



Devoted in the Midlife

(Fanged After Forty #13)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When your friendly neighborhood bounty-hunter-turned-vampire-turned-dragon gets handed a murder case by a literal god its just another Tuesday in Philly.

Hailey Whitfield has a lot on her plate: vampire politics, bounty hunting, dragon powers she barely understands—and now, divine murder mystery duty, courtesy of a god named Kit who pops in, says “figure out who killed my dragon kids,” and bounces. Thanks for that, Kit.

Adalinda, the ancient dragon matriarch, is trying to figure out who wiped out the last of her kind. The only clue? A pair of enchanted daggers no one can find.

Hailey assembles her team—the Bond Girls (? pending)—to track the truth. But the deeper they dig, the more they realize someone very old, very powerful, and very emotionally twisted is playing a deadly long game.

Good thing Hailey’s never backed down from a challenge. Or a dragon.

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HAILEY

"Okay, so there we were, knee-deep in chocolate, when—" The tale of our misadventures was cut short by an insistent knock at the front door.

"Seriously?" Kendra threw her hands up.

"If that's Luci coming to gloat, I swear I'll blast him into another reality—like the sticky one we just left."

Adalinda, who'd been watching us with regal amusement, suddenly stilled. Her sharp gaze fixed on me, and she cocked her head as if listening to something beyond human hearing. "I don't know who is on the other side of that door," she said, "but it's a dragon."

All at once the group scattered around my living room mirrored the tension. Luke stopped mid-ramble about his latest charm mishap, hands still raised in animated illustration. Goldie, who was curled up in her cat form beside Luke on the couch, lifted her head and peered suspiciously at the door. Izora, cradling Courage the chihuahua we found on a bounty hunt, exchanged a long look with Ransom.

"What is it?" Kendra finally asked, her hand drifting toward the hidden blade I knew she kept strapped to her thigh like a paranoid Mary Poppins.

"A dragon," Adalinda answered. "Male. But that's...it should be impossible."

Zara bounced excitedly next to Nash and Grim. "Another dragon? Like a shifter?"

"There are no others," Adalinda snapped, but confusion laced the certainty.

Adalinda had woken up from her hibernation to find all her dragons dead. She had told me that she couldn't sense any more on earth. It was one of the reasons she turned Jax and me. Flint was the last dragon hatchling and there wouldn't be any more unless Adalinda started having dragon babies. Or she could just create more dragons since she was the dragon queen with the ability to do so. I'm not sure why she hadn't.

The knock sounded again, an oddly polite rhythm for a supposedly extinct creature. I pushed to my feet with an eye roll. "Well, let's not keep impossible waiting."

Jax gripped my elbow, his touch light but meaningful. We locked gazes and through our bond, his protectiveness flowed over me. "Careful."

I rose to my toes and kissed him softly on the lips. "Always."

"Oh please," Izora drawled. "Between the magical firepower and pointy objects in this room, I almost pity anything that tries to start something." Her tiny dog yipped as if in agreement.

I threw open the door with my best customer service smile that usually made skips nervous. It slipped right off my face as I took in our visitor.

His skin held the deep burnished tone of polished copper, seeming to hold its own inner light even in the grey afternoon. His angular features belonged on an ancient coin or a modern runway. He wore a simple gray knit sweater and slacks that were a shade darker. But his eyes were obsidian dark and glinting. He held my gaze with a weight that pressed the air from my lungs. Dragon. Something deep in my soul

seemed to whisper the word.

"You gonna let him in, or just start a staring contest?" Ransom called dryly.

Color rushed up my neck, but I stepped aside. Otherworldly or not, no need to leave him on the doorstep like a misdelivered package. "Please, come in."

He inclined his head, movements liquid grace as he crossed the threshold. The room fell silent as everyone took their own assessing look. Goldie sneezed, whiskers twitching.

When the man spoke, his voice was rich and faintly accented with something I couldn't place.

"I am Ketsul, though most simply call me Kit these days."

Adalinda stepped forward, wariness and wonder warring across her face.

"How are you here? What are you?"

A smile tugged his mouth, kind and just a touch sad.

"Always so direct, my old friend. It's been a long time." He swept the room with an appraising gaze, settling back on her. "Perhaps we could sit? I'm afraid there is much to discuss."

We settled awkwardly around him in the living room.

Claudia perched on the couch arm next to Paige.

Howard was cross-legged on the floor, in front of Kendra who sat in one of the

armchairs.

Even Janice left off her glaring to lean in, sensing something momentous.

Kit stood in the center, utterly still yet somehow thrumming with leashed energy.

"I am Quetzalcoatl," he began without preamble.

"An old god of a land far south of here. Adalinda," he turned to her, "long ago, I granted you power, intending to make you my chosen witch. But something in you, some indomitable will, took that magic and made it your own."

She stared, lips parted in a soft 'oh'.

Jax reached over to grip her hand and she squeezed back reflexively.

"Huh," I blurted, "so that's two major species created by accident then?" I winced as Jax shot me a look. Apparently, I'd never quite mastered that brain-to-mouth filter.

But Kit chuckled, unoffended. "Indeed. Though I would say my 'accident' turned out a bit better than some others." He slid a sly glance at Izora.

However, Izora was "accidentally" turned over ten thousand years ago. She'd been a Scandinavian Princess when a goddess named Rhiannon cursed Izora when attempting to give her powers in hopes of creating her own magical race. The spell went wrong and turned Izora into the first vampire. Rhiannon tried to correct her mistake and tried to kill Izora, but Rhiannon couldn't because Izora was immortal.

So, Rhiannon perfected her spell and created a new race of witches. Every few generations or so a witch was born that had the power to desiccate the Initial or any vampire. Rhiannon was the same goddess Kendra got her powers from.

"Hey!" She glared, offense somewhat undermined by the wriggling Chihuahua attempting to lick her ear. "We were purposeful, thank you very much. Strategic even."

"Hmm yes," he mused, "all that strategy certainly shows in your unrivaled subtlety and cooperative natures."

Ransom disguised a snort as a cough. I bit the inside of my cheek, determined not to grin. Teasing Izora was a bit like poking a tiger, but I had to admit, I liked Kit's style.

"As fascinating as this supernatural history lesson is," Luke cut in, "can we get to the part about why you're in Hailey's living room? Last I checked, dragons weren't exactly thick on the ground." He waved a hand around.

"Present epic exceptions noted."

Kit nodded, humor fading.

"Indeed, that is the heart of it. I may not walk this realm often, but I do look in on my children, my dragons, from time to time. And when I checked of late, I found only emptiness. Death. All but a treasured few, extinguished."

His gaze landed on me and Jax, Adalinda, and Flint, who had entered the living room and flew over to me, landing my feet.

I scooped him and held him close.

Unexpected emotion choked my throat.

The silence stretched, heavy and hurting.

Kit finally spoke again, quieter.

"I came to find answers. To determine what could destroy creatures of such strength and resilience, my finest legacies. And to avenge their deaths." His hands clenched once before relaxing.

"But I have found nothing. No signs, and no trails to track. It's as if they were wiped from existence."

"I'm so sorry," Cleo offered, leaning into Nash and linking her fingers with Grim's.

Kit reached into his pocket and withdrew two golden dagger sheaths with intricate designs twining their lengths.

Jewels winked in mesmerizing patterns, colors shifting and blending in a way that made my magic-attuned eyes ache.

They seemed to hum, power shivering along my skin like the first lick of lightning before a storm.

Adalinda gasped.

"I know those," she whispered.

"I held the daggers once, long ago. Stole them from a foolish human who had no comprehension of their meaning." Her fingers drifted out as if to touch, then pulled back.

"But the blades themselves were stolen from me as I slept. I never found them again." Anger and bewilderment flickered in her eyes.

Kit extended the sheaths to her, gleaming against his dark skin.

"Whoever stole them from you, used them to kill the dragons. I had hoped that with the sheaths, I could find the blades, but alas, even their magic has limits."

"Well damn," Kendra poked my ankle with her boot, "sounds like a job for the Bond Girls."

Kit glanced between us, confused.

"The what?"

I couldn't help grinning. "It's what we call ourselves. Professional skip tracers, with a side of supernatural bounty hunting. If there's a person - or object - out there to be found, we'll sniff it out." Pride warmed my chest, familiar and grounding. This, at least, I understood.

Understanding dawned in his dark eyes. "Ah. You have your own coterie of powerful women." His smile flashed, brief and blinding. "No wonder it feels like fate, my path crossing here. And I see why Adalinda chose you to turn into a dragon."

He squared his shoulders, fixing his attention back on Adalinda. "The daggers are the only items capable of slaying dragons. They both hold the power to pierce even your nigh-impenetrable hides, but one of them can nullify magic." Sorrow and old rage threaded his voice. "I have done what I can to trace them to no avail. And my time here wanes."

"Wait, what?" Ollie looked up from the truly remarkable paper plane he'd been fashioning. One of the wings drooped sadly. "Why wouldn't you stay? We could help!"

Kit sighed, deep and resonant. "We gods cannot remain long in the mortal realms. It taxes us, in ways I couldn't begin to explain. Even now, I feel the pull to return." He spread elegant hands in a mix of apology and frustration.

"But what about Lucifer?" Paige tilted her head, frowning. "He's basically set up camp."

A huff of laughter, more wry than amused. "Different rules for different divinities. This is his game board, so to speak."

As if to punctuate his point, his form flickered, misty one moment and solid the next. The air around him shimmered, smelling sharp like the heart of a lightning strike.

"I must go," he spoke quickly, dark eyes finding mine. "I don't know why, but I feel it's right to leave this quest in your hands. Perhaps it's the magic between us," he nodded to Adalinda, "or just a tug of intuition. But I ask you, Hailey Whitfield, will you and your Bond Girls seek my daggers and the truth behind my children's deaths?"

My thoughts spun, excitement and trepidation a tilt-a-whirl behind my ribs. But as I met his gaze, so ancient and urgently hopeful, I felt the decision lock into place. My chin dipped once, firm. "We will," I promised. "You have my word."

"Wait," Cleo called as he started to fade, body more mist than matter. "How will we find you again? To return what we find or ask for aid?"

The barest hint of a smirk curled his lips. "You have a god on speed dial," he noted, flicking fingers toward Izora. "She can show you how to reach me. And you, little dragon star," he locked eyes with Flint, "know that you can always find your way to me, should the need arise."

Bye, Unca Kit , Flint said telepathically. We get stabby things!

Kit's laughter lingered even as his form dissipated completely, leaving only the faintest hint of petrichor and crackling energy behind.

"Well," Luke broke the ringing silence, "those murder daggers aren't going to find themselves." He stood, hands propped on his hips, determination warring with barely restrained glee on his face.

Adalinda met my eyes, a mix of uncertainty and steel in her gaze. I quirked a brow back, aiming for my cockiest head tilt. "Oh, we'll get them all right. And we'll figure out who or what decided to go dragon hunting." My smile sharpened, magic starting to stir in my veins. "Then we'll show them why that was a really bad idea."

Jax reached out, fingers twining with mine. The cool kiss of his skin against mine eased the tangled heat in my chest. "As one," he said quietly, just for me.

"As one," I echoed, squeezing his hand. Then we started planning.

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HAILEY

My living room had never been more crowded, or more supernaturally charged.

Vampires, witches, dragons, and one fierce little chihuahua packed the space, their voices rising and falling like waves crashing on the shore.

In the eye of the storm, I surveyed my team and tried to ignore the tangle of nerves in my stomach.

Flint darted between legs, his iridescent blue and green scales catching the light as he chased a very tolerant Goldie in her cat form.

She batted at him playfully, her honey-blond fur a blur.

Claudia and Paige snuggled on one side of the couch.

Izora perched on the arm of the sofa on the opposite side with Courage cradled in her arms.

I cleared my throat, and the room fell silent.

"All right, everyone, let's get started."

I cleared the coffee table and laid out the dagger sheaths in the center, the ancient

leather seeming to hum with untapped power. When I sat down beside Kendra, Flint, no longer distracted by his feline playmate, clambered into my lap, his small wings fluttering against my chest. I stroked his scales absently, marveling at how much he'd grown in such a short time. Soon, he'd be too big to perch on my shoulder like a scaly parrot.

"We've got a lot of ground to cover," I began, meeting each of their gazes in turn.

"Jax, I need you to focus on keeping things running smoothly on the vampire front. And take any nonhuman skips if they come in."

Jax nodded, his hazel eyes serious.

"I'll handle it."

"Grim, Nash, can you two cover the skip tracing cases with Cleo while we're occupied with this?"

Grim's scarred face twisted into a wry smile. "Chasing down human bail jumpers? It'll be like a vacation."

Nash elbowed him good-naturedly. "A vacation with a lot of paperwork. But we've got it covered."

I turned to my core team, the ones I knew I could count on when the supernatural shit hit the fan. "Kendra, Zara, Adalinda, Izora—we're on dagger duty. We need to figure out where the daggers are. We need to find them and figure out who used them to kill the dragons."

Kendra's brow furrowed, her dark eyes already distant with calculations. "I'll start researching their magical signatures. If we can trace their origin..."

"I've got contacts in the magical black market," Zara offered, her usual bravado firmly in place. "If anyone's been trying to offload ancient dragon daggers, I'll find out."

Adalinda cradled one of the sheaths reverently. "I will commune with the spirits of my ancestors. Perhaps they can provide guidance."

Izora sniffed, unimpressed. "I'll just ask around. Amazing what people will tell you after flashing them a little fang."

I bit back a laugh. I guess flashing her fangs was better than killing them.

Flint shifted in my lap, his small, sharp claws digging into my thigh. He was getting heavier every day, his baby fat giving way to solid muscle. A pang went through me at the thought of him growing up too fast.

Mama , he chirped directly into my mind. I help?

I scratched under his chin, earning a rumbling purr. "You're helping just by being here, little man."

"We're here for you, too, Hailey," Luke said, his voice soft but laced with that unintentional charm that made everyone lean in closer. "Whatever you need, we've got your back."

Heads nodded in agreement around the room, eyes glimmering with fierce loyalty. I swallowed against the sudden tightness in my throat. Leading this group, this weird supernatural family, had never been part of my life plan. But now, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

"I know you do," I replied, injecting confidence into my voice. "And we've got this."

We're going to find out who's behind this."

Kendra scooted off the couch onto her knees, then pulled out the ritual items she needed for a locator spell from her bag. Quickly, she set everything up, with the sheaths in the center as the focal objects. She murmured an incantation. Then nothing happened.

"What the...?" Kendra bunched her face in glared at the sheaths.

"No offense," Zara piped up from across the table, "but couldn't Kit have left us a cheat sheet? Or maybe just, I don't know, a map?"

Her practical suggestion, tinged with fond exasperation, coaxed a smile onto my face. Not so long ago, Zara's presence would have set my teeth on edge, old resentments prickling under my skin.

After all, she bit me and left me for dead.

Luckily Jax turned me to save my life, or my non-life.

Since Zara was a newly turned vampire who didn't know there were rules against killing humans, she was placed in the vampire rehab program.

Dominic and Amaya thought it would be good for Zara to stay with Jax and me until she was ready to live on her own.

But after the wild ride we'd shared in that crazy fantasy realm, her straightforward approach had become a welcome constant.

Izora snorted, her dark humor leaking through. "Right, because ancient dragon deities are known for their clear communication skills."

Adalinda shot her a quelling look. "The daggers are ancient. You don't demand answers from divine relics. You earn them."

Zara held up her hands in mock surrender while Kendra pointedly turned a page in her notebook. I watched them each attack the problem in their own way.

