Fenrir ran a hand over Hercules's back. "Still are. I don't think they liked the collars. It's not normal for them. And I get the sense they don't leave their home plane often. This one doesn't understand why it's dark outside. It worries him. He's the smartest of the three, the leader. He can get some imagery into my head. Perseus is a beta, and that one over there wants someone petting her all the time. Oh, and I think they might be hungry. And no, that's not me reading minds. His belly's gurgling."

Hercules looked up to him and whined.

"All right, then. I will feed them before I take them back to Mother," Tix agreed. "Lord Sloane, do I have permission to contact her?"

Gray looked my way. "This is an investigation, baby. I've been out of the game for too long. I'll defer to you."

My men used to help me with all my cases when I worked as the sheriff of the supernatural world. Which was a couple of weeks ago for me, and twelve years for them. Gray had once worked for the Texas Rangers, solving the weird, supernatural crap the regular rangers didn't want to deal with, but he'd been a dark prophet for much longer now. The dark prophet didn't solve murders. He was the cause of me wanting to murder people, though.

I was definitely in charge of this case. "Of course you can let her know where they are. I'm sure she's worried. If she wants to come and get them, I would love to meet her."

Tix clapped his hands. "And I will bathe the hounds before. I can't send them back to Mother scruffy."

He seemed to expect the hounds to fall in line. They stayed right where they were.

“Go with Tix.” Fenrir stood, holding Puff against his chest. “You could use a bath, too.”

All three hounds followed him out.

And I started to wonder what questions I could ask Lilith.

* * * *

Liv

I knew I was dreaming, knew I was likely in the bed they’d selected for me, Casey having carried me there. They would have tried to figure out if I was okay.

I don’t know why I was thinking that as I stood in the Coven House, waiting for my turn. I wasn’t used to conscious dreaming. I so often felt stuck in the time I was dreaming about. But this was different.

I had to wonder if it was different because of the white-haired young man who stood at my side.

“That’s him, right?”

Dean. Dean was here with me. “Are you asking if that’s Myrddin Emrys?”

It was an odd question because everyone in my world knew exactly who that male was. Shouldn’t his own son?

“I am. I’ve seen him before but it was briefly, and he looks different.” He stared across the space where Myrddin was holding court with the closest members of his coven.

I knew what day this was. Oh, not the specific day. I couldn’t tell if it was Tuesday five years before. But I knew it was a sacred day. Myrddin was preparing to give his Profane unholy communion. There was the altar in the center of the

temple. It was always warm in here, proof that we had a backdoor to the Hell plane built in.

“That’s your father,” I told him. At this point I wasn’t questioning why I could stand to the side and watch myself.

“My father is JT Malone. He lives on the Vampire plane. That man is nothing but a sperm donor,” Dean said bluntly. He looked a lot better in the dream than he did in real life. In reality he was slowly wasting away, and his color and sunken cheeks proved it. Here he was in the bloom of health. Likely because he still saw himself that way.

“I don’t know why you would deny the king of witches,” I replied. I had the feeling this was one of his powers, and it made me wonder if this was the first time he’d snuck into my dreams.

“Because there should be no witch king. Our society doesn’t and shouldn’t work in such a way,” he replied, his jaw firming.

“But you’re cool with Donovan leading the supernatural world?” It felt a bit hypocritical to me.

“From what I’ve learned, Donovan was a nominal head of government, not the autocrat Myrddin is. There was a duly elected council, and he only voted to break a tie. He didn’t rule over the supernatural world with an iron fist.” Dean turned those crystal eyes my way. “He certainly didn’t do what Myrddin’s about to do. Tell me something, Olivia. How much of the memories in your head do you honestly believe are real?”

I didn’t like the fact that he was here. I felt vulnerable, and there was nothing I could do about it. “Have you been playing around in my head?”

He shrugged. “It’s not like I have anything better to do. I suppose I could have chosen someone else, but I fear Lee’s head is full of sex and violence. I want a relationship with him. I wouldn’t violate him in that way. Same with the others.”

“But I’m fair game?”

“Oh, yes,” Dean agreed. “You’re the enemy, though I’ve started to wonder exactly how true that statement is. Why did you come back to this place?”

I watched as the doors to the temple opened, and I walked through in my formal black robes. I looked younger. Far younger, and yet there was a hardness in my eyes I didn’t recognize. This wasn’t how I saw myself.

Now I knew which day this was. This was the first day, the moment I became Profane. The first unholy communion. A shiver went through me, some foreboding I didn’t quite understand.

Still, I was glad we weren’t in Wyoming again. I would hate to have someone else witness that.

“I suppose this is one of my proudest moments,” I said, watching as Shera and Calliope entered the room. At this point, Nimue stood in a place of honor at Myrddin’s side. She was his good right hand, his lover, his uncrowned queen. She looked gorgeous in her blood red gown. I’d been told when she’d first come to the Earth plane, she’d had short hair, but she’d grown it out because Myrddin liked long hair on women. We all grew our hair out.

Why should he care about my fucking hair? He wasn’t my lover and yet there I was with hair almost to my waist. It wasn’t pure black at this point. There was still brown and warmth in the color, but that would change shortly.

“Is it? You’re about to take demon blood for the first time, aren’t you? That’s part of this ceremony.” Dean leaned against the wall, his eyes on the scene playing out in front of him.

“I’m going to make my pledge to the master.” I watched myself. I looked...nervous. That’s not how I remembered it. Even though I was not in the body of the dream Liv, I could feel the fine tremble of her hands. My hands. I could sense that it was not anticipation she was feeling.

It was fear.

“You don’t look happy.”

“You’re manipulating the images.” I should have known no spell would keep someone with Dean’s magic down. His magic came from his father, and it was powerful. So powerful he could make me see things that weren’t there.

Or he could show you the truth.

“I’m not at all. Actually, I’m only here because you let me in. I’ve been trying to get into your head ever since I went under. It’s better than concentrating on keeping the fires from burning up my internal organs. Can I ask if that was you who found the spell to stabilize me? The spell is so advanced I would assume no one outside of the witching world would have seen it performed, would know the effects.”

“I’m a prisoner. They forced me to help.” I watched as my younger self knelt in front of Myrddin, who looked resplendent in his red robes. I noted there was someone behind me, also in robes. He was taller than me, and he set a hand on my shoulder. Was he helping me down? Or forcing me? I looked back to Myrddin, who was calm, a satisfied look on his face. Every eye was on him as the loveliest creature in the space.

But then it was not hard to look beautiful when you’d seized all the power and magic for yourself, when you kept hundreds of witches constantly performing spell after spell to give you strength even as theirs diminished.

“I doubt that. I think if you’d kept your mouth closed, they wouldn’t have known you could help,” Dean mused. “Which makes me wonder what you’re getting out of it.”

Anxiety curled in my gut, and I wanted to get this over with. “I made a deal with Evan to help you. I’m getting what I need, and she gets to keep her brother’s crush around for a while longer. It’s okay. You’ll still probably die since the only way to save you...”

It was only partially a lie, but I wasn’t about to tell him the whole truth. Even if this was a dream.

“Is a spell that requires the feather of a fallen angel.” Dean completed my thought. “Yes, that is likely to get everyone

killed. I suppose as evil genius plans go, it's a good one. How exactly are you planning to get into Lucifer's realm? Are you going to ask the dark prophet to sacrifice for the plot?"

"That was my first thought, but Luci himself came through. He's planning a party. While we're there, Lee will steal the feather. Though I do admit we first need to figure out where he keeps his wings."

Dean sighed, a worried sound. "There's almost no way Lee doesn't get caught."

"Not my problem." But something turned in my gut. It was my problem because I would be the one who sent him in. Not that I could tell Lee Donovan-Quinn what to do. He tended to make his own plans. "I won't be there. I'll be here trying to find a way to smuggle you back to your father."

Dean nodded. "Ah, so that's the real plan. I don't suppose you're talking about taking me back to the Vampire plane."

I stared at the man I was talking about. Why did Myrddin seem so much...less than I remembered? Dean was doing something, putting a filter on the memory because I hadn't cried that day. Yet there I was with a tear-streaked face, kneeling before a man who wore a pretty mask. I know I didn't cry. That day was joyous.

I watched as Shera started to stand, trying to back away.

A large demon shoved her back to her knees.

That hadn't happened either.

He was playing with me, but I wasn't going to lie to him. Once he was in his father's realm, he would understand. "No, I'm taking you to your true father, and he will be able to fix the problem. I've done nothing but help and all I get for my trouble is you invading my mind and playing with my memories."

"I am not the one who's played with your memories, Olivia," he said quietly.

"Are you trying to tell me this is the reality of that moment? I remember differently. I certainly didn't do that."

In the scene in front of me, I was fighting. I was being held down, and that delicious drug was being forced into my veins.

The world tilted because for a moment I could feel it. I could feel how hard I had fought. I could feel the tears running down my face. I could feel the need inside me, and it wasn't for the drug. Inside I had called out for Casey. I wanted to see Casey coming through those doors. Or Kelsey. I prayed she would bust through with Gladys in her hand, and she would kick all their asses and save me, and I never had to think about what he'd said to me.

I chose you, Olivia, because you'll be easy to manipulate. You folded the first time something bad happened to you. Also because it will hurt so many people on the other side when they see what you're about to become.

I shook my head. "He didn't say that to me. He welcomed me to his family."

"He doesn't have family. He has minions. You see the way Nimue is standing? Like she sees nothing and hears nothing. She's under his thrall. You're lucky he didn't have a couple more thrall stones on him." Dean winced as he watched them force the blood in my veins and I screamed like I was dying.

A chill went through me. This wasn't right.

Except there were parts of me that remembered how it felt. How my skin crawled and organs ached as they were flooded with that blood. "You're doing this to me. I guess you're not as squeaky clean as they seem to think you are. This is torture. What do you want to make you stop?"

"I'm not doing a thing," Dean protested. "I can't and you know it. I'm able to project, but the Uro spell stops all other magic. I'm disconnected from everything but my ability to astral project myself into other realms, in this case your dreams and memories. Apparently that isn't magic, or isn't something the spell recognizes as magic. Guess I'm talented in more ways than one. This is all you. This is your brain and memories beginning to rebuild after what he did to you. This is part of getting off the demon blood."

He was wrong about that. I was still on the blood. Evan had come through. So he didn't know what he was talking about.

I shook my head, wanting the wailing to stop. We were all doing it now—Shera and Calliope screaming, too, like banshees warning the world—and there were far more demons in the room than I remembered. They watched us as we were held down and our bodies convulsed with the first fire of that blood.

“Tell me something. What did Evan give you in exchange for saving me?”

I wasn't about to tell him. He looked entirely too smug. Or rather there was a sympathy in his eyes I couldn't abide. “It's not your business. I want to wake up now.”

“I'm not holding you back. I want to wake up, too, but I can't. Olivia, I am not the one who brought you here. I get the feeling you're unconscious in a way that's not from sleep. I can help you if you let me.”

I couldn't trust him. He'd been far too influenced by the royals. “And why would you do that?”

“Because I wasn't raised by the man who is violating you right now,” he began, a grim expression on his face. “Because I was raised by a billionaire cowboy who tries to help everyone he can. My real father taught me not to measure myself by how others treat me, but rather how I treat them. Even when it's hard. And I take back what I said about the thrall stone. It would have been easier on you. He wouldn't have been forced to suppress your memories and implant new ones. You would have complied with everything he asked. He wouldn't have needed the demon blood if he'd had a thrall stone.”

“Needed the demon blood?” The demon blood made me strong. I was the one who needed it, not Myrddin.

“Yes.” He studied me for a moment. The cries were quieting now but only because we'd strained our throats and sobbed silently.

The deed was done. The blood was in our veins, and there was nothing else to do.

There was a voice inside me telling me there was something wrong. That something Dean was saying held more truth than I wanted to admit. “Why? He said it was part of the exchange. I gained power from the demon blood.”

“Only if the demon blood he fed you held power. What is the likelier scenario? That he selected three middling witches and gave them insane power from demonic lords? Or that he took his best and brightest, witches of great power who’d been made to believe they were weak, and fed them the blood of demons who would make them submissive and easy to lead? Like Nimue. All that power, and he controls it because he controls her.”

He was wrong about that. “She left him, so he didn’t control her very well. She left all of us.”

“No, she didn’t, and you remember that, too. Maybe when you let that memory out, you’ll see the truth. We don’t have much time left. I think you’re waking up. Casey’s worried you’ve been under for too long. I don’t know if this will work again, so I have to leave you here,” he said. “Just remember you can’t truly heal until you understand the wound you took, and I’m not talking about the one in the forest in Wyoming. He used that against you. He knew you were hurting and that taking away that pain would bring you closer. But don’t ever think you were important to him. We’re all pawns. Ask Nimue.”

“Is she with the rebels now?” Nimue had been my grounding force, my mentor. She’d helped me, come to visit me when I was in the education coven house. And then she’d been gone, and no one talked about her. Not for years. I’d started to forget about her because she hadn’t seemed important.

She’d been very important.

Why would I forget?

“Remember, Olivia,” Dean said quietly, but I could already sense him distancing from me. “And when you do, remember that sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. Give yourself grace. If it helps, I forgive you in advance. He’ll kill me, you know.”

He was being dramatic. “You’re his son.”

“I’m also part of a prophecy he knows well. He let me go the first time out of sentimentality and the fact that he didn’t exactly understand. He thought he’d taken care of the other threat, so he could let me go. He won’t make the same mistake again. If he kills me, all hope is lost.”

“He won’t. He’s your father.”

He looked both young and ageless in that moment, his eyes holding a maturity far beyond his years. “Then it seems my fate is in your hands. Like I said, I forgive you. What you went through, it could break the hardest of people. When the demons come, I hope you fare well and that this world can fight back. When the worst happens, find the Malones. I know he’s not my father on this plane, but JT Malone will fight, and he’ll know who can help him.”

We were back to that?

There were demons all around my younger self. Cackling. Gossiping. One of them licked Shera’s unconscious body.

Goddess, what were they going to do with us?

I woke on a cry, my subconscious getting me out of there in the nick of time.

“Hey, baby, are you okay?” Casey was standing by the bed, staring down at me.

He was everything I needed in that moment. My head was reeling but worse, my soul felt split and untethered. I didn’t know what reality was anymore, but this vampire was the very best of a past I knew was real.

My skin was still crawling from the feel of demon hands on me. I didn’t know if it was something Dean had planted in

my head or if it had been a bad dream, but I needed to wash it away.

“Sweetheart, should I call Evan back? She’s pretty good with healing, and you look so pale. What happened?”

That was the problem. I was no longer certain of what had happened. The things I’d clung to for so long were distant for me now. I was starting to feel things I’d buried, and for good reason. I didn’t want to feel that way ever again.

But there was something I could handle feeling.

“Kiss me.”

His eyes flared. “What?”

I reached up, grabbing the front of his shirt. “I said kiss me, Casey. I can’t talk right now. Kiss me or walk away.”

“Baby, I think we...” He stopped, and I saw the resolve come over his face. “You need this?”

I nodded and then he was covering my body with his, his mouth coming down, and all the bad shit fled until I was left with nothing but the feel of his tongue mating with mine.

Heat flashed through me, and my body ached with longing. Casey hadn’t been my only lover. I’d been with my ex-fiancé for far longer, but I could barely remember Scott’s face now. It had been Casey who’d haunted me all these years, whose memory had cut through all the others.

He hadn’t been able to burn away Casey and Kelsey. Wasn’t that what Dean had figured out that day the royals had returned? He’d been in my head that day, too. He’d been there before I’d let the master take over.

Before I’d let him bury me away and do what he wanted to with my body and my magic.

I rolled us over, moving on top of Casey. He was a gorgeous beast, with his fangs out and his eyes going full-on light blue. It was the color of the sky in wintertime, but there was nothing cold about how he looked at me. His hands moved up my thighs to cup my ass.

“You need to be in control, baby?” He squeezed my cheeks, sending a wave of lust through me.

“Yes.” We didn’t play the way Kelsey did with Gray. We hadn’t done a ton of kinky stuff, but I suddenly understood the impulse. I couldn’t be the submissive partner today. I needed to be in control.

His hands came back and away, offering himself to me. “Take what you need, baby. I know you won’t want to hear this...”

I knew exactly what he was going to say, and five minutes before I would have stopped him. The words would have turned in my gut, but I wanted them now. “Tell me.”

“I love you.”

I couldn’t say it back. I couldn’t, but it was there in my heart. It was there in the soul I still had left.

I started to pull my shirt over my head but remembered the veins he would see. They weren’t as dark as they’d been before, but they were still a map of everything I’d done in the last dozen years, physical proof that I’d taken a darker path, one that hadn’t included him.

“Don’t. I still love you. I still think you’re beautiful, Olivia. No matter what.”

I dragged the shirt over my head because I believed him. Because I wanted nothing between us in that moment. The walls would come up again soon enough, but for now I wanted to pretend we could be together. I wanted the world to make sense for an hour or so before I went back to plotting, and those veins, that map of betrayal on my body, led me further and further from him.

Lucky for me someone had already gotten me out of my pants and shoes. Likely because Evan had wanted to take anything off that was constricting me. My underwear was doing a damn fine job of that. “Tear them off.”

I didn’t care that I might not have another pair. Kelsey was now the queen of a whole Hell realm. She could order some

new ones. She would likely be thrilled to because she would take this as a good sign.

It wasn't. It was pure desperation, but in the moment it was the perfect solution.

He had those bikini panties off me in a flash, and then I tore open his shirt, sending buttons flying all over the room. I let my hands find his chest, caressing the cool flesh I found there. Casey had a beautiful chest, all lean muscle and alabaster skin.

I used to love to cuddle with him. He would wrap his body around mine and listen to my heartbeat. He could do it for hours, and I would feel safe and relaxed and loved.

I'd never told Kelsey how well Casey took care of me. I'd never shared that with her because I'd been trying to hide how much care I'd needed. I'd been hiding how much I'd needed her. I'd smiled and lied and resented her when she didn't see through it.

"Don't, baby. Stay with me," he pleaded. "Just for a little while. Let it be us and nothing else in all the planes. We're safe here."

Safe. How long had it been since I'd felt safe? Loved? Like I belonged?

I practically ripped open his slacks, freeing his cock, and I could feel his magic starting to pulse through the room. Vampires fed off sex magic, and he hadn't in a long time. I no longer questioned him. He wouldn't lie to me about other women.

Had I lied to him? Had there been others that I couldn't remember because my body had been used even as they discarded pieces of my soul?

I shoved the thought out of the way as I lowered myself onto his stiff cock. I was already wet, but I loved the feel of him stretching me wide. His hands came up, gripping my hips.

I fucked him, wanting to dominate and take back something that had been lost to me. But somewhere in the

middle of all of it, I realized what had been lost was the softness I felt.

What I'd lost had been the ability to choose, to access a part of myself that only came alive around the people I loved.

“Livie? Are you okay?” Casey asked.

I realized I'd stopped, but we were still connected. And I wanted to stay that way. I didn't want some quick orgasm to flash through me so I could go back to being his enemy again. I didn't want some weird victory over him.

I leaned over, slowing the moment, reveling in it. I looked down at his gorgeous face, loving every plane and angle. I ran my hand over the softness of his hair and kissed him. Really kissed him, letting our mouths learn each other again.

At some point we turned over again and he was on top of me, and I loved how he pressed me down, how his hips started to move. It was softer this time, as though he wanted this moment to last.

“I missed you,” he whispered as he thrust inside me, filling me up, reminding me how good it had always been between us.

I wrapped myself around him and let go of everything but him. I floated on pleasure and comfort, on the warmth I always felt when I was near him.

When the orgasm hit, I let my head fall back and urged him on.

His fangs struck even as he fucked me hard and, for a moment, I was free.

Chapter Fourteen



Liv

I woke when the moon was rising. I'd woken up from a dreamless sleep this time, and I should have felt fabulous. I'd slept the whole "night," and it had been forever since that had happened. I normally woke every few hours and took a tea to try to get back to sleep. Once more vampire beats most medicine or therapies. If you've got problems, fucking a vamp will solve a lot of them.

Casey had left me a note that he was going to meet with some experts about how the hounds would have gotten here and we'd talk later. There had also been a carafe of coffee waiting for me on the dresser along with the note.

Coffee was off-limits for the Profane. We drank the teas Myrddin offered us for healing.

I was not Profane anymore.

Profane didn't wake up naked with fang marks on their necks and their bodies humming with satisfaction. At least not the way I'd done it. I'd actually been prim for a person who called herself Profane.

Or maybe I'd been given a name and conditioned to act in a certain way.

I sat there in the middle of the bed I'd shared with Casey the night before, and a shiver went through me. What I'd seen in my dreams had felt so real. More real than my memory of the event.

For the first time I had to consider I was wrong. Logic dictated that the scenario had to be on the table.

I was about to get up and get dressed when there was a brisk knock on the door and then Kelsey was sweeping in, Eddie at her back. And a bunch of hellhounds.

The hounds who'd been trying to murder her the night before were now sniffing at whatever Eddie was carrying. They were dancing around, and Puff was busy getting underfoot.

"Down, Hestia. This is for Olivia. It is not for canines." Eddie put the tray down. It was covered with a cloche.

I held the sheet to my boobs because I was naked and now there were a shit ton of people and creatures in my room. "Hello, privacy?"

Kelsey's lips turned up in an amused grin. "Yeah, we were never big on that, were we? Do you remember the time you let all the kids sneak into my bedroom while I was naked? Payback is a bitch, sister."

"Shouldn't they be back with their mom?" I wasn't interested in meeting the legendary First Woman. Not at all. Curiosity wasn't helpful in my position. It led to bad decisions like the one I'd made the night before. Night. Day. It was all confusing here. Everything was confusing here.

"She wasn't home so she's going to come here and pick them up when she gets back. I find it interesting she happened to be out. Tix told me she rarely leaves her realm." She sat down on the edge of the bed, that grin turning wicked. "So, Casey was humming earlier. I think he's in songwriting mode."

Dear goddess. I did what Kelsey had done that day she'd referred to so long ago. I pulled the covers over my head and prayed the universe would swallow me up. In my defense, I hadn't known she was naked when I'd sent the kids in to wake her up, although she'd been with Marcus Vorenius the night before, so I should have.

He would do it. Casey, that is. He would write some dumbass song about how his love had healed me or something, and then he would go one further and write an entire musical

around it. He'd done it before. It was terrible. We'd made fun of it, the other witches and I.

I kind of wanted to see it again. I'd never told him that those songs had played through my head for years. I wondered how I would have felt about it if I'd had a whole soul.

"All is in readiness, mistress," Eddie said from what sounded like the door. "I will take the hounds back to the kitchens with me. Do you happen to know how long Fenrir will be gone?"

Poor Eddie sounded haggard. I didn't think the Hell plane had been kind to him. He'd turned into an Earth plane-loving demon.

"He and Evan are running an errand. I promise they'll be back in an hour or two," Kelsey said. "Thanks, Eddie. You're the best."

He *was* the best. Kelsey always got the best, but then she seemed to need someone to take care of her. Profane took care of themselves because we were the strongest. We needed no one. We didn't need a lover who thought about how much we used to need coffee to function. Now I only needed...

I brought the sheet down around my chest, looking at Kelsey, who was now lying down beside me, her head propped up on her hand and facing me. "I think the blood Evan is giving me is turning me into a pretentious asshole. She's poisoning me. Did you tell her to do it?"

Kelsey's eyes flared, and I realized I'd made a mistake. "Is that what she offered you?"

"Well, I thought for sure you were in on it." I hadn't really dreamed I could put one over on Kelsey.

If it bothered her, she didn't show it. "Nope, although I was worried you would get the shakes and die. You know we made a vow to never do drugs."

We had. It had been high school. "You broke that quickly."

"Yeah, I had a misspent youth. But you were always so straightlaced."

I hadn't joined Kelsey's experimentations in finding oblivion. "The demon blood isn't a drug. It's an enhancer. It's like a vitamin."

Kelsey snorted. "Sure, sister. You're not trying to find a way to escape reality. It's completely different from what I tried to do when I was a teen. So why do you think Evan is poisoning you by turning you into a pretentious ass? I think your timing's off on that one. You've been Dark Willowing for a long time now."

She knew that was the worst season, and she kept shoving it in my face. "I was lying here and I was thinking about the coffee Casey left and I thought about the fact that I used to need it to function. And it went through my freaking head that Profane didn't need caffeine because we had rage to fuel us."

Kelsey groaned and rolled onto her back. "You're right. That's bad. And really, what's wrong with coffee? Did you give up wine, too?"

"A Profane does not drink such things."

"Well, Myrddin does."

"That's different." It was my turn to roll over. Twelve years and I still felt comfortable with her. I should be feeling vulnerable, but how often had Kelsey slept beside me? So many times. There had been sleepovers when we were young, and times when I hurt and didn't want to be alone. She'd been there. "I don't know why right now. I'm still half asleep. I don't want to argue."

I didn't want to think about the fact that Myrddin did whatever his male ass wanted to and the rest of us had to follow rules he'd dictated. The thought was unsettling because I wouldn't have questioned it mere days before.

"Obviously. Do you want me to find Casey so you can cuddle?"

