



The Party

Author: *A.D. Starrling*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: Christmas, Magic, and an Undead Chicken?!

When Mae Jin and Nikolai Stanisic receive an invitation to a special party in Chicago, they expect some chaos — after all, their hosts include Immortals, divine beasts, and the descendants of angels and demons.

But in a house packed with supernatural allies, mischievous kids, demonic visitors, and a touch of holiday madness, Mae and Nikolai quickly realize this isn't your typical Christmas celebration.

The Party is a delightful holiday romp bringing together beloved characters from the Seventeen, Legion, and Witch Queen series in a tale full of humor, heart, and a little Christmas magic!

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THE PARTY

“You nervous?” Nikolai Stanisic glanced at Mae Jin as they passed Goose Island.

She ignored the fluttery feeling that had been lodged in her stomach since they reached Chicago and met the sorcerer’s gaze steadily.

“More curious than nervous. You?”

“These guys are descended from angels and demons.” Wariness crept into Nikolai’s voice as he took the next exit. “I’d be a total idiot if I said I wasn’t worried about meeting them and those beasts.”

It’s alright, my witch, Brimstone huffed where he lay coiled like a pretzel in Mae’s lap. We’ll protect you. He burped gently.

She wrinkled her nose at the smell of tacos. They’d had to make a pit stop an hour ago. It was either that or face a hunger-crazed fox familiar and demonic weapon.

Yeah, Hellreaver hummed on her chest with a faint whiff of burritos. You and your sex fiend of a boyfriend.

Mae pursed her lips.

Nikolai directed a suspicious look at the fox and the weapon.

“One of them just said something insulting, didn’t they?”

“Hell called you a sex fiend.” Mae’s cheeks grew warm. “I mean, he’s not completely wrong.”

Alastair blushed on the center console. Brimstone rolled his eyes hard.

Nikolai’s expression turned smoldering. He checked the sat nav.

“There are some woods not far from here. Should we pull into them and have ourselves a little?—?”

“We’ll be late for the party,” Mae said hastily.

The lustful glow in the sorcerer’s heated gaze abated. He sighed.

“Let’s hope our guest quarters are in a quiet part of the house.”

That damn sorcerer knows we’ll be in the room with you, right? Brimstone said frostily.

Mae ignored the fox.

“I’m sure Violet mentioned there’ll be kids at this thing,” she told Nikolai with a grimace. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to take a raincheck until we get back to New York.”

His expression fell so comically she found herself swallowing a snort. In truth, the way he relished fulfilling his nighttime duties as her consort made her stupidly happy. And not just his nighttime duties. Having Nikolai in her life was like finding a piece of a puzzle she didn’t even know had been missing from her life.

Mae’s heart twinged as she recalled her trip to South Ridgewood the day before. She

hadn't told Nikolai she'd gone to visit Rose Blake's grave.

Though the headstone where she'd laid a bouquet of her best friend's favorite flowers stood above an empty coffin, it was still the final resting place of the woman she had long considered a sister.

Memories of Rose's true fate and her final ending on Brooklyn Bridge still haunted Mae's darkest hours. She hoped and prayed that she would get to see her best friend again, someday soon.

They drove through a residential area. A park soon appeared on the left. Nikolai slowed and took the turn after it.

A bright winter sun bathed the landscape around them as they drove up the private road leading to Artemus Steele's mansion, the light reflecting off the banks of snow lining the grass.

It was Christmas Eve.

Though Mae would have preferred spending the festive holidays with Nikolai and her family in New York, she could hardly refuse the invitation that had arrived on her doorstep a few weeks ago.

Two months had passed since the epic battle that had seen her defeat the Sorcerer King and take her rightful place as the Witch Queen prophesied to lead the world of magic in the ultimate battle against the forces of Hell.

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Which meant it was finally time to meet the allies who would fight by her side in the war that would decide mankind's fate at the End of Days.

Though Mae had already learned of their identities and powers from Violet and Miles Nolan, today's meeting would hopefully answer all her and Nikolai's burning questions, especially about the woman who had sent the Nolan cousins and Serena Blake to Chicago to help them in their fight against the Sorcerer King.

A pair of majestic, wrought iron gates appeared beneath the trees crowding the perimeter wall of the estate they were approaching. A gargoyle was perched atop each of the stone pillars bracing them.

Nikolai rolled to a stop in front of the entrance.

"That's strange. I thought Serena said there was some kind of access panel to call the house."

Brimstone and Alastair hopped out after them as they alighted from the SUV. They looked around.

Mae's gaze landed on something half hidden under a bush. She narrowed her eyes.

"I think I found the access panel."

The mangled remains of a metal post lay forlornly in the grass. The marks on it looked fresh.

Brimstone padded over and sniffed it curiously.

Something fluttered down and landed beside him.

It was a chewed up piece of electrical wiring.

They looked up.

Nikolai startled. “What the?—?!”

Another piece of wiring fell from the jaws of the closest gargoyle.

Brimstone’s hackles rose.

My witch, the demon fox growled. Those are no ordinary gargoyles.

Hellreaver transformed and hovered protectively in front of Mae.

The gargoyles flinched.

Stone creaked. Gargoyle Number One leaned sideways a fraction of an inch.

“Aren’t they the ones Lennie told us to watch out for?” he hissed in a guttural sotto voce.

Gargoyle Number Two dropped the remains of the mangled cable in his mouth and took on a worried air.