On the surface, they couldn't be more different. But as the evening wore on and they passed books and theories back and forth, a seamless rhythm emerged. When Kendra raised a skeptical eyebrow at one of Adalinda's more esoteric suggestions, Zara smoothly redirected the conversation.

As the night ticked on, research materials and empty takeout containers scattered across every surface. Eyelids drooped and yawns slipped out between theories. Slowly, the team began gathering their notes and bags. Luke and Ransom left about an hour ago. Janice must have snuck out not long after Kit left because I didn't remember seeing her when I was passing out assignments. Hmm. She must have gotten a call from Hunter HQ.

Adalinda slipped the dagger sheaths into her bag with a thoughtful frown. "I'll take these and see if I can get a magical read on them. Perhaps a more intimate environment will encourage them to share their secrets."

One by one, they filed out into the misty night, hands shoved in pockets and chins tucked against the chill. Zara shot me a tired salute as she left, Kendra and Adalinda following deep in conversation. Izora sauntered out last, Courage snoozing in the crook of her arm.

And then, stillness. The sudden absence of voices left a hollow space that the drumming rain quickly filled. I surveyed the scattered debris of our planning session.

In his bed by the sofa, Flint twitched and huffed in his sleep. A smile tugged at my

lips despite the knot of worry in my chest. The path ahead was unclear. But with my team around me, I let myself believe we just might be able to navigate whatever the gods threw our way.

I collapsed onto the couch, the last dregs of adrenaline seeping out of my bones. Jax settled beside me, he curved an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into him. I snuggled into his side, letting my head rest against his chest.

We sat like that for a long moment, the silence broken only by the sudden muffled patter of rain and the occasional snuffle from Flint's bed. Jax's fingers trailed up and down my arm in an absent rhythm, his touch as soothing as the steady beat of his heart under my ear.

"You did good tonight," he murmured eventually, his chin resting on the top of my head.

I huffed a laugh, the sound muffled against his shirt. "I'm not sure what I'm doing. I just know it needs to be done."

His chest rumbled with a hum of agreement. "That's what leadership is."

Leadership. The word settled on my shoulders like an ill-fitting coat. When had I become the one people turned to for answers, for direction? I was just a skip tracer with a side of supernatural weirdness. But now...

Now I was part-dragon, juggling ancient magic and shadowy threats like some urban fantasy heroine. An over-forty heroine at that.

Jax grounded me like no one ever had. More than my four siblings. The steady hum of our bond was a reminder that I wasn't facing this alone.

My team had my back, and Jax was the steady foundation beneath it all.

I tilted my head back to look at him, a sudden rush of gratitude tightening my throat.

As if sensing my thoughts, Jax dipped his head to press a soft kiss on my forehead.

I let my eyes flutter closed, breathing in the clean scent of his skin, the hints of spice and leather that clung to him always.

We might have stayed like that for hours, letting the world narrow to the small cocoon of the couch.

But a particularly loud snore from Flint jolted us out of the moment.

Our eyes met, shared laughter bubbling up to chase away the last of the tension.

"Come on." Jax unfolded his long frame from the cushions.

"Let's get the little guy to bed."

I scooped Flint out of his nest, cradling his sleep-heavy body against my chest. He snuffled and chirped, burrowing into my warmth as I carried him to the bedroom with Jax trailing behind.

Our room was dim and peaceful, the flickering candles casting dancing shadows on the walls. We rarely used the lights in our bedroom because candlelight was easier on a vamp's eyesight. Plus the glow cast a romantic vibe through the room.

I settled Flint onto his cushion in his makeshift burrow in our closet, tucking the blankets around his small form as he rolled and stretched. With a jaw-cracking yawn, he settled back into slumber, his dreams untroubled by thoughts of ancient daggers or

looming threats.

Jax's arms slid around me from behind as I straightened, his chin coming to rest on my shoulder. I leaned back against him, letting his warmth seep into my tired muscles.

"He's going to outgrow that bed soon," Jax murmured.

I huffed a laugh. "At this rate, he'll be wanting his own room by next week."

Jax's arms tightened around me. "They grow up so fast."

The wry humor in his voice coaxed a smile onto my face despite the bittersweet truth beneath the words. With all the madness swirling around us, it was easy to forget that Flint was still just a baby. A baby dragon, sure, but a baby, nonetheless.

I pulled the closet door to, leaving it open a crack. Then I turned in Jax's arms, twining my own around his neck. He kissed me like he'd been waiting to get me alone all night, which he probably had. I sure did.

Deepening the kiss, he slid his hands down my back, pulling me closer as if he could absorb me into himself. We just stood there kissing and touching for several moments before separating.

We undressed each other as we moved toward the bed, letting lips and fingers map familiar paths across bare skin. When we tumbled onto the bed, it was with breathless laughter and wandering hands, the darkness chased to the corners by the glow of our mingled joy.

Jax's lips found mine again, the kiss deepening as if he could pour every ounce of reassurance into the press of his mouth. I wound my arms around his neck, answering

with my own need to banish the uncertainty that shadowed our lives.

His hands roamed over my body, each touch sparking heat beneath my skin. "Beautiful," he murmured against my lips. "So damn beautiful."

His hands caressed every inch of newly exposed skin, his touch reverent as if I were something precious and fragile. He laid me back on the bed, his lips trailing fire down my throat, across my collarbones, lower still until he closed his mouth over the peak of my breast.

I arched into him, my fingers tangling in his hair as he lavished attention on my sensitive flesh. Each pull of his lips, each flick of his clever tongue, sent sparks racing down my spine to pool in molten heat at my core.

"Jax..." His name fell from my lips on a sigh, part plea, part prayer.

He hummed against my skin, the vibration making me gasp. Slowly, torturously, he kissed his way down the plane of my stomach, pausing to dip his tongue into my navel.

And then his fingers were there, parting my slick folds to delve into the heart of me. I cried out, my hips bucking into his touch as he stroked and caressed, each pass of his fingers winding the coil of tension tighter in my belly.

He brought me to the edge once, twice, only to gentle his touch and bring me back down. My thighs trembled, my breath coming in panting gasps as he worked me higher and higher.

When the wave finally broke, it crashed over me in a rush of blinding pleasure. Jax's name tore from my throat as I shuddered and clenched around his fingers, the intensity of my release leaving me boneless and gasping.

Jax gathered me close, his arms banding around me as he settled his weight over me. I could feel the hard length of him pressing against my thigh, the heat of his skin searing into mine.

With a groan, he buried himself inside me, my body welcoming him like he'd been made to fit there. We moved together, our rhythm as familiar and necessary as breathing. Each slow drag of his hips stoked the embers of my pleasure back to a roaring flame.

I locked my legs around his waist, drawing him impossibly deeper. Our lips met again, the kiss messy and desperate as we chased our shared peak. Tension coiled tighter and tighter, our movements growing frantic with need.

When we shattered, we came together, twin cries of ecstasy swallowed by the press of our mouths. Pleasure whited out my senses, my vision sparking behind my closed lids as Jax's fangs sank into the junction of my neck and shoulder. I answered in kind, tasting the coppery tang of his blood on my tongue, the bond between us flaring bright and strong.

We collapsed together, our limbs tangled and chests heaving. Jax's weight pressed me into the mattress, solid and grounding. I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling the last tremors of bliss shiver through him.

In the hazy aftermath, wrapped in each other's arms, the troubles of the world felt very far away. Whatever tomorrow held, whatever dangers we'd face, we'd face them together. In this moment, that certainty was enough. It had to be. It was all we had.

3

LUKE

The autumn evening wrapped around me like a chilly shroud as I made my way down the lamp-lit sidewalk to Wade's house. Multicolored, dried leaves crunched under my boots. I was hunting Janice down because I wanted to know if she wanted to go to the gallery with me. A new artist was hosting a show tonight. Janice loved art as much as I did. We were friends, good friends, but sometimes I still felt that mortal hesitancy, that fear of overstepping invisible bounds. The vampire in me scoffed at such human worries.

Wade's house was a dark silhouette against the deep blue dusk.

The windows glowed with warm light.

I climbed the porch steps and knocked, the sound startling in the stillness.

The door opened and Janice stood there, a welcoming smile on her face.

I opened my mouth to greet her, but my tongue stilled in confusion.

Janice's smile had not changed but something in her eyes made my skin prickle with goosebumps. They were Janice's warm brown eyes, crinkled at the corners just like always.

But the longer I stared, the more my instincts screamed that something was wrong.

"Luke, what a nice surprise," Janice said, in a perfect imitation of her usual wry tone.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Her affectionate sarcasm sounded so normal, so Janice.

Maybe I was just being paranoid.

Letting my worries about the increasing supernatural threats get the better of me.

I tried to relax my stance and return her smile.

"Hey, Janice. I was wondering if you'd like to go to this gallery show with me tonight. That new artist I was telling you about is being featured and I thought we could go check it out."

As I waited for her to reply, the back of my neck burned, and I realized with chilling certainty that I could feel the tingle of a charm power, a seductive pull trying to fog my thoughts. But not Janice's familiar calm that could soothe even my most agitated states. This was something else, something that raised all the hairs on my body to attention.

Janice's eyes sharpened. The air between us thickened with tension as we stared at each other, and my dawning realization met with a predatory stillness from the thing wearing my friend's face.

"That sounds great, Luke." Not-Janice's tone remained pleasantly neutral even as her gaze stripped me bare, trying to determine how much I knew. "Why don't you come in for a minute and we can--"

"Actually, I just remembered I forgot something at home," I interrupted, marveling at

the steadiness of my own voice.

"I better run back and get it."

Not-Janice paused a few seconds too long before nodding.

"Sure, see ya."

I turned away before she could see the panic rising in my eyes.

My steps remained even until I heard the click of the door closing.

Then I ran, an all-out sprint fueled by terror and confusion.

The pavement blurred beneath me as I raced to Jax and Hailey's, my mind whirling with horrible possibilities.

What had happened to the real Janice? And who, or what, had taken her place? The charm power I felt was far stronger than anything I'd ever encountered, strong enough to batter past my considerable defenses.

If I hadn't been so attuned to Janice's energy, I might not have noticed the difference at all.

Reaching my sister's house, I pounded up the steps, my breath coming in ragged gasps.

I didn't bother knocking, just barged through the door with Hailey's name already tearing from my throat.

She emerged from the living room, eyes wide with alarm.

I saw Kendra and Adalinda behind her, heads turning toward my dramatic entrance.

"Luke? What's wro?—"

"It's not her," I gasped out, grabbing Hailey's arms. Saying it out loud made it real, the horrible truth crashing over me. "It's not Janice. There's something...someone...at Wade's house pretending to be her."

I watched my sickening dread reflected at me in Hailey's eyes as the implications sank in. We stared at each other, the silence heavy with all the unspoken fears suddenly howling to life.

Not-Janice's smile flashed through my mind again, a mockery of my friend's warmth. A shudder worked through me. Whatever was happening, we were in far deeper trouble than any of us had realized. The monster, it seemed, was already inside the house.

Hailey's living room suddenly felt claustrophobic, too many bodies radiating confusion and doubt. I paced between the coffee table and the couch, my hands gesturing in sharp, agitated motions as I tried to explain what I'd seen, what I'd felt. Kendra and Adalinda exchanged skeptical glances, their expressions shifting from surprised concern to something bordering on pity. I could practically hear their thoughts - poor Luke, cracking under the strain of recent events.

"Listen to me." I put a hard edge in my voice. "That was not Janice at Wade's house. It looked like her, sounded like her, but it wasn't her. I could feel it using a charm power, trying to influence me."

"A charm power? Like yours?" Hailey's brow furrowed. "I thought you were one of the only vamps who could do that."

"I thought so too," I said grimly. "But this was like nothing I've ever experienced. We have to do something, now, before-"

"Okay, okay, just slow down." Kendra stood, laying a placating hand on my shoulder. "You've been under a lot of stress, Luke. Is it possible that maybe you misinterpreted..."

I shrugged off her touch, stung by the gentle condescension in her tone. They didn't believe me. That meant they were under the charm Not-Janice was using. My jaw clenched as I looked from one doubtful face to the next. Fine. I'd find someone who would.

I turned on my heel and stalked out, ignoring Hailey calling after me. Blood pounded in my ears as I climbed the stairs to Jax's office. He was the one person who might listen without instantly questioning my sanity.

I burst through the door without knocking. Jax glanced up from his desk, one eyebrow raised. His hazel eyes were a stormy grey in the lamplight.

"Luke? What-"

The words poured out of me again, tripping over each other in my haste. I leaned over Jax's desk as I told him about Not-Janice, my knuckles white against the dark wood. Surely he would understand the gravity of the situation.

But as I spoke, I watched the frown lines deepen between Jax's eyes, his mouth turning down at the corners. He sighed and stood, coming around the desk to stand in front of me. He gripped my shoulders, his expression serious but tinged with something infuriatingly like sympathy.

"Luke, I just talked to Janice, and she seemed fine to me. Are you feeling well?"

Maybe your powers are acting out again."

This was not about my wonky charm magic. The unspoken implication hung heavy in the air between us. I stared at Jax, feeling like I'd been gutted. He didn't believe me either.

Brushing past him, I fled the suffocating confines of the office. My feet carried me out the back door and into the sprawling shelter of the backyard. The scents of damp earth and decaying leaves enveloped me as I gulped the crisp night air.

A high-pitched yip drew my gaze to the far end of the yard. Izora crouched on the grass, playfully growling as Courage danced just out of reach, his little tail wagging furiously. They looked like an idyllic picture of a girl and her dog, never mind that the girl was an ancient vampire, and the dog had a taste for the supernatural.

"Izora!" The name tore from my throat, raw and desperate.

She glanced up, her expression vaguely curious. I stumbled toward her, the words tumbling out yet again, ragged with urgency. She stood and squared her shoulders as I approached, absently brushing grass from her jeans. Courage circled her feet, growling uncertainly at my agitation.

"... and no one believes me, but I know what I saw, what I felt. We have to do something, we can't just..."

"Luke." Izora's voice was flat, almost bored.

"You're hysterical. Calm down before you strain something."

I gaped at her, my mouth working soundlessly. Izora, blunt and boldly honest Izora, thought I was being hysterical. A near-hysterical laugh bubbled up in my throat.

Maybe I was losing it after all.

Without another word, I spun away from her and Courage's wary gaze. My legs ate up the ground as I crossed the yard and street to my house, to my last hope for someone to believe the threat we were facing.

"Young man! Young man, I'm speaking to you!"

Mildred's reedy voice pierced my consciousness. I turned to see her glaring at me from the sidewalk, clutching her little poodle to her polyester-clad bosom. The dog, which had been recently dyed a truly unfortunate shade of lavender, squirmed in her grip.

"You nearly ran us down, charging across the street like that! You and your hooligan friends are getting out of hand. Why, I have half a mind to call the police about the drug deals I'm sure go on in that house."

I stared at her, uncomprehending. The absurdity of being lectured about road safety and accused of drug trafficking when an evil doppelganger of my friend was doing God knew what in this very neighborhood almost made me laugh out loud.

Shaking my head, I left Mildred sputtering on the sidewalk and continued my single-minded march to my front door. The porch light flared to life, triggered by my presence. I froze with my hand on the knob, disappointment washing through me. Ransom wasn't home yet. He'd gone to Catch and Release with Paige and Claudia. Claudia was interviewing for the bar manager position.

As I stood there, at a loss for what to do next, headlights swept across the yard. Ransom's car pulled into the driveway, the beams illuminating my face and making me squint. The engine cut off and doors opened, and Ransom, Paige, and Claudia stepped out.