I was actually kind of irritated that he hadn't hung around. We hadn't slept together in years, and he'd left me behind to research shit? I pulled the sheet back over me. "It was a mistake."

“It was not,” she said. “It was inevitable because you love him. Livie, can we talk about this without arguing?”

“I’m not ready.” Not when I could still remember everything that had happened the day before. Not when I could still feel the way those demon hands felt on my body, feel the desperation to avoid taking that blood.

She sighed. “Okay, then let’s talk about something else. I think I’m bigger.”

That got me sitting up. I tucked the sheet around me and examined my bestie. I didn’t even try to fool myself. She was my friend. She was kind of my only friend. Surprisingly, in addition to canceling caffeine and carbs, Myrddin didn’t exactly encourage friendships. There were no girls nights at the Coven House. Every night was worship-the-dude night.

“Well, you are pregnant.” The words still felt weird coming out of my mouth. I’d been so sure Kelsey Jean Atwood would never have kids. She was supposed to be my kiddos’ fun auntie because I was the one who would absolutely have two point five kids and a white picket fence and the whole American-dream thing.

The man I loved couldn’t have kids, and I’d left hers behind.

“I know, but I’m like a couple of weeks pregnant.” Her hand went to that lightly rounded belly of hers. “I asked some women in Frelsi and they said with a first pregnancy I shouldn’t show until I’m months along.”

I’d helped the midwife from time to time, thought about apprenticing under her. This was back when we lived in the Council House. Her name had been Hildie, and she’d had a kind face. She’d delivered many babies, and not only witches. Any pregnant woman was welcome in her practice. She’d caught wolves and werecats and demons in those capable hands of hers.

She’d died in the first wave. I wondered now if that had been a mistake or a choice made by Myrddin because people listened to Hildie.

Hadn't that been what the witch trials were about? Men taking out wise women who asked the right questions, who tried to make the world better and more fair for other women.

Something Dean had said floated back through my head. *Because there should be no witch king. Our society doesn't and shouldn't work in such a way.*

We'd always made decisions together. Oh, certainly there were witches who were assholes, but we tended to take care of them, tended to put our community first.

What had happened to Nimue?

"Have you seen anyone? Like a doctor?" Even as I asked the question, I knew the answer. "Henri?"

Her eyes closed as though she truly could feel the life inside her. "It's so early all he's done is check to make sure my blood pressure is okay. I'm afraid Henri is better at emergency medicine than the kind of long-term care I need. I always thought Sarah Day or Hildie would take care of me."

Sarah Day. Goddess, how could I not think about her every day? I didn't want to get into that with Kelsey. "Do you think this is the kid you saw?"

"Yeah, the boy," she replied quietly.

Kelsey had seen her children in a vision on the night Gray had become the dark prophet. She'd had a vision of a demon child and a tiny she-wolf, her babies with Gray and Trent. She'd told me shortly after as we'd sat and processed everything that happened that night. Of course she'd been wrong since she hadn't seen...

I gasped as the revelation hit me. "Shit. You didn't see Fenrir because he's too old to jump on a bed. He probably won't be with you because he'll be with Evan. That's why he wasn't in the vision." A secondary truth washed over me. "You were always supposed to fall through that painting, weren't you?"

Her eyes opened, and she looked up at me, tears shining there. "According to Gray, yes. I never had a chance to stay here and influence what happened. Neither did the king and

queen. I had to go and find Dean. I had to find the book. I know you think I did something selfish, but I would never have left you willingly, Liv. I wouldn't have left you or Fen or Trent or Gray. I wouldn't have left Lee or the other kids. I wouldn't have left Casey or Eddie."

I hated the fact that I couldn't cry. The impulse was there, but I couldn't connect to it. So I took a long breath and tried to banish the instinct. She wasn't leaving, so I decided I should get dressed. It's not like she hadn't seen it all before. Wolves are accustomed to nudity, and honestly, witches aren't precious about it either. I slipped from the bed and made my way to the dresser. "Well, now we know why he wasn't in your vision. And I'm sure there's someone in the village who can serve as a midwife."

She sat up, watching me as I started to dress. "I'm sure there is. I was told I might feel the side effects quickly since this child was conceived during a fertility ritual. I know the queen's been feeling it. Hey, do you know why Myrddin would be afraid of the queen's new kiddo?"

I stepped into a pair of sweats and reached for one of Casey's T-shirts. So she'd heard. "I have a suspicion. Is it true she conceived the child with Donovan?"

"Yeah, but he was human at the time."

I whistled because having that confirmed for me was a trip. That had to have been some crazy magic. I shouldn't give her anything. Myrddin hadn't told the queen what he feared that day. I should let them all figure it out themselves. I pulled the shirt over my head. "There's a possibility that a child conceived between a companion and a vampire in his latent phase could be Nephilim."

She stared at me. "I don't think that's the name she's going with. She's naming the baby Harriet, after her dad. Quinn hates it. He wanted Rosalind. I think Harry is way cooler."

I managed to not laugh. Kelsey might be the sheriff of our world, and she could solve a mystery like nobody else, but she wasn't exactly a walking encyclopedia of supernatural creatures. "It's not a name. It's a...being. It's what happens

when a creature of angelic persuasion and a creature of demonic influence have a child together.”

“I thought angels and demons used to get it on all the time. That’s how we got the supernaturals.”

“In some cases the child was purer than others,” I explained, trying not to think about how good that coffee smelled. “I’m talking DNA, and not like sexual purity. And I would suspect in the beginning there were lots of Nephilim. They were very powerful, and that’s probably why they were hunted down and killed, and now we have companions and vampires and werewolves and demons instead of a bunch of superpowered, potentially immortal humans.”

“How would he know if Harriet’s going to be Neph... whatever...or just a regular companion?” Kelsey asked.

It was right there on the tip of my tongue to give her a lecture on how the master knew everything, and if he says the child is a monster then we should take care of it.

But I wouldn’t, I realized. If he ordered me to kill the queen’s child, I wouldn’t do it. Even if I was sure the child was Nephilim. The idea of Nephilim was something like the idea of a hellhound. If everything you knew about them came from a book, you would run from the fuckers. They look mean and ugly and they could kill you, but like all things, a hellhound was about what you put into it. Puff was never going to be a raging ball of murder. He would always protect those he loved, but he would never go after the blood of the innocent. In some ways, I worried the Nephilim had been hunted down because of their potential and not their actual actions. Beyond that, the queen’s child would be a baby. I couldn’t kill that child any more than I could have harmed Lee or Rhys or Evan or Fen.

Except I had. My body had. I’d felt his rage as he’d sent a fire bolt Evan’s way. He’d talked like me. He’d accessed my memories, and when he spoke, he spoke as me.

“Hey, it’s okay. Don’t think about it.” Kelsey slid off the bed and opened the cloche with a happy sigh. “Danish. Yes.

Eddie makes the best pastries. Look, there's chocolate croissants. Your favorite."

I shook my head. "I don't think I can eat now."

Even though I wanted to.

"I already had the throwing-up portion of my day." Kelsey took a Danish and settled onto the couch, proving she wasn't leaving any time soon. "I wanted to talk to you about the dinner thing Lucifer is throwing."

I knew exactly what she was going to say. "You're not taking me."

Her face fell. "Technically he ordered Gray to bring his family. That means I can leave you behind. I think it's for the best. Lucifer is a tricky fellow."

I waved that off. "He's a massive ass, and I don't need to hang with him and eat at his table."

"Good," she said, obviously relieved.

"But you have to know that if you send Lee in, he's going to get caught," I said.

She was right back to looking worried. "He's got a plan."

"Lucifer has a better one. Look, Lucifer knows we have a sick wizard. You can't expect that he doesn't know who Dean is and what he means to the planes." I felt the need to talk her out of this insane plan. But I also didn't have a better one. She would hate the only thing that would work. "So if he knows then this dinner party is about one thing."

"Gray."

I nodded. "You're going to have to choose, Kels. Do you want the kid to live or do you want your husband free? Or you can let Lee try to steal it and open a whole bag of very demonic worms."

"We don't even know where he keeps his wings," Kelsey said, picking off some Danish and chewing it thoughtfully.

"Even if you did, I assure you he could feel it if someone plucked one off. The truth of the matter is Dean's best bet is to

have Lucifer rescind the Uro. The fire comes from Hell. He has control over it. He could fix it at any time. I don't think he's going to be willing to give up a body part to save a kid who could kill a man you claim can potentially give Lucifer what he wants—to close the door to Heaven.” I was coming around to the idea. It made sense given what I knew about Myrddin.

I liked it better when I hadn't questioned everything about my life.

“Well, we have to try. I have to hope Lee knows what he's doing.” She polished off the first Danish and went for the second. “We haven't had a ton of luck finding your soul. Evan and Fen are in town asking a black-market dealer what Myrddin would keep it in. I don't guess you want to give me a hint where you think it could be?”

My eyes rolled. “How the hell would I know? It's not like I had a...”

I'd been about to say *choice*. But I had, hadn't I? That piece of my soul had been a gift to the master.

Like the demon blood had been my choice?

I wasn't sure what was more pathetic—the idea that I laid down everything I believed in and became something terrible, or that I'd been a scared girl in a woman's body shoved into becoming something terrible.

“I don't want you to get a headache, so don't worry about it right now. I'd actually like to talk to Lily when we get back to Frelsi about figuring out a safe way to access your memories,” Kelsey said, her tone gentle for once. “I'm not going to push you to remember. I can't help but think about how when you took my wolf off, it went to Trent.”

Before they'd devoured my magic, those witches had forced me to pull Kelsey's wolf off her soul. They'd wanted them separate so Kelsey would only have her human strength, and so all those human insecurities would flood back into her without the wolf to balance them. They hadn't cared about a vessel for the wolf, wrongly thought it would simply

disappear. They hadn't known or cared much about the soul. That wolf had leapt straight into Trent, into its mate, and he'd held her until Kelsey could take her back.

I'd had no one.

"It's different. I didn't have a mate." I was fairly certain it was useless for her to look for it.

"You're sure it's not inside Casey? He could miss having a piece of soul in him. He'd probably think it was weird vampire indigestion or something."

"It didn't go into Casey. He was too far away. If it had gone into someone, they would have had to be close to the Coven House at the time my soul was taken. No. I think Myrddin found a way to store it. It doesn't matter. I don't want it back. What he took from me was pain and rage and vulnerability."

"And your ability to feel joy. He took your deepest emotions. Liv, I know you were hurting, and if I manage to find it, you'll have to feel those things, but you can't heal without going through the pain."

"That's easy for you to say."

She sighed and stood, her disappointment obvious. "It's not. I remember how bad it is to go through something traumatic. I remember how awful it is to feel empty, like no one in the world could ever care for me. I remember what it was like to not want to exist anymore. Lucky for me I had someone who did care, who didn't let me go."

I also remembered the day I'd found her bleeding and how the world had stopped and I'd begged her to stay with me. I hadn't been able to think about a world without Kelsey in it. She'd been my safe place for most of my life, and then she'd been gone. "Well, I didn't have anyone."

"You do now. I'm here. Casey's here. All you have to do is reach out and you'll find what you need."

"What I need is for you to let me go." I wasn't even sure if letting me go meant I would return to Myrddin at this point. All the questions had opened some place inside me I hadn't

encountered in a long time, and honestly, I didn't want to confront it. I might go to the woods and live the hermit life. Or build out a van and drive around the world with three cats and a travel vlog.

“Can't do it,” she said almost sadly. She grabbed another Danish and walked to the door. “I can't give up on you. No matter what it costs me. I'll come and get you if Lilith shows up. I'd love your opinion on whether you think she's actually the one sending Hell beasties to kill me.”

I didn't know why she would trust me at this point, but I had nothing better to do. “I won't take my soul back, Kelsey. If I know Myrddin, he's used it for something and it's destroyed, and I say good riddance.”

“We'll have to agree to disagree on that,” she concluded. “You really should try the pastries. And there's a vial of blood for you under the napkin. Evan left it so she could go and do the research thing.”

They were still looking for my soul, still thinking if they could force that pain back into me I would be the weak, vulnerable Liv they enjoyed.

I turned away and heard the door close.

I didn't want her to leave and yet I couldn't stand her being here.

And then I yawned.

Stupid weakness. I took the blood she'd so casually left behind. Like she wasn't worried it would make me strong. Like she wasn't worried about me at all.

Maybe it wouldn't be so terrible to have some coffee. Eddie's blood wasn't as powerful as what Myrddin gave me, and it was obvious I had to compensate.

I tried the croissant, too, and I had to admit, it was delicious. I sat on the balcony of my prison cell, looking out at the moonrise.

It was nice.

* * * *

Kelsey

It was almost noon when I found myself pacing in what Tix called the salon.

“Baby, I can handle whatever I need to handle.” Gray sat behind his desk, leaning back as he watched me. “I know it makes you nervous, but if I have to work for Lucifer for a little while longer, it will be worth it to save Dean.”

We’d been arguing about this for almost an hour. After I’d left Liv’s room, I’d checked on Dean.

He seemed weaker than before, and I knew Lee felt it.

“We don’t have much time left.” Lee sat in a wingback chair, one leg folded across the other. He was wearing his normal uniform of jeans and a black T. “I can hear his heartbeat slowing. And his breathing. Sometimes I think I feel his mind trying to brush against mine, but even that’s weaker now. He can’t hold out forever.”

“I won’t let him die,” Gray promised Lee.

“You can’t sell yourself to do it,” I argued stubbornly, knowing I didn’t have another solution. My hand went to the slight curve of my belly. This kiddo couldn’t have one dad who spent all his time letting the Lord of Hell filter the possible worlds through his soul. I had no idea what it would do to him long term, but I knew he was so much more comfortable with himself and the rest of us since I’d come back. He was getting along with Fenrir. He was excited about the new baby.

“I also cannot allow our shot at taking out Myrddin to die,” Gray pointed out. “This isn’t a choice, Kelsey mine. Lee can’t do it by himself. It requires both Lee and Dean and the weapon the royals are searching for.”

“Mia.” Lee sounded so certain. “It requires Mia. She has the weapon. She’s the final piece of the puzzle, but it won’t

work if Dean dies.”

We were walking a knife’s edge, but I had a bit of optimism. “As long as he doesn’t have Gladys, he can’t do shit, and I don’t intend to hand her over.”

“He has the grimoire back, and there are ways he could make you give Gladys to him,” Gray said solemnly. “Tell me you wouldn’t do anything if Myrddin got his hands on Trent or one of the kids.”

“Well, I’d love the fucker to get his hands on me.” Lee’s fangs were out, his eyes shining in a way that let me know he was thinking of how he would handle the situation.

“If the prophecy is correct, he can kill you.” I couldn’t stand the thought of Lee’s life ending so soon after his turn. Becoming a vampire—with king powers—hadn’t exactly fixed Lee’s recklessness. One of the reasons I wanted him here with me instead of on the Earth plane had been to keep him from trying to solve the problem on his own. “We need Dean alive and well, but I can’t stand the thought of what Lucifer is going to ask.”

“Then I steal it.” He said the words casually. No biggie. “I have the Mantle of Arthur in the bag of holding. I know we’re all worried that Lucifer will know when I take a feather, but that bag is damn fine at hiding what it holds. If we can’t get what we need through negotiation, I’ll take it, and when we leave his realm the bag will be in my pocket with him none the wiser.”

“I don’t think you understand how jealously Lucifer guards his body. All you’ve met is an aspect of him.” Gray’s fingers tapped along the desk as he spoke. “That aspect, while not physically real, can do a lot of damage. It isn’t vulnerable.”

I wasn’t quite getting it. “Okay. So we saw a projection of Lucifer?”

“In a way,” Gray allowed. “If you touch him, he feels real. He can do a lot of physical things like kill or fuck. What you have to understand is that Lucifer’s physical body is far too large to deal with. But he also guards it, hence sending out

aspects of himself to deal with anything he needs. Long ago, he wasn't as careful and pieces of himself were stolen. Weapons were created. Dangerous weapons.”

“Yeah, I got tagged with one,” Lee said with a huff. “I thought his wings were separate though.”

“His heavenly wings are,” Gray conceded. “He cut them off after he fell. He grew demonic wings that are still on his body, but that doesn't mean he won't guard the angelic ones. Having a piece of Lucifer means having a bit of power over him. He doesn't like that. Not at all, and I worry what will happen if he catches you.”

“He won't,” Lee promised. “I've checked and the Mantle of Arthur works here on the Hell plane. I've been skulking around a bit, and no one knew. Tix watches more than reality shows. The dude gets real spun up about *Outlander*. Oh, and if you don't know, Liv and Casey are totally doing it again. I did not witness that with my eyes. I heard it as I was doing a sweep of the mansion with the mantle. Casey didn't sense a thing.”

Well, he probably wouldn't have stopped even if he had. I knew I should be pissed about it, but he'd had to test it sometime. “Have you followed Liv at all?”

Lee's face went blank. “A bit. I wanted to make sure it was okay to have her around Dean. Most of the time someone's with her, but when I find her alone, I do watch her. She's struggling.” Lee turned toward the door. “Isn't she, Casey?”

Sure enough, my academic friend stood in the doorway, a frown on his face. “Well, knowing you're following her around won't help. I suspect you know why she's struggling. You know you really should run a plan by the elders.”

Lee's lips curled slightly in an arrogant grin. “Plan? I don't know what you're talking about.”

It was my turn to frown his way. “Yes, you do, and I suspect Evan does, too. What is the demon blood for? There's no way Evan simply decided to give it to her so she could slow her transition. That demon blood should make Liv strong.”

“Only if you feed her the right blood,” Casey said, walking into the room. “It’s a trick I’ve learned Myrddin uses on his inner circle. I’d heard rumors about it before, but I had it confirmed a few hours ago. I asked Henri to test the blood we took from Liv right after we captured her. He wanted to make sure she wasn’t carrying anything that could hurt us, but looking at it again, he managed to ID the actual demonic blood that was in her veins after her last use.”

“And what did he find?” My heart ached for my friend. She was right there, but it felt like there was a wall between us.

“Myrddin has been feeding her the blood of what is essentially a worker-bee class of demons,” Casey said, his tone even, but I could tell from the hard set of his jaw that he was angry.

Gray’s eyes closed, and there was sympathy in his gaze when he opened them again. “Damn it. I know exactly what you’re talking about. They’re bred for being easy to work with. They don’t question orders or feel any need for physical autonomy. They’re naïve and trusting of their overseers, and loyalty is bred into them. If Liv has been on that blood for years, she hasn’t had much of a choice in what she did.”

“I suspect Myrddin’s been using her body,” Casey added. “She doesn’t remember things she should, or rather she remembers them completely different than what actually happened.”

“Okay, if that’s what this bee blood does, what would Eddie’s...” The revelation hit me, and I knew exactly why Liv was having trouble, why she’d started to have moments of clarity. “Satan blood. Eddie is a satan, and a satan must be ruled by reason and logic.”

“And that is why Rhys, Evan, and I came up with the idea to feed it to her. Don’t blame Eddie. We convinced him it was for your good, too, but we didn’t want to risk you saying no,” Lee admitted. “Although I will say Evan changed things up at the last minute. She was supposed to exchange it for Liv’s help with Dean.”

“I don’t think Liv could have helped more with Dean,” I replied.

“Still, I’m worried about my sister. She’s fighting the inevitable, and it’s going to bite us all in the ass.” Lee sat up. “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you, Kelsey, but we’re used to being on our own and making hard calls without asking permission. I didn’t know if it would work, and I rather thought you and Casey wouldn’t want us experimenting on her.”

“I’ve known what you were doing since I figured out she was still getting dosed,” Casey said with a sigh. “I studied up on demon blood when I realized Liv was on it. I genuinely thought she was taking it to improve her powers. I never imagined he would use her like this. I feel sick.”

I did, too, and I had no idea how I was going to tell her. “How long does she have to be on the blood? Can we wean her off it?”

“We could take her off it today,” Lee explained. “It’s satan blood. It is not addictive. It is reason distilled. Addiction isn’t logical to a satan, as it would interfere with their duties, so it works like methadone. I’m ashamed to say I didn’t think it would work this way with Liv. I didn’t agree to the plan because I thought it would wake her up.”

“You didn’t think she was asleep at all.” I knew what Lee had thought, but he didn’t remember her the way I did. “You thought she’d turned on us.”

“We don’t know that she didn’t,” Lee countered. “But I’m willing to entertain the idea that she wasn’t always in control of her actions. If Myrddin really had her brainwashed like that, we have to think about the fact that she can be unbrainwashed.”

He wasn’t big on technical terms. “I think it’s going to be harder than that. Every time I think she’s starting to remember, she gets sick. I worry she’s going to get really sick. We’re sure she doesn’t have like a parasite or something that’s making her behave this way? Myrddin used thrall stones before.”

Casey shook his head. “We scanned her for magical parasites, including thrall stones. We never did it before because we had no idea they existed.”

“Thrall stones and the types of parasites you’re talking about are very, very rare.” Lee seemed to consider the problem. “From what I’ve gathered, the schools he set up to train witches were really about conditioning them. Liv ended up in one of the worst. It was for the more talented magic wielders. If you asked the witches, they would say it’s about battle magic and training, but from what I can tell from the ones who got away it was about beating down any and all resistance to Myrddin. Even then, only three were selected to be Profane, and they were the ones who gave up pieces of their souls. At the time we thought they did it in exchange for more power. Now I wonder.”

I did, too. I wondered if she’d had a choice at all.

“Having that piece of her soul back will help enormously,” Gray pointed out. “I’ve been studying up, and I believe being apart from that piece of her soul is what’s holding her back. From everything, really. I would know more if I knew exactly what piece and how much Myrddin took.”

“I can tell you what piece. He took away her basic emotions.” It had been hard to watch her this morning. She’d looked so lost, like she’d wanted to feel but simply couldn’t. “He took away her love and affection. He left her with only one. Rage.”

“I disagree. I think he left her with fear, too. But he did take away her guilt and pain,” Casey added. “He took away what she felt from that night in Wyoming. It’s why she’s afraid to try to get it back. Even if we do manage to find it and bring it back to her, what happens if she won’t accept it? That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“The soul needs to be complete,” Gray replied. “If we release it close to Liv, it’ll find its way back in whether she wants it or not.”

“Oh, I’ll hold her down if I have to,” Casey said with pure will. “I’m sick of that asshole having control over her. I want

my wife back.”

“You know you’ll have to deal with the real Liv if she gets her soul back, and she might not be happy to find out she’s married.” I knew my bestie. “She’s always wanted a nice wedding, not some hasty ‘vampire take my blood and oops, we’re married’ thing.”

“We’ve had zero luck figuring out where Myrddin’s hiding it,” Lee said with a frown. “Evan, Fen, and I spent some time at the night market asking around.”

“I think that should be my job,” I pointed out.

Gray’s eyes narrowed. “You are pregnant and on a Hell plane.”

“I thought I would be safe.” I didn’t like the kids out there doing my job.

“You should be, and yet we’ve had two attempts on your life,” Gray countered.

“We don’t know it was me they were coming after,” I argued. “After all, no one outside this house really knew I was coming, and you’ve stated plainly no one inside this house can hurt me.”

“No one living in this house can, but they can certainly talk.” Casey walked over to the mantel, seeming to warm himself at the fire going there. Academics enjoyed physical sensations more than most vampires. Casey wouldn’t actually be cold, but he might like the feel of warmth on his skin. “I think we have to consider Lilith our prime suspect. The question is why would she do it? What does she gain?”

“We need to find Gray’s father.” I’d been trying to figure out where the bastard had gone. “We know he was demoted and worked for a time in another house, but I don’t think he’s there anymore.”

“He’s a rogue,” Lee explained. “I’m trying to find him. And I don’t think anyone will talk to you down here. You’re Lady Sloane. The demons I met would freak out if you showed up in the middle of a night market.”

“I could go undercover.” Sitting in this house was starting to make me crazy. Especially since I was almost sure the house was watching me. It was creepy at times. All in all, I was ready to get back to Frelsi where no one expected me to wear jewelry made of bones. I didn’t want people to not talk to me because they considered me far above them. I wanted them to talk to me because they knew I could kill them if they didn’t. If you asked me to choose between being the high-and-mighty lady of the manor and that bitch everyone is scared of, I knew which way I was going.

“Everyone knows who you are,” Gray said with a chuckle. “Baby, come here.”

I moved around his desk and settled myself on his lap. I didn’t handle change well. I’d managed to keep my shit together when it came to losing twelve years with my family, but I wondered if I was chafing at the new restrictions that came with pregnancy and being the lady of Gray’s manor.

Gray’s arm went around my waist. “Kelsey mine, they all know who you are. There is no one in this land who doesn’t know who their lady is. I know you want to be out there kicking ass, but it’s better if the kids do it. Trent is doing a great job, and even Liv is helping.”

“Yeah, I still don’t understand what happened there. Why would the house want to separate Liv and Casey?” I asked.

Casey got a grumpy look on his face. “I don’t understand that either. It really didn’t want me to follow her. I thought it couldn’t physically move things.”