“You mean, the wicked weapon inhabited by the souls of a thousand fiendish demons?—”

Hellreaver froze before vibrating smugly.

“—the formidable demon fox with the nine tails?—”

Brimstone stopped growling and puffed out his chest.

“—the powerful, brooding, doe-eyed sorcerer?—”

“Doe—doe-eyed?!” Nikolai choked.

“You do have doe-like eyes,” Mae admitted grudgingly.

“—and the crazy witch lady who rules over them all?”

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Mae scowled at the gargoyles. “Why, I ought to come up there and teach you guys a lesson!”

“Oh-oh,” Gargoyle Number One mumbled uneasily. “Crazy witch is about to go on a rampage.”

Hellreaver snickered. Brimstone started wheezing.

“What’s going on here?”

They turned.

A Jeep Cherokee had stopped next to their vehicle.

A pretty brunette and a young man with dark hair and curious blue eyes climbed out of it.

“Hi, Mila,” Mae greeted.

Nikolai dipped his head.

Mila Jackson’s expression cleared. “Hey, it’s great to see you guys again. Why are you—?” She froze at the sight of the gargoyles atop the pillars. Her face turned weary. “Gerry, Larry, what did we tell you about loitering on Artemus’s gates?”

“You said not to do it,” Gargoyle Number Two replied sullenly.

Nikolai's lip curled. "Gerry and Larry?"

The guy with Mila grinned. "Man, Artemus is gonna have a cow when he finds out about this." He took his cellphone out and started texting someone.

Gargoyle Number One looked at him with mounting dread.

"And why did we say not to do it, Gerry?" Mila asked patiently.

"Because Artemus will go apeshit, shift into his angel mode, and rain down terror upon all and sundry with his heavenly blade," came the low sullen mumble.

Mila shuddered. "We all know how that ended last time, so how about you guys be good gargoyles and return to Hell? FYI, I'm sure Astarte will be thrilled when she finds out you sneaked inside the portal after her."

"The Goddess is not here," Larry confessed. "Vozgan let us through."

Brimstone brightened. Vozgan is here?

Hellreaver hummed happily.

They'd become friends with the helldragon after meeting him in the underworld a few months back.

Mila frowned. "That overgrown lizard is going to get his tail whipped by Artemus if he's not careful."

This Artemus guy sounds like he has a short fuse, my witch, Brimstone said skeptically.

Yeah. Hellreaver sniffed. We already have one unhinged witch in our lives. We don't need any more lunatics.

Mae's mouth pressed to a thin line.

"What'd they say this time?" Nikolai asked warily.

The guy with the cellphone spoke before Mae could reply.

"Serena has a message for you two," he told the gargoyles with a grin. "You have sixty seconds to scram before she comes down here and kick your ass."

Larry and Gerry traded a troubled glance. They turned with a torturous creak of stone of stone and climbed down the pillars into the estate.

"Come, Gerry. Let's go say hello to Martha," Larry rumbled.

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“Who’s Martha?” Mae asked carefully.

“One of the angel statues in the graveyard.” Mila grimaced. “They have a crush on her, so they gave her a name.”

Nikolai stared. “This place has a graveyard?”

“It’s the home of the LeBlancs, one of Chicago’s founding families,” Mila explained. She made introductions. “Mae, Nikolai, this is my brother Caspian.” She directed a warning look at her brother. “Don’t hit on Mae.”

“Why would you assume I’d hit on her?” Caspian said innocently.

“Because you’re like a dog in heat most days and Mae is pretty,” Mila said curtly. “I’m telling you right now, Nikolai will gut you if you try to cop a feel.” She paused. “Hellreaver might too.”

Caspian studied the sorcerer and the weapon nonchalantly.

“I’m an Immortal. They can gut me all they like.” He shrugged. “I’ll just keep coming back.”

Nikolai’s eyes glittered with a dangerous light. “A little bird told me you guys struggle with decapitation.”

Caspian’s face fell. “Dude, that’s cold.”

“Violet is such a tattletale,” Mila muttered.

“It was Bryony, actually,” Mae admitted.

Bryony Cross was the High Priestess of the New York coven and technically Mae’s highest ranked subordinate. Not that she acted like a subordinate most days. Mae swallowed a sigh at the thought of the piles of paperwork that would be waiting for her upon her return to New York. Running the world of magic was no easy task.

If it wasn’t for Bryony and Abraham, I would have ditched that job a month ago.

The gates rumbled open presently.

They climbed back in the SUV and followed Mila and Caspian’s Cherokee.

A potent wave of divine energy pressed down on Mae when they crossed the threshold into the estate. The way Nikolai stiffened and Brimstone and Hellreaver stilled told her they’d felt it too.

Violet and Miles had mentioned the barrier that protected the property. It had been erected by the goddess who had given birth to Artemus and his twin brother Drake Hunter.

They drove up an access road lined with trees.

Moss-covered tombstones dotted the woods crowding the grounds of the estate.

“Am I the only one who thinks having a cemetery on your doorstep is creepy?” Nikolai said.

Mae studied the graves. “You gotta admit, compared to Hell, this is positively

cheery.”

The outlook opened up ahead.

A sprawling Gothic mansion appeared at the end of the driveway.

Set over three floors, its roofline was topped by steeply pitched gables with spires and decorative wood trimmings, brick chimneys, and dormers. There was even a tower with crenellated parapets. Lights shone through the leaded windows, giving the place a warm and cozy feel.

They parked next to a bevy of vehicles and got out.

