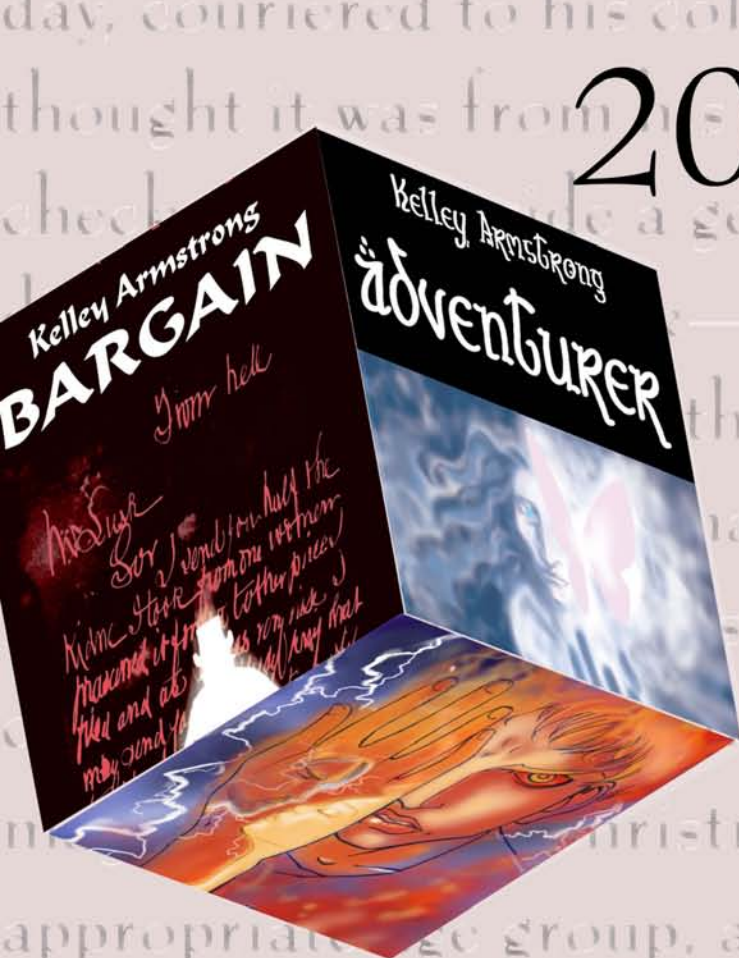


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Otherworld Tales

2005



Artwork by
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Introduction

Welcome to Otherworld Tales 2005. In 2005, I decided to forgo my annual online novella and, instead, explored some back-stories too short to warrant their own novel or novella. I polled readers, and the top four character choices each got their own story, as did the top four events. The remaining four I chose myself.

Most of these are past events related or alluded to in the novels. As such, they function more to fill in gaps, rather than as true stand-alone “short stories.” Some dramatize back-story events, such as Eve’s death in the compound. Some simply expand on a character, giving him or her a voice, like Jeremy reflecting after sending Elena and Clay to Toronto in Bitten. Others do both, as in the tale of Aaron’s vampire “rebirth.”

As with all my online fiction, I consider these pieces “works-in-progress.” That means I’ll likely return to them later and tinker. It also means you may find typos, plus factual and grammatical errors. If you do, please let me know.

I hope you’ll enjoy these stories as much as I enjoyed telling them.

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Rebirth

England
1802

Aaron stumbled from the tavern and gasped as the first blast of cold air slapped his face. He paused in the doorway and took a deep breath, letting it wash some of the toxins from his lungs . . . and maybe a few from his bloodstream as well. Geoffrey jostled him from behind, and Aaron gave him a good-natured shoulder that sent his friend staggering back.

“Move it, you big ox,” John said, kneeing Aaron in the rear.

“Just push me out of the way.” Aaron shot a grin over his shoulder. “Or maybe you should squeeze past instead. You’re skinny enough.”

Aaron stepped onto the cobblestone street and stopped for another gulp of fresh air. Not exactly fresh, he thought with a grimace. The narrow street stunk of shit—horse shit, dog shit, human shit—that’s what came of living so close you couldn’t take a crap without piling it on someone else’s. Give him farm life any day. There was plenty of shit there too, but at least there was room to spread it around.

He squinted up and down the street, his ale-soaked brain struggling to remember which way they’d come. That was another problem with towns. You couldn’t see a damn thing. The

buildings not only crowded your view, they crowded out the moonlight. The few lanterns dotting the street added more smoke than light.

“Inn’s this way,” Geoffrey said, smacking Aaron’s arm. “Come on before the mistress locks the door.”

Aaron grunted. She’d locked them out the last time, and it had been a long, cold night on the street. Aaron and Geoffrey came to the city for a weekend every other month, bringing goods to market. They’d finished their work this morning, but their families didn’t expect them back until Sunday night, knowing that any young man willing to stay home and help his parents on the farm deserved time now and then to sample the cosmopolitan treats he was missing.

One of those “treats” peered out from an alley as they passed. She met Aaron’s gaze and batted her lashes in what he supposed was meant to be a come-hither look, but seemed more like soot caught in her eyes. She couldn’t have been more than thirteen, the bodice of her dirty dress stuffed to simulate the curves she wouldn’t see for another few years . . . if she lived that long.

Aaron reached into his pocket, walked over and pressed a few coins into the whore’s palm. A look, part relief, part trepidation sparked in her eyes, then they clouded with confusion as he walked back to his friends.

John bumped against him. “How drunk are you? You forgot to take what you paid for.”

“Oh, Aaron never has to pay for it,” Geoffrey said. “A tart sees him coming and she closes her purse and opens her legs.”

“If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

John started to turn, but Aaron grabbed his shoulder and steered him forward.

“What?” John said. “It’s paid for.”

As they stumbled past an alley, a whimper snaked out from the darkness within. Then the crack of fist hitting flesh.

Aaron stopped, drunken grin sliding from his lips.

“Ya gotta have more than that,” a voice rumbled. “Find it . . . or I will.”

“Aaron . . .” Geoffrey said, plucking Aaron’s sleeve. “It’s none of your business and, for once, let’s leave it that way, or we’ll be late and spend another night on the street.”

Aaron brushed his friend off and strode into the alley. As he walked, his vision cleared and his steps steadied, the effects of the ale sloughing off as he focused on the voices. He pulled himself up to his full height and peeled off his jacket. That was often enough—tower over the thug and give him a good look at the muscles earned in life on a farm, and most would decide they really didn’t need that few pence tonight after all. As he approached the two—a black-haired lout and a quaking shopkeeper—his gaze went to the lout’s hands, looking for a weapon. Nothing. Good.

Aaron grabbed the lout’s shoulder. “You want to rob someone? Try me.”

The lout’s hand slammed forward. A flash of metal. Where had that come—? Before Aaron could finish the thought the blade drove into his chest, right under the breastbone. He shoved the man away and staggered back into the wall. His hands went to his chest. Blood pumped out over his fingers. The lout came at him again, but the sound of running footsteps made him think better of it and he ran off into the darkness.

“Aaron? Aaron!”

Aaron tried to take a step, but faltered and slammed back against the wall. For a second, he stood there, knees locked, forcing himself to stay up. Then he crumpled.

Aaron twisted in his bed. Too small. The damned thing dug into both his shoulders and hit the top of his head and bottoms of his feet. Inns. They cram as many people into a room as they can, and if you're more than five-foot-six, well, that's not their fault. Eyes still closed he took a deep breath. Flowers . . . and a faint musty smell. The mistress probably set out fresh blooms to cover the smell, so she wouldn't have to change the bedding more than once a month.

He should open his eyes. He knew that—but he also knew that first blare of morning sun was going to feel like Satan's imps stabbing pitchforks in his eyes. He shouldn't drink so much. He wasn't used to it and he paid for his folly every morning after. Speaking of folly . . . he let out a groan. The lout in the alley. Next time he decided to rescue someone, he would take that extra moment to make damned sure the lout wasn't concealing a knife. Now he *really* didn't want to get up. He'd been stabbed in the chest once before, and it had taken him weeks to recover.

His father was going to kill him. He remembered the last time, when he'd been unable to lift anything heavier than a piglet for a month. His father had to do all the chores, and he'd keep giving him that look, muttering "Aaron, Aaron, Aaron," his weathered and wrinkled face collapsing in a deep sigh. He kept his gaze down when he did it, to cover the pride in his eyes.

"A big strong boy with a good heart," he'd boast to the neighbors when he thought Aaron couldn't hear. "What more could a father want?"

"God gave you strength," his mother always said. "Always remember that it's a gift, and gifts from God are to be used in the service of God. Help those less fortunate than you, and you'll please Him."

Helping others, though, did not mean getting stabbed and being unable to help his aging father. His mother would be very firm about that.

“Be *careful*, Aaron,” she’d say. “You’re too quick to act. Take a moment to *think* as well.”

Maybe he could persuade one of his brothers to come back home for a month and help. Even as the thought passed though, he dismissed it. They had their own families and jobs and farms. He was the only one left . . . and his father relied on him. He groaned again.

Enough of that. Time to grit his teeth and get up. You make your bed; you lie in it. Next time, look closer for the damned knife.

He pulled up his knees. They struck something with a hollow thwack. He opened one eye. The light didn’t hurt . . . probably because there hardly was any. The wavering glow of candlelight only cast a dim glow in the dark room. Was it still night?

He reached sideways, to brace himself as he sat up. His hand smacked against wood. A bed with sides on it? Had Geoffrey and the others dumped him in a horse trough again?

He opened the other eye. Still good. Grabbing the sides, he heaved himself up, bracing for the throb of pain through his chest. It didn’t come. Had he dreamed the stabbing? His fingers moved to his chest. Felt fine . . . fine and whole. Damned cheap ale. Giving him nightmares now.

He sat up and blinked. A dark empty room, lit only by a few candles. Vaguely familiar . . . There was a board across his box-like bed, pushed sideways away from his head and chest. That’s what he’d hit his knees on. A black-robed figure sat near his feet. The soft sound of regular breathing came from the figure. Asleep.

Aaron rubbed his eyes. Where the hell was he? It looked familiar. He blinked, memory clicking. It looked like the inside of the family mausoleum. Well, not really a mausoleum . . . it

was made of roughhewn wood, not stone and marble. A mausoleum for a farmer's family was ridiculous . . . as every neighbor had, at some point, whispered to another. But that was the condition of marriage his mother had made.

"My children must be buried above ground," she'd told his father. "It is our way."

His father hadn't argued. Who knew what *her* ways were? She was a Jew and a foreigner and all he knew was that this beautiful young woman he'd met in London was willing to marry him, a forty-year-old bachelor, and bear his sons. She could have said she wanted him to build her a tower to the moon, and he'd have done it.

As for why Aaron was waking up in the mausoleum . . . well, obviously the ale was giving him nightmares. Damn. He'd really hoped the *stabbing* part of his evening had been the dream, not the waking. He moved to lie back down and return to sleep when his knees knocked the board again, this time sending it clattering to the floor. The figure in the chair jumped up, her hood falling back. A dark-haired woman, gracefully sliding into middle-age—his mother.

"Aaron!"

She rushed to him, hands grabbing his shoulders, fingers digging in. Her face loomed over his—blotchy with tears, eyes swollen, hair bedraggled.

"Say something," she whispered. "Please."

"I drank too much. Again."

Her arms flew around him, head going to his chest, burrowing in, shoulders convulsing in a silent sob.

"I prayed it would be you," she whispered. "I know it's not right for a mother to have favorites, but I always hoped—if God chose one of my children for the blessing, I hoped it

would be you. And then after . . .” She hiccuped a sob. “I prayed, Aaron. I *prayed* you’d be the one.”

“What one?” He pulled back to look at her. “I really think I drank too much. Maybe if I just go back to sleep—”

He tried to lie down, but her fingers dug into his shoulders.

“No! There’s no time. Your father . . . he’s already worried about me. He wants to seal the coffin. It’s been three days. It must be sealed.”

“Seal? Coffin?” Aaron looked down. “I’m sleeping in a coffin?”

His mother took his hand and pressed it to a spot above her breast. “What do you feel, Aaron?”

His fingers almost trembled with the pound of her racing heart. Before he could answer, she moved the fingers to his own breast . . . and they went still.

“Now what do you feel?”

“Noth—Bloody hell!” He jumped, almost tumbling back into the coffin. “What—”

“You’re *alive*.” His mother words were harsh with emphasis. “A different kind of life, Aaron, but you are alive and that’s all that matters.”

“All that—? I’m not breathing! I don’t have a—”

“You died, and you’ve been born again. It’s a gift of my blood. A secret gift, told to each woman before she weds. Every generation only a few are blessed. They die, and return to live again . . . to live, and live, and live, and nothing can kill them. A blessing beyond measure.”

“So I’m . . . alive?” He chewed his lip, then slowly nodded. “All right. But what do we tell Father?”

Her gaze dropped. “We can’t tell him, Aaron. You . . . you can’t ever see him again.” She hugged him again. “I’m so sorry. But he wouldn’t understand. What you are . . . they have a name for it. They . . . they do not understand it.”

“What am I?” he said slowly.

When his mother didn’t answer, he reached up, wrapped his hands around her upper arms and pulled her away from him, his gaze going to hers.

“Mother . . . what am I?”

She wouldn’t look him in the eye. “They . . . they call it a . . . a vampire, Aaron, but they don’t understand—”

“A vampire!”

“It is not what they think, Aaron. You are not some soulless demon. You can feel that. You are still you, still my son, still as good and as God-fearing a man as you ever were.”

He forced her chin up, to meet her eyes. “And the . . . blood, Mother? Is that a lie, too?”

“You must feed, yes. On human blood. But it is only feeding, like taking milk from a cow or eggs from a hen. You do no harm.”

“So I do not need to kill?”

A hesitation. A long hesitation, then she hurried on, words tumbling out, almost incomprehensible, “Only once a year, before the anniversary of your death.”

“And if I do not?”

Her gaze met his then, eyes blazing. “You must Aaron. You must.”

“Kill another person to prolong my own life?”

She hesitated again, and the struggle in her eyes sliced him to the core, the conscience of a moral woman at battle with the ferocious instinct of a mother who will do anything to keep her child alive.

“You can make careful choices,” she said softly. “Find those who are dying, and relieve them of their suffering. It is only once a year, Aaron. There are people, many people, who are not long for this earth. Take their lives, and do some good with it. Honor God in that way, and He will understand.”

God? Aaron bit back the word before it flew from his mouth. He suspected God had very little to do with this “blessing,” but if his mother believed so, if she’d convinced herself that it was so, then he would not destroy her faith by questioning the origin of this taint in her blood. And, as he sat there, holding her, listening to her cry, he knew he would not destroy her hope either. A loving, loyal son he’d been in life, and so he would be in this . . . nonlife.

She said he couldn’t see his father, which meant she’d expect him to leave. She’d want to see him again, to be sure he was still with her, however far away, but if he were to drift . . . perhaps to decide his new life lay in the New World before the year was up, she would understand. He had a year. A year of feeding on the blood of men, but if she were right, and it did them no harm, then he could stomach that. He would visit her, and feign contentment for her, and before the year was up, he would leave, and let her believe that he was still walking this earth, somewhere, happy and alive. That he could do for her, and so he would.

Aaron slunk through the alley looking for passed-out drunks. *Like a stray dog rooting for scraps in the trash*, he thought. He’d been a vampire for nearly a month now, and it wasn’t getting any

easier. Instinct showed him how to feed, but he despised every second of it. It didn't seem to have too much effect on humans—his mother had been right about that. Yet skulking through alleys like a scavenger, preying on the weak, it made his stomach churn . . . or it would, if his stomach could still churn. The only thing his gut did these days was complain when he wasn't paying enough attention to it.

As a human, he'd always been able to skip a meal or two during harvest, work through from dawn until dusk and eat when he had time. But now he was at the mercy of his appetite. He had to feed daily, and if he was but an hour or two late, his whole body revolted, turning sluggish and slow, leaving him crawling through back-roads, looking for food.

As he walked, a cry came from the dark end of an adjoining alley. He went still, the old urge taking over, honing in on the sound like a cow hearing the bawl of her calf. *These days it was more like a hawk hearing the squeal of a mouse*, he thought. From savior to predator. A blessing indeed. He kicked a bottle into the stone wall and watched it shatter. The cry came again. His head lifted again, the old instinct refusing to buckle under the new order.

He stopped in mid-step and tilted his head. And why should it buckle? Was he not impervious to harm? So his mother claimed. Perhaps the time had come to test that assertion. The worst that could happen? He'd get another blade between the ribs and be free. But if he couldn't die, then there was nothing to keep him from doing the same thing he would have done a month ago . . . and, this time, claim a blood bounty from the would-be human predator. He heard the thug snarl something to the woman in his grasp, and Aaron's lips parted, canines lengthening. He ran his tongue over them. Now this was one meal he wouldn't mind taking.

Six months later, Aaron slid along the darkened road, his feet making no sound. He'd learned that his new body came custom-made for stealth, for hunting. Ahead of him walked a man, shoulders squared, swaggering slightly. *Proud of yourself, aren't you*, Aaron thought. It takes a brave man to beat a whore.

The world was full of would-be predators. If you knew where to look, you could find one any day of the week, and with very little effort. Aaron no longer worried about the effects of his blood-taking. If one of his new "victims" suffered a bruised neck or a day or two of weakness, he wouldn't feel guilty. A world of difference from slinking through alleys. He had his power back, and his pride.

His mother had noticed the change almost immediately.

"See," she said every time he visited her. "You are adjusting. You are *living*."

And so he would continue to live, for another half-year. He'd already begun hinting about traveling to the New World, and his mother was pleased, seeing this as a sign that he was planning for his future, that he planned to have a future.

A couple rounded the corner and headed Aaron's way. In an instant, his bearing changed, shoulders lifting, slowing, stride shortening, jauntier, the smooth glide vanishing. He reined in his field of attention, too, concerned only with his immediate surroundings, not straining to see and hear his target. A friendly smile and tip of his head as the couple passed. He walked another half-dozen steps, glanced over his shoulder at them, then swung his gaze around, slow and careful. When he was certain he was alone, the predator returned.

As Aaron drew close enough to hear the clomp of the man's boots, his fangs began to extend. An automatic reaction, like salivating. He forced himself to think of something else, of

where he'd spend the night, and the canines retracted. He nodded, pleased to have mastered this trick of control.

When his quarry hit a T-intersection at the end of the lane, Aaron closed his eyes to test another developing skill. He counted to twenty, then looked. The man was gone. Turned left, his gut said. He hurried to the crossroad and looked each way. There, ten yards to the left, was the man. Aaron grinned. It'd been weeks since he'd "guessed" wrong. He hadn't figured out how he could track people. His sense of smell was better attuned to only the scent of blood. This tracking skill seemed more like a sixth sense, being able to "feel" a presence, as if the pulse of life were vibrating to him through the air. Lately he'd even begun to be able to separate "presences" and could track a target through a group—albeit a small group—of people.

As he drew closer to his quarry, he slid into the shadows. No real need to hide. He was, after all, he thought with a small grin, impervious to harm. Still, there was no sense calling attention to himself. A slow glide through the shadows then, once he was close enough to smell the man's unwashed body, he'd swoop out and snatch him up, and his victim would be unconscious before he was even sure he'd been attacked. *Like a hawk diving for a mouse*, Aaron thought, and his grin widened.

Something whispered behind him. Aaron swung around and focused on the sound with a speed and precision that still astounded him. No one was there. He didn't need his eyes and ears to tell him that—he sensed it or, more accurately, *failed* to sense anyone. He replayed the sound in his mind. The whisper of leaves? The rustle of blowing paper? Both logical explanations . . . except that he'd been plagued by these odd noises behind him—quite natural noises of various types—for days now. Aaron took a slower, harder look around. Every sense told him there was no living being there, and yet . . .

He shook off his unease and loped off to catch up with dinner.

Aaron took one last draught of blood, shivering as the heat of it streamed down his throat. Then, with more reluctance than he cared to admit, he ran his tongue over the puncture wounds to stop the blood flow. He lifted his head and eased back on his haunches.

“You can take more than that.”

Aaron whirled sideways so fast he almost toppled over. There, less than a foot away, stood a woman. A woman who gave off no “sense” of life, who had slipped up on him as quiet as a phantom. Her dark green woolen cloak blended into the shadows, only accentuating her copper red hair and pale skin. Under the cloak, Aaron caught a glimpse of a dress—a fine dress, as finely made as the cloak, spun from the kind of cloud-soft wool he’d only ever seen in shops.

She wasn’t beautiful, and she had to be almost as old as his mother, but there was something about her that dared him to look away, maybe the piercing stare of her green eyes or the almost arrogant tilt to her sharp chin or the slightly bemused smile on his lips—or maybe it was all three of those things, sending out different messages and challenging his brain to figure out what the combination meant.

“You can take more than that,” she said again. When he only stared, she arched her brows. “Well?”

“You’re a . . . vampire,” he said slowly.

A slight roll of her eyes. “I should hope so. Do you have many humans popping ’round to give you pointers on blood-taking?”

“You’ve been following me.”

A graceful shrug of her shoulders. “Curiosity. The curse of our race. Live long enough and anything new tickles your fancy. And you certainly are new. Hereditary, I presume.”

When his brows knitted, she said, “Vampirism is in your bloodline.”

“Is there any other way?”

“Yes, but it’s very difficult, not to be undertaken by the faint of heart or the uninformed, and you don’t strike me as the kind of young man who would choose such a thing.”

“Choose?” His lip curled. “Who *would* choose such a thing?”

Another elegant shrug, then she waved at the unconscious man. “You can feed more without killing him. Quite a bit more. It’s easier that way, so you don’t need to hunt almost every night.” Her gaze met his. “Unless you like to hunt every night.”

When he didn’t answer, she continued, “Whether one enjoys the hunt or not, every night can be a bit taxing, and inconvenient. Continue feeding then and I will—”

“I don’t want to kill him.”

An exasperated sigh. “May I finish? I was about to say that I will show you how to tell when you’ve taken enough, to stop before you pose any danger to his life.” An arch of the brows. “Acceptable?”

He nodded, but did nothing.

Her lips twisted in a smile. “Here, let me turn my back, and give you some privacy.”

He waited until she’d turned around, then repositioned himself on the other side of the man, so he could see her while feeding. Several times he stopped drinking, not trusting her to tell him when to cease. With that exasperated patience, she had him continually check the man’s pulse and, so long as it was strong, he could continue. When the pulse finally fluttered, she told him to stop.

He closed his eyes, and luxuriated in the warm heaviness of a full stomach.

“Better?” she said.

He opened his eyes to see her watching him. He blinked, forced his fangs to retract and got to his feet, gaze turned from hers.

“I can teach you more,” she said, voice almost a purr.

“I don’t—thank you, but no. I don’t—won’t need it.”

He expected her to press for an explanation, but she said nothing, just studied him then nodded, that same, infuriating, half-smile on her lips.

“You don’t intend to make your first kill,” she said. “That would be quite a . . . waste, don’t you think?”

He didn’t answer.

“Well, perhaps then, if you are in your . . . final months, you could use some companionship, someone you can talk to. It does get rather difficult, doesn’t it? Talking to people, being with them, always worrying whether they’ll see what you are, never quite able to stop thinking about what *they* are.”

“I’d like . . . I want to be left alone.”

A polite nod. “As you wish.”

With that, she turned and walked away.

As the months passed, Aaron found his mind often slipping back to the red-haired vampire. He'd be feeding, and hear her voice, telling him how to watch for signs that he'd drunk too much.

Or he'd be scooting through a busy market, always nervous about getting too close to humans, and he'd wonder if such caution was needed. Could they see that he wasn't breathing? Would they sense that his heart didn't beat? She could have told him that, probably eased his anxieties with tips and tricks for blending into the human world. Or he'd be walking at midday and think about the first time he'd ventured forth after sunrise, crouched under a drawn curtain, wagging his fingers over the sill, tensed, certain they'd burst into flame as the legends always said. She'd probably get a laugh out of that, maybe tell him stories of other "sun-wary" vampires.

Mostly, though, he thought about her when he was sitting in the corner of a bar or waking in an inn, surrounded by strangers, not daring to say more than a word or two. For someone who'd always valued the company of others, this was the worst part of his new life: the loneliness. Now and then, he'd hear a whisper or a rustle behind him when he was hunting, and he'd turn to look for her. Then he'd see the newspaper blowing past or the dead leaves scraping against a window pane, and he'd tell himself that what he felt was relief. He'd told her to leave him alone and she had.

As the anniversary of his death approached, Aaron's resolve didn't falter. He enacted the final step of his plan, telling his mother that he was setting out for the New World, an action she'd come to expect after his months of talking about it. Naturally, once gone, he couldn't contact her—he couldn't send a post and risk his father recognizing his handwriting—but his mother

understood that, and bid him farewell with only a few tears. He hated deceiving her but, given the choice between lying to her and breaking her heart, he supposed God would forgive him the falsehood. As for whether God would forgive the rest . . . well, Aaron refused to fret over it. He'd done the best he could with the hand Fate had dealt him and, if God condemned him for his choices, that was His decision, and Aaron wouldn't waste a moment of what little time he had left regretting anything he'd done.

He was sitting in a tavern, enjoying an ale—a *good* ale, in a *good* tavern, surely he deserved that much in his final days. Most of what he'd earned doing odd jobs over the last year he'd given to his mother. One of his brothers had brought his wife and moved home to help with the farm, but Aaron still liked to contribute. On his last visit, though, his mother had given the money back and told him to put it to good use in the New World. So he'd donated half to charity, and was indulging himself with the remainder.

When half the tavern's patrons turned to gawk as the door swung open, Aaron turned with them. The moment he saw that flash of copper hair, he couldn't help smiling. He covered it with a gulp of beer as the red-haired vampire swept toward his table in the corner.

She cast a suspicious glance at the stool, and brushed it off before sitting.

"Ale?" he said, lifting his mug.

She only arched one brow, as if she couldn't believe he was even asking.

"They might have wine," he said.

"If they do, I'm sure I don't want it," she murmured. Her eyes studied his, then she gave a soft sigh. "Still haven't changed your mind, I see."

"Nope."

Again, that keen stare.

“You aren’t brooding, are you?”

“Do I look like it?”

“Good, because there is nothing duller than a brooding vampire.” She adjusted her skirts, then waited while he polished off a quarter of his mug. “What if I were to offer you a way out?”

“A way out of what?”

“That vexing moral quandary you’ve mired yourself in.” When he frowned, she said, “A way to take a life without feeling guilty about it.”

“It’s not guilt—”

“Yes, yes,” she said, fluttering her hands. “It’s wrong. Morally reprehensible. Violates the sixth Commandment and all that. But what if there was a loophole? A way to continue living.”

“Not interested.”

Another soul-searching stare, then another sigh. “You are a stubborn one, aren’t you? Better than brooding, I suppose. Humor me, then. I believe I have found a way for you to live; at least do me the courtesy of hearing my suggestion, as payment for my earlier assistance.”

“It won’t change my mind, but you can tell me if you like.”

She rattled off an address.

When he frowned, she said, “Go there and take a look. I believe you’ll see something that would . . . interest you. How much longer do you have before your anniversary?”

“Eight days.”

“Perfect. Take three. Spend some time at that address. Then meet me here again, at midnight.”

Three days later, she was already in the tavern when he arrived, and already had a mug of ale waiting for him.

“Well?” she said when he didn’t speak fast enough.

He shrugged.

“What? You did see what I meant, didn’t you? It’s the home of a grave robber. One who supplies corpses to the medical schools. Very fresh corpses.”

“He kills people and sells the bodies.”

“And that doesn’t . . . give you any ideas?”

“If you mean killing him, I probably will. Might as well. If I’m already damned, there’s no harm in it, and if God has forgiven me for the rest, he’ll forgive me for that. Either way, the world will be better off.”

“Good,” she said, settling back in her chair. “So you’ll kill him and—”

“Oh, I’ll kill him. But as a man, not a vampire.”

Aaron almost choked on his beer, fighting not to laugh as the red-haired vampire slumped forward, looking ready to beat her head against the tabletop.

“Sorry,” he said, biting back a smile. “But I said I am resolved.”

“No, you’re stubborn, and I don’t know why I’m wasting my time trying to change your mind.”

“Because you’re bored? Looking for a challenge?” His lips curved in a slow grin. “Or maybe because I look like something you might want to decorate your bed with?”

She gave an unladylike snort. “My tastes don’t run to farm boys.”

Aaron only smiled and leaned back, stretching his legs.

“Explain this then,” she said, leaning closer. “You obviously feel compelled to do these acts of . . .” A shrug. “Charity, I suppose, perhaps through guilt or a misplaced sense of altruism. But you do them and you enjoy them. You will kill this grave-robber to help others, yet refuse to do it in a way that would prolong your life, and allow you to *continue* helping others. Does that make sense?”

He sipped his beer and gave a soft grunt.

“No, it does not,” she said, slapping her gloves on the table. “I would propose, then, that you take this grave-robber’s life, as a vampire, and live for another year, since you already intend to kill him.”

Again, Aaron only grunted. After a moment, he agreed to give it some thought.

Two days later, Aaron was in the grave-robber’s house, kneeling behind him, draining the last dregs of blood from his body.

“Make sure you take it all,” the red-haired vampire—Cassandra—said. “If you leave any, it won’t work.”

He did as she said, then leaned back, closed his eyes and shuddered.

“And so you have another year,” she murmured.

He opened one eye. “But that’s it. Just one more.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she said. “Now, come. All this bloodletting has made me hungry. Hunt with me.”

INFUSION

1946

“Antonio.” Dominic walked to the table and plunked down a bottle of cheap champagne. “I’ve decided to name him Antonio.”

Malcolm sipped his beer as a chorus of “good choice” rose up from the others. Wally and Raymond Santos glanced Malcolm’s way, as if seeking permission to congratulate Dominic, but Malcolm just kept drinking, and let them make up their own minds. After a moment, Wally joined in with a raised glass to the new father, while sixteen-year-old Raymond busied himself cleaning out a thumbnail.

Dominic paused behind the head chair. Billy Koenig scrambled out of it, making a quick joke about keeping it warm for him. Dominic thudded into the chair and dropped his burly arms onto the table so hard Malcolm’s beer sloshed. Typical Dominic—always throwing his weight around, letting no one forget that he was Pack Alpha heir apparent.

“A drink for Antonio,” Dominic thundered, his voice reverberating through the dingy bar. He turned to the owner, across the room, counting bottles. “Vinnie! Glasses!”

Waiting tables certainly wasn’t Vincent’s job, but he hopped to it. As Vincent approached, Malcolm held up his empty mug. Vincent paused, but only for a second, then took Malcolm’s glass. Dominic allowed himself only a split-second scowl, but it was enough for Malcolm. It

was easy to establish dominance when you were bigger than everyone else. Doing it without that advantage was the real accomplishment.

Once the glasses were filled and distributed, Dominic lifted his. “To fatherhood.”

Everyone clinked glasses, even Malcolm. He knew how far he could push the future Alpha, straddling the border of insolence, but never dropping over into insult.

“Now, how about a wager?” Dominic boomed. “Take bets on who’ll be the new father sitting here next. I’ll pick Malcolm.” A quick grin. “God knows, he’s been trying hard enough.”