“Oh, it moves all the time, but it’s almost always helpful.” Gray kissed my neck, breathing me in. He played with the clasp on the necklace I wore. It was large and not daywear, but I still had it around my neck. I didn’t want to take it off. I’d gotten used to it. It felt like it was...mine. “I tried to rearrange some furniture, but it kept going back to the way it was. I finally realized that where the couch was there was a small hole through which these rodents could get through, and they like to eat everything. Once I fixed that sucker, the house put everything back the way I wanted it. So I don’t know why it

didn't want Casey up there, but I'm sure there was a reason. And we figured out the brand, so I'm calling it a win."

"The house wanted us to figure out the connection to Lilith," Lee mused. "I'm surprised it knows so much."

"It's a mystery," Gray agreed, but it was so obvious his attention was all on me. The lord of the manor was horny and getting increasingly impatient.

Lee sighed and stood as though he knew damn well when he wasn't wanted because the olds were about to get frisky. "I'm going to find Evan and Fen. I'm worried about her. I don't like the fact that she changed up our plan. It's not like her."

"She's afraid of what's going to happen," I said as I looked Lee's way.

"But what's going to happen will happen whether she takes some herbs or not," Lee replied.

Casey moved beside him. "Maybe we should look into that, too. I'll go with Lee. We've got another couple of days before we can leave. We might as well ask around since we don't seem to be having a lot of luck finding Liv's soul."

They shuffled out, and I was left with my horny hubby.

"I wouldn't worry about Evan," he murmured as he kissed my neck. "Tix says she's fighting it. He doesn't sense anything evil under her surface, just a power that could help her enormously in this war."

"Well, Tix says he can talk to our unborn child, so you'll forgive me for being wary," I shot back.

Gray's hand went to my belly. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. Tix is connected to everything about this house, including the ones who head it."

I shuddered at the thought and scrambled off his lap. "If that's true then our baby boy is disturbed by sex, and we should rethink all of this."

Gray's eyes went wide. "I was joking, baby. Of course he can't hear anything. Our baby isn't even a fetus yet. I don't

think he has eyes or even a functioning brain, so it's all good." He reached for me, dragging me back. "Baby, everything is going to be okay. I promise. We're going to figure out what Lilith is doing. It might be as simple as testing the new Lady Sloane. Hell is a harsh place, and I shouldn't be surprised someone would test you. If you want to get into a big old fist fight with Lilith, I'll tell Tix to start making the Jell-O because I know who's winning that one."

It was good that he had faith in me. I let him drag me back, but my eyes had caught on one of the photos on his desk. He had several, and a couple of them made my heart ache.

There was a picture of Fenrir, standing beside Lee and Rhys and Evan, and he was smiling the most adorable grin I'd ever seen. He held a fish up, obvious pride in his stance. "When was that taken?"

His expression softened. "I think Fen was twelve. It was one of the few times they came back from the outer planes. We were in Louisiana at the cabin. Trent and I taught the kids how to fish. I was...better then. More in control."

I knew how badly he felt about not being as active as he wanted to be in Fen's life. "You seem in control now."

I knew why. He was calm, and he hadn't been under Lucifer's influence.

He sighed and rested his head against my shoulder. "I can handle it, Kelsey mine. I promise. I can't let anything happen to Dean. If Dean dies, Lee dies. When they're gone... I don't want our son growing up in a world full of demons. He might be fine. He'll be a royal demon, but I still dream of that little she-wolf, and that won't be a world she can live in."

Tears blurred my vision. "We'll find another way."

"Kelsey," he began.

But I didn't want to argue. I pointed to another picture, this one of a gorgeous woman with blonde hair. She looked serious standing in front of a big house with two older people at her side. Likely her mother and father. She wore a modest navy dress and sensible shoes. "Who's that?"

He was quiet for a moment. “My mother. It’s the only picture I have of her. I don’t know why I have it out.”

“Because she was your mom.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant because of what it represents. A sort of graduation. They took that picture an hour before she signed the contract with my father and became pregnant with me.”

And I ached all over again. This was something we’d never really talked about. I knew he’d grown up wealthy, and while he’d lived on the Earth plane, his family had a place in the supernatural world. They’d been a powerful witching family and well connected with the demonic houses. “You don’t have more pictures of her?”

“She died in a house fire shortly after I graduated from college. This was the only picture that survived the fire. Don’t worry. She’s still around,” he said with a sigh. “This place is Hell, after all. She’ll show up at some point. Now, let’s talk about why sex is a good thing for a pregnant lady.”

He started to kiss me, and all my questions faded away.

Chapter Fifteen



Liv

I stopped at the sound of Kelsey's voice.

Was she standing outside my door? She'd walked out over an hour before and left me with all the stupid pastries that I'd eaten too much of, and now I was fairly certain I had not only a sugar high but a stomachache, neither of which explained why I could hear Kelsey talking like she was standing here in my room.

Have you followed Liv at all?

A bit. I wanted to make sure it was okay to have her around Dean. Most of the time someone's with her, but when I find her alone, I do watch her. She's struggling.

Lee. That was Lee's voice.

I turned and tried to figure out where it was coming from. The mirror. I saw the slightest glow coming off the mirror over the dresser. It was magical. I hadn't noticed it until now when it was in use. The question was who was using it and what did they want me to hear.

Lee was following me. That didn't surprise me at all. I would be more shocked if he said he trusted me.

He said something about me struggling and then Casey was agreeing with him. Fuck, yeah I was struggling. I was a prisoner. It sucked to be a prisoner, and no one understood how horrible it was for me.

I mean it wasn't like I enjoyed having a luxurious bathroom where the tub knew the perfect temperature and that I once enjoyed a good lavender bath bomb and a warm towel.

For Hell, it was disappointing on the self-torture front. Hell was supposed to make a girlie tough, and it seemed to be having the opposite effect on me. It reminded me of all the things I'd loved before the world had exploded.

What is the demon blood for? Kelsey was asking. There's no way Evan simply decided to give it to her so she could slow her transition. That demon blood should make Liv strong.

The blood did make me strong. It was the fucking collar that took it away.

Only if you feed her the right blood. Casey sounded so obnoxiously sure of himself. It's a trick I've learned Myrddin uses on his inner circle. I'd heard rumors about it before, but I had it confirmed a few hours ago. I asked Henri to test the blood we took from Liv right after we captured her. He wanted to make sure she wasn't carrying anything that could hurt us, but looking at it again, he managed to ID the actual demonic blood that was in her veins after her last use.

He continued speaking, explaining that Myrddin gave me blood to make me submissive. Bile rose to the back of my throat. He was lying. He had to be lying. I wasn't going to sit here and let them talk about me this way. I threw open the door and stalked down the hall. Where were they?

I started for the salon. That seemed to be where Kelsey liked to plot and plan.

I could still hear them. Somehow the house was feeding me their conversation. They were talking about how dumb I was. They speculated that I was too stupid to do the things I'd done, so obviously Myrddin had used my body.

I jogged, my anger rising with every word they said. Evan had used Eddie's blood not because it was the easiest to get, but because of the effect it would have on me. Because satan blood would break me down and force me to question everything I knew.

I wasn't even sure of where I was going. The house seemed to nudge me this way or that, and then I found myself

standing at the door to the library and I knew where it wanted me.

The voices stopped but not before I heard about how they would stuff that piece of my soul back inside once they found it.

The soul needs to be complete. My anxiety rose with each word Gray said. If we release it close to Liv, it'll find its way back in whether she wants it or not.

All that pain I felt had been held in that piece of soul Myrddin had excised. They wanted me to be in pain.

Oh, I'll hold her down if I have to. Casey's words confirmed my every worry. I'm sick of that asshole having control over her. I want my wife back.

The man who was supposed to love me would force me to feel that pain again. He would hold me down and violate me like the witches.

He's trying to make you whole again. He's trying to break the hold Myrddin forced on you. How can you make any decisions without your soul? It's your pain. Yours. It's as important as love and joy and contentment. You feel nothing because there's no happiness without pain to contrast it.

That voice hadn't come from somewhere else in the house. No. That voice came from me.

Stupid satan blood.

I pressed through the doors and made my way up the stairs to the third level. The house wanted me here? Well, here I was. I hoped she'd made some progress because I couldn't go on this way. I needed my power. Not my pain.

If I had my pain, I had my guilt, my remorse, my regret. If they forced that piece of my soul back, I would have to deal with the last dozen years of fucking trauma. If they were right about what had happened, I would have to acknowledge how stupid I'd been.

Not happening. They could go fuck themselves.

I shoved through the door that only seemed to open for me and the woman stood there, staring down at a bowl which seemed to glow. Her fair skin was illuminated by the reddish hue that came from the bowl. It looked like she was bathed in blood.

Her face turned my way, and the moment was broken. “You heard? It didn’t seem fair that they were discussing your future without a single thought to including you.”

“You can hear everything?” Something about the room felt off to me. There was a chill that went through the air, and I could feel the magic she was using prickling against my skin.

“Of course,” she said absently. “I am the house and the house is me. Nothing occurs here that I am not aware of. I know you are a prisoner here, and I can hear you crying out to be free.”

I wouldn’t have said I was crying about it, exactly. There were some things that were nice.

But there would be a price for comfortable beds and warm hugs and a vampire who told me he loved me.

“Are you closer to freeing my magic?” I didn’t want to talk about feelings with this being.

Her eyes were pitch black and her hair looked light, almost white, in the eerie glow of the room. “See for yourself.”

She stepped back and gestured to the bowl.

I didn’t want to approach it. I didn’t want my skin to turn blood red. In that moment I wanted to be back in my stupid room trying not to finish up Eddie’s pastries and thinking about whether or not I could find a good book to pass the time until Casey came back and I could pretend I didn’t want to see him.

But I did because my fear of the pain he wanted to impose on me was greater than my love. I stood over that ceremonial bowl and stared down inside.

And I felt the first rush of power I’d had in weeks. It sizzled over my skin, reminding me of everything I’d lost

when Kelsey had taken me captive.

Power and magic, but also the absence of fear. She'd placed the weight of doubt back on me, and I hated her for that.

You only hate her because you're too delusional to face the fact that it's yourself you loathe. Forgive yourself. Give yourself grace.

I shoved that voice aside. It was easier now that I knew what was influencing it.

"You don't need the demon blood," the house whispered. "Once you're free, we'll find truly powerful blood. I'll help you. I'll guide you back to your master. I'm a prisoner, too."

I closed my eyes and felt the power crackle in my hands. So close. I was close to being able to tap into that part of me that no one should be allowed to subvert. The magic was me and I was the magic. Like the house.

She was still close, her voice whispering as that fog she'd created encircled me. "When you're free you won't ever have to worry about feeling again. You'll be who you were meant to be. You'll be Myrddin's enforcer. You'll help him bring about the new world, a world where witches don't have to worry. How many of your sisters fell to the sword or the rope or the fire because they feared our power? There are planes out there where witches fear no one. Why not our plane?"

There would only be one way to do that.

To close the plane to Heaven and let Hell rule the inner planes.

Like Myrddin wanted.

In that moment I knew what they'd told me was true. Myrddin would give the Earth plane to the demons, but with the magic flowing through me, it made sense.

The humans would never stop. They wouldn't allow witches to live. They'd written whole books about how to kill us.

The red glow seemed to whisper to me, showing me the utopia that could happen if we only banished Heaven.

You are as much a child of Heaven as you are of Earth. As you are of Hell. You choose how dark your magic goes. But how can you choose without all of your soul? Without your pain, you have no empathy. Without your empathy, any choice you make will be a selfish one. Is that who you want to be?

I pushed away from the glowing magic that muddled my brain with the promise of power.

Power was an illusion. Power could be taken. Magic could be drained. But there was a piece of me that no one could destroy. No one except me.

Had I made the choice to destroy that piece of my soul? Or had that been an illusion, too? Could I trust anything that had happened in the last twelve years?

“What’s wrong? Did it not work?” For the first time, the house sounded slightly unsure. “You can’t feel the power?”

I had, but now I questioned it. My hand went to the collar around my throat. “I can, but I don’t see how I can wield it until this thing is off.”

Would I feel better when I could tap into my magic? Would these terrible questions fall away? Or would I simply have to ask how much of the magic I’d used in the last twelve years had been my own.

Had Myrddin decided to break me because he thought it would be easy? Or because he’d liked a challenge?

Because he’d wanted to hurt the people I’d loved once.

Love. Maybe even broken, my love was always a present tense.

Kelsey and Casey, Dean had said. She still feels for Kelsey and Casey.

I’d thought that was weakness, but what if that remanent of love was my power?

“I can break it, but I need you to do one small thing for me.” Her voice was soothing. “The lady of the house wears a powerful jewel called the Eye of Night.”

“You want me to steal it? I don’t know that’s happening. She seems to like it.”

“No, I need her to wear it. It’s nothing that could harm her. It’s simply a focus for the magic of the house. Being worn by the current Lady Sloane will give it the power I need to break free. Ensure she’s wearing it when she goes to Lucifer’s realm. The stone will soak up energy, and when she brings it back here, that energy will feed me and I’ll be able to break that collar you’re wearing,” she promised.

It seemed innocuous. Gray had given her the necklace. He wouldn’t have given her something that could hurt her. She was already wearing it. I’d seen it on her earlier today. She seemed attached to it, which was actually weird for Kelsey. She wasn’t a designer-jewelry kind of girl. Oh, she could get attached to clothing, but more like boots she’d worn in or a leather jacket that fit just right. Weapons. She was really attached to weapons.

“Have you found a vessel?” Something about the conversation was making me antsy, but I wanted choices, and my friends didn’t seem big on giving me those.

My question seemed to throw her for a moment, and then her expression smoothed and she smiled my way. “Yes. I’ve spoken to one of the house maids. She’s willing to serve me in this way. Once I’m out of the realm, I can take a corporeal form.”

I wasn’t sure how that was possible if she was truly the spirit of the house, but then I wasn’t an expert on Hell plane magic. I really had been a witch who dealt with Earth magic. What did I know that I should question a creature who’d likely seen the millennia come and go?

“How close are you?” We were waiting to see what happened with Lucifer, but I had zero doubt Kelsey would want to get back to the Earth plane as soon as she possibly could.

If they got me back to Frelsi, they would continue to look for my soul, and I would have no choice but to sit and wait.

“I’ve already made the fake collar.” She gestured to a workbench. In the low light, I saw she’d been working on a piece of jewelry that replicated the collar around my throat. “When I’ve perfected the spell to break the one binding your magic, we’ll switch to this collar. Lady Sloane will take the Eye of Night to Lucifer’s realm, soak up the right magic, and we’ll be able to leave this place forever. Think about it. No one will ever bind you again. You’ll be free, and you won’t have to feel the pain that wracked you before, the pain your friends seem to want to inflict on you.”

No pain. No remorse. I could feel nothing.

You will be nothing.

I shut that down. I wanted the choice. “I’ll make sure she’s wearing the necklace.”

The house’s lips curled up. “Excellent. Then you should be on your way. They’ll be looking for you soon.”

I left the lair behind, my mind whirling with the possibilities.

* * * *

Kelsey

I looked down at Crizzelo, who shrank back as though waiting for a blow. I only wanted an answer. She’d breezed into the dining room with a big letter in her hand a couple of minutes before, and that letter had rocked my world. “What do you mean we have to be ready in two hours?”

She held the note in her shaking hand. She’d gone from happiness to fear in a heartbeat. “It is all here, Lady Sloane. It is detailed in the missive sent by Lord Lucifer. It just arrived. I ran as hard as I could to bring it to you in a timely manner.”

That wasn't the answer I wanted. I wanted her to say "Hey, you've been invited to Lord Lucifer's, and you've got a couple of days to figure it all out."

That wasn't how the Lord of Hell worked.

My son looked up from his late lunch. "What's it say, Mom?"

Trent sat across from him. Gray and I had walked in to greet them and Evan when Crizzelo entered stage left with the news that fucked my day over.

"I think that's our invite to Lucifer's dinner party," Trent said with a grim expression on his face. "Two hours' notice?"

He'd been looking Gray's way when he asked that question. Gray sighed. "He likes to do that. We're lucky we have two hours. He tends to like to pull people out of time and space when he's ready to talk. I know it sounds ridiculous, but this is a polite request from him."

If he had his way, he would be able to pull my husband away any time he liked. If Gray signed another contract, I wouldn't ever know when he would be forced to work for the Lord of Hell.

Evan sat back. Unlike the two men she was sitting with, Evan's plate was light. Nothing but some fruit and a small salad. I'd noticed she'd been avoiding meat. When we ate together, she tended to offer up her portion to Fen, who wolfed it down. "Well, I'm going to go and make sure we all have enough anti-persuasion charms. I'll check on Dean. Maybe I should stay with him."

That was another part of the missive that disturbed me. "We're supposed to bring him. Lucifer claims he can heal him if the negotiations go well."

Evan nodded, her lips a flat line. "Then I'll get him ready for transport."

Fen picked up the giant sandwich he'd been devouring. "I'm going to help her. Do I actually have to wear a suit? It showed up in my closet this morning."

“Yes,” Gray replied. “You’ll survive. And I’ll have Eddie come up to help you get dressed. Evan should have something in her closet as well. If you see Lee, send him down. We should talk before we go.”

Evan and Fen strode out.

“Is Lady Sloane okay?” Crizzelo’s big eyes were even wider than usual, and she stared at my husband.

“She’s fine.” Gray’s hand came down on my shoulder. “She’s simply a bit overwhelmed. Could you send back a missive explaining that we are honored to have received the invitation and we’ll be there on time.”

Like we had a choice.

She nodded and seemed happy to have not gotten her ass kicked, which made me hate Gray’s dad more, but damn. Two hours? I’d thought we’d have more time.

“Is everything okay?”

I turned, and Liv stood in the doorway of the salon. She’d missed lunch, preferring to lock herself in her room. She was back to talking to me as little as possible. I’d thought we’d had a breakthrough this morning. I’d been told she’d pretty much demolished those pastries and there hadn’t been a lot of coffee left, but having a belly full of sweet carbs didn’t seem to make a dent in my bestie’s angst. “Nope. I got a note from Lucifer requesting the presence of our household in his realm for dinner. We’re to bring Dean Malone in case the negotiations go well and Lucifer decides to help us.”

She seemed to think about that for a moment and then she nodded tightly. “You’ll need to dress for the occasion. I know you’ll want to go in jeans and a T-shirt.”

A gasp came from the doorway, and Tix was making his way through. “Oh, no. That will never do. You cannot attend the Lord of Hell’s dinner party wearing anything less than the finest gown we can provide. I’ve already selected clothing for the party, and you are no different, my lady. You’ll find a gorgeous, traditional gown hanging in your closet.”

I wasn't a gown kind of girl. "Can't I wear a nice pantsuit?"

I couldn't kick ass in evening gowns. I know the queen can, but she's had years of practice to perfect fighting in high heels. I didn't have a Dev Quinn to insist on stilettos. My guys were laid back.

It was all happening way too fast. I wasn't ready. I needed more time.

"Hey, baby. It's going to be okay," Trent promised.

"Trent is right." Gray got into my space. He smoothed back my hair, and I could see the resignation in his eyes. He was going to sacrifice himself.

I couldn't let it happen. But I also didn't know what else to do. If Dean died, so did all our hopes for defeating Myrddin.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Tix said with a shake of his head. "We have mere hours to transform Lady Sloane into... well, what Lady Sloane should look like."

"You're beautiful, baby," Trent said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. "I look exactly like Lady Sloane should look. I mean it's such short notice he should be happy I accepted the invitation."

Tix's jaw dropped, and he looked to Gray like he could save him.

Gray held up a hand. "Of course we're going. We've already agreed, but Lucifer is going to have to accept that the new Lady Sloane is more casual than ones in the past. She's surely got something that will work in that closet."

"I think if she wears the Eye of Night, it will likely elevate whatever she chooses," Liv said quietly. "I would be willing to help pick something out."

That felt like progress. I put my hand to the big jewel I'd been wearing pretty much day and night. "I agree. This sucker is practically a crown. Maybe if I wear a pushup bra this baby will highlight my boobs, and then I can wear pants."

“No pants,” Tix insisted. “And our lovely prisoner must wear something beyond ripped jeans and a concert T.”

“I’m not going,” Liv announced. “And I don’t care because he’s an asshole, and I don’t want to be around him.”

Tix’s mouth dropped and closed and dropped again. “But…”

Trent held up a hand, pointing to the invitation he’d been studying. “It merely states that we’re to bring our family. Technically, Liv is a prisoner. I think it will be fine for her to stay behind. Casey can stay here with her.”

“He should go,” Liv said with a frown. “I know he won’t want to miss it. Don’t you need an academic around to do whatever academics do?”

“We’ll be fine,” Gray assured her.

Liv frowned. “Dean’s fading, you know. I don’t think he has much more time. Being here on the Hell plane has helped, but the Uro spell can only be held back for so long.”

My gut turned, but I forced back the bile. I had to be strong. “Then I should get ready to go. Trent, did you find anything out this morning?”

“We’ve hit a brick wall,” he replied, glancing over at Liv. “But we can talk about it later.”

“You can’t find my soul.” She shrugged like it was no biggie. “I know what you’re doing when you go on runs. I know Lee and Evan are looking, too. You won’t find it because Myrddin has it. I gave it to him to do whatever he liked with it.”

“How can you talk like that?” I hated how calm she was.

“I talk like that because it’s true,” she replied simply. “Now do you want to get dressed or do you want to fight about this? I know what you’re looking for and it’s futile. It’s gone.”

I couldn’t believe that. I knew what had happened when she’d pulled my wolf off. My wolf hadn’t departed this world. She hadn’t been sucked up into some magical knife. We might be going about this wrong. “It’s not gone. We’ve heard rumors

that Myrddin keeps the souls he takes on the Hell plane, but I wouldn't put it past him to put that rumor out himself. It's a good way to deter anyone who might want to look. We need to go about this a different way."

"I think that's a problem for another day." Trent put his napkin down and pushed back from the table. "We need to wholly focus on tonight. I think Lee's going to make his attempt at getting the feather. I say we give it a shot. We can leave the negotiations open, and if Lee gets what we need and we can heal Dean ourselves, we do it."

"He's going to use the Mantle of Arthur?" Liv asked, and she seemed to consider it for a moment. "It could work, though I worry Lucifer will know something's happened."

One big shoulder shrugged as Trent blew past that worry. "If he can't prove it, he can't harm us. Lucifer is caged in by certain rules concerning Gray. He can't physically harm Gray."

"But he can hurt any of you," Gray pointed out. "Not that I think he will, but he can be unpredictable when he doesn't get what he wants. I would rather control it by negotiating a decent contract. Eddie can watch over us when it comes to this."

Because Eddie was a satan, and despite the fact that he spent most of his time overseeing a cleaning crew and baking up the most delicious desserts, he could still judge a contract.

There were problems with that scenario. "A good contract should be looked over by a lawyer. Lucifer knows we're running out of time. He's going to try to slip something by because we won't be able to take it back to base and have Hugo Wells look over it."

Hugo was my go-to academic when it came to legal work. Casey might be able to fix anything technical, and he'd become a whiz at research, but I needed Hugo for this one.

Trent's expression went smooth, letting me know he was worried I was about to lose it. "Let's play it by ear. If we need to talk, we'll request a private room and we'll work it out. I'm

not going to let anything happen to you or Gray. Go and get dressed. I need you to trust me that this is going to be okay.”

Well, that felt like he wanted to get rid of the little woman so he and Gray could talk. But the truth was I wasn't sure I could be reasonable about this. We were walking into a powder keg and hoping it didn't explode. I let him kiss me and followed Liv out.

“I don't want it back, you know,” she said as we hit the stairs that led to my suite.

“I don't care what you want,” I shot back, feeling a bit mean.

“Yeah, I got that.” She was quiet until we got to the suite, waiting for me to open the door.

I didn't have to do that. The big French doors glided open as I approached. It was weird to have a magical house. I didn't even have to ask for Alexa or Siri or anyone. The house simply knew. “What would you do if you were me? Just leave you to scorch the earth with your rage?”

“That's what I should have done. If I'd let you be, I wouldn't have this problem now, would I?”

I felt the blood drain from my face because she was literally talking about letting me die. That she would have been better off if I had been successful that day when we were teenagers. I'd been confused and scared and so fucking sad because my father had tried to kill me in the woods. I'd watched him slaughter baby wolves, and my power had flared for the first time. I'd had to run, and weeks later I still hadn't processed.

Liv had saved me, and she'd been my safe space.

“Kelsey, I'm sorry I said that to you.”

“Are you?”

She stared for a minute. “I know I should be. I know I should feel something.”

“But you don't want to.”

“If I feel something, I have to feel the pain, too.”

I took a long breath, letting the pain sink into me because I'd learned long ago not to ignore it. Existing meant feeling. Everything. Love. Joy. Pain. Remorse. Anxiety. If you took one away, the others meant less. They balanced each other, defining the opposite emotions so they're clear and real and we learned from them. Liv didn't want the pain, so she was comfortable not feeling anything at all.

I might have to face the fact that I'd lost her all those years ago, and what stood in front of me was nothing but a ghost. The blood she'd been taking had made her more capable of looking at things in a logical fashion, but it couldn't make her want to feel again.

“This is your choice?”

Her jaw tightened. “If I say yes, will you execute me? Do I have a right to exist if I don't do what Kelsey Owens tells me to?”

