



A Killing Curse (The Nix Series Book 5)

Author: *Shannon Mayer*

Category: Urban

Description: One last time, the Phoenix will rise, and her flames will savage all who stand between her and those she loves...

The game is afoot, and I never saw it coming. A game of demons, angels and new breed of abnormal that is beyond anything else I've faced. A monstrosity that is bent on destroying every other abnormal on the planet. Only one thing can stop those who would wipe us out. A cursed weapon. Created by a person who has been dead a long time. With an impossible task at hand, I can no longer face the darkness on my own. Even for me, the Phoenix, I need people at my back and my side. The clock is ticking as my team and I race to find the curse, the weapon, and the final pieces that will save the world. And when the darkness rises to consume us, I will have to face my greatest fears. Will I survive my own flames, or will I burn the world and my own existence up to save those I love?

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Killian was alive. The heart beating under my hand was steady and strong, even if the man it belonged to seemed to be in some sort of coma. The world around me slid away for a few minutes as I stared down at him. As I let my fingers thread through his hair and trace the lines of his face.

I touched one of his hands—there were burns that traced like lightning up from his fingertips to his elbow and even further, the lines reached up to his shoulder. If I stared long enough, they looked like they were moving, as if the marks were alive and trying to swallow him whole.

The threat of Gardreel and the fallen, the threat of the handlers and the institutions, the threat of being tracked or even the threat of the people around me, abnormals I barely knew—all of it was gone in those few moments.

Easter slid a chair over to me and I sat, without a word, and without taking my hand off Killian's chest. Because a very small part of me feared that if I stopped touching him, he'd disappear. Like before.

Like my entire world before. For the moment, keeping my hands on him meant we would be okay. That he would live. Though I could see that death was stalking him closely.

"I'll get us some food." Easter didn't touch me, but I could feel her energy, like she wanted to. "We both need to eat."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak for fear of what might come out. Screams? Maybe. Sobs? No, none of those. But I might start yelling at Killian. I might start

killing those around me out of sheer frustration.

“You better not die on me,” I said quietly to him. I wanted to see his lips turn upward, wanted to see him open his eyes and tell me he’d just been waiting for me to show. He did neither.

All I could do was just sit there and breathe him in. It had been over a year that we’d been apart, over a year since I knew for sure if he was alive, if I knew that he was with my children, protecting them. Children, not child.

We’d had a daughter, a girl who’d survived when I’d been told she’d not. A pain I did not like, because I’d lived it before, cut through me. When I’d thought Bear had been dead, there had been nothing left in me. Nothing but the need to kill those who’d taken my child from me.

A shuddering breath caught me off guard and I finally found my voice. “Did you name her, Killian?”

Not that I expected him to answer, not really.

He was calm under my hand, but there was a stillness to him that I didn’t like, that I didn’t understand. As an abnormal he healed faster than a human, and as a powerful abnormal he should have been awake by now. Even I could see the injuries he’d taken were mostly gone. I brushed my fingers over the angry red lines that ran across his chest, neck and arms. Almost like the electricity he had control over had come back to bite him.

Or had he been lashed? I let my fingers do the work and closed my eyes. No, these wounds were something else; they weren’t from a leather lash, and they weren’t from knives. They pulsed under my fingertips.

“The wings did it.”

I opened my eyes and turned to see Mario standing ten feet back and leaning against the wall.

“The wings,” I said.

“That’s what he was ranting when we brought him in. Whatever it was he’d been fighting had cut him up with their wings. We assumed it was some kind of abnormal that was working with the labs. Maybe some sort of shifter.”

I pressed harder against the scars, and they . . . pushed back. Yes, something was in there. “How long did it take to heal over the wounds?”

“Not long, a few hours.” Mario shrugged but didn’t come closer. His eyes were like mine, blue and wary. He had every reason to fear me. And I had every reason not to trust him.

I frowned as I felt the edges of the scars. It was more like his skin had been torn open than properly cut. Maybe like a rough-edged stone knife. Keeping my hand against the one scar, I let my fingers walk the length of it.

“He’s been talking in his sleep—if you’d call this sleep—and muttering names. Someone named Bear?” Mario offered those words, and I did not react. Couldn’t.

“Anything else?”

“Angel. That’s the only other name that he’s given. The rest is just the usual, what you’d expect of someone who has been fighting his whole life, telling us to fuck off, telling us he’ll kill us.” Mario pushed off the wall and slowly made his way over to the other side of Killian. “He won’t last long under this spell, curse, or whatever it is.

Days at best. We can get fluid into him, but not much. Not enough, and we don't have even an IV bag to our name here."

Mario was not wrong. Even in the short time that I'd been sitting with him, Killian's heartrate had slowed—fractionally, but I'd felt it. His skin had cooled too—the same as his heart, it was fractional but with time it would slide into icy cold. He'd be dead soon if I did nothing.

"What are you suggesting?"

"That you put him out of his misery," Mario said. "When the time comes."

I had Dinah out and pointed at my brother before he could so much as blink. "I think you should keep your mercy killing ideas to yourself, Mario."

Ruby, the Cane Corso-pitbull cross that had chosen me as her person, let out a low growl at my side, pressing her body to my thigh as she picked up on my anger. That rumbling growl was wet and throaty and she took a step toward him. Mario gave her a long look, his eyes a little wider.

Dinah gave a low snort. "Lesson one. She doesn't give up on people. Lesson two, piss her off and find out how short her fuse is. I dare you. I'd have no problem shooting you."

From my back, Diego chuckled. "And if the ladies won't, I'll happily blow a hole in your middle."

Mario shrugged, reached out and pushed Dinah to the side.

Wrong move.

I was up and on him, driving him to the ground and jamming Dinah under his chin in one single move, my finger hovering over the trigger. “Never touch my gun without permission.”

Ruby was at my side and her teeth were bared, inches from his face. As if Dinah wasn’t enough of a threat.

Diego whispered, “Please, please let me kill him.”

Dinah just laughed. “Oh, he fucked up already. Tell him to put his finger in me, I’d like that. Then I’ll blow his whole fucking hand off.”

Mario locked eyes with me. “You would kill me for touching your gun. Are you serious?”

“I would kill you for not understanding that I don’t have the bandwidth for other people’s bullshit right now.” I got off him and stepped back, and tucked Dinah into her holster. “But I won’t because our numbers are down. And we need every motherfucking abnormal we can get. Especially those who have some leadership qualities.”

I stepped back from him, keeping him in my sights. He stood and brushed his clothes off, keeping an eye on Ruby, but otherwise acting for all the world like nothing had just happened. “I always thought the rumors about you were . . . elaborated. I stand corrected.” He gave me a tight nod. “When you’re ready to discuss the next step—”

“Ten minutes,” I said. Because if I let myself stay and keep on touching Killian, I wouldn’t be able to leave him. And right then we had things that needed discussing. “Give me ten minutes and then I will talk to you about our next steps.”

Discussing things like how to stop the fallen.

Mario looked at Killian. “You don’t have much time with him.”

He wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. Killian was dying, right in front of me, and there was very little I could do. I shook my head. “He won’t die today. Let’s get shit handled. Give me ten minutes.”

My brother’s eyes narrowed, thoughtful, and then he gave me that same nod as before. “I’ll wait for you.”

He left me there and I sat back down, letting my fingers once more trace across Killian’s body.

Wings did this, like the wings of the leather-clad, multi-armed fallen that had attacked us at Carlos’s house. I pulled one of my knives out of my boot sheath, and laid the razor-sharp tip against one of the scars. Not like another scar would bother Killian any. And I needed to see what was underneath. What was pulsing against my fingers.

Pressing down, I slid it into the flesh, opening the wound.

The smell was first putrid, like decomposing meat. The deep green pus, streaked through with black and red, was next, oozing out and down his side. “Fuck, Dinah, you see this?” Tiny chunks of what looked like leather burbled out too. Bits of wing?

“Jesus, that’s bad. You’re going to have to lance them all.”

Diego let out a hiss. “You need some antiseptic. And wash your hands before you touch me again. That’s gross.”

I went to work, cutting open every ridged scar across Killian’s chest, belly and upper arms. All of them were completely infected. Two I had to cut deeper and put pressure

on in order to get the thick pus out, to literally pop them open and force the chunks to go. Those two were darker than the others, the pus nearly solid black.

Those two had something else in them. Something sharp and hard. I touched the foreign object with the tip of my knife.

Killian let out a low groan as he lifted a hand as if he'd stop me.

"Sorry, you have no choice in this." I leaned over his chest, my fingers and knife working in tandem to pull the objects out of him. They were stuck hard and I ended up with a knee on his side and pulling with all my weight before they let go.

Stumbling back, I held the shiny black piece of wing in my hand. The scales were the same as those on the ones I'd fought. I lay them in my hand and bounced them there.

Killian had damaged the fallen, broken off parts of them, and those parts had sunk into him. And even as I looked at them . . . they dissolved in my hands. Ruby snuffled at the dust, blowing it around the room. She gave a snort and then looked up at me with her one eye.

As if she wasn't sure. "Bad guys," I said. "This is what the bad guys smell like."

She woofed as if she understood.

I drew in a long slow breath as I considered the situation. The dust that was on my palms, and on the floor, was all that was left of the fallen. Something Killian had done had killed or injured them, and something in his blood had finished them off.

The only question was . . . what?

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Ruby snuffled around the floor, licking up the ashes of the fallen. I didn't stop her; I doubted it would hurt her at all. And maybe she'd get a taste for the fuckers. I rubbed my fingers together. The ashes were not greasy at all—not the way I'd expect them to be.

I dusted my hands on my pants, but the shit stuck to me, like glitter. “Fucking angel glitter,” I muttered.

And then I froze. “Dinah.”

“Yeah?”

I dropped to the floor as I spoke, scooping up the glitter. “Think you could shove this angel dust shit into a couple of bullets?”

I scooped the dust into a small pile, pinched a bit, then put it down her barrel. The thing about the sentient guns was they could from time to time use an outside ingredient. But it was touch and go. Everyone kept saying that the fallen's abilities were the only thing that could kill another fallen.

But what about some of their ashes?

“Shit, that's a fucking brilliant idea!” She trembled in my hand as I scooped all the dust down her barrel. “You must get your brains from your sister.”

“Sure didn't get them from my dad,” I muttered.

She laughed. I laughed. We loaded her up to hopefully be able to do some damage.

Her inner workings clicked and rumbled as I held her. “What do you think?” I asked.

“I’ve managed to meld it with my explosive rounds. I think that was best.” She made a clicking noise that made me think of someone licking their lips. “Seven shots. Not a ton, but that could mean all the difference.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

I stood and looked back to Killian. He hadn’t moved—again, not that I expected him to jump up and down just from having his wounds lanced.

He did, however, open his eyes a crack. “Lass?”

I moved to his side and took his hand. “Killian?”

“Dying,” he whispered. “Kids safe.”

I wasn’t sure if he was asking or telling me. “For now, yes. They are.”

His eyes closed and that smile I loved slid over his lips, but not another word. His hand went limp in mine as he fell back under whatever held him in thrall.

“We have to hurry,” Dinah said. “That man is too fine to just let him die on a table.”

“Is he really?” Diego grumbled. “I mean, I am a very fine man. People just let me die.”

“Oh, shut up with you,” Dinah snapped. The two of them set to bickering as I took a cloth from the table next to Killian, poured some rubbing alcohol on it, and wiped his

wounds down. They had already closed, but the alcohol helped with the stench.

If he didn't come out of this coma soon, I would lance them again.

"Why would he get an infection?" Diego asked. "Abnormals don't generally get hurt like that."

I motioned to his hands. "Looks like he encountered the same shit that Cowboy touched. The angel dust they use to knock abnormals out."

The implication was clear, at least to me.

Cowboy had enough demon in him to freak out Ornias, and that was the reason why he'd reacted so badly. That had to be the reason why they both reacted to the dust this way. Not because they were abnormal, but because they both had a good amount of demon blood in them.

It was as good a guess as any, not that it changed how I felt about him. If he was a demon, then he was my demon.

I leaned over and pressed my lips to his. They were a little warmer. Or maybe that was hope giving me a false lead. "Don't die, Killian."

I left him there and stepped out of the room. Mario didn't ask what I'd done, though I saw his nose curl on the scent that had clung to me. I wiped the knife on the cloth and then tossed that in a nearby cannister. "Infection, I lanced it. That will give us time to figure out how to help him."

He nodded. "You're ready to plan then?"

I waved at him. "Lead the way."

“Of course.” Mario turned his back to me, giving me a perfect shot if I’d wanted to kill him without a fuss.

Dinah let out an exasperated sigh, but she kept her voice low and just for me and Diego. “How is it that he doesn’t know you? He was around when we were hunting abnormals. Look at this, so fucking trusting!”

“She was out of the circuit a long time,” Diego rumbled from my back. “She has become myth and legend and those that never really dealt with her before don’t believe that she is who the stories say.”

Technically Mario had been around when I’d worked for my father, but he’d been small potatoes. And he’d stayed clear of the big players. Which made more sense now that I knew he was my father’s son. My brother.

If I was being honest, he’d been smarter than the rest of us, staying far away from the family and the horrors that the rest of us had lived through.

“What is your plan for everyone here?” I asked.

He looked over his shoulder. “To keep them alive.”

“Other than the obvious.”

He gave me an odd look and I smiled, understanding clearly that he didn’t want to talk.

“Dinah,” I said as Mario led me through the old factory, “it looks like he doesn’t want to talk where his own people can hear him. Which means he has secrets he doesn’t want them to know.”

She shivered. “Oh, I love secrets. How about you, Diego? You like a good secret?”

“Only if it’s really juicy.”

I watched Mario’s back, noticed the tightening across his shoulders. The tension growing.

“You think that they know he doesn’t trust them?” I asked loud enough that my voice echoed through the space we were in. A long hall, one of a few that we’d walked.

Diego and Dinah laughed together, as if we’d practiced this moment. “No, they don’t know he’d throw them to the fallen if it was his life or theirs,” Diego said. “A man after my own heart.”

Mario swung around, his one hand coming up, light with a dark red fire. “I suggest you and your friends shut your mouths.”

He wanted to play with fire, did he?

I stepped up and put my hand over his, dousing his flames. “Don’t make that mistake, Mario. I want to like you. But the fact is you don’t trust your people. That does not bode well.” I pushed my hand into his and called up my own fire, dragging it through me and pushing it to my hand.

The bright yellow fire was edged with white licks, brighter than the last time I’d used it. Far brighter. He winced and pulled his hand away.

“I don’t need them knowing that there are moles.” He ground the words out. “I am looking for them. But I have to be sure. As you said, we need all the people we can pull together.”

For a fight? I frowned at him and pulled my hand away. “You think it will come to a battle?”

He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. “Can you just fucking wait until we get to my office?”

Dinah laughed. “We’re on a bit of a time crunch, right? You know that?”

His eyes shot to my holster. “What is her name?”

“Dinah,” she barked. “And that big bastard on her back is Diego. Kind of shit aim on him, but with a big barrel, who cares if the aim is any good, am I right?”

Mario’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean there is a time crunch?”

“Just a feeling,” Dinah said. “I have those.”

He sighed. “We are almost to my office. Can you just give it a minute?”

I motioned for him to go with a wave of my hand.

As we walked I couldn’t help but notice the warren of halls and doors, many that were obviously created in recent months by the shiny welds and the shit material. The factory was a maze that would give them an edge if Gardreel and his fallen were to drop in unannounced.

We intersected with Easter on the main floor. She had two plates of food and a look of irritation written clearly on her face. Ruby gave a woof, greeting her. I took one of the plates of food and she silently stepped in beside me.

“I got turned around in here,” she said. “This place . . . there is Hider magic in it, but

something else too.”

“A spell to keep it not only hidden, but twisted,” Mario said. “We have a few spell casters, they have been working nonstop to keep us safe.”

“There will be a cost to that,” Easter said. “Spells always have a kickback. You know that.”

“I do.” Mario nodded at her, his eyes drifting over her face.

Dinah gave a low whistle. “Several spell casters working at once? That’s a big kickback.”

Interesting that Dinah had a thought about spell casting. Then again, she’d been stuffed into a gun with a spell.

The factory was quiet with the exception of our voices, but I could sense abnormals watching us. My skin was crawling by the time we’d climbed a final two sets of stairs to a large open office space that looked out over the factory floor. Ruby kept pace, her toes clicking on the hard surface, her hackles rising as we went, her one good eye watching all around us.

I didn’t blame her, especially when we got to the top of the stairs.

The metal door with the heavy hinges gave me pause, the bands of iron on it meant to keep people out. Or people in, depending on how you looked at it.

Carlos and Pete already waited for us inside the room, Carlos with a coffee mug wrapped up in his hands. Pete sat with his eyes closed as if he were sleeping, leaned back in his chair. But I could see the pulse in his neck and the flare in his nostrils that said he was faking it. He’d already smelled us coming, or at the very least me and the

rot that was all over my hands.

“Was it really him?” Carlos asked as Mario stepped into the room.

I nodded. “Yes.” My feet stopped at the threshold of the door, as did Easter. Mario was inside the room, and already sitting in a chair behind a large desk. He looked over his shoulder. “What is wrong?”

I rapped my knuckles on the metal. “What the fuck is this two-ton metal door for?”

Mario made a sweeping gesture with his hands, encompassing the factory. “There are a number of abnormals with exceptional hearing. This room is soundproof even to them. As I was trying to get you to see,” he lowered his voice. “There are those who might not be fully in our camp.”

Sure, that made sense. But I didn’t want to go into a locked room like this. Call it PTSD, but the idea of shutting a massive metal door behind me, hearing it click shut . . . it made me want to kill people.

“I don’t trust anyone, dear sister.” He smiled, a genuine one as far as I could see. “Not even you. Especially not your dog. I think she’d like to eat me.”

Outwardly, I kept my face calm. Hell, I even smiled, though I knew the coldness of my visage. “Best not to trust family. In my experience, they’ll screw you over every chance they can get.”

“Amen,” Easter said. “My own mother sold me to the highest bidder.”

“Double that,” Dinah grumbled. “Look at me, I got screwed by the man who said he’d love me forever.”

“Men are the worst.” Easter nodded. “Especially the ones who lie.”

Dinah snickered. “You mean all of them?”

They laughed, I did not. Because I knew that it was an easy shot at men, when they didn’t all lie. There were a few good ones left. Like Killian.

I blinked, shocked at my thoughts. Fuck, I was going soft.

“I’ll give you the key if that makes you feel better?” Mario offered, though there was a tone to his voice that was pure condescension. “But we cannot have this conversation where others can hear us. Unless you want to risk information getting back to the fallen ones?”

Even as he spoke, the sensation of being watched intensified. Motherfucker Gardreel had people everywhere. We needed time, and I would make that time happen.

“You know what? Hold that thought while I do your work for you.” I put my plate of food on the floor, turned and strode down the stairs, snapping my fingers for Ruby to follow me.

She trotted down next to me and then sat at my side as I did a visual sweep of the space around us. “Find the bad guys, Ruby.”

Not exactly the same training that Abe had, but in her own way she was more tightly bound to me. I’d told her that the dust she’d sniffed up had been the bad guys. Her one eye drooped shut and she sniffed the air, then put her nose to the ground.

She did a circle around me, wider and wider.

“I thought you said we were on a time crunch?” Mario barked.

“I thought you said you had moles,” I snapped back. “And since you can’t find them, and dig them the fuck out, I will!”

Maybe I was in a bad mood. Maybe I just wanted to kill something. Both were plausible.

As it was. Someone was going to die. It was just a matter of who.

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Ruby kept up her circling, sniffing the ground, looking for someone who smelled like the angel dust she'd breathed in. Angel dust. Fucking assholes.

"Don't use the good shots," I said. "Just regular bullets will do the trick."

"On it," Dinah and Diego said in tandem and then immediately began to argue about who was going to do the actual killing. I let them bicker. I wasn't interested in sneaking up on people. Let them hear me coming.

Yes, I realized I was looking for a fight. I wanted to smash heads and let loose some of the rage burning through me. Killian was dying, I could do nothing about that. My children were essentially out in the wild, fending for themselves. I could do nothing about that.

And Mario, he couldn't even clean up his own fucking house.

That I could do something about.

I followed Ruby as she made her way through the factory. We went past the stairs that led up to the office. Mario had his hands in the air, but Easter just watched, eating her meal. "Get 'em!" she cheered us on.

Dinah laughed. "Fuck yeah, we'll get 'em."

Like we were going into a ball game. Top of the ninth or whatever.

Ruby never picked up her pace, she just kept on scenting the air and the ground until

she brought me to a door. She bumped it with her nose, sneezed and shook her head.

“Here?” I pointed and she gave a quiet woof.

Here it was then. The door was wooden, with “Stay out!” scratched into it. But more than that, I could see the magic woven into it. Someone inside was a spell caster.

“Effective,” Dinah whispered. “Did they think that would work?” I pulled her clear of her holster, motioned for Ruby to sit and stay.

“Watch for green,” I said. Green being the color of a death spell.

“What about me?” Diego whined.

“Keep it up and I won’t use you at all,” I said as I leaned close to the door. The spell woven into the door would keep me from kicking it open and it would keep me from hearing anything inside that was being discussed. I needed them to open it from the inside.

The smell of abnormal was strong—they weren’t all that powerful then, or at least one of them wasn’t. I knocked. “Room service.”

Dinah snickered.

“What the fuck?” rumbled from inside the room. I stepped back as the door opened.

The guy in the door was huge, muscled so heavily I wasn’t sure his head wasn’t attached straight to his shoulders. He had a tattoo across his left cheek and a single eye in the middle of his head.

“Who you?”

“Room service.” I smiled and lifted Dinah.

The confusion on his face was solid—he was staring down a gun and not recognizing that he was in imminent danger of dying. “Didn’t order room service. Get the fuck out of here.”

“No.” I kicked out, catching him on the inside of his knee and popping it out of joint. He went down, howling.

He was not the one with the big magic, though. One-eye was the muscle.

“Not very good at your job, hey motherfucker?” Dinah screamed as I stepped over him and into the room.

The other two abnormals, they were of a different class. The spell caster was a woman and she was already spinning her magic, her hands flicking and dancing in the air. I swung Dinah up and shot her in the guts. I might need to talk to her.

Her magic fled as she fell, her eyes wide and her magic hands going to her stomach.

The third, he had delusions of grandeur. He leapt at me, long spindly fingers reaching for my throat. He was reminiscent of a daddy long legs spider. All joints and thin limbs. I let him grab me.

“I got you now, bitch! Who do you think you are?”

“Your worst nightmare!” Diego yelled. “God, I always wanted to say that!”

I swung Dinah around and jammed her into his solar plexus, or maybe it was a thorax. I squeezed the trigger, but she hit nothing. I frowned. That close she shouldn’t have missed.

He laughed. “Can’t hit me?”

“He actually avoided me!” Dinah screamed. “Let me have another go!”

“No, my turn!” Diego bellowed.

I tucked her into her holster, as calm as if I wasn’t getting the blood cut off to my head.

“Bellarose, I’ll kill her! Then we’ll get you help! They said they’d heal us. Lorn, grab her from behind!”

Hands free, I swung them up and around and snapped both his spindly arms at the first joint. He screamed and I turned my body into his, using the momentum to throw him over my back and onto the floor at my feet. I still held one of his long arms. I jammed a foot into his armpit and yanked hard.

The arm popped free. “Just like every other bug I’ve squashed,” I said.

Lorn—one-eyed muscle man—stood and wobbled on one leg. “I kill you.”

“Unlikely,” I said as I pulled Diego around. The big gun let out a whoop as I squeezed his trigger and pumped two slugs into Lorn’s chest. I only needed one informant to confirm what I already knew. Not three.

Bellarose and Insect Man lay on the floor. Pale green fluid dripped out the socket I’d yanked free, and her blood mingled with it.

“How much do you know?” I crouched in front of them, Diego across my lap. Lorn—still breathing, but shallowly—was behind me. So, I leaned back and sat on his chest, so his last sight was of me.

Bellarose shook her head. “You’re . . . you’re in a facility. They promised.”

I laughed. “Promises are made to be broken, darling. Don’t you know that yet?” I put my hand on Lorn’s face and leaned closer to them. He struggled for his last breaths, and I just stared at the two in front of me. “I suggest . . . that unless you want to die horrible, tainted deaths, you start telling me all about your contacts with the fallen.”

It took them all of ten minutes to tell me what they knew. They weren’t the only ones inside the factory spying on Mario and his crew. They had been told to watch Mario to see if he had anyone that displayed a certain set of powers.

Spell casters.

Magelores.

Ascendants.

The night of the bleeding stars. That was the last thing that Lorn gasped out.

And something called a death talker. That one was new to me. I could guess at what it meant.

“Thank you,” I said as I stood up. Bellarose didn’t sigh with relief. The bug man did. I shot him first.

“They’ll kill you,” she whispered as I leveled Dinah at her head. “They . . . they hate you the most.”

I smiled. “That’s a position I’m used to.”

The boom echoed through the room. I turned away from the bodies and stepped out

into the hall where Ruby had waited patiently. I rubbed a hand over her head. “Good girl.”

She snorted and rubbed her face against my thigh as we walked away, back to the office.

At the top of the stairs Mario stared hard at me. He was pissed.

I shook my head. “I killed three of your moles. They said they aren’t the only ones.”

The rage that rolled across Mario’s face reminded me far too much of my father and that had me bracing for a fist to come my way. Surprisingly, he pulled his shit together. “Thank you. Any idea who the others might be?”

“They were kept in the dark,” I said.

“It’s safer than it was, then. But still not good to have our conversations out in the open,” Mario said, anger still obviously humming through him. “Are you ready to discuss now?”

I didn’t disagree with him.

I still didn’t like the big fucking door.

Seeing as the most recent place I’d found myself with doors like this had left me . . . on edge when it came to heavy locking doors. At my side a tremor ran through Easter, her eyes flicking back and forth. She’d stood outside the room the whole time, waiting for me.

I didn’t touch her, but there was a moment where I . . . reached for her was the only word I could use. Mentally I reached for her, and that connection I’d created when I’d

burned her handler out of her was still there.

She turned her head to me. We shared a look, an understanding that if he was stupid, we'd make it out of here alive. We'd tag team the motherfucker if we had to. She smiled first, winked, and then I echoed both movements and we stepped across the threshold together, Ruby at my heels, her head swinging toward Mario. She really didn't like him, and that alone was enough to keep me from trusting him at all.

"You know that's creepy as shit watching you two interact," Pete said. "Like a pair of possessed dolls."

I shrugged and sat down at the table, started in on the food Easter had brought me, flinching only a little when the door clanged shut behind us. I kept half an eye on Easter, noting the sweat breaking out across the edge of her hairline.

I made myself focus on what was in front of me, namely the food. Even with that, I barely tasted it and slipped a chunk of the pseudo meat to Ruby. Food was fuel; I didn't have time for savoring anything.

Mario sat across from me, folded his hands on the large desk, and waited until I'd almost finished eating. "So, do you actually think you have a solution to our problem?"

Our problem, as if the whole world hadn't been under attack by the fallen and instead, we just had a territory disagreement between two gangs.

I took the last bite of food and washed it down with a swig of water. "Yes. I have a solution but it's far from simple. We need to find a demon, and stuff him in a new weapon the way Dinah and Diego here have been placed inside these guns. Then we can kill the fallen."

Mario didn't move but I could almost see the gears turning. "A demon."

"Yes. A rather particular demon, one that is strong enough to do the job." If it had been any demon, I would have just gone and bottled up Ornias from the church. I lowered my plate to the floor so Ruby could clean off the rest of the crumbs. "One I've cast out before."

Easter let out a slow breath. "Not the desert fire demon? He was a right powerhouse."

Yeah, that thought had crossed my mind, but I'd quickly dismissed it. "No, his power is too close to mine and he can suck me under. I can't risk it." I paused and pulled Dinah and Diego out, laying them on the table. "We need Bazixal. He wanted to control me once, I think I could convince him to play ball. Or at the very least, I can get him to the negotiating table."

Maybe need was not the right word. Bazixal was a monstrous demon, perhaps the strongest that we'd ever dealt with, and I'd barely been able to get rid of him. The truth was, he was strong and we needed a kickass demon that had fallen from grace.

If what my grandmother had been saying was true, that was, and the same power that imbued the fallen was what we needed to kill them.

And demons, they were just fallen who'd fallen a little further.

"And just how are we going to do this?" Pete asked, finally sitting up. "I mean, you can't just call a demon, it's not that easy. Even I know that. You need a circle, a spell caster, you need a sacrifice. And I am not going to offer up my ass as a sacrifice."

"You know an awful lot about calling demons." Easter spoke the very thoughts I was having. "No luck?"

He cringed. “I know things. That’s all.”

As if he’d tried to call one up. Yeah, it was likely he had at one point. Magelores were all about power and strength, and if he could have had a demon in his back pocket, I had no doubt he would have.

“So first we find a demon, but then you want to . . . stuff him . . .” Carlos looked at the two guns on the table. “Like these two. Who would want a weapon like that? It would likely turn on its creator! At least these two had souls! They have personalities!”

“Seems to be the case,” I said. “But I don’t know how to stuff a soul—demon or otherwise—into a weapon. Any of you know? I’m assuming there is a set of instructions out there somewhere.” I took a good long look at Pete.

He cleared his throat. “I can help you with the calling up part, but that’s it.”

I’d take it. I gave him a nod. “Then that’s your job. Get the pieces together.”

Pete squinted. “I might need to contact another Magelore to help.”

Another nod. “Fine. Just do it.”

That was maybe the only step we did have nailed down. “Spells for putting souls into a weapon. Anyone?” I asked as I scooted my chair back. Ruby set her head on my lap and I rubbed around the base of her ears.

“What about you, Diego?” Carlos asked. “How was it done? Do you remember?”

Diego gave a grunt, shuddering against my back. “No. I was so far gone into dying that I recall nothing, only that it was done. They asked my consent, I gave it. That is

all I know. Chanting. There was chanting. And music.”

Easter leaned over and motioned at Dinah. “Girlfriend, what about you?”

Interesting. They’d created quite the connection while they’d traveled together.

“I didn’t see how it was done,” Dinah said. “But the person who would know . . . would be Eleanor.”

Eleanor. My other gun. The gun that held the soul of my mother. The gun that had backfired to keep from killing me, and instead had ripped what was left of her from this world.

“She’d dead,” I said. “She can’t help—”

Mario held up his hand, stopping me. “That’s not . . . entirely true.”

I frowned as my heart picked up speed because he could not be saying what I thought he was saying. Not possible. Mario smiled back at me, and again I wasn’t fully sure that I liked what I saw in him.

“She’s not dead.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

My mother was somehow, impossibly alive was what Mario was saying, and I wasn't sure how to react. So I didn't. I just sat there and gave him a dead stare because let me be perfectly blunt—I could feel him trying to get a rise out of me. I could feel him trying to dig at my emotions to make me more vulnerable.

Well fuck him. He had no idea what he was up against.

He'd dropped that little bomb in the middle of the room that left me silent, but it surely did not work on Dinah.

“What the actual fuck are you talking about? Eleanor died! She died to keep Phoenix safe, I should fucking well know because I was fucking well there! So, you can take your lies and shove them up your tight little ass!” Her voice was hard, but I heard the tremor in it, and more than that the tremor that ran through her body under my hand.

That had been a bad day for both of us. I'd lost my mother; she'd lost the only person who truly understood the situation she was in and who'd been at her side for years in the most literal of senses.

Mario shrugged. “It's a story, are you ready for it or do you want to keep screaming at me?”

Dinah huffed. I kept my thoughts to myself. I wanted to see how big of a hole he would dig for himself here. How many lies he would spin to try and manipulate me.

This last year had taught me patience of a different kind. My natural inclinations were to kill first and not bother with questions. But I'd learned a great deal about myself by

being forced to wait. If Mario was playing with me, I'd . . . well, normally I'd just kill him. But right then I needed abnormals who had power, so he wouldn't be dead. Not yet. And if he wasn't lying about our mom . . . then I would take his knowledge.

And then I would kill him.

"Tell us," I said, my voice low. Ruby picked up on my energy and let out a rumbling growl, butting her head up against my hand, supporting me in her own way. She didn't like Mario. I respected that.

Maybe I'd let her kill him if it came down to an option.

"The labs have been around a very long time." He stood and began to pace the room. A showman, just like I'd thought. "Since before you or I were born even. Just as they are today, they were set up to take in abnormals. To run tests on them, to study them, to try and use their powers if they could. This should be of no surprise to you; humans have been pulling shit like this for hundreds of years, locking up those they don't understand. Labeling them as crazy. Testing on them."

I nodded at him to go on.

"Our mother was put into one of these labs."

"She was killed," I said. "And her soul put into a gun."

"Exactly." He pointed at me, making a shooting motion with his fingers. "But there is a moment between life and death—more especially for abnormals, you know this. A place where we are neither dead nor alive, and our souls are loose there, for lack of a better term. Not all can traverse this, or at least not all without help. And while maybe her soul was taken and put into a gun," he paused and looked at Dinah, "her body was kept alive."

Fuck, I did know exactly what he was talking about. I'd spent time in a form of limbo when I'd been trapped in the Clearview Institute. I'd used it as an escape, not really understanding what it was, only that it gave me a place to recharge, and to search for others that were like me in the hopes of banding together. There hadn't been many who could walk in that place like I could.

"That's hogwash bullshit," Pete grumbled. "I've killed enough abnormal to know—"

"It's not bullshit," I said. "When you bit me, where did we go?"

Pete frowned. "I mean, it was kind of like I was in your head, wasn't it?" He stared at me and I stared back, waiting for him to get it. His eyes widened. "Wait, you can't mean—"

"It was, and is, a place of limbo, not just in my head," I said. "Cowboy can get there too; I found him there, but he seemed to be faint. Like he wasn't good at it."

Carlos was quiet for a beat, and his voice cracked when he spoke. "Could you find my Rosa that way?"

I shook my head. "Not every abnormal can be there, at least in my experience. I either must be physically touching them like I was with Pete, or Easter," I tipped my head to her, "or they have some innate talent. Might be a proximity thing too, I'm not sure."

That last, I threw in there to keep him from pestering me to look for Rosa every time I shut my damn eyes. Because Bear could reach me in that place of limbo no matter how far apart we were. But was that because we were related? Most likely it had to do with our blood and connection as mother and son.

It wasn't like there was a rule book that I had to work off, so I had no way of

knowing for sure, and I did not have the time to be fucking around looking for everyone's child.

“Regardless.” Mario held up his hands, drawing everyone's eyes back to him. Yes, he had that showman quality to him, not unlike our father. That did not endear him to me, to be clear. “Her body is still alive, hooked up to machines.”

He clicked a button and the TV screen behind him came to life. The video was shitty, but there was no doubt that whoever had taken it had been in a facility. Shot from the waist, the scene bobbed and weaved until the person turned into a room on the left. A single bed, a single body, hooked up to IVs and breathing machines. There were a lot of wires and equipment so as the shot moved over the person in the bed it was hard to say for sure who it was. If not for the color of her hair and the scar to the left of her eye from my father slapping her with his ring on, I wouldn't have known.

“That's her,” I said. “If you have this video, then you know where she is.”

Mario shook his head. “It was sent to me anonymously. And when I tried to trace it, the sender had been killed.”

“Where were they?” The city that the sender had been in would be near the facility.

“They'd run,” he said as if he already knew the direction of my thoughts. “They were in the UK when I found the body.”

“Where was the postage from?” Easter asked.

“Again, I tried that angle. There are no facilities in northern Canada.” He pulled a face. “They'd run before they'd even put the video in the mail. They knew it was dangerous.”

A strange feeling rolled over me. “When was this sent?”

“Two years ago,” he said.

Two years. Right around the time that . . . that I’d thought Bear and Justin—my first husband—had been killed. Justin was able to respawn, though. Over and over.

It wasn’t that I knew for sure. Because with every respawn Justin changed his image.

But it fit.

And despite all that we’d been through, he had always been trying to keep me and Bear safe in his own fucked up way.

“Who are you thinking?” Dinah asked. I looked down as I realized that I’d put my hand on her.

“J,” I said.

She sucked in a gasp. “The timing is right. And he’d risk it . . . but how did he know?”

I snorted. “He didn’t. More likely he thought he would give me some closure if I could say goodbye to her.”

But I would take it.

“You know who sent this?” Mario twisted to look at the video.

“Play it once more. You see hands at one point.” I stood, taking Dinah with me so that I could get closer to the image.

The scene played out again, and there was a split second at the very beginning that drew my eyes. “There, start it and freeze it right away.”