Relief crashed over me so intensely my knees almost buckled. I stumbled down the steps toward them, my face surely a mask of manic desperation in the harsh shadows of the headlights.

"Ransom! Thank God. Something's happened, something bad."

The next few minutes passed in a blur of me rushing through the story yet again, my words increasingly strained as I watched my mate's expression morph from curiosity to concern to grim doubt. Paige and Claudia exchanged loaded glances over Ransom's shoulder, a silent conversation passing between them.

"You believe me, don't you?" I was aiming for firm, but it came out pleading. "You of all people should be able to tell I'm telling the truth."

Ransom gripped my elbow as the girls discreetly slipped into their house next door.

"I can feel your belief," he said carefully. "I don't doubt that you're convinced of what you saw. But Luke, a glamour powerful enough to fool you? To override your charm? I just don't see how it's possible."

I opened my mouth, not even sure what I intended to say, just knowing I had to make him understand. But my protest was cut short by the crunch of footsteps on gravel.

"Well, isn't this cozy?"

Janice's voice, so familiar but horribly alien, cut through the charged air between Ransom and me. We turned as one to see her sauntering up the driveway, a smirk playing across her lips. Ransom's hand tightened on my arm as he greeted her with forced casualness.

"Janice! Luke told me you two were going to the art gallery tonight."

Not-Janice stepped into the light, and I had to lock my knees to keep from recoiling. Seeing her again, I knew with absolute bone-deep certainty that this was not my friend. Her eyes glittered with a coldness that had never touched Janice's laughing gaze. The smirk twisting her mouth held a cruelty Janice could never even imagine.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it," she said breezily, moving well within the bounds of my personal space. Every muscle in my body seized.

Her face filled my vision, her eyes boring into mine. The world tunneled, my senses overwhelmed by the cloying scent of her perfume and the roaring rush of blood in my ears.

"I am Janice."

The words, spoken with quiet intensity, reverberated through my skull. A heavy fog bank rolled across my mind, thick and oppressive. I blinked hard and struggled to remember why those words sent such terror spiking through my veins.

"I am Janice."

Not-Janice's grip gripped my hand and squeezed. Her gaze compelled mine, trapping me in place more surely than the hand on my throat. Something dark and insidious curled through my thoughts, smothering the bright flame of my resistance.

"I am Janice!"

This time the declaration came out commanding, triumphant. And just like that, the fog crystallized into shining truth. Of course she was Janice. How could I have ever thought otherwise? The panic, the crawling wrongness of our earlier interaction, it all seemed so distant now. Unimportant. Irrational.

Ransom's concerned face swam at the edges of my vision, but I barely registered him. My attention was solely on Janice. Beautiful, clever Janice who I suddenly wanted very badly to please.

She smiled, slow and satisfied, as my expression went slack. Her eyes promised dark delights if only I would obey. Yes, of course I would obey. Anything she wanted.

"Say it, Luke." Her voice was a purr, stroking along my nerve endings like velvet. "Tell Ransom who I am."

"Janice." Her name felt like honey on my tongue, sweet and right. I smiled at Ransom, my earlier distress forgotten. "Ransom, this is Janice. Isn't it great that she's coming to the gallery with me tonight?"

Something flickered in Ransom's eyes, an emotion there and gone too fast for me to catch. His hand fell away from my arm, leaving me more firmly in Janice's thrall.

"That's great," he echoed.

The words were leaden, but I hardly noticed.

Janice was already drawing me down the driveway, her arm linked proprietarily through mine.

"Don't wait up," she called over her shoulder. "We'll probably be out late."

I went with her willingly, eagerly.

The night was full of promise and Janice would guide me through it.

No more confusion, no more fear.

Only her.

Only Janice.

HAILEY

I bit back a laugh, shaking my head at Luke's adorably wide-eyed indignation when recounting his encounter with Janice moments ago.

"I can't believe he thought Janice was anything other than her usual charming self," Kendra snickered, settling back into the plush armchair with her tea. "I mean, we JUST talked to her what, ten minutes ago? And she was just...Janice."

Adalinda's lips twitched, her elegant fingers idly stroking Flint's iridescent scales as he curled up in her lap like an oversized housecat. "Indeed. I've encountered many supernatural entities over the millennia, but none quite as terrifying as a hunter."

I allowed myself another moment of mirth, savoring the warmth of easy camaraderie, before sobering. As amusing as Luke's paranoia was, we had more pressing matters at hand.

I leaned forward to meet Adalinda's gaze, "Any leads on tracking down those murder daggers?"

The Dragon Queen's eyes sharpened, a faint shimmer of opalescent scales brushing her temples as she focused inward.

"There is... something. The faintest echo of an ancient magic, a residual energy that feels distinctly like Kit's divine signature."

I straightened, a tingle of anticipation skittering down my spine. "Divine signature? What does that mean, exactly?"

Adalinda steepled her fingers, her voice taking on a resonant, almost hypnotic quality as she expanded, "Each deity carries a unique magical imprint, an ineffable essence that permeates any objects or beings they imbue with their power. In this case, I sense echoes of Kit's godly magic woven into the sheaths."

She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply as if tasting the air for notes of vintage ambrosia.

"It's faint, eroded by the relentless passage of time, but unmistakable."

Kendra and I exchanged a look, our eyes widening at the implications. If Adalinda could sense Kit's magic, even across vast distances and millennia, then maybe...

"Can you use that essence to track the daggers? Like a magical bloodhound, except with more scales and less slobber?" I asked, hope warring with trepidation in my gut.

The Dragon Queen nodded slowly, her gaze distant as she prodded at the gossamer threads of divine energy only she could perceive. "I believe so. It will require focus and precision, but if I can lock onto Kit's unique signature, I should be able to follow it to the daggers' current location."

Determination surged through me, chasing away the lingering wisps of humor. We had a lead. An actual, tangible thread to follow, literally and metaphysically. I jumped to my feet, my fingers already twitching for the sleek curves of my laptop. "Let me see what I can dig up on likely places an ancient Aztec god might stash his magical cutlery."

As Kendra and Adalinda murmured in low tones, I threw myself into research mode. The familiar blue glow of the screen embraced me like an old friend as I navigated

the rabbit holes of search results and obscure mythology forums.

Two hours, three mugs of blood, and a minor hand cramp later, I surfaced triumphant. "I think I found something!" I called out. "There's a long-abandoned temple complex in the Yucatan peninsula that was once a major center for Quetzalcoatl worship. It's remote, steeped in legends of dragon magic and blood rituals, and has a cryptic reference to 'the vault of the sky serpent' buried in its catacombs."

I turned the screen so the others could see the grainy satellite images of vine-choked limestone ruins nestled in the emerald sea of the jungle. Adalinda leaned in, her eyes flickering with ancient recognition. "Yes... I can feel it. That place is drenched in Kit's energy, even through your technological scrying. The original enchantments have faded, but the stones still echo with the dragons' bygone roars."

She placed a hand on the screen, her fingers splayed across the pixelated ruinscape. A shudder rippled through her, making the air hum with released power. Flint chirped anxiously, his tail lashing as he sensed the magical currents swirling around Adalinda.

After a long, crackling moment, Adalinda withdrew her hand, flexing her fingers as if to shake off the clinging tendrils of the past. "I have it," she declared. "The temple's energetic coordinates are locked within my mind. I can guide us there."

Kendra nodded briskly, already shrugging off her cardigan in preparation for spellcasting. "Right then. Give me a few to gather some supplies. We'll want to be prepared for anything."

She shot me a wry look, no doubt remembering the many, many times we'd landed ourselves in dicey situations. "Especially if we're heading into the eldritch ruins of a deity whose followers were fond of jaguar warriors and ritual bloodletting."

"Har-har," I deadpanned, even as a frisson of nervous energy skittered through my veins. Kendra wasn't wrong. We were about to step into the crumbling remnants of an ancient mystery, guided only by magical breadcrumbs and the desperate need for answers.

But what choice did we have? The clock was ticking, the killer was still out there, and those daggers were our only solid lead. Plus, I'd be lying if I claimed my thirst for adventure hadn't been parched lately.

I clapped my hands together, both to shake off my spiraling thoughts and to signal a transition. "All right ladies, let's get cracking. With any luck, this time tomorrow we'll be sipping margaritas on a sunny Yucatan beach, murder daggers in hand."

Kendra snorted. "More like hacking our way through a snake-infested jungle with our wands and wits, but sure. Focus on those margaritas."

I flashed her a grin, even as my mind churned with the possibilities and pitfalls that lay ahead. Regardless of the risks, we were doing this. Diving headfirst into the deadly and divine, with nothing but our magic and moxie to light the way.

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HAILEY

I zipped up my backpack as a chirp sounded.

Flint perched on the bed, his iridescent scales shimmering anxiously in the afternoon light that sliced through the blinds.

As I reached for my stakes, he gingerly snagged a claw on my sleeve.

Mama stay, he whimpered in my mind.

Flint protect.

Warmth expanded behind my ribs, an uncomfortable pressure I recognized as equal parts love and guilt.

I scooped him up, marveling as always at how his sturdy weight belied his small size.

"Oh baby," I murmured into his velvety scales.

"Mama has to go find some important daggers so we can keep everyone safe. Like a treasure hunt! I'll be home before you can even miss me."

Flint snuffled into my collar, his baby dragon breath heating my neck. But already miss Mama.

Something twinged in my abdomen, almost a physical ache. Being a vampire had brought many strange changes, but dragon motherhood was by far the most bewildering. I nuzzled him, breathing in his warm vanilla scent.

"Tell you what," I said brightly. "While I'm gone, you can be the man of the house. Keep an eye on things here, and have Papa help you practice your flying. I bet you'll be soaring by the time I'm back."

Rweelly?

His sapphire eyes blinked hopefully.

"Really," I nodded.

"But now I need my best dragon warrior to be brave for me, okay?"

Flint wriggled with determination, puffing out his chest.

Flint brave!

Flint fierce!

He leaped awkwardly from my arms, beating his wings with mighty gusts that scattered the papers from my desk.

As I crouched to gather them, grinning, eager thumps shook the doorframe.

"Reporting for duty!" Zara singsonged, her combat boots dancing.

Tendrils of hair escaped her sleek ponytail as she gesticulated animatedly.

"This is gonna be epic. Do you think there will be mummies? Or ancient booby traps we have to dodge like in Raiders?"

"Unlikely," Kendra replied from the hallway.

"The temple has been abandoned for centuries. Though I suppose we could encounter residual magic."

She entered in a designer hiking outfit, every hair sleekly anchored in a braid.

I didn't need to breathe anymore, but Kendra still managed to make me feel underdressed in my practical leathers.

"We talking shriveled corpses or magical lightning?" Luke rubbed his hands together, grinning mischievously. "Either way, dibs on not being cursed this time."

Kendra shot him a withering side-eye. "If you get cursed, I'm portaling you to Siberia until I find a counterspell. I don't have the bandwidth to deal with another zombie squirrel incident."

"That was one time!" Luke protested. The amusement crinkling his warm hazel eyes softened his words.

I bit my lip, fighting a smirk. Luke had an uncanny ability to diffuse tension with his charm, both the natural kind and the out-of-control magical kind.

"There will be no curses," Izora declared from the doorway, somehow managing to look both regal and cozy in a cashmere turtleneck. "I have seen this temple in my scrying. It holds magic, but nothing we cannot handle." Her eyes flashed with dismissal.

I met Kendra's gaze and saw my own internal "you had to say it" reflected back.

Izora's assurances had a way of tempting fate. But none of us were foolish enough to contradict the ancient semi-reformed vampire queen.

Zara bounced on her toes. "So that's a maybe on the mummies, right?"

"We can always hope," Luke winked at her.

Adalinda swept in. "I would rather not entertain mummies if we can avoid it. But speaking of ancient magic..."

She turned to me, her bottomless onyx eyes sparking with epiphany. "We will need an Orichalcum-lined box to safely contain the daggers once we find them. Their divine energy will not be kind to vampiric constitutions."

I blinked. In all our careful planning, that particular detail had slipped through the cracks. Transporting artifacts that could dampen our powers definitely required precautions.

"Orichalcum," I repeated as if saying it with enough authority would conjure a solution. "Right. Of course. Do we...have anything like that?" Ancient mystical metals weren't exactly standard household goods.

"I saw one!" Zara exclaimed, then deflated slightly. "In a museum in Prague. Behind many locks. And possibly some lasers."

"Let's maybe avoid international museum heists this week," I suggested delicately. Grand larceny was more of a month-two agenda item.

"Perhaps your Jax has something suitable in his collection?" Adalinda's suggestion

lilted upward musically, even as her sharp eyes watched me like a hunting hawk.

My stomach fluttered at the possessive — Adalinda never referred to Jax without it, a habit I wasn't entirely sure how to interpret.

"I can check," I nodded, already reaching for my phone. Texting was still faster than telepathy over a distance.

Jax's response pinged back immediately, because of course he had nothing better to do than anticipate my every whim. The words "giant diamond" caught my eye as I scanned it.

"He has a lead box," I relayed slowly. "But apparently there's a massive de-cursed diamond in it that he needs to remove first?"

Luke's eyebrows shot up wolfishly. "I vote we skip the temple and just heist Jax's prize rock collection."

"Do not even think it." Izora's warning emerged half-snarl. "That diamond is beyond your comprehension."

Her venom surprised me— I guess Jax wasn't the only one with history there. But it worked wonders at refocusing our collective attention.

"Right then," I clapped briskly. "Plan Obtain Cursed Cutlery is a go. Jax will bring the box to the living room, and I'll grab the dagger sheathes."

Everyone nodded with varying degrees of solemnity and glee, filing out with a clatter of boots and gear. As I picked up the ancient leather sheathes, their solid weight reassuring in my hands, a sense of rightness settled in my spine.

Jax appeared in the hallway as if summoned by my thoughts, Courage cradled awkwardly in the crook of his arm like a shivering football. The tiny dog vibrated with distress, his rhinestone collar blinking frenetically. In his other hand was the box. I took it from him and kissed him before we made our way down to the living room.

"Don't let anything happen to my baby!" Izora called from the bottom of the stairs, maternal steel lacing her tone. "I will smite you in ways that transcend death if one hair on his precious head is harmed."

Jax held the shaking chihuahua slightly away from his body, as if Courage were a disgruntled grenade. He met my amused gaze with a beleaguered sigh.

When we all reached the living room, Kendra opened a portal to Kit's temple ruins.

Massive tree roots cleaved ancient blocks of stone, and tendrils of mist curled possessively around crumbling columns. The scene looked like Indiana Jones' fever dream crossed with Jurassic Park.

"Woah," Luke breathed, stumbling slightly on a carpet of vines. "This place has some serious lost world vibes."

I couldn't disagree. The air hung heavy with damp earth and a hint of sulfur, like the jungle was slowly digesting the ruins. Birdsong and insect chatter blended into a constant thrumming backdrop.

"The Temple of the Eternal Flame," Adalinda murmured reverently, her eyes skyward. "Built by dragon acolytes in the time before time, to honor their celestial patrons."

My gaze followed hers up the towering stone walls, their once-precise edges blurred

by relentless tropical growth. Sunlight filtered through the choked canopy, dappling across an arc of blackened murals near the sagging roof. I shaded my eyes, squinting.

"Are those...scorch marks?"

"Indeed." Adalinda nodded gravely, gliding across rubble with supernatural grace. "Legend tells of a great battle between dragons, long before humans walked the earth. Divine fire rained from above as the losers fell, incinerating the temple and its keepers."