A weariness threatened to invade my bones. It was too much. I was trying to solve every problem I had, and I was about to lose Gray again. Even a few days out of his original contract with Lucifer, he was a different person. He was happier and a better husband and father. I hadn't been here when he'd originally worked for Lucifer, but I knew it had wrecked his relationship with Fenrir for a while.

Would this baby feel that pain?

At what point did I give up on Liv because she didn't want to be saved?

“It means I'll let Sasha deal with you. I assure you no one's going to execute you. It's not how the royals work.” I started for the closet. It looked like I would have to figure this out on my own.

I would have to mourn her. How could I mourn her when she was standing right there? When I could reach out and touch her? When I could feel her in my heart?

“So I stay a prisoner?” Liv didn't seem ready to stop. She followed me.

I rounded on her. “What do you want, Liv? I can forgive you. I know you didn’t make those choices, but you are making this one. You are making the choice to be a coward. You think I left you behind? I didn’t make the choice to leave you, but this, what you’re doing here and now, is leaving me. Leaving Casey. Leaving everyone behind because you can’t handle what happened to you. I’m sorry, Liv. I thought you were stronger. I thought we could love you enough to get you through, but the truth of the matter is you broke and you don’t want to do the work to put yourself back together, and I can’t tell you how much that makes me ache.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t know anything about my pain.”

I pointed her way. “I do. I know because I’ve had the strongest part of my soul cut from me, and it was you who did it. And I forgave you. Immediately. Wholeheartedly. Liv, you once sold me out to Donovan and I forgave you. You let me walk into a trap where the king was going to make the decision if I should live or die, and you didn’t give me a single heads-up. And I forgave you. I fell into another plane of existence and spent every second trying to find my way back.”

“You were stupid. You knew the prophecy. It’s your fault. You were so desperate to get Marcus back when you already had two husbands,” she seethed.

Oh, Myrddin hadn’t taken her anger. He’d left her with rage and hate and not a lot else. “He was important to me. Is. I would have done a lot to save him, but again, I didn’t choose to lose twelve years with my son and the husbands I love. Go away, Liv. It’s obvious you do feel something for me, and it’s not good. I could apologize a million times and without that piece of you it won’t matter. Nothing will be enough. I have to face the fact that you died that night. You died because you couldn’t live with what happened.”

She stared at me for a moment, so still I wondered if she was getting ready to attack. And then her shoulders came down. “I...I don’t know why I said that to you. I find this place unsettling. I suppose it has something to do with the tricks you’ve been playing on me.”

“Tricks? If you’re talking about what Evan did with Eddie’s blood, all I can say is don’t take it the next time she offers it.”

“How is this not as bad as what Myrddin did? He didn’t tell me what the blood would do to me either,” she argued.

I was done. “Take it. Don’t take it. You are making me not care, and I hate that.”

“It’s easy for you to say. You always have someone who’ll fight for you. Poor Kelsey.”

I wasn’t about to take that. “Get out. I’m done with this. If you want me to be done with you, that’s how it will be. I’m about to lose my husband again, so babying you isn’t my priority. When this is done, we’ll go back to the Earth plane, and you can spend your time in a cell. And before you call me a bitch, it’s exactly what you were planning for me except Myrddin would have killed me. He’s the one who sent me off plane. He would have taken Gladys and then slit my throat, and guess what, sister, it would have been okay because you can’t feel anything. The whole world can burn because Olivia Carey isn’t strong enough to fight.”

She’d paled, but I didn’t care in that moment.

I walked into the closet and saw the monstrosity of a gown Tix had left me. It had petticoats or something.

Not happening.

“I did, I think. Fight, that is.”

I closed my eyes in frustration because Liv didn’t seem to be done with me. “It doesn’t matter now. I’ll let you go if that’s what you want.”

“It’s hard to remember because I think so much of what I remember is false,” she said quietly. “But I know I tried to save Sarah Day. I had a way out, but she needed it. He was going to take Mia.”

I had seen what she did that day. “I know.”

“And then I was alone, and they put me in the camp. I think they hurt me there.”

“I’m sorry, Liv. I wish you hadn’t gone through it.”

“It wouldn’t have broken you,” she whispered. “I think that’s what kills me. You would have fought and won, and I’m the sidekick.”

“You were never the sidekick. You were my hero, Liv. You were the hero of a lot of us. We loved you.” I felt something stir in my chest, an odd fluttering. I put my hand there, right over my heart. How could she even think that? She’d always been important to me. She’d been the sister I needed so desperately.

She looked a bit haunted standing there in the doorway of the closet. Although the closet here was larger than her dorm room where we’d sat and talked most nights in college. We’d come such a long way, and I hated how distant we were now.

“I think he took it,” Liv said. “My soul. I get flashes of what might have happened at the ceremony, but I don’t know if they’re real or not. I remember being so proud. And then I remember being terrified. Is it surprising which one I prefer?”

It wasn’t surprising, but she had to face the truth. “It’s a choice you’re making. You might not have made the choice to become Myrddin’s enforcer, but you have free will here and now. I know you hate that collar and the blood you’ve been taking, but both have worked to put you in a place where you’re not under his influence. You can choose.”

“I’m under your influence instead,” she accused with a stubbornness I’d never seen in her before.

I shook my head. “As far as I can tell, I have no influence at all. None of this is helpful. I don’t want to fight anymore. Not before I have to go into the lion’s den.”

She seemed to come to some decision. She walked over to the rack of clothes on my left and pulled down a black cocktail dress. “It’s got a big enough skirt you can fight in it if you have to, but it’s elegant enough to convince Lucifer you’re taking the dinner seriously. And it goes well with the necklace. Wear the Givenchy heels. They’re comfortable and more flexible than anything else here.”

She turned and started to leave.

“Thank you,” I said, holding the dress. I wouldn’t have looked at it. I would have tried to wear slacks. She was right about the shoes, too.

She stopped, not turning. “I’ll think about what you said. I worry, though. I don’t think you can find my soul. If you can’t, then you should have Sasha put me down. He’ll do it. Donovan won’t be able to handle the blood on his hands, but Sasha won’t hesitate. He didn’t know me before, so he’s the perfect one to do it. Don’t wait too long. A week or two to ease your conscience, and then...”

My heart caught in my chest. “I don’t...”

“You’re right. I died a long time ago. It will be a relief to everyone,” she said, not turning my way.

“Not to me.”

Her hand went to the doorjamb, as though she needed it to hold her up. “Remember me the way I was. The woman I used to be... She forgives you. She loves you. And Casey. It’ll be better for him, too. Let Lee try tonight. He’s good at what he does, and Lucifer won’t be able to harm you if he can’t prove what’s happened. After all, Lee wouldn’t be the first to steal a bit of Lucifer’s body. I know of at least one person who got away with it.”

She walked away, and I was left with an ache I was sure would never heal.

Chapter Sixteen



Liv

I stood and watched as Eddie put one hand on Lee. Lee stood in the big foyer of the house, Dean Malone in his muscular arms. I had to admit the two young males made a striking couple even if they weren't together in that way. Dean's strength was lean and subtle, where Lee was a walking example of a football linebacker. Lee's coloring was that midnight dark I've only ever really seen in the *sidhe*, while Dean was all light. His head slumped against Lee's shoulder, and he looked young and vulnerable.

If there was anything of his father in there, I couldn't see it.

"Are we ready?" Eddie asked.

Tix frowned. "Shouldn't I be asking that question? Lord Sloane, I don't know why we need to bring the satan along. I can teleport everyone to Lucifer's realm myself."

Tix was upset there was another butler going along. He was a very jealous servant.

I felt something big move in beside me and looked down. Hellhound. Three of them, actually. The largest of the three started to move toward Fenrir, who looked utterly uncomfortable in a suit and tie.

"Hercules, stay," Fen said in a deep voice.

The hellhound whined but sat back on his haunches.

"I know, buddy, but hellhounds weren't invited to this dinner," Fen said. "Casey will watch after you. He's got all the treats."

Casey. I wished he was going, too. Nope. They had to leave someone behind to make sure I didn't...run away? Which I shouldn't pretend like it's a dumb thing for them to do since it was exactly what I'd been planning.

Kelsey looked gorgeous in the dress I'd selected, and the shoes did exactly what I'd thought they would. They made her legs look long and sculpted. She's such a beautiful woman, but she didn't know it.

I felt sick inside at what I'd said to her. The words had come out before I thought about them, wild anger making me reckless. And yet, the apology wouldn't come now. It was stuck in my throat, sitting there because I didn't have the courage to walk up to her and tell her I was wrong.

That would mean she was right. About everything, and I couldn't face that right now. So I stood there as they gathered around getting ready to go into what would likely be a rough battle.

"You know why I need Eddie," Gray said with a sharpness to his tone. "Tix, if you're going to..."

Tix held a hand up. "I'm sorry, master. I do understand why. I'm...I don't like to admit this. I'm nervous. I don't like the fact that he's blindsided us."

"That's his way," Gray replied.

Tix nodded. "Master, I'm going to ask you to be especially careful. Something's been happening in the house, some energy I don't like. It's flared several times since you brought Lady Sloane here, but I cannot pin it down. It's elusive, and that worries me. I fear it could have something to do with Lucifer's invitation since we all know how his realm can affect things down here."

Evan held up a hand. "Uhm, I don't."

Gray turned her way. "We're about to open a portal to Lucifer's realm. Even a bit of that energy can make things go wonky here. The house is magical, so we might deal with some weirdness for a day or two. Things like rooms going

missing. I would stick to the main rooms until we get back, Casey. I would hate to lose you for a couple of days.”

I didn't like the sound of that, but I wasn't surprised. I'd been told by the house she needed the magic from Lucifer's realm to make her transition.

I wondered what would happen to the actual structure of the house when she became corporeal and left the Midnight Kingdom. I hadn't thought about that.

What kind of magic would that necklace soak up, and how would it affect Kelsey?

“We'll deal with all of it.” My best friend stood there stalwart, not looking my way at all. “I want to get this over with. Tix, energize.”

She'd watched a lot of *Star Trek*. We'd watched a lot of *Star Trek*.

I wanted to smile, to be amused, but I couldn't connect to that either.

“Be careful, guys. We'll hold down the fort.” Casey moved in next to me, and I noticed he was holding a wriggling Puff.

All the hellhounds wanted to be with Fen. I wondered how Lucifer would handle that. A Hell creature Fenrir could control might make Lucifer angry or wary. Not taking them along was a good idea.

Tix reached out, and there was a bubbling sound and then a loud pop and they were gone.

If energy had come through, I couldn't feel it, but then I wasn't connected to anything anymore. I was adrift, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could handle it.

“What did you say to Kelsey?” Casey knelt down and let Puff on the ground where the big hellhounds surrounded him. The slightly smaller one—the female, I thought—started to lick the little guy like he was her puppy. Hercules stared at the place where Fen had disappeared and laid down like he was going to wait right there until he came back.

“None of your business.”

“Something was wrong with her,” Casey accused. “And I think you know.”

“She’s about to spend an evening with the Lord of Hell. She’s nervous, and rightfully so since he’s a massive asshole,” I replied. Which was likely why I should have helped her and then gone along to support her like I would have a million times before.

“It’s more. She’s been nervous the whole time, but I caught her crying after you left her room. I was going in to tell her about some information I discovered and she was crying in her closet. That was about you,” he replied, his blue eyes narrowed on me.

It looked like I was in for another fight. The good news? If the house was right, I would be back to full power in a few hours and out of here.

Did I really want that? How could I know since I wasn’t whole? An important piece of me was missing. How could I trust the decisions this me made when I was missing crucial parts?

Compassion. Love. Empathy.

Was this who I wanted to be?

Everything Kelsey had said to me felt like a weight dragging me down. It was so much easier to not care.

And so much more cowardly.

“I pointed out some facts of life to her. She didn’t appreciate it.” I walked over to the small bar. As long as I was here, I could enjoy Gray’s excellent taste in alcohol. If I went back to the Coven House, it wouldn’t be allowed. I would have to lead the Profane and be a role model.

Of submission and idiocy. Of being mindless and showing everyone how I let that fucker walk all over me.

“Facts? I’m not sure you’re good with those right now.”

I poured a couple of fingers of Scotch. “Maybe that’s how I like it.”

I seemed intent on poking everyone who cared about me. Probably because them caring about me meant I owed them something. Something simple like caring about myself, too.

I hated how I couldn't feel joy, but I could feel like my skin was two sizes too small. I could feel anxiety like it was a live wire animating my flesh.

"Liv, come on, baby. Talk to me." Casey's hands came up to cup my shoulders.

Oh, I could feel that. Sex. I could enjoy sex. It took me right out of my head, and when that vampire bit me I didn't think about anything but pleasure.

I could easily become Casey's sweet submissive girlfriend.

I was feeling nasty, something deep bubbling inside me. Was he really any different than Myrddin?

Maybe if I made them all hate me, I would get what I wanted. Oblivion.

Or I'd go back to Myrddin and take what he'd given me before and not care. I could sink into the addiction of not having to be me.

"There's nothing to talk about. You're all fools if you think you can find my soul and stuff it back inside me and I'll be some happy girlfriend again." I knocked back the drink, the alcohol burning its way down my throat.

"I don't think you'll be happy," Casey corrected. "I think you'll finally be able to heal."

"There's no healing, Casey." I forced myself to move away from him. Sinking into another addiction wouldn't help me any.

I could be by myself. Hell, maybe I would go wherever the house was going. Maybe I could find a painting and fall into it and all my problems would be solved. I could find that witch plane Kelsey had talked about, the one where they enslaved men. I could be happy there.

Not without your soul, you can't.

“There’s not any healing at all if you reject your soul.” Casey’s arms crossed over his chest as he studied me. “It’s not gone. I know you think it is, but it doesn’t work that way. I’ve been studying and I know we can find it. Myrddin can say he used it for fuel all he likes, but he cannot destroy a soul. A soul is sacrosanct. As far as I can tell it’s the only thing in all the planes that is indestructible. So we need to figure out where it’s hiding. I wish it had come to me, but I’m not a good vessel. Apparently all I can handle is my own.”

“Like it would go to you,” I said under my breath.

“You’re afraid. I get that. Liv, whatever you say to me now, it doesn’t count because you’re not you. You’re the scared child part of you. The traumatized part that can’t process another moment of terror.” His expression had gone sympathetic. “I understand that. Just remember when I do find that piece of you and you’re whole again that you don’t have to ask me for forgiveness. It’s yours. My love, my forgiveness, they’re always yours. I hope you find it in you to forgive me, too.”

“For leaving me? For always thinking the worst of me?” I wanted to push him. I felt bad about what I’d done to Kelsey, and here I was doing the same to him.

I was a live wire of anger and hate, and I couldn’t stop myself.

They were the reason my world crumbled twelve years ago, and they’d done the same fucking thing to me when they’d taken me prisoner. I’d been strong, and they’d made me weak.

“Yes,” he replied, not reacting at all to my bile. “For all of those things. For not seeing how much you needed back then. For not fighting harder to find you that day. For being angry when there was no place for that between us. I’ve thought about this, Olivia. I’ve pretty much done nothing but think about this for the last few weeks. I love you. That is the truth of my life. I can’t force that to be the truth of yours, but I will ensure that when you decide, you’ll be whole.”

“Fuck you, Casey,” I said and started to move for the doors. I would go back to my room and maybe get totally lost. Anywhere was better than here.

When the house moved, I would be ready, and they would never see me again. I wouldn't go back to Myrddin. I would do exactly what I'd just thought. I would move to the outer planes and live alone. No one would make me feel anything again.

My escape was stopped by the little demon who'd been around so much. She burst into the room.

“My lady?” She looked around the salon, obviously out of breath.

“She's already gone, Crizzelo,” Casey said, dropping to one knee so he was roughly eye level with her. “Has something happened? Lord Sloane and the rest have left for Lucifer's realm.”

The hellhounds perked up all of the sudden, as though they'd caught a scent and it was something they liked. Even Hercules got to his feet, his tail starting to wag.

“Tix is gone as well?” Crizzelo asked, biting her bottom lip.

“He went with them,” Casey acknowledged.

Crizzelo wrung her hands together, anxiety obvious. “But his mother is here.”

The hounds started to bounce up and down.

“Hello?” a feminine voice said.

And then the doors were opening, and I felt my jaw drop.

I knew that woman and her name wasn't Lilith.

Nimue. Nimue walked in and dropped to her knees in her flowing gown. Her hair reached her waist, and a smile broke over her as the hounds nearly tackled her. “My babies. What happened to you? Oh, my loves. Who did this to you?”

You. You did this to me. You did this to all of us.

The world seemed to narrow down to her familiar face as I remembered the day Nimue woke up. The day my world broke again.

“Baby?” I heard Casey say.

I was lucky vampires moved fast because I was in his arms as everything went dark and I was taken back in time.

* * * *

Kelsey

I didn't like the idea of rooms moving around seemingly on their own, but I didn't have a chance to register my discontent before I was suddenly in what looked to be a massive stone castle.

Lucifer knew how to do medieval chic, that was for sure.

The only lighting I could see came from big torches attached to the stone walls, the flames orange and red and casting wild shadows everywhere.

“Lord and Lady Sloane, welcome to my realm. Such a pleasure to have you here.” The Lucifer I'd met before walked down the hall, clapping his hands together in obvious delight. He wore a three-piece suit, his dark hair slicked back. Everything about the male in front of me looked sleek and modern compared to the old-school surroundings. He looked so solid it was hard to remember this was merely an “aspect” of the being. From what Gray had said, Lucifer was really all around us since he *was* the realm.

It was all very mystical and magical, and all I could think was I hoped this part of the realm was like his foot or something and not his stomach.

I'm not a mystically oriented girl. I wasn't filled with wonder. I just worried how would Lee trick the man if he was everywhere?

If I stabbed the walls, would it hurt Lucifer? I needed to figure out which part of this place was where he kept his balls because I could tear through those and then he wouldn't be thinking about the fact that Lee was trying to take one tiny feather.

Yep, those were the thoughts running through my head when I should have been calm and collected.

“Do you have a place where I can settle Dean?” Lee asked, holding the young man without showing the extra weight affected him at all.

“Ah, the young Emrys,” Lucifer said, joining us and looking down at the man in Lee's arms. “He looks so peaceful, and yet I can hear him screaming from here. He doesn't have much longer, you know. He'll be dead in the next twelve or so hours.”

I wish I could say he sounded sad about that, but there was a certain satisfaction to his words. Like he knew he had us over a barrel. Which he did. He knew he had something we needed, couldn't live without, and he meant to extract maximum payment.

“Allow my servant to show you to a room where Mr. Emrys can be comfortable while we negotiate for his cure,” Lucifer said, snapping his fingers.

“Malone,” Lee corrected. “He's Dean Malone.”

Lucifer shrugged, an elegant gesture. “The name doesn't change the nature of his blood.”

“No, but it changes the nature of his being.” Lee started to follow the small demon who'd shown up at Lucifer's bidding.

“We're going to go with Lee and make sure Dean gets settled in all right,” Fenrir said.

My gut clenched because what they would really do is try to give Lee cover so he could look for those wings.

It was starting, and I had to play my part or it would all be over before we'd had a chance to save my husband.

“Hurry along, then.” Lucifer waved the young adults off as Evan joined her brother and Fen. “The old folks will be in the salon having a drink. I’ve brought in an ale I think the wolves will enjoy, and a blood wine for those more Hell-plane inclined.”

“That sounds lovely.” Gray seemed as calm, cool, and collected as I thought I should be.

It all sounded terrible, but I couldn’t be honest at this point.

I was still thinking about Liv and the awful things she’d said to me. I don’t cry easily, but I’d wept when she’d left. I’d sobbed for all the things we’d lost and might never regain. That person who’d stood there and casually told me her life would be better if she’d let me off myself hadn’t been my best friend. I hadn’t recognized her at all in that moment. My heart hurt. Like actually hurt. There was an ache in my chest, like it was overly full and needed a release valve.

I didn’t think I could give the order to end my best friend, but I also couldn’t let her fall back under Myrddin’s influence.

Any more than I could let Gray fall under Lucifer’s.

“Lady Sloane will require something non-alcoholic,” Tix announced with a sad shake of his head. “I sent over her dietary needs.”

Lucifer frowned. “Why? She’s a werewolf. I thought they all drank. Is something wrong with her? Gray, does your lady require a medical professional?”

“I’m fine.” I didn’t like how all the attention was suddenly focused on me. I let my hand drift up to the stone at my neck. It seemed warmer than it had before, likely a side effect of being near the big boss. “I’m just pregnant.”

“With a demon child,” Lucifer said as though that should change everything.

“A halfling. Not even a halfling since his dad is a halfling,” I pointed out. I started to follow him down the hallway. The walls seemed washed in red, our footsteps echoing.

“A royal isn’t really considered a halfling,” Lucifer explained in an academic tone. “That child you carry won’t be affected by alcohol in any way. You can eat whatever you like and the child will be fine. Demonkind are a hardy lot. For what it’s worth, so are werereatures. While it can be hard for a she-wolf to get pregnant, once she is, the child is damn near impossible to harm. Ale is one of the things she-wolves crave during pregnancy.”

“I’m not exactly a she-wolf.” Sometimes it was hard to figure out where I belonged in the supernatural world.

“No, you’re something more,” he replied, gesturing to the big wooden doors ahead of us. They swung open without a single creak, exposing a den-looking room luxuriously decorated in reds and golds. Further ahead I could see the room kept going, the lines flowing out to a balcony that overlooked the grounds. It was the kind of thing that looked great in a magazine, but I wondered what happened when it rained and the rain didn’t recognize the inside-outside borders. Though it probably did here in Hell.

Lucifer led us out there.

It was a magnificent outdoor space. The moon was full and silvery, hanging low in the sky.

There was a big bar to our left and a well-appointed table in front of us. A buffet of what seemed like appetizers was off to the side. Night-blooming flowers crept up the walls and around the stone banister that kept us from falling.

I moved to the edge and realized how high up we were. My stomach lurched because I couldn’t see the bottom.

“Hell is endless, you know.” Lucifer joined me, his hands on the railing as he looked out over his kingdom.

“Is it? I thought this was merely your realm.”

“It is. This is a personal space, but I have dominion over every plane of Hell.”

“I never thought of Hell having distinct and different planes. I thought they were all one big torture scape.”

Lucifer raised a brow. “I’m surprised you’re so ignorant when it comes to Hell. I would have suspected your academic mentors would teach you better. After all, you were bred to hunt and kill my kind.”

“That’s not exactly true. I’m a specialized wolf meant to keep the powerful alphas in check. It was the academics who started training us as demon hunters,” I pointed out. “But only ever on the Earth plane. I wasn’t meant to be here. The only reason I am is my husband. I assure you, I have no intentions of starting a killing spree.”

“It might be fun, though only if you massacred the demons who bore me,” Lucifer admitted. “Otherwise, I might get quite cross.”

I wondered why I was here alone when Trent and Gray would normally be hovering. I glanced behind me and saw they were each speaking to a Lucifer themselves. We’d walked in with one, but there were three now. Nope. Four. The bartender looked like a Lucifer, too, though they were all slightly different. The one talking to Gray was as tall as Gray and wore a dark suit sans tie. Trent was talking to a shady-looking Lucifer wearing jeans and a T-shirt and piling a plate high at the buffet.

“I take it this is a good way to divide us up?”

Lucifer leaned against the banister, looking back at his other selves. “I simply send out the parts of me a person will respond to. The one talking to Gray is all business. They’re discussing some events that have recently happened that will affect the prices of crops. You know your husband is quite wealthy here.”

We hadn’t gone into the economics of being a Hell plane farmer. “He’s wealthy everywhere.”

“Yes, but his Earth plane wealth came from his mother’s side of the family,” Lucifer explained. “Such a deliciously terrible family. They’re all here now, of course. Serving Hell in one way or another. I believe his mother, in particular, is restless. Or so I’ve heard. Have you met your mother-in-law?”

My dead mother-in-law? “No.”

Lucifer shrugged. “Well, it’s not like she and Gray got along well.”

“She sold him.”

Lucifer tsked, wagging a finger my way. “Not true, Lady Sloane. You act like he’s some common legacy. You know it’s not like a parent can sell a child’s soul. The child has to have some bit of demon in order to be able to be called to serve the Hell plane. They’re bred specifically to a task. Your husband, for example, was born to become the dark prophet. His mother’s family was particularly good with prophecy, though they dabbled in all the dark arts. What no one likes to acknowledge is that you really can’t force a soul to come to Hell unless the person who owns it believes on some level they belong there. That’s what I find entirely amusing.”

I was confused. “I’ve known several legacies. They didn’t want to go to Hell. I have a friend who knew a witch who was a legacy.”

He seemed to search his memory and then nodded as though he’d pulled up the right file. “You’re talking about the obnoxious woman who calls herself the Queen of all Vampire. Her friend was raised a legacy. She believed she would be dragged to Hell, and from a young age she was made to feel there was a part of her that deserved it. It’s a trick we play to ensure we’ll get what we need. Consider it training.”

“I consider it evil.”

A brilliant smile lit his face. “Thank you so much. I do as well. It’s the little things I never get credit for. Anyway, if the young Sarah Day had believed she didn’t deserve Hell, the contract couldn’t have been enforced. Intent is important when it comes to a legacy.”

“So Gray never had to descend?”