Mario did as I asked, and I found myself staring into the blurred eyes of a man that I’d loved for a lot of years. Or at least a man I’d learned to love. “Fucker. It’s him, I’m sure of it.”

“Then we find him and ask him.” Mario thumped the table and I laughed at him.

“He’s dead. You said it yourself.” I narrowed my eyes at him as I saw the truth. “You knew who it was who sent you the video?”

He shrugged. “Regardless—”

“He likes that word,” Dinah whispered.

Mario glared at her. “Even if our mother’s soul has gone on, there is a chance that we can gain what she knew. In the body, there is memory held and stored in the mind and the muscles. If we were able to get to her, and put you and a death talker in touch with her, there is a chance that—”

“You mean actually break into one of the labs?” Easter cut him off, her voice hard. “Go back into one of those hell holes? On a chance? You are out of your fucking mind. You haven’t been there; you don’t know what you’re asking of us.”

Mario stared her down and the tension between the two of them was interesting—not quite animosity, not quite interest. “You would not be the one going back in. Nix would be the one. She has the connection to our mother and the apparent ability to traverse limbo. That would be needed at the least. She could take a death talker with her; two would be far easier to get into a facility.”

I leaned back in my chair, considering the options. I needed to get Bazixal to agree to place himself inside a weapon. With a little negotiating, I was relatively certain I could convince him. I could offer him the thing he wanted—to be on this side of the demon realms.

Mario nodded. “I understand, but I have been searching for this spell for a long time, and I believe that this is our only option.”

He had, had he? Interesting. He wanted his own sentient weapon too.

The spell, the how to do it on the other hand . . . and would it work with a demon rather than an abnormal who had a soul that was dying? I didn’t have the answer to that. If my mother—dead or otherwise—was the one shot I had, then she was the one shot I had. If Mario wasn’t blowing smoke up my ass. A distinct possibility just to get us out of his hair. Or to get us to find the spell he’d been looking for, apparently.

Carlos spoke up. “Are there any other possibilities? Anyone else who might know this spell? It does seem a long shot. Especially when we don’t even know where the woman—your mother if this is true—might be, or if she is even still alive. Information stales quickly. We all know this. And this video is two years old. Not exactly fresh.”

Fred might know. The crazy old kook had a good number of fingers in different pies.

“You’ve already sent people over for Fred and Cowboy?” I asked.

Mario nodded. “Shouldn’t be long now. We had to wait for our diversion.” He turned and clicked a button. The news came on and the anchor’s face was somber.

“Breaking news. We have reports of a fire in the top three floors of the Empire State Building. Crews are on site, but it seems that the fire is being fed by an unknown

accelerant.”

The scene shifted from her face to a live shot of the Empire State Building, smoke rolling off the top of it. The people closest were all looking up, hands shading their eyes.

I stared at the fire. “Why would that get their attention?”

“It’s one of their landing pads,” Mario said. “I’ve seen them landing there off and on.”

Landing pads.

Ruby let out a rumbling growl and I found myself grabbing at her collar. I didn’t like this.

“How long before Fred and Cowboy get here then?” I didn’t bother to soften my voice.

Mario turned to me; his face smooth as a baby’s ass. “Soon.”

Soon. The lie just rolled right the fuck out of him.

“I’ll go check, if you like?” he offered. “Make sure they are on the way?”

“Do that,” I said as I shared a look with Easter. She gave me a nearly imperceptible nod. She might want to fuck him, but she got that he was not on our team. Not by a long shot.

“I’ll go with you.” She stood and I slid Diego off my back and handed him to her.

Diego shivered. “Oh, I love me a saucy redhead.”

Mario didn’t so much as break stride. “Of course.”

Of course.

I watched them go, and noted that Mario did not shut the door tight. I stood and went to stand by it, so I could see out the crack. Easter looked back, saw me and then kept on going with Mario.

“Are we really going to try and break into one of those places?” Pete asked. The fear in his voice was there, a slight shake to the words. “I mean . . . it took you a year to break out. And there was no way I’d have escaped on my own.”

“That’s not our biggest problem,” I said softly. “Mario . . . we can’t trust him. Not by a long shot.”

I turned to look at them both. Carlos was pale. “You think he is working for the fallen?”

“I think he knows too much. And there are scars across the base of his neck that I don’t like the look of.” I paced the room, Ruby keeping time with me. “I think he might be double-timing us.”

“Then why wouldn’t he have just handed us over?” Carlos asked quietly. “They were actively hunting us, why not just take us the second we arrived?”

I frowned, but didn’t slow my pace as I rolled my thoughts through what we’d learned. “Something to do with my mother,” I said suddenly. “He had that ready to show us. It was timed for our arrival.”

“Dios mio,” Carlos whispered. “I thought he would help.” He covered his head with his hands, rubbing at his hair a moment. “Then we have to go. We have to go quickly before he realizes . . .”

I shook my head. “He knows I know. The second Easter shadowed him, and I gave her Diego, he knows.”

Which was good and bad.

“Unless there is someone else who has the information we need, we still need to get to my mother,” I said.

Dinah snorted. “Seriously, she can’t be the only one.”

“A lot of abnormals have been killed,” Carlos said, and Pete nodded.

“A lot.” The Magelore frowned. “And the Magelores, they would be a place to ask.”

We both looked at him. “What?”

“Well . . . we do have spell casting abilities. You know that. Not me. But others. Higher ups.” He cleared his throat. “If we found a stronger Magelore, we might be able to tease it out of them?” He winced.

I laughed. “Glad you pulled a face. Can you imagine trying to tease something away from a powerful Magelore? They’re like fucking dragons!” I snapped.

“Hoarders,” Dinah grumbled.

I sat down in Mario’s chair, pulled my knife out of my boot and rolled it across my knuckles, thinking out loud. “Back to the task at hand. We’ll leave Mario for the

moment. The fallen, they are looking for abnormals to try and break out, they guarded against that possibility,” I said. “They won’t be looking for any of us to break in.”

“Us,” Pete said. “I don’t like that word. Mario said it would be just you.”

I stared hard at him. “We don’t have a choice, Pete. I will need your speed, Carlos’s Hider abilities, and Cowboy’s EMP pulse. We can knock out the facility before we even go in. If Easter will stand guard up top, I can be in and out in a matter of minutes.”

In theory.

In my mind’s eye the scene played out, smoke and flames, gunshots, slipping through dark corridors with lights flashing. A body over my shoulder as I dragged my mostly dead mother out of a facility she’d been in for years. What then?

Did I kill her afterward, put her out of her misery?

The answer was simple. Yes. But not before I pried her memories out of her.

The two of them stared at me, eyes slightly wide. “You’re already planning this,” Carlos said. “You’re going to do it.”

I gave him a slow nod. “Unless you have a better idea? We could literally spend years searching for this spell that Mario has been looking for. I don’t think Gardreel and his fallen are going to give us years.”

No, I doubted they were even going to give us hours at the rate we were going.

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I spun the knife in my palm, watching the blade tick over and over as I pulled all the pieces I was dealing with together. Mario was a problem. But knowing that he was indeed a problem was the first step.

Why was he helping Gardreel?

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Carlos said. “Not if he’s working for them.” The sweat on his cheek told me that he was Hiding us right then. Keeping our words from escaping the room.

“Sleeping in a nest of vipers is fine unless you make a sudden movement,” Dinah said. “That’s when you get bit.”

“She’s right,” I said. “We stay as long as we can.”

“What about Killian?” Carlos asked quietly. “That’s their ace in the hole, that you won’t leave him.”

Dinah sighed.

My jaw ticked. “They don’t know me then.” I jabbed the knife into the table and changed the subject. “The big issue is finding my mother. How many facilities are left, and which one is she in? That’s where the tablet will come in handy. It’ll help us narrow down where we are going.” And if not, I had an ace up my sleeve that I would use. One that I didn’t want to, but I would do it if there was no other choice. Using a Tracker was tricky on a good day. I doubted it would be a good day if I had to be in contact with that one.

Pete let out a low whistle. “Shit, it’s like you knew when you took the tablet. Did you?”

I didn’t let him think that he was wrong, didn’t nod or shake my head. I didn’t know. I just knew enough that certain key things in a fight would be needed. Information amongst those key items. Information was always a good thing to have.

“I’m going to find Harden. You two stick close to one another, and see if you can find out anything useful.” I stood, and Ruby stood with me.

“Useful,” Pete said as if the word were foreign to him.

I got moving, Ruby keeping close as I left the room and headed down the double flight of stairs. Harden was the local tech guy, and he’d taken the tablet from me the second we’d come into the factory. By now he should have something—or at least the start of something.

As I walked through the factory, I could feel the eyes of the other abnormals on me again. Of course, I was the monster. I always had been. Then again, I had just seemingly on a whim killed three of their own.

I could sniff around for hours and not find Harden.

I stopped in the middle of the largest room and called out. “Where is Harden?”

A scattering of feet as the abnormals left the vicinity in a hurry. I sighed. That was the downside to being the monster.

Everyone was afraid of me, even when I didn’t want them to be.

“I’m here.” The voice came through the PA system, scratchy and smoke-filled. “In

the control room. Take the flight of stairs to the first basement, then to the end of the hall, last room on your right.”

The sound of his voice echoing around me faded, but I was already moving toward the stairwell that led down to the basement.

I let my feet and body work on autopilot as my mind went back to Killian. He did not have a lot of time, even with me lancing the wounds, which meant I needed to find a way to help him too. If . . . if I could. And if I had to leave him . . . my guts clenched. I did not want him to think I’d abandon him, the way I’d thought he’d abandoned me.

Even if it was the right thing to do. If I had to leave him, then I’d do right by him and put a bullet in his head. I wouldn’t leave him to suffer.

“Fucking fallen angels,” I growled.

“Killian?” Dinah asked quietly.

“Yeah. We might have to, Dinah.”

She groaned. “Just find a way to fix him up, okay?”

That was the question of the day. How to help him. If the wounds were created by one of the fallen, then there was an infection that we hadn’t seen before. I could lance them again, but for how long would that buy him time?

“What about your fire?” Dinah asked.

“I’m considering it,” I said. “It might work.” It also might kill him. That was the problem, I had no control really over the flames. Then again, it was coming down to the wire. Either I saved him, or he died.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath as I reached the control room door and let myself in.

Ruby stepped just in front of me and sniffed the air, then gave a low woof of approval.

Good enough for me. She seemed to have a better sense of these things than most people.

Harden sat with his back to me, leaned over something. Monitors covered the wall above his head showing the various parts of the factory as well as the exterior of the building. I watched for a few moments, seeing people drift by the street that the factory was on.

“There isn’t anyone watching us,” Harden said under his breath. “I would know. This is all I do, day and night. Watch and work, watch and work. Fucking hate this place. Fucking Mario thinks he’s so damn smart.”

I stared at the homeless man slumped across from the building, his head partially covered with rags, his body swaying in time to a tune only he could hear. “I don’t think you would know.”

Harden lifted his head and looked at me. He wore a pair of thick glasses that made his eyes big and bugged out, magnifying them in a way that did not help the geeky look he had going on.

“And you would? Two seconds in here and you would? I don’t think so. You don’t know patterns; you don’t see what I see!”

I stared at him and then looked back to the homeless man. Only the homeless man was gone. As if he’d never been.

I searched the other monitors quickly, finding the rag-covered male on a different corner, still facing the factory. Still watching from under his hood. Still swaying, one hand clenching into a fist over and over again.

The thing about him that was interesting to me was that he moved far too fast. He should have been shuffling if the swaying was any indication. And yet in a literal blink he went from one corner to the other, with no apparent movement.

He moved like a fucking Magelore.

I leaned over and tapped the screen where he sat now. “That one, how long has he been watching you?”

“That’s Barry. He’s been around since we got here. He’s not abnormal, just a homeless dude.”

Chills swept up and down my spine. “Since you were here.” And Harden didn’t see it.

“Yeah, he’s homeless, and he likes this area.” Harden turned back to the tablet under his hands, fingers flying over a keyboard he’d hooked up to it. “This here, I’ll have it cracked in no time. Then we’ll have some answers, right? I think I can set it so the password is easy. 1234, how about that, am I right, or am I right?”

My eyebrows shot up and I ignored what he’d said about the tablet. “He likes an area with not a lot of pedestrian traffic, so as to not get any handouts. Your nincompoop is showing, Harden. If he was truly homeless, he’d be somewhere that he could actually get money.”

He didn’t lift his head from the tablet. “We’ve been monitoring everyone who comes through the area, including Barry. Barry is harmless. Barry is just a human. Barry can be ignored.”

Fuck, Barry was a goddamn Magelore and he'd rolled Harden under his spell. I grabbed the tech handler and tore the front of his shirt down. Three bite marks in various stages of healing were spaced across his upper body and clavicle. I dragged Harden, and subsequently the tablet, with me out of the room.

"Let me go, you crazy ass bitch!" He took a swing at me and Ruby clamped down on his arm. He screamed, she snarled and I didn't correct her. She was protecting me and helping me haul him along.

"Good girl." I smiled down at her.

She woofed around her mouthful, and Harden tried to twist away from us, dropping the tablet. I caught it with my other hand before it hit the ground and tucked it into my waistband. "Harden, you've been working too much. You need a break." I dragged him out of the basement, up the stairs and into the main room. "Pete!"

My holler echoed and a moment later Pete appeared at the top of the stairs that led to our conference room from earlier. "What? Jesus, are you killing people already?"

I narrowed my eyes at him and said nothing. He needed to get his ass down those stairs yesterday, and that tiny bit of connection between us flared to life. Whether it was from him biting me or something else, I reached for him the way I'd mentally reached for Easter.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming down! You don't have to yell!" He grabbed the railing edges and all but leapt down both flights of stairs, landing on the main floor with a thump. He hurried over to my side and looked at Harden. "What?"

I rolled the tech around, flashing the bite marks. "Don't say what they are, but do you recognize them?"

Pete's eyes shot open wide. "Um. Yes."

"And you understand that if we said it out loud, that could trigger something?" I handed Harden off to Pete and Pete clamped down on his arms. Ruby let go as soon as the Magelore had him.

"Yeah, it could set off the um . . . biter. They would know. Then there would be no surprise."

At least he was catching on quick.

"Right. I'm going to deal with that person. Keep Harden safe." I gave him a pointed look. "He hasn't actually deciphered what we need on the tablet, though we have a code to get in now at least."

Harden for his part had gone completely limp. The proximity to another Magelore could do that to a victim; I'd been banking on it. "Carlos, you come with me."

Carlos hurried down the steps. "You need me? What is happening?"

"We're going to sneak up on someone, and there is going to be a fight I'd rather no one else see. Can you keep everyone in the area unseeing? Or just hide me and the fight. Whichever is easier."

Carlos kept pace with me. "Yes. But what or who are you going after?"

I looked over my shoulder in time to see Pete drag Harden through the conference room door and shut it. "Magelore. He's been stalking the factory and feeding on Harden. He could be one of the other spies, or . . . or he might be actually straight up, and that's why he doesn't want in with Mario."

“Shouldn’t we get Mario? This is his house, he should deal with this,” Carlos said. “Let him tackle the Magelore.”

I paused. “You trust him? What if this Magelore is like Pete? What if he could help us? Magelores were one of the abnormalities that Gardreel is seeking.” Along with ascendants and death talkers.

It was not lost on me that Mario had said I’d need a death talker to gain my mother’s memories.

Carlos let out a heavy sigh. “You are right, but I do not like it.”

Ruby let out a whine. “Yeah, I don’t like it either,” I said. “But it’s what we’ve got.”

“I’m going to try talking to him first. If a fight starts, you cover our tracks. Because no matter what happens, we cannot let Gardreel find us.”

“No pressure,” Carlos said, his sarcasm showing clearly.

Dinah wiggled in the holster. “You aren’t going to shoot him?”

“No. Not unless I have to,” I said. And even then, I didn’t want to shoot the Magelore. If keeping the abnormal alive would somehow foul up Gardreel, then I would do that.

I kept walking to the north side of the building where I’d seen Barry last. If that was even his name. With a Magelore it was hard to say.

“Are you sure we want him on our side, like Pete?” Carlos asked.

“He’s been watching them,” I said as I found an exit. “And feeding off Harden. But

he hasn't come into the fold—and Mario wants a Magelore, I'm sure of it. Which could mean that this one, this Barry knows something about Mario. Something we need."

Carlos grunted. "It could also mean he's going to hand them over for a hefty prize to Gardreel, like Pete was doing."

Yes, that was a possibility too. I nodded. "Far as I know, Magelores can't be controlled like the other abnormals, so they don't get 'handled' like the rest of us in the facilities. I think they usually end up killing them." That had been the plan for Pete anyway.

"Why is that? What makes them so special?" Carlos asked.

"Question of the day, my friend," I said softly as I put my shoulder to the door and let the sunlight come through, allowing my eyes to adjust to the change. A few seconds was all I needed and then I was through, out into the daylight, and motioning for Carlos to come with me.

"No idea. Maybe they're missing a soul?" I offered the thought, though my mind wasn't really on why the Magelores couldn't be mind fucked like the rest of us. Though I knew that if it was a soul that was required to make us manageable, I had no idea how Easter or I were able to be taken. I snorted at myself. I'd never claimed to have a soul.

"We just need to do a perimeter sweep," I said, pitching my voice so it would carry even as I tried to get a whiff of the Magelore. "We get Mario off our backs for a few. Fucker that he is."

"You the boss." Carlos shrugged as if he didn't care. "I'd like to have a smoke in peace for once."

He cracked open a new pack of cigars and tucked one into his mouth, shading it in order to light it.

I watched him. I didn't want to use him as bait. He was too valuable. "Come on." I motioned for him to follow me and could tell by the lift of his brows over a swirl of smoke that he'd been fully ready to be the bait. I shook my head ever so slightly. "Don't dawdle, old man. You'll fall and break a hip, and then where would we be?"

He grunted and waved the cigar at me, and through the plume of smoke, the space behind him shifted. Barry was close. He wouldn't try and take us both; he was waiting for one of us to separate.

Fine by me. "Jesus, that cigar stinks like shit." I waved my hand for good measure and then pointed in the direction I'd been headed. "You go that way, toward the dumpsters if you're going to smell like that."

He laughed and started past me, waving the cigar around so the smoke spread. Our eyes met and he nodded.

I tucked my hands into my pockets and ducked my chin to my chest, and strode directly toward where I'd seen the movement through the smoke.

"You sure about this?" Dinah grumbled.

I slapped a hand over her. "No cameras here, we have to check."

I took the corner and knew that there was no camera there based on the monitors I'd seen in Harden's hideout. Which meant this was perfect for the Magelore to snag a new snack.

Hands dropped on my upper arms, and I let him drag me a half step before I went

straight down, spun and punched him in the junk package. I followed it up with a grab of every single one of his family jewels and held on tight, digging my nails in, through the soft flesh.

He howled, arched up on his heels and froze with his hands spread wide as if I'd stuck him on a crucifix. Carlos came running. The howl was pitched high, screeching like an animal caught in a leg trap.

"God, that's awful! How did you know—"

"Saw him through the smoke," I yelled to be heard over the Magelore's screams. A few people walked by, but nobody heard him through Carlos's ability to keep things hidden. Even this godforsaken caterwauling. I gave another yank and a twist to my handful, which dropped the Magelore to his knees. From there I pulled Dinah and pressed her against his temple.

"Shut your filthy fucking mouth, Magelore." I growled the words into his ear. "Or I will let her blow your brains out onto the cement."

He rolled his eyes to me, one brown, the other black. "I no hurt you. Scared. Just scared."

"You've been feeding on Harden," I said.

"No hurt," he whispered and then he . . . he fucking passed out. I let go of his jewels but stayed where I was, crouched over him with Dinah shivering.

"You think he's simple?" Carlos asked. "Never heard of a Magelore that was simple before."

I shook my head. "No, there is no such thing as a simple Magelore. Let's bring him

in, see what Pete can get out of him.”

I rolled Barry over to his belly and stripped a piece of his own clothing off, shredded it and used a strip to tie his hands at hard angles together and then to his ankles. No matter how strong a Magelore was, this was a hard position to find any muscle power in.

I dragged him back into the factory and to the main floor. “Pete, we need you.”

“Music to my sweet ears,” he called back as he stepped out of the conference room. “Harden about pissed his pants and then passed out. You kill the Magelore—”

His eyes landed on the dirty package I’d pulled in and then he was hurrying down the steps. “Damn. That was fast. Wait. You didn’t kill him? Must be a young one or something.” But even as he was speaking, I could see the doubt in his own words. The young ones were dead, not smart or strong enough to avoid Gardreel and his fallen ones.

“Something’s wrong with him,” I said. “That’s your department. If he’s been spying, we kill him. If he’s broken, we kill him. We can’t afford to babysit.”

Pete nodded. “Got it.” He rolled Barry over and drew a slow breath. “I know him. He’s strong. Almost as strong as Vivian.”

That . . . didn’t make any sense. “He was easy, Pete. As in one blow and he went down and passed out. Are you sure?”

“Sure as the shit that comes out of my ass once a week.” His hands drifted over the other Magelore. “His name is Barton. He’s probably one step below Vivian. Maybe half a step.” He spoke her name almost like . . . she was a god to him. Good thing I’d killed her.

I stared hard at him. “Then figure it out. Because whatever happened to him, could happen to you too.”

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As I suspected, Pete didn't like the idea of turning into a homeless Barry Magelore type. He had his hands on the filthy—and I mean that literally—Magelore and was dragging him off to God only knew where. I didn't care, as long as he dealt with him. Better yet if he figured out what the fuck had happened to him.

I hopped up the stairs, two at a time. Ruby kept pace with me, silent at my side.

Carlos was slower, bringing up the rear. "Now that that is dealt with . . . why are you not with your man?"

That question would have slowed someone else. I didn't so much as break my stride. "I'm busy, Carlos, trying to save the fucking world. He's dying. And unless you know how to help him, there is literally not a damn thing I can do."

I looked back at him to see his eyes narrowing. "Hard words from you," he said. "For someone you love."

"It's a hard life, with hard decisions," I said. "Killian knew it when he set his path in line with mine."

I swung back around in time to see Harden lift his head from Mario's desk and touch a finger to his temple. "What happened? I don't drink anymore but I feel hung over. Like a really bad hangover."

I moved into the room, grabbed a pitcher of water off a side table and poured him a glass. "You've been bitten repeatedly by a Magelore. Pete's dealing with him, which means he is untying the bonds that Barry had on you. Might be uncomfortable."

Harden frowned and took a sip from the cup I offered, then tipped it back and drank the whole thing as if he'd been without for days.

"Not many people would willingly drink from a cup she offered," Dinah said. "So, either you are super trusting, or super stupid."

Harden choked on a mouthful of water. "What? Why would she poison me?"

"I wouldn't." I slapped a hand over Dinah as if that would help quiet her. "She likes to rile people up."

"No I don't," Dinah said and then laughed. "I would never try to scare someone."

I sat down next to him, and Ruby put herself between me and Harden, her one good eye pinning him with a glare. Or maybe it was just her resting bitch face. Putting a hand on her head, I rubbed her between her ears. "Look, you need to get that information off the tablet. You need to do it now. And then we have to destroy it. I have no doubt there is a tracker inside of it. Gardreel and his fallen will be on us in a flash."

Of course, if Mario was working for Gardreel, and the tracker blinked on . . . I wondered how far Mario would take the game of being against the fallen?

Harden blinked a few times as if coming out of a haze. "Right. Yes, of course!"

I handed him the tablet, slipping it out from my waistband. He took it, his fingers sliding over it. "New password, 1234, nice and simple. That's good. Simple is good." He smiled, but the edges of his lips suddenly cracked, blood dribbling down the edges. His fingers petted the tablet. "They don't want you to have this." He gave a shiver and lifted his eyes to mine. "They . . . want what the Magelore know. They want the hive mind."

He convulsed in his seat and his eyes went blank.

I leaned over and snapped my fingers in front of his eyes. He didn't track the movement.

"Fuck."

Carlos stepped around and waved a hand in front of Harden's face. No movement. No eye dilation, nothing.

"Fuck," I said again. Taking Harden by the head, I laid him down on the table and closed his eyes with my fingers. Harden wasn't dead, but he might as well have been. His mind was well and truly gone. I didn't doubt that had been Barton, Barry, speaking through him.

"Breaking the ties between him and the Magelore did this?" Carlos shook his head.

"He was far deeper gone than three bites." I rubbed a hand over my face. "But that was Barton giving us something, at least."

"You going to kill him?" Carlos asked. "Because if he's going to die anyway, a bullet is at least quick and merciful."

"That's my job!" Dinah yelled. "I'm the merciful one!"

I ignored her. The tablet had information we needed. A hacker could have gotten it without tripping any of the tracking devices. If I had to just open it up and look through it, I sure as shit wasn't doing it here. I had the password, at least.

"What now?" Carlos asked quietly.

“We take the tablet somewhere else, open it and try to get the information we need before Gardreel finds us,” I said. Not exactly what I’d call a foolproof plan. But one that might work if I used what I knew about the city.

Footsteps pounded up the double set of stairs. Pete was not being quiet.

I frowned. How the actual fuck did I know it was Pete?

Because I could sense him—just like I could sense Easter. “Fucking hell,” I whispered. The bite mark he’d given me when we’d been trying to break out of the facility was of course a connection. I’d known that when I’d basically encouraged him to bite me. But I didn’t think it would still have an effect now.

I shook my head. No point in letting him know. Pete burst through the door. “Barton is dead, I tried to bring him around but whatever was done to him was like setting a trip wire . . . oh shit, he took the geek with him?”

I nodded. “What happened?”

Pete’s eyes were wide, and fear radiated off him, stinking up the room. Fear that I could feel sliding between us. I brushed it aside and focused on his words.

“I cut his finger, and took just a couple drops of his blood. I could see him in a facility, could see them trying to break him. They couldn’t get through to him, so they just tortured him until his mind was gone. Then they set him loose.” The sweat was pouring off him. “It’s bad, Nix. Like real bad what they did to him.”

I nodded. “Keep going. What did they want from him?”

Pete put his hands flat on the table. “They wanted something . . . the Magelores . . .”

“Are connected,” I offered. “Barton came through Harden here and filled me in. What about the hive mind could work for the fallen?”

Pete was shaking. “We’re all connected. At least to a degree. So if Barton had information, he could have passed it on to another Magelore before he died. So that there was nothing to torture out of him.”

I stared hard at him. “That what you do?”

He started to shake his head and then nodded. I could feel the sense of relief that he could speak about this. “I didn’t have a lot. But I know where most of the Magelores made their hunting grounds. They wanted it from me. They kept asking about Vivian. They wanted her more than anyone else. I kept telling them she was dead.”

“Because she was the strongest?” Carlos asked. “You think that’s why?”

Pete shrugged. “That’s my best guess. She was a powerful spell caster too. She had a lot going for her, power structure wise, and a lot of years gathering knowledge to her hoard.”

“And Barton?” I asked.

“He didn’t feed on humans. He only ever fed on abnormals. It meant that he was strong—we gain power depending on the food source.” He slid a look to me, and I narrowed my eyes.

Don’t even think it, Pete.

He cringed and nodded. “Right. So anyway. Barton’s mind was pretty messed up, but what I could pull from it is that the Magelore hive mind has something that the fallen want. And they think that Vivian had it—actually they’re sure she had it. So they’re

looking for the Magelore she handed it off to before she died. They let Barton go when they could see they'd broken him too far. Being that he fed off powerful abnormals, my guess is they thought they'd use him as a sort of living tracker."

My jaw ticked. "And he led them here. How long was he feeding on Harden?"

"A couple days, I think," Pete said.

A couple days. Long enough that Mario should have noticed. Unless he didn't care because he wanted to catch the Magelore.

I was betting he didn't know that Barton had been in the fallen's hands already.

We had to move, we couldn't just sit here and wait for shit to rain down from the sky.

"Carlos, find Mario. Stick close to him and see if you can pick up on any chatter between him and the fallen."

Carlos gave a tight nod. "I am regretting bringing us here."

"He had Killian," I said. "I would have ended up here eventually."

I snapped my fingers at Pete. "Find Easter, bring her to the old church in the financial district."

Carlos looked at me. "Do you think that Mario knows you are on to him?"

It was a valid question.

I pulled the tablet out. "If he's a smart man, he'll suspect. But he won't make a move because he isn't as strong as me. I'm going to give Gardreel a calling card to follow

nice and loud. Away from this place.”

“Maybe we get to test out the new bullets?” Dinah whispered, hope in her voice. “I really want to do that.”

Carlos’s dark eyes narrowed. “And your man? What if we have to run for it?”

Who had we met in here that we could use? Almost no one. And that of course had been Mario’s plan too.

I answered his question with one of my own. “Do you know anyone in here, either of you?”

Pete nodded first, then Carlos. “There’s a shifter in here I ran with years back,” Pete said. “Honest as a shifter can be.”

Which meant not so much.

“Twins. They are scrappers, the both of them,” Carlos said.

My jaw ticked. “Get them ready to take control of the group. We need leaders if Mario meets an untimely death.”

Dinah laughed. “Oh, fuck yeah. I don’t like him. Never did. None of our siblings were worth fighting for.”

She wasn’t wrong. I’d had a moment where I’d hoped . . . but it wasn’t to be.

“As for Killian . . . if things go sideways, see if you can get him out too.” I tucked the tablet back into my waistband. “He’s not dead yet. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Breaking into a jog, I headed out of the factory with Ruby shadowing me. What a giant ass clusterfuck this was. I didn't like playing defense. Which meant it was time to blow some shit up.

Time to change the rules.

Out in the streets of New York City, I slowed my pace and took the next left, crossing the street. Ruby woofed if anyone got too close and otherwise was quiet, keeping close to my side. We weren't exactly inconspicuous, but I wasn't looking to hide right then. Traffic was heavy and we slid through it, barely changing my pace.

I would give Gardreel a direction to look that wasn't Mario and the abnormals there. A direction that Killian was not in the path of if Gardreel realized his plant—Barton—was dead.

Fucking Magelores, somehow even when shit going wrong wasn't their fault, it was their fault.

I pulled the tablet out as I walked and pressed the power button. The screen blinked white and then showed off a logo of a pair of wings, not all that different from the tattoo I had across my back and upper arms.

The image dissolved in a fluttering of birds across the screen. I punched in the simple code Harden had set up. 1234.

I kept walking, knowing that I was taking a chance by not paying full attention to my surroundings. "Watch, Ruby."

She gave a woof and that was good enough for me. The screen that came on had a passcode that was linked to a fingerprint. What were the chances?

I slid my finger over the beckoning lines and let it rest there. I glanced up, checked our street, and continued as the tablet blinked open.

“Hello, Phoenix.”

Gardreel’s voice echoed through the tablet and even over the noise of the city, I heard him.

“You might be wondering why your fingerprint opened one of our tablets. The truth is, I suspected you might try and break into our system. And of course, you would know that the minute you did, your position would be targeted. So, the question is, did you know? Are you waiting for me to find you?”

“Creepy motherfucker. Or should I call you granddaddy?” I said. “I mean, I assume you have some kids out there? Some abnormal could call you Dad. Pops.”

Dinah laughed. “Shit, is he really talking to us or is that a recording?”

The sharp intake of breath through the tablet said it all to me. “Live, he is chatting with me live. Tell you what, Gardreel, fallen angel and creator of abnormals,” another sharp intake of breath from him, “you and your feathered friends fuck off and leave the rest of us alone, and I won’t kill you all and piss on the ashes.”

His laughter was sudden and bounced out of the tablet enough that the humans around us cringed. Yeah, the sound of a fallen angel laughing had my skin crawling too, like listening to a madman caw right before he tried to hack your head off with a rusty blade.

Dinah shifted in her holster. “Is he going to back down? Because I would really like another chance to blast one of those nasty fucks.”

The screen flicked to life, and I was now not only listening to Gardreel, but looking at him too. I smiled at him, the smile that I'd perfected in my years of killing abnormals. Cold, hard. It was the smile that said death was coming for you. "I did your job for years," I said. "I'm surprised you didn't just try and recruit me back then."

"We did."

I didn't think many things could shock me, but here I was, wrong again. I composed myself quickly. "Let me guess, Romano wouldn't share?"

Gardreel sighed. "That is the past, Phoenix. What you need to understand now is that Eligor is even now being put into another body. A body that will connect me once more to you. I know that you won't wait for me with the tablet. But I wanted a chance to make you that offer. Come to me. And I will let your child live. I will heal your man. They will be safe."

The offer was a good one, a great one, as offers went. But I knew the truth.

"You lie pretty good for an angel." I laughed at him. "I mean, fuck, it's not like you're worried about getting back into heaven, are you?"

The sudden change in his features told me a whole story and I stopped in my tracks. "Shut the fuck up. That's it, isn't it? You think you'll get back into whatever version of heaven you think is out there if you kill off the evidence of your sins?" The words tumbled out of me.

Dinah chimed in. "Oh, God! Maybe if I help, they'll let me in heaven too?" And then she laughed and laughed.

Gardreel's face continued to tighten until it looked like he'd sucked down a few too many lemons.

I shrugged and took another corner, starting down the gentle slope that would take me to the financial district and the church I was headed to.

“Seems a gamble to me,” I drawled. “I mean, I wouldn’t let you back in if I was your boss. You defected, broke the rules, and now are trying to save face? Tells me you aren’t all that loyal.”

His breathing was coming in rapid pulses, and I smiled. “Don’t like what I’m saying?”

“Nail to head.” Dinah laughed. “A little too close to the sore spot, just to the rear of his balls.”

Gardreel’s face filled the tablet’s screen. “I will cleanse this world.”

I rolled my eyes. “I wouldn’t bet on that. Perhaps a face-to-face discussion is warranted if you’d like to keep on talking about how you’re getting back into heaven?”

The rapid blinking said it all. He wasn’t expecting me to talk to him. Certainly not face to face.

“Easter will be there,” I said. “And the Magelore who broke out with me. That’s like two of the three things you want, right? Just missing a death talker.”

“How . . .”

I smiled and winked. “Mario told me. Handed you right over, sung like a canary. We are, after all, blood.”

Two of us could play the lying game.

Then I flipped the tablet shut but didn't turn it off, and continued walking. I'd always known there was a chance we wouldn't find anything useful in it, or that it would break when Harden tried to crack it. I had not expected to talk to Gardreel.

Dinah shivered and muttered under her breath, "You sure about this?"

"I just gave him a lot to mull over. Put Mario in the hot pot if he is indeed working for that side, and if we get a shot at Gardreel . . . you can use the new bullets."

"Sweet," Dinah growled. "Diego is going to be pissed he missed out."

"Easter will bring him," I said.

Hope though was a funny thing. Just when I'd sworn off hoping, it crept into my life again, only to be yanked out. I'd found Killian and a brother who could have been something amazing in my life. Killian was dying, and the brother was a fucking douche at best.

"No more hoping, Dinah. We do our job, kill all these pissheads and get our kids."

Her sigh went straight through me. "Ours."

"Bear. Emerald. And my baby girl."

She was quiet a moment. "Fuck yes."

I took a corner and the long metal fence that wrapped around the church came into view. As soon as I got close enough, I tapped my fingers along it, drumming a steady beat.

"Wakey wakey, demon. Ornias, I'm talking to you."

Time to have a family reunion of a different kind.

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The place of in between, before he was brought back to life into another person's body, was not a terrible place to be. Warm, and calm, there was peace in this strange floating space and there was safety that he found in very few places.

A tug on his center and he knew that soon Gardreel would have him in a new body, one that . . . well, one that would be in Gardreel's possession full of tracing devices. And then he would want Eligor to track down Nix. He would force Eligor to find her.

A pang rippled through him. That couldn't happen. But how did he stop Gardreel from taking him away from this place? Eligor reached through the empty space with his consciousness. Surely there was somewhere he could hide? A body that Gardreel didn't know about?

Maybe there was someone that no longer needed their body? Again that tug on his center told him that Gardreel was going to yank him clean of this place of limbo—and soon. His touch felt distracted, like he was busy.

Trying not to panic, Eligor moved through the fog, searching for something, anything that might give him what he needed . . . there in the distance was a figure.

It was even a male—and while he would have taken any body at that point, male was a bonus. Splayed out on his belly, there was darkness wrapped around the man's body all the way to his cowboy boots. Eligor reached out and let out a low hiss.

A quarter demon. This one was a quarter demon. Did he dare take possession of this one?

A flicker and the man stood next to him, looking down at his body, one that he recognized. This one had been with Nix. He'd helped her escape. Or maybe she'd helped save him, that was more accurate.

"Am I dead?" the boy asked. "I touched something, and it started burning me."