Malcolm gritted his teeth as the others laughed and called out good-natured jabs. It was his own damned fault. Malcolm had meant to keep his hopes secret until he could show off the goods, but two years ago, sitting around this very table listening to Dominic brag about his boys, he’d announced a pending arrival of his own . . . only to discover six months later, when the child was born, that it wasn’t his. Since then, everyone had known he’d been trying, and hadn’t even sired a daughter. *That* was his father’s fault—the one blood blight Malcolm couldn’t overcome through sheer strength of will.

As they drank the champagne, the cleaning girl stopped by to wipe off their table. She murmured something that was probably meant to be “excuse me,” but her thick accent and whispered voice rendered the words unintelligible.

The girl didn’t speak more than a dozen words of English. Malcolm figured the only reason Vincent had hired her was because he could pay her half what he’d pay anyone else, her being a Jap and all. Still, it had to be bad for business. How many ex-GI’s came in here, saw a Jap, turned around and left? Malcolm wasn’t sure whether the girl really was Japanese, but it didn’t matter—people saw slant-eyes and they saw Pearl Harbor, and five years wasn’t enough to make anyone forget.

The girl paused at Malcolm's side, and lowered her head. Wally grinned and kicked him under the chair. Malcolm leaned back to let the girl wipe his place. Unlike the quick swipe she'd given the others, she made sure to get every spot, including a few that'd probably been there for weeks.

When the girl finished, she scurried off and intercepted Vincent as he headed over with Malcolm's fresh beer. She took the tray and returned to the table. First, she wiped a spot for the mug, then she wiped off the mug itself and finally laid it before him like a ceremonial chalice. As Malcolm grunted his thanks, snickers raced up and down the table.

The girl pointed to the half-filled tray of peanuts nearest him.

"Sure," he said. "Fill it up."

When she scampered off with the bowl, Wally hooted. "That girl has it bad, Mal. Gets worse every time we come here."

Malcolm only gulped his beer.

"Hey, come on, Mal. Think about it. She waits on you like that in public, imagine what she'd do for you in private."

Another chorus of snickers.

"Not my type," Malcolm muttered.

Dominic leaned forward. "Because she's a Jap? Nothing wrong with that. From what I hear, they're damned eager to please, if you know what I mean."

Billy nodded. "Buddy of mine at work has a Jap girlfriend, on the side of course, and you wouldn't believe the stories he tells. Ever heard of geishas? All Jap girls learn some of that shit, and they'll do anything to make a guy happy. Nothing's too kinky—"

Dominic cut him short as the girl approached.

“What?” Billy hissed. “She doesn’t understand English anyway.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dominic murmured.

When she was gone, they started up again, regaling Malcolm with tales of Asian women.

“And,” Dominic said as they finished. “Unless my nose is wrong, there might be a bonus.”

“Just what I need,” Malcolm said. “A slant-eyed brat.”

Dominic shook his head. “It’s only the mother, Mal. Doesn’t count. Look at Ross Werner. His momma was black and you can hardly tell. With us, it’s the male blood that counts. Women . . .” He shrugged. “Just the vehicle. At most you might get a kid with dark hair and dark eyes, but yours are dark enough anyway. Wouldn’t matter. And . . .” He leaned closer. “You never know. A little foreign matter in the mix might be just what your boys need to get the job done.”

Malcolm gritted his teeth. Dominic always sounded so sincere, like a big brother who really wanted to help, but Malcolm knew he’d like nothing better than to see Malcolm humiliate himself by presenting a half-breed baby to the Pack.

As the night wore on, though, and Malcolm drank more beer, he couldn’t stop thinking about what Dominic had said. Maybe mixing up the bloodline *would* help. He’d never tried that. And Ross’s case did suggest the foreign blood wouldn’t show, which is all that mattered.

The girl was in the fertile stage of her cycle, and she obviously wanted him. An easy conquest. Plus, if Asian women were as submissive as the others said . . . Malcolm smiled. Submissive was good. Especially if it came from a girl who was in no position to complain if things got out of hand.

By the time the group settled the bill, Malcolm had made up his mind. He sent the others on without him, then cornered the girl as she came out of the back storage room. She started, seeing him there, then dropped her gaze and made no move to get past him.

“Been a long night,” he said. “Bet you could use a drink.”

When she didn’t answer, he pantomimed drinking, then pointed from her to himself.

“Drink. You. Me.”

“I—I work,” she said. “Done soon.”

“No, babe, you’re done now. Let me handle Vinnie.”

He reached for her apron and snapped it off. She gave a shy little smile, then nodded.

“Get drink,” she said. “For you.”

She took his hand. Hers was tiny, almost birdlike. He wondered how hard he’d need to squeeze to hear those thin bones snap like twigs. Not very hard, he’d wager.

He turned to let her lead him into the bar, but she stopped at a locked door a few feet down, and took out a key.

“Room,” she said, gaze still lowered. “My room. Yes?”

He smiled down at the girl. “Sure, babe. Whatever you want.”

Malcolm sat on a chair in a tiny room, empty except for the chair and a sleeping mat. A few candles cast the only light—a wavering, sickly light that lined the room with shadows. When the girl went into the adjoining room to get his drink, he’d flicked the light switch, but nothing had happened.

That cheap bastard Vincent probably cut off the hydro when he let the girl take the room. Maybe, if the girl was as good as the others claimed she'd be, he'd see about "persuading" Vincent to spring for lights and heat up here. Wouldn't be any inconvenience to him, and the girl sure would be grateful--she'd leave the welcome mat out for any time he felt like coming back.

The girl slipped from the back room. She'd changed out of her work clothes and into a white cotton robe with an embroidered belt. Her bare feet seemed to glide across the floor. Tiny feet, like the rest of her, slender and hesitant, as graceful and defenseless as a doe. Pretty as one, too. Now that he'd looked past his prejudice, he had to admit she was damned pretty, especially in that white robe, holding a tray like the offering of some virgin priestess. When she bowed before him, the liquid in the glass didn't so much as ripple. He peered at it. The drink was amber, like beer, but clear and . . . steaming.

"Tea?" he said, lip curling. "I don't drink—"

"No, no tea," she said quickly. "Special drink. For you. Make—" A meaningful look at the sleeping pad. "Make good."

"Make *me* good?" He started to rise. "You don't need any damned drink to make me good, babe—"

"No, no. Please." She backed away, gaze downcast. "Not you. *You* good. Yes. Drink make me good. For you. Make you . . ." She seemed to struggle for the word. "Feel better. Make it feel better. For you."

She babbled on some more, waving at the mat, but he got the gist of it. The drink was supposed to make the sex better. He'd heard of things like that, and as the others had said, these

girls were supposed to know all there was to know about pleasing a man. This must have been one of their tricks.

Malcolm took the drink and sniffed it. Just herbs. His werewolf nose didn't detect any taint of anything noxious. He took a sip. Fire burned down his throat, like hundred proof whiskey.

He closed his eyes and shook himself. The heat spread to his groin and he smiled. Not like he needed the help, but sure, why not. He took a bigger sip.

"Yes?" the girl said.

He looked up to see that she'd unfastened her belt. He could see a swath of pale skin running from her throat, down between her small breasts, over her flat stomach, to the dark thatch below. His cock jumped and he raised the glass in salute. Another sip, and she let the robe fall off one shoulder. A third sip, and she dipped the other shoulder, and the robe slid down her body to pool at her feet. For a moment, she stood before him, naked and pale in the wavering candlelight. Then, without a word, she knelt and reached for his zipper.

Malcolm rolled over. A moment's sleep-fog of thinking "Why am I lying on the floor?" then he remembered and smiled. Whatever Jap hoodoo that girl had put into his drink, it was something else. He closed his eyes and sighed, the tip of his tongue sliding between his teeth as he stretched. Shit, he almost *hurt*, and it had nothing to do with sleeping on the floor.

After all those things he'd been thinking in the bar, about what he could do to a little slip of a girl like this, he hadn't even tried. Couldn't be bothered. He'd just laid back and let her work her magic. He'd roused himself for a bit of energetic thrusting, but that'd been the extent of his participation. She'd done all the work.

And work she had. Gave him three damned fine rides . . . maybe even four, but he'd been getting hazy near the end. Three times was bragging rights enough. Twice was a given—he could always go twice, and always did, whether his partner felt up to it or not. The only times he'd managed a third, though, were after a few hours rest. Three—maybe four—bouts in a row . . . He rolled onto his back and grinned.

Whatever was in that drink was some powerful stuff . . . and so was the girl. Masterful, but never dominant, always letting him know he was in charge. After the second time—or was it the third?—he'd thought he was down, but she'd managed a revival, rubbing, licking, cajoling . . . begging. He felt a fresh surge and leaned back, savoring the memory until he was hard again. Then he rolled over for another go . . . and found himself alone.

Malcolm grunted and lifted his head. The simple movement felt like tumbling headfirst out of a tree. He grabbed the sides of the bed and steadied himself. When the world stopped whirling, he opened his eyes and peered around the dark room. Where was that girl? Helluva time to take a piss.

A voice wafted in from the adjacent room. A singsong voice. He chuckled. Singing while she sat on the john—guess she was still feeling pretty good, too. Maybe she was cleaning up for the next round. Another chuckle. Better give her some time—there'd be a lot to clean up. As he lay down, a second voice joined the first. He blinked. What the hell . . .? A radio or record player, had to be. But if there was no hydro up here . . .

Malcolm pushed himself up again, so fast this time that he almost blacked out. He wobbled to his feet and had to rest a moment to get his bearings. His first step nearly sent his legs sprawling out from under him like a newborn fawn's. He'd been hung over worse than this,

though. Mind over matter, as with everything else in life. If you have the guts and the will, you can do anything.

He closed his eyes and ordered his muscles to obey. When he took another step, they started to listen. Still, it was slow going. His head pounded, and every fiber of his body urged him to lie back down and sleep it off.

Finally, he made it to the wall, then inched around to the door, inching not out of caution, but necessity. When he reached the doorway into the adjoining room, he peered around the corner. The first thing he saw was the wallpaper. Strange white wallpaper with black geometric shapes. He blinked. No, not wallpaper, someone had drawn on the walls, drawn . . . symbols.

A smell wafted out. Something burning, giving off a sweetish odor so faint even his nose could barely detect it. The voices started up again. Singing, but with no tune. Chanting.

There, across the room, was the girl, sitting on a high stool, naked. But she looked . . . different. There were circles drawn around her breasts and stomach, but that wasn't what gave him a start. It was the way she sat, chin high, gaze steady, her poise exuding confidence, no sign of the shy girl he'd just bedded.

The girl's lips were still. She wasn't the one chanting. It was the two women in front of her, their backs to him, one white-haired, one dark. The white-haired one had her head bowed. The other swung a pendulum in front of the girl's stomach. The girl said something and the dark-haired woman snapped at her. The white-haired woman murmured a few words and the girl sighed, then said something that made both women laugh. The old woman patted the girl's bare knee and they started chanting again.

As Malcolm watched, his legs began to tremble, begging him to go lie back down. When he resisted, all went hazy, and he seemed to float there, the chanting filling his head, lifting him up, symbols swirling around him . . .

A soft growl and he shook the sensation off. Goddamn that drink. First a killer hangover, now hallucinations. That's what this was—a dream or hallucination, caused by the drink. Had to be. His mind set, he stumbled back to the mat and crashed into sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, the girl was gone. He wandered down to the bar, but no one was there. He pushed back a stab of annoyance. Normally *he* was the one to vanish before breakfast. He told himself the girl hadn't taken off for good, just gone to get him something to eat, but he didn't stick around long enough to find out whether he was right.

That night, he returned to the bar alone, but the girl wasn't there. According to Vincent, she was scheduled to work, but hadn't shown up. Malcolm went upstairs to the girl's room, which was still unlocked. He found it exactly as he left it: a small room with a mat, a chair and candles, now blackened stubs.

He glanced at the adjoining room, then hesitated before striding over and walking through the doorway. Inside was . . . nothing. Just another room, even emptier than the first. No sign of what he'd thought he'd seen the night before. No smell in the air, no symbols on the walls, not even the stool. Just as he'd figured—it'd been a dream, induced by whatever the girl had put in his drink.

One thing was for sure, though, the girl had cleared out, likely for good. And she might have taken something of his with her. The chance was slight, he knew, but they'd certainly been

busy enough to start a baby and he sure as hell wasn't letting it go at that. Pack Law said that if he bedded a woman during her fertile period, he had to keep track of her. If there was a child, and it was a son, then it was a werewolf, and therefore had to come back to him. That was the Law. So whatever "pressure" he had to apply on Vincent to tell him where to find the girl . . . well, he was just obeying Pack Law.

By the time he finished with Vincent, he was certain that, when the man said he didn't know where the Jap girl had gone, he was telling the truth. He did, however, have an emergency contact for her, from when she first took that job.

Malcolm took the address—supposedly the girl's grandmother's—and arrived there just in time to find an old Jap lady in the process of moving. He tracked the woman to her new apartment, and saw the girl there. They'd moved only a few miles away, to a larger apartment. Obviously the girl had found a better job and invited granny to move in. That explained why she'd been so eager to get him into her bed, having known it would be her last night at the bar, and her last chance with him.

Malcolm made a note of the new address, and returned to the Sorrentinos's estate outside New York City. At the end of the weekend, he went home to his own family estate near Syracuse. The next month, when he visited his Pack brothers in NYC, he stopped by the girl's apartment. He saw her, but made no effort at contact. Finding out he'd tracked her there might give the girl a romantic thrill . . . or it might spook her.

As good as that night had been, he wasn't interested in a repeat if it threatened his chance at fatherhood. If she *wasn't* pregnant, then maybe he'd show up, see what happened. Maybe he was being overly optimistic, but when he saw her, something seemed . . . different. Dominic always said he could smell it when he'd knocked up a girl, even before she started to show.

Malcolm had always figured Dominic was full of shit, but now he wondered. Something seemed different. He'd just have to be patient, wait and see.

He stopped in again after the second and third month, not because he expected to see anything, but just to make sure she hadn't shipped out. He was compiling a list of details in case she did—where she worked, where they shopped, places and people he could shake down for information if she moved again. But she didn't, and when he came by after the third month, he noticed she was wearing baggier clothing. Still too soon to hope—she might have only put on some weight—but hope he did. On his fourth visit, he was more convinced. By the fifth, he was certain. He was going to be a father.

When the eighth month came, he found excuses to stay at the Sorrentino estate, and went by the girl's apartment almost daily. There was no need for him to be there when the baby came—most Pack werewolves waited a month or so after the arrival before claiming their sons. But Malcolm couldn't be so nonchalant, not when so much could still go wrong. There could be complications with the birth. Or it might be a girl. Or it might not be his again. So he hovered close and waited, and in the middle of the third week, his vigilance paid off. He was there when it all began, when his child entered the world.

Weeks ago he'd found a route up the fire escape and to a window that never quite closed. Normally, he just crouched on the fire escape, hidden in the darkness of night, where he could watch and listen. When he heard that first scream of hard labor, though, he wrenched open the window and squeezed through into the grandmother's bedroom.

The scream, and the voices that answered with soothing reassurances, came from down the hall. He slipped to the doorway and looked out. Risky, but if he was right, and the baby was on the way, intruders would be the last thing on everyone's mind.

From the bedroom doorway, he could see into the living room, and the first thing he saw were the symbols covering the walls—the same black symbols from his “dream.” He inhaled sharply. So that hadn't been a dream—big deal. They were Japs. Who knew what religion they followed, what gods they worshipped? Painting stuff on the walls and on their bodies, chanting and waving pendulums around, it was all no stranger than a Catholic Mass. No reason for his heart to be thudding like a cornered stag's.

Another scream. Then a voice, and another, the same two voices from his dream, launching into the same chanting singsong. He moved into the hall, then crept forward until he could see the living room. There was the girl, naked again, her torso covered with lines and circles. She wasn't lying on a bed, but crouched over a mat, as if she was trying to take a crap, not deliver a child. The old woman—the grandmother—held the girl, giving her balance, while the black-haired woman lit a fire in a small dish. When whatever was in the dish began to smoke, she lifted it to the girl's nose.

The girl filled her lungs with the smoke, then went still. Her face relaxed. Then she lifted her face to the ceiling, raised her hands and began to chant. Even when a contraction rocked her thin frame, her expression didn't change—the words only came louder, harsher, more determined.

Another contraction and she punched her fists into the air, her chant a near-howl. The lights flickered. Malcolm shook his head sharply, certain he'd seen wrong, but then the lights flashed again, and again, dimming with each blink. The flames on the candles shifted, angling toward

the girl as if she was sucking the energy from them. Malcolm's gut went cold and he knew then, as he'd known deep down from the start, that these women were another supernatural race, a race of magic-makers.

There were other . . . things out there. Most werewolves admitted this, if only to themselves. They'd heard too many stories to cling to the Pack's claim that werewolves were the only otherworldly creatures. The werewolves kept to themselves, and feigned ignorance of other supernatural races, but they knew. They knew.

An excited chirp from the old woman knocked Malcolm from his thoughts. Between the girl's legs, deep in her dark thatch, another dark thatch had appeared. The top of a baby's head. *His* baby's head. The girl slammed her hands down, her chant now a snarl, face tight and shiny with sweat. But she didn't cry out.

Malcolm held his breath as he waited for the first wail. Dominic, who always managed to witness the birth of his children, claimed that you could foretell a child's strength by his first cry. The loudest of his three had been Antonio, who'd already beaten his brothers' babyhood milestones, lifting his head sooner, sitting up sooner, crawling sooner, and now, at not yet a year, walking, thereby proving his father's theory. So Malcolm braced for his child's first scream, and prayed it would surpass anything Dominic had heard from his.

After one final heave, the baby fell into the waiting hands of the attendant. And it made not a peep.

The child was dead. After all these months, all this hoping . . .

And yet, he couldn't help feeling almost relieved. Having a half-Jap baby was one thing, but this was an interracial mixing he wanted no part of. His gut told him it was better this way, and Malcolm always trusted his gut, so he stepped back—

The baby kicked and made a noise. Not a scream of outrage at being yanked from the warm, dark womb, but only a little gurgle, almost a coo, as if to say “here I am” as quietly and politely as possible. The woman holding him laughed and said something to the baby’s mother, who’d laid back on the mat to rest, unperturbed by her child’s silence.

As Malcolm tensed, his gaze traveled down the child’s blood-streaked torso. Then he let out a whoosh of breath. It was a girl. Good, he could leave and forget all—

The attendant lifted the child to show the mother. A tiny penis and scrotum fell from between its legs . . . and Malcolm’s gut fell with it. There was still one last hope. Maybe the child wasn’t his. As the woman wrapped the baby in a symbol-covered blanket, Malcolm closed his eyes and inhaled, and his stomach dropped to his shoes. His child. His son. And a werewolf.

The Law was clear. Father a son and you must claim him for the Pack. They couldn’t allow a werewolf to grow up not knowing what he was. And yet that didn’t apply here, did it? These magic-makers would know what the boy was when he came of age. They would take care of him, and there would be no risk of exposure to the Pack. He could leave, and never think on this again.

So that’s what he did.

When Malcolm returned to the Sorrentino estate, he went straight to Emilio, and asked whether there were any “tasks” the Alpha needed done. It wasn’t a surprising request. Malcolm was always ready to serve the Pack, if it meant boosting his reputation. This time, though, he had an ulterior motive—to wipe from his brain all thoughts of that strange, quiet child and those

magic-makers. Emilio gave him a job—hunting down and terminating a troublesome mutt—and Malcolm was out the door before the Alpha could say goodbye.

Two weeks later, the mutt dead, Malcolm went home to Stonehaven. He barely got through the door before he heard the familiar thump-scrape of his father's footsteps. Malcolm tensed and ran through his mental list of infractions, things he'd done that grazed the boundaries of Pack Law. If his father was so quick to welcome him home, he wondered which of these "infractions" he'd found out about this time.

Edward Danvers rounded the corner, his bad leg dragging behind. In public he used a cane, but in the house, he never bothered. He stopped at the end of the hall and straightened. He always stood straight in Malcolm's presence, those couple extra inches of height being the only physical advantage he had on his son.

Edward looked around the vestibule, his frown growing. Then a flash of sadness behind his dark eyes.

"It was a girl, then, was it?"

Malcolm froze. He'd told no one about the baby, certainly not his father. He opened his mouth to protest, but Edward cut him off,

"I know you well enough to know when you're up to something, Malcolm, and when you're excited about something. The obvious reason you'd be *that* excited and take off to New York for over a month would be to watch for the birth of a child. So, it was a girl, then?"

Malcolm considered saying yes, but knew even this lie was risky. A werewolf was supposed to take no interest in his daughters, logical because they were not werewolves and therefore could stay with their mothers. But his father was rarely logical, and more than once Malcolm had suspected that when a lump sum went missing from the bank account, the

money—part of *his* inheritance—was going to Edward’s only other child, a daughter a few years younger than Malcolm. If Edward thought he had a granddaughter, it would be just like him to go looking for the girl, to make sure she and her mother were well cared for.

“Died,” Malcolm said as he pulled off his other shoe. “In childbirth.”

“Did he?”

Malcolm nodded.

Edward limped closer. “So it was a *he*? A son?”

Malcolm hesitated, then nodded and tossed his shoes onto the mat.

“Your first-born son dies, and you aren’t the least bit upset. How . . . odd.”

Malcolm shrugged.

“Was it the Japanese girl Dominic mentioned? The timing would certainly be right. Let me guess, Malcolm. The babe didn’t die. He just looked a little more . . . foreign than you’d like.”

With another shrug, Malcolm turned away to hang his coat on the rack.

His father’s voice hardened. “If you had a problem with a half-Japanese child, then you shouldn’t have bedded the girl in the first place.”

Malcolm grabbed his suitcase and tried to brush past his father, but Edward stepped into his path. One good shove, and the old man would topple. Hell, a *really* good shove, into the wall, and he’d topple and stay down forever. As much as Malcolm longed to do it, longed to do it almost every day, he couldn’t. Edward had made sure of that the moment his son became strong enough to best him—rewriting his will so the estate would be held in trust by the Sorrentinos, meaning someday Malcolm would have had to go crawling to Dominic for money. And that would be a fate worse than putting up with Edward.

“He’s your child, Malcolm. Your son.”

Edward's voice had softened. Malcolm's fists clenched. He hated that voice worse than the angry one, hated the reminder that whatever he did, his father still saw him as his son, needing only attention, firmness and love to "redeem" him.

Edward continued, "There is nothing wrong with a mixed-race child."

Not this mixed race, Malcolm thought, but he said nothing, just let his father continue,

"I don't care if the babe is purple, Malcolm. He's your son, and my grandson, and probably the only one we'll ever see."

"There'll be more."

Edward shook his head. "I only had two children, and you've shown no signs of faring any better, and certainly not for lack of trying. It's in our blood."

Malcolm met his father's gaze. "In *your* blood. Granddad had three sons and a whole passel of daughters. So the problem, *father*, is clearly yours. Not that it surprises me."

He saw the barb strike home and smiled. If the bloodline was weak, it was clearly Edward's fault. He was weak. Not just weak, but a coward. As a Danvers, Edward had been expected to fight for Alphahood but when the opportunity arose, he'd somehow managed to cripple his leg. No one was quite sure how it had happened—the story changed with the teller—but whatever the cause, the injury permanently took him out of the line of succession. As a mediocre fighter, Edward had stood no chance of winning a fight for Alphahood, so he'd intentionally taken himself out of the race. And everyone in the Pack knew it.

Malcolm had spend his life wiggling out from under the shadow of his father's cowardice. After Dominic, he was now the best fighter in the Pack. Among the mutts, Malcolm's reputation for ruthlessness surpassed that of every other Pack werewolf. No one could call him his father's son . . . except in this one thing, his inability to carry on the line.

“Perhaps you don’t want the child, Malcolm, but I do. Give me my grandson and I’ll never trouble you with a moment of his care.”

Malcolm hesitated, but knew his father would never give in so easily. As weak as Edward was, he could be relentless when it came to something he wanted, pursuing it as single-mindedly as Malcolm had pursued his reputation. Tell him no, and he’d go out and find the boy.

Malcolm couldn’t allow that to happen. The thought of claiming that strange baby as his own made his skin creep, and made his gut roil with something almost like fear. No, not fear. Contempt. Contempt for those women and their petty magics and that peculiar child. He knew then what had to be done, and that he should have done it when he’d first laid eyes on the boy. There was only one way to eliminate the problem—by *eliminating* the problem.

Malcolm shrugged. “You want him, fine. I’ll go get him, Just don’t bother me with the brat.”

His father smiled. “I won’t.”

Malcolm’s father insisted on accompanying him to New York. That he hadn’t foreseen, but it turned out to be a minor bump, not the road block it could have been. Edward was quite content to stay at the hotel and wait for Malcolm to deliver his grandson. He never suggested helping Malcolm take the child. Didn’t have the stomach for it, Malcolm figured.

He often wondered how his father got him away from his mother. Pack Law was clear on that—a son had to be taken and all contact with the mother severed. Ideally, you’d convince the unwed mother that this was for the best—take the boy, and leave her free to marry without the burden of an illegitimate child. If that didn’t work, kidnapping was the next option. The missing

child of an unwed mother was a low priority for police. If she caused trouble, though . . . well, there was a final solution, though Malcolm had never known a Pack werewolf to resort to it. He didn't know why—it seemed the easiest route to go, and safe enough if you were careful. He knew all about being careful—had enough practice at it.

When he reached the apartment, only the grandmother was there. It was growing dark—night was always the best time for this sort of thing. He could have waited outside the building, taking care of the girl and the child without ever setting foot in that apartment, and leave the old woman alone, but that would be the soft way, the coward's way, his father's way. Strength meant doing what needed to be done—all of it, no half measures or short cuts that could come back to haunt you.

He went in the window again, and saw that he'd come not a day too soon. The room was piled with boxes—moving boxes. He could hear the old woman in the kitchen, where he'd spied her through the other window. It would be easy to slink down the hall, slip up behind her, and snap her neck. So easy . . .

He strode to the kitchen door, and shoved it open so hard it banged against the counter. The old woman spun around. Seeing him, her eyes went wide. He expected her to lunge for a knife, but she only stood there, wide-eyed.

“Where's my son?”

As he spoke, he advanced on the old woman, backing her into the corner. She went willingly, as if it never occurred to her to do otherwise, to fight back.

“Where's my son?” he said, slower, enunciating the words.

“He—he is not here, “” she said, her voice heavily accented, but her English good. “We didn't think—”

“That I’d be back? That I’d want him?”

She swallowed. “I know this—this is your way. To take the sons. But this one—you do not want this one. He will be different. Better for us to take him.” She managed a strained smile. “You will have more sons. Many more sons. Big strong boys like yourself.” The smile grew and she tapped her temple. “This, I see.”

He hesitated. “See?”

Her face relaxed and she nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes. I know this. I know many things.” Her eyes grew crafty. “You have not heard of our race, have you?”

“But you’ve heard of mine.”

“Who has not heard of the mighty werewolves? That is why we came here. No accident, this. We chose you. We are a rare race, a dying race. We needed a . . .” Her eyes rolled as if searching for a word. “An infusion. Stronger blood to mix with ours, and what is stronger than the werewolves? We chose your race, and then we chose you from your race, to strengthen our blood.” Her gaze met his. “We honored you in this.”

“You did, did you? Well, maybe it’s not an honor I asked for, a freak of a son, a half-breed—“

“And no concern of yours.” Her voice took on a tone at once soothing and authoritative. “This child need not be any concern of yours. We will take him.”

She waved at the boxes on the counter. “We’re already preparing to leave. We will go and never trouble you again, and you will have more sons and grow to take your rightful place as Alpha, unencumbered by this child.’

Caught in her gaze, he felt the urge to give in. Why not let her to take the child? It would be easy. So easy . . .

He reached out and snapped her neck.

He'd barely finished stuffing the old woman under the sink when a sound came from the front hall. A panic-choked shout. The girl and the child. She called again, in English this time.

“Grandmama!”

A whimper cut through the silence. The child. Not screaming or wailing, just giving one soft whimper. Malcolm heard a torrent of foreign words as the girl tried to calm the child, then a bustle as she laid him down.

The girl shouted again. Light steps ran up the hall, racing for the old woman's bedroom first.

Malcolm slipped from the kitchen and headed for the living room. There was the child, in his bassinet by the sofa. His dark eyes were as wide and worried as the old woman's had been, and he writhed in his tightly wrapped blanket.

Malcolm stepped toward the child. The patter of light running footsteps sounded behind him. Then a shriek.

Malcolm turned. The girl stood in the doorway.

“Get away from my son,” she said, her English perfect and unaccented.

“*Your* son? Oh, I beg to differ on that.”

She stepped toward him. “Where is my grandmother?”

Malcolm only smiled. Her jaw worked and she spat an epithet he didn't understand.

“Get out,” she said. “We've done you no harm.”

“No harm? You hid my son—”

“My son. Your only part in his making is long over, and you were well compensated for that.” Her lips twisted. “Not exactly a hardship for you.”

“Nor for you, as I recall.”

“You think I enjoyed—” She spat another foreign word, and pulled herself up straight. She barely reached his chest, but acted as if she stood on eye-level with him. “You weren’t even my choice. You were theirs. I wanted the big man, the one who’d proven he could sire sons.”

Malcolm swung at her, but she seemed to expect this, and nimbly dove to the side and raced for the child. He wheeled and shoulder-slammed her out of the way, but she kept coming, clawing, kicking, fighting to get to the child, stopping only when he reached into the bassinet and grabbed up the tiny body.

She went still. “Give me my son.”

She held herself rigid, every muscle locked tight as if to keep from flying at him. Her eyes blazed and her lips were parted, teeth bared in a frozen snarl. She looked . . . magnificent, pulsing with fury and hate. A worthy mother for his son.

Malcolm ripped his gaze from hers. It was a trick, some magic, just like her grandmother had used on him, trying to bend him to her will, to break *his* will.

He looked down at the child in his arms. The boy gazed back at him, bright-eyed and calm. Malcolm’s hand moved to the child’s throat.

“Stop! He’s your son!”

“I’ll have more. Your grandmother said so.”

“My grandmother—?”

“She foresaw it.”

“Foresaw—?” The girl let out a bark of a laugh. “Is that what she told you? We have our gifts, but that is not one of them. No one can foresee the future, and that child you hold may well be the only one you’ll ever see.”

“Maybe I’m willing to take that chance.”

He put his hand around the baby’s throat. The girl flew at him. One good shove, and she hit the wall hard enough that she should have gone down and stayed down. But she didn’t. She pushed herself up and, blood dribbling from her mouth, came at him again. Her nails ripped furrows down his bare forearm. So he dropped the child. Just dropped him.

The girl screamed and dove for the baby. He kicked her, kicked her with all he had, square in the gut, and she sailed backward into the wall, arms still outstretched toward the child. When she hit the floor this time, she lay there only a moment, then started dragging herself toward her son, her nails scraping the floor. Malcolm reached down to scoop up the baby up.

The front door swung open.

“Malcolm!”

He stopped, bent over the silent child, and looked over at his father. Edward’s gaze was riveted to the girl.

“Oh, my God. What have you done?” Edward’s cane clattered to the floor, and he limped to the girl, then dropped down at her side. His hands went to the side of her neck. “Malcolm! Call Emilio. Now!”