He shook his head. “That’s an entirely different thing. Gray is a royal. There is no question what plane he belongs to. And yet, there’s still a piece of him that thinks being here is punishment for his sins. I often worry what would happen if

humans got over their shame and guilt. I worry this plane might wink from existence.” He threw back his head and laughed. “And then I remember we’re talking about humans. Like that will ever happen. My asshole father really fucked them over.” The smile faded. “He should have stuck with his perfect creations. Human souls are overly complicated.”

It struck me that he was being quite talkative, at least this aspect of him was. It looked like the one hanging with Trent just wanted to eat and drink some beer. If he was talking, I had some questions. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the nature of souls.”

“Oh, no you haven’t, Lady Sloane. You’ve been looking for one. Or rather a piece of one. Isn’t that why you sent the young royals all over the planes asking about purchasing one? Yes, I heard about that. I have eyes everywhere.”

That was what I was afraid of. “All right, yes, I’m looking for one. A piece of one, actually.”

“Your sad witch friend. Not happy with her bargain? Or you don’t like her makeover.”

“I don’t think she bargained at all. I think she was forced.”

“Well, that can happen,” Lucifer returned as though we were talking about the weather and not someone’s soul. “There are some fools who think they can steal a soul. It never works the way they want it to. For all we like to say we’re going to devour a soul, it can’t happen. The soul is the heart of creation. It can transform, but you can’t destroy it. I should know. I’ve been trying for millennia. If you come across a way, tell me, sister. I’ll pay for that knowledge.”

“She thinks he used it in a spell.”

Lucifer snorted, letting me know how ridiculous he found that. “If that were true, no one would have a soul left. Witches can be greedy bitches. No. Your friend’s soul is hanging about somewhere, probably wondering what the hell happened. A lost child whose mother forgot them at the store. Don’t worry about it. When the body she’s using dies, the soul will come right back together. No harm. No foul.”

I totally hated him. “I’m not going to wait until she dies.”

“So she’s looking for the piece that was taken from her?” the Lord of Hell asked as though surprised.

“Not exactly. She thinks she’s better off without it.”

“Well, I’ve met her, and she’s a sad little thing, isn’t she? Thinks she’s so strong, but she’s only filled with what he decided to put into her. He stripped her bare and rebuilt her. Quite smart of him, really. If he’d left that part of her, she wouldn’t have been effective as an enforcer. That whole free-will thing is rather overhyped, if you ask me. Give me a worker bee any day of the week.”

“So Myrddin gets to go around ripping out pieces of people’s souls?” I tried to temper my anger.

“If the divine creator had a problem with it, wouldn’t it stop? Your friend should have protected it better.” His eyes lit with malicious glee. “What was she wearing when it happened? Was it a mini skirt? Was she walking alone after dark? In a bad part of the city? She really should have been more careful.”

“You’re an ass.”

“Again, you give the sweetest compliments, Lady Sloane. You and I are going to get along quite well,” he said. “And that’s important because we’re going to spend a lot of time together, your husband and I.”

A cold chill went down my spine because what I’d feared was right here. “You don’t know that.”

“I can’t be entirely sure, but I know I’m the only one who can cure that wizard you think is going to save the Earth plane.” He looked out over his kingdom. “I’m not so sure about that because Gray’s last contract ended entirely too soon. I was about to see how it all played out when... He was free. I was lucky someone decided to try to take out the baby vampire king.”

There was a scenario I hadn’t thought of. “Did you do it?”

An elegant hand waved off that question. “Of course not. Though I don’t have a problem using what I have. It’s a bit of a miracle, isn’t it? I need a hold over the dark prophet and Myrddin provides. He’s lucky he did since he hasn’t provided anything else.”

It was good to know our intel was correct. “There are other ways.”

“Not really. I suppose Myrddin could reverse it if he had... say, one of the feathers from my heavenly wings.” There was an anticipation in Lucifer’s tone that sent that chill I’d felt to an absolute freeze.

What did he know? Was Lee already in custody? Was he already dead?

“But other than that, it has to be me,” Lucifer continued. “I don’t heal people for the fun of it. I do have a reputation to uphold. And I like to make sure I’m getting the absolute best deal possible. Ah, our final guest is here. We can let the bidding begin.”

He gestured to the doors, and I watched as a tall man walked through, dressed in red robes that cinched around his body.

Myrddin Emrys gave me a smile that sent my heart into a tailspin. “Hello, Lady Sloane. Lord Lucifer, shall we begin?”

Chapter Seventeen



Liv

I was dragged back into memory, into reality, the moment so real in my throbbing brain that I was there.

“What did you do? What have you done, Myrddin?”

I sit up from my place at the workstation. Myrddin’s private space is only available to a few of us. To the most trusted of his witches.

Sometimes I’m proud to stand here, helping him with his spells.

Sometimes I know it’s wrong and I should fight. Then he gives me more blood, and that part of me that screams goes back to sleep.

He took something from me. Something important. But it’s not me speaking. It’s Nim. Nimue, who is my mentor. When Myrddin is angry, she often stands in the way and talks him down, but she’s still one of us. She still believes.

She’s the legendary Lady of the Lake, her magic so old no one quite knows where it came from. The only person more powerful than Nimue is Myrddin himself.

He loves her.

He’s enslaved her. Like he did you.

That part of me is waking again, and I don’t know if I’m pleased or horrified. It’s so much easier to sleep. When that part of me sleeps I don’t feel anything at all. It’s hard to feel because he took a piece of me, but it still comes through from time to time, and I ache with it.

I let the pestle I've been working with sit against the lip of the mortar as Nimue stalks in.

This space was formerly the kitchen where Albert worked his own magic. How many times had I stood beside the demon helping him make grilled cheeses for the kids or some snack we would all enjoy while we watched a movie?

I was a babysitter then. Now I'm...now I think I might be a slave.

"Nimue." The man himself turns, his face in a deep frown. "I don't think I like the tone you're taking. Please remember we're not alone here. I have Olivia with me. We're working on a spell to make transport between the Hell plane and this coven house easier."

"You don't like the tone I'm taking? Are you fucking with me?"

I look at the woman who's been a mentor to me in this dark place. She's helped me grow, helped me see that this is the best way for witches to achieve all of our goals.

Nimue is a stunning woman, but then how could she be otherwise when she's Myrddin's chosen love?

"Perhaps we should talk." Myrddin's tone goes smooth, lyrical even. I find it soothing when he speaks to me like this, as though he can reach into my body and calm my spirit.

I don't think it's having the same effect on Nim.

"You want to talk about this?" She holds out her hand, and I see a small white thing lying on her palm. Is that a bone?

Myrddin stops, his body going still in a way that lets me know he's accessing his magic. He gets this predatory silence as though even the air around him knows to stop moving and focus every bit of energy on what he wants. "Olivia, you should go to your room now."

"Liv, don't you dare leave," Nimue orders. "Did he do this to you, too? Do you know what this is? It's a thrall stone. I haven't been myself for over a decade. I had no real free will because all I wanted to do was please him."

I shake my head. "He wouldn't do that. He doesn't need to. We all love him."

Even as I say the words, I wonder. Is this why I am the way I am? Why I go to sleep at night and don't try to break out? Why I don't try to find a way to get to Casey?

Sometimes I'm happy Kelsey is gone so she doesn't have to know what I've become.

"You don't." Nim makes her way to me, holding my hand in hers. "You don't love him. You're under his influence."

A dark chuckle comes from Myrddin. "As if I would waste a stone on her. I don't need to. Olivia proved far easier to break than I could have imagined. I should have known. It's always the ones who seem to have a strong foundation who break when it shakes the first time. Not like you, my love. I did have to use the stone on you, and now I know how long it lasts so I can be ready for the next time."

Nim's hand squeezes mine as I try to process what Myrddin's said. "There won't be a next time. I know when you must have done it. Years ago. It's the only explanation. It was when I held the stasis chamber for the king's surgery back in the pocket world. I won't ever allow myself to be so vulnerable around you again."

"He used a stone?" I'm slow. I had my dose of demon blood a few hours before and while Myrddin promises it will make me strong, I often feel weak, a bit out of myself after I've taken it. I'll get better. I'll handle it better as my system gets used to it, or so I've been told. But now I don't understand why he would use a stone on the love of his life.

"Shut up, Olivia," he spits my way, and his face looks different, like the mask slipped for a moment. Myrddin always looks perfect.

Except when the mask slips and I can see that part of him that scares me, the part I try so hard not to think about.

"Olivia, I need you to get behind me," Nimue says, holding out a hand. "I know he seems to be your friend, but he's not."

Myrddin wasn't a friend. He was...everything. He was like a father to me. So much so that I no longer needed my own dad. I didn't need my mom. I didn't need Kelsey or Casey. I just needed to do what he told me to or he would hurt me.

I'm afraid of him. I realize it in the moment. This feeling I have, this instinct that nothing he shoves into my system can quite get rid of, tells me he hates me. He uses me. Everything he says is a lie.

"Do you know what a thrall stone is, Liv?" Nimue moves around the room cautiously, her eyes never leaving Myrddin.

I shake my head.

"It's a piece of a demon he put in my head so I'm easily influenced by him. He's doing the same thing to you by forcing you to take demon blood," she explains quietly.

I know she's right, but that's not what comes out of my mouth. "I take it so I'm strong."

"She won't believe you." Myrddin watches her, too. Like she's a snake who will bite him.

Or maybe like she's prey he needs to take down.

I do. I believe her, so why can't I make myself move toward her? She's trying so hard to help me. Why am I not taking her hand?

"Olivia is fully under my influence. She's a good girl," Myrddin says.

"She's a terrified woman," Nim corrects. "Olivia, you need to understand that he's planning on convincing you to let him use your body. He wants to kill the children. He's the one who sent the Hunter through the painting. I don't know if she'll ever be able to come back. Come with me and we'll look for her. Don't let him use you. He wants your familiar face. He'll convince you all he wants to do is talk to them, but he's lying."

My hearts thumps in my chest because even as slow as I am, I feel the tension. While Myrddin looks calm, I feel his power growing. Nimue should run but she doesn't. She keeps her hand out, keeps offering me help.

“If I can’t have you, Nimue, no one can. Olivia, let this be a lesson to you. Learn what happens to women who defy me.” Myrddin holds his hands up, and I feel him pull power from me. It straightens my spine and makes my every bone ache.

When he brings his hands across his body, Nimue stops. She stills, and her eyes widen right before her body crumples to the floor.

Her head goes another way, and Myrddin catches it with a sickening thump.

My vision goes watery. Blood. It’s everywhere, and yet Nim’s eyes are open.

“You’ll forget everything but the lesson, Olivia. Now clean this up, you dumb cow.”

I want to scream but my body moves.

The lesson is learned.

“Liv?”

I pushed out against the arms that held me because the vision had been so vivid.

Myrddin had separated the legendary Nimue’s head from her body, and he’d had me place her in a box where she couldn’t regenerate. Every day for a long time he tried spells to make her forget, and I believed some of them worked, but she didn’t forget she hated him.

I forgot everything. Everything. I’d been so weak.

“Your friend is coming out of what feels like years of suppression spells,” an unfamiliar voice said. “I can sense the spells that were used on a being. She was tortured. I can feel it on her soul. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you. It’s a particular talent of mine. I can’t read her mind, but I can read her soul. There’s a piece of it missing. It’s ragged and torn. Whatever happened to her, it was violent.”

She sniffled like looking at my soul hurt her own.

“She’s my wife.” Casey sounded like the one who’d been tortured.

I started to come out of the vision. No. The memory. Not the false ones he fed me. The reality of the last twelve years of my life.

Everything had been a lie.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. Her voice was soothing and lyrical. “I know a bit of what it means to be tortured. I’m sorry for what she went through. Is this the first time she’s had a true memory surface? It can be physically hard when that happens.”

“I think she’s started having them, but they seem to give her headaches.” Casey’s hands smoothed back my hair. “She’s been on demon blood for years. I think it made it easier to control her.”

“Depending on the blood, yes it would. But if she’s on demon blood, the memories shouldn’t resurface,” the woman explained.

“It’s satan blood,” Casey said quietly, almost guiltily.

The woman sighed. “That explains it. The satan blood will actually clear the suppression spells from her system. You were smart to give it to her. It will help her get off the blood without too much physical discomfort. Clearing the spells will be harder. You’re a vampire, but she’s not a companion. Unless whoever did this to her took her glow as well.”

“I’m an academic,” he replied.

“Ah.” Lilith. It was Lilith who walked into the room. Except she’d looked so much like Nimue. That had to be my memory surfacing. She only resembled her, and that was what had sparked that terrible remembrance.

I opened my eyes to discover they had not deceived me. The woman staring down at me was damn near Nim’s twin. “Nim? I thought he still had you.”

A brow rose over the woman’s eyes. “Nim? You are confused. My name is Lilith, young one.”

I shook my head, not bothering to push Casey away. I didn't want to. I wanted to be in his arms, and I wasn't going to fight it.

"She's talking about the Lady of the Lake." Casey's eyes were wide with concern as he looked down at me. "Are you okay? I think we should go back to the Earth plane. We need to get you to Henri."

I didn't need a doctor. There wasn't anything Henri could do for me, but the woman in front of me could answer a few questions. "I'm fine. Help me up."

He simply stood, taking my weight and not showing it bothered him at all. "You should at least rest for a while."

I shook my head. "Come on, Casey. She looks exactly like Nimue. Don't you have a few questions? I know what happened to her now. When the thrall stone finally made its way out of her head, she tried to save me, but I was too far gone. She wouldn't leave, and that was how Myrddin killed her. At least she would be dead if she was human." It was all so hazy when moments before it had been crystal clear. "I'm not sure where she is now, but we need to find her head."

The Coven House had blown up. Nimue could still be in the rubble. All these years...

"She's fine. The queen got her out, and she's regrowing her body," Casey told me.

"I look like this woman?" Lilith stood, the hellhounds at her side. They looked oddly right standing there as though this was a woman who always had a canine entourage.

Casey set me down on the couch. "Are you sure you want to do this now?"

I wasn't sure when else I would do it. "I'm fine. Aren't you the least bit curious what happened to Nim?"

"I don't have to be curious. She told us what happened. Myrddin cut her head off and stuffed it in a box and kept her in the closet for years," Casey replied, staring down at me as though he wasn't sure if he should pick me back up again. "I

thought you knew. I'm a little pissed she didn't mention everything that was happening to you."

I shook my head. "She very well might not remember. Myrddin played with her head for years and years. He tried to make her forget so they could start again. I don't know how much she would have held on to. For what it's worth, I'm not sure I can trust my own memory at this point."

Lilith sat down on the sofa across from us, the hounds settling beside their mistress. "From what I can feel coming off you, I suspect you remember very little truth. Some of the spells I sense are years and years old."

"I don't understand what you mean by feeling something coming off me."

She was so stunning she looked a bit unreal. Long dark hair and perfect skin that nearly glowed. Those violet eyes I'd seen before in Nim seemed to pierce me. "I can sense magic and auras. I'm particularly good with souls. Yours is missing a piece. It was taken from you with great violence."

My stomach felt sick, but I pushed past the queasiness. "Yes, I've recently begun to believe that as well."

"Who did this to you?" Lilith asked.

"A man named Myrddin Emrys. He's a big name on the Earth plane." Casey sighed and settled down next to me.

"I've stayed away from the Earth plane for a long time. I'm afraid it holds too many bad memories. I'm sorry for your pain, but I don't know this Nimue," Lilith admitted.

"You look like her. You could be her sister."

She went still. "This friend of yours has my eyes? They're violet?"

It was more than the eyes. "Yes. They're memorable. She's also an incredibly powerful witch."

"I would like very much to meet her," Lilith said quietly, a determination in her eyes. "I've been looking for a woman. Someone I lost thousands of years ago. I thought her soul had perhaps moved on to another realm, but now I wonder."

“Well, before we introduce you to anyone, I’d like to know why four creatures from your realm have recently tried to murder Lady Sloane.” Casey seemed to have forgotten the word *subtle*.

A flush stole across the petite woman’s skin, and she looked down at the largest of her hellhounds. “Hercules, come here.”

The canine turned his head up and stared into his mother’s eyes, giving her a trust I wondered if I would ever feel again.

When Lilith looked back, there was a sheen of tears in her eyes. “My poor babies. They were spelled, weren’t they? Was it a physical charm placed on them? I can’t sense an internal spell, but anyone who knows me wouldn’t attempt to set me up like that.”

“Set you up?” Casey asked.

I was still staring at her, still thinking about how Nimue had a chance to flee and hadn’t taken it. She’d come for me, tried to save me.

Like Kelsey would have if she hadn’t been tricked away from her family.

Logic stated the truth. I was part of that family. So why couldn’t I feel the connection?

“I have no reason to harm Lady Sloane. I don’t know her,” Lilith replied. “Is my son here? Tix is the only one of my children I truly have a relationship with. I would never harm Tix. He’s...he’s the only one who has a piece of me in him.”

“You’re the mother of demons.” I was still a little out of it. I was processing what I’d learned and the fact that I was sitting across from the First Woman, the one religion teaches was defective.

“Yes, that was part of my punishment for not taking my place.” Her shoulders went back, spine straightening, and Hestia placed her big head on Lilith’s lap as though the hellhound realized she needed some comfort. “In the beginning there was Heaven and Hell and Earth. When I rejected Adam, I wasn’t welcome on two of those planes. Let’s

just say, my time here on the Hell plane hasn't always been as comfortable as it is now, and many of those births were not my choice."

"I'm sorry," I said, wanting to be.

Lilith's lips turned up in a sad smile. "I think you wish you could be. He cut out a center piece of your soul. He took your pain, but he took your joy, too. Youngling, I know it seems easier, but life is meaningless if we can't feel it." She turned to Casey, seeming to steel herself. "I assure you, Academic, I am not at fault here. I would never harm my babies. You said there were four. I only have three hounds."

"The day we came here, a predatory cat attacked Lady Sloane," Casey explained. "It had a brand."

"Yes, I'm sure it did. I run something of a sanctuary for animals no one else wants," she replied. "I'm forced to brand the more dangerous of our occupants. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I had nothing to do with it. I'll check with my servants, but it would be fairly easy for someone of ill intent to sneak one of my creatures off plane. I know it will come as a surprise to you, but demons are easily bribed. I try to keep my circle tight, but I still need servants, and I can't promise none of them will betray me. I don't have the comfort of the oath Lord Sloane has."

"Why not? I thought every great house had that," Casey said.

"I'm not a house. I rule over the Daybreak realm, but I foreswore having more children or a spouse long ago," she explained. "In fact, if I should be killed or found unworthy of my realm, the House of Sloane would take over."

The implications hit me, and I worried Lilith was going to walk away. "Gray would never do that."

"No, but his father might," she mused. "It would be a good way to take over. If one of the creatures had managed to kill Lady Sloane, I would be accused. Of course, it makes more sense to kill Lord Sloane and take over."

“Lady Sloane is pregnant,” I pointed out. Despite that piece of my soul that was missing, I proved I could still feel some guilt. I’d sent my bestie to Lucifer’s realm to soak up a bunch of energy that would make it possible for her house to go on the lam.

That sounded stupid when I really thought about it.

“He could want to kill Lord Sloane so he could take over easily, though he would have a better hold on the realms if he had a grandchild. Demons take their lineage seriously,” Lilith explained. “Can you be certain they were going after Lady Sloane? Or were they sent to simply create chaos and point a finger my way? Have you asked the house what it saw?”

“The house doesn’t exactly like me,” Casey admitted with a frown. “It likes to make my life hard.”

A curious look came over Lilith’s face. “Why would it do that? You understand that the house isn’t exactly sentient in a way we understand. Think of it more like a giant spell meant to protect and harbor the inhabitants. I’ve heard the humans now have smart houses. It’s a bit like that.”

“I thought the house could take form,” I heard myself say, suspicion creeping along my skin.

Lilith stared at me. “Form? What do you mean?”

Something was wrong. I could feel it now. I was falling into another trap, and this time Kelsey would be the one to pay. Kelsey....and her baby. I stood, a little panic starting to flare inside me.

How foolish had I been? How selfish that I hadn’t even considered the consequences?

“The house. She speaks to me as a woman with a lot of blonde hair.” I tossed out the idea that this collar was coming off any time soon, and honestly, after what I’d recently learned, it shouldn’t. Until I cleared the blood from my system and had my memories restored, I wasn’t reliable. I’d been the unreliable narrator of my own story for twelve years. “She’s the one who told me the brand belonged to you. She has a room in the library.”

Casey stood. “Baby, that’s not the way the house works at all. You said she has blonde hair?”

I nodded. “She’s thin and not too tall and has a ton of blonde hair. She...she offered to help me get away if I helped her.”

Lilith’s head shook. “That’s not the house. The house doesn’t need anything. What did she want in exchange?”

Casey was moving toward the desk Gray kept in the salon.

“She wanted me to make sure Kelsey wore this necklace when she went to Lucifer’s realm,” I replied. “I didn’t see any harm in it. She said it soaks up some kind of energy that will make it easier for her to take corporeal form.”

“Is this her?” Casey had a framed photo in his hand.

I nodded because it was obviously the same woman I’d met in the library. “Yes, she’s older, but that’s her.”

“That’s Gray’s mother.” A groan came from Casey. “All this time we thought we were dealing with Gray’s asshole father and it was his mom. He has a shitty family. Now we have to figure out what she really wants.”

“She wants everything.” Lilith stood, straightening the skirts of her dress. “Is it the Eye of Night your mistress is wearing?”

I snorted. “She’s so not my...”

“Liv,” Casey cut me off.

It probably wasn’t the best time to correct her. “Yes. But I didn’t even have to talk her into it. She wanted to wear it.”

“Because it’s a focal point,” Lilith explained. “Each realm has one. The Eye of Night, in particular, helps focus certain energies, and one of those is portal energy. Normally it’s not dangerous. I would be surprised if Lord Sloane even knows what it does. Once it’s been in Lucifer’s presence for long enough it will be fully powered and ready to take a soul where it wants to go, if she knows how to use it. If this woman doesn’t have a body, she’ll need one, and there’s nothing easier than displacing a babe in the womb.”

Now I was in a full-fledged panic. I couldn't be the reason Kelsey lost her son. She'd already lost so much time with Fenrir. "We have to go. We have to warn Kelsey."

Casey set the photo down. "I can't get to Lucifer's realm. Eddie went with them. There's no one here who can teleport."

"You can't," Lilith said. "But I assure you I can. Get close to me. Being an ex-wife of the Lord of Hell comes with some privileges."

"Ex-wife?" Casey asked, his hand finding mine and pulling me close.

"Yeah. I had a bad-boy thing going for a little while. Rebellion. I'm over it now. What I'm not over is the loss of my only daughter, but I think you're going to help me with that—after I save Lady Sloane a world of heartache and convince everyone I'm not trying to hurt her." She held her hands out, and we were enveloped in a bubble.

And then we were traveling, and I prayed we got there in time.

* * * *

Kelsey

Gray and Trent were both at my side as our enemy made his way into the room. My stomach took a deep dive, twisting a bit in a way that made me wholly uncomfortable, but I stood there forcing myself to be strong.

"What exactly is he doing here?" Gray moved in front of me, and I noticed his horns were starting to come out.

The Lucifer who'd been talking to me shrugged and poured himself another drink. "Well, it is a party. You can't expect you would be the only guest."

"Eddie," Gray called out.

Trent's fingers threaded through mine and gave me a squeeze. "Go with Eddie. Gray and I will get the kids out."

Like I would leave them behind in Lucifer's realm. I took a long, steadying breath, trying to push the panic down. Something was happening. I couldn't explain it, but I could feel a shift in the air like a cold wind pulsing across my skin. "I'd like to know exactly what Lucifer thinks he's going to get out of putting me in a room with the man who tried to kill my son for years."

Myrddin put a hand to his chest, a *what, me?* expression coming over his face. "I don't know what stories they've been telling you, Hunter, but I only ever tried to help the royal children."

I noticed the Lucifer who'd hung out with Trent kept right on eating while the one with Gray joined mine. It was a reminder that he was everywhere.

"See, he tried to help," Lucifer Two proclaimed.

"He tried to help them into a grave." I looked around because I expected Eddie to come running. Tix, too. He should be running to protect his precious master, probably leaving me and Trent here to deal with the real problem.

"Not at all." Myrddin moved close to the Lucifers, as though to point out that they were good friends.

And he was going to try to eat my soul.

Dread. I could feel it like a snake coiling and getting ready to strike. Wrong. Something was wrong. I put a hand to my belly. I couldn't panic. Panic was the enemy.

"Eddie," Gray tried again. "Tix."

Lucifer's head shook. "They can't hear you. The whole protecting you from danger doesn't apply in this realm. Did I fail to mention that? You can't expect to be protected from me. I am the ruler here. I control all things on the Hell plane. Now, we should talk about the boy."

"He's here?" Myrddin asked, his eyes narrowing. "I can't feel him."

“He’s under my protection,” Lucifer explained. “For the moment. It was naughty of you to send that witch with an Uro spell. Nasty thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I certainly wouldn’t send someone to kill my own flesh and blood.” Myrddin was an excellent liar, but this one I didn’t think was a lie.