Eligor looked down at his own body, but there was nothing there but the silver threads that made him up, and he realized that the man, the part-demon wasn't even looking at him. He was talking to himself.

"I think you are dying," he said softly. "Or your body wouldn't be here."

The man looked around, blue eyes pained as he searched for the source of the voice. "I wanted to help. I wanted to help make things right. I just keep fucking it up! I want to help."

If he'd had a heart, it would have been thumping. "What if I . . . told you that I could help? You could survive and I would be there with you. And together we could help."

The man did a slow turn. "Who are you?"

"I am Eligor."

The man stumbled back. "One of those handlers. The little dude that Gardreel killed!"

There was no ability to nod in this form, but he still found himself trying. "Yes, and I forced her to shoot me to try and stop Nix from being found. But if I don't find a body soon," the tug on his silver threads was stronger now, drawing him away from the part-demon, "then he will have me again, and he will have a thread once more tied to Nix. If I am with you, he won't find me. And I can help you survive these wounds. We can help each other, and then we can help her."

Wounds that were created from the dust off the gathering crews. They used it to knock the abnormals out, but it was poison to a demon. It ate them up from the wound and went deeper, into the veins and organs.

Blue eyes searched the space around where he floated. “You’d take over my mind?”

“No, no I wouldn’t!” Eligor promised, and would have winced because it was a lie. “I would be there, helping you. Teaching you.”

The tug on his threads was sharp now, hard and demanding.

Eligor! Return to me now!

Gardreel’s voice cut through him, and he shot toward the part-demon man before he could be yanked away and stuffed into a different body. There was no choice now, he couldn’t wait. He drove himself in through the ears and straight into the mind of the . . . boy. He was just a boy.

Colt Winterborn Rork was only twenty-one years old and his mind did not take well to an intrusion. Eligor tried to be gentle.

“I’m sorry, but you must let me in. Gardreel can’t have me. We can help her together.” His words fell on deaf ears, despite the boy’s previous desire to help.

Wait, I . . . no, this is terrible! Get out, get out, get out!

The words were loud and demanding, but they were easy for Eligor to ignore. He’d been a handler for years; a bit of complaining was nothing new from a new abnormal.

He took the reins of the body and wove his way into the sinew and muscle, healing the pieces that were scarred from the angel dust, renewing the body in a way that Colt

Winterborn Rork never would have been able to. “See? I am helping. You won’t die.”

“Who you be helping?”

That voice came in through his new ears. He opened his eyes to look into the face of a very strange man with a long narrow beard and eyes that were displaying a great deal of worry. He cleared his throat and slowly sat up, feeling the youth and vigor in his new body. “Nix. I’m helping the Phoenix.”

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The steps leading up to the front doors of the church were covered in an unnatural ice—ice that let off loads of steam so that the church seemed cloaked in an unnatural fog. Being that it was the middle of summer, the ice and fog were not a great sign. I continued up the steps and stopped at the top. The ice wrapped around the door, a barrier to anyone who thought they might just wander in. I took note that there were no humans nearby.

The demon was throwing off serious ‘fuck you’ vibes, and the humans’ natural sense of self-preservation was keeping them at a distance.

Ruby’s growl was low and I wanted to emulate her. This was not what I was expecting, and I didn’t like the obvious show of power. Ornias was not this strong. He was a minor demon at best.

“What do you think?” Dinah asked. “This seems more than what shadow boy in there could drum up on his own.”

I lifted a hand and let it ghost over the ice. “I think that things are shifting in the demons’ playground.” Because of the fallen? Or because of something else?

More questions that I didn’t have the answers to.

I could have used Dinah to blow the hinges off, or I could have waited for Easter to show up with Diego. But both options were loud, and flashy. We needed to keep things somewhat quiet.

With a frown, I reached deep inside and pulled up my fire, drug it through my limbs

and pushed it into my hands. Bright yellow flames, edged with white, flickered around my fingers as I pressed them to the ice-covered doors.

“That’s different,” Dinah pointed out. “The flames are different than before.”

“Hotter,” I said. “The only color hotter is blue.”

Like Bear’s fire. His flames were blue, which told me he was stronger than me. I smiled as the ice melted, water running down the wood door and puddling at my feet. Something inside thumped against the door, rattling it.

“As if that’s going to scare you,” Dinah snorted.

I pulled my hands off the door before the wood caught fire. “Whatever is in there doesn’t know me.”

The thump of tires jumping the sidewalk half turned me around. A dark blue SUV with deep tinted windows rolled to a stop. Easter was out first, Diego strapped to her back. I could hear him chattering away at her, even at this distance.

“I’ve never been with a redhead before,” he drawled. “I like it.”

Pete and Carlos followed. Pete had been driving and he waved and smiled as the drivers having to go around the SUV half in the street honked and flipped him off.

But it was Carlos I looked at. “You left Mario alone?”

Carlos shook his head. “He wouldn’t let me near him. I think he knows that you know.”

Well, that was just fucking peachy. I gave him a quick nod. “Then we have to move

fast.”

Easter stepped up next to me, eyeing the ice that still coated a good chunk of the front entrance.

She strolled up the icy stairs to stand next to me, looking over the ice-encased church. She ran a finger over the ice closest to her. “Subtle for a stay-out sign.”

Shrugging, I half smiled. “You know demons, real classy.”

Easter snorted. “Mario hadn’t sent Lanny to get Fred and Cowboy.”

My whole body tensed. “And?”

“I made sure that he sent someone to get them.” Her face was flat, no emotion. “He’s an ass. And Carlos, you’re wrong. He thinks we don’t realize that he’s working for the enemy.”

Fuck. “Stupid?”

“Big ego.” She shook her head. “Pity, I liked the look of him. But I don’t like big egos in small packages.”

“Oh, snap!” Dinah crowed. “Did you get a look at it? Was it really that small?”

“I was a big boy,” Diego purred. “Huge.”

“Says the small man trying to prove it’s bigger than a hot dog.” Dinah laughed.

Pete choked on nothing and cleared his throat. “We going in or not?” His eyes darted between me and Easter, or more truly between Dinah and Diego.

We were going in, but I was getting a feel for the demon in there, just by standing at the doorway. “In a minute.” I held up my hand and put it against the engravings in the wood. “The question is, what is Mario doing then?”

Carlos held up both hands, palms to the sky. “He is moving everyone. Pretending that he is afraid of the fallen.”

“What about Killian?” My eyes locked on Carlos, but he didn’t flinch.

“He’s as safe as the rest of them. Mario said we have a few hours at the new site, at best. That was all I could get out of him.”

Easter nodded. “That’s what I took from him too. He was willing to move, which means it was already in his mind for some reason.”

My hand was cool, and the energy behind the door had built to where my skin crawled. Time to say hello to the new occupant. I grabbed the handle, squeezed it and pushed the door open.

Easter took point and stepped into the church first. “Fucking cold in here.”

“Demon owned,” I said. “Ornias, I know you missed me. And I thought I’d bring more friends this time. Seeing as you have a new friend too, right?”

I strolled in through the foyer, and as soon as the two guys stepped through, they slammed shut behind us. I didn’t look back, but the crackle of ice rippled through the air as they were covered once more. No, I didn’t look back, I just walked down the aisle between the pews, feeling the air frost, the temperature dropping all around us.

This was not typical for Ornias. Not this cold. Not this show of power.

I reached the front of the church and turned. Easter and Pete flanked me, and Carlos stood just in front of me. “No one say anything regarding deities. Got it?”

Nods all around, but my attention was locked on the wall and balcony above the entryway. Ornias was a prick of a demon. The question was, who or what had taken him over, and why? I didn’t much believe in coincidence, which meant there was a reason that a new demon had taken up residence here.

The dark shadows against the wall melted, pulling away from the thick paneling, and slowly congealing into the formless tube that Ornias had always emulated . . . only this time was different. Aside from being larger than normal, an actual set of eyes blinked out of the darkness.

I arched a brow. “You do have a new friend.”

“Why are you here?” His voice was different too, more of a tenor now. Ruby barked at him as he slithered across the pews toward us, arms sprouting out of his sides in multiple places until he was a tube with twenty arms. Grabby hands pulled himself along, crawling across the pews. Yup, somebody far more powerful. I squinted at the pews, looking for the usual feeders that the demon used. But they were all gone.

“What are we looking at?” Pete asked. “It’s cold but I don’t see what you’re talking to.”

“I see it,” Easter said. “It’s got a lot of arms, and it’s . . . darkness come to life.”

“Me too,” Carlos whispered.

The Magelore couldn’t see the demon? I would consider what that might mean at another time. Assuming it meant anything other than he didn’t have much of a connection to the spiritual realm. I looked over my shoulder at him. His eyes were

closed shut. Idiot.

“Open your fucking eyes, Pete.”

He blinked and cringed. “That. Is terrible.”

I put a hand on Carlos’s shoulder and stepped around him.

“Ornias, I need to find Bazixal. Any idea where I might do that? An address would be perfect.” I had my fingers tight on Ruby’s collar, keeping her close. Her body was tense, and her growls were low, but more than that I could feel her ready to leap. I did not want her tangling with a demon. I knew who would win, and it wouldn’t be my dog.

The demon’s laughter was pitched far too high. “Truly, you seek your death then. He hates you. You destroyed his chance at freedom from the realm of demons. And now you want to talk to him? That’s a terrible idea, even for you.”

I made myself smile. “If you won’t tell me, I will bring the fallen down on your house here.”

The laughter cut off. “You wouldn’t dare. And why would they listen to you anyway? You’re the biggest abomination of them all, worse even than little old us.”

Us.

“Would dare,” Dinah said. “Yes. We would totally fucking dare, you douche tube.”

I flipped the tablet out onto the floor, and it bounced open, showing a stilled image of Gardreel’s face. “He’s chasing me right now. If I leave this here, he’ll arrive in a very short time. What do you think he’d make of little old you?”

Ornias—or whoever had taken Ornias’s spot—reeled back. Two voices spilled from the demon entity at the same time. The new one, and the one I’d expected.

“We do not keep track of the demons of note. They are dangerous to us as they can take us over.” The shadowy tube writhed and began to back away. “Go away. We like it here. Close to those we loved once.”

I ignored the fact that the demon was speaking of love at all. It crawled up and over one of the pictures of an angel that held a sword in its hand. Caressing it.

“A starting point then,” I said. “Give me something or I’ll assume we are enemies.” Fallacy seeing as I already knew we were enemies. But demons were weird about alliances. They could be fooled, just like we could.

The shadowy tube writhed a moment and then rolled back, sliding closer and closer until I could have blinked, and my eyelashes would have brushed against the darkness. I stared hard into it, searching for something to focus on. Swirls of shadows, of limbs and bodies reached through it for me.

“A starting place.” The breath of the words washed over me, stinging my face with an icy cold. “You will have a journey, Phoenix, if you wish to stop them. Many places to visit. You cannot do this on your own.”

I stared at the demon. “A journey.”

“Find the spell. Find the tools. Find the demon. Find the fallen.” The demon writhed. “The fallen . . . do not like me. I do not like them either. But I do not like other demons either.”

I wanted to say no shit, but I kept my mouth shut.

“Why?” Easter asked.

“I was one of their greatest generals before I fell, I oversaw many of the legions,” he purred. “Even should they win the day and cleanse the world, they will not like me taking form here.” The voice kept pitching up and down, as if it were doing scales. “And perhaps, I do not like Gardreel enough that I would side with you . . . Phoenix. Perhaps.”

I didn’t move. The darkness rolled around me and the others screamed as I was picked up and held far above their heads. Ruby’s barking was intense, and then I could hear nothing but the rushing of water, the roar of a river I knew well.

“This is the place to discuss a negotiation.” A tall muscular man stood across from me. He was naked from the waist up, scars and tattoos scattered across his torso and down his arms, most notably a lion’s head and body taking up the left side of his chest. He did a slow circle as he spoke, showing off the scars where his wings had been across his back. The back half of the lion, including the tail, was etched into his skin and down his spine. “You opened this up for all of us when you started using it again. I suppose that is why I am willing to offer you help now. That and I hate Gardreel. A small thing in our world.”

“Limbo,” I said. “Demons can use it?” Fuck me sideways, this was not what I wanted to worry about. Of course, there was no offer of help when I was stuck in the facility.

His laugh crawled across my skin. “Fallen can use it, Phoenix. I am the fallen. You are a child of the fallen, the granddaughter of the Sword. She was always a favorite of mine.” He waved a hand, and the water froze over into a solid chunk of ice. “I am no Bazixal, but I can help you. If anyone knows the fallen, it is one of their own. Take me with you.”

I snort-laughed. “And just how the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

He smiled and winked at me. “You just have to say you’ll take me with you, and when we find a useful body, then I will take possession of it. I will sit quietly on your shoulder until we reach a body.”

He stepped closer to me. “Are we agreed?”

I shoved him backward hard enough to make him stumble and go down to one knee. “What kind of body?”

“One that is dying, is preferable.” He shrugged but there was a glimmer to his eyes. “Or weak. They are open to possession.”

Killian. He already knew about Killian and wanted to use his body.

I knew a setup when I heard it.

But I also knew that there was nothing we could do for Killian. “And the body?”

“Healed.” His smile never wavered. “Good as new. Also, you have about ten seconds to decide before the fallen’s minions come through the church doors.”

“Your name,” I said. He grimaced. I held my ground. “I’ll let him die before I hand him over to you without your name.”

His smile faded. “Ipos.”

The name rang a bell, and the lion on his skin made more sense. In lore, he was a lion headed monster. “You can see the future,” I said, dredging up what I knew about him.

His face tightened. “At times.”

“And you can find hidden treasures?” I smiled. “Yes, I like this deal very much. I agree. You can use Killian’s body until I have no use for you anymore.”

He pursed his lips. “Good enough. A deal then.”

Ipos shot forward, faster than I could follow, and grabbed my face with one hand. I thought he was going to try and kiss me. Nope. It was far worse than that.

He put his head to mine and whispered in what I suspected was Latin. “Eritis mihi in aeternum.”

His power washed over me, and I fell backward, limp, feeling as if the fire in me had been put out. He caught me across his one arm and stared down at me. “When the Sword fell, I wondered what her bloodline would do. You are very interesting.”

The Sword had to be my grandmother, that was my only thought as the ice shattered over the river and the water surged above the edges and flowed over us both.

I was dropped unceremoniously to the floor of the church. I landed in a crouch; head bent as I struggled to catch my breath.

Ruby was at my side before anyone else. She stood on her back legs, put her front paws on my back and barked and snarled at the darkness above us.

“You have taken him,” Ornias whispered. “You are either very clever, or very stupid.”

I coughed, chilled all over, the skin around my neck feeling like I had a frozen chain around it. “Probably both.” I lifted my head as Ornias whipped away from me, crawled up the back wall of the church and disappeared into the ceiling.

The ice all around us began to melt. Except me. I was cold through and through. I reached up and touched my neck. A necklace of some sort wrapped tight around my throat.

I will stay with you until you bring me to a body. You have one in mind, yes?

I nodded.

“You okay?” Carlos was the first of the others to move.

“Fine. We need to go.”

“That was unpleasant,” Easter drawled. “And not all that helpful.”

Of course, they hadn’t had the benefit of talking with Ipos. His laughter rumbled through me, reverberating in my throat. Easter lifted both eyebrows.

“What the fuck is that? You get a shot of testosterone?”

“Demon is coming for a ride.” I coughed and shook my head. Ruby whined and pawed at my foot. Yeah. I didn’t much like it either, but it was what it was. And I would deal with it. “Time to go.” I didn’t scoop up the tablet, but instead bent and touched the power button, flicking it back to life. Then I touched Ruby on the head to make sure she was with me, then headed to the main door.

I put my hand on it and called up the fires in my belly.

They spluttered and died under the ice that was wrapped around my neck. “Fucker, ease off.”

Keep your hand there, I’ll remove my ice.

I didn't want the demon's help, but before I could deny him, the ice fell off the door in huge chunks that shattered on the floor, scattering, making the others jump.

Okay, it made Pete and Carlos jump; Ruby and Easter just side stepped.

"The fallen are coming," Ornias whispered from the shadows next to the door. "You promised you wouldn't bring them here!"

I looked into the darkness and smiled. "You must be mistaken."

Ornias writhed away from me, straight up into the rafters. The ghosts he fed on were slowly floating down between the pews, drifting now that the big bad demon was gone.

"Easter, let Diego light the church up."

"Gladly." She turned and aimed at the front of the church. Diego boomed and the front half of the church burst into flames, the fabric and ancient wood catching in seconds.

A whoop of sirens from outside told me that the cavalry had arrived. But had the fallen arrived with them? Only one way to find out.

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I put my shoulder to the church door, the flames still just far enough away, and opened it to peer out and get a quick count. There were two large army trucks blocking in our smaller vehicle. I ducked back in. “No sign of the fallen.”

I will tell you if they draw close, Ipos said, his hold around my neck tightening and cooling further at the same time. Ignoring him, I looked to the others.

“The fire will help,” I said. “But there are twenty-five mercs out there, and easily three times that many people just watching.”

The crackle of the flames grew as they spread, crawling up and over the ceiling, eating up the frescos and bursting out the stained glass. Ornias was pissed, but being nothing but a tube of darkness, there wasn’t much he could do.

I turned my head and motioned at the others. “Get out of here. I’ll handle the soldiers.”

Easter laughed, tossed me Diego, and pulled a pair of guns free. “Like you get to have all the fun? I think not.”

Pete grunted and pointed at his stomach, affecting a Scottish accent. “Get them in ma belly.”

Carlos just shrugged and pulled a small handgun from a holster under his shirt. “I can hide us all well enough that they won’t see us.”

And just like that I had a team, a team that I wasn’t entirely sure of but at that point

what did it matter? I felt the power of Carlos's Hiding abilities slide over us as the first row of soldiers slid through the thawed-out doorway.

There was no time to question what we were doing now.

I swept Diego around and fired into the first row, blowing their bodies back without remorse. They'd chosen their sides, and I'd chosen mine. Mine was about to win.

Pete zipped into the next row and ripped the heads off two of the soldiers, his mouth open as he drank down the fountaining blood. Easter took the others beside him, her shots clean and straight to their heads.

"Me, me!" Dinah yelled.

I pulled her free and slung Diego to my back as I stepped up and took out the next four figures, dropping them clean. I kept moving forward, the rapid fire of my and Easter's guns filling the echoing space of the church, competing for the roaring flames that were eating away at the timbers.

As fast as it had started, the fight was over and the four of us were out on the front steps of the church, bodies all around us. Traffic had stopped and I could see why. The large army vehicles parked out front had completely blocked the road. I kept walking up toward the one in the lead, yanked the door open and pulled the shocked driver out.

I turned and shot him, without thought, throwing him out onto the road. He was a liability.

Easter, Pete and Carlos climbed into the back. There was a bit of a ruckus, and then silence. Carlos slid up to the passenger seat, sweat on his brow. "I can cover this for a bit, but I will need a break soon. I have been going nonstop."

“Don’t bother,” I said as I sat and slid the truck into gear. “I want them to follow us.”

The more they—the fallen and Gardreel—looked to me, the less they’d look toward Mario, and by association, Killian. “Easter, go through their shit, look for anything actually helpful. I doubt they expected us to take—”

A scream cut me off and I barely kept the truck straight. “Carlos, wheel!”

He leapt into my seat as I scrambled back, Ruby leaping ahead of me. She got her teeth into the legs of a plump woman who’d popped out of a cupboard. I didn’t recognize her and yet I knew exactly who she was.

“A handler,” I breathed out as I let Ruby keep mauling the woman as she howled.

In the corner of the back of the truck, Easter crouched, her hands over her head. “I won’t go back, I won’t!”

Pete’s eyes were wide. “What do you want to do?”

I yanked the woman up to her feet but let Ruby dangle off her bleeding leg. My suspicions about her were not exactly friendly. “You’re the one who broke my friend?”

Susan’s eyes were wide, her skin shock filled. “That’s my job.”

I let a slow smile cross my face. “And my job is to stop Gardreel. But you know what? I’m not going to kill you.”

She blinked a few times. “You’re not?”

I kept my eyes locked on her and let that darkness that lay quiet in me rise, let her see

every piece of it. Darkness that had been trained into me, darkness that was very different from a demon's. "Not until you tell me everything."

Her whimper was punctuated by Pete laughing. "Shit, I never thought I'd see you torture someone. Is it my damn birthday?"

"Ruby, release." I gave the command and she dropped immediately. Susan hung from my hand, limp. "Easter, you going to help me break her open?"

The best medicine for a hurt in my books was to kill the person who'd tortured and maimed you. Maybe not what you'd call traditional healing, but in my world, it was a sure-fire way to make it through to the other side.

Easter slowly pulled herself up as the truck rocked around a corner.

"Carlos, you just keep driving, don't stop." Which was saying something with New York traffic.

You will torture this one, one of the fallen? Ipos was curious, but seemed neither bothered or excited.

"She has information. And you didn't warn me that she was near." I threw her up against the side of the truck and pulled a knife. "And we need it."

She is weak. I didn't sense her. Ipos said.

Carlos let out a long spew of profanities. "Traffic!" He flicked a switch, and a siren blew out of the truck, clearing the way for us. For the next hour, he wove his way through traffic and keeping us moving.

And that hour probably felt like years to Susan.

I hoped they felt like centuries. Three times she passed out. Three times we pulled her around. Once her heart stopped and Pete gave her CPR to bring her around, licking his lips clean of her blood once he was done.

“She tastes like rain,” he said.

That brought a whimper out of her. “Don’t let him eat me.”

Bingo.

At the end of the hour, we knew a few things.

“Ipos, you will confirm this, yes?”

Susan’s head turned my way. “Ipos?”

I tapped her face with my knife, and she flinched. “Yes, one of your friends?”

Ipos laughed and again it rumbled through my voice box. His hold on me tightened and he spoke out of my mouth. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Pun intended, darling.”

Carlos cleared his throat. “What do you know?”

Easter answered him. “There are three facilities that could hold the one we are looking for. One in Oregon, one in New Mexico or Texas near the border, and one in Vermont.” She stared down at the beat-up body of Susan. “Gardreel is obsessed with wiping out abnormals. He won’t stop for anything. The other fallen are less zealous, but don’t have a choice. This one will be reborn again, and Gardreel will know what we’d been told—just like Eligor warned us.”

I moved up to sit next to Carlos. “The plan is to create an extermination order through the powers that be—the UN in particular—that would allow Gardreel and his goons to eradicate every abnormal on the planet. Not that they are really holding back much. But there are some abnormals still in high places. They are all that’s holding him back.”

“What happens after that?” he asked.

Susan’s toothless, bloodied mouth mumbled her answer. “Humans next.”

Humans next.

My eyebrows shot up and I looked at Easter who was intent on Susan’s face. As if she’d been able to see it when Susan had been breaking her mind. Here we were in the back of a truck, rocketing around New York City the way the cabbies wished they could, and basically just been told that fallen angels wanted to rule the world. After they wiped out everyone in it.

That was no small thing. And yet it didn’t change our plans any.

“Fuck,” Pete said. “That would be . . . can you imagine these fuckers ruling the world?”

I could. That was the problem. “They’d make the rest of the assholes look like fucking saints.”

Pete swallowed hard. “What are we going to do with her? She’ll just tell Gardreel what we know, and right now we need whatever element of surprise we’ve got.”

I could . . . help. She is not stronger than me.

“You want her body?” That was not good.

Not my favorite. But it would suffice.

“And what about the other one?”

I have the ability to heal one body in the time allotted to me. That is all. I could almost hear him yawning. Bored. He already knew I’d chose Killian over this one.

If he couldn’t keep her alive, then we had to. “Patch her up. Keep her alive, that way Gardreel can’t drag her into another body.” Sure, he might be able to trace her, but that wasn’t the worst thing in the world. I wanted him to know where I was—at least for the moment.

Susan groaned and cried. Easter shot me a look. “I want to kill her.”

“You can, but we wait.” I stood and went to the front of the truck and crouched next to Carlos. I bowed my head and directed my question to Ipos.

“Any fallen close?”

They are coming, but you have a little time.

Good enough.

“Who are you talking to?” Carlos asked.

“The demon I’m taking back to Mario.” I smiled as Carlos blanched, his hands going limp on the steering wheel. I grabbed it and steadied the truck. “Any idea where he moved?”

“Near the JFK airport. There is a secondary airstrip that he uses—he keeps it hidden well from the humans normally.” Carlos looked at me.

I took a quick look at where we were. “Head for the Midtown tunnel. We’ll make a switch there.”

“This time of day, it’ll be backed up,” Easter said.

“That’s the plan.” I watched as traffic flowed around the big truck, the siren helping to clear the way. “Use the truck to block traffic behind us and then we run to the front of the line. Pete, you carry our new friend.”

“Got it.”

I stood and went to the back. “I’m going to load up for what’s coming.”

Dinah laughed and Diego sighed. “Please tell me that it will be a lot of shooting.”

“All the shooting you two bloodthirsty fuckers could want,” I said as I opened the storage containers in the back of the truck. A stash of goodies. I handed out flak jackets and guns, ammo and additional equipment. Smoke bombs, flares, flashlights, and a medic bag. Good enough.

I shrugged into the equipment, feeling the weight of it on my shoulders.

Easter and Pete did the same, then Pete took the wheel so Carlos could get geared up.

“We’re coming up on the tunnel!” Pete shouted just as we finished strapping Carlos into his flak jacket.

“Hit the gas, plow through the middle, then crank the wheel to the left to block

traffic,” I said. “Everyone else, hang on.”

I grabbed Ruby’s collar with one hand, and a holy fuck handle with the other and braced my legs.

Pete shouted as we hit the first section of cars, pushing them to either side of us, sending them up in a screech of metal and bouncing tires. The big truck tipped precariously as we slid sideways before we slammed to a stop. “That’s it, everybody out!” I yelled.

Easter flicked a switch and the back door slid upward. Pete grabbed the handler, and we were out and running past the stalled-out traffic, the people falling out of their cars, screaming about insurance and who the hell was going to pay for this.

“Not me!” Pete yelled into the red face of a woman who was half his size and looked ready to take him on. Not smart.

We ran through the tunnel, between the cars until we were nearing the exit. “There.” Easter pointed at a big dark blue truck, one with four doors and a canopy. I slid over the car closest to me and Dinah squealed.

“Let’s kill ’em!”

“Bloodthirsty indeed.” Carlos shot me a look, but I just kept going. I pulled Dinah free and held her in one hand as I yanked the driver’s side open. A young guy with a teardrop tattoo under his eye startled, his eyes wide as he looked down Dinah’s barrel.

“I didn’t steal it!”

“I call bullshit!” she yelled. I did too. That and we couldn’t afford to let anyone give

a good description.

As I dragged him out of the truck, I put Dinah to the back of his head and pulled the trigger. The boom was solid and echoed through the tunnel. Screams erupted, but I was already pointing into the truck. Ruby leapt up and went right to the back seat.

I frisked the dead body, found what I was looking for and slid into the truck, and seconds later the others joined me.

“Okay, now you Hide us,” I said to Carlos.

He leaned back in the passenger seat and closed his eyes.

What is it you are seeking? Ipos asked as I hit the gas pedal and got us moving. Using the big truck, I literally pushed our way out of the tunnel. I didn’t care that we were scraping sides. People were trying to get out of our way, which helped.

“Not right now, demon,” I said as I focused on what was in front of us. We still had a drive to get to the airport. And then we had to find Mario.

“That was . . . disturbing to listen to. Even for me,” Carlos said, his eyes closed. I didn’t think he meant me killing the thug. He meant Susan and the torture.

I shrugged and got us into a lane that was moving. Ruby sat with her head on the console next to me. “I don’t enjoy it, Carlos. It’s part of the job and if you aren’t willing to do what has to be done, what good are you?” I let my hand stroke across Ruby’s head, feeling her scars.

He was quiet a moment. “And what must we do now?”

“Like I said, we go back to Mario.”

“They won’t have long before the fallen are on them.” Carlos nodded. “Assuming that he isn’t already in their back pocket and waiting for us.”

I looked back at Pete who was patching Susan up. Sort of. “Ask her who Gardreel has on the inside of Mario’s crew.”

She was babbling before Pete even asked.

“I don’t know their names. But Mario is already working for Gardreel. The deal is he won’t be killed if he just plays along.” She sucked in a ragged breath.

And there it was. Shocker, I know, but my family was full of assholes.

I handed Carlos the phone I’d taken from the driver. “Make the call, find out exactly where they are. He doesn’t know we know yet. Let’s keep it that way.”

Carlos dialed through and hit speaker. Mario’s voice came through loud and clear. “Where are you? There’s trouble in the financial district. That you?”

“Yes, that was us,” Carlos said. “We’ll come to you; we have a prisoner.”

Nothing from Mario for a moment. “We’re at JFK. East side, there is a gate that will look locked, just drive through it.”

Good enough. I mouthed ‘mute’ to Carlos. He turned the phone to silent on our end.

“And your plan is?” Easter leaned forward, her hands on the back of my seat. Anyone else and my skin would have been crawling. I glanced at her in the mirror. Her skin had gained some of its color back.

“We keep going. Hopefully the tunnel gives us a head start. It will take time for them

to figure out which vehicle was stolen, and where it went.”

Ipos was humming softly. I would speak with your voice, so you can all hear my thoughts.

“Pretty fucking polite for a demon,” I said. “But yeah, use my voice.”

His hold around my neck tightened and the skin dropped more than a few degrees.

“Gardreel,” Jesus, my voice was strange in that low of a register, “wants Phoenix, yes?”

Head nods all around.

“Then he will use his contact to gain her confidence, which I can see in her head is not the case.” I took a turn and laid on the horn to get the car in front of me to move, and when that didn’t work, used my bumper. “If I had his position and . . . assets. . . . I’d send in two choppers full of soldiers, use the angel dust and knock all the abnormals out. But I would wait until the mark I wanted was there. Namely, Phoenix. Bag ’em and gag ’em.” The fact that the demon knew lingo that was rather street, was interesting. Who had he been inhabiting?

If what Ipos thought was true, Killian was safe for the moment.

“Fred is here,” Mario said, not realizing he wasn’t able to hear us. “Brought your Cowboy with him. He’s . . . odd.”

I frowned. That didn’t sound right. Cowboy was young, inexperienced, but he was not odd. I motioned and Carlos took us off mute. “Thanks. We’ll be there soon as we can.”

“How soon? We’re getting transport ready,” Mario barked.

Sure he was. Transport for everyone he handed over to Gardreel.

“Thirty minutes,” I said, knowing it would be half that at best. Fifteen minutes and I’d be dealing with Mario.

“Good.” He hung up. Carlos put the phone down with a heavy sigh.

There was silence for about three seconds.

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Athump filled the air, like the aftershock of a bomb without the actual explosion, and something hit the truck and pushed it sideways, skidding across the road. To be fair, we weren't the only vehicle getting shoved around by the unseen force. I wrestled with the steering wheel of the truck and fought to keep us on the road.

"What the fuck is that?" Dinah yelled.

"No idea." I spoke through gritted teeth. The force was continuing to push long after a simple shockwave should have.

As suddenly as it had hit, the push was gone and the cars all around us came to a stop. I looked up to the sky in time to see three figures flying in the same direction we were headed. Multiple arms, wings of leather, swords hanging from their thick waists . . .

Those are the soldiers of the fallen. Those who were too weak to retain a proper body, Ipos said and then laughed.

"Fuck." I jammed the truck in reverse, cranked the wheel and got us moving again in the right direction. "We have to beat them."

"You drive, we'll discuss," Easter said as she tapped the center console with one of her guns. I got us moving again, using the truck as a part battering ram, the squeal and screech of metal making the two men wince. "We have the three facilities your mother's body could be in. We don't have time to hit them all. Or the firepower."

I looked at Carlos and he tapped his ears. "Our prisoner, she cannot hear. I've plugged her up, so she won't be able to pass on anything."

I nodded and Easter went on. “Three facilities, one crack team—if we can get your Cowboy and he’s as good as he says. We need to know which one to hit and go hard and fast before . . .”

“Before Gardreel knows what we’re doing,” I said. Assuming he didn’t already suspect and have things in play.

The traffic was thinning out and that made me suspicious. “Traffic should be getting worse, not better.”

“What’s that up there?” Pete leaned in so he could look past Ruby. She snapped her teeth at him, but my eyes were locked on what was up ahead.

“A blockade?” Easter said. “For us?”

“Because of the truck,” I said. “The one we left behind. They knew someone was coming through.”

A solid line of police cars waited for us up ahead. I put the gas pedal down hard; Carlos helped steady the steering wheel. “Hang on,” I barked as I leaned out the side window, swinging Diego up. “Biggest boom you’ve got, Diego.”

“Fuck yeah!” he growled as his inner workings clicked over. I had no idea what it would be. “Hang on tight, Nix!” he yelled as I squeezed the trigger and he fired. The kickback was brutal as a fucking rocket launched out of him, jamming the butt of the gun hard into my shoulder, even though I was braced. Sure, it was small, sized for a weapon of his size, but it was still a rocket.

“Is that what I think it is?” screamed Dinah. “Goddamn, man, you’ve been holding out on me!”

The rocket flew perfectly and hit the front line of the cars. They exploded with a roar that rent the air, the concussion hard on the ears. The police cars flipped upward, sending the first two out of the way and creating a nice opening for us.

Pedal down, the engine roared and I drove us through a blizzing haze of smoke and fire, then continued as if nothing were wrong. We didn't have a lot of time, and I wasn't sightseeing here. I could see the figures in the air ahead of us. We were catching them, but not fast enough.

"Just out for a fucking Sunday drive," Dinah laughed.

"How long before the rest of the cops show up?" Easter asked.

"Give it a minute and they'll be on us," I said. "Carlos, you still keeping us from the fallen?"

He grunted so I was going to give that a yes.

Sirens lit up behind us—no surprise there. The steady drone of helicopters was next through the open windows. Ipos was right about that.

"Think those are cops too?" Pete asked.

"What's on them?" I threw back. He hung out a back window and then ducked back in.

"Nope, those ain't cops."

Gardreel was on us then. Even a Hider could not cover us when we were blowing up shit like this. Maybe Zee could have, but he was in a league of his own.

But helicopters on us was fine by me. We would need at least a couple if we were going to get the other abnormals to safety.

“Fucking hell, I’m going soft,” I muttered. Of course, that was assuming there was anywhere that was safe anymore.

That thought struck me hard. Where was safe now? There had to be some places. “Easter, ask your friend where the dead zones are, where Gardreel can’t see.”

Easter slid back and there was a meaty thump, a whispered question and a burbled answer.

“She says the Russian mob has held out—she’s not sure how—the Middle East desert, and maybe parts of Death Valley.”

I sure as shit wasn’t about to go deal with the desert witch again, or the fire demon who called to my innate fire. That was a definite nope. Russia was too far away, which meant Death Valley it was. “Anyone know if there is anything that will work for cover in Death Valley?”

The other three shook their heads. At least we had something, though. A dead zone would be the best we could do for what remained of the abnormals. After we got them away from Mario.

My jaw ticked and I found myself reaching for Dinah, not to draw her, but for a small piece of comfort.

I would admit to no one that I was scared for Killian—maybe even more so because of Ipos. He was far too complacent. Too easy. Which meant he was a confident motherfucker.

To save Killian, I would do this, but what if I still lost him in the end?

I shook it off as Carlos pointed out the last turn that would take us to JFK. I knew it well, but I'd never gone to the other side, where Mario waited.

Of course, he wasn't the only one waiting.

I drove us onto the airstrip and out into the middle, cranked the wheel and faced the twenty-plus cop cars that were coming fast behind us. They were pissed. Like kicking a wasp nest, they were coming hard for us now—we'd blown up some of their friends. The screeching of brakes lit the air as I flicked the engine on the big truck off.

"Diego, Dinah, get ready." I pulled both guns around and handed Diego to Easter.

"Ooooo, I love it when I have multiple pretty ladies sliding their fingers around me. I like this gig, forget I ever cursed you for sticking me under the floorboards, Carlos!" Diego crowed as Easter settled him in her arms. She rolled her eyes, but I took note that he fit with her well.

I only needed the one gun. As much as two was better, Dinah was . . . she was my teammate. She was my sister. And I trusted her absolutely.

"Let's kick ass," she growled, shaking in my hands. I pointed a finger at Carlos.

"You stay down, stay covered up with flak jackets. Keep her from moving," I pointed at the handler. "Let the three of us do the heavy lifting."

Carlos nodded and did as I said.

"Come out with your hands in the air!" The words boomed via a megaphone.

Pete snickered. “They don’t get real original, do they?”

Easter didn’t say a word, just watched me. “Waiting for the helicopters to land?”