As we picked our way closer, delicately etched scales and wings took shape beneath the oily soot. A serpentine tail curved through stylized flame, while cracked gemstone eyes winked in the filtered light. Even shattered and burnt, the artistry stole my breath.

"This is amazing," Zara whispered, reaching out to trace a singed claw. "I can almost feel the heat still."

"Don't touch that!" Kendra admonished sharply, swatting Zara's hand away. "We have no idea what kind of residual magic could still be lurking."

Zara pouted but withdrew, and I made a mental note to thank Kendra for her pragmatism later. As much as my inner archaeology nerd wanted to examine the murals for hours, we had a mission. Tearing my eyes away, I scanned the cavernous space.

"The vault should be in the deepest sanctum," Adalinda gestured toward a jagged crevice bisecting the far wall. Noxious fumes wafted from its depths. "Far beneath the blood of the earth."

"Naturally," Luke grimaced. "We couldn't just have a convenient dagger broom

closet."

I squared my shoulders. "Time to embrace our inner Lara Croft."

The passageway twisted down into the wounded bedrock, claustrophobic and dank. Basalt walls glistened with mineralized seeps, and our footsteps echoed endlessly into the gloom ahead. The air grew staler with each tight corkscrew, and I found myself desperately missing the cloying jungle heat. After the third near-vertical ladder, even my enhanced vampire thighs burned.

"I'm starting to think these daggers don't want to be found," Luke huffed.

As if in response, the tunnel ended abruptly at a massive disc of obsidian, elaborately carved with draconic runes. Gemstones glittered in the dancing beams of our headlamps that looked like some type of lock mechanism, fused into the volcanic glass. I ran my fingers across the largest glyph, an intricate geometric series of angles I instinctively recognized from the sheath.

"A celestial key," Adalinda whispered in wonder. "I had thought them only myth."

"The sheath is the key?" I raised an eyebrow at the ornate leather in my hand.

We set to work, examining the patterns for matches. Bit by frustrating bit, the sheath's endlessly nested corners found their corresponding grooves in the door's labyrinthine lock. Pressure plates clicked and ground with each new alignment, ancient tumblers falling into place like the world's most ominous puzzle box.

Finally, the last piece settled with a shuddering thud. For a breathless moment, nothing happened. Then, with the grating shriek of stone against stone, the entire door rolled ponderously sideways to reveal an arched opening. Stale, mineral-tinged air rushed past us into the chamber beyond.

"We're in," Kendra said tightly. Her face looked pale in the lamplight, taut with an unease I'd never seen from her before.

Adalinda took the lead, her posture telegraphing coiled readiness. The portal opened into an intimate circular vault, its walls lined with faded remnants of burnt scrolls. But what made my breath catch was the central dais - a rough-hewn slab of obsidian cradling two simple scabbards that pulsed with piercing white light.

The daggers.

Power rolled off them in suffocating waves, both alluring and profoundly unsettling. It felt primordial, an echo of creation too immense for mortal comprehension. I fought the sudden urge to drop to my knees.

"Easy," Adalinda murmured, though I wasn't sure if she was speaking to us or herself.

As we crept closer, the chamber's hungry shadows seemed to lengthen, their edges shimmering through my second sight. My fangs tingled, and a vicious migraine spiked through my temples. Izora hissed, her hands clenching reflexively.

"Something's wrong," Zara whimpered. Her face contorted in pain. "I feel like gravity tripled. Everything's so heavy."

"My magic," Kendra gasped, "it's gone." She snapped her fingers, but no sparks appeared. Her eyes widened in naked fear.

Dizziness washed through me, an awful human frailty I hadn't felt in years. I braced against the wall, breathing raggedly. "The daggers," I gritted out. "They're suppressing our powers."

Izora snarled, more animal than woman. She lunged toward the dais, only to stumble

and nearly fall. Luke caught her awkwardly.

"I can't charm," he said numbly. "I'm trying, but there's nothing there. How..."

"We have to get them in the box." I dragged words out by force of will, fighting the gray haze pressing at the edges of my vision. "Take them out of here."

Step by torturous step, we struggled to the obsidian plinth. Adalinda's hands shook as she grasped the pommels, her skin blistering on contact. I clawed open the lead-lined case, shoving it toward her. The daggers thunked into the cushioned lining like ingots of frozen starlight.

The pressure eased instantly, like a vise releasing. I gulped air and straightened tentatively. My fingernails extended into claws, then retracted - there and controllable again. Kendra whispered something liquid and crackling, and green witch fire bloomed between her palms. We shared a pained grimace of relief.

"Let's not do that again soon," Luke croaked, still cradling an alarmingly pale Izora.

Wordlessly, I secured the case and clipped it to my belt. The knowledge of what it contained, what it could do, settled like lead in my stomach. In one fell swoop, we'd acquired the power to bring the supernatural world to its knees - and it terrified me.

"Portal us home," I told Kendra quietly. "We have work to do."

As the chamber dissolved into light, the last thing I saw were those charred dragon murals, their gemstone eyes accusing in the dark. We'd found the relics of myth, but at what cost?

I had a feeling we were about to find out. The hard way.

HAILEY

The nullifying dagger lay on my coffee table like an ominous centerpiece, its dark blade seeming to swallow the light from the autumn afternoon filtering through the windows.

Around it, the most powerful beings I knew shifted uneasily, their movements sluggish as if moving through water instead of air.

I wiped my palms on my jeans, my skin prickling with the wrongness radiating from the artifact.

"Well, I think we can definitively say it works on vampires," Luke quipped, his usually fluid grace reduced to a halting shuffle as he circled the table.

His face, always pale, had taken on a waxy pallor, dark circles blooming beneath his eyes.

From her perch on the armchair, Adalinda observed the effects with a deep frown.

Her elegance remained intact, but I caught the minute tremor in her fingers as she swept a lock of raven hair behind one ear.

"This dagger nullifies magic. I'm not sure what the other does. But together they can kill a dragon."

A thought struck me, and I glanced around, realizing we were one dragon short.

"Where's Flint?"

Jax shrugged, the movement stiff. "Hiding in the bedroom. He said the dagger makes everything feel 'yucky.'" A ghost of a smile flickered across his face at our son's choice of words. "Can't say I blame him."

Yeah, me neither.

"So, it weakens us physically, disrupts our magic, and generally makes us feel like microwaved crap," Zara summed up from her spot on the couch. "But how do we use it without...you know, using it?" She flapped a hand at the dagger, unwilling to move any closer.

Izora tilted her head thoughtfully. "Therein lies the problem. We have to get close enough for it to affect the killer, but that means it affects us too."

"And we still don't know exactly what it might do to a vampire long-term," Luke added, worry creasing his brow. "Or a shifter. If it can block shifting, what happens if one of them gets cut?"

An uneasy silence settled as we all pondered that disturbing question. My eyes drifted back to the blade, its edge wickedly sharp. How much damage could even a nick do?

Adalinda cleared her throat delicately. "Shifting for a shifter is more biological than magical so the dagger's power doesn't affect a shifter's ability to shift, but if they have magical abilities, those wouldn't work. A direct stab to the heart with this dagger would likely still prove fatal to a shifter, powers or not. The sudden loss of magic combined with the physical trauma..." She trailed off, her lips pressing into a thin line. "As for a smaller cut, I suspect it would strip away their abilities entirely,

shifting included. Permanently."

A chill skated down my spine at the thought. To lose such an integral part of yourself in an instant, to an enemy's blade... I shook my head. "And for vampires?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted the answer.

"Untested." Izora's tone was carefully neutral, but the slight narrowing of her eyes betrayed her unease. "Our regenerative abilities might lessen the impact, but..." She spread her hands in a gesture of uncertainty.

"So, we're dealing with the supernatural equivalent of nuclear waste," I summed up. "Potentially catastrophic, hard to control, but possibly our only shot at stopping a killer." I sighed. "Fantastic."

Jax rested a hand on my shoulder, his touch grounding even through the dagger's miasma. "We'll figure it out," he murmured. "We have to."

I leaned into him briefly, drawing strength from his solid presence. This was my city, my people. Even monsters like us needed protection sometimes. I took a steadying breath, the sweet decay scent of fall leaves drifting in through the cracked window.

"Okay, then." I squared my shoulders. "Let's brainstorm. How do we make this thing work for us without, you know, the gruesome death part?"

Luke, ever the scholar, pulled out his phone and started typing rapidly. "I'll see what I can dig up on anti-magic containment. Maybe we can rig some sort of carrier that blocks the effects until we need them."

"I've got a few contacts in artifact recovery," Izora mused, her fingertips drumming restlessly against her thigh. "They might have some ideas."

"What about a delivery system?" I wondered aloud. "Some way to get the dagger close without us having to be in zapping range?"

"Like those insulin jet injectors?" Zara piped up unexpectedly. We all turned to stare at her, and she shrugged. "What? I dated an Army medic once. He had all sorts of fun toys."

"It's...not a terrible thought," Jax admitted after a beat. "We could look into some kind of projection device."

"Great, magic-negating hypodermics. I'll add it to the list of things I never thought I'd say." Despite the snark, I felt a small ember of hope kindling in my chest. We had a plan, or at least the bones of one. It was a start.

As the debate picked up around me, theories and countermeasures flying, I noticed Zara slip away from the group to join Xander by the window. I hadn't realized he had returned from his trip to New York. He was still tying up loose ends from retiring as the leader of New York State. The lanky vampire stood with his arms crossed, observing the scene with the wry half-smile of someone who'd seen too much to be easily fazed.

"Some welcome party, huh?" Zara's grin held a sardonic edge as she tipped her chin at the glowering dagger. "Come back to Philly, see the sights, get your magical mojo kneecapped by kitchenware."

Xander snorted, his dark eyes glinting with reluctant amusement. "Still beats New York," he drawled. "I'll take a magic FUBAR over rat pixies in the subway any day."

Zara's laugh caught me by surprise, a bright, unguarded sound that cut through the room's palpable tension. It faded into a companionable silence as they watched Luke scribble on a legal pad, his brow scrunched in concentration.

"You know," Zara began after a moment. "All this hype over tall, dark, and dampening over there..." She jerked a thumb at the nullifying dagger. "But what about the other one?"

Xander tilted his head, curiosity flickering across his angular face. "Now that you mention it..." He raised his voice without taking his eyes off Zara. "Hey, Dragon Lady. What's the deal with Mystery Blade Number Two? Don't leave us in suspense here."

Adalinda glanced over, one sculpted brow arching at the nickname. "Isn't it obvious? It cuts."

"Cuts...?" Zara prompted, making a go-on gesture.

The Dragon Queen let out a delicate huff of frustration. "It cuts," she repeated. "Dragon hide, dragon scale, dragon bone if the tales are to be believed. That's all it's ever been known to do."

I leaned forward, propping my elbows on my knees. "But you think there's more to it." It wasn't a question. I could read the uncertainty in the set of her mouth, the furrow between her brows.

"I think," she said precisely, "that dragon-kind does not create weapons of singular purpose. And I think that blade has kept its secrets for a very long time." Her jewel-toned eyes turned distant, ancient mysteries swirling in their depths.

"There are stories, of course. Myths passed down through generations of dragons, growing more embellished with each telling." A faint smile played at the corners of her mouth. "Some say it can unmake what the dragons have made, that any creation of our magic would crumble at its touch."

Her gaze cut to me, glittering with wry amusement. "Others whisper that it holds the power to transform, to remake the nature of a thing into its truest self. That a dragon in human skin could be...peeled back to their scaled glory."

I suppressed a shudder at the image, visceral and vaguely nauseating. I'd seen what happened when shifters got stuck between forms - it wasn't pretty. "And you believe these stories?"

Adalinda shrugged one slim shoulder. "Believe? No. But I have learned not to discount the kernel of truth in even the wildest tales." She reached out, trailing an elegant finger along the dagger's hilt. It was a strange contrast, the delicate curve of her hand against the weapon's brutal lines. "And I have never known Kit to make anything without purpose."

Zara worried at her lower lip, her brow creased in thought. "So, it's like a magical Swiss Army knife, but we don't know what the other wacky attachments do?"

"An apt, if inelegant metaphor," Adalinda agreed with a slight wrinkle of her nose. "The blade is a mystery, even to the eldest of us. Some theorize it may be a key of sorts, that it could unlock powers or places long sealed away."

"Dragons do love their riddles," Xander mused. At Adalinda's sharp look, he raised his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, I calls 'em like I sees 'em."

"Regardless," Adalinda continued, ignoring Xander's smirk. "Its purpose remains to be seen. Perhaps it is simply a blade, nothing more or less. The simplest answer is often the truth." But there was a flicker of doubt in her eyes, a question left unvoiced.

I reached for the daggers, wrapping my fingers around the worn leather of their hilts. They felt surprisingly light in my hands, almost delicate despite the wicked edges. One to weaken, one to wound. A matched set, but with only half the instructions.

The dagger of nullification made a strange kind of sense - destroy the magic, destroy the mage. Or dragon in this case. But why create a second blade just to cut? Why shroud it in secrets and speculation? Something wasn't adding up.

I glanced around the room, taking in the tense lines of my friends' faces, the wary hope and weary determination. We were no closer to answers, not really. Just more questions piled atop the old.

But that was the job, wasn't it? To keep asking, keep pushing, until the truth finally gave way. We'd figured out the demon councilwoman, stopped a rogue necromancer, and even negotiated a peace treaty with the fae. We could handle one little dagger.

I set the blades back on the table, the metal whispering against the wood. Okay, two little daggers.

"People." I pushed to my feet. My voice rang with a confidence I didn't quite feel, but I faked it well enough. "We've got our toys, we've got our theories. Time to put them to work."

Jax met my gaze from across the room, a smile ghosting across his lips. "As the lady wishes," he murmured, dipping his head in a playful half-bow.

In the bedroom, Flint let out a sudden shriek of laughter, followed by Kendra's muffled chuckle. The sound was bright and startling against the heavy atmosphere, a reminder of the world still spinning outside.

I squared my shoulders, feeling my resolve settle like a weight across my back. "Let's figure out how to use the daggers to catch us a killer."

It was going to be a long night. But then again, when you ran with vampires and witches, socialite dragons and snarky pixies, the weird and wild was pretty much par

for the course.

I could handle long. I could handle weird. And if I played my cards right, maybe I could even handle those creepy, cryptic little daggers and the nasty son of a beast who'd wielded them.

Hey, an immortal girl can dream.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 am

7

HAILEY

The glossy sheen of the ancient daggers caught fragments of muted sunlight as I held my phone to my ear.

Beside me, Luke leaned in, his brow furrowed with the same apprehension that had my stomach twisting into knots.

The line crackled and then the unnervingly chipper voices of Avery and Allison, our baby sisters turned fledgling vampires, bubbled through the speaker.

"Hailey! Luke!" they chorused in unison, their glee at odds with the mysterious circumstances of their mandated stay at 'The Farm.'

"Hey, twincicles," I used my old teasing pet name, angling for some normalcy.

"How's life on the supernatural dude ranch?"

A beat of hesitation, then Avery's forced enthusiasm. "Oh, you know, just peachy! Lots of fresh air, good old fashioned hard work..."

"And what does this hard work entail exactly?" Luke had one eyebrow cocked, clearly not buying the 'summer camp' spin.

"Pfft, nothing major," Allison hedged. "Just your basic farming chores and, uh,

interpersonal growth exercises."

I swapped a dubious glance with Luke. The twins' obfuscation was raising more red flags than a carnival tent. I strived for a casual, coaxing tone. "That's cool. Hey, have you two made any progress on your official sentences? I know the Council wasn't super clear on the rehabilitation details..."