The girl’s eyelids fluttered. She said a word and reached for the child. Edward gently laid her down, and scrambled over to the baby. As he picked up the baby, the child kicked and swung his fists, but didn’t make a sound. Edward hurried back to the girl and pressed the child to her.

“Help is coming,” he said.

“Don’t—” Her tongue flicked over her bloodied lips. “Don’t let him . . .”

“He won’t hurt the boy. Ever. You have my word on that.”

“Take—” Her voice was ragged, eyes almost closed. “You. Take . . .”

Edward squeezed the girl’s hand. “I will.”

The words had barely left his lips when she went limp. Edward’s head fell forward. Then the baby whimpered and he looked up sharply. He slipped the child from his mother’s arms and gathered him up in his own. Then he pushed to his feet.

“Clean this up,” he said, his voice tight.

Without a glance Malcolm’s way, Edward limped to the door, then stopped, his back still to his son.

“Get a blanket. It’s cold outside. He needs a blanket.”

Malcolm looked at the blanket at his feet, the one that had fallen from the child. It was the one covered in those damnable symbols. He kicked the blanket under the sofa. If his son had to live, then no one could know about this “infusion” of magic-maker blood. He’d been used by these women, but that would be his secret, his shame, and his alone.

He grabbed a plain blanket from the bassinet, walked to the door and handed it to his father.

DEMONOLOGY

Talia stared at the painting. A tiny fishing boat caught in a raging storm, swirling in an eddy, the crew members struggling, but managing to keep it afloat . . . while a giant wave swelled behind them. That's my life, she thought. You fight the storm and you keep fighting, but somehow, you never shake the feeling that a huge wave is gathering behind your back, waiting to blow it all to smithereens.

Her eight year old son, Adam, was sprawled across the office floor doing his homework, his blond head bent over the math workbook, pencil in his mouth, scowling at the numbers as if that could make them surrender their secrets. He'd been quiet for fifteen minutes now, a sure sign that he was dreading this appointment.

In the support group she attended, for parents of hyperactive children, the other mothers always crowed about their children's "quiet periods," those rare times when their kids stopped bouncing and bounding and chattering, and sat quietly for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Talia never joined in. When Adam grew quiet, it was a sure sign that something was bothering him. These days, he sank into these quiet spells at least a few times a week, more often if that week included "appointments."

In the last few months, they'd been to at least a dozen doctors. General practitioners, specialists of every type, psychiatrist, psychologists, social workers . . . a never-ending parade of professionals all claiming they could figure out what was wrong with Adam. Talia hated that phrase: "what was wrong with Adam."

There was nothing wrong with Adam, and she told him that every day. But the fact that she needed to tell him so often, that he required constant reassurance, was proof that even Adam, never the most sensitive child, knew something alarming was happening. How many blood samples could a little boy give, how many questions could he answer, how many x-rays and tests could he undergo, before he stopped trusting his mother and started to believe that there really was "something wrong."

"Mom?"

Talia looked over.

"I'm thirsty."

She lifted her purse. "I brought juice boxes and animal crackers—"

"I'm *more* thirsty than that." He wrinkled his nose, freckles forming new constellations. A pause, then he slanted a sly look her way. "I saw a pop machine down the hall."

"Did you now? And let me guess. *That's* how thirsty you are: full can of pop thirsty."

"Please?"

With a dramatic sigh, she opened her change purse and counted out, not just enough for a soda, but for a soda and a candy bar. Yes, she was bribing her child, apologizing for the appointment with junk food, but sometimes, the guilt won out, and you'd do just about anything to make the medicine go down easier. His grin as she handed over the money said she'd done the right thing, whatever the parenting books might say.

“Thanks, Mom.”

He bounded for the door and nearly knocked over a student walking in. A blurted apology and a sheepish glance at Mom, then, as he started to turn back to the door, he froze, gaze snagged on a photo. An aerial view of a forest fire. Adam had noticed it the moment he'd walked in, zeroing in on that one out of all the other extreme weather pictures decorating the office. Yet now he stared as if seeing it for the first time—the same way he'd stared at it a half-dozen times since they'd arrived.

“That’s a neat photo, isn’t it?” Talia said. “I wonder how they took it? From an airplane, I bet.”

“Cool,” Adam said, then tore his gaze away and took off, back on target.

Talia moved to the doorway to watch him. He shot her a look that said he was too old to have his mother looking out for him, but she only stuck out her tongue and stayed her ground.

As he ran down the hall, weaving through groups of students, her gaze slid back to the forest fire photograph. Should she have commented on it? Most of the doctors she'd talked to would have said “no,” that she should either ignore his fascination or distract him from it. Maybe Talia was naive, but that didn't seem right to her. Treat it as normal—that's what she thought, act as if Adam's fixation with fire was neither positive nor negative, just a fact of his life, like another child's obsession with cars or trains.

Budding pyromania. That's what the “experts” called it. Pyromania. Talia could barely even say the word, as if speaking it gave it a validity it didn't deserve. Yes, her son was fascinated by fire—not just fire itself, but depictions of it. Yet there was a big difference between staring at a candle flame and lighting your bed on fire, and Adam had never shown any inclination for the latter. He didn't light fires; he just liked to watch them. And, yes, maybe that

was a warning sign, but it was a simplistic explanation that ignored so many things that even the “experts” agreed didn’t fit with the diagnosis.

When Adam got angry, which, thankfully, was rare, if he struck out, his hands were hot enough to give you a physical jolt of surprise. The last time he’d done that—three months ago, with a bully at school—he’d left a mark on the kid’s skin. That’s when Talia realized she couldn’t keep treating Adam’s fire fascination as a boyhood quirk. That’s when the parade of experts had started.

And now, after months of searching, she’d ended up here. At a doctor’s office of a different kind. A college professor. She turned to look at the nameplate again. Robert Vasic. Professor. Nothing to indicate his area of expertise or even his department. Not that she couldn’t have looked that up. And she should have. No one could accuse Talia of being anything less than thorough, especially when it came to her son’s care. No matter how well recommended a doctor came, she always at least checked his credentials.

But this time . . . this time she hadn’t even made note of the department when she’d walked in. She chalked it up to exhaustion, that after months of searching, when the nurse at a specialist’s had taken her aside and slipped her Vasic’s number, she just said “good enough” and made an appointment. The truth, if she dared to admit it, was that part of her was sure she didn’t want to know too much. She was too desperate.

“Do you think he forgot about us?”

Talia jumped, and looked at the student Adam had nearly bowled over. The young woman smiled.

“Sorry, I was just wondering whether Doctor Vasic was going to show up.” A laugh. “He can be a bit absent minded.”

“Oh?” Talia said, trying to sound interested as she leaned over to look for Adam.

“Last month, we were supposed to have a quiz, and he completely forgot about it.” A grin.

“Not that anyone was complaining.”

There Adam was, at the vending machine, trying to make a decision.

“He’s a great prof, though, isn’t he? Enthusiasm makes all the difference, I think. Of course, it’d probably be hard to make something like that boring.” She laughed again. “When I told my mom I was studying demonology, she almost had a fit. She thought I was taking an occult class.”

Talia whipped around to stare at the young woman. Her mouth opened, but the student continued,

“Then I told her he used to be a priest, and that made her happier. I think she figures we’re learning about exorcisms and stuff.” She grinned at Talia. “My aunt called last week, asking if I could take a look at my little cousin, check for signs of possession. I think she was joking . . . but I’m still not sure.”

Talia struggled to nod, her brain spinning. Demonology? Former priest? Possession? Oh God, what had she done? She caught sight of Adam bouncing back from the machines, can in one hand, bar in the other, face beaming. She held up a finger, telling him to wait. Then she darted into the office, grabbed her purse and his homework, murmured something about remembering another appointment, and raced out.

“Mom?” Adam said as she hurried down the hall to him. “What’s—?”

“The appointment was canceled.”

He grinned. “So I don’t have to go? Cool.” A momentary shadow, then that sly look again.

“It’s getting pretty late to go back to school.”

She put a hand against his back to steer him forward. “Definitely too late. But I think there’s still time for the arcade, and I bet it isn’t too busy at this time of day. No line up for Pac-Man.”

The grin broadened. “Cool.”

They’d caught the attention of a professor, a slender middle-aged man with short graying hair and a beard. With his towheaded good looks, boisterousness and infectious grins, Adam often won attention in public, but it was usually indulgent smiles and the occasional pat on the head. But the professor, who’d been rushing down the hall, had stopped and was frowning slightly, as if he recognized them, but wasn’t sure. Talia smiled and kept walking in the other direction.

“Ms Lyndsay?”

She almost stopped. Almost turned. Then she realized who that “interested professor” must be: Robert Vasic. He knew he had an appointment with an eight-year-old and his mother, and there weren’t many eight-year-olds wandering the halls at Stanford.

“Ms Lyndsay?”

The voice moved closer, as if he’d headed back.

She took Adam’s arm, ignoring his protests, and steered him into a throng of students exiting a classroom. By the time they were through the crowd, Vasic was gone, having probably thought his identification mistaken. A soft sigh of relief, and she hurried Adam to the exit.

Talia dreamed of Adam’s father, as she found herself doing more often these days, especially after her quest smacked into another dead end. It made sense, she supposed—that a single

mother, struggling with a parenting problem would reflect on her son's absent father. But there was never any anger to her dreams, no "why I am stuck handling this alone" bitterness.

From the start, she'd accepted that Adam was her sole responsibility. Had she been able to contact his father when she'd learned she was pregnant, she would have—it was only right. But that hadn't been an option, and she'd never wished it was otherwise.

She'd been just starting college. There'd been a lot of changes in that first month, not all of them good, not all of them welcome. The biggest had been the end of a relationship. When she'd gone away to college, the guy she'd been dating since ninth grade had dumped her.

Maybe "dumped" wasn't the right word, implying a sudden, unexpected end to the relationship. Josh had warned her. Started warning her the day she sent in her college application. Leave for college, and we're through. Like most of the boys in town, he already had a job lined up at the tire factory, and had his life lined up right behind it. Start a good job, with good benefits, get married, start a family, just like his brothers and his father before him.

When he'd learned that Talia's plans didn't coincide with his, he'd given her his ultimatum. Go to college and you lose me. She hadn't believed him. When she'd been accepted, he'd taken the news with little more than a few days of sulking, and continued dating her right until Labor Day weekend. She'd thought he'd changed his mind. She knew the truth now—he just hadn't expected her to go through with it. When she did, he dumped her.

Three weeks later, she'd come home for the weekend, planning to talk to him and work it out . . . and found him dating Brandi Waters, who'd been after him since they'd been twelve. And that was the end of her weekend home, and the end of Josh.

Sunday morning, she'd caught the bus back to school, though she was sure she could have saved the fare and just kicked herself all the way back. Had she really gone home to try to make

up with him? After what he did? She should have booted his ass to the curb the moment he'd given her that ultimatum.

When she got back, she'd dropped off her suitcase at the dorm, then headed to the cafe to drown her sorrows in an herbal tea with scones and jam. They didn't have scones in Springwater. At home, they'd be biscuits, served with gravy not jam. They didn't have herbal tea, either. And they certainly didn't have any place like the Elysian Cafe, with its incense burners, abstract art, and Tuesday night poetry readings. Most times, Talia found the place too So-Cal, but tonight, anything that didn't remind her of home was exactly where she wanted to be.

She'd resisted the urge to bring schoolwork. Tonight was for wallowing, not studying. So she'd grabbed one of her roommate's novels. Stephen King's Salem's Lot. Vampires. If that wasn't indulgent wallowing, she didn't know what was.

She'd noticed him watching her as she'd sat down. A decent looking guy. Not gorgeous, but Talia didn't go for gorgeous. He sat by the fireplace, chair pulled up to the blaze as if he found the air-conditioning too much. She pegged him at a few years older than her, probably a grad student. Average height, average build, medium brown hair . . . average all around, really.

Only his eyes were noteworthy. They were an average shade of brown, but they glowed. Yes, that seemed impossible for brown eyes—green can glow, blue can glow, but never dull muddy brown. Yet his did, a warm brown with coppery glints. Those eyes looked vaguely familiar, and she thought maybe she'd seen him around campus before, which might explain why he was watching her. She smiled back, polite, nothing more, then sat down with her tea and scones.

After a few minutes of reading, a shadow passed over her table. She looked up to see the young man. He smiled. A cute, average sort of smile, friendly, nothing more.

“Vampires, hmmm?” he said, nodding at the King book. “Do you like vampires?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met one.”

He threw back his head and laughed as if this was the funniest thing he’d heard all day. His laugh was anything but average, as rich and vibrant as his copper-speckled eyes.

“That’s not the most comfortable place for reading,” he said, gesturing at her wooden chair and tipsy bistro stool. “The seats by the fire are much better.”

“Sure, but they’re always full—” She looked over. The chairs were empty, with only a jacket thrown over his to save his place. “Well, they were full when I came in.”

He smiled. “I scared everyone away for you.”

She laughed. “Thanks. But I’m not sure—”

“You don’t have to be sure,” he said, his eyes still dancing with amusement. “I’ll just go back to my chair and move my coat over one for you, and if that one gets uncomfortable, you know where you can find something better.”

With that he smiled, and tipped his head, the gesture oddly old-fashioned and courtly, then walked back to his chair by the fire.

Talia held out for ten minutes. Then she looked at him, reading quietly, looking up when he felt her gaze on him and only nodding with a friendly little smile, no pressure, no rush, as anti-Josh as this place was anti-Springwater. She gathered her tea and her scones and her book, and went to join him.

They’d spent the evening talking. Just talking, about an endless array of topics. He seemed to know something about everything, but what he wanted to know most was more about her, her

life, her interests, her goals. Of himself, he said very little, always deftly changing the subject when it arose. It didn't matter. Talia was fascinated, and there was something fresh and exciting about being found fascinating in return. Nine years later, she could still see him, leaning forward, the fire a backdrop behind him, making his eyes glitter, his hand absently dangling before it as if to luxuriate in the heat.

Only when the cafe closed at midnight did they leave. He offered to escort her back to her dorm. He actually said "escort," and she'd tried not to laugh, charmed in spite of herself. When they'd reached the building, they'd stopped under a tree to talk some more, and he'd kissed her.

In his kiss, there'd been something she'd never found with Josh and when she'd closed her eyes, she'd seen fire, and felt it blazing through her. Then she did something that she still couldn't believe she'd done. She'd invited him to her room. Her, Talia Lyndsay, the girl who'd made Josh wait almost two years before letting him "go all the way." And, to this day, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't regret what she'd done.

That night . . . well, she'd had lovers since, and few had come close. He'd been the perfect lover, patient yet passionate, and some nights she could still see him, feel him—the glimmer of his face in the candle light, the heat of his fingers.

That was what she always remembered in these dreams. Those candles and that heat. She'd come from the bathroom to find that he'd lit every candle her New Age obsessed roommate owned. She'd jokingly asked where he'd found the matches, because Sunny kept them hidden, but he'd only smiled and rose to meet her. And his touch. Hot, his skin like someone with a fever and his fingertips, warmer still.

She'd asked him to wear a condom, asked when she'd invited him up, and he'd produced one from his wallet. She'd seen him put it on—she was sure she had. As for what went wrong,

she could only assume it had broken. She hadn't noticed it until the next morning, rising to find a still-damp spot under her.

Afterward, all she remembered was him lowering her to the pillow, then staying there, watching her as her eyelids flagged. Once, she'd forced them back open and had one last glimpse of him, holding a candle to watch her face, his own shimmering against the flame. Then she'd drifted off, and when she awoke, he was gone. A month later, when she missed her period, she knew he'd left something behind.

After she'd left Doctor Vasic's office, she'd started feeling foolish. That student had been laughing about her out-of-touch mother jumping to conclusions—and Talia had done the same thing. Put the words “ex-priest” and “demonology” together, and she'd envisioned a man booted out for radical occult views, a nut who'd see a child fascinated by fire, and see a child possessed by hellfire imps. Right . . . and that was just the kind of guy who'd make full-tenured professor at Stanford.

So, Talia did what she should have done *before* the interview. She researched him. And she found a man with a solid academic record, lauded, admired and respected by his peers.

After three nights of dreaming about Adam's father, she knew her subconscious was telling her something. In her quest to help Adam, she'd run out of options. It was time to take another look at Robert Vasic . . . from a safe distance.

Two days later, Talia sat at the back of Robert Vasic's lecture hall, in his huge first year class. Getting in hadn't been difficult. As a young entrepreneur, she'd developed a knack for getting past "no." Taking time off work hadn't been tough, either. She was a horticulturist—a glorified gardener, as she said—and self-employed, so her schedule was flexible. Busy, but flexible.

Talia had little interest in demons, and couldn't believe Stanford not only offered courses in it, but that the first year class was *this* big. By the end of the lecture, though, she understood the attraction. As that student had said, Vasic was an outstanding lecturer.

When Talia had seen him in the hall, he'd looked like your typical dull academic, a droner for sure. But he taught his class with a quiet passion and a dry humor that made her suspect he could have even made her advanced botany classes interesting.

At the end, she tried to slip out unnoticed. It shouldn't have been difficult—the outflow was like a rushing river of bodies.

"Ms Lyndsay?"

She heard Vasic's voice, soft yet strong enough to cut through the chatter. She could pretend she hadn't heard, but if she did, she might not get up the nerve to make another appointment.

Talia worked her way out of the crowd. Vasic stepped off the lecture platform and motioned her aside.

"Did you enjoy the class?" he asked.

His voice was mild, no hint of mocking, but Talia still felt the first tingle of a blush.

"It was very interesting, thank you."

"It can be, though it's never as interesting as some students hope. No Satanic rituals. No demonic possession. No exorcisms."

Now her cheeks burned.

“So how is young Adam?” he asked. “He looked quite happy the other day. Glad to miss an appointment, I’ll bet. No doctors poking and prodding, asking questions, pestering him about his dreams, his thoughts, his feelings . . .”

“It’s been difficult for him.”

“I’m sure it has been.” His eyes met hers. “For both of you.” He paused. “May I buy you a coffee?”

Talia nodded, and let him lead the way.

They talked until their coffees went cold. Vasic asked questions, and Talia answered. It never felt like an interview, though. More like confession. Talia had never been to confession—she wasn’t Catholic—but she imagined this was what it would be like, talking to an open ear, to someone who seemed to have all the time in the world to listen to her, and was genuinely interested in everything she had to say. With each scrap unloaded, the weight lifted.

She told him about Adam’s father. All of it, most of which she’d never breathed to another soul. No matter how “liberated” you thought you were, there was a shame in admitting you’d become pregnant at seventeen, in a one-night stand, and didn’t even know the father’s name.

But with Vasic, the confession came easily. He’d wanted to know everything about Adam’s father, obviously looking for a genetic link, so she’d told him everything, right down to the silly fancies that ate at her brain, the images of fire, the heat of his touch. Far from judging her, Vasic had been fascinated, pulling the details out with a growing excitement, wanting to know every

observation she'd made, until he seemed to cut himself short, dowsing his enthusiasm and forcing himself to move on.

One other topic had inflamed that same spark of excitement—her description of Adam's "abilities." That's what he called them—the rising temperature when Adam's temper flared, the hot fingertips, the near-burn. He'd asked again how old Adam was. And when had this started? Had he burned anyone since that first time? Again, he seemed to fight his own interest and forced a change of subject.

When they finished, Vasic leaned back in his chair as if digesting it all. His gaze flicked to the wall behind the counter. Talia followed it to a calendar, that month's picture a photograph of a tornado. Vasic had noticed it before, when they'd first walked in, pausing slightly to look, then murmuring a comment before moving on.

"First," he said as he tore his gaze back to Talia. "Let me reassure you. There is nothing wrong with Adam. He's not a 'budding pyromaniac' or any other label they've assigned. I've worked with cases like this before, behavioral anomalies that science can't explain, and while his abilities may change as he grows, there is no cause for alarm. He will learn to manage them as we all learn to manage our special skills. That is where I can be of most assistance, Ms Lyndsay. Helping you and Adam monitor and manage his skills."

Talia tensed. "How much is this—"

He cut her short with a small laugh. "My apologies if that sounded like a sales pitch. I'm an academic, Ms Lyndsay, and I deal only in the currency of knowledge. Yes, I will keep notes on Adam for my research, but he will remain an anonymous subject, and I promise you that it will be strictly observational. I'll never subject him to any test or experiment for the sake of my

work. My career is established. I'm not seeking to do groundbreaking work, but simply to learn and to help others do the same."

"Learn about what? You know what's—" She stopped, realizing she'd been about to say "what's wrong with Adam." Instead, she said, "What's happening with Adam. If you've seen this before—"

"If you're asking for a label, I can't provide one. I don't believe in them." He leaned forward. "Labels don't matter, Ms Lyndsay. What matters is that you have a very healthy, very special young boy and that none of that—his fascination with fire, his special abilities, those anomalies they found in his blood tests—is a cause for concern. We can continue to meet like this, monitor Adam's progress, make him comfortable with his skills, and everything will be fine."

She looked Vasic in the eye. "Do people buy that bullshit?"

He blinked and pulled back.

"You said you've met other children like Adam. Do their parents fall for that? You pat them on the head, tell them everything is fine, and they go away happy?"

"A child's welfare is paramount—"

"I didn't need you to tell me that my son is fine. I know he is. What I want is an explanation. Not just a label. An explanation."

"There's no need—"

"To raise my voice? The hell there isn't. I've been searching for an answer for months, Doctor, and now you have it and you think you can just tell me everything is fine and I should be happy with that?" She paused, reining in her anger. "You said you wanted to meet Adam?"

Again, Vasic blinked, as if surprised by the change of tone and subject. Then he smiled and his eyes gleamed with barely contained enthusiasm. “Yes, certainly. I’m quite—I would very much like to meet him. He sounds . . . remarkable.”

“He is.” She took out her business card. “And if you want to meet him, here’s my number. When you’re willing to tell me what’s going on, I’ll bring him by your office.”

She let the card flutter to the table, and strode from the coffee shop.

When a week passed with no word from Vasic, Talia began to second-guess herself. Maybe the lure hadn’t been strong enough, and he hadn’t been as interested in Adam as he’d seemed. Or maybe he really didn’t know what was happening, only that he’d seen it before.

No, he *was* interested. There had been no mistaking the way his mild gaze had ignited when she’d told him about Adam’s “abilities” and his age, and when she’d asked whether he wanted to meet him.

As for what was happening, he knew that, too. His questions hadn’t been a “fishing expedition,” as with the other doctors and specialists, randomly tossing out queries in hopes of hitting the mark. He’d known exactly what to ask, including about Adam’s father. *Especially* the questions about Adam’s father. Nothing she’d said had shocked or surprised him . . . because he’d expected it.

After nine days with no call, Talia decided to light her own fire under Robert Vasic. First, she sent Adam to visit his great-great-aunt Peggy. Peg was like a second mother to Adam, and a fairy godmother to Talia. When Talia had been choosing colleges, her mother pushed her toward

Berkley, where her Aunt Peg lived. Peg had offered to let Talia stay with her, but had understood when Talia had wanted to try dorm life instead.

After Adam came, though, her aunt had been adamant. Talia would stay with her, and she would stay in school, while Peg—a retired schoolteacher—looked after Adam. When Talia had graduated, she'd given up job offers to stay in the area. After all Peg had done for them, Talia wasn't about to wrest her son away from her aging aunt when she no longer needed free baby-sitting.

Once Adam was at Aunt Peggy's, Talia made the call. Then she waited. Less than thirty minutes later, someone pounded at the front door. Didn't ring the bell or knock politely, but pounded. She opened it to see Vasic on her stoop, bareheaded in the rain, water streaming off his hair and beard, breath coming in pants as if he'd run from the car and was unaccustomed to the exertion. Seeing him like that, she felt a little bad about what she'd done. But only a little, and only for a moment.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he hurried in. His eyes were dark with concern, and she felt another slight pang of remorse.

"I'm fine," she said.

As he searched her face, she knew she should have seemed more upset, if not crying, then at least red-eyed, but making that phone call had drained her limited acting abilities.

"You should sit down," he said, taking her arm to guide her.

He thinks I'm in shock, she thought, and considered running with it, but couldn't. She gently pulled from his grasp and led him to the kitchen.

"Where's Adam?" he asked.

"Staying at his aunt's."

A brief frown, as if surprised she wouldn't have him right there, at her side, after such a traumatic event.

“And the other boy?” he asked. “Is he all right? The burns . . . second-degree you said?”

She looked at Vasic. “Does that surprise you?”

He blinked.

“It doesn't, does it? You knew this could happen. These changes you mentioned, that's what you meant. That it would get worse. That he'd start inflicting real burns.”

His gaze went to the patio doors. The rain beat against them, the harsh patter backlit by lightning and the rumble of distant thunder.

“May we . . .?” He gestured at the doors. “Another room, perhaps. Less . . . distraction.”

She took him into the living room.

“You knew this could happen,” she repeated before he could change the subject.

“Someday, yes. But not at this age. He's so young. I've never . . .” A deep breath. “I'm sorry, Ms Lyndsay. That sounds inadequate, but I made an error in judgment, and I feel horrible about it. I knew Adam was displaying his pow—abilities at an early age, much younger than I usually see, but I misjudged the speed at which he could progress. I did intend to contact you, in a few months, after you'd had time to . . .”

He let the sentence fade.

“Calm down?” she said, crossing her arms. “Stop being such a demanding bitch?”

He flinched at her language. She moved behind the couch, subconsciously taking cover before letting loose the bomb.

“Adam didn't burn anyone, Doctor Vasic. I just wanted to hear you admit that he could.”

Vasic's head shot up, and he frowned.

“You’ve just told me that my son could—will—someday be able to inflict serious damage with these ‘abilities’ of his. Now I think I have the right to know what’s going on. A label and an explanation, and if you refuse that, I can make things very unpleasant at Stanford—”

“There’s no need to resort to threats, Ms Lyndsay,” he said, his voice taking on an expected edge.

“And I don’t want to, but this is my son, and I need to know what he’s going through.”

He met her gaze. “What good will that do, Ms Lyndsay? A label isn’t going to give you a cure. There is none. It won’t help you look after him and keep him safe, no better than you can do—and are doing—now. What will a label do for you? How will an explanation help?”

“It will help me understand my son.”

“Will it?” His gaze bored into hers. “And what if this ‘label’ changed the way you saw Adam, changed your feelings for him.”

She met his gaze. “Not possible.”

They argued for another hour. Three times Vasic said he was leaving. Once he got as far as the front stoop. But when Talia showed no signs of backing down and letting him help Adam before she got an explanation, he took her back into the kitchen, by the patio doors.

For a minute, he just stared out at the storm. The look in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. It was the same look Adam got when he stared into a fire.

“Do you like storms, Ms Lyndsay?” he asked softly.

“I . . . guess so. I’m not afraid of them, if that’s what you mean.”

“But they can be things to fear. Incredible power for destruction. Like fire. Beautiful from a distance, but devastating if uncontrolled. That’s the key, to storms and power. Control.” He glanced over at her. “I can teach Adam to control his powers. As for the source of that power . . .

.” He looked her square in the eye. “I think you already know what it is; you’re just too rational to believe it.”

“I don’t know what—”

“I’m talking about? Good. It’s better that way. Safer. For you. There is absolutely no need for you to know the source of Adam’s powers, Talia. You don’t need to know that to help him, and knowing will change . . .” He looked back out the window. “Everything.”

“I don’t care.”

He nodded, and opened the patio doors, then stepped outside. When he reached the far side of the plant-choked patio, he beckoned to her. She looked up at the rain.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Just step out.”

She did, bracing for that first splash of rain. But it didn’t come. She took another step. Still nothing. She made it to the middle of the porch and was still dry, while rain beat down all around her. She looked up. There was nothing over her head. Nothing to shelter her. She turned toward Vasic.

“Put your hand out,” he said softly.

She did, reaching out and feeling the hard sting of the fast-falling rain against her palm. Then the rain softened, and turned cold. Ice cold. Snow covered her hand. She looked at Vasic.

“Do you still want to know?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Then come inside and I’ll tell you.”

Birthright

Logan peered out the car window at the long, wooded drive. Then he lifted the sheet of paper and double-checked the address. He didn't need to check it. He'd already memorized the entire note. Easy enough—there were only ten words on it, including the address.

The first contact he'd ever had with his father, and this was all he got. Ten words.

Jeremy Danvers, 13876 Wilton Grove Lane, Bear Valley, New York.

The note had arrived on Logan's eighteenth birthday, couriered to his college dorm room. He'd thought it was from his mother, probably a birthday check tucked inside a generic "for my son" card. He didn't mind the check—he always needed money—and it was better than the equally generic gifts she bought when she made the effort.

Logan used to swear his mother bought gifts for her children using the buying guides that appeared in magazines every Christmas, that she'd just go to the appropriate age group, and pick the first item on the list. She wasn't being lazy. The truth was that Susanna Jonsen didn't know her children well enough to know what they'd like. She wasn't a bad parent, not abusive or neglectful. Some women just aren't cut out to be mothers, and unfortunately it had taken Susanna three kids to realize she was one of them.

Logan considered himself the luckiest of the three. When he was two, his mother had met his stepfather, who hadn't wanted to take custody of a bastard of questionable parentage, so Logan had gone to live with his maternal grandparents, and grew up, if not with much money, with the kind of love and stability his mother couldn't offer.

If not particularly personal, his mother's birthday checks were always generous, usually a couple hundred dollars. As soon as the envelope arrived, Logan had started planning how he'd spend the money. He needed new school supplies, groceries, clothes, all those boring necessities that, sadly, one couldn't live without. But he was definitely putting some aside for fun, maybe taking his buddies out for pizza and beer.

He'd opened the envelope only to find another one inside. On it, written in barely legible black strokes: "For my son—important medical information." It wasn't his mother's spidery, precise writing, so it had to be from his father. That *should* be obvious—everyone was "son" to two people, but Logan had never met his father. He only knew that he'd been dark-skinned—probably African-American—and only that because, well, it was obvious that Logan's year-round tan and some of his features didn't come from his Norwegian mother. As for details, his mother refused to elaborate.

"He wasn't nothing but a sperm donor," she'd say. "Took off the day I told him you were coming. Don't spend another minute thinking about him, because he doesn't deserve it."

Of course, Logan did think about his father, and for the past two years he'd had cause to think about him more and more. Something was wrong with him, medically wrong, something his doctor laughed off with a slap on the back and a reminder that "it's puberty, boy, you're supposed to be changing."

There was more to it than that, and when Logan saw that envelope, he knew he'd been right. What ever "condition" he had, it was the birthright of his long-vanished father.

He'd paused a moment then, envelope in hand, the implications of its arrival suddenly hitting him. His father knew where he was. Not only remembered him, but knew his birthday, knew he was here, at college.

Logan had ripped open the envelope then, fingers trembling. He'd reached inside and plucked out a piece of note paper. On it, a name and address. That's it—just someone's address. This address.

He let the car roll forward, and craned to see through the thick evergreens, but if there was a house at the end of that winding laneway, he couldn't see it.

Another look at the paper. The eight could be a six, or vice-versa. Same with the ones and sevens. He knew it didn't matter. This was the place. Passing through Bear Valley, he'd stopped at the doughnut shop, ostensibly for coffee, but really to learn what he could about this Jeremy Danvers.