I grinned at her. “Pete, you take the police in front, we’re taking the birds.”

“Fine by me, I can’t fly them anyway.” He rolled his shoulders and cracked his knuckles. Smarter than the average bear, he tightened his flak jacket, and adjusted a helmet he’d picked up out of the army truck. Twenty squad cars meant we had to bank on forty cops there, and ten-plus in each helicopter.

“Soon as we clear one bird, you go help Pete,” I said. “I’ll finish the other off and then be right behind you.”

Easter put her hand on the door, ready to jump out. “You think they’ll land or just blast us from above?”

I dug around in the bag and pulled out the flares. “This could work. We can jump out, throw them out and welcome them to drop. Wave your arms, look weak. Scared.”

She snorted and took a couple of the flares. “You think they’re that dumb?”

I shrugged. “Hard to say. They don’t really know what they’re dealing with, so in that sense, yes, they are that dumb. Whether or not this works, that’s entirely different.”

In the back Ruby crouched watching me. I could leave her behind, but I doubted she’d stay. The best I could do was slip one of the flak jackets around her body and tie it on. Not perfect, but it was something.

The look from Easter said it all and I held up a hand. “Don’t even start.”

“Didn’t say a word about the fact that you’d keep that dog safe, but don’t give a shit about any of us here.”

I blinked. “That’s not true. I’d save you.”

“If it didn’t interfere with you surviving,” she said.

I nodded. “I can’t save anyone else if I’m dead and I’m the prize that Gardreel wants.” I looked over at Carlos before he tucked under the flak jackets fully. “See if that one will tell you why I’m so fucking special.”

And then I stepped out of the truck onto the busted-up tarmac, flares in my hands. I threw them out to the left and right, and Easter did the same. We waved for the helicopters to land, even as the gunfire went off behind us.

Pete was digging in, because the screams came next, and they came fast. “He’s getting better at this.” I shouted to be heard over the rotors of the two birds.

Easter snorted and then the helicopters were landing, just far enough apart. “I’m on the right,” she said, and I moved to the left, head down and hand up to shade my face and eyes.

Of course, the officers inside the helicopters just saw two women running toward them. They didn’t see what we really were.

As the door slid open, I leapt inside and pulled Dinah. I jammed her under the chin of the helmeted figure who helped me in and pulled the trigger. Two more went down before they seemed to realize what was happening. She was having a great time.

“Fuck yes, this is better than sex! Let me mess them the fuck up!”

“Shoot her, shoot her!” someone shouted, though it was hard to hear. It was the mouth of the man I killed next that I could read it on.

I spun and grabbed the guy closest to me, spinning him around and holding him to my chest as someone else got a shot off. His body jumped and I shot past him over his shoulder. They were dressed in flak jackets and helmets too, prepped to fight.

“Dinah, aim for the eyes!”

“Oh yeah, the jelly shots!” she yelled as I squeezed the trigger.

I felt more than heard someone behind me. I was going to be too slow.

But Ruby was not. The big bitch leapt up from the floor where she’d stayed quiet at my feet and took the shooter down to the ground, her teeth digging into his throat. He screamed, his gun went off and she yelped.

“Fuck!” I roared the word, dropped the dead one I’d been holding up and cleared the rest of the bird in seconds. They dropped like dominos, one after the other. The pilot sat there shaking and I kept Dinah trained on him. His eyes were wide, and his hands were up. But we might need him.

I grabbed a headset and spoke into it. “Don’t you fucking move.”

I dropped the headset and went to my knees next to my dog, hating that I was here again. Abe had saved me and Bear, and we’d lost him. Losing another dog . . . not happening.

I put a hand to her neck and there was a steady pulse. She lifted her head and whined at me. I slid my hands around her body. The flak jacket had taken the blow and it had saved her life. But the bullet had still hammered her, knocking her down.

“Stay.” I held a hand over her head, and she lay down and closed her eyes. There was no one left alive in the bird, besides the pilot. I motioned for him to move, and he scrambled to do as I said, and slid out of the wide doors ahead of me. The screaming was still coming from where Pete had started in, but the gunfire was a lot less.

A quick count showed me that Mario had shown up with a few of his people to help. Though help was a rather loose word. They were trying to slow Pete down. Pete, a Magelore who had slipped into a literal feeding frenzy like a damn shark.

I let my eyes close a little and slipped into the place in between—that limbo. And there was Pete, raging. I lifted a hand and touched him on the shoulder. “Easy. You got them all.”

He turned back to me, his eyes cleared, and he let out a long breath. “Shit, I think I just levelled up.”

And then he blinked out of that space. He started out of the in-between, but a figure flat out stopped me.

I’d know him anywhere.

“Killian, what the hell are you doing here?”

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I stood inside that space of limbo, staring at the man I loved almost as much as I loved my children. “Killian.”

His head lolled toward me, green eyes hooded, and that grin that was his alone spread across his lips. “Lass. You came for me. I knew you’d find me on this side of death.”

I rolled my eyes and dropped beside him. “I’m not dead, Kill, they fooled you. But you are dying. I need you to hang on. And you need an ass kicking for believing I could die so easily.” I let myself lean forward and kiss him gently, trying to give him something to fight for. He smiled under my mouth.

Next to us Ipos materialized, his body strong and solid where Killian’s was fading. Dying.

“This is the one?” Ipos crouched next to Killian.

I wanted to say no. I wanted to tell him that Killian was mine, not his. “You can save him?”

“Heal up his body, no problem.” Ipos nodded. He reached out and put his hand over Killian’s heart, digging his fingers into the fading flesh. “He has to give consent. Even I’m not that good.”

This was where the crux was—convincing Killian to let a demon inhabit his body. I knew what it was to have a handler. But how different was that to a demon? I suspected not very.

“Killian. Focus on me.” I held his face in my hands, leaning over him. “I need you to say yes.”

Ipos nodded. “Will you allow me possession?”

Killian mumbled something, and I shook him lightly. “Say yes.”

His smile was for me. “Yes.”

Ipos winked at me and shoved me out of limbo. “I’ve got it from here, firebird.”

I blinked and was standing on the broken tarmac. The screaming had stopped, but I could see that my job was far from done. Mario’s crew had shown up to help, though it looked like they’d just stopped Pete from killing all the cops.

Easter jogged over to my side. “You blanked out there for a good ten seconds.”

“I’m fine,” I said without her actually asking if I was okay. “We need to sweep the birds for any tracking devices, get Mario’s people on to them and get moving. I kept the pilot.” I pointed to the guy on his knees beside me. “I’ll deal with my brother.”

As if things would be that simple.

Easter headed in Mario’s direction as he strode toward us. I turned and made my way back to the truck we’d rolled in on. I flung the back door open and pulled the flak jackets off Carlos and the handler. Both were alive.

Though the woman was definitely worse for the wear. I had a hard time feeling bad for anything that happened to her. Even if it had been Eligor, I wasn’t sure I could drum up much sympathy for those who would destroy so many for their own shame, for those who would kill their own children.

Carlos sat up. “She sang like a canary in the mine,” he said, and the handler groaned, whimpering. “The reason they want you is because you’re ascendant.”

“Right, and?” I didn’t hold a hand to him. He didn’t need it.

The handler didn’t so much as try to sit up.

Behind us I could hear the helicopters start up again. Easter had gotten everyone moving. That was good. I had a sneaking suspicion Mario would move a hell of a lot faster for the pretty redhead than his asshole long-lost sister.

“You are a specific line of fallen blood. Your grandmother was a hunter of the fallen. She had abilities that could stop them. She had abilities that could kill demons.”

Chills rippled up and down my spine, but I didn’t flinch. “And?” There was more, I could feel it as surely as I could feel my body reacting to his words.

“She could control the fallen if she connected with them. Gardreel thinks you might be able to control other abnormals that same way. If they have you, and that’s true, then they don’t have to actually kill them all. They just turn them into their own private army to help take over the human governments around the world. And then they have slaves too. Or still kill them if they wished.”

Jesus, the handler really had sung out everything. “Anything else?”

“If they can’t have you, they’ll go after your boy. And if not him, then they’ll go ahead with the plan as it had been before. Brainwash as many abnormals as possible and then set them loose. Let terror reign and then Gardreel would step in as a savior of sorts.”

I stared down at the handler. “Sounds sacrilegious to me, making himself a savior.

I'm pretty sure he's going to hell for that one."

She groaned; the sound wet with her own blood. "He hates humans and abnormals. But he needs one to wipe out the other. He wants this to be a place for the fallen. He'll call them all to him when the earth is cleansed."

Cleansed did not sound like a good time and I didn't like the connotations of a raging fire it brought up. "You don't just mean getting rid of the abnormals and ruling the humans, do you?"

"No," she whispered. "The Cleansing Fire will come. He has been looking for the spell for it and last I heard, he was close to finding it. Maybe it's more of a curse. A killing curse." She struggled to take a breath in. It was like now that she was speaking, she couldn't stop. "You have very little time to stop him. The spell would be spoken on the night of the bleeding stars. Then he will release it. It will cleanse the world. He will start the world anew, as if he . . . is God."

Carlos whispered a prayer under his breath.

I frowned, not really giving a shit about the religious implications and focusing on the spell instead. "If he's found it."

"If," she agreed, her voice weakening even as she spoke. "There are two spell casters that know it, that we know of. Both are in the labs, being worked on by handlers. One is a Magelore. The other is ascendant, like you. If he can get that spell, he won't bother to look for you."

I swallowed hard, already knowing that one would be my mother's empty shell. That explained why she was still alive. I would have asked more but the handler's body began to convulse. I knew the signs of death stalking someone. Her chest lifted and fell twice more and then stilled as she shuddered, and the last breath slid out of her. I

narrowed my eyes.

This was the moment of death; she was still warm, and in theory she could be given CPR and we could bring her back. So dead. . . but not dead dead.

Eligor had an essence pulled out of his body. Could the same be done to her? I had no idea, but I was going to try.

“Grab me a bottle, anything that we can shut tight,” I barked at Carlos as I bent and grabbed the handler’s head. I wrapped my fingers around her skull and pressed my thumbs to the middle of her forehead, tried to recall just how Gardreel had done it.

He’d kind of plucked at Eligor, drawing his essence out. I closed my eyes and sunk into the meditative state, sliding down through the currents and into the fog-ridden world.

I blinked and stared at the figure in front of me. She was petite, with a massive wide wingspan with feathers as brightly white as if I were staring at the sun. Her hair was flaming red, though, like Easter’s.

And then I understood. “You’re her mother.”

She put her hands over her face. “I didn’t want to hurt her. None of us do! We have no choice!”

“Then help me stop him,” I growled. “Help me stop him from hurting everyone.”

She crumpled to her knees and her wings went wide, slowing the fall into a graceful crumple. “You need to bottle me up, so he can’t take me back.”

“How?”

“There is a word that commands the spirit of the fallen as they die. But I cannot speak it. You must find it.”

I all but pushed off the ground in that foggy limbo in order to get back to my body. My eyes flew open as Carlos pushed a bottle into my hand. I wasn’t fucking around with her if she couldn’t help me.

I held the bottle open and stared at her slumped body. “A word, Carlos, a single word will pull her essence into this bottle.”

“How the fuck—”

“I don’t know.” Only I did know, or rather I knew someone who might have the word. Eligor. Fuck, that would mean reaching out to my captor and asking him for help.

There wasn’t a lot of time. Either I trusted myself enough to fight off Eligor if he tried to take me over for Gardreel, or I didn’t.

My jaw ticked and my hand tightened around the glass bottle. If I let her spirit go, Gardreel could in theory bring her back. And then he’d know what we knew. He could move my mother’s body, or the Magelore. Unless I planted false evidence.

“We’ll go after the Magelore, Carlos. That’s our best bet.”

He startled and I gave him a look. “You sure, boss?”

“Yes. The other one is just a shell from what we know. The Magelore will give us anything for freedom; just look at how Pete threw in with us.”

The body below me twitched and the chest ticked almost like a breath. “Leave her

here.”

I jumped out of the truck and Carlos followed. Of course, we got out just in time to see the skies darken with wings of leather.

Four of them to be exact. The same four that had headed for the airport. They’d waited for the gunfire to be over.

“Fuck these monstrosities,” I growled, then raised my voice. “Mario, get your people into the two helicopters! Easter, get them the fuck out of here!”

I would have to deal with Mario later.

Movement rippled around me, and I saw out of the corner of my eyes a body slung over a pair of broad shoulders—a body that looked like Killian. Not exactly as gentle as it could be, but if he was out then there was a chance, at least.

But why the fuck hadn’t Ipos gotten him back on his feet?

I turned to face the four fallen as their twisted legs touched the ground. Ruby snarled and started barking, sharp and piercing. I didn’t shush her. The noise kept their eyes on us and not the fleeing abnormals.

What had my life come to, now I was sacrificing myself for the ones I used to hunt? A slow smile spread over my face. “Dinah, you ready to try out the special rounds?”

“We’ve got those, a few smokers, and an acid round. If we could pull some lightning through Killian, I think we could really fuck them up.” She paused. “And yeah, special rounds first!”

Acid. That was new, I must have grabbed it from Carlos’s stash and not realized. The

four fallen weren't rushing me. "Carlos, get out of here. Hide them as best you can." When he hesitated, I shoved him away. "Literally not a thing you can do about this right now. Off you fuck, man."

"They will kill you," he said simply, and straight to the point. "And then what will happen to us?"

"Then you will have Bear to protect," I said, hating that if I died here, the fate of the world would rest on my son's shoulders. "He is like me. He could stop them. You keep going, you keep getting the pieces together."

Carlos gave me a quick nod, turned and ran toward the helicopters.

The front runner of the fallen four finally made a move. "Come with us, and we will not harm the others."

That was kind of what I was hoping for. A chance at Gardreel, face to face.

Wait. The word rumbled in my head, and I didn't know who or what was talking to me, but I felt it in my bones.

My grandmother was close.

I would face Gardreel. But not yet.

I snapped my fingers at Ruby and pointed at Killian who was in the bird closest to me. "Guard him, Ruby."

She whined, low and frustrated, but ran across the broken tarmac, leapt into the helicopter, and lay down next to Killian. It was the best I could do.

“All right then, boys.” I pulled Dinah free, and she gave a sigh. “Take me if you can.”

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The four fallen moved as a well-oiled unit, spreading around me so I had to keep moving, circling them. I took note that two wore short swords at their thick waists. Their hooves and splayed toes scratched across the tarmac as we circled around one another. They were each over ten feet tall and their reach with their blackened, thick leathery skin was solidly in that range.

“Head shots?” Dinah asked hopefully.

“Yes.” I lifted her, aiming her at the one closest to me. I squeezed the trigger and the bullet shot out, glimmering through the air.

We hit the fallen between the eyes and he stumbled back, expression one of stunned incompetence.

He went to his knees and started screaming, scrabbling at his face with his multiple arms.

“Good enough.” I swung and shot the next two rounds, nailing all but one between the eyes.

“That’s it,” Dinah said. “I had only three shots.”

Three down, one left. That improved my odds.

“Dinah, you see what I see?” I pointed at the waist of the one I’d shot first. He writhed on the ground, his screams pitching higher and higher.

“Girl can never have too many swords,” she snarled. “I mean, obviously I prefer guns, but I think you’re right.”

I aimed her at the fallen closest to me, right at his waist, and squeezed the trigger. Dinah’s aim perfected mine and we hit the middle of the belt buckle, snapping it in half. The belt slid from his waist and the short sword and sheath hit the ground.

“You cannot hurt us with your measly weapons,” the last of them said. His face was twisted like melted wax, eyes halfway down one side of his face, mouth halfway up the other.

I laughed at him, “Really? Doesn’t look like that to me.” I tucked Dinah in her sheath and ran for the sword. The fallen on my right took a swing at me with an open, long-fingered, claw-tipped hand, and I dove. My fingers wrapped around the hilt of the sword as I turned my dive into a somersault. I rolled and was on the outside of the four fallen. The one still standing seemed surprised. And then the first of them stood up, slower, but standing as liquid poured from the wound.

I supposed not many of them were fought with—they just grabbed hold of their victims and flew away.

“Sloppy, boys.” I yanked the sword clear of the sheath and swung at the fallen closest to me, aiming for his shoulder. I’d gladly take them apart piece by piece.

The sword dug into the leathery hide and the fallen shrieked, scrambling and flailing. And shot up into the sky, with me still hanging from the handle of the sword.

“Well fuck.” I didn’t let go of the weapon that was obviously causing all the pain. He spun, flinging my legs out wide through the air. Below us the other three fallen rose into the air. Fuck, they were just going to fly off with me hanging onto the goddamn sword.

“Dinah, any ideas?”

“Don’t fall,” she said.

Gripping the handle tight, I snapped my legs toward the fallen’s body and pushed off. We were thirty feet up. High, but not too bad. If I was going to fall, this was the time.

The sword yanked free and cut the arm the rest of the way off as I back flipped away from him. One of the others shot toward me. The bullets had slowed them, but that was it.

“He’s gonna catch you!” Dinah started laughing, and if I’d had the time I would have laughed with her.

I swung the sword over my head and slammed it through the clavicle of the fallen that was swooping up to grab me.

The melted face looked up at me, horror flickering through it as the sword began to hum under my hands. Like . . . a bomb?

My sudden weight, the sword, and gravity pulled me and my new friend down toward the ground. Not as fast now. Ten feet up I let go, the vibrations in the sword handle freaking me out.

I landed in a crouch and looked up in time to see the fallen’s body explode, the shrapnel of bone and sword pieces shooting through the air. I ducked, covered my head and pieces shot across my arm, cutting me open.

Dinah yelled. “Ah, he got me, boss!” I slapped a hand over her, feeling a piece of metal that hadn’t been there before stuck in her barrel. I yanked it out. The chunk was solid, almost as big as a dagger.

I stood and turned as the two healthy fallen stared me down. “Can’t leave till Gardreel comes, huh?”

“How is she killing us?” the left one said to the right one. “I thought it was not possible unless . . .”

They both looked at me and I stared right back. “What? Unless I’m what? Born from a fallen hunter?”

Their eyes flickered. “More than that. You are more than just born from a fallen hunter. She is one portion of the issue. Your grandfather is obviously the other.”

I didn’t give a rat’s ass about my father, grandfather or otherwise. If what I had from him was keeping these assholes wary, then halle-fucking-lujah. Praise the gods and all that shit.

They did not land. The pieces of their friend were splattered all around us, and the remaining injured fallen flew away with a limping gait in the air. Good enough for me.

“Did we just beat them?” Dinah whimpered. I touched the divot in her barrel.

“Yeah, for now.”

My ears finally caught up and the sound of the helicopters lifting off was enough for me to spin and run toward the closest one to me. The one that had Killian in it.

And apparently, I was not the only one making a last run for it.

Fred and Cowboy booked it across the shitty tarmac with another abnormal pushing them along, waving their arms, a few cops trying to follow them.

They hopped into the helicopter furthest from me.

Good enough. I turned on the speed and as the helicopter got to my head height, I leapt up and caught hold of the landing tracks. Clinging to the cold steel, I pulled myself up inch by inch, and then hands were hauling me in through the open door.

“Thanks,” I acknowledged the help, but turned away to watch the fallen. They hadn’t moved.

What was their purpose? To see what I could do?

Or to actually capture me?

They dropped to the ground as I stared, and shuffled toward the truck that we’d left the handler’s body in. I motioned for a headset and was handed one. “Easter in here?” My voice came through with some static.

“Yup.” She stepped up beside me, her own headset on.

“Diego has that rocket launcher.” I still had some of the angel dust. I motioned for her, and she tipped his muzzle toward me. I poured the rest of it in. “Now would be a good time.”

Even with the angel dust, I wasn’t sure it would do much damage, but maybe it would slow them down. And I realized that was all we were trying to do. Slow the shit down that was sliding toward us. And hope we could outrun it long enough to give us all a chance.

Easter spread her legs for balance and behind her, Pete grabbed her belt. I steadied her side as she sighted down Diego’s barrel and squeezed the trigger.

The kickback was good, but she had it. The rocket flew in a tight spiral, sparkling all the way. The explosion of the truck was solid, and it threw the remaining fallen back a good fifty feet, the sound tearing at my ears and giving me a good blowback of heat even this far up. The helicopter pilot adjusted, and we didn't take any damage. The last thing I saw was a black hole in the tarmac where the truck had been. Whatever was left of Easter's handler—I refused to call her Easter's mother—would be incinerated. Maybe it would make it harder for Gardreel to draw her back in.

I looked at Easter hard as Ruby tucked her head under my hanging hand. I could see the handler's features clearly in Easter's. She never needed to know that her mother was the one who'd tortured her, the one who'd broken her mind for the sake of what was essentially a madman's rantings.

"You sure about going to Death Valley?" Easter's voice crackled over the radio.

I wasn't sure, not entirely. "Head west, we'll find something."

Making my way through the crush of people, I found Killian sort of propped up in a corner. His eyes were not open, his chest rose and fell, but he was clearly still not with us. I looked at the woman who sat next to him, her pale blond hair brushed up into a high ponytail. She glanced up at me and I didn't bother to speak to her. She didn't have a headset on.

Instead, I motioned for her to move.

Her face hardened, closing off. As if that would keep me from being next to him. I grabbed her by the arm and bodily yanked her out of my spot, then slid in next to Killian, propping him against my shoulder. Ruby sat in front of us, pressed against our legs, which meant I could hear her rumbling growl.

The woman was intent on having Killian, was she?

I looked over at her and considered that maybe he'd replaced me. It wouldn't be unreasonable, not with two kids and a damn plague of the fallen to outrun.

Her blue-green eyes locked on mine, and I winked at her. Fuck her if that was the case. Not my problem, he was mine first and nobody took what was mine.

I closed my eyes, trusting Ruby, reached up and pulled off the headset. I needed to go back into that space, that limbo where I'd seen him.

Ipos was there. But why hadn't he healed Killian?

Because there was something within that place that held a power that I didn't have anywhere else, and if I was going to help him that was where I'd do it.

I sunk into the sound of the rotors filling my head, creating a white noise that blocked out everything else, every shuffle of every filthy body crammed in this space.

The water was there, the raging river, and I paused at the edge of it.

Paused and did a slow turn to see someone unexpected behind me.

Her tattered wings spread wide, and the edge of her lips crinkled. The long white braid was still over one shoulder. Was she dead? I didn't think so.

"Little Phoenix. You are looking for a place to hide?" My grandmother cackled. "A respite before the next fight?"

She tucked her wings in tight to her body as she strolled closer.

I didn't move. I wasn't sure if I should be afraid of her, but in close proximity I could snap her arm and get behind her if I had to. "You know a place?"

“Of course I do. I had to hide myself from time to time. Head to the Grand Canyon. At the juncture of the rivers there is a place that Gardreel will never look.” She tipped her hand left and right, like a boat on the water. “And your man. What will you do with him? He’s about dead.”

My jaw ticked. “I know. Ipos—”

She laughed. “Ipos? That’s the one that’s crawled into him?” She put her hands on her hips. “Could be worse, I guess. He has knowledge. Use him.”

I wanted to look away and yet I couldn’t. Something about this woman who claimed to be my grandmother—and I’ll be honest, there was a connection I could not deny—made me squirm. As if she could look into me, the way my mother had been able.

“Ipos—”

“Cannot heal him. He’s clever. He knows you can heal that man of yours, and then he gets a fully functioning body.” Her eyebrows lifted.

Fucking hell. I’d been duped by a goddamn demon.

I lifted my eyebrows right back as if I wasn’t furious. “I don’t know how to help Killian,” I said. “So he will die if Ipos can’t heal him.”

Her wings rippled with irritation as she waved a hand at me. “Bah, you have it in you. Child, you are part angel, even if there is darkness too, and angels—even the fallen ones—can do what others cannot. Especially for those they are tied to. Your Easter, the Magelore, your children, your man. You can save them when death would take them.”

Hope, dangerous and sly, slid through me. “How?”

“That fire of yours should do it.” She paused. “A word of advice. Don’t give up on your brother yet. He might surprise you.”

“I disagree with that last,” I said, feeling strangely melancholy. “He is siding with Gardreel.”

“Perhaps.” She tipped her head side to side. “Perhaps.”

“Anything else you want to help me out with?” I asked.

She lifted a wing and brushed the tips of it across my cheek. “It’s a journey you’re on. It won’t be easy to bring all of what you need together. Trust your gut, firebird.” Her laugh was soft. I wasn’t sure that I liked she was backing up what Ipos had said. Shit, she’d even used the same nickname he had. “Only the world depends on you.”

I didn’t know if I should thank her, or curse at her, so instead I nodded and pulled myself out of the fog. If I could heal Killian, what would it take? My fire? His lightning? Some combination of both?

Dinah was jiggling away in her holster strapped to my chest, but there was no way I’d be able to hear her. I put my two fingers to Killian’s neck. Slower, his heartbeat was slower still, but he was alive.

Which meant I had time.

I slipped the headset back on in time to hear Mario raging.

“If we go where the informant told us to go, then we’ll be fucking screwed!”

“Hold tight,” I spoke into the mic. “I agree with you, Mario.” I didn’t want him to have a place that was safe, not when Gardreel was using him.

There was no intake of breath and yet I could easily see him in my mind, breathing hard, worked up over the fact that if we did what was expected, we’d be trapped.

“We’re still going to head that direction,” I said. “Carlos and the other Hiders will keep us out of sight of the humans and fallen alike. Here and there we will leave a clue, so they know we are still headed west. But we have a different destination.”

I kept a hand on Killian’s chest. “And we need to land for fuel.”

Of course, I didn’t mean for fuel, but they didn’t have to know that. I would take the chance while the birds were down to try this healing gig with Killian. And if it didn’t work . . . then he would be left behind.

No matter how much it killed me.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

We stopped in a town called Williamsport, Pennsylvania, just after two in the morning. There was a tiny airstrip—private by the looks of it—that we used as our landing pad.

Mario was out first, barking orders. Most of the abnormals stayed in the helicopters. I pulled Killian up and over my shoulder and hefted him out. He was not a small man by any means, but I'd kept my body in good shape while I'd been locked up in the fucking labs.

The second my foot hit the tarmac; I was joined by someone I'd honestly thought was dead.

“Cowboy, you made it.” I barely glanced at him as I fought to keep moving. Maybe I wasn't in as good a shape as I'd thought.

“Phoenix.” His voice was the same as before only . . . no, there was something different.

I laid Killian down on a patch of grass and sat next to him. “Dinah, I've got to call up my fire, and then . . . heal him.”

Even I could hear the disbelief in my voice.

Before Dinah could answer, Cowboy did. “I can help you do that.”

He crouched beside me, his blue eyes serious, only they weren't really his eyes. I moved without thinking, leaping on him, tackling him flat to the ground with my arm

pressed up against his windpipe.

“Eligor.”

He didn’t fight me. “Let me help.” He mouthed the words as his face lost color and then his lips began to go blue.

I had a choice. I could let him help as he suggested and have a better chance of bringing Killian back, or I could go it alone and probably lose the one man who could stand with me against anything.

I eased up on my hold and allowed Cowboy—Eligor—to sit up. “You’ll help me and then you’ll tell me what the fuck you did to Cowboy.”

He nodded and coughed. “Of course.”

Eligor

Even in her ferocity she was a sight. All fiery and determined to protect those she cared about. He admired that about her, more than he should have.

“Put your hands on his chest,” he instructed. “Find his heartbeat.”

Phoenix never questioned him—another thing he liked about her. Once she was on a path, she didn’t deviate from it. She slid her hands under the man’s shirt—he wasn’t sure he liked that—and settled them over his chest. “Now?”

“Now you call up your power and sync it to the rhythm of his heart. Each pulse you will send a pulse of your own energy into him, clearing out the damage.” Eligor let himself put his hands over hers. She didn’t flinch, just looked up at him with those eyes that he could not forget. She was worth helping. Worth saving if he could.

Eyelids fluttering closed, her breathing evened out and then her body went very still. Eligor didn't dare move. Her hands began to warm under his and he slowly pulled away, feeling the fire in her rise.

A split second later her hands lit up and the abnormals around them all stopped to watch. He was proud of her. She literally burned through the bonds that had been placed on her. He'd made her stronger.

The fire on her hands crawled up her arms and the heat off it raised her hair so that it swirled up around her face.

"Beautiful." He spoke without meaning to, and blamed it on the soul inside of him, the one that lusted after her. Eligor would never do that.

The red, orange and gold flames began to pulse through the man under her hands, ten beats and she pulled her hands away.

Eligor moved to hug her, to congratulate her on a job well done.

But the man on the ground opened his eyes and she was leaning over him.

The man lifted a hand and stroked it across her face. "Lass, I knew you'd save me."

Anger crackled through Eligor so fast he gasped with it. This was not him; he was sure of it. The boy's body was too strong, too full of lust.

This could not be him.

Phoenix

My body thrummed with the flames that had burst out of my hands, and it took a

fucking lot of effort to tamp them back down. Killian's hand against my cheek was cool and I helped him sit up.

There was no time for anything other than a moment of looking into his eyes, of knowing that he was alive. That we'd get through this together.

I blinked, breaking the connection before he leaned in for a kiss. "I knew you'd need me to save you," I said. "That's how it goes, isn't it?"

His low, dark chuckle sent more than a few shivers through me. "Lass . . ." His eyes widened. "Bear and—"

"I've got them covered," I said as I helped him stand. "I sent a Hider to them. Can you walk?"

Killian's legs wobbled as he stood and then his eyes changed, bleeding from green to blue.

His smile shifted and he ran his hands over my arms. "Phoenix. You did save him. Well done."

Ipos had taken over. Fuck.

Eligor gasped.

They locked eyes and Ipos went for Eligor, tackling him to the ground.

"You bastard!" Ipos snarled as he swung a fist. "I'll fucking kill you!"

I caught his arm. "You might not like it, but he's on our side too. Pull your shit together. I don't care what your past is." I tightened my hold on his arm. "Killian, you

should be able to take control.”

Blue eyes looked up at me and then they bled back to green. “Lass?”

My jaw ticked. “You have a demon.” As if I was telling him he had a tapeworm. “He’s going to help us or he’ll be removed.”

He frowned and put his hands to his head. “He is talking to me.”

I nodded. “They do that.”

He pushed to his feet, took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Where are we at?”

There he was, the man who gave me every reason to trust him. Back to business, not questioning how he’d managed to acquire a demon. We’d reacquaint ourselves with each other later, when the world wasn’t coming apart at the seams, and I’d have to beg forgiveness for the demon part. I kept him moving back to the helicopters, because I knew that no matter what I’d said about leaving a sign behind for Gardreel, he was actively hunting us now. And if we stayed too long in one spot, we were good and royally fucked.

I would face him. But not yet. Not yet.

“We are sending the others west to a place that Gardreel won’t know about.”

Eligor was behind us, and I could damn well feel him there. He’d taken Cowboy’s body somehow, I didn’t understand it, but it didn’t matter. We couldn’t take him with us any more than we could have taken the other handler. They were fucking tracers straight to Gardreel.

I spun, pulling Dinah as I turned so that she was pressed right into the center of

Cowboy's head.

"Did you kill him and take his body?" I asked.

Killian stood at my back, a hand on my shoulder.

Eligor's eyes went to him and the hardening in them told me a story all on its own. He hated Ipos too.

"No, of course not. He was dying, I saved him," Eligor said. So strange to hear Cowboy's voice with Eligor's inflections, with the softness to him that Cowboy did not have.

"You saved him. And Gardreel, he can find you?"

His hands shot up and if he'd been anyone else, he'd be dead. But he waved them side to side in denial. "No, no, you don't understand. I could only take over the body because it was on the brink of death, there was no other way . . . I couldn't do it otherwise on my own. And I could heal him, it's one of my gifts."

Something in his words was teasing a thought out of the back of my head, but I pushed it away for the moment. "You didn't answer me about your boss." I moved Dinah back to the center of his head.

He swallowed hard. "He can't. That was the other reason. I was . . . in between. I could feel Gardreel calling to me and I had a choice . . . I chose to come to you, Phoenix. To help you. To help stop Gardreel."

His eyes shot to Killian again and there was that same hardening. I'd known that Cowboy had a bit of a crush on me—I didn't care about that. But what Eligor had going on was something much deeper, at least on his side. He'd been in my head for

over a year, and he thought he knew me. He believed the mask I'd shown him.

I lowered Dinah. "I don't trust your motives. Nor do I trust you. Which means I can't let you out of my sight."

His jaw dropped open. I doubt he ever thought I would say such a thing to him.

Killian's hand squeezed my shoulder gently. "Are we not going with the others then?"

The others. I turned and looked over my shoulder at the two helicopters.

Being that it was the middle of the fucking night, and no one in Williamsport had taken any note of us, it wasn't long before the two helicopters were fueled up.

Mario stood off to the side, far enough away, smoking a cigar.

I went to stand next to him.

"What is he giving you, for handing over all these abnormals?"

Mario laughed. "You think I'm handing them over? Take your blinders off, Phoenix."

I looked at him and stared hard. Killian came to stand next to me and I found myself wondering what he saw in Mario.

"You remember him?" I asked.

"Little guy on the block." Killian nodded. "But he's survived when no one else managed to. Interesting."

He came to the realization that Mario was on Gardreel's payroll faster than I had.
"Yeah, my feeling too."

Mario shook his head as he took another drag on his cigar. "You know what? Go ahead, kill me. See how far you get. My people won't follow you. And right now, you have a man on the inside. Me."

"I don't see you denying that you're working for him," Killian said.

Mario closed his eyes as he blew smoke into the air. "I am a very good liar. Gardreel knows I have pull, and he's banking on me handing over the stronger abnormals. I suggested putting the Magelore out front, to keep him close. I suggested saving Killian so you would come to me. I am doing whatever the fuck I can to keep the abnormals safe." He opened his eyes and pinned me with a stare. "That includes you. Our one chance."

The bitterness in his voice was heavy, thick.

"You want to switch spots?" I offered.

His shoulders tensed. "No. I'm not strong enough."

"Then tell your friend that you're headed west. That I'm with you, and that you aren't sure where I want to go," I said.

Mario held his cigar, watching me closely. "And?"

"Head to the Grand Canyon. At the river's juncture there is a place, you'll feel the pull of it, I'm sure."

He eyed me up. "How do you know?"

I didn't trust him, which meant he would have to figure that part out. Our grandmother thought I should give him a chance, which was stupid but . . . "Go. I'll take my team and we'll head in another direction. You tell Gardreel I'm still with you. Keep his eyes on you as long as you can."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at me through the smoke of his cigar. "You can't stop him. I tried. The spell is . . . it's wrapped up in our mother's mind. He tried to have me pull it out of her, I couldn't do it."

My heartbeat smoothed out. "You know where she is?"

He shook his head. "He brought her to me, then took her away."

Truth. He wasn't lying.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Eyes and ears." He crushed the end of his cigar on the sole of his boot and then tossed it. "That will work, they will know I was here."

Subtle.

"Are you going to hand them all over?" Killian asked.

Mario sighed. "Not if I can avoid it. But like you, I survive no matter what. Even if it means leaving someone behind." He winked at Killian as if they shared a secret. Killian frowned hard at my brother, and I walked away from them both.

Dinah sniffed and spoke low. "Check my barrel, the crack is aching." She sighed. "Also, men are asses. I don't like them."

I pulled her clear and checked the chip that had been taken out of her. “It’s not bad. You aren’t going to blow apart. But I’ll get it fixed as soon as we can.”

She grunted as I slid her back in her holster. “We going to where I think we’re going? To pin down the one we’re looking for?”

The one we were looking for—aka my mom.

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

I had it in my mind that a single pit stop would help us pin down which facility my mother was stuck in. One stop, one bargaining chip. If the cranky bitch would bargain with me. She was known for not wanting to help anyone over a certain age.

“What if you don’t stop them?” Mario called, pulling my attention back to him. “What then?”

I looked him over, really looking at him. He wasn’t as strong as me, hell, he wasn’t as strong as Bear. “Find my son. Help him finish the job.” I could have told him that Carlos’s wife had Bear hidden, but I didn’t. Because I didn’t want him looking before I was dead.

Fuck, I hated that I was handing this over to Bear if I died.

Killian caught up to me.

“I hate this shit,” I muttered. “Feelings and emotions just get in the way of the job.”

Killian slid an arm around me. “But they make you stronger too. You’ve never fought this way before Bear. And you’re right. If you die, Bear has it in him too.”

Mario didn't have it in him to do what had to be done. And I knew my son's heart. It was stronger than mine when it came to getting shit done.

As if thinking about him brought him closer, there was a moment where I felt him beside me, leaning his head against my shoulder. I stopped and just absorbed the moment.