“No, but you would send someone to kill Lee Donovan-Quinn.” I knew exactly what had happened. It had been foolish to think Lucifer would actually help us. The Midnight Kingdom had lulled me into thinking there could be some good found here in Hell, but I had to remember who Lucifer Morningstar was.

I wasn’t sure if it was him or Myrddin who was infusing the room with the feeling of wrongness. I would have sworn I could feel the child in my belly turning. Like he was panicking, too.

Cold eyes turned my way. “Well, the lad has tried to kill me on more than one occasion. His mother recently blew up my home.”

“Her home. You stole it,” I accused. I was going to fight through whatever spell they were sending my way.

“What do you want, Lord Lucifer?” Gray stepped in front of me again. “I would like to remind everyone here that my wife is pregnant with the next head of the House of Sloane. That is supposed to mean something. Even here in Hell we have rules.”

“And I would never harm a demonling,” Lucifer returned. “Never. Especially since I really want to see what happens when a royal demon puts a baby up in a Hunter. I think it could be spectacular. All that power. So no one is going to harm your child or Lady Sloane. And you know what I want, Grayson.”

So he was playing hardball.

“And I’m here to negotiate.” The words came out of my husband’s mouth on a low growl. “Though now I have to

wonder if you haven't been maneuvering me into a position I don't entirely understand. Someone's been trying to kill my wife and child."

Lucifer's mouth turned down. "I told you I wouldn't do that. I was unaware you were having problems. We should find the perpetrator. As you said, Lady Sloane is carrying the future ruler of the Midnight Kingdom. Whoever it is will be dealt with, but that doesn't change the fact that you are the one trying to manipulate me, Grayson, and I don't take well to that. You have a talent I need."

"A talent you cannot take from me," Gray countered.

And that was precisely why he'd brought in Myrddin. He wanted to force our hand. "Are you planning on giving Dean to Myrddin if we don't capitulate to your every whim?"

"Something like that," Lucifer murmured. "The truth of the matter is, Dean is the blooded child of Myrddin Emrys. He is currently here on the Hell plane, where I have dominion over everything. He has enough demon blood to come under my rule while he is here. So I get to decide what happens to him. There are two bidders. Let's see who comes in with what I need."

"Lord Lucifer, you promised me," Myrddin argued.

"The only promise I made was that you could leave here with something of import. I never said what that thing or person would be," Lucifer replied. "You're off your game. Now, I want to stop prevaricating and get down to business. Grayson, I want an open-ended contract for your services or I'll allow Myrddin to take his son."

"He's going to kill him." I wasn't about to allow this to happen, but I couldn't think of a way out right now. If Gray signed that contract, we would never be free. He would be forced to descend on Lucifer's whims.

I heard a low growl and realized I had another problem.

Fenrir was at the doorway, and somewhere in this palace, I would bet his nice clothes were in tatters because he was in wolf form. Evan stood at his side, her eyes narrowed.

“What is he doing here?” Evan asked. “I wasn’t sure what was happening because this psycho scented the air and then his clothes exploded and I had to run to keep up. I take it we’ve been betrayed. What a fucking surprise. Calm down, Fen. You can’t rip Lucifer’s throat out. I’m pretty sure it grows back.”

“Such a smart girl,” Lucifer said, staring Fenrir’s way. “And a dumb wolfling. Yes, I called you that you massive bit of fur and muscle. You’re still a child if you think you can threaten me. Mr. Wilcox, if you don’t want me to murder your son, you should get him under control.”

“Fenrir, please,” Trent said, holding out a hand. “Let Gray handle this. You need to protect Evan and your mother.”

“I’m not going to harm Lady Sloane,” Lucifer said between gritted teeth. “That child is important to the future of Hell. The princess is another story altogether.” He looked back Myrddin’s way. “Don’t you want her for some reason? Are you looking for another child bride? Didn’t I already give you one of those?”

“I want my son,” Myrddin said, though his eyes had strayed to Evan. “Where is the other one? I have reports that Lee Donovan-Quinn traveled to the Midnight Kingdom. I’ll take him if I can’t get my son. I’m owed a soul.”

“No, you’re owed something of import,” Lucifer shot back, and it was easy to see the male was losing patience. “As it so happens, I plan on gifting you a new Coven House. It’s a whole building I own in New York City. You’ll find that covers my promise to you. Unless Grayson isn’t willing to meet my demands. As for the amusing prince, he’s...” Lucifer frowned. “I can’t feel him. Why can’t I feel him? This is my realm. It’s made of my body. I should be able to feel every creature who crawls here.”

Shit and double shit. “He was going to portal back after he dropped off Dean. He’s watching over the prisoner we have at our place.”

“Prisoner? Do you mean Olivia Carey?” Myrddin asked.

Lucifer paced, shaking his head. “I don’t care about her. She’s meaningless, though she’s covering her power. I suspect that has something to do with you. But I don’t care because no one portalled out of here. So if he didn’t portal away, the fucker is still here.”

“It’s the Mantle of Arthur,” Myrddin said under his breath. “I curse the day I gave that to his father. Had I known the trouble it would cause me I would have let Donovan die that night. Lord Lucifer, Lee Donovan-Quinn is a thief, and he’s here to steal from you.”

“That is a lie,” Evan proclaimed.

“You’re trying to heal him yourself.” Myrddin faced off with Evan. “The boy is trying to steal the one thing that can heal an Uro spell.”

My fear ratcheted up substantially. How the hell would we get away from Lucifer if Eddie wasn’t here to teleport us out?

“Lord Sloane, is your guest trying to steal one of my feathers?” Lucifer’s voice had gone deep and low, his eyes changing to a pure red. “I know you’re new to this realm, but let me school you. No one steals from me. Especially not pieces of me. Do you think I allow thieves to take my body parts and make weapons or spells out of my sacredness?”

“Lord Lucifer feels every loss.” Myrddin didn’t seem intimidated by the massive wolf standing between him and Evan. “It’s the only way to cause him pain. Is that what you wish, Lord Sloane?”

Lucifer growled, and I noted his fingers had sprouted some serious talons. “Where is the boy?”

We’d made a horrible mistake. I couldn’t let Lee pay for it.

“Let’s negotiate,” Gray said, ignoring Myrddin.

I was about to tell him no when there was a loud cracking sound, and we suddenly weren’t alone.

Liv, Casey and...Nimue stood on the balcony.

A gasp went through the room, and I realized in shock that it had come from Lucifer himself.

“Lil?”

“Lil?” Gray pulled me closer, making sure Trent stayed near, too. “Is that Lilith?”

“She looks like Nimue, but she doesn’t smell like her,” Trent said.

“You know this Nimue?” Lilith’s eyes were suddenly on us.

And Liv was trying to get to me. Liv’s eyes were wide as she started to run my way.

Myrddin held up a hand, and Liv stopped in midstride, her body going perfectly still. “I don’t think so, Olivia. I think it’s time you returned to your proper place.”

I watched as my friend frowned and obviously tried to move. Her mouth opened as though she had something to say and then closed again.

“Let her go.” It was all devolving, but I would be damned if I allowed him to take her.

“I don’t think so,” Lucifer said, though he hadn’t taken his eyes off the woman in the scarlet gown. “Lilith, it’s been so long.”

“Is this the man you sold my daughter to?” Lilith asked, and there was some serious rage coming off her.

“Trent, I need you to go and find Eddie,” Gray whispered. “I think you can sneak out the back. Lucifer didn’t say he couldn’t portal. Only that our communication is being interrupted. I want our wife out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” I whispered back.

But Trent was already moving. I watched as he seemed to blend in with the shadows, sneaking around the columns and back inside the main house, leaving us on this huge balcony.

“Our daughter,” Lucifer corrected. His eyes were back to normal, and he took a step toward her. “Lil, it’s been so long. I rather thought you would stay in your kingdom forever.”

“I travel often. I simply don’t come to see you,” she replied. “Answer my question. Is this the man you sold my daughter to? And where is my son? He should have gotten Lord Sloane out of here as soon as that male entered your realm. If you’ve hurt him...”

That was the moment I felt a cold chill come over me, and I started to wonder if I would survive the next few minutes.

Chapter Eighteen



Liv

I couldn't move. I was fixed in place, and then I realized that while the world kept spinning on around me, Myrddin Emrys was whispering in my head.

What have you done, you dumb cow? Something's different about you. Did you think you could break free from my spells? I thought for sure you would have slit your own wrists to avoid the pain of withdrawal. Or have they been feeding you demon blood?

I hated that voice. My body might be obeying his magic, but my mind was finally free.

Which meant I had a chance. I simply had to find a way to distract the fucker.

Kelsey. I had to find a way to help Kelsey because Lilith seemed way too involved in her own family drama, and she was forgetting the mission.

Casey. I needed Casey. He should be rushing to Kelsey. Where was he?

I could feel a hot wind blast across my skin. We were on some kind of big balcony, the flames of Hell giving the sky a smoky maroon color. This was the seat of Lucifer's power, and it looked like he was showing off, letting his guests see how high he was above the fiery planes.

I managed to move my gaze, seeking Casey.

Don't bother reaching out for the vampire. I've got him in a stasis spell. He's not going to help you. Tell me where Lee Donovan-Quinn is.

I threw up every wall I had.

Olivia. He tsked in my head. *Don't fight me. I have your soul. I have it right here in my pocket. Would you like me to leave it here in Hell with Lucifer? He loves to play with souls, you know.*

Lies. He was lying, and yet I could feel my soul. It was here. It had been close for a while now. Why hadn't I felt it before?

"I wouldn't hurt your son," Lucifer was saying. "Lilith, you know I would do almost anything for you."

Normally I love a good family drama, and if there wasn't a witch out there trying to dislodge Kelsey's son's soul from his body, I would have asked my bestie to pop some corn and done a deep dive on how Lilith ended up married to Lucifer Morningstar. I mean she'd gone from Adam to the Lord of Hell. It could put Brangelina to shame, and appeared to have ended just as happily.

But now nothing mattered except the fact that necklace was still around Kelsey's neck.

"Tix is fine," Lucifer continued. "As for our daughter, you know I had no choice in that. If you want to blame someone, blame my father. Heaven set up the system long ago."

"You didn't have to give them Layla. Nimue. That's her name now, isn't it?" Lilith asked. "They renamed my daughter."

We were in so much trouble, and I couldn't break free. I heard Fenrir growling behind me, but he wasn't exactly attacking. Kelsey and Gray were across the room, and I thought Evan was behind me, likely sticking close to Fen. I had no idea where Lee was and that was how I wanted it because I could feel that fucker trying to get inside my brain.

"Don't concern yourself with Nimue, woman," Myrddin said with a frown. "She belongs to me."

"She belongs to herself," Lilith practically roared and turned her attention to Myrddin. "I know what you did to her."

“And this is why I didn’t tell you what happened, my love.” Lucifer actually sounded human for a moment. Like a man trying to placate his woman. Or rather a complete asshole who was trying to justify the unjustifiable. “Why don’t we get rid of the mortals and go somewhere quiet to talk?”

I didn’t think that was going to work out for him. I was pretty sure Lilith was done with men.

But she was not done with her daughter.

“Hey, I need you to break free, Liv.” Kelsey was standing in front of me, her voice low. She was pale, and I wondered if she could see the glow coming off the necklace she was wearing. Probably not. I could see the magic because I was looking for it, had seen it before. I’d seen it in the witch’s room. I could see the beginnings of a tail of magic coming off the necklace.

She couldn’t see it. Gray wouldn’t be able to see it.

“Livie, please. I can’t lose you again,” Kelsey said, tears in her eyes. “Something’s wrong. I need you.”

You’re useless. It’s why it was so easy to break you. You’ll come back with me and perhaps I’ll have you kill the boy. Once he’s gone, I’ll be able to make good on my contract because no one will be able to stop me.

“I had no choice. Myrddin straddles the line between Heaven and Hell. I was forced to give them a guardian to keep the balance,” Lucifer was saying. “Layla was the only one strong enough, the only one they would accept. If I hadn’t given her up, there would have been no first King of the Sword, and you know what that would have meant. I wasn’t ready for that chaos. Now I am. Join me, Lil. Myrddin is going to close the door to the Heaven plane, and we will rule. We will have everything we ever dreamed of.”

Well, of course she’d been right about that, too. Damn it. I was going to have so much atoning to do when I found my soul again.

“Is there a reason you’re letting Lady Sloane run about like a mad woman?” Myrddin asked, an edge to his tone.

Lucifer turned his way, and I swear the sky flared a deeper red. “She’s pregnant. I’m not spelling a woman who carries a royal demon in her belly. There are too few of us left. She can’t do anything, and Lord Sloane is under control... Where did the wolf go? Her other husband is not here. Ah, he’s searching for the satan. Of course. He won’t find him.”

Lilith seemed to remember why we were there. “Lady Sloane, take that necklace off.”

Kelsey dropped to her knees, her hand on her belly.

Lucifer stopped, and his jaw dropped for a moment and then he chuckled. “Is that what’s happening? I was far too invested in my own plots to catch it. Who is it? I have to admit I’m a bit worried about that soul being too precious for our world.”

“Lucifer, she’s going to displace that baby’s soul,” Lilith said, looking down at Kelsey. She was beside me now. “And tell him to let my friend go. He’s the one who did this to Olivia. She’s been through enough.”

“You always set me up to disappoint you,” Lucifer said. “I can’t let go of the room. Lord Sloane will lose his proverbial shit if I do, and I can’t even tell you what that wolf king is going to do. Did you hear me? Myrddin is going to give us everything we ever wanted.”

Violet eyes flared. “Everything we wanted?”

Lucifer nodded. “Yes, he’s going to free us from the Heaven plane. Think about it, my love. You will be my queen. We will have dominion over all of the lower planes.”

Lilith stared, and her head shook. “You’re still a child who’s angry with his father. You’re just like the rest of the occupants of Hell, torturing yourself and never understanding it’s your own guilt that keeps you in this prison.” She sighed, a long-suffering sound. “No. I want no part of this. I want only to know my daughter and to make sure she is safe and happy. But if you want any chance to talk with me, you will allow me to help Lady Sloane.”

A muscular shoulder shrugged. “She needs no help. She’s fine. The spell won’t harm her at all, and she’ll still have a babe.”

“With the wrong soul,” Lilith insisted.

“Then her witch friend should save her,” Lucifer countered. “I don’t have a hold on her. She can move at any time.”

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t force myself to move.

Because you’re weak, and it will be so much better to be back in the shadows. Where you belong. You are nothing, but the truth is you won’t care when you’ve taken your proper place again.

I lost my magic before. Lost my faith. Lost my light.

They didn’t have to stay lost.

What Lilith had said sunk into my soul.

This was a prison of my own making. Not the torture Myrddin had put me through, but the stubborn refusal to feel the pain so I could start to heal. I wanted an easy way and there was none, but I didn’t hurt merely myself. If I didn’t find a way to fix it, everyone would suffer.

I looked down at my best friend.

She wants to keep you down, Myrddin whispered in my head.

No, she fucking didn’t. She wanted me by her side. Kelsey had never done anything but hold my hand when we went through something terrible. I had been angry at the world, and I’d vented in the safest place I knew. My friendship with her.

She would forgive me, too.

Faith. I had it in her. If I could get that back, I could get it all back.

I watched as Kelsey tried to pull the necklace off, but she seemed weak.

I hated seeing her weak. She'd likely felt like this when she'd seen me on the grass dying that day twelve years before. And she'd been strong enough to help bring me back.

You are weak. I'll make you strong again. I'll make you Profane again. You can leave all of this pain behind. Leave your name behind and simply be my enforcer.

No pain. No guilt.

No joy. No love.

No Casey or Kelsey.

I felt my finger move.

Why would he pick me if I was weak? What would the point be? He wouldn't. If I was a weak witch, he would have killed me, rolled my head to the rebels, and moved on.

Instead, he'd made sure to mold me into a killing machine.

Because I was fucking strong.

Because I was Olivia Carey, and he had no power over me.

Like I was breaking through ice, I felt the spell crack around me, fissures forming and allowing me to move. Power. It was there. It had been for a long time, and he'd tapped into it, using me like a battery. What they'd told me so long ago had been true. My magic had come back, and it was mine, not some borrowed magic. It had been tainted and twisted with the demon blood until I didn't recognize it, but now I did.

And that collar couldn't hold me. Nothing could bind my magic.

It raced through me, a wave I didn't bother to try to tame. I felt the collar break, felt the pulse of power, and then my muscles moved and I did what I'd intended to do when I portalled into this place. I stepped in front of my best friend and protected her. Like she would have protected me.

I let go of all the hate I'd held in my heart when I'd banished the warmth because it had been too hard to hold on to. I let myself be that soft, loving Olivia Carey I'd been and

found the fierce warrior I'd become despite every single thing Myrddin had done to me.

I found the stream Mama Sloane was sending and plucked it from the air around me. The magic. I could see it, could feel it in a way I never had before. I was connected to it, and I could command it. I pulled on that thread and did exactly what that bitch wanted me to do. I pulled her out of time and space and gave her corporeal form.

She fell in front of me, but she no longer looked beautiful and young. Her slender form was gaunt and aged, her blonde hair a sickly gray and thin.

“Mother?”

I turned and Gray was helping Kelsey to her feet. Fenrir bounded over, placing himself between me and the witch on the ground.

It was a sweet gesture, but I didn't need it. “Watch over your mom, Fen. I'll handle this.”

“Yeah, you will.” Evan had a big grin on her face. “I'm pretty sure you broke Lucifer's hold on all of us. And in his own freaking realm.”

“She did not.” Lucifer was scowling, but I noticed he'd dragged Lilith behind him. “She broke the wizard's hold and set her own magic free. When it was apparent she was going to win, I let everyone go. I thought it was perhaps the old Lord Sloane. He might have been easier to work with than the child.”

I had some explaining to do, but not before I dealt with the problem at hand. “Gray, she's your mom. What should I do with her? She was going to use the Eye of Night to displace Rain's soul and take over the body. I believe she was trying to implicate Lilith in the attacks on both you and Kelsey so Lucifer would have no choice but to uphold his laws.”

“She wanted the Daybreak Kingdom, too,” Casey continued. He was standing near the wall. The insecure part of me would have said he was keeping his distance. But I was a different me, and I knew what my husband was doing. He was

giving me space to work. He was trusting me to do this and do it right. “I suspect she would have later killed Gray and called it an accident. Then she would have held the keys to two kingdoms. She had to get rid of Lilith because of her powers. She’s the only one who would have been able to see what Gray’s mother had done.”

Because Lilith could read souls, and she would have known Rain wasn’t right.

“I deserve more than what I got, which was nothing,” Gray’s mother said, her lips thin and cracked. “I gave you a dark prophet, and all I got was a tiny room in a meaningless house.”

“Well, you are not being raped by a thousand demons,” Lucifer reasoned. “I mean I would think that was a positive, but if you’re unsatisfied with the experience, I’ll be forced to examine my methods. Another reward then. I’ll have you join the old Lord Sloane. What a match you were. He’s training young demons on how to torture a soul. Well, he’s being used to teach. I think you’ll like it.”

With a snap of his fingers, the woman was gone.

“All right then, we can return to the negotiations. Ms. Carey, I take back what I said. That was extremely impressive.” Lucifer looked me over. “No wonder the wizard wanted to use you.”

“What happened to her? To Gray’s mom?” Kelsey asked, placing her hand in Gray’s.

“She’s being tortured right now,” Lucifer explained, putting a hand to his ear. “If you listen, you can probably hear her. It’s why I love being on this balcony. The sound of the damned is so soothing.”

“You’re a jackass,” Lilith said with a huff.

“Well, what am I supposed to do, love? She looked like one of those women who always wants to talk to a manager. She would probably have written a review, and I’m trying to keep that Yelp average tight, if you know what I mean,” Lucifer said. “And I wouldn’t have upheld that particular rule.

Not when it came to you. I would have let Lord Sloane and the Midnight Kingdom burn. She miscalculated.”

“I think she calculated exactly right. If you have to choose between me and your rage, your choice is already made.” Lilith’s brow rose in obvious challenge. “Or will you let my friends leave with me? I assume this whole ploy is a way to get the dark prophet to work for you again.”

“I don’t know. I might ask the witch if she wants to work down here a while. She’s got talent,” Lucifer muttered.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.” Kelsey seemed to be finding her feet again. “Olivia, are you done with all the leather and sadness and crap?”

Naturally she summed up the worst period of my life with eloquence. “Yes. I think I’m done being Myrddin’s bitch. Can I kill him now?”

I had plans for him.

“Down, witch,” Lucifer chastised. “And my wife is unfortunately right. I’m still going to negotiate with the dark prophet. It’s all right. She’s already pissed at me. I can make it up to her later.”

“Fuck you,” Lilith announced. “And I think I’d like a word with the wizard.”

“I was offered safe passage,” Myrddin announced. He’d moved closer to the balcony’s edge, and I wondered if I could push him off. He’d probably live, but it would hurt, and he’d likely get swarmed by hungry demons, which would also hurt.

Lucifer’s eyes rolled. “He was. I can’t allow any of you to hurt him. Gray, will you sign my contract or do I allow the wizard to kill the boy here and now?”

“Or we could pick door number three, as my mother would say,” a familiar voice said.

There was a whooshing sound, and Lee Donovan-Quinn was suddenly standing in the middle of the balcony.

And I worried the evening had gotten infinitely more dangerous.

* * * *

Kelsey

I was going to have a fucking heart attack. I just knew it. I'd nearly lost my son's soul, and now my dad's was in trouble because it was housed in that reckless boy's body. "Lee, move away from the pissed off Hell lord, please."

Lucifer's eyes seemed to glow with unholy fire as he moved closer to Lee, who folded the Mantle of Arthur over his arm. "Oh, don't bother, boy. I would catch you before you could run. You've been trying to steal from me. You've been trying to steal a piece of me."

"He's only a boy." Lilith seemed to go still, indicating she thought this could go very wrong.

Lucifer wasn't buying it. "No, he's not. He's a vampire king and the son of the most obnoxious woman I've ever met. Lady Sloane is a fucking delight compared to Zoey Donovan-Quinn."

"I am not." It was insulting. I could be every bit as annoying as Zoey.

"Hush, baby." Trent was back and wrapped an arm around my waist. "Let Lee handle this."

So he knew what was going on. He'd likely found Lee and talked this over. But I still stood by my assertion. Way more annoying than the queen.

"I will admit that the time I met your mother, I underestimated her. I sent a piece of me that's particularly misogynistic," he said with a negligent shrug.

"That would be all of you," Lilith huffed under her breath, but her eyes were on Myrddin.

Lucifer ignored her. "But I won't underestimate you. Do you know what the punishment is for taking something of

mine?”

“I’m sure it’s terrible. Probably an eternity of having my innards eaten by ants or something.” Lee sent Lilith his most charming smile. “Hey, Nim’s mom. You look good. She’s coming along nicely. The last time I checked she had knees and everything. And she’d started a flirtation with a water dragon.”

“She’s really alive,” Lilith asked, her voice going hopeful.

“And she’ll be ready to kick some ass soon,” Lee promised. “My sister and I will be happy to escort you. I mean we will if I’m not dead and trapped here in Hell.”

“That’s the funny thing. He can’t trap you. You can only trap yourself,” Lilith replied. “If you believe you don’t belong here, the most he can do is send your soul on to its next voyage.”

“Well, then my brother is safe because no one ever accused him of not loving himself. In all ways,” Evan piped up.

She and Fenrir seemed to have calmed down. They stood close to the doors as though ready to flee when the time came. Smart kids.

“I’ll sign the contract if you’ll allow Lee to leave,” Gray said.

Trent hissed under his breath. “No, you won’t. Let him do what he needs to do. We were never going to allow you to descend that way again.”

What had Trent been planning? I didn’t blame him. This was how he’d been forced to work for over a decade. He wouldn’t change overnight, but we needed to talk about including me in plots and schemes. I liked scheming. It’s one of my favorite things to do.

“As it happens, I decided not to steal from Lord Lucifer.” Lee was far too calm and collected for a man who was going up against the first fallen angel. “I will admit my grandfather taught me well, and one of the things he taught me was to know when the job was far beyond my skillset.”

Myrddin, on the other hand, suddenly looked hella nervous. “You can’t know that, Lord. The boy is full of lies.”

“I am all man, and no lies here,” Lee countered with the surety of a man who knew he held the winning cards. “I took one look at all those hallways and figured out there was no way I would find his wings. And I don’t have to because I learned from my mother that there’s always a door number three.”

“Intent is enough to convict on the Hell plane,” Myrddin pointed out like he was a prosecutor.

“The magician is correct. You planned to steal from me. That in and of itself is a crime against me. Give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you where you stand, vampire.” Lucifer seemed to have grown a foot, and his horns rose over his head, his skin taking on a red sheen.

I could feel the tension going through the room, and suddenly Liv and Casey had joined us.

“I think I can put a protection spell around us,” Liv whispered. “I need to get the rest of them close.”

I wanted to hug my bestie and start planning her post-cult wardrobe, but now wasn’t the time. “We need to get Lee over here.”

“Or you could trust him,” Trent said firmly. “He knows what he’s doing. We planned for this.”

“You could have mentioned that to me,” Gray grouched.

“I’m sorry. I’m not used to talking to you about stuff like this,” Trent replied. “I hoped we wouldn’t have to do it, but it’s all going to be fine.”