They hadn't been able to tell him much, just that Danvers lived with his cousin and the two "kept to themselves," but that Danvers was "good folk," whatever that meant around here. Logan hadn't pressed for more—he could tell they didn't like chatting with strangers about locals.

As for the address, the people in the doughnut shop couldn't confirm the exact number, but it was "way up Wilton Grove" and "on the left, just past the bridge" and "a big piece of land, mostly trees" with the house "tucked back in a ways." So obviously this was the right place, and the only reason he was still in the car, at the end of the lane, was that he was stalling. He was afraid of what he'd find at the top of this drive, or what he wouldn't find. The most obvious

answer was the one that sent his heart tripping: that this Jeremy Danvers *was* his father. And if he was? Logan didn't know how he'd handle that. Worse, though, he didn't know how he'd handle the disappointment if it *wasn't* his father.

He took a deep breath, then slammed the car into reverse and hit the gas. Dust billowed up as he zoomed backward on the dirt shoulder, past the mouth of the driveway. One more deep breath, then he jammed it into drive, veered left and roared into the laneway.

The first thing Logan noticed as he stepped from the car was the smell of trees. A year ago, if anyone had told him trees had a smell, he'd have laughed and said "I've never gotten close enough to sniff one." Raised in the city, with no interest in things like hiking, camping, or fishing, he'd never even gone to summer camp. Then, almost a year ago, he'd been cutting across campus and picked up a smell as clear and alluring as his Gramma's freshly baked cinnamon rolls. He'd followed it and found himself in a stand of trees, and there'd been nothing there but the trees.

He'd stood there, drinking in the sharp tang of greenery and the loamy smell of damp earth, and he'd known this was what a forest smelled like. He recognized the scent from his dreams, the ones he'd started having almost two years ago. Dreams of the forest, of running.

Sometimes, in the dreams, he was being chased, heart pounding, feet pounding, blood pounding as he ran, knowing he couldn't stop, if he did stop they'd— And that was where the thought always ended. He never knew who they were or what they'd do, only that he had to be prepared, he had to take shelter, and that shelter wasn't just a "where," it was a "who." Another elusive "they," *his* they, that would protect him from *those* they. He chalked it up to anxiety.

His last year of high school, then his first of college, of course he was stressed, and some days it felt like the whole world was a big *they*, determined to keep his ambitions in check.

In the other forest dreams, the more common ones by far, he was just running. Running for the sake of running, barreling through the forest, wind in his hair, ground flying by in a blur under his feet. A strange feeling for a guy whose idea of strenuous exercise was a weekly game of basketball. He was fit enough—he just didn't much see the use in athletics. He wasn't good enough to make a career at it, but he was smart enough to make a career using his brain, so that's what he concentrated on. Yet now he dreamed of running. Not only that, but he'd never been better at his weekly game. He could jump better, react better, move better, and even his friends had started to notice.

As he walked to the front door, he had the sense he was being watched, but when he looked around, listened around, and sniffed around, no one was there. Yes, sniffed around, something he'd never admit doing. Forests weren't the only thing he'd learned had a smell. Everything did, and these days, sometimes he could smell his friends coming long before he saw them. His hearing had improved, too. Sight stayed the same, as did his sense of taste. So when he listened and smelled, and found no one, he knew there was no one there.

He stepped onto the front porch, and lifted his hand. Then he stopped. Behind this door could be his father. His father! Was he ready for this? What would he say? How would he react? What if, after sending the note, his father had changed—

“Looking for someone?” drawled a voice behind him.

Logan wheeled to see a young man step onto the porch. He was around Logan's age, maybe a couple of years older, well-built, with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes, a strong jaw the only thing keeping him from tipping over into “pretty-boy” territory. The kind of guy who

walks into a party and looks across the women—including the one on your arm—with the arrogant insolence of a billionaire at a car show, knowing he can walk out with anything that catches his fancy.

“You looking for someone?” he repeated.

Logan squared his shoulders and hoped he wasn’t being too obvious about it.

“Jeremy Danvers,” he said.

The man’s eyes went from cool to icy. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Is he home?”

“You think this is a good idea?”

“Wha—?”

“I’m asking if you want to reconsider. Maybe you made a mistake.”

Logan met the man’s stare. “If Jeremy Danvers is here, I want to see him.”

The young man gave a slow nod, and opened his mouth as if to say something. Then his fist shot out, plowing into Logan’s jaw before his brain even registered seeing it coming. Logan slammed into the stone wall behind him and everything went dark.

Logan’s face sank into something soft and warm, and he inhaled the faintest scent of laundry detergent. He lifted his head. Pain throbbled through the back of his skull and he let out a soft moan, then dropped back onto the pillow and closed his eyes. Just a few more minutes of sleep, and then he’d—

His eyes snapped open as he remembered where he was . . . or where he had been.

Now he was lying on a twin bed covered with a clean bottom sheet, but no top sheet or blankets. In front of him was a bare wall. He picked up the slight scent of dampness. A basement—albeit a clean one. He rolled over and saw . . . bars.

Logan started jumping up, but the pain forced him down, and he bit back a wave of nausea at the sudden movement. Jail? He was in jail? Oh, God what had he gotten himself into?

He'd heard about things like this, rumors of college kids venturing into some backwater town, who looked at a local wrong, and wound up in jail. Well, if that was the case, these yokels would be in for a shock. He wasn't some dumb kid who didn't know his rights. He was a law student . . . well, pre-law, even if his only "law" course had been in high school, and hadn't really covered anything vaguely useful.

Ah, shit, he thought and closed his eyes. *I'm in trouble.*

At the rustle of the page turning, Logan looked left to see the guy who'd decked him. He sat on a folding chair outside the cell, and was reading what looked like a textbook, a pencil between his fingers. The young man frowned, and jotted something in the margin, then continued reading.

A student? Logan looked around. He wasn't in jail; he was in someone's basement, with an older student standing guard. Now it made sense.

"It was a set up, wasn't it?" Logan said.

The young man didn't jump at the sound of a voice, just lifted a finger, telling Logan to wait, as if he'd known he was awake.

"The letter, the address, it was all part of it," Logan continued.

A soft sound, almost like a growl, and the young man slapped his textbook shut.

"Part of what?" he said.

“The hazing.”

“Hazing?”

“For Pi Kappa Beta. I told Mike I didn’t want to join, but he signed me up as a pledge, didn’t he?”

The young man met Logan’s gaze with a steady stare. “Do I look like a fraternity brat?”

Logan sized him up. Blonde, blue-eyed, ridiculously good-looking, athletic, probably a jock with not much going on above the neck line . . .

“Yeah, you do.”

The young man snorted and shook his head. “You want to get out of this alive, you’re going to need a better story than that.”

“A—alive?”

“Dumb kid,” he muttered. “You’re lucky you *are* just a kid. A couple of years older, and I’d be digging your grave out back, not baby-sitting you.”

Logan lowered his eyelids so the young man wouldn’t see the flash of fear. *Get a grip*, he told himself. It’s hazing. Bury me in the backyard? Please. Couldn’t Pi Kappa Beta come up with something more believable than that?

“Did you really think you’d get away with it?” the young man continued. “Barely Changed, and you’re going to challenge the Alpha? That first Change at addle your brain?” He met Logan’s eyes. “Or was it so bad that this seemed like an honorable way out? Suicide by Pack?”

Logan blinked, brain struggling to make sense of what the young man was saying, and fighting against the dawning realization that maybe he wasn’t locked up as part of a hazing ritual, but had been taken captive by a madman.

A distant door clicked open. “Clayton?”

“Down here,” the young man—Clayton—called. “We have a problem.”

“So I smelled,” a deep voice murmured as light footsteps sounded on the stairs.

A moment later, a man rounded the corner. He was tall and slender, dark-haired with a close-trimmed beard and dark eyes. He couldn't have been more than a few years older than the other young man, and wore a polo shirt and trousers. Logan let out a soft breath of relief. Definitely a frat hazing.

The dark-haired man stopped short, nostrils flaring as he saw Logan. Something like dismay flickered in his eyes.

“New,” he murmured.

“Very new,” Clayton muttered. “And stupid. Walked right up to the door and asked for you.”

“For—?” Logan began. “You're Jeremy Danvers?”

The dark-haired man gave a small twist of a smile. “Not quite what you expected?”

Logan told himself that didn't matter, that he already knew this was a prank, and hadn't still hoped to find his father. And yet . . .

“What's your name?” Danvers asked.

Logan only glared at him.

“Logan Jonsen,” Clayton said, lifting a driver's license. “Doesn't sound familiar.”

“Jonsen?” Danvers said. “No.”

“Hey,” Logan said. “That's my wallet.”

“Be glad that's all I took. I was thinking of taking fingerprints, too. . . with your fingers still attached.” He looked at Danvers. “What do you want done?”

Danvers paused, then said, “I think we'll give Mr. Jonsen the chance to reconsider.”

He stepped closer to the cell. Clayton tensed, as if Logan might spring and reach through the bars.

Danvers continued, "I don't know what you thought you were doing, but if you ever do it again, it will be the last time. And if you share this story with any of the others, I will reconsider my decision. Is that clear?"

Logan opened his mouth to argue, but then he met Danvers's eyes . . . and the words dried up. When he dropped his gaze, his hands were shaking. He clenched his fists. Again, Clayton tensed, ready to lunge forward.

Danvers started to pull back, then stopped. He took a deeper breath and his chin jerked up.

"You haven't Changed yet, have you?" he said.

Before Logan could answer, Danvers stepped forward again and inhaled, then glanced over at Clayton.

"I can tell he's new," Clayton said. "But that's it. If he hasn't Changed, he's damned close."

Danvers looked at Logan. "You *haven't* had your first Change yet, have you?" He studied Logan's eyes, then blinked. "Not only that, but you have no idea what I'm talking about . . ."

"Shit," Clayton muttered.

"How did you get here?" Danvers asked.

"Someone sent me the name and address," Logan said. "Supposedly my father, some bullshit about medical information, but obviously it was someone's idea of a joke." He looked up at Danvers, but couldn't meet his eyes, and shoved his hands in his pockets, unable to muster any kind of fight. "Can I go? I just want to go, okay?"

Danvers pushed back his bangs, and shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, Logan. Not just yet. Clayton? Bring him up to the study.” Danvers turned and lowered his voice. “Nicely.”

Logan looked longingly at the window. Beyond it, he could see a field and a forest, and in that forest, the promise of freedom. They’d left him alone in here, and he told himself he could make it, open the window, climb out and run, even if Clayton had warned he’d hear him if he so much as stood.

In that forest, he’d find not only freedom, but the bliss of ignorance, where he could keep telling himself this had been an elaborate frat hazing . . . or a freak encounter with crazy people. If he stayed, he knew he’d discover the truth—that he was here for the very reason his father had sent him—to get medical information. And he knew that this “medical information” wouldn’t be the revelation of any normal condition.

He’d felt the strength in Clayton’s punch and in his iron grip when he’d led Logan upstairs. He’d seen Danvers’s nostrils flare when he’d first seen him, heard him say he’d already “smelled” the problem. He’d felt his own gut reaction when he looked into Danvers’s eyes. And he knew, whatever they were about to tell him, he almost certainly didn’t want to hear it. But as alluring as ignorance was right now, if he left, he’d regret it. So he stayed, and strained to hear the distant conversation of the two men.

“—fucking irresponsible mutts,” Clayton was grumbling. “What kind of father sends his kid to the Pack? If Dominic was still in charge, that kid would be dead.”

“But Dominic isn’t, and presumably Logan’s father knows that. He must hope I’ll be more sympathetic.”

“Sympathetic?” Clayton snorted. “He’s putting you in a hell of a situation. That’s inconsiderate, irresponsible . . . and stupid. This is a father’s job. He wants to advise his kid to join the Pack? Fine. But do it after he knows what he is. This way, if the kid reacts badly, what are we supposed to do? Say ‘oh well,’ and let him leave?”

Logan didn’t catch Danvers’s response. He strained to hear more, but they’d stopped talking.

A moment later, the two men appeared in the doorway. Danvers took the recliner. Clayton sat beside him on the fireplace hearth.

Danvers began. “Do have any idea what . . . condition your father was referring to?”

Logan shook his head. Danvers probed for more, asking how much he knew about his father, and the circumstances of his upbringing. Then he leaned forward and murmured something to Clayton. The younger man’s jaw set, and he was obviously unhappy with what he was hearing. He didn’t object though. Didn’t say a word. Just stood and glared at Logan, and in that glare, Logan read a warning as clear as if he’d spoken it, and he knew that the talk of cutting off fingers and burying bodies in the backyard wasn’t just talk. He swallowed hard, but Clayton only stalked past him and out the door.

With Clayton gone, Danvers continued asking questions, turning to symptoms now, asking and verifying and probing for details, as if assessing the progress of Logan’s “condition.” Then he moved to less concrete areas, asking about changes in behavior, urges and longings, emotions and dreams.

After about ten minutes, something clicked along the hallway floor. Danvers stopped, then glanced out the door and lifted a finger.

He turned to Logan. “I have no experience doing this, Logan, and I know that any way I do, it will be a shock.” He paused. “It would be better if you’d figured it out on your own. Do you have any idea, however wild or preposterous it might seem, about what’s happening to you?”

Logan hesitated, then shook his head.

“I think you do,” Danvers murmured. “If you prefer it this way, though, I’ll confirm your suspicions.”

He turned to the doorway and motioned. A wolf walked in, a huge gold-colored wolf. Logan resisted the urge to shrink back. He could hear his brain screaming denials . . . and wasn’t sure, not consciously sure, *what* it was denying.

The wolf walked to Logan. Its muzzle jerked, and it flipped something from his mouth onto Logan’s lap. Logan looked down to see his wallet. Then he glanced up at the wolf, looked into its blue eyes—familiar blue eyes fixed in a familiar suspicious glare. Clayton’s eyes.

His brain rejected the recognition with screams of denial. *It’s a trick. A trick. Don’t believe it. Get out now. Fight! Run!*

He managed to hold himself still until Clayton—the wolf—turned away. Then he sprang at Danvers. Even as he did, some deeper part of his brain cried out in protest, telling him that he shouldn’t dare or, and even if he did dare, that this was quite possibly the stupidest thing he’d ever done in his life.

But it was too late. He was already in flight. He saw Danvers easily dive out of the way, and even as that deep-rooted part of his brain sighed in relief, he felt something hit his side. He heard Clayton’s snarl. As he fell, he twisted and saw Clayton’s fangs flash, saw them slash

down toward his throat, felt them close around it. And his final thought was that he had indeed made the biggest mistake of his life . . . and the last.

Logan buried his face in the pillow, now smelling more of himself than laundry detergent. *This feels familiar*, he thought. This time, when he lifted his head and saw bars, his gut reaction was not fear but relief. Overwhelming relief.

He should be dead. As crazy as that sounded, the thought that he could be killed—*killed!*—just for lunging at a guy, he knew it was true and, in the strangest, most surreal way, was neither shocked nor outraged, but only grateful to be alive.

He sat up. Blood rushed to his head, blurring his vision, and all he could see was an indistinct figure sitting outside the cell, reading.

“Clayton?”

A soft laugh. “No. Clay’s not very happy with you right now. It seemed best if I stood guard for a while instead.” Danvers sobered, and laid his book on the floor. “If you’re feeling up to it, Logan, we need to talk.”

Logan could only nod.

Danvers continued. “I don’t know your father, so I can’t judge his intentions. I believe those intentions were good, that he was somehow unable to tell you the truth about your . . . birthright himself, and that he wanted you here, in the Pack. That’s what it’s called. The Pack—a werewolf Pack.”

He paused, studying Logan’s face for his reaction. While part of Logan’s brain still dug in its heels and refused to believe, that deeper part was the stronger voice now, squelching logic

and telling Logan with unshakable gut-level conviction that this was true, that he was a werewolf and that maybe, in some way, Danvers was right, and he'd already known it.

When Logan didn't respond, Danvers nodded and kept going, "As for why your father would send you here, the Pack offers things outside werewolves don't have—security, training, companionship. Your father must have wanted that for you. But, in sending you here, not knowing what you are, he did, however unintentionally, put us both in a difficult position. Now that you know not only what we are, but who we are, and where we live—"

"I'm a threat," Logan said, his gut clenching. "You're going to kill me."

"I wouldn't have kept you alive just to explain why you can't remain that way."

"But Clayton—"

"Didn't try to kill you. He was furious, but I didn't need to stop him from finishing you off. You're young enough that he'll grant you a warning shot. But only one." Danvers met Logan's gaze. "If you ever attack me, or attempt to attack me, again, he *will* kill you. That is both his job and his nature. And I won't stop him. The same goes for Clayton himself or any other Pack member. An unprovoked attack warrants death. That is our Law. We face enough danger from without; we won't tolerate it within."

Logan paused and rubbed his bandaged throat. "So you'll trust me. If I promise not to tell anyone—"

"No. I'm afraid I can't take that risk. Right now you may accept what you've been told, but things could change when you leave here. You cannot be given any opportunity to reveal what we are until you know, for certain, that doing so would risk your own safety as much as ours. You'll remain here until your first Change—when you become a full werewolf."

"But—but I have school—"

“And right now, this takes precedence. I’m sorry, but even if you were to leave, when your Change does come—” He shook his head. “School would be the last thing on your mind. You’ll be here, not just for our safety, but for yours, and you’ll see that soon enough.”

“So you’re keeping me *here*? In a cage?”

A small laugh. “I’m afraid you aren’t that big a physical threat yet, Logan. So long as you don’t attempt to run, you’ll be under what you might call ‘house-arrest,’ while we wait for your Change and I prepare you for it.”

Danvers rose and walked to the cell door.

“So that’s it?” Logan said. “I’m part of this Pack now?”

“That will be your decision, when you’re better able to make it. For now, you have other things to worry about.” He unlocked and opened the door. “Let’s go find some dinner. You’ve had a long day, and I imagine you’re hungry.”

He didn’t wait for Logan, just turned and headed for the stairs. Logan hesitated in the doorway, then shoved his hands into his pocket. There, at the bottom, his finger grazed the wadded note.

So this was his birthright? Not the riches of an inheritance or the glory of a proud past. Not even a name. The blood of a werewolf, that’s all his father had given him. He touched the folded paper. No, maybe that wasn’t all. An affliction, yes, maybe even a curse, but an involuntary one, passed along with something else, what every loving parent wants for their child: the chance of a better life.

Logan pulled his hands from his pockets and followed Danvers up the stairs.

The Case of the Half-Demon Spy

Adam watched as Paige took a water glass from the tray outside the meeting room door. She lifted it to the side of her head, the base pressed against her left ear, then she cocked her head, her brow furrowed in concentration. After a moment, she replaced the water cup with a coffee mug, and closed her eyes.

“Say something,” she said.

“I’m afraid to. What the hell are you—?”

She cut him off with a brusque wave, lowered the mug, then grabbed the water glass with her other hand and looked around.

“There,” she said, jerking her chin at the closet. “Go in there.”

Adam shook his head, grabbed his new Walkman and took out his cassette case.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll go in the closet.”

“Again . . . what the hell are you—?”

“Stop swearing. It doesn’t make you sound cool, you know. Not that anything could . . .”

He balled up a napkin and pitched it at her. “At least I don’t have a huge zit on my nose. Makes you look like a witch.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey, maybe it’ll help you cast spells. Hope so. You can use all the help you can get.”

“Ha-ha. Take those headphones off and give me a hand. I’m doing this for you.”

“Doing what?”

“Saving you from a boring afternoon hanging out in this hallway waiting for the council meeting to end. Now, do you want to go into that closet or should I?”

“We both could,” he said with a sly grin. “That would be one way to pass the time.”

She gave him a look, as if the suggestion didn’t warrant a response. Couldn’t blame him for trying, even if he knew the answer wouldn’t change and, really, he wasn’t sure what he’d do if it ever did.

He’d been friends with Paige for almost two years now, and there were times when, alone like this, with a girl who was cute enough, and . . . His gaze dropped to her chest, at fourteen, already bigger than a lot of grown women’s . . . Well, sometimes he *did* entertain thoughts of darkened closets and misplaced hands and—

“Adam.” She glowered up at him, hands on hips. “Are you going in there or am I?”

“If you do, can I lock the door?”

A roll of her eyes, and she strode past him to the closet, opened the door and waved him inside.

“What am I supposed to—?”

“Just talk. That should be easy enough.”

He opened his mouth to retort, but she shut the door in his face. Christ, like he'd *want* to be in a closet with her. She'd probably spend the whole time giving him orders. Do this, do that kiss me here . . . touch me there . . .

His groin tightened and he shoved back the images. Better not to think of it. If he ever did get Paige in a closet, he'd regret it. She'd make sure of that.

"What am I doing?" he asked.

"Helping me conduct a scientific experiment."

"Scient—?" He grabbed the door handle, but she'd spell-locked it shut. "Is this homework? You promised you wouldn't spend the weekend doing homework again."

"I'm not. I don't have any." She opened the door, ushered him out and held up the water glass. "Glass works better than china. Or maybe it's because of the longer tube. I'm not sure."

"Works better for what?"

"Conducting sound. I'd read about it, but I wasn't sure it would work. I guess I should have known better. Simple physics, really."

"Uh-huh."

"Come on," she said, handing him a glass. "Let's find out why they kicked us out of that meeting."

"We're going to spy on them?"

"Of course not," she said, already striding off. "Spying means watching. We're going to eavesdrop."

They'd been outside the door for ten minutes, and had caught no more than a few words. The interracial council meeting was being held in Vermont, as they often were, at one of the remote locations the council used. This particular one was a cabin turned into a small rental lodge for church groups, Girl Scouts and the like. The meeting area was a long, narrow room with the door at the far end . . . too far from the meeting table to eavesdrop, even with high-tech spy gear like empty water glasses.

"Maybe I can burn a hole in the door," Adam whispered.

Paige snorted, and put her ear to the glass again.

Adam leaned back against the wall. "I don't know why we're bothering. They're probably discussing something boring, like interracial politics."

"Do they ever kick us out for that?"

She had a point. There had been many times when Adam had wished his dad *would* boot them out of some endless policy discussion, but that was just the kind of thing his stepfather and Paige's mother insisted they pay attention to, as future delegates.

"If they're going to make us wait out here, it must be something they don't want us to hear." She glanced over at him, brows raised meaningfully. "Something not fit for our young ears."

Adam grabbed his glass from the tray and put it against the door. But it was no use. He couldn't hear more than scattered words, then a slow thumping, getting louder, almost like . . . footsteps.

The handle turned. Adam backpedaled, glass going behind his back. Paige wheeled and began reading the list of "rental rules" on the wall. The door opened. His dad looked out, then stepped into the hall and closed the door.

“I’m afraid this is going to take longer than we thought.” He took out his wallet, reached for a ten, then paused, and plucked out a twenty. “Why don’t you two walk into town and see if you can find something to do. There isn’t much there, but I think I saw some arcade games at the General Store.”

Adam reached for the bill, but his stepfather handed it to Paige, his eyes twinkling. “Just to be sure it’s split evenly.”

“Or split at all,” Paige murmured as his dad retreated into the room.

“Think they overheard us spying?” Adam asked as they walked into the back hall.

“Probably. Between my mom and your dad . . . “ She shook her head. “We definitely need to work on our stealth skills.” She lifted the twenty. “I think I saw Mortal Kombat in the store.”

“Half for games, half to the winner?”

She grinned. “You’re on.”

They stepped outside. Adam started heading for the road, but Paige tapped his arm, and nodded at the path leading into the woods.

“That looks like it heads in the same direction. I bet it’s faster. And certainly cooler.”

Inviting him to walk with her into the deep, dark, deserted forest? With any other girl, that would mean he was in for something even more fun than video games. But this was Paige. She probably wouldn’t even think of that. Not with him anyway.

He watched her walk onto the shaded path, her ponytail bobbing as her hips swayed, the darkness of the forest closing in behind her. Maybe she did have something else in mind . . .

“Mom said aster grows wild around here,” she called back to him. “If I could get it fresh, I might be able to get that second-level wind spell working.”

Figures. He sighed and followed her into the woods, feet scuffing the dirt path as he walked.

Something rustled behind him. He turned, but saw nothing.

“Aster is bushy with—” Paige began.

“Shhh. I heard something.”

She turned, and mouthed, “What?”

“A rustling noise,” he whispered.

“Try lifting your feet when you walk. Oh, and while we’re here, if you want to practice—”

Another rustle, quieter, as if farther away, but drawn out, like someone moving through a pile of dead leaves. They both stopped to listen.

“Could be a deer,” Paige whispered, but her eyes were doubtful as they followed the sound.

The noise stopped around the other side of the cabin, closer to the road.

“We should check it out,” Adam said.

He didn’t wait for Paige’s nod. He knew she’d be right behind him. As much as she liked to pretend *he* was the adventure-seeking one, he hadn’t been the one testing water glasses for eavesdropping, had he?

Still, he never called her on it. Paige was expected to be the responsible one of the pair, only one of many expectations her mother—and others—piled on her. Not a burden he cared to share, but he could lighten it by being the one who barreled heedlessly into danger . . . leaving her obligated to follow and “keep an eye on him.”

By the time they reached the side of the cabin, Paige had already overtaken him. He smacked into her back as she stopped at the rear corner. He tried to brush past her, but she planted a hand against his chest, then leaned forward to peek around the corner.

She pulled back. “There’s someone there.”

He moved forward to see around her. She hesitated, then let him take a look. A man stood to the side of the meeting room window. He was tall and lanky. His hair was short on the sides and long in the back—the way Adam had been trying to grow his until his mom used the Walkman to bribe him into a haircut. Tattoos covered the man’s stringy arms. Adam had seen those tattoos before . . .

As he craned to see the man’s face, Paige yanked him back.

“I know—” he began.

Paige shushed him and moved them into the woods.

“I know him,” Adam said when they were far enough away to speak. “He’s a half-demon. He came to Dad’s office last week, when I was there. He wanted to talk to him.”

“About what?”

Adam shrugged. “Dad made me stand outside. Getting a lot of that lately. But whatever the guy said, it really pissed Dad off, and you know that’s tough to do.”

“Did your dad say anything afterward?”

“Not to me, but when he was kicking the guy out, I heard something about the council. Dad told the guy he wasn’t fooling him, he knew what he was trying to do, and if he ever came to him again with something like that, he’d bring it up to the council himself. The guy was furious. Kept saying Dad would regret—”

Adam stiffened, then turned to run for the back door. Paige caught his arm. He should have been able to yank free easily enough—she barely came up to his shoulder—but when she dug in her heels, she was tough to budge.

“He’s not going after your dad,” she said. When he gave an experimental tug, she tightened her grip. “Think about it. Robert’s in a room with five other delegates, all supernaturals. No half-demon is stupid enough to take him on in there. If he did come for your dad, he’s going to lie in wait. Running in there would only scare him off. Scare him off, and he’ll just come back another time . . . when you aren’t around to help.”

Adam hesitated, then nodded. As Paige released his arm, she shook her hands, and he could see the palms were red.

“Did I burn—?” he said, reaching for her hand.

“Nothing a little healing salve won’t fix.” She lowered her hands quickly, before he could see them. “Wait here. I want to get another look. I thought I saw something.”

He watched her slip back to the corner. When she returned, she was frowning.

“He’s taking notes,” she said.

“About what?”

“The meeting, I guess. He must be writing down descriptions, seeing who’s there, though I don’t know why he’d bother. Everyone knows who the delegates are—or can find out easily enough. But if we couldn’t hear through the door, there no way he can hear through that window.”

“He could if he was the right kind of half-demon. Dad called him an Exaudio. That’s hearing, isn’t it?”

Paige nodded. “A mid-level auditory-enhanced half-demon. Vastly improved general hearing, plus the ability to induce temporary deafness in a single individual.”

She recited the information as promptly as if he’d asked for her home address. Any other time he’d have ribbed her about spending too much time with the council research books, but today his only thought was “good thing someone knows it,” followed by “maybe I should know it.”

He dismissed the second part as soon as it came. As long as Paige did the research, there was no reason for both of them to waste sunny afternoons poring over dusty books. When they grew up, that could be her job, and he’d do the fun, more dangerous stuff better suited to a fire demon.

“That means he could hear through that window and spy on the meeting, doesn’t it?” Adam said.

“A lot easier than we could . . . and without a water glass.” She cast a reluctant glance at the cabin door. “I suppose we should go in and tell them.”

“He could be gone before we did.”

“True . . .”

She looked at the door, and he could see her thinking it over, trying to figure out an excuse for handling it themselves, an excuse her mother would accept.

Adam returned to the corner, peeked around, then came back.

“He looks like he’s getting ready to leave,” he whispered. “We have to do something.”

She nodded, making no move to check for herself, as if knowing he was lying. The truth, as they both knew, was that even if the guy wasn’t leaving yet, and they reported it to the council,

by the time the adults figured out what to do about it, the spy would be gone. The council was much better at discussing plans of action than taking them.

“Okay,” she said after a moment.

“Good, I’ll take him down. Once I have him, you run in and get my dad—”

She shook her head. “First-degree burns aren’t going to stop a guy like that. I’m no help until I learn my binding spell, and I’m nowhere—not quite that far yet.”

“I can take him. He’s not much bigger than me, and I’ve been working out—”

“Which isn’t going to help you if he pulls a knife or a gun.”

“Supernaturals hardly ever use that stuff.”

“And are you going to take the chance that this guy is the exception to that rule?” She met his gaze. “Let me rephrase that. *I’m* not letting you take that chance. Try it, and I’ll get the others.”

When he glanced back at the corner, jaw setting, she laid her hand on his arm. “As much as I’d like to hog-tie the guy and hand him over, all we really need is that notebook. Your dad obviously knows who he is. If we get the notebook, the council can find out what he was up to and go after him. That’s good enough, right?” She looked up at him. “For now.”

After a moment, he nodded.

“I can create the distraction,” she said. “But you’ll need to get the book. And you’ll need to have your powers ready, in case he turns on you. Have you been practicing?”

He nodded, though he didn’t tell her that he’d been using his own methods, not hers. Almost since the day they’d met, Paige had been trying to help him hone his powers, helping him learn to control them so he could burn on purpose, not just accidentally when he got upset.

She'd taught him the techniques she used for spellcasting concentration. Trouble was, they didn't work for him.

To cast a spell, you had to clear your mind and turn off your emotions. To invoke fire, he needed to do the exact opposite—turn his emotional valve on full blast. He didn't tell Paige that, though. She wanted to help, so he let her. And telling her how he *did* ignite his powers would only upset her. Sometimes reaching down into that darkest part of himself disturbed even him.

So they came up with a plan. Well, Paige came up with the plan, as always, but she did pause once or twice to get his nod of approval, which was nice.

"You sure you're okay with it?" she asked when she was done. "If you don't feel—"

"I'm fine."

"If something goes wrong, I'll have to go for help. You know that, right? I can't—" She swallowed. "I can't do a damned thing."

"Don't swear."

He smiled when he said it, but she didn't smile back, probably didn't even hear. Last year, when they'd started being allowed to hear details of council investigations, Paige had noticed that her mother never undertook anything without backup, not even something as simple as delivering a warning.