Mario coughed and when I turned to him, he was looking at where I'd felt Bear. He gave me a slow nod. "He's a good one."

I nodded back, not really understanding how I could feel Bear, how Mario could see something of him. Familial connection again? "You'll know if I don't make it."

The brother I'd never known, the brother I didn't trust, narrowed his eyes. "Don't die, Nix. I'd rather like to get to know my sister. See if she's worth getting to know."

He turned his back on me and I just stared at the broad span of his shoulders, at the way he motioned for everyone to follow him. Mario had an easy grace to him with the other abnormals. He would do good if we could clean this fallen shit up.

Of course, that would be if he wasn't about to fuck us all over.

"And if you don't turn out to be a total asshole, I would like to get to know you," I said. A quick intake of breath, and I was refocusing on the task at hand.

Motioning for Pete, Carlos, Easter and Cowboy to follow me and Killian, I walked away from the tarmac. The first thing we needed was a vehicle. Just one that would carry all of us. Ruby loped along ahead of us, nose in the air. Someone had taken her flak jacket off.

A cry erupted from the helicopters, and we all spun. The blond woman who'd

hovered over Killian stood watching us go.

“You need to handle that,” I said.

Killian shook his head. “Nothing to handle. She thought there was something for her with me, and there never was.” He turned away without so much as a nod in her direction. My guts clenched.

“Seems like you’re getting good at walking away from women,” I said.

Dinah sucked in a sharp breath. Easter, Pete and Carlos backed up. Eligor was oblivious.

Killian stopped in his tracks. “Right now?”

I nodded. “Right now. Yeah. Right now.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

I stared at the man I loved more than any other, the man I'd wondered for the last year if he'd left me for dead on purpose. The sound of the helicopters behind us, the danger ahead, and yet I knew we needed to have this settled. "You didn't even check my heartbeat. I was strapped to a table, gagged and barely stitched up from giving birth, and you didn't even check. You walked the fuck away."

His jaw ticked. "You think I just gave up on you?"

"I think that you need to explain what the fuck happened," I said. "How did they fool you?" The anger was still there. I could tell myself over and over that he'd done what he'd done to keep Bear and our daughter safe.

"They were threatening our daughter," he said, his voice low. "I knew that if you were alive, you'd find a way back to us." His eyes darkened, but he never looked away from me. "I looked for you, I pulled every string I had, and you were just gone. As if you'd never existed. I started looking for Easter then, hoping she could help me. But she was gone. It was as if you'd both been erased." He drew in a deep breath. "After that I took the babes, and I ran for safety. Once it became clear we were being snatched up, I knew that there were very few safe places. We were headed to Moscow when I got tagged. I got Bear and Angel on the plane and that . . . that's all I remember."

Moscow. I almost didn't want to know. "With the Russian mob."

He bobbed his head. "That was the plan. They knew we were coming. I had someone waiting for us on the other side."

“And the blonde?” Dinah asked. “What the fuck is it with her?”

It still amazed me that Dinah had such good sight for a gun.

Killian sighed. “She was the bait. I fell for it.”

Dinah let out a crowing laugh. “You mean you got caught with your pants down? What did I tell you? Men suck.”

My heart did a very hard turn in my chest, as if it could get away from this truth. But Killian was already shaking his head.

“She said she had info about Phoenix,” he spoke to Dinah. “I sent the kids ahead. Got them on the plane and I was to meet the blonde at the terminal.” He frowned. “They hit the terminal with angel dust.”

My body chilled all over. “Then she’s a plant?”

“I figured Mario knew,” he said.

Easter spun and was running back toward the slowly rising helicopters. She motioned at one of them, I don’t know what she said, but she pulled Diego from her back and then she was shooting. A body fell from the helicopter and smacked face-first on the tarmac.

Easter turned away, making a wind-it-up motion with her hands.

“There,” she said as she rejoined us. “That will give them a better chance.”

Killian stared hard at me. “Anything else?”

I didn't care if he was pissed. He'd have questioned me if the roles had been reversed. As it was, I was going to have to answer for making him consent to having a demon inside of him.

Our group left the airstrip, and I took the lead as I searched for a vehicle that would fit all of us.

Killian kept up to me easily, quiet for a minute. "Lass, what did you do to me? I feel like . . . like I was never sick."

I glanced over at him, tried not to feel stupidly relieved that he was not only alive, but upright and walking with me, and still calling me lass. "I burned the sickness out of you."

I could still feel the sensation of something in him fighting me. Fighting the fire that I shoved into his veins. Fighting to keep its hold on him. I'd love to say it was Ipos, but it didn't feel demonic.

"Burned what though? They hit me with that angel dust shit," he growled. "Everyone else fell asleep, but I got sick." He frowned and rubbed at his head. "I almost managed to get out of the terminal."

I thought about Cowboy. He'd gotten sick too when he'd touched the building covered in angel dust.

Directly behind me Eligor gasped. I turned and motioned for him to catch up to me which he did in a hurry.

"Want to explain why that discussion made you suck wind?" Though I could guess. It didn't take a genius to figure he knew the reason why Killian and Cowboy were affected so differently than the other abnormals.

“It means he’s part demon, and he likely had a handler in his head already, you burned the handler out of him,” Eligor said, his voice harder than I’d ever heard it. “The angel dust kills anyone who has more than a quarter demon in them. It’s why this body was dying. Why I could save him. Because like you, I could take the angel dust away.”

Killian stiffened, probably noticeable only to me, but I just shrugged. “Explains why you’re such a monster in the sack.” And I slapped his ass for good measure. Dinah crowed and I turned my back on Eligor.

There was a shuffle, a feeling of movement, and I spun in a crouch as Eligor jumped not at me, but at Killian.

But if he thought Killian would go down easy after all he’d been through, well . . . that was for him to find out. Especially after the incident earlier. It seemed that Ipos wasn’t all that fond of Eligor either.

I stood and stepped back to give them room.

Killian caught Eligor’s outstretched hands just at the wrist and yanked him down so Eligor’s face connected with Killian’s knee as he snapped it upward. Blood flew and Eligor dropped to the ground, not even catching himself. He might be in a young strong body, but he was no fighter. Cowboy—if he’d been in charge—probably would have lasted longer. Killian stepped back. “You want to try again, lad?”

“Yikes,” Pete said and gave a low whistle. “Don’t be taking him on, kid. He didn’t survive this long by being easy to take down.”

“Not the kid,” I said. “Eligor took his body and hijacked it.”

I frowned, thinking. Maybe I could burn Eligor out? The way I’d burned out the

handler in Killian?

“What the fuck?” Pete stumbled away, as if getting body snatched was contagious.

I crouched next to Eligor’s head. “You going to behave? Or am I going to burn you the fuck out of the kid’s body right now?”

He lifted his head and looked at me. “You shouldn’t be with a demon.”

I reached out and grabbed his face, dragging him closer to me. “Did it ever occur to you that I’m a demon too?”

I don’t think I could have shocked Eligor more if I’d reached down and grabbed him by the balls.

He blinked up at me. “I’ve seen your blood reports, there is no demon blood in you.”

I laughed; I couldn’t help it. “Maybe it’s a choice, Eligor.” His face went slack, and I stood up. “Choose. You’re either with us, and I trust you, or I kill you now right here.”

His lip trembled. “How do you know you can trust me?”

Without any effort I reached through that bond that tied us together and dug my way into his head. I flipped through his thoughts and quickly realized the problem. Fuck. Like . . . the last thing I needed was a lovestruck fallen who had no idea that he was in love with me.

“You can come.”

Killian raised his brows at me but didn’t question me as I strode away from Eligor.

His eye color changed to a steady angel blue. “He’s weak-willed at best.”

“I’m aware.” I frowned. “But we might need him.”

“Not with me here, in your boy-o.” He winked and I wanted to grab him and choke the life out of him.

Maybe he saw the intent in my face because he faded, and Killian’s green eyes were back. “That demon . . . he can take over?”

“Looks like it,” I said.

Easter moved up to my other side. “Good idea on the fallen coming along?”

“It’s fine,” I said under my breath. “He . . . he’s broken. There’s no other word for it.”

She grunted. “Ain’t we all, baby.”

I snorted and we picked up the pace. Carlos hung back a little, staying close to Eligor. Pete ranged off to one side just ahead of us, like he was scenting the air. Ruby mimicked him on the other side, giving him a look now and again.

Thirty minutes of walking and we’d reached a mall parking lot. The bright blue and white sign spluttered and danced in the early morning shadows.

“Let’s find something.” I made a motion with my hand. “Eligor, you go with Carlos. Pete, with Easter.”

We split up into pairs, and Ruby tucked herself up to my empty side. I let my hand touch Killian’s here and there. A subtle touch. We didn’t have time for the theatrics of clinging to one another, of drinking each other down, of make-up sex. But I was

here. He was here. That was good enough.

“I am sorry, lass,” he said softly. “If I’d known, I wouldn’t have—”

“You saved her,” I said, winding my pinky finger with his. “You did the right thing.”

“Doesn’t mean she can’t still be pissed,” Dinah mumbled. Killian reached across and put his hand on her.

“I know her, Dinah. I knew that if she were alive, she’d hunt me down maybe just to kill me.” He flashed me a grin that sent a flutter to my heart. Irish fucker knew me far too well. “We good?”

I tightened my hold on his finger, just a pulse, and then slid away from him. “Yeah. We’re good.”

Back to business.

We needed a ride.

A white van on my left sat under a light that had been broken out, leaving it in a patch of shadows. I tried the handle. Open.

“I got it,” I called out. I slid into the driver’s seat and Killian pushed me across.

“I think I can jump start it.” He chuckled and snapped his fingers. Electricity crackled across his hand, and he directed it into the engine via the ignition.

I slid into the passenger seat and Ruby leapt across to settle at my feet. I took note that Easter placed herself behind Killian. Good choice. Eligor tucked in behind me. Pete and Carlos climbed into the far back.

“Smells like puke,” Pete grumbled. “This is a fucking mom wagon. If we have to make a run for it, we’re going to get mowed down.”

“It’ll be less conspicuous than something bigger and nicer,” I said. “If we get an opportunity, we’ll pick up different wheels along the way.”

Killian pulled out of the parking lot. “Where are we headed, beautiful?”

I blinked, forgetting what it was like to have a pet name, or to not want to kill the person who used one. “North Dakota. There’s a Tracker that set up shop there a few years ago. She could give us the right direction to the facility. If I can convince her.”

Easter groaned. “God. She’s grumpy as fuck though, I met her once. You think she’ll help?”

My turn to grimace. “She’s our best shot. Once we know which facility we’re hitting . . .” I slowly turned and looked at Eligor. “Unless you know?”

He blinked up at me, his nose still dribbling a bit of blood, his eyes blackening up already. “Know what?”

“Which facility they have my mother’s body in?” I said.

He cleared his throat. “I thought your mother was dead? That’s what was in your head.”

“Technically, yes,” I said. “Her body was kept alive. Gardreel needs the spell from her or the Magelore he has bound up. So where is the ascendant that he has already?” I wondered at that. Magelores were all about survival. Given the right parameters, Pete would toss us to the wolves if it meant he knew he’d make it out of a situation alive.

That being said, he'd proven himself.

"I don't know," Eligor said. "I was kept at the Clearview facility. And as soon as I knew you were coming in, you were my only priority, as Easter was Susan's."

Easter stiffened. "I'd kill her again if I could."

Eligor looked over at her and in my head, I was thinking 'don't say it, don't you fucking say it.'

"She was only trying to do right by you, she didn't know," he said softly. "Gardreel had us all believing we were helping you . . . not that it matters now."

"That's what abusers say," I said. "I didn't know. I was trying to help you, not hurt you. It's fucking bullshit to keep the truth from yourself. Just so you can sleep at night."

He blanched and swallowed hard.

"The Magelore was in the more eastern facility," Eligor said. "I only know that because she was snagged after she'd been hurt badly. Because of her injuries she was easy to capture. But she's also proven more stubborn than anyone. It's like she sees right through us. She knows that when we offer her freedom, that it's not true."

Oh fuck.

"She." I said the single word, hoping I was wrong. "And she was hurt badly?"

"Brink of death," Eligor said. "Gardreel himself found her; he'd been tracking you."

Killian began to laugh. "It's not funny, lass, I know but . . . it is rather amusing. It has

to be her.”

Fuck me. If that was the only other person with the spell Gardreel wanted, we were well and truly screwed up shit creek with no paddles.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

“Vivian,” I said to Eligor. “That’s her name? The Magelore that’s in one of the facilities?”

His swelling eyes went wide. “You know her? How?”

I leaned my head back in the seat and closed my eyes, Ruby curled up at my feet. “I’m the reason she was captured. I thought I’d killed her, though. She’d never talk to me even if we had no other option.”

Vivian had worked for my father, had worked with Mancini. I had a sudden niggling thought that maybe Mancini and the demons had been keeping the fallen at bay. What if . . . by killing them, I’d opened the gates for Gardreel?

“Fuck,” I whispered. I didn’t even want to voice it out loud, the idea was too damn messed up to let it take root.

The others grew quiet, and Killian kept a steady pace on the highway until we were nearly out of fuel. We pulled over and everyone piled out at a shitty little gas station in the middle of nowhere. I hadn’t even been paying attention to the area, so caught up in my own existential crisis that I was.

That maybe, just maybe I’d been the reason that the fallen were now out in the open.

Eligor stayed in the vehicle, which was fine by me. I strode toward the gas station and pulled Dinah. “No killing. We just want money and food.”

“Spoil sport.”

A similar conversation rolled between Easter and Diego. Only he laughed and she laughed right back. They were a good match. It felt right.

Even so, I could feel my other hand itching for a second gun.

“You need a backup with me?” Dinah seemed to read my thoughts as we stepped through the glass door, the little bell dingding, announcing our arrival.

“I like to be prepared,” I said as I lifted her up and pointed at the clerk. He was in his later years, salt and pepper hair, unshaven, and blurry-eyed. “Cash. Now.”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing until they looked as though he were sleeping sitting up. In a sloppy move he yanked a shotgun up from under the counter. I squeezed the trigger, putting a hole directly between his eyes. He flopped backward and I strode around the side.

“I thought you said no killing!” Dinah barked and then laughed. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“He started it.” I pulled out the cash tray and took all the bills. A few hundred dollars, not much. But it wasn’t really about the money. I lifted Dinah and shot out two of the cameras. Easter took out the third at the back of the store.

She and Pete gathered up a bunch of food—and I use that term loosely. Potato chips and chocolate bars were barely substantial meals for a car full of adults.

As I stepped out of the gas station, the TV sitting on the counter blared to life.

“Looking at the forecast, you’re going to want to set some time aside three nights from now. Just after dark on the fifteenth, we’re going to have an amazing meteor shower. Best seen out of New Orleans, ‘the night of the bleeding stars’ as some of the

locals call it, is sure to be a real show.”

The voice clicked off along with the TV.

“Subtle.” I muttered.

Dinah sniffed. “Wait. Three days? Do we suddenly have a time limit?”

“Looks like it.” I pushed out the door, the bell jingling over my head.

I paused at the vehicle parked to the side of the station. An old Bronco, top heavy, and likely to tip over if you hit a corner too hard. Jacked up so it would be even more likely to roll. I went over to it and opened the door. The keys dangled from the ignition. I slid in and turned the key. The engine rolled over, purring like a damn kitten.

I pulled it around the front. “We’re going to caravan.”

Ruby hopped right in with me. Easter took the driver’s seat in the mom wagon, and Eligor looked torn. I shook my head. “Fine, come with me. Carlos, you ride with Easter. Pete, you come with me and Killian too.”

In under five minutes, we were on the road again.

“Let me drive, lass. You need to sleep if you can.” Killian motioned at me to move over.

“So sweet,” Pete laughed, and then held up his hands when I twisted around to look at him. “It’s just unexpected, Nix. One thing to hear you two shackled up, another to see that it’s real and not some game to gain power.”

Dinah sniffed, but I didn't even bother to give Pete a response.

"We've got a couple days to get there," Killian said, also ignoring Pete. "You think we can stay ahead of this Gardreel?"

I handed him a bottle of water and nodded. "We have to." I paused and reached a hand over for him. "There is no other option."

He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. I could feel Eligor in the back of my head, even though they were in the car behind us. Irritated, angry and so very confused about the emotions.

I leaned back, hanging onto Killian in a way I chose not to think about. The time in the facility . . . had broken something in me. Ruby set her big head on my thigh and let out a snuffling sigh. Pete and Killian were silent, and I let sleep take me over. For the first time in I didn't know how long, I was safe.

Or at least as safe as I was going to be.

I didn't dive into the fog of my mind, the river, I didn't go looking for Bear no matter that I wanted desperately to see him, to check in with him. I knew that if something happened, he'd reach for me.

Instead, I let myself sink deep into a healing sleep that my body and my mind craved like a drowning man craves air. I took it.

Somewhere around the three-hour mark, my sleep was interrupted by a whisper that rolled up from the backseat.

"Pete." I said only his name and felt his attention shift to me. I closed my eyes and sunk into that space of in-between. There was a tension that Pete was giving off, and

with the bite between us . . . I blinked and stood, fully clothed on the edge of the raging river.

The fog rolled up around us and Pete stood across from me.

“Something is happening,” Pete said, his body tense like a deer knowing it was spotted by the hunter. “There is a connection between Magelores. I’m not supposed to ever say anything, but I think this warrants it. Gardreel is with Vivian, I’m sure of it.”

I stared hard at him. “Will she break?”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Maybe? And . . . I can take us to her.”

Fuck, of course he could.

“I wouldn’t save her,” I said.

“I know.” He nodded. “The facility is close, like thirty minutes east. She said it’s full of kids. Abnormal children. They were all put there, together. Away from their parents.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Did we go? That was the question.

I didn’t open my eyes. Instead, I reached through the connection I had to Easter. I felt her startle, but she stayed driving. My decision was already made. I spoke out loud. “We have a detour. Let’s call it a practice run. Vivian is going to break. We have to kill her before she does, and while we’re there, we might be doing some rescuing.” Might. As if I could leave kids with Gardreel. Kids like Bear. Fucking right I was going to get them out.

Easter shivered and when she spoke, I heard her as clearly as if she was in the vehicle with me. “Into a facility.”

“Yes.” There was nothing else to say. We had our weapons; we had our team. But we had something Gardreel didn’t know about. Two somethings. Ipos if he could be useful.

More than him though . . . I turned around and looked at Eligor.

“Eligor. We’re going to need you to do this.”

“I don’t have any say in what happens there—”

“I need you to give Cowboy control of his body. We need his ability if we’re going to take the facility. And then I need you to work with him to help us get through.” I reached back and wrapped my hand around his neck, feeling him swallow. “Do it. Give him control.”

“I . . . Okay.” He bowed his head and a split second later his entire body stiffened and flailed. Cowboy’s eyes were wild, as they locked on mine. “Jesus! Jesus H. Christ! That motherfucker has control of me, you have to stop him! Jesus. Stop him!”

I tightened my hold on his neck, keeping his attention on me. “Cowboy. You need to trust me. You did once, I need you to do it again.” Once more I couldn’t say what I wanted to, not without Eligor figuring out that I would help Cowboy regain his body at some point. But I had a feeling we’d need the fallen one throughout our trips in the facilities. Plural. Fuck me, I didn’t want to go into one, never mind two.

Between Eligor and Ipos, I was hoping we’d have the upper hand.

Cowboy blinked a few times, his hands clinging to my arms, and I chose to ignore the

tears trickling down his cheeks. I knew what it was to have your handler take control of your body. It wasn't pretty and it didn't leave you feeling like smiling. "Okay." His voice was scratchy, and his Adam's apple bobbed under my hand.

I let him go. "You're going to knock out the power, then you'll stay outside with Carlos. Pete, you'll lead us to Vivian. Easter, me and Killian will take point. Pete, which direction?"

They all nodded. No one argued. Pete spit out the general direction. "Take your next right, she's east," and Killian did his best to follow with the roads at hand. It was nearing noon, on a summer day. Bright sunlight, without even a distraction to help us out.

We weren't exactly going in under the cover of darkness. It might be our salvation, because no one would think we'd be so fucking stupid as to show up in the middle of the damn day.

"Cowboy, ask Eligor if Gardreel would expect a daytime hit." I deliberately didn't ask Eligor. I didn't want him back and running the show if I could help it. I wanted him buried and useful, not in charge.

The kid cleared his throat and grabbed the back of my seat. "I don't want to talk to him. I don't like how he feels in my head."

I could have killed him right then and not felt bad, except that we needed him. I didn't even bother to turn around and look at him. Again, it was best that I didn't. As it was, my hand inched across to Dinah's holster. "Don't bitch at me or Easter about having some asshole in your head. Ever. Now ask him."

Unfortunately for him, he couldn't seem to stop himself. "No, you don't understand—"

I climbed over the seat and was on him. I wrapped my hands around his neck and pressed down. He barely tried to fight back. I stared straight down at him as my body shook with a killing rage. “Don’t ever tell me I don’t understand what it is to have Eligor in your head, asshole.”

Cowboy stared up at me. The look shifted and then it wasn’t him anymore.

I took a breath to blow the worst of the anger away, and then forced myself to turn and get back into my seat.

Eligor cleared his throat. Funny, I could feel him rise back to the surface of Cowboy’s body.

“Gardreel would not expect it,” he said quietly. “He prefers to work at night. The number of guards and handlers will be lower too. The facility with children in it is not as tightly guarded.”

I looked at Killian. “Ipos, you got anything to add to this?”

Killian stiffened and then blue eyes glanced over at me. “What could I have to add about a facility that the fallen have created?” The sparkling light in his eyes said it all. “I am just being well behaved so you don’t choke the shit out of my body, too.”

He was being very well behaved, which made me wonder just what the fuck he was up to. “Killian.” Just his name and he was back.

“Don’t like that one much,” he rumbled, “but he is quiet at least.”

That was the difference between Cowboy and Killian. One could control his fear, the other couldn’t.

Eligor shrunk down. “Perhaps it is best if I stay in charge.”

My jaw ticked and Eligor raised his eyes to mine. “Unless you want the boy back.”

I did and I didn’t. “Think you can trigger his power when I ask you to?”

Eligor shivered, or maybe it was Cowboy shivering when he realized he’d been cast out in favor of someone who would fucking well listen to me.

“I . . . I will make it happen,” Eligor whispered, his words thick with fear.

I twisted back around in my seat and closed my eyes. And this time I sought out the river and the quiet calm. Because if I could find one Magelore there, I could find the other.

Vivian. It had to be fucking Vivian.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

The quiet of the abyss in my mind sucked me down in a rapid pull. I dove through the turbulent waters of my rage and went deeper yet. Thinking about Vivian, the Magelore I'd fought and thought I'd killed. That was enough to make the rage swirl hotter. But behind that rage was something else, the sense of a touch I knew all too well.

Fucking Eligor, just couldn't keep himself in one damn body. What would make him follow me deeper? Because it looked like it was time to finally deal with him.

Emotions had always been something he'd clung to, particularly the softer ones.

I let my heart open a little, feeling the pain of losing Bear, of being separated from my children. And while that pain flowed, I focused on what was in my mind.

I had a plan, though I wasn't sure that Vivian would want to play the game. I needed as many abnormals, as strong as I could get them to fight once the time came.

Because already I could see that we were being pushed toward the night of the bleeding stars. Whatever was going to happen, would happen then. Three days. Fuck.

If we got her out, if we cleared out the facility and I could convince her to stand with us . . . I stopped my deep dive into that place of limbo and really thought about what I was doing.

"She's not going to work with you, fool," I whispered to myself and rubbed a hand over my face. "She'd as soon kill you as work with you!" That last was a shout into the void.

Hope.

Fear.

Desperation.

The emotions sunk into me, pushed into me by an outside touch.

Eligor had followed. The push from something inside my head—something that was trying very hard not to be seen or felt. I went still, letting the fingers inside my mind soften before I grabbed them and yanked them through into the ether with me, dragging what was connected to them.

Eligor tumbled out of nowhere, in what I assumed was his original form. Big sweeping white wings, blond hair, chiseled jaw and baby blues. He was model gorgeous, and yet he shrunk away from me like a child afraid to be beaten. Though in this case, he was more likely to be killed rather than just beaten.

“I didn’t mean for you to feel any of that.” He held up both hands and I stared hard at him, not saying a word. “Phoenix, I do want to help, you were in pain and I’m trying to in the only way I know.” I kept staring and he kept on digging his early grave. “I thought that if you would feel some fear for your own life, that maybe you wouldn’t put yourself in so much danger.”

I held up a single finger and he tracked it with his eyes, not so much as moving his body an inch. “Eligor.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t need you to survive all of this. I could burn you out of Cowboy’s body and send you back to Gardreel to suffer at his hands.” I held up a second finger. “I could

burn you away into nothing. Ending your miserable fucking existence.” I held up a third finger. “Or I could give you and Cowboy to Gardreel as a nice little present. I really don’t give a single shit about you, Eligor.”

Which begged the question why didn’t I just burn him right out? Because something inside me said he was a tool, a useful tool, and I didn’t throw weapons away unless they were broken.

“But you care about this boy whose body I share now,” he whispered. “You don’t know him; you don’t know the filth he thinks about.”

I didn’t so much as blink. “Eligor. The world is about to be cleansed by Gardreel if we don’t stop him. My son and daughter are in this world and so I will fight for it with all I have. And I will damn well mow down anyone who gets in my way or tries to slow me from doing my job! I don’t give a shit if that boy thinks only about fucking me up the ass in front of a cheering audience as long as he does his job!”

He blinked up at me. “Then why are you going to save Vivian?”

“I’m not,” I said, deadly quiet. “I’ll go in there and kill her. She won’t side with us.”

He blanched. “But you said that you were going to need her? And then you were afraid for your children! That’s what your thoughts were putting out to me! That you needed her more than anything to help save them, and I couldn’t understand why . . .”

“And look what happened.” I gave him a slow smile. “I put bait in the water and the fish bit down hard, hooking himself.”

His jaw flapped open, just like said fish. “I . . . you knew I’d . . .”

I reached over and pulled him so that we were touching noses. “My grandmother

hunted the fallen, Eligor. You know her?"

He bobbed his head. "Yes."

"Then understand that killing you is in my blood, and sensing when you're up to something makes my skin itch. And fearing me is in yours. I suggest that you remember that the next time you try to fuck with me. The next time you try to push me in a direction as you see fit."

I held him a little tighter and called up the fire that was in my blood, pushing it down my arm and into him. "I think it's time you went back to Gardreel."

"I can help you," he whispered. "I can still help you. Please."

"I have a demon to help me." I locked eyes with him.

"I . . . I can help you at the facility. Please." He was on his knees, begging, tears streaking his face.

If he could actually help, it would be worth keeping him around. My guts tightened with the thought of going into a facility again. Willingly.

"Last chance." I said. "Last fucking chance."

He blinked up at me. "Thank you."

"Whine at me again and I'll give you an up close introduction to Dinah," I said and shoved him away from me.

Bullshit dealt with, I calmed my breathing and imagined Vivian as I'd last seen her. Though if she'd been tortured, I doubted that she'd look the same now.

It took all of ten seconds.

A rasping laugh behind me put every hair I had standing on end. Pete was a Magelore. But he was not a Magelore the way that Vivian was. Like the difference between a common housecat and a tiger. Both had claws and sharp teeth. Both could kill, but on vastly different scales.

“Vivian.” I spoke her name as I turned.

Here, she looked as I remembered. Beautiful, dangerous, and ready to kill just for the sake of the thrill. Her smile showed off brilliant white teeth, all sharper than a box full of needles. “Ah, Phoenix. How am I not surprised to find you still alive when I am stuffed into this . . . place?” She waved a hand and for a moment her image wavered, showing me a body stuffed literally into a small square box. There was just skin, a bit of hair. No visible limbs. Streaks of blood. The box was too small for a body, and yet there she was.

I raised a brow as she sighed and flipped her long red skirt, hiding the truth of what was happening to her right then. “They’re going to break you.”

“Pete, yes? I contacted him, believing he was connected to you now.” She rolled her eyes. “I’d heard you had a Magelore working with you. There were not many that would see you as a friend. Most of us would have killed you. Pete was always soft.”

My blood cooled. “You told him they were going to break you?”

Her smile was ruined only by the flick of her tongue. Nerves. “They will try. I won’t give them the spell they want.”

I had to ask. “Why not? It would mean the end of your suffering and you could kill a fuck ton of people if you did it.”

“Because I will not let the filthy asshole win!” she screamed. Her rage reverberated around me, shaking the quiet of this place. “I will not give him the satisfaction! It’s mine!”

And there it was, the truth. It was her spell, and she would not give it up. Even if she herself couldn’t use it. Magelores were . . . strange. Hoarding things that they believed were their own in a way that other abnormals did not. They were the dragons of our world.

“Then why—”

“Because as I’m sure you already know, I need to die,” she said. “And you could do it. Burn me up with your flames, Phoenix. Burn the entire facility if you must. It is better for all those within it to die, than to continue to be consumed by this madness. To be told that they are nothing but human.”

“They are children,” I said, my voice cold even to my own ears. “You want me to burn them up?”

She spit to the side, her lips curled. “Those children, who would care for them if you got them out? They have been told that they are not the monsters they know themselves to be. Kill me and kill them. It will be a mercy and seeing as it is what you were designed to do, I would think it would not matter much to you either way.”

That she was pleading with me for death . . . an abnormal that I’d have killed a hundred times over without blinking, had me hesitating. Not that I couldn’t do it. The kids were another thing.

“I don’t have that much fire.” I held a hand up, stopping her as her mouth dropped open. “But I will kill you. And if I must, I will kill the others if I cannot get them out.”

My gut knotted but I didn't move. Bear would be better off dead than in Gardreel's hands. I knew that. And I knew that it was true of these kids too.

She snorted. "The fire is inside of you, fool. Whatever blocks they put on you, whatever you think you can't do, you're wrong. You are the one. You are the Phoenix." She didn't move and yet she was right there in front of me, the way I'd pulled Eligor to me. Her breath fluttered my hair as she whispered into my ear. "You will be the one to stop them. And they know it. I hear it in their nightmares, you scare them the way you used to scare the abnormals. And now the abnormals whisper in their dreams that you will be our hero."

Her laughter was soft, seductive. The laugh that had pulled so many to their graves.

Something warm trickled down my cheek. Not my own tear, but hers. I stared up at her, keeping my own feelings in check. Watching her with detachment.

She laughed as the tears fell. "The monster has become the hero! Ah, the irony is not lost on me, Phoenix. Not a drop of it goes to waste as I feel my body being crushed moment by moment. You, YOU will be our hero." She rolled her eyes, like a shark before it bit down, as the laughter took her again, bending her at the waist.

This was more like the Vivian I knew. I waited her out. There was no time in this place. Not really.

Time ticked, her laughter faded into gasping gulps of air and finally, Vivian sighed and stood upright. She brushed a hand through her hair. "Your father was so very wrong about you, and yet . . . you are who you are because of him. Because of the beast he became. Let your flames burn, Phoenix. Stop damping them down. In a way you are like a young Magelore, unaware of the depth of your abilities."

"I'm not damping anything down—"

“If you are not, then why are you finding everything you can before you face the demon?”

I stared hard at her. “Do you know the spell I need to stop Gardreel? If you know I have to call up that fucker, then you know I need it.”

She shook her head. “Only one person does. She has two major spells, and I have only one. And you know what you must do to take the information from a mostly dead woman. Someone who can talk to the dead.” Her face twisted up and she hissed, arching her back so far that she reached her heels with her fingertips and then she began to be folded up in front of me, bit by bit until she was crushed into a box.

I blinked and she was gone, and I pulled myself up out of the fog feeling more tired than before. Fuck.

“We’re almost there,” Pete said.

Vivian’s words echoed in my head. Was I running from facing Bazixal? Hell, I had no desire to face down the demon again, to feel the fires of hell licking around my face. Just the thought had me tensing.

Killian noticed. “Lass, what is it?”

“Vivian.” I bit her name out. He nodded.

“We don’t have to go after her.”

But we did. Because if not for her, then for the kids. She might not give up the spell, but damn it, there was a chance he could take it from her forcibly.

And we couldn’t take that gamble that she’d break.

So much for sending Gardreel in the other direction as we pretty much just walked right the fuck into his house.

As the car slowed, I looked out at what we had for cover. There was nothing but trees around us. Trees that made up a rather thin forest. “Pull over, let’s hide the car.”

Was I really going to do this? Was I really going to go into that facility to kill Vivian? Because she’d told me I was to be the abnormals’ hero?

Never in my life had I felt so indecisive about killing someone. Certainly not a Magelore. Certainly not abnormals.

“They are looking for us,” Carlos said suddenly. He’d been quiet all this time, working his ability to keep us Hidden. And the strain showed. Sweat glowed along the edge of his hairline, catching the light. His eyes had bags under them, and his one hand was clutched around a set of wooden rosary beads. “They are . . . using another Hider. I don’t know how, but they are very strong. The closer we get, the harder they are attacking my own Hidings.”

My jaw ticked and I forced myself out of the car. The fresh air and the sound of creatures just living their lives, oblivious to what we were facing, did not help the rage that was slowly growing.

Easter wasn’t going to push me to go into the facility, and neither was Pete, despite what he’d said.

“This is fucking stupid!” I snapped. “She could be lying. There might not be a single kid in there.”

And yet I felt the pull toward the facility now, strong, decisive. It felt as though I were tied to someone in the facility. Probably Vivian herself. I thought about the way

her tear had warmed against my cheek. Had it been a way to tie herself to me?

Dinah had been rather quiet until then. “Then why are you even considering it?”

“Because there is something in there that we will need.” The words burst out of me. “I don’t know what it is, or if it’s a who, but we need them. If we can kill Vivian and stop the spell from getting to Gardreel, that’s a bonus.”

You will need someone who can talk to the dead. Vivian’s words.

He’s looking for a death talker. Lorn’s words.

“A death talker,” I said. “There is a death talker in there.” The certainty crept over me. “That’s why Vivian brought us here. Not for her.”

Pete startled. “You don’t think she wants to be rescued?”

Killian snorted. “You mean put out of her misery?”

The Magelore shrugged. “Whatever. You know that there is a fight coming. Right? We could use her. She’d be strong.”

Easter was already shaking her head. “That’s assuming that she didn’t turn at the last second and attack us behind our own lines.”

There was a moment that I thought Pete would argue, but he just nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

They kept on talking, their words flowing over me. The agitation had me all but bouncing on the soles of my feet. Now that we were this close, the sensation of needing to get in there was a tangible thing across my skin.

Killian let himself out of the car and came to stand near me, leaning against a tree. “I’ll follow you anywhere, lass. You know that. Even into one of those joints.”

I closed my eyes. “I can’t explain it. It feels like. . . like Bear is in there.”

Killian jerked as if I’d punched him in the gut. “Is he?”

“No. No he’s not.” I was mostly sure of it. “But that’s what it feels like.” I rubbed a hand over my face.

Eligor carefully slid out of the car, his body language that of a kicked dog looking for scraps. Ruby jumped out after him, gave him a quick sniff and a snarl and then circled around me. Not exactly keeping Eligor away, but also warning him off with a huff here and there. I looked at her, at the scars etched into her skin, knowing that I had my own share inside and out.

“What if it’s another kid?” Dinah whispered suddenly. “What if you’re feeling someone else you’re related to?”

Her words clicked and I realized that was it. Someone in there was related to me. Maybe even the person that was the death talker. “Fuck.”

“It could be her,” Dinah said, and I knew who she meant. So did Killian. “It could be Emerald.”

Emerald, the daughter that she’d had before her soul had been stuffed into the gun. She’d have been a powerful abnormal because of her father. A creature of death.

Easter was looking around. “I . . . this isn’t far from where I was taken.”

And she’d been on the hunt for Emerald. Her words were all that it took to push me

into action.

“We’re going in.”

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“If there are kids in there, what are we going to do with them?” Carlos asked quietly. “If there are as many as in your facility?”

Which would be just over a hundred. “You’re assuming I can get any of them out.”

Carlos smiled. “I think you’ll find a way to get them all out.” He frowned. “Not far back there was a school, and a bus parked to the side. We could use that.”

A bus. He really thought I was going to get a hundred kids out of the facility. “Sure, we could use that,” I said, but seriously did not mean it. I knew we’d be lucky to get Emerald out. If that was who I was sensing.

“Pete. You take the lead,” I said as we got moving. “Killian, you go on point with him.”

The boys nodded and started off through the forest, a straight line for the facility that we were about to break into. A facility that likely held my niece.