I took a deep breath. Trusting my friends and family had taken me a long way.

“Because I have something you want, and I’m willing to trade it for Dean’s life.” Lee reached under his arm and pulled the bag of holding free from the mantle he’d worn. It had been tucked in, safe from prying eyes, and I had to wonder what the hell he had.

It wouldn't be Gladys or his father's sword. Lee wouldn't do that.

This, I realized, this was what we needed, and I felt myself relax. There were times to kick ass and times to use what we had to negotiate, and it was obvious Lee understood.

A growl came from Lucifer's throat. "Something you stole."

"No, sir." Lee went entirely serious. "By all the rites of the Hell plane, this item belongs to me because this weapon was used to kill me. Since I survived my human demise, I claim the right to wield the Dark Dagger."

A gasp came from Lilith, and I noted that Myrddin had moved further away as Lee reached into the bag and pulled out the short sword they called the Dark Dagger.

If myth was correct, it was made of one of Lucifer's bones, and he didn't like having those missing.

"Mine," Lucifer growled.

"Yes, it is if you heal Dean Malone," Lee offered, his voice perfectly calm. "I will give you this piece of yourself back. You haven't had this piece for millennia, and I can't imagine how good it will feel to put it back in place. It's been a weapon used against vampires for centuries. It's a weapon that my father could use in his war against Myrddin, but I am willing to give up that advantage in exchange for Dean's life and health. You can cure the Uro spell with a thought, can't you?"

"Yes, he can," Lilith offered. "But it's not in his nature. He's a transactional creature. He does nothing out of the kindness of his heart."

"Who had it?" The question ground from Lucifer's mouth, and I could see his fangs had gone long and sharp. "Who killed you?"

Such a weird question to have to answer, but Lee's life hadn't exactly been on the normal side.

"My Lord," Myrddin began, "it was a rogue agent. And Lee Donovan-Quinn was caught attempting to steal from my

Coven House.”

“Dude, seriously? It was his home.” I couldn’t stay quiet forever. Hypocrisy was this guy’s middle name. “He was literally born there. You stole it from his parents.”

“And that will mean nothing to Lucifer. But this will,” Lee continued. “It was his agent Alexander Sharpe, and I am certain Myrddin is the one who gave him the dagger.”

“I did nothing of the kind.” Myrddin dismissed the accusation with a wave of his hand. “I’ve never seen that weapon before in my life.”

“Yes, you have.” Liv stepped up, and I could feel the magic crackling off her, but this time I wasn’t afraid of it. The collar Lily had made to contain her magic was on the floor, but I knew she didn’t need it now. Something had broken free in my friend and while I knew she would never be the same carefree girl she’d been, I also knew I would love this version of Liv as much as I had the one before. “The Dark Dagger was kept in the Coven House. Myrddin knew about it and where it came from. I don’t know for sure, but he’s likely the one who stole your bone and created the weapon.”

Was Lucifer about to kill Myrddin? Because that would be the capper on a wild day. It would almost make the whole “Gray’s mom tried to evict my baby’s soul from his body” thing worth it.

We needed so much therapy. I really hoped the royals found the Days because we could use some Felix sessions right about now.

“You cannot prove that.” Myrddin’s tone had gone stiff. “Lord Lucifer, you granted me safe passage and a boon. Are you going to break that sworn vow?”

Lucifer was at least eight feet tall now, and I could see him gathering his body, red mist flowing from the balcony below. If he kept it up, those massive horns would poke through the roof soon. Rage coursed off him, and I worried he might kill us all without a thought.

Lilith put a hand on his arm and the mist evaporated, the threat fleeing the room liked she'd popped a balloon. It was good to know someone could control the Lord of Hell. "Don't make this worse. You know you can't kill him, and you cannot prove what the witch has said. Her memories are too twisted for me to read them for truth, and I cannot read that bastard at all."

"I need him. I hate needing him." Lucifer shrunk again, becoming the handsome rogue I'd met before. "My plans will fail without him, and now I must go into them blind because I cannot allow pieces of myself out in the world. Prince Lee, you have your deal." He flicked his wrist. "Your friend is healed. He should wake up in an hour or so, and I've transported him back to the Midnight Kingdom. Give me the dagger."

Lee hesitated.

Lilith nodded, seeming to understand. "His word, in this case, is good. He will do as he promised. It's safe to give him the dagger. Lucifer, tell him he will suffer no ill effects from your anger. The prince is worried you will take the dagger and then end his life again with it. But you will not do such a thing because he is not the one who stole your bones."

"He did not, though I will remember the fact that he put me in this position," Lucifer admitted. "You have made an enemy of me, but you will leave my realm free and safe this evening."

I didn't like the sound of that, but we had to take what we could get. His mother had once made an enemy of the dark god in front of me and Zoey was still kicking.

Lee handed Lucifer the Dark Dagger and the Lord of Hell examined it, his features softening as though in remembrance. He caressed it briefly before pressing it to his chest. No blood flowed as the dagger was absorbed right through the fabric of the clothing he wore. Lucifer's chest expanded as the hilt sank inside, and he seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

Trent did, too, and I realized the true danger had passed.

Lucifer took Lilith's hand and brought it to his lips. "You are, as always, correct. I feel better than I have in a long time. Prince Lee, perhaps I spoke in haste. I should be grateful you were willing to turn over the dagger. You're right. It could have aided your father. Lord Sloane, I hope you will consider serving as my focus from time to time. We can work something out, though I will give you space for now. Maybe you will consider the fact that your child has come to no harm in my realm."

That fucker was delusional since he'd been ready to let Mama Sloane pull her fast one. I opened my mouth to tell him off, but Trent's hand came right over it.

"I shall consider what you've said," Gray replied with way more politeness than he should have.

But we were almost out of here with everything we wanted, so I relaxed and only licked Trent's hand a little to let him know I was annoyed.

"Then I must be satisfied with the outcome of this session of ours," Lucifer announced, and I noticed he hadn't dropped Lilith's hand.

"I am not." Myrddin's lips curled into a snarl. "Satisfied, that is. You promised me that I would leave here with my son."

"Who you want to kill," Liv accused.

"That is none of your business, bitch," he shot back. "And don't think I'm done with you."

"I promised you a boon. I never said you would get Dean," Lucifer replied. "As always, I'm careful in the way I word my offers."

"And now I cannot have Lee either. You promised him safe passage from here." Myrddin seemed to be figuring out this was not going to go his way. "So our plans are still at risk. You understand if the two of them live, I am in danger, and I am the only one who can grant you the outcome you wish."

"Are you questioning me?" Lucifer turned the magician's way.

Myrddin didn't back down, giving me some hope we still might see his head roll. "I am demanding my due. If you wish for me to do your bidding, you will give it to me. I'm no minion to be dismissed with nothing."

"I promised you a boon." Lucifer sniffed, looking haughty and regal again. "Fine. Take your rage out on someone. I don't care, but you can't take one of them with you. I can't have Lord Sloane angry with me."

Gray started to step up, but Myrddin was already on the move. His hands lifted, and I felt a rush of power.

"Then I'll take a child for a child," Myrddin said.

My heart threatened to shatter. "Fenrir!"

But it wasn't Fenrir whose body was suddenly in the air.

Evangeline rose, her eyes widening, and I watched in horror as Myrddin used his magic to toss her off the balcony and into the bowels of Hell.

Chapter Nineteen



Kelsey

The world seemed to both stop and be in a nauseating fast-forward all at the same time. I watched as Evan went over the balcony and knew there was nothing I could do to stop it. We were so high. She would fall, and then even if she somehow managed to survive, the ground beneath was infested with demons who would view her as a sweet treat. They would take her apart.

As I began to run across the room, my mind processed all the crimes they could commit upon her. Sweet, funny, smart Evan. Brave Evan.

Tears blurred my eyes, and I felt something big move beside me.

A harrowing howl seemed to fill the world, and I realized Fenrir was still in wolf form. For a moment I thought he would tear Myrddin apart, but what he did was worse. He followed Evan, leaping over the balcony wall to his sure death below.

And I stopped, my body hitting some invisible barrier. I put my hands up, outraged I couldn't go after my son. Pure panic flooded my system. "Fenrir!"

Gray was beside me, trying to get through, and I hadn't noticed when Trent had taken his wolf form. He snarled at my side, his head butting the wall.

Lee had gone pale, his eyes fixed on that balcony as he looked back at me. For a moment he was a child again and I was the adult who made the world easier for him. "Kelsey, I can't fly."

My heart ached. He would always blame himself. "Lee."

I couldn't say anything but his name. There was nothing to say.

Lee turned Myrddin's way, his fangs long in his mouth and death written on his expression.

He couldn't kill Myrddin without Dean. I knew it deep in my soul. If he went after Myrddin now, we would have lost all three of them. Evan and Fenrir and Lee.

The horror was too much to process, and I couldn't even get to the balcony's edge to see if I could do something to help.

"I think not, Prince Lee." Lucifer seemed way more interested in staring at Lilith than he was in the life and death drama going on. "I did promise the man safe conduct."

Lilith was way too calm in my mind, and I wondered if I'd misjudged her. "He should leave or I'll be the one who breaks your promise. I know he's hurt my daughter."

"Well, she was meant to be his bride and she denied him over and over. Rather like her mother," Lucifer said with a sigh as he stared down at Lilith's shoulder, his fingers moving on her arm. "Myrddin, you should leave. I'm not particularly happy with you right now either."

"Tell the queen this is not the last of her children I will slaughter," Myrddin announced and then in a cloud of dust, he was gone.

The queen wasn't the only one who had lost a child. Whether or not Fenrir survived the fall, he would never be the same. The loss of his mate would kill something inside my son.

That was the moment I realized Liv was standing behind me and her whole body was still, her hands at her sides. So still.

I knew that face. I'd seen it when she was working a spell, when someone was in danger and she couldn't afford to lose concentration.

Casey watched her. “I think she’s got a hold on them both. Don’t distract her.”

Her lips moved, but I couldn’t hear the words she was saying.

Lee turned to Liv, his eyes wide. “She’s begging Evan to do something. She’s telling Evan she can do it. I don’t know what *it* is. My sister is alive? How could she have survived that fall?”

Because she hadn’t fallen. Because Liv had saved her. Because despite the fact Lucifer had put up a wall, Liv’s magic had managed to get through it. She could have taken a shot at Myrddin, but she’d chosen to save Evan and my boy. My best friend had chosen love when I needed her to.

Gray had turned to face Liv, too, and it was obvious his hearing was far better than mine. “She’s begging Evan to save Fenrir. She can’t hold them both.” My husband put a hand on Trent’s back before shifting his attention to Lucifer. “Lord Lucifer, please allow me to save my son and the princess.”

Lucifer’s eyes lit, and I could see the calculation there. “Oh, do you need a favor from me, Lord Sloane?”

I didn’t care in that moment. I only wanted my son to be safe. I wanted Evan back here. I would have sold my own soul to ensure they survived.

“I think you should wait to answer him, Lord Sloane.” Lilith strode to the balcony and looked over. “That’s right, child. You have the power. Don’t be afraid. Let it flow. It’s not a curse. It’s strength and providence. You can save yourself and him. All you have to do is let go of your fear.”

A whooshing sound filled the world and Liv’s body sagged, Casey catching her before she fell to the floor.

Evan rose from below, great wings bearing her up. Her eyes were black orbs as she flew, wings beating the hot wind around them. In her arms she held my son in his wolf form. She looked far too delicate to hold such a massive wolf, but she cradled him to her chest as she attempted to move back

onto the balcony. She was a newborn colt trying to run before she could walk.

“Stay calm, child,” Lilith said, her tone calm and soothing. “You can do this. When you were given wings, the knowledge of how to use them was placed in your blood. Don’t panic. Simply listen to your instincts. They will not lead you astray.”

Evan dropped once more and then steadied, flying over the railing and landing on the balcony floor with a crash.

I felt the wall drop and ran for them.

Fenrir changed, the flow from wolf to young man coming in an easy transition. He was on his knees, reaching for her and dragging his mate close. “Baby. Fuck. Fuck, I thought you were going to die. I...I...”

He simply held her, wrapping himself around her. He didn’t seem to realize she wasn’t hugging him back. There was a blank look on Evan’s face that I didn’t like. I could understand the trauma of what she went through, but I didn’t think that expression was about fear. Not fear of dying.

But I was pretty sure she was terrified of those wings still twitching on her back.

“Are you okay?” I could see blood where the wings had torn through the skin of her back and her clothes. Her fingers were bleeding from the sharp talons that had sprouted.

She turned her head up, and I noticed her ears had taken on a more triangular shape. She looked oddly more Fae, though I didn’t think this was part of her Fae ancestry. No. This was the change she’d feared, the price for being saved by the primal. There was a bat-like appearance to her ears, and those leathery wings were definitely more bat than anything angelic. “I don’t know how to make them go away.”

“You don’t have to,” Fen said. “You’re beautiful, baby. You can fly. Not even Lee can fly, and he’s got all the power.”

“I can’t fly yet,” Lee countered. “I will almost certainly be able to fly.”

“I don’t want them,” Evan said, her voice lower than usual.

“Baby, it’s okay.” Fen stood, holding his hand out to help her up. “We’ll make it work.”

She ignored his hand, choosing to stand and damn near take her brother’s head off because those wings of hers came complete with extra taloned hands. “I can’t walk around like this, Fen.”

Oh, she was in shock. “It’s okay, Evan. We’ll find a way to make it easier to deal with.”

“Why would she want to do that?” Lucifer looked on like he didn’t understand what was happening. “She looks so much better. The way she was before was bland. And honestly, I’ve seen that face on every random white lady. This is a good look on you. The wings make your tits look bigger.”

“Luc,” Lilith hissed. “You’re not helping.”

“Well, I’m not known for wanting to help. I’m sick to death of all the drama, and now I’m horny because you smell so fucking delicious,” Lucifer admitted. “Come back to my room and I’ll talk about letting you torture Myrddin. I’m sure we can work something out. He doesn’t need all his limbs to do what he’s promised.”

Lilith’s eyes rolled. “And I’m sick to death of you disappointing me. I think I’ll take my new friends and go. Don’t come to my kingdom again unless you have news of my daughter.”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment I thought we would have a problem, but then Lilith snapped her fingers and the world bent and changed around me and in an instant we were back in the Midnight Kingdom in the salon we’d left from.

I looked around, quickly counting heads to make sure we hadn’t left anyone behind.

“Where’s Dean?” Lee had a hand out as though he could feel the young man.

I could think of more of our peeps. “Eddie and Tix were with us, too.”

“My mistress, I am so relieved.” Eddie walked into the salon. “They took us to the kitchens and then we suddenly found ourselves back here and unable to teleport in.”

Tix practically pushed him aside, running into the room. “Lord Sloane! You’re alive. I was certain something terrible had happened but I couldn’t get back.” He stopped, his head tilted. “She tried to do what?” Tix gasped and put a hand to his heart. “Rain tells me that bitch who lives in the library tried to evict him from his own body. Where is she? No one is going to mess with my...my charge.”

“He’s very protective of his charges.” Lilith had a soft smile on her face as she took in the alien-looking Tix. It was hard to believe they were related since she seemed so human with the exception of those lavender eyes.

Tix gasped and turned. “Mother!”

He rushed her way and she opened her arms, welcoming her son.

I moved to mine, who was standing slightly apart from Evan. “Are you okay?”

His eyes trailed to where Liv was leaning heavily against Casey. “Yes, but only because of her. If Liv hadn’t...”

He couldn’t even speak the words.

Trent was back in his human form. Naked, naturally, but if anyone was shocked, they didn’t show it. “Dean is here. I can smell him. I think he’s back in his room. Lilith, thank you for the save. If there is anything I can do, please let me know.”

“I only wish to know everything you can tell me about my daughter,” she said quietly.

“Layla?” Tix asked. “I thought my sister was lost forever.”

“Well, her father is a tricky one. I should have remembered,” Lilith muttered.

The hounds had found their mother again, and I noted Puff was with them, sniffing around Evan.

He growled.

“Hey, buddy, that’s your mom,” Fen said, picking him up. “It’s okay.”

“He doesn’t recognize me.” Evan seemed to panic, turning, and her wings slapped against the bookshelf, sending a vase crashing to the floor. “He doesn’t know who I am.”

Lee started to reach for her, and one of the talons on her wings caught him on the cheek and he began to bleed. “Hey, Evan, calm down.”

Lilith moved in front of her. “Calm, child. You changed. You can change back. Let go of the wings now. Until you need them again. What is your name?”

Evan seemed to still, her wings folding in against her back. “Evangeline Donovan-Quinn.”

“Princess Evangeline Donovan-Quinn,” Lee corrected. “Of the royal family of the King of All Vampire and daughter of the High Priest of Faery and his goddess.”

Evan frowned, rolling her eyes and suddenly looking more like Evan again. She had a set of delicate fangs, but she sent her brother a bratty look. “You are so pretentious. I would almost think you’re Rhys and not Lee.”

“Rhys is right about this,” Lee admitted. “We’re standing in front of the First Woman, the mother of demons. Apparently the mother of Nimue, Lady of the Lake, and the one person who might have a shot at controlling Lucifer. She should know who she speaks to and that we can help her.”

“Prince Lee, you are quite the politician,” Lilith replied.

A smooth smile crossed Lee’s face, and the playboy was back in the building. “I’m far more, ma’am.”

Tix’s lips turned down. “Do not hit on my mother. She is thousands of years old. Thousands. She saw man fall.”

Lee winked. “I bet we fell for her.”

I swear sometimes Lee sounds like he’s trying to be Joey from *Friends*. “Go and check on Dean.”

Lee shrugged. “Sorry. She’s hot, and she looks like she’s going to calm my sister down. My sister, who I’ve been worried isn’t equipped for the war to come. Now I’m not as worried. You just wait, sis. Sasha’s going to have whole new training protocols for you.”

“Hey, don’t tease her,” Fen objected.

But Evan ignored them both, watching Lilith with worried eyes. “I don’t know how to change back. I can’t live like this. I can’t go home with wings and fangs and talons.”

Liv stood up. “I can help you. You need to take some energy from me.”

“Baby, you’re pretty much out of energy,” Casey objected. “I think you should go rest.”

Liv shook her head, and I swear I could see the brown in her hair again. Like breaking the connection to Myrddin had begun a reversion to her original form. “No, I need to do this. Let me help her. Casey, I still can’t feel what I should. My soul is still incomplete, and it might always be, but I can do the right thing. I can do it because I should. I think it’s Eddie’s blood. I know I have to get off it, but it has helped me in so many ways.”

“I will not miss it, Mistress Olivia.” Eddie bowed.

Liv held out a hand, and Eddie took it. “I thank you, my friend. Your wisdom has always been a lighthouse for this family.”

I was not going to cry.

Maybe a little.

Liv squeezed Eddie’s hand and then moved into Evan’s space. She took a long breath and placed her hands on Evan’s shoulders. “You are in control of this. You decide when and if you change. Picture your body the way it was before. You can walk the Earth in that form and have all the power of the primal at your fingertips.”

“I don’t want it,” Evan vowed.

“You have to want it. This won’t work if you reject it,” Liv explained.

“Baby, I love you,” Fenrir promised. “There is nothing wrong with you. I think you look awesome.”

“I look like a freak, and I’m further from being a proper mate to you than I ever have been. If you think the alphas won’t accept a companion as your mate, I can’t even think of what they’ll say about a hybrid primal,” Evan said, her voice tight and tears in her eyes.

“You’re not a vampire,” her brother said firmly. “I would be able to sense if you were. What I think you are is something more like a hybrid werebat.”

She jabbed a finger his way as though he’d made her point. “And that is even worse. Wolves have problems with other wolf packs, much less other were creatures. They will never accept me now.”

“I don’t care,” Fenrir promised. “Evan, we’ve been over this. I do not care.”

“But you will.” She sniffled, and my heart ached for her. But she turned back to Liv. “I have to find a way to change. If you can help me...”

Liv held out her hands. “Put your palms on mine and close your eyes.”

Her hands shaky, Evan did as Liv asked.

“Now I want you to think about folding your wings in.” Liv’s eyes closed, too. “They’ve been with you for a while now, so you know there’s space for them. There’s space for your fangs and claws, too. It’s normal and natural for them to recede when you don’t need them.”

“It’s not happening,” Evan said.

Lilith moved in beside her. “Because you’re panicking. The witch is right, and the energy that is flowing off her will help, but you have to open yourself to it. It’s only good energy, Princess Evangeline. I can see it. The witch is changed, and you can trust her. And the wolf king... His love for you makes

his soul shine. You are true mates, and wings cannot change this. So breathe and let the witch guide you through this first transformation.”

Evan’s eyes closed again, and she took in a deep breath.

After a long moment, her wings folded in and receded, leaving her with a decimated shirt and two light scars where the wings had disappeared. I wasn’t close, but I thought they were slightly open.

“Okay, I feel better.” Evan stepped back and looked down at her hands. “I can feel them, but they don’t hurt. I think I could do it again if I needed to.”

“Oh, you’ll do it again.” Trent had found a pair of pants—likely because Eddie had hidden them all over the mansion. “You’ll have to train, Evan. Lee is right. This is going to make a huge difference in the war to come. I know you’re upset about it, but I think once you settle in, you’ll see how much power you’ve been handed.”

“I’ve been handed a curse,” Evan said with a frown. “But I can see the men in my life are only going to see me as a weapon for now. I’m going to check on Dean and make sure Lucifer did what he promised. Fenrir, put on some pants, babe.”

She strode out of the room.

“Well, she’s going to be fun,” Lee said, beginning to follow her. “I thought she would be excited. I never imagined this would be her reaction. It’s not like she’s got to walk around with eight-foot wings.”

“No, but she’s got to deal with the fact that she could hold Fen back,” Gray said with a shake of his head. “And I know you don’t care, Fen, but she does, and she’s not wrong about this making things worse. With her father back, we’re going to need the wolves to fall in line. We can’t take on Myrddin without them.”

“That’s not Fenrir’s responsibility,” I pointed out.

“But it is.” Fen moved to the hallway. “And I will handle it, but I will not give up my mate for any reason.”

Casey had a hand on Liv's back, seeming to balance her. "Are you okay? Let me take you back to our room so you can rest."

"You're still playing the husband role?" she asked, a tired uptick of her lips.

"I'm not playing," he vowed.

Lilith had a hand on one of the hound's heads, scratching thoughtfully as she stared my way and then looked back to Liv. "Witch, are you ready to reclaim that piece of you he stole?"

"We don't know where it is," Casey replied. "We've been asking around about where he could have stored it."

Lilith snorted, an oddly elegant sound. "So much knowledge has been lost on the Earth plane. You cannot force a soul into storage. He was lying about that. Or perhaps he's delusional and truly believes he has her soul in an amulet around his neck. The soul goes where it feels safest. It cannot be destroyed. It is the truly eternal part of us. As to where Olivia's soul is, it's here."

Liv frowned, her eyes turning to Casey and confusion clear on her face. "Do you have it?"

"He does not, though it's easy to see he would have kept that piece safe for you." Lilith sighed and looked to her son. "Seriously? No one knows?"

Tix shrugged. "Well, I do. It's quite plain, but I also know it won't work until the witch is ready. Shall we have some tea, Mother? You can tell me what you've learned about Layla."

"You could have mentioned Lucifer is your father, Tix," Gray said with a frown.

"Or he could tell us where Liv's soul is," I complained. "We've been running all over the Hell plane looking for it."

Tix turned his alien eyes toward Gray, but the expression on his face was pure disgusted teen boy. "He is not my father."

"Tix's father was someone who I cared very much about," Lilith confessed. "And my son is correct. The witch will figure

it out when the time is right. I would worry more about the princess. There's a darkness to her soul that I don't think she's ready to deal with. I think your wolf is in for some heartache."

I worried about that, too.

"We'll handle Evan. She's a practical young lady," Trent promised.

But I didn't think Trent understood what a practical young lady could do when faced with impossible decisions. I felt a tug in my chest as they walked away. "Can't you force Tix to tell us?"

Liv held up a hand. "Don't. Lilith is right. Give me a day or so. I promise I won't go anywhere."

She was trying. I had to as well. "Then Eddie, it's time to work your magic because I did not get the decadent buffet I was promised."

Eddie's fangs gleamed as he grinned. "I can handle that, my mistress."

Chapter Twenty



Liv

“I can’t believe how hungry I am.” Dean Malone sat across from me at the big dining table. We were all sitting around it like some kind of family, and I wanted so badly to really feel this moment.

Lee shook his head as he watched the young man with the crystal eyes. He’d been the one to help Dean after he’d showered and dressed. “Well, you’ve had your insides roasted for a couple of days. I’m pretty sure that would make anyone hungry.” Lee looked my way. “Are you sure he’s okay?”

I couldn’t put into words what it meant to have Lee look at me like whatever I was about to say was meaningful and that he would believe it. It felt like I was starting to be me again. If only I could tap into that part of myself I’d lost. The truth was Lilith was right. I was afraid. I was afraid of what I would feel. There was a tiny part of me that wondered if that piece of my soul even wanted to come back, if I’d made myself unworthy of the best part of me.