Sure, Ruth Winterbourne was old, older than most moms, but his dad was almost as old, and he issued warnings and stuff by himself. He might not like invoking his darker powers, but at least he had them.

Paige looked at her mother, the most experienced witch she knew, and saw her future. Leader of the Coven, leader of the supernatural council . . . and completely defenseless except for her binding spell.

Paige had been fretting about it ever since. Adam tried to tell her she didn't need that stuff—she'd always have him for backup—but that didn't seem to help. All he could do now was reassure her that he'd be careful, and that if something went wrong, and she had to get help, he'd understand.

Next, they took their places. Adam left Paige near the cabin door. Then he circled through the woods and came out on the half-demon's other side. He crouched there a moment and watched him, but there wasn't much to see. The guy was standing beside the window, head tilted, jotting down notes. Exciting stuff.

Across the clearing, a light sparked in the forest. Paige's signal. Adam hunkered down and waited. A moment later, a bright orb bounced from the forest, hovered there a moment, then evaporated. The spy never even saw it. Adam imagined Paige stamping her foot as her light ball fizzled. The farther it went from her hand, the faster it would fade, but that wouldn't keep her from blaming her own inexperience, and vowing to practice more.

A second later, another light ball appeared. This time, it stayed long enough for Paige to kick a pile of dead leaves. At the sound, the half-demon spun. The ball went out. He blinked, then shook his head and returned to his spying. But he didn't turn his back on the woods, so when the next light ball came, he saw it the moment it zipped from the darkness.

The spy strode for Paige's hiding spot. Adam held back until the man had barely passed him. Then, gaze fixed on the notepad, he bolted from the bushes. He'd make a beeline for the notepad, and grab it from the half-demon's hand while his attention was on Paige's distraction, then keep running for the back door, where Paige would already be waiting, holding it open.

At the last second, Adam realized he'd jumped out too soon, before he'd been completely out of the half-demon's view. The man must have caught a movement out of the corner of his

eye. He saw Adam charging and whipped his hand back—the hand holding the notepad. Adam tried to check himself, but it was too late and when he veered, he crashed right into the man.

The notepad went flying to the ground . . . and the man's hands went flying to Adam's throat.

Adam managed to duck the throat-grab, but the man caught him by the arm. Adam swung. The man yanked, and Adam flew off his feet. As he twisted, he tried to invoke his power, tried to pull the deepest, darkest thoughts from his brain, but all he could think was that he'd made a fool of himself in front of Paige and, soon, everyone in the council. Made a fool of himself and embarrassed his stepfather . . . and he wasn't sure which was worse. Then, as the half-demon flung him down, he realized he might have something more serious than humiliation to worry about.

As Adam hit the ground, and the air flew from his lungs, he saw a blur behind the half-demon. Paige, running at the man.

Oh, shit. She'd said she'd run inside for help, but he should have known she wouldn't run away and leave him alone. Her mouth opened to call for help, to attract the council's attention that way. Before she could get out a syllable, though, the half-demon must have heard her running footsteps behind him.

The half-demon turned away from Adam. Paige skidded to a stop, eyes going wide, lips moving in some useless incantation. Adam flew to his feet and grabbed the man, hand going around his upper arm. The man yelped and tried to yank away, but Adam tightened his grip, feeling the heat flood through him.

The man fought harder, panicked. Adam's grip slid. The man pulled free and ran for the forest. Adam tore after him, but the man was faster and Adam reached the road just in time to see a car jump to life and take off down the road.

At a noise behind him, he turned to see Paige running over. She stopped in front of him and looked up, head tilting back, eyes dancing, cheeks glowing, curls flying free from her ponytail. Whenever his friends asked Adam what his “Boston friend” looked like, he’d say “cute, I guess,” but as she looked up at him then, grinning, just for him, she looked better than cute. Her lips parted, and he knew if he just leaned over—

“You did it,” she said, and waved the notepad between them.

He looked into her eyes then, saw only the glowing happiness of a friend, and knew that’s all he’d seen before, and probably all he ever would. Which was, really, for the best. So he let her throw her arms around his neck, and hugged her back. When she pulled away, she held out the book.

“Take it,” she said. “I’ll do the talking, but you can give them this. You’re the one who got it.”

He took the notebook, and they walked back into the forest, heading for the cabin.

“Our first adventure,” he said. “The first of many.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that.”

He grinned down at her. “I am.”

“This should work,” Robert said, handing Leo a bottle of salve. “It’s Ruth Winterbourne’s recipe and she finds it works particularly well on Adam’s burns . . . though that one seems to be worse than he usually inflicts.” A smile erupted from beneath Robert’s beard. “He does seem to be making remarkable progress . . . though I’m sure you aren’t nearly as impressed, being the

recipient of that progress. I do apologize. This is the first time he's ever caused second-degree burns—”

“I'm fine,” Leo said, waving off the apology. “The kid did good, and I owed you.”

Robert finished talking to Leo, then hurried back to the hotel. Just his luck he'd run into Ruth on his way back. If she ever found out the truth . . . Better not to think on that. It was the kind of thing that could threaten a very old and very dear friendship.

Yet, even if he knew he'd be caught, he wasn't sure he would have done any differently. The council was sliding into old age along with him and Ruth, and as it did, he looked back and realized it had never been the vibrant, active force for good it could have been.

With Paige and Adam and the next generation, that could change. The will and the desire for innovation was there. He saw it in Paige, and knew Adam would follow her on whatever new path she proposed, particularly if it offered more excitement than policy meetings.

When they'd come running into that cabin, notebook in hand, he'd seen by their expressions that his ploy had succeeded—their glows of victory tempered with the knowledge that they'd picked a fight they may not have been ready for. Someday they'd be ready, though. They'd make sure of that now.

Robert picked up his pace and began to whistle.

Expectations

As I sat listening to Victor Tucci's story, a single refrain ran through my head.

And what do you expect me to do about it?

I wouldn't say such a thing, of course. Perhaps some variation on it, something politer, without the inherent connotations of indifference such a phrase could carry. Yet the gist would be the same. What did he expect me to do about it?

A rhetorical question. I knew precisely what he expected me to do, without so much as a hint as to his intentions in his words, his bearing or even his eyes. I knew. And I knew that when he finished, and made clear that expectation, we'd both be disappointed. Perhaps I even more than he, for I was about to receive yet another glimpse into my future, where my value would forever be measured only by my parentage and what that parentage could do for men like Victor Tucci.

I thought of stopping him. I suppose I should have, to save us both the bother. I certainly couldn't afford the waste of this hour. It was two A.M., I had an exam at eight and, when it came to sleep, I was well below my quota, a combination of a busy exam study schedule and a stressful visit from my father two days ago having deprived me of all but a few restless hours of

slumber. So, I should have said, “Look, I know what you want, but I can’t help you” . . . or some politer variation on the sentiment. Yet I didn’t.

My father taught me to hear people out, whether it was a VP with a new marketing concept or a junior custodian complaining about a switch in toilet paper brands. Cutting people short demonstrated a basic lack of courtesy, and made people feel their thoughts and opinions weren’t worthy of your attention. Ironic, isn’t it, that as fast as I run from my father’s influence, in so many things, it’s his words I hear, and his words I follow. Does that mean I lack the will to really break free? Or that I’m mature enough to acknowledge when he was right about something? I don’t know.

I swallow a yawn and blink hard, hoping my eyes aren’t glazing over.

Maintain eye contact. Don’t fidget, don’t check your watch, don’t glance at the clock, don’t do anything that might make it seem you have better things to do. Don’t just try to appear interested; try to be interested.

That last part was easy. I *was* interested in what Tucci had to say. Any conversation involving the words “rare,” “black-market” and “spellbook” were guaranteed to get my attention. Of course, I could have informed him that the correct term for what he was describing was “grimoire,” but it’s never polite to correct someone when you know perfectly well what they mean. Of course, the first thing I thought when Tucci mentioned the book was “where is it and how can I get hold of it?”

From the sounds of it, though, this book didn’t contain the sort of spells I’d care to add to my repertoire. I have no aversion to dark magic, not in principle nor in practice, provided that the principle and the practice are guided by ethical standards. All martial forms of magic are considered dark magic. Dark, not evil. The morality of dark magic depends on the application.

One cannot argue that using an energy bolt spell to kill a business competitor is moral (unless you happen to be my father, in which case, morality is a clay that can be molded to suit the requirements of circumstance). Yet nor would most people argue that using that same spell to foil an assassination attempt is equally immoral.

Still, while I'm cognizant of the value of such magics, and have been actively studying martial and lethal spellcasting, there is a limit to how many such spells one conceivably needs. They are, after all, only weapons. A non-supernatural who foresees the need for self-defense may acquire a gun, perhaps a knife, and learn a form of martial arts. Different weapons for different circumstances. Yet the only person who requires a dozen varieties of guns is one who is not fending off assassination, but carrying it out.

Given the type of spells Tucci was describing, a more accurate analogy would be, not additional varieties of guns, but ones specially designed to do more than kill, perhaps to put out an eye or disfigure a face or create a wound that will cause untold agony before death. In other words, not instruments of defense, but instruments of torture. And that is one form of weapon I have no use for, proof that I have not absorbed *all* of my father's teachings.

"So you can see why I'm concerned," Tucci said as he finished.

"Naturally. Such spells should not be in the public domain, and I will agree that it is a cause for concern, and yet . . ."

I paused, about to ask some variation on "what do you expect me to do about it?" and try not to cringe as I awaited the inevitable response, when a thought struck. Perhaps Tucci didn't expect that at all. Perhaps what he wanted was . . .

"You'd like me to retrieve these grimoires," I said, straightening, the drowsiness I'd been fighting finally falling away. "To remove them from circulation."

A blank look, and I was about to rephrase myself, substituting spellbook for grimoire when Tucci nodded.

“Yes, yes, that’s it exactly, Mister . . .” He faltered on the word, as if he couldn’t bring himself to use the formal mode of address for someone half his age, but knew he should, out of deference to that surname, which he finally got out. “Cortez.”

“Lucas. Please.” I snatched my notepad and pen from the side-table. “Now, first, let me be very clear that I’m not certain I could undertake a task of this magnitude. My work thus far has been limited, primarily in the simple legal advice. Yet that is not to say I have no experience with more *active* work, so to speak, including surveillance. The removal of property not my own would entail slightly more expertise than I currently possess, but one cannot gain experience without taking that first step.”

Tucci stared at me, uncomprehending. A not-uncommon reaction when I open my mouth.

I propped the notepad on my knee. “Why don’t you tell me some more about where this grimoire is being held, and by whom?”

He continued to stare. I mentally replayed the last sentence, but it seemed straightforward and simply worded enough. So I waited, presuming he needed more time to organize his thoughts.

“You . . . you’re going to . . . get them . . . yourself?” he said finally.

“Preferably, although, if necessary, I do have a few contacts I could call upon who have some experience with this kind of . . .” I let the sentence drop away as I saw the look in his eyes, and knew this wasn’t what he meant. “You wanted me to take this to my father.”

“Well, yes,” he said, as if such a thing should have been obvious. And it was, being precisely what I’d assumed he’d intended from the start, misled only by my own misguided surge of optimism.

Tucci continued, “I’m sure your father would let you help. As you said, it would be good experience for you, getting to know the business from the bottom up, so to speak.” A flash of a smile. “Can’t learn everything sitting behind a desk, can you, son? At your age, I’m sure you don’t want to, either.”

I waited a moment, to be sure none of my disappointment leaked into my words. “True, I’m sure, for any young man who intends to follow the path into the family business. However, as you are doubtless aware, I have disavowed all connections to the Cortez Cabal.”

“Yes, yes, that tiff with your father—”

“It isn’t a—” I swallowed the word. “I realize that my alienation from my father and the Cabal is widely considered an adolescent act of rebellion, but I should think that, after five years, and having outlasted my teens, it is apparent that this is more than that.”

From his look, I knew that the only thing that was apparent to him was that I was living proof that some young men didn’t leave teenage rebellion behind when they reached their twenties. I looked into his eyes, and I could see myself reflected back as he saw me, a resentful, ungrateful brat, someone he’d rather not deal with at all but, as a non-Cabal sorcerer he stood no chance of an audience with my father or brothers, so this spoiled scion was as close as he could get to the Cortez Cabal inner family.

“I’m sorry,” I said, rising to my feet. “If you wish to bring this to the Cabal’s attention, I would recommend you notify—”

I stopped. Did I want him bringing this to the Cabal's attention? Granted, however rare he thought this grimoire was, my father probably had a copy hidden somewhere, or access to one. And yet . . . If he didn't, did I want to hand it over to him? Possibly get the current owner killed over it? My stomach twisted at the thought, yet I forced the worry back with logic. My father wouldn't order the owner killed so long as he could get the grimoire without resorting to such drastic and potentially untidy measures.

"Notify who?" Tucci said, his gaze impatient, probably assuming my attention had slipped to thoughts of keg parties and girls and whatever else rich college boys filled their empty heads with. "See here, I don't think you're understanding the seriousness of this, young man. This is a very important spellbook, and it's in the hands of a witch."

My head jerked up. "A witch?"

"I said that, didn't I? The moment I arrived, I told you who has this spellbook—"

"Evan Levy," I said. "From Minnesota, if I'm not mistaken."

"Who the hell is Evan Levy? I said—" His jaw shut with a clack, as if forcing his mouth shut, reminding himself that, inattentive brat or not, I was still a Cortez, and heir-apparent to my father's throne. "I'm sorry, but you must have misheard. I said Eve Levy."

"Eve Levy?" I frowned, running the name through my head. Familiar, and yet . . .

"Levy, Levi, some—" Tucci's hands fluttered. "Some Jewish name."

"Levine," I said slowly. "Eve Levine."

I sat down. Tucci rambled on, but my father's lessons on proper listening behavior flew out of my head, and I made no effort to pretend I was still listening. Vincent Tucci wasn't bringing this to my attention because it was a dangerous spellbook that should be put under lock and key, but because it was in the hands of a witch. Such a thing should not be tolerated. Preposterous,

of course. Racism at its ugliest. No, not its ugliest. Its ugliest would come if the Cortez Cabal got wind of the situation. While my father's attitude toward someone like Eve Levine was pragmatic—he'd try to buy the book from her and, failing that, intimidate her into handing it over, my brothers and the board of directors would not be so willing to treat Eve as they would a sorcerer. For them, this would be an excuse to execute an embarrassment, a witch who fancied herself a master of sorcerer magic, who dared teach sorcerers to use their own magic.

Would such an execution be unwarranted? I would like to disagree with capital punishment in all situations, but I have seen cases where one cannot argue for anything less, where it becomes a matter of kill the transgressor or allow more innocents to die, and in such an instance I must value the life of the innocent over that of the criminal. Although I knew Eve Levine by reputation only, a criminal, a killer. Yet, not knowing the circumstances behind her crimes, I cannot judge her on those.

But I can judge her on one indisputable fact: that she made her living instructing sorcerers in magic they weren't skilled enough to use properly and, if this grimoire Tucci was concerned about was any indication, in magic *no one* should use. She gave men the power to torture and kill. An executable offense? I don't know. What I do know, though, is that my brothers and the Cabal board of directors would not kill her for this. They would kill her for the indignity of a mere witch presuming to teach sorcerers, and an indictment on those grounds was as despicable as a KKK lynching.

"A witch . . ." I said, adjusting my glasses as I pretended to ponder this. "That does make a difference. You're quite correct. She does need to be stopped, and anything I can do to help, I will."

Tucci tried not to smirk. "Glad you feel that way."

I picked up my notepad. “If you can provide me with the particulars, I will pass them along to my father immediately.”

My motorcycle idling at the curb, I looked up at Eve Levine’s apartment building. A modest high-rise in a good neighborhood. One might expect something more luxurious for a world-class teacher of the dark arts. If you’re going to sell your soul, you might as well put a decent price tag on it. As always, though, teaching isn’t the most lucrative way to make a living, whether it’s black magic, high school English or criminal law.

As with my law professors, Eve would see people pass through her classes destined for jobs that would net triple her income. Yet the old adage about “Those who can’t do, teach.” failed in this instance. Eve Levine was widely known as an expert practitioner of her art, and I had heard enough stories that, even sitting here looking at her building, I had to put such tales from my mind, remember the importance of my mission and bolster my resolve.

Why did Eve Levine teach when she could earn more by “doing”? I will admit to some optimistic bent in my nature that makes me long to believe that she refrained from acts of evil out of a basic core of good that shunned immoral uses of her powers. Yet if it is possible, much less advisable, to rate such things on a continuum, teaching magic to kill and maim must be seen as *more*, not less wrong than carrying out such acts oneself.

It’s a matter of scale. If you commit such acts, you commit them for personal gain. If you teach them, you give countless others the power to do the same, and the sheer number of “evil” acts is multiplied many times over. One could argue, and rightly so, that most of Eve’s students

didn't have the spellcasting wherewithal to maim a cockroach much less a human, but the fact remains that her lessons exist to give people that power, whether they can use it or not.

It is possible that Eve taught out of a misguided sense of morality, a "But I'm not doing this stuff myself" defense that let her conscience rest easy. Yet I suspected there was more to her decision than that, and it was prompted by the same impulse that compelled her to rent a modest apartment in a good neighborhood, rather than a good apartment in a seedier section of town. That reason showed itself ten minutes later, when the front door of the apartment opened, and out strode a slender woman with dark hair to her waist, dressed in black jeans, a turtleneck shirt, a hip-length leather coat and boots that added another inch or two to her already formidable height. Eve Levine. And that "reason?" It was at her far side, almost hidden behind Eve, only sneakers, a backpack, dark hair and gesticulating hands visible. Eve's preadolescent daughter: Savannah.

A cab waited at the curb, as it did every weekday morning. Eve opened the door and waved her daughter in. The girl paused, hands still moving, relating some story that couldn't be interrupted. Her mother waited, mock exasperated, then playfully shoved her into the taxi the moment she'd finished, and climbed in after her. Savannah had to be nine or ten, old enough to take the cab by herself. And the school was less than a mile away, not an unreasonable distance for a child to walk, but they always took a cab and Eve always went along, then walked back herself, picking up a coffee on the way. It was an unwavering routine that I'd been following for the past week, long enough to reassure me that I now had close to an hour to break into Eve's apartment and confiscate that grimoire.

I waited for a break in traffic, then swung out. At the light, I stopped beside two young women in a sports car, who tried to get my attention. This, however, was one case where my

father's advice about paying attention to people did not apply, and I could, without guilt, pretend I didn't notice them. The driver rolled down the window, calling to me, and I considered employing my surefire method of deflecting unwanted female attention while riding my motorcycle: removing my helmet.

The safety gear necessary for proper use of a motorcycle—a full helmet with tinted visor, bulky leather jacket, gloves and boots—renders one's features and physique invisible, and even the most unlikely male suddenly becomes attractive, a dark, mysterious figure astride a vehicle that symbolizes rebellion and freedom from cultural mores. To destroy that image, I merely need to remove the helmet, and endure the looks of surprise, disappointment, and even, occasionally anger, as if I've committed the unforgivable sin of false advertising.

There had been one time, about a year ago, when I removed the helmet, and the young woman *didn't* flee, but even, after a few moment's hesitation, asked me out to dinner. I'd accepted—out of surprise, I think, and perhaps a healthy dose of that unrelenting optimism. We hadn't even made it through the appetizers before she'd started making "suggestions." Had I considered contact lenses? Perhaps a less generic haircut—something longer . . . or shorter . . . highlights might be nice. And, while I appeared to be in reasonably good physical condition, she knew a friend who swore by protein shakes for bulking up. In short, if I wasn't what she'd hoped I'd be when I removed that helmet, perhaps she rectify that. After dinner I'd begged off with a lie about an overdue paper, walked her to her car and beat a fast retreat.

The light changed, sending the memory skittering away.

I let the sports car get two car lengths ahead of me before zipping into that lane and turning the corner beside Eve Levine's apartment. I'd park a block over. I'd mapped out my route—indeed, every step of this expedition—days ago. Then, yesterday, I'd carried it through

right to the point of opening her front door, then walking through my escape. Overkill, I'm sure but, having never undertaken a break-and-enter before, I was leaving nothing to chance.

First, I had to get through the apartment building front door. Hardly an obstacle, as I'd learned the day before. I hid my jacket, helmet and boots, and changed into flat shoes, then walked to the nearby strip mall, from which I purchased an oversized floral arrangement and affixed a large card with "Congrats!" scrawled across the front. Then I walked to the edge of Eve's apartment building. When I saw a man striding through the lobby, I hurried to the front doors and began struggling, trying to open them while holding the flowers. The man took one look at me—a clean-cut young Latino in a golf shirt carrying flowers—and immediately assumed "delivery boy." He held the door for me with only a laughing comment about dropping them off at apartment 318 for his wife.

Next, I had to get inside Eve's front door. Again, a simple task. She didn't even bother spell-locking her door, as if even that bit of witch magic was beneath her. Perhaps that also bespoke a overreaching confidence, an arrogance even, assuming that anyone who knew she kept valuables like rare grimoires would also know her reputation enough not to attempt to steal them. Whatever the reason, the door had only a basic lock, one easily handled with the skills I'd acquired from a half-demon I'd assisted in a legal matter. Within a few minutes, I was inside Eve's apartment, ready to begin my hunt for her grimoires.

As I expected, Eve's confidence didn't extend to leaving her grimoires in plain sight, or locked in a chest. She'd placed a false back in the bedroom walk-in closet, so it appeared a normal shallow one. It was only upon searching her closet that I realized the trick. I cast a trap-detection spell, but found none, not surprising, I suppose, considering she had a child in the home.

I should have snatched the grimoire and made my escape. That was the plan. However, when confronted with a wall of grimoires, half of which I had never seen, a quarter of which I had never even heard of, I could not resist lingering. The temptation to fill my bag was overwhelming, and as I stood there, salivating like a child before a wall of exotic candies, I couldn't help but think that it was my obligation to remove them. Almost immediately, the impulse shamed me—that I would even consider using the excuse of “doing right” so I might have these spells for myself. In compensation, though, I could not resist permitting myself a glance through several of the books I didn't recognize, if only so I would know if they were something I might wish to seek out elsewhere.

And that's when it happened, as my attention was absorbed by a spell for casting a trap that would knock someone unconscious, the very sort of non-lethal spell that I could see a definite use for. I was poring over the spell, wondering if I had time to jot it into my notebook when I heard a floorboard squeak behind me. My first thought was one of the very sort of arrogant confidence I'd accused Eve of. I heard it creak and thought I might be mistaken because I had cast a perimeter spell at the front door, which was the only viable entry point. Yet even as that assurance flashed through my mind, I had had cause to question the assumption. Perimeter spells were witch magic, which I was not yet proficient in and, although that particular spell was a simple one I had mastered, my rate of success was likely not one hundred percent. It allowed a

margin of error, particularly if my attention had been elsewhere, already roaming Eve's apartment, wondering where she'd hidden her grimoires.

I realized this just in time to grab a grimoire from the shelf, and start shoving it into my bag. Then, at a sound from the doorway, I whirled to see an energy bolt whip past the very space where I'd been standing.

I dove to the side, hands rising in a knockback spell, something simplistic yet easily cast. Still moving, I caught a blur of motion, and thought I'd hit her, but as I wheeled, I saw that she was still standing, having anticipated my move and leapt aside. Her next energy bolt hit me like a high-voltage blast to the gut. Everything went black, a split-second loss of consciousness that ended as I crashed to the floor and jolted awake.

I tried to leap up, but couldn't move, my arms and legs frozen in a binding spell. Eve advanced on me, then stopped a few feet away.

She blinked. "My God, they're right, you do look like your father." She tilted her head for a closer look. "Well, no, you don't really. But at first glance . . . It must be your eyes."

She took a step back. "So, Lucas Cortez. When my neighbors described the young man they'd seen at my door yesterday, I wondered if it could be a Cortez employee. But a Cortez himself? Now that I *didn't* expect."

Neighbor? I cursed myself for my carelessness. So that was why Eve hadn't employed traditional security methods. She'd discovered an inexpensive and, quite possibly more reliable alternative: taking an apartment next door to a bored and nosy retiree. A useful piece of advice I'd do well to remember. For now, though, I had more pressing concerns.

"So what is Lucas Cortez doing stealing one of my grimoires?" she continued.

As she scooped up the book that had fallen from my bag, I wiggled my fingers. They moved, but only barely and with effort, proving that her binding spell was gradually weakening as her concentration wandered. Time to stall . . .

“I’m sorry,” I said, affecting the guise of a sheepish schoolboy. “It was an initiation prank, for my Cabal fraternity. I didn’t want to do it but . . .” A helpless shrug. “Being a Cortez, I don’t get off easy on stuff like that. I know it was stupid, and I’m sorry—”

“You lie almost as well as your father.”

“I *do* apologize—”

“Oh, I’m sure you would apologize . . . if this was a prank. But only Ivy League schools have Cabal fraternities, and unless the rumors are wrong, you don’t attend one of those. So what could you possibly want with this grimoire?” She leafed through it. “No offense intended, but this magic is far too advanced for a twenty-year-old sorcerer.”

I waggled my fingers again. The spell was fading. One good wrench, and I’d break it.

“I—I need the money,” I said, forcing a blush of humiliation. “You’ve probably heard, I’ve cut ties with my father. I’ve tried to make it on my own, I really have, but college is so expensive.” I swallowed. “I just needed a bit of money and someone told me you had more books than you could possibly use, so I thought you wouldn’t miss one—”

She cut me off with a laugh as she tossed the book onto the bed. “My God, you *are* good. As entertaining as it is to watch a budding master of the art of bullshit, I’m going to have to insist you start—”

I hit her with a hard knockback spell, leapt to my feet—

Something hit me in the shoulder, harder even than the energy bolt. As I flew back toward the bookcase, I reached out to catch myself, but her spell was so strong that I still slammed into

the bookcase, my arm cracking, pain ripping through it. I slid to the floor, cradling my broken forearm.

“Oh, shit!”

Eve moved forward and, for a second, I thought she was going to fall to her knees beside me, but then she backed off, cursing. When she wheeled on me, her eyes were hard and cold.

“That changes things, doesn’t it? Do you think I don’t know why you’re here, Lucas Cortez? Do you think I haven’t heard *those* rumors. Fancy yourself some kind of crusader against injustice, do you? Well, you should stick with legal advice, boy, because you’re in way over your head here. What would happen to me if papa Cortez found out I broke your arm? Smartest thing I could do right now? Safest thing?” Her eyes went colder as they met mine. “Finish the job. Dispose of the body.”

I pitched to my feet, and made a headlong run, zigzagging to avoid her spells. I sheered past the bed to grab the grimoire. She lunged to get it first and I changed course, running for the door instead. As she snatched up the book from the bed, I slammed the door, casting a lock spell even as it closed.

Eve grabbed the door handle, turned it, then let out a bark of a laugh.

“Witch magic? You really are your father’s son. Pragmatic to the core. It’ll take me twenty seconds to get out this door, so you’d better have your running shoes on, and I swear, if I ever hear a peep of this from anyone . . .”

I didn’t hear the rest of the threat, already being in the front hall. I threw open the door and raced down the hall. She didn’t follow.

I paced my dormitory room, trying to contain my impatience as I placed the unavoidable call to Victor Tucci.

“Yes,” I said. “I have removed the grimoire from her possession, and have surrendered it to my father, who will deal with Ms Levine”

“And he knows who gave you the tip?”

“Absolutely. He’s grateful to you and will not forget your assistance in this matter.”

As Eve pointed out, I have a facility for falsehoods, a talent both natural and learned. There was little chance of Victor Tucci ever discovering my lie. A man like that only wanted to know he had earned some credit with my father, credit that he would doubtless never use. Even if he was in a position to require such a credit, he would never be allowed the opportunity to redeem it—under such circumstances, his pleas to speak to the Cabal CEO would be denied out of hand.

As for Eve Levine, with regards to my injury, she had nothing to fear. Even had I been inclined to use my position to exact revenge for my arm—which I certainly was not—I retained enough of my family pride to never allow such a thing to happen, to admit that I had been bested by a witch.

I also knew I had no need to fear that Eve would change her mind and come after me. Had she ever intended to “finish the job and dispose of the body,” she’d hardly have told me her plans. Ever the teacher, she’d been imparting a valuable lesson, one that I would remember. I was not prepared for such endeavors. Before I ever attempted such a thing again, I needed to vastly improve my criminal skill-sets.

So the exercise had been a valuable one. More than that, I had experienced my first taste of success. After I hung up with Tucci, I sat on the edge of the bed, my broken arm in a makeshift

sling, and fumbled with my pantleg, tugging it up with my good arm, then holding my leg aloft while I removed the elastics from my calf and let the thin volume fall to the floor.

I reached over and picked up the grimoire. A slender tome containing no more than a dozen spells. As I flipped through, I couldn't even decipher what more than a few of them did. That explained why Eve had stashed it on a high shelf, amidst dusty grimoires, those with magic too difficult even for her advanced skills. Future volumes of study, put aside until she had the time and skill to revisit them. With any luck, by the time that happened, if she did notice this one missing, she'd never connect it with my visit.

I closed the book and tapped it against my legs. What to do with the thing? Considering what sort of magic it was purported to contain, I suppose I should have destroyed it. Yet that seemed almost sacrilegious, and certainly presumptive, to take a book so rare, a piece of history, and burn it because I feared what it could do. My own ancestors had been guilty of a similar crime, so many years ago, setting fire to a form of power they feared: witches.

Yes, the analogy was a poor one, yet could I pass judgment on this book. Should I? A matter that would require more consideration. For now, I had other things to do. First, call a local shaman physician to get my arm set. Then take a three-hour bus ride to retrieve my bike, presuming I could ride it with my arm in a cast. Once that was done, I had a week's work of classes to catch up on.

I found a good hiding spot for the grimoire, put it out of my mind, and reached for my phone book.

Territorial

Karl glanced over at the woman walking beside him, chattering away about the joys of Tae Bo, and he realized, with a gut-sinking burst of clarity, that he was no longer interested. It would have helped if he'd figured that out before he'd persuaded her to leave the party with him. But a fickle heart never makes life so easy, does it? What gleams under the candelabras of a charity gala loses much of its sparkle once that first blast of cold night air knocks away the pleasant buzz of three glasses of champagne.

The prize wasn't without value. Not terribly pretty. Too gilded, too bright, too colorful. While Karl considered himself a man of taste in most things, in others he never allowed taste to enter into the matter, and it certainly didn't with this. The moment he'd seen Cindy Mays on the dance floor, his pulse had quickened, and he'd smiled, feeling that first jolt of lust, knowing what would follow—the delicious chase and then . . . the reward. He wasn't sure which he preferred more: the pursuit or the prize. Didn't matter. They came entwined as one. A single delicious package.

But after he'd cajoled Cindy outside, he'd realized he no longer coveted this particular prize. He didn't question its value. That was clear enough. A twenty-four carat gold pendant of a

tiger's head, yellow sapphires for its stripes, emeralds for its eyes and diamonds for its teeth.

Tacky, yes. But worth more than all the dainty diamond drop necklaces and pearl chokers at the party.

As for Cindy herself, well, she looked like the sort of woman you'd expect to be wearing a two-inch tiger head around her neck. While he had been known to take a woman home and give her something in return for her jewels before he lifted them, this would not have been one of those times.