I looked at Easter, and maybe she was holding it together, but the tension on her was there. The flicker around her left eye. The way she held her mouth slightly crooked.

I didn’t ask her if she was willing. She’d either go in or she wouldn’t. I turned to Carlos. He was sweating profusely and barely standing as he leaned heavily against the white van.

“Keep holding it, Carlos. But stay here. Cover the van. They’re looking at you now, not me.”

He crossed himself and let himself back into the van. “I can hold this longer if I lie down.”

I looked at Ruby and she tipped her head, her scarred up ears flipping over. She gave a low woof and started out after Pete and Killian.

Easter and I were next, nearly shoulder to shoulder.

“What about me?” Eligor called after us.

“Protect Carlos. And if you find some balls, get Cowboy to throw an EMP pulse in about fifteen minutes,” I threw over my shoulder. The kid could have been some help, and in theory Eligor could have too. But I didn’t need another person to save where we were going, and I knew it in my gut that was exactly what I’d end up having to do.

As the four of us—five if you counted Ruby—slid through the forest, there was a sensation of being watched that crawled over my skin. “Eyes on us,” I said. “Pick up the pace.”

Dinah shivered in her holster. “I wish Eleanor was here.”

I put a hand on her as I jogged under the wild canopy. I wished the same thing.

Diego was quiet on Easter’s back, and I realized that the guns were both quieter than usual. I didn’t have much time to think about it, not when I was focusing on what was coming.

“There’s no way we can break in a back door,” Pete said. “I think we’re coming in on the flank.”

I frowned up at him. “How are you—?”

“Vivian’s feeding me information about the layout. There’s a small ventilation shaft that we could use, it runs out into the forest. Might be tough for the dog, and it’s a long crawl, but we can use it.” Pete looked over his shoulder at me and I could see the worry in him.

“We’d be stuck if they found us,” Easter said. “Trapped.”

“Sitting ducks,” he confirmed. “It’s long. Quarter mile of crawling. Drops into a maintenance room in the first basement.”

First basement. Which meant it went deep, just like the one I’d broken us out of. My jaw ticked. There was no going back now. I was committed. “Then we’d better haul ass.”

I already knew that we’d be sending Ruby in first. She’d go ahead of us and clear the room if we needed. And if this facility was like the other, there would be dogs and cats around. So seeing her wouldn’t be an immediate concern. Unlike the rest of us popping in. We would be noticed by the first camera that clicked on our shining faces.

“Why are you smiling?” Pete asked. “You can’t seriously be happy about this?”

I winked at him, feeling the rush of the moment crash over me, adrenaline spiking. “I’ll never tell.”

“Fucking nuts,” he whispered.

He led us through the trees, the branches and undergrowth sparse and growing sparser by the step. Pete held up a fist and we all crouched, taking cover where we could. I

tucked in behind a tree as a pair of guards strolled past us.

“You going out for drinks tonight, Steve?”

“Fuck. Yeah, I think so. I hate missing out.”

“That’s what happens when you get married, you miss out.”

“Not me! I got two girls on the side, Kiara will never know. Hell, my ex didn’t know for years!”

They laughed as they went back and forth, oblivious as humans so often were to the world around them.

Pete wiggled his fingers and we crept forward. The trees thinned more and there was a shining shaft that the smell of cooking grease slid out of. Ruby whined and circled back to me. I put my hand on her. She licked her chops.

Pete had better not drop us into the middle of the kitchen exhaust.

Easter pushed past him to the shaft and slid her hands over it. The screws popped out one at a time and then she pulled the grate off silently. I stepped up next, Ruby’s collar tight in my hand. “Let’s go.” I pointed at the shaft, and she shot in, scrambling along at a speed that none of us were going to be able to match. I went next, and left the rest up to them, but I already knew that Pete would follow first, then Killian would pin the Magelore between us, leaving Easter to pull up the rear and put the screws back in.

I knew it in the sense that their thoughts were brushing up against mine. I wasn’t sure I liked it, but in the moment it was useful.

The shaft was barely two feet deep and well rounded, so it was a true army crawl. I didn't bother and try to be quiet. Not with Ruby clattering along ahead of us, her nails clacking on the metal. I just tried to hurry the fuck up.

I counted the seconds, then the minutes as we scrambled along. Not caught. But not out yet either.

A voice ahead of us floated. "Hey, how did you get in there, dog?"

Fuck.

I slowed my pace, moving quieter now.

"Come on, let's get you out of here." There was the sound of someone working a hand tool, the whine of a motor. "Almost there, couple more screws. I wonder if you wandered in from outside. Bet you smelled the cooking. It might smell good, but it's utter shit."

The guy sounded nice. I almost felt bad.

"Ruby," I whispered her name. "Attack."

There was a clatter of the shaft being opened, and then her nails were scrambling on the metal as she launched herself out.

A scream up ahead of me had me pushing harder now. There was the snarl of Ruby, a yip and then silence. I reached the end of the shaft and kicked myself out of the tunnel, dropping to the ground next to Ruby.

The maintenance guy was bleeding out, his eyes wide and his throat ripped out. I pulled Dinah and put her right to his head and squeezed the trigger.

The sound was muffled, her silencer working nicely.

I grabbed his foot and dragged him behind a stack of boxes. As the others dropped out of the vent, I grabbed a mop and cleaned up the blood stains. The last thing we needed was to get the place roused before we were ready.

“His clothes will fit me.” Killian bent next to the dead guy and flipped him over. “And he has a key card.”

I nodded. “Just the key card. We don’t have time for anything else.”

Killian grabbed the guy’s hat and stuffed it low on his head. “Just in case.”

“Let’s go.” I motioned for him and Pete to lead once more. “We take out cameras as we see them. If Cowboy and Eligor come through, we’ll get an EMP pulse in less than ten minutes.”

Diego laughed from Easter’s back. “Why not just use that electrical kick you get from your fuck buddy there, and fry them?”

The fact that a gun had the most sensible solution to what we were doing was almost embarrassing if you didn’t think about the fact that he’d been a killer in his previous life.

“He has a point,” Dinah said. “But I could run the lightning easier than that big brute.”

“I’m no brute, you tiny bitch!” Diego snapped.

That the guns were arguing again meant that they were back to normal. Or as normal as talking guns are going to get.

Killian grinned and I didn't think anything of it until he grabbed me, yanked me to him and kissed me hard. The kiss was brutal, crushing and everything I could have wanted in that moment, and it was followed by a rush of electricity that ripped through my body and pooled at that spot in my lower spine.

He let me go, the grin on his face saying it all. That and the hard-on now pressed against my thigh. "You got it?"

I nodded, not sure I could have spoken. Intimacy between us had always been hard, sharp, and full of his electricity. This was setting off all my bells and whistles. I drew a breath, calmed my heart, and stepped out of the maintenance room. Killian's power hummed as I called it up through my body, down my arm and into Dinah as I squeezed her trigger.

The electricity was far more accurate this way as it slammed into the camera and sent a shockwave through the entire system. The lights flickered, but we were already moving, Pete ahead of us in a flash. "This way!"

He found a stairwell that went down, and we launched into it, running full speed. Ruby passed us all, leaping almost from one landing to the next. The lights steadied up, which meant we might not have a lot of time before the cameras were up and running again. Backup generators were kicking in, which meant backup cameras would be too.

"They might already know we're here," Easter said, her voice strained.

"Keep moving," I said. "We'll scramble if we have to."

I glanced at Killian and almost asked Ipos for some help. Almost. He turned to me, eyes blue and winked, as if he knew. Fucker.

At the bottom of seven flights, we found our first guards. Four of them. Once for each of us, though Dinah wasn't happy about sharing. Their bodies went down in under a second. Well, Pete took a little longer, but they were down, and we had more key cards.

This is where I made the hard decision. "Pete. You're with me. Easter, go with Killian and figure out if Emerald is here."

I motioned for her and handed her Dinah; she gave me Diego. "She'll know if it's her."

There were no goodbyes. "Meet back here. If the others aren't here when the EMP pulse hits, go."

Go.

Killian's eyes met mine in a silent farewell.

It was all we had.

Pete motioned with his head as we stepped through the door the guards had been ahead of and stepped into something far worse than I could have imagined.

"Fuck," Pete whispered.

The walls, floor and ceiling were bright white, and the inmates were all dressed in ankle-length scrubs so you could see tiny bare feet. The kids all turned to look at us, worry etching in their faces.

"Their handlers will know," I said, rage roaring up through me, the fire that was in me burning hot when I thought about Vivian. Saying that they were better off dead.

That I should just burn an entire facility full of abnormal children.

I reached for the kid closest to me, a little boy with sandy brown hair and pale green eyes. He blinked up at me as I cupped his face and let my fire run through him, finding the connection to his handler. “Son of a bitch,” I growled as I burned that connection so hard and fast, I felt the handler reel backward, felt something in the handler break. I pushed the kid to Pete.

“What am I supposed to do with the kid? What about Vivian?”

I didn’t look at him, just took the next kid by the head and did the same thing, burning it out of him, leaving the boy gasping and me breaking out in a sweat. It really was exactly what I’d done for Easter not all that long ago. Except that they weren’t held as tightly as her mind was, so the fix was easier. Faster. I kept grabbing the kids, literally touching their faces as I spoke through gritted teeth. “If you can find her, bring her here.”

As I burned through the kid, I reached for that connection to Easter and Killian and called them back to us. They busted through the door a second later.

I looked at Easter and Killian. “We can’t leave them.”

Easter’s face was grim. “Then we have to move fast. There are easily a hundred kids here. Carlos was right about that.”

A hundred and how many adults? Not many.

I took a breath and dove in, calling up that fire that burned even through the river that I’d created inside my mind.

There was no try, there was no maybe.

I wasn't leaving a single kid behind.

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This was what I'd been sensing as we'd driven here. It wasn't Vivian that needed saving, it was every single abnormal kid that Gardreel and his goddamn fallen had scooped up.

Even knowing that they'd been here, I'd not realized that drive to protect the young was so strong in me. My maternal instincts were as on fire as my hands burned through the handlers' connections. The upside? Some handlers had multiple kids, which meant I didn't have to deal with each kid.

The process was still a lot.

My mind raced as I reached for the kids, as Easter and Killian all but shoved them toward me. Behind me the cacophony of chatter, of high-pitched voices and then crying, nearly had me spinning around.

"Shut the fuck up!" Easter yelled and the group immediately quieted.

I nodded her my thanks and reached for another kid. My legs shook as the fire burned through me and into her. My throat was parched as though I'd been in the desert, sucking down sand and wind.

"Start getting them out," I gritted out as I kept at it. We were through half of them. Half was better than none. Easter snapped her fingers, shoved Dinah into my holster and took Diego back as she got the first batch of kids moving.

"Fast feet, quiet mouths!" she snapped, and they were gone.

Ten more kids and I was on my knees. More worrisome than that was the feeling of eyes sliding back and landing on us.

The handlers were trying to re-connect with their charges.

My jaw ticked. “Killian, the cameras.”

“On it.” He turned to the closest camera and grabbed it with his palms. Electricity coursed out of him and bounced around the room, pinging off lights and settling us into a shadowy darkness with just the emergency lights coming on once more.

The seconds ticked by as loudly as if I could hear them, but it was more likely the humming that turned into a blaring alarm.

“That’s all of them.” Killian grabbed me under the arm. “Come on, kids, let’s go!”

He was dragging me to the door, my legs numb from the effort. I stopped at the door, my hand on the frame, a tug turning me around. “Take them up.”

“You don’t mean to wait for the Magelore?” He stared at me, and I shook my head.

“No, there is someone else here.”

I turned back to the level they’d kept the kids. “Go, I’ll be right behind you.”

He growled, kissed me hard, giving me a pulse of electricity to use if I needed it, then did as I asked. Not out of weakness, but because he trusted me and my instincts. Just like I trusted him.

Killian would get the kids out, I knew that.

With my hand on the wall, I followed the sensation of . . . family . . . down the curving hall. The feeling of a child I knew, but maybe hadn't ever met? Maybe one of my brothers had a child I didn't know about. Maybe Bea's daughter. Dinah's daughter. My niece.

I didn't want to hope.

And yet my feet picked up speed as a door on my left came into view, the only one shut. I put my hand to it and Dinah trembled.

"She's in there. I know it."

"Me too." I tried the door, but it was locked. I stepped back and then kicked out, the door not even bending a little.

"Let me," Dinah said, her voice shaky.

I pulled her out even as the footsteps of more guards came to my ears. I spun and went to a knee, aiming, squeezing the trigger, watching the bodies fall, hitting the wall, slumping down.

Before they were full down, I'd turned back to the door, squeezed Dinah's trigger again and blew the lock open.

I pushed the door with my shoulder and swept the room.

A girl with long chestnut hair sat in the far corner with her hands over her head. "You can't make me believe! You can't! I can talk to the dead! You can't make me believe otherwise!"

"She's strong," Dinah whispered, "just like you. I bet she hasn't been here long."

“Emerald.” I said her name and her head snapped up. Her eyes were not green like you’d think but more blue, closer to my color. “Time to go, kid.”

She wobbled to her feet. “Who . . . who are you?” There was a faint accent there. Like English was her second language.

“I’m your family,” I said. And then took a chance that she knew him. “I’m Bear’s mother.”

Her face crumpled and she fell toward me, so that I had to catch her even though my own body was weak from all I’d done to free the children from the handlers.

“I tried to keep them safe!” she yelled. “I tried!”

I grabbed her by the arms. “Are they in here?” Surely, I would have felt my own children over my niece. But I had to ask, I had to be sure. She was already shaking her head.

“No, no, I made sure that the monsters followed me. I made sure that they didn’t see Bear or Angel.”

Angel. My daughter. I took Emerald’s head in my hands and ran my fire through her, just in case, trying not to think about Angel or Bear.

And that’s when I felt it. Something inside of her that was not like the other children. Not just a block, not just something to bend her mind into a pretzel.

A fucking booby trap. She gasped and tried to pull away from me, and I had no doubt it hurt but if I stopped now . . . I could see what would happen. The fire would consume her in a way that would leave her literally melting into my hands. We had to see this through together. Fuck.

Gardreel had known. And he'd set me up.

"No, no!" I held on tighter as my flames curled through her mind, like burning the fuse on a stick of dynamite. "Hold on, we can't stop! We have to see this through!"

"Why? You're hurting her!" Dinah yelled.

Emerald began to cry, but she clung to my arms, nails digging in. Trusting me to save her.

"Hang on, tight as you can," I gritted out as the fire burned through me. The heat rose and the sound of it echoed in the room, crackling, roaring like a forest fire going nuclear. The booby traps were sharp, dug deep into her psyche, waiting for me.

"Fuck you, Gardreel," I growled as I let the power push its way through me and into my niece. A scream ripped out of her as the heat backwashed through us both, orange, red and blue flames lighting up and down my arms to her head. Her hair didn't light on fire, neither did her clothes. But her tears dried as they fell.

"Please!" she gasped. "Stop!"

I closed my eyes and clung to her head as she began to fight me. I couldn't let her go. I could see the last trap, could see how deep it was buried in her and that it was meant for me. It was meant to spring and trap both of us.

He'd known I'd come. He'd known all along somehow that I'd come for her.

Emerald's scream pitched higher, piercing my ears as she thrashed and kicked out. All I could do was pump the fire into her, driving it deep into her mind, chasing that booby trap, grabbing hold of it and literally scorching it into nothing.

Until it was ashes and nothing more.

As the flames slid away from me, I loosened my hold on her face and slumped to my knees, pulling her into my arms. “I got you, kid. I got you.”

Her sobs echoed in the tiny room, small after the screams.

A single footstep snapped my head up and I already had Dinah aimed at the door as Pete stuck his head in. He winced when he saw Dinah pointed at him.

“I didn’t find her. I don’t understand. I thought they had Vivian.”

“Help me,” I said, and he slipped into the room, getting me to my feet and then scooping Emerald into his arms.

“Where are the others—?”

“Go, go!” I snapped and then he and I were running. Ruby was just ahead of us, leaping up the stairwell.

There had been no EMP pulse. Either Eligor hadn’t figured it out, or Cowboy balked for some reason. If they’d been there, I’d have shot him.

Flight after flight we went back the way we’d come. Halfway to the maintenance room I had to stop. I couldn’t breathe, my lungs and body felt like I’d been turned inside out and put on a spit. How could I have had more flames than that? Vivian was insane to think . . . Pete grabbed my arm and dragged me upward.

“Don’t gas out on me now!” he yelled. “I killed a bunch down there and I saw the bodies but we’re missing a fuck ton of guards.”

Which meant they'd be waiting somewhere for us.

Along with whatever fallen monsters they had on hand.

"Get her out of here," I gasped out. What the hell had happened back there? Why was I hurting so much?

Pete took one look at me and shook his head. "Not leaving without you, boss lady. I got us into this mess. I'll get us out."

He bent and scooped me up over his other shoulder and then shot up the stairs. I bounced against his back, hating that I needed help. And realizing that I hadn't even asked him.

"Here." Killian was there, pulling me off Pete and into his arms. "The path is clear. The cameras are down, go, go!"

We were flying through the facility at high speed. No guards. No fallen. How was this happening?

I closed my eyes as Killian ran and just let him take my weight. Let him help me.

"Here!" Easter's voice was next and then I had to open my eyes because I knew there was a crawl ahead of me. "Tie her to the dog."

Tie me to the dog? Did I look that bad? Apparently.

Someone took off their belt and then my one wrist was looped in it. The other end was given to Ruby as she was lifted into the shaft, and me right after her.

"Go!" Killian barked and Ruby listened as if she were bound to him and not me. I'll

admit the trip out of the shaft was a shit ton easier than the way in. Of course, I got bounced along the sides pretty good. Ruby didn't stop pulling until we were ten feet away from the opening and headed deeper into cover. Little hands were all over me and I realized my eyes were closed.

"Is she hurt?"

"Is that really her?"

"Come on, help her!"

All the hands, all the little voices. One of them pushed through. "I can heal her."

And then a rush of cold, like arctic waters pouring down my throat, and my eyes flew open. A little girl, maybe ten years old, sat on my chest, her hair all but shaved off. Her face was cat-like, from her nose to her eyes and ears which sat on top of her head. Golden eyes.

I didn't remember touching her face.

She smiled. "They put a spell on me to look human. You burned it off."

I blinked. "You healed me."

Her smile widened showing off tiny fangs, not unlike a Magelore. "I'm a cat shifter, I heal people when they least expect it. And you are the Phoenix. The one whose magic burns away the bad guys." I sat up and looked around me. They fucking glowed in their white onesies. And all I could think about was how the hell were we going to get one hundred kids out of here? How the hell did I get them from here, to somewhere safe?

As I pushed to stand, Easter, Pete and Killian were climbing out of the shaft.

“So now we got them out,” I said. “I don’t think they’re all going to fit in the minivan.”

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Turned out that I was right about the minivan. It did not fit one hundred kids.

It fit one. Emerald.

The other hundred, well, that was a problem that only Carlos could solve. “That bus?” I said. “You’re going to have to go get it. Then you are on babysitting duty.”

He stared at me like I’d lost my fucking mind, and maybe I had. He looked over the group of kids. “You . . . want me to HIDE all of these children? For how long?”

I looked at him and swallowed hard, knowing that maybe I was a fool for this. Fuck, I was a fool, I had lost my fucking mind. “Pete is going to help you. He is going to use whatever spooky fucking Magelore connection he has, to get them to safety. Because nobody has Vivian. She’s alive, all right, but nobody has her.”

The two of them startled and turned to me. “You can’t be serious,” Easter said. “You’d trust these kids with VIVIAN?”

I closed my eyes, seeing again Vivian, and how she’d begged me to free those within the walls. To kill them if I had to. The tears. She’d been crying and it had been legit.

“Which one of you is a Magelore?”

A tiny dark-haired boy put his hand up slowly. “I am.”

Bingo. “This was about me getting him out,” I said. If I’d been a gambler I would have bet this was her boy. “Tell Vivian the price is to keep the rest of them safe too.

Alive. No biting.” I pointed at Pete, and he nodded, his face solemn. “Until we’re ready.”

“Ready?” Pete frowned.

“There is a fight coming.” I looked out over the kids, knowing that there would be no choice. “They are going to have to fight with us, against the fallen.”

Carlos crossed himself. “Dios mio. Are you serious?”

I looked at the kids and nodded. “We’re going to need all of you to stop the bad guys. All of you have talents, all of you can fight. Some of you can heal.” I reached out and touched the cat-faced child. “Will you help?”

One by one they raised their hands. I nodded. “Then we’ll fight when the time comes. And so will Vivian if she knows what’s good for her.” Fucking lying Magelore. If she’d just told me there were kids in there, I would have gone.

I put my hand on Pete’s shoulder and tightened my fingers. “I trust them with you, Pete. If for one second it looks like she’s going to flip-flop, you know what to do.”

His face hardened. “I will deal with her then.”

The finality in his voice was all it took to push away any lingering doubt. “You’ve grown, Pete.”

He winked at me. “Someday I’ll tell you why Vivian’s the strongest. And why being with you has brought me up into her stratosphere.”

Interesting. But not pertinent other than it would keep the kids safe. I clapped my hands. “All of you, go with Pete and Carlos. They’ll protect you until you don’t need

protecting anymore.”

Carlos looked at me. “You are not the monster, Phoenix. If you ever were, you were hiding even then.”

A smile ghosted over my lips. “Get the fuck out of here, Carlos, before I change my mind and send you off without Pete to help with all those kids.”

He laughed, and then pulled me into a hug. “You are not the monster,” he said again. “Remember that.” He let me go and I stared hard at him.

“Someone has to be, Carlos. Might as well be me.”

“And me,” Dinah said. “I like being a bitch.”

It looked as though he had something more to say, but he bit it back and then they were away, leading the kids through the forest like a pair of fucking pied pipers, back toward the school and the bus. Gardreel might want to find them, but with any sort of cover off me, hopefully his eyes turned my way.

Fuck, who was I kidding? I could already feel the weight of those eyes, considering. And if we didn’t get our asses moving, he’d be on us before we were ready to face him.

“You sure?” Easter asked quietly. “You think we’ll need them for a final fight?”

“Better than leaving them in there,” I said as I turned away and started back the way we’d come. Emerald had been quiet all this time.

“You sent away a Hider,” she said. “Why?”

“Because those kids need him more than we do,” I said and let myself look at her. “Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

“Are we going to find Bear and Angel?” Emerald asked.

Killian jerked like he’d been slapped. “You know them?”

“I found them just after you were taken. We were on the same plane.” She blinked up at him. “He’s my friend. She’s pretty quiet for a baby so she’s okay.”

Friend. “He’s your cousin,” Dinah said. “They both are.”

Emerald frowned. “Who is talking?”

“My gun.” I pointed to Dinah in her chest holster. Emerald reached over and I let her touch the handle because fuck, how could I not? If she was drawn to the weapon, maybe it was because the soul within it was her mother’s.

Messed up, so fucking messed up.

Eligor sat in the very back of the Bronco as the four of us climbed in.

Emerald gave him a look, her cheeks pinkening up. Yeah, he was cute, if only she knew what she was really looking at.

I however gave him a fucking stink eye. “No EMP pulse.”

“I tried.” He cringed. “I tried but I couldn’t figure out how to make it work without letting him to the surface. And he . . . is not being cooperative.”

My jaw ticked. “You fucking let him to the surface next time. And if he doesn’t

cooperate then I will deal with him. But we almost got caught because you couldn't pull your head out of your ass."

Killian didn't ask where we were going, just got us turned around and booking it out of the area.

"I still don't understand how there weren't more guards, or at least one fallen?" Easter muttered. "Not that I'm complaining, but did they think that the kids were less dangerous? If anything, all those kids are more dangerous, with less control than an adult—especially in high stress situations."

I was mulling over the same thing, and I'd felt something back there, a tickle, a sensation that I couldn't quite be sure of. But I could take a pretty good guess. "Eligor? You want to tell me what exactly happened?"

I looked in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were still clamped shut tight and the tension around his face was intense to say the least. As if he were holding his breath while being severely constipated. It was not a good look in my opinion.

"I kept them away," he whispered. "I'm still keeping them away. That's why I didn't use the EMP pulse."

"How?" I twisted around. "How are you keeping them away?"

"I'm the top handler." He licked his lips. "I . . . pulled rank and sent everyone I could to one of the small rooms and told them to meditate until I told them otherwise. I made them send away all the guards to the south end of the facility. Away from you."

My eyes widened. "And you never thought to mention this before?"

"I wasn't sure I could do it. Especially at a distance." He cringed as if I was going to

beat him.

“Ipos, this for real?” Yes, I was asking a demon for truth. Crazy had never looked so sane.

“If he’s the top handler still, then yeah. He could do it.” Killian’s voice held an edge and then he shook it off. “Fucking hate that bloke.”

“You’re still holding them? How far away are we?” I looked at Killian and he held up his hand. We’d gone twenty miles.

“Yes, but not much longer.” His words were tight, strained.

“Hold it as long as you can,” I said. “I want to see how far your distance is.”

He groaned but slowly gave me a single thumb up.

Turned out his distance was only another five miles before he gasped and opened his eyes. “I can’t hold it any longer.”

I gave him a quick nod, said nothing as my mind worked out this new tool. If I took into account the distance from where we’d parked to the facility itself . . . it was a fuck ton farther than even Cowboy’s EMP pulse would hit. Close to thirty miles was no small thing when it came to taking out the handlers. Because they were the real security system. They would know the second any of their charges saw something out of place.

Already I was re-working the plan I had for hitting the next facility.

“Gardreel wasn’t there,” I said, breaking the silence. I took note that Emerald had been exceptionally quiet, curled up next to Easter. But that name made her lift her

head.

Eligor cleared his throat and wiped both hands down his face several times. “No, he wasn’t. Why would the other Magelore tell you she was there?”

I looked at Emerald. “That was where they were keeping all the kids. And the future of the Magelore blood line was in there. Vivian’s boy. I suspect that Vivian sent us to save him, lying about where she was.” But the box had looked very real, and her pain had seemed real. Which told me that there was a good chance she’d been locked up at some point but had managed to get free.

And she’d used me.

Eligor shuddered. “They are . . . they are perhaps the worst abnormalities.”

“Why?” Emerald asked. “Because they drink blood? Or because they can’t be handled? Like me?”

My lips twitched as I watched Eligor turn to her. “Both. They are more than half demon, three quarters really, with just a very small portion of human blood in them.”

“So, half demon is okay?” Her body was tense as she asked the question. “They aren’t as bad?” Of course, what Eligor didn’t know was that her father had been a demon of sorts. A very, very bad monster that her grandfather had controlled.

Eligor shook his head. “No demon is okay.”

I laughed; I couldn’t help it. “Eligor. You are a fallen angel. You do realize that makes you a demon in your own right?”

He stiffened. “No, it doesn’t—”

Emerald held up her hand, as if she were in school. “Actually, it does. A fallen angel has lost grace, and so they are no longer an angel at all, but one who will actively try to pull down those around them to make themselves look better. That’s what my . . . mom used to say.”

Dinah flinched in her holster. Of course, Emerald had a mother, someone she was raised with—even if it was hard for Dinah to hear it.

Eligor shook himself. “It is not the same.”

“Po-tay-to, Po-tah-toh,” Killian drawled. “Semantics. You’re a demon. Just like the ones you been slagging. Fucking hypocrite.”

Eligor huffed and slumped in his seat like a sullen child.

I was in no mood to placate him. “Everyone get some sleep. It’s a long drive, and we don’t know when we might have to fight.”

Easter was the first one out cold, with Eligor close behind her. Emerald just stared at me through the rear-view mirror, her eyes locked on my face, searching. I knew the questions were coming.

She leaned forward and whispered, “You’re really my auntie? Like my blood auntie?”

“Yes.” I closed my eyes and put my head on the head rest. “I am.”

Her hands dug into the top of the seat, creaking the fake leather. “And my . . . real mom?”

“She’s dead, kid,” Dinah bit out. “You stay close to Nix. She’ll take care of you.

That's what your . . . real mom would have wanted." Her voice cracked at the end, and I put my hand over her.

Emerald audibly swallowed. "I'm half demon."

I reached back and cupped the side of her face, finding her with ease. "I know, kid. I've got demon in me too. So does Killian. So does Eligor's body back there." At least I was assuming I had demon in me. If I had fallen blood, that was pretty much demon in my mind.

Killian grunted. "I'm beginning to think the best of us do. The strongest ones." I didn't want to point out that if that was the case, it was also worth noting that the bloodthirsty ones were also mostly demon.

He wasn't wrong, the thought had crossed my mind too. "Try to get some sleep, Emmy." The nickname popped out of me, and I let it hang there. "We'll talk about demons and abilities later. You're safe now, that's all that matters."

Because I knew that was the next thing she'd want to talk about. What she could do to help. What she was good at. And I already knew. She could talk to the dead. She was the one that Gardreel had been trying to break.

To get her to speak to my mom.

It was not lost on me that he might be setting me up to get the information, the spell on how to raise a demon, and find a way to kill the fallen for himself. That because my mother had the other spell as well, we were going to do his work for him.

I closed my eyes—there was literally nothing I could do about it right then—and sunk into a deep sleep with Ruby's head settled across my thighs, her solid warmth sinking through me. Killian would wake me to take over the driving when he was needing a

break.

There were no dreams, there were no visions of fucking Vivian, though there was a moment I thought I heard her laughter. As I came to, I kept my eyes shut and let my mind work over what we were dealing with.

I wondered if Vivian just sent us in there to save the boy. Was he hers? That seemed the most likely situation. But then was she stuck in another facility, and if she was, had she given up the spell that Gardreel so badly wanted? What if he had figured out a way to get into her head? None of that felt right. I was almost certain she'd found a way to escape. The same as me.

If Vivian was free, Pete would know soon enough. And if she wasn't . . . well, then if that was the case, we were working on a much shorter time span than we'd had before. Days. We'd have days to create a weapon worthy of killing the fallen.

The night of the bleeding stars. Three days away. Not far enough by half.

Killian pulled over, we switched places and I took over the driving.

"Lass, do we ask her where Bear and Angel are?" he whispered to me as we passed each other outside the vehicle, the air cool and humid, making his breath puff.

Yes. I wanted to shout the word, to demand to know where Bear was and where my little girl was. I shook my head. "No. The more who know, the more danger they are in. We wait until we can actually go for them ourselves."

"Fuck, I know you're right, but it's eating me up." He ran a hand through his hair as he slid into the passenger seat. He closed his eyes as I pulled us back onto the road. The Bronco rumbled as a couple of large semi-trucks sped by us. Not exactly confidence-inspiring if we had to tangle with one of the large army trucks that

Gardreel and his fallen had at their disposal.

I got the Bronco up to speed and took note of the other vehicles around us. Nothing suspicious. Nothing to worry about, at least not yet.

Emerald leaned forward. “Will you tell me about my mom? What was she like? Why did she give me up?”

Oh fuck.

Dinah cleared her throat. “I knew her best. She wasn’t a bad person. She just made some stupid mistakes. She chose the wrong man to love, and he betrayed her and you . . .”

Emerald looked over my shoulder, down to the shoulder holster. “Why do you know so much about her?”

Dinah had gotten herself into this, I wasn’t about to dig her a path out. At some point the kid would learn who she really was.

“Because I was with her a long time,” Dinah said. “She loved you more than anything. And because she was afraid for your life, she gave you away. She didn’t want to, she wanted you with her forever, but it wasn’t safe for you.”

Emerald was quiet. “I was in danger.”

“Because of who your father was,” I said, deciding maybe Dinah needed a little help. “His strength passed to you. And there were people—like your grandfather—who would have used you up. Your mother saved you the only way she could.”

Emerald slid back in her seat, and in the mirror, I could easily see the tracks from the

tears. Dinah trembled against me, and I put a hand over her. She'd told her what she could for now. More would come later; I was sure of it. But in pieces.

I don't know why, but the trip to North Dakota was literally unremarkable. We didn't have anyone following us, there were no traps waiting down the highways. Maybe Mario had done his part better than we'd hoped. Maybe Gardreel thought we were still with him, though that was hard to believe when I thought about getting all the kids out.

Twice I checked in with Pete and Carlos. They were strung out, but not in danger. Lots of squealing, screaming kids. I smiled at the thought of them dealing with a hundred kids.

Us, well we rolled through the badlands like we were on a fucking vacation. When the truth was with each mile my muscles tightened further. Because the woman we were going to see . . . she was a special breed.

"You sure about this?" Easter asked as we got closer to her place. "I mean . . . I've never asked a Tracker for shit, and I know exactly why."

I snorted. "You think she's grumpier than me?"

Easter laughed. "No, I doubt that. This one is young though, not like Jack."

I nodded. We all knew about Jack, the Tracker across the pond. He was difficult to deal with to say the least.

I cranked the wheel at the next stop sign that would take us out of town, more into the rural areas of Bismarck, North Dakota. What a place to set up shop. Middle of fucking nowhere.

The road got bumpier the further out we went, and soon enough a large, three-story farmhouse came into view. The upkeep on it was solid, but the structure itself was old. That much was obvious. Between it and the massive barn sitting just behind it, the place had a feeling of age.

A beat-up Jeep sat out front. I parked at the end of the driveway—I was not blocking us in. “You all stay here.”

I let myself out and started down the long driveway. Before I was halfway to the house the front door banged open. A woman with long red hair—seriously, what was it with all the fucking redheads?—stepped out onto the porch. I couldn’t see her eyes with the way the porch shaded her.

I held up both hands, palms toward her. “I’m looking for the Tracker.”

A large dog bounded out past her, woofing and . . . howling. He came straight at me, tongue out, eyes wide as he raced across the yard.

I had Dinah out and pointed at him before he’d taken ten strides. “Call him off.”

He slid to a stop, sat and waved a giant mitt at me. “Hiya. Alex. Who you?”

A talking . . . thing. Not a dog. Something else. “Phoenix.”

“Oh, pretty bird. I like pretty birds.” He lay down where he was and rolled to his back, showing total submission. His master, though, was not so inclined.

“You even think of shooting him, I’ll cut your head off and set it on a fucking pike,” she growled as she stepped down the stairs. Dressed in blue jeans and a simple black T-shirt, she moved like a predator.

Good.

It took a great deal of strength to drop Dinah's aim. I held her at my side. "So, the dog talks and you think it's a good idea to lower me?" she beaked off.

The Tracker stopped. "Your gun just talk?"

I snorted. "You got a talking dog. I don't think you have room to point out oddities."

Her lips quirked. "Fair enough. What the fuck do you want, Phoenix."

"A direction."

Her eyebrows went up. "You want me to Track a kid for you?"

This was where it got tricky. "No, I need you to Track a mostly dead woman."

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Tricky indeed. She took her hand away from her back and I saw the top of a sword handle. Interesting. She took another step, so she was out from under the porch. She was pretty, but the lines of her jaw were hard, and her nose had been broken at least once. “I don’t Track adults—”

“I know.” I held up my other hand, palm out. “I know you don’t Track anyone but kids. But this woman, if I can find her, and get the information out of her head that I need, then I can save a fuck ton of people. Kids included.”

The Tracker narrowed her eyes at me. Tri-colored. Swirling with magic. I locked eyes with her and let the fire in me rise upward. If she wanted to see what she was dealing with, so be it.

A good minute passed before she smiled. “You know what? All right. What’s the pay?”

The pay . . . fuck. “What do you want?”

“Money.” She laughed. “That’s how this works. We aren’t bartering for that fucking broken-down Bronco you got over there.”

The dog—if you could call him that—rolled to his feet. “No money, Rylee. Just help pretty bird.”

His tongue lolled out and I couldn’t be sure, but I’d have sworn he winked at me.

I frowned and Rylee—the Tracker’s name I was guessing—sighed. “Fuck it, Alex,

we aren't a goddamn charity. You know I have to pay for your dog food, right?"

He just shrugged his overly hairy shoulders. "I eat rabbits."

To say this was weird was . . . an understatement. "So you'll help?"

"What's her name?" Rylee asked.

"Jasmine," I said. "She's my mother, and she looks a great deal like me. Only with lighter hair."

Her eyes widened. "You don't have a picture of her? Shit on toast, are you for real? You can't pay, you don't have a picture, I can't make you a miracle. I'm no Jesus, despite how fucking awesome I am."

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were the best."

"That won't work with me. I'm the only one. Easy to be the best," she barked. "I need something, a picture is ideal, but even a drawing would do."

I didn't have a picture of my mother. I hadn't had one for years. I could see her clearly in my mind . . . "I can show you," I said. "But I have to take your hand."

She had every right to be suspicious. She didn't know me from any other abnormal coming through her place to cause trouble. I held out my hand. "I can show you."