Another too-long pause crackled across the line. Then Avery blurted, "Well, funny you should ask. There's been this whole investigation thingy happening since the Farm's second-in-command got sorta... decapitated?"

"What?" Luke and I yelped in concert. A surge of adrenaline sharpened my vision and set my fangs on edge.

Allison rushed to fill the stunned silence. "No no, it's totally fine! They sewed her head right back on. Full recovery expected."

Luke gripped my forearm, his hazel eyes wide and incredulous.

I could practically see him envisioning the headlines: 'Vampire Newbies Embroiled in Gruesome Farm Fiasco.'

"Girls, I swear if you're in over your heads..." He let the big-brother-warning hang.

"Relax, bro, we've got this," Avery insisted.

"As soon as the victim stops doing her best Nearly Headless Nick impression, we'll crack this mystery wide open."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, summoning patience. Shifting gears, I asked, "Hey, how's Arric handling all this? He's not exactly known for his warm mentorship

skills."

Avery snorted. "You'd think, right? But he's been like, aggressively protective of us. It's sweet. Annoying, but sweet."

"Yeah," Allison chimed in, "he's basically Ollie 2.0. Only hotter and with fangs."

Luke choked on air. My eyebrows shot up so high they levitated. "Wait. What? Are we talking about the same Arric 'I-Put-The-Grim-In-Grim-Reaper'?"

The twins giggled conspiratorially. Allison surmised, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much. Our broody Council rep has been in rare form, flirting and butting heads with the Farm's big boss, Blanche."

"Hold up," I sputtered, "Who is Blanche? I thought Arric was your..."

"Blanche White," Avery supplied.

"Yep, that's her real name. She's this badass fae queen who runs the joint. And the sparks flying between her, and Arric could power a small country."

Luke and I shared a nonplussed look, both mouthing 'What even?'

As if on cue, a cacophony of shouts and.

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exploded through the phone.

Allison swore under her breath.

"Oop, sorry guys, gotta jet! The Kelpie is trying to drown Arric again. Byeeee!"

The line went dead, leaving me blinking at my darkened screen.

Luke let out a low whistle.

"Well. That was..."

"Bizarre? Concerning? Frustratingly vague?" I supplied, tucking my phone away with a sigh.

"All of the above." He shook his head, lips pursed.

"You think we should..."

I pointed to the box with the daggers.

"We've got our own supernatural shitstorm to wrangle. The twincicles will have to handle the Farm's unique brand of crazy solo for now."

Luke hummed his pained agreement.

We both turned back to the inscrutable weapons, silently praying they'd crack open this case before our sisters landed in another decapitation-adjacent debacle. Just another day in the topsy-turvy world of the Philadelphia vampire-dragon PI.

The daggers sat on my coffee table, all menacing edges and ominous glints. They seemed to stare back at me, smug in their refusal to divulge any secrets. I squared my shoulders, cracked my knuckles, and dropped onto the sofa. Time to get metaphysical.

My fingertips traced the intricate engravings spiraling along each blade. Esoteric symbols and foreign scripts winked at me, incomprehensible messages from a different age. They prickled my skin, an itch of magic I couldn't quite scratch.

These daggers represented a maddening dead end in my increasingly desperate investigation.

A set of ritually significant weapons, drenched in ancient power, discovered suspiciously close to a string of supernatural murders no one could solve.

It didn't take a Mensa membership to connect those dots. And yet, here I sat, no closer to answers than I'd been two frustrating weeks ago.

Blowing out a sharp breath, I centered myself and reached for my inner well of power.

The thrumming energy of my vampire-dragon nature swirled up to meet my call, a rush of heat and pressure waiting to be unleashed.

Carefully, deliberately, I pushed tendrils of my magic into the unyielding metal, seeking any chink in its defenses.

The daggers immediately pushed back, repelling my power like similar poles on stubborn magnets.

A staticky tingle raced up my arms, the blades' innate energy clashing with my own in discordant waves. Gritting my teeth, I leaned in harder, compressing my magic into a narrow, focused beam aimed at the heart of each hilt.

For a split second, I thought I sensed a flicker, an infinitesimal yield in the daggers' iron-clad auras.

A surge of excitement joined the torrent of my power - and then dissipated just as quickly as the weapons slammed their metaphysical doors in my face once more.

The backlash stung my palms and pride in equal measure.

"Fairy farts," I grumbled, glaring holes in the smirking blades.

Magical interference was par for the course with high-level artifacts, but this felt different.

Personal.

Like the daggers held a petulant grudge against my particular cocktail of supernatural energy.

I briefly entertained the petty fantasy of drop-kicking the glittering arseholes into the Schuylkill River.

With an aggrieved huff, I dragged my hands through my hair, tugging at blonde tangles.

Fine.

If the bastards wanted to play hard to get, I'd try a different approach. Kill 'em with kindness.

Marshaling my irritation into determination, I laid my palms flat on the blades once more.

I focused on my breathing, slow and even, imagining tranquility as a sweetly placid stream trickling through my veins.

Instead of pressing my magic out, I coaxed it to pool beneath my skin, a tempting offering for any receptive energies.

"All right, my pointy little friends," I murmured, keeping my tone coaxing.

"I'm not your enemy here. We both want the same thing - to stop the evil assbat who killed the dragons."

I concentrated on imbuing my power with pure, untarnished intent. No aggression, no demands, just an open channel begging to be filled with insight. My third eye pulsed behind my forehead as I compressed desire and need into shining mental bullets. Remember your wielder. Grant us clarity. Lend us your secrets to serve justice.

The blades remained as aloofly unimpressed as snooty cats. I cycled through every intention I could conjure - memory, history, revelation, power, purpose, truth. I focused until a headache bloomed behind my eyes, until sweat beaded my temples from the sheer force of my goodwill.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

The daggers' magical blockade didn't so much as quiver. I was wasting time and sanity trying to crack uncrackable nuts while a deadly mystery continued to bleed Philadelphia dry.

Despair, cold and clammy, slithered in my gut. For the first time since this case landed in my lap, I felt utterly out of my depth. No traction, no leads, no leverage. What kind of supernatural sheriff couldn't even wrench a single clue from her only piece of evidence?

"Hailey." Jax cut through my spiral. Lost in my own head, I hadn't sensed my mate enter the room. His large hand cupped my shoulder, kneading tension-bunched muscles with knowing fingers.

"You're pushing too hard again," he chided gently.

"Your aura is a mess of frustrated knots."

I sniffled, swiping at the moisture on my lashes before leaning into his touch.

"I have to push," I argued mulishly.

"These Ginsu rejects are our only hope at ending this thing."

"And we'll get there," he assured me. "But not by running ourselves into the ground." He spun my chair, forcing me to meet his gaze, green eyes soft with understanding. "You need a break, sweet. Let that big brain rest and reset."

I shook my head mutely, but it was a weak protest and we both knew it. Jax put the daggers back in their lead box and tugged me to my feet and into his arms. "The others are waiting for us at Catch and Release. We're gonna show Xander a good time Philly-style and forget about murder and mayhem for a couple of hours."

Folding myself into his embrace with a shuddering sigh, I let Jax's certainty bolster my own. Maybe he was right. Maybe stepping back from this impossible puzzle was the key to seeing its solution.

Or maybe I'd simply feel better about bashing my head against unbreakable magical walls after a round or three of O-neg shooters.

Either way, a night of distraction sounded heavenly.

The thrum of music and chatter washed over me as we entered Catch and Release, inviting as a hot bath on a cold night.

After the whirlwind of supernatural disasters lately, normalcy tasted like a vintage I hadn't sipped in years. Even if "normal" was an elite vampire nightclub.

Red and white lights sliced through the hazy air, flashing over the lithe bodies gyrating on the dance floor. I inhaled the mingled scents of incense, liquor, and blood, so familiar they almost stung with nostalgia. Beside me, Jax squeezed my hand, his profile painted in crimson shadow. I squeezed back. He murmured in my ear, his words lost in the pulse of the bass, but I knew what he'd said.

Time to unwind.

We cut a path to our usual booth, the crowd parting for Jax like the Red Sea for Moses.

Perks of being the big boss.

Zara and Xander had beaten us here, heads bent together in animated conversation.

As we slid across from them, I caught the end of Zara's sentence.

"-telling you, Philly beats NYC any day."

"Please," Xander scoffed, but a smile tugged his lips. "NYC is the city that never sleeps for a reason. You can't beat that energy."

"You just like being in charge of the shiniest toy," Zara teased, green eyes sparkling. "Admit it, running NYC has made you soft. Lost your edge."

Xander clutched his chest in mock affront. "You wound me, Zara. I'm the sharpest fang in the canines."

She snorted into her drink, nearly spilling the crimson concoction. A genuine grin split Xander's face, crinkling the corners of his tired eyes.

I hadn't seen him this relaxed in, well, ever. Immortality was a bitch on the complexion, but he looked centuries younger bantering with Zara.

As they launched into another volley of city rivalry, I slid my gaze to the bar. Paige perched on a stool, nursing a vodka tonic and staring at Claudia with indiscreet adoration. Her mate was in her element, confidently directing the other bartenders as she mixed drinks with preternatural speed. She'd taken to undeath like a bat to night.

Paige's expression was so lovesick, I expected cartoon hearts to start bubbling from her head.

Jax's fingers threaded through mine on the seat between us, cool and strong.

I leaned into him, soaking up his solid presence.

Jax was a man of action, not flowery speeches, and I couldn't recall the last time he'd suggested a break.

Always handling the next crisis, unraveling the next intrigue.

But the tiny half smile on his lips as he watched Zara and Xander trade barbs told me he needed this as much as I did.

An escape from politics and prophecy, just for a night.

The server dropped off a fresh round of blood-laced drinks and Xander raised his glass.

"To new friends and fresh beginnings," he declared, clinking his tumbler against Zara's.

"To surviving immortality without going batty," she rejoined with a sly wink.

Jax groaned at the pun, but I saw the way Xander's eyes crinkled.

Zara had injected a shot of caffeinated enthusiasm into his usual jadedness, like a double espresso for the soul.

I'd never seen two people fall into friendship so fast, especially not an ancient master vampire and an impulsive baby fang.

As their voices rose in another friendly debate, Xander gesturing expansively with his free hand, I stole another glance at Claudia. She was watching us from behind the bar, polishing a glass and smiling softly at her mate's profile.

For a moment, her eyes met mine, and a current of understanding passed between us.

The loves of our unlives, finding unexpected connections.

Wonders never ceased.

I squeezed Jax's fingers, and he turned to me, eyebrow raised in silent question. "Nothing," I murmured, leaning close so he could hear me under the music. "Just happy."

His eyes warmed, twin candle flames in the dimness. He brushed his lips over my hair, the ghost of a kiss, there and gone. An immortal so powerful he could level cities, undone by a moment of normalcy. It kindled a warmth in my chest fiercer than any blaze.

I sipped my drink, letting the blood and vodka sing through my veins. Xander's laughter boomed across the table, prompted by something Zara had said.

Even Paige seemed to be shedding her academic pretensions, swaying slightly on her stool to the pulsing beat.

We were an odd coven - a patchwork of misfits knitted together by fate and bad jokes.

Fragile as spider-silk, but strong as steel.

But then, wasn't that the nature of immortality? You collected people like pins on a map, fragile human connections rusted by time. If you were lucky, some stuck. Looking around at the faces gilded in red, familiar and fond in the strobing light, I knew I was one lucky vampire. Prophecies and politics be damned. We'd always have nights like these, tiny eternities spun from laughter and blood.

And for now, that was enough.

8

LUKE

I glanced up from my book when Ivy knocked on my bedroom door.

"Come in." Ransom muted the TV, which he'd been watching with one eye closed. One look at her expression as she clutched her phone, and I knew our quiet afternoon plans had just evaporated.

"You two need to head with me to Rune Academy. Now." Well, shit.

I set my book aside, exchanging a glance with Ransom. "Now-now, or vampire-now?"

Ivy cocked her head, not even cracking a smile. "Luke, I don't even know what that means, but the headmaster didn't sound like he was in the mood for a brunch delay."

Ransom stood smoothly, already reaching for his jacket. I rubbed my forehead, wondering what kind of magical mess Goldie could have gotten into and whether it involved fire, blood, or knowing our girl, probably both. At least we could rule out boys for a few more years.

I made a quick stop in front of the hall mirror to make sure having an elementary schooler hadn't aged me a decade in the last five minutes.

The face looking back still passed for late twenties, if you squinted past the

immortality.

Small mercies.

When I joined Ransom and Ivy in the pantry, the back wall was already shimmering as the portal magic activated.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but that swooping feeling in my stomach as the world rippled never quite went away.

One deep breath and a step later, the crisp Pennsylvania fall gave way to the earthy warmth of the Rune Academy courtyard.

I took a moment to appreciate the sprawling, timeless beauty of the campus, like something out of a wizard's architectural fever dream. Gothic spires and ivy-covered archways juxtaposed sleek modern atriums sparkling with magical elements. The magic-tinged air carried hints of old books, dried herbs from the greenhouse, and that distinct pins-and-needles ozone scent of active enchantments. Students darted between classes clutching books and chattering.

"You have to appreciate the grounds warding," Ransom said as we walked with Ivy across the sun-drenched courtyard, ringlets of runes etched into the stone walkways. "Allowing us to pass through the daylight unharmed." Trust Ransom to focus on the practical magic over the aesthetic flourishes.

We were greeted at the front of the building by two familiar faces. John and Beth, the headmaster and headmistress. If I had breath, their grim expressions would have sucked it out of my lungs.

"Thank you both for coming on such short notice," John said with a tight nod. "Please follow us."

Beth shot me a look that whispered you're going to want to sit down for this one as she turned to lead us through the ivy-covered stone halls.

The admin wing had the same blend of magical gravitas and disorienting normal school vibes as the rest of the campus - motivational posters for broom safety next to ads for honor roll potion tutoring.

Sitting right outside the headmaster's dark oak door, swinging her legs and sporting a defiant gleam in her eyes I would recognize across dimensions, was Goldie.

My stomach sank into my two-hundred-dollar shoes. Seeing us, Goldie hopped to her feet, setting her chin at that particular angle that meant she expected to be in trouble but wasn't about to admit it.

"I didn't start it," she declared, her bright eyes flashing. Then, she jutted her chin impossibly higher. "But I finished it."

Ransom simply raised one eyebrow. I resisted the urge to drop my face into my palms. "Oh, boy."

Leaving Goldie in the too-quiet outer office, we followed John and Beth through the heavy oak door. I didn't have to be a telepath to catch the smirk Goldie tossed my way as it clicked shut behind us.

"So." I planted myself in one of the ornate chairs across from John's desk, aiming for an air of vampiric poise rather than exasperated parent. "What exactly happened?" Ivy sat beside me, and Ransom stood behind us both.

Beth perched on the arm of the adjacent chair, hands folded. "There was an altercation between Goldie and another student. A young witch who made disparaging remarks toward Goldie's friend Emily for being—and I quote—just a

human at a supernatural school."

In a school full of magical prodigies, a "just human" kid was always going to be an easy target.

"Unsurprisingly," John continued, steepling his long fingers on the immaculate desk blotter, "Goldie took exception to this and decided to stand up for her friend. By, ah, shifting into her cat form and introducing her claws to the other girl's face."

I winced. Ransom leaned forward, looking every inch the ancient warrior despite the faculty office surroundings.

"Is the other student all right?" he asked. Beth waved a dismissive hand.