The necklace was too heavy to remove at the party without her noticing. But after a few more drinks at a bar, he doubted she'd notice if he absconded with her necklace, purse and all her clothing. Cindy had been rapidly descending from giddily drunk to falling-down-plastered before he'd charmed her from the gala.

Karl roused himself from his thoughts. Whether or not he had an interest in the lady—or her jewelry—he should keep up his part of the conversation. Ignoring her was rude.

“—and the philosophy of Tae Bo is mind working with spirit.”

“Interesting, so—”

“Once we harness the power of the mind over the body—”

Apparently, Cindy was one of those people who didn't require an active partner for conversation. From the looks she'd been giving him in the party, he suspected she didn't need an active partner for anything. Karl suppressed a small shudder, then chastised himself. Bad enough to lift a woman's jewelry; you didn't need to insult her as well.

He eyed the necklace again and struggled to feel some lick of hunger, of avarice even, but couldn't muster it. As they'd been walking, some random stimuli—a scent or a sound—had

triggered an association he hadn't made before and when he'd looked at the necklace, he'd been reminded of one that he'd had for almost a year now. A wolf's-head pendant.

The pendant was smaller and far more delicate than Cindy's tiger. While it still wasn't the sort of thing you'd expect a society matron to wear, it wouldn't look out of place on her daughter. He hadn't stolen that necklace, but had bought it. For a lady . . . though not for the usual reason.

He'd bought the necklace for a "sister," so to speak. Elena Michaels. A Pack werewolf with whom he'd cultivated a casual friendship. No, cultivated was the wrong word. It smacked of manipulation. While one could not say that a man who wooed women for their jewelry was any stranger to the art of manipulation, with Elena it was different—

Cindy stopped on the street corner. "So where is this bar, Kirk?"

He was sure he'd told her Kurt, his usual alias, but at this point, the point was moot. It wasn't like he planned to give her a chance to use it again anyway. Now, how to wriggle out of this without being insulting?

He looked up and down the street, as if distractedly searching for a bar. Then he jammed his hands in his pockets, sighed and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Cynthia, but . . ." He cast a look her way, eyes sliding down her black dress in a way that he hoped looked properly regretful "I can't believe I'm going to say this but . . ." . A resolute shake of his head. "No, I can't. My deepest apologies but I'm afraid I had one two many glasses of champagne in there and now, as my head clears, I'm ashamed of myself."

He glanced at her ring finger, with mega-carat engagement ring and platinum wedding band.

“You’re married,” he continued. “And this isn’t right. It was wrong of me to approach you. I offer my sincerest apologies, for what they are worth, but when I saw you out there, on the dance floor . . . I couldn’t help myself.”

That part, at least, was true.

Cindy lifted her ring finger. “This is what’s bothering you?”

“Yes, I know it seems old-fashioned but—”

She yanked off the rings and dropped them into her purse, then gave him a tight smile.

“There. Problem solved.”

“Simply concealing the fact does not change—”

“I’m separated, okay? My lousy cheating husband ran off a month ago.”

Funny, when he’d first approached her, she’d said her husband was away on business. Karl looked out over the streetscape, weighing his choices. He could call her on her lie, but did he really want to cause a scene here, on a busy corner? No. If she was determined to have her fling with a stranger, perhaps a stolen necklace would teach her the dangers of such things.

That sounded remarkably like a justification. Karl almost laughed. No matter how many times he told himself he didn’t need a justification—it was how he made his living; simple as that—his conscience couldn’t resist pitching in now and then.

He turned to Cindy. “If you’re quite sure—”

“I am,” she said, collagen-filled lips trying to form a firm line, but only succeeding in pouting.

“All right, then. I believe I saw a neighborhood pub a block over. But if you should change your mind, at any time—”

“I won’t,” she said, and strode across the street, leaving Karl to catch up.

Having apparently tired of discussing exercise—or deciding Karl needed more “stimulating” conversation—Cindy launched into a description of her latest lingerie shopping spree. Karl listened as far as “. . . and I said to the salesgirl, does it look like I need cleavage enhancement?” before letting his mind slide back to thoughts of the Pack.

With Elena gone, he stood little chance of having his request for territory heard, much less granted. Just last week, he’d had occasion to take Peter Myers, a Pack wolf, to dinner, when Peter had been passing through town. Over the meal, Karl had raised the subject of territory. Jokingly, of course, with self-depreciating jabs about his advancing age, and thoughts of retirement.

“You know Jeremy can’t do that, Karl,” Peter had said. “Territory is for Pack. It’s always been that way. But if you wanted to join the Pack, I’m sure Jeremy would consider it.”

Karl had flashed a smile. “Somehow I doubt I’m Pack material.”

“If you mean the thieving part, I don’t think it would be a problem. You’re discreet. That’s what counts.”

When Karl hadn’t answered, Peter had sighed. “Then I don’t know what to say. If any mutt was to be granted territory, it’d be you. You’re, what, forty-five? You aren’t likely to turn man-killer now. You keep your nose clean. You respect the Pack, never pick fights . . .”

“But . . .”

Peter had hesitated, then leaned forward. “Look, Karl, between you and me . . .” He’d shifted in his chair, as if uncomfortable with what he was about to say.

“Whatever you tell me, it will never get back to Jeremy.”

“Nah, that’s not what I’m worried about. I just don’t want to, you know, insult him, by speaking for him but . . .” He’d leaned forward. “Go ahead and pick a state, defend it against mutts . . . just don’t *call* it your territory. That’s the problem, see? Jeremy can’t grant you territory. It would break the Laws. And if he says yes to you, what does he say to every other mutt who ever wanted a place to call his own? Man-killers who want a safe place to kill humans with impunity. So just . . . take it. Unofficially.”

In other words, steal it. Take it, hide it and don’t let anyone else know you have it. Should be easy enough for a thief.

Karl knew Peter hadn’t meant it that way. He’d been genuinely sympathetic to Karl’s cause. That was what infuriated Karl most.

As with most people born into a class society, the Pack held fast to their “Laws” not because they necessarily agreed with them, but because that’s how they’d been raised, as had their fathers before them.

The back of his neck prickled and he slowed, eyes narrowing as he scanned the street. That sensation usually meant one thing: another werewolf nearby. Sensing them was one of the many lessons that had been a part of his childhood, along with how to live as a werewolf, how to steal, how to fight—seemingly endless lessons that he’d hated.

Karl took a deep breath, but couldn’t pick up a scent. The “radar” wasn’t perfect—sometimes any threat could set it off. More often than not, though, it meant “werewolf.”

He looked each way, sniffing. While he tried to be discreet, caution was more important than discretion, and after a moment, Cindy looked over, arched brows arching higher.

“Allergies,” he murmured.

“If you need something for it, I have a remedy in my purse.” She winked. “Top grade.”

Karl doubted she was talking about high quality allergy medication. He stifled a dart of distaste, then almost laughed. He got his pick-me-up from stealing property and he sneered at someone who got hers from illegal drugs? People in glass houses . . .

As he smiled, Cindy looked over sharply.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just realized we’re going the wrong way. Apparently, I *did* have too many glasses of that champagne.”

He looked around, searching for the source of that uneasy feeling as he pretended to be getting his bearings.

“Skip the drink,” Cindy said. “Just hail us a cab.”

Had he been his father, he would have jumped at her offer—get into a cab and get away from danger. Of course, had he been his father, he wouldn’t have been with Cindy in the first place. Burglary was his father’s method of choice—quiet burglary.

A quiet man, never raising his voice, never picking a fight, that was Josef Marsten. And, as much as Karl had loved him, he’d never been able to squelch that tiny part of him that had heard some of his father’s lessons and called him a coward. Too late he’d realized there was a difference between cowardice and caution.

Cindy looked up, her toe actually tapping the ground in impatience.

“Well?” she said. “Are you going to hail a cab or am I?”

The urge to hail one, shove her into it, and slam the door was almost overwhelming. But one of the many lessons his father had taught him was consideration for others. If you had to steal their belongings, at least you could be nice to them the rest of the time.

“The bar is just over there,” he said, gesturing toward a road they’d passed. “I promised friends I’d stop in. We’ll make it a quick visit.”

From the look she gave him, she was beginning to suspect she was being strung along. Now, if only she’d decide that was the case and return to the party . . .

“A *very* quick visit,” she said, then swiveled and stalked back the way they’d come.

As they backtracked, Karl continued sniffing, but exhaust fumes from the steady traffic drowned all other smells. He searched for men between twenty and fifty, walking alone or with companions. Yet everyone was paired off or in groups, and all with women. No werewolf hunted with a woman at his side . . . unless it was Elena, but he’d recognize her or anyone likely to be with her.

The thought of Elena brought a fresh gut-twist of frustration—reminding him that he wouldn’t have these problems if he could claim territory, and how much less likely that was to happen with Elena gone.

He shook off the feeling and continued looking and sniffing. Still he picked up nothing. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling. A predator knows when he’s being stalked.

The problem with being known as an excellent fighter was that it made you a target for werewolves looking to build their own reputations. More likely, though, this was a territorial matter—a werewolf newly moved to town, clearing the region for his temporary stay. By nature they were territorial beasts. It was also a matter of safety. If a nearby werewolf causes trouble, you don’t want to be mistaken for him when the Pack descended.

His father had a simple way to deal with the matter of shared ground. When another werewolf came near, Josef had cleared out. Only once had he stood firm . . . and had only meant to delay their departure, not avoid it.

Karl had been sixteen, and the growing wolf in him had longed to settle and defend territory. So, when his father came home to tell him to pack—yet again—Karl had used the only stalling tactic he'd known would work: he told his father he needed to Change.

Karl had been Changing for only three months—still at the stage where every one was a struggle, and control was nearly impossible. When the urge came, it couldn't be denied.

So his father had hustled him into the forest behind their motel. The problem was that Karl didn't really need to Change. He'd crouched in a thicket, grunting and panting, as he tried to think of a way to persuade his father to stand his ground, to fight the intruders.

His father had waited outside the thicket, patient as always, whispering advice and encouragement. Finally the Change had begun, but slow, taking another twenty minutes before he even reached the halfway point. Then his father had burst in, something he'd never done before. When he'd noticed Karl in the midst of his Change, he'd done something almost equally rare—sworn. He'd even cursed in English, rather than German as he usually did, as if Karl hadn't figured out the rough translation of those words years ago.

“Stay here,” he said. “Karl? Can you understand me?”

Karl grunted.

“Wait here and don't move. Understand?”

Another grunt.

His father left, bushes crackling in his wake. Karl lay on his side, half-Changed, feeling that cold prickle on his neck that told him a strange werewolf was nearby. Whomever his father had scented in town had followed them here.

He had to finished. Now. He concentrated. His limbs twitched, but that was it. With a snarl, he slammed the process into reverse. Again, only that faint twitch of response, as if his muscles were exhausted.

“Looks like you’re stuck, boy,” a rumbling voice said behind him.

He twisted around. A man’s face shone above him in the dark.

The man pushed aside the bushes. Farther away, other bushes snapped, as someone barreled through the undergrowth, coming closer.

“Malcolm!” His father’s voice, sharp with panic. “Malcolm. I’m right here.”

The branches slid back into place as the man withdrew. Karl dropped his head to the ground, screwed his eyes shut and concentrated on Changing—backward, forward, it didn’t matter, he just had to Change.

Karl dimly heard his father’s voice. “You found me, Malcolm. If it’s a challenge you want, you have it. A fair fight. Tell your posse—your friends to stand down.”

Karl smacked his hands against the ground, as if that could jump-start his Change. It was Malcolm Danvers and his “posse.” Pack werewolves. Karl had never met them—his father made sure of that. “If you have to fight, Karl, don’t be afraid to do it,” his father always said. “But there’s one exception to that rule: Malcolm Danvers. If you see him, or any of his posse, run and don’t look back.”

But now his father was disobeying his own rule. Challenging Malcolm. To protect his son.

“You want to challenge me, Marsten?” Malcolm said. “Waste of my fucking time, don’t you think? Worse than that, an embarrassment. Word gets out I bothered with a no-name like you, mutts will be laughing behind their backs.”

Marsten gritted his teeth, straining to Change.

“How about you, Wally? You want take Marsten’s challenge.”

The sound of a man spitting was the only response.

Marsten felt his limbs start to tremble as the Change began. They lengthened, reverting to human form. Wolf would have been better, but this would do.

“Ray?” Malcolm called.

The Change came fast, so fast he missed Raymond’s response and was back to human before Malcolm spoke again.

“Well, Marsten, seems we have a problem. No one cares to take you up on that challenge. What do you suggest we do about that?”

“Let me go, Malcolm. My boy and I—we’re no threat to you.”

“No? You’re mutts. That’s threat enough.”

Karl flew to the edge of the thicket and pulled back the branches just in time to see Malcolm leap on his father. His father’s eyes went wide, and his fist swung back, but Malcolm’s hands were already around his neck. A wrench. A dull snap.

Marsten heard a low whimper. As the men turned, he realized the sound came from him. He watched his father’s body slump to the ground, then turned on Malcolm Danvers, his whimper hardening to a warning growl.

Malcolm laughed. “At least someone in the family has balls. Looking for revenge, pup? Come and get it.”

Karl was about to fly from the thicket. Then he looked into Malcolm’s eyes, and understood what his father had meant. This wasn’t a man he could fight. Someday, maybe. But this was one time when he’d have to take his father advice. He pulled back, as if preparing to leap, then turned sharp and—

“I thought you said it was down this road,” Cindy snapped.

“Road?”

“The one you’re walking across!”

A horn blast shattered the last of Karl’s reverie, and he found himself in the middle of the street, crossing against the lights. Behind him, Cindy was toe-tapping again. She was making an odd face, too. Presumably a scowl, but her surgically-smoothed features weren’t cooperating.

“Are you drunk?” she said as he stepped back onto the curb.

No, but I wish to hell I was.

“I’m so sorry—” he began.

“Stop apologizing. God, I hate that. People who say they’re sorry, then keep doing the same thing, as if apologizing makes it okay.”

She had a point, an unexpectedly astute one. At any other time, he’d have latched onto that, some sign that she wasn’t as inane as she appeared. But tonight . . .

He sighed. “Cindy, I’m sor—” A weak smile as he stopped himself. “No, I won’t say that, but the sentiment is sincere enough. This isn’t working out. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Perhaps my allergy medicine reacting with alcohol but—”

He stopped, body tensing as the faintest scent of a werewolf drifted past. A werewolf he recognized. In his mind he saw the scene of his father’s death again, and looked past Malcolm to the red-haired man beside him. Raymond Santos. But that couldn’t be. Raymond was dead. He’d seen to it himself.

After years of honing his fighting skills, Karl had been cheated. He’d sworn revenge against the Pack, only to have Malcolm and his posse leave the group, as Malcolm’s son, Jeremy, took the reins of leadership. So Karl had turned his attention to Malcolm himself. Then, just as he’d

been about to declare himself ready for the confrontation, another mutt had killed the aging champion. Wally Santos was long dead, killed by the Pack. So only Raymond remained. Karl had taken out Raymond, but had gotten no satisfaction from the kill—hadn't even taken credit for it.

“You're completely out of it, aren't you?” Cindy said, sympathy creeping into her voice. “Don't you read the medicine bottles? Never take allergy stuff with alcohol.” She sighed. “At least let me take you back to your apartment before you walk in front of a bus.”

“I can—”

“Hello, Karl.”

Karl wheeled and saw Raymond Santos standing behind him. Before he could react, the man stepped from the shadow of the overhang.

“Daniel,” he said. Daniel Santos. Raymond's youngest son.

“Bit jumpy there, old man,” Daniel said, flashing his teeth in a smile.

His mind still clouded by memories, Karl was certain Daniel had somehow learned who'd killed his father all those years ago, and had come to take revenge. He saw Daniel's grin, sharp and dangerous, eyes glinting with that taint of cruelty he'd inherited from his father and uncle. Yet, as smug and nasty as Daniel's smile was, there was nothing malevolent in it.

“What do you want, Daniel?”

“To talk. Got an offer you can't refuse.”

He continued to grin. Arrogant, smarmy little bastard. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

“Kirk?” Cindy said. “Who's your friend?”

“He’s no—” Karl turned to Cindy. “It’s time for you to go home. Here, I’ll call you a cab.”

“No need for that, *Kirk*,” Daniel said, gaze sliding over Cindy. “We could use a little female companionship.”

If what Elena had told him was right, Daniel had developed a taste for satisfying three of his werewolf hungers at once—violence, food and sex . . . not necessarily in that order. Seeing the look he was giving Cindy, Karl believed it.

He turned to Cindy. “Go home.”

“But—”

“Go home now!”

As he snarled, Cindy backpedaled. He resisted the urge to apologize, to pull the mask of civility back in place. After a moment, she turned and hurried off into the night.

“Now why’d you go and—” Daniel began.

“You want to talk to me? Talk. Then I’ll give you ten minutes to get out of this city.”

“You’re in a pissy mood tonight, Karl. Didn’t get what you wanted?” Daniel cast a smirk at Cindy’s fast retreating back. “Don’t worry. I think I have something you’ll like even better. I hear you aren’t making much headway getting territory from the Pack.”

“Who—?”

“With Elena gone, you don’t have a hope in hell. Not that you ever did. Jeremy Danvers plays a shrewd game, pretending mutts have more power under him than we did before, but we don’t really, do we? He might not hunt mutts like his old man but—” Daniel shrugged. “Blood will tell, won’t it?”

The apple never falls far from the tree. In this one case, Karl didn't want to believe that. And yet . . . Look at him. Look at Daniel. Not replicas of their fathers, yet lessons learned from their fathers ran deep.

When Karl looked at Daniel, he felt disgust and distrust. Not the traits one seeks in a potential partner. And yet . . . Daniel was a clever man. Ruthless and clever. Perhaps he had a plan Karl could use. Probably not. But there was no reason not to hear him out.

"One drink," he said.

Ghosts

I sat in the study, listening to the silence of the empty house. Antonio and Nick were right outside the window, on the patio, but even their muted whispers didn't disturb the hush. Clayton and Elena had only been gone a few hours, but the house had already settled into hibernation, waiting for their return.

Every now and then, I'd catch echoes of a voice raised in anger, joy, frustration, laughter—always raised. Every footstep was a pound or a stomp, as they barreled through doorways, sprawled across sofas and carpets, their presence so loud I could hear it in the walls when they were gone.

Gone.

Temporarily, I tell myself. I should think of it as a respite—a few days to rest and plan before their return invasion. God, let there be a return—

There will be. This was for the best, and they'd return from Toronto safe and together, and this threat would be annihilated, our dead vindicated, and every corner of the house will boom with those shouts and footsteps until I retreat to my studio, and wonder why I didn't enjoy the peace while it lasted.

I hate the silence.

I loved it once, during those barren, blessedly short years between my grandfather's death and Clayton's arrival. Silence then truly did mean peace, that my father was gone again and I could relax. But then Clayton came, and Elena . . . and it was never quiet again.

I turned from the window and, for a second, time stuttered and I was standing here, in this same pose, eleven years ago. Elena was on the couch, smiling the first genuine smile I'd seen from the nervous, confused young woman who'd appeared on my doorstep with Clay the day before.

She's sitting there, smiling at something across the room. I turn, and see a giant golden wolf slinking into the room. For a moment, it doesn't register—Clay here, as a wolf, in this setting, the pieces don't connect and it takes a moment to realize it is him. By then, it's too late. His teeth sink into her hand, and one thought fills my brain: this is my fault.

I know it wasn't my fault—not entirely, though I do share some of the blame, as we all do. But as I see him bite her, I feel the gut-punch of guilt for not seeing this coming, for not having understood months ago what was happening in his life.

I hadn't seen the truth because I'd been too busy worrying about what his change in mood portended. I'd seen him drifting away, and it had terrified me, specters of a silent, ghost-filled house rising. I'd told myself that I was happy for him, hating the selfish pit of grief in my gut every time I thought of him leaving.

I turned from the window.

“Jer?”

For a moment, I stood frozen, caught between times. Then Antonio called again from outside the window. I knew what he wanted. To do what we were supposed to be doing now

that Clay and Elena were gone—plotting a way to end this threat. Yet I wasn't ready. Not ready to get down to business, and not ready to face him.

I'd suggested sending Nick to Toronto with them. Antonio refused. We needed him here. So I hadn't pushed. I should have pushed. My family, my "children," were gone, tucked out of harm's way . . . and his son remained.

He'd refused my suggestion—that was the logical thing, and Antonio put logic first, emotion second. He hadn't always been like that. A self-taught life lesson, and a harsh one. Given the chance to send Nick away from this, his heart would have leapt with eagerness. But his brain had said no—we need the extra fighter. I should have pushed. Insisted.

"I'll be out in a moment," I said, not moving closer to the window, speaking where I couldn't see them. "I'll just switch the laundry over and bring out some lunch."

He started to answer, probably to say the laundry could wait—which it could—and even lunch could be postponed, under the circumstances, but I was already out of the room.

I headed down to the basement. As I passed the cage, soft crying followed me, slowing my steps. I turned, but of course there was no one inside. Just ghosts. The crying stopped, muffled by a snuffle, hands swiping away tears, throat unclogging in a cough.

"Jer—Jeremy." My name came awkwardly from her lips, as if she'd prefer not to use it, to call me something more formal, keep that distance between us: captor and captive. "Can I come out please?"

I walked faster. I hadn't walked away back then. I'd stayed and tried to reason with her, knowing how ludicrous that was—insisting on applying the dictates of reason to what must have been, for her, sheer madness. She'd come to meet her fiancé's family, and now found herself locked in a basement cage, changing into a wolf every few nights, her lover banished, the keys to

her dungeon held by a stranger who insisted she be *reasonable*, of all things. I could not begin to imagine what those few months must have been like for her. But I'd get a taste of it soon enough.

I made it as far as the laundry room before the next ghost called out to me, still from that damnable cage.

“Jer? Jer, please. Let me go with you. I'll find her. I'll make it up to her. She'll understand. Just let me talk to her.”

That time I *had* turned away. I had to. Bolted up the stairs two at a time, hearing Clayton's pleas turn to shouts then screams as he begged me to let him help me find Elena. Upstairs, I'd packed a bag and left. Left before I turned around, marched down those stairs and screamed back at him, vented all my frustration and rage and helplessness on him.

My throat had itched to say the words—to shout them—to make as much noise as he did for once. Why had he opened that cage door and let her out? Did he think me a monster, locking her up? I'd had no choice. He'd left me no choice.

He'd bitten this girl and I was the one who had to listen to her sob, rage, scream until she had no voice left and, worse of all, cry quietly in the corner, calling his name when she thought no one was listening. I had to restrain her during her Changes, fight her, bear her bites and scratches, but none of them more painful than that look of utter terror on her face as she watched her body change forms.

Still, that wasn't why she was in the cage. I could deal with the rages and the fits. But she wasn't weak or foolish enough to listen to this stranger, to simply lie down and let the madness envelop her. She fought not just me, but this life and every time she thought I wasn't watching, she tried to escape.

That's why I locked her up: because I knew if she made it away from this place, she'd find true hell. Bitten werewolves rarely survived. Clay had, but only because he was a child—a bright, resourceful and, most importantly, accepting child. He'd accepted what he was and dealt with it. Elena could not accept. Who could blame her? Turned into something that, in her world, existed only in nightmares and horror films. And made that way, not by a stranger or an enemy, but by the man she'd entrusted her life and future to.

While I'd been out, Clay had snuck back, hoping to explain—as if such a thing could ever be explained—hoping to make amends, and he'd opened the door that kept her safe. The moment it opened, she'd attacked, knocking him out, locking him in and running. Now she was about to discover that this nightmare wasn't one you woke up from, nor one you could leave behind by simply fleeing the madhouse.

I'd never considered taking Clayton with me to find Elena. Just as I hadn't considered forcing him to stay and help mend what he'd broken. After the bite, I'd been so furious, I'd inflicted the worst punishment I could imagine on him: banishment. Later, when Antonio suggested I let him come back, so he could truly see the damage he'd wrought, I refused. By then, any thoughts of punishing him had passed, and I cared only about healing Elena. Having him around would only remind her of his betrayal.

So when he begged to come with me, I'd refused.

It took a few days to find Elena. She'd returned to Toronto. As for how she made the trek with no money—I hadn't wanted to think about that. Once I arrived in the city, tracking her down had been more a matter of patience than skill. I'd tried to do it the “logical” way—returned to her school, found her apartment, even located a couple of friends, but she'd visited none of them.

After a few days of tail-chasing, the answer came to me, as I knew it would. I was eating dinner, having skipped lunch, so hungry that, for the first time since she'd escaped, I'd been too intent on something else to worry. Then, as I sat there, I knew where she was. Just knew, as if picking up a beacon.

Holding onto that beacon wasn't easy—it wavered and faded, and seemed to slip away a few times. I tried too hard, as I always do. The strange connection I have to my Pack is a fragile, difficult thing, rarely coming when I need it, and always threatening to leave before I'm done with it. It was like being given a complex piece of equipment with no manual—I fumbled and experimented and, sometimes, it worked.

Eventually, I found Elena.

When I did, I wished I'd brought Clay along. He should have seen her there, cowering in the shadows, driven half-mad by her Changes, and the horror of what she'd done under their influence, starving and brain-fevered. Then he would have truly seen what *he* had done.

In that moment, I wanted him there. But later, I'm not sure I could have made that choice. Would it have forced him to understand? Or would it have broken him?

I pulled myself from my memories, switched the laundry and headed back upstairs, hurrying past the cage, now as silent as the rest of the house.

Empty.

Had I been right to send them away? I could have used their help. Yet how much help would Clay be, knowing Elena was a target? And how much help was she, still burning to avenge Logan? Passion can enflame a warrior to greatness, but if the flames burn too hot, they consume common sense. Plus, there were greater things to consider.

Choice can be an impossible thing. A leader must be decisive. Yet how can anyone with foresight, hindsight and the ability to link the two ever truly be decisive? You see the mistakes of the past, and the possible outcomes of your decision on the future, and no choice can ever be absolutely right.

Even decisions that seem blatantly obvious can have ramifications you never imagined.

As a young man—and even before that—I saw problems with the Pack, particularly in the way they treated non-Pack werewolves, down to the derogatory term they used for them: mutts. To a modern, Westernized human, our class system and rules would seem abhorrent. Yet even I realized we could never live by human standards of equality. A class system is hardwired in our brains. We are truly half wolf, and we understand wolf ways best—living in a hierarchical society based on power, territory and survival of the fittest.

To undermine that would be suicide—any Alpha who tried a more democratic way would be overthrown. If the Pack didn't do it, the outside werewolves—the supposed benefactors of those reforms—would. They'd sense weakness and seize power. That was just our way.

Yet reform was necessary—not just for humanitarian reasons, but for practical ones. It made sense to stop indiscriminately killing non-Pack werewolves and target only those who posed a threat. It made sense to open a dialogue with them, not directly, but through a delegate who'd speak on the Alpha's behalf. It made sense to treat them—if not as equals—at least as fellow beings worthy of our notice and even our protection.

But had those simple, obviously sensible changes been interpreted as weakness? Were my choices responsible for the situation we now found ourselves in? Would these werewolves have risen up against the Pack if Dominic was still Alpha? Perhaps not, but I would not let that change my decisions—I was resolute on that point.

What I had to do instead was prove that, despite the changes, there was no weakness. I had to slap down this threat with all the force and finality Dominic would have used. And if that failed? A good leader always has a backup plan, and in sending away Clayton and Elena, I'd launched mine.

I walked into the kitchen, and found Antonio and Nick making sandwiches.

"Five minutes, and we'll be eating," Antonio said.

Nick glanced at the microwave clock. "Their plane should have landed by now."

"Elena will call," I said.

I wiped a trail of mustard Antonio had splattered. He made a face, telling me he would have gotten it, but I just kept cleaning. It gave me something to do.

"You sent them to Elena's apartment, right?" Nick asked. "Where she was living with that guy."

I nodded. "Perhaps not the wisest—"

"No, it's good." A small laugh. "*I* wouldn't want to be there, but maybe it'll help. Give Elena a chance to see her choices better. And show Clay she's really thinking of moving on—not just screwing around to piss him off. He has to shape up."

All three of us nodded, though I'm sure we were all thinking the same thing, that Clay might not be able to "shape up," at least not in any way significant enough to overcome what he'd done.

"They'll work it out," Nick said as his father handed him a tray of sandwiches. "Just watch. Imagine how much mileage I'll get out of this one—reminding them of the time I helped put down the mutt revolt, risking my life to save theirs, while they were holed up in Canada having a honeymoon."

Antonio waved him from the kitchen. I watched him leave. When the door closed, I turned to Antonio.

“He should go after them. If Elena’s a target, she needs protect—”

“That’s why Clay’s with her.” He took the dishrag from my hand and pitched it into the sink. “If you really thought there was a risk of them following Elena, you wouldn’t have sent her away.”

“It’s a possibility—”

“So is a plane crash. Or a nuclear attack. They won’t follow her, Jer. Sending her away was a precaution and a strategy. When Daniel and his gang realize Clay and Elena are missing, they’ll smell an ambush. While they’re watching their backs, we strike from the front.”

I nodded.

“Good plan, right?” he said. “Of course it is. It’s yours. Remember that. Now let’s get outside and put some meat on our bones while we flesh out this skeleton of a plan.”

As I took a pitcher of water from the fridge, I noticed something on the floor. One of Elena’s hair bands. I reached down and picked it up.

Antonio shook his head. “I don’t even want to ask why that’s there. Let’s just hope they wiped off the counter afterward.”

I turned the band over in my hand. Long hairs still clung to it, as if it had been yanked out and tossed aside.

“They’re coming back, Jer.”

“I know they are.”

He walked over, took the band and met my gaze. “And we’re going to be here when they do.”

I looked into his eyes. He knew. Of course he did. Yes, I'd had good reasons to send Elena and Clay away. Very good reasons, and I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't. But there was one added advantage that had made me quick to decide when the question arose.

An Alpha must put the well-being of the Pack first. At all times. At all costs. Each individual member within that Pack must be protected, but an Alpha's priority is the Pack itself, as an entity, as a construct. If no members of the Pack remain, the Pack ceases to exist. I cannot allow that. Ever.

"They're coming back," Antonio said again. "And we'll be here to see it. That's the plan."

I gave a small smile. "It's a good plan."

"Of course it is." He slapped my back. "Now get outside and make it work."

Escape

I concentrated on the mirrored wall. One-way glass—the good stuff, not the kind they have in cop shops, where you can press your face against it and see through. Seeing through this type required a special talent. A demonic talent. I slitted my eyes. The mirror blurred, then the other side came into focus, wobbly and distorted, like looking at it from underwater.

Straight across from me was another cell. Inside, a man watched television, his back to me. Dark-skinned and dread-locked. A supernatural of some kind. What kind didn't concern me. Not yet.

I peered down the hall. More cells. More people inside. At the end of the corridor was the exit door, complete with a flashing red light and some fancy fingerprint reading machine. Damn. Well, what did I expect? A wide-open door with a neon “escape here” sign?

“See anything, mom?” Savannah whispered behind me.

“Not yet. But don't you worry. I have a plan.”