Mae observed the house guardedly as Mila and Caspian began unloading grocery bags from the Jeep.

My witch, Brimstone said quietly.

I know.

Though she could not visualize their cores like she could magic users, she could sense the incredible energies of the people inside even from where she stood.

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Mae blinked. Oh. There's someone with a magic core.

It must be the witch who lives here, Brimstone said.

"Mae?" Nikolai gave her a puzzled look as he took a couple of bags off Caspian.

She flashed him a distracted smile and went to help Mila. "It's nothing."

Brimstone tensed by Mae's side. Alastair made a warning sound on Nikolai's shoulder.

The ground began trembling.

Magic flooded Mae's bloodstream and quickened her pulse. Nikolai's face tightened, white sparks dancing around his fingertips.

"It's okay," Mila said hastily. "This is just," she stopped and grimaced, "—you'll see in a second."

The sound of a stampede reached Mae and Nikolai before they could ask her what she meant.

A purple helldragon shot around the side of the mansion.

He darted past them, braked in a shower of dirt and grass, and reversed until he drew abreast.

“Oh. Hi, Mae. Hi, Niko!” Vozgan said cheerfully, hopping from one foot to the other.

Nikolai coughed and waved at the dust clouds thickening the air. He frowned at the helldragon.

“I distinctly recall ordering you not to call me that.”

“Don’t be such a kill joy,” Vozgan retorted, unfazed.

Brimstone went over to greet the helldragon.

Mae’s scalp prickled when she felt a fearsome presence approaching.

A chocolate-colored Rex rabbit appeared around the corner. He shot past them, legs a blur and a red glint in his limpid brown eyes.

Brimstone froze. He followed the creature unblinkingly with his gaze, ears cocked and body leaning eagerly forward.

“Hey, wait for me!” Vozgan protested. He started after the rabbit. “See you later, Brimbrim!”

Mae stared. “Was that?—?”

“Smokey the Hellhound?” Mila said. “Yeah, it was.”

“He’s cute,” Nikolai grunted.

“Dude, that bunny will lose his shit if you tell him that,” Caspian warned.

It seems this place is full of hot-blooded fools, my witch, Hellreaver said uneasily.

He'd returned to his pendant form and was hugging her sweater grimly.

Mae decided not to remind him that her life was also full of hot-blooded fools and he was the worst one among them. She'd just taken a bag from Mila when a terrifying squawk made her and Nikolai jump.

Mae clutched her chest and an equally startled Hellreaver.

“What the hell was that?!” Nikolai snapped.

An orange chicken with a lopsided neck and an ominous aura came into view. She dashed past them, tattered wings flapping menacingly as she chased after the helldragon and the rabbit.

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Oh. Brimstone fairly vibrated with excitement beside Mae. My witch! I—I'm afraid I must go!

He bolted after the chicken.

“What's he doing?” Caspian asked curiously.

“Answering the call of the wild.” Mae sighed. “You know, fox, undead chicken.”

“Oh.”

Nikolai muttered something under his breath. Alastair took flight and disappeared after Brimstone.

“Not you too!” the sorcerer protested.

The crow ignored him.

Hellreaver tutted disapprovingly.

“I take it that was Gertrude?” Mae asked Mila and Caspian warily.

“Yeah,” Mila said. “Astarte is convinced she got possessed by the spirit of a vengeful demon general after she died.”

A shudder shook Caspian. “That chicken is a menace.”

They carried the grocery bags up the steps to a porch with slender turned posts and eldritch, cast-iron lanterns. A veritable cacophony blasted their ears when Mila opened the front door.

Mae and Nikolai stopped inside the threshold with the Immortals and stared.

The foyer was full of kids.

Two girls sparred noisily with wooden swords to the right. A couple of boys were play-fighting on the marble floor. A little girl with blonde ringlets and an angelic expression was braiding the fur of a sleeping dog under a table, pink tongue sticking out cutely as she focused. A boy sat cross-legged beside her, a book on his lap and seemingly oblivious to the chaos around him. A teenage girl with pink-streaked hair and ripped jeans leaned against a wall next to them, her eyes and fingers glued to her cellphone.

Two men stood on the staircase. One of them was trying to remove the kid clinging to his leg like a leech. The other guy was failing badly in his attempt to cajole a little girl down from a banister.

“This place is a zoo,” Nikolai stated leadenly.

“You get used to it,” Mila grunted.

“Is that a kid on the chandelier?” Mae asked cautiously.

They followed her gaze to the glittering crystal contraption suspended from the high ceiling. A boy in nothing but his underpants and a red cape was standing proudly on it, one hand on his hip.

“You mean Commander Underpants?” Mila said with a roll of her eyes. “Yeah, just

ignore him.”

“He might break a bone if he falls from there,” Nikolai muttered.

“He won’t,” Caspian said blithely. “His father is the Sphinx. The kid can levitate.”

“Apparently, divine beast genetics can be passed on,” Mila explained at Mae and Nikolai’s surprised stares.

Mae’s eyes glazed over a little at that. Nikolai paled.

They’d heard plenty about the divine beasts who lived in Artemus Steele’s mansion.

Mila sighed at their expressions. “Yeah, that’s how I felt when I first found out.”

“Still, Artemus is going to skin the kid alive if he sees him on his precious antique,” Caspian added with a hint of macabre anticipation.

A plastic arrow whizzed past Mae’s head.

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Another one bounced off Nikolai's crotch.