"Oh, she's fine. Healed before she made it to the infirmary, not even a scar. But you can imagine the outcry. Parents howling for suspension, students taking sides, half the faculty calling for disciplinary action, the other half wanting to nominate Goldie for Shifter of the Month for defending her friend..."

She threw up her hands in a shrug, and I had a flash of sympathy for all the admin types throughout history who'd had to play politics on top of normal school shenanigans.

Ransom crossed his arms. "So if this isn't a cut-and-dried behavioral issue, I assume there's a reason you called us in?"

John and Beth exchanged a weighted glance. John sighed, taking off his wire-rimmed glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. "The simple truth is, we're not entirely sure how to handle this. We don't condone violence, certainly, but we also deeply value the loyalty and sheer courage it took for Goldie to stand up for her friend like that, against an older student no less."

"In a human school, this would be a no-brainer." Beth shook her head, mouth quirking. "But here, the rules are still being written for situations like this. A shifter child, not even a tween, nobly coming to the defense of her human bestie against magical bullying? It's uncharted territory."

Ransom's face was unreadable, but I caught the glimmer of something fierce and proud in his eyes. "So you want our input on whether she gets detention or a trophy?"

I scratched my chin, trying to walk the impossible parental tightrope between discipline and empathy. "She's eight and can literally sprout claws when she feels threatened. Maybe we start with a stern talk and a trip to the ice cream shop to talk about solving conflict without violence, supernatural or otherwise? A little positive reinforcement to balance out any punishment."

Beth nodded slowly. "A commendation at the end-of-week assembly for exceptional defense of her classmates, but given along with the task of writing an apology letter for resorting to force? And we could sign her up for those emotional regulation sessions with the centaur counselor..."

Ransom snorted, but he didn't argue the point. We all knew Goldie needed better tools than tooth and claw to navigate the tumultuous waters of growing up between worlds.

"What about the other girl?" I asked, remembering my own playground days and the axiom about it taking two to tangle. "The one spouting the magical purist garbage?"

John straightened a stack of papers, the very picture of diplomatic discretion. "Student privacy means we can't disclose the specifics of anyone else's situation, as I'm sure you understand. But yes, rest assured it's being dealt with seriously. We have a zero-tolerance policy for that kind of discriminatory harassment."

I nodded, figuring that was all I was going to get on that front. Parenting meant learning to trust other people to discipline the brats occasionally attempting to cannibalize your own.

"While we're here," I said as we stood to wrap up, "is there any chance we could check in on Emily? I'd like to see how she's doing after all this."

"Of course." Beth smiled, the expression turning wry. "And I suspect Emily will want the chance to either thank Goldie or smack her herself for being an idiot, so it's probably good timing."

Beth led us out of the office and down a few more portrait-lined halls. She knocked on one heavy door, sticking her head in to murmur something. A moment later the door creaked open, and a familiar dark ponytail came bobbing out.

"Hey, kiddo." I raised my hand in a wave as Emily scuffed to a stop in front of us, all skinny jeans and purple high tops and a graphic tee blazoned with the periodic table of elements. "Heard you had some excitement today."

Emily rolled her eyes with the full force of a double-digits tween, but I glimpsed the uncertainty behind the mandatory bravado. "Just another Tuesday. I'm fine."

"You know you belong here as much as anyone else, right?" I crouched to meet her gaze, hating the flicker of doubt and defiance warring there. "Just because your mojo isn't from some crusty old magical lineage doesn't mean you're not every bit as much a part of this world."

She shrugged, but something in her narrow shoulders eased. "Yeah, I know. It's dumb." She scuffed a toe on the runner carpet, glancing up through her lashes. "I mean, it was kind of cool of Goldie to go all Alley Cat for me, I guess. But I could've handled that basic witch."

Ransom bit back a smile. "I don't doubt that for a second. But that's what friends do, have each other's backs, even against snooty magical Mean Girls."

"I just don't want Goldie getting in trouble because of me," Emily mumbled, crossing her arms. I put a hand on her shoulder, marveling as always at the fragile feel of children.

"Goldie makes her own choices. Spectacularly bird-brained ones, sometimes, but they're hers. You're not responsible for what she did, but I know she'd do it again in a hot second to defend you. Because that's the kind of friend she is."

Emily peeked up at me, something like a real smile tugging at her mouth. "Yeah. She's ride or die like that. It's pretty cool." She straightened, giving a disaffected sigh. "Anyway, I better get back to study group."

I blinked. Yep, this one was going to be running magic circles around all of us before she could legally vote. "You need anything before we head out? A portal home, or...?"

Emily waved me off. "Nah, I'm good. Tell Mom I'll see her tonight? And that I'm fine, seriously."

"Scout's honor." I held up three fingers in what I vaguely remembered as the Scout salute. Emily snorted, tossing a wave over her shoulder as she vanished back into the study room.

Beth walked us back to collect Goldie, who was trying very hard to look like she hadn't been eavesdropping on every word from the outer office. I didn't bother to hide my grin as I took her hand, Ivy falling into step on her other side as we headed back toward the portal.

I squinted into the warm autumn light bathing the courtyard. "Sounds like you're in trouble and a hero. Welcome to magic school, kiddo."

Ransom shook his head, the corner of his mouth ticking up. "Just try not to bite anyone before we get home, little hero. At least not where the faculty can see."

Goldie beamed, practically skipping between us as the portal shimmered to life ahead. I caught Ransom's eye over her curly head and had to laugh.

Immortal politics, tween drama, and disciplinary pep talks. Just another Tuesday indeed.

9

HAILEY

I adjusted my blouse and settled into the office chair, giving Flint a gentle nudge as he curled up on my shoulder.

His tiny claws pricked my skin through the thin fabric as he trilled happily, clearly pleased with his perch.

I sighed, equal parts exasperated and charmed by my little dragon sidekick.

At least someone was excited about this council video call.

I glanced over at Jax, who seemed engrossed in shuffling through his notes, brow furrowed in concentration.

No rest for the wicked, or the leaders of the vampire world.

"You ready for this?" I asked, reaching over to straighten Jax's collar. He looked up, eyes softening as they met mine.

"As I'll ever be," he replied wryly. "Though I'd much rather be doing this in person."

"You and me both," I muttered, clicking the link to join the call. "But duty calls, and Milan will have to wait. We just don't have the time."

The screen flickered to life, revealing Dominic and Amaya already seated at the conference table. I bit back a smirk at the sight of them, practically cuddling in their chairs. For a couple of ancient master vampires, they could be downright adorable in their budding relationship.

"Hailey, Jax, thanks for joining us," Dominic greeted, his Scottish brogue warm even through the digital connection. His eyes landed on Flint, and he chuckled. "I see you've brought a little friend."

"Flint insisted on attending," I replied lightly, reaching up to scratch the dragon's head. "Apparently he didn't want to miss any important vampire business."

"Well, he's certainly livening up the meeting already," Amaya said, her features softening into a smile. She leaned into Dominic's side, their ease with physical affection still new. Seeing them like that made me want to giggle.

We quickly filled them in on the situation with the daggers, Kit, and the dragons. "We'll keep you posted," I concluded after giving them a general run-down of what had happened over the last few days.

"So, shall we dive into our usual business?" Jax said. "It's been a hell of a few weeks."

"That's putting it mildly," Dominic agreed, his expression sobering.

"The dragon situation seems stable for the moment," I reported, absently petting Flint's scales as I spoke.

"But it's opened up a whole new set of complications. We're in uncharted territory here."

"Agreed," Amaya chimed in.

"And with Arric serving his penance, we're short a council member. Tobias's seat can't remain empty for long."

Jax leaned forward, steepling his fingers. "I've been giving that some thought. We need fresh perspectives, but there's still the question of Soran and Gretchen's bloodlines. Do we extend invitations, knowing what their progenitors did?"

Dominic frowned, exchanging a weighted glance with Amaya.

"It's a tricky precedent. While I believe in judging individuals by their own merits, the sins of the maker do linger."

"Corruption doesn't flow through every branch of their line," I argued, perhaps a bit too forcefully.

Flint chirped in apparent agreement, and I had to resist the urge to smile.

"We can't hold entire families accountable for the actions of a few bad seeds."

"You make a fair point," Amaya allowed, though her tone suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. "But the risk remains. One rotten apple can still spoil the barrel."

Jax cleared his throat, drawing our attention. "What if we tried something new? Instead of defaulting to bloodlines, we could have the region leaders hold elections. Appoint members to serve limited terms, bring in new voices every decade or so."

I sat up straighter, mind whirring with possibilities. "I like it. Keeps things from getting too stagnant, and it gives the regions more direct representation. Helps keep things running smoothly on the ground too."

Dominic stroked his chin thoughtfully. "It's a radical departure from tradition. But perhaps that's exactly what we need right now. A chance to evolve."

"We four would remain at the helm," Amaya clarified, her expression calculating. "With the elected members serving as advisors, yes? Their votes would hold weight, but the ultimate authority would still rest with us."

Jax nodded. "That's the idea. A balance of stability and progress."

"It could work," Dominic mused. "Amaya, darling, could you draft up a proposal? We can circulate it to the region leaders, get their thoughts."

"Consider it done," Amaya agreed, jotting a note on the pad in front of her. "I'll have it ready by the end of the week."

I beamed at the computer screen. "This is good. A step in the right direction. Speaking of progress, how's the jury lottery system working out?"

Dominic grinned. "Splendidly, actually. We've only had to convene once since the trial for Arric and the twins, but it went off without a hitch. Smooth, fair, and efficient."

"Music to my ears." Jax leaned back in his chair. "I think we could all use a bit of quiet after the recent chaos."

"Hear-hear," I agreed fervently. "Though actually, while we're on the subject of making amends, what's the status on compensation for the necromancers? The ones Soran and Gretchen had locked up for years."

A heavy silence descended, the weight of past mistakes hanging thick in the air. Dominic sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead. "It's proving a delicate matter,

haggling over price. They've suffered immensely, but there's debate over the council's obligation to make restitution."

I could sense my temper rising, frustration simmering underneath my skin. Flint made a soft noise of concern, a tiny paw patting at my cheek. I took a calming breath, reining myself in.

"Debate?" I repeated flatly. "Those necromancers lost years of their lives, subjected to unimaginable cruelty, because of the actions of council members. Soran and Gretchen's betrayal is our responsibility to bear. We make this right."

Amaya held up a placating hand. "We're in agreement, Hailey. Truly. Perhaps the solution is simple—we finance the reparations directly from Soran and Gretchen's estates. Their assets should more than cover what's owed."

"Fitting," Jax remarked, a hint of dark satisfaction in his eyes. "Let their ill-gotten gains fund a bit of justice for once."

Dominic scratched at his beard, a habit I recognized from countless council sessions. "It's a start. I'll reach out to Ava, and come to a fair arrangement. With luck, we can put this sorry chapter behind us."

I exhaled slowly, trying to release the last threads of anger. Flint cooed soothingly, and I managed a small smile. "Good. It's long overdue. While we're on the subject of cleaning house, I have to admit, the enforcer team could use some new blood."

Jax shot me a questioning glance. I shrugged, feeling oddly sheepish. "I haven't been giving it the attention it deserves. Too many plates spinning lately. We need someone else to head it up."

"I'm sure we can rustle up some qualified candidates," Dominic assured, his gaze

knowing. "Why don't we each draw up a list of recommendations, and bring them to the next meeting?"

I flashed him a grateful look, relieved to have the support. We lapsed into a companionable silence for a moment, the heavy conversation settling around us. Flint took the opportunity to clamber down into my lap, turning in a tight circle before plopping down with a contented sigh. I chuckled, giving his eye ridges a gentle scratch.

Jax cleared his throat, breaking the spell. "I think that covers the most pressing concerns. Anything else on the docket?"

Jax and I exchanged a meaningful glance.

"No official business," Dominic replied.

"Just to prepare you, I'd wager a hefty sum that Grim and Nash make moves to turn Cleo sooner rather than later." I grinned. "They'll likely be petitioning the council soon."

Amaya quirked a brow. "Really? I thought they were still playing coy."

"Oh, they're well past coy at this point," Jax scoffed, rolling his eyes. "The way those three have been dancing around each other? I give it a month, tops, before someone makes it official."

"Ach, young love," Dominic sighed theatrically. "Centuries may pass, but some things never change."

"On that philosophical note," I drawled, "I should probably go check in on Kendra."

Amaya nodded understandingly. "Give her our best. And Hailey? Take care of yourself too, yeah? You're no good to anyone if you run yourself ragged."

I mustered up a wry smile. "I'll do my best. Same goes for you both."

Amaya waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, I'll make sure he relaxes," she declared with a salacious wink.

I groaned, making a show of covering Flint's ears. "And on that note, I bid you all adieu. Save the kinky stuff for after the meeting, lovebirds."

"No promises," Dominic retorted cheekily, pulling Amaya close with a grin.

The screen went dark, and I slumped back in my chair with a gusty exhale. Flint chirped quizzically, cocking his head.

Mama okay? he asked, his childlike voice echoing in my mind.

I scooped him up, nuzzling his snout affectionately. "Mama's fine, little man. Just tired. What do you say we go see Aunt Kendra, huh? I'm sure she could use some dragon cuddles."

Flint trilled eagerly, flapping his wings. He paused, considering. Cookies too?

I laughed, rising from my chair and settling him on my shoulder. "Sure, why not? After a meeting like that, I think we deserve some treats."

With a determined smile and my dragon companion babbling happily in my ear, I headed off to face the next challenge. The council could handle the big-picture problems for now. I had a witch friend in need of help, and a bottomless dragon belly to attend to. All in a day's work for this vampire dragon.

HAILEY

I rapped my knuckles against Kendra's door, feeling the thrum of her protective wards assessing me. After a moment, the door swung open, revealing my bestie's pinched face.

Kendra looked like she'd aged five years in the span of an afternoon, her shoulders slumped under an invisible weight as she waved me inside.

"Good, you're here," she muttered, turning to lead me into the living room. I caught a whiff of burnt sage and something sharper, like ozone after a lightning strike. Kendra's house was a fascinating blend of suburban normalcy and magical mayhem. Scuffed sneakers littered the floor by the front door while intricate sigils adorned the walls, humming with power.

Bookshelves strained under the weight of countless leather-bound volumes, their spines etched with arcane symbols. In the center of the room, a heavy oak table was strewn with bowls, candles, and the unmistakable glint of silver. The twin daggers. I had no idea when she'd moved her dining room table in here, but I wasn't going to ask right now. She looked too grumpy.

Kendra gestured to the blades with a scowl. "I've tried everything, Hailey. Potion amplification, cleansing rituals, even a blood sigil. Nothing makes a dent."

I picked up one of the daggers, the chill of the metal seeping into my skin. No surge

of power, no hint of the magic that had transported me between worlds.

"What about the nullifying one?" I asked.

Kendra jabbed a thumb at a small lead box on the corner of the table. "Locked up tight. But even with it contained, the other dagger is about as magical as a butter knife."

She sank into a chair, running a hand through her hair. I'd never seen Kendra so frustrated. My unflappable, hyper-competent witch friend looked like she was one incantation away from tearing out her own hair.

"Maybe we need a sacrifice," she muttered darkly. "A goat or something."

I snorted. "Pretty sure the HOA would have something to say about that."

Kendra's lips twitched. "Can you imagine the look on Old Mildred's face? She'd probably file a complaint about the mess."

We shared a strained laugh, the tension broken for a moment. I perched on the edge of the table. "Jokes aside, this is serious," I said quietly. "If we can't figure out these daggers..."