And I would. As soon as I thought of one. Savannah sat on the bed, legs crossed, reading a teen magazine given to her by the bitch whose flunkies had tossed us in here. What was her name? Baker? No, Bauer. Sondra Bauer. Perfect suit, perfect hair, perfectly phony smile. Oh

dear, I'm so sorry we had to kidnap you, little girl, here's a nice magazine to make it better.

When I got hold of her, that smile wouldn't be nearly so perfect.

Savannah returned to her reading, as carefree as if she'd been sitting on her bed at home. She knew I'd get her out. She trusted me.

If only I'd made Savannah go to school today . . .

She hadn't been sick. Any normal mom would have made her go. But I wasn't normal, never pretended to be. As a kid, I'd hated school—used to fake sick at least once a week to avoid it. The first time Savannah did this, I'd made a decision. I could do what my mother had done—draw up a list of sick day requirements: temperature over 101, vomiting, rash, broken bones, blah, blah, blah. Or I could toss the parenting books out the window and do things my way. So I made a deal with Savannah. She got three “home” days a year, and could use them whenever she wanted, without needing a reason. Today she'd decided to use her one. And at ten o'clock, a team of armed commandos posing as cops busted down our front door.

They'd come for me, and only me. If I'd made Savannah go to school today, she wouldn't be here. Hell, if I'd made her go to school, I wouldn't be here. First bastard that had come through that door caught an energy bolt in his gut. And the second one? He'd been smarter. He'd ducked past his dying partner, grabbed Savannah and stuck a gun to her head. End of fight.

As for blaming Savannah's home day for our being here, that was bullshit. Me and my life choices were the reason my twelve-year-old daughter was in an underground cell, held captive by psychos who wanted to conduct god-knows what kind of experiments on her.

If Savannah had a normal mother, she wouldn't have even been in school in August. But two unexpected relocations that spring had nearly made her fail seventh grade, so I'd enrolled

her in a four-week “academic summer camp” to catch up. As for why we’d relocated, that was my fault. The fault of my life choices.

I’d always known my life wasn’t kid-friendly. Never planned to have any. But plans and reality don’t always mix. When I found out I was pregnant, I’d never considered ending it. Never thought of giving her away either. Adoption wasn’t an option for a kid with witch, sorcerer and demon blood. She was mine, and from the moment I felt that first kick, I knew she was mine for good.

I’d known too that I’d needed a serious life-makeover. So I’d stopped making my living using the dark arts, and turned to teaching them. I’d kept Savannah out of that part of my life, and kept everyone in that part of my life out of hers. I thought that’d be good enough. Bullshit. I’d told myself that’d be good enough; I’d known it wasn’t.

Everyone who knew me said my life revolved around my daughter, that I was the best damned parent they’d ever seen. I knew better. A real mother would have changed, really changed, become someone, if not good, then good enough. Instead of ducking into the shadows with my little girl, I’d marched onto the supernatural world center stage, building an unparalleled reputation as a teacher of the dark arts. I’d always thought that reputation would protect Savannah. And it had. Until someone decided they wanted to capture the best witch they could find. And whose name topped the list? Eve Levine, black witch and Aspicio half-demon.

So this was my fault, and all my learning and all my power hadn’t been able to protect my daughter. But I’d fix that now.

“Savannah? You were awake when they brought us in, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can you tell me what you saw?”

She tossed the magazine aside. “Sure.”

Savannah told me everything she remembered, right down to descriptions of the guards. That’s my girl. Always watching, always learning. I’d been drugged, but no one had even bothered to blindfold Savannah. She was only a child. Defenseless and harmless.

Once she’d given me a layout from our cell to the front door, I came up with a plan. I told Savannah her part, but left out my own. Parent-child honesty is all very well in its place, but there are some things no kid needs to hear.

“So I run?” Savannah said. “That’s it?”

“That’s all you need to do, baby. When I give the sign, you run like hell.”

“I’m not a little kid, mom. I can help. What about that confusion spell?”

“Any time you spend casting it is time you don’t spend running. If something goes really wrong, use it. But if you’re only stopped by one person, use the binding spell. Then keep running. Now, if you get out of this place and I’m not there—”

“But you will be there.”

“Savannah . . .”

“Fine. If I get in trouble, I call Melissa, and she takes me to the Coven.”

“And who do you contact in the Coven?”

“Mom, we’ve been through this a zillion times. Ever since I was in preschool. Nothing’s ever going to happen to you, so I don’t know why—”

“Humor me, baby. Please.”

“I call Ruth Winterbourne, leader of the Coven. I don’t know why you’d want me going to them anyway. You hate the Coven.”

“Yes, but I trust Ruth. You call Ruth and only Ruth. Don’t speak to anyone else until you’ve talked to Ruth. Not even your Aunt Margaret.”

“I don’t know my Aunt Margaret.”

“Which is why you’re not going to speak to her. She’s not a bad person, just stupid, so forget her, and go straight to Ruth. If Ruth’s not there . . .” I hesitated. “Paige. Yes, you could talk to Paige. She must be at least eighteen now. Shit, no, she’d be older than that. Perfect. If Ruth isn’t there or you can’t find her, then talk to her daughter, Paige.”

Savannah shrugged and picked up her magazine.

“Savannah . . .”

“I got it,” she muttered. “If Ruth isn’t there, talk to Paige. Doesn’t matter anyway. You’re not going anywhere.”

“It’s just a precaution. I want—”

“Fine. I know what to do, okay?”

She paused, and looked away, shoulders tense.

“It’s going to be okay, baby,” I said softly.

She nodded, then after another moment, her shoulders relaxed and she turned back to me.

“Do you think we’ll be out of here before tomorrow? I’ve got a math test tomorrow, and I haven’t studied.”

I laughed and ruffled her hair. “Can’t imagine why not. Now there’s a note for your teachers. ‘Please excuse Savannah from today’s test. She was kidnapped at gunpoint yesterday and was unable to study.’”

Savannah grinned. “Mr. Parks always says he’s heard every excuse in the book, but I bet he hasn’t heard that one.”

“I bet you’re right. We are getting out of here today, but I promise you don’t need to go to school tomorrow. We’ll go home and spend the day studying in our jammies, okay?”

“And order pizza?”

I smiled. “We’ll order whatever you want.”

I did need to get Savannah out that day, and it had nothing to do with math tests. I had no idea what these bastards had in mind for us. Some kind of science experiments, that’s all I knew, and only because I’d overheard something like that before they’d knocked me out. I couldn’t wait until a good escape opportunity jumped up and bit me in the ass. By then, they might have moved Savannah out of my cell . . . or worse.

I wanted to put my plan into action when the guard came with our dinner, but he was too short. Stupid excuse, huh? Not for this plan. When he mentioned something about the night shift guard bringing our bedtime snack, I decided to wait. At eight o’clock, the door lock clicked. I scooted Savannah into bed and tossed a blanket over her. She closed her eyes and faked sleep.

The guard stepped in. An inch or so over six feet tall. Yep, that’d do. When you’re just a hair under six feet yourself, you need to consider these things more than any five-foot-five woman could ever imagine. I also lounged back against the table, which made me shorter. Hate doing that, but sometimes it helps.

As the guard laid the snack tray beside me, his gaze traveled up the length of my jeans, paused at my chest, then continued up to my face and met my eyes with a barely concealed grin of admiration. I considered a coy smile and soft blush. Might have worked . . . if I had the

faintest idea how to do either. Instead, I met his gaze full on, then gave him an equally thorough once-over, and smiled. His grin burst through.

“Settling in okay?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Well enough.”

I let my gaze slide to Savannah. His followed.

“Cute kid,” he said. “Seems to be doing pretty good herself, sleeping soundly and all.”

Another shrug. “Scared, but holding up.”

I walked to Savannah, bent over and tucked her in better. The guard’s gaze planted itself on my ass and stayed there until I straightened. When I turned, I looked around the cell.

“Is this place bugged?” I whispered.

“Nah. Sometimes they’ll sit in the hall and listen through the intercom, but that’s it.” He glanced out the open door, into the empty hall. “Look, I know this is tough and all, but you’ll be okay. No one wants to hurt you. Just don’t give them any reason to.”

I crossed half the distance between us. “It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“The girl? Oh, I’m sure they’ll treat her okay.”

I took another two steps toward him then veered and circled behind him. “But how can I be sure? I want to be sure”

He turned and nearly bumped into me. I stood my ground, close enough to feel his clothes brushing mine. He didn’t step back.

“We could . . . arrange something,” he said.

I met his gaze. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

His hand reached behind me and slid over my ass. I glanced at Savannah.

“Right,” he said. “Maybe we should . . .” He looked toward the hall.

“Any video cameras out there?” I asked.

“Nah. Nothing like that.”

“So where do you hang out when you’re on duty?”

“Guard station, right outside the door.”

“Got a partner?”

“Not on night shift.”

“Let’s go then.”

He grinned and led me from the cell.

On the other side of the main exit, I peeked back. As Savannah had said, the door locked from the inside only. Beside the door was the skeleton of some kind of security panel, as if they’d thought about putting one in, and changed their minds, or hadn’t got around to hooking it up yet. The guard station was on my right. To my left the hallway circled around. According to Savannah, the elevator—and the only way out—was down that hall.

I hooked my fingers through the guard’s belt loops, swiveled around and backed into the guard station, tugging him in after me. He started to shut the door, then stopped.

“Better leave it open,” he said. “You hear the elevator, you let me know.”

“I will.” I pressed myself against him, lips a quarter-inch from his. “Now, how do you want to do this? We can make out for a while, maybe chat a bit, get to know each other before we get down to business. Or—” I met his gaze. “—we can skip that, and I’ll get on my knees and get to work.”

A sharp intake of breath. Then a broad grin. “Hell, yes.”

“Thought you might like that.”

I flipped open his belt, and undid his button and zipper as he grinned like a kid who’s been given dessert before dinner.

“Uh, not to spoil things, babe, but just so you know, this isn’t a one shot deal. I don’t mind helping you with your kid, but one blow job isn’t going to do it.”

“Didn’t expect it would. Are you on night shift all the time?”

“For the next two weeks.”

“Good, then for the next two weeks, after my daughter’s asleep, you come get me and you tell me what you want.”

His grin returned, broader than ever. “Anything I want?”

“Anything.” I looked up at him. “I’ll do anything to keep her safe.”

“Works for me, babe.”

I lowered my head, letting my long hair fall forward and mask my face. As I pretended to move in for the main attraction, I whispered an incantation. When I stopped, his cock wasn’t the only part of him that was stiff.

I stood. Trapped in a binding spell, the guard could do nothing but stare at me, his eyes oozing panic.

“Didn’t your mother ever warn you about things that sound too good to be true?” I said.

I looked down at the gun in his holster. Too loud. This required magic. My energy bolt was damned good—and fast—but not always immediately fatal. I didn’t have time to screw around, or take the chance that he’d break the binding spell and call for help.

I cast another spell, this one aloud. An ice spell. His neck froze. His eyes rolled in agony. I grabbed a heavy-duty stapler from the desk, unfolded it and tested the heft in my hand. Then I swung the stapler and caught him in the jaw.

His frozen neck shattered, head lolling back. I dropped the stapler, grabbed the gun from his fallen body and ran into the corridor. Then I stopped, stepped backward, and closed the door to the guard station before I returned to the cell for Savannah.

I led Savannah past the closed guard station door. We were just about to round the corner when the elevator thudded down.

“Shit!” I wheeled and pushed Savannah aside. “Stay there, and don’t move.”

I cast a cover spell on her, then I hurried to the corner, and peered around it. The elevator doors opened. Two guards stepped off, one talking, the other laughing. I cast a energy bolt at the first and a quick knockback spell on the second. The second guard flew backward into the elevator as the first let out a yelp and thudded down, face first. Another cast, this time a binding spell on the second.

The elevator doors started to close. As I raced down the hall to stop them, the second guard stepped into the gap. The doors bounced off him and opened. I front-kicked the guard back into the elevator, then hit him with a binding spell.

I bent to check the first guard. Dead. Good. I pulled his legs into the doorway, so they’d keep the doors open. As I did, my binding spell snapped and the other guard jumped to his feet. He pulled his gun. I recast the binding spell. My heart was thumping like a racehorse’s and I

knew I couldn't concentrate hard enough to hold the binding spell for long. I wrapped my hands around the guard's.

"Mom?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Savannah peered around the corner. I released the guard's neck, kicked him back into the elevator car, then hit him with an energy bolt. His eyes went wide, like someone touching a live wire. But he didn't fall. I hit him with another, and down he went. Then I dragged him out of the elevator and ran back for Savannah. I took her by the arm, then invoked another of my *Aspicio* powers.

"Mom!" she hissed. "I can't see!"

"I know."

"I hate it when you do this. I'm not a little kid. I—"

"Less talking, more running," I whispered.

I led her to the elevator, steering her around the dead guards. Once inside, I pushed the first guard out of the doorway.

"First floor, right?" I said.

"Second. We came in the second."

I pressed the button and un-blinded her.

"Now, when the doors open, you stand here and keep pushing the 'open' button, while I—"

"Clear the way. I know."

The elevator stopped on the second floor. I ducked my head out, looked both ways, then stepped out. Savannah said the exit was to the left. I glanced back at her, making sure she was doing as I'd asked, then slipped down the hallway.

I got within a yard of the corner when a guard sauntered around it. He stopped, startled, then reached for his gun. I slammed a right-hook into his jaw. He staggered back. A knee jab to the gut sent him down. As I readied an energy bolt to finish him, footsteps sound behind me.

“Savannah!” I hissed. “Stay—”

I spun to see, not my daughter, but a guard, a dozen feet behind me, gun raised, finger already pulling the trigger. A crack and a flare. And a single thought screamed through my brain.

Oh, shit.

WEDDING BELL HELL

Countdown: 3 weeks

Cross-legged on the bed, I stared at the white blanket of papers around us.

I leafed through the stack in my hand. “Roses, carnations or orchids? Chicken, fish or beef? A play-list, guest requests or a mix of both? Photos inside, out or off-site? Rent a limo, car or use our own.”

I threw the papers up and letting them drift down around me. “We rented the hall, reserved the chapel, picked caterers and florists and photographers and DJs . . . and still the work never stops. Isn’t that what we hired all these people for?”

I looked over at the page Lucas was studying. “What’s that one for? Valet parking, self-serve or minibuses?”

“Matchbooks.”

“Match—? What do we need matchbooks for? To light the centerpieces?”

“No, as I recall, we have yet to reach the critical ‘table arrangement’ decision.”

“Candles. Just stick some candles . . . or maybe the goldfish bowls Savannah wants. Or your mom’s disposable camera idea, to get some candid shots—”

I slapped my palms to my temples and thumped back onto the bed. Lucas rubbed my bare feet. After a moment, I peeked through my fingers.

“Do I even want to know about the matchbooks?”

“Probably not.”

“Procrastinate, and we’ll only have more work later. Let’s get it over with.”

“Well, it appears that commemorative matchbooks were included in the cost of our wedding invitation package.”

“Oh? Bonus. Okay, then, now onto the next order of—”

He lifted his hand from my foot, finger rose. “Not so quickly, I’m afraid. We need to decide what we want the matchbooks to say.”

“Oh, I don’t care. Paige and Lucas. Lucas and Paige. Whichever. Then the date. There, on to—”

“Color.”

“Color of—?”

“The matchbook and the text. We also need to select a typeface. And artwork. Plus, they’d like to know if, for an extra hundred dollars—”

“—we can cancel the damned matchbooks altogether?”

He chuckled and resumed my foot massage. I let myself enjoy it before pushing onto my elbows.

“You realize there’s only one answer.”

“To which question?”

“All of them.”

He arched his brows.

“Elopement,” I said.

He shifted closer to me, carefully moving the papers aside as he did. “If you really want—”

“We can’t. Your mother—”

“Has already said it’s our choice. Yes, she’d like a church wedding but, having found someone actually willing to marry me, she’s not about to quibble over the specifics.”

“But she’d be disappointed. And your father wouldn’t forgive us.”

“Which, one could argue, is all the reason we need to elope.”

I play-punched his leg. “You don’t mean that. Things are going very well with your father—far better than I even expected. He wants us to get married and, while that does cause me moments of heart-pounding ‘there’s gotta be a catch’ dread, at this point, I don’t care. If a church wedding makes him happy, it’s a small price to pay.” I lifted the ledger where we were tracking our wedding budget. “Well, not a *small* price, but worthwhile.”

Still holding the ledger, I glanced over at Lucas. “He still letting us run the show, right? Hasn’t insisted on paying again?”

Lucas shook his head. “Just general ‘if the costs get to be too much . . .’ reminders that he—and his checkbook—are available.”

“And . . . nothing else, right? No advice, no suggestions . . .?”

“None.”

“Which worries you.”

“Terrifies me.” He forced a small smile. “But perhaps he realizes this is one area where his interference wouldn’t be welcome.” He paused. “And, in the more likely event that he’s simply lying low, plotting his mode of attack, we have the backup plan.”

I grinned. “We do, indeed. Now, onto the next life-or-death matter.” I flourished a page. “Rubber chicken, dried-out beef or fish that hasn’t seen water in weeks . . .”

Countdown: 1 week

Savannah and I were out front planting mums for fall. I wasn’t much of a gardener, but I figured, as a homeowner in a neighborhood with magazine-ready gardens, I should at least make some effort.

“I wouldn’t,” Savannah said, as I explained why we were out here. “If you can’t compete, don’t join the race, my mom always said. Better a spectator than a loser.”

“Dig,” I said, pointing.

“And like you have time for this crap. What’s more important? Saving the world from evil or having a pretty garden? It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s ‘fitting in.’ Now dig.”

A horn honked, and I looked up to see a sporty little black car pulling to the curb, window passenger window sliding down. Leaning over from the driver’s seat was a tall woman in her late forties, her dark hair short and stylishly tousled, broad grin lighting up an unexceptional face.

“You girls look busy,” she called.

“Maria.”

I smiled, and stripped off my dirty gloves. Savannah tossed her trowel onto the sidewalk, and bounded over, arms wide.

“Gra—” she began.

“Don’t you dare,” Maria said, raising a warning finger.

“One more week, and you’re a grandmother. Do you prefer Gran or Granny?”

She hip-checked me out of the way, then opened the passenger door and climbed in.

As Maria eased the car into the driveway, I grabbed my trowel, and gloves and followed, catching up as they were getting out of the car. When Savannah headed for the back door, I stepped into her path.

“Maria’s suitcases are still in the car,” I said.

Savannah sighed and gestured for Maria to pop the trunk.

Maria hesitated, key fob raised. “Are you sure about this Paige? I can’t image a bride-to-be wanting her future mother-in-law moving in for the week before the wedding. I can stay at a hotel—just drive in to help and—”

“And waste precious time traveling? We have a lot to do. Stay here. Please.”

She smiled and gave me a one-armed hug as she popped open the trunk.

As we headed inside, Savannah was still razzing Maria about becoming grandmother. It was a dubious connection—her son marrying Savannah’s guardian—but Maria never pointed that out, just emphatically declared that she was far too young to be the grandmother to a teenager.

“But I’ve never had a grandmother,” Savannah said, making sad puppy eyes at Maria as we cut through the kitchen. “You wouldn’t deprive me of that, would you? My one chance for a grandparent?”

“Tell you what, if you call Benicio grandpa, we have a deal.”

Savannah paused. “Maybe I will . . .”

Maria laughed as we walked into the living room. “Now *that*, I have to see. Oh, and if we’re to be grandparents, you also have to start calling our son Dad.”

“Certainly not,” Lucas said from the couch, not lifting his gaze from his notebook. “I intend to insist on Father, spoken with the proper degree of respect.”

Savannah made a rude noise. Maria crossed over and bent to kiss Lucas’s cheek, then glanced down at his notes.

“What are you working on?” she asked.

“A list,” Savannah and I said in unison.

Lucas lifted his eyes, fixing us with a baleful glare. “I’m taking note of everything we still need to do for the wedding, organized by date, priority and probability of enlisting help to complete it.”

“It’s a list,” I said, sliding onto the sofa beside him.

“Watch it, or you’ll find your name beside every item.” He looked up at Maria. “How was your trip, Mamá?”

Maria sat down and regaled us with tales of late summer construction horror, as crews worked feverishly to finish before winter blew in. She’d driven down from Seattle. When Lucas and I bought the house, deciding to settle in Portland, Maria had moved from Illinois to Washington state, declaring it was “close enough to pester her son, but not close enough to drive him crazy.”

It was a joke, of course—few mothers meddled less in their child’s life than Maria. She and Lucas were close, but she had her own life—her career as a high-school teacher, several boyfriends, a wide social circle and a string of causes that she championed.

Lucas was telling her about some damage my car had sustained in a crater-deep pothole, when the doorbell rang.

“Probably the neighborhood beautification council,” Savannah muttered. “Come to complain because we left gardening tools unattended on the lawn for ten minutes.”

“If so, they’re *your* tools,” I said, getting up. “Before you clean them up, though, practice your hostess skills on Maria while I answer the door.”

While I doubted it really was the beautification council at my door, it wasn’t impossible. When I’d first seen our house, I’d fallen in love with the neighborhood, which had reminded me of the one where I’d grown up in Boston—quiet streets of modest, immaculately tended older homes. As I’d learned, most of the residents were either retirees or urban professional couples, one with the spare time to landscape and the other with the cash to hire someone to maintain that picture-perfect look. We had neither.

When I swung open the door and saw an fortyish woman in a suit, designer clipboard at the ready, impatience oozing from every pore, I thought my time had come. Maybe it was the small mess of Savannah’s gardening tools. Or maybe my bright sunny mums were flashier than the neighborhood code allowed.

“Miss Winterbourne?” she said. A forced smile. “You won’t be hearing that much longer, will you? By next week, it’ll be Mrs. Cortez. Or will that be Winterbourne-Cortez?”

“It will be Winterbourne,” Lucas said from behind me. “This week or next. May I ask—?”

“Winterbourne-Cortez,” the woman murmured, marking it onto her pad. “Lovely.” She proffered her hand in a shake as brief and light as an air-kiss. “Margory Mills, wedding planner, at your service.” Another tight smile. “At least for a week.”

“Wedding planner . . .?” I glanced over my shoulder at Lucas, who gave an abrupt “Not me” shake of his head, then winced, pushing up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “My father hired you, I presume?”

“He did indeed. A very generous man.”

“Yes, well, while we appreciate my father’s gesture, and apologize for any inconvenience the misunderstanding might cause—”

“You want to plan your own wedding,” she said, stepping inside and brushing past us. “I completely understand, and so does your father. But you already *have* planned it. All that’s left is coordinating the affair so your special day is as perfect as you imagined it.”

“Yes, but—” Lucas began.

I caught his attention and cast a privacy spell, so we could speak without Ms Mills overhearing. “If it makes your dad happy, it is not such a bad idea. There *is* a lot of work still.”

He nodded, then turned to accept Ms Mill’s proposition . . . but she was already in the living room, introducing herself to Maria and Savannah.

“The troops are rallying already, I see,” Ms Mill said as we walked in. “Splendid. Many hands make light work. Now let’s see these wedding plans.”

I retrieved the overstuffed file folder while Savannah—after two meaningful looks and a nudge—offered refreshments. Once the coffee and cookie tray were delivered, Savannah retreated to her room while we went over the plans.

“Amazing,” Maria said when we finished. “I don’t know how you kids did it. All that work. Makes me glad I’d never—” She stopped with a sidelong glance at Ms Mills. “*Planned* a wedding. This certainly will be lovely, though.”

“Of course it will,” Ms Mills said, patting my hand. “All that’s needed now is to launch this ship. First, you’ll need to complete the wedding party list for me. I don’t see a maid of honor or a best man.”

“We’re just having bridesmaids and ushers,” I said.

“Oh . . .” She looked ready to comment, then snapped her mouth shut. “Well, I presume you have a third usher, to even out the party.”

I shook my head. “Savannah’s more of a junior bridesmaid and flower girl combined. We wanted to keep the wedding party small.”

“I see. Well, onto the dinner then.” She perused the menu. “I see you have red wine. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of that brand . . .”

“It’s a local winery. They also have a great nonalcoholic sparkling strawberry, so we’re all set there—”

“What about white?”

“Well, we’re serving beef, to support the beef farmers.”

“Some people will still prefer white, and you must cater to all your guests. I’ll add a case of that, at Mr. Cortez’s expense, of course.”

Lucas glanced my way, ready to argue, but I gave a small shake of my head. I could live with Benicio paying for a case of white wine.

“Now, about dinner.” She pored over the menu, frowning. “I only see beef . . .”

“That’s the primary dinner option, but we also have a vegetarian entree, for one of my college friends.”

“What about kosher? Lactose-free? Gluten-free? Nut-free?”

Lucas shook his head. “There is one lactose-intolerant guest, but he simply avoids dairy products. While we would love to offer meals for every conceivable personal choice and food allergy, it isn’t feasible, with a guest list of only forty. We’ve hired the local women’s shelter to cater and, while they will provide ingredient lists for concerned guests, the menu must understandably be limited.”

“Women’s shelter? Oh, dear.” A brisk note in her book. “No matter. I know an excellent four-star restaurant in Portland that will cater on short notice. We’ll have a choice of beef medallions, sea scallops—”

“We’ve already hired the shelter group,” I said.

“And Mr. Cortez will compensate them with a sizable donation, I’m sure. Now, about the DJ. Your father would prefer a live band, and he’s told me you both like jazz, so we’re flying a lovely quartet from—”

Lucas held up a finger, asking her to wait. Then he took out his phone, and dialed.

“Papá? It’s Lucas. Your wedding planner is here.” Pause. “Yes, the gesture was—” Pause. “Yes, we are quite busy—” Pause. “Yes, it was very thoughtful of you. However . . .”

Countdown: 3 days

“Okay,” I said, rounding the bottom of the stairs, cordless phone still in hand. “I’ve straightened out the hotel. Seems the desk clerk was looking at next month’s reservations. The

block we reserved for our guests *is* still booked. Crisis twenty-nine averted. Oh, and twenty-seven, too—I've spoken to Petulia's Petunias and convinced them that, having lived for three years without a website feedback form, they don't absolutely need one done this week."

Lucas nodded, and put his cell-phone into his satchel. "And I believe potential crisis twenty-eight is resolved as well. I've cleared up the misunderstanding with that necromancer, assuring him that, while I'm happy to investigate his legal case, I cannot represent him, not being a member of the bar in Utah . . . and I cannot begin *any* investigation in the next ten days."

"Good." I collapsed against him. "All bullets dodged so far."

Savannah walked around the corner, shaking her head. "You guys don't need wedding planners; you need life planners."

"Are you volunteering?"

She snorted and headed past us for the stairs.

"While you're up there, get changed for dinner, assuming you're joining us . . ." I backed away from Lucas. "Elena's plane. It's after five, and they said they'd call when—"

"She called your cell," Savannah called back. "The house line and Lucas's line were busy. They're on their way. Oh, and they invited Maria to dinner as well. And yes, I reminded them that means no supernatural talk at the table."

"Thank y—"

"Hey, someone's here," Savannah called from upstairs. "It's a big black SUV."

I stiffened, and Lucas's arm tightened around me, chin jerking up.

"Just kidding," Savannah said, grinning as she hurried past us down the stairs. "It's only Adam."

"Ask him—"

Too late. She was already in the kitchen, making a beeline for the back door.

Countdown: 2 days

Lucas had asked Benicio to come no sooner than Thursday, which we'd figured was too close to the wedding for him to interfere, yet early enough that he didn't feel like "just another guest."

He was there right after breakfast.

Lucas had said his parents got along fine, but I'd still been nervous, wondering if—like many estranged couples—they only put on a good show for their child. If that was the case, though, Benicio and Maria were both excellent actors. They exchanged hugs and "how's teaching?" and "how are your grandsons?" chatter . . . and seemed genuinely interested in the answers.

While they were talking, I sent Savannah out to offer refreshments to Troy and Griffin, Benicio's bodyguards, stuck out in the SUV. Benicio hadn't brought them inside—according to Lucas, that would be rude, suggesting Benicio thought he needed protection in our house. I wanted to invite them in, but wasn't sure that was allowed. Emily Post doesn't cover etiquette for dealing with a guest's bodyguards.

"They'll take coffee," Savannah said as she came back in. "And muffins."

"You're becoming quite the little hostess," Maria said as Savannah set about preparing the tray.

"I feel like I'm stuck in a Jane Austen novel," Savannah grumbled.

“The lowly ward,” I said. “Consigned to servitude. When you’re done that, you can report to Maria for your next orders. We’ll be showing Benicio the house.”

“And this bedroom we turned into an office,” I said, walking from the master room into the adjoining area. “It’s too small for a second desk, so we’re thinking of finishing the basement for a large office, making this room a sitting area or library.”

“There’s only the three bedrooms?” Benicio said.

“Yes, Papá.” Lucas met his father’s gaze, keeping his voice soft but words emphatic. “We don’t need any more. Not for quite some time.”

Benicio only smiled. “So you think now, but things may change once you’re married . . .”

He stepped into the hall before we could answer. “I noticed a lovely new subdivision going up just outside the city. It has excellent estate-sized lots, and the builder assured me their zoning would allow a second, smaller residence on the property for hired help.” He lifted his hands against our protests. “I know you don’t want a battalion of employees, but you’re both very busy. I’m sure a housekeeper—”

“We have a woman who comes in every week,” I said.

“Perhaps, but that must hardly make a dent in your workload, Paige. A housekeeper could do the laundry, cooking, day-to-day tidying.” He looked at Lucas. “I’m sure it isn’t easy for Paige, especially with you gone so much.”

“It’s just fine,” I said, clipping my words.

“Perhaps, but I have someone in mind. A young witch, recently emigrated and in a rather difficult position.”

“Father,” Lucas said sharply. “That is—”

“I—I’ll be downstairs,” I said quickly. “Helping Maria and Sav—”

Benicio caught my arm. “My apologies, Paige. That was underhanded of me. Yes, there is a witch, but I’ll find her other work. I simply want to make things easier for you, for both of you. Your time is so much better spent on the work you love. We’ll speak no more of housekeepers, though.”

“Or new houses,” Lucas said.

Benicio nodded and let us lead him down the hall toward Savannah’s room.

“I did want to ask about your honeymoon, though.”

“It’s looked after,” I said.

“But how are you getting there? The last thing you need is airport delays on your honeymoon. I’m not using the jet this week—”

“No, Papá.”

“The wedding, then. Is there any last minute—?”

“No, Papá.”

“Have you decided how you’re getting to the reception? I hope it’s not a limousine. Weddings should be special. Romantic. Perhaps a horse-drawn coach—”

“Benicio?” Maria looked up as she climbed the stair. “If you want to help, I have something you could do. I know Paige and Lucas wouldn’t want to impose by asking but—”

“Anything,” Benicio said.

“It’s the reception favors. Savannah and I are down here getting ready to start making them—putting the candies into the little pillows and tying on the ribbons. They’re cute, but it’s going to take us all morning. Do you think you could give us a hand?”

“Er, yes, I suppose—”

Maria put her hand on Benicio’s arm and started leading him away. “And could you ask the boys to come in and join us? Yes, hardly bodyguard duties, I know, but I know they’ll be good sports. We can make a production line of it . . .”

Countdown: 19 hours

“Black and white,” I said, staring down at the brandy snifters stuffed with matchbooks.

“Black and white. Could it be any simpler?”