"Incoming!" the boy who'd fired the projectiles shouted enthusiastically from the top of the staircase.

The man with the kid attached to his leg looked around sharply.

"Hey, Artemus said no firing weapons inside the house!"

Hellreaver vibrated uneasily on Mae's chest.

There is a divine dragon inside that man, my witch.

Mae's pulse quickened as she observed the fiery beast inside Haruki Kuroda.

The guy reaching for the little girl on the banister turned and scowled at the boy with the bow.

"You're several seconds too late, you little shit!"

He walked up the stairs, snatched up Bow Boy, and proceeded to give him a noogie.

"You shouldn't swear in front of the children, William," Pink Haired teenager admonished without looking up from her phone.

William's eyes shrank to slits. "That's gold coming from the chick who's standing there doing nothing. How about you help us out?"

“I’m already helping.” She pointed at Braiding Girl and Book Boy. “I said I’d look after them.”

“Oh, come on, Lucy!” William protested. “Lola and Oliver are the most docile kids in this entire madhouse. You could practically leave them on their own for the day and they’d be fine!”

“Don’t make me call Social Services on you, Uncle William,” Oliver said coolly. He licked his finger and turned a page.

William’s expression grew pinched. “I keep forgetting that kid has a smart mouth on him.”

Lucy smirked.

Caspian stepped over the boys rolling on the floor and maneuvered his way expertly around the sword-fighting girls, several grocery bags in his arms. He disappeared down a passage to the right.

“Shouldn’t someone try and stop her?” Nikolai asked uneasily as Mila hefted the load in her arms and prepared to follow her brother. He indicated the little girl on the banister.

The kid was climbing it with steadfast determination.

“She’s fine,” Mila said breezily. “Besides, she bounces well.”

Mae and Nikolai gave her a horrified look.

Mila grimaced. “I’m kidding. Leah’s got her back.”

A young woman with fiery red hair was coming down the stairs. She walked past William and Bow Boy and lifted the girl off the banister.

“Sienna, your mother’s gonna have words with you if she sees you do that. And they won’t be pretty ones.”

Mae stared. She could see the soul of the divine beast who inhabited the redhead.

She must be Leah Chase, the host of the Nemean Lion. And that little girl is Serena’s daughter.

Sienna struggled in Leah’s arms.

“Noooo! Let go, Aunt Leah! I’m climbing a mountain!”

“You’re climbing the steps to an uncertain death is what you’re climbing, kid.” Leah winced when Sienna grabbed a fistful of her hair and tugged hard. “Haruki, I think we should revisit our plans to have five kids.”

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Haruki froze, eyes rounding. “Wait. We’re having five kids?!”

William made a disgusted sound. “Stop bragging about your rosy future and help me manage these little assho—I mean, darlings.”

“Rawr, rawr, I’m a lion!” the kid wrapped around Haruki’s thigh contributed animatedly to the conversation.

Haruki sighed. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Kris, but I hear a lion roar most nights and she does not sound like that.”

Leah grinned. William sneered.

The sword-playing girls stopped fighting, expressions of horrified delight dawning on their faces.

“Uncle Haruki and Uncle Leah are being lewd again!” the one with the pigtails hissed conspiratorially at her sparring partner.

Her companion nodded solemnly. “We should take notes.”

Mila muttered something under her breath and started across the foyer.

“You can put your coats in that closet,” she told Mae and Nikolai over her shoulder, indicating a door on their left.

Mae walked over and opened it.

A pretty girl with blonde hair stood on a stepping stool inside the storage room. She had her hands braced against the wall on either side of a pale-faced, dark-haired, dread-stricken teenage boy and was leaning up to kiss him.

Nikolai made a choking noise.

Mae slammed the door shut.

Yup, that was Jacob Schroeder about to have his lips violated by a girl.

He looks a bit weak to be the Hydra's host, my witch, Hellreaver observed suspiciously.

Mae wasn't fooled. The beast inside the kid was a fearsome creature, albeit one currently frozen in the face of an amorous advance.

Mila stopped halfway across the lobby. "What's the matter?"

Mae chewed her lip. "There's some kind of situation going on in there."

"Amelia is at it again," Oliver muttered without looking up from his page.

"Big Sis is a hussy," Lola declared solemnly beside him, except she lisped the 'hussy' and it came out 'hutthy'. The dog woke up, yawned, and went straight back to sleep.

Suspicion darkened Mila's eyes. She retraced her steps, dumped her bags in Nikolai's arms, and yanked the closet door open. She sucked in air at the sight of Jacob desperately holding the blonde girl at bay.

So did Pig Tails and her sword-fighting companion, who'd followed her.

Jacob glanced wildly their way. “Help me!” he gurgled.

Mila lowered her brows.

“Amelia Storm, unhand that guy right now!” she growled. “And you,” she snarled at Jacob, “—how about you grow a pair? You’re the bloody Hydra, for Christ’s sake!”

“No cussing in front of the kids, Mila,” Lucy reminded mildly.

“But,” Jacob glanced at Amelia, “—I don’t wanna hurt her.”

“It’s okay, Jacob,” Amelia crooned. “I don’t mind a little pain.” She closed her eyes and puckered her lips with a smooching sound that made the Hydra’s host shudder.

“What is wrong with these kids?” Nikolai asked Mae in a horrified whisper.

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I like their spirit, my witch, Hellreaver said.

“Uncle Tomas and I have a bet going on whether Amelia grows up to be a dominatrix or not,” Oliver informed them nonchalantly, still reading.