But I was working on it. I knew logically what the old me would have done, and I’d checked Dean shortly after he’d awakened. I’d used all my power to ensure nothing remained that could harm him. “Yes, it was a complete healing. Not even the witch who cursed him the first time could have healed him the way Lucifer did.”

If only someone could heal me.

“Maybe you should try the roast chicken.” Casey sat beside me. He pretty much hadn’t left my side once. He let me do what I needed to do, but he wouldn’t leave me alone. We’d taken a nap while Eddie had been cooking, and then he’d been

the one to inject the blood Eddie had sent. Less this time. It would take me weeks, but I was getting off the demon blood.

But the power I'd felt when I'd broken the binding spell... it hadn't left. There was a seemingly endless well of power there to call upon. I felt like a door had opened. Despite the fact that there was a part of me that was still numb, I was hopeful for the first time in a long time. Enough that I wanted to tease my vampire. "Haven't tasted chicken in a while, babe?"

"Well, we haven't been close enough physically in years for the bond to share your senses with me," he admitted. "And now that I know what your diet was like, I think it might have been a blessing."

A Profane did not indulge.

That logic of Eddie's was hitting me pretty hard now. Profane? Yeah, I was supposed to be one of the devil's disciples and that asshole Myrddin was concerned about me getting tubby or something. Here's a clue. When someone tells you that you're going to get this cool new title and it's Profane, but you need to like be a puritan when it comes to everything, tell them to fuck off. Like look that shit up in the dictionary and then question authority.

"Probably. It was nutritionally balanced," I said, taking a beautifully roasted chicken thigh onto my plate along with some of Eddie's indulgent mac and cheese. "You know when I think about it, I get pissed. I was promised a life of evil. Shouldn't evil include carbs?"

Kelsey shot me a grin. Her plate was already piled high because bestie could eat. "It should. And you should have had all kinds of weird sex stories to tell me."

"Or not," Casey said with a prim twist of his mouth. "Personally, I'm glad Myrddin didn't take things to that level. She would feel terrible about it. And I wouldn't feel happy. How would you feel if Trent and Gray had weird sex stories?"

Trent cleared his throat. "They were perfectly normal married sex stories, and she asks about them all the time."

Kelsey looked over at Gray as though worried he would get offended.

Instead he laughed, the sound booming through the dining room. He was sitting at the head of the table and reached out to either side, taking Kelsey and Trent's hands in his. "I think they were a little crazy and beautifully perverted, and we'll tell our wife every single one. See, this is a perfect reason for a threesome. When one of you gets trapped on a different plane, there's still a sexual outlet to be had."

"I'm pretty sure that's why my parents did it," Lee offered. "And then naturally my mom wasn't going to be left out of that, so she followed them." Lee sat back, looking thoughtful. He'd come down alone with Dean, saying Evan needed some time and that Fenrir was pretty much sitting outside her door with Puff looking sad and shit. His words, not mine. "I sometimes wonder how it worked. Like how did Myrddin know the time difference between the planes? Is there a book or something?"

"I would like a copy because we never knew." Trent had at least half a chicken and what looked like a whole meatloaf in front of him, and Eddie kept bringing more.

I took a bite of the mac and cheese, the taste filling me with comfort.

Casey's eyes closed and he sighed.

Eating was so much more fun with him. I might gain back all the weight I'd lost on Myrddin's starvation plan and then some because I was pretty sure there was a chocolate cake in my future. And a bold Cab. Goddess, I'd missed my wine time. And margaritas.

"It didn't work like that." Dean was paler than normal but seemed solid for a guy who'd effectively been in a coma for a couple of days. "The plane Kelsey and I were on actually moves only a bit faster than this one. It's connected to the plane I grew up on. I was born about a year after Lee and Rhys, and yet we're roughly the same age."

I didn't understand much about how the spell had worked, though I was fairly certain Myrddin had used some of my magic to power it. There were a lot of murky memories resurfacing. I thought they might for a long time. My vampire was probably going to have to deal with a lot of bad dreams from my side of our bed. "They didn't cross time, did they? They were caught in a stasis spell. A spell that kept them trapped for twelve years."

"Why not longer? Why not simply kill them?" Casey asked.

"Because Christine hid the painting," Kelsey replied around a mouthful of hot wing. Eddie had brought her extra hot sauce, and she seemed to be loving it.

The word around the Coven House had been that Myrddin himself had hidden the painting. I'm sure he'd spread that rumor because he hadn't wanted anyone to know he'd been played. There were others who'd thought somehow Harry Wharton had hidden it before he'd died.

Trent nodded. "I don't know how she knew to hide the painting, but she likely saved everyone. Myrddin might not have been able to destroy the painting given its unique nature, but he could have put it somewhere else, somewhere dangerous. Somewhere they never come back from."

He could have put it on the Hell plane and allowed the royals to walk out into an army of demons. Or banished it to a plane where they would surely have been killed. Instead, it had been sitting in the Coven House, waiting to bring them back to Dallas.

Kelsey shook her head. "No. I would always have found you. But I do have questions since Liv seems to know more than anyone else has. Why twelve years?"

"That's all the power the spell had," I explained, and felt my gut tighten. "Kelsey, I think he used my power. I vaguely remember being in the same room with the painting, and Myrddin told me he was doing some kind of energy exchange therapy to help me get my magic back. But I always felt more drained and less myself afterward. I was weak for a long time.

I thought it was what the witches had done to me in Wyoming, but now I think I was healing from that and he did more damage.”

Dean blew out a long breath. “That was a lot of magic to have lasted twelve years. But yes, it would have been incredibly draining, which is why he didn’t use his own. My bio dad is kind of an asshole.”

“I’m sorry.” I felt like I needed to say the words. “I really do believe that’s what happened, and I’m sorry it was my magic that trapped you. A stasis spell would mean you were technically in the Cove...” I needed to start calling things by their proper names and not the ones that had been washed into my brain. “What I’m trying to say is you were in Ether all those twelve years, but you were trapped in a stasis spell that meant you were inside the painting and unable to move forward until the magic wore off. Christine must have worked some real protection spells to keep you safe. She likely didn’t even know she was doing it.”

“She thought she was protecting the painting. She knew it was the key to one day bringing you all home,” Lee said. “Grandma Chris was a hero.”

“She was.” Kelsey leaned over to pat his hand. “She saved us all.” Then she turned my way with that look on her face that told me she had some questions. “So I was in Ether?”

“Yes.” She’d been there because the painting had been there. The minute she’d stepped through the door, the stasis spell had trapped her.

“For twelve years,” she said slowly, as though trying to make those words make sense.

I knew exactly where she was going. My bestie would be upset by losing twelve years, but she always thought with one part of her body. “You were in stasis. You did not need a sandwich.”

“Twelve years.” Kelsey slapped the table lightly. “I assure you I needed a sandwich. Eddie, I need more wings. I got twelve years to make up for.”

She was insane, and I loved her. I sat there watching her knowing that what I should be feeling was love for her. I wanted to feel that again because Kelsey had always been one of the safest spaces I had ever...

Kelsey. My best friend. Sometimes my whole world.

Kelsey, who carried so many burdens she might not notice one more, especially if she had twelve years to get used to carrying another soul inside her.

I felt tears roll down my cheeks. It was odd. It had been so long since I'd cried. Crying wasn't allowed either.

But crying is healing. Crying is proof that we can still feel, still love, still want something better.

"How many days did you spend on the Faery plane?" I asked the question in a quiet tone, but Kelsey seemed to understand something was happening.

"I..." She thought for a moment, her expression going serious. "It was four days. Three on the Faery plane and then one in Summer's realm. Then we went back and found the door and we were here."

"Except you weren't." Gray had turned thoughtful, too. "You went through the door and then you were in Ether. Liv, how long was it before he took your soul? She would have been in Ether by then. She would have been in stasis, and the protections spells wouldn't have hidden her from something like a soul that needed a place to stay."

"No, it wouldn't," a soft voice said, and I realized Lilith stood in the doorway. "Olivia's soul would have sought the safest place it knew, that it could get to. No spell could have stopped it, and I believe the Hunter, even in stasis, would have reached out and sheltered it."

Kelsey put a hand to her chest. "How many souls do I have in me? We're sure Gray's mom's not in there, right?"

Lilith chuckled. "I see your strong, stubborn soul and that baby's beautiful life-force. He's going to be magnificent someday and will bring honor to all of his parents." Lilith approached Kelsey, putting her hand over Kelsey's. "And

there is a piece of torn and tattered soul attached to you. It breathes because of your love, but it wants to go home now. You should know that the piece of Olivia's soul you carry inside you is currently wrapped around the child. It protected him from the attack. It fiercely guarded him. Gray's mother never had a chance, which was why I wasn't worried. I knew the minute I saw you that the baby was protected."

Kelsey pushed back her chair, and she was the one who was crying now. She moved to me, hauling me up and wrapping her arms around me. "Thank you. Thank you, sister."

And I felt it. I felt the moment I was ready and my soul opened, felt the warmth that flared between our bodies as the best piece of me reentered.

For twelve years I'd been without the ability to feel anything beyond anger and ambition.

"Hold her," Lilith said. "This will be hard on her. Don't fight it, child. Let it flow. Let it all in. Accept it. The love, the regret, the pain. Accept the pain so you can begin to heal. Accept everything the universe has given you in the last twelve years so you can be strong for the fight to come. You think he picked you because you were weak. He didn't. He stole your magic because it was so strong. He used you like a battery to charge his own and never once found the bottom. That magic is yours again, Olivia Carey. The magic is yours, and so are all your emotions. That is where the goodness of the magic comes from, why he had to separate you from them. They are your strength."

It was too much.

I'd done this. I hadn't fought the way I should have. I had allowed Myrddin to drug me, to use me.

I heard someone screaming, the sound of an animal in such pain.

Me. It was me. It was years and years of outrage and heartache and loneliness. I'd pushed away the people who loved me. I'd become something I didn't recognize.

Somehow I was on the floor, sobbing like I'd never done before, but I wasn't alone. Kelsey was on one side while Casey had wrapped himself around my back, and I felt his tears on my shoulder.

I wasn't alone because we felt this pain together. It wasn't only mine. It was ours because we'd joined our lives long ago, and nothing could break that bond. Not time or space. Not Myrddin Emrys.

Like a soul, this feeling—this love—was eternal.

And I was whole again.

And ready to fight. On the right side this time.

* * * *

Kelsey

I closed the door, feeling better than I had in a long time.

Liv was sleeping, wrapped in Casey's arms, and they were together without question.

"Are you okay?" Trent stood outside Liv's room. I was glad I could refer to it as her room and not think the word *prison*. Hell, according to Lilith it would be hard to put Liv in a prison again. She'd told me that being with Myrddin all those years had somehow given her more ability than she'd had before. Even as he'd used her magic, she'd pulled some of his and now could call on it. She'd always been able to break the binding spell. Deep down, she hadn't wanted to.

Deep down, she'd always wanted to come home.

"Yeah." I put a hand on my belly. "I know I couldn't feel it at the time, but I feel lighter now. And I know that is not because I didn't eat."

"You got twelve years to make up for," Trent said with a grin as he moved in and dropped a kiss on my lips.

Stasis or no stasis, I still had zero idea how I survived. My poor belly. No wonder I'd been crabby. "Tell me I didn't miss dessert."

My luscious meal had been interrupted by the reconstitution of my best friend's soul, so I had to be okay with it, but I was pretty sure Eddie had been making something with chocolate.

Trent shook his head. "You are the craziest bitch I could have imagined."

He meant that as a compliment. "Because I went through everything I went through today and I'm still worried I might have missed a cake?"

He sighed and kissed me again, dropping his forehead to mine. "Because you are the strongest person I know, and I'm so grateful to be your mate. May I always be worthy of you."

I loved this wolf with all my soul. "You are. You are so strong, too, babe. You kept everything together while I was gone."

"Yeah, well, I've been thinking about that. I could have tried to rescue Liv."

I should have known he would feel some guilt when the truth about Liv came out. "That was not your job. Your one job in the whole world was to protect and shelter the kids, and you did that. Casey tried. There wasn't any way for him to know she wasn't in her right mind."

"You did."

"Yeah, but I got thrown into all of this when it was already going strong. I wasn't sitting in the pot having it warm up around me," I replied. "I was tossed in and said what the fuck, that's boiling and not right. You and Casey and everyone else watched the world change and Liv change with it. You couldn't know what was going on, so there was a possibility that she was in control."

"I still don't think you would have left her there."

“In a perfect world, I wouldn’t. I would have let you and Sasha take the kids and I would have gone back for her and deprogrammed the fuck out of her.” I was feeling comfortable with my choices. “Even if she had chosen poorly, I would have annoyed her until she chose again.”

It’s what sisters do.

“There is no perfect world, only perfect moments, and I only have those because of the two of you,” a deep voice said.

Gray. He was behind me, and he kissed the top of my head.

I could use a perfect moment with these two. “How about we go to that playroom and explore some more?”

I could take the cake with me.

“You have no idea how much I want to do that, but we have a problem,” Gray said with a sigh. “I’m afraid the Evan situation has gotten worse.”

That sent all thoughts of pleasure fleeing. I turned, tilting my head to meet his gaze. “What do you mean?”

“You should come and hear what Lilith has to say,” Gray replied. “Maybe your presence will keep our son from murdering her. If she can be murdered. I’m not entirely sure, but Lucifer is pissed with us already, so given how he looks at the woman, I don’t think Fen hurting her will go over well.”

Crap. “Where are they? Is Evan still locked in her room?”

Trent took a deep whiff of the air around him and frowned. “She’s not here at all. Where did she go? I don’t think it’s safe for her to leave the grounds. I know she’s far more powerful now, but she doesn’t know how to use it.”

We started down the hall and soon found ourselves approaching the salon. Which was weird because we should have been further away.

“It’s the house,” Gray said, picking up speed. “Things must be going wrong if the house thinks we should be there sooner. Unlike what my evil mother managed to convince Liv, the house truly only serves this family. It’s worried about one of us and is putting us where it thinks we need to be.”

I heard a low growl.

“Fen, you need to calm down, man,” Lee was saying.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Dean replied, and I felt a pulse of magic.

“She has my mate.” Oh, those words came out the slightest bit garbled which meant Fen had a mouthful of fangs and was likely ready to use them.

I rushed through, ready to stand between my son and whatever was threatening him.

“Ah, Lady Sloane.” Lilith stood there in her airy gown looking like she belonged on a Faery plane. The hellhounds looked confused as their big heads swung between their mistress and the obvious alpha of all the planes. “I was hoping you might bring some much-needed reason to our conversation. I’m afraid the princess has requested asylum, and I have granted it.”

Fuck. I could bet that Fenrir not coming with her had been part of the request. “Asylum? From what?”

Trent moved in close to Fen, putting a hand on his shoulder. “This is not helping, son.”

Lilith reached out and tried to calm her pets. “You know as well as I do that word is nothing more than a political ploy to put me in a position where I can’t refuse her. My kingdom is known as a sanctuary for the broken creatures of the world, for the misunderstood. And in particular for the feminine who needs refuge from the masculine.”

“My son would never hurt her,” I said, my heart breaking for them both.

“I know that,” Lilith replied, her voice even. “I can see his love for her, but she needs time, and he won’t give it to her.”

“She doesn’t need time away from me.” Fenrir’s eyes looked distinctly wolf-like, and I knew he was dangerously close to changing, and then there would be no reasoning with him.

Lilith sighed and stepped out from behind her hounds. “She needs time away from everything, Wolf King. I know this hurts you, but she’s aching, too, and she cannot figure this out with the pressure of your relationship weighing on her. It’s not that she doesn’t love you. She is still your mate, but she has to figure out how to be the new creature she is.”

“She isn’t new,” Fen growled. “She merely has wings. It’s a fucking blessing. I don’t understand.”

And that was why Evan needed time. I knew he would be upset with me, but I had to do what was best for both of them. I understood his incredibly possessive nature. None of this made sense to Fenrir. He was still alive. Evan was still alive. They were mates. That was all that mattered.

But Evan was more complex.

“Can I talk to my sister?” Lee had his arms folded over his chest like it was taking everything he had not to try to take over the situation.

“She’s requested a few days of silence,” Lilith said with a sympathetic gaze. “I believe that actually has to do with her new powers.”

“She hears differently,” Gray surmised. “I wondered if there were changes we couldn’t see. If she’s taken on bat-like powers, then her hearing would have changed as well. Have we thought about taking her to the Under?”

The Under, where it had all happened. They could potentially help her. “That’s a good idea.”

“Eddie can have us there in an hour or so.” Fen was still insistent. “I’ll pack her things. We can stay for as long as she needs us to. I know the werabats there will aid her.”

“She didn’t ask to go to the Earth plane,” Lilith corrected. “She asked for sanctuary in the Daybreak Kingdom, and it has been granted. I’m sorry, Wolf King. In this I cannot be moved. I will encourage the princess to reconnect when she’s ready. Until then, you must be patient. Remember that is the truest heart of love. Patience.”

Fenrir growled and started to charge, but Lilith was gone and with her the hounds. Fenrir attacked an empty space and fell to his knees.

Trent got on the ground with him. “Son, she’s okay. She just needs time.”

“She needs time,” Lee said gravely. “Please give it to her. Prove your love for her is more valuable than your instincts. Let her figure this out. Do you believe you’re meant to be?”

I watched the moment my son chose to believe.

“Yes, but it hurts. I want to help her,” Fen said, the danger passing.

Lee sighed and held out a hand. “And you will, when she processes what happened. I know my sister. She doesn’t handle change well, but she’ll figure it out. Come on. Let me watch you and Dean drink a bunch of beer and wish I could do the same. We’re both going to miss someone tonight.”

“I’ve never had to miss her before,” Fen said quietly.

“And I’ve missed Mia for so long I barely remember what it was like to be with her,” Lee admitted.

“Then come and tell me about them both,” Dean offered. “Tell me about Mia and Evan. I want to hear all the stories.”

Fen got to his feet. “I’m sorry, Mom. Sorry, Papa and Dad.”

Trent shook his head. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“I kind of tried to kill Lucifer’s ex,” Fen said with a wince. “Although I wasn’t going to kill her, just make her take me to Evan.”

I put a hand on his cheek. “It’s going to be okay. She’ll come home when she’s ready, and honestly, I don’t think Lilith will let her stay for too long. She’ll want to come to the Earth plane to meet Nimue.”

Lee slapped his shoulder. “See, we can hang around Iceland some more because that’s the first place they’ll go

looking.”

“Not how I expected my day to go.” Fen started for the door. “I think I’ll take that beer now.”

“Me, too.” Dean put a hand on his chest. “I can still feel like flames and stuff. That was terrible. I do not recommend it.”

Lee’s eyes rolled as he joined them. “Then don’t jump in front of heinous curses, dummy.”

“Oh, like you could have handled it,” Dean shot back.

“I’m a vampire king,” Lee announced.

“Who still can’t fly.” Fen had to get his dig in.

I let my body fall to the couch as the boys walked toward the kitchen and I was left alone with Trent and Gray, who sat down on either side of me. “Holy shit, that was a lot of drama. Tell me it’s not this way all the time.”

Trent groaned and let his head drop to my shoulder. “It is not easy raising young adult superheroes.”

Gray chuckled, and his hand found my belly. “Well, this one will be far easier because he’s not going to be on the run. We’re going to win this war. I feel it in my bones.”

And he was a prophet. I tilted my head up, my opposite hand finding Trent’s face and stroking that sexy scruff of his. “I hope so because I’m looking forward to raising our youngest two kids in some semblance of peace. And I have to admit something.”

“His name is Rain,” my men said at once.

They knew me well. “I kind of like it now. And damn, but I love you both.”

“Then let’s use that playroom for what it’s meant for.” Gray stood and hauled me up.

Trent was grinning as he stood. “That’s what I’m talking about. I’ve got a ton of stress to take out, and sex is the best of ways.”

No running for him tonight.

Gray started down the hall but it seemed to shift again, and we were in front of our suite.

The House of Sloane would always take care of us.

“Lord Sloane, I wanted to ensure you have everything you need.” Tix was back to sheer perfection in his three-piece suit as he strode toward us.

“I’ve got it all right here,” Gray assured him. “I won’t be needing anything for the rest of the night.”

Tix frowned. “Be brave, little one. It can’t last forever. Pretend it’s all a ride.”

I put a hand on my belly and prayed he was joking.

But when we made it to the playroom, nothing else mattered. We were together. All of us now, and we would face whatever came next.

Join the adventure when Zoey, Danny, Dev, Rhys, and Shy try to find the Days in *The Rebel Seer* coming Fall 2024.

Author's Note

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Book 1

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A stranger in a strange land

Megan Starke has given up believing in knights in shining armor. With an unrewarding job and a failed marriage, no one would confuse her life with a fairy tale. No one is coming to save the day or carry her off to a romantic fantasy. So when she wakes up in a magical world and discovers she is to be the grand prize in a fierce and bloody tournament, she isn't sure if she's having a sexy dream or a horrible nightmare.

Two kings without a kingdom

Beckett and Cian were raised to be the saviors of their people. Prepared all their lives to lead the Seelie Fae, prophecy proclaimed they would find a bondmate whose love would complete them and unleash their magical powers. But the thrust of a traitor's blade stole that future and now it threatens to take their lives. Struggling in exile, their glorious destiny has become a curse. Unless they can find the perfect woman to save them, they will descend into madness and ruin. When all hope seems lost, Beck sees Meg and knows she's the key to their salvation.

An epic battle begins

In a world filled with dethroned kings, upwardly mobile vampires, and dangerous, feline-loving hags, Meg will need all her strength to survive. Finding herself caught between Beck and Cian, she's willing to do whatever it takes to claim her happily ever after.

* * * *

Beast

Book 2

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A playboy who needs to grow up

Fresh from his latest tabloid scandal, vampire playboy Dante Dellacourt has been given an ultimatum. Either he takes a consort and settles down, or his family will disown him. Unwilling to lose everything he has, he reluctantly agrees to find a wife. Marriage is just another kind of contract, after all. No one said anything about love being a part of the bargain.

An outcast who has only known hardship

Exiled by her pack, Kaja is a werewolf without a home. Her life was never easy in the frozen tundra she grew up in, but it was familiar. Waking up in a foreign landscape, surrounded by bright lights, loud noises, and far too many people has left her overwhelmed. Frightened and with no one to trust, she savagely fights to get free of this strange new world.

A passion strong enough to change them both

Called to defend the gnomes of the marketplace, Dante is almost blinded by the radiant light coming off the fierce werewolf. Kaja glows like no consort he has ever seen. Gorgeous and wild, she calls to him in ways he had not dreamed possible. For Kaja, she finds in Dante a man unlike any she has ever known. They could not be more different, but she finds him irresistible.

In order to claim his werewolf bride, Dante must first discover how to overcome their differences. Will he tame his ferocious beauty, or will she unleash his inner beast?

* * * *

Beauty

Book 3

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The princess in the tower

In one horrifying night, Bronwyn Finn lost her family, her kingdom, and the princes who had haunted her dreams for years. Left alone, years pass as she fights for survival and craves revenge against the uncle who took everything from her. But she's never forgotten her Dark Ones. Now she hides along with her guardian, but the war rages ever closer.

Two dark princes

A tragedy marred Lach and Shim's lives. The future kings of the Unseelie Fae are obsessed with finding their promised wife—Bronwyn. Lach and Shim have never stopped believing that Bronwyn is their mate. She is the bond that connects the halves of their shared soul.

A destiny that will change a kingdom

With the blessing of the renegade kings, Beck and Cian Finn, Lach and Shim begin a dangerous quest to find their bride before Torin and his hags take her life.

Across two planes, a war will rage. Lives will be lost. Love will be found. And the Seelie Fae will welcome their true kings home.

[Love the Way You Spy](#)

Masters and Mercenaries: New Recruits

By Lexi Blake

Now available!

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Tasha Taggart isn't a spy. That's her sisters' job. Tasha's support role is all about keeping them alive, playing referee when they fight amongst themselves, and soothing the toughest boss in the world. Working for the CIA isn't as glamorous as she imagined, and she's more than a little lonely. So when she meets a charming man in a bar the night before they start their latest op, she decides to give in to temptation. The night was perfect until she discovers she's just slept with the target of their new investigation. Her sisters will never let her hear the end of this. Even worse, she has to explain the situation to her overprotective father, who also happens to be their boss.

Dare Nash knew exactly how his week in Sydney was going to go—attending boring conferences to represent his family's business interests and eating hotel food alone. Until he falls under the spell of a stunning and mysterious American woman. Something in Tasha's eyes raises his body temperature every time she looks at him. She's captivating, and he's committed to spending every minute he can with her on this trip, even if her two friends seem awfully intense. He doesn't trust easily, but it's not long before he can imagine spending the rest of his life with her.

When Dare discovers Tash isn't who she seems, the dream turns into a nightmare. She isn't the only one who deceived

him, and now he's in the crosshairs of adversaries way out of his league. He can't trust her, but it might take Tasha and her family to save his life and uncover the truth.

About Lexi Blake

New York Times bestselling author Lexi Blake lives in North Texas with her husband and three kids. Since starting her publishing journey in 2010, she's sold over three million copies of her books. She began writing at a young age, concentrating on plays and journalism. It wasn't until she started writing romance that she found success. She likes to find humor in the strangest places and believes in happy endings.

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