I didn't need to finish the thought. We both knew the stakes. Someone out there wanted dragons dead and now Jax, Flint, Adalinda, and I were the last of the dragons.

A muffled thud from upstairs made me jump, my vampire reflexes kicking into high alert. Kendra waved a dismissive hand.

"It's just Howard," she explained, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "He showed up last night, fresh off some big bounty hunt."

I raised my eyebrows, a smile tugging at my lips. "Oh really? And how's that going?"

Kendra ducked her head, failing to hide her grin. "Good. Really good, actually. I've been thinking..."

She trailed off, chewing her bottom lip.

I leaned forward, sensing juicy gossip. "Thinking what?" I prompted.

"About asking him to move in," Kendra said in a rush, like she'd been holding the words in for weeks.

"His lease is almost up, and he's been hinting about relocating his office anyway..."

I reached out to squeeze her hand, my undead heartwarming with genuine happiness for my friend. "Kendra, that's fantastic. You should totally go for it."

She glanced up at me, her eyes sparkling.

"You think so? I mean, with everything going on..."

"Hey." I fixed her with a mock-stern glare.

"Don't you dare put your life on hold for supernatural bullshit. If Howard makes you happy, then that's all that matters."

Kendra's face softened into a smile, and she squeezed my hand back. "Thanks. You know, he's missed you. Your friendship. I think he'd really like to catch up when things calm down."

A twinge of guilt twisted in my chest. It was true, I'd been neglecting my friendship

with Howard since...

well, pretty much since turning into a vampire had consumed my life.

I made a mental note to carve out some bestie time with my favorite bounty hunter.

As if on cue, Howard's footsteps creaked on the stairs, drawing closer. Kendra hastily swiped at her eyes and straightened her shoulders. I bit back a grin, remembering the giddy, blushing feeling of new love.

The door swung open, and Howard filled the frame, all broad shoulders and easy smiles. His eyes flicked from Kendra to me, lighting up with genuine warmth.

"Hailey! Long time no see, stranger." He crossed the room in two long strides, folding me into a bear hug.

I laughed, slapping his back. "Hey, I'm always here. You're the one taking high-profile, glamorous skips all over the states."

Howard snorted, releasing me to drop a casual kiss on Kendra's forehead.

I didn't miss the way she leaned into him, their bodies curving together like two puzzle pieces.

"Glamorous? I spent the last week staked out in a roach-infested motel. Definitely puts a damper on the badass bounty hunter vibe."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face.

Watching the two of them, the easy intimacy in their teasing, made something warm unfurl in my chest.

Amidst all the supernatural chaos and dagger-induced frustration, it was a reminder that life went on.

That love could still bloom, even in a world of blood and shadows.

Howard's gaze fell on the daggers, his brows drawing together. "I'm guessing those are the cause of all the magical fireworks down here?"

Kendra sighed, some of the tension returning to her shoulders. "Yep. And so far, they're not giving up any secrets."

"Okay, let's take a step back." I held up my hands. "We're getting punchy. Why don't we take a break, clear our heads, and come back at this with fresh eyes?"

Kendra hesitated, her gaze darting between me and the daggers. I could practically see the wheels turning in her head, the burning need to solve the puzzle warring with her body's demands for rest.

"You're right," she said finally, letting out a long breath. "Staring at these things for another hour isn't going to change anything."

She turned to Howard, slipping her arms around his waist. "Think you can whip up some of your famous hot chocolate?"

Howard grinned, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Anything for you, babe."

Warmth bloomed in my chest as I watched them, the casual intimacy a balm on my frazzled nerves. Howard caught my eye over Kendra's head, flashing me a grateful smile. At that moment, I understood everything he couldn't say out loud.

Thank you for being here. For supporting her. For reminding us both what really

matters.

I smiled back, pouring all my love and friendship into the simple gesture. Then I clapped my hands together, breaking the spell.

"All right lovebirds, less canoodling, more hot chocolate. Kendra, grab your fluffiest blanket. It's time for an old-fashioned bestie break."

Kendra laughed, the sound loosening the knot of tension between my shoulder blades.
"Yes ma'am."

As I followed them out of the living room, I spared one last glance at the dagger gleaming on the table. For a few hours, the mysteries could wait. Right now, my best friend needed me.

HAILEY

The crisp October air nipped at my skin as I opened the door, unsurprised to find Adalinda on the other side, her lips pursed in a telltale sign of irritation.

Before I could even greet her, a blur of iridescent scales shot past me, making a beeline for the Dragon Queen herself.

Flint, in all his unrestrained enthusiasm, launched himself from Luke's lap and into Adalinda's waiting arms.

She snatched him deftly from the air, her annoyance melting into a soft smile as she cradled the baby dragon close.

Flint trilled contentedly, his luminous eyes half-closed in bliss as Adalinda stroked his shimmering scales.

After a moment of indulging Flint's need for affection, Adalinda gently set him down, watching with an amused quirk of her lips as he scampered off to explore. Turning her attention back to me, the Dragon Queen arched a perfect eyebrow. "I see our little princeling remains as energetic as ever."

"He's been zooming around all morning," I confirmed with a grin. "Not that I'm complaining. Beats the alternative of him setting the curtains on fire again."

Adalinda hummed in agreement, her gaze flickering around the room as if searching for scorch marks. Satisfied that Flint hadn't left any new ones, she fixed me with a pointed look.

"Speaking of unwelcome wake-up calls, I don't suppose you could have a word with Izora about personal boundaries?"

I couldn't help the snort that escaped me. "What did she do not?"

"I woke to find her curled around me like a vampiric python," Adalinda grumbled, a hint of exasperation coloring her words. "I swear, if she dares to bite me in my sleep, I'll stake her myself."

That startled a laugh out of me. "You know that won't actually kill her, right? Izora's not your average vamp."

Adalinda's eyes glinted with mischief. "No, but it would be immensely satisfying nonetheless."

She had a point there. Izora's antics had been grating on everyone's nerves lately, especially with the close quarters we'd been keeping. I couldn't really blame Adalinda for her frustration. We were all feeling the strain of having so many people under one roof.

"Everybody's right on top of each other these days." I ran a hand through my hair. "Wade's house is packed to the gills, and Luke and Ransom's place isn't much better. Maybe we could see if Paige has some extra room? Might help to spread out a bit."

Adalinda tilted her head, curiosity flickering across her features. "Why do you call it Wade's house? I thought it belonged to you."

"Ah, that." I waved a hand, the story tumbling out. "It used to belong to Wade, a friend's uncle, before he sold it to us. Guess the name just stuck."

"Hmm. Fascinating how dwellings retain the echoes of their past owners," Adalinda mused, her eyes distant for a moment before snapping back to the present. "But I didn't come here to discuss real estate. I was hoping to take another look at those troublesome daggers."

I nodded, grateful for the change in topic. The mysterious blades had been weighing heavily on my mind, the non-magic-voiding one in particular. If anyone could shed some light on their origins, it would be Adalinda. I'd brought them home with me from Kendra's yesterday. She needed a real break.

Retrieving the daggers from their super-secure hiding place in our coffee table drawer, I handed them over to the Dragon Queen, watching intently as she examined the exposed dagger with an expression of deep concentration. The nullifying one was still in its lead-lined box. She traced the intricate patterns etched into the hilt, and for a moment, I could have sworn the symbols glowed faintly beneath her touch.

Adalinda's brow furrowed as she whispered words in a language I couldn't begin to decipher. Beside me, Luke leaned forward, his own gaze fixed on the dagger as Adalinda continued her ancient incantation.

Minutes ticked by, the air growing heavy with expectation, but the dagger remained stubbornly inert. No matter how Adalinda called upon her dragon magic—ancestral memories, bloodline energy, the very language of dragons themselves—the blade refused to yield its secrets.

Finally, Adalinda lowered the dagger with a sigh, frustration etched into the lines of her ageless face. "This weapon is unlike any I've encountered before," she admitted, her tone heavy with concern. "Its magic is elusive, slippery. I cannot seem to gain a

foothold."

It wasn't the answer I'd been hoping for, but I appreciated Adalinda's honesty. If even the Dragon Queen couldn't unravel the dagger's mysteries, we were going to need a new approach.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a familiar figure appeared in the doorway. Kendra swept into the room, her dark eyes immediately locking onto the dagger in Adalinda's hand.

"I want to try a different kind of locator spell I found in this grimoire," Kendra said by way of greeting, setting down a heavy book and an assortment of mystical ingredients. "See if this will lead us to whoever used these daggers to kill the dragons.

Kendra hummed thoughtfully, already flipping through the worn pages of her spell book. "It won't be easy, but I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve. Let's see what we can do."

Together, Kendra and Adalinda set to work, carefully arranging the non-magic-nullifying dagger within a circle of rune-inscribed candles. The scent of burning herbs intensified as Kendra began to chant, her voice rising and falling in a complex rhythm that tugged at something primal within me.

I watched, transfixed, as tendrils of smoke wove themselves into intricate patterns above the dagger, forming ghostly images of faces and places I didn't recognize. For a moment, I dared to hope that the spell was working, that we were on the cusp of a breakthrough.

But as quickly as the images appeared, they dissipated, leaving nothing but a cold sense of disappointment in their wake. Kendra's shoulders slumped, her expression one of grim resignation. "I'm sorry. The dagger isn't giving us anything. Whoever last

used it must have some serious magical protection in place."

I fought back the urge to scream in frustration. Another dead end, another unanswered question. But I couldn't let myself wallow in defeat.

Squaring my shoulders, I met Kendra's gaze with a determined nod. "Then we keep looking. We keep digging until we find something, anything, that can help us stop this killer before they strike again."

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was all I had.

12

HAILEY

Just like the weather, my nerves fluctuated between the scalding frustration of another failed spell and the cool embers of fragile hope.

Each time the daggers slipped through our magical nets, it chilled me further, but I had to believe we would find a way.

Even if it took every magical being in the supernatural world banging their heads together to come up with some solution.

I glared down at my phone.

After days of hitting dead end after dead end trying to magically track the killer, a spark of static from the dry fall air made me jolt as my finger brushed the screen.

The sting sharpened my determination.

This couldn't go on. We needed a new approach. Something bigger. Bolder.

I typed out a text, stabbing each letter with enough force to slay a vampire, if autocorrect was any judge.

Emergency Magical Hive-Mind Session. Our place. 2 hours. Everyone better be here.

I jabbed the send button, then added a bit for clarity.

Bring all your magic, all your brains, and all your pointy objects. It's time to make these daggers give up their secrets before someone else dies.

The tiny gray text bubbles appeared and vanished in quick succession as the others started responding with variations of "On my way." Thank goodness.

We needed the whole crew together, with all of our magic in one place.

Maybe a full dragon-vampire-witch brainstorming session could finally break through whatever wards the killer had wrapped around those daggers.

Or maybe getting all our particular brands of supernatural crazy together would knock something loose.

It wasn't like I had a treasure map with a big red X marked "Solution Here." But I had my friends, my little found family of things that went bump in the night. And I had a really big backyard. If we couldn't figure this out between the dozen of us, then I was officially out of ideas.

After sending the text, I sank into our oversized couch.

I stretched out and reached for the remote, flipping through channels until the familiar chords of the Supernatural theme song filled the room.

In the kitchen, I heard the distinctive sound of Jax moving around.

The soft thunk of the refrigerator door, the rattle of a pan being set on the stove, the click of the igniter as he lit the burner.

A smile tugged at my mouth as I picked up the warm, savory smell of chicken and herbs.

My Jax, cooking for one tiny hungry dragon.

Gosh, I loved that man.

"Is this the one where Dean makes the devil's trap bullet?" Kendra asked as she flopped down on the other end of the couch.

I shook my head. "No, I think this is the one where they find out the Colt can't kill Lucifer. Oh, hey, Adalinda."

The dragon queen gave a regal nod as she settled into Jax's favorite armchair.

Flint's happy trill drifted out from the kitchen, followed by Jax's deep chuckle. "Yes, you can have the big bowl, you little beggar."

The front door opened, and Luke walked in just as Dean Winchester plunged a machete into a snarling vampire's neck, lopping the head clean off in a spray of way-too-fake blood.

"You know, it really is a good thing that vampires aren't actually like that," Kendra said as the headless body thudded to the ground. "Can you imagine the mess?"

"Excuse you, Dean Winchester can hunt me anytime." I waved a hand at the screen. "Or Sam. I'm not picky."

"Preach." Luke high-fived me as he passed to settle on the arm of the couch.

"Team Winchester all the way."

From the kitchen, Jax's voice carried a distinct note of amused warning. "Hey, I heard that!"

I leaned my head back to smirk in his general direction. "I said hunt, not hump! I'm a taken woman, but I'm not dead. Well, no more than usual."

Kendra snorted, Adalinda raised one elegant eyebrow, and Luke chuckled. "Don't worry, no fictionally hot hunters are stealing your mate anytime soon."

The sizzle of meat hitting a hot pan merged with the sound of TV machetes and magic. I let the familiar, teasing exchange settle around me like a warm blanket. The comfort of a prickly, dangerous, wonderful family that would literally face down hell together. Or in this case, a mystery held in a couple of shiny knives.

I glanced at the clock. Less than an hour until the group descended in full force. Forty-five minutes to soak up the calm before the storm.

They trickled in like a stream of supernatural suspects in a mystical murder mystery. My very own collection of Clue characters, ready to point fingers and unveil secrets. We headed out to the backyard, the only place big enough to hold us all. Paige and Claudia arrived hand in hand. Grim and Nash flanked Cleo like dark sentinel bookends, their usual snark subdued by the gravity of the situation. Even Izora swept in with minimal dramatics.

Xander and Kendra claimed spots at the picnic table, making room for Luke to perch on the table beside them. Zara hovered near the deck, her normally animated face drawn into lines of tense readiness. Ransom took up his usual sentinel post near Jax. Janice walked through the gate in the fence a few minutes later and waved hello as she sat across from me in one of the yard chairs.

I eyed the blades like one might eye a coiled snake. With wary respect with a healthy

dose of "please don't bite me." Each leather sheath looked harmless enough on its own, but together, they seemed to buzz with a low-level energy that set my teeth on edge. Maybe it was just nerves, but I swore the damn things knew we were about to dig into their secrets.

Adalinda's long fingers flipped open the latches on the lead-lined case with deliberate, hypnotic precision.

The hinges creaked softly as she lifted the lid, the sound obscenely loud in the sudden hush that fell over my backyard.

For a long, suspended second, nothing happened.

The daggers lay revealed in their case, the polished hilts and scabbards gleaming with a malevolent sort of invitation.

Then reality stuttered.

It was like the world hiccupped, a visual glitch that rippled out from the exposed blades.

For a disorienting instant, everything seemed to blur and refocus, edges going soft and colors bleeding together.

I blinked hard, trying to clear the distortion from my vision.

That's when I heard the sharp, collective intake of breath from the others. My eyes snapped to Janice, following their stunned gazes. At first, I couldn't process what I was seeing.

It was like watching a time-lapse video of a caterpillar liquifying in its cocoon before

rebuilding itself cell by cell into a butterfly.

Only instead of a butterfly, Janice's form was morphing into something decidedly less colorful and way scier.

Her magical aura shivered and collapsed, the metaphysical equivalent of a house of cards caught in a stiff breeze. As it fell away, the woman I'd come to know as a bossy, busybody neighbor melted with it, leaving behind a towering figure that seemed to absorb the afternoon light into his emerald scales.

Janice, or the creature that had been wearing her face, rose to a height that put even Jax's six-foot-plus frame to shame.