William grimaced. “Do you even know what a dominatrix is, kid?”

Oliver looked up with narrowed eyes. “This is why you should read more books, Uncle William.”

William’s mouth flattened to a thin line. “That kid has an answer for everything.”

“He really does,” Leah muttered.

“That’s because his father is the Sphinx,” Haruki explained wisely.

A haughty half-smile curved Oliver’s lips.

A toddler in a cowboy hat and diapers chose that moment to shoot out of a side passage and cross the foyer at a dead run, high-pitched squeal echoing across the hall.

A bear of a man came barreling out after him.

“Marcus, stop right there!” He slowed at the sight of Mae and Nikolai. “Oh, hi. You must be our guests from New York. I’m Asgard. Asgard Go—” He faltered, wariness creeping in his face. “What are you all doing in front of the closet?”

“Amelia is trying to jump Jacob again,” Pig Tails blabbed. She pointed helpfully.

Asgard drew a horrified breath. He came over and scowled at the accused. “Why, you little—!” A crash, followed by an excited squeal, came from a room opening off the foyer. “Dammit! Sorry, gotta run! Amelia, you better unhand Jacob before your father sees you!” he warned over his shoulder.

A familiar figure appeared at the rear of the foyer just as Asgard vanished after the little boy.

“Did I just hear Asgard and Marcus?” Madeline Godard-Black asked in a harried voice. She was holding another kid in a cowboy hat and diapers under her arm. Her expression brightened at the sight of Mae and Nikolai. “You made it.”

Mae smiled faintly. “Hey, Madeline.”

They’d met the scientist and Mila in Philadelphia a few months back.

“Asgard and Marcus went that way,” Lucy indicated for Madeleine’s benefit.

Madeline’s charge took this opportunity to slip out of her hold and his diaper and make a run for it. She gasped, outraged.

“Leonard, get your sweet little tushie back here, right now!”

They watched her dash after the naked fugitive.

“Aunt Naomi!” Bow Boy finally wailed. “My brother is being mean to me!”

A brunette with blue eyes popped her head out of another room, a half-blown up balloon in hand.

“That’s probably because you did something to deserve it.”

It was the witch whose core Mae had sensed.

Naomi Wagner Lancaster’s face lit up when she spotted Mae and Nikolai. Her pregnancy bump stretched her dress as she came toward them, a white cat with yellow and blue eyes at her feet.

“Welcome.” Naomi beamed. “It’s nice to finally meet?—”

Something drew her eyes. She stopped, her smile fading. Her expression grew flinty.

“John David Dante Lancaster, what are you doing up there?!” she hissed at the kid on the chandelier.

“You must address me by my superhero name, Mother,” the boy proclaimed disdainfully.

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Naomi gritted her teeth.

“I’m not calling you Commander Underpants, son. Get your skinny ass on the ground before your father sees you and puts you in time out in the mausoleum!”

The kid clutched his chest dramatically. “Oh, the mausoleum! Be still, my terrified heart.”

The sword-fighting duo clapped at his acting.

“Bravissimo!” Pig Tails gushed.

The boy grinned. His smile froze at a soft metallic whirring.

The chrome and gold birdcage elevator under the stairs pinged. The accordion door opened, revealing five men. The one in the lead was talking as he stepped out.

Mae stiffened a little when she discerned the presence of the incredible beast inside him.

He must be the Sphinx.

Hellreaver vibrated nervously on her chest.

“As I said to Otis, no one knows the origin of that?—”

Sebastian Lancaster rocked to a halt at the sight of the chaos inside the foyer.

The men with him stopped and stared.

Mae could tell two of them were Immortals and powerful ones at that. She studied them cautiously, Nikolai equally alert beside her.

The one with the snake mark on his forearm must be Conrad Greene. And the other guy is Ethan Storm judging from that pentagram birthmark on his hand.

“Did you get everything?” the man with blonde hair and blue eyes behind them asked Mila jovially.

“Yeah.” Mila leaned toward Mae. “That’s Zachary Jackson, my dad. The guy behind him is Otis.”

Mae stared. Otis Boone was just as ordinary looking as Violet had described him to be in his human form. Yet, the divine power of the seraph inside his soul was so bright it almost seared her vision.

“We were gone for twenty minutes,” Conrad said to no one in particular.

“And they were the longest twenty minutes of my life, dad,” William declared leadenly. “I’m never having kids.”

Conrad rolled his eyes.

Ethan smiled. “Hey, Lola. Did you miss me?”

The little blonde girl with the ringlets threw herself at the Immortal, the dog padding after her. “Daddy!”

The Immortal caught her, propped her on his waist, and kissed her cheek. She giggled

and hugged him.

“Where did Lucas and Anna go?” Conrad asked.

“They’re getting stuff from the attic,” Lucy replied. “Serena and Drake went with them.”

“And Alexa?”

William made a face. “In the kitchen, helping.”

Conrad stiffened. He looked over at Mila.

“Is someone supervising your mother?”

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She sighed at his tense tone. “Relax. Olivia, Laura, and Daniel are keeping an eye on her. Callie and Nate are there too.”

Conrad looked unconvinced.

“Should we pre-empt things and call the fire department?” he asked Ethan.

“My mom has a habit of burning the kitchen down when she cooks,” Mila explained at Mae and Nikolai’s stares.

Mae sensed she might have found a kindred soul in Alexa King.