Savannah plucked out a fuchsia matchbook. “Maybe they thought they were doing you a favor. Livening up a seriously boring wedding color scheme.”

Elena took a book and turned it over. “Maybe we could bleach them. The matches won’t work, but it’s a nonsmoking reception anyway. Who’ll notice?”

“I know,” Jaime said. “I’ll buy some flowers to match. Just a few scattered in with the white ones, so it’ll look like an intentional accent color.”

“It’s not that bad,” Elena said. “At least everything else is—” She stopped and crammed the matchbook back into the snifter. “Savannah? Jaime? Grab a couple glasses and we’ll set them out for the rehearsal party.”

I snatched one before they could whisk the glasses away. “Lucas with a K? Who spells Lucas with a K? I don’t believe it. They’re ruined. Where’s my phone. Maybe a rush order—”

“I thought you didn’t even want matchbooks,” Savannah said.

“Well, no but—” I took a deep breath. “Oh God, I can’t believe I’m panicking over the matchbooks.”

Jaime grabbed my arm and motioned for Elena to take the other one. “Savannah, hon? See if you can scare up a bottle of champagne. If anyone complains, tell them it’s an emergency.”

Countdown: 15 hours

Three glasses of champagne later, and the minister could have called to announce he’d double-booked, and I would have just said “No problem.”

We held the rehearsal party in the hotel meeting lounge. Just finger foods and drinks, decompressing and enjoying the company of friends before the insanity to come.

“—walking around the corner,” I was saying. “And Lucas is madly waving me back, but, nope, I’m not retreating because I have this spell.”

“Which she’d only mastered the week before,” Lucas said, casting a quick glance around to make sure his mother wasn’t nearby. “But, naturally, she’s eager to use it.”

Elena grinned. “Naturally.”

“Completely understandable,” Lucas said. “Though, perhaps, in hindsight, testing it against a Ferratus half-demon may not have been the most . . . judicious choice.”

“So he’s barreling around the corner, and I’m standing there, as calmly as can be, reciting my spell. I cast it and— Pfft. Nothing. Here comes this half-demon, high on god-knows what, me planted in his path like a moron going ‘Hmm, that’s odd. The spell should have worked . . .’”

Someone tapped Lucas’s shoulder. I turned to see Troy.

“Fair warning,” Troy murmured to Lucas. “Your dad’s going to be making his way over here. He wants to talk to you about the wedding.”

“Wedding’s tomorrow,” Clay said. “Tell him it’s too late to tinker. Better yet, I can.”

Jeremy laid his hand on Clay’s shoulder and shook his head. “Let me run interference this time. He wanted to speak to me on another matter.”

As Jeremy slipped away, Jaime shook her head. “Is it just a control thing with Benicio or what?”

“I think he just wants to be involved,” I said. “Problem is, his idea of involvement *is* control. But if it gets worse, we have a backup plan.”

“In the meantime, why don’t you guys call it a night,” Elena said. “It’s getting late. Slip out now and get a good night’s sleep. I’ll call you a cab.”

“Better yet, take your Dad’s ride.” Troy grinned. “He can’t complain about that . . . and he can’t follow you without his wheels. Come on. I’ll talk to the driver.”

“Here,” Troy said as we crawled into the SUV’s leather rear seat. He handed us a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “I’ve told the driver to take the scenic route. Oh, and—”

He leaned in and pressed the button to raise the black glass divider between the front and rear seats.

“How . . . private is that?” I asked.

He grinned. “One-way glass and completely soundproof. Enjoy.”

Countdown: 8 hours

Lucas reached over and brushed a curl off my cheek. I slid across the six inches of mattress between us, and snuggled under his arm, head on his chest.

“How long have you been awake?” he asked.

“A while.”

“Worrying?”

“A bit.”

He adjusted his arm under me, hand dropping to my bare hip. “About the wedding particulars . . . or the generality?”

I tilted back my head to look up at him. “The particulars. You know that. I’m definitely getting married today, and I’ve been practicing my binding spell, so don’t even think of running.”

A soft chuckle. “I won’t. So, I presume, then that a wedding gift, given now, would not be unreasonably premature.”

I jumped up, and swung over-top of him, crouching on all fours and grinning down. “A gift? For me?”

He blew strands of my hair off his face. “No, for my other wife-to-be.”

I scrambled off him and hopped from the bed.

“It’s in—” he began.

I grabbed a bag from under the bed and handed it to him. “Yours first.”

His brows arched, then he pulled himself up until he was sitting, his back against the headboard. He reached into the bag and pulled out an old, leather bound grimoire

His brows arched higher. “Wherever did you find—? I’ve been looking for this for—”

“Years,” I said, plunking down beside him. “But you didn’t have Robert Vasic to dig it up for you. Now, where’s mine?”

He opened the book, and began leafing through it.

“My gift, Cortez,” I said, reaching for the book.

He snatched it away at the last second. As I fell forward, he grabbed me, and pulled me to him in a laughing kiss that turned slow and delicious, and all thoughts of my present slid from my brain until I felt something poke my shoulder.

I turned to see him nudging my back with a manilla envelope. I took it, opened it and pulled out . . .

“A list?” I said, staring down at the handwritten page.

“A to-do list.” As I frowned, he plucked it from my fingers. “Step one: pick a suitable date. Step two: confirm with all parties. Step three: select a destination from the choices provided.” Still reading, he took three glossy brochures from the envelope and passed them to me. “Step four: book flights. Step five: plan itinerary. Step six: enjoy seven days of hell chaperoning five teenage girls.” He laid the paper down. “I thought it was time the Sabrina School had a class outing.”

“You mean—” My throat dried up. “A get-together? With the girls? That’d be amazing. Some of them might not be able to afford it, but if I can scrape together—”

“Would I give you a gift you need to pay for yourself? It’s been scraped. Or, I should say, reallocated from the fund formerly designated for a suitably ostentatious engagement ring, which the recipient refused to allow her fiancé to purchase.”

I kissed him so hard he pulled back, laughing and gasping for breath. Then he lowered me onto the bed and we kissed, bodies entwining—

The alarm sounded.

Lucas glanced over at it. “When is your first appointment?”

“Eleven.”

He shut off the alarm, then leaned over me again. “Then I propose we take advantage of the respite—and the empty house—and allow ourselves a well-earned lazy morning.” A pause, looking thoughtful. “No, not a proposal. As your soon-to-be husband, I *insist*.” He tickled his fingers up my side. “I’ll finish what I began. Then, when you’re properly woken, I’ll whisk you away to a leisurely breakfast at Angelo’s.”

“I think I’m going to like being married.”

His mouth lowered to mine. I slid my hands down to his—

The doorbell rang.

“Didn’t hear it,” I murmured against his lips.

“Hear what?” he said, resuming the kiss.

It rang again. I let out a curse. Lucas lifted his head, hesitated, then motioned for me to wait. He crawled from bed, pulled on pants, grabbed a shirt and padded into the hall as the bell rang again.

I waited two minutes, then pulled on my robe and crept in the hall to hear him arguing with someone at the door, his civility quickly fraying. Yes, the breakfast tray was a thoughtful gesture, and please, thank his father for that. Yes, while the morning at a spa sounded quite nice, we’d already booked our appointments. No, Lucas did not need to consult with his wife-to-be on that. No, we did not need lunch catered for the wedding party. No, we had not changed our mind about the jazz trio . . .

Finally, after physically edging his father's messenger out, Lucas sighed, forehead resting against the closed door. I crept up behind him and put my arms around his waist.

"Time to enact the backup plan?" I murmured.

"I believe so."

Now that Lucas *wanted* to meet with his father, though, Benicio was nowhere to be found. So we enjoyed our breakfast at Angelo's, then headed to the hotel to gather our respective halves of the wedding party and get ready.

Before we parted, I squeezed Lucas's hand. "So I guess the next time I see you will be at the altar."

A small smile as he leaned down to kiss my forehead. "It's a date."

Countdown: 5 hours, 30 minutes

I found Savannah with Elena, Jaime, and Talia, in a corner table at the hotel restaurant.

Talia pulled out a seat for me. "I was just telling Savannah how much I loved the invitations. She did such a great job with them."

"The invitations?" I laughed. "Believe me, Savannah didn't pick those. She said they were the most boring things she'd ever—"

I stopped, gaze crossing over three confused faces and settling on the fourth person, who was studiously picking apart a chocolate croissant. I turned to Talia, who had her wedding invitation in hand.

"May I see that?" I said, taking it before she could answer.

On the front of my invitation—my very formal, very simple wedding invitation—someone had sketched a cartoon of Samantha from Bewitched and Harry Potter. I stared at it, then burst out laughing.

“Did you do that on all of—?” I paused, sobering. “Tell me you didn’t—”

“Only ours,” Savannah said. “The humans got the boring plain ones. Well, except Talia.”

Talia’s brows arched. “Humans? Is that what we are to you? *Humans?*”

“Okay, supernaturally-challenged. Better?” Savannah ducked Talia’s swat, then looked over at me. “So I’m not in trouble?”

“Only if you don’t make us one for our keepsake box. Now, we have hair appointments—”

My cell-phone rang. It was Lucas, still looking for Benicio.

“Is my mother there?” he asked.

“Not yet. We were just going to swing by and grab her for the salon.”

A pause. “Ah. Well, if you see my father . . . anywhere, could you please tell him I’m looking for him?”

Maria was up, but not quite ready. She popped into the bathroom. I could hear low voices from inside, like she’d turned on a radio. Was she going to be a while? Maybe I should tell her to meet us . . .

As I turned, my gaze snagged on a pair of leather loafers half-hidden under the bed. Men’s leather loafers, brand new and very expensive.

The bathroom door opened and Maria hurried out, closing it behind her.

“Oh,” I said. “Lucas is looking for Benicio. He wants to speak to him. If you see him . . . anywhere, could you relay the message? I’ll just . . . I’ll wait in the hall. Let you finish getting ready.”

I called Lucas back from the hotel.

“Found him, I presume?” he said.

“Umm-hmm.”

A soft sigh, then he started to say something, but stopped mid-syllable. “Ah, I have a call waiting. That was prompt.”

Countdown: 15 minutes

I watched my reflection in the mirror, tugging a curl over my shoulder, then brushing it back. Over, back. Over, back. Hands trembling. The noise from the tiny chapel a distant rumble, like the far-off roar of the ocean. All alone. Asking for a few minutes to practice my vows. But I didn’t need the practice. Knew them by heart. Felt them by heart.

The door creaked open and a face appeared above mine in the mirror. For a second, Adam just stood there, staring.

“Now that, is a sight I never thought I’d see,” he said finally. “Paige Winterbourne in a wedding gown.”

I turned and grinned, and he faltered in mid-step.

“Looks that bad?” I said.

“Awful. Doesn’t suit you at all. Take it off and burn it while you still can.” He walked over and handed me my bouquet. “You left this in the front room. Lucas found it, and I think the poor guy had visions of a runaway bride, dropping her bouquet and bolting.”

“How is he?”

“Happy.” Adam swung around me, getting a full-view of my dress. “His dad’s pretty pleased, too. That was a smart idea Lucas had.”

“It was my idea.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Naturally.”

The door swung open. Savannah popped her head in, then let out a dramatic sigh.

“There you are. You’re supposed to be at the front of the church, loser.”

“Yeah,” Adam said. “Move it, Paige.”

“Not her.” Savannah grabbed Adam’s arm and dragged him out. At the door, she looked at me. “I’ll be back for you in a minute.”

I walked into the church to the tune of popping flashes. Elena and Talia led the procession. Savannah was ahead of me, her “bridesmaid” role having been upgraded to maid of honor. If you have a best man, you need a maid of honor. And we now had one, standing beside Adam and Clay at the front of the room. Benicio, beaming brighter than any of the flash bulbs.

And to Benicio's right, Lucas. My destination.

“I think I have rice in my bra,” Savannah hissed as we posed on the front step for pictures.

“Join the club,” I murmured teeth clenched in a jaw-aching smile.

Lucas leaned into my ear. “I’ll help you with that in the car.”

“I bet you will.”

Another blinding round of flashes. Then the crowd parted, path opening to the limousine that would whisk us to the reception hall.

As the last of the people moved out of the way, and the opening cleared, I stopped in my tracks, jaw dropping.

“Oh my God,” Lucas murmured.

Savannah started to snicker.

“That’s very . . . fancy,” Elena said.

“Not my idea,” I muttered between my teeth.

“Oh, I didn’t think it was.”

Talia let out a small laugh. “Last time I saw something like that was on TV. Lady Di’s wedding, I think.”

Lucas and I both turned to see Benicio smiling.

“You never did actually say no to *that* idea,” he said.

I looked at Lucas. He shrugged, then swooped me up and carried me down the red carpet to the coach-and-four waiting at the end.

Adventurer

This story is dedicated to Alexis, who convinced me that

“Silent Kenneth” had a story . . . and deserved to tell it.

He could see feel Taira flitting about in his brain, buzzing with annoyance. When Kenneth pictured his ayami—his spirit guide—he always thought of Tinkerbell: tiny woman with a full-sized sense of herself. He had no idea what Taira really looked like . . . if she had any form at all. He blamed in the image on Peter Pan. As a child, that story had spoken to him more than J. M. Barrie could have ever imagined. A boy who could fly above the world, accompanied and guarded by a jealous fairy guide. Kenneth had often wondered whether Barrie could have been a shaman himself.

What had Taira buzzing now was not jealousy, but frustration.

Kenneth was in a meeting of the supernatural council, as they debated how to break into a St. Cloud Cabal satellite office.

“You could help,” Taira said, her voice like an echo in his head.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You could at least *offer*.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You won’t, will you?”

He didn’t respond.

A spark of fury, like a tiny firecracker exploding, and she fell silent. Sulking. It is said among shamans that each is paired with his or her perfect spirit guide. A system that Kenneth suspected had broken down the day he’d come into the world. Perhaps another shaman had been born at the exact same moment, and the Creator—distracted by something more pressing, like an earthquake or angel uprising—had misassigned the ayamis. Somewhere right now, there was probably a shaman CIA agent being parachuted into enemy territory, accompanied by an ayami who’d really rather be napping.

Around him, the council’s momentary burst of planning had dissipated—again—swallowed by the unresolved question of whether they *should* be planning.

“I’m still not convinced we ought to be involving ourselves in Cabal business,” Cassandra said, then leaned back, as if—having given her opinion—the matter should be resolved.

“I disagree,” Paige said. “But we can pick up *that* debate another time. This case is different. Bryant Peters is being blackmailed by a St. Cloud AVP, using Cabal files, but acting on his own initiative. It’s personal. Not Cabal business, therefore not Cabal related.”

As they continued, Kenneth’s gaze shifted to Elena—the werewolf—who was fidgeting, casting glances at the door, where her mate waited down the hall . . . not so much standing guard, Kenneth suspected, as avoiding the meeting.

Kenneth had heard, through the council grapevine, that the werewolf couple were trying for a baby. When they’d arrived, he gripped Elena’s hand—a greeting he knew the werewolves

preferred to back slaps and warm hugs, and one he preferred as well. That fleeting contact had been enough for him to read the rhythms and cycles of her body, and he'd leaned over and murmured, "I hear you're trying to get pregnant. *This* would be a good time."

Now she was whispering something to her alpha—Jeremy—as Cassandra and Paige battled it out. Jeremy excused Elena, and she was gone in a flash.

Kenneth smiled. He liked the werewolves, liked their energy, humming from them like electrical charge. It was similar to Paige and Adam's youthful exuberance, but different. Like white wine and red, both delicious in their own way. Kenneth could sit in a meeting for hours, drinking in all the energy, and leave feeling as if *he'd* been on that parachute drop covert mission himself . . . without ever leaving his warm and comfortable chair.

"The problem—" Cassandra was saying. "—is not whether we are getting involved with Cabal business, but whether we *appear* to be, which we must be more careful of now, with Lucas taking a role in the council—however peripheral."

"Why?" Adam said. "Are we afraid of pissing off the Cabals? If we do piss them off? I say good. Let them know the council is changing, getting stronger. Let them worry."

Paige shook her head. "We aren't ready for that. Not nearly ready."

"And I don't believe we should be *getting* ready for that," Cassandra said. "The council has always, whenever possible, avoided contact with the Cabals, for good reason."

Paige waved her hand. "Another argument for another time. We need to focus on this specific call for help, which does not directly involve a Cabal."

"Yet Cassandra does have a point," Jeremy said. "We should not appear to involve ourselves in Cabal business, not for fear of offending the Cabals, but to avoid giving other

supernaturals is the impression that—with your marriage—the council has become a tool of Lucas Cortez’s crusade.”

Jaime nodded. “And that could scare away supernaturals who may need our help, but who don’t trust a Cabal son, whether he’s with the family business or against it.”

Jeremy nodded. Jaime flushed, like an unsure student who blurts out an answer . . . and gets the right. Jaime was the newest council delegate, and Kenneth knew she was often overwhelmed—intently following the volley of debate, processing as fast as she could, but saying little. The new kid who starts class midway through the year and is making a valiant effort to catch up.

“So we ignore this guy’s call for help?” Adam said. “Tell him ‘Sorry, but we can’t risk giving the wrong *impression*’?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “We help him, but cautiously, avoiding any unnecessary contact with the Cabal. We get what we need from his office. Quickly. Then move on.”

So discussion turned to getting that information from the Cabal satellite office where the AVP worked. The office was nearby. Paige, being in charge of choosing meeting locations, had made sure of that. If they could get inside tonight, they could finish this part of the investigation and move on. The problem with getting inside . . . and finding the information.

“You could help with that,” Taira said, rousing from her snit.

“I could . . .” Kenneth replied.

“You *should*.”

“And spoil their fun?” He stifled a yawn. “I’ll let them plan this. It’s time for a nap.”

She didn’t let it go at that, of course. She bullied, harangued and cajoled him all the way to his hotel room, as the others went to eat lunch before a busy afternoon of planning. Only when

he laid down on his bed and closed his eyes did she stomp off again, this time with a parting, “You are impossible.”

He waited until he was sure she was gone. Then he waited some more. When she didn't return, he separated from his body and took flight, Peter Pan on a mission.

Kenneth found the Cabal office easily enough. When Paige had told him what they'd be discussing, he'd driven past the office, memorizing the route in case he needed to return.

Once inside the building, he sought out the AVP's office first. He found it, and popped inside—getting the layout of the room rather than searching for the blackmail file or the AVP's home address. Unless such things were lying about, Kenneth was as helpless to find them as any non-corporeal being, unable to so much as open a drawer.

But he could memorize the layout of the room, and then the building, finding the safest and quickest routes inside. He passed a few areas rigged with shaman alarms, spells to detect astral projection. They might have caught a younger, more eager shaman, but Kenneth moved at his usual speed—“Granny speed” as Taira called it. So he felt the familiar twang as soon as he neared the alarms, and simply steered past them.

Once done, he returned to his room, exhausted, and truly in need of that midday nap.

Thirty minutes later, a tap at the door awoke him. It was Jeremy. Kenneth handed him the plans and explained the layout and security he'd found. Getting past the security would be the council's job. Kenneth couldn't help them there.

Jeremy nodded. “I know. Lucas will be coming with us, and he's familiar with the St. Cloud security systems. This—” He lifted the blueprints. “—will be an enormous help.” A small smile. “As always.”

Kenneth nodded, accepting the only acknowledgment he'd get. His terms. While he never refused to astral project if it the council asked, he liked it better this way. No fuss. No pressure. Like Robert and Ruth before him, Jeremy would take the blueprints, memorize them, then use them in the planning session. No one ever asked how the missions went so smoothly, as if they'd known exactly where to find everything. Everyone need a bit of mystery in their lives. Even supernaturals.

Jeremy was confirming the last of the blueprint notations when Taira returned. Kenneth inwardly winced, but she said nothing, just fluttered about, working herself into a proper fury until Jeremy left.

"Where did those plans come from?" she said as Kenneth closed the door.

"He found them. On the Internet, I believe. Jeremy is a very clever man."

"You do it again, didn't you?"

"Hmmm?"

"You took off on an adventure. Without me."

"An adventure?" He shuddered. "I should hope not. Nasty things."

"You—you—" she sputtered, and he pictured her, tiny wings flapping madly, fairy dust scatter into the corners of his brain. "You are impossible."

He stretched out on the bed. "I know."

One final indignant shake of her wings, and she was gone. Kenneth smiled. She'd be back. And he'd make it up to her. Next time, he'd take her along. Maybe.

Bargain

“The guy’s name is David Hargrave,” Roy said, spooning whipped cream off his mocha coffee, and slurping it between words. “Killed three chicks in Tennessee. Definitely a were. If his Pack’s not hunting for him now, they will be soon.”

Xavier looked to his left, where a table of college kids pecked at their laptops while sipping three dollar double espressos. On their right, middle aged business women sniped about their coworkers as they downed nonfat lattes.

He sighed. There was something so wrong about conducting criminal business in a Starbucks.

“So . . .” Roy continued. “Is that good? We golden?”

“Golden?”

“Yeah, you know. Square. Even Steven. Chit paid in full.”

Xavier took a swig of coffee. Tasted like it’d been brewed in a dirty ashtray. He pushed it aside and looked at Roy. “What do you think?”

Roy quailed under Xavier's stare. There was something to be said for working with guys who were scared of you. Unfortunately, for Xavier, most of those guys were the type who called meetings in Starbucks.

As his mentor had once said, "Kid, there are guys who can scare the shit outta folks with one mean look, and guys who couldn't if they were carrying a machete in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. We're type two. Born grifters, but lousy thugs."

True, but there were some people Xavier could still intimidate, though he suspected it had more to do with the scar on his face than anything in his eyes. There was something menacing about facial scars, like wearing a T-shirt that read: "I was in a to-the-death prison knife fight and all I got was this lousy scar." If the true story behind the scar leaked . . . well, let's just say Xavier's days of scaring even whipped-cream slurping toadies like Roy were over.

"I need you to do one more thing for me," Xavier said. "Then we're square."

Roy deflated, as if this was the answer he'd been expecting, but had remained optimistic.

Xavier continued. "First, spook Hargrave into thinking the cops are on his trail. Second—"

"You said *one* more thing."

"They're connected. Second, when Hargrave bolts, follow him and find out where he holes up. Third—"

Roy opened his mouth. Xavier fixed him with a look, turning so his scar was on full display. Roy shut his mouth.

"Third, keep an eye on him. Probably for a few weeks."

"A few—?"

“Could be a couple of months. I’ll give you two fifty a week in expenses. You lose Hargrave, you still owe me, plus you have to pay back those expenses. But if he’s still there when I need him, your debt is repaid, and I might even have a couple small jobs for you.”

Roy perked up. “Okay. Sure. So how do I spook him? Swipe a cop uniform and ring his doorbell?”

“Not unless you want a good look at your own innards. He’s a were. You don’t engage. Get a uniform and let him see you poking through his trash. Or wear a suit, go to his neighbors, ask questions about him. Do whatever it takes to make Hargrave think the cops are hours from showing up with an arrest warrant.”

Heading back to his car, Xavier walked past several sky-high office towers. The streets were filled with men and women in suits, skirts and preppy “business casual,” scurrying between buildings, chasing the next meeting, the next offer, the next client, loyal worker drones buzzing from hive to hive in service of their queen—the company bottom dollar.

If his folks had their way, he’d be with those drones right now. While other parents envisioned medical degrees and law licenses and PhDs for their kids, his had dreamed of four MBAs on the wall, one for each child. They’d managed three out of four, but hadn’t stopped pursuing that perfect score until Xavier hit his mid-thirties. Then they seemed to come to their senses and decide that, since he showed no inclination to move home or ask them for loans, they should be happy with that seventy-five percent success rate.

With good humor, Xavier bore his siblings jibes about their drifter baby brother, knowing they were, in some ways, envious. In truth, his way of making a living wasn’t much different

from theirs: the meetings, the schmoozing, wooing new clients, keeping old ones happy, constantly networking and expanding his contacts, then managing the projects he had, reaping the most profit out of each. Tough work. But, unlike his siblings, he didn't have any office to report to, no nine-to-five hours to keep, no boss to answer.

The current project he was working on was one of his most intricate yet, with a sweet payoff that was all but guaranteed. All he had to do was find the right combination of events to set it in motion.

It had started a few months ago, when he'd run into trouble with a Cabal. He tried to avoid that. Any grifter with an ounce of self-preservation did. He worked hard to stay on their good side or, better yet, stay off their radar altogether. But every now and then, it happened. You pulled a job for some guy and the next thing you know, there's a squadron of Cabal goons clomping up your apartment stairs.

As Xavier had been slipping out the window, a thought had struck him. It'd been a long time since he'd talked to Elena Michaels. Too long.

There were times when a werewolf ally would come in handy, and that had been one of them. The last time he'd seen Elena, he'd told her she owed him a favor. Yet, having never gotten her agreement on the matter, he knew better than to push it. Instead, he'd use the reminder as an opening, a way to get her to listen to his bargain.

He only hoped that, after three years, she still remembered that he'd helped her . . . and she'd forgotten that he was partly responsible for getting her into trouble in the first place.

Elena would make a powerful addition to his contact list. And if she and her psycho boyfriend ever had a falling out, Xavier would be there to offer whatever comfort he could. Anything for a friend.

The honk of a passing car startled him from some pleasant thoughts on *that* potential bonus. Business before pleasure. Business-wise, a werewolf would be handy. A Pack werewolf would be very handy. A Pack werewolf who also served as a council delegate? Well, it just didn't get any better than that, especially now that that Cabal rich kid who fancied himself a crusader—Lucas Cortez—had married a council delegate. Next time a Cabal gave him trouble, he could just cry to the council about the injustice of it all. Elena might be too savvy to fall for that, but Cortez was another story. Idealists were always so gullible.

First, though, he needed to get Elena on board with an initial bargain. She'd be expecting a scam, so he needed as square a deal as he could make it, one tilted in her favor, but not so much that she'd be suspicious. She'd see that he could be trusted—and useful—and a professional relationship would be born.

Hargrave was step one. Find a man-killing mutt before the Pack did, and hustle him out of town. Now he had something to offer Elena. For step two, though, he needed to ask her for something in return, to make it a fair trade, setting the right tone for the relationship. Nothing too tough, just some simple job he might hear about and think "Hey, Elena would be perfect for this." A job suited to a werewolf.

Time to start looking.

A week later, Xavier was in his apartment kitchen, listening through his answering machine messages. After three days away, they'd started piling up. Amazing how fast the system worked. Put a "job wanted" call out on the grapevine, offer a finder's fee, and in they pour.

He'd had to be careful with the specifications. It would be easy to say "Give me a job that needs a werewolf," but then he'd have twice as many messages from contacts wanting an introduction to this new "employee" of his. Instead, he'd asked for jobs suited to a supernaturally strong, gifted fighter.

The vagueness hadn't worked as well as he'd hoped. The first message was from a witch he hadn't worked with in years, trying to feel him out about this new guy, guessing he was a Ferratus half-demon—a type as rare as werewolves. Three more messages were in the same vein, including one very irate call from a business partner accusing Xavier of holding out on him with this new employee. Xavier sighed. Feathers would need to be smoothed—reassurances given, gifts sent, promises made. Some days, this really wasn't any different from running a business.

The other calls were the same sort he'd been getting all week. Muscle jobs: working someone over, scaring someone, guarding someone. Petty thug stuff. Elena would hang up on him the minute he suggested any of those.

So far the only possibility he had lacked the finesse he'd been hoping for, but did have a payoff Elena might appreciate. This one was also about thuggery—catching one, not being one, stopping a Ferratus half-demon who'd been shaking down the owners of some black market spellcaster shops.

The idea of muscling muscle to protect the weak and innocent would appeal to Elena's council delegate sensibilities . . . so long as she didn't figure out what these "innocents" did for a living. He could play dumb if she found out, but Xavier hated scamming Elena. Not so much a matter of respect as self-preservation.

He'd give it a few more days.

Three days later, when no better opportunity presented itself, he knew he had to use the Ferratus job. Roy wouldn't guard Hargrave forever.

So it was time to contact Elena. He remembered enough of her bio details from the compound records that he could probably track down a phone number. But he wouldn't. Better—and safer—to maintain the polite fiction that he didn't know where she lived. So he called Robert Vasic. Vasic was no longer the council's half-demon delegate—having passed the job on to his stepson—but every half-demon Xavier knew still dealt with the old man, and ignored the kid.

Two days passed with no return call from Vasic. Xavier was seriously considering the possibility that he'd have to call Elena directly. Or maybe there was still a backdoor route: the witch who'd married Lucas Cortez. It'd be easy to get a message—if not to her directly—to her crusading hubby, a plan that had the added advantage of giving him an excuse to make that initial contact with the kid.

Speaking of kids, wasn't that witch the same one who'd taken custody of Savannah—the little girl from the compound? Not a little girl anymore, he imagined. She'd been a good kid, and he hated to “use” her, but that could make contact with Cortez even easier.

“—werewolf.”

Xavier started, coming back to planet Earth. He was sharing a bottle of Jack Daniels with Tommy, a thief and fellow Evanidus half-demon, holed up in a smoky, dark bar—a proper place for a criminal meeting.

“You avoiding the question?” Tommy asked.

“What?”

“I was talking about that job-wanted ad you put on the grapevine. When I heard it, my first thought was ‘Holy shit, Xav’s got himself a werewolf’.”

Xavier snorted a laugh. “Don’t I wish. It was just a regular job for a guy who likes to work with his fists.”

“Too bad, ’cause if you did have a werewolf on the payroll, I’d know the perfect job for him.”

Xavier hooded his eyes before he glanced up from his drink, trying not to look too interested. “Yeah?”

“Jack the Ripper’s From Hell letter.”

“Huh?”

“Jack the Ripper. The guy who killed—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know who he is.” Xavier refilled his glass, taking his time. “So what’s this letter?”

“One of a bunch the guy supposedly sent. It was stolen from the police files years ago. Been missing ever since. There’s a guy—some human—who want it. Willing to pay big bucks, too.”

A human client? Xavier didn't do much work for humans, but every so often a job came along on the human side, and a supernatural contact of his would hear about it and realize it was custom-made for their kind.

"So what's this job got to do with werewolves?" Xavier asked. "Finding the letter? They can't track something like that."

"They don't need to. It's never been lost—not to our side anyway. It's in a private collection. Some sorcerer in Canada—Toronto, I think."

Toronto? Wasn't Elena from Toronto? Xavier downed his whiskey, hoping the sting of it wiped away any gleam in his eye.

"So why would you need a werewolf to get it?"

Tommy told him.

"Huh." Xavier filled his glass again, gaze down.

Tommy knocked Xavier's elbow, nearly making him spill the bottle. "You *do* know a werewolf, don't you?"

"No, but I think I might know another way around the job. You want in? Five percent finder's fee?"

"Fifteen."

"Ten . . . and you give me all the details you know, and tell me where I can get the rest."

By the time Xavier left the bar, he was flying high on whiskey and success.

A job in Elena's hometown, stealing a letter that was already stolen property, and therefore wouldn't offend her council delegate sensibilities. She wasn't a thief, but he'd give her

everything she needed, to make this job as danger-free as possible. Something this simple, what could go wrong? He'd give her a serial killing werewolf, and she'd steal the From Hell letter for him. An easy job, low risk and high profit for both of them.

The perfect bargain.