Those tri-colored eyes kept swirling, which made it hard to read her.

"You know what," she said, "I'd like to see you try."

I didn't understand what she meant by that, and so I took her hand and let the fire roll

up and through me. She gasped and her fingers locked around my palm.

The fire kicked back to me and then I was yanking her into that quiet world of mine, through the river, through the water to stand on the other side.

“What the fuck?” she yelped, but smartly did not let go of me. “This shouldn’t work on me.”

“Here.” I pulled up the image of my mother and stood her in front of us. She did look like me, only slenderer. Finer boned. Frail almost. And then I realized she resembled the fallen that I’d met. Pale, light blue eyes, nearly white-blond hair. Even her smile had an angelic quality to it.

“Took after your father, did you?” Rylee snorted.

I looked at her. “Your mouth gets you in a lot of trouble, doesn’t it?”

She grinned as if I’d just told her the best joke. “Every. Fucking. Day.”

And then she yanked her hand free of mine and we tumbled out of that space of in between. She stumbled back from me and bumped into her dog who steadied her with his mitts that looked almost human. Jesus, he was messed up. Even if he had convinced her to help me.

“I can’t go on a salvage with you—”

“I just need a direction,” I said. “East, west or south.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “That’s it? You don’t want me along for the ride?”

I paused, thinking about it. Thinking about taking a Tracker with me—they were

generally good fighters, and had dealings with a lot of abnormals. I slowly shook my head. “No. I’m sure you could fight, I’m sure you’d be an asset, but I have a feeling you might bring your own brand of trouble with you.”

Her grin was wide and immediate. “Yes, there is that small detail.” She took a deep breath and as she slowly let it out, her eyes swirled faster until they were just a vortex of movement. “Your mark is south. Really, really far south.”

One of the facilities was on the border of Mexico on the Texas side. “That helps. I’ll send you some cash when we wrap this up.”

She shrugged. “I’ve heard that before.”

I took a step back, then another and another, keeping her in my sights. It’s not that I didn’t trust her. But you didn’t leave someone at your back you didn’t know, when they had a weapon and strange magic you didn’t understand.

I lifted a hand. “Thank you.” Not something I said often.

Rylee didn’t turn away either. “You’re in for some trouble. I think you could use a break. I know I sure as shit could.”

And that was that.

I turned and strode back to the van, slid in and got us turned around.

“We’re going south,” I said.

Easter sucked in a breath. “She actually helped? Fuck, I thought this might be a wild goose chase.”

Yeah, I'd kind of thought it was a crap shoot too, but I'd also known it was our best shot. "She gave me a direction. It fits with the facilities that Eligor knows about." I spoke loud enough that Eligor startled when his name was spoken.

I watched the rear-view mirror as we drove away. Rylee had disappeared, but her dog sat in the middle of the yard waving until we were out of view. He was a weird one, even as abnormals went. But his words—strange as they were—had convinced the Tracker to help me.

"I owe you one, dog," I muttered.

I'd like to say that the trip south was as quiet as the one to talk to the Tracker and her dog.

It was not.

We were a couple hours south of Bismarck when the sirens started. Emmy sat up straight, her eyes wide and her breath coming in gulps. "They found us."

"Just the police," I said. "And they aren't necessarily coming for us."

Killian shot me a look and I shrugged as he reached over and put a hand on my arm. "Lass. Let's be honest with ourselves now."

"Fine, it's unlikely that they are coming for us," I amended.

Emmy shook her head. "No, I can sense them . . . they have something with them. Not one of the fallen. Something else. Something . . . they made something special to come after us."

Oh well now, didn't that just take the fucking cake. "How do you know?"

“She knows because it is of demon origin,” Eligor said from the backseat. He looked like shit, as if he’d been the one doing all the driving. From the bags under his eyes to the red shooting through them. In short, he did not look well.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“This body is not . . . conducive to my long-term survival. I need another one. It has too much demon in it.” Sweat beaded along his upper lip as he spoke.

Another one. Fuck, like I needed to add body snatching to my to-do list.

I frowned. “How come I can’t feel what’s chasing us?”

Emerald was shaking hard. “It’s bad, whatever it is. We have to hurry.”

I put my foot on the gas pedal and the Bronco sort of sped up. I’d killed a demon before, but did I want to try it in the middle of the highway, while protecting Emerald? No, no I did not.

“Eligor, can you do anything?”

“No, the beast won’t obey me.”

The beast. Oh, that sounded wonderful. “Emmy, tell me when they are close.”

“Now,” she whispered.

I jerked the wheel to the left and peeled off the highway, bouncing across open ground as something exploded the tarmac behind us.

“Hang on, I’m going to open the roof up,” Killian yelled. “Heads down.”

Everyone but me stuck their heads down. Even Ruby whined and lay flat on the floor as Killian drew the electricity across his fingers and used it to cut a panel out of the roof, the faint burn and hissing crackle filling the air. Tricky bastard always had something up his sleeve.

“God, I love him,” Dinah whispered. “I really wish he’d had a brother.”

Easter popped up through the hole and pulled Diego around. “Jesus.”

“Diego will do,” the big gun rumbled. “But what the fuck is that?”

I didn’t look in the mirror, not right away, I was too busy navigating the road in front of us.

“What is it? I want to shoot it too!” Dinah yelled.

Killian reached around my middle and grabbed her. She squealed and then both he and Easter were shooting out into something behind us.

A boom shook the air, concussing my chest as Diego shot off one of his rocket launchers. “Direct hit!” he yelled and then his voice faded. “Shit.”

“Nothing’s touching it!” Killian said. Something slammed into the left side of the Bronco, screeching down the metal. I glanced over in time to see a set of fangs attached to a long thin body, a tube not unlike my friend Ornias, from the church in New York City.

“How can Gardreel be employing a demon now?” I snapped. Eligor cringed.

“I don’t know. I don’t know!”

“Because they want to be free too,” Ipos said through Killian. “They will help him make this happen. I personally do not want that.”

Despite what Eligor and Gardreel wanted to believe, they had fallen, and by falling they had become demons.

The screeching against the Bronco was increasing, as if dozens of teeth, and then hundreds were digging in and falling away.

Flashes of red and black skin, though skin would give it the impression of being soft, and fragile, when it looked harder than that.

“Nothing is knocking them off!” Easter yelled.

Eligor groaned and slid further down into his seat. “They sent shriekers in. This is bad. We can’t survive this.”

I didn’t know what the fuck shriekers were, and I didn’t have to in order to know we had to pull out all the stops. “Killian, try shocking them!”

“Working on it,” he yelled back just as the world lit up. Like he’d turned on a massive switch, the world went from night to day in a literal flash. There was a moment where I could see nothing, my eyes blinded and then we were bumping along, barely managing to get around nature’s fucking potholes. I took note that Ipos was saying nothing.

I kept the pedal down and kept driving—not like there were many trees out here. “Anything?”

“They backed off . . . fuck, no they’re still on us, lass!” he shouted.

Emerald didn't start crying, didn't start screaming or freaking out. She just closed her eyes.

I, on the other hand, knew we were running out of space. The shriekers were fast, way too fast.

"Ipos, will my fire hurt them? The fire of an ascendant?" I yelled up at Killian. He startled and looked at me, blue eyes solidly on mine.

"Yes. You can kill them, Phoenix, but—"

That was all I needed. I cranked the wheel hard to the right, spinning the Bronco around to face the oncoming demons, barely keeping it upright.

I leapt out of the car as everyone else was still getting their bearings.

"Wait, Phoenix!" Eligor was the first to scramble out after me. But I didn't slow my stride, which seemed to give the demons some pause. They rolled toward me, like a wave of writhing dark tubes with teeth. Tubes that had far more substance than my friend Ornias.

That pause only lasted a split second really, and then they rushed me. Hundreds of them scrambling over one another.

"Ready?" I yanked Dinah clear and held her steady.

"I'm your bitch!"

I breathed deep and pulled up the fire that burned deep and dark within me. I pulled it up and along my arms, just like I did with the electricity that I borrowed from Killian. As soon as the flames rolled down over Dinah's barrel I started shooting. The flames

curled around each bullet as they flew from her and slammed into the first of the demons.

The first few shots it was hard to tell if there was any damage, and then I saw them going down, one after another. They tried to go around me, but I could . . . feel them wasn't the right word. But it was the closest I had. I could sense them.

It was almost exactly like hunting abnormals. There was a smell and a sense of where they were going to be just before they got there. I let my body and mind sink into the act of killing them all while Dinah screamed and laughed.

The flames burned hot through me, and my skin crackled with it. Distantly Eligor was yelling at me. Something. Maybe something important.

“You have to stop! Phoenix, you have to listen to me!”

“Not anymore, fucker!” Dinah screamed back for me.

The more I used the fire, the hotter it burned, until I was dripping with sweat, barely able to see past the heat waves rolling out around me.

“You'll kill her!” Eligor yelled. “You'll kill your gun; you'll burn her soul out!”

That stopped me. The demons retreated out of the way of my flames, and I let the fire die down long enough to really feel Dinah's handle. Soft. The metal was soft under my hands.

“Fuck, Dinah! Why didn't you say anything!”

I tucked her not into the holster against my chest but tossed her instead back toward Killian. He caught her and immediately dropped her. Too hot.

“Me, me!” Diego yelled from where Easter held him.

A scream rent the air, raising every hair across my arms and the back of my neck. The little demons had pulled back and were being absorbed into something . . . bigger. Something that was rather pissed off with us.

I know you, Phoenix. You banished Bazixal.

Well, fuck. If I thought that the night couldn't get any worse, I was very, very wrong. Because a new demon knew my name.

Which meant it was time to play hardball.

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“You have my name, demon,” I shouted out into the writhing darkness, trying to calm the fears that were crawling along my spine. “What is yours?”

Laughter, deep and gravelly, rolled out of the creature, or maybe creatures was more correct as it sounded like the smaller shriekers were echoing their larger friend, which created an orchestra of sound around us.

You will not have my name, Phoenix. For I know that which you seek, as does Bazixal. And you will not have it. Not from me. Not from him. We care not if the fallen take this world. They do not know what we know.

“No?” I settled my legs into a stance meant for fighting an opponent at least close to my own size. Something tangible and not a chunk of writhing darkness. “You sure about that? ’Cause I’m about to make you my bitch, name or no name.”

The demon pulled back. Why are you not afraid of me?

I grinned as that fear that had started on me swept away. “Because I’m the goddamn Phoenix, and I’m going to turn you into ashes.”

I leaned back and then leapt forward, running toward the darkness even as I called up my fire. The fire of an angel trained to kill her own. The fire that had been in me all this time. It ripped through me, crawling along my limbs and lifting my hair around my face.

No fear. There could be no fear in me.

The shrieker tried to fall backward, scrambling to put distance between us, but I was already on it, driving my hands deep into its mass and taking hold of the . . . black? The dark? It was like grabbing hold of tissue paper that didn't tear. I clamped down and immediately saw inside the demon's mind.

Not pretty.

The evil that lurked inside of it was overwhelming, and I screamed as I dug through it. Because I needed to see how the fuck Gardreel had convinced it to help him. Why would a demon help a fallen angel? And if it had information, I would take it—happily by force.

Bits and pieces came to me as the demon writhed and fought to keep its secrets.

That the fallen didn't understand that they would lose if they took the world. They were not angels any longer. It was good for the demons to help them. And there were bigger demons than even Bazixal waiting to take hold of the world.

I bore down, tightening my hold on its body. That truth I'd already suspected.

The fallen were demons that still had bodies. That was the only difference. Once their bodies were gone, they would be demons. Just like the rest of them. And the world would be owned by us.

"Son of a bitch!" I dropped to one knee and dug in harder as I tried to find out where Bazixal could be called up. Because I realized with what I was learning, that Bazixal would fight me too. There was no way he wouldn't. Not if by sitting back and doing nothing, he'd essentially become free to walk the world.

The shrieker lived up to its name—it and all its small ones screamed and howled—as I burned the ever-living shit out of it. My flames seared over me, rising higher and

higher as I clung onto the demon, turning bright white. It thrashed and we went down in a heap, but I didn't let go, not even once I realized that the flames weren't just hurting it, but me too.

They were starting to crisp the tips of my fingers. Burning parts of my belly where the fire originated.

But I didn't have what I needed.

You see? The shrieker began to laugh, you are not strong enough even now. You cannot take what you need from me. You can kill me, but you can't break me. And to take a demon's power, you must break them!

I roared as the flames consumed us both, my throat tightening around the heat. The screaming that erupted out of me was not pain, but rage. Because I could feel the weight of his words. Demons were fucking liars, but they could also be stupid and let things slip. He was so busy bragging that all I'd be able to do was kill him, he didn't realize he'd given me a key.

And a place. I saw it, just a flicker in his mind but I knew the place and I wasn't surprised, not a bit. The mansion in the swamps where I'd banished Bazixal. Where I'd stopped him, that was where I would call him up again.

As all that fire poured out around me, the waves of orange and red and gold and white, the demon shrank, falling in on itself. Folding like an intricate piece of origami, over and over. The smaller ones were doing the same, growing tinier yet until they were all the size of larva squiggling on the ground.

I let the flames go, but there was a cost to all that heat. I looked down, fully expecting my clothes to have been charred off. But my mother's corset had protected my upper body and seemed to have deflected a lot of the flames.

The cost, though, was in me. I could feel every part of me that had been walls for so long, gone. Torched away. Every part of me was open and I could . . . feel the others around me.

Killian's concern I'd be hurt badly.

Emerald's fear that we would all die by the shriekers.

Easter's confidence that I had this.

Even Ruby's worry that she couldn't get close to me.

Distantly, I could even feel Pete and Carlos.

Lives popped up all around me, distant and close.

Eligor, on the other hand . . . his emotions were blocked. I could sense Cowboy faintly and he was still freaking the fuck out.

With some effort I pulled myself together and blocked out the others, putting my walls back in place, keeping myself safe. The last thing I needed was to feel their thoughts inside of me.

My knees buckled even as Easter and Emerald smashed their heels into the larvae around us.

There were no words from the things that were on the ground. I caught a glimpse of Emerald's face. Horror. Disgust. She was looking at something she could have been related to—but was it the demon, or me?

Hands slipped around me, and Killian was there, tipping water into my mouth.

“Drink, Nix. Drink.”

The water helped soothe the ragged edges of my throat. “We have to go.” I managed to get the words out, but they sounded about as solid as I felt.

He scooped me up. “Easter, you’re driving. Eligor in the front.”

They did a quick shuffle and then we were on the road again, only me and Killian in the back, stretched out with Ruby lying full length beside me. I closed my eyes.

“What do you need?” Killian had his mouth close to my ear, his breath tickling me.

“Sleep, but we don’t have time for that.” I lay there with my eyes open, one hand on Ruby, the other reaching back for Killian. “He said . . . he said I wasn’t strong enough to break Bazixal. That it is in the breaking of a demon that you can take their power. And that is what we need to stuff him into a gun because he sure as shit won’t consent. He won’t go easy.” I winced as we hit a pothole. “The demons . . . they’re going to help the fallen.”

Killian’s face changed and I knew I was looking up at Ipos. “He spoke truth in that. We have to be broken or give consent.”

I lay there as we bumped along, and I realized that no one was going to speak until I had worked this out.

“It’s got to be different than when you willingly give up your soul to go into a weapon.” I did a long slow blink as I tried to wrap my head around what I was dealing with. “My ability, it kills demons, but not the fallen. Why?” I forced myself to sit up. “Eligor, why is that? It makes no sense. That’s what my bloodline was created to do.”

He looked over his shoulder from the passenger seat. “Because you are not pure. I do not mean that as disrespect. But you are only partly of the fallen. You are partly human too. That dilutes your abilities.”

I waved a hand at him to go on.

He cleared his throat. “You killed one of the fallen already. But you used his own power against him. You were a conduit. The same way you will need a weapon to become a conduit for the power of . . . Bazixal.” He spoke the demon’s name in hushed tones, as if he were worried that he would accidentally call him forward.

“So, I can fend off the fallen. But not kill them. Like with the dust.” I had hoped, a small part of me thought maybe we could bypass all this running around shit and get right to the fighting part. The killing part.

“Yes. You can injure them, as you’ve been doing—I believe that all abnormals can injure them, but not kill them. They regenerate and can come back. At best—and this is if Gardreel would even let you get close—you could slow him down. But not for long. He has a source of power that even I do not understand.”

He looked over at Easter, then to Emerald and Killian. “All of you carry some abilities that could hurt the fallen. Not to the extent that Phoenix can, but it is there. It is why we chose to knock you out before we took you into the facilities. We had to, in order to not be injured ourselves.”

His words were starting up a thread of ideas in my head. Abnormals could injure the fallen.

The battle that was coming. The abnormals would need to stand with me, to give me time to deal with Gardreel. Like a fucking general and her army.

“But what about when they have all the arms and the wings?” I frowned and then realized that we hadn’t actually used any abilities on the ones that we’d faced down at Carlos’s house. We’d shot them.

“Those too.” Just like back at the airstrip. He ducked his head. “Where you used the bullets, you dusted them with the remainder of a fallen? They did damage then. But only then.”

The pieces were coming together, slowly, but they were clearer than they’d been only a few minutes before. “I thought Bazixal would want to kill the fallen.” I closed my eyes. “I will have to force him into a gun.”

There was quiet all through the car. No sirens, no police chasing us down, no shriekers.

“Do you think they just gave up?” Emerald asked quietly.

“No.” I leaned into Killian, letting him take my weight. “They’re trying to figure out where we’re going and how we killed that shrieker. And with no Hider to keep us out of sight, they’ll figure the first part out soon enough.”

Easter tapped her hands on the steering wheel. “They’ll be waiting for us then.”

“Yes.” I reached over and pulled Ruby a little closer. Her warmth and Killian’s sunk into me. I didn’t think I could sleep after seeing inside the shrieker’s mind, after looking evil in the eye and truly understanding how much they hated us.

They hated abnormals almost more than the fallen did.

Because we represented everything they could have been.

And if they were helping the fallen now, truly helping, we were good and royally fucked.

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Easter drove through the rest of the night, stopping only for fuel at a quiet gas station with flickering lights and a half-blind attendant. No cameras either. Not that I thought we were only being watched through surveillance in that way. I had no doubt that Gardreel had some version of his own Tracker chasing us down. I let the others drive while I slept, recharging my batteries. I felt like I'd been sick for weeks; my body ached, and my mind was fuzzy.

“Are you sure you're, okay?” Emerald leaned over and put a hand on my calf. Her concern was not unwarranted. Most abnormals didn't have their own abilities try to eat them up. I waved a hand at her.

“I'll be fine.”

I didn't know if I'd be fine, not at all. But I wasn't above lying to a kid to take away the worry in her eyes when we were already dealing with demons, monsters, and fallen angels.

As the morning light hit, the sun splashed over my face and I opened my eyes, and the thoughts that had been tossed around in my head while I slept came to the surface. I needed to get a message to Mario, but . . . “Anyone get a number for Mario?”

Easter nodded. “He gave me his personal number.” She laughed. “Like I'd ever . . . well, maybe. We're coming up on a town. We should switch vehicles anyway. You can call him.”

We slid off the interstate and past the first few obvious stops, and then she took us into a small subdivision, but that wasn't going to work. “No, let's find the shit part of

town,” I said.

Emerald tensed beside me, her accent tugging at my ears. “You want to go to a dangerous part? Why?”

Like with Cowboy, I felt as if I had to give her some instruction, to give her a leg up. “Because the cops rarely look for the people who kill criminals. They’ll chalk it up to some gang-related hit. And that means it won’t be as noticeable for the assholes looking for us.” I looked at Eligor, and then to Killian. “Either of you demons disagree?”

Eligor paled. “I am no demon.”

Killian’s eyes turned blue, and rather thoughtful. “I believe you are right. I believe that they will be looking at the obvious places. Of course, they could have learned seeing as they’ve been following you for so long. You are a favorite of all of ours, so bloodthirsty. So . . . bad.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, choosing to ignore the innuendo. “And you. You have been rather quiet, Ipos. Why is that?”

He smiled. “You’re upset that I let your man control his own body? Would you rather it was me kissing you? I would.”

I didn’t shift my stance at all, didn’t so much as blink. The rage in me rose hot and fast, and with it came the flames that I thought I’d pretty much burned out the night before. His eyes blinked back to green as Ipos fled. I didn’t even have to say anything.

Killian raised his eyebrows. “Lass. I think you scared him.”

“Your parasite needs an ass kicking,” I said and turned away from him. He reached for me, and I struggled to let him touch me. I’d saved his body, and I knew he was still in there, that it was mostly Killian. But at what cost?

“Getting rough,” Easter said, and it took me a second to realize that she meant the area we were in, and not the back and forth between me and Killian. The buildings were in disrepair, the brick stained, signs half lit, or hanging off their struts.

“What are you looking for?” Eligor asked. It was a question Cowboy would have asked, but I chose not to point it out.

“Bikes,” I said as I pointed out a biker ahead of us, his leather jacket covered in a patch I recognized. Skull and crossbones lit on fire. Subtle. “Follow him.”

He didn’t go far before he pulled into a two-story garage, several other bikes visible all around and inside.

“What are you going to do?” Eligor whispered. “Are you going to kill them?”

I stared hard at him. “Yeah, I am.”

“Me too,” Dinah said.

Diego laughed. “I’ve been sleeping, and I wake up to a shoot-out? Lovely!”

Easter parked right behind the biker we’d followed in. He got off his bike—no helmet of course—and turned around to us, his mouth already open, his fists coming up. I stepped out of the Bronco, Dinah already in my hand. I shot him in the guts and then the head as he fell.

I moved on autopilot as the gang came rumbling down the steps, taking them out one

after the other. Easter and Diego were right there with me. But not Killian.

I should have wondered more at that. Should have worried that he wasn't at my side.

A bike started up while we were still clearing the garage out. Easter wiped a fleck of blood off her face and looked out the window. "One of them is fucking off."

"That's fine. We've got enough bikes."

And we did. We had our choice of bikes.

I grabbed a couple helmets and tossed one to Emerald. "You ride with me."

Easter pulled a helmet on, tucking her brilliant red hair up into it. "What about him?"

Eligor stood there, looking unsure. "You need to let Cowboy up now. He can ride one of these."

He nodded, and a moment later he was on his knees, gasping for breath. "Jesus. Nix, please don't let him do that again."

"Then hold your shit together. Can you do that?" I asked.

Dinah shivered in her holster. "I'm betting he lasts five minutes this time."

She was laughing, but I was not. Because Killian was missing. Ruby crawled out of the Jeep, her head low, and a whine in her throat. My jaw ticked and I damped down the hurt. Because it was not his fault, I knew it. Fucking demon had taken over, had just been waiting for his chance. Or maybe I'd scared him just that bad.

"Where is Killian?" Easter stood next to me.

“The demon took him.” I walked over to a bike that had a sidecar and checked it for fuel. Got it started and backed out of the garage. Easter didn’t question why we were leaving.

Killian was on his own. He would either get free of the demon himself, or I would find him later and help him.

This was not our love story; I was not going after him when I had bigger fish to fry.

Cowboy was still shaky, but he got on one of the bikes. I snapped my fingers at Ruby and pointed to the sidecar. She leapt in and slumped down, curling into a ball in the seat.

Easter handed me a slip of paper with a number on it. I went back into the garage, dug around in one of the dead men’s pockets and pulled a phone out. No lock on the phone; I dialed the number.

It clicked through immediately. “Who is this?” Mario’s voice was rough, as though he were exhausted.

“Your sister,” I said. “Where are you?”

“We made it to the . . . place you said.” His words were full of static. “They can’t find us.”

“Good, leave the weakest ones there, and get your ass and your strongest to the address I’m going to text you. We’ll face off with the fallen there in forty-eight hours.”

Silence for a beat. “How can you trust me?”

“I don’t. But I’m your chance at ending this, at sending the fallen to hang with the rest of their family.”

I hung up the phone and texted him the address in NOLA. The house where I’d faced down Bazixal.

I closed my eyes and reached for Pete. He was distant, but they were moving toward NOLA too. That was good.

I let the connection go before he could feel me reaching for him, and I shut down the urge to reach for Killian. He was on his own for now.

I strode back to the bikes, gave Easter a nod, and then we were gone, going south as fast as we could.

We stopped for fuel and food, that was it. There were no more hits on us, and I knew why.

Gardreel knew where we were headed. He was waiting for us. Why waste resources when we were running straight to him.

Fifteen hours of driving took us into the evening of the same day. The next night was the night of the bleeding stars.

Odessa was where we ended up. That’s all I could think about as we rolled close to the facility that held my mother’s body. And by close, I mean we were thirty miles out, just on the range of what Eligor could do in terms of putting the rest of the handlers out of commission.

“Can they see us here?” I asked Eligor as we parked our bikes on the side of the road, right near a pipe-laying plant. Lots of equipment, not much cover. This was more

about blending in.

Cowboy jerked and I raised a brow. “Just ask him.”

He nodded quick. “No, he said they shouldn’t be able to . . . but he’s not sure.”

Easter snorted. “How are we doing this? We’ve lost Killian, Pete and Carlos are gone.”

“He,” I pointed at Cowboy, “is going to throw an EMP pulse when I say so. We’re going to walk in the front door.”

She stared at me. “The front door.”

“You think he’ll expect that?” I let myself smile even though part of me could not tear my heart away from Killian. He’d trusted me. I’d convinced him to put a demon into his body. “We go in through the front,” I said, pushing my thoughts down deep. “We use Eligor first. I’ll kill the front desk, we’ll get the codes, or key cards to use the elevators. We get to our mark; Emerald will have a chat with her and get the spell we need. Then we’ll book it.”

Emerald nodded. We’d been talking on the drive, and it turned out her abilities were solid. She could pull not only from spirit, but from the memories trapped in a body. Exactly what Mario had said he was looking for. A death talker.

Exactly what Gardreel had been looking for.

“They’ll see us coming with the bikes,” Easter said. “I assume you have an idea?”

“Yes. Dinah, you remember the hit on the east side of the river? When we took down the four loan sharks who owed Romano money?”

“You mean when you stole the cop car? Yes, yes, I do,” she said. “That’ll get you to the front no problem, but the cops here might notice.”

I shrugged and started walking toward the donut shop I’d seen when we’d rolled into Odessa. “Maybe. We don’t need it long.”

Easter laughed. “What are you thinking?”

“I’ve an idea.” I motioned for Cowboy to hurry up, taking note of the sweat on his brow, and the pallor of his skin. Eligor wasn’t the only one suffering from their connection. “I’ll need your help.”

“Yeah, sure, you got it.”

I led them back to the donut shop; the giant blinking pink frosted donut rotating on the top was kind of easy to spot. The single cop car sitting outside was exactly what I was hoping for. The door jingled when we let ourselves in, and there was a cop slumped over a cup of coffee.

I sat right next to him, motioning for Cowboy to sit on the other side.

The cop’s head snapped to me first. “Back the fuck up.”

“No.” I had Dinah jammed into his side before he got all the words out, so he could feel her muzzle. “You’re going to come nice and quiet with me and my friends.”

His dark brown eyes went from being furious, to fear in a heartbeat. “I got family.”

A lie.

“We all do,” I said as I pushed Dinah against him a little harder. “Get the fuck up.”

He did as I said, and I kept on him. Cowboy kept tight to his other side and we had him out to his cop car, and around the back to the trunk.

“You’re going to put him in there?” Easter asked.

“Nope.” I made him flip the trunk open. “Eligor said he needed a new body. How about this one?”

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Turned out that Eligor taking over a body was simpler than I'd thought. I'd fully expected to need to shoot the cop, to take him to the brink of death.

"No!" Cowboy held up his hand, then just grabbed the cop before I could ask him what he was doing. He put his mouth over the cop's, not quite a kiss. The cop went for his gun, I grabbed one arm and Easter grabbed the other.

A silvery substance that I knew to be Eligor's essence flowed out of Cowboy, and into the cop. He jerked hard, and I pinned his one arm to the inside of the trunk as Cowboy and he kind of tumbled in.

Cowboy scrambled off him. "He's out."

The cop lay there a moment with his eyes closed and then he slowly sat up. "This body will do. You didn't have to hurt it." He shivered and shook his head once. The radio on his chest squawked to life.

"Shane, you there?" A woman's voice echoed through.

I nodded at him and Eligor answered. "Yeah, good."

"Got a call from the coffee shop that you were dealing with some ruffians?"

"Just . . . some people passing through needing directions."

"Ten-four."

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

We piled into the car, and I took the driver’s seat. “When we get there, Eligor, you go first. See if you can put the handlers down, or whatever it is you do.”

“If Gardreel is there, he’ll—”

“Try,” I snapped. “That’s what I’m asking you to do. Fucking try.”

He bobbed his head. “Okay.”

We drove in silence, except Ruby licking her lips every now and again. She sat at Cowboy’s feet, staring up at him with a kind of adoration you’d reserve for meeting a god. He stroked her head. “Thank you, for getting him out of me.”

“No fun, is it?” Easter laughed. “You would have broken if they’d had you long.”

Eligor shook his head. “No, we would have killed him. There is too much demon in him.”

I looked at him in the mirror. “The lines between fallen and demon are thin.”

He shrunk in his seat. “They are. And it is why I am trying very hard not to cross it.” He pointed to the right. “There. Take that turn.”

As we rounded the corner, the facility came into view. I’d never seen one from the front entrance. It looked like a high-end spa with flowers and shrubberies bursting to life all around the white stone, two-story building. There were no guards, but there were lights on all over the building, and in the gardens, making the stone glow.

The sign read Odessa Rehabilitation Center—A place to heal.

“Creepy,” Easter said.

I nodded and parked the car. “Let’s go. Ruby, you and Emmy with me.”

All four doors opened, Emerald tucked in behind me, and we headed to the glass front doors. “Eligor, in front.”

He stepped up and I slid behind him. We weren’t hiding anything. The receptionist saw Eligor and buzzed the door open. He went in and I was right behind him.

There was no hesitation. I lifted Dinah and shot her, sending her backward in her seat. Eligor sucked in a sharp breath.

“Easter, clear the room,” I said as I made my way around the desk. There were no cameras showing here. I pulled up the computer screen. Empty. There was nothing. I went through the desk drawers full of pens and paper—the usual shit—until I found what I was looking for.

A key card.

I grabbed it and went to the elevator and got us all in and hit the lowest floor. Fifteen. Fucking fifteen floors below.

“Small box,” Easter said as we started down.

Cowboy snorted. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“If we get caught, we’re going to have a hell of a time getting out of here,” she said, and he blanched.

Emerald grabbed at the back of my pants, wrapping her fingers around my belt, her

body trembling. I didn't have time to comfort her.

The doors slid open.

Two guards stood with jaws slack. Easter drove the butt of Diego into one, and I slammed Dinah into the other. Both guns groaned. "I hate it when you do that," Dinah muttered. "I'm going to have a sore ass now."

"You'll just leave them?" Cowboy asked. I was already bent over the first, with my knife. I drove the tip through his uniform and into his heart. He jerked once and that was it.

Cowboy bent and helped me without being asked as we dragged the bodies into the elevator and set them, so their legs were in the door, keeping it from being called up.

The facility here mirrored the others. White walls, white floors, white everything. "We stay together, keep it tight." I led the way, feeling for my mother, feeling for her pull like I had with Emerald.

Only there was nothing.

Not a single push into any of the rooms.

I didn't panic easily, I didn't even get scared easily, but the idea of being trapped in another facility, of being duped into it . . . was not pleasant.

"I can't sense her," I said.

Emerald stepped past me. "You need me, because she's dead, right?"

"Kept alive on machines," I confirmed.

“I can find her.” She took the lead, and I was right behind her. Here, no one walked the halls. There was not a single sound, which was . . . not good.

Emerald jogged down the curving hall, turned left at the first intersection and then stopped in front of a door on her right. “Here.”

I tried the door, and it was not locked. Bait. I knew bait when I saw it.

“Can you connect with her without touching her?” I already suspected I knew the answer.

Emerald shook her head. “No. I . . . I can’t.”

Easter tapped me on the shoulder. “We’ll wait here, Eligor can scan for handlers. We got your back.”

I nodded and slipped inside the room, Emerald right behind me.

The woman on the bed did not look like my mother. She was bald with electrodes pasted all over her bare skin and upper body. A respirator hissed and hummed as it forced oxygen in and out of her. Tubes and wires everywhere.

“The spell to put a soul into a weapon, that’s what you need,” I said softly. Emerald didn’t hesitate, just picked up my mother’s hand. On the side table was a pad of paper and a pen. She grabbed the pen and then bowed her head over her other hand holding my mother’s.

I walked around the bed, looking down at the body. Trying to make it fit with what I remembered. But there was nothing.

“That her?” Dinah whispered.

“Her body,” I said. “It’s not really her. Eleanor isn’t here.”

“I thought maybe . . . maybe she would be here, you know?”

I did know.

The time slid by, and the body never moved, there was no moment of recognition on her part that I was there. It was three minutes tops before Emerald sighed. She scribbled something down on the paper. “Here, this is what you need. But there is something else.”

And she wrote fast on a second piece of paper.

I stared at it.

Knowing exactly what it was.

“Cowboy, hit the EMP!” I shouted as I grabbed Emerald and bolted from the room.

“That’ll blow the elevators!” he yelled.

“I know.” I ran back toward the elevators as the pulse passed over us, shredding the security system, backup generators, everything.

The space fell into complete and utter darkness. Easter and I each pulled a flashlight before we’d taken two steps.

“There is no one else here,” I said as I got to the elevator. I reached up and took the panel off. “We climb.”

I shoved Emerald up first, then I got going right behind her.

The ladder inside the shaft was tight and in a very short time everyone was huffing. I counted the floors as we went. At the floor below the lobby, I held everyone up. “Here.” I made my way around the shaft and jammed a knife between the doors. “Easter, get the other side.”

Between the two of us, we peeled the doors back just enough to get Emerald, Cowboy and Eligor through. Then they held the doors for us to slip through.

The second floor was a solid dark. “Eligor, status report.”

“They’re waiting for you out front,” he whispered. “Gardreel is with them.”

“He set the bait, all along. Once he lost Vivian,” I kept my voice low. We weren’t moving anywhere. “The body had not only the spell we needed, but the spell he needed. He knew we’d come.”

Emerald sucked a breath. “I’m sorry!”

“Not your fault,” I said. “You couldn’t know. But now that you and I have both seen it, even if we destroy the paper, he knows we know.”

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“So now what?” Cowboy asked. “What do we do?”

Emerald curled tight against me. “He’s going to take us again, isn’t he?”

“No,” I said. “I won’t let that happen.”

“They are going to use the angel dust,” Eligor whispered. “They are preparing it now.”

I was up and moving before he finished speaking, the others running with me. “Look for stairs,” I said.

“Here!” Cowboy yelled. “I got stairs.”

They led up, and I took them two and three at a time. “Eligor, how close?”

“Less than thirty seconds,” he huffed out.

The first floor was where the front desk was, where we came in, and there was only one door that I could see. The same green door that had been behind the receptionist.

“Hurry.” I pointed at the door.

Easter hit the door first, using her shoulder to bust it open, and spilled out, ducking down behind the desk. Emerald, Cowboy and Eligor followed her. I strode out, and around the desk, squinting into the big lights that were aimed straight at the building. I could see a few figures, several with wings silhouetted. I lifted Dinah and shot out

the glass in the front doors and kept on walking.

“Gardreel, I’m surprised.” I kept walking. “I honestly thought you were too afraid to meet me in person.”

“I am not afraid of you.” His voice boomed as though he had a megaphone but doubted it.

“Really? My, you are afraid of my grandmother. The Sword. Namaa, if you prefer her given name. I like the first better. Sharp. Dangerous.” I kept on walking until I was out of the building and well away from it. The others slowly followed me.

“Ten seconds,” Eligor whispered.

I grinned. “Ten seconds to angel dust, huh?”

The sky above us rumbled and a bolt of lightning slammed down into the ground between me and Gardreel as the skies opened, and rain crashed down around us.

My heart thought it was Killian. My head said it wasn’t. He was gone, Ipos taking control of him until he could find a way to take it back.

For once, my head was wrong.

The lightning ripped out through the skies, and hit every single fallen in the vicinity, throwing them back a good twenty feet. Killian stood behind them all at the driveway entrance, his hair slicked by the rain, his grin crooked and sexy as fuck. “You coming or not, lass?”

I was running first, the others caught up, but I didn’t care in that moment. He grabbed me around the waist, kissed me hard enough for me to know it was him, really him,

and then shoved me at the cop car. “It won’t hold them, let’s go.”