Conrad spotted the kid on the chandelier. “When did he get up there?”

Sebastian lowered his brows at the sight of his son. The boy gulped.

“John,” the Sphinx said in a steely voice.

“Yes, father?” the kid quavered.

The Sphinx’s eyes flashed white. “Down, now.”

John floated to the ground and alighted sheepishly in front of his father.

“We should ask him to babysit when we have kids,” Nikolai whispered in Mae’s ear, clearly impressed.

Brimstone and I want to babysit too, Hellreaver protested.

Mae pursed her lips.

I bet you two would let our kids eat junk food and watch the late night shopping channel.

Hellreaver flinched guiltily.

Nikolai cut his eyes to the weapon. “What’d he say?”

Things were getting frosty over the way between the Sphinx and his son.

The divine beast pointed imperiously at the staircase. “Go upstairs and put your party outfit on.”

“I don’t wanna,” John said sullenly.

The Sphinx narrowed his eyes. “This is not a debate.”

John swallowed convulsively. “Okay, I’ll go,” he mumbled. “But I refuse to wear that outfit.” He straightened, the stubborn light of defiance brightening his eyes.

That kid has a death wish, my witch, Hellreaver remarked.

Mae hushed him.

The Sphinx crossed his arms. “It’s either that outfit or you go naked,” he declared coolly.

John deflated.

“Do I have to wear the vest?” he asked sullenly.

“Yes.”

John sighed like he’d been given a death sentence. “And the bow tie? Can I at least lose the bow tie? And the checkered socks?”

Mae bit her lip.

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Naomi swallowed a snort behind a fist.

The Sphinx's shoulders quivered slightly.

"The bow tie and the socks stay," he managed in a strangled voice.

John sagged. "But I'm going to look like a complete twerp, father!" he wailed.

"You were born a twerp," Oliver said in a matter of fact voice.

John stuck his tongue out at his younger brother.

"There's nothing wrong with looking like a twerp, son," the Sphinx said graciously once he'd swallowed his laughter. "Why, look at Otis here?—"

"Hey!" Otis protested.

Mila narrowed her eyes at the Sphinx. "You better take that back."

Haruki was studying Mae and Nikolai curiously. "By the way, aren't they?—?"

"About time the rest of you noticed," Naomi said wryly.

Mae and Nikolai found themselves the focus of a roomful of inquisitive eyes.

"Hi," Mae said steadily. Nikolai bobbed his head guardedly.

Their hosts welcomed them affably, the kids' stares burning holes into their faces.

Conrad's gaze landed on Hellreaver. He came over, interest sparking in his eyes. "Is that the demonic weapon we've heard so much about?"

Leah and Haruki followed the Immortal, equally curious.

"Yes." Mae looked down at Hellreaver. "Go on, say hi."

Hellreaver hesitated before detaching himself from her neck.

The kids gasped when he transformed.

"Hi." The voices of the thousand fiends inside Hellreaver rumbled awkwardly around the foyer.

"So cool!" Bow Boy croaked.

Even Oliver looked impressed.

Hellreaver startled when he found himself surrounded by children.

"My witch?" he quavered uncertainly.

"Play nice," Mae told him firmly as she and Nikolai followed Mila.

"What's that, Lola?" Ethan was saying as they exited the foyer. "Your sister is doing what—?" A scandalized sound left the Immortal. "Amelia Storm, get your butt out here right now!" he roared.

"Uh-oh, Uncle Ethan's about to lose his mind," Pig Tails said gleefully.

Conrad sighed. “Don’t provoke your uncle.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Pig Tails said, her enthusiasm unwavering.

“Is it bad that those kids are already growing on me?” Nikolai muttered to Mae.

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Mae grinned.

The mansion's kitchen took up almost half of the rear of the property. It had retained most of its original features, the rich, textured wallpaper complementing the dark wood units and adding to the overall warm feel of the large space.

Nate Conway was busy cooking at a cast-iron range, a sleeping baby strapped securely to his back. The Chimera's soul shimmered brightly inside Callie Stone where she sat on a window seat feeding a cheerful toddler. Three Immortals and the host to the Phoenix were applying cream-frosting to an enormous birthday cake and several batches of cupcakes on the table dominating the floor.

They all looked over when Mae and Nikolai entered the room after Mila.

"Glad you found the house okay," Nate said quietly.

Olivia Storm gave them a dazzling smile. "It's nice to finally meet you." She put down her piping cone and came over to hug a startled Mae and Nikolai.

Callie approached with the little boy and an equally large smile. "We're so glad you could make it." She kissed Mae and Nikolai on the cheek.

Daniel Lenton welcomed them with a nod.

"I hear Gerry and Larry did a number on you," Alexa drawled after they exchanged greetings with her and Laura.

Mae scratched her cheek. “More like they did a number on the gates.”

“We should tell Artemus to cut his losses and give them Martha,” Laura told Alexa.

The back door opened.

“It’s happening!” Caspian said excitedly.

Nate’s face fell. “Again?”

“Yup. Vozgan just challenged Gertrude to another battle.”

Daniel lowered his brows. “That dragon is an idiot.”

“I second that,” Alexa murmured, laser-like focus returning to her face as she resumed frosting the cake.

Mae and Nikolai followed Mila and Caspian outside.

A formidable energy danced over them when they stepped onto the rear porch.

An Immortal with dark hair and green eyes sat serenely on an ornate metal swing seat to their left. Alastair was perched on his shoulder. Smokey snoozed on his lap. Brimstone napped at his feet, next to a goat, a dog, and several chickens.