"Damn you," Luke yelled. "You whammied me!"

I didn't know what the heck he was talking about.

I could barely hear him over my heart beating a staccato drum line in my ears.

Draconic features mixed with humanoid ones in a combination I'd never seen before. It was like he was a human half-shifted into a dragon. Vivid green eyes blazed above angular cheekbones, the pupils sharp vertical slits. A ruff of iridescent spikes crested the top of his head and trailed down the back of his neck, disappearing beneath the blouse he'd been wearing as Janice.

"What the actual flying fu—?" The half-strangled words forced themselves out of my throat, jagged with shock and the first rising sparks of fury.

Luke kept yelling, cutting me off.

"I oughta kick you're a?—"

Around me, the others snapped into battle-ready stances without conscious thought.

But nobody could use magic.

I quickly slammed the lid of the blade box shut and my vampire strength returned in full force.

Blades sang as they cleared sheaths, and I heard the distinctive click of at least one gun being cocked.

We might not have planned for this particular twist, but we damn well knew how to respond to a threat.

The strange man-dragon-thing raised his hands in a universal gesture of peace, but the razor-tipped claws glinted at the ends of his fingers.

He opened his mouth, and I tensed, ready for anything from a blast of dragon fire to some kind of siren song designed to enspell us all into slack-jawed compliance.

13

HAILEY

The autumn air hung heavy with an unseasonal heat as I stared down the being who had just appeared in our backyard.

He stood there, entirely too calm for someone confronted by a crowd of angry supernaturals, with an otherworldly shimmer to his skin that made my stomach turn.

His emerald eyes gleamed with a twisted intensity I immediately distrusted.

I could practically feel the waves of wrongness emanating from him, even before he opened his mouth to explain his despicable plans.

"I suppose introductions are in order," the man-dragon began.

"I am Vaelog, the true savior of dragon-kind. And you, my dear Hailey, are an interloper in matters far beyond your comprehension."

Jax tensed beside me, his energy thrumming with barely contained fury.

I placed a steady hand on his arm, never taking my eyes off Vaelog.

Around us, the others shifted uneasily.

Kendra, her hands sparking with offensive magic; Luke, fangs bared; Ransom and

Izora, ancient power rolling off them in waves; Zara, a coiled spring ready to launch herself at the threat.

But it was Adalinda who spoke next.

"Vaelog? I thought you were lost centuries ago. What madness is this? What have you done?"

A grotesque smile stretched across Vaelog's too-perfect features. "What have I done? Oh, my dear misguided queen, I've only ever acted in the best interests of our kind. While you were content to hide in shadows, to mingle with lesser beings, I saw the truth. That dragons were meant to rule."

He began to pace, his movements fluid and hypnotic. "I was there at the beginning. Awakened by the same divine power that created you. But unlike you, I had to take our power. But I had to do it because I alone understood our true purpose. We are not meant to serve, to integrate, to submit. We are apex beings, destined to reign over this world."

My mind raced to put the pieces together. This creature, this twisted mockery of a dragon, had been there since the start? But Adalinda's shock painted a different picture.

"You were never chosen," she breathed, realization dawning in her eyes. "You stole the ritual, corrupted it for your own gain. Quetzalcoatl had no hand in your creation."

Vaelog snarled, his facade of calm shattering. "Quetzalcoatl was a fool, content to let our potential rot! I took what was rightfully mine, and I emerged stronger for it. Strong enough to correct the mistakes of the past."

A cold dread settled in my gut as the implications became clear. "You killed them," I

growled, my own dragon wanting to rise to the surface. "The other dragons. You slaughtered them in some twisted bid for purity."

"I cleansed our bloodline of weakness," Vaelog spat. "And I would have rebuilt it, stronger than ever, if not for Adalinda's stubbornness. Together, we could have birthed a new age of dragons, an unstoppable force to claim dominion over this world."

Bile rose in my throat at the implications. This monster had planned to forcibly breed Adalinda, to twist her into some broodmare for his deranged vision. Beside me, Jax let out a rumble that promised violence.

Adalinda's face contorted with disgust. "You could've just asked me out," she muttered darkly.

Vaelog ignored her, his focus zeroing in on me. "And now you dare to interfere with destiny? You, an abomination of vampire and dragon? You cannot stand against me. None of you can."

His form shimmered, then exploded outward in a mass of scales and shadow. Where the man had stood, a dragon now loomed, but a dragon unlike any I'd seen, which to be fair was only me, Jax, Adalinda, and little Flint. This was larger, darker, its very being radiating an aura of divine corruption and rage.

Crap. We were in for the fight of our lives. Thank goodness Flint and Goldie were asleep inside the house.

"Adalinda, the daggers!" I shouted, even as I reached for my power.

In a flash, Adalinda darted forward, grabbing one of the ancient blades. Jax and I moved as one, our human forms melting away to be replaced by scales and wings and

raw, primal strength.

The battle erupted around us, a whirlwind of claws and magic and desperate determination. Kendra's wards flared to life, shielding us from human eyes as we unleashed hell upon the monstrosity that was Vaelog. Luke and Ransom fought with the savage grace of vampires, their blows blurring with speed. Izora's power crackled through the air, searing and deadly. Zara, Paige, Claudia, Grim, Nash... they all threw themselves into the fray with reckless abandon.

But even with all our strengths combined, Vaelog was a force of nature. His physical might dwarfed ours, his corrupted form shrugging off blows that would've felled a lesser being. He tossed us aside like ragdolls, sending bodies crashing into trees and fences with sickening crunches.

Claudia hit the ground hard, Paige instantly at her side. Grim and Nash closed ranks around Cleo, their focus torn between the fight and her safety. We were losing ground, and fast.

In a desperate gambit, I reached out with my mind, finding Adalinda's familiar presence. "The medallion," I urged, pouring every ounce of my fear and determination into the thought. "The one from Bruce. Please tell me you still have it."

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then, a surge of startled realization. "It's at home," she replied. "I'd forgotten all about it."

Exasperation warred with hope in my chest. "Get it!" I threw myself back into the fray to buy her time. "Go!"

And she was gone, a streak of silver light vanishing into the night. Jax and I redoubled our efforts, a united front of fang and flame against the overwhelming force that was Vaelog. The others rallied around us, battered but unbroken, fighting

with a ferocity born of desperation.

It could have been minutes or hours, time lost all meaning in the chaos of the battle. But just as my strength began to falter, just as Vaelog's claws found purchase in Jax's scaly shoulder, a blinding flare of power lit up the night.

Adalinda had returned, the amulet clutched in her determined grip. She raised it high. "Vaelog! I command you to stand down!"

For a single, breathless moment, nothing happened. Vaelog froze mid-lunge, his grotesque form straining against invisible bonds. A howl of fury and disbelief tore from his throat, but he was powerless to resist.

In a move almost too fast to follow, Adalinda lunged forward and yanked the other dagger from the box. My strength waned as the ward blinked out.

The nullifying dagger flashed as she buried it to the hilt in Vaelog's heaving chest. The scream that followed was a thing of nightmares, a sound that would haunt my dreams for years to come. But as it reached its crescendo, a change rippled through the air.

The sky above us split open, a swirling vortex of light and color that seared my enhanced vision. It was a portal, I realized, to another realm.

Okay. I was getting a little bit sick of portals to other realms.

Through the shimmering gateway, I glimpsed soaring peaks and lush valleys, the distant forms of dragons wheeling through an untouched sky.

"A hidden world," Adalinda whispered with wonder and grief. "One of the realms lost to time and treachery."

Kendra took off running to the other side of the yard. When she was far enough away, she threw up the ward again, higher and farther so the dagger wouldn't kill it again.

Flint and Goldie ran outside, looking up. Flint took off, landing on my scaly back as he trilled in excitement, his small form wriggling with barely contained glee. Despite the chaos, I couldn't help but smile. If the little guy's reaction was anything to go by, we were witnessing something truly extraordinary.

Vaelog's form shuddered and convulsed, his power and might leeching away with every passing second. Adalinda stood over him, the bloodied dagger clenched in a white-knuckled grip.

"The dagger strips away all magic when it pierces flesh," she explained, her eyes never leaving Vaelog's writhing form. "Your ability to shift, your stolen power, it's gone. You're mortal now. Powerless."

As if on cue, Vaelog's dragon form melted away, leaving behind a broken, pathetic figure of a man. He stared up at us with eyes that burned with impotent rage, but there was fear there too, the fear of one who'd flown too close to the sun and felt his wings turn to ash.

The portal pulsed and shimmered, a silent reminder of the wonders and horrors that lay just beyond our reach.

A heavy silence settled over the battlefield as we took stock of our losses and triumphs. Claudia leaned heavily on Paige. Grim and Nash hovered over Cleo, their normally stoic facades cracked with concern. Luke and Ransom looked like they'd gone ten rounds with a woodchipper, but their eyes glinted with grim satisfaction.

And at the center of it all, Jax and I shifted back to our vampire forms and stood shoulder to shoulder, battered but unbroken. Our eyes met, a silent conversation

passing between us in a heartbeat.

We had a more immediate problem to deal with. What to do with the self-styled savior turned genocidal maniac?

Adalinda gazed down at Vaelog's prone form, her expression unreadable. "We could end it here," she murmured, the dagger still clutched in her hand. "After everything he's done..."

"No." Jax was firm, resolute. "Death is too easy an escape. He needs to face the consequences of his actions. To understand the depth of his crimes."

I nodded slowly, an idea taking shape. "The vampire rehab program. Dominic and Amaya have experience dealing with dangerous, unhinged individuals. They could hold him, evaluate him..."

Jax was already reaching for his phone, quickly filling in our fellow councilmates on the situation. In a matter of minutes, it was settled. Kendra opened a portal to Milan, and Ransom and Paige hauled a snarling, struggling Vaelog through to face his new reality.

As the portal winked out of existence, I let out a big breath. It was over. The immediate threat was contained, and we could begin the long process of picking up the pieces.

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HAILEY

One problem down, one big one to go.

With the fake Janice unmasked, we still had to track down the real one.

Fast.

"We need to do a locator spell," Kendra announced.

"Let's go get some of Janice's hair from her hairbrush at Wade's."

We trooped out of the backyard, toward the gate that would let us walk down the sidewalk and to the street behind us where Wade's was.

As we crossed the yard, a shrill voice pierced the air. "What the world?!" Mildred, our elderly neighbor from the end of the cul-de-sac, the one who always thought we were up to no good, stood at the edge of our property, bifocals glinting in the sun as she gaped at our ragtag supernatural parade. Her bony finger jabbed at us, her thin mouth working soundlessly in shock.

My belly went cold. The ward. Kendra met my eyes, face green. She muttered a very creative curse. "I had to make it big to make sure the dagger wouldn't kill it. It must go out to the sidewalk."

For a moment Mildred just stared, eyes darting between the lot of us, hands white-knuckling a floral housecoat around her thin frame. Then she turned on her sensible heel and scurried back to her door as fast as her aging legs could manage.

I blew out a heavy breath, fingers pressing my temples where a headache was building steam. "Okay. Who can erase her memory the fastest before she speed-dials the police and we end up on the six o'clock news?"

Izora flashed an unsettlingly toothy grin. "I'll handle it." She set off down the sidewalk at a determined clip, heels clacking against the pavement.

"Don't kill her!" Luke yelled, panic edging his tone.

Izora just waved an elegant hand dismissively over her shoulder without bothering to turn around or slow her militant stride.

I sent up a quick prayer to the powers that be—maybe Luci could pull some strings—that Mildred would escape this encounter with mind and body intact. Then I jerked my chin at the others. "Come on, let's find Janice. Izora will catch up."

We barreled over to Wade's and thundered up the stairs to Janice's room, single-minded in our urgency. Kendra made a beeline for Janice's dressing table and snatched up her hairbrush.

She plucked a few dark strands from the bristles and held them aloft, chanting. The hair glowed, twisted in her fingers like it was caught in a phantom breeze. I stopped breathing, watching, willing it to work.

After several tense beats, Kendra opened her eyes. "Got her. She's about a mile from here."

Relief hit me like a truck, leaving me lightheaded. "Let's go."

We took off back to our house, all of us, except for Ransom and Paige, who were still in Milan, and Izora, who was hopefully not killing Mildred right now. And of course, no Janice, as we still needed to rescue her.

"We don't all need to go," I said. "Why don't you guys stay here and keep an eye on that portal? Jax, Kendra, and I can get Janice."

Luke looked up at the portal and curled his lip. "Um, okay, yeah. We'll stay here and if the portal changes, we'll just alert the navy? What do you expect us to do?"

I flipped him the bird and climbed into Jax's black SUV. "Sing it a lullaby. And keep an eye on Flint." He flew off of my shoulder and onto Luke's. "Back soon."

Kendra directed Jax to an empty house pretty close by. She'd been right about it being about a mile. The house was a generic suburban two-story, "For Sale" sign already bleaching in the weed-choked yard. Painted a nauseatingly inoffensive beige with bland taupe trim, it melded into the street of nearly identical properties.

I didn't bother with the doorbell. Too much adrenaline singing in my veins, too much fear-fueled fury. I slammed the heel of my boot just beside the lock, and the door cracked inward like it was made of balsa wood.

"Janice?" My voice sounded harsh with desperation even to my ears.

A weak cry answered from a back room. We surged forward and found her in a bare bedroom, wrists and ankles zip-tied to a metal bedframe. Pale and gaunt, her hair a rampant bird's nest, eyes glassy. But alive. Blessedly alive.

"Janice, thank frick." I crouched to saw at the zip ties with a pocketknife, freeing her with shaking hands. "I'm so sorry it took us this long to figure it out."

She tried for a smile but ended up with a grimace. "I knew you'd come. But can we

eat like as soon as we get out of here? I'm starving."

Half-hysterical laughter bubbled out of me. "You got it."

Later, ensconced on her own couch with a fleece blanket and the remains of three Big Macs, Janice told us what happened. How Vaelog had appeared out of nowhere, his charm like cloying honey in her mind. How he had commanded her to go to the empty house and tie herself up, then left her there, helpless and alone. Confused and ashamed tears dampened her cheeks as she spoke.

Kendra put a gentle hand on her arm, sympathy in every line of her face. I perched on the armrest beside Janice, stomach churning with guilt and anger.

We filled in the gaps for her, explaining how Vaelog had been impersonating her. How we hadn't realized at first, how he'd been manipulating us all. How close we came to disaster before finally seeing through his ruse.

Janice shook her head, disbelief and horror warring across her exhausted features.

Once Janice was a little steadier on her feet and her belly was full, we converged on the backyard again to stare at the giant portal in the sky.

Kendra said it first. "We're going in there, right?"

It wasn't really a question. I met her gaze as a slow smile spread across my face. "Hell yes, we are." The words came out savage and clipped.

On the heels of my pronouncement, the air beside me shivered and Lucifer materialized as if summoned by my vehemence. He had a knack for dramatic entrances.

Speak of the devil, as they say.

Immaculately dressed as always in a dark suit that probably cost more than my car, he regarded us with hooded eyes. I waited for a trademark quip, some flippant comment about our bedraggled state.

But he didn't spare us a hello. His attention turned to the portal, hawklike intensity in every line of his too-perfect face. "Finally," he murmured with dark satisfaction.

Then he strode forward and jumped, flying high in the air and going into the portal without hesitation, the shimmering surface parting around him like a curtain of light before knitting closed once more.

"That's... not good." Lucifer's interest in the portal could be a good omen or a very, very bad one. You never knew which way the coin would land with him.

Only one way to find out.