We climbed in; Ruby was all over us, barking and yipping in excitement, like she was a damn puppy. I slammed the cop car into reverse as the fallen started to get up from the blow Killian had dealt them.

They wouldn’t fall for it again, I knew that. Killian was on his bike and peeled out, sending a spray of gravel across the hood of the police car as we took off after him.

Anxiety flowed through me, and I realized it wasn’t my own. “Emmy, you okay?”

“Yeah, just . . . Eligor isn’t here, he . . . he asked me what I saw. He asked me for the spell.”

I didn’t twist around. I couldn’t look at her, because her energy said it all. She’d told him.

“He said just in case I got hurt. I believed him, I’m sorry!” She let out a sob.

“Not your fault, kid,” Easter growled. “He was a slippery fuck right from the beginning.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

I shook my head. “Easter is right. They . . . they set us all up from the beginning. As soon as they lost Vivian, they allowed us to get here,” I grimaced, thinking about Eligor, thinking that maybe he’d picked up a thing or two from me. Maybe he’d learned to hide how he really felt. Whatever the case was, it had worked in their favor. He’d told me that a Magelore held the other spell, and I’d believed him.

I frowned. Could Vivian be working with them too? That didn’t feel quite right.

“What’s the next step?” Easter asked.

“We need a spell caster,” Emerald said and Easter pointed at herself. “And they have to have a wand made of southern moss and oak. When we have that, all we need is a gun and the demon.” She swallowed hard. “The words are simple to the spell. Do you want them now?”

Easter looked at me and I nodded. “Yes. Better that we all know them. Eligor is already going to give it up to his boss.”

Emerald took a deep breath and cleared her throat. “The soul of one, freely given, cast in steel, from body riven, given power, given life, to cause the world a world of strife. No more grave, no more answers, let this spell be necromancers, way to beat the call of death, and into weapons give steel breath.”

She sighed. “That’s it. And you specifically need the demon Bazixal.” Emerald paused. “Both spells said that.”

My foot nearly hit the brake. “Both spells said that we specifically need the demon Bazixal? Are you sure?”

She bobbed her head. “Yes, I didn’t write that part down. I should have.”

“Did you tell Eligor that part?” I could hope she hadn’t, but by the way her face fell, she had indeed. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. We have a wand to find. Easter, you got one like that?”

“No, but I know someone who does. An old witch in Savannah. She’s a master at stuff like this. It’ll cost us, though. She isn’t cheap.” Easter twisted around so she was looking out the back of the cop car. “They’re coming. I can just see them in between lightning flashes.”

I took us straight into town, and we left the cop car by the pipe-laying factory and got on our bikes. We didn't need cops running us down, as well as the fallen.

"How are we going to slow them?" Cowboy shouted over the wind as we started to pick up speed.

I didn't have an answer to that. What I knew was all we could do was try to outrun them. They weren't faster than the bikes.

That was the only upside of riding in the rain, with the stinging bite of every droplet slamming against my face. The fallen didn't seem to like the rain either, and we lost them somewhere along the way.

Savannah was a long way away. We didn't have time to dick around, and then we were going to have to backtrack to get to New Orleans.

At the first stop for fuel, I pulled Killian aside. "You take Cowboy and Emerald to New Orleans. See if you can find any abnormals willing to fight. Easter and I are going to have to find a faster way to Savannah than the bikes, or we're going to run out of time."

We had to beat Gardreel to Bazixal.

"You need a private jet," Killian said. "Let me see if I can get something lined up along the way, you just keep going. I'll call you." He tapped the stolen phone in my pocket.

I stared into his green eyes. "And the demon?"

"We came to an agreement. I wouldn't let you burn him out, and he let me take the reins permanently. Not exactly perfect, but good enough. You scared him, that's why

he ran.”

He kissed me quick and then he was taking the two younger abnormals with him. They would be safe with him. Or as safe as we could be in our current situation.

Easter and I got moving, me with my sidecar and Ruby pretty damn happy to be coming along for an extended car ride.

There was no holding back on speed. We had the bikes going full throttle in between pit stops.

No sleep.

No talking.

We barely ate enough to keep going.

The drive to get to Savannah was enough to keep me awake despite the nearly eighteen hours it took.

Eighteen hours, and we were on our last day. Close to noon.

Easter led us through the town of Savannah, under the low-hanging moss-covered trees, past the squares that made up the central part of the city. Ruby gave a woof as we passed a thin woman with a cleft palate. She shook a fist at the dog, and for a second, I thought she had webbed hands.

“Here,” Easter yelled over the rumble of the two bikes. She flicked hers off first and was through the gate to a large old house. The front garden was immaculate, if a bit wild looking. I snapped my fingers at Ruby, and she leapt out of the sidecar and came around to me.

We followed Easter up the rickety steps to the front door.

She banged three times. “Celia, are you home?”

I pulled out the phone. Nothing from Killian. Fuck. If he didn’t find us a faster way back to NOLA, we still might be able to do it. Assuming that this Celia woman had the wand, and it wasn’t too much to part with a fucking stick.

My jaw ticked.

The door opened and a woman who looked like she’d just stepped out of the nineteenth century stared out at us, her puffed sleeves and long full dress helping her fit the part. Her face was soft, and that could have been deceiving. Because her eyes were hard as they flicked over us. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“I need a wand,” Easter breathed out. “A very specific wand made of southern moss and oak wood.” Easter paused. “Please.”

Celia drew in a deep breath and crossed her arms. “Well, come on in then. Let’s discuss the price and the timeline.”

I stepped around Easter. “The timeline is immediate. The price is whatever you want.”

Her eyes snapped to mine, and I stared right back. Old ladies didn’t scare me, not even those who had spells at their fingertips.

Her lips slowly curved. “I’ve heard about you. Your grandmother, Namaa, used to have tea with me from time to time. Completely wild, but even so she liked a good cup of Earl Grey. I miss her.”

The idea that my grandmother and this woman had tea together made my head hurt. “We need that wand, Celia. Can you make it for us?”

She sniffed. “Of course I can. It will take a bit of time.”

“How much time?” Easter asked. “We are on a crunch.”

The old woman waved us into her house. I looked up a long stairway to the second floor, but she went to the right, headed toward what looked like the kitchen. The smell of cookies baking filled the air.

Surreal didn’t even begin to cover the sensation. Especially when I took a good look at what was in the kitchen. It looked like an old school apothecary, right down to the miniature cauldron sitting on a hotplate, bubbling away. Herbs hung from the rafters, jars of spice and God only knew what, sat in perfectly organized shelving units on the counters.

“That wand takes months to make,” Celia said as she sat down at the table.

Easter groaned and bent her head, barely holding herself up. “We don’t have months.”

Celia and I were still doing our best to out-stare each other. She finally sighed and looked away. “I may have one tucked away, but it is my personal oak wand, you must understand—”

“We’ll take it,” I said, my voice even. “And of course you’ll be compensated.”

She snorted. “Or I’ll be dead. A wand of that power is partially my protection.”

Dinah had been silent all this time. “Not to be melodramatic,” she now drawled. “But

the world is on the line. Why not offer her a spell in exchange?”

A spell.

Celia sat up straighter. “Did your gun just talk?”

“You want a weapon like her?” I asked. “I have the spell to make another.”

And that was how the deal went. I scribbled down the spell, and Easter took the wand.

It could have been worse.

Of course, we still had to get to New Orleans before the stars began to bleed.

I checked the phone one more time. “Nothing. We fuel up and we go.”

“If you are in a hurry, I might be able to help,” Celia said. “I . . . the spell you gave me is worth more than the wand. I would not be in your debt.”

I was sitting on the bike. “What are you thinking?”

“I have a friend with a private jet. I’m betting he’d take those two bikes for a one-way flight.” Celia smiled. “He’s a shifter, but he’s always wanted a bike. He’ll love those.”

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We never met the owner of the jet; Celia arranged the whole thing for us. We drove to a private airstrip just outside Savannah and left the bikes there, climbed aboard the plane, and in under ten minutes we were in the air.

“How long to NOLA?” Easter asked the one flight attendant.

The woman blinked huge eyes at us. Abnormal for sure, but I said nothing.

Her voice was breathy and soft. “A little over three and a half hours. The weather is good, so there is no need to worry about delays.”

Three and a half hours. We’d be in just before five in the evening. Was it early enough? I honestly didn’t know.

Which is why I laid myself down across a section of the seats and went to sleep. Ruby lay on the floor next to me, and I let my hand dangle so I could touch her. Easter was already out. I had no reason to trust that Celia woman, except . . . except she knew my grandmother.

I slept solid for the first three hours, and then drifted into that place of in-between, tugged there by someone I loved.

He’d gotten taller. “Bear.”

“Mama,” he whispered and threw himself into my arms. I hugged him tight as his smaller frame shook. But not so much smaller now. His head tucked into the crook of my neck and shoulder.

“I’m almost . . . I’m almost ready to come for you. Are you okay?”

He struggled to breathe. “It’s hard. It’s so hard.” Tear tracks stained his face.

I cupped his face with my hands. “Hang on, baby. You can do this. I know you can.”

“You’re killing the ones, the ones who took you from us?” His eyes searched mine and I nodded.

“Yes. The ones who have hurt so many abnormals. I have to stop them.” I kept my hands on him, knowing that what I was about to say was unfair, but there was no choice. “If . . . if I fail, Bear . . . you are the only other ascendant.”

He closed his eyes.

I told him everything he would have to do. The spell. The gun. The spell caster. The demon.

I told him so that the world would have a chance if I failed.

“You won’t fail, Mom.” He pulled me into a hug. “I know you won’t. Burn them. Burn them all.”

I kissed his forehead and the plane bumped as we landed, jarring me out of the foggy space. There was no rage in me now, just sorrow. A deep, deep well of sorrow that I could not deny.

“Thank you for flying with us,” the attendant said in that oh-so-soft voice. Ruby woofed at her, and she bent and rubbed the dog’s head, surprising me. She smiled. “I love dogs.”

I kept moving, pulled out the phone and stared at it. Either Killian was in trouble, or there was nothing he could have pulled off.

I dropped the phone back into my pocket. “Easter, we’re about thirty minutes from the house. We’ll head there now and do the spell.”

“You need another gun,” Dinah said. “Or a weapon of some sort.”

I nodded. “I know. I’ve got a plan.”

Easter didn’t ask how we were going to get there, or what we’d do if we got there and it was too late.

I pulled up the phone again and clicked on the Uber button. The owner of the phone had an account linked, and I had an Uber waiting for us in a matter of minutes.

The driver was . . . chatty. “That’s one of the old slaver’s mansions, isn’t it? You doing one of the haunted tours? They do some really great special effects. Looks like a demon coming out of the fireplace!” He laughed and I shared a quick look with Easter.

She shook her head. “Humans are fucking stupid. Messing around in that place.”

The driver laughed. “Humans? What are you two pretty ladies? Abnormals?” He laughed again, and then looked into the back and got a good eyeful of resting bitch face times two. “Oh.”

“Drive,” I said. “As if your life depended on getting us there in as short a space of time as possible.” And then I smiled.

He hit the gas and we were all but screaming through the streets. The sweat was

visible along the back of his neck.

“You really know how to motivate people,” Dinah said. “Something I’ve always loved about you.”

I put my hand over her. “Romano always had a secret stash of weapons in every place he went. They should be in the office, in the wall behind a picture.”

“You think they will still be there?” Easter asked.

“I’m betting on it,” I said. “I was the only one who knew about the stashes, because he wanted me to have access to more weapons if I had to protect him. The codes in the safe were always the same. 666999.”

“And you’re telling me . . .” Easter left it hanging.

“Just in case.” Just like I’d told Bear what he’d have to do if I fell at the last hurdle. Just in case.

I didn’t like contingency plans. They felt too much like setting yourself up for failure. But in this case, there was too much riding on me. Too many variables.

Like pulling up to the now ‘Haunted house tours of New Orleans’ and seeing easily a hundred people waiting to go in and get a scare. How many more were in the house? One human was one too many, especially when there were demons and abnormals about to have a showdown in the middle of said house.

“Dinah, get your flash bang on,” I said. “We need to clear them out.”

“Me too,” grumbled Diego.

Easter laughed. “He’s been muttering to me all this time about not getting used enough.”

I rolled my eyes. Save me from insecure men. I was suddenly very glad I’d handed him off to Easter.

I stepped out of the Uber, held Dinah in the air and squeezed the trigger. The flash bang went off and the humans screamed, scattering around us. Stinking like fear and body odor, they ran, scattering like rats ahead of the water rising.

Ruby snarled at any who got too close to us. I strode forward to where the attendant crouched below her little window in the too-small ticket booth. “I suggest you leave too.”

“Right, okay, please don’t shoot me.” She was shaking and trembling as she stumbled out of the booth, down the sidewalk and out of sight.

I stretched out my senses, searching for Killian, Emerald or Cowboy. They were inside.

Killian was . . . amused.

He met us in the foyer of the house. “I had a plan to clear out the humans,” he said. “You couldn’t wait?”

I shrugged. “My way was quicker.”

The house was decked out as though it were Halloween and not the middle of summer. But then again, humans liked to be scared if they thought they were actually safe. I hurried up the two flights of stairs that led to the upper bedrooms, pushing past red tape and fake cobwebs. Seriously, this was a fucking mess. The walls were

scorched with flame marks. Those were real at least.

The office was the last door on the right and I let myself in. Killian was right behind me. “What are you looking for?”

“A gun.” I flipped back the pictures, but none had an indent behind them. “These aren’t where they were originally.” I placed my hands on the walls and started feeling along. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

“What am I feeling for?” he asked.

“A slight indent. When you push on it a false panel opens.” I slid my hands across the wall as Easter yelled up from downstairs.

“We’ve got company!”

“Deal with it!” I yelled back. My finger dipped, and I pressed on the false panel. It popped open and the safe was just sitting there. I punched in the code and cranked the handle.

The two guns inside were replicas of Dinah and Eleanor, made to fit my hands. The same style of berretta, right down to the matte black coating.

“A match for me,” Dinah said. “That’s good. I wish it was a girl going into it, and not a slimy demon motherfucker.”

I didn’t disagree. “Let’s get this shit done.” Killian and I ran back downstairs, Ruby bounding ahead of us. I fully expected to see Gardreel there, his asshole fallen making their stand.

What I saw was Mario and a dozen abnormals.

But were they there to help us, or make my life miserable?

“Sister,” he called out, “I’m here.”

Yeah, that didn’t say one way or the other. I steadied my stance, holding Dinah pointed downward, and the new gun steadied in my right.

“Whose side are you on, motherfucker?” Dinah yelled.

Mario’s smile was immediate. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Cut the fucking games.” I took a step toward him. “You’ve played both sides of the field. You here to help?”

“Make me a gun like yours, and I’m in.” He rolled his shoulders. “Deal?”

I turned and walked into the house. “Guard the place. The fallen don’t like hits that involve our abilities, so don’t bother using your guns.”

I made my way to the central part of the house where the massive fireplace had been. Still was, only now it was fixed up.

“We need Pete,” Easter said. She, Emerald and Cowboy had pushed all the furniture and knick knack shit out of the room and bared the floor. Etched into the floor was a circle. And when I say etched, I mean literally etched into the stone.

Step one was done before we even needed it. “Pete said we need a sacrifice of some sort,” I closed my eyes and reached for the Magelore. Startled when I felt him a hell of a lot closer than I’d expected.

“He’s on his way. Should be here in minutes.” I opened my eyes. Easter was staring

past me in a way that had me spinning. Her eyes were narrow and her mouth drawn into a thin line.

Gardreel stood there, Eligor at his side, his head down.

“I’m sorry,” my handler whispered.

I didn’t move. We hadn’t heard anything, there had been no fighting. No sounds of battle. I frowned. “Angel dust?”

Gardreel tipped his head. “I find it is most effective to use what works. Lucky for you, I did not have enough on hand for anyone but my friend, Mario, and his people.”

“What do we do?” Emerald whispered.

Gardreel tipped his head so he could look at her. “You, young demon, did me a great service. I could not get the spell I needed from the old Magelore. Vivian was very . . . difficult and then she escaped. But you just handed it over to my right-hand man. Very well done.”

Even though I already knew that we’d been duped, it still brought a level of rage to the surface that was difficult to contain.

Fuck it. I wasn’t going to contain the rage, not at this point. I snapped Dinah up and shot Eligor in the belly. He grabbed at his guts and stumbled toward me.

I grabbed his head and threw him into the circle, his blood spraying. “Thanks. We needed him.”

The blood spread quickly, as Eligor moaned, “No, no, don’t do this.” He tried to crawl out of the circle and I shot him again in the shoulder.

“Stay down, Eligor,” I snapped.

Calling up Bazixal . . . I didn’t have the words, I knew I didn’t. But I also knew he wanted me. Was obsessed with me. Pete was too far away, and Gardreel was in the way. “Bazixal, you miss me, motherfucker? Come say hello. If you dare.” I tucked the new gun into my waistband, and pulled a knife, slashing it across my upper forearm. Blood dripped to the floor and absorbed into the stone.

Gardreel threw his head back and laughed. “You think that will work?”

Just for fun I shot him in the throat. “I am sick of you speaking.”

Dinah shivered in my hand. “Oh, that was a good shot. I felt it all the way to my lady balls.”

I turned sideways so I could keep an eye on him, and an eye on the fireplace. And then I took a step backward so that I was inside the circle with Eligor. The second my blood hit the floor inside the circle, the fireplace exploded with a massive gout of flame, black and gold.

The heat was intense, and it took all I had to keep my eyes open. “Be ready, Easter!”

She had the spell, and I was bringing the demon to her.

Gardreel grappled with his throat. No words, no binding demons for him. I gave him a wink. “See what I did there? Bazixal always did like me best.”

Bazixal, coated in flames, stepped out of the fireplace, dressed all in black. His eyes were black pits that echoed bits and pieces of fire. He was tall, easily seven feet, limbs corded with heavy muscle. He was different than the last time I’d seen him.

He stepped into the circle with me, and I struggled not to step back as he made his way around. “A sacrifice of a fallen? Lovely. I will take him. What is it you want, Phoenix? I must say,” he paused and I found myself staring hard at him, “I am surprised to find you, of all people, calling on me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Enough talk. You want to live out here? Have a chance to hurt people?”

“Ah, yes.” He sighed. “You want me to help you with killing Gardreel, correct?”

“Yes,” I said as Dinah squirmed in my hand. I held a finger along the length of her barrel. I didn’t need her help, and I certainly did not need her mouth right then.

Bazixal sighed again. “I would . . . if I could. But I cannot. You see, Gardreel would help cleanse the world. Stop all the humans from thinking they rule this place.” He swept his hand up and around and I realized then why he looked different.

He’d taken on aspects of my father. From the clothes to the way of speaking. Even to the heavily muscled body. A shiver went through me.

“You recognize me now? Do you like what I did with him?” He leaned closer so that I could see into his eyes. I could see the souls in him, writhing. Fighting to get free. Eligor was about to be one of those. My father was likely in there somewhere.

“You could have done better,” I said. “Found someone better to emulate.”

He snapped back, “I will be free. But not with you, Phoenix.” He’d circled around me, and I’d followed. Keeping the biggest threat in my line of sight.

Gardreel hit me from behind, throwing me out of the circle.

I rolled as I hit the ground and came up, firing solidly into Gardreel. He ducked and dodged, and Dinah snarled as we missed time and again.

“Fucking feather brain!” she screamed.

“Such language. I always did like her,” Bazixal said and then held up a hand. A shimmering wave of black and gold flames slid between us, and the bullets bounced off. “But I am done with you. Brother, let us make this world new again.”

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Brother. Gardreel was Bazixal's brother?

It didn't matter, not now. Gardreel's voice came through, loud and clear as he began to speak his spell. The one that Emerald had given Eligor.

"How much time before it cleanses everything?" I turned to Emerald. "How long?"

Her eyes were wide and full of liquid. "As soon as he finishes it."

There was no time. I felt Carlos and Pete enter the house. "We have to slow him down!"

I pulled on my fire, knowing that it would hurt him. If I could get back into the circle. My own flames were brighter, closer to white than the deep red and orange of Bazixal's. I put my hands against the wall of flame, hissed as the heat slammed into me, tearing at me.

But I could push through. The pain was temporary.

"No!" Killian yelled as I leapt through the flames and into the circle once more, the fire streaking across my body. Bazixal was on his knees in front of Gardreel. I ran at the fallen, his mouth moving with the spell, and tackled him to the ground, taking us both outside of the circle. He grunted as he hit, the flow of words cut off in mid-sentence.

I could slow him down. But we still didn't have a demon to go into the gun.

“Killian, is Ipos willing?”

“Ipos?” Bazixal screamed. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

Gardreel rolled over with me, and even as I let my flames crawl all over us, I could see it wasn't doing the damage I'd hoped.

He began to chant the spell again. I slammed my elbow into his face, stopping him. He drove a knee into my gut. Back and forth we went, exchanging blows. Neither able to get the upper hand.

I needed to rip his fucking voice box out.

He flipped us over, pinned me to the ground. “I thought I could use you. I thought you would be the perfect sacrifice. Bazixal begged me to bring you. Now look at the mess!”

His throat was almost healed from the gun shots. I couldn't get to Dinah. “Ruby!”

She came running, full tilt, and slammed into Gardreel, her teeth sinking into his throat as they went down together. “Kill him.” I gave the simple command. Knowing it could mean her death. Knowing it would buy us time.

Her snarls were wet, he couldn't scream, and I stood back up, wobbled only a little.

Bazixal was still on his knees, and I could see bindings, like blackened chains tying him to the floor. The start of the spell. I hadn't stopped it completely.

Fuck.

I turned to see that Killian was shaking his head. “He won't. He won't help.”

Double fuck.

Demons are just angels who have fallen. They are one and the same.

Words spoken by my grandmother. I pulled the second gun free. “Dinah, you might get your wish.” It was a risk, but we had no other choice.

I ran around the circle to where Easter, Cowboy and Emerald stood as far back as they could. Pete and Carlos were not behind them as I’d thought. The sounds of fighting erupted from outside the house.

“The monstrous fallen are here,” Easter said. “Pete and Carlos . . . they have the kids fighting them. We have to hurry!”

I closed my eyes. “I’m going to get help.”

The only way I could reach my grandmother was through the place of limbo. I sunk down through the raging waters and then stood on the shoreline on the other side.

I reached for her connection to me, and she came, popping into existence.

“You cannot get the demon to help?” she asked. Her wings stretched out around her. “I am not surprised.”

“You knew all along. Why didn’t you just offer?” I shook my head. “Never mind, I’ll ask that later. Will you put your soul in this gun? To stop them? The ones you’ve been fighting for your entire existence?”

She tipped her head to the side. “I would only be useful for killing fallen—nothing else. That would be my entire purpose. And it would be up to you to continue that tradition. Will you do that?”

She was asking me to be the hunter, to be what I'd always been, to put my life and possibly the lives of those I loved in danger. There was no choice. I bowed my head. "Yes. Fuck. Yes."

I was thrown out of limbo, and she was there, with us in the flesh. Easter held her wand at the ready. "Who the hell is this?"

"No time." I turned to my grandmother and raised Dinah. She bowed her head, I handed her the empty gun. Then I pressed Dinah to her chest and squeezed the trigger.

Her body jumped and she went to her knees. Easter drew a quick circle around her and let my blood drip on the floor. "Now, Easter!"

She flicked the wand into the air. "The soul of one, freely given, cast in steel, from body riven, given power, given life, to cause the world a world of strife. No more grave, no more answers, let this spell be necromancers, way to beat the call of death, and into weapons give steel breath."

The spell whipped up and around the dying fallen, even as Gardreel began to chant once more—gargled with his own blood. Killian's lightning crackled through the room as he slammed it into the circle, doing all he could to break the circle and stop the spell. His eyes flicked to blue, and his lightning turned a deeper shade, to blue-black.

"Help the kids!" I screamed. He didn't question me, just turned and ran for the doors.

It was going to be a race to the end.

Easter's spell was fast, it spooled around my grandmother and slammed into her as her eyes rolled back in her head.

I had my back to the first circle.

Hands reached through and dragged me into the space where Bazixal and Gardreel stood.

Only Bazixal was fading. “This was not the deal!”

“Take her body,” Gardreel snapped. “Eligor has prepared her mind for you. It is through her that the ascension will complete.”

Oh, fuck no.

I arched my back, slamming my head into Gardreel’s chin. The spell here was thick and cloying, driving into me, up my nose. I twisted around, tried to free myself, but my energy was sliding away, like the pool of Eligor’s blood.

“Dinah,” I whispered her name as I managed to get her free. There was no other option. I got her situated. They weren’t worried about me shooting them. They should have been worried about me taking me out of the equation.

“No, no!” Dinah screamed. “No, don’t ask me to do it!”

“Must,” I whispered. “Must.”

She screamed as I put my finger on the trigger, closed my eyes, and blew out my last breath.

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He loved her. Lying on the floor, dying, he let himself admit that he loved her.

And that he'd turned on her because he was jealous of Killian. Tears squeezed out of his eyes, streaking the face of the body he'd stolen.

I'm just another demon. Unless I do the right thing.

That thought hit him hard, and he let it be in his belly. Just another demon. Which meant . . . he was just as capable of stopping Gardreel. Of saving her.

The gun was screaming. She didn't want to do something. "No."

He sat up, wrapped his arms around Bazixal and let himself fall. Not in the sense that he fell to the ground, but he gave up the last of his connection to believing that he was not a demon.

The circle cracked and opened up a vein to the realm of demons in the floor. Bazixal beat at him, his flames crisping the skin on the body he held onto.

"No. I will save her," he said, softly. "The only thing I can give her that she will accept."

Gardreel bellowed, his power slamming into Eligor's back. But it was too late. He let himself tumble into the crack along with Bazixal, the flames consuming them both.

"Be well, Nix," he whispered as he fell. "Make good choices. Better than those I made."

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Dinah was screaming. “I won’t do it! No!”

I pulled the trigger and she jerked in my hand, sending the bullet to the left of my head, skimming my skull.

Eligor’s voice whispered in my mind. Make good choices. Better than those I made.

“He’s gone, the demon is gone!” Dinah screamed. “Don’t you fucking pull that trigger!”

Bazixal was gone?

I opened my eyes. Eligor was gone. Gardreel was losing his shit, his face twisted with rage even as his body morphed into that of one of the monstrous fallen. Arms ripped out of his sides, and his body cracked and reformed at different joints.

“I will end you!” he bellowed.

I rolled to my back as a gun was slid across the floor to me. I didn’t hesitate. I grabbed the gun with my right hand, pulled every ounce of fire I had in me, and sent it down my arm as I squeezed the trigger.

I expected a concussion.

I did not expect an explosion of light and magic. Flames, white hot edging on blue, ripped out of me, connected to the gun, and shot a beam of power straight into Gardreel. His legs and arms flung wide, cracks burst through his skin, and he

screamed as his body was torn apart, piece by piece.

The silver strands of other fallen fled his body as he broke apart. That was his source of power. He consumed the other fallen's energy.

I took a breath and the world imploded around me. I was flung backward, felt a bone snap in my leg. Smoke and flames, the house shook. It was like the world was coming to an end. Maybe it was. Maybe we hadn't been quick enough.

Someone grabbed at my hands, pulling me out of the house. A set of teeth were on my good ankle. Then another set of hands.

I was flipped unceremoniously over someone's shoulder, and we were running away from the house.

"Put me down," I rasped out.

"Not yet, lass." Killian didn't sound good, and I wiggled until he was forced to put me down. Emerald was there, right with us and . . . Ruby. She limped along, blood all over her steel gray coat. But she was there, alive. Killian had blood dripping down his face, but there was something else. No time to think on it.

I turned as the house imploded in on itself in a flash bang of epic proportions. I shaded my eyes as the mushroom cloud lifted up and out, consuming the area. "Easter."

"She went out the back with Cowboy," Killian said. "We have to keep going."

"Why?"

The gun in my right hand shivered. "Because that kind of power released was a bit

much, between the two of us, and it's wiping out the fallen left and right. And when they go . . ."

The ground trembled. "Right, cracks straight to hell." I got moving, jogging along, away from the site of so . . . so much shit.

We ran, but we were slow. Too slow.

A fallen literally fell at our feet and the ground heaved. He clawed at me. "Forgive me!"

I tried to untangle myself from him, tried to get free. "Go, go!" I yelled at Killian.

"No, lass. Not this time." He held tight to me and kept steady when the fallen tried to pull me down with him. Of course, an opening to the demon realm gave someone another shot at me.

Bazixal reached through. "You're mine!"

Easter was yelling for us in the distance. I saw her try to reach us with her magic. But it was too late.

I grabbed hold of Killian, and he grabbed Emerald. Ruby stuffed herself between us and I let my fire loose. It was the only hope we had of escaping.

But as the flames rose around us, I knew only one thing.

We were too late.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

Iran with Angel strapped to my back, Captain keeping pace easily. The Russian mob had turned on itself two days ago, and we'd barely gotten out. I don't know what set them off, I didn't speak Russian but there was a lot of excitement. Chatter. The city New Orleans was mentioned. Two days, Angel and I had been on our own. We were running out of supplies, and I had no idea where we were. I'd used up a lot of my energy getting us out of the compound. I wasn't sure I could light so much as a matchstick with my fire.

The forest here was so thicker than when we'd entered, and I could barely see through it.

Angel started to cry. "It's okay, it's okay," I whispered, trying to hush her. I had a little food, and a blanket, but not much else. "We'll find somewhere to go."

Captain let out a low woof, his black-tipped ears swiveling.

I turned in the direction he pointed. Back the way we'd come. "They've found us."

Fog rolled in through the trees, obscuring any clear shot at someone. I pulled my handgun out of the holster. I wished it was Eleanor or Dinah.

Angel whimpered as I pulled her off my back and set her on the ground behind a massive tree stump. "Captain, guard." I pointed to my little sister and the Belgian Malinois lay down at her feet and put his head in her lap. She cooed and grabbed at his ears.

I didn't want to think about what would happen if someone shot me. If I died. Captain

couldn't feed her. He could get her to safety maybe. Keep her warm.

Tears slid down my cheeks, I couldn't stop them. I was so tired, so tired of being afraid.

"Little man, where did you go?" The thick accent was attached to the man that Killian had thought was our friend. Of course, he didn't know that he wouldn't be here to protect us.

I stayed quiet as Molov drew closer. "Come now, little man. That fight is over. The ones with the wings, they are fleeing! We have won!"

Hope flared in my chest. That meant . . . that meant my mom had done it. She'd saved us.

My lower lip trembled. But she wasn't here. Which meant . . . I was on my own. Maybe for good this time.

Molov snapped his fingers, and I heard the whine of the wolf-hybrids he kept in his kennels. They would sniff us out in no time.

They would tear us all apart and eat us while we screamed for mercy. I'd seen it. I moved away from Angel and Captain. "You'll kill us," I said, shifting behind the trees. "You want me dead."

"It is the price of being your mother's children. We can't have more monsters like her." He laughed and gave a whistle. The wolves came in from all sides. I spun and shot one in the head as it leapt at me. But it wasn't enough. I ran to the center of the trees, where Molov stood. He had his hands on his hips. "You don't want to be eaten, do you?"

I whipped the gun up and shot, nailing him in the shoulder, spinning him away from me. And then I ran. I would take them as far from Angel as I could. It was all I could do for her.

I was so tired, my own abilities dodged me. I'd used them up in escaping the compound.

The mist seemed to roll with me as I dodged branches and leapt over fallen logs and rocks. I slid down a slope and tumbled at the bottom, twisting my leg.

I got up, but knew . . . I was done. I turned to face the wolves, picking them off until my gun was empty.

I scrambled backward as they kept coming, snarling and low to the ground.

“They will feast on you! You fucking little shit—” Molov laughed and then . . . nothing.

I braced myself fists up as the wolf closest to me launched at me.

Captain burst out from behind and took the wolf to the ground, snarling and fighting for me. “Captain, no!” I yelled.

Where was Angel?

I tried to stand. Another wolf leapt at me and . . . a massive gray dog covered in scars took it down, snarling and snapping, pulling its throat out. That one didn't wait, it went after the next wolf closest, then the next before Captain even finished the first off. Gun shots filled the air and the wolves that were left ran, scattering.

A figure stood at the top of the slope, her body outlined in the fog. My heart

constricted. I tried not to cry. I tried not to, and failed.

“I knew you’d come for me,” I whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

Angel snuggled in between me and Killian. The northern Russian nights got cold faster, and she was more than happy to take up the space between us and the warmth there.

“We’re never going to be alone again.” He smiled to soften the complaint. I didn’t mind. This little one was mine, and I wasn’t about to let her go any time soon. Feet padded into the room and Bear crawled into the bed at my back.

“Feet are cold,” he mumbled, putting the ice blocks against my calves.

Killian reached over and scrubbed Bear’s head, ruffling up his hair. “You help me with breakfast this morning, let your mom sleep.”

Bear pushed his way deeper under the covers. “Five minutes?”

Killian laughed as he slid out of bed and pulled on his jeans. “Five minutes.”

I turned so that I could hold both of my children, keeping them close to my heart. There were moments that I felt the fear too keenly, that they would be snatched from me again. That I would be taken away.

“Never again,” I whispered to Bear. “We won’t let it ever happen again.”

“I love you too, Mom.” His scrawny little boy arms were getting long enough to wrap around me and Angel.

A few minutes later he got up and shuffled down to the kitchen on the first floor. I

could hear Emerald singing softly in her bedroom. She spoke Russian fluently, so we'd stayed here. To see if we could find her adoptive family.

"You aren't going to give her back, are you?" Dinah asked when I mentioned it.

"It will be up to her," I said. "She's not ours anymore. She is her own person."

My other gun—Galia as she chose—had agreed. "The world will be quiet for some time. The fallen will recoup, there are always some thinking they are better off here."

Which meant I had time to recoup too.

"Why didn't you offer to help, right away?" I asked Galia not long after the fight. "You could have—"

"Because I knew that Gardreel was watching me too. If it looked like I would help, then he would have stopped you from getting the spell. You only managed because he let you."

I didn't like that.

But I couldn't argue either. There had been no way if he'd really wanted to stop us, that he wouldn't have.

I rocked Angel gently. It was not lost on me that Killian had named our daughter pretty much after our ancestors. Even if he hadn't known it at the time. Already on her back there were the soft lines that marked out a set of wings that never would be. A tattoo that was no tattoo.

She nuzzled in close, her fingers tangling in my hair.

Dinah was on the table next to me. "I still can't believe that Eligor saved you."

I sighed. “He was torn. I think he gave the spell to Gardreel out of jealousy.”

“And when he saw you about to die to stop the spell, that changed him.” Dinah shifted on the table. “Are we going to go practice today?”

“Yes, later. We’ll get Bear working with you again.”

“Good. He has a good natural aim. Did you see him take out those wolves? Perfect shots!” she crowed. That was a story she still liked. Me, not so much. Watching my son run from the wolves, sending Ruby out after them, finding Angel . . . we were almost too late.

I closed my eyes. Galia was quiet next to Dinah. She was more like Eleanor. Reserved. It turned out she could shoot bullets, much as it was a surprise to her.

“How long, before I have to go to work?” I asked, quietly, not wanting to wake my girl.

“A few months still,” Galia said. “You have time to heal, firebird. I suggest you take it.”

The question I’d been avoiding. “And will they come for my children?”

“They might,” she admitted. “Which is why we must practice. Is the other one coming?”

Easter was on her way, and she was bringing Cowboy. Pete was here already with his family.

Carlos had found his daughter using the Tracker and they were on their way as well. His wife . . . she had died as soon as the Russian mob caught wind of her.

“You are making your own arsenal,” Dinah said. “Are you going to make more guns that can kill the fallen?”

I nodded. “Yes, and as soon as Easter is here, we’re going to start with the one closest to us.”

Galia laughed softly. “You think Ipos—”

“I think he will love to be in a gun next to you, Galia.” I sat up, and tucked Angel under the covers. I could still see Ipos in the church, stroking the stained-glass image of my grandmother. Love made you do crazy things. Pulling my clothes on, I set my holsters up for across my hips, hanging from my thighs. “I did some research on him. He was your friend.”

She was quiet. “And you think that he would stay in a gun?”

I smiled. “I think that he knew all along we’d ask him. But he wasn’t going to get in a gun until he was sure you would. Dinah knows how lonely it can be, to be the only one. He wanted to be sure.”

Galia sighed. “Men.”

Dinah laughed. “Fucking men.”

I rolled my eyes as I scooped them both up and settled them into their holsters. Dinah on the left, my faster hand. Galia on the right. I put my hands over them. “Ladies. Let’s kick some ass.”