“Is his name Noah?” Nikolai asked Caspian suspiciously.

The Immortal smiled. “It’s Tomas Soul. Nice to meet you.”

Mae and Nikolai murmured a cautious greeting.

Mae's gaze dropped to the demon fox at the Immortal's feet.

I see you're making yourself right at home.

Brimstone opened an eye lazily.

I can't help it, my witch. This guy has the most restful aura. Even the hellhound can't resist his powers.

A snore ruffled Smokey's lips.

Tomas gave Mae a knowing smile, like he could hear their silent exchange.

Mae recalled what Violet had revealed about the Immortal.

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He probably can.

Motion beyond the porch drew her eyes.

Most of the rear garden was taken up by a cemetery and woodland.

Vozgan stood poised on the lawn hedging the graveyard, body braced for battle and expression fierce.

Gertrude issued a threatening “Bwak” across from him.

Nikolai grimaced. “Are they really doing this?”

Mae noticed a pair of familiar figures beyond the helldragon and the chicken.

Nikolai squinted. “Wait. Isn’t that?—?”

“Yeah, it is,” Mae said with a sigh as the demons’ potent energy brushed against her magic.

There, arbitrating the match, was Chazaquiel, the Eighth Leader of the Grigori and one of Astarte’s commanders.

Arakiel, the Second Leader of the Grigori, had his arms crossed beside him and was wearing a scowl on his face. He tapped his foot impatiently.

“How about you fools get on with it? It’s almost time for the party.”

Chazaquiel cleared his throat self-consciously when he realized he had an audience. He raised a small red flag.

Mila stared. “Where’d he get the flag?”

“Haruki bought it for him,” Tomas said.

“Christ,” Nikolai muttered.

“Ready?” Chazaquiel asked the two contenders.

“Ready,” Vozgan growled.

“Bwak bwak.”

The air fairly crackled with tension as everyone held their breath.

“And...GO!” Chazaquiel dropped the flag.

The chicken blurred.

The dragon grunted, flew across the yard, and landed on his back, all but knocked out.

Mae blinked.

Nikolai’s eyes bulged. “What the hell just happened?” He looked at Caspian. “Did you see?—?”

“Nope,” Caspian said cheerfully. “Gertrude is a law unto herself.”

“You owe me fifty bucks,” Mila informed her brother curtly.

That chicken is the spawn of the devil, my witch, Brimstone declared with bloodthirsty enthusiasm. We should befriend her.

Smokey huffed in agreement. The hellhound had woken up and was watching Mae intently, his brown eyes full of curiosity.

Vozgan came to with a groan. A portal opened behind him.

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Astarte stepped out of it with Armaros.

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” the Goddess said apologetically. She took her foot off Vozgan’s face. A frown wrinkled her brow. “What are you doing on the ground?”

Armaros assessed the situation at a glance.

“Looks like this harebrained idiot challenged the chicken again,” he grunted.

Gertrude was parading around the back yard under Arakiel and Chazaquiel’s watchful stares, the occasional satisfied “Bwak!” leaving her as she puffed out her chest.

Astarte sighed as the helldragon climbed unsteadily to his feet. “Your father warned you that you were no match for her.” She looked around and clocked Mae and Nikolai on the porch. Her face relaxed. “I see you made it okay.” She gazed curiously past them. “Where’s the star of the party?”

“Napping.” Tomas put Smokey on the ground and rose. “Meeting all her cousins exhausted her. I’ll go see where they’re at.”

Alastair returned to Nikolai with a sheepish caw.

“Traitor,” the sorcerer muttered.

The crow bumped his cheek affectionately with his head.

Oliver popped his head out of the back door. His face brightened at the sight of Astarte.

“Godmother!”

Astarte smiled. “Hello, my little lamb.”

Mae and Nikolai went to get their stuff from the SUV.

Callie showed them to their room.

“We’re so glad you came,” the Chimera said. “Everyone is so excited to get to know you.”

“You mean the kids and the Immortals are excited to see Hellreaver,” Mae said drily.

They could hear high-pitched squeals and laughter issuing from one of the downstairs rooms where Hellreaver was entertaining their hosts.

Callie looked appropriately abashed. “I mean, it’s not everyday you get to talk with a demonic weapon.”

Lucas and Anna Soul met them on the stairs.

“Hey.” Lucas put down the box of party decorations in his arms and shook Nikolai and Mae’s hands while Anna welcomed them with a kiss on their cheeks. “We’re glad you accepted the invitation.”

Mae read the silent message in the Immortal’s quiet eyes.

According to Violet, Lucas and Anna Soul were unique among the Immortals in that

they possessed the full legacy of the Archangel who had gifted their race with his powers.

Mae knew then that this trip wasn't just about the party or the festivities.

Just as she'd suspected, this was a meeting of allies on equal grounds. One that would provide the first opportunity to form the crucial bonds that would carry them through the war they would all face one day.

Nikolai's cautious expression indicated he'd also detected the hidden meaning behind Lucas's words.

"We're glad to be here," Mae said steadily.

They bumped into Serena Blake and Drake Hunter when they were leaving their room a short while later.

The super soldier acknowledged them with an amused smile.

"I hear Larry and Gerry gave you guys quite a scare."

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“We weren’t scared,” Nikolai protested.

“You were totally freaking out,” Mae told the sorcerer.

“They ate the electrical wiring, Mae,” Nikolai grunted.

“The gargoyles are here?” Drake asked warily.

Mae studied Artemus Steele’s brother curiously.

The demonic power inside him was as familiar as her own.

I guess that’s a given seeing as who his father is.

“They should have returned to Hell by now,” Serena reassured her husband. A faint frown marred her brow. “Or at least I hope they did, if they know what’s good for them.”

Drake’s mouth pressed to a thin line. “We should fix the gates before Artemus notices.”

Mae and Nikolai followed the couple downstairs. It was another hour before things were finally ready for the birthday party. Their last hosts showed up just as they finished setting the table in the kitchen.

The hairs lifted off Mae’s nape when Artemus Steele and Lily Soul entered the room behind Tomas. It wasn’t just the daunting strength the couple exuded that was making

her mouth go dry.

Sitting calmly in Artemus's arms was a pretty blonde baby girl.

Mae couldn't take her eyes off her.

She reluctantly dragged her gaze away as Lily came over, a smile brightening her face.

"Thank you for coming." She kissed Nikolai's cheek and clasped Mae's hands. "It means a lot. To all of us."

The Immortal's powers brushed against her magic, as fierce and as kind as her twin brother Tomas's.

Artemus welcomed them with a solemn, "Hi."

The divine energy radiating off his soul made Mae blink.

So, that's what you get when an angel and a goddess make a baby.

I wish to fight him, my witch, Brimstone said quietly.

Mae glanced at her familiar. She could tell the demon fox was being serious.

She chewed her lip.

Truth be told, I wouldn't mind testing my skills against him too.

The faint smile Lily flashed her way told her she'd read Mae's mind and didn't mind the challenge in the least.

The room got full pretty quickly as everyone gathered to celebrate Alice Grace Steele's first birthday, the kids crowding the countertops and the floor alongside the adults and the demons.

The little girl watched unblinkingly as Artemus and Lily lit the candle on her birthday cake and lifted her up so she could blow it out.

"Happy Birthday Alice!" the whole room chanted.

"Go on, sweetheart," Artemus told his daughter with a tender smile. "Blow the candle."

Lily kissed the little girl's temple.

Alice focused and leaned forward.

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Some smoke got in her nose. She wrinkled it.

Mae's stomach dropped when she sensed the little girl's prodigious powers surge. Oh?—

“—shit,” Astarte mumbled.

Chazaquiel furrowed his brow at the Goddess. “What?”

Brimstone stiffened by Mae's leg.

Nikolai paled when he detected what Mae and the Goddess had just felt.

The divine beasts were similarly stirring around the table, expressions growing wary. Smokey jumped off the table and ran under Callie's chair.

“What's the matter with everyone?” Artemus frowned and got a handkerchief out distractedly as Alice crunched up her face. “It's okay, baby. Here, blow your?—”

“Er, Artemus,” Lily started hoarsely.

“I wouldn't do that if I were—!” Mae warned.

Alice sneezed.

The explosion evaporated half the handkerchief, blew the cake apart, blasted a twenty-foot wide hole in the south-facing wall of the mansion, and set a bush on fire.

Stone glowed and metal tinkled in the deafening aftermath.

“Bah,” Alice said with a sheepish sniff.

“The cake,” Alexa said forlornly at the sight of the cream frosting plastered across the ceiling and walls.

“My kitchen,” Nate practically wailed.

Lucas and Anna looked at Lily.

“Honey?” Anna said glassily.

“I did not see that coming,” Lily stated leadenly.

Tomas shook his head, equally wide-eyed.

Artemus stared at his daughter with a mix of awe and alarm. He startled when the kids recovered from their shock and began whooping in excitement.

Movement outside captured Mae’s gaze.

A man with dark hair, blue eyes, and dazzling white wings poked his head around the corner of the gaping opening in the side of the mansion. His expression grew misty as he beheld Alice.

“Hello, my sweet angel,” he gushed sappily.

Alice brightened. “Gada!”

Artemus recovered his composure.

“Oh, great,” he told the newcomer nastily. “You’re here.”

The man’s face crumpled a little. He wiped an eye. “You’re hurting my feelings, son.”

Nikolai leaned sideways. “Is that who I think it is?!” he hissed at Mae.

Mae swallowed and nodded wordlessly.

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The Archangel Michael was even more fearsome in the flesh than she had imagined he would be.

A large shadow blocked the opening. The helldragon Vannog crouched beside Michael and squinted at the room.

“Was that Vozgan?”

The purple helldragon stuck his neck through a rear window, Gertrude roosting on his head.

“That wasn’t me, dad,” he said cheerfully. “It was Artemus and Lily’s kid.”

“Oh.” Vannog studied the little girl warily, his giant pupils dilating and contracting. “That power felt akin to that of a truly powerful helldragon.”

“No kidding,” Drake said, still shell-shocked.

“Well, at least we know where to find a human flamethrower if we ever need one,” Serena muttered.

Artemus scowled at the super soldier. Lily sighed.

Alice giggled.

Artemus’s gaze switched from his daughter to Michael.

“Do you know anything about this?” he said suspiciously.

Michael flinched. He recovered and bestowed a beatific smile upon the room.

“Heaven moves in mysterious ways,” he stated wisely, carefully avoiding Artemus’s eyes.

Artemus pondered this for all of five seconds.

“Lily, cover Alice’s eyes for a minute,” he snarled. “I need to go over there and kick her grandfather’s